

# 1. The commemoration of the dead in the Middle Ages

## *Summary*

Though the commemoration of the dead is of all times and cultures, the MeMO database is intended only for research into the commemoration of the dead (*memoria*) in medieval (Latin) Christianity. Scholars who study this phenomenon have chosen a wider approach for their research than only the care for the dead. They consider *memoria* a phenomenon in which the care for the here and the now is inextricably connected to the care for the hereafter.

By living as a good Christian here on earth, which might include making donations to the poor, one could shorten one's stay in purgatory and enter heaven earlier, also because the recipients of the benefices committed to prayers for the souls of the generous donors. Donations, foundations and other good works were also manners in which one could show with which communities one felt associated; also donors could express their socio-political viewpoints. *Memoria*, then, offered medieval Christians a way to express one's identity.

Besides case studies, broad quantitative and qualitative research is also essential for *memoria* research, because it allows us to distinguish between what was common practice and what was unusual. Research into different regions and into changes over time is important as well.

Researchers into the commemoration of the dead are presented time and again with a tricky challenge: the research materials have become dispersed, and sometimes their existence may even be unknown. The MeMO database therefore offers inventories with descriptions of objects and texts that fulfilled a function in *memoria*. The inventories cover the area that is currently the Netherlands in the time period until 1580.

## *1.1 The origins of the commemoration of the dead*

One of the tenets of Christianity is that paradise became accessible to humanity again when Christ died on the Cross ([fig. 1](#)). Adam and Eve's Fall from Grace had been remitted through Christ's death. The first Christians thought that the Last Judgment would soon take place. Living life as a good Christian was sufficient to be allowed to enter heaven. When the Judgment did not



Top: Museum Catharijneconvent Utrecht ABM h20, f. 198 v. Bottom: See [MeMO memorial object ID 581](#)  
For the captions of all images in this chapter, visit [the MeMO database](#).

come about people started wondering what happened to the souls of the deceased until the moment of the Last Judgement.

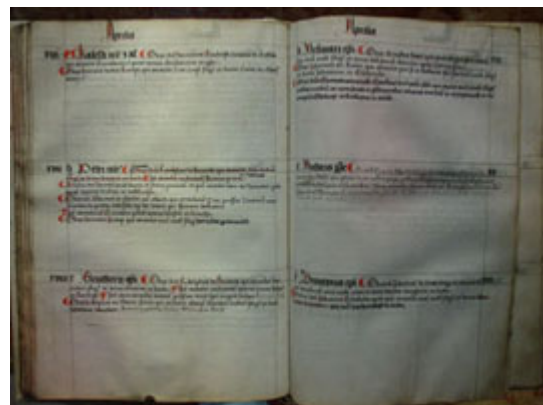
This situation caused the emergence of the concept of purgatory, a third place for man after death beside heaven and hell. Eventually the existence of purgatory was subsumed in the teachings of the Western Church. According to these teachings there is a Particular Judgment immediately upon death, which gives perfect Christians, i.e., the saints, direct access to heaven. The damned, i.e., those who have died without having asked forgiveness for their great sins, are to burn in hell in all eternity. Those who are yet to do penance for their sins but whose sins have been forgiven are condemned to a stay in purgatory (fig. 2).



Fig. 1. See [MeMO memorial object ID 628](#) and [ID 492](#)

Though purgatory is a place of pain and sorrow, it has only one exit, which leads to heaven. The duration of one's stay in purgatory depends on one's sentence. At the Last Judgment purgatory will disappear and only heaven and hell will continue to exist in all eternity (fig. 3).

It was therefore essential to lead a good life, which meant to commit as few sins as possible and to follow the Ten Commandments, to perform the Acts of Mercy and support the Church with money and goods (fig. 4). This could also be done by founding Masses and memorial services in churches and monasteries to shorten one's own and other people's penance in purgatory. In addition, this system generated the livelihood of the clergy and conventuals. The poor and the sick who received food or other forms of help were expected to help their benefactors in shortening their stay in purgatory through prayer and by attending memorial services.



Left: Fig. 2. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht OKM h1 f. 175v

Centre: Fig. 3. See [MeMO memorial object ID 2481](#)

Right: Fig. 4. See [MeMO text carrier ID 314](#) and the [website of the St. Plechelmusbasiliek](#)



## 1.2 Commemoration and identity



Fig. 5a and 5b. See MeMO memorial object ID 716 and MeMO memorial object ID 78

### *A public matter*

Researchers of the medieval commemoration of the dead, i.e. memoria, consider the principle of *do ut des*, I give so that you give, one of the major principles for medieval society in general as well as memoria. The commemoration of the dead was characterised by a combination of care for the hereafter and care for the here and now. For this reason researchers often use the expression 'community of the living and the dead', because the deceased continued to be part of their communities after their deaths, through their good deeds and because their names were mentioned in prayers.

Memoria was therefore a public matter, but there were also tasks that were performed individually. Part of one's obligation as a member of a community (fraternity, monastery, family, etc.) was to pray at the grave of a deceased community member.

Several aspects can be discerned within this interrelatedness of the care for the here and the hereafter. First, there are religious and liturgical aspects. It has social aspects as well, such as identification with certain groups by supporting especially those communities (one's own family, one's monastic community, one's guild, etc.). Historical and socio-political aspects played a part as well: creating reminders of events and of the benefices that the institutions received, such as lands and properties, as well as privileges. The commemoration of such matters could also have a legal use when certain properties or legal rights

were challenged. See also: Commemoration in the convent Mariënpoel: prayer and politics.

### *Creating and expressing identities*

The commemoration of the dead gave people the possibility to position and express their identity. The works of art that were created functioned as means of communication just like the texts that were read aloud, the rituals that were performed and the gifts that were donated. A

donation to a Dominican monastery, for example, might show that the donor trusted that the monastery took good care of the prayers and services for the salvation of the souls of the deceased. Moreover it expressed an affinity with the religiosity of the Dominican Order. Identification with the Order and the ensuing identity as an adherent of the aims and values of the Dominicans may have been even stronger if family members had entered the monastery.

Another example of the demonstration of identity and connection are the group portraits of the Pilgrims to Jerusalem from Amsterdam, Haarlem and Utrecht. All portrayed persons show themselves to be pilgrims to Jerusalem by wearing the Jerusalem cross and the palmbranch. The pilgrim's insignia on the floor slabs that covered the graves of some of these pilgrims clearly show, however, that they also undertook pilgrimages to other places, but only in some cases are they represented in the paintings. After all, these portrait series are intended to emphasize a specific group identity. Other pilgrims' insignia were less relevant, and could even be considered undesirable in the Jerusalem group portraits ([figs. 5a](#) and [5b](#)). A floor slab or tomb monument, on the other hand, may have been intended to show the various aspects of the identity of a person, including his or her relations with several groups. See also: [Representations of Jerusalem pilgrims](#).

Written sources also provide insight into how identity is created. There are chronicles that relate the story of the foundation of a monastery, including everything that was being done for the new monastery by the founder and his family and friends, and containing stories about the donations of later benefactors. Other examples are the registers of graves in which the names are recorded of the lay persons who were buried in a monastery. These documents too demonstrate that these persons apparently felt a connection with that institution ([fig. 6](#)).

In short, through the commemoration of the dead and one's donations and foundations people could show their identities and their views and ideals. For this reason two important questions for memoria research are:

- In which ways was memoria an agent in both the creation and expression of identity in communities of the Middle Ages, such as religious orders, parishes, confraternities and families?
- How did the creation and expression of memoria vary between these communities and how did the practice change over time?

### ***1.3 Use and function of memoria sources***

Objects and manuscripts that played a role in the commemoration of the dead can all be considered as utilitarian objects. Narrative sources could be read aloud for purposes of education and commemoration. Calendars of saints in which the memorial services that were to be held were recorded, served to remind institutions of their obligations towards their benefactors ([fig. 7](#)). Memorial pieces and tomb slabs were intended among other things to call the faithful to prayer for the dead.

This is not to say that the intentions of the patrons or institutions were always acted upon, or that donations always had the intended effects. For example, the faithful could ignore the many calls for prayer on tomb slabs and memorial pieces. Or they could disagree with the messages that the patrons intended to confer through the rituals, sermons and representations that these patrons had paid for.

The stained glass window that was donated to the St. Janskerk in Gouda (in 1557-1559) by Philip II was intended among other things to show him as the ruler of the Netherlands (fig. 8). But from 1559 the legitimacy of Philip's position was increasingly challenged. In 1568 this led to the Dutch Revolt, and in 1581 the States-General decided to dethrone Philip. Those who saw the window may well have been of very different opinions than Philip and his adherents.



Fig. 6. See MeMO text carrier ID 106 and *Commemoration in the convent Mariënpoel: prayer and politics*

## 1.4 Memoria research and the MeMO project

In research into identities it needs to be determined, among other things, in which aspects groups distinguish themselves from other groups, and how people present themselves as members of a group. This goes for various types of family groups, as well as social strata and functions, and organisations such as guilds and monastic orders.

Researchers need to be able to judge the information provided by the sources as to its prevalence or rarity. Is a memorial representation with a Crucifixion and devotional portraits one of many, or are some of its iconographic aspects special? Does a foundation charter that details a family's commemoration contain the usual stipulations, or does it deviate in certain ways? The answers to such questions can be found through a combination of broad comparative research and quantitative research on the one hand, and case studies on the other. See 1.5 below for an example of such research.

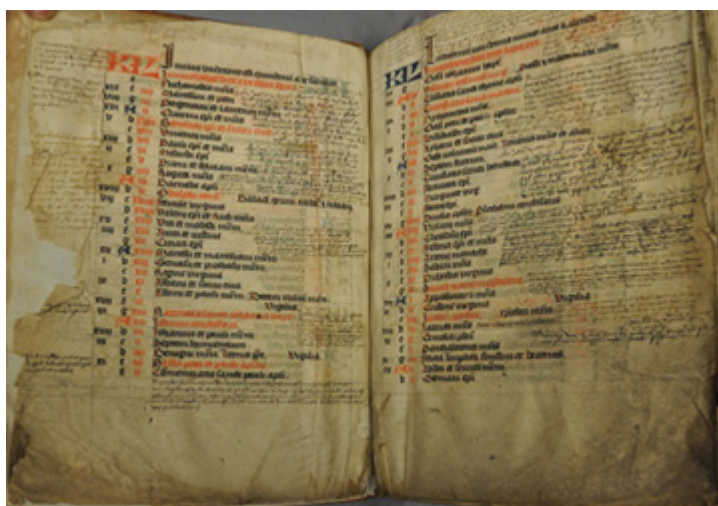
Researchers into the commemoration of the dead are presented time and again with a tricky challenge: the research materials have become dispersed, and sometimes their existence may even be unknown. The MeMO database therefore offers inventories with descriptions of objects and texts that fulfilled a function in memoria. The types of sources that have been included in the database are the following:



- Tomb monuments and floor slabs
- Memorial pieces (Memorialbilder)
- Text carriers containing memorial registers
- Text carriers containing narrative sources that fulfilled a function in the commemoration of the dead

For further explanations see [chapter four](#) and [chapter five](#) of this introduction.

The inventory covers the area that is currently the Netherlands until 1580 (see map in [chapter seven](#)). Around that year the larger part of the Netherlands saw the change in the public religion from the catholic religion to what was then called the reformed religion. This change slowly but surely caused the end of the commemoration of the dead in its medieval form in these areas. Noord-Brabant, Limburg, parts of Gelderland and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen largely remained catholic, although the catholic and the reformed religion alternated with intervals until 1648.



Left: Fig. 7. See [MeMO text carrier ID 423](#)  
 Right: Fig. 8. See [MeMO memorial object ID 872](#)

## 1.5 Broad quantitative and qualitative research

### *Counting as a way to prepare for research*

The database is a suitable tool for collecting quantitative data. These may involve simple counts. How many registers with donations from parish churches are known and have been described, and how many from monasteries? How many manuscripts with short biographies of conventuals are currently kept abroad?

This type of questions can be decisive in launching a new research. For instance, the large number of Latin and Dutch inscriptions on tombstones and other monuments in the MeMO database turn out to be eminently suited for a comparative analysis ([fig. 9](#)). The transcriptions of the epitaphs in the manuscripts of the Utrecht historian [Arnoldus Buchelius \(1565-1641\)](#) may also be included in this investigation, which allows researchers to work with even larger numbers. For instance, a researcher can determine

- to what extent the selection of the language is related to the social class or stratum of the commemorated persons and/or their functions,
- in which respects the shape and contents of the texts in these two languages differ from each other and to what extent medieval or humanist Latin plays a role in these differences,

And in general

- whether any regional or diachronic changes can be determined in these matters.

#### *Case studies and the broader perspective*

Quantitative research can also be used to place a case study in a broader perspective and to find out whether this case study is representative or unusual. Counting memorial paintings and sculptures with prayer portraits will show for example that in one respect the triptych with the Last Judgment of Anna van Noordwijk is a normal, regular representation (fig. 10). Anna's husband and their sons are shown on the left wing; Anna and their daughter are placed on the right wing. On the centre panel Anna's grandparents kneel to the left and her parents kneel to the right, with the wives behind their husbands.

This means that the men are consistently shown in the most important spot, according to the two standard configurations for memorial images in the area that is now the Netherlands: either the men kneel to the right of the religious image (i.e. to the left as seen by the spectator) and the women to its left (i.e. to the left as seen by the spectator), or the women kneel behind their husbands. Research has shown that since these patterns were strictly adhered to, deviations from the patterns show that the commissioner apparently intended to convey a special message about the people who are commemorated. Also, it has been demonstrated that the configuration in



Top: Fig. 9. See [MeMO memorial object ID 1385](#)  
Bottom: Fig. 10. See [MeMO memorial object ID 718](#)

paintings that portray multiple married couples clearly indicates which persons are married to whom.

The triptych with the Last Judgment does not show any deviations in the configurations of the men and women, but it is unusual in another respect. The coats of arms indicate that the Van Noordwijk family, the lineage from which the woman stems, is the focal point. And this seems to have been unusual: we know of no other memorial image whose commemorated persons have been identified in which the deceased ancestors of the woman of a married couple are commemorated, and of which that wife was the patron.

For it is almost certain that Anna van Noordwijk had the triptych made. The painting shows the portraits of her ancestors, and it is dated about 1512 on stylistic grounds. It is quite possible that it was made shortly after the death of Anna's husband in the same year.

In the literature it is often assumed without any arguments that it were the men who were the patrons of donations and foundations. After studying the written sources concerning memoria, however, various researchers have determined that it may be presumed that women played a large part as patrons. Extensive investigations into the roles of men and women as patrons in gift-giving and foundation practices would be very welcome (see also [3.5](#)).

Memorial pieces that show more than two generations are rare in any case. In our database, which contains over 450 memorial paintings and sculptures, there are currently about fifteen representations of (members of) three or four generations. The majority of the other artworks show either a single person, a married couple or a family.

Another aspect is special as well: the painting shows the Last Judgment, but Saint Mary and Saint John the Baptist are not shown in their usual places in heaven on either side of the Judging Christ, but instead behind the portraits on the wings. These saints, who are normally represented in an image of the Last Judgment, are shown here as the patron saints of the portrayed persons.

## ***1.6 Literature and websites***

It should be clear that the literature indicated below is only a selection of the available literature on the commemoration of the dead in the Middle Ages. For an international bibliography until 2011 see Van Bueren, Ragetli and Bijsterveld, '[Researching Medieval Memoria: Prospects and Possibilities](#)'. For a bibliography on memoria research in the Netherlands, see Kim Ragetli, Viera Bonenkampová and Martine Meuwese, [Bibliography on Medieval Memoria Research for the Low Countries](#).

### *Literature*

- Angenendt, Arnold, 'Theologie und Liturgie der mittelalterlichen Totenmemoria' in: Karl Schmid and Joachim Wollasch (eds), *Memoria. Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter. Münstersche Mittelalterschriften* 48 (München 1984) 80-199.
- Bijsterveld, Arnoud-Jan A., *Do ut des. Gift Giving, Memoria, and Conflict Management in the Medieval Low Countries* (Hilversum 2007).
- Blockmans, Wim, Antheun Janse (eds), *Showing Status: Representations of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout 1999).
- Bueren, Truus van, and W.C.M. Wüstefeld, *Leven na de dood. Gedenken in de late Middeleeuwen* (Turnhout 1999).



- Bueren, Truus van, and Fenna Visser, 'De website Memoria in beeld. Een hulpmiddel bij het onderzoek van memorievoorstellingen', *Madoc. Tijdschrift over de Middeleeuwen* 23 (2009), 102-108 (with a case study of the triptych with the last Judgement and the Van Noordwijk family).
- Bueren, Truus van, Kim Ragetli and Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, 'Researching Medieval Memoria: Prospects and Possibilities. With an Introduction to Medieval Memoria Online (MeMO)', *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 14 (2011) 183-234.
- Bueren, Truus van, 'Het belang van tellen. Kwantitatief onderzoek naar middeleeuwse kunstwerken' *Article, themed volume: De Middeleeuwen* 5 (2012, november) 14-18.
- Bueren, Truus van, and S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, 'De Geboorte van Christus door Jacob Corneliszn. De identificatie van de geportretteerde personen' *Oud Holland* 125 (2012) 169-179 (including the importance of the configuration of the portraits). With an extensive summary in English.
- Cohn, Samuel K., *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death. Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore and London 1992).
- Damen, Mario, 'Vorstellijke vensters. Glasraamschenkingen als instrument van devotie, memorie en representatie (1419-1519)', *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 8 (2005) 140-200.
- Eck, Xander van, Christiane E. Coebergh-Surie and Andrea C. Gasten, 'The stained-glass windows in the Sint Janskerk at Gouda. The works of Dirck and Wouter Crabeth' in: *Corpus vitrearum Medii Aevi*. Netherlands, volume 2 (Amsterdam 2002) 79-85.
- Geuenich, Dieter and Otto Gerhard Oexle (eds), *Memoria in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*. Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 111 (Göttingen 1994).
- Groot (ed.), Wim de, *The Seventh Window. The King's Window donated by Philip II and Mary Tudor to Sint Janskerk in Gouda (1557)* (Hilversum 2005).
- Oexle, Otto Gerhard, 'Die Gegenwart der Toten' in: Herman Braet and Werner Verbeke (eds), *Death in the Middle Ages*. Mediaevalia Lovaniensia series 1 studia 9 (Leuven 1983) 19-77.
- Oexle, Otto Gerhard (ed.), *Memoria als Kultur*. Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 121 (Göttingen 1995).
- Oexle, Otto Gerhard, 'Mittelalterforschung in der sich ständig wandelnden Moderne' in: Hans-Werner Goetz and Jörg Jarnut (eds), *Mediävistik im 21. Jahrhundert. Stand und Perspektiven der internationalen und interdisziplinären Mittelalterforschung* (München 2003) 227-253.
- Schleif, Corine, *Donatio et memoria. Stifter. Stiftungen und Motivationen an Beispielen aus der Lorenzkirche in Nürnberg* (München 1990).
- Schleif, Corine, 'Forgotten Roles of Women as Donors: Sister Katerina Lemmel's Negotiated Exchanges in the Care for the Here and the Hereafter' in: Truus van Bueren and Andrea van Leerdam (eds), *Care for the Here and the Hereafter. Memoria, Art and Ritual in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout 2005) 137-154.
- Schleif, Corine, 'Men on the Right - Women on the Left: (A)symmetrical Spaces and Gendered Places' in: Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Sarah Stanbury (eds), *Women's Space. Patronage, Place, and Gender in the Medieval Church* (Albany NY 2005) 207-249.
- Schleif, Corine, and Volker Schier, *Katerina's Windows. Donation and Devotion, Art and Music, as Heard and Seen Through the Writings of a Birgittine Nun* (University Park PA 2009).
- Velden, Hugo van der, 'Diptych Altarpieces and the Principle of Dextrality', John Hand, Ron Spronk (eds), *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych* (Cambridge and New Haven 2006), 124-155.
- Weijert, Rolf de, Kim Ragetli, Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld and Jeannette van Arenthals (eds), *Living Memoria. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Memorial Culture in Honour of Truus van Bueren*, *Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen*, CXXXVII (Hilversum 2011).

### *Websites*

- Commemoration in the convent Mariënpool: prayer and politics (English).
- Representations of Jerusalem pilgrims / Jeruzalemvaarders in Beeld (JiB) (English and Dutch).

See chapter seven for a general overview of the literature and websites mentioned in these introductory texts.