

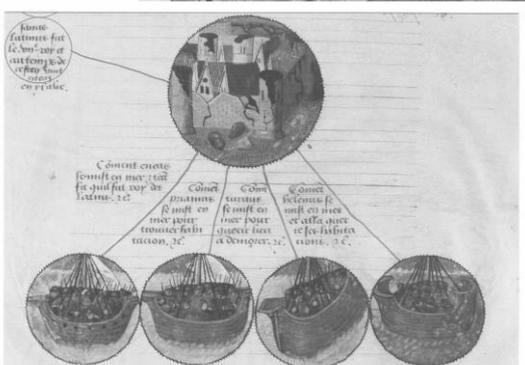
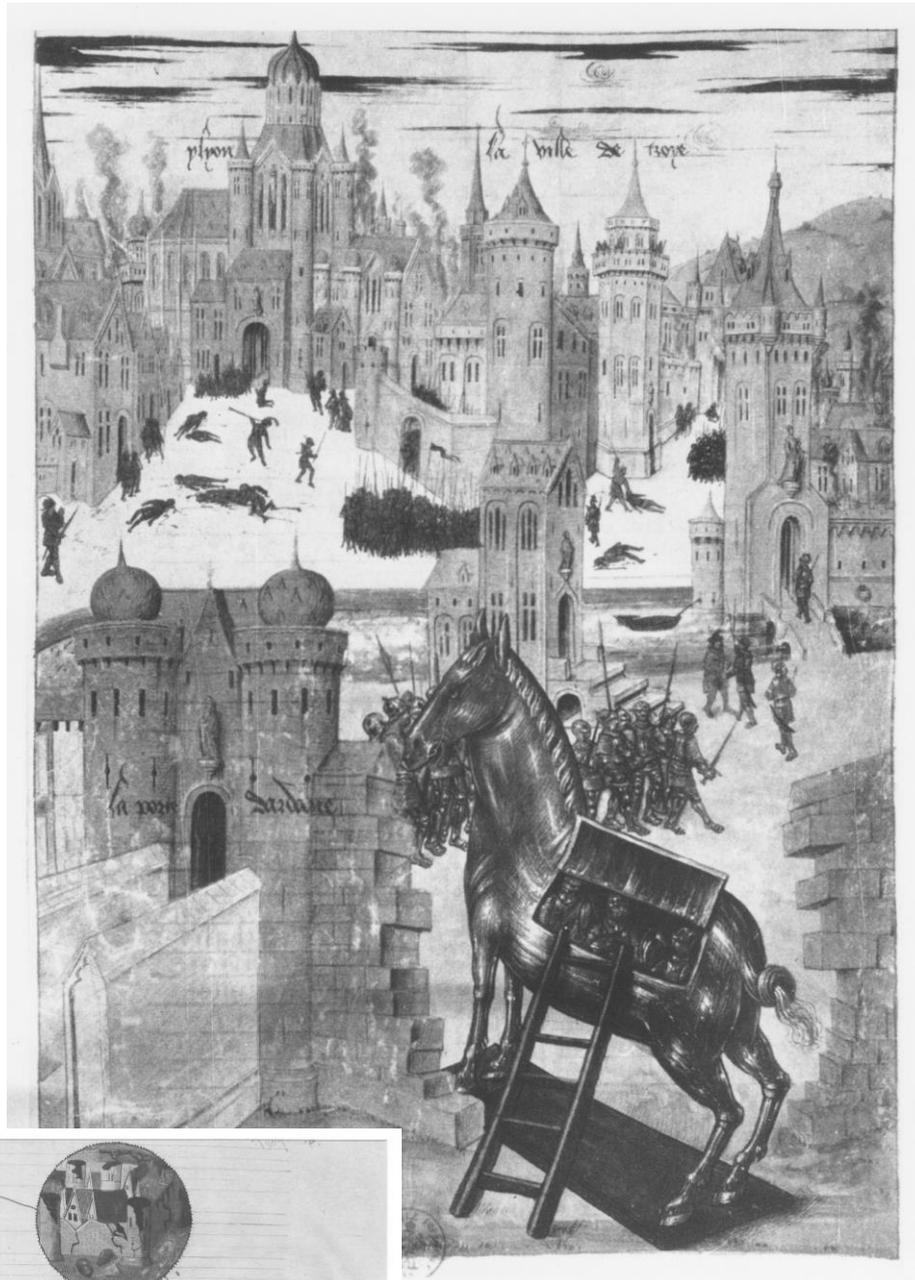


*De eindeloze stad. Troje en Trojaanse oorsprongsmythen in de
(laat)middeleeuwse en vroegmoderne Nederlanden.*

W.A. Keesman

DE EINDELOZE STAD

TROJE EN TROJAANSE OORSPRONGSMYTHEN
IN DE (LAAT)MIDDELEEUWSE EN VROEGMODERNE
NEDERLANDEN



WILMA KEESMAN

Wilma Keesman, *The endless city. Troy and Trojan origin myths in the Low Countries in the - late - medieval and early modern periods*

Summary

I. Introduction

The Trojan War was one of the first secular subjects on which the emergent press in the Low Countries published works. In a short period, three different texts on this history appeared. Reprints indicate genuine, enduring demand. Why were people so interested in this subject?

Interest in Troy was already substantial and long-standing, throughout Europe. The adaptation of the material flourished in courtly chivalric literature, with the *Roman de Troie* by the Anglo-Norman court author Benoît de Sainte-Maure; this poem later served as an example for the thirteenth-century Dutch Trojan stories of Segher Diengotgaf and Jacob van Maerlant, which were similarly written for courtly circles. Of even greater influence was the *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, an adaptation of Benoît's *Roman* by Guido de Columnis. He became the primary authority on Troy of the late Middle Ages. Like others, the three Dutch incunabula mentioned above, produced for an audience that had become largely urban, draw on his work. The interest among scholars in this enormous corpus remained limited, and was uneven. The extent and complexity of the material presented a practical problem, but a more fundamental obstacle was the lack of understanding and appreciation of the medieval view of Troy as a *historical fact*. Late medieval texts received the least attention.

There is more material that can provide an insight into the significance of the Troy-related material. Of particular importance are chronicles. Following the Roman example, many medieval peoples and dynasties placed their origins in Troy. Accordingly, many chronicles opened with the fall of the city and the subsequent adventures of their own people's or ruler's Trojan ancestor. This raises the obvious question of whether interest in the material in the Low Countries in the late medieval period, and in particular in urban areas, can be explained in part by just such an ancestral line to the city. Trojan origin sagas have long been regarded, however, as strange excrescences of the historical view of the material, and thought best ignored. In the Netherlands barely any attention was paid to them. This study is concerned mainly with the inventory and analysis of these sagas in the Low Countries, for it are precisely these sagas that hold the unique importance of Troy for the Netherlands.

II. The tradition of classical knowledge about Troy

The 'eye-witness reports' of Dares and Dictys were regarded as the most important source of information about the Trojan War. Other classical authors served only as supplementary sources: they wrote long after the events took place, in the unreliable verse form, and had gods appear in their stories. Their poetry offered moral and allegorical truths rather than factual truths. In the Middle Ages, the work of Dares and Dictys was spread mostly indirectly through the adaptations by Benoît de Sainte-Maure and Guido de Columnis, both of which were intended as historiography but embellished with courtly and learned extras. In this case the humanist *ad fontes* meant: back to Dares and Dictys. For the time being, nothing changed in their status and in the view of the Trojan War as a particularly well-documented historical fact, even when Homer and the classical tragedies came into view. It was only when Dares

and Dictys were exposed in the early eighteenth century that the poetic sources became overwhelmingly significant, and Troy a myth – until archaeology restored its historical basis.

The medieval interpretation of the history of Troy was determined largely by influential early Christian authors, who gave the city and its struggle a place in their universal world view.

In the late medieval Low Countries, Guido was the primary source. His work formed the basis of the three above-mentioned Troy editions, each taking a different approach. Gheraert Leeu presented his *Historien van Troyen* (Gouda, 1479) as reliable historiography, with an emphasis on the connection between Troy and Europe. Jacob Bellaert's *Vergaderinge der Historien van Troyen* (Haarlem, 1485) was a translation of a knightly, Burgundian Troy compilation, with an appropriately handsome text design. Roland van den Dorpe's *Hystorye van der destrucyen van Troyen* (Antwerp, ca. 1500) was the most independent and innovative. Here, the history of Troy was presented as an exemplum of the dangers of love. Only Van den Dorpe reaped undeniable success. This was due not only to his approach, but also to Antwerp: such a large city offered more scope for sales. Moreover, nowhere was the idea of one's own Trojan past so popular as in Antwerp. In this environment, the *Destrucyen* was bound to become a success.

III. A historical fact

Troy was regarded as history and, accordingly, the medieval view of history also determined the view of Troy. Importantly, history was explained as the succession of four world empires, which God had successively invested with universal power. The last of these was the Roman Empire, supposed to endure until the Final Judgement, and here again that power had been passed on: by now the Germans were fulfilling the imperial reign. This notion of *translatio imperii* could be connected to the idea of a religiously charged East-West movement through the course of history. Most world events did not contribute to the plan of salvation, to the salvation of the human race by Christ. The interpretation model for that part of history was the Wheel of Fortune: the endless cycle of rise and fall that demonstrated the vanity of all things earthly. In addition, secular history offered an endless series of other lessons.

Troy was a powerful example of Fortuna at work, and served as a vanitas symbol. Further lessons learned depended on the observer, circumstances and literary context. By explaining the history of Troy as a cautionary exemplum of love and lack of chastity, late medieval Dutch literature was closer to the misogynistic ecclesiastical tradition than to courtly idealism. That lack of chastity, it must be said, did account to some degree for the material's appeal.

Troy's great importance lay not in its value as a moral example, however, but in its unique position at the interface of salvation history and secular history. This is because Troy was the mother city of the Roman Empire, and thereafter the mother city of everyone who aspired to match that important model.

IV. Trojan origin sagas: the European tradition

Of the medieval Troy sagas, the Frankish saga was the most important and the oldest. As regards its content, this saga had a long and stable tradition. It was the interpretation that was subject to change. Franks, the French and Germans, nobility, the clergy and citizenry, they all gave their own twist. As the mother city of Rome, Troy had traditionally been connected to the idea of 'Empire', and it was in this capacity that the city was accommodated in the

medieval world view. Through the *translatio imperii* to the Romans, it was found that the Trojans had been incorporated in the great East-West plan; they were predestined to succeed in the last world empire, in which Christ was born. A claim of Trojan blood had the fundamental implication of being 'the chosen', sovereign, the highest secular power. In early sources for the Frankish saga it was primarily about the people: they provided an explanation and foundation for the ancestry of the people, its name and nature, autonomy, unity and destiny. But in the seventh century Fredegarius already placed this last aspect in the context of salvation history. The imperial crowning of Charlemagne, in 800, was decisive in making the Franks the new Imperial People, a status that was contested ever after between the French and Germans. The saga also had a dynastic significance. The first genealogical connections with Troy had been made for the Merovingians. Later, the Carolingians coupled themselves to Trojan blood, by means of Blithildis, the Merovingian royal princess invented for the purpose. Almost all ruling royal houses in the German Empire grafted themselves onto this genealogical tree, and the French kings did this to no lesser extent. In so doing, they substantiated all kinds of propositions, and in particular their right to the emperorship.

In England, people invoked the equally ancient and influential Brutus saga. This story, too, was used in all manner of political issues, especially in the relationship with France. In terms of development, dissemination and use, this saga corresponds closely to the Frankish saga.

The initial authors and audiences should be sought in a relatively limited circle of *litterati* and their possible commissioners at the larger secular and ecclesiastical courts. As of the twelfth century, these constructs about the past became available in the vernacular, for a public that was to a certain extent *national* and included laymen. In the first instance, this meant the nobility. But increasingly the citizenry too became acquainted with these traditions, which inspired them to create similar sagas to establish their own place in history, support their political and economic interests, and raise the status of their cities. Often these were the patricians: this provided a means of securing for themselves noble blood and a historical basis for their social rank. However, some knowledge of the lineage sagas must also have penetrated to broader layers of society by word of mouth, public performances or a city's monuments.

Eventually, virtually the whole of Europe had placed its origins in Troy. Among some people, this led to a more general interpretation of the Troy sagas as a collective history of the origins of Europe, the habitat of the new chosen people: the descendants of Japheth, the Christians.

Cultural transmission was an important element. The Trojans, king foremost, were regarded as God-sent conquerors of Europe as it was in its supposed original state. In addition, as part of the *translatio* notion the Trojans figured as transmitters of more specific forms of civilisation: of wisdom and science, of chivalry and courtliness, and of urban culture.

Under the influence of humanism, discussion about the Troy sagas grew. Over the long term this undermined the sagas themselves, although this was really more an indirect consequence rather than a victory of historical criticism. Attention now turned to other ancestors: the Gauls and the Germanic peoples (including Angles and Saxons). Their history was originally often combined with the Trojan lineage, even by the humanists. As a result, while the Troy sagas declined in relative importance, they were rarely entirely dismissed. What does appear to have arisen is a dichotomy between modern, humanist historiography and popular, more traditional historiography. The dividing line between these two forms of historiography was intellectual rather than social, as it was not only the broader public among whom the old sagas continued to thrive. The court, too, long remained committed to them.

V. Leading in the Low Countries: Brabant

The Low Countries were largely the territory of the German Duchy of Lower Lotharingia, but actual control lay with the territorial principalities. The oldest Dutch Troy sagas came into being as a phenomenon accompanying their battle for power and for the supremacy which was implied in the ducal title of Lower Lotharingia. The first claim to Trojan blood in the duchy was a Trojan-Carolingian genealogy for the counts of Namur and Boulogne, and was involved in their acquisition of that title. Their successors, the dukes of Brabant, joined this genealogical tree.

Brabant's claim to Trojan blood can first be found in a small number of genealogies dating to around 1270. Their origination has been explained by the dynastic crisis that occurred with the accession of Jan I, and by the ambition of the court to restore to the Lotharingian ducal title its former weight. But this does not fully explain the content of these texts. It is proposed here that Jan I wished to use them to substantiate a claim to the vacant imperial crown. The most important indication of the earlier existence of a Brabant Troy saga is provided by Segher Diengotgaf. Uncertainty about the dating of his work makes it difficult to explain the origin of this older saga. The stated intentions regarding the genealogies may all have played a role.

The oldest Brabant Troy saga was disseminated until into the sixteenth century. Originally, it served the dynasty. In the second instance, it also became meaningful to the cities. It became the bearer of local interests, and of a nationalism that was identified with the dynasty. In particular, the court-capital Brussels identified strongly with the ducal connection with Troy. The dukes, too, appear to have seen the city in the same way: as their own Troy.

But the Brabant Troy tradition was much more extensive: it also encompassed the tale of the Swan Knight named Brabo. In that story the genesis of the country and its cities plays a more prominent role. This enabled this history to assume an even greater role in the collective self-awareness than the oldest Troy saga. By disentangling the complicated tradition, various stages of development could be exposed. The first Brabo saga probably originated to serve the court, in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, as a supplement to the existing derivation from Troy. The story rationalised the dukes' connection back to a rather too fairytale-like Swan Knight named Elias, and offered further explanation and promotion. The second version was conceived not much later in Louvain. It was a bold but clumsy antiquisation of the Brabo story, intended to regain the position of court-capital and capital city from Brussels. In a third version, this antiquisation was radically revised to create a history of the empire of Agrippina, which equalled Rome and in which the origins of Brabant were supposed to have lain. While this story was conceived for Jan III, it was popularised primarily by an Antwerp interpretation of around 1470, in which that city's status and economic importance were securely rooted in history. A fourth, even more stylish rewrite appears to have been produced to support the ambitions of Charles the Bold, as well as those of Brabant itself. This version was incorporated in Jean Lemaire's *Illustrations de Gaule et Singularitéz de Troyes* (1511-1513), which was intended to exult the Habsburgs but, owing to circumstances, never completed as planned. It was nevertheless successful, but little remained of the Brabant element.

It was the oldest Brabant Troy saga that was designated as the 'official origin' of the dukes, in contrast to the criticised derivation from Elias. Erroneously, that contrast was then also applied to Brabo, the improved Swan Knight. However, Brabo is also to be labelled 'official origin', since it was embraced as such repeatedly by and for the court. Earlier hypotheses about an urban, particularly Antwerp-based genesis of the Brabo saga must be rejected.

Only in the second instance was the story taken up by cities. Louvain was remarkably

early in its adoption. But it was particularly Antwerp that embraced Brabo and used him in official city propaganda until late into the sixteenth century. For the Brabo saga, the effect of this urban annexation was twofold. On the one hand, the story gained wider recognition. On the other, it was dissected and dismantled. Every city was interested primarily in its own share of the story. As a result, the saga as a whole – and thus the connection with Troy – faded into the background.

The arrival of the printing press had similarly conflicting consequences. It brought greater dissemination, but it also worked selectively. For the time being local historiography did not appear in print; that was too risky. Only a large market like Antwerp could gain some extra attention. Regional historiography shared the same problem of having its market limited by the subject matter. For this reason, printers were inclined to combine regions. And so the sagas appeared in a new context, one in which original interpretations and intentions sometimes clashed. Such collections brought enfeeblement, confusion and inconsistency.

VI. Trojan origin sagas in the wider Low Countries

As early as in the tenth century Flanders adopted the Trojan-Carolingian genealogical tree as its own, with an eye on the West Frankish throne. Supplementary to this, Flanders' indigenous roots were also fleshed out, with the forester's legend. In the fifteenth century that story was extended to form a complete origin myth, with its own line to Troy via the Merovingian Ydona, daughter of Lotharius. In this way, the counts gained equality with the Carolingians, descendants of another daughter of Lotharius, Blithildis.

The extended forester's legend described the founding of various cities. The special attention given to Bruges may indicate input from Bruges in the story, which was later used for the city's self-promotion. It is probable that the as yet unexplained name of the 'White Bear' society also fits into this context. This name placed Bruges on a line with Rome and other Trojan daughter-cities. The *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen* described Ghent's Trojan origins. This story was derived from the Hainaut Troy saga, probably for the benefit of the printer, who, with a Flemish-Ghent chronicle, was keen to equal the success of the Brabant-Antwerp *Alderexcellentste Cronyke*.

At the end of the fourteenth century, Jacques de Guise created a Hainaut Troy saga, in the *Annales Hannoniae*. He dedicated this to the Count of Holland, Zeeland and Hainaut, with the probable aim of revising his neglect of the latter. His creation of the city and empire of Belgis put his own people's past on an equal footing with that of the Romans. In his genealogy of the counts he, too, varies the Carolingian lineage from Blithildis significantly, with implication of Hainaut superiority. He greatly influenced the late medieval and early modern view of the ancient past of the (Southern) Low Countries. In addition, as was already evident in the *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen*, his work was also drawn upon to glorify certain cities. In particular, the Ghent patrician Marcus van Vaernewijck worked to achieve greater annexation of the Belgis saga for Flanders and Ghent.

The origins of the Counts of Holland were commented upon by various authors connected to the court. A satisfactory explanation of their view remained problematical. It is argued here that they attributed a Merovingian lineage to the counts. In that way, they provided an appropriate background to the Roman kingship of William II and offered counterweight, in particular to Brabant claims to power.

In the fifteenth century the Merovingian origins of the counts were made abundantly explicit. Competition with the Brabant lineage saga is clear, resistance to the Burgundian

rulers implicit. The commissioning party was probably the Van Brederode family. The Van Arkels too had a Troy saga, which emphasised the sovereignty of these powerful Holland vassals. When after 1428 their role was over, the Egmonds descended from them could well use the Trojan blood.

Shortly before 1450 a myth arose that also addressed the origin of the people and of certain places. In it the Hollanders were associated with Troy in an unusual manner: they were identified with the giants (here: Slavic people) chased out of Albion by Brutus. This story was expounded as an awkward embellishment of the Hollanders' own past. It is explained here as a Trojan anti-saga, which portrayed the Holland forefathers as wild men, fitting inhabitants of this Forest without Mercy, this Holt-land.¹ They symbolise the chaos before the arrival of Trojan authority and Christianity. The story was intended to exult Utrecht's first bishop, Willibrord.

The saga about the Slavic people did a poor job of meeting the need for a glorious past. Aurelius, the earliest historiographer of the Batavians, resolved this. In his *Divisiiekroniek*, he retained much of the old saga material, but he replaced the descent from giants with a derivation from the Batavians, *noble savages*. Thus the innovation of his Batavian myth lay in its positive implications. Aurelius appears even to be suggesting that the Batavians came from Troy. The printer, who believed the Hollanders would be interested in a Trojan origin, was doubtless happy with this approach.

The late flourishing of the Gelder historiography can help to explain why Gelre never developed its own Troy saga. This is not to say there were no Gelder connections with Troy. A direct claim to a Trojan origin was made by the Egmonds, for whom this was a means of promoting their status and political interests in Gelre and farther afield. Traditions about Nijmegen and the Germanic ancestors reflect derivations from Trojan material from elsewhere.

In Friesland there was no dynasty. That circumstance contributed to the genesis of a multitude of origin sagas. The oldest stories, involving the Asian Sem and the Indian Friso, emphasised freedom and early piety. They were intended to contradict the Holland-Utrecht portrait of the Frisians as unruly heathens.

In the early years of the sixteenth century, the Groningen patrician Sicke Benninge gave the Frisians new, fashionable prestige: he made Friso into a Trojan, thereby removing the religious overtones of the Friso saga. A small group of Groningen academics was also studying Friesland's past. Their world appears to have been intellectually separate from that of Benninge. Nonetheless, educated authors were also opting for Troy, as is evident from the work of city secretary Reiner Bogerman.

The only 'Frisian' Troy saga that became well-known was conceived for the Habsburgs. In this tale, Friesland was among lands traditionally owned by their Trojan forefathers. One of them, Grunus, founded Groningen. This foundation story underscored the Habsburgs' power over the city to which they were currently laying siege. Grunus, taken out of the Habsburg context, became the pride of Groningen. This led to competitive undermining from other parts of Friesland, which caused Grunus' Trojan background to fade from view.

The mythical historiography about cathedral cities preferred to focus on Rome rather than Troy. Trojan blood was the blood chosen to carry secular power, and thus irrelevant for prelates. For them Rome, the world's pre-eminent and oldest bishopric and the universal ecclesiastical centre, was the ultimate model.

¹ In the Middle Ages, the forest symbolised godless wilderness. The given etymology of Holland corresponds with this symbolism: 'holt' meant wood. The word is similar to the contemporary Dutch word for wood 'hout'.

In spite of this, lines to Troy were also drawn for cathedral cities. The most important Dutch example concerns Tongeren, the original seat of the bishopric of Liège, and a visibly old city. For Tongeren, too, a fine Roman past was conceived. In the twelfth century a Trojan link was added as a result of a promotional campaign conducted by the collegiate chapter of Saint Servais in Maastricht. That Trojan past was further exaggerated in the work of Jean d'Outremeuse, in order to glorify Liège and the city's *beau monde*. Tongeren was also used beyond the Prince-Bishopric of Liège to create a Trojan past: in Brabant and Hainaut, and at the Burgundian and Habsburg courts. From the sixteenth century onwards, examples can be found that show that the city itself was proud of this origin.

VII. Conclusion

In the Late Middle Ages Troy still had the same significance: as an exemplum for old truths and truths to be formed and, especially, as the chosen birthplace of the last Empire, of an order and civilisation willed by God, with which people were keen to associate themselves in order to explain and strengthen their own position. In the Low Countries, too, various lines to Troy were laid: for ruling dynasties, for nobility, and subsequently for cities, too. The quantity of sagas here was even greater than in the surrounding countries, due to political fragmentation and the associated power struggle, which was also fought on this front. Thus, interest in Troy was still directly connected with one's own origins in the city. The press endorsed this, and humanism was often mild, especially when in the service of a court, city or printing office.

Nonetheless, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a turning point. It was precisely the multitude of Dutch sagas that made the Troy tradition vulnerable here. Developments surrounding the court, the selective and erosive interest of cities and printers, the progress of the Dutch Revolt, the contiguous shift of the cultural centre to the North: all this helped to diminish the value and appreciation of the once so important Troy sagas. Their significance was forgotten.

Translation: *Metamorfose Vertalingen*, Utrecht