A Woodblock on Pilgrimage: From Flanders to Philadelphia

Patricia Stoop
A Woodblock on Pilgrimage: From Flanders to Philadelphia

Abstract
Essay on a 17th century woodblock in the Kislak Center's collection.

Keywords
Woodblocks, Pilgrimage

Disciplines
History | Library and Information Science
At the beginning of this year, the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts of the University of Pennsylvania purchased a unique and fascinating woodblock (c. 12.5 × 9.5 inches). Apart from the fact that for mysterious reasons over the course of time, a strip of about half an inch was cut off from the left end of the block—this was already the case when it belonged to a private owner in Eindhoven (Noord-Brabant, the Netherlands) in the 1950s—the woodblock is in excellent condition.

[Ed. note: we are very grateful to Dr. Patricia Stoop, visiting Brueghel Chair at the University of Pennsylvania / Universiteit Antwerpen for contributing this post.]

At the beginning of this year, the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts of the University of Pennsylvania purchased a unique and fascinating woodblock (c. 12.5 × 9.5 inches). Apart from the fact that for mysterious reasons over the course of time, a strip of about half an inch was cut off from the left end of the block—this was already the case when it belonged to a private owner in Eindhoven (Noord-Brabant, the Netherlands) in the 1950s—the woodblock is in excellent condition.
The devotional print is related to Scherpenheuvel (literally ‘Sharp Hill’, most often called ‘Montaigu’ after the French), which since the beginning of the seventeenth century was the main pilgrimage center in the Habsburg Low Countries. Its cult goes back to at least the beginning of the fourteenth century. In his continuation of the *Spiegel Historiael* the Brabantine priest and author Lodewijk van Velthem (c. 1260/75–after 1317) mentions a holy oak, which had the form of a cross and stood on the hilltop between the towns of Diest and Zichem, where he was ordained as a priest. The tree was worshipped because of the healing powers ascribed to it:

*Van ere eyken die men anebede. LVII.*

*On an oak that was worshipped. Chapter 57.*

*In desen tiden was ganginge mede*

*In these days pilgrimage took place*

*Tuschen Zichgem ende Diest der stede*

*to a place almost in the middle between Zichem and Diest.*
Rechte bi na te middewarde.
Daer dede menich sine
bedevarde
Tot ere eyken, dat si u cont,
Die alse .i. cruse gewassen stont
Met .ii. rayen gaende uut.
Daer menich quam overluut,
Die daer ane hinc sicerpe ende staf
Ende seide dat hi genesen waer
daer af.
Som [s]liepense onder den
boem.
Dus quam hem voren in haren
droem
Datsi vanden boem genasen.
Aldus so quamen daer die
dwasen,
Ende die waren meest siec
vanden rede,
Ende vele verlorne daer optie
stede.
Dit duerde wel .i. half jaer,
Sodat menige sicerpe hinc daer
Ende menich staf anden boem.

(Book 4, Chapter 57, ll. 4256–74)

Not too long after Velthem’s disapproving observation, a small statue of the Virgin Mary was placed in the cross-shaped tree. According to the legend, a shepherd had noticed around 1415 that the statue had fallen down. When he lifted it up in order to take it home, he was unable to move. Only when his master, who was worried because the shepherd had not returned home after work, put the statue of the Virgin back into the tree, was the servant able to move again. In this way the Virgin had shown the spiritual importance of the
In the woodblock the shepherd is depicted in the lower left corner: he is identified by the French word *berger*, which indicates that the prints to be produced from this block were intended for a French-speaking audience.

After the miracle with the shepherd, the site was frequented by inhabitants of the surrounding villages whenever they were sick or a member of their family suffered from illness or pain. As suggested in the short passage from the text by Velthem, the pilgrims hung their support aids on the tree when they did not need them any longer: in October 1603 the tree counted no less than 135 canes. But there was also a lively trade in *ex-votos*: pilgrims could buy representations in gold, silver or tin of the body parts that were cured or needed healing (in the last case it was believed that the representation of the ill limb would take over the disease). These votive offerings were left hanging on the holy tree, as can be seen in the image above the radiant aureole in which the Virgin is depicted.

In the 1580s Scherpenheuvel found itself in the midst of the battlefields of the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648). While occupied by Protestant forces of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands between 1580 and 1583, the statue of the Virgin fell victim to an act of iconoclasm and was removed. After the town was retaken by the Spanish army, the cult was restored in 1587 by the parishioners of Zichem. (This town is represented in the woodblock both by the striped coat of arms at the left end of the woodblock and the stag with the crucifix at the right end of the block, which refers to St Eustachius, the town’s patron saint). By that time the site also had a strong appeal to Spanish soldiers who were wounded or infected by diseases. Via them, stories of miraculous healings spread all the way to France and the north of Spain. One of the people who benefited from these miraculous healings is represented centrally in the lower edge of the woodblock. Hans Clements—or Jean Clement as he is called on the woodblock (both names are derived from the Latin name Johannes)—, citizen of Lucerne in Switzerland, was born crippled. He traveled throughout the Netherlands on this knees, begging, until he arrived in Scherpenheuvel where the Virgin Mary finally answered his prayers and cured his disability.

The story about Hans (or Jean) Clements is one of the most famous miracles that happened in Scherpenheuvel in 1603 and 1604. It is extensively described
by Philips Numan (c. 1550–1627), humanist writer and town secretary of Brussels, in his collection of miracles ascribed to Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel: *Historie van de mirakelen die onlanx in grooten ghetaele ghebeurt zijn door die intercessie ende voer bidden van die H. Maget Maria op een plaetse genoemt Scherpen heuvel by die Stadt van Sichen in Brabant* [History of the miracles that happened recently in large numbers by the intercession and mediation of the Holy Virgin Mary in a place named Scherpenheuvel near the city of Zichem in Brabant]. Numan collected the miracles by order of the archbishop of Mechelen, Mathias Hovius (1542–1620). The first edition was printed in Louvain by Rutger Velpius in 1604. The image below is taken from the third edition printed by the same printer in 1606. Besides the publication in Dutch, Numan wrote a French version for the local nobility and a Spanish one intended for the court. Not much later an English translation was printed (1606). A Latin version was published by the famous humanist Justus Lipsius (1605).
The second great miracle is depicted in the lower left corner of the woodblock: there we see a woman on her knees, her arms spread while she expresses the message of the devil. The woman is identified as Catherine du Bus, a woman from Lille, France, who was able to speak Hebrew and Greek, although she never studied those languages, a clear sign that she was possessed by the devil. While being exorcized, she made predictions about the siege of the city of Ostend, which at the time was occupied by the Dutch rebels. During the process, which initially failed a number of times, the devil—in both the woodblock and the copperplate engraving he is pictured in a speech balloon—via Catherine’s mouth shouted to eyewitnesses that they were wrong in believing that the Spaniards would be able to win the siege. After eating a fragment of the oak tree of Scherpenheuvel, however, the devil was forced out, and on 22 September 1604 the Royal Spanish troops of Archduke Albert of Austria (1559–1621) took over Ostend, all thanks to the intervention of the Virgin of Scherpenheuvel.

Miracles like these established the fame of Scherpenheuvel as a pilgrimage site on a greater level than a regional one. In 1603, after they had heard that the Virgin had wept blood, the Archduke and his wife Isabella (1566–1633), who are depicted in the lower right corner of the woodblock (which is quite exceptional in devotional prints from Scherpenheuvel), visited the place for the first time and took it under their protection. In order to spread the devotion, books such as Numan’s and other devotional representations were mass produced. In the meantime a small wooden chapel was built for the statue of the Virgin in front of the oak in 1602. As we see in Velthem’s text, the worshipping of a tree was not much appreciated by the Catholic priests. Only two years later this wooden chapel was replaced by a larger, stone version. Likely it is this chapel that is depicted on the woodcut. In 1607 Albrecht and Isabella, out of gratitude for the expulsion of the Calvinists from the Southern Low Countries, decided that
Scherpenheuvel had to be transformed into a fully-fledged pilgrimage site. In order to stimulate this they commissioned the building of a new basilica as a symbol of the Counter Reformation. The foundation stone of this new church was laid by them on 2 July 1606, the Feast of the Visitation of the Virgin. It is usually this basilica, which still is the destination of many pilgrims to this day, which is represented on devotional prints from Scherpenheuvel such as the example below.

This observation may help us in dating the woodblock. Contrary to the date of c. 1750 offered in the catalogue of Samuel Gedge Ltd. (from whom the Kislak Center acquired the piece) it is more likely that the woodblock is from a much earlier date. The fact that the woodblock does not depict the new basilica that was built from 1609 onwards (and consecrated in 1627), but instead the chapel that stood at the pilgrimage site before, indicates that the woodblock was produced in the short period between 1603/04, the years in which the miracles of Hans Clements and Catherine du Bus took place.
place, and 1609 when the chapel was torn down in order to replace it with the new basilica, or certainly before 1627 when the new basilica was consecrated. Given the fact that devotional prints such as this woodblock were intended to propagate the cult of both the Virgin and the pilgrimage town, it seems to make little sense that one would not depict the impressive new church on devotional prints after it was completed. Moreover, the striking similarities in iconography with the copperplate engraving in the third edition of Numan’s Historie printed in 1606 as well as with a devotional print from 1602 and especially an approbation by the church on 17 November 1604 (see below) seem to support a dating in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

–Patricia Stoop
— Copperplate engraving by the Antwerp engraver and print publisher Adriaan Huberti (active between 1573 and 1614) from an ecclesiastical approbation (1604) showing Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel in the oak, the three miracles ascribed to her, and archduke Albrecht and his wife Isabella. Under the mandorla with Our Lady one can see the little stone chapel that is also
depicted at the woodcut. The coats of arms are those of Zichem (under the mandorla), Brabant (left) and the princess of Oranje-Nassau, the Lords of Zichem (right). Brussel, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 20614, fols 2v–3r.

References


Samuel Gedge LTD, Catalogue xxv, no. 20.