

The layers of history - graves in the Oude Kerk

As visitors of the Oude Kerk walk in the church, they might not be aware that they are literally stepping on hundreds of years of history. The around 10.000 people buried under the floor were prominent men and women of the Amsterdam society: honourable aldermen and generals, acclaimed artists and scientist, wealthy merchants and explorers. The hardness of the tombstones might suggest that the memory of these people withstand the test of time. In fact, nothing is set in stone: the graves testify of many changes over the centuries, oblivion, and blind spots in our knowledge about the past. Some graves were emptied to give room for the newly departed, while on others, the inscription is already faded. There are many of the dead buried here whose exact grave location is unknown, whereas others share their final resting place with seemingly unrelated persons – often even from different centuries.

The graves can teach us not only about the history of Amsterdam. They speak also about the many layers of history, the often accidental relations between its characters, and our changing memories and perception of the past. The graves prompt us to ask questions like who was considered to be worthy to be remembered? Who were the people to whom monuments were erected in the cathedrals? What kind of rituals took place there to keep these memories alive? What are the national and local narratives that such historical repositories like the graves represent? And even more importantly, who are the ones, who are left out of this story?

Colonial legacy

Certain issues such as the traces of colonialism in the urban heritage are pressing us to reconsider the narratives of remembrance concerning certain figures who are heroized in the grave monuments. A good example of that could be the story of the two Jacobs at Oude Kerk. First the monument of Jacob van Heemskerck, who was a naval hero and admiral from the Dutch golden age. He is remembered in the Netherlands mostly as a brave and genius explorer and naval hero, who successfully discovered a trade route to East Asia through the Nordic Sea and defeated the Spanish army at Gibraltar to protect Dutch trading ships. His funeral was the first that celebrated someone as a naval hero. His grave monument occupies a prominent position on an obelisk by the entrance of the choir. The inscription celebrating his virtues was penned by P. C. Hooft, historian and poet of the 17th century. However, no signs are indicating the colonial legacy of these trading routes - many of which fell under the supervision of Heemskerck.

The graves can testify of grand narratives of the past. However, the silence of signless tombstones also compels us to look for individual narratives, stories of people whose names are not immortalized in history books or grave monuments. There have been some individual initiations to conduct independent archival research into family genealogies. Many people whose relatives are buried in the Oude Kerk are interested in conducting their own archival research to learn more about their ancestors. Positioning individual and family stories in relation to larger historical accounts can be a fruitful and exciting way to challenge dominant narratives and shape collective memories. For instance, Patricia Kaersenhout, Dutch-born artist with Surinamese ancestors has researched her family history to discover that one of her relatives, a black man born in Suriname, is buried in the church. The location

of his grave is unknown. The black man identified as Jacob Matroos Beeldsnijder, most probably the only black man buried here, was born to an Afro-Surinamese slave and her owner, a high ranked colonial officer in Suriname. Beeldsnijder was his own father's slave until he liberated him. Later, the man came to Amsterdam and lived here until his death. In her research, Kaersenhout was driven by personal questions that could relate her own experiences as a Dutch-Surinamese woman to what her ancestor could have experienced. For instance, what did he feel and think? How did his environment treat him?

Society, community and minority memories in the graves

Besides the two Jacobs, the graves in the church can offer other parallel stories that can inspire discussions of memory, community, and identity. The Oude Kerk as a church and spiritual place played an important role in strengthening the identity of religious communities - and it still has the potential to do so today. However, what might come as a surprise, the communities organized around the church, in the De Wallen area, were more diverse and inclusive in the past than we would imagine today. For instance, Ida Oyens, a prominent member of the 19th century Réveil movement is also buried in the church. The Réveil advocated for the experience of one's piety instead of the rationalistic doctrines of the Protestant church. The movement also emphasized the need to tackle social problems such as poverty, crime, alcoholism, and prostitution, which were especially pressing in the neighbourhood - and so are today. Oyens established the first prostitution centre of her time that offered help to women who wanted to break free from prostitution. This has a special relevance today when red light windows surround the church, and in the close vicinity of the church, you can find the Prostitution Information Center, an organization that takes exactly the opposite of Oyens' approach and aims to lift the stigmas around sex workers.

Johannes di Minas' story is also a good example to show that the church was an intersection of different groups and communities. Di Minas was a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church that had a long history of presence in the Netherlands through trading relations. Armenians had a strong and independent community in 18th century Amsterdam, with a church in the Krombolsteeg (just a few hundred meters away from the Oude Kerk). Being a nation without a country and with painful memories of persecution and collective suffering, religion has always been crucial for the collective identity of the Armenians. When di Minas died, the Arminian church community bought a grave for him in the Oude Kerk. But the memory of the priest still exists in the Armenian community of today. He used to live in the Koningstraat in De Wallen, his former house has preserved the facing brick facade that used to signify that a priest was living there. In 2008, the Armenian community held a special memorial service in honour of di Minas in the Oude Kerk and commissioned a study to identify all the Armenian graves in the church.