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Erasmus

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1469? - 1536

Erasmus

An international humanist

Erasmus had a complicated relationship with the land of his birth. He liked to call himself Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, and yet repeatedly criticised the coarse manners and lack of taste of his fellow town-dwellers and country folk.

He was probably born in 1469 as the illegitimate son of a priest. This meant that a future as a monk was the obvious choice. After completing his training at a seminary of the Brethren of the Common Life, among other places, he joined the Augustinian monastery in Steyn near Gouda. Erasmus was taken with the monastery's library and immersed himself in the world of classical antiquity through the writings of classical authors and Italian humanists. The latter, with their enormous learning and critical approach, brought ancient times closer than ever before.

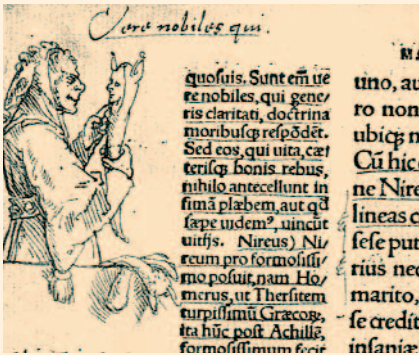
Monastic life with its strict regime and duties was suffocating. Erasmus's extraordinary knowledge of Latin gave him the opportunity to leave the monastery.

He travelled as an independent scholar across large areas of Europe, living from the income from his writing and gifts from a growing multitude of admirers. Erasmus stayed in contact with friends, like-minded scholars and informants through an extensive correspondence network.

In 1500 he wrote *Adagia*, one of the world's first bestsellers, courtesy of the still new printing press. This collection of classical proverbs offered readers a speed course in the lifestyle and way of thinking of the humanists. In addition, Erasmus published books on etiquette, guides for heads of state, and dialogues and tracts that were aimed at educating lords and commoners to be good and responsible Christians.

Erasmus was the first to apply the humanist critical approach to Christian writings. He studied Greek specifically to read the writings of the early founders of the Church and the texts of the New Testament in the original language. This resulted in a series of new critical editions

of early Christian writings, including a new edition of the New Testament in Greek with a new translation in Latin. With this *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus expressly distanced himself from the Vulgate (the official Church translation) and defended the right to adopt a critical approach to the Bible with the aim of strengthening the perception of faith. Erasmus hoped that one day everyone would be able to quote the Bible – the farmer behind his plough, the weaver at his loom and the traveller on his journey; he believed that even women should read



the Bible. His ideal was the attainment of tranquil, austere devotion rooted in inner reflection.

In the polarisation that began in 1517 with the religious reforms of Martin Luther, Erasmus did not want to adopt a position – or did not dare to. He was not prepared to break away from the Catholic Church and hoped that the differences that had arisen could be resolved with sound reasoning. This caused him to be criticised by both sides. Erasmus died in the summer of 1536 at the home of the printer Froben, in Basel.



Sub-topics

Primary education sector

- The travels of Erasmus
- Erasmus and young people
- The ninety-five theses of Martin Luther

Secondary education sector

- Humanism and the Renaissance
- Modern devotion
- The Reformation: Erasmus and Luther
- Republic of the Letters; Latin as the language of scholars (and English today?)
- The Praise of Folly

Past and Present

- Do the classics mean as much to us as they did to Erasmus?
- Erasmus as a man of our times
- A comparison of the Erasman rules of etiquette for young people (1530) and those of today

In the Treasure Chest

- Facsimile of the Praise of Folly by Hans Holbein the Younger

References

Places to Go

- Brussels: Erasmus House

Books for young people

- Maurits Tompot and Ines van Bokhoven, *Het geheim van Erasmus* (12+)

Background literature

- H. Pleij, *Erasmus en het poldermodel*

Websites

- www.erasmushouse.museum
- www.wijsheden.net