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Arnhem, February 23, 1395: Reconstructing the First Carnival Play Performance in the Germanic Collections

Eckehard Simon

I write in praise of the Germanic collections in the Harvard University Library. I could do this by discussing the thirty-nine books that one “John W. von Goethe, of Germany,” as the bookplate reads, gave to Harvard College in 1819. I could praise the foresight of Professor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who, in 1835–36, had 650 Scandinavian books shipped from Stockholm and Copenhagen. I could express my personal gratitude to Archibald Cary Coolidge who, in building the great Hohenzollern Collection before the First World War, provided me with the local history books where I find the performance records from which I am reconstructing the early history—the unwritten history, that is, plays for which no texts survive—of German theater. Or perhaps I should praise the Germanic book selectors I have known: the late Walter Grossman, Vienna-born, Harvard Ph.D. in history, a noted scholar of Moses Mendelssohn who became a professor when the University of Massachusetts opened its Boston campus in the 1960s; the by-now mythical David E. Silas who, with supreme disdain for a frivolity called vacation, spent every day of the year, Christmas included, in Widener 197 for a span of seventeen years. It is David I have to thank for filling last gaps in local and regional history. Or perhaps I should sing the praises of the gentlemen scholars in Houghton Library, like the incomparable James E. Walsh, the very much unretired Keeper of Printed Books, who, with quiet dedication, has for decades published masterful inventories of our German treasures. But the current Librarian for Germanic Collections, Michael P. Olson, could write much better about this than I; in fact, he has done so in the 1994 issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*.¹

What I should like to do, instead, is to show how I use the enormous resources of the Germanic collections each day that I spend reconstructing German carnival theater before the Reformation in the archaeological pit called Widener Study 15. I introduced my project in a little piece Kenneth Carpenter and Richard Thomas asked me to write for *Voices from the Stacks*, a special issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*.² To our on-line successors, these pieces will sound like elegies, sung from the catacombs, to the age of Gutenberg. I would not wish

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¹ Michael P. Olson, “Harvard’s Germanic Collections: Their History, Their Future,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, n.s. 5 (1994):11–19.

² Eckehard Simon, “Reconstructing Medieval Theater from Local Records,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* n.s. 6 (1995):14–19.

to try the reader's patience by parading by the skeletons of six hundred lost performances. Rather, I would like to examine the first and oldest of these records, documenting a carnival play staged on the Lower Rhine, in the town of Arnhem, in 1395.

I found this record on stack floor D, the dungeon level of Widener, where our splendid Dutch collection is housed. It appears among thousands of entries in the account books of Arnhem for the years 1353 to 1427, which the Utrecht historian Wybe Jappe Alberts published in four volumes between 1967 and 1978.³ I owe most of my performance records to the human penchant to keep tabs on money spent, especially public money (administrators will appreciate this). The item appears among the expenses for wine bought at town expense and given away, an annual category that lists actors and musicians, in Arnhem and other towns, with striking frequency. Here is what the Arnhem treasurer writes, in the Low Frankish dialect then spoken in Rhenish towns from Cologne to Nijmegen: *Primo te Vastelavont die gesellen spoelden her Nyters spil 12 quartern, 3 lb. 4 s.*⁴ With *vastelavont* he means the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday—Shrove Tuesday, known in New Orleans as Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras. A quick check in Grotefend's handbook on calculating dates⁵ reveals that in 1395 Shrove Tuesday fell on February 23. So as the first expenditure of the 1395 wine account, the treasurer notes that on Shrove Tuesday twelve quarts, worth three pounds four shillings, were given to the young chaps who put on the play of "Sir Nyter."

Those conversant with German might interject at this point that *gesellen* doesn't mean "young men," but "journeymen." But here you would be repeating a mistake Fastnachtspiel scholars have made for many years. In fact, there is a whole theory that explains that the well known Nuremberg carnival plays are so lascivious because journeymen were not allowed to marry and, as frustrated bachelors, made up in words what they could not do in deed. Actually, the medieval term for journeyman is *knecht*. With *gesellen* the record clerks, in towns all over German-speaking central Europe, mean the young men of the town. Since medieval actors were lay people who had to pay for their costumes and props, these chaps were more likely the reveling sons of the well-to-do, like merchants.

The treasurer does not tell us where the *gesellen* staged their play of "Sir Nyter." When the young men perform again the following year, on carnival Tuesday 1396, he notes that they did so "in the marketplace."⁶ This information runs counter to the standard view, based on Nuremberg custom, that roving bands of mummers put on carnival farces inside houses and taverns. The Arnhem records, constituting the oldest tradition of carnival plays, attest that we are dealing here with open-air theater. These lost plays were public performances that the town councilors subsidized, with money as well as wine, because they considered them socially useful contributions to the public carnival festival. The magistrates would often invite gentry from the countryside to celebrate carnival in Arnhem. Theater was a way of impressing them with the new mercantile wealth and culture of the town.

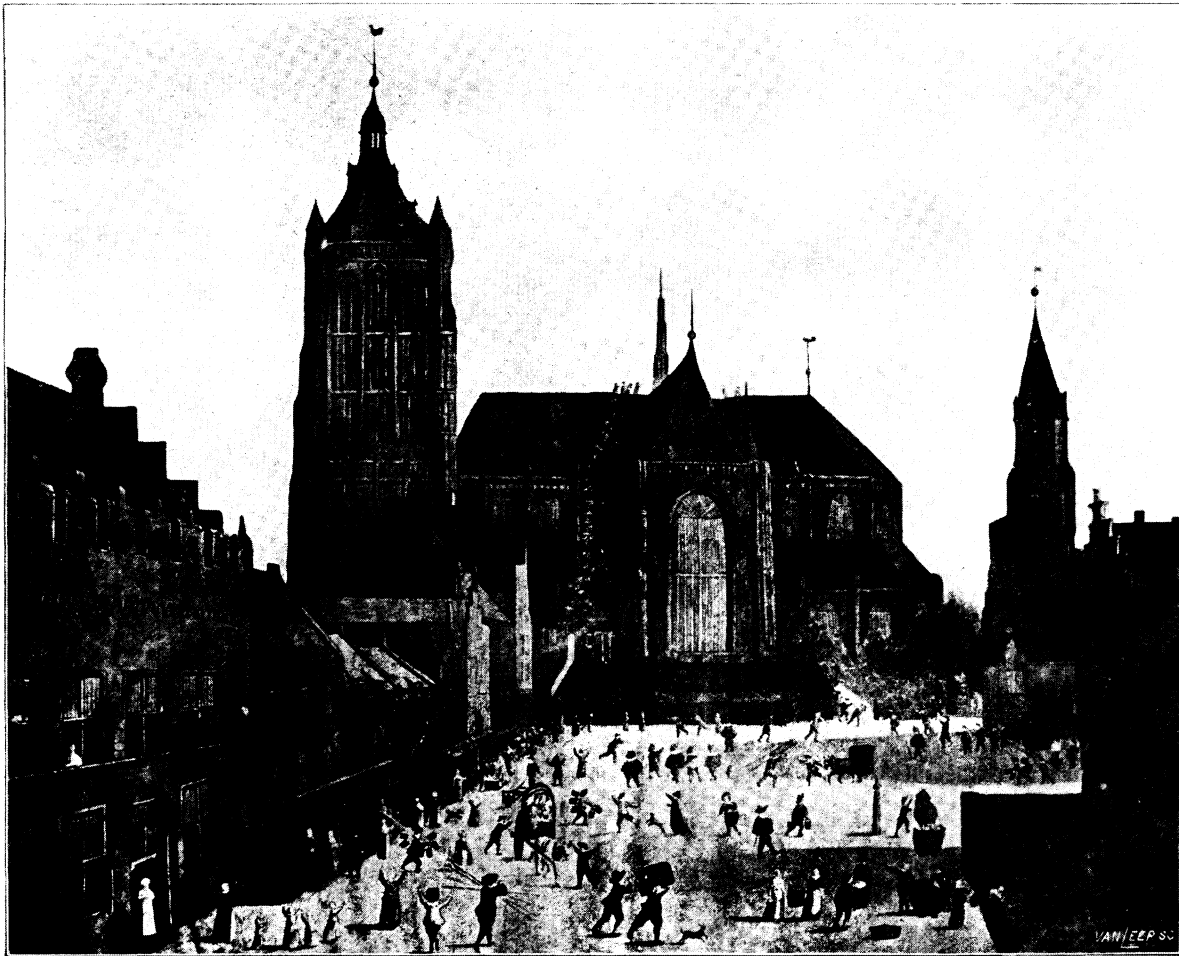
³ Wybe Jappe Alberts, *De stadsrekeningen van Arnhem* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1967–78).

⁴ *Stadsrekeningen* 2, 295.

⁵ Hermann Grotefend, *Taschenbuch der Zeitrechnung des*

deutschen Mittelalters und der Neuzeit, 10th ed. Revised by Theodor Ulrich (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1960).

⁶ *Stadsrekeningen* 2, 317.



Twenty-five of the twenty-seven carnival plays Arnhem clerks mention between 1395 and 1523 were staged in the marketplace. Theater buildings were unknown in medieval times. Most plays, religious and profane, were staged in marketplaces and streets, even in winter and in all kinds of weather. Actors and spectators shared in a social performance that gives new meaning to the word *Stadttheater*: the theater was the city itself. In Arnhem it gets dark early in February, around 5 P.M. Lighting the large marketplace (figures 1 and 2 show its size) would have been difficult and costly. The accounts list no expenses for the legions of torches that would have been needed. Hence the goodfellows of Arnhem—as Shakespeare still did in *The Globe*—must have put on their “Sir Nyter” show during the daylight hours. We know from other towns that carnival plays were often staged on all three carnival days: Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. This explains why performances were a matter of public concern and, hence, to our benefit, of public record. The marketplace was the town’s commercial center. There could be no selling and trading during theater days.

Who is “Sir Nyter” and what was the subject of the Arnhem play? Nithart or Neidhart was a minnesinger of sorts who sang at Bavarian and Austrian courts between about 1210 and 1240. He specialized in turning the conventions of troubadour love poetry upside down, in itself a carnival device. The singer is an impoverished and decadent country knight who spends his life courting peasant lasses. For this he must endure the hatred of his jealous rivals, upstart peasants

Figure 1. The Arnhem marketplace in 1633 when the “Great Church” caught fire. From A. Markus, Arnhem (note 15), 60-61.

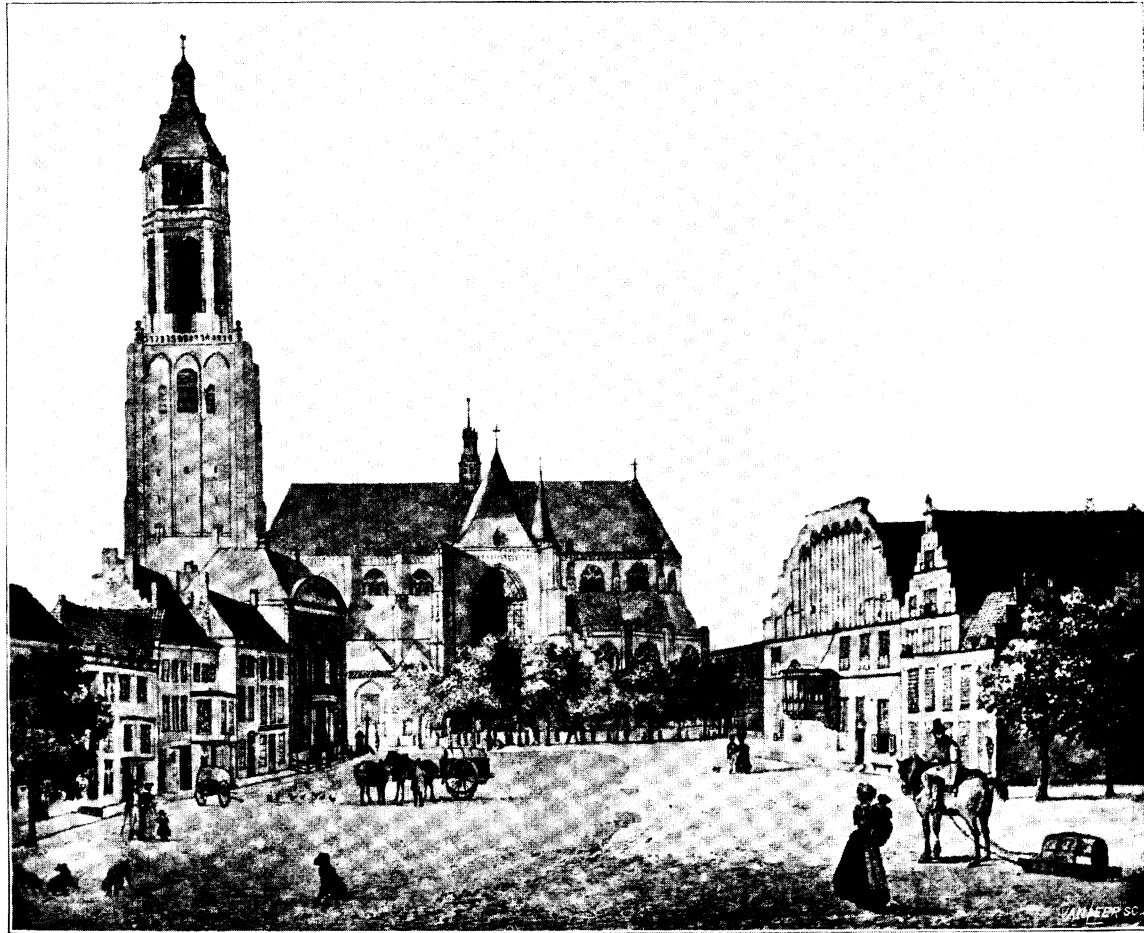


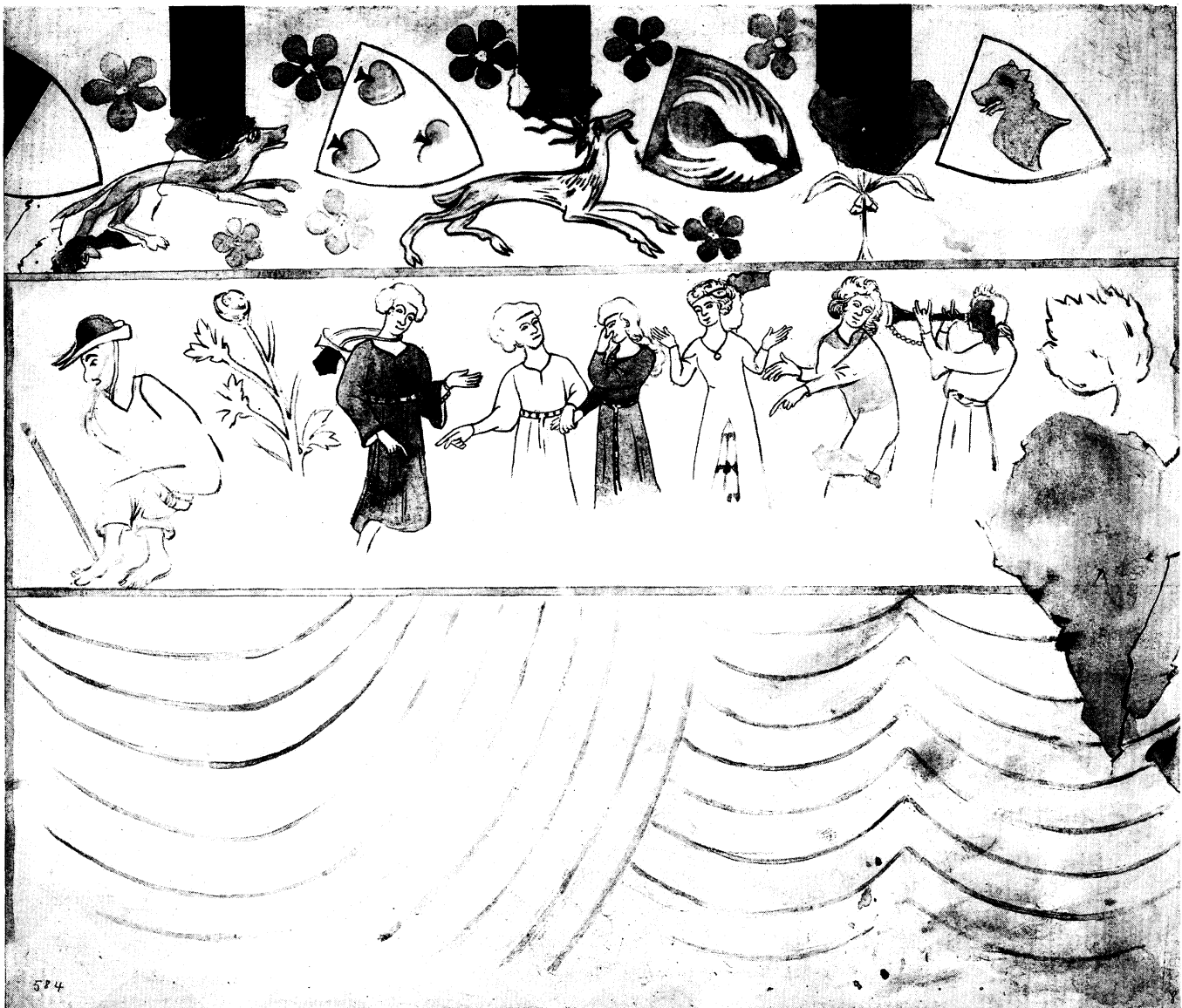
Figure 2. The "Large Marketplace"
in 1830. From A. Markus,
Arnhem, 180-81.

who pretend to be knights. Neidhart's songs were as popular in their time as were, more recently, the tunes of the Beatles. For many generations, singers wrote songs in his manner and, in the process, bestowed upon Neidhart a mythical life. He becomes Sir Neidhart, the crafty knight, who plays tricks on rowdy peasants. It all began because they first played a mean trick on him, by stealing his violet. Known as the *Veilchenschwank*, this story is first attested around 1330 as a wall painting (figure 3). This mural, three meters wide, once adorned the drinking chamber of a house in Diessenhofen on the Rhine, near Schaffhausen, a club where the local and regional gentry used to socialize. I found descriptions of the Diessenhofen mural, part of a cycle, in one of the many books on regional art our magnificent Fine Arts Library owns.⁷ It shows how quickly the story of Sir Neidhart's disgrace, the opening scene of Neidhart plays, became part of popular culture.

The Diessenhofen mural helps to summarize the story. Sir Neidhart, poet and knight, serves at the court of the duchess of Austria. One fine spring day, the duchess asks Neidhart to find, in the meadows below the castle, the first violet, harbinger of spring. If he brings it to her, she promises to be his lover for a year. This curious offer, at which social historians can only smile, mixes remnants of courtly love service with the rural May bride ritual, echoes of which one can hear in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neidhart rushes out, soon

⁷ Albert Knoepfli. *Kunstgeschichte des Bodenseeraumes*. Bd. 1, "Von der Karolingerzeit bis zur Mitte des 14.

Jahrhunderts." Bodenseebibliothek, Bd. 6 (Konstanz und Lindau: Jan Thorbecke, 1961), 131-34.



finds the blue flower, and puts his fine hat over it to mark the spot. But our villains, the peasants, have been watching him. The chief boor plucks the violet and replaces it with a flower of his own making (figure 3 left). After parading to the meadow and dancing around the hat (note the piping minstrel, extreme right), Neidhart lifts up his cap (in the picture, it dangles from his neck), points out the would-be violet to the shocked duchess (arms raised, center) while courtiers point at him and a lady-in-waiting clamps her nose. The mortified duchess banishes Neidhart from the court. Neidhart and his knights then invade the village, usually identified as Zeiselmauer near Vienna, and wreak vengeance upon the peasants with their swords. In some Neidhart plays—most of the texts we have were written in the Tirol—this is followed by episodes in which Neidhart dupes the peasants.

The young men of Arnhem, then, put on a Neidhart play in 1395. The oldest text of such a play survives as a chance entry in a collection of letters and charters, called a formulary, owned today by the Benedictine Abbey of St. Paul in Carinthia, Austria, near the Slovenian border. The play is therefore known as the St. Paul Neidhart Play. It has achieved considerable fame as the first comedy

Figure 3. "Discovering the Foul Violet," subject of the first carnival play. Panel from a mural cycle (ca. 1330), formerly in the "Haus zur Zinne," Diessenhofen, Switzerland (destroyed during rebuilding work). From a water color copy in the Archiv der Eidgenössischen Kommission für Denkmalpflege, Zurich.

written in German. I spent some delightful summer weeks examining this codex in the fortress-like abbey of St. Paul, a thousand years old and still in business. Given their love of theater, Austrian scholars have long been happy to claim this “first *Lustspiel*” as their own. But it was not written in Austria. Internal and dialect evidence suggest that it was written in Swabia, perhaps in the town of Schwäbisch-Gmünd. The text is in a secretary hand; a notary clerk appears to have entered the play into the office formulary, perhaps as a relief from the boredom of his work. Water marks date the formulary to about 1370. A Neidhart play, then, existed in a southwest German town about twenty-five years before the first performance of such a play is attested, in Arnhem, on February 23, 1395. Neidhart’s troubles with the peasants were both famous and theatrical. This attracted playwrights to the pranks. The story of the ersatz violet was also carnivalesque. Carnival, then as now, celebrates the human body and its functions. Like carnival feasting, dancing and sex, excrement makes visible a bodily function.

The Neidhart play was to prove popular with the people of Arnhem, then a town of some four thousand inhabitants, considered medium-sized for its time. The young townsmen staged the play again in 1419 and 1432. Now is the time to answer the question the reader might have been asking. How can you call a play performed in a Dutch town the first *German* carnival play? The question is a delicate one, especially for those who remember *A Bridge Too Far*. Please note that I have been careful not to refer to the town as Arnhem. Once again our local and regional history collection comes to the rescue, in the form of several articles published by the editor of the Arnhem accounts, the Utrecht historian Wybe Jappe Alberts.⁸ A country called the Netherlands did not exist around 1400. Arnhem was the capital of the duchy of Gelderland, governed from 1377 to 1423 by the dukes of Jülich, a German duchy to the south. The Jülich duke had a palace in the Arnhem marketplace where he liked to disport himself at carnival. Arnhem belonged to the German Hansa. Its economic and cultural ties lay with Westphalia to the east and the Rhenish towns to the south. The account books show a constant traffic and communication flow from Münster, Wesel, Cleve, Geldern, Duisburg, and Cologne, as well as from Hamburg and Lübeck.

As the Diessenhofen mural—to which we could add others in Winterthur, Switzerland, and Vienna—and the Swabian and Tirolean Neidhart plays show, the Neidhart cult began in the south and was at home there for three centuries. How did a Neidhart play get from the south to Arnhem? The answer is suggested by the strange dynastic migrations that occurred in an empire that was neither holy nor Roman, as Napoleon remarked, nor an empire, but a patchwork of hundreds of principalities. As the luck of inheritance would have it, the Wittelsbach dukes of Lower Bavaria-Straubing, who hailed from Ingolstadt, ruled the counties of Hanouwe, Holland, and Seeland at the time of our Neidhart play, that is between 1345 and 1436. For details I refer to an article in yet another regional periodical.⁹ In a major study, the Dutch cultural historian Frits Pieter von Oostrom speaks of a “flood of German culture,” musicians,

⁸ Wybbe Jappe Alberts, “Beiträge zur Geschichte der ostniederländischen Stadt im Spätmittelalter.” *Westfälische Forschungen* 13 (1960): 36–51; “Die östlichen Niederlande und der Niederrhein im Mittelalter,” *Annalen des Historischen Vereins für den Niederrhein,*

insbesondere das alte Erzbistum Köln 166 (1964): 7–24.
⁹ Laetitia Boehm, “Das Haus Wittelsbach in den Niederlanden,” *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 44 (1981): 93–130.

poets, entertainers, most of them from the south, that washed over Holland and the court at The Hague during the century of Bavarian rule.¹⁰ That flood must have carried a Neidhart play to Arnhem.

Let us, in conclusion, look in the Arnhem accounts for the carnival season 1395 for other clues to flesh out, as it were, the February 23 performance and then search books on old Arnhem for pictures of the medieval town and its marketplace. (Examining financial records may strike you as about as much fun as reading your gas bill. It is an acquired taste, I admit. But once you raise your theatrical consciousness, it can have a certain fascination.) Under building supplies bought and shipped at town expense the treasurer lists, alas without date, “boards and planks for a scaffold.”¹¹ To enable spectators milling around the marketplace to see a play, many towns erected wooden stage platforms. The towns also built temporary bleachers so that noble spectators and town worthies might view marketplace spectacles, which included tournaments, with the comfort becoming their station. The Arnhem expenditure could refer to either scaffold type. What the accounts make clear, however, is that the duke of Gelderland and Jülich and the count of Cleves, heralds and minstrels in tow, plus other lords from Gelderland were gathered in Arnhem during the 1395 carnival. Judging from the amount of wine the town bought for them, much more than the actors received, they must have had a very good time. To the count of Cleves, the town offered a little welcoming gift, worth a royal 112 pounds.¹² In Neidhart play performances, which included songs and dances, spectator sentiment sided with Neidhart and his sword-wielding knights. We know this from a letter the emperor Maximilian I wrote from Cologne on March 8, 1495. Here he compares the action of Neidhart plays, which he must have seen in the Tirol, to his ongoing military campaign against “the peasants,” as he calls them, of Gelderland.¹³ A similar sentiment, perhaps, prompted the duke of Gelderland and Jülich, celebrating carnival in his marketplace palace, to invite his friends to watch the 1395 Neidhart play. Ever interested in impressing the old nobility, the Arnhem town council tried very hard to make their guests happy.

Scholars who write about their home town tend to take great pride in the place. This manifests itself in the often lavish way they illustrate their books. It is one of the glories of our Germanic collections that they are full of such local books, lovingly produced, if only in a few copies. I have used them gratefully for years to reconstruct the architectural settings of performances, both for research and for teaching “The Medieval Stage,” a Core course of mine. Visualizing sites never fails to provide me with clues. The 1567 bird’s-eye view of Arnhem (figure 4) comes from Professor Jappe Alberts’s introduction to medieval Arnhem, sponsored by a regional history club.¹⁴ The marketplace is the rectangle at bottom right, just inside the town wall and the gate tower guarding the entrance from the Rhine river. The spacious square is flanked by the Gothic

¹⁰ Fritz Pieter van Oostrom, *Het woord van eer: Literatuur aan het Hollandse hof onstreeks 1400* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1987), 21. Published in English as *Court and Culture: Dutch Literature, 1350–1450*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹¹ “van steygerhout ende plancken te vueren 12 s[hillings],” *stadsrekeningen* 2, 306.

¹² “den joncker van Cleve aen cleynoet geschenket 112 lb. 13 s.

4 d.[pence],” *stadsrekeningen* 2, 297. Wine for the lords, 296, moneys for minstrels and heralds, 303.

¹³ See Victor von Kraus, ed., *Maximilians I. vertraulicher Briefwechsel mit Sigmund Prüschenk Freiherrn zu Stettenberg* (Innsbruck: Wagner’sche Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1875), 103.

¹⁴ Wybe Jappe Alberts, *Arnhem. Het leven in een middeleeuwse stad* (Dieren: de Bataafsche Leeuw, 1983), 30.

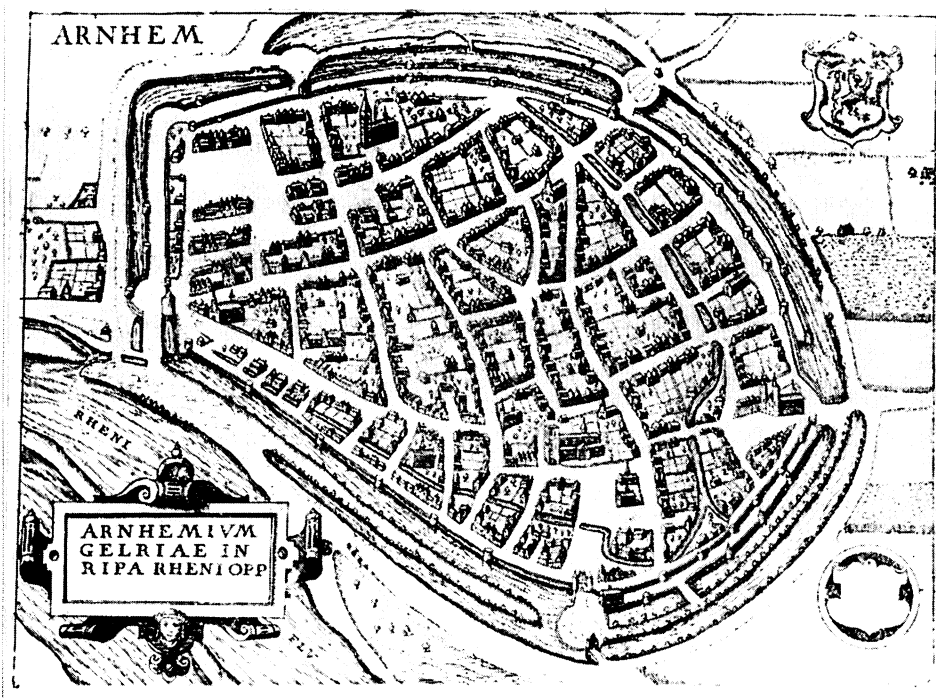


Figure 4. Plan of Arnhem as it looked in 1567. The marketplace is behind the Rhine gate tower, lower right. From W. Jappe Alberts, *Arnhem. Het leven in een middeleeuwse stad* (note 14), 30.

cathedral, the ducal palace, and the town hall. I found some old etchings of the marketplace (from 1633 and 1830) in an illustrated history the Arnhem school teacher A. Markus wrote in 1907.¹⁵ Since local merchants financed the publication, Markus allowed them to insert ads on every page. So if you want to know what corsets the good women of Arnhem bought for their ample bodies in 1907, this is the place to look (p. 223). Looking at the marketplace as well (figures 1 and 2), you will agree that the town provided the young men of Arnhem with a magnificent *Stadttheater* for their carnival plays, including the Neidhart play of February 23, 1395.

¹⁵ A. Markus, *Arnhem omstreeks het midden der vorige eeuw, mit geschiedkundige aantekeningen* (Arnhem: Maat-

schappij tot Exploitatie der Nieuwe Arnhemsche Courant, 1907), 60–61 and 180–81.