

Nijmegen Revived

From Roman Settlement to Havana on the Waal

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[D A A N C A R T E N S]

An early Saturday morning in April 2013. The city of Nijmegen is busy. Perhaps less so than in the week of the Vierdaagse, the four day marches, when the population of the city quadruples, but the quayside is full of people and on the other side of the Waal stand row on row of spectators armed with enormous telephoto lenses or film cameras. That morning an arch bridge spanning 285 metres was being placed between the two banks with unprecedented precision. A semicircle, fine and delicate as a Japanese wood carving, particularly in the morning light, it has been lying in wait for this moment for months, like a futuristic trophy. The busy shipping traffic is still, the tide is right, the weather conditions ideal. Just a few hours later this huge operation is complete: in addition to the railway bridge (dating back to 1879) and the 'old' Waalbrug (1936), Nijmegen now has a third connection with the northern part of the city, which is growing explosively. 'Nijmegen embraces the Waal' is also the slogan of the various building activities and the future construction of an island in the Waal.

Within a few decades Arnhem and Nijmegen will draw even closer together, at least in terms of physical expansion. The two cities differ enormously in character, Arnhem being a fashionable administrative city with an art academy, whereas for a long time Nijmegen was a poor labourers' city. The arrival of the Catholic University in Nijmegen in 1923 gave it a new lease of life, and since the eighties the Catholic governors have made way for a leftwing activist movement and a city administration which since 2002 has been composed completely of progressive parties. Since then Nijmegen has earned its reputation as 'Havana on the Waal'. So much for the present, but the history of the city goes back to the decades before our era, when 'De Oversteek' (The Crossing), as the new bridge is known, was still accomplished with boats and rafts.

Roman roots

Another morning, this time a sultry summer dawn on the Kops Plateau, or the Kopsse Hof, a high plateau of wooded groves, thickets, paths and moorland, criss-crossed day in day out by dog owners walking their four-footed friends and health freaks jogging off their excess kilos. The atmosphere here is different,



thinner than that of the city; not infrequently the air shimmers and weather changes are clearly discernible. Looking between the bushes, which grow to head height, you can see the Ooijpolder, the unique nature reserve near Nijmegen, popular among walkers and birdwatchers. Further on and deeper down winds the Waal. No coincidence, then, that the Romans saw this as an ideal place for a settlement from which to conquer Germania. They built an enormous 42-hectare encampment on the Hunnerberg, another area of high ground, now a built-up part of modern-day Nijmegen. The camp, surrounded by an earth wall, was also an administrative centre, because the Romans had struck a bargain with the Batavi who inhabited those areas. Nijmegen therefore first appears in history as *Oppidum Batavorum*, more than a century before Emperor Trajan named it *Ulpia Noviomagus Batavorum* in 98 AD.

At around 15 hectares, the settlement on the Kopse Hof was smaller than that on the Hunnerberg, but it was more sophisticated and luxurious. The first stone buildings in Dutch history were built here, and archaeological findings show that this camp also provided quarters for military officers. Trade flourished; the Batavi in particular were sharp businessmen, plying their trade in Lent and Oosterhout, where the 'Waal sprong' area, Nijmegen's extension to the north, is now under development. In 69 AD the Batavi rebelled, tired of the Roman yoke and heavy demands for soldiers for the Roman expansion, which had in any case reached deadlock in Germania. The Kopse Hof was destroyed and the triumphant Romans built a new settlement, elevated to city status by Trajan, on the site of the current Waterkwartier, a famous underprivileged district of Nijmegen. In the second century the city of *Noviomagus* and its surroundings flourished. Around 6000 people lived there, which made it unique at the time. It was a thousand years before another city, Utrecht, achieved so many inhabitants. In the first centuries AD the city centre moved to the Valkhof, which was situated on high ground. The remains of that magnificent site will form the everyday backdrop of many wedding photos from 2014.

As I walk those fields with my dog, not just on summer mornings, but all year round, where the Romans lived and history played out, I realise that Nijmegen has not been particularly creative in its approach to that history. Anyone wishing to imagine those early settlements must visit the Archeon in Alphen aan de Rijn,

Bombardment of Nijmegen

22/2/1944.

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Het Arsenaal, former City Archive, now Flemish Cultural Centre.
Photo by Hester Quist

where many buildings have been painstakingly modelled. Still, there are enthusiastic researchers and amateurs who often come across surprising discoveries. In 1999, for instance, Professor B. Brus published an interesting article showing that it was the Romans who had laid down seven kilometres of water pipes, remains of which are increasingly found in the ground in the elevated region of Berg en Dal. It was known that the Romans regularly organised 'water games' in their settlements, using more water than was otherwise needed for daily requirements. The system of clay pipes was an ideal method of water transport, proving the technical expertise of the residents. Brus's article has received little attention in Nijmegen, wrongly in my opinion, and there are many other examples.

Anyone wishing to quench a thirst for archaeological findings would do well to visit the Museum Het Valkhof (designed by Ben van Berkel and opened in 1999 by Queen Beatrix), known to Nijmegen residents as 'the swimming pool'. There you will find beautiful displays of jewellery, coins and utensils, the highlight being the Gods Pillar, dating back to 17 AD. There is also a cycle route and road from Nijmegen to Xanten, which really only becomes interesting on the German side of the border, as the requisite Roman past is on show in picturesque Xanten itself. The recently designed walking route through the city is informative but not spectacular. The real question is which city is the oldest in the Netherlands, Nijmegen or Maastricht, and it is this which has long kept bureaucratic minds occupied. Residents of each place insist on their own home territory; historians have found in favour of the Waal city.

Medieval city

In the early medieval period Nijmegen grew up around the Valkhofburcht. In 1230 Hendrik VII gave the city the designation Rijksstad (imperial city). It might be a cliché, but trade grew and flourished due, of course, to the city's unique location on the Waal. In 1273 the church, Stevenskerk, was consecrated by Bishop Albertus Magnus, and it remains the most important city landmark today, viewed from the surrounding area. By around 1560 Stevenskerk had reached its current proportions. The church is now mainly used for (university) meetings, exhibitions and organ concerts. It is a beautiful place, with lighting reminiscent of Saenredam's paintings, the walls in white and terracotta plaster. After the Iconoclasm all the statues of Mary and the saints were removed. The silence and spaciousness are almost dignified. It is a unique place to set the imagination free and be inspired by the essential figures of Nijmegen's history, the Limburg brothers and Mariken van Nieuwegein.

In 2005, some 91,000 visitors to Het Valkhof Museum saw the unique exhibition dedicated to the Limburg brothers' world famous books of hours, *Les Très Riches Heures* and *Les Belles Heures*. Since that enormous success, a city charitable foundation, which wants to bring medieval life closer to the people of Nijmegen and its tourists, has organised the annual Limburg Brothers Festival in the last week of August. Who were these famous brothers? Many of Nijmegen's artists worked at the court of the Dukes of Guelders, among them Herman and Willem Maelwael, well-known painters and gilders. The house where their studio was located still stands on Burchtstraat, where you can also see the facade of the medieval town hall. Willem Maelwael's son Jan exchanged

the court of Guelders for that of Philip of Burgundy. His sister Metta married the Nijmegen sculptor Arnold van Limburg and their three sons, Paul, Herman and Johan, obtained easy access to the court of Burgundy due to the family connection. There the brothers produced biblical illustrations, which brought them to the attention of art collector the Duke of Berry. It was for him that they made the books of hours, which drew so much attention at the ingenious exhibition of 2005. The brothers visited their birthplace several more times during their lives, but died, probably from the plague, in France. Nevertheless they hold an important place in the Canon of Nijmegen, which was established in 2009 following the form of the Canon of Dutch History.

Of course Mariken is the figure most naturally associated with Nijmegen. *The True and Very Strange History of Mariken van Nieuweghen Who Lived more than Seven Years with the Devil and Kept Company with Him* first came out in print in 1518, published by Willem Vorsterman in Antwerp. The author is unknown, but was clearly familiar with Nijmegen and used many facts from the history of Guelders in the miracle play. Generations of school children have been required to read



Moenestraat. Photo by Hester Quist



Marikenstraat. Photo by Hester Quist

the text and there have been countless famous performances as well as films (by Jos Stelling in 1976 and André van Duren in 2000). The story still appeals to audiences today, perhaps due to its clear moral, very much of its time: even if man sins, he can receive forgiveness through confession and the intercession of Mary. Mariken is a commercial and cult figure in Nijmegen, with generations of girls named after her. The annual women's running event is called the Marikenloop, and the traditional culinary delicacy of Nijmegen is called Marikenbrood. Since 1957 a statue of Mariken by Vera van Hasselt has stood in the Grote Markt square. She must have been immortalised thousands of times by residents and especially tourists, in one of the prettiest locations in the city, between the Waag (weighing house) and the gatehouse leading to Stevenskerk. The statue of Moenen by Piet Killaers stands in the church's shadow. In the nineties the rather sleepy, impoverished shopping scene was refreshed with the construction of Marikenstraat and Moenenstraat, attractive shopping streets with modern apartments above the shops, connecting Burchtstraat with Molenstraat, which flourished in the 19th century, and passing straight through the old city archives, Het Arsenaal, on the way. These are good examples of appealing urban architecture that have clearly brought in more shoppers from outside Nijmegen (especially Germans from the border region).

Fortified city

For centuries Nijmegen was clearly intended as a medieval fortified city, surrounded and delimited by earth walls. The population, housed in small, closely packed cottages, was decimated during epidemics and grew in better times. House building around the fortress was forbidden. In 1875 there were 23,000 people living in Nijmegen in 2,400 houses. Only after the destruction of the ramparts in 1876 could the city expand, and the nineteenth century brought rapid growth. Architects such as Brouwer, Semmelink, Maurits and Buskens built town houses on the main roads, Groesbeekseweg, Annastraat and Graafseweg, which are still lived in or used as offices. From 1591 the Catholic population had no church of their own. That was strange, as they were clearly in the majority, but after the Iconoclasm and intervention of William of Orange, the Remonstrant upper class held sway. Only in 1808 under Louis Bonaparte were two Catholic churches erected. From that moment things moved quickly and the Waal city developed a clear Catholic character, which did not crumble until the years of social resistance at the end of the twentieth century. A Catholic newspaper was published, *De Gelderlander*, a Catholic infirmary, the Canisiusziekenhuis, was founded, and the rapidly growing city was divided into four parishes, served by the Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and secular priests. Catholic entrepreneurs such as Dobbelmann and Terwindt joined the urban elite and in 1898, for the first time in centuries, the city gained a Catholic mayor, Van Schaeck Mathon, who now has a completely reconstructed avenue named after him.

Certainly the most important in this series of Catholic 'conquests', entirely suited to the time of so-called Triumphalism (*Christus regnat, imperat, vincit*) was the foundation of the Catholic University of Nijmegen on 17th October 1923. There was certainly resistance – the city council decided in favour with a majority of only one. Obviously the Catholics were for it, but an unholy alliance

The schommel
(The Swing) by Henk
Visch. © Stadsarchief
Nijmegen



Mariken van
Nieumeghen by Vera
van Hasselt. Passage to
the Stevenskerk. Photo
by Hester Quist



of Protestants, liberals and social democrats voted against. Today's Radboud University Nijmegen, which was extended to include an academic hospital in 1956, is now an 'open' community in its thinking, offering a full range of degree courses. In the sixties the towering Talengebouw, or language building, became visible from all directions, underlining the importance of the university, and over the last two decades the sciences have been housed in ultra-modern complexes. Many politicians and administrators were educated in Nijmegen, both at the university and at Canisius College, alma mater of former Prime Minister Lubbers and former Minister of Defence, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and founder of D66, Hans van Mierlo.

If you take a walk from the station through the city, you will certainly recognise much of the medieval street pattern in the completely renovated city centre on the Waal. Nijmegen's allure is further determined by the concert hall *De Vereeniging* (built in 1882) and the nineteenth century streets and avenues, such as Berg en Dalseweg, which is described in detail by A.F.Th. van der Heijden in his cycle of novels *De tandeloze tijd* ('The Toothless Time'). The continuation of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century city expansion lies on the other side of the Maas-Waal Canal. Since the seventies, districts such as Dukenburg and Lindenholt have been the ideal residential areas for the children of the baby boom generation. Now further expansion in a southerly direction is no longer possible, developers have created the Waalsprong, which offers many opportunities.

But describing it as a continuous line of growth and prosperity does not do justice to history. On 22nd February 1944 the view of the city received a wound which has only recently healed, more than half a century later.

The bombing

A sunny winter's afternoon, a busy station; children were back in class after lunch at home, mothers washing up or shopping, fathers at the office or one of the many factories. Suddenly the sky to the east turned black, aeroplanes dropped their load over the city. Houses and streets went up in flames, vision was

obscured by the enormous plumes of smoke. There was great consternation, crying and screaming audible all around. Hours later, as the centre smouldered, the trail of the bombing emerged: from the Valkhof to the east of the centre to the station to the west, the heart of the city was one long scar. In subsequent days, it emerged that the bombardment, carried out in error, had claimed 800 victims and left the centre of the Waal city in ruins. After an interrupted campaign over German territory, Canadian and American bombers had decided to drop their load above the German border city of Kleve, unaware of the terrible fact that they were long past Kleve and were dropping their devastating load over Nijmegen.

In the autumn of the same year, 1944, Nijmegen, along with Arnhem, remained on the frontline and emerged from the war heavily battered, both physically and psychologically. Plans for rebuilding the city were proposed in 1947. The town hall and Stevenskerk were restored, but beyond that people found it difficult to choose between a historicising approach (a nostalgic, traditional view of the city) and a modernising operation (an open, modern city). The choice was never really made. Where whole streets were wiped out, modern nineteen fifties blocks of flats appeared. I myself live in a nineteenth century town house, but neighbours' houses have been rebuilt in a more or less modern style. The centre remained open and empty for a long time, sometimes by choice (Plein 44 became a symbol for the bombing), but generally due to differences in opinion, or lack of financial resources. Only when the money was available, in the prosperous nineties, did the real modernisation take place. The centre is now an amalgam of pre-war properties and streets, utilitarian nineteen fifties buildings (such as the V&D and HEMA department stores) and contemporary streets and houses, such as Marikenstraat and Moenenstraat and the Lux complex, comprising a cinema and conference rooms, largely underground. Not a particularly beautiful centre, perhaps, but cleverly revived and lively, and the leafy lanes, suburbs and surrounding area make up for a good deal.

De Oversteek (The Crossing),
new bridge over the Waal (2013).
© Stadsarchief Nijmegen



Cemeteries

Among the victims of the bombing were many schoolchildren, including those of the Saint Louis Montessori kindergarten, near the town hall, where eight nuns and 24 children died. The newspapers of those days show photos of long rows of grieving family members and relatives on their way to the city's various cemeteries. The nuns and children of Saint Louis were buried in the Catholic cemetery *In Paradisum* on the Daalseweg. A little house, still filled with candles and children's drawings, forms the memorial for a class of innocent young victims, their names written on the walls. In 2000 a monument designed by sculptor Henk Visch, *De Schommel* ('The Swing'), was unveiled where their class once stood. Between the undamaged chestnut trees, it is a beautiful symbol of childlike playfulness and human futility. Since 2000 Nijmegen's mayors have commemorated that February afternoon of 1944 in this quiet place in the midst of the city bustle. They then move to the cemetery with family of the victims and a large group of interested members of the public, to the eternal resting place of the children and their teachers.

Nijmegen has many burial places. The Jewish cemetery is closed to the public. The Holy Land Foundation cemetery borders on the former Biblical Open-Air Museum (now called Orientalis) and has a similar atmosphere. There are also various small parish cemeteries. The victims of the bombing are spread over many of these resting places. The Catholic cemetery *In Paradisum* was consecrated in 1885. Many southern style tombs belonging to rich families exhibit the Catholic grandeur of those years.

A majestic avenue of beeches is preserved as a historic monument. A statue of Christ is clearly visible from all directions, and many priests and missionaries were interred in the priests' crypt nearby. A little further on lies the long forgotten poet Gerard Brüning, who died in 1926, at the age of 28. In his essays and poems he dreamt of a New Time, which he saw represented in fascist Italy. A beautiful statue of Christ by Eduard Overbeeke decorates his neglected grave.

A few steps from this forgotten man of letters, in late June 2012, I buried my beloved spouse Pieter Smals. I would not mention him here, were it not for the fact that he was a member of Nijmegen's city council for years. A representative of a post-war generation, with a strong sense of history, he worked passionately for a modern urban community, a city for *now*, a Nijmegen for 'the crossing'. 'Oh my love / who now lies on peacock cushions / soft, your empire was here, / of this earth, earthly soft, / where I lay you to rest (...),' (From *Op pauwenkussens zacht. Een klaaglied*, 'On peacock cushions soft: A lamentation' 2012).

Against a backdrop of lorries loading and unloading outside the Albert Heijn supermarket, standing among the gravestones I am struck by the juxtaposition of big city and local neighbourhood that characterises Nijmegen, a combination which defines the charm of the old Waal city. ■