

## THE BOKKERIJDEERS

Louise Nelson, Windsor

In the XVIIIth century what is now Belgian and Dutch Limburg was a collection of villages and towns, some belonging to the United Provinces, others to the Dukes of Brabant, to the Bishops of Liege and Loon, or to noble families. Throughout the period from 1648 on, Belgium, and thus Limburg too, had been the scene of many battles. Endless troops of foreign armies had passed through its territory, pilfering and destroying houses and crops. All through the eighteenth century, called by the Belgians "le siecle de malheurs"(1) -- the century of misery -- French, Austrian and Dutch troops fought each other on Belgian soil. Even after the War of the Spanish Succession (1714), the Dutch were allowed to keep troops in Belgium, then occupied by the Austrians. Heavy taxes were levied on the Belgians to maintain these foreign armies. Belgium served as a buffer state between France and Holland. Besides the unpleasant military occupation, these were terrible years of famine. Cattle seemed to have been regularly killed off by a plague lasting from 1714 to 1741, then from 1746 until 1768 and finally from 1771 until 1781.

In Limburg in particular, poverty was widespread. The soil did not produce much, the daily pay for workers was very low. There was no industry. Poor people were not protected by a strong and honest judicial system. Judges often could be bribed. Education was a privilege of the rich and the poor were generally exploited by the wealthy classes. All this led to a climate of deep-rooted dissatisfaction, frustration and even revolt.

No wonder, then, that poor people gathered in gangs to survive by foraging, by stealing, and even by murder. It was difficult to pinpoint and find these gangs as so many roving army bands of all nationalities crisscrossed Belgium, and so many mercenaries joined an army only to desert when profits did not materialize or when danger was imminent. However, one particular gang of robbers did emerge more strongly than others. They called themselves the Bokkerijders or Ram-riders, or in French, Les Verts-Boucs. These bandits owed their name to the superstitious belief that by mere evocation of the devil's name, they would be transported on the back of a hairy black ram to wherever they wanted to go. They performed their evil deeds along the banks of the Maas and Rhine rivers and of small rivers in Limburg, like the Demer and the Oeter.

There were three distinct stages in the evolution of the gang. In each of these periods, the aims and methods, if not the makeup, of the bands differed.

The first period extends from 1734 to 1756. In the beginning, the Bokkerijders usually came silently, unexpectedly, without violence,

preferably during deep dark stormy nights. They attacked isolated dwellings, in groups of five to twenty, and fled as quickly and as mysteriously as they had come. If by any chance any of them were recognized, they would be found a short time after the theft so far away from the scene of the crime that it seemed impossible that they could have been implicated in it. Thus an aura of fear, mystery and respect surrounded this group of thieves. They were incredibly fast, cunning and adept in playing upon the fears and superstition of their victims. The typical expedition looked like a well-planned prank. People belonging to this group of thieves hardly ever murdered anyone. They sought out the wealthy to despoil them, then divided the loot not only among themselves, but also among poor people in dire need of food and clothing, so their sorties had the overtones of a latter-day Robin Hood's band. Some of the thieves who were arrested and condemned advanced as excuses for their activities, in addition to economic scarcity, social occasions on which there was heavy drinking.

The second period, from 1762 to 1776, and the third stage from 1790 to 1799, mark an important change in the operation of the bands. Not only were the forays of the bands strongest during this time, but they had become substantially different. In short, these gangs had now become professional robbers, no longer aiming at their survival or that of the poor, but organized for profit. They composed a secret society to which each had to swear allegiance. They met in churches or in isolated chapels to initiate new members in a ceremony in which the latter had to sit on a wooden ram. The new members had to pledge fidelity to the gang, had to swear an oath of secrecy not to reveal anything about the gang's activities, not even to a priest in the confessional. In fact, they had to renounce God, abjure their faith, spit on the consecrated host and sometimes smash the holy cross and statues of saints. Some made a distinguishing mark on their penises.

So devastating were they that at the end of the eighteenth century there was not one single house of the well-to-do from Aachen to Maastricht that had not been fallen upon by Bokkerijders and put to the torch.

Who belonged to the later Bokkerijders and why was it so difficult to extirpate these gangs? Members of the second and third waves of Bokkerijders belonged to all classes of society, no longer just the lowly. Unlike the first group, they were completely amoral, always used violence, and frequently murdered their victims. Some came from "de deftigste families". There were also women members, the Bokkerijdsters. The leaders were usually better educated than the other members and some held important positions in the community such as mayor or doctor. Bokkerijders belonged, then, to a well-organized fraternity. Yet their exterior behaviour never betrayed their allegiance to a band of ruffians: they attended church and

seemed to be exemplary citizens. Some of them were so clever that they allowed their own houses to be plundered in order to remove suspicion.

There were several Bokkerijder gangs. They often had contacts with each other and operated in particular districts -- jurisdictions, one may say -- and they sometimes called on each other for assistance. It was not exceptional for one gang to send fifty men to help another gang on one of its expeditions.

Each gang was led by a council of ten chosen people. They decided on raids, the loot to be taken and its distribution. The council sat in judgment on traitors, executed them by stabbing, and had their bodies thrown on the public road to deter others from betrayal. Most of the time the loot consisted of linen, since the rich farmers and burghers had large linen closets. Clothing, food, jewels and precious metals, including gold and silver from churches, were also taken. Where necessary, the items were appraised by specialists, usually Jews, and sold.

Gang reunions often led to drinking sprees where discussions soon turned to quarrels and sometimes even ended in killings. The loot, it should be noted, was divided among the members of the band according to a fixed scale. The captain of the band and his wife received a double portion.

From 1750 to 1800 just one gang, that of Schinderhannes near Maastricht, which had 205 members and was organized like an army, committed four hundred thefts and a dozen murders and amassed a considerable fortune. Criminal archives from Hasselt, Maastricht and Loon shows an increasing number of Bokkerijders arrested, sentenced and executed. In the archives of Loon, a document dated 1750 indicates that it was really dangerous to go outside of the city limits since there were numerous dangerous (veldrovers, boeven, baanstrompers) who took money and clothing from wayfarers. Indeed, an era of terror began. The records speak of different gangs from various small towns and villages: the gang from Wellen, from Bree, from Valkenburg, from s'Hertogenrade, from Maaseyck. Voltaire, for instance, writes in awe of the bandits of Beeringen.

As the terror increased, the people tried to organize themselves for self-protection. Unfortunately the judicial system was not unified, laws varying from one district to another depending on local charters. However, special sheriffs were appointed and officers assigned the task of uprooting this rampant social evil once and for all(2).

The method of the Bokkerijders was to place a brandbrief, an extortion note demanding that gold or the like be deposited at a certain location. If the note was ignored, the gang would attack by surprise and, after plundering the home, set fire to it. Even the best defended homes were attacked in these raids, and often the brigands could count on help from the inside. The Bokkerijders did not hesitate to torture women and children in order to extract the information they wanted. They were cruel, utterly devoid of mercy.

As Bokkerijders frequently met in isolated chapels in the fields, the bailiffs or governors ordered the destruction of many of these chapels, annihilating at the same time valuable architectural monuments. Two men stand out as noteworthy sheriff-governors of Belgian Limburg: first, Lambert Hollanders who operated in Liege between 1764 and 1779 as well as in Hasselt, Saint Truiden and Wellen: then Clerex, praised in the chronicles of Liege, who held office from 1790 to 1799. These men were endowed with rechtsmacht or the rightful power over different regions. They began training officers chosen from among citizens of good repute. Clerex would often be seen at night patrolling throughout Limburg with an armed escort.

All through the eighteenth century the judicial system used torture on people suspected of any violation of the law. Indeed, judicial torture went back to the Middle Ages. Small wonder, then, that it was extensively employed to exterminate a secret society like the Bokkerijders. In Limburg there were definite rules concerning its use. First of all, a suspect could only be tortured in cases where a serious crime was suspected. A court had to issue an order that an accused person be tortured and the torture had to be adapted to the nature of the deed, the degree of suspicion and the strength of the accused. If the accused did not confess, torture could not be applied a second time and the accused was freed. People with terminal diseases, pregnant women and persons under the age of fourteen could not be submitted to torture. Detailed procedures had been established by Philip II for Limburg, Brabant, Antwerp and Liege:

1. The prisoner must go without food for sixteen or seventeen hours before being tortured (to avoid messy vomiting).
2. If many prisoners were tortured at the same time, one had to begin with the weakest one.
3. The accused had to sign his deposition twenty-four hours after he had been tortured and had confessed.
4. Justice officers were paid from the goods of the accused. If the accused was condemned to death, all of his goods were confiscated and given to the governor.

A distinction was made between the "friendly torture" and the "sharp torture", which was longer and more painful. Among the tortures ordinarily used were cold water thrown on naked bodies, shrill whistles blown in women's ears, rope torments and the infamous thumbscrew. In the deep cellars of old castles, like the Castle of Rekkem near Maastricht, chains have been found with which prisoners were bound by the arms, legs and neck in cells that could be flooded. In Loon, in the town hall, you can still see the duivengaten, a device consisting of a board with holes in which the arms and legs of the subject were inserted, and sometimes a fire was lit under the feet for good measure. And then there were the Spanish boots (Spaanse laarzen) in which the legs of the accused were crushed between two

wooden beams. We also know of the practice of pouring water or urine in the mouth of the prisoner, and the use of whips or leather straps to beat the accused while he is hanging "between heaven and hell", i.e. hung in the air by means of thin ropes cutting into his bare flesh. During the tortures, a priest would recite various prayers, an Our Father for a small offence calling for a short whipping, the Miserere and longer prayers for more serious whippings. Finally, there was het tortuurstoeltje, the torture seat, in which the feet were tied to the legs of a chair and the arms stretched behind one and attached to heavier and heavier weights. A wooden collar, about eight or ten centimeters wide, was secured around the neck, and inside the collar were numerous sharp nails. If the tired prisoner moved, the nails would then enter his neck. This torture could last as long as three or four hours.

The bailiff sent to the judge a list of the questions to be asked of the accused. The accused was confronted with witnesses. As tortures lasted for hours, the judges and officers ate and drank in front of the tortured person. There was always a doctor present to take care of the accused after the ordeal. Many strong people withstood torture, though guilty, and many weak persons were hanged, though innocent. Torture was banned by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II in 1787, but his orders were not followed. In November 1794 the French, who then occupied Belgium, eliminated torture, though Holland continued it until 1798.

Most of the accused Bokkerijders who confessed their guilt were sentenced to death. The lightest sentence given to them was the "schandpaal": for three days or more the accused was tied to a pole in a public place where people could go and look at him. On this pillar of shame, the accused bokkerijders, both men and women, were gebrandmerkt, that is, they were branded on the right cheek by the application of a heated key, leaving a permanent mark. (One is reminded of a similar brand on Lady De Winter in Dumas' Three Musketeers). This procedure was called "sleutelen", "keying."

An execution was a public event of great pomp and circumstance. It took place at a crossroads or in the city market, where facilities for the execution were set up. If the village was too small to have a place of execution, it had to pay for the transfer of the prisoner to a larger town and had to provide a cart and horses as well as the wood for the gibbet.

At the trial, the accused received the verdict kneeling, and, if condemned to die, had to be executed after three days. His family had to provide food for him and could visit. Sometimes a Bokkerijder escaped public execution, poisoned by a substance placed in his food by a kind member of the family.

On the day of the execution, trumpets, church bells and drums announced the event early in the morning. The execution took place at high noon. The priest accompanied the condemned man to the gibbet. A parade

preceded the prisoner, including the governor, the judge, the justice officers and members of the town council. There were also archers and drummers in the death march. The charges were announced repeatedly and the sentence invoked as a warning to others. The local people were gathered to witness the scoundrel's punishment and the children were usually placed in the front row. However, from 1775 onwards there were so many daily executions that the public became indifferent to the spectacle. In Maaseyck, the baluw or sheriff walked in the parade carrying a broom, the symbol of his job of "cleaning house". To impress people more, some gunpowder was put on the chest of a criminal in Tessengerloo in 1764; when it exploded, the people thought it was the man's soul going to hell.

In Limburg, many chains have been found in places where such executions occurred, but no bones, for the dead bodies were usually kept hanging a while and were eaten by animals or finally burned. The last gibbet in the province was seen in Sickensheuvcl in 1794.

From 1754 to 1794, 860 people were sentenced as Bokkerijders. Of these, 195 were executed, eight were sent into exile and fifty whipped. Yet many Bokkerijders remained undiscovered and unpunished. The report of the execution was inscribed in the criminal records of Hasselt, Maastricht, Loon and other large cities. The hangman or executioner was never in the parade. In Limburg he was called "Monsieur" and his office was hereditary. The price paid him depended on his services. Officers, on the other hand, were paid ten Brabantse gulden for making an arrest, thirty for the torture session, and sixty for escorting the condemned man to the gibbet.

Here are a few of the most celebrated Bokkerijders:

Van Carlo: he was burgomaster of Maaseyck in 1752-1753, and again in 1783-1784. He was sentenced to death in 1794 but died of poison before the execution date.

Henricus Houben, also of Maaseyck, was captain of a gang until 1785. His house still exists, with its secret passages under the streets and the main square, leading to the Maas River.

Nolleke or Magere Nol led a large gang in Wellen for more than twenty years.

Josef Kerckhoffs was chief surgeon in s'Hertogenrade (1762-1776). He was the leader of a gang of Bokkerijders while he behaved like the most pious Christian parishioner of the town. And it was just by chance that his gang was discovered.

In Valkenburg and Maastricht, 550 Bokkerijders were tried, put to death or exiled in 1776 and all of their possessions were confiscated. In Wellen, between 1770 and 1777, 220 of them were apprehended, of whom some twenty-four were sentenced to death. The Bokkerijders of Hasselt, Guyoven, Tongeren and Cortessem had branch operations in Brabant and Liege. In Cortessem, they met at the foot of a huge isolated tree called Onze Lieve Heer Boom (The Tree of Our Lord) that still exists. The irreverence of this

is especially telling when we recall that the Bokkerijders had done a great deal of damage not only to private property but also to churches where, like the iconoclasts, they destroyed statues and paintings and also carried off gold and silver objects.

After 1779, the Bokkerijders disappear from the criminal records. Yet the terror they inspired persisted throughout Limburg in the following century, and even into our own time. The age of legends emerged and French novelists, notably one named Ecrevisse, wrote about them in the nineteenth century. Even in 1907, prayers were offered in religious schools for protection against them (3).

At the beginning of this paper, I spoke of the evolution of the Bokkerijders. This evolution may be described by drawing a parallel between them and the Sicilian Mafia. Both of these secret societies originated in a desperately poor rural area. The early operations of each can be understood as a function of social relations, one feudal, one perhaps more transitional between feudal and bourgeois society. Eventually, as social and economic relations changed, these organizations endured as a kind of secret underground, spreading their tentacles throughout the society, aiming at profit and not adverse to the employment of terror and merciless violence. Fortunately in Belgium an energetic policy of repression, as well as improving political and economic conditions, brought an end to the Bokkerijder menace.

However, long after the Bokkerijders had ceased to exist as a social phenomenon and a social danger, the memory and the fear of them lived on. In that cultural process by which history is transformed into myth and legend, the Bokkerijders continued to haunt the popular imagination as the embodiment of that sinister night-time evil which passes unperceived in the day-time behind the mask of ordinariness.

#### Notes

1. Ironic that it should be known as this by the Belgians when it was considered the Age of Enlightenment by their neighbours.
2. The sheriffs were called baluw or drossaards.
3. This took place in the Ursuline Teachers College in Overpelt. My own mother believed that the Bokkerijders were still active in the nineteen-forties.

#### Sources

Juliaan Melchior, De Bokkerijders (Maasbree: Uitgeverij de Lijster, 1981).

L'ami du Limbourg, Maastricht, 1866 (Newspaper).

Bulletijn der Melophilen van Hasselt, 17<sup>e</sup> deel, jaar 1880.

Criminal Files, State Archives of Hasselt, Luik and Maastricht,  
Statiestraat 8, Hasselt.

Publications de la Societe Historique et Archeologique dans le Duché de  
Limbourg, Rijksarchiv in Maastricht, Vol. XXIV, 1887.

Jos. Russel, "De Rooversbenden in de Landen van overmaas", Rijksarchief van  
Nederlandsch Limburg in Maastricht, S.I.P., Sleinada, 1877.

Prof. Dr. H. Vekemann und Prof. Dr. J. Müller Hofstede  
(Hrsg.)

# Wort und Bild in der Niederländischen Kunst und Literatur des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts

## Inhaltsverzeichnis

1. Vooraf, **Prof. Dr. H. Vekeman**, *Institut für Niederländische Philologie, Universität zu Köln*
2. Einleitung, **Prof. Dr. J. Müller Hofstede**, *Kunsthistorisches Institut der Universität Bonn*
3. Nederlandse embleemtheorie. Van Marcus Antonius Gillis (1566) tot Jacob Cats (1618), **Prof. Dr. K. Porteman**, *Afd. Nederl. Literatuurstudie, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*
4. Tekst en afbeelding als bronnen bij historisch onderzoek, **Dr. H. Miedema**, *Kunsthistorisch Instituut Amsterdam*
5. 'De duistere sin van de geschilderde figuren': zum Doppelsinn in Rätsel, Emblem und Genrestück, **Dr. J. Becker**, *Kunsthistorisch Instituut Utrecht*
6. Das Bild des bäuerlichen Lebens bei Adriaen Van Ostade, **Dr. B. Schnackenburg**, *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Kassel*
7. Höfische Minne und Bürgermoral in der Graphik um 1500, **Dr. Th. Vignau-Wilberg**, *Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen München*
8. Invloed van emblematiek, hiërogliefiek en deviezenkunst in het werk van Jonker Jan van der Noot, **Drs. P. W. M. van der Sluijs**, *Nuland - Nederland*
9. Philosophia Picta. Zu einer Bildallegorie des Frans Floris, **Dr. R. Schleier**, *Kunstgeschichtliches Seminar, Universität Hamburg*
10. Moralisierende Elemente in der Graphik der Boschnachfolge, **Dr. G. Unverfehrt**, *Kunstgeschichtliches Seminar und Kunstsammlung der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen*
11. Ruben's 'Susanna and the Elders' and moralising inscriptions to prints, **Dr. E. McGrath**, *The Warburg Institute, University of London*
12. 'Non saturatur oculus visu' - Zur „Allegorie des Gesichts“ von Peter Paul Rubens und Jan Brueghel d. Ä., **Prof. Dr. J. Müller Hofstede**, *Kunsthistorisches Institut der Universität Bonn*
13. Literatuur als inspiratiebron voor de Vlaamse tapijtkunst van de 17de eeuw, **Dr. E. Duverger**, *Onderzoekseiden N. F. W. O., Gent*
14. Allegory and Symbol in the work of Anthony van Dyck, **Dr. Chr. Brown**, *The National Gallery, London*
15. 'Pier den Drol.' K. Van Mander en P. Bruegel. Bijdrage tot de literaire receptie van P. Bruegels werk ca. 1600, **Drs. J. Muylle**, *Archeologie en Kunstwetenschap, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*
16. Een ereplaats voor een versleten jurk; de interpretatie van de titelgravure in Coornherths „Werken“ van 1630, **Drs. A. J. Gelderblom**, *Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht*
17. Zum Verhältnis von Text und Bild in der Graphik. Beobachtungen zu Mißverhältnissen, **Dr. K. Renger**, *Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München*
18. Taufe in Feuer und Wasser. Jan Luyken und Jacob Böhme, **Prof. Dr. H. Vekeman**, *Institut für Niederländische Philologie, Universität zu Köln*
19. Die Rezeption der Jüdischen Altertümer des Flavius Josephus in den holländischen Historiendarstellungen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts, **Dr. Chr. Tümpel**, *Hamburg*
20. Probleme des Bildsinns bei Rembrandt, **Dr. A. Smitmans**, *Rottenburg*
21. 'Trucidata Innocentia'. Die Verurteilung des Oldenbarnevelt bei Joost van den Vondel und Cornelis Saftleven, **Dr. H. J. Raupp**, *Kunsthistorisches Institut der Universität zu Köln*
22. Rederijkers- en Rebusblazoenen in de zestiende-zeventiende eeuw, **Prof. Dr. A. Keersmaekers**, *Universiteit Antwerpen*

ISBN 3-923769-04-0

Format 30,2 cm × 23,7 cm; Ganzleinen; ca. 340 Seiten; ca. 288 Abb.

Subskriptionspreis bis 31. 12. 1983 DM 86,-  
danach DM 98,-

Bestellungen bitte direkt an den Verlag oder über den Buchhandel



Franz J. Lukassen Verlag · Dr.-Josef-Fieger-Str. 6 · D-5042 Ertstadt

verlängert  
bis 30.06.1984