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The Archaeology of Medieval Schools

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Introduction

Schools were a serious element of medieval society, and both the early medieval cloister education and the late-medieval city schools are well-known and well-studied (Post 1954; Fortgens 1956; Stuip/Vellekoop 1995; Schouteet 1960; Orme 1989; Grendler 1989). But as far as the Latin schools are concerned, these studies have largely limited themselves to the educational theory. Many humanists have reported on the ideals of an educated population (Bot 1955), and many preserved schoolbooks show exactly what was learned and in what way. Lacking, however, was a basic idea of how this schoollife practically worked: what a school in those days looked like on the inside; how pupils and masters were dressed, what they used for writing and counting, and how they filled the hours between the lessons. In other words, there was a need for studying schools and schoollife based on material culture. This multidisciplinary research, started in 2001, is based on two main groups of sources. On the one hand, excavations of schoolsites and archaeological finds of school equipment are studied. On the other, depictions and descriptions of schools with all the tangible objects in use there (fig. 1) are taken into account. Here, the archaeological dimension of the research will be stressed.

Late-medieval education

Sprung from churchbound choirschools, in the course of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries the school next to the church came more and more under control of the Dutch city councils. Their goals differed from the clergy who had directed education before and who were mainly concerned with new clergymen. The governments actively tried to create a good school, mainly by installing a famous schoolmaster, who earned his money largely through the school fee parents paid for their children. In an effort to make the secondary school accessible for a broad population, many cities created some sort of programme that waived school fees for the poor; the teacher was then paid by the government. A Sunday school was usually offered to sons of the working class. Although large parts of society were still missing out on education, the interference of the city councils at the end of the Middle Ages made schooling much more common than it had ever been.

In this era, boys and girls started their lessons by learning how to read and write and pray at a communal school close to home. Afterwards, some of the boys were sent to a Latin school, usually at an age somewhere between eight and twelve. There, they would thoroughly study Latin, grammar and literature as well as active writing and speech. For this, they had to go to a Latin school in one of the larger cities, which in many cases meant they had to board school there. At first, the master took in some of the out-of-town pupils. When the school populations grew, houses for scholars came into existence, where boys learned and lived together. In that way, going to the 'great school' changed their whole life. The aim of the Latin schools was to deliver literate pupils who were fluent in Latin, which, as a world language, would open up many career possibilities. But they also had to become good Christians, as education was regarded as a way to elevate the whole of society.

Fig. 1: Depiction of schoolmaster with ferule and pupils with books and writing equipment in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves, ca. 1440-1445 (Collection and photograph: Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).

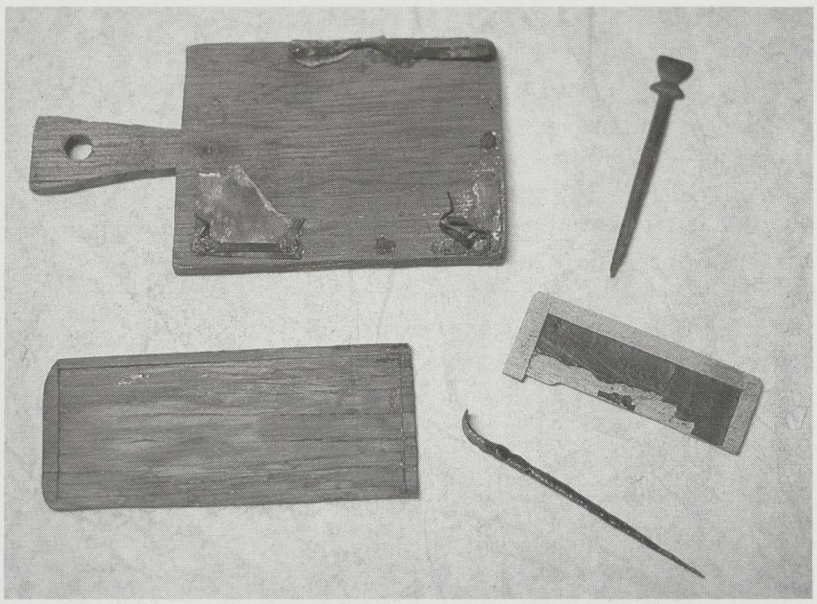

Fig. 2: Finds of school equipment: hornbook, fragments of wax tablets and writing pegs from the Netherlands, 14th–16th centuries (Collection: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; photograph: A. Willemsen).

In my research I focus on Latin or city schools in the Netherlands in the period of ca 1300 till 1600, while the investigation is based on archaeological finds, depictions in art and contemporary texts. The period chosen contains the growing and blossoming days of the Dutch Latin schools and saw humanism, reformation and counterreformation all trying to use education for their own purposes. In a larger frame the Latin schools were an important ingredient in the change of this geographical area from a medieval to a modern society.

Material school culture

To study the material aspects of these early-modern Latin schools of the Netherlands, first an inventory is being made of all sorts of writing equipment as it was used in schools; of all wax tablets, hornbooks, inkpots, writing pegs, graphite holders, pens, ferules, etcetera (fig. 2). In this stage, material from all sites is considered. Purpose is to determine from what sort of context these objects usually come, to determine the position of practical literacy in late-medieval society and the position of school and writing education within society. This might answer the question to what extent the presence of such material (maybe in a specific combination) points to a context in which schooling is to be expected. This inventory of equipment is far from complete or finished, and most of the material classified up till now does not have a defined context information. A first tendency however is already recognisable: there is a distinct presence of writing material in two types of contexts, being cloister sites and school sites.
Secondly, and more importantly, research is done into the results of excavations of medieval schools, or other contexts connected with schools such as boarding houses for pupils. These are inventarised thoroughly, not only in the Netherlands, but also in the other Northwest-European countries. From these specific sites, not only school equipment but all finds are looked at, for these closed contexts give insight in to daily life at a medieval school as a whole. Therefore, in this case the full assemblage is studied.

The Groningen Latin School

A good example of such an assemblage comes from the excavations that were carried out by the Archaeology Service of the city of Groningen in 1995 at the site of the former Latin

School (Willemsen 1998, 171–175; Hermans 1998; Zimmerman 1998; Prummel 2000). Here, at the location of the now recently finished Province Hall, a large cesspit of 9 x 4.5 metres was found. It had been built into the earthen city wall when the city was laid out, around 1500, and went out of use when houses were built on the land around 1550. In between, it was never emptied. It was filled with cess and lots of small things that were either lost or thrown away. At four isolated places in the cesspit, the material was in a notably worse state of preservation than in the rest of the pit. At these spots, lots of small rectangular remains of fabric were found. These places thus indicate the location of four toilet holes, complete with toilet tissue. The find pattern from this cesspit was extraordinary. There was almost no common household waste such as food, bones and broken kitchen ware, but the pit did reveal all kinds of items used for eating, learning and play. These include diverse writing equipment such as pen tops, inkpots, remains of wax tablets and bookbindings, tableware such as wooden spoons and pocketknives, things pointing to children such as children's shoes and a belt, and toys like spinning tops, marbles, knucklebones, a ball and blowpipes. Even a knitted hat from a type well-known from portraits of teachers, was unearthed (figs. 3; 4).

A European perspective

In the rest of Europe, other school excavations show a similar pattern, with typical finds present on the one hand, and more common finds absent on the other. In Germany for instance, the late 19th-century excavations in the sewers of Lübeck, near the St. Jakobikirche, revealed a set of finds including wax tablets, inkpots and a ferule, originally from the 14th-century Latin School that used to stand here (Warncke 1912). In England, the Free Grammar School of Coventry, housed in reused buildings of the Whitefriars Abbey around 1550, tells a comparable story. From under the seating of the schoolboys, counters and dice were dug up, together with blunt arrow heads used for target practice, jugs and drinking glasses, penknives, a medaillon with the Madonna, a jew's harp and twelve inkpots, one with the initials H W. Most of these objects are complete, and the publication states that "the temptation to post the possessions of other scholars down the inviting cracks in the stall floors must have been irresistible" (Woodfield 1981).

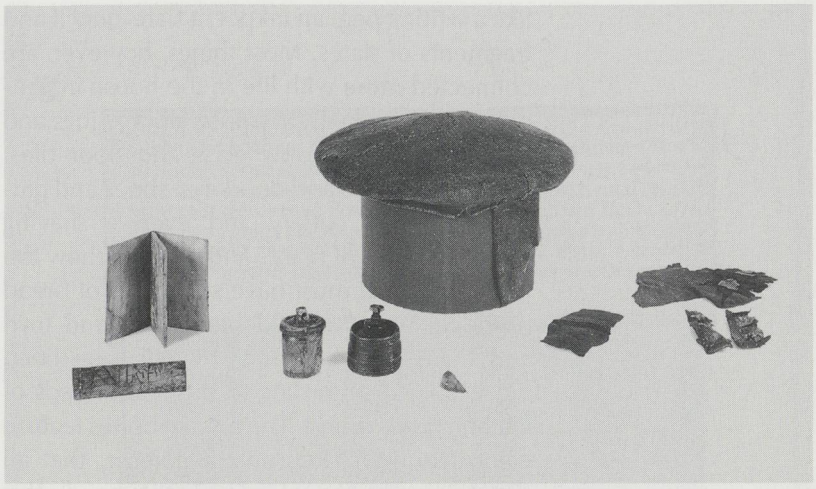

Fig. 3: School finds from Latin School Groningen, including writing tablets, inkpots, fragments of books and a teacher's hat, ca. 1500 (Collection and photograph: Stichting Monument & Materiaal, Groningen).

A boarding house in Zwolle

Back to the Netherlands. In Zwolle, excavations were carried out in the Domus Parva (Assink/Van Beek/Hasselt 1987). This was a boarding house opened by the Brothers of Common Life in 1384 to house out-of-town pupils that attended the then famous Latin School led by Johannes Cele; it remained in use until the end of the 15th century, when it was rebuilt into a lecture hall and a dining room of the larger complex of the Brothers. In the 14th and 15th centuries, up to 50 pupils lived there together; it is known that at least some of the elder ones had a small room of their own. The excavations of 1986 revealed remains of this school community, including a few items connected with writing and learning

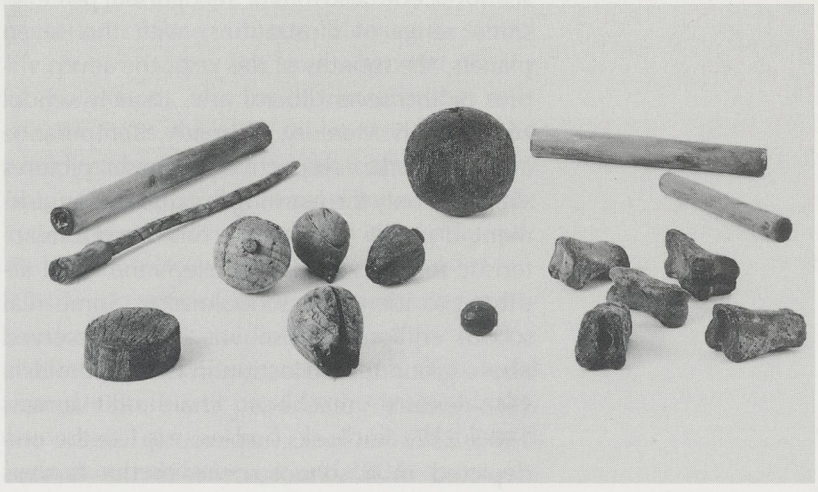

Fig. 4: Toy finds from Latin School Groningen, including blowpipes, spinning tops, a ball and knucklebones, ca. 1500 (Collection and photograph: Stichting Monument & Materiaal, Groningen).

like a writing peg, an inkpot, a slate-pencil and fragments of slates. Most things, however, are connected more with life in the house in general; there are many pisspots, storage jugs and cooking pans, window glass and floor tiles, dress accessories and doorkeys, shoes and pattens, beakers, cutlery and even a shaving knife. Remains of plants and animals show the boys' diet, that must have seen a lot of bread porridge, but also held beef, pork and fowl and many different fruits; it will have been nicely spiced according to the many seeds of kitchen herbs found. The animal bones feature eight cats, four dogs and a polecat, that all died violently by a blow on the head; this shows that a cat-hitter must have been active around the pupils' house.

Depictions and descriptions

The material schoolculture is mirrored in the details of schoolscenes depicted in manuscripts and early printed books. Many of these pictures are woodcuts or engravings that were made to illustrate the title page of printed school texts (Schoengen 1911–1925). The idea of a school is always depicted as a teacher surrounded by pupils; the building is not important. Depictions of school also occur in other settings, for instance accompanying the descriptions of the lives of important persons - in books we see Aristotle, or St. Augustine, or the Jesus child being brought to school, always carrying the ABC (hornbook) or schoolbooks. These pictures are a stereotype, showing that in the minds of late-medieval people wisdom always originated in education and education was found in a school outside the house. A school scene also has a recognised place in some series of illustrations: with the seven planets, the months of the year, the seven virtues or the seven liberal arts. Usually school comes with Mercury, February, Temperance and Grammar respectively. These pictures show not only the learning but also the punishment of pupils, which was considered characteristic for schools. The ferule is the fixed attribute to identify a schoolmaster. Some real school equipment also has been preserved above ground; a collection in Brussels holds a 16th-century teacher's chair (d'Haenens 1986, 239) that looks suspiciously like the one depicted in a school scene in the famous Hours of Catherine of Cleves (see fig. 1). The Whitefriars Church in Coventry still houses part of the stalls of the 16th-century Grammar School.

Further echoes of daily life in and around schools can be found in dialogues and sentences, written by schoolmasters to lighten the learning of Latin and noted down by pupils in tablets, slates or notebooks. None of these things was meant to last, but some survived as waste in cesspits, re-used as roof slates or as binding material of books. The last page of a schooltext of Torrentinus, printed in Zwolle around 1505 contains such a dialogue. Two schoolboys, one Syriscus and one Petrellus, talk about 'boys' things' and they mention many objects; Peter wants to play with nuts that he has bought by pawning his writing tablet. At the end of the conversation, the church bell strikes three and they head for school: "Ad scholam, ne? (to school?)" asks the one. The other replies, "Immo, ad carcerem (yes, to the dungeon)" (Kronenberg 1923).

In addition, some authors wrote texts in simple Latin that could be used for practicing dialogue. In 1523, Erasmus made a book of scholarly conversations, the *Familiarium Colloquia Formulae*, that was meant to appeal to the specific interests of the schoolboys. The themes of the conversations are therefore daily life at school and especially the games that were played between the lessons: the sections bear headings such as 'de pila' (on the ball) and 'de tali' (on knucklebones). They are prefaced by a more general dialogue on play, that gives a familiar impression of schooldays, starting with "For some time the weather, the sky and the day invite us to play", answered by "In fact, everything invites us to it, only the teacher does not invite us" (Wirth-Poelchau 1982).

Daily life at a Latin school

These contemporary depictions and descriptions of schools correspond with the finds of school items and those from school sites. The pisspots from Zwolle, for instance, give a tangible evidence of the note made in the preserved 1555 regulations of the City School of Bruges, the Bogardenschool, that mentions for the month of October that three or four pisspots had to be placed in each row of the dormitory for the winter, "so that pupils won't

have to walk too far in their undershirts in the cold if they have to pee at night" (Schouteet 1960, 118). And the toy finds from the Latin School of Groningen (see fig. 4) give exactly the same impression of play in between the lessons as the dialogues of Erasmus and as the autobiographical Trachtenbücher of Matthäus and Veit Konrad Schwarz of 1500 and 1550 (Fink 1963), that show the games the authors used to play in their spare hours at the Latin School of Augsburg (fig. 5).

The picture painted by these finds, in combination with the depictions and texts, is somewhat as follows. When around 1500 a Dutch townsman looked through one of the glass windows of the building beside the church simply referred to as 'the school', he would have seen a well-filled classroom, with a tiled floor, under a beamed roof. The schoolmaster in his gown and beret was seated in the middle, on a chair placed on a small platform, behind a lectern with some books. The schoolboys were arranged around him, sitting on benches; they brought their own writing equipment. They were busy working in small groups on their Latin exercises, taking down notes on wax tablets using styluses. Next to the master's platform, one of the boys stood being questioned; good work was praised, failure punished by some slaps of the ferule. In between the long lessons, the boys ran out to play in the schoolyard, in the churchyard or on the streets. They would make lots of noise and rag and fight each other; both their playthings and their knives were on occasion confiscated by the masters and thrown away, as they were found five centuries later, in the cesspits of former late-medieval schools.

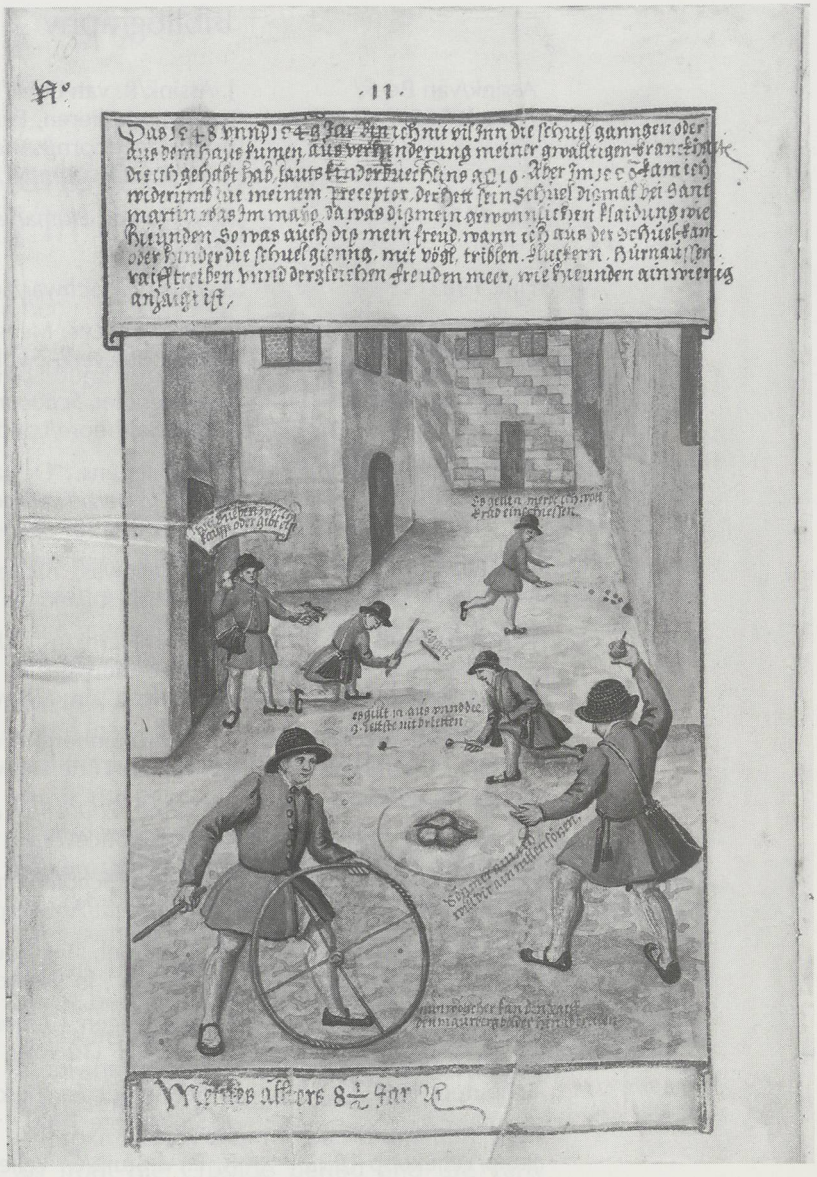

Fig. 5: Games played in the schoolyard of a Latin school, Trachtenbuch Matthäus Schwarz, around 1500 (Collection and photograph: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig).

Strange finds

Archaeological finds are not always easily to read, especially when they were excavated by someone else, some time ago. One of the things that is still a mystery to me is the find of a wax tablet, a ferule and twigs of a rod in the 15th-century grave of a girl unearthed in Dordrecht in the 1980s (Hallewas 1984, 320). From the study of education through the ages, it is evident that it has always been considered a positive thing. The association of school equipment gives someone a certain status, in the age of humanism both as a literate and as a morally just person. But what then does the presence of these objects referring to school life, put in a grave at a time when the placing of gravegoods was by no means the rule, mean? Does the wax tablet stress that she could read and write? But what about the symbols of masterly punishment? In other words: is this the grave of a brave, or a very bad pupil? Or did she maybe die at school?

This is just a fraction of the remaining questions about late-medieval schoollife. I hope that in the following years the study of material school culture will provide the clues. Ideally, the results can be both read in a book and seen at an exhibition around 2004.

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