

Rudi Künzel, *The Plow, the Pen and the Sword: Images and Self-Images of Medieval People in the Low Countries*, translated by Claire Weeda (Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 12). Routledge, London and New York, 2018. 343 pp. ISBN 978-1-472-44210-9.

Born in 1939, Rudi Künzel, who for many years (1966-1989) was on the staff of the Meertens Institute (onomastics, folklore, dialectology), working on the *Nederlandse Lexicon van nederlandse toponiemen tot 1200* ('Dutch lexicon of place names in the Netherlands up to 1200'), has ever since his first publications in 1979-1981 been an initiator and constant advocate of a French approach to historical anthropology that mainly revolves around the images and self-images of social groups and their impact. He has always seen this as an extension of classic social history (economic class structure versus social ranking) and the interplay of *mental* phenomena (belief, emotion and thinking) in social life.

The focus and structure of the book reviewed here match those of Künzel's University of Amsterdam dissertation *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen* ('Images and Self-Images of Medieval People', 1997), a regional study of what are now the Netherlands and Belgium in the early Middle Ages based on relevant written testimony with which Künzel is familiar through his work on place names. To give its focus and findings greater international resonance and encourage further regional research into mentality, he has – rightly! – produced an English version, not only revising the text, but also incorporating references to international research (as can be seen in the bibliography and the highly detailed subject index, pp. 295-343). So how is Künzel's study structured?

A clear introduction (pp. 1-24) informs readers at length about the purpose and presentation of the book. Künzel has given careful thought to the emergence of the new research paradigm based on such key concepts as 'mentality', 'ideology', 'self-image', 'culture', 'religion', 'folklore' and their social attributes ('class', 'group', 'popular', 'individual' and so on).

The testimony that is of relevance to the questions he raises is 'stories' of the most varied kind: lives, *gesta*, annals, chronicles, miracles, reports on the transfer of relics, legends and sagas, as well as letters, poems and treatises. Their explicit or implicit details bear witness to existing situations, ways of thinking, sentiments and mindsets. Normative testimony – tribal laws, rules, diplomas, edicts, conveyance documents, lists of property, liturgical texts and records of knowledge – is deliberately avoided by Künzel because of its usual lack of relevance to social reality. This distinction between narrative and normative traditions is typical of the whole book – for narrative traditions are the very reason why Künzel has rejected the two familiar concepts of 'cultural unity' (Gurevich) and the 'clergy/laity' and 'aristocracy/peasants' dichotomy (Le Goff) as a theoretical approach to his presentation. Instead he has opted for Duby's 'group cultures' model. This also explains the three snappy 'tool' metaphors in the main title of the book, which do not recur in the actual text – was this an idea suggested by the publishers or advertisers?

An equally important reason for Künzel's preference for 'group mentality' is that every group can be subdivided, and so raises questions about differences in mentality. It is this second social level that ensures more precise empirical detail. This is particularly important with regard to the clergy: church leaders (bishops and their immediate subordinates), monasteries and convents with their abbots, monks and nuns, and parishes with their local priests and congregations. Each subgroup could presumably have a cultural or mental profile of its own. The same applies to the aristocracy and the peasantry. The search for such profiles is a key feature of the first part of the book (Group cultures, pp. 25-98): Künzel has collected individual profiling testimony in four social categories: clergy, aristocracy, peasants and merchants. Not so very much is available, and what there is differs from group to group and from subgroup to subgroup. Almost all of it is recorded – and hence concealed – in texts written in ecclesiastical Latin. Künzel sees himself as an expert in the magnification and filtering of unintentionally transmitted or deliberately distorted details and 'stories'.

The self-image of the clergy is mainly based on idealized missionary, ascetic, administrative and curative notions. However, Künzel has inevitably left unanswered the question to what extent such virtues are reflected in the practical actions of what are, after all, the 'better' Christians. Devout militant pride, feats of horsemanship, fair rule, noble origins, munificent spending – such aristocratic components of self-image stand in contrast to the critical attitudes and distress of defenceless clerics and ordinary people faced with threats, seizure of goods, repression and killing by those greedy for power and possessions, especially in times of aggressive encastellation by local aristocrats and increasing claims to self-assertion by the clergy (investiture). Since the dependent peasants, however named and described, themselves remain mute and are only referred to in ecclesiastical writings, Künzel has to rely here on fragments in collections of miracles, lives of saints and poems which give little indication of how the coarse peasantry fared at the boundary between orthodoxy, heterodoxy or lack of faith and serving their masters. Künzel can also only occasionally find direct testimony of self-image among emerging urban social groups. The scant evidence of businesses and the behaviour of merchants cannot provide a coherent group profile, for the clerical perspective and manner of reporting remain ambivalently detached from both the utility of catering to demand for merchandise and the market- and profit-oriented lifestyle.

The second part of the book moves on without any break to four exemplary case studies, all dating from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Here Künzel abandons the method of focusing empirical findings on epoch-making group-specific profiles, and instead examines two individual documents, an epic poem (*Unibos*, Ch. 5) and an exemplum about a dream (*Tournament of the Dead*, Ch. 8), then the dramatic treatment of a ritual (relic humiliation, Ch. 6), and finally a comparison of the images and self-images of three towns – Sint-Truiden (St. Trond), Trier and Cambrai – and how they evolved. The intention here is surely not to record their revenue. What is so fascinating about Künzel's studies is that he cites all the

circumstances attested to in writing in order to reveal the social complexity of the invariably conflictual processes involved – whether it be a villager’s cunning plots against his aristocratic neighbours, the relentless presentation of the relics of a founding abbot by his monks, the wayward customs not only propagated but also violently defended by constantly changing urban groups, or the didactic cooptation of the illegitimate tournament to illustrate ideas about the afterlife (hell).

Künzel’s detailed conclusion (pp. 265-281) reviews the findings of the various chapters. He presents the first part – the regional profiling of group cultures – as a tool for similar future research, and avows his ‘spatial-comparative historical-anthropological point of view’ (p. 269). He intends the second part to be seen as an exemplary elaboration of complex, conflicting mentalitarian situations and changes – although he admits he cannot make up his mind how representative they are.

Anyone who has read Künzel’s book, which can surely be seen as the consummation of his endeavours to promote historical anthropology and historical cultural studies, can surely only admire his theoretical approach and his scrupulous criticism of the evidence. Those who wish to pursue his call for future regional studies should bear the following in mind:

1. Künzel’s confinement of his research to the modern nation state implies more coherence than is suggested by the historical facts. This is understandable, for the physical sources for his research – monasteries and bishoprics (see map, p. 14) – do not form a spatially continuous whole but, according to recent spatial research, are relatively autonomous and above all ecclesiastically centralized locations that are the concentric focus of their members’ actions and beliefs with regard to this world and the next – all this with an ever-changing range and degree of significance, both of which must be pinned down if we are to draw broad mental or cultural conclusions.

2. Künzel has – rightly – confined himself to narrative forms of testimony that provide reliable, explicit and indirect information on group-specific images and self-images. However, I believe an innovative continuation of the research must depend on two additions. One is material: consideration of the now far greater tangible legacies – remnants of settlements and buildings, graves, tools, textiles etc. – as well as the greatly improved methods for interpreting them. The other is textual: the use of lexicographical and textual/semantic techniques for obtaining useful individual as well as more extensive testimony. Both additions could enrich the existing research into mentality and hence the basic forms of habitus and components of ways of thinking. And this would be a second extension of social history – and would in turn benefit the anthropological extension of cultural research.

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