

Anita Boele, Utrecht University

Charity, Compassion and Community

This paper discusses the charitable acts of men and women belonging to religious and lay communities and the role of charity in the creation and maintenance of social relations in late medieval towns in the Netherlands. As a religious duty, charity had to be performed with an inner feeling of compassion and empathy with the sufferings of the poor, implying a (at least temporarily) social relationship between benefactor and beneficiary. Simultaneously, the poor formed an indispensable link in the vertical relationship between the individual believer and God. These issues were extensively discussed in contemporary didactic and religious texts often elaborated with examples of compassionate behavior. These texts provide a rich insight in how concepts of poverty and poor relief shaped the personal lives of men and women living within those communities, their sometimes complicated relationships with the 'involuntary' poor and their personal relationship with God. At the same time, they show how these concepts were adapted and assimilated to practical needs and interests related to broader social and economic developments that took place within the context of late medieval towns, resulting into a close intertwining of religious and civic values.

Dr. Anita Boele, Postdoctoral Researcher Utrecht University
Department of Social and Economic History