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The Narrative Sources from the Medieval Low Countries

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How does one find information about an author, an anonymous text, or a genre of writing from a particular region in the middle ages? Where does one search for writers of saints? lives, authors of diaries or letters, historians, and chroniclers? Before the advance of the digital age, medievalists relied (and of course still do) on the printed bibliographies and source collections, organized by modern country, and compiled from the nineteenth century onwards. So, for Germany we have the Wattenbach-Holtzmann series of *Geschichtsquellen*, for France it is still Molinier, even though a new project initiated by Fawtier has begun, while England?s sources have been opened up by Hardy and most recently by Sharpe. Some are inclusive and list narrative and documentary sources (Wattenbach-Holtzmann), others include only narrative ones (Molinier), while some are restricted to Latin authors (Sharpe). There are also supra-national projects that encompass most of the Christian middle ages starting with the work of Chevalier and now in the process of being replaced by the ongoing *Repertorium Fontium Historiae Medii Aevi*, a printed list in alphabetical order of all known authors, in Latin, compiled by an international committee based in Rome. The volume of medieval authors whose name begins with ?P? is now in preparation.

For the Medieval Low Countries we are fortunate to have an up-to-date electronic database, *Narrative Sources* [2], that is available free on the Internet. In geographical terms it covers the present countries of the Netherlands and Belgium and a large chunk of what is now northern France, including French Flanders and French Hainault, as well as parts of Germany, such as Eastern Friesland and Northern Rhineland. It also includes Liège, even though strictly speaking it never formed part of the Low Countries. The database contains 2,141 entries for all narrative texts (chronicles, histories, saints? lives, miracle stories, letters, and diaries) written in that area between c. 500 and c. 1550. It is not restricted to Latin texts, but also includes those in vernacular languages such as Middle Dutch, Frisian, Old and Middle French, and Middle German. As a compilation it is, therefore, larger than M. Carasso-Kok?s *Repertorium van de verhalende historische bronnen uit de Middeleeuwen*

(The Hague, 1981) which is restricted to the Netherlands, or L. Genicot and P. Tombeur?s *Index scriptorum operumque Latino-Belgicorum Medii Aevi* (Brussels, 1973?9) which covers Belgium. In the period 1996?2004, as part of a collaborative project, scholars from the universities of Ghent, Leuven, and Groningen compiled the database. Regular updates are published on an annual basis. An extremely useful *Narrative Sources User?s Guide* by Professor Jeroen Deploige from Ghent University was published in 2003. Its electronic version can be downloaded, free, from the *Narrative Sources* website.

The content of the database?a list of all medieval narrative sources, totalling 2,141 entries, across a region stretching from Friesland in the north to French Flanders in the south, and from Holland and Flemish Flanders in the west to the northern Rhineland and Liège in the east?is in itself a superbly valuable resource. It is particularly valuable because it crosses modern-day political boundaries and allows access to men and women who wrote in a political landscape that was culturally and socially much more coherent than it is in our own days. We find famous authors like Lambert of Saint-Omer (fl. c. 1120), creator of the first medieval encyclopedia, who lived and worked at Saint-Omer, one of the wealthiest towns of (French) Flanders, or Lambert of Ardres (d. after 1220), the author of a hugely important dynastic chronicle of the relatively minor comital families of Guînes and Ardres from the area north of Boulogne, or Galbert of Bruges, the first clerk-journalist who recounted, with horror, the murder of Count Charles the Good in 1127. But we also have many less well-known authors. One of them is Emo of Huizinge (d.1237), abbot of Bloemhof, a Premonstratensian monastery at Wittewierum in the northern province of Groningen. Although he features in the database because he wrote an invaluable chronicle of his monastery with lots of contemporary detail from across Europe (thanks to his rapportage of the 1217 crusade), he is also important for another reason, particularly in England. Together with his brother Azzo he was one of the first attested students of the university of Oxford, where he went for its expertise in Canon Law. In his Bloemhof chronicle he harks back to his youth when he toured Western Europe in pursuit of teachers, thirsty for an education that was only scarcely available at home. It is for these reasons that I shall take Emo as an example to assess the value and user-friendliness of the *Narrative Sources* database. How, then, do we set about finding him?

Once you have typed in the URL for the *Narrative Sources* database (http://www.narrative-sources.be [3]) you are directed to its home page where you are invited to choose between the two languages in which the database may be interrogated (Dutch or English). Once you have made your choice, you are taken to a menu screen. This gives you a choice of seven options. The database itself is the second on the list; the others link to a note on presentation, tools, related websites, and recent publications. Although you can freely choose any of these options, you will be required to enter your name, email address, and affiliation before you are actually given access to the database. The users? email addresses are collected by the owners of the database for follow-up information about new or updated entries.

The database itself is the raison d?être of the website. If you know the name of the author you are interested in, you type his first name into the search field. In our case, this is Emo. Non-medievalists may note that in medieval studies the use of the first, rather than the last, name is standard practice. If known, you can also add the author?s last name and/or his geographical origin. However, nowhere does it tell you, unless you have read the presentation section first, that you have to use the language in which the author wrote when entering this information. Emo wrote in Latin, but because his name is unusual and has no modern equivalent this need not concern us here. Moreover he is the only person of that name in the database, so his first name alone suffices. But if you had tried to find Lambert of Saint-Omer or Lambert of Ardres you would have needed to type the surname or geographical origin such as Lambertus-de-S. Audomaro or Lambertus-presbiter-Ardensis. Otherwise it is a question of ploughing through the twenty-one results achieved when searching for ?Lambertus? using only the ?author? field. These examples highlight the need for users to have some knowledge of the career of the person they are searching for and some Latin (or at least access to a source like *Orbis Latinus*), as does the fact that if more search terms were required to find Emo, a searcher would need to know that Emo?s ?surname?, Bloemhof, becomes Floridus Hortus. This classical language requirement, then, is a huge threshold to overcome, and especially tricky in this day and age when even amongst medieval scholars the knowledge of Latin is increasingly rare. On the other hand, there is perhaps no reason to criticize the *Narrative Sources* database compilers so long as the grand

enterprise of the *Repertorium Fontium Historiae Medii Aevi* remains entirely written in Latin with no concession to modern languages! But let me return to our quest to find Emo.

If you type in ?Emo? without changing any other search option (so that, for example, the language remains ?Allemand?), you will be offered eight entries on Emo. This is also the case if the searcher proceeds by using the index. Of the eight hits for ?Emo?, the first three are relatively unimportant. They all concern another twelfth-century author, Guibert of Gembloux, secretary of the great mystic abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who is mentioned by our Emo in his chronicle. The main entry on Emo of Bloemhof is the fourth one labelled ?Emo? while the remainder concern his successor Menko (see below). Making changes to some of the search options can reduce the number of hits. Typing ?Emo? and also limiting the language to ?Latin?, for example, produces just the one result?the main entry on Emo that was the fourth hit when using the original search and index search.

Emo?s entry offers a typical range of search fields; some twenty-four of them in total, each identified by a two-letter abbreviation in the left-hand margin. They begin with the identification number (NL0365), type of source (annals or chronicle), language (Latin), author (Emo), and Status (Premonstratensian monk). This last section contains a potted history of the author in Dutch and English?although at first sight it may seem that everything is in Dutch as the text changes to English half way through the single paragraph for this field without any visual marker to indicate that it has done so. Other search fields follow which give the title (*Cronica Floridi Horti*), the incipit or first few words of the text, the explicit or last few words (useful in order to make sure that the reader can identify a potentially new mansucript text with this one), and the size of the work indicated by the number of chapters in the text. There then follow several more fields that give information about the number of manuscripts known (in Emo?s case there is only one contemporary manuscript kept in the University Library at Groningen), all known editions of the text (five complete ones published between 1699 and 1991, plus several abridged ones), and all known translations (three of them, all in Dutch). Thereafter is listed the ?literature? field which contains a bibliography of all substantial discussions of Emo?s work. All entries have such a bibliography, setting out the most important modern studies of the authors, or anonymous narratives, in any modern language. Although all the bibliographies are ambitious and pretty comprehensive, many have not been updated beyond 2004; the last time a comprehensive editorial update took place.

The last few fields are technical references that allow the searcher to navigate further within the database. All of these fields can be searched and lead to other texts of the same genre, the same language, area, monastic order, etc. Thus the example of Emo can lead us to other thirteenth-century chroniclers in the northern and southern Low countries, and it allows us to differentiate between them by monastic order (Benedictine, Cistercian, Premonstatensian) or by more specific regions, for example Groningen, Gelre, Flanders, or Hainault, or to find the various monasteries in Emo?s homeland where chronicles were written, Wittewierum being one of them. Since the number of early-thirteenth-century chronicles in the northern Low Countries is rather limited, you might wish to compare this historiographical genre with other types of writing such as saints? lives, miracle stories, or translation narratives (which tell the story of the transfer of saints? relics from one place to another). Searches involving any of these fields produce rich and exciting yields that no conventionally printed collection of the sort described above can offer.

The information about the manuscripts of an authors? work is particularly invaluable. In the Middle Ages, all texts were handwritten and had to be painstakingly copied, one by one, for a story to be circulated. During the process of copying a chronicle or saint?s life, the scribes regularly inserted unique pieces of information into the original text. Hence modern historians often have to check each of the individual manuscripts of a text, particularly if it has not been properly edited, to make sure that they have all the available information about, and variants of, that particular narrative. The database includes all known manuscripts and editions of each of the narratives included. This makes it an invaluable tool for a comparison of writing workshops and medieval libraries across the Low Countries. In Emo?s case, as we have already noted, we only have one medieval manuscript of his chronicle. But even though we have only the one copy, it is an extremely important manuscript because it was copied by Emo?s successor as abbot, Menko, who continued the chronicle during his life. Hence we have in fact two authors for one chronicle in

the autograph (that is, a manuscript written in the author?s own hand) of the second author. Emo and Menko between them represent a form of historical writing that was quite common in the Middle Ages, when institutional histories?whether of a monastery, bishopric, or noble family?were often continued sometimes over several generations by a series of authors who kept the story alive and up-to-date. The fact that only one medieval copy has survived of their chronicle illustrates another feature of medieval historical writing. As I have already highlighted above, Emo?s chronicle is a valuable historical source because it contains otherwise-unknown details about the history of the crusade of 1217. For present-day historians, then, a local chronicle from a distant monastery in the north of the Netherlands turns out to be of utmost value, whereas its medieval audience was confined to the monks of Bloemhof at Wittewierum.

The authority of the database is uncontested. It has been compiled by a group of distinguished medievalists from Gent, Leuven, and Groningen whose procedures have been rigorous. However, fully conscious of the fact that whatever checking mechanisms one has in place, errors can slip in, the compilers offer users the opportunity to submit revisions, additions, or corrections to existing database entries. This does not mean that the database has been ?wikified? in the sense that any user can offer uncensored revisions to any entry. Instead corrections and additions are gathered from its readers and users and are then collated and entered into the database on an annual basis.

The website contains useful sections on the presentation of the database and the tools available to access it, and for the computer literate it has much technical information that allows the specialist to learn about the technical procedures that surround the compilation of the material found within it. The website also allows users to link up with related websites?a technical tool that is invaluable. There are links to the hagiographical database of the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Manuscripta*, which lists all known manuscript of hagiographical texts, including those concerning the Low Countries. For readers interested in the Dutch language there is an indispensable link to the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*, which gathers all information about manuscripts containing texts written in Dutch anywhere in the world. The most comprehensive and prestigious guide to medieval narrative sources is the *Repertorium Fontium Historiae Medii Aevi*, based in Rome, which I referred to in my introductory paragraph. Finally, there is a link to *The Labyrinth: Resources for Medieval Studies* sponsored by Georgetown University (USA), which provides organized access to electronic resources in medieval studies. It seems churlish to complain about any negative aspects of the opportunity to link to related websites. However, I have to say that it is a bit of an irritant that one is prevented from flicking between the *Narrative Sources* database and any of its linked websites without having to go through the name/email/affiliation entry procedure (although at least it is enough simply to retype your name).

All in all the *Narrative Sources* website is an immensely valuable tool for any medievalist with an interest in the Medieval Low Countries. I use it frequently, and find that it usually supplies the information that I am looking for quickly, efficiently, and correctly. But you have to allow yourself time to get used to its idiosyncracies, and the database still relies a little too much on the assumption that its audience is Latin literate. Increasingly, sadly, this is not the case and the database compilers should note this. I recommend the database strongly as an extremely useful an authoritative resource for anyone interested in medieval studies.

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Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3879
[2] http://www.portahistorica.eu/review-of-digital-source-editions/narrative-sources-from-the-medieval-low-countries
[3] http://www.narrative-sources.be