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Hunger tales: Remembering Famine in Sixteenth-Century Leiden

Some years ago, my colleague Bart van der Boom asked the students in his oral history class to interview local people in the city of Leiden about their memories of the final winter of the World War II, that in the western part of the Netherlands was the scene of a terrible famine. One of the interviewees told the student that when food supplies finally arrived after the liberation in May 1945, some people had died of eating too much 'Swedish white bread' and tinned sardines. Swedish white bread was, in fact, distributed earlier in the winter, but it has also come to figure in many tales about the food droppings after the end of the war. Moreover, Van der Boom sensed that it was no coincidence that this story concerned bread and fish. In Leiden bread and fish are central to the local memories of another war and the end to another famine, that of 1574, that is commemorated every year.

The story is a textbook example of memory remediation, a term used by students of memory such as Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney to describe the process by which old memories help make new ones (Erll – Rigney – Basu, 2009). We know that experiences in the present can to a surprising extent be premediated by cultural memories of similar events in the past; this is true in pre-modern societies as much as in those studied by Erll and Rigney (Pollmann, 2017). By looking at the history of Leiden's memory culture through that lense, this article attempts to offer a new answer to the question why famine, bread and fish came to play such an important role in Leiden's memory landscape.

I.

In 1577 Jan van Hout, the secretary of the city of Leiden in Holland, composed a chronographical inscription for the town hall to commemorate the lifting of a Habsburg siege of the city on 3 October 1574. In 1572, Leiden had joined the Revolt of William of Orange against the Habsburg regime. With the Revolt had came also a Reformation of the city, and a purging of the local churches of all 'idolatrous' objects and images. In a significant symbolic gesture, the altarstone

that was purged from the church of St Peter was redeployed to carry Van Hout's inscription. This recorded how a 'black famine' during the five-month siege had claimed the lives of 6000 of Leiden's population of 15,000 inhabitants, until 'God had taken pity' and had 'given us bread again, as much as we could wish for'.

The inscription on the town hall was part of an extensive memory culture surrounding the relief of the city, in which the theme of famine took center stage (Pollmann, 2008). Memories of the famine were enshrined in other commemorative inscriptions in the interior of the town hall and elsewhere. Famine was also the central theme in all the histories of the siege, the first of which was published shortly after the relief of the city by Jan Fruytiers (Fruytiers, 1574a). Fruytiers had not been present in the town during the siege, but probably had the chance to talk to locals soon afterwards. He put forward a harrowing account of the consequences that the food shortages in the city had had. Seven weeks without bread had forced people to depend on cabbages, grass and vineleaves. They had slaughtered and eaten cats and dogs. Infants had withered in their mothers' wombs, and children had dropped dead in the streets. Poor women, hiding their faces in their gowns, had searched for discarded cabbage leaves and bones in the refuse heaps, and poor boys were seen sucking dry bones. When the city was reduced to slaughtering all the cows and horses, the boys were slurping the blood from the gutters (Fruytiers, 1874: 22-23). The shortages had caused dissension in the city; some women, especially, had lobbied hard for surrender, 'saying the Prince was sitting on a salted herring' (Fruytiers, 1874: 20).

Later histories embellished Fruytiers's account, but did not substantially add to these details, which were also echoed in paintings and plays throughout the seventeenth century and beyond (Pollmann, 2011). In a painting Otto van Veen celebrated the feeding of Leiden's multitudes by depicting the population wolfing down the food that had been brought by the rebel ships that had sailed over the river Vliet into the city. A 1615 copy of the painting displays a horse's head, tongue lolling and eyes rolling, and the skull of a cow, both abandoned in exchange for the bread, herring and cheese now on offer. Thirty years later, an allegorical painting of Leiden's suffering also showed dead cats and rats.¹

The perpetuation of these memories was not just a concern of the authorities. Hunger and food also recurred as a theme in family tales, and in commemorative objects associated with the annual commemorative feast that had been instituted almost immediately after the siege. Thus, a big bronze pot that had allegedly been taken out of one of the Habsburg sconces, full of the tasty stew that was known as 'hutspot', was kept by the Schaeck family, and celebrated in a poem by Joost van den Vondel. A wealthy Leidener made a bequest to the poor of the Stevenshof, who were to receive a gift of bread on the annual anniversary of

1 Otto van Veen, *Distribution of Herring and White Bread after the Relief of the Siege of Leiden* (1574-1629), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam SK-A-391; Pieter van Veen, *The Feeding of the Redeemed Leideners on 3 October 1574* (1615) Museum Lakenhal, Leiden Inv. S. 443; Joris van Schooten, *The Sacrifice of Burgomaster Van der Werf* (1643), Museum Lakenhal, Leiden, Inv. S. 384.

the relief on 3 October. Seventeenth-century minister Paschier de Fijne tells us that families ate together on the eve of the annual commemoration to pass on the tales of the hunger they had suffered. Perhaps they, or De Fijne, wanted to suggest a parallel with the Seider meal before Pesach in which Jewish families share commemorative dishes to take them through all the stages of the Exodus tale.

Local reputations were also associated with the famine (Pollmann, 2008). Most famously, there emerged an extensive cult around burgomaster Pieter Adriaensz van der Werf, who during the siege had allegedly countered calls for surrender issued by hungry women, by offering to cut off his own arm for them to eat. His story was popularised in plays and sermons from the seventeenth century onwards, always in the context of lurid and emotive descriptions of the hunger that the Leiden population had had to endure. Another family was rewarded for its public spirit in supplying the pigeons that had been used to make contact with the Prince of Orange, rather than to slaughter and cook them to fill the 'hungry stomachs' of their own household. The family was entitled to carry the name 'Van Duivenbode' – pigeoncarrier – while the bodies of the celebrity pigeons were 'filled with hay' and gifted to the city hall (Van Maanen 1981; Zijlmans 2007; Pollmann 2008; Pollmann 2011).

Thus it came as a real surprise when we learned, through a careful reconstruction by Thera Wijsenbeek (Wijsenbeek, 2006), that food supplies in the besieged city had never actually run out, and had been distributed quite fairly. Using an anonymous eyewitness account of the siege (Anonymous, 1874) as well as the urban records and hospital accounts, she observed that in July 1574, the local authorities had started to ration bread, and made a house-to-house inventory of remaining food supplies. They left an *achel* (c. 34 litre) of grain for every head, and sequestered the rest. In early August, they began to distribute maltcakes, and did a headcount, recording the presence of 12,456 residents in the city. By late August, the soldiers who had been hired by the city began to mutiny over the food shortages. The authorities had responded to this with another effort to survey remaining food supplies, and by rationing the remaining food. On 2 September, they slaughtered the cows in the city and distributed the meat, on 24 September they first began to slaughter horses. By that stage maltcakes were still being distributed. Other sources confirm that as late as 30 September, the town slaughtered another 52 cows as well as 27 horses (Orlers, 1614: 33-34). While there were undoubtedly severe food shortages, Wijsenbeek argued that the rationing and distribution system should have allowed a calory intake that was sufficient for survival right until the end of the siege on 3 October. That was not, of course, to deny that there had been many casualties. Noting that the anonymous chronicler reported that people had died after washing and eating discarded cabbage leaves, Wijsenbeek concluded that most of Leiden's dead had probably not died of famine, but of the disease or diseases that contemporaries described as 'pestilence'. Dysentery or a similar disease may have been caused by drinking bad water; once the supply of cereals had run out, and the malt

was turned into cakes, the light beer that was the staple drink of the Dutch also became scarce. Whatever the case may be, in a stroke, Wijsenbeek had cast serious doubt over four hundred years of historical consensus and one of the most popular tales to emerge from the Eighty Years War. She did not, however, have the opportunity to follow up on the fascinating new question that emerged from her conclusions. If the people of Leiden had mostly died of an epidemic, how come it was famine that dominated the memory culture surrounding the relief?

I made a tentative first attempt to answer that question in a lecture given in 2008, just as I started work on a major collective research project on memories of the Revolt (Pollmann, 2008). At that time, I could think of three possible factors to explain the role of hunger in Leiden's memory culture. First, I argued that because pestilence was widely seen as a divine sanction for collective sin, it might not be a very attractive focus for memory practices (Noordegraaf – Valk, 1988). Secondly, more than pestilence, the hunger tale cast both the entire population of Leiden and its magistrates in a heroic role, through their willingness to sacrifice all for the rebel cause of liberty. This emphasis on shared suffering and collective heroism was especially welcome in a city that, both before and during the siege, had been deeply divided over the support for the Protestant rebels, and may have contributed to the subsequent healing of the wounds. Finally, there was an ideologically satisfactory 'happy ending' to the story of Leiden's suffering, because many of the memories contrasted the famine with the sudden sense of plenty that emerged when the rebel armies liberated the city: 'miraculously', there was enough cheese, herring and bread, 'as much as we could wish for'. The cheese soon disappeared from the memories, but bread and fish turned into the emblem of the relief of the city, I argued, also because they evoked Christ's miraculous feeding of the multitudes at the sea of Galilee.

Thirteen years on, however, new work by myself, and my Leiden students suggests that there are reasons both to reconsider these explanations and to go beyond them. While the second and third of these arguments still stand, as far as I am concerned, I was soon dissatisfied with the first. More than in 2008, I have come to realise that we should consider dearth and famine as phenomena invested with cultural meaning (Mukherjee, 2015; Mukherjee, 2019; Pilcher, 2012 there esp. *Mandala*). Biblical famines, providential tales, and other historical examples informed a set of cultural expectations and tropes with which early modern people identified and which they used to interpret the meaning of dearth, hunger and famine (Walsham, 1999; Mukherjee, 2015: 20-62). Applying insights on the pre- and remediation of memories by literary scholars (Erll – Rigney – Basu, 2009), my research team demonstrated that such cultural tropes also powerfully influenced both early modern memories and experiences of war (Kuijpers – Eekhout, 2013; Müller – Van der Steen – Pollmann, 2017). In this light, it is useful to consider to what extent existing cultural scripts may have coloured both Leiden's famine memories, and its experiences of food shortages.

II.

My original explanation for the focus on hunger in Leiden's memory culture was predicated on the idea that pestilence was unsuitable for commemoration because it was associated with divine displeasure. Although contemporary authorities were also well aware of other causes and legislated especially in order to try and prevent bad miasma from spreading, everyone agreed that the primary cause of plague was providential. Epidemics also rarely seem to have led to memory practices. In Catholic Europe, epidemics were occasionally commemorated with the erection of plague crosses or through feasts in honour of saints who had averted or ended epidemics, such as Santa Rosalia in Palermo. In 1679 the Habsburg emperor Leopold commissioned the famous Vienna Plague column, an example that would be emulated across Central Europe. Yet as Ruth MacKay notes, early modern local histories are typically silent on the subject of epidemics (MacKay, 2019), and in Protestant Europe commemorating epidemics in public was rare. Diarists and chroniclers might keep extensive records of what transpired during plague outbreaks, but until the 1720s these were not usually published. One of the reasons why scholars have long relied on Daniel Defoe's fictional 'Journal of the Plague year' of 1721 as evidence for events during the great London plague epidemic of 1665, for instance, is that there were very few other printed descriptions of what had happened during the outbreak (Robertson, 2020). The same was true in Leiden. In 2012 Ladan showed that Leiden had been struck by deadly epidemics in 1529 and 1567, but these have left no trace in the local memory culture whatsoever (Ladan, 2012). Considering this, it is perhaps already quite remarkable that there was a print devoted to the 'mortality' (i.e. pestilence) of 1574 in the town's history that was published by Jan Orlers in 1614.² It is only after Leiden suffered one of the most deadly plague outbreaks in the history of the Dutch Republic, in 1635-1636, and again lost about a third of its population, that we find further traces of a local memory culture surrounding plague. A poem that enumerated the dead was published in a collection of devotional songs. As Art-Jan de Kwant has demonstrated, some families also retained vivid memories of the suffering two decades later (De Kwant, 2020).

A more serious problem with my argument about the commemoration of pestilence is, however, that I ignored that famine and dearth, as much as pestilence, were also widely seen as the providential outcome of God's wrath over human sin (Walsham, 1999). Indeed, Fruytiers opened his account of Leiden's siege by recalling how at one time he had been astounded by the tales of famine that had been suffered in the biblical cities of Jerusalem, Samaria and Bethulia, 'which were besieged by their enemies in such a way that they were forced to eat unnatural foodstuffs, such as dogs, cats, rats, horses and children'. No longer so. Fruytiers noted that he and his contemporaries had in recent years witnessed very

² Willem de Haen, 'Mortalitas' in Rijksmuseum RP-P-OB-79558, made for (Orlers 1614).

similar phenomena with their own eyes. In the space of two years there had been a succession of sieges, those of La Rochelle, Sommières and Sancerre in France, and of Haarlem, Middelburg and now Leiden in the Low Countries, that had brought with them famines of biblical proportions (Fruytiers, 1874: 3-4). Fruytiers was especially well-informed about the famine that had struck the French city of Sancerre in 1572-1573, when the Reformed Huguenots were besieged for 8 months by Catholic armies, and slowly starved into submission. Immediately after the siege, the Reformed eyewitness Jean de Léry had written a lengthy account of the famine in the city, which culminated in the gruesome story of a couple's decision to kill and eat their own child. The story was grim evidence for De Léry's contention that the city's fate had been God's punishment for the lack of gratitude on the part of the Reformed of Sancerre and those of France (Nakam, 1975). Fruytiers was able to report a happier outcome for Leiden, but he had clearly read De Léry's account, and shared his view that famine should be seen in a providential light. Of course, only God knew what had brought about these famines, Fruytiers acknowledged, but he thought the Scriptural examples pointed in a clear direction: famine had been God's punishment for pride, decadence and lack of charity. That some of these cities had nevertheless been relieved, should thus be considered 'a true wonder and miracle work of the Lord' (Fruytiers, 1874: 4).

Both De Léry and Fruytiers drew heavily not only on biblical tropes, such as those in Jeremiah's Lamentations about the fall of Jerusalem, but also on imagery from Flavius Josephus's famous account of the famine in Jerusalem during the Roman siege of 70 AD. Denouncing the Jewish resistance against the armies of his imperial patrons, Flavius Josephus had devoted long sections to the consequences of the famine in the city, and the social dislocation brought about by the siege. In 1525, a vernacular version of this tale had been published in Antwerp by Willem Vorsterman. *Die destructie vander stat van Jherusalem* recounted how 'the people ate all the animals they could lay their hands on: dogs, cats, rats and mice, and what's more they ate human waste. And there was great weeping and crying in the city because of the want, because many people died of hunger'. Like in Sancerre, the misery in Jerusalem was exemplified by a story about a mother who killed, cooked and ate her child (Braekman, 1984; Kuiper, 2020).

It was not only Calvinists who drew upon such sources, because they were already common knowledge, also in Leiden. We can also see evidence of such knowledge in a curious object in the collection of Leiden's Museum Lakenhal, to which I was alerted by Marianne Eekhout, who had come across it in the course of her work on urban material memory practices (Eekhout, 2013 and 2020). The stone is known as the Leiden 'breadstone', and is traditionally associated with a miracle that had occurred in Leiden during the great famine of 1315-1316. At that time, so the story was told in a series of chronicles, a hungry woman saw her sister carving up some breadding and hiding half of it. When the woman approached her and asked her to share it with her, her sister denied having any, swearing that if there were bread in the house, God should turn it into stone.

This He of course promptly did. The message was clear. During periods of dearth and famine, ordinary expectations about charity, especially between sisters (or, in some variants of the story, neighbours) might no longer be valid, but people who protected their own at the expense of others would not meet with divine approval. The breadstone was evidence of this (Van Rooijen – Lenarduzzi – Pollmann, 2020: 63-66).³ Starting with the chronicle by the anonymous author known as the (Clerc from the Low Countries) in the late fourteenth century, the tale of the stone was transmitted in a series of vernacular chronicles, and in the Leiden memory landscape. Leiden had a ‘land of miracle’, the alley in which the event had taken place was known as ‘Miracle alley’, and the breadstone itself was kept in a case in the Leiden Pieterskerk. It was displayed there on feast days by the masters of the Holy Spirit, who were in charge of collecting alms for the local poor, and meant to encourage charitable giving. The story and the stone were famous; an image of the Leiden bread stone was on display as far away as Middelburg, and until well into the seventeenth century tourists were told about its existence (Lenarduzzi – Pollmann, 2020: 63-66).

But of course the miracle bread had not fared well in the Reformation. Reformers insisted that the time of miracles had ended with the early Christians, and treated relics and miraculous objects as idolatrous. The breadstone was probably purged from St Peter’s church at about the same time as the altar stone that carries Van Hout’s inscription. It was, however, not cast away, but passed into the hands of the Leiden collector and goldsmith Cornelis van Aken, who, perhaps not incidentally, had also been in charge of surveying the food supplies in the city during the siege. To document the stone’s provenance, he asked three old men to testify and confirm that this was the very stone that they had seen in the church, and that was associated with this miracle. In order to ascertain that they were all talking about the same miracle, the notary read out loud book 9 of Cornelius Aurelius’ *Divisiechroniek* to the witnesses, who confirmed that this was the story as they knew it (Aurelius, 1517).⁴ Rather overenthusiastically, one of the witnesses was even prepared to testify that his own father had known the sisters and their children very well.

The story of the miracle fitted into a broader historical context. In the preceding chapter of the *Divisiechroniek*, Cornelius Aurelius had discussed the appearance of a comet in 1316, that had presaged ‘a great heavy and troublesome time of dearth, and a great pestilence. This dearth time was so great, that the poor folk ate the dirty, stinking, dead carcasses of animals, all raw, and the grass of the

3 Leiden, Bibliotheek Erfgoed Leiden, Ms 501, [(J. D. Frenay), ‘Het Leidsche broodwonder’, 4 vols plus 2 vols of appendixes A and B]. Although the title page suggests this account was written by B. de Bont, the actual author was the Leiden priest and medical doctor J. D. Frenay (1816-1895), who had been asked by De Bont to research the local provenance of the stone. His results were summarised in Van Rooijen, 1943.

4 Aurelius had borrowed the tal from Johannes de Beke, *Croniken vanden stichte van Utrecht ende Hollant*, from the early 14thc.

soil, uncooked. And the dearth and the mortality was so great and heavy, that countless poor people and beggars lay dead in the woods and the wildernesses, and on the fields and roads, and were buried there without any ceremony or funeral. Moreover, little children were found lying while sucking at their mothers' dead breasts, and had gnawed and bitten them, so that the only difference with Jeremiah's Lamentations was that the women had not killed their children to cook and eat their flesh.' (Aurelius 2011: book viii) We cannot be sure that the old men were also familiar with this part of the story, but one suspects that when they were raising money for charity, the Masters of the Holy Spirit and preachers would have frequently reminded the Leiden population of the context in which the miracle had taken place, so as to strengthen the moral message to which the breadstone bore witness.

Looking at this description of the famine of 1316, the descriptions of the Leiden famine of 1574 and that of De Léry, it is evident that in famine tales some issues were deemed more relevant than others. This is especially clear when we realise that most Europeans were very familiar with periods of dearth ('duurte'), and some people suffered periods of hunger every year, when prices were high just before the new harvests. 'Famine', however, was different. 'Famine' ('honger-snoot') started when bread ran out. Of course, bread was the most important staple for pre-modern Europeans, and a shortage of bread was thus extremely serious. Yet, bread also had a particular religious and symbolic significance that went beyond its actual calorific value, so that a shortage of bread was experienced as a sign of extreme want, perhaps regardless of what else there was to eat. The famine tales further reflect a binary cultural distinction between food that was 'raw' rather than 'cooked', and 'unnatural' rather than 'natural', that is familiar from many other societies (Lévi-Strauss, 1964). In Josephus, Aurelius, Fruytiers and in De Léry, famine leads to the consumption of raw foodstuffs, especially meat. Josephus had emphasised that hunger had caused 'passions' that made people too impatient to wait until the food was cooked and eaten (Josephus, 2015: book V).⁵ In the later sources, the need to consume foods 'raw' is not explained – there is no mention of a lack of fuel, for instance, and its main function in the stories seems to be to underline desperation and lack of control. Hunger also drove people to eat things that were deemed 'inedible'. For Jews inedible substances included foods that were not kosher, cloven-hooved animals like horses, as well as scavengers such as dogs and cats. While Christians had of course rejected most of the Jewish dietary laws, they had retained the taboos surrounding others. Sixteenth-century Christians thus remained as appalled at the thought of eating dogs, cats and rats as Jews would have been, and in famine tales the need to eat such flesh was widely referred to as a marker of extreme want (Mukherjee, 2015: 4, 22-28; Thomas, 1983: 114-115). Horsemeat was unpopular; a papal injunction had at one time banned the eating of horse meat because it was associated with paganism, but

⁵ In medical theory, passions were one of the non natural factors that influenced health.

it was not a total taboo. Nevertheless, and perhaps also because horses were so expensive and a luxury item, the decision to slaughter horses was seen as a sign of desperation.

Another common theme in the texts is the eating of food that has been cast off, that is 'stinking' or 'rotten', or lying on refuse heaps, and that people would be ashamed to eat.⁶ Fruytiers recorded that boys picked up dried fishscales and bones, and women who searched the refuse for edible things were covering their heads in shame. Finally, and very much like in tales of plague, narrators associated famine with the breakdown of normal social taboos and relations, and the collapse of charitable obligations. (Amelang, 1991; Robertson, 2020) This was exemplified by the fate of unborn children, infants, the young, the sick and the very old. Hunger was widely seen as something that 'ate' the bodies of starving people, as evidenced by their 'shrinking', and 'drying out', so that in famine tales hunger and infants competed for their mothers' milk. Women died while suckling their children, but children bit the breasts that fed them. In such stories, women who refused bread to their sisters and neighbours during a famine might, at a push, turn into women who were ready to kill and eat their own children (Mukherjee 2015; Kuiper, 2020).

What are the consequences of this for our understanding of Leiden's memory tradition? First, it is evident that we should read Fruytiers's text not as a factual account, but first and foremost as an effort to explain the providential significance of what had happened in Leiden. He had offered such providential readings of current affairs before, in a pamphlet on the All Saints' Flood of 1570, which he had read as an indictment of the Catholic church, and he was also to frequently juxtapose events in the religious wars of France with those in the Netherlands (Fruytiers, 1570; Fruytiers, 1574b). It is no wonder, then, that Fruytiers's description of famine in Leiden was informed by the tropes that had long been used to describe similar providential instances of want. This also accounts for rhetorical details like his listing of 'vineleaves' as one of the things people Leiden ate; there were vines in Jerusalem and Sancerre, but not in Leiden (Fruytiers, 1874: 22).

Yet that is not to say that eyewitnesses who read Fruytiers's account would probably have seen it as 'fictional'. To the contrary, Fruytiers's history was rapidly adopted in Leiden as the best official account of what had happened there, probably because those who had lived through the siege were as familiar with these tropes as this author. Thus, like Fruytiers, the anonymous eyewitness account of the Leiden siege that was already used to such good effect by Wijssenbeek also measured famine by the absence of bread. Other foodstuffs could simply not make up for it. The move to maltcakes, the anonymous author tells us, caused popular unrest and anger, also because these had in the first instance not been cooked properly. Once there was no longer any bread to be distributed, people moved to carrots and some spent such unbelievable sums on them that 'they

6 For the taboo on stinking food and its association with disease see Rawcliffe, 2013: 233-239 and Coomans, 2021. I thank Claire Weeda for these references.

made the vegetable sellers rich.' The implication seems to be that carrots did not really count as food, and neither did other vegetables (Anonymous, 1874: 8). That people were searching for the old cabbage leaves and cabbage trunks on the refuse heaps, was also sign of this. By September, the prices of vegetables had risen even further, and people began to die in large numbers 'of hunger and plague'. For this eyewitness, eating horse meat, too, had been a last resort. He did not, however, record the eating of cats and dogs, the boiling of animal skins and the cooking of grass and starch that had been reported by Fruytiers. He reported how the decision to slaughter the cows first was not favoured by the Leiden authorities, who wanted to retain some milk for the sick. They had to bow under pressure from 'the commons' in town. As a compromise, people were given beef and horsemeat in equal quantities, until the beef ran out (Anonymous, 1874: 17). As we have seen, by the time relief arrived, some locals had already ventured out to the abandoned scones and had found some food there. Yet the majority had to wait for the arrival of the rebel ships in Leiden, a moment of 'exceptional joy', said the anonymous eyewitness (Anonymous, 1874: 19). The victuals that that these brought along were taken to the hospital of St James, from where every man, woman and child could collect half a loaf of bread, some cheese and a salted herring. For some, the eyewitness recorded, help came too late. 'Because they had not eaten bread for such a long time, there were many who after they began seriously to eat, could not satisfy themselves, and have died of this, because they were virtually dried up, withered and decayed.' (Anonymous, 1874: 19-20). A better explanation for this may be that deaths of 'pestilence' continued beyond 3 October. Yet for our eyewitness, too, once the food had arrived, the suffering was officially over. Because the eyewitness and Fruytiers shared the same sense of what famine was, and could couple this to a political event, Fruytiers's account confirmed and gave meaning to the gruesome episode they had just lived through by giving it a happy ending. The 'miraculous' arrival of plenty confirmed that the city had made the right choice in sitting out the siege.

In doing so, it was essential that the story had ended 'well'. In an excellent paper, my student Femke Gordijn compared the account of this eyewitness with that by cronicler Willem Verwer from Haarlem, a city that had suffered an even longer siege with equally appalling food shortages from May 1573, when access to the town was cut off, until the city's surrender in July (Gordijn, 2018). Much more so than the anonymous Leiden eyewitness or Fruytiers, Verwer's account notes the inequalities during Haarlem's siege; while the poor suffered terrible want, others were still buying food at very high prices. The soldiers garrisoned in Haarlem were aggressively demanding their share of the remaining supplies, and the city government did not apparently succeed as well as Leiden in organising rationing.

Verwer described the shortages in terms that are very similar to those of Fruytiers and our anonymous Leiden eyewitness (Verwer, 1973: 19). His entry for 14 May 1573, when bread was first rationed, was titled 'the hunger begins'. He recorded how in Haarlem, too, people were given maltcakes, and later hempcakes,

and eventually just the uncooked seeds of hemp. Horses were slaughtered in Haarlem, but Verwer also notes the sale and consumption of dogs and mice, and of draff and waste from the city's many breweries that was normally used as animal feed (Verwer, 1973: 75, 96). He reported how infants' bodies were seen floating in the river the Spaarne, as well as the suicide attempt of a mother who no longer knew how to feed her children (Verwer, 1973: 96-97). In other words, Verwer used the same indicators for famine, want and destitution as the Leiden accounts, and had in fact more dramatic tales to tell than his Leiden peer. Yet significantly, Haarlem was never to develop a memory culture surrounding the famine it had endured. This may be partly because had other matters to commemorate, such as the bombardments that the city had suffered (Eekhout, 2012). Yet there was also no 'happy ending' as a counterpoint to the suffering. Because Haarlem had to surrender, it was condemned to pay a huge indemnity, and saw the massacre of its garrison. The Habsburg rule lasted for another three years, before the city reverted to the rebel camp. By that time, the city of Leiden had already been rewarded by the rebel States of Holland for its sacrifices during the siege. William of Orange designated it as the city of choice for the new Academy. The city was soon repopulated, with thousands of migrants from the Southern Netherlands, who quickly adopted the story of Leiden's famine as their own. Haarlem's hungry were forgotten.

We do now, I believe, have a better explanation to my 2008 question, why the Leideners commemorated famine rather than pestilence. Thinking harder about the meaning of the reports on food shortages, and the cultural traditions that were used to explain and frame them, we can see that both eyewitnesses and the first historian of Leiden's siege used existing and traditional criteria for assessing their plight. Biblical precedents, the siege of Jerusalem, descriptions of the Great Hunger of 1315-1316 and local memories predisposed contemporaries to note some effects more than others. 'Famine' set in, as soon as it was no longer possible to bake bread. Although Leiden was quite effective in rationing the available food, and guaranteeing a sufficient caloric intake for all in the city, the food on offer was deemed very inferior. No one reported on the shortage of beer, which is a possible reason why people turned to bad drinking water, fell sick and died, although a recent study argues a plague epidemic was also rampant (Ladan, 2021). Rather, contemporary authors focused on the markers of extreme want that were carried over from the description of biblical famines, the siege of Jerusalem, and the famine of 1315-1316: the consumption of 'inedible', raw and rotten food, that moved people to do shameful things. Fruytiers's description of Leiden's plight embellished the story by using such examples, not only so to dramatise it, but above all to enhance the similarities with biblical precedents and so to give it a satisfactory meaning and purpose. This served less to emphasise that famine had been God's providential punishment, than to highlight that He had, once more, taken pity on His people and forged their miraculous relief, which had brought a world of plenty. His readers did not object, and soon adopted this very perspective to commemorate their plight.

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