



Raingard Esser, *The Politics of Memory: The Writing of Partition in the Seventeenth-Century Low Countries* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 208; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012, xi + 364 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 20807 0).

Anyone who has studied the Dutch Golden Age will be aware of the many books published at the time describing the cities and provinces of the Dutch Republic. The technical term for these books, which combined topographical description with a survey of local history, is 'chorography'. From Johannes Isacius Pontanus' 1611 book on Amsterdam to Caspar Commelin's 1693 book on the same city, more than fifty urban and regional chorographies were published in the United Provinces in the seventeenth century. Written mostly in the vernacular, illustrated with engravings, and addressed to a wide audience, these works enjoyed great popularity. Less well known are their counterparts for the Spanish Netherlands, which were written mostly in Latin. Raingard Esser is the foremost expert today on chorographies from the Low Countries, and in this learned and incisive book she offers a systematic examination of a selection of chorographies from both the earlier and later seventeenth century, from both Holland and other parts of the Republic, and from the Spanish Netherlands as well as the Republic. These three comparative dimensions are what gives her work its analytic punch.

Esser makes two main arguments in her book. One is that a profound change can be traced over the course of the seventeenth century in how history was written. To be sure, chorography was always a mixed genre combining narrative and description. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the century, the humanist, rhetorical mode of writing predominated. Characterized by stylistic consistency and a single authorial voice, incorporating dramatic characters and indirect or fictitious speeches, this mode had as one of its principal aims to set before readers exemplary stories from which they could draw edifying lessons. By the end of the century, authors had abandoned this moralizing in favor of an antiquarian mode concerned above all with establishing a body of facts. Relying on archival documents, material artefacts such as coins, and other non-narrative sources, it presented readers with empirical evidence in a relatively raw, undigested state, touting such evidence as an indispensable marker of authenticity and 'truth'. Authors writing in this mode sought to enhance their credibility by striving for accuracy and detail, relying on eyewitness testimony, and acknowledging the limits of their knowledge. Daniel

Woolf has found a similar transformation taking place in seventeenth-century English historical writing; Esser demonstrates how it was at work in Dutch chorography. Her work contributes to our understanding not just of early modern historiography, but of epistemology and the changing character of knowledge in the seventeenth century.

Esser's second argument is that chorographies served as a crucial 'arena for the creation of memories and identities' (8). Utilizing her second and third dimensions of comparison, Esser shows that very different local and regional identities formed in different parts of the Low Countries. This fact per se may already be well known, but Esser's examination of the chorographies adds enormously to the range and depth of our understanding of it. It shows, for example, how Amsterdam's chorographers appropriated national heroes and accomplishments for the city's glorification, casting Amsterdam as the epitome and heart of the Republic. Esser's contribution is greatest when she focuses on places outside Holland that have been less well studied. Nijmegen, for example, though it lost its imperial free status as early as 1247, continued to base much of its urban pride on its historic connections to the Holy Roman Empire, as well as on its claim to being the first city of the ancient Batavians. Far from the Hollanders' self-image as peace-loving, industrious, and accepting of diversity, works on Nijmegen and Gelderland in general emphasized their region's martial traditions, noble values, and purity. In the Southern Netherlands, chorographers managed to an extraordinary degree to efface the memory of the Revolt altogether, as if it had never happened and the territories of the Habsburg Netherlands had never been partitioned. In their writings one sees the emergence of a distinct, Southern Netherlands national culture that looked back to the Burgundian and early Habsburg periods as golden ages. In this culture, historical memory focused on the role played by successive rulers, from the crusading Godfrey de Bouillon to the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, as champions of true Christianity. Incorporating elements of the new 'critical hagiography', the southern chorographers presented catalogues of holy men and women, saints, bishops, churches, and monasteries, casting Flanders and Brabant as spaces of timeless sacrality.

Who precisely was doing all of this, and why? A great number of the chorographies were sponsored or even commissioned by political elites. In the north these were local and provincial authorities, whereas in the south the archdukes themselves ordered their official court historian Jean Baptiste Gramaye to write several chorographies; nobles in the archdukes' service, as well as Catholic clerics, were responsible in the south for others. Esser is sensitive to the political import of the chorographies and acknowledges that the latter served particular interests, creating 'a canon of traditions and a usable image of the past' (12). She does not trace in detail, though, the politics of their production or subsequent employment, leaving readers wondering about these. She notes that chorographies in the north also included songs, personal recollections, poems, vernacular plays, and orations. In this way, she claims, the northern chorographers drew on a wider 'public memory' – of the Revolt in particular – in the process canonizing that memory and incorporating it into 'history'. Her point is that the chorographies, at least in the north,

reflected a wider, non-elite culture of memory and were not merely the ideological implements of ruling elites. The point is convincing, but could have been more firmly established if Esser had made more explicit the extent to which particular chorographies were reflecting pre-existing memories and identities, as opposed to forging new ones. Her casual use of certain terms reflects this ambiguity: she writes that chorographies established, constructed, confirmed, reflected, and developed identities, but makes little attempt to differentiate between these processes. This criticism does not detract greatly, though, from a book that makes a very substantial contribution to our understanding of regional and local identities, political cultures, and the changing character of historical memory in the seventeenth-century Low Countries.

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