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Willibrord and the "tree fall": A Historiographical Myth of the Origins of Dutch Civilization[1]

In the fifteenth century the interest in the roots of Dutch civilization took a sudden upsurge among the writers of chronicles and of more sophisticated types of historiography in the Northern Netherlands. Many historians took pains to investigate the primeval stages of their region's past, and they quite often used or even created myths and legends in the process.

The most important historiographical myth was undoubtedly the Batavian myth, created by humanist historians who took their inspiration from ancient authors who touched upon the Netherlands accidentally, most notably Tacitus. Dutch historians identified the people of the Batavi, mentioned by Tacitus, with the inhabitants of Dutch regions like Holland or Gelderland and pictured them, in a sense, as noble savages prefiguring the positive qualities of the inhabitants of the Netherlands.[2] The Batavians are more or less to the Dutch what the Gauls are to the French, although the Batavians, in contrast to the Gauls, no longer play a role in popular imagination.

The Batavian myth is related to the origins of the Dutch people. Late medieval Dutch historians, however, used their imagination also to account for the origins of the land itself - for its actual physical existence, that is. Unlike other countries, the Netherlands had not simply been there since the creation of the world. According to many authors, the country had gradually arisen from the sea, as a result of the accumulation of mud deposited by the river Rhine. The idea that the Netherlands are in fact part of the sea does, of course, still play a role in popular imagination: until recent times, numerous inundations reminded the Dutch that the physical existence of their country is far from self-evident. Other authors who occupied themselves with the geographical origins of the Netherlands dreamt about the condition of the Dutch soil. Some fifteenth-century historians believed that the country had initially been covered by savage forests, usually called "the Wild Woods without Mercy". (In fact, the name "Holland" was believed to have derived from "Houtland", "woodland"). Then these woods fell down, or so the historians claimed, and Dutch civilization could make a start. In this paper I will discuss the tales connected with the tree fall and their development in Dutch historiography from the fifteenth century onwards.

In the works of a number of fifteenth-century historians we find the history that the Roman emperor Claudius, arriving on the Dutch shores on his way back to Rome from England, was struck by the huge forests he discovered on the mainland and decided therefore to call them the Wild Woods without Mercy. The same works inform us that the fall of these woods took place just before the mission of Willibrord, the British saint who converted the Northern parts of the Netherlands to Christianity and became the first bishop of Utrecht, in 695. Our first testimony stems from a small chronicle dating from about 1440. It relates that in the days when Willibrord went to Rome to be consecrated a bishop by Pope Sergius, a gale combined with a severe earthquake felled all the trees standing in the Wild Woods without Mercy in one night. When Willibrord, invested with the pallium, returned from Rome and saw that all the trees had fallen down, he thought that God had given him a special sign to convert the country. Accordingly, Willibrord started his mission after the tree fall, supported by the Frankish majordomos, with the conversion of the Northern Netherlands, now comprised in his bishopric, as a final and lasting result.[3]

It is, of course, highly significant that the tree fall was in so many words related to the initial stage of Christian history in the Northern Netherlands. The tree fall represents the end of geographical wilderness: after the crash of the Woods without Mercy, the country became suited for sedentary habitation and agricultural cultivation, as was made explicit by later authors who included the tale in

their story. The activities of Willibrord, on the other hand, represent the end of Dutch savagery in the light of the history of Salvation: paganism gives way to Christian truth. The culmination of the latter process is the foundation of the diocese of Utrecht. By making the tree fall and the foundation of the diocese coincide, the 1440 chronicle gives the impression that the "barbarous" past of the Northern Netherlands was swept away in one single moment, after which the history of Christian civilization could begin. God made, as it were, a clean sweep in the Netherlands. He turned the country, almost literally, into a tabula rasa, fit for cultivation in both senses of the term.

In its original, mythical form, the tale about Willibrord and the tree fall remained alive for a little less than a century. Quite a number of historians who were writing about 1500 adopted the tale in the form our chronicle from 1440 had presented it,[4] while others modified it. One of these modifications consisted in attributing the initiative of the tree fall to Willibrord himself. Instead of interpreting the event afterwards as a divine token, the saint was reported to have prayed to God to fell the woods. Some authors explained that the woods were used for pagan rituals.[5] In fact this shift in the tale of the tree fall is not very surprising. Missionary saints destroying trees which have a religious function among the heathens are a well-known feature of medieval hagiography. Although the medieval lives of Willibrord make no mention whatsoever of events like a tree fall, they do report that the saint destroyed several pagan shrines.[6]

A second, more important shift in the story occurred in the beginning of the sixteenth century, when several humanist historians disputed the existence of the Woods without Mercy. They did not deny that there had once been large forests in the Netherlands which had fallen down in the course of history. An objective confirmation of this fact seemed to be offered by contemporary reality: many Dutch farmers struck upon old trees hidden in the soil when they were ploughing their fields. The idea, however, that in Antiquity all of the country had been overrun with woods offended the humanists in their national pride. The idea was hardly compatible with the newly invented Batavian myth, according to which Holland had known a reasonably elaborate proto-civilization long before the days of Willibrord. Moreover, classical sources offered no confirmation of the view that the emperor Claudius had given the woods their odious name.[7] Tacitus, on the other hand, had spoken of a *nemus sacrum*, a sacred grove that could be connected with the Batavians. According to the humanists, it was this *nemus sacrum*, a forest of more modest proportions, that Willibrord had destroyed after his consecration in Rome.[8]

With this shift, the tale of the tree fall lost much of its mythical character. The humanists brought the tale into line with the classical heritage, but deprived it of its power at the same time. The *nemus sacrum* was only a poor substitute for the Woods without Mercy, which supposedly had covered the whole country. The destruction of the *nemus sacrum* was reduced to a mere episode in the life and deeds of Willibrord, too small an event to symbolize the transition from pagan barbarism to Christian civilization. The introduction of Christianity itself was no longer considered the founding act of Dutch civilization: its roots were associated with Batavian paganism, not with Willibrord's mission. The tale of the tree fall became ordinary history, whereas the myth of the origins of Dutch civilization was henceforth connected with the Batavians.

The third and final shift in the tale about the tree fall took place in the second half of the sixteenth century, when it was denied that Willibrord had had anything whatever to do with the tree fall. In part this shift was based on a confusion. Fifteenth-century historians had distinguished the tree fall, dated to the end of the seventh century, from another event: a horrible tempest, dated to about 860, so powerful that the river Rhine was driven inland by the sea and all the trees alongside the river were felled.[9] In the first half of the sixteenth century the two events came to be seen as one. One historian mentioned a storm tide as a major factor in the tree fall brought about by Willibrord[10] - before that, historians had only spoken of winds and earthquakes - but the main responsibility for the confusion rests with Cornelius Aurelius, the historian who, most probably, invented the Batavian myth. Aurelius did not mention a tree fall in Willibrord's days at all, but suggested that the Dutch forests (which he still called the Woods without Mercy) had come down during the tempest of 860.[11] After Aurelius, whose work became extremely

influential,[12] Dutch historians supposed that only one tree fall had taken place and asked themselves when it had happened: at the end of the seventh century, in 860, or even later. In most cases they decided in favor of 860, rejecting the tale about Willibrord as a remnant of devotionalism, superstition, or Catholic propaganda - for in those days the Dutch republic was founded and officially adopted the reformed religion. The tale of Willibrord and the tree fall had been degraded once more: from ordinary history, it had become mere legend. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the possibility that the tree fall had occurred in the days of Willibrord was sometimes still considered in earnest;[13] eighteenth-century historians seem only to have mentioned the legendary role of Willibrord in the tree fall for the sake of completeness, as a peculiar popular belief of former days.[14]

The tree fall of 860 was granted a much better fate in early modern historiography. Not only did most historians choose 860 as the year of the one and only tree fall, it grew into an event of mythical proportions in its own right. While the tree fall of the late seventh century could be connected to the foundation of the diocese of Utrecht, a most decisive moment in Dutch ecclesiastical history, the event of 860 could be related to a most decisive moment in Dutch political history: the foundation of the county of Holland, which was believed to have occurred in 863. From the middle of the sixteenth century onwards, Dutch historians explained that the first count of Holland had been appointed by the emperor just a few years after the soil had been cleared from the woods standing on it and thus made suitable for habitation and cultivation.[15] The most elaborate and eloquent expression of this idea was given by a historian (or myth-maker) writing in the middle of the seventeenth century, Jacob van Oudenhoven. In his work on the origins of Holland, which appeared in 1654, he endorsed the old adage that Holland was a gift from the sea and the wind. In primeval times, Oudenhoven explained, the land we now call Holland was no land, but the bottom of the sea. According to an old tradition, which Oudenhoven claims to have heard from old Dutchmen, the dunes were formed by a heavy storm, many centuries before the Christian era. Because the dunes blocked the flow of the river Rhine, an effect of sedimentation occurred and gradually the land was formed. Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century, was still unable to say whether Holland consisted of land or of water. But eventually the land gained victory over the sea, and because the Rhine supplied many tree seeds, the "Great Dutch Forest" grew up. Oudenhoven then asked when this forest had fallen down. He rejected as superstitious the possibility that Willibrord had made this happen, and preferred the year 860. Gales and gigantic currents in the Rhine caused the crash of the forest. After the eradication of the woods, Oudenhoven explained, people were planted in the region instead of trees. Shortly afterwards the county of Holland was founded on the now populated and smoothly flattened plains.[16]

It is evident that with Oudenhoven, the primeval history of Holland has regained its mythical character. Holland is presented as a marshland and as a woodland at the same time. When both elemental forces, the sea and the forest, have destroyed each other in gigantic storms, the pretty lowlands appear on which civilization is possible and the county of Holland can be built up. There are, however, considerable differences between the myth constructed by Oudenhoven and the myth about Willibrord and the tree fall of Oudenhoven's fifteenth-century predecessors. First of all, Oudenhoven's myth bears a clearly secular character. Holland is established in a chain of far-reaching natural phenomena, not by supernatural forces: neither God nor his servant Willibrord play any significant role. Accordingly, the turning point from prehistoric barbarism to the history of civilization is not connected with the establishment of spiritual power (the foundation of the diocese of Utrecht) but with the establishment of temporal power (the foundation of the county of Holland).

Second, the story told by Oudenhoven - but also by his contemporaries who linked the 860 tree fall with the foundation of the county of Holland - demonstrates the Hollandocentrism that has pervaded Dutch culture ever since the foundation of the Dutch state. The myth of Willibrord and the tree fall was a myth for all Dutchmen alike. The diocese of Utrecht comprised all of the Northern Netherlands, so that by linking the tale of the tree fall (and thus the beginning of civilization) with the consecration of the first bishop of Utrecht, a myth was created about the origins of Christian history in all regions of the Northern Netherlands. On the

other hand, by transferring the tree fall from Willibrord's consecration to the installation of the first count of Holland, a myth was created which touched only upon the inhabitants of the region of Holland and their origins. Holland had made a supra-regional myth its exclusive regional property.

The county of Holland is notorious for this tendency. From the late Middle Ages until the present day, Holland has been appropriating all national symbols of the Dutch state, and has in turn been making its own regional symbols the exclusive representation of Dutch national identity. The Batavian myth offers a good example in this respect. Tacitus' Batavia is not situated in Holland but in Gelderland, as everyone knows nowadays. Yet the historians of the county of Holland have always been arrogating the Batavians as their own ancestors, and thus as the forebears of the Dutch people in general.

Hollandocentrism has been so powerful that foreigners nowadays hardly make a distinction between "Holland" and "the Netherlands", and the people of Holland proper are proud of that. Consider the so-called Leo Belgicus, [see cover] a map of the Low Countries in the shape of a lion, from Frisia in the North to Luxemburg in the South. The map was printed in Amsterdam in 1650, but the cartographic tradition is at least half a century older. But recently the same lion has been printed embracing only the county of Holland.[17] This example shows clearly that the tendency of Holland to appropriate all Dutch national symbols and to take itself for the sole representative of the Netherlands still exists, even among historians who should know better.

In conclusion we can say that the use of the tale of the tree fall in Dutch historiography proves to be quite revealing as far as Dutch national identity is concerned. Secularism and Hollandocentrism have always been remarkably strong in Dutch society and culture. But the image of the tree fall as the starting point of civilization is highly significant in itself. One could, of course, interpret the tree fall as a castration phantasy, but this is not what I am thinking of in the first place. I am thinking of a contrast with Germany, such as Dutch people looking for their own identity always establish. To the Germans, the forest is their national symbol. It is clearly a vertical symbol: the trees point upward, to the heavens. The forest thus gives the Germans a sense of the infinite. According to the tale of the tree fall, Dutch civilization starts with the eradication of this vertical symbol. Civilization is associated with flatness. It can only unfold in a horizontal dimension where it soon encounters its narrow limits; limits that are constitutive of the Dutch way of life and that therefore have to be consciously experienced. Dutch civilization is therefore essentially restrictive, claustrophile rather than claustrophobic. Secularism strengthens this tendency, for it is a way of denying vertical relations; and Hollandocentrism could be seen as a deliberate attempt at narrowing horizontal space and thus of fostering national feelings even further. The tale of the tree collapse reminds us that aspiring to wuthering heights is definitely un-Dutch; egalitarianism on a small scale corresponds much more to the national character.

NOTES

[1.] This article is based on a paper read at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds, July 1994. I have discussed the source material used here more elaborately in my article "Willibrord en de grote boomstorting. Een mythe uit de oud-vaderlandse geschiedschrijving', *Holland. Regionaal-historisch tijdschrift* 24 (1992), 65-77.

[2.] See Karin Tilmans, *Aurelius en de Divisiekroniek van 1517. Historiografie en humanisme in Holland in de tijd van Erasmus* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1988), 121-66; in English: *Historiography and Humanism in Holland in the Age of Erasmus. Aurelius and the Divisiekroniek of 1517* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1992), 199-288.

[3.] *Het Oude Goutsche Chronycxken...*,ed. Petrus Scriverius (Amsterdam, 1663), 10.

[4.] Johannes a Leydis, *Chronicon comitum Hollandiae et episcoporum Ultrajectensium* (first redaction, 1467-9), MS Leiden, University Library, BPL 172 D, ch II.4, fol. 15v-16r; id., *Chronicon* (second redaction, 1485-94), ed. Franciscus Sweertius, *Rerum Belgicarum Annales Chronici et Historici* (Frankfurt, 1620), ch. II.14, 23; Jan Veldenaer, *Dit sijn die chronijken van Utrecht...*, *Fasciculus Temporum* (Utrecht, 1480), fol. 247v; Anonymus Latinus, *Chronica de Trajecto et ejus episcopatu ac*

ortu Frisiae (ca. 1480), ed. Antonius Matthaeus, *Veteris aevi analecta seu vetera monumenta hactenus non visa* (The Hague, 1738 (2)) vol. 5, 310-311; "Kattendijke-kroniek" (ca. 1490; private collection), fol. 124r-v; Jan van Naaldwijk, *Chronyk van Holland ende van Zeelant* (first redaction, ca. 1514), MS London, BM, Cotton Vitellius F XV, fol. 23r-v; Hendrik van Gouda, *Chronica Hollandiae, Zeelandiae et Frisiae* (second redaction, 1522), MS Groningen, University Library, no. 129, fol. 171r. I owe the references to Naaldwijk and the Kattendijke-kroniek to Karin Tilmans, and the reference to Gouda to Mathilde van Dijk. On the recently discovered Kattendijke-kroniek, see Karin Tilmans, "De Kattendijke-kroniek: een uniek kopij-manuscript uit Haarlem", *Boeken in de late middeleeuwen*, ed. Jos Hermans and Klaas van der Hoek, Boekhistorische reeks 1 (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1994), 183-200.

[5] Willem van Berchen, *Hollandse Kroniek* (1480), MS Brussels, Royal Library, no. 8039, fol. 313v, was the first to make Willibrord responsible for the tree fall (I owe the reference to Karin Tilmans); Reinier Snoy, *De rebus Batavicis libri* XVIII (1519), ed. Sweertius, *Rerum Belgicarum Annales*, ch. II, 22, was the first to mention pagan rituals.

[6] See Alcuin's *Vita Willibrordi archiepiscopi Traiectensis* (796-7), ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. vol. 7 (Hannover-Leipzig: Hahn, 1920), ch. 10, 124-5, and ch. 14, 128; *Vita S. Willibrordi auctore Thiofrido abbate Epternacensi* (early 12th c.), *Acta Sanctorum* Nov. III, ed. Carolus de Smedt et al. (Brussels: Socii Bollandiani, 1910), ch. 11, 466-7, and ch. 13, 468-9. On the medieval *vitae* of Willibrord, see Anton Weiler, *Willibrords missie. Christendom en cultuur in de zevende en achtste eeuw* (Hilversum: Gooi & Sticht, 1989), 186-90; István Bejczy, "Ein Zeugnis Alkuins: die *Vita Willibrordi*", *Dutch Review of Church History* 70 (1990), 121-39.

[7] For the diffusion of this view, which originated with *Het Oude Goutsche Chronycxken*, in the 15th and early 16th centuries, see Bejczy, "Willibrord en de grote boomstorting", 69 n. 17; to be added: Kattendijke-kroniek, fol. 105v.

[8] The first and most eloquent expression of this idea is Snoy, *De rebus Batavicis, loc. cit.*

[9] See most notably Leydis, *Chronicon* (second redaction), ch. V. 30, 88.

[10] Snoy, *De rebus Batavicis, loc. cit.*

[11] *Die Cronycke van Hollant, Zeelant ende Vrieslant...* (=*Divisiekroniek*, 1517) (Dordrecht, 1585), ch. II.5, fol. 17r; ch. III.95, fol. 53v. Karin Tilmans is preparing a critical edition of this chronicle.

[12] A shortened version of his *Divisiekroniek*, usually called *Cronijcke int corte* (1543), was used as a history schoolbook in Dutch education for two centuries and a half; Tilmans, *Historiography and Humanism*, 313, mentions 25 16th-century editions, and a total of 70 editions up to 1802.

[13] See most notably Hadrianus Junius, *Batavia* (Leiden, 1588), ch. 13, 172; and Petrus Scriverius, *Verclaringhe van oudt Batavien Nu ghenaemt Hollandt* (Leiden, 1606), 45.

[14] A complete list of references can be found in Bejczy, "Willibrord en de grote boomstorting".

[15] Lambertus Hortensius, *Secessionum civilium Ultraiectinarum et bellorum...* (1548) (Utrecht, 1624), ch. VI, 140, was the first to link the 860 tree collapse and the foundation of the county of Holland; Hortensius believed, however, that the tree collapse had really taken place in 1170.

[16] *Out-Hollandt, nu Zuyt-Hollandt* (Dordrecht, 1654), ch. 3, 14-20.

[17] The "Holland lion" appears on the cover of the review *Holland, Regionaal-historisch tijdschrift* (see note 1).