

Vincent Nijenhuis e.a., *Vrouwen en vroomheid. De boetvaardige zusters van het Sint-Ursula klooster in Purmerend (1392-1572)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2017, 254 blz., ISBN 9789087046545).

At the end of the fourteenth century a small group of laywomen in Purmerend, a small town north of Amsterdam, chose to live a religious life in piety and penitence. After a couple of years, the small group grew into a larger community known as the monastery of St Ursula. Although historical research on this community already started at the beginning of the twentieth century – when J.J. Graaf published part of the community’s archive – the subject was hardly picked up by historians during the following decennia. Consequently, the history of the community remained largely in the dark. However, excavations in 2009 at the Koemarkt in Purmerend revealed remains of St Ursula’s monastery, and this stimulated further research on this ‘forgotten’ monastery, of which *Vrouwen en vroomheid. De boetvaardige zusters van het Sint-Ursula klooster in Purmerend (1392-1572)* is an important result.

*Vrouwen en vroomheid* can be placed in the broader research regarding the female reception of the Modern Devotion, the backdrop to the birth of the community of St Ursula. The *Devotio Moderna* was a spiritual movement that flourished in the Low Countries and Germany from the end of the fourteenth century until the Reformation and was particularly popular amongst women. Despite the female interest in this apostolic *revival*, older historical research mainly focused on the men involved in the movement. As women could not preach or perform pastoral tasks, they were regarded as passive members who were dependent on men for their spiritual development. Nevertheless, recent research has proved the shortcomings of such statements, which opened up new perspectives to look at the female participation in the Modern Devotion. *Vrouwen en vroomheid* builds further on this historiographical trend by focusing on a case-study of how religious and semi-religious women, against the background of the Modern Devotion, organized themselves in a community, and how this monastery further developed until its abolishment at the beginning of the Reformation. The authors pay specific attention to how the religious and semi-religious women experienced and adopted the ideals of the Modern Devotion, and how the community was embedded in its local societal environment.

The book can be broadly divided in three large parts, respectively focusing on the origins and early development of the community, its functioning on a spiritual and worldly level, and the abolishment of the community and its memory.

The first part of the book examines the general development of the community against the background of Purmerend (chapter 1) and the Modern Devotion (chapter 2). In this, the authors pay specific attention to the institutionalization of the community from a small group of religious and semi-religious women who lived in a private house in a monastery-like community that adopted the third rule of St Francis. Further, attention is paid to how the community was linked with the network of Devouts in the northern part of Holland (chapter 3).

A second part focuses on the community's functioning. The fourth chapter concentrates on the members of the community and attempts to shed light on the socio-economic capital and background of the women. The main conclusions are that St Ursula was a relatively small community and with the exception of some sisters, most women possessed limited or no resources and mainly originated from the local region. Besides the women there were also male associates to the community (like confessors and chaplains) and so-called 'andere devote maagden' – other devout virgins, who took no vows, but were associated with the community. A fifth chapter examines the internal spiritual life of the women religious that focused on the liturgy of the hours, intercessory prayer and memory. Crucial for this argumentation is a book of hours kept in the British Library, which the author convincingly attributes to the community. The following chapter focuses on the economic resources of the community: St Ursula was a rather small and poor community that gained most of its resources from leasing.

A last part examines the growth of the community in the fifteenth century and the growing friction with the local government in the sixteenth. Chapter 8 builds further on the latter line of enquiry by developing the abolishment of the community against the background of the Reformation. Nevertheless, the end of the community did not mean the end of catholic presence in Purmerend. Most former sisters of St Ursula stayed in the town and were treated relatively well (they continued to receive an alimentation). Also in the centuries that followed Catholics were able to perform – although discreetly – their religion, and was the memory of the St Ursula convent preserved (chapter 9). Proceeding from archaeological and landscape research, the last chapter provides a reconstruction of the community.

*Vrouwen en vroomheid* is a welcome contribution to the field of female or gendered experiences of the Modern Devotion in North-Holland. With its strong focus on the local embedment of the community, the book provides a thorough case study of how the ideals of the Modern Devotion were expressed within a local community. However, such a local focus also entails the danger that key questions about the (a)typicality of the community remain unanswered. Although the authors regularly refer to broader tendencies, a more comparative approach could have positioned the community of St Ursula within its broader religious landscape. For example, throughout the book the authors point to several peculiarities of St Ursula and local

interpretations of the monastic rules, but fail to answer to which extent these ambiguities were unique to the community. Furthermore, they mainly define these peculiarities as typical for the initial experimental phase of the Modern Devotion, but at the same time note that some of these local adaptations continued to exist (as for example the earlier mentioned 'other devout women' and the ambiguity regarding the vow of poverty of the women religious). This raises additional questions regarding the local variations of the ideals and rules concerning the Modern Devotion; these questions are not sufficiently addressed in this contribution. That said, the accessible and comprehensible character of the book deserve praise (especially because of the included glossary and the edition of a couple of key sources). In doing so, this book opens up historical and archeological research on late medieval female religiosity to a wider audience. In sum, *Vrouwen en vroomheid* is an accessible contribution to the field of late medieval female spirituality, that provides exiting material for further comparative research on female members of the *Devotio Moderna* in Holland.

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