

Raingard Esser. *The Politics of Memory: the Writing of Partition in the Seventeenth-Century Low Countries*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012. xi + 364 pp. \$163.00. Review by JOSEPH M. MCCARTHY, SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY.

Chorography, a genre combining physical description and natural history of a region with information on local history and antiquities, was made popular in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century with the publication of the Italian merchant/scholar Ludovico Guicciardini's *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi*. The following century saw a remarkable efflorescence of chorographies both in the Dutch Republic, which produced a total of fifty urban and rural chorographies (among which five lavish works devoted to Amsterdam were published in the years 1662-1665) and in the Spanish Netherlands where the Habsburg court commissioned works for the urban centers, regions and provinces of the South. The genre declined at the end of the seventeenth century perhaps due to the solidification of the two Netherlandish states after the end of the Eighty Years' War in 1648.

In *The Politics of Memory*, Dr. Raingard Esser, professor of Early Modern History at the University of Groningen, studies the process by which these chorographies were produced with special attention to the historiographical discussions that accompanied them and calls attention to the need for revising Arnaldo Momigliano's distinction between historical writing as narrative and antiquarian research as descriptive. Her study has two aims: first, to analyze historiographical conventions, approaches and methodologies in chorographical writing to see how they change over time, and second to use Aleida Assmann's concept of "political memory" to study the development of different historiographical traditions in the Protestant North and the Catholic South so as to contribute to the current interest in "cultures of memory" and "memory studies."

The core of the work is two sections of three chapters each, one section devoted to the chorographies of the northern cities of Amsterdam, Haarlem and Nijmegen, the other to those of the southern cities of Antwerp, Leuven and Geraardsbergen. A third section deals with regional chorographies. In this comparative treatment, Amsterdam has pride of place because of its importance as the political and commercial

center of the Dutch Republic, one of the most important metropolises in the western world. The seventy-five pages Esser devotes to it is greater than the total of pages accorded to the other five cities under consideration and nearly matches the eighty-eight pages given over to the analysis and description of regional chorographies. Aptly titled "The Jewel in the Crown," the treatment of Amsterdam is organized around the chorographical milestones erected by three major figures, Johannes Isacius Pontanus (1611), Olfert Dapper (1663) and Caspar Commelin (1693). Each of these authors is discussed in terms of his presentation of city images and iconography, origin myths, the Dutch Revolt and religious diversity/immigrants. Their efforts describe an arc from the classically trained historian, Pontanus, writing in Latin and relying on the conventions of ancient authors, to the publisher, Commelin, writing in Dutch and displaying an antiquarian fondness for visual images of heraldic objects, coins, monuments and other artifacts. In the course of the century, the question of the Batavian origins of the Hollanders, so vital to Pontanus, became of mere formality of presentation in Commelin, the treatment of the Dutch Revolt fossilized, and the insistence on the cultural and confessional uniformity of the Amsterdammers evolved into consideration of cultural and confessional diversity as one of the city's key assets. The pattern of description and analysis having been established with the Amsterdam case study is repeated through each of the other parts, so that a truly comparative study of the preparation, networks and methods of the various authors and of such themes as urban/regional nature and origins, population variations and religious tradition emerges.

From these comparisons, Esser ventures a variety of useful observations and conclusions. Southern chorographies tended to be written in Latin by clerical elites and fewer in number than northern chorographies, perhaps in part because the southern Netherlands conveyed a message of community by way of pageants, processions, images, art and architecture rather than writing. The South also saw the emergence of a distinctively Catholic historiographical approach in which hagiography and an emphasis on "tradition" and continuity became increasingly normative. Where Northerners conceptualized "time" and the movement of history in terms of change and periodization, the notions of description and continuity favored by Southerners

created an impression of timelessness in which the Eighty Years' War and its results could be ignored. In both North and South, analysis and interpretation of evidence gradually gave way to its collection and description, a move toward antiquarianism. Literary style and persuasion gave way to quotes, footnotes and critical apparatus. While in the northern Netherlands vernacular literary works were emphasized and local literary, scientific and political figures were lionized, Southern Catholics worked at the standardization of religious belief and practice in a context of world history "made" by the Habsburgs. Differences in presentation and approach could also be attributable to the availability or lack of availability of intellectual networks to individual chorographers. The sophistication of the work of chorographers who had been to university and discussed methodology with one another was of a distinctly higher level than that of chorographers who worked in isolation, especially if they were amateurs. There is evident also some difference between eastern and western regions. Amsterdam's triumphant middle-class commercialism and trumpeting of her leadership role in the Dutch Revolt was countered in the chorographical productions of the somewhat disenfranchised and fractured Eastern provinces by emphasis on their aristocratic past and historical links with the Holy Roman Empire (as opposed to Burgundian and Habsburg rule).

A brief summary cannot begin to do justice to the extent and subtlety of Esser's analysis and insights. So close a reading of the Dutch chorographers of the seventeenth century, conducted with full attention to the historical context and building upon recent studies of individual chorographers and their work is necessarily of critical importance and anyone studying Dutch history, historiography, civic identity, and the shaping of group memory will find reading this book an extremely stimulating and rewarding exercise.