Historical Homes

An Adversary for the Ages: 
The Late Medieval Historiography 
of Viking Endeavour across the 
Low Countries. 
A Preliminary Survey

Christian Cooijmans

Introduction

[...] les Liegeois l’ont entrepris à enwaleir [...]. Mains vos devez 
savoir que al avaleir furent là troveis des corps d’hommes mors 
qui tenoient X pies ou XII de hault, et les plus petis si tenoient 
IX pies; et avoient leurs espeeze deleis eaux, toutes enrunies et 
brisies et pouries. Li peuple enfuit tout espawenteis, car ilh 
ne savoit dont ilhs venoient là ne queis gens ch’estoient [...]; 
mains chu furent Normans qui furent là ochis par l’evesque 
Franque de Liège [...]. (Bormans 1880: 311).

(The people of Liège endeavoured to build a wall [...]. But you 
should know that, whilst digging, the bodies of dead men were 
found, which were ten or twelve feet tall, and the smallest 
were nine feet; and they had their swords upon them, all 
rusted and broken and decayed. The crowd fled in distress, 
because they did not know where these people came from or 
who they were [...]; these, however, were the Northmen who 
were killed by Bishop Franco of Liège [...].)
This conspicuous passage is found in the *Myreur des histors* ('Mirror of History'), a late fourteenth-century chronicle by Jean des Preis (styled d'Outremeuse), detailing the discovery of human remains in his native Liège during the year 1326. The unusually tall stature of the armed skeletons led the author to conclude that these were no ordinary men, but the very Northmen whose purported tenth-century attack on the city he had recounted earlier on in his work (Bormans 1877: 85–86). For Jean and many of his contemporaries, a historical awareness of local and regional viking activity relied on the transmission of a highly diverse corpus of narrative sources – compiled, transcribed, and reinterpreted over the course of several centuries. In Liège itself, for example, authors may have been conversant with the early thirteenth-century *Chronica pontificum Leodiensium*, which contains the following passage:


(And the abbey of St. Peter in Liège, founded by the blessed Hubert, was laid waste. The brothers living there were killed, and they destroyed the entire city and burnt down the whole church, the coffin of the blessed Lambert remaining untouched and unharmed by the fire.)

No more than a few decades later, another author from Liège, Gilles d’Orval, recounted the same viking attack in much greater detail:

Et quod abbatia Sancti Petri in Leodio a beato Huberto fundata, tunc vastata sit, innuitur ex eo quod monachorum
capita, qui ab eis martyrizati sunt, clavis ferreis et capitalibus confixa inventa sunt in pilaris et in cripta eiusdem ecclesie tumulata. [...] Cum etiam itidem Normanni cunctam civitatem vastarent, feretrum beati Lamberti [...] infringere volentes, divinitus timore percussi eum contingere non potuerunt, et sic tristes recedentes [...]. (Heller 1880: 49).

(And the abbey of St. Peter in Liège, founded by the blessed Hubert, was then laid waste, [and] it is suggested that the heads of the monks, those who were martyred, were found fastened to its columns with iron nails and buried in the tomb of the same church. [...] When those Northmen also wished to lay waste to all of the city, determined to break the coffin of the blessed Lambert, [...] they were not able to touch him, having been struck with the fear of God, and so these wretched men withdrew [...].)

Regardless of whether the second passage is based on the first or both follow a joint base text, a narrative link between the two texts is in evidence. Since no known records from the Viking Age itself impart the above-mentioned events so explicitly, later accounts like these seem to represent a gradual process of textual embellishment, produced by the imagination of consecutive generations of intermediate authorship.¹

Conceivably acquainted with these scenes of brutality, Jean's rationale for the imposing bodies to have belonged to malevolent vikings becomes a much more fathomable premise. Knowingly or not, he himself contributed to this ongoing process of narrative transmission, by which the distant vikings and their actions – both real and imagined – were embedded into an expanding and evolving historical consciousness. This chapter, representing a preliminary study, endeavours to explore how and why late medieval historians throughout the Low Countries recollected, represented, and repurposed the viking phenomenon. Whereas
many of the works under consideration have already been subject to extensive scholarly scrutiny (e.g. Burgers 1999; Mol and Smithuis 2008; Driel 2012), the particular role played by vikings within them has only seldom been highlighted.

The Viking Age Low Countries

Before examining its later medieval portrayal, it is warranted to provide a brief outline of the documented and otherwise attested Scandinavian presence across the region during the Viking Age itself. The Low Countries, broadly corresponding to the territories of the present-day Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, encompass the lower basins of the Rivers Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt. By the eighth century, this area had been wholly incorporated into the Frankish realm under the auspices of the Carolingian dynasty (Millis 2006: 12-15; Bachrach 2001: 249). At this time, economic and cultural exchanges with Scandinavia were already well-established, as intrepid merchants, missionaries, and other migrants continued to make their way overseas in ever-increasing volumes (Loveluck 2013: 195-196; Lebecq 2012: 15-16, 21).

Formal Franco-Scandinavian relations were less amicable, however, as political tensions between Charlemagne and the Danish monarchy culminated in a large-scale military incursion along the Frisian coast in 810, detailed by contemporary sources like the Annales regni Francorum (Kurze 1895: 131). More recurrent forays were reported during the 830s, when commercial centres like Domburg-Walisrichum and Dorestad became principal targets of viking antagonism, the latter being assailed at least nine times over the course of three decades (Waitz 1883: 9, 11-13, 35, 61; Pertz 1829b: 228). As Scandinavian aggressors grew in confidence and capability, their operations began to move increasingly inland, with prominent political nuclei like Nijmegen, Cologne, and even Aachen – the erstwhile heart of Carolingian courtly life.
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– being besieged during the 880s (Kurze 1891: 96-97; Waitz 1883: 153). Eventually, a combination of preventative and remedial countermeasures, including the payment of tributes, granting of (landed) benefices, and construction of fortifications, allowed Frankish elites to curb this Scandinavian aggression, which had been all but extinguished across the region by the early tenth century.

Cultures of writing

For several subsequent centuries, the regional exploits of these bygone viking hosts seem to have reverberated across the cultural memory of the Low Countries, even as the territory itself remained embroiled in the ongoing geopolitical contentions of the Kingdom of France, the Holy Roman Empire, and the emergent Duchy of Burgundy (Prevenier 2000). During the later Middle Ages, a diverse culture of writing blossomed throughout this relatively small region, accelerated by an increasingly literate urban middle class, which depended on the written word for the provision and consumption of numerous administrative and intellectual services and pastimes (Pleij 2009: 63; Schryver 1997: 132). This was a society able to recognise and recontextualise its own history, progressively employing the vernaculars of Dutch and French alongside the Latin which had monopolised prior written discourse (Oostrom 2009: 37; Schryver 1997: 132).

Across the region, the appropriation of historical narratives began to play a significant role in the reinforcement of collective identities, including those of prominent dynasties, monastic houses, and wider urban or provincial communities as a whole. For groups like these, reimagining the past served to establish precedent, to legitimise and glorify political and ecclesiastical authority, and – conversely – to disenfranchise any perceived opposition (Schryver 1997: 161, 174-175; Prevenier and Blockmans 1986: 219-220; Schneidmüller 2002). In light of these
rationales, a large share of regional late medieval chronicles may be more effectively examined as works of contemporary political proselytism than as depictions of historical reality. Meanwhile, genre conventions were also becoming increasingly intermingled, making it more and more difficult – at times even counterproductive – to ascribe contemporary narratives to fixed textual categories (Ebels-Hoving 1987: 227-228; Schryver 1997: 161). Regional annals, for example, may have been endowed with hagiographical elements, whilst dynastic chronicles could contain features of chivalric romance, and so forth. Finally, as seen above, histories like these borrowed heavily from one another, often copying entire sections to the letter.

As hundreds of narrative works like these are recognised to have been produced within the geographical reach of the present-day Netherlands alone (Carasso-Kok 1981), this chapter will limit itself to a number of prolific late medieval examples in exploring the role vikings continued to play in the authorial consciousness of this post-viking era.

Vikings and their portrayal

Throughout the late medieval Low Countries, the viking phenomenon continued to receive a marked amount of authorial attention. Despite its drawn-out narrative transmission, however, some elements of this Scandinavian endeavour remain largely faithful to the ninth-century source material. A straightforward example is seen in descriptions of the 881 viking attack on Aachen, which was recorded as follows by the contemporary Annales Fuldenses:

At illi instaurato exercitu et amplificato numero equitum plurima loca in regione regis nostri vastaverunt, [...] monasteria, id est Prumiam, Indam, Stabulaus, Malmundarium
et Aquense palatium, ubi in capella regis equis suis stabulum fecerunt. (Kurze 1891: 96-97).

(But they renewed their army and increased the number of horsemen and pillaged many places in the lands of our king: [...] the monasteries of Prüm, Cornelimünster, Stavelot, Malmedy, and the palace of Aachen, where they used the king’s chapel as a stable for their horses.) (Reuter 1992: 90).

This latter indignation – in particular – outlived the Carolingian period, and was recounted by historians like Sigebert of Gembloux during the early twelfth century: ‘[...] Aquis in palatio equos stabulantes, oppidum et palatium incendunt [...]’ (Pertz 1844: 343) (Horses were stalled in the palace of Aachen, and the town and palace were set afame). A century later, Vincent of Beauvais, in producing his encyclopaedic *Speculum maius* (‘The Great Mirror’), cited Sigebert as one of his sources, copying the above passage almost verbatim (Benedictines of St. Vaast 1624: 978). His work was then promptly translated into several vernaculars, of which a well-known Middle Dutch adaptation – in verse – was realised by Jacob van Maerlant during the 1280s:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Aken wonnen si die stede,} \\
\text{Ende indes keysers pallayse mede} \\
\text{Hebben si ghestallet hare paerde} \\
\text{Den Roemscen rike teere onwaerde.} \\
(\text{Utenbroeke and Velthem 1863: 238}).
\end{align*}
\]

(They conquered the city of Aachen,  
And likewise in the emperor’s palace  
Did they stable their horses  
Unworthy of the Roman empire’s honour.)
This excerpt was subsequently reproduced by various authors throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, including Claes Heynensoon, the Bavarian herald at the early fifteenth-century court of Holland (Verbij-Schillings 1999: 139 – see also Fig. 1).

Although by no means a comprehensive chronology, these successive examples demonstrate the consistency with which some of these passages were handed down over the course of half a millennium or more. This was hardly typical, however, as many late medieval chroniclers instead sought to depict vikings in various anachronistic or out-of-place scenarios, deliberately or otherwise.

An effective case study is presented by the coastal County of Holland, whose progenitor was identified by numerous late medieval chroniclers as Count Theodoric, or Dirk. Although credited with a variety of virtuous deeds, Dirk’s encounters with regionally operative vikings seem to rank among his most celebrated achievements, as manifest – for example – in Johannes de Beke’s mid-fourteenth-century Chronographia, composed at Egmond Abbey: ‘[…] Theodricus et sua posteritas eandem dicionem feodalì iure possiderunt ac atroces Danos de finibus Romani regni potentissime profugarent’ (Bruch 1973: 55)
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(Dirk and his descendants held this same lordship [Holland] as a rightful benefice, and firmly expelled the cruel Danes from the borders of the Roman realm). Tracing its institutional roots to the tenures of the count and his immediate successors, the praise bestowed on Dirk by the community of Egmond should come as no great surprise (Mostert 1993: 16). But corresponding accolades also arose elsewhere, including the anonymous late fifteenth-century *Kattendijke-kroniek*, of presumed secular origin (Tilmans 1998: 181):

Dirck, die eerste also ghenoemt, [...] was die eerste graef van Hollant ende Zelant ende heer van Vrieslant totter Louwers toe, xxxviii jaer lanck. [...] Hij keerde die Denen ende heyden stoutelicken uut sijnen lande. (Tilmans 2005: 185).

(Dirk, first of his name, [...] was the first count of Holland and Zeeland and lord of Frisia up to the [River] Lauwers, for thirty-eight years. [...] He boldly drove the Danes and heathens from his land.)

Despite these retrospective attributions, very few details about Dirk survive from the Viking Age itself. It is nevertheless clear that his inauguration as count would have taken place sometime during the early tenth century, a time when viking endeavour had already practically disappeared from the region (Bruch 1986: 3). Hence, his illustrious suppression of these Scandinavian interlopers is likely to be an anachronism – a foundational myth contrived to legitimise and eulogise the rule of the later medieval counts of Holland. In some instances, this discrepancy was stretched further still, here illustrated using the late thirteenth to early fourteenth-century *Rijmkronek van Holland*, revised by the comital clerk Melis Stoke:
Doemen screef VIII° jaer
Ende LXIII over waer,
Karel de Kalewe zekerlike,
Die coninc was in Vrankerike
Ende van Vrieslant had een deel,
Begonste te stichten al geheel
Hollant uut siden conincrike.
Want hi gaf enen Dederike
Dese lande, [...]. (Burgers 2004: 12).

(As was written the year eight hundred
and sixty-three, in truth,
Charles the Bald, who was firmly
king of the Frankish realm
and possessed a part of Frisia,
began to fully establish
Holland from his kingdom.
For he gave the one called Dirk
this land [...].)

These details, likewise found in the above-mentioned
Chronographia (Bruch 1973: 55), present an implausible scenario:
not only did Charles the Bald not control these particular lands at
any point during his reign, Dirk would have been neither capable
nor qualified to take on any viking forces when this supposed
transaction took place, having seemingly yet to be born, let alone
reach adulthood.3

Similar retrofitting may have taken place for Egmond Abbey’s
own recorded history. Even though the monastic community
itself does not predate the tenth century, vikings feature
prominently in the first vita of its patron, Adalbert, composed
around 985. According to the hagiographer, the Northumbrian
missionary passed away near Egmond in the early eighth century,
whereupon a small chapel was erected over his grave (Vis 1987:
48-51). The shrine is noted to have survived a number of viking incursions due to post-mortem interventions by the saint himself, including the miraculous displacement of a sand dune in the presence of a Scandinavian host (Vis 1987: 56-57). Another regional saint, Jeroen, based at Noordwijk, was purportedly martyred by vikings around 850, upon which his remains were interred and forgotten, only to be rediscovered and translated to Egmond in later centuries (Oppermann 1933: 47-53; Berkum 1993: 60; Mulder-Bakker 2002: 47-48).

As the earliest hagiographies for both saints seem to have been produced beyond any living memory of their respective lives and deaths, their suitability as historical sources may reasonably be called into question. Supported by the counts of Holland, they may have been composed to consciously incentivise local cults of veneration, consolidating Adalbert and Jeroen’s position in the abbey’s institutional memory. In turn, this association – as well as the local presence of relics – would have expanded Egmond’s ecclesiastical centrality as a pilgrimage site. As the perceived antithesis of sanctity, vikings served as a narrative motif to underline the righteousness of these saints and ratify their local worship. Whether factual or fictitious, this continued association between heathens and holy men continued to accentuate the abbey’s significance well into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as expressed by chronicles produced within and outside its walls, including de Beke’s Chronographia:

Hoc eciam tempore sanctus Yeron per dyocesanum episcopum et comitem Theodricum cum miraculis in Egmondam translatus est, qui pridem a Danis in Nortich, [...] martyrii palmam consecutus est. (Bruch 1973: 61).

(At this time, St. Jeroen, who had previously received the palm of martyrdom from the Danes in Noordwijk, was translated to
Egmond by the diocesan bishop and Count Dirk, surrounded by miracles.)

Over time, other regional authors seem to have composited some of these separate episodes of Scandinavian violence into a single instalment, as seen in the fifteenth-century Middle Dutch chronicle later styled *het Goudse kroniekje*:

Doe toghen dat wrede heyden volc voert tot noertwijck daer si veel volcs versloeghen ende vinghen. Onder welcke was die heylighe priester sinte ieroen ende wort ghevanghen ende wort onthoeft. Daer na soe toghen si tot egmondt, ende braken daer die heylige kerke die sinte aeibrecht selver hadde ghesticht. (Anonymous 1478: 16r).

(Then those cruel heathens made their way to Noordwijk, where they killed and captured many people. Among them was the holy priest St. Jeroen, who was captured and beheaded. Afterwards they went to Egmond, and there destroyed the holy church which St. Adalbert himself had founded.)

The versatility with which contemporary chroniclers employed vikings as a narrative device can likewise be seen in late medieval descriptions of Godfrid, a Scandinavian leader who was granted parts of Frisia as a Carolingian benefice in 882 (Waltz 1883: 153; Kurze 1891: 99; Pertz 1829a: 199). Very few details on his tenure exist in contemporary sources, whilst many consecutive authors are silent on the matter altogether. Nevertheless, some historians – including Johannes de Beke (Zeeburgh 1873: 91) – had been able to fill this narrative vacuum by the fourteenth century:

[...] ac idem Godefridus rex exinde Friones sibi rebellantes redegit in vile servitutis improperium, ita quod omnes circa collum circumasstrictum baiularent laqueum, ut
unumquemque sine mora suspenderet, qui contra maiestatem suam aliquomodo rebellare presumeret. (Bruch 1973: 59).

([..] and the same King Godfrid then reduced the rebelling Frisians to the shame of servitude, such that all of them would carry the burden of a noose around their neck, to be immediately hung by, should they somehow presume to rebel against his majesty.)

In this instance, the Frisians are unequivocally characterised as victims of Scandinavian brutality. Within another century, however, subsequent chroniclers had made subtle yet significant changes to the narrative, as seen in *het Goudse kroniekje*:

Daer nae [...] soe makeden die vriesen een opstal teghen den coninc godeuaert, ende teghens den keyser. Mer doe die coninc kaerl dat vernam, soe quam hi mit soe groter macht in vrieslant, ende bedwancse soe seer [...], soe dat elc vriese moste draghen om den hals een strop van enen bast ghelijc een dief daer mense ter stont aen hanghen mochte of si hem meer staken teghens des keysers moghentheyt. (Anonymous 1478: 17r).

(Afterwards [...] the Frisians rebelled against King Godevaert [Godfrid] and against the emperor. When King Charles [the Fat] heard this, he came with a large host to Frisia, and suppressed them [...], so that every Frisian had to wear a noose around his neck like a thief, to be immediately hung by, should they again oppose the emperor's authority.)

At this point, the Frisians are more explicitly cast as culprit rather than casualty, challenging both Scandinavian and Carolingian rule. Although their punishment remains unchanged, Godfrid's role in administering it is completely discounted. Scandinavian
influences like these seem to be emphasised and diminished as needed, usually in accordance with prevailing regional political climates at the time of authorship. In this instance, the latter of the two sources may reflect the fifteenth-century animosity of the County of Holland towards the Frisians, who had resisted their political subjugation for many centuries (Huisman 2010: 159-162). As expected, concurrent Frisian chroniclers characterised regional Scandinavian occupation as being a much less acquiescent process. The *Gesta Frisiorum*, for example, recounts – in no uncertain terms – the Frisian opposition against a preceding Godfrid’s attempt to subdue the region:

Recht ghelyc als die weduwe Judith den Hertoghe Olofernes dat hovet afslöech, alsoe is [...] Gotfridus, in syne paulione, oek wonderlic gheslagen van den Vriesen. [...] hy [meende] die Vriesen weder te bedwingen ende in den eyghendoem te brengen [...]. Dem Vriesen ende Sassens worde doe groete blytschap van Gotfridus doet. (Epkema 1853: 298).

(Like the widow Judith cut off Duke Holofernes’ head, so too was Godfrid marvellously killed by the Frisians in his tent. [...] he had meant to subjugate the Frisians and bring them under his rule [...]. The Frisians and Saxons were filled with happiness by Godfrid’s death.)

**Conclusion**

Much like their ninth-century counterparts, the North and its peoples spoke to the imagination of late medieval chroniclers across the Low Countries. Where Carolingian authors often skewed their accounts to depict viking activity as being capricious and indiscriminate, their successors turned this portrayal into an increasingly abstract template of adversarialism. Here was a belligerent and anarchic force of foreign nonbelievers
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- a quintessential Other - whose actions could be easily recontextualised to suit a wide range of narrative purposes. As such, incoming vikings, typecast in their anachronistic moulds, remained a familiar ingredient in the codification of various monastic and dynastic foundation myths across the region. These renditions would themselves continue to be transcribed and transformed over the course of numerous generations, subject to patronage and political adherence, until the Scandinavian assailant was as chronologically distant from the late medieval author as that same author is from the present day.

This chapter has provided a preliminary glimpse into the appropriation of the viking phenomenon by late medieval authors across the Low Countries, and represents an initial stride towards a more detailed and comprehensive study of this representation during a formative period of collective politico-cultural memory and identity. In turn, this type of inquiry may serve to benchmark long-term perceptions, trace processes of textual transmission, and compare attitudes towards Viking Age hostility within and beyond this regional landscape of sociopolitical change.
Endnotes

1 I am indebted to Dr Morgan Boharski for her help with the French translation of this text. All other translations into English by the author, unless stated otherwise.

2 Whilst primarily associated with Scandinavian endeavour, the term ‘viking’ is here considered to be occupational rather than ethnic. As such, it is presented as a common noun, with a lowercase initial.

3 (Near-)contemporary references to viking activity in Liège are found in the Annales Bertiniani and Regino’s Chronicon (Waitz 1883: 153; Kurze 1890: 118).

4 The development of these institutional histories may likewise be framed against the theoretical conceptions of Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ (2006) and Hobsbawm and Ranger’s ‘invented traditions’ (1983), for example.

5 Rather than Charles the Bald († 877), reference may have been made to his grandson Charles the Simple († 929). A diploma dated 15 June 922, detailing the latter king’s conferment of the church of Egmond and its dependencies to Dirk, seems to confirm this notion (Lauer 1949: 286–288).
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Christian Cooijmans


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