**The remarkable soundscape of the pilgrimage church of Wezemaal (Brabant, Belgium) in the 15th and 16th centuries**

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NB: ‘This paper is based on a multidisciplinary research on the history of the St Martin’s church of Wezemaal and the devotion to St Job in that church from the Middle Ages till present. The research resulted in a two volumes book: Bart Minnen (red.), *Den heyligen Sant al in Brabant. De Sint-Martinuskerk van Wezemaal en de cultus van Sint-Job 1000-2000*[‘The Holy Saint of all Brabant’. The Saint Martin’s Church of Wezemaal and the cult of Saint Job 1000-2000], Averbode: Uitgeverij Averbode, 2011, ISBN: 9789031733422.

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| **Introduction** |
| Wezemaal is a village in Belgium, in the former duchy of Brabant, near the town of Louvain. |
| Since the 13th century, the spiritual care of the parish was in the hands of the Norbertine abbey of Averbode. |
| In the 15th and 16th centuries the St Martin’s church grew into the most important pilgrimage place of St Job in the Low Countries. In medieval theology Job was considered as the prefiguration of the suffering and risen Christ.  But the faithful people worshipped Job mainly as a healer of skin diseases and protector against long–lasting suffering. |
| For reasons we will see, St Job’s worship in Wezemaal became surrounded by a remarkable soundscape that surpassed by far that of a common village church.  The sounds themselves we cannot bring to life again. But thanks to the rich sources that have survived, it is possible to unravel the various elements of which this rich soundscape was composed. |
| **The sound of the crowd** |
| The village church was not designed for the large numbers of pilgrims who each year made their way to Wezemaal. |
| Between 1495 and 1520, when Europe was afflicted by a severe form of syphilis, the worship of St Job reached its absolute peak. Around 1510, more than 23.000 pilgrim badges were sold in one single year.  The yearly rhythm of the pilgrimage is revealed by this graph: it shows how much money the offertory box of Saint Job contained at the times when it was emptied. We can see that pilgrims visited the church throughout the year. But around this very 10th of May, the feast of St Job, the pilgrimage reached its yearly climax. The church then became crowded by people of all ranks, praying, singing, begging for healing, requesting religious services, bringing gifts and buying souvenirs. |
| Around the 10th of May, even at night the church was filled with sounds.  In 1501, the pope granted a plenary indulgence to everyone who stayed and prayed in the church for 24 hours, from the eve of the 10th of May till the next vespers, and bestow it with a gift. Many pilgrims believed that during the Vigil they were penetrated by the sacred power of the holy spot, which they thought was extra strong at night. |
| It must have been chaos for the three norbertine parish priests. By no means they could cope with the manifold religious needs. Very much against their will, they had to tolerate that the baron of Wezemaal and the church fabric allowed many secular priests (so called “outer priests”) to provide religious services.  In 1513 the norbertine vicar sighed that numerous poor people affluxed “from all parts of the world”, and that many foreign priests of different bishoprics, speaking different languages and following different rites had made their appearance in the church. These priests celebrated masses on request, sung ecclesiastical chants, blessed the people, issued pilgrimage certificates, and even carried around the Holy Sacrament.  One of them, Henry Preymans, even managed to marry a woman of the village, got a daughter, became appointed as organist and was buried in the church. |
| **Heavenly sounds and worldly instruments** |
| The church of course possessed an organ according to its rank and wealth. After part of the building was burnt during the civil war in 1489, a new organ was commissioned from Daniël II Vander Distelen, one of the most important organ builders in the Low Countries, who built or restored organs in collegiate churches in towns like Louvain and Antwerp. |

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| Besides the heavenly tones of the organ, the church at its most important feast days also opened its doors to musical sounds that we would rather associate with a worldly environment. |
| Due to a late medieval legend, in the 15th century Saint Job also became the patron saint of the musicians in Western Europe. This legend tells how Job, suffering on his dung heap, is comforted by three musicians. Having nothing else to reward them, Job hands them over a crust of his ulcers which instantly turns into a golden coin. |
| The pilgrim badges of Wezemaal, which go back to the middle of the 15th century, are the oldest known objects showing this legend.  Therefore it is not surprising that in the musical framework of the devotion to Saint Job, an important place was provided for worldly musicians. |
| Each year on the 10th of May, the fabric invited small companies of musicians from the nearby towns of Louvain or Mechelen. Some of their instruments mentioned in the church accounts we recognize on the pilgrim badges of Wezemaal.  Besides soft-toned or ‘low’ instruments such as lute and viol, the guest musicians also used loud or ‘high’ instruments: shawm and tabor, bagpipes, and above all, different kinds of trumpets. |
| Because it could be heard from far, these ‘high’ instruments aimed at attract the attention and involve the whole surrounding community. The loud, glorious sounding music emphasized the public nature of the religious services and added solemnity to the sacred feast.  The use of these instruments in churches was quite common in the 15th century. The guest musicians not only performed their music during the processions outside the church, but also within the building: in front of the miraculous statue of St Job, during the mass, and even at the elevation of the host, the mystical highlight of the Eucharist. |

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| **Angelic chant** |
| Nevertheless, the ecclesiastical chants were far more valued than this occasional instrumental music. The 21 musicians that performed in Wezemaal during 1523 were altogether paid 12,5 florins, whereas the retribution for the sacred chants amounted to 190 florins. |
| in 1501, the papal court in Rome granted a request of the baron and the fabric to promote the church to a higher rank. A choir of nine priests (the three norbertines plus six secular priests) was to be installed, lifting the rural church to the level of a collegiate church. After much discussion with the norbertines, this chapter-like choir finally became installed in 1514.  The selection criteria for the six wordly priests were: a good voice and a “reasonable knowledge of the ecclesiastical chants”.  The choir of nine priests was supplemented with six choristers and three professional singers: an alto, a bass, and a choirmaster, who also assumed the task of teaching the choirboys. |
| The choir had to sing the daily seven canonical hours, and every week a high mass and a mass of the Holy Sacrament. During the hours, the foreign priests were forbidden to celebrate masses. |
| During the holy office and in the processions, even the choir priests of this rural church wore precious copes with a gilded morse. |
| The boys also were dressed up “like the priests”, as one church account mentions. They wore a red or black tabard. In 1563 the fabric commissioned six bonnets and six black tabards made of English cloth. The boy’s hair was cut and they even got a tonsure. |
| The church possessed beautiful written liturgical manuscripts on parchment. |
| The church accounts contain no indications as to the kind of singing. The existence of an ensemble of three professional singers, each of them with a different voice type, together with choir boys, justifies the presumption that Gregorian chant alternated with polyphonic singing.  The most likely option is the fauxbourdon, a harmonisation technique particularly used by composers of the [Burgundian School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burgundian_School" \o "Burgundian School), in which to a unison Gregorian part two other voices were added, one of them running parallel to the top line.  Complemented by the ethereal sound of the choristers and the tones from the organ echoing from above, this fusion of heavenly sounds, exceptional for a rural church, must have made a great impression to the devote people and the common villagers. |
| **The soundscape outside** |
| We already mentioned the processions, enriched by the singing of the 18 choir members and by musicians of nearby towns.  And of course, after the procession, it was time for the fair, with market stalls, music, dance and story-tellers. |
| On particular moments, theater plays were performed on St Job’s day. We have one very rare mention of a play of St Job in 1481, performed by a group of ‘companions’, with no more details.  The plays most likely were performed on the churchyard, as was still the case in the 17th century during the procession.  It is not clear however whether we must interpret this play as a simple tableau vivant, in which during the procession groups of people represented scenes in silence, or full plays performed on a stage, after the procession. |
| **The singing tower** |
| Thanks to the poor Saint Job, the parish church of Wezemaal became one of the richest in Brabant. The most obvious expression of this wealth was a huge new bell tower which was completed in 1475, and which housed at least six bells. |
| The bell which can be seen in the top of the oldest pilgrim badges probably was the small bell above the St Job’s Chapel, in the southern transept. The tolling of this small bell right above the miraculous statue enhanced the protective power of St Job, the victor of Satan and disease. As you know, bells were considered as a powerful weapon against disaster and evil forces, such as Satan and disease demons. |
| Church fabric and community refused to accept the irreversible character of the sudden collapse of the devotion to Job from around 1520. |
| They kept selling pilgrim badges, and from 1560 onwards also pennants in tin, of which this very rare specimen recently has been found – still showing the old miracle legend of Job, but with the musicians playing new renaissance instruments, such as a *viola da braccio* and a *viola da gamba*. |
| The most striking initiative was the installation of a carillon in 1563, very exceptional for a rural church. This carillon was assembled out of no less than fourteen bells, 7 or 8 of them coming from the French town of St Quentin after its capture by the Spaniards in 1557. |
| Never before the musical praises of St Job resounded over such a distance.  In 1563, the miraculous healing of a man was followed by three days of bell tolling and carillon ringing.  “Nowhere else in Brabant a work of such harmony is to be found”, the vicar in 1611 wrote about the carillon, long after the bells had gone. |
| **Sounds of the past** |
| Indeed, this marvelous soundscape brutally became silenced amidst the darkest years of the Eighty Year’s War: in 1578 the church was plundered and its bells robbed to be melted down to guns,  and the next year the building burned out after a lightning stroke. For 25 years the church lay in ruin amidst a nearly deserted village. Carillon, guest musicians and chapter choir forever had given way to a deathly silence. |
| The memory of the golden age lived on for a long time, but the vaults reconstructed after 1600 never again would echo the rich soundscape from the past. |