

Networks of the Unseen – A Church and its Village

John Decker

Pratt Institute

ORCID: 0000-0001-8648-1455

Contact: jdecker@pratt.edu

The Church of St. Leonard (Sint-Leonarduskerk) in the town of Zoutleeuw, Belgium, was begun in the 12th century and underwent a series of renovations in the 15th and 16th centuries. The church is one of the few spared during the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566 and, as a result, provides scholars with a visual record of relatively unspoiled church architecture and decoration. In the 1990s, nearly 150 years of the church's accounting records were published in a volume titled *The Accounts of the Works of the Church of St. Leonard in Zoutleeuw, 1405, 1452-1599*. These accounts provide a window into the socio-economic context of the church and the town that supported it. In addition to recording the purchase of expensive items like panel paintings and statues, the accounts also bring to light the various transactions of the day-to-day operations of the church and its land holdings. In particular, they record payments for goods and services from various tradespeople and members of the community. I have undertaken a digital humanities project using these records as my point of reference. Rather than attempting to examine the entire time span represented in the accounts, I have limited my explorations to the period prior to the Protestant Rupture and the seismic social shifts that occurred because of it. The entries for these years (1405, 1452-1506) paint a picture in which the church was the center of a web of relationships between vendors, workers, church officials, the community, and nearby towns. My primary research question with this project is what might patterns in the data tell us about the nature of those relationships?

I am building a MySQL database from these records and using Pandas and NetworkX in Python to generate a network graph of the co-occurrences of individuals named in the documents as well as a connectivity table showing the degree of connections each person in the network graph has. I also use Matplotlib and Bokeh to visualize the outcomes. The completed database, python scripts, and visualization will be made available both on a website and through a GitHub repository.

As is often the case with historical records intersecting the lives of “average” people in this period, many of the entries in the records have no specific names attached to them. Designations like “player,” “piper,” “drummer,” “wagoner,” and others are the sole indices for individuals. In other cases, however, the records provide names and trades, or else enough information to impute a trade to the person. My project

acknowledges the presence of craftspeople like painters, sculptors, and goldsmiths in the records but primarily attends to the contributions of those hidden actors (e.g. carpenters, plasterers, seamstresses) who are often overlooked in standard histories. While the information provided for the named individuals is, generally speaking, not enough to write a biography for them, we get glimpses of marginal lives normally left unseen. These glimpses, when taken in aggregate, offer a starting point for assembling a synthetic history of a church and the community that built it.

Keywords: digital humanities, hidden figures, co-occurrence graphs, history, cultural heritage

References:

De Mecheleer, Lieve. 1997. *Rekeningen van de Kerkfabriek van de Sint-Leonarduskerk van Zoutleeuw, 1405, 1452-1599*. *Fontes historiae artis neerlandicae* 3; *Bronnen voor de kunstgeschiedenis van de Nederlanden* 3. Brussels: Paleis der Academiën.