The dog burials at the castle of Arkel in Gorinchem
A study on the status of dogs in the Middle Ages

Introduction: three dog burials at Gorinchem

In 1996 amateur archaeologists carried out excavations along the Dalemsedijk in Gorinchem, on the site of the former bailey of the castle of the lords of Arkel. During these excavations three dog skeletons were found; one belonging to a large dog and two belonging to smaller specimens (Fig. 1, 2). The skull of the large dog is incomplete but still measures 12.3 cm. The skulls of the smaller are intact and measure 12 and 10.5 cm respectively. The dogs were buried next to each other, but unfortunately no drawings or photographs were made at the time.

In 1412 the castle of the Lords of Arkel was destroyed by Count William VI of Holland and Zeeland. His hatred for the Arkels was thus that he desired all trace of the castle to disappear and even ordered the foundations to be removed. As the site has not been built on since, it is certain that the dogs were buried before 1412. This is unusual as dead dogs were usually disposed of as refuse and were thrown into a cesspit or the moat. During excavations at the castles of Teylingen and Brederode, for instance, numerous dog remains were recovered from such sites. The unusual dog burials at Gorinchem seem to suggest that the skeletons are those of dogs of high status, probably belonging to the Lords of Arkel or the castle warden. In short, we seem to be dealing here with a very old dog graveyard, the oldest that I know of in the Netherlands. Whether this is indeed the case is a question I hope to answer below.

Dog burials and grave markers

On the whole, dog cemeteries are associated with the 18th century and later, and we see them at various castle sites and country estates. This does not imply that people did not care for their animals in the preceding period, it only means that it was not customary to bury their corpses with pomp and circumstance. However, there are some earlier examples. When the rather unpopular Leiden sheriff Willem de Bont, a staunch
Tiere zur Repräsentation

Menageries were a popular feature in the 18th and 19th centuries, used to display exotic animals and to educate the public about them. The Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) wrote a satiric poem to commemorate the funeral and burial of Tyter, a dog that was buried in a 77 cm high tomb marker for the dog Stutzel against the east wall of the castle of Winterstein. It was erected by the dog's owners, who were members of the Remonstrant denomination. The stone reads:

"HERN WOLBEKAT GESCHACH VB SEINE GROSSE TREVLIGKEIT DIE ER SEINE HER VD FRAVEN BE-WEST"

Below this text is an image of a small brown male dog.

A less serious dog epitaph is the one composed by the Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679). It was written to commemorate the funeral and burial of Tyter, a dog that was buried in a 77 cm high tomb marker for the dog Stutzel against the east wall of the castle of Winterstein. The stone reads:

"HERN WOLBEKAT GESCHACH VB SEINE GROSSE TREVLIGKEIT DIE ER SEINE HER VD FRAVEN BE-WEST"

In the Middle Ages, dogs were often buried in the same manner as humans, with their belongings and personal items. These dog burials were a way to honor the dog and to mark their place in family and community life. Dog burials were not just for dogs of nobility, but for common folk as well. In the Netherlands, for example, dog burials were common in the cities. Dogs were buried in public places and on the city walls, as a way to mark the spot where the dog had been killed or had died. Ordinary dogs could be kept if one had a barrel of salt, as dogs were feared of outbursts of rabies or the plague. The owner was supposed to keep their own dogs, in the case of non-compliance, a city official known as the dog butcher would take care of the dog. However, in some cases, city councils eventually rewrote the regulations, allowing pet dogs to be kept.

Dogs and status

In the Middle Ages, dogs were considered to be a status symbol. The nobility owned dogs, and the size and breed of the dog were an indication of the owner's status. The larger the dog, the higher the owner's social standing. Dogs were also used in hunting, and the size and breed of the dog were an indication of the owner's wealth and status.

ordinary dogs could be kept if one had a barrel of salt, as dogs were feared of outbursts of rabies or the plague. The owner was supposed to keep their own dogs, in the case of non-compliance, a city official known as the dog butcher would take care of the dog. However, in some cases, city councils eventually rewrote the regulations, allowing pet dogs to be kept.

In the country too, there was a clear difference between the treatment of elite dogs and those belonging to farmers and peasants. A farmer who was plagued by deer, hare or rabbits eating his crops could do nothing about it, as they were not permitted to hunt game. Trespassing was regarded as poaching and was heavily punished. To ensure that the country folk did not poach game, they were not permitted to keep hunting dogs or dogs fit for hunting. Any dogs they had, were to be disabled, either by chopping off part of a paw or by placing one paw in a block. Some dogs were made to wear a large piece of wood between their front paws, to disable their movements. A knight, on the other hand, was supposed to keep birds for hunting, as well as dogs and horses, if he were to retain his status. The importance of these animals is also manifest from seals, on which knights usually had themselves depicted in full armour, riding a horse, with their shield in the left hand. The seals of knights who had not as yet received full knighthood differed. They are shown on horseback, accompanied by dogs, with a bird of prey on one arm. This type of seal was also used by ladies (Fig. 5).

Ordinary dogs could be kept if one had a barrel of salt in the house. A barrel of salt was very costly, so in some cases, city councils eventually rewrote the regulations, allowing pet dogs to be kept. Dogs were also used in hunting, and the size and breed of the dog were an indication of the owner's wealth and status. Dogs were also used in hunting, and the size and breed of the dog were an indication of the owner's wealth and status.
Tiere zur Repräsentation

Apart from hunting dogs, small dogs were kept by the elite. The smaller the dog, the higher its status. How dogs and their owners, I know of only two instances in medieval funerary monuments. In his monumental study on medieval funerary imagery Kurt Bauch\(^{35}\) claims that the earliest dog to appear at the feet of the lying figure on a cophagus with a rear side surmounted by a baldachin. Against this rear side a standing figure of the deceased was placed. Jean was shown with a falcon in one hand and gloves and the other arm and with a hunting dog at his feet (Fig. 8). The funerary slabs, made of Limoges enamel and now in the abbey church of St. Denis, show Blanche with a hound at her feet and Jean with a lion. Both carry a sceptre in their left hand.\(^{36}\)

Dogs on graves

The close ties that existed between dogs and their medieval owners were also expressed on tombstones and funerary monuments, where they lie at the feet of the deceased (Fig. 6). In the literature on tomb sculpture, such dogs are often interpreted as symbols of fidelity, an idea that was promoted by Erwin Panofsky’s interpretation of the brown, hairy dog featuring on Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini portrait in the National Gallery in London.\(^{10}\) Of course, there is some evidence for such an interpretation. Medieval texts abound with stories of faithful dogs and in the bestiaries fidelity is mentioned as one of the main characteristics of the species, but, to my mind, it will not do to interpret every dog in this way, especially not those featuring on funerary monuments.

In his monumental study on medieval funerary imagery Kurt Bauch\(^{35}\) claims that the earliest dog to appear at the feet of the lying figure on a cophagus with a rear side surmounted by a baldachin. Against this rear side a standing figure of the deceased was placed. Jean was shown with a falcon in one hand and gloves and the other arm and with a hunting dog at his feet (Fig. 8). The funerary slabs, made of Limoges enamel and now in the abbey church of St. Denis, show Blanche with a hound at her feet and Jean with a lion. Both carry a sceptre in their left hand.\(^{36}\)

Dogs and their owners

Wealthy medieval ladies treated their lap dogs as described in detail in a poem by Jan van Borssele (ca. 1280 – ca. 1315), who has a knight’s sigh that he wished he were a dog, for, as a dog, he would be allowed to enter the ladies’ apartments and lie on the bed, he covered in furs and kissed and cuddled. A dog, in his opinion, was better off than a man. In fact, for some dogs this certainly held true. During the period that Jacqueline of Bavaria (1401–1436) was married to the duke of Brabant the servant taking care of her white dog was given a salary of 200 pounds, while her private secretary received no more than thirty.\(^{21}\)

Dogs hunting were good treated with great care. The 1345 accounts of the counts of Holland show that dogs were fed white bread.\(^{22}\) In the Middle Ages white bread was no simple fare, but consumed only by the vassate secretary received no more than thirty.\(^{21}\)

Apart from hunting dogs, small dogs were kept by the elite. The smaller the dog, the higher its status. How dogs and their owners, I know of only two instances in medieval funerary monuments. In his monumental study on medieval funerary imagery Kurt Bauch\(^{35}\) claims that the earliest dog to appear at the feet of the lying figure on a cophagus with a rear side surmounted by a baldachin. Against this rear side a standing figure of the deceased was placed. Jean was shown with a falcon in one hand and gloves and the other arm and with a hunting dog at his feet (Fig. 8). The funerary slabs, made of Limoges enamel and now in the abbey church of St. Denis, show Blanche with a hound at her feet and Jean with a lion. Both carry a sceptre in their left hand.\(^{36}\)

Dogs on graves

The close ties that existed between dogs and their medieval owners were also expressed on tombstones and funerary monuments, where they lie at the feet of the deceased (Fig. 6). In the literature on tomb sculpture, such dogs are often interpreted as symbols of fidelity, an idea that was promoted by Erwin Panofsky’s interpretation of the brown, hairy dog featuring on Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini portrait in the National Gallery in London.\(^{10}\) Of course, there is some evidence for such an interpretation. Medieval texts abound with stories of faithful dogs and in the bestiaries fidelity is mentioned as one of the main characteristics of the species, but, to my mind, it will not do to interpret every dog in this way, especially not those featuring on funerary monuments.

In his monumental study on medieval funerary imagery Kurt Bauch\(^{35}\) claims that the earliest dog to appear at the feet of the lying figure on a cophagus with a rear side surmounted by a baldachin. Against this rear side a standing figure of the deceased was placed. Jean was shown with a falcon in one hand and gloves and the other arm and with a hunting dog at his feet (Fig. 8). The funerary slabs, made of Limoges enamel and now in the abbey church of St. Denis, show Blanche with a hound at her feet and Jean with a lion. Both carry a sceptre in their left hand.\(^{36}\)

Dogs and their owners

Wealthy medieval ladies treated their lap dogs as described in detail in a poem by Jan van Borssele (ca. 1280 – ca. 1315), who has a knight’s sigh that he wished he were a dog, for, as a dog, he would be allowed to enter the ladies’ apartments and lie on the bed, he covered in furs and kissed and cuddled. A dog, in his opinion, was better off than a man. In fact, for some dogs this certainly held true. During the period that Jacqueline of Bavaria (1401–1436) was married to the duke of Brabant the servant taking care of her white dog was given a salary of 200 pounds, while her private secretary received no more than thirty.\(^{21}\)

Dogs hunting were good treated with great care. The 1345 accounts of the counts of Holland show that dogs were fed white bread.\(^{22}\) In the Middle Ages white bread was no simple fare, but consumed only by the vassate secretary received no more than thirty.\(^{21}\)
Brabantunum believed the dogs to be puppies and considered them as no more than a picturesque addition to the tomb.42 The dogs, however, are not puppies, but small status dogs, and one of them is chewing a bone.43 The presence of a bone next to the twozoomorphic symbols, indicating the transient nature of wealth and glory.44 Indeed, on a painting of circa 1485, that has been attributed to Hans Memling (circa 1430/40 – 1494), three status dogs are featured at the feet of a figure personifying ‘Vanitas’ in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Strasbourg. A porcupine of Philip III (†1391), granddaughter of Edward I, on her tomb in Exeter Cathedral represented an early form of dog cemetery. As the dog motif spread and time elapsed, changes occurred. There are clear regional differences. The ‘new’ animals often showed the lord with a squirrel at his feet, the emblem related to the heraldic arms or emblem of the owner.44 The dogs, however, are quite unique. That the dogs on funerary monuments were more likely to indicate status than fidelity is also evident from the fact that, in the later Middle Ages, they were often replaced by other animals, although dogs and lions were still the most numerous. The ‘new’ animals often related to the heraldic arms or emblem of the owner.44

The monument for Robert de Vere in the church of Bures shows his with a humb at his feet. In the collegiate church of Cleves, the Counts of Cleves have a swan at their feet. So does Margaret de Bohun (†1139), granddaughter of Edward I, on her tomb in Exeter Cathedral. Both the Counts of Cleves and the Bohuns claimed a descent form the legendary swan knight.45 The 16th-century tomb of Sir John Gilbert of Bohuns claimed a descent from the legendary swan knight.45 The 16th-century tomb of Sir John Gilbert of Bohuns (†1450) has a porcupine at his feet (Fig. 10).42 Another dog, ‘Jakke’, was named on the brass for Sir Brian Stapleton of 1438 in Deerhurst, which is named as early as 1300, was inhabited over a long period of time. From the stratigraphic evidence the excavators believe the dogs to be medieval.41 We also find such dogs on the double tomb of Louis and Margaret of Aragon’s tomb dates to around 1275 and is of the wife of Philip III of Aragon, 1243-1271, the first wife of Philip II of the Bold, king of France from 1270 to 1285.

**Fig. 10.** Detail of the brass of Sir John Cassey and his wife Alice in the church of Denhurstm, circa 1400. The dog at Alice’s feet is named ‘Terri’.

Brandenburg believed the dogs to be puppies and considered them as no more than a picturesque addition to the tomb.42 The dogs, however, are not puppies, but small status dogs, and one of them is chewing a bone.43 The presence of a bone next to the two zoomorphic symbols, indicating the transient nature of wealth and glory.44 Indeed, on a painting of circa 1485, that has been attributed to Hans Memling (circa 1430/40 – 1494), three status dogs are featured at the feet of a figure personifying ‘Vanitas’ in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Strasbourg.

Isabella of Aragon’s tomb of 1243 in the church of Ingham (Norfolk).43 These examples are, however, quite unique. That the dogs on funerary monuments were more likely to indicate status than fidelity is also evident from the fact that, in the later Middle Ages, they were often replaced by other animals, although dogs and lions were still the most numerous. The ‘new’ animals often related to the heraldic arms or emblem of the owner.44

The monument for Robert de Vere in the church of Bures shows his with a humb at his feet. In the collegiate church of Cleves, the Counts of Cleves have a swan at their feet. So does Margaret de Bohun (†1139), granddaughter of Edward I, on her tomb in Exeter Cathedral. Both the Counts of Cleves and the Bohuns claimed a descent form the legendary swan knight.45 The 16th-century tomb of Sir John Gilbert of Bohuns (†1450) has a porcupine at his feet (Fig. 10).42 Another dog, ‘Jakke’, was named on the brass for Sir Brian Stapleton of 1438 in Deerhurst, which is named as early as 1300, was inhabited over a long period of time. From the stratigraphic evidence the excavators believe the dogs to be medieval.41 We also find such dogs on the double tomb of Louis and Margaret of Aragon’s tomb dates to around 1275 and is of the wife of Philip III of Aragon, 1243-1271, the first wife of Philip II of the Bold, king of France from 1270 to 1285.

**Fig. 10.** Detail of the brass of Sir John Cassey and his wife Alice in the church of Denhurstm, circa 1400. The dog at Alice’s feet is named ‘Terri’.

Brandenburg believed the dogs to be puppies and considered them as no more than a picturesque addition to the tomb.42 The dogs, however, are not puppies, but small status dogs, and one of them is chewing a bone.43 The presence of a bone next to the two zoomorphic symbols, indicating the transient nature of wealth and glory.44 Indeed, on a painting of circa 1485, that has been attributed to Hans Memling (circa 1430/40 – 1494), three status dogs are featured at the feet of a figure personifying ‘Vanitas’ in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Strasbourg.

Isabella of Aragon’s tomb of 1243 in the church of Ingham (Norfolk).43 These examples are, however, quite unique. That the dogs on funerary monuments were more likely to indicate status than fidelity is also evident from the fact that, in the later Middle Ages, they were often replaced by other animals, although dogs and lions were still the most numerous. The ‘new’ animals often related to the heraldic arms or emblem of the owner.44

The monument for Robert de Vere in the church of Bures shows his with a humb at his feet. In the collegiate church of Cleves, the Counts of Cleves have a swan at their feet. So does Margaret de Bohun (†1139), granddaughter of Edward I, on her tomb in Exeter Cathedral. Both the Counts of Cleves and the Bohuns claimed a descent form the legendary swan knight.45 The 16th-century tomb of Sir John Gilbert of Bohuns (†1450) has a porcupine at his feet (Fig. 10).42 Another dog, ‘Jakke’, was named on the brass for Sir Brian Stapleton of 1438 in Deerhurst, which is named as early as 1300, was inhabited over a long period of time. From the stratigraphic evidence the excavators believe the dogs to be medieval.41 We also find such dogs on the double tomb of Louis and Margaret of Aragon’s tomb dates to around 1275 and is of the wife of Philip III of Aragon, 1243-1271, the first wife of Philip II of the Bold, king of France from 1270 to 1285.

**Fig. 10.** Detail of the brass of Sir John Cassey and his wife Alice in the church of Denhurstm, circa 1400. The dog at Alice’s feet is named ‘Terri’.

Brandenburg believed the dogs to be puppies and considered them as no more than a picturesque addition to the tomb.42 The dogs, however, are not puppies, but small status dogs, and one of them is chewing a bone.43 The presence of a bone next to the two zoomorphic symbols, indicating the transient nature of wealth and glory.44 Indeed, on a painting of circa 1485, that has been attributed to Hans Memling (circa 1430/40 – 1494), three status dogs are featured at the feet of a figure personifying ‘Vanitas’ in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Strasbourg.

Isabella of Aragon’s tomb of 1243 in the church of Ingham (Norfolk).43 These examples are, however, quite unique. That the dogs on funerary monuments were more likely to indicate status than fidelity is also evident from the fact that, in the later Middle Ages, they were often replaced by other animals, although dogs and lions were still the most numerous. The ‘new’ animals often related to the heraldic arms or emblem of the owner.44

The monument for Robert de Vere in the church of Bures shows his with a humb at his feet. In the collegiate church of Cleves, the Counts of Cleves have a swan at their feet. So does Margaret de Bohun (†1139), granddaughter of Edward I, on her tomb in Exeter Cathedral. Both the Counts of Cleves and the Bohuns claimed a descent form the legendary swan knight.45 The 16th-century tomb of Sir John Gilbert of Bohuns (†1450) has a porcupine at his feet (Fig. 10).42 Another dog, ‘Jakke’, was named on the brass for Sir Brian Stapleton of 1438 in Deerhurst, which is named as early as 1300, was inhabited over a long period of time. From the stratigraphic evidence the excavators believe the dogs to be medieval.41 We also find such dogs on the double tomb of Louis and Margaret of Aragon’s tomb dates to around 1275 and is of the wife of Philip III of Aragon, 1243-1271, the first wife of Philip II of the Bold, king of France from 1270 to 1285.

**Fig. 10.** Detail of the brass of Sir John Cassey and his wife Alice in the church of Denhurstm, circa 1400. The dog at Alice’s feet is named ‘Terri’.

Brandenburg believed the dogs to be puppies and considered them as no more than a picturesque addition to the tomb.42 The dogs, however, are not puppies, but small status dogs, and one of them is chewing a bone.43 The presence of a bone next to the two zoomorphic symbols, indicating the transient nature of wealth and glory.44 Indeed, on a painting of circa 1485, that has been attributed to Hans Memling (circa 1430/40 – 1494), three status dogs are featured at the feet of a figure personifying ‘Vanitas’ in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Strasbourg.

Isabella of Aragon’s tomb of 1243 in the church of Ingham (Norfolk).43 These examples are, however, quite unique. That the dogs on funerary monuments were more likely to indicate status than fidelity is also evident from the fact that, in the later Middle Ages, they were often replaced by other animals, although dogs and lions were still the most numerous. The ‘new’ animals often related to the heraldic arms or emblem of the owner.44

The monument for Robert de Vere in the church of Bures shows his with a humb at his feet. In the collegiate church of Cleves, the Counts of Cleves have a swan at their feet. So does Margaret de Bohun (†1139), granddaughter of Edward I, on her tomb in Exeter Cathedral. Both the Counts of Cleves and the Bohuns claimed a descent form the legendary swan knight.45 The 16th-century tomb of Sir John Gilbert of Bohuns (†1450) has a porcupine at his feet (Fig. 10).42 Another dog, ‘Jakke’, was named on the brass for Sir Brian Stapleton of 1438 in Deerhurst, which is named as early as 1300, was inhabited over a long period of time. From the stratigraphic evidence the excavators believe the dogs to be medieval.41 We also find such dogs on the double tomb of Louis and Margaret of Aragon’s tomb dates to around 1275 and is of the wife of Philip III of Aragon, 1243-1271, the first wife of Philip II of the Bold, king of France from 1270 to 1285.
ceased sons of Philip III the Bold. The left boy has two dogs at his feet, one wearing a collar with three large bells on it. The other is chewing a bone. The right boy has a large hound at his feet, chasing a rabbit. These are the same status elements therefore that we see on hunting seals.

42 Edward Gilbert: A Guide to the Priory Church and Saxon Chapel, Deerhurst (Gloucestershire), Deerhurst 1956 (Reprinted 1980), S. 10 and on the inside of the cover.

43 John Chambers: A general history of the county of Norfolk: intended to convey all the information of a Norfolk tour, with the more extended details of antiquarian, statistical, pictorial, architectural, and miscellaneous information, including biographical notices, original and selected, part II, Norwich 1829, S. 737.

44 Bauch 1976, S. 74.

45 Margaret Bohun was married to Hugh Courtenay, Earl of Devon (†1377), whose effigy lies next to that of his wife on their communal tomb in the south transept of Exeter Cathedral. He has a lion at his feet. In this particular instance the lady’s animal emblem was placed on the tomb to show that she was of royal blood and of higher rank than her husband. The tomb was originally in the Courtenay chapel on the south side of the nave. This chapel was demolished in 1833; the tomb survived but is much restored.

46 Gilbert’s brother Humbert was a colonist and he drowned with his ship named “Squirrel” on the way back from America.

Photo credits