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Charity after the Flood: The Rijksmuseum's St Elizabeth and St Elizabeth's Flood Altar Wings

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In the Rijksmuseum collection there are four panel paintings that once made up the wings of an altarpiece in the Church of Our Lady, or Grote Kerk in Dordrecht. When opened, the wings of the triptych showed scenes from the life of St Elizabeth of Hungary (figs. 2, 3). When closed, the altarpiece presented a bird's eye view of the polder of the Grote Waard, southeast of Dordrecht, after it had been flooded (figs. 1, 4-6). When the dikes broke on 19 November 1421, large parts of this low-lying area became submerged and some of these flooded areas would never again be reclaimed from the sea. The flood became known as the St Elizabeth's Day Flood, or St Elizabeth's Flood, because it happened on or around the saint's feast day.¹ The name it was given links the flooding of the Grote Waard to the storm surge of 1404, also called St Elizabeth's Flood, which had been catastrophic for Flanders and had also affected Zeeland and Holland.² Although it does not give an eye-witness account – as it was painted some seventy years later – the image of St Elizabeth's Flood is highly valued today as unique documentation of an important crisis in Dutch history and as 'a remarkably early record of such an event ...'.³ This combination of historic event and visual drama has turned the panels into cherished topics of conversation. In a sense, however,

< Fig. 1
The city gate and
Grote Kerk of
Dordrecht, detail
of fig. 4.

this status has obscured their interpretation. After a close examination of the iconography of the panels in the broader perspective that includes their original arrangement, this essay will contribute to a better understanding of the image of St Elizabeth's Flood – an image that has had such a profound impact on the way the flood has been remembered subsequently.

Transfer and Transformation

The panels depict the area around Dordrecht, with the dike-break between Cillaarshoek and Wieldrecht in the far right on the right panel. The water floods over the dike with considerable force, sweeping away a farm in its course (fig. 6). For hundreds of years, this has been seen as the starting point and culmination of the catastrophe. The current consensus on the flood, however, is more nuanced. Firstly, the dikes broke in different places and the polder did not disappear overnight. The inundation was the result of a gradual process over several decades, during which the land became barren and the wooden houses fell into disrepair. One village after another became uninhabitable as the water levels rose. The area had become prone to flooding because the dikes were poorly maintained; compounding this, salt extraction, involving the removal of extensive areas of peat, had lowered the ground



Figs. 2, 3
**MASTER OF THE
 ST ELIZABETH
 PANELS, *Life and
 Death of St Elizabeth*,**
 inside wings of an
 altarpiece, 1490-95.

Oil on panel,
 127.7 x 109.5 cm
 and 127.5 x 109.5 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. nos. SK-A-3145
 and SK-A-3146.





Figs. 4, 5
 MASTER OF THE
 ST ELIZABETH
 PANELS, *Flood of
 the Grote Waard*,
 outside wings of an
 altarpiece, 1490-95.

Oil on panel,
 127.3 x 109.5 cm
 and 127.5 x 110.5 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. nos. SK-A-3147A
 and SK-A-3147B.



Fig. 6
Dike-break between
Wieldrecht and
Cillaarshoek, detail
of fig. 5.

level and left the area vulnerable.⁴ After the flood of 1421, the people were unable to reconstruct the dikes and after each storm surge the situation became more and more deplorable. Conditions worsened still further after another flood in 1424, also called St Elizabeth's Flood, the third of that name in a relatively short period of time. A process was set in motion that proved to be irreversible. As a result, many villages in the polder of the Grote Waard were eventually submerged and people were forced to leave their homes. Some found shelter in Dordrecht, which is prominently depicted in the foreground of the left-hand panel.

Secondly, the number of casualties and submerged villages was greatly exaggerated in subsequent years: nature's destructive power was not as great as some of the later chroniclers assumed. Reality and myth became so inextricably intertwined that much

remains uncertain with regard to what actually happened during the St Elizabeth's Flood of 1421, or how much the city of Dordrecht itself was affected by the water.⁵ Although it is now accepted that the numbers of flooded villages and deaths were significantly inflated, the long-term consequences of the flood were severe. After Dordrecht had lost its position as international harbour the city had to reinvent itself. The economic repercussions for the region, rather than its immediate effects, may have fuelled the mythologization of St Elizabeth's Flood, and influenced later generations' perception of the event.

To this day, the flood panels serve as powerful illustrations of the traditional narrative that describes the fight against floods that has shaped Dutch national identity.⁶ Over the centuries that followed, St Elizabeth's Flood found a prominent place in the collective memory and the flood panels seem to have assumed an important role as mediums through which the event could be commemorated, even though they were painted several decades after the event, probably around 1490-95.⁷ The panels helped shape the memories of the flood that had affected so many: it seems likely that the merchant Chrysostomus Neapolitanus, who wrote about the flood, saw the altarpiece on a visit to Dordrecht in 1514.⁸ He mentions that he sailed the flooded area where he saw the church spires rising above the water, but he adds extraneous details in his description of the flood, for example he mentions a child in a cradle. His letter is the first known written document to mention this flood-related miracle that he must have read or heard about, or seen, elsewhere. As a conspicuous element in an accessible location inside the city's main church, the altarpiece would certainly have served as a public monument that strengthened collective memory and helped to

shape narratives of the flood. The story of the child who was miraculously saved because a cat kept the cradle afloat, and therefore called Beatrix – she who brings good fortune – is depicted on the left wing of the altarpiece, evidence that the story was already connected with St Elizabeth's Flood in the 1490s.⁹ Indicative of their role as intermediary, the flood panels inspired more images of St Elizabeth's Flood, by different artists (e.g. fig. 7), as early as the sixteenth century.¹⁰

After thorough archival research, Liesbeth Helmus was able to reconstruct the original location of the altarpiece in a chapel in Dordrecht's Grote Kerk, an area that had been designated for the villagers of Wioldrecht who had found shelter in Dordrecht after their village was completely destroyed. They had offered the Grote Kerk the use of two bells and a baptismal font they had rescued from their ruined church, and in exchange were granted the use of an

altar inside the church in Dordrecht.¹¹ The villagers and their offspring were allowed 'to decorate it, to celebrate Mass there and use the altar in honour of God as they pleased'.¹² Helmus drew the logical conclusion that the descendants of the Wioldrecht flood victims commissioned the altarpiece.¹³

The altarpiece was removed from the church during the Reformation. The central image of the triptych did not survive, and it is uncertain what the central panel depicted, or even which technique was used to make it.¹⁴ A painting in the style of the side panels, or a sculpted image, would have been possible and plausible. The wings were saved when they were transported to the Schuttersdoelen, the training ground of the militia quartered in the Steegoversloot in Dordrecht. When the Schuttersdoelen moved to the former Augustine monastery, the panels were placed in the room that had been the refectory. After 1801, but before

Fig. 7
ROMEYN DE HOOGHE
after ARNOLD
HOUBRAKEN,
*Flood of the Grote
Waard*, 1675-77.
Etching and engraving,
209 x 310 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-P-OB-76.843.



the panels were purchased by the Rijksmuseum in 1933, the wings were split, separating the obverses from the reverses and producing four panels, two depicting the flood and two the life of St Elizabeth.¹⁵

As a result of these vicissitudes, the religious purpose for which the flood panels were originally designed has been completely forgotten. The prevailing status of the panels that depict the flood is reflected in the position that the Rijksmuseum has given them, a status retained in the new arrangement since 2013. The two panels depicting the flood have been given pride of place in the permanent exhibition 'Middle Ages and Renaissance 1100-1600' in the institute that profiles itself as the national museum of art and history. Although they were painted on the inside – more important to the central message of the triptych than the outside of the wings – the scenes representing the life of St Elizabeth are in the museum depot. This arrangement reflects a long-standing attitude towards the panels. In the process of acquiring them in 1933, the Rijksmuseum was at first interested exclusively in the flood panels, not the panels showing the life of St Elizabeth, and only decided to include the latter at the insistence of the Rembrandt Society, the main sponsor of the purchase.¹⁶

In their efforts to actively nourish cultural memory, the Rijksmuseum curators have used the flood panels to give the predominant narrative of the fight against floods, so formative of Dutch identity, a firm root in history.¹⁷ In making this choice, they have discarded another narrative, that which includes the life of St Elizabeth. The disconnection of the flood panels and their subsequent somewhat separate lives – with the flood panels winding up on permanent display and their companion pieces in a depot – has further obscured the interrelation that is essential to their interpretation.

Although pushed into the background, their role as prominent parts of an altarpiece that depicted the flood in conjunction with the life of St Elizabeth gave the flood scenes a religious context that was highly significant at the time and profoundly colours the picture. In short, the flood panels cannot be completely understood or correctly interpreted without taking into consideration their original context and the social and religious background against which they were painted.

Staging the Landscape

The artist and workshop responsible have been tentatively located to Dordrecht because that is where the altarpiece was erected after it was finished.¹⁸ In fact, the artist's place of work remains a mystery. No other works have been connected stylistically with the wings, and the corpus of the artist remains limited to these works. Although the quality of the work has been criticized in the past, for example by Edwin Buijsen, the incorporation of a historic event in Dutch history in the religious framework of an altarpiece in a church is regarded as exceptional.¹⁹ The idea of depicting the Grote Waard may have been the result of a dialogue between the painter and those who commissioned the work, whose forebears, after all, had found shelter in Dordrecht. The painter's decision to focus on the landscape was probably informed by contemporary artistic inventions in which landscape was given ever greater importance. In his book *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*, Christopher Wood explicitly refers to the backs of altarpieces and the exterior of wings as 'breeding grounds for unorthodox pictorial and iconographic themes', including landscapes, in the latter half of the fifteenth century.²⁰ Although few paintings from that period in Holland survive, a note dated 1610 mentions a now lost altarpiece of the life of St Bavo by the painter



Fig. 8
 MAÎTRE DE
 L'ÉCHEVINAGE,
The Deluge, miniature
 in Raoul de Presles's
 translation of
 Augustin's *La Cité
 de Dieu*, Rouen,
 third quarter of the
 fifteenth century.
 Vellum, 460 x 345 mm.
 Paris, Bibliothèque
 nationale de France,
 département des
 manuscrits,
 ms fr. 28, fol. 66v.

Dieric Bouts depicting the surround-
 ings of Haarlem. Bouts probably painted
 it before he moved to Leuven where he
 is mentioned for the first time in 1457.²¹
 He combined the life of a saint with
 a geographically defined landscape
 on an altarpiece foreshadowing the
 St Elizabeth triptych in Dordrecht in
 many respects.

The painter of the flood panels
 gives the landscape a great deal of
 prominence, but the landscape is
 not the main subject. It is a stage for
 the human drama that is unfolding.
 Two corpses float in the water in the
 immediate foreground of the right-

hand panel. On the right of the left-
 hand flood panel, a naked man has
 found refuge in a tree. The master may
 have taken these horrific details from
 scenes of the Deluge that were wide-
 spread and often included drowned
 people floating in the water (fig. 8).
 The biblical story of Noah was frequently
 used as a parallel in discourses of
 historic floods, sometimes to frame a
 disaster as a way for God to interact
 with human beings, as a warning or a
 punishment for sins, on an individual
 or communal level, especially in ser-
 mons and spiritual texts written in the
 aftermath of floods.²² The pictorial

element of baby Beatrix in the cradle which appears again and again in images of subsequent floods (fig. 9), is often traced back to the panels of St Elizabeth's Flood,²³ but it also has pre-figurations in images of the story of Noah, traceable back to the fifteenth century, for example in a version of Johannes de Columna's *Mare historiarum* (fig. 10) copied and illuminated between 1447 and 1455.²⁴ These visual references to well-known biblical scenes of human drama evoked the appropriate emotional response to the flood depicted and related models helped painters to compose their version of a similar event.

Comparison to images of the biblical flood is limited to details, however. Unlike images of the Deluge, or other catastrophic floods, the villages in the Grote Waard are not completely submerged (compare figs 4, 5 to figs. 8, 10). Some of the villages are situated on

islands surrounded by water, especially in the upper right-hand corner of the painting. Other towns have clearly been abandoned in haste with merchandise still on public display in the open windows, for example in the town of Strijen (fig. 6). These details set the flood panels apart from later depictions of St Elizabeth's Flood, where the towns are completely submerged with only church spires and rooftops above water level. Although Romeyn de Hooghe's depiction of the Grote Waard resembles the flood panels, his version shows a much larger mass of water (fig. 7).

Scientific analysis, especially infrared reflectography, has revealed much about the makers' painting practices.²⁵ Several hands worked on the paint layer, creating the stylistic differences between the inside wings and the outside, but photographs of the under-drawings revealed that a single artist was responsible for the design of the

Fig. 9
JAN LUYKEN,
Flood in Groningen
(1686), 1698.
Etching, 110 x 155 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-1896-A-19368-1562.





Fig. 10
MAÎTRE DE
JOUVENEL and
COLLABORATORS,
The Deluge, miniature
in Johannes de
Columna, *Mare
historiarum ab orbe
condito ad annum
Christi 1250*, Anjou,
1447-55.
Vellum, 455 x 325 mm.
Paris, Bibliothèque
nationale de France,
département
des manuscrits,
ms lat. 4915, fol. 25r.

four scenes. This master painter must have been at the head of a workshop with assistants and pupils.²⁶ Photographs of the underdrawings of the panels also revealed that the composition was not copied from a ready example. The underdrawings were made rapidly and, in both the flood and the life of Elizabeth, not all the forms were prepared. The figures in the flood scenes, for example, were added at a later stage of the production process. The master painter gave careful consideration to the composition, moving figures and adjusting details while working on the paint layers.²⁷ The landscape of the flood panels was also changed while the

work was progressing, especially on the right panel with the dike-break, in order to show as much of the Grote Waard polder as possible.²⁸

It seems that the painter of the flood panels, in staging this drama, was more interested in a careful rendering of the region, taking care to include every town, than in depicting a disastrous flood. Although the consensus is that the flood of 1421 probably caused several dikes to breach, the master of the flood panels depicts only one, between Cillaarshoek and Wieldrecht (fig. 6). The exact location of the town of Wieldrecht is unknown. It may very well have been located near a town called Broek, where the estuary of the Hollands Diep is now, and where the situation after the flood was described as deplorable.²⁹ The painter furthermore depicted the landscape as if seen through a wide-angle lens, east, south and southwest of Dordrecht, with the city of Dordrecht prominently depicted in the foreground of the left panel. Thirty-eight towns and estates are identified by name.³⁰ Many sites on the flood panels, such as Almkerk, Maasdam and Strijen, still appear on today's maps. Some town centres have shifted after a large part of the territory flooded. This was the case with Capelle and Waspik. Other sites mentioned on the flood panels have completely disappeared, among them Eemkerk and Houweningen, all situated roughly in the inundated area that is now the Dutch national park of tidal wetlands known as De Biesbosch (fig. 11).³¹ The word 'huesden' is written in the upper left corner of the same panel, 'soeuenbergen' in the upper right corner of the right-hand panel. The names are written in the sky above the landscape, in the outer corners of the image to indicate the wide range of the flooded area. Heusden (almost fifty-five miles east of Dordrecht) and Zevenbergen (some eleven miles south of Dordrecht) represent the far-reaching result of the flood.

Fig. 11
Map of the Dordrecht area, a copy after a
1560 original.
The Hague,
National Archives,
archive no. 4.VTH,
inv. no. 18968.







Fig. 12

ANONYMOUS
(circle of ALBRECHT
BOUTS), *Landscape
with Scenes from
the Passion of Christ*,
Haarlem, c. 1470.
Oil on panel,
132 x 102 cm.
Utrecht, Museum
Catharijneconvent,
inv. no. ABM 5126.

It seems that the painter has not depicted divine punishment that has come down on these villages, but focused on their hour of need. The movement of the figures underlines the chronology of the events, starting with the dike-break in the right background, the flooding of the area and, finally, the refugees finding shelter in Dordrecht. The panels do not depict a single moment in history, but rather a series of interrelated events that closely follow one another, culminating in the refugees entering the city gate. In this respect, the painting is reminiscent of other models, where scenes visualising subsequent moments are placed alongside each other, inviting the viewer to follow the course of events and

to travel through the landscape and through time. The painter of the flood panels uses the same method on the inside of the wings, where St Elizabeth is depicted several times as the events in her life unfold.

The winding road through the landscape may have reminded contemporary viewers of images of Christ carrying the cross from Jerusalem to Calvary. Scenes such as one on a panel painting from the circle of Albrecht Bouts, probably painted in Haarlem (fig. 12), must have been on display in Dordrecht too. The landscape is the setting for subsequent scenes from the Passion of Christ, but the focus is on Christ carrying the cross in the foreground. He follows a path from the gate of

Jerusalem on the left side of the panel to Calvary in the background on the right. Christ is depicted more than once so that the viewer can trace the events of the Passion on the panel. Although the image of St Elizabeth's Flood does not have a single protagonist, the viewer is prompted to follow the victims on their unhappy journey towards the Grote Kerk, perhaps contemplating the names and numbers of the affected villages along the way.

The flood victims carry heavy loads on their backs, but their path seems a reversed image of Christ's journey. The victims travel towards a welcoming city that offers them shelter and salvation. For visual parallels focusing on salvation rather than damnation, the painter may have turned to well-known images of the Last Judgement which were omnipresent in miniatures (fig. 13), prints, panel paintings (fig. 14) and triptychs too (fig. 15). Here, souls are depicted as they follow a path to an open gate of a walled city where they are sometimes welcomed by St Peter. Heavenly Jerusalem is usually opposed to the Mouth of Hell on the opposite side. The overall design of the painting, with the dike-break at Wieldrecht in the far right and the city of Dordrecht with the city gate in the left foreground and the dominating church behind, is closely related to Last Judgement scenes where the heavenly Jerusalem is often depicted as a glorious city with an open gate at the end of a winding road.

The visual parallel with images of the Last Judgement further emphasizes the importance of Dordrecht in the interpretation of the image. The city certainly suffered damage after the flood. In an excerpt from the Dordrecht city accounts for the year 1421 we read that the city was partly unfortified [onbevest] because the wooden scaffolding had been washed away 'with the great water' [metten grooten waeter].³² Writing only a few years after the flood occurred, an anonymous author wrote that water stood

two feet high in the streets of Dordrecht after the dikes had broken.³³ Although Dordrecht was certainly affected by the flood, it is depicted in its full glory on the flood panels without any indication that the city had also suffered from the storm. Dordrecht almost seems to rise above the water. On the flood panels, Dordrecht is a haven of peace in the crowded landscape filled with people, some dead, others alive but homeless. If anything, the pictorial elements and the composition lend the scene of St Elizabeth's Flood a biblical quality that must have resonated with the viewers of the altarpiece, especially in its original religious setting.

Fig. 13
MASTER OF
THE DARK EYES,
Last Judgement,
miniature in a book
of hours, Holland,
c. 1490.
Vellum, 200 x 138 mm.
The Hague,
National Library of
the Netherlands,
Ms 76 G 16, fol. 52v.



St Elizabeth and the Charity of Dordrecht

The images of the life of St Elizabeth on the inside – the most important side – of the altarpiece supply further arguments in support of this interpretation of the depiction of the flood within the context of the larger altarpiece. Going against the wishes of her husband, Elizabeth of Thuringia took care of the destitute. After she was widowed, she devoted the rest of her short life to the poor and the sick and founded a hospital which also appears on the panels. Her dedication to the needy made her a model of devotion and

charitable care and she is traditionally depicted with a beggar receiving alms from her, in the form of bread or clothing (fig. 16). On the panel painting of the Last Judgement and the Works of Mercy, each charitable act is represented by a different saint: Elizabeth is shown clothing the naked (fig. 13). Her image is modelled on personifications of charity, often depicted as a woman giving clothes to a beggar. The scene of St Elizabeth clothing the naked is directly beneath the figure of Christ as judge, underlining Elizabeth's importance as a model of charity.

Fig. 14
ANONYMOUS,
Last Judgement,
the Seven Works
of Mercy and
Seven Deadly Sins,
Antwerp, 1490-1500.
Oil on panel,
115 x 125 cm. Antwerp,
Maagdenhuismuseum
(OCMW Antwerpen),
inv. no. 134.
Photo: KIK/IRPA,
Brussels





Fig. 15
 HANS MEMLING,
Last Judgement,
 altarpiece open,
 1467-71.
 Oil on panel,
 242 x 180.8 cm
 (central panel) and
 221 x 90.4 cm (wings).
 Gdańsk, National
 Museum, inv. no.
 SD/413/M - M/568/MPG.
 Photo: © 2018 Scala,
 Florence



Fig. 16
 SIMON BENING and
 COLLABORATORS,
*St Elizabeth and a
 Beggar*, miniature in
 the Da Costa Hours,
 Ghent, c. 1515.
 Vellum, 172 x 125 mm.
 New York,
 J.P. Pierpont
 Morgan Library,
 ms M. 399, fol. 328v.

Elizabeth was sanctified in 1235, shortly after her death in 1231, and became increasingly popular, in the Low Countries too.³⁴ St Elizabeth's relics were kept in the church of Marburg, where she was buried, and the church became a popular destination for pilgrims who wanted to venerate the saint. Fourteenth-century pilgrims' souvenirs from Marburg depicting Saints Elizabeth and Francis have also been found in Dordrecht (fig. 17).³⁵ It seems that people from Dordrecht brought these badges home with them after a visit to Marburg. A further indication of her popularity in the Low Countries is the *Chronicon Tielense*: she is one of the few selected saints whose birth, death and sanctification is mentioned.³⁶ Significantly, this is also the earliest known chronicle to mention the St Elizabeth's Flood of 1421.

The Rijksmuseum panels do not single out one event from Elizabeth's life but depict a series of moments. The first panel depicts her early life,



Fig. 17
 ANONYMOUS,
Sts Elizabeth and Francis, badge from Marburg, found in Dordrecht, 1250-1350. Pewter, 42 x 45 mm. Langbroek, family Van Beuningen collection, inv. no. 1579. Photo: Medieval Badges Foundation (HPI, no. 193)

her arranged marriage to Louis of Thuringia, who leaves on a crusade and does not return (fig. 2). The wedding is prominent in the foreground as is the moment when her husband is called to join the crusaders: this marks the start of Elizabeth's religious life. The right-hand panel focuses on her work for the sick and the poor. The scene in the foreground counterbalances the scene of the wedding banquet; it depicts St Elizabeth inside the hospital where she would do her charitable work (fig. 3). She is depicted twice, in the foreground undressing a man in rags who has apparently sought care in the hospital, and again at the back offering a drink to a sick person on a bed. She wears the robe of a Tertiary, because she was supposed to have joined the Third Order of St Francis.³⁷ In the next scene Elizabeth is on her own deathbed and angels carry her soul to heaven. After her death she would be buried in the hospital church that she had

dedicated to St Francis. The final scene in the background of the panel is a view of the church with Franciscan monks carrying her coffin.

St Elizabeth is the most important figure on the insides of the wings, the most important sides because they were only visible when the altarpiece was opened to reveal the central image and Elizabeth cycle to churchgoers on special occasions. The saint therefore has a prominence on the altarpiece that goes beyond the naming of the flood for the day on which it occurred. She is primarily depicted because of the qualities she was renowned for. These images would once have influenced the way the flood was received: the scenes of St Elizabeth shift the focus of the altarpiece towards charity. This suggests that the flood panels were painted primarily in praise of Dordrecht's actions after the disastrous flood had taken its toll. As St Elizabeth cared for the needy, so the city of Dordrecht took pity on the flood victims. The man in rags, entering St Elizabeth's hospital, corresponds to the victims of the flood and St Elizabeth is paralleled with the city itself. St Elizabeth and the needy are depicted in the immediate foreground of the composition. So are Dordrecht and the flood victims. The facial expressions of the victims in the foreground of the flood panels accentuate the value and necessity of Dordrecht's benevolence. When confronted with charity, they humbly accept it as they move forward in what is almost a processional journey towards the city gate.

During the fourteenth century, city government was assigned more and more responsibilities in caring for the destitute, especially in coordinating various initiatives.³⁸ The publication of Juan Luis Vives's tract on poor relief, *De subventione pauperum*, is the point of reference in more centralized charitable care practices and regulations. The work went through numerous editions after its first appearance in 1526 and was translated into many

different languages – Dutch (1533), German (1533), English (1535), and Italian (1545) among others.³⁹ Although Vives incorporated new ideas in his tract, it is generally accepted that he developed 'a single integrated system out of the several practices already functioning in northern Europe'.⁴⁰ Among the people coming under the responsibility of city government he counts those who have unwillingly become destitute, 'those afflicted by some sudden misfortune, like captivity in war, imprisonment for debts, fire, shipwreck, floods [eluvies], many kinds of diseases or, in short, any of those numerous misfortunes that strike virtuous households.'⁴¹ Vives explicitly refers to flood victims as those who deserve help from city government.

Dordrecht had certainly taken the fate of the people in the surrounding area to heart. The Dordrecht city accounts mention initiatives to distribute bread, beer, cheese and other provisions.⁴² On the left panel, the city is disproportionately large in comparison to the small villages in the area, especially if one compares the churches. The large tower of Grote Kerk is perfectly outlined by the river Merwede flowing towards the horizon, with Papendrecht ('papedrecht'), Sliedrecht ('slierecht') and Hardinxveld ('hardixveld') on the north bank, and the castles of Merwede, Crayesteyn and Loevestein on the south bank. The painter devoted considerable attention to the careful and detailed representation of the city, with the town hall, the Vuilpoort (the city gate), the Church of St Nicolas and especially the Grote Kerk (fig. 1).

Although the water evidently flows through the dike between Wieldrecht and Cillaarshoek (fig. 5, 6), these towns themselves are not given much prominence. All the villages in the painting are identified by name, giving them an equality of treatment. The names involve each of them as a victim in the

flood drama. Instead of focusing on one flooded village, the master painter accentuates the vastness of the area, pointing out Heusden on the far left and Zevenbergen on the far right, so that the victims seem to come from the larger inundated area that included many different villages. The victims represented are those who found shelter in Dordrecht, those from Wieldrecht as well as those from elsewhere, giving the charity of Dordrecht greater significance within the scope of the catastrophe. The number of villages depicted on the flood panels certainly indicates the vastness of the flooded area, and therefore that Dordrecht's charity was equally vast. In this context, the landscape should be read as an acknowledgement of debt and gratitude and this interpretation would certainly better explain the focus on such a careful depiction of the Grote Waard polder in which each village plays an equal role but is subordinate to the city of Dordrecht.

Helmus wrote that the ensemble – both the image of the flood and the life of St Elizabeth – were commissioned to remember the terrible catastrophe that had hit Wieldrecht and to thank St Elizabeth for rescuing the survivors, indicating that the image of the flood on the outside served a different function from the inside. The images on the inside serve as an *ex voto*, meaning that the image was painted to thank St Elizabeth for her intervention; the outside has a commemorative role.⁴³ Although memory certainly plays an important part, the function of the inside and outside images is inextricably interwoven. With the panels, the people who commissioned them wanted to thank both St Elizabeth and Dordrecht for their roles in the aftermath of the disaster. With the altarpiece, the flood victims thank St Elizabeth for her help, and Dordrecht for following her example in showing charitable care in the wake of the flood.

In Conclusion

When they were removed from the church, the flood panels were taken out of their original context and the subsequent separation of obverse and reverse of the panels has further obscured the original arrangement, and thus their interpretation. Their continuous role as *lieux de mémoire* in modern literature and exhibitions, most demonstrably with their placement in the Rijksmuseum, has added new layers of meaning that somewhat misrepresent their original intention. For the first time, the flood panels are studied in the larger framework of St Elizabeth's Flood and its aftermath, especially Dordrecht's response, to better understand their iconography. The painter used well-known religious images in designing the image of a historic flood to deliver a message about charitable care in the wake of catastrophes. The painter gave careful consideration to the way the landscape should be depicted, not intending to render it realistically, but to underline the message of shelter and salvation. First of all, the bird's eye view of the large area visualizes the full extent of the region that suffered economic decline ever since. Secondly, the shape and structure were adapted with reference to biblical narratives to fit the religious setting. The composition of the landscape and the human tragedy allude to images that focus on rescue and redemption.

Most importantly, the flood panels should be studied in close relation to the life of St Elizabeth in order to fully understand their complexity. With the scenes from the life of St Elizabeth on the reverse, the role of the city of Dordrecht in the wake of the flood is placed in a religious setting where Dordrecht's benevolence is compared with Elizabeth's exemplary charity to the needy. The references to scenes of Last Judgement visually tie Dordrecht to Heavenly Jerusalem. Depicted in full glory, with the Grote Kerk tower-

ing above all other buildings, Dordrecht certainly measures up to images of Jerusalem. When the triptych was opened on special days, the significance of Dordrecht's actions was revealed. The scenes from the life of St Elizabeth on the insides of the wings placed Dordrecht's response to the flood in the perspective of Christian charity and salvation history.

Once Helmus reconstructed the original location of the altarpiece in the Grote Kerk and identified the people who commissioned it, the figures on the panels were recognized as people from Wieldrecht. Although their children and grandchildren ordered the altarpiece, their intention was probably not to single themselves out. Enough time had gone by to create an emotional distance between the catastrophe and the patrons, who had probably not experienced the flood personally. The misfortunes of their parents and grandparents are depicted within the larger context of the flood that had rendered them, and others, destitute. The descendants of the people from Wieldrecht commissioned the altarpiece to show the city of Dordrecht the gratitude considered the appropriate response to charity, and to place Dordrecht's response to the flood in the broad perspective of virtue, charity and salvation. Whatever the central image, the panels conform to a theological-moralistic discourse highlighting the appropriate actions and attitudes to follow a catastrophe, not just of those in positions to assist, but also of those in need, and put charitable actions in the larger discourse of Christian religion: charity connects people, ties communities together and ultimately brings mankind closer to God.

In the interpretation of the flood panels, the popular narrative of the Dutch fight against the sea has replaced once dominant narratives that focus on the importance of charity to communities. The latter receded into the background with the growing focus

on floods and water in Dutch history. Close investigation reveals that the flood panels stand in a tradition of religious imagery, landscape painting and artistic invention that dictates their appearance. The painter combined these different strands, creating a close-knit ensemble that can only be fully understood if the larger religious framework for which the image was once designed is taken into consideration. The painting is not about the flood *per se*, but about charity after the flood, when Dordrecht followed the virtuous example set by St Elizabeth of Hungary,

whose name was inextricably tied to the catastrophe of 1421. An inclusion of the panels depicting the life of St Elizabeth in the Rijksmuseum's permanent display, with a greater emphasis on the significance of charity, would certainly help to communicate the essence of the flood panels to the public. Painted seventy years after the event, the image is not an illustration of a historic flood, but a construct that can only be fully understood in the social and religious context of charitable care in the fifteenth century.

ABSTRACT

This essay reconsiders the panels in the Rijksmuseum's collection depicting the St Elizabeth's Flood of 1421. When they were removed from the church, the panels – once the outsides of the two wings of an altarpiece – were taken out of their original context, and the subsequent separation of the panels' obverse and reverse further obscured the original arrangement. The image itself provides important clues to its meaning with visual references to images of the Deluge, Christ's Passion and Last Judgement. Most importantly, the flood panels should be studied in close relation to the life of St Elizabeth of Hungary, once depicted on the inside of the wings. Painted several decades after the flood, the panels do not render the catastrophe realistically. Instead, the image focuses on charity after the flood disaster when Dordrecht gave shelter to the victims and so followed the virtuous example of St Elizabeth. As an image of Dordrecht's charity, the flood panels perfectly fit the religious context of the Grote Kerk for which they were once designed.

NOTES

* Research for this article was funded from an NWO VICI grant awarded to Professor Lotte Jensen for the research project 'Dealing with Disasters: The Shaping of Local and National Identities, 1421-1890'. For more information, see www.dealingwithdisasters.nl/en/. I would like to thank my colleagues Lotte Jensen, Marieke van Egeraat, Lilian Nijhuis, Adriaan Duiveman and Fons Meijer for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1 Elisabeth Gottschalk, *Stormvloed en rivieroverstromingen in Nederland*, 3 vols., Assen 1971, vol. 2, pp. 51-82. The flood happened 'daags na Sint Elisabeth (20 november) 1421' according to the *Chronicon Tielense*, c. 1450, see Jan Kuijs et al., *De Tielse kroniek: een geschiedenis van de Lage Landen van de volksverhuizingen tot het midden van de vijftiende eeuw, met een vervolg over de jaren 1552-1566*, Amsterdam 1983, p. 772.

Also writing shortly after St Elizabeth's Flood, another chronicler dates the flood to St Elizabeth's eve. See *Chronyke van Joannes van der Beke, Canonic t'Utrecht, al voor de tijden der Reformatie uyt het Latijn in 't Duytsch overgeset door een out onbekent Aucteur*, in *Veteris Ævi Analecta, Seu, Vetera Monumenta Hactenus Nondum Visa* (Antonius Matthæus (ed.), 2nd ed.), 5 vols., The Hague 1738, vol. 3, pp. 1-407, esp. p. 404.

2 Gottschalk 1971 (note 1), vol. 2, pp. 7-19.

3 Liesbeth M. Helmus, 'Het altaarstuk met de Sint Elisabethsvloed uit de Grote Kerk van Dordrecht: de oorspronkelijke plaats en de opdrachtgevers', *Oud Holland* 105 (1991), no. 2, pp. 127-39, esp. p. 127; Margreet Wolters, 'Master of the St Elizabeth Panels, Inner Left Wing of an Altarpiece with the Wedding Feast of St Elizabeth and Louis of Thuringia in the Wartburg, c.1490-c.1495', in Jan Piet Filedt Kok (ed.), *Early Netherlandish Paintings*, online coll. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 2010, see

- hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.collect.9055 (consulted 28 September 2018).
- 4 On the paradox between peat digging and water management, see Jan van Herwaarden et al., *Geschiedenis van Dordrecht tot 1572*, Hilversum 1996, pp. 159-63; Piet H. Nienhuis, *Environmental History of the Rhine-Meuse Delta: An Ecological Story on Evolving Human-Environmental Relations Coping with Climate-Change and Sea-Level Rise*, Springer 2008, pp. 245-46; Maarten G. Kleinhans, Henk J.T. Weerts and Kim M. Cohen, 'Avulsion in Action: Reconstruction and Modeling Sedimentation Pace and Upstream Flood Water Levels Following a Medieval Tidal-River Diversion Catastrophe (Biesbosch, The Netherlands, 1421-1750 AD)', *Geomorphology* 118 (2010), nos. 1-2, pp. 65-79, esp. pp. 69-70. On punishments after disputes regarding peat digging, see Jan van Herwaarden, *Opgelegde bedevaarten: een studie over de praktijk van opleggen van bedevaarten (met name in de stedelijke rechtspraak) in de Nederlanden gedurende de late middeleeuwen (ca. 1300-ca. 1550)*, Assen/Amsterdam 1978, pp. 301-02.
 - 5 Van Herwaarden et al. 1996 (note 4), p. 162.
 - 6 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Fontana 1988 [1987], pp. 35-37. James C. Kennedy prominently depicts one of the panels on the cover of his book *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, Cambridge (MA) 2017.
 - 7 Liesbeth M. Helmus, 'Meester van de Heilige Elisabeth-panelen. Voorstellingen uit het leven van de heilige Elisabeth van Hongarije (binnenzijden). De Sint-Elisabethsvloed, 18-19 november 1421 (buitenzijden)', in Jeroen Giltaij and Friso Lammerse (eds.), *Vroege Hollanders: schilderkunst van de late Middeleeuwen*, exh. cat. Rotterdam (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) 2008, pp. 324-329, esp. p. 325.
 - 8 Gottschalk 1971 (note 1), vol. 2, p. 73.
 - 9 Judith Pollmann, 'Of Living Legends and Authentic Tales: How to Get Remembered in Early Modern Europe', *Transactions of the RHS* 23 (2013), pp. 103-25; Van Herwaarden et al. 1996 (note 4), p. 163.
 - 10 Helmus 1991 (note 3), pp. 127-31. The pictorial element of the child, later called Beatrix, was elaborately investigated by Julian Treuherz, 'The Cat and the Cradle', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 46 (1983), pp. 240-42; H. van de Waal, *Drie eeuwen vaderlandsche geschied-uitbeelding, 1500-1800: een iconologische studie*, The Hague 1952, pp. 255-58.
 - 11 Helmus 1991 (note 3), p. 136.
 - 12 According to the text of the charter dated 1438: 'Des so is den goeden luden wt den ambocht voirsz. [that is Wieldrecht] ende haren nacomelingen, woonachtig binnen ons stede, geconsenteert ende gegonnen een outaer te hebben binnen ons kercken voirsz., te weten, dat outaer, staende aen der ander pylaernen aen die zwtzide, gesticht in Sinte Lambrechts eer ende dat te mogen versyeren ende den dienst Gods dair op te mogen doen, ende dat te gebruiken ter eere Gods, also hem dat believen sal, durende also lange, als hem off hare nacomelingen die voirsz. clocken ende vonte niet weder geleverd en waren.' See Jan Leendert van Dalen, *De Groote Kerk te Dordrecht, Dordrecht 1927*, pp. 274-75.
 - 13 Helmus 1991 (note 3), pp. 137-38.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, p. 138, n. 3.
 - 16 Helmus 2008 (note 7), p. 329, n. 1.
 - 17 Graham Black, 'Museums, Memory and History', *Cultural and Social History* 8 (2011), no. 3, p. 418.
 - 18 Arthur van Schendel, *Catalogue of Paintings Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, coll. cat. Amsterdam 1960, pp. 5-6, no. 39 E1; Helmus 1991 (note 3), p. 133; Helmus 2008 (note 7), p. 26.
 - 19 Edwin Buijsen, 'De Meester van Rhenen en de Meester van de St.-Elisabeth-panelen: niet één maar twee personen', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 36 (1988), no. 2, pp. 133-38, esp. p. 136.
 - 20 Christopher S. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*, Chicago 1993, pp. 33-45.
 - 21 Helmus 2008 (note 7), p. 26. See also Albert Châtelet, *Early Dutch Painting: Painting in the Northern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century* (Christopher Brown and Anthony Turner, transl.), Oxford 1981, p. 75.
 - 22 Adam D. Sundberg, 'Claiming the Past: History, Memory, and Innovation Following the Christmas Flood of 1717', *Environmental History* 20 (2015), pp. 239-60, esp. pp. 242-45.
 - 23 Van de Waal 1952 (note 10), pp. 255-56.
 - 24 Pollmann 2013 (note 9), p. 113.
 - 25 In her 1991 article in *Oud Holland* (note 3), Helmus gave two possible explanations for the stylistic differences. She argues the artist was the 'inventor' of the flood scenes, but based the life of Elizabeth on iconographic models. The infrared reflectographs overturned this suggestion because the painter corrected and adjusted the underdrawings on both the inside and outside wings. The working method is similar, according to Wolters 2010 (note 3). Alternatively,

- Helmus suggested that the painter paid more attention to the scenes on the inside, as they were more important because they could only be seen on feast days.
- 26 Helmus 1991 (note 3), pp. 133-34 and Helmus 2008 (note 7), p. 329.
- 27 Wolters 2010 (note 3).
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Gottschalk 1971 (note 1), vol. 2, pp. 66-67.
- 30 The names of the left panel: huesde(n) (Heusden) // gorc(om?) (Gorinchem) // loeueste[in] (Loevestein) // wo(a?)ricum (Woudrichem) // almskerck (Almkerk) // besoe(?) (Besoyen) // cappel (Capellen) // waspic (Waspik) // ee(m)ker[c] (Eemkerke) // raemsdon[k] (Raamsdonk) // gheertrud de(n) berch (Geertruidenberg) // herdicvelt (Hardinxveld) // giess(e)n da(m) // werke(n) da(m) // craeistein (Crayestein) // houwenyne(n) (Houweningen) // herdzwerd (Harradeswerde or Arndswaard) // heisterbac (Heysterbach) // slierecht (Sliedrecht) // pape(n)drecht // merwen (Huis te Merwede). The names on the right panel: drijmelen (Drimmelen) // int moer(?) (De Moer?) // almund (Almonde) // de swalu (Zwaluwe) // soeue(n)ber(g)en (Zevenbergen) // munster kerc // dubbelmunde (Dubbeldonde) // wie(l)drecht // de maes (the river Maas) // allen v(oet?) (Almsvoet) // strien (Strijen) // cillaarshoec (Cillaarshoek) // de(n) dubbel (the river Dubbel) // alloeissen (Alloeyen) // maesdam (Maasdam) // de we (de Wey) // maes (the River Maas) // den hoec (Puttershoek) // de mijl (de Mijl).
- 31 Willem van der Ham, *De Grote Waard: geschiedenis van een Hollands landschap*, Rotterdam 2013, pp. 32-33.
- 32 Charles M. Dozy, *De oudste stadsrekeningen van Dordrecht 1284-1424*, The Hague 1891, p. 125: 'Doe metten grooten waeter die staketten overal ontrent die stede wech geslegen ende gedreven waeren ende de stede daerby grootlike onbevest, gecocht om die stede weder te vesten 600 houts... 199 l.'
- 33 *Chronyke van Joannes van der Beke* 1738 (note 1), pp. 404-05. 'Item doe op die selve tyt [St Elizabeth's Eve, 1421] brack den dyck by Dordrecht in, daer dat soute water mede afgedyct was, daer de groote waert, daer Dordrecht in staet, mede bedyct was, ende dat water wert van der selver nacht also groot binnen Dordrecht, dattet wel twee voet hooch op ter straten stont, als men doe seyde, mer dat hooge water opter straten dat en stont niet langer.'
- 34 Paul Gerhard Schmidt, 'Die zeitgenössische Überlieferung zum Leben und zur Heiligsprechung der heiligen Elisabeth', in Carl Graepler and Paul Gerhard Schmidt (eds.), *Sankt Elisabeth, Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige: Aufsätze, Dokumentation*, exh. cat. Marburg (Philipps-Universität/Landgrafenschloß) 1981, pp. 1-6.
- 35 Hendrik Jan E. van Beuningen and A.M. (Jos) Koldeweij, *Heilig en Profaan: 1000 laatmiddeleeuwse insignes in de collectie H.J.E. van Beuningen*, Cothen 1993, p. 160, no. 193 (illustrated here); Hendrik Jan E. van Beuningen, A.M. (Jos) Koldeweij and Dory Kicken, *Heilig en Profaan 2: 1200 laatmiddeleeuwse insignes uit openbare en particuliere collecties*, Cothen 2001, p. 264, no. 1123. See also the database Kunera, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen/Centrum voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, nos. 00192, 03906, 06246, 13846, 13849, and 13894: <http://www.kunera.nl> (consulted 10 September 2018).
- 36 Kuijs et al. 1983 (note 1), pp. 71, 77.
- 37 Elizabeth entering the Order of St Francis was probably a later invention to underline the similarities between ideals of poverty and poor relief. See Wolfgang Brückner, 'Zu Heiligenkult und Wallfahrtswesen im 13. Jahrhundert: Einordnungsversuch der volksfrommen Elisabeth-Verehrung in Marburg', in exh. cat. Marburg 1981 (note 34), pp. 117-36, esp. pp. 122-23.
- 38 Anita Boele, *Leden van één lichaam: denkbeelden over armen, armenzorg en liefdadigheid in de Noordelijke Nederlanden 1300-1650*, Hilversum 2013, pp. 46-48.
- 39 Constantinus Mattheussen, 'De subventionē pauperum', in Joseph IJsewijn and Ángel Losada, *Erasmus in Hispania, Vives in Belgio*, Leuven 1986, pp. 87-92, esp. pp. 89-91; Juan Luis Vives, *De subventionē pauperum sive de humanis necessitatibus, Libri 11* (Constantinus Mattheussen and Charles Fantazzi, eds.), Leiden/Boston 2002 (orig. 1526), pp. xxx-xxxviii.
- 40 Juan Luis Vives, *On Assistance to the Poor* (Alice Tobriner, transl. and introd.), Toronto 1999, Introduction, p. 4.
- 41 English translation, see Vives 2002 (note 39), p. 123.
- 42 Dozy 1891 (note 32), p. 125.
- 43 Helmus 1991 (note 3), pp. 137-38.