

# Historical research in Gelderland and the role of the archives<sup>1</sup>

by Dolly Verhoeven

Dolly Verhoevens Beitrag stellt die drei wesentlichen, mit ihrem an der Radboud Universität Nijmegen neu eingerichteten Lehrstuhl zur regionalen Geschichtsforschung (Geschiedenis van Gelderland) verbundenen Ziele vor und nimmt die spezifische Funktionen der Archive in Geldern für die regionale Geschichtsforschung und Geschichtskultur in den Blick.

Aufgabe des Lehrstuhls sei die Erforschung der historischen Identität von Geldern bzw. der in der Provinz gelegenen Regionen. Da die „historische Identität“ einer ganzen Region schwerlich fassbar sei, liege der Schwerpunkt faktisch auf der Erforschung „historischer Identifikation“ bzw. Identifikationsprozesse, wobei Grenzverläufe und -verschiebungen zwangsläufig einen Einfluss ausübten. Neben der eigenen Forschung auf diesem Gebiet werden auch Forschungen durch Dritte, insbesondere solche von Nachwuchshistorikern, angeregt und gefördert. Dritter Aufgabenschwerpunkt ist die Stärkung der interdisziplinären Kooperation mit der nichtakademischen Regional- und Lokalforschung, den historischen Vereinen und ihren Akteuren, aber auch den Museen.

Die Rolle der Archive sieht Verhoeven dabei als zentral an: Ohne Archive sei keine ernsthafte historische Forschung möglich. Aufgabe der Archive sei neben der Bereitstellung des historischen Quellenmaterials für die Forschung auch die aktive Mitwirkung am regionalgeschichtlichen Diskurs (promoting history) in Form historischer Bildungsarbeit.

Für drei wichtige Nutzergruppen erhofft sich Verhoeven von den Archiven spezifische Angebote: Geschichtsstudenten benötigten wegen der in der digitalen (Lebens-)Welt veränderten Recherchemethoden stärkere Unterstützung und Einführung in die Struktur der Archive und damit auch in die strukturierte Quellensuche. Lokale und regionale Geschichtsforscher ohne Geschichtsstudium („amateur“ historians) lieferten zwar zahl- und materialreiche Beiträge zur Lokal- und Regionalgeschichte, doch fehle häufig die Einbettung der Ergebnisse in größere Zusammenhänge. Eine Hilfestellung der Archive könne darin bestehen, Kurse zur historischen Methodologie (educational program for amateur researchers) anzubieten. Speziell bei den professionellen Historikern schließlich solle aktiv dafür geworben bzw. die Möglichkeit geboten werden, dass diese ihre Materialsammlungen, insbesondere solche, die im Zuge von Oral history-Projekten entstanden seien, in den Archiven deponierten und damit nachnutzbar machten. Abgesehen von den formulierten Wunschzielen bleibe die wichtigste Aufgabe der Archive aber weiterhin in der Überlieferungsbildung, Bewahrung und Bereitstellung historischer Quellen.

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak on your symposium on *Archives as places of history* about the present day practices of historical research in the province of Gelderland and to share with you some thoughts on the role archives play – or might play – in this research. I will be glad to do so.

## A chair for the history of Gelderland

Let me start by telling you something about the new chair for the history of Gelderland to which I was appointed in November 2014 and for which I gave my inaugural lecture in October 2015.<sup>2</sup> The chair was instituted through a combined action of the province of Gelderland and the Radboud University in Nijmegen. The purpose of the chair is threefold.

## Researching the identity of Gelderland

In the first place it is meant to research – and if possible strengthen – the historical identity of Gelderland or the identity of sub regions within the province. This is indeed

an interesting research topic, but also one that comes with a number of dilemmas.

To start with, historical research is no marketing program and building or strengthening a provincial identity should never be the main purpose of academic research. What historians do is analyse and interpret historical data, discuss and sometimes deconstruct historical myths, and create new viewpoints and new stories about the past. But, though it may not be their purpose, in telling historical tales about the region, historians inevitably do influence in some way or the other the process of regional identity building.

Another dilemma related to the topic of identity is the fact that Gelderland is not known for its strong provincial identity. Inhabitants tend to identify more with the towns, villages or regions they live in than with the province in general. And this has more or less been the case since the

<sup>1</sup> Lecture, held at the German-Dutch Symposium 'Archives as places of history' in Münster, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The full text of this inaugural lecture (in Dutch) may be found at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2066/149253> [consulted: 16.12.2015].

middle ages when the territory of Gelderland was divided into four different regions, called 'quarters'.<sup>3</sup> So on what level should research take place?

Moreover, identity may be considered as a very slippery and controversial research subject – in present time as well as in history. The well-known Dutch historian Ernst H. Kossmann once advised to best treat it like a giant jellyfish on the beach: circle it attentively, look at it from all sides, but avoid to step into it, because it is too complicated, too multidimensional and too dynamic to be useful as a research concept.<sup>4</sup>

In my inaugural lecture I proposed to overcome some of these dilemmas by concentrating research not on the matter of identity (that is: who are the people of Gelderland) but on the matter of identification (what do the people of Gelderland identify with – and how and why does that change over time). Identification is always a matter of 'us' and 'them': who are we, and who are we not. So the interesting question is: which group is considered to be 'us', which group is 'them' and what does the border between those two groups look like.<sup>5</sup> Gelderland has known many different borders in the course of time. Some of them with neighbouring territories like Brabant, Utrecht, Kleve or Münster in the Middle Ages. Other borders cut right through the territory of present time Gelderland: like the *Limes* in roman times or the border between occupied and free areas in 1944. Some border zones are political, others cultural – like for instance the border of the lower Saxon dialect that goes right through the province.<sup>6</sup>

### Stimulating historical research

Next to researching the topic of identity, the second purpose of the chair is to inspire historical research by others than the chair holder herself. This is no unimportant issue, as the chair is limited to one day a week. So if we wish to make any progress over the next years, contributions from other researchers are more than welcome. There are many people already working on provincial historical topics today. It is my intention to stimulate them and – if possible – also to promote the exchange of research results.

Luckily, tied to the chair is a small budget, which I intend to spend mainly on the hiring of young historians, who just graduated from university. During a period of six months they get the opportunity to do research on a selected topic within the general history of Gelderland. In this way the chair may generate extra output, while at the same time young researchers – and students – are stimulated to engage in provincial history.

The first young historian has already started working this summer.<sup>7</sup> He is researching the consequences of the transfer of some former Kleve communities to the Netherlands in 1816: namely Zevenaar, Huissen, Duiven and Wehl. The research question that was formulated for him is: what effect did this political change have upon the identification process of the inhabitants of those communities. How and how long did they continue to relate to their former

home country? Did they, at a certain moment, begin to feel Dutch? When was that? And what caused it? He hopes to have some first answers at the beginning of 2016.

### Connecting academic and local history

The third purpose of the chair for the history of Gelderland is to strengthen the connection and stimulate the communication between academic historians who work at the university and those who are actively engaged in the field of regional and local history outside of the academy. The second group consists of – among others – curators and amateur historians who work for historical museums or are connected to local historical societies.

In Gelderland we count about 80 museums with presentations about local or regional history, and also about 80 local or regional historical societies. Today, the majority of publications about historical subjects in Gelderland are produced by 'amateurs' within the context of historical societies.<sup>8</sup>

Both groups – inside and outside of the university – are important for the advance of knowledge about the provincial history. There are of course differences between the ways they work, but I dare say both have their own specific qualities. And I am convinced that working together may enrich them both.

So, to sum up: the chair of the history of Gelderland is focused on processes of identification through history and especially on the meaning of borders and borderlands in this respect. It is striving to stimulate research by others than just the chair holder. And it is eager to find ways to bridge the gap between scientific and public history.

### Gelderland's history and the role of archives

I now come to my second question, which is: what is – or might be – the role of archives in researching Gelderland's history? As a trained historian, focusing in my own research mainly on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, I am inclined to consider archives the starting point of any serious historical research. Archives are the treasurers of history and their primary functions must always be firstly to collect, select, preserve and disclose historical materials like documents, photos and film, and secondly to make it as easy as possible for researchers to access those materials – either physical or digital.

3 Willem Frijhoff, *Gelderlandgevoel vroeger en nu*, in: Meindert Evers/Johannes Stinner (Hrsg.), *Het hertogdom Gelre. Geschiedenis, kunst en cultuur tussen Maas, Rijn en IJssel*, Utrecht 2003, S. 494–504; Jan Kuys, *Centraal en regionaal bestuur van graafschap en hertogdom Gelre tot 1543*, in: ebd., S. 156–165.

4 Gert Oostindie, *Kossmanns kwal. Identiteit, migratie en koloniale geschiedenis zijn onlosmakelijk met elkaar verbonden*, in: *De academische boekengids* 68 (May 2008), S. 16–20.

5 Dolly Verhoeven, *Het Gelderse gevoel en de betekenis van grenzen in ruimte en tijd*, Nijmegen 2015, S. 9.

6 J. B. Berns/H. Scholtmeijer, *Dialectonderzoek in Gelderland. Een historisch overzicht*, in: *Bijdragen en mededelingen Gelre* 96 (2005), S. 215–230.

7 I am referring to Dirk Lueb MA.

8 Addy Schuurman, *Leemtenlijst van de Gelderse geschiedenis in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, Arnhem 2010, S. 90–95.

## Promoting history

Since I also consider myself a public historian, with a passion for presenting history to a general public, I very much applaud initiatives to actively promote the use of archive documents, photos and other material for this purpose. Some archives in Gelderland are actively engaged in such initiatives. One example is the Regional Archive of Nijmegen – an institution with which I am especially familiar because I also hold a chair (for one day a week) for the local history of Nijmegen. In October 2015 Nijmegen experienced its annual history-weekend, being part of the national history-month. Over 20 organizations participated in this event, among which the Radboud University, the Valkhof Museum, the municipal library and several historical societies. The Regional Archive of Nijmegen was one of the main organizing parties and offered a number of activities, such as: a historical book market, guided city walks, a story-telling event and a historical quiz.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from their involvement in the local history-weekend, the archive of Nijmegen also offers a year-round program of education, lectures and other activities. Other archives in present-day Gelderland also offer educational programs, especially for primary and secondary school groups, like Tiel, Doetinchem and Zutphen, and some of them participate in expositions – either within the archive itself or in a local or regional historical museum.

But important and inspiring as they may be, these activities are not specifically aimed at historical research. And I did promise you some thoughts on that subject as well. In the remainder of my lecture I will present to you three groups of researchers, and for every one of them I have one example and one wish.

## Adding context for history students

The first group I'd like to mention are history students. When I re-entered the academic community as part-time professor of Nijmegen's history in 2008 – after some 15 years of absence – I was surprised to discover that archival research was no longer a self-evident part of the curriculum. Students might graduate in history without ever having been inside an archive. Instead, they founded their research work on printed sources and literature.

Fortunately – at least in my opinion – this trend has altered in the last few years. The Nijmegen history program has developed a course for all second-year students, in which they make their acquaintance with archival materials.<sup>10</sup> The course takes place inside the Regional Archive in Nijmegen and starts with one piece, pre-selected by the teacher: a document, a picture, a letter or something else. This one piece is meant to inspire the students to ask questions: what does it mean, who made it, for what purpose, how can we use it to answer questions. For example, in the course that ran in the autumn of 2015, my students were confronted with a photo of a group of male foreign workers in one of the Nijmegen factories in 1956. They started to ask themselves questions about who these men were,

why they had come to the city of Nijmegen, how they were received there and whether they succeeded in building a life in this city.

The next step the students take, is to find scientific literature about these subjects, in order to add context to their questions and to specify the exact direction of their research. After that, they start searching for additional sources of information in the local and other archives. Like – in this case – police reports, factory documents, personal documents and recorded interviews. With the help of this material they try to answer their questions. After six weeks of research, they sum up their conclusions in a report. The course ends with a small symposium at the university, where the different subgroups present their results to each other.

In this course the role of the teacher is not to direct the process, but more to guide and observe it – since the students may to a great extent follow their own path. This role gave me opportunity to observe the way students conduct their research process.

Unlike the research methods that were used when I was a student, when we used to work with printed inventory lists, students can now find source material in the digital archive database by just typing a word, like – in this case – foreign worker; just as they would do when searching the internet by Google. It is no surprise that they are very familiar with this manner of searching, even if you have to explain to them sometimes that in historical perspective they need to be aware of potential other search terms.

The digital database search is a blessing in terms of speed and it offers the possibility of cross-searching several collections at one time, which is magnificent. But there is also a disadvantage – and this brings me to my wish for this group. Just like on the internet, students are inclined to look as directly as possible in the archive database for the specific answer to their specific question. They are no longer forced to ask themselves questions about the structure of the archives and the institutions that produced certain sources of information. With a bit of luck, they can stumble directly upon the desired documents. But ... with a little less luck, they may also misinterpret these documents and miss some others by lack of context.

Now of course, it is the responsibility of the academic teachers to point this out to students and to stimulate and train them to look beyond their first hits. But cooperation with the archives in explaining matters of structure and context might be very helpful in teaching our future history researchers to optimize their research results. This might be done by giving general information on the structure of the archives and ways of researching them on the central website. Or by giving context information combined with

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.maandvandegeschiedenis.nl/58124/nl/024geschiedenis> [consulted: 16.12.2015].

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ru.nl/opleidingen/bachelor/geschiedenis/studieprogramma/tweede-derde-jaar/> [consulted: 16.12.2015].

the document itself (which is sometimes – but not always the case). Or perhaps even by offering masterclasses on the general structure of archives in cooperation with the university, as is presently being tried out in Nijmegen.

### Providing support for ‘amateur’ historians

After the students, the second research group that I wish to bring to the stage are ‘amateur’ historians, working either individually or in the context of a local or regional historical society. As I already mentioned, it is this group of researchers that produces most books and articles about local and regional subjects within Gelderland’s history. Almost every historical society has its own magazine, appearing monthly, quarterly or yearly. Generally, the amateur historians possess a great knowledge of the local situation. They tend to confine their research activities to a specific source of information or to a very specific local topic. As a result, the information that is produced by the amateur historians is often rich in detail but falls short on context and comparability. You might say that, contrary to students who are trained to start with a historical question but are inclined to take too easy shortcuts to find their answers, amateur historians skip the questions and the context, and focus instead on elaborate answers.

Out of many possible examples, I choose one from my own home town: a book about a royalist association (‘Oranjevereniging’) in Apeldoorn. It was instituted in 1881 as one of the oldest in the country and it had a rather complete archive, with minutes of many meetings, year after year programs of activities and lots of photos. The local historical society of Apeldoorn decided some years ago to ask one of their members to write a book about the association. Unfortunately the author, though very diligent, was not at all trained in historical research and had no experience in placing his material in a broader context. The book ended up being a rather boring collection of incidents and facts, beautifully designed, but not at all addressing general questions on the history of royalism in Apeldoorn, Gelderland or the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup>

Is there anything archives can do about that? I think there might be. Some archives present courses on historical research – mostly on subjects like genealogy or palaeography, but sometimes also on other themes. The Regional Archive in Tiel, for instance, recently offered a masterclass on researching Second World War archives.<sup>12</sup> I can imagine a special and inviting educational program for amateur researchers – maybe in cooperation with the university – focused on strengthening the starting point of their research and aimed at helping to achieve maybe a bit more general results.

### Storing oral history material

The third and last group of researchers that I want to mention today are my peers, scientifically trained historians working inside or outside the academy. They are of course familiar with historical research, they know how to find

and use historical sources and usually they are aware of the broader context of their research. It is this group that will be very grateful for the digitization and will – generally – know how to use it wisely. What is there to wish for them?

Something quite different from the other two groups, students and amateur historians – but at the same time something these two groups may also profit from. Professional historians, as you may know, combine all kinds of research material. They may include in their exploration environmental information, historical objects and human memories. The latter research method – called oral history – opens up an additional role for the archives. Oral history is a very intense and rewarding historical method that may shed a new and unexpected light on historical phenomena. But there are also some dangers attached to it. In conducting oral history, historians create their own sources. They ask respondents about (parts of) their life history and use this information in their publications. No doubt they will add a reference: oral history interview conducted on date x with person y. But who will be able to check if the information is correctly used? Who may falsify the outcome of the research? And who can re-use the oral history material in later research on the basis of other questions? No-one. Unless ... the oral history material is safely stored and disclosed in one of our archives. I very strongly plea to my fellow historians not to keep their oral history interviews privately in their drawers or on their computers, but to depose them for purposes of control and re-use as a matter of self-evidence. And I do hope that archives are willing and eager to facilitate present and future researchers in this respect.

One of the archives in Gelderland who are facilitating the development of a regional oral history collection is the Gelders Archief in Arnhem, where interviews from different projects are stored and made accessible for future use. One of these projects concentrated on memories about living on castles and manors – of which there were many in Gelderland: not only former owners were interviewed, but also servants and gardeners. The purpose was to record from different angles a disappearing way of life.<sup>13</sup>

### Finally

Ladies and gentlemen, I come to a conclusion. In this speech I have taken for granted the basic tasks of any archive: acquisition, selection, preservation, disclosure. Of course performing those tasks in a proper manner is the most important contribution that archives can make to historical research. It is only in addition that I have expressed some wishes, dreams maybe, on making archives even more supportive to historical research. By presenting ar-

<sup>11</sup> Hans Kaal, 130 jaar Oranjeveesten Apeldoorn 1881–2011, Apeldoorn 2011.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.maandvandedegeschiedenis.nl/54296/nl/masterclass-archiefontderzoek-wereldoorlogen> [consulted: 15.12.2015].

<sup>13</sup> <http://landschapsbeheergelderland.nl/met-bewoners/oral-history/werkgroep-oral-history-gelderland-leven-op-landgoederen/> [consulted: 15.12.2015].

chival context information, by helping researchers to better found their research activities and by providing a safe place for newly created oral history material. By expressing my wishes I did not intend to burden the archives with a load of extra work. Rather, I would like to invite them to explore the possibilities of step by step improvement and enrichment of historical research. And to do so in cooperation with their different user groups. ■



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