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# Pilgrimage to Maastricht

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The Cult of Saint Servatius  
and the Veneration  
of the Relics





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Centre Céramique - Maastricht Museum


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# Contents

- 6** Foreword  
WIM HUPPERETZ

## MAASTRICHT AS A CITY OF PILGRIMAGE

- 11** 1525: The Pilgrimage of Master Craftsman Arent  
Willemsz and His Visit to Maastricht  
SANDRA LANGEREIS
- 25** Maastricht, City of Saint Servatius  
PIETERNEL COENEN
- 37** Maastricht Pilgrims' Souvenirs and Their Distribution  
JOS KOLDEWEIJ
- 50** The Collapse of the Bridge over the Maas in 1275  
RÉGIS DE LA HAYE
- 53** The Iconography of the Key of St. Servatius  
in Regional Sculpture  
JIP VAN REIJEN

## VENERATION AND DEVOTION

- 65** The Church Treasuries of Maastricht's Basilicas  
PIETERNEL COENEN AND MIRIAM PALONI
- 82** A Remarkable Medieval Charter at the Church of  
Our Lady  
RÉGIS DE LA HAYE
- 84** Coordination between Aachen, Kornelimünster and  
Maastricht  
RÉGIS DE LA HAYE
- 87** The Four Devotions of Maastricht:  
Caught between Religion and Politics  
PETER TE POEL

- 99** PHOTO SECTION  
The Maastricht Pilgrimage of the Relics: 1962 and 2018

- 112** Notes  
**114** Bibliography  
**117** Glossary  
**120** Index  
**124** About the authors  
**126** Acknowledgements  
**127** Picture credits

# Foreword

The Pilgrimage of the Relics and Maastricht as a place of pilgrimage are inextricably linked, representing the unique ecclesiastical and cultural heritage that makes this historic city so special. Every seven years the Pilgrimage of the Relics takes place, including a solemn procession and a range of religious activities and festive events. In 2018 over 175,000 people watched the procession and took part in the many activities. This religious tradition, which stems from the Middle Ages, still attracts a great deal of interest today, as devotion and reflection are a source of meaning for many Christians and non-believers in difficult and turbulent times.

## **Maastricht, a place of pilgrimage**

*Pilgrimage to Maastricht: The Cult of St. Servatius and the Veneration of the Relics* starts with a vivid account of the pilgrimage made by barber Arent Willemsz.

On 1 May 2025 it will be 500 years to the day since, full of amazement and devotion, he beheld the relics of Saint Servatius at the treasury of the Church of St. Servatius. Sandra Langereis has written a gripping account of his pilgrimage based on the detailed journal he kept, allowing us to experience through the eyes of this adventurous pilgrim his sometimes perilous voyage, which eventually took him to the Holy Land.

Pieterl Coenen takes the reader through the life of Saint Servatius, his legend and how Maastricht became known as an international place of pilgrimage.

To Jos Koldeweij, the souvenirs that pilgrims took home with them provide fascinating insights into the importance of Maastricht as a place of pilgrimage, and the long distances that pilgrims travelled.

The iconography of Saint Servatius' famous key is Jip van Reijen's starting point for an exploration of the links between the Chapter of St. Servatius and religious wood carving in the region.

Régis de la Haye describes two unique medieval charters that were important for pilgrims and the regional coordination of the showing of relics.

In a literally dazzling chapter, Pieterl Coenen and Miriam Paloni recount the history of and describe the 'treasures' kept at the Basilica of St. Servatius and the Basilica of Our Lady.

The four Maastricht devotions – the holy statues that offer comfort and support to believers – have witnessed many events down the centuries. Peter te Poel puts them in historical perspective.

The book closes with a glossary compiled by Suzanne Bogman that explains the many religious terms used throughout.

## **Building bridges**

In 2025 the theme of the 56th Pilgrimage of the Relics is 'Building Bridges'. The Maastricht Museum has offered to build bridges and connect people by bringing important partners together to produce an exhibition, a publication and a varied educational programme.

In this connection, we would like to look back to the start of the discussions, and the book that served as an example and an inspiration to all partners: *Hemelse trektochten* ('Divine Treks'), published in 1990 as part of a historical series on Maastricht, to mark the Pilgrimage of the Relics in that year. It provides an exemplary account of the history and traditions that places the unique phenomenon of the Pilgrimage of the Relics in historical perspective. In an age of secularisation and with a new generation which, though it looks to the past, has its own way of finding meaning in life, we had no intention of producing a similar publication. This book, published to mark the Pilgrimage of the Relics 2025, has a modern feel and a focus on stories that immerse the reader in ancient traditions, and which place the religious heritage in an interesting framework. The editors were particularly concerned to ensure that the information and essays are accessible for a wide readership. The lavish illustrations transport the reader to the world of the pilgrim and the cult of Saint Servatius, Our Lady and the Pilgrimage of the Relics.

## **Partners and benefactors**

The team at the Maastricht Museum would like to thank the respected partners who have been involved from the outset, contributing their expertise and enthusiasm to help put in place a wide-ranging and multi-faceted programme of events for the Year of the Pilgrimage 2025, and who have also contributed to the publication

that accompanies the exhibition: the Treasury of St. Servatius, the Treasury of Our Lady, the Bonnefanten and the Royal Historical and Archaeological Society of Limburg (LGOG). Our collaboration with SRAL The Conservation Institute Maastricht revealed valuable knowledge during the conservation work on the Bust of Saint Servatius, which was completed in 2023-2024. The museum would also like to thank the Vereniging Het Graf van Sint-Servaas, which takes care of the saint's grave and initiates and organises this major event every seven years, for the friendly and inspiring collaboration we have enjoyed during this project. They are also responsible for part of the educational programme at Centre Céramique. The Chapter of Saint Servatius Ltd played a key role in facilitating the English edition of the publication.

A special word of thanks goes to those who loaned their valuable artworks to make this exhibition possible. The Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg loaned us eight *Servatiusplatten* that have never before been shown in Maastricht. We would also like to express our great appreciation for the collaboration with Centre Charlemagne in Aachen, which loaned us many important objects that allowed us to tell the story of pilgrims in Maastricht and the Pilgrimage of the Relics.

The Maastricht Museum and its staff are very grateful for the invaluable support and trust shown by Maastricht city council.

The exhibition, the publication and the innovative educational programme for both young and old would not have been possible without the trust and financial support of many partners and benefactors. First and foremost we would like to thank Stichting Centre Céramique for the energy and support with which it facilitates the Maastricht Museum's ambitious programme. I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to our benefactors the Mondriaan Fund, Vereniging Het Graf van Sint Servaas, Stichting Kanunnik Salden/Nieuwenhof, the Sormani Fonds, the Dr. P.G.J.M. Janssens Foundation, the Chapter of Saint Servatius Ltd, Cultuurfonds Limburg and Stichting Bonhomme Tielens.

Waanders Publishing was responsible for producing this attractive publication. This English edition has been

published for non-Dutch readers, and will be distributed internationally.

We look forward to all the unique, rewarding moments that the year of the Pilgrimage of the Relics 2025 will bring. The Maastricht Museum will enjoy its role in initiating and promoting activities associated with this special event, alongside the partners who have worked with us from the very beginning.

Wim Hupperetz  
Director of Centre Céramique – Maastricht Museum

On behalf of our partners:

John Dautzenberg  
Dean of Maastricht, Parish Priest at the Basilica of St. Servatius

Jan Vries  
Parish Priest at the Basilica of Our Lady

Theo Bovens  
Chair of the Vereniging Het Graf van Sint Servaas

Lydia Beerkens  
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Thijs Hendrix  
Grand Provost of the Chapter of Saint Servatius Ltd

Stijn Huijts  
Director, Bonnefanten

Jacques van Rensch  
Chair of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Society of Limburg





# MAASTRICHT AS A CITY OF PILGRIMAGE





# 1525: The Pilgrimage of Master Craftsman Arent Willemsz and His Visit to Maastricht



SANDRA LANGEREIS

**On the morning of Wednesday 26 April 1525 master craftsman Arent Willemsz rose well before sunrise from the bed he had for sixteen years shared with Marrit, the mother of his six children. An hour and a half later, he would have to bid his family farewell for many months, and close his busy barber's shop for the rest of the year, for as soon as the bells of Delft's churches rang six o'clock, he would venture out on his pilgrimage.**

A bishop blessing the staffs and haversacks of two pilgrims, miniature in *Pontificale Romanorum*, 15th century, ms. 5144, fol.175bis, parchment, 206 x 143 mm. Bibliothèque de la Part-Dieu, Lyon

Stained-glass image showing pilgrims warming themselves by a fire. The pilgrims can be identified by their pilgrim's staffs, and the pilgrim's flasks hanging on their backs.

Anonymous, *Extending Hospitality to Strangers, The Works of Charity* (series title), c. 1510-1520, grisaille paint on glass, d 24.1 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The house was still enveloped in a deep silence as Arent readied himself for early Mass at five o'clock, at which the priest would bless his long journey. Dressed in his crisp new pilgrim's cloak of coarse grey wool, he set out for the church at the first sign of dawn. After his confession and absolution, obligatory for every pilgrim, his leather pilgrim's haversack and wooden pilgrim's staff which he had laid on the altar were blessed with holy water. As soon as he too had been blessed by the priest's prayer for pilgrims, and he had risen from his knees before the altar where, to the sounds of liturgical song, his staff and haversack had been consecrated, Arent received his coveted pilgrim's pass from the priest. This would show everyone he encountered on his travels that he was journeying under the protection of the church, having exchanged his everyday life as a citizen for the consecrated status of a pilgrim. If he encountered difficulties along the way, no one could refuse him shelter, bread or water, and everyone who crossed his path would be obliged to help him complete his arduous journey, for love of Christ. This was not just any old journey; he was a traveller with a sacred purpose: the journey of journeys, which would take him to holy places, where he would accrue divine grace for himself



and his nearest and dearest, and for the salvation of all Christian people. Step by step, on his pilgrimage he would ensure that he achieved this lofty goal, by the very act of wandering the fields and roads. The grand finale would take him to the holiest of holy places: Jerusalem, the city where Christ is buried. After Mass, Arent was ready to embark on his long-planned trip, equipped with the instantly recognisable attributes of his new life



as a pilgrim that had been blessed by the priest – the pilgrim’s haversack and staff, vital as both a walking stick and a weapon should he encounter brigands or wild animals on the way. This was the most devout and most distant pilgrimage imaginable, which would take him all the way to the Holy Land. He had already drawn up his last will and testament, for many of those who set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem never returned from their perilous voyage to the distant shores of the murderous Mediterranean.

In the half hour that remained after early Mass, he quickly returned home to eat breakfast. Then he would have to be on his way. He took his leave of Marrit and Huich, his eldest, albeit only twelve, and from Neeltje and Marritje, his eight- and six-year-old daughters, and the toddlers Willem and Anna, and his dear sweet Soetje, just one year old. Afterwards, Arent solemnly noted the emotional moment of departure in his travel journal. ‘To begin at the beginning of this sacred pilgrimage, let it be known that I, master Arent Willemsz, barber, rose on the morning of the 26th day of April in the year 1525, attended Mass, then quickly broke fast, and at VI o’clock departed the town of Delft!’

### Rented waggons and inns

No one was so mad as to undertake this perilous journey alone, so before he passed through the town gate Arent met up with the three men who would be his fellow travellers from the very start: Gerbrand Vechtersz, a priest in Haarlem, Willem Cornelisz Boll, also from Haarlem, and Adriaan Bartholomeusz, who had embarked on his pilgrimage in Alkmaar where,

like Arent, he was a barber by profession. In Dordrecht the company would be joined by priest Jan Govertsz, chaplain of the Old Church in Delft, who had been staying with his family. Like his good friend and fellow Delft resident Arent, he too would keep a travel journal that would be transformed into a narrative account of his journey after he returned. In Antwerp, two men from Dordrecht and Gouda joined the group, along with Willem Harmensz Ramp, later mayor of Haarlem, who a few years after his safe return would be portrayed by the famous painter Jan van Scorel as a member of the prestigious Haarlem Brotherhood of Jerusalem Pilgrims.

The first forty kilometres in a rented waggon pulled by a sturdy horse were behind them in fewer than ten hours, so Arent and his fellow travellers arrived at the port in Dordrecht in the afternoon. There, at six in the evening, the pilgrims boarded a boat bound for the harbour at Oudenbosch, located beside a deep sea inlet, after first – and certainly not for the last time – ‘making merry’, enjoying a large meal at the The Garden of Holland inn. These wealthy pilgrims thus felt no devout urge for the pious mortification of earthly desires. At inn after inn, they celebrated the fact that they were – apparently effortlessly – able to afford the huge expense of a trip to the Holy Land. Married men like master craftsmen Arent had even had to satisfy the priest before departure that they could provide for their wife and children back home for a year.

There were many types of pilgrim in the Middle Ages. Most ordinary mortals were unable to afford a major pilgrimage to the Holy Land, or Rome, or Santiago which, besides heaps of grace, also conveyed a great

Several years after their pilgrimage, Arent’s companion Willem Harmensz Ramp was portrayed here, second from the right, in this group portrait of Jerusalem pilgrims.

Jan van Scorel, *Portraits of Twelve Members of the Haarlem Brotherhood of Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 1528-1530, oil on panel, 114 x 275.7 cm. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem

deal of social prestige. Many pilgrims therefore travelled only a small section of these major holy routes. They had to make do with a shorter pilgrimage to places closer to home, like Maastricht and Aachen. A Dutch pilgrim from the west of the country could complete a journey like that – roughly three hundred kilometres each way – on foot within a month, without any need of expensive transport. A journey on foot, the most arduous and wretched form of travel, was the pious ideal even for the pilgrimages to distant lands. But the majority of wealthy long-distance pilgrims would feel no shame in using all manner of transport in the late Middle Ages, as Arent and his companions did. Only those who adhered most strictly to the doctrine attempted to complete the journey to Santiago, Rome or Jerusalem entirely on foot. The most pious of them all went barefoot, wearing a hair shirt, living on a crust of bread and a sip of water,

Only those who adhered most strictly to the doctrine attempted to complete the journey to Santiago, Rome or Jerusalem entirely on foot.

with no funds at all, for money was the scourge of humankind. Appealing to Christian charity, these ascetic pilgrims sought free shelter every night at pilgrims' hostels, known also as 'hospitiia' or 'hospitals', that were set up by churches and monasteries. Lack of funds was certainly a factor for most of the pilgrims who arrived at their door, whether their destination was near or far. But in late medieval society, there were a striking number of penitent devotees among the wealthiest and most powerful, who deliberately sought physical suffering, and took the hardships of the journey to new heights, walking on bare feet or in shoes whose soles had been removed.

Arent the pilgrim was not one of these extremists. His God was a merciful God, not a vengeful God, a patient and benevolent father, who conferred his grace on anyone who performed good works with good intentions, such as putting one's heart and soul

into a pilgrimage to holy places, where extra high concentrations of grace lay waiting for devout pilgrims. Arent's party would avoid the crowded pilgrims' hostels like the plague, to avoid increasing their risk of contracting a life-threatening infectious disease along the way. And so Arent slept whenever he could in clean, usually expensive lodgings, and he ate and drank at inns recommended by seasoned pilgrims. Throughout his journey, Arent kept a scrupulous record in his journal of what transport they had used and where they slept. He also faithfully recorded when they had 'made merry', and at what inns they had gorged themselves on food and drink. This was useful information for the return leg, and for other pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, when they consulted printed pilgrims' guides and the unpublished travel journals of other pilgrims while planning their own journey, as Arent had. Such works were collected by brotherhoods of pilgrims as a way of passing on useful information to aspiring pilgrims. And at a time when brigandry was rife along country roads, this was no luxury, if the pilgrims wanted to be sure of completing the hazardous journey to the Holy Land with decent transport and lodgings.

#### **Brigands on the heathland of Brabant**

The pilgrims moored up at the harbour in Oudenbosch around midnight, signalling the end of their long first day of travel. There, they rented a horse and cart to convey them through the pitch dark to the port of Bergen op Zoom, twenty kilometres to the south. Halfway there, on the desolate heathland of Brabant, the dozing pilgrims were rudely woken from their slumbers. 'But when we came near Rosendaal we saw two musketeers jogging up on horseback, and one on foot', Arent wrote in his journal.<sup>2</sup> These armed scoundrels left no room for doubt that they were out to steal the sacks of money the pilgrims had brought along with them. Alarmed by the threatening manner of the brigands as they trotted alongside the waggon, everyone was instantly 'awake and bold'. The pilgrims responded pugnaciously, frantically waving their staffs, and the bandits sloped off, thanks be to God. Arent and his companions arrived in Bergen at seven in the morning, in a state of agitation, but unharmed. They proceeded immediately to Mass, after which they celebrated their victory with a sumptuous meal at The Three Herrings. It was not until one o'clock that they boarded the ship that would take them to the commercial metropolis of Antwerp, with its wealthy banking families. They arrived at nine in the evening, and went straight to The Soap Cauldron inn, where they once more 'made merry'.

But in the late evening of that exhausting second day of travel, Arent was seized by his recollections of the

sinister confrontation with the armed robbers, and he was unable to derive any pleasure from the abundance at the supper table at The Soap Cauldron, he confided to his journal. And his mood did not improve on the third day, when after attending morning Mass they wasted a good deal of time at the home of a miserly Antwerp banker and merchant, who artfully attempted to exchange the cash savings of the Dutch pilgrims for almost worthless bills of exchange at a very unfavourable rate.

A bill of exchange was a traveller's cheque that would be cut in two, leaving a rough edge. The banker/merchant would give one half to the pilgrim, and send the other half by courier to a commercial associate abroad – in Venice, in this case – who would pay out the money invested in local currency on presentation of

the matching other half. A bill of exchange considerably reduced the chances of being robbed en route, of course. But Arent refused, as a hardworking master craftsman, to exchange his hard-earned gold guilders for a few pennies' worth of Italian ducats. He gave the banker a much smaller sum than he had hoped, and decided to keep the lion's share of his gold and silver coins about his person, as did his companions, who were equally displeased at the shameless greed of the Antwerp banker. 'And we all stayed indoors today', Arent briefly wrote in his journal. But his friend from Delft, chaplain Jan Govertsz, honestly recorded in his journal that after their visit to the banker, the Dutch pilgrims had in fact proceeded immediately into the city, where they bought clubs and arquebuses; nasty weapons,



especially for pious pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, but vital for repelling armed bandits, who seemed to be swarming round their luggage like flies.<sup>3</sup>

On the fourth day of their long journey, after attending early Mass, the pilgrims rented a waggon to take them from Antwerp to Diest, sixty-five kilometres to the east. Their heavily-laden conveyance arrived at nine in the evening. Arent excused himself from supper at the Wild Man inn, as he wished to call on his cousin, who lived at the Carthusian monastery in Diest. His friend Jan Govertsz accompanied him. The monks showed the pilgrims abundant hospitality, so Arent was in good spirits the following morning as he travelled the final fifty kilometres to their first real place of pilgrimage: Maastricht.

Whether Servatius really did exist, and was indeed Bishop of Maastricht in the fourth century, is difficult to prove on the basis of historical evidence.

### **That church where lies Saint Servatius**

When the Dutch pilgrims' wagon passed through the Tweebergen Gate and entered Maastricht, it hobbled over the cobbled streets, making straight for The Golden Knocker inn 'by the church where Saint Servatius lies'. After a well-deserved night's rest, Arent rose at dawn on Monday 1 May 1525 to attend early Mass, in preparation for the pilgrims' visit to the holy relics at the oldest church in the northern Low Countries, the impressive Church of St. Servatius, whose solid walls and sturdy towers of light-brown sandstone had been built at the spot where, in the year 384, Saint Servatius, the first Bishop of Maastricht, is said to have been buried.

According to an old legend, there had been a small chapel at Saint Servatius' grave since the beginning of the Middle Ages. Some years before Arent and his companions visited Maastricht to walk this hallowed ground as pilgrims, the chaplain of the Church of St. Servatius, Matthaeus Herbenus, who was also headmaster of the chapter school housed in

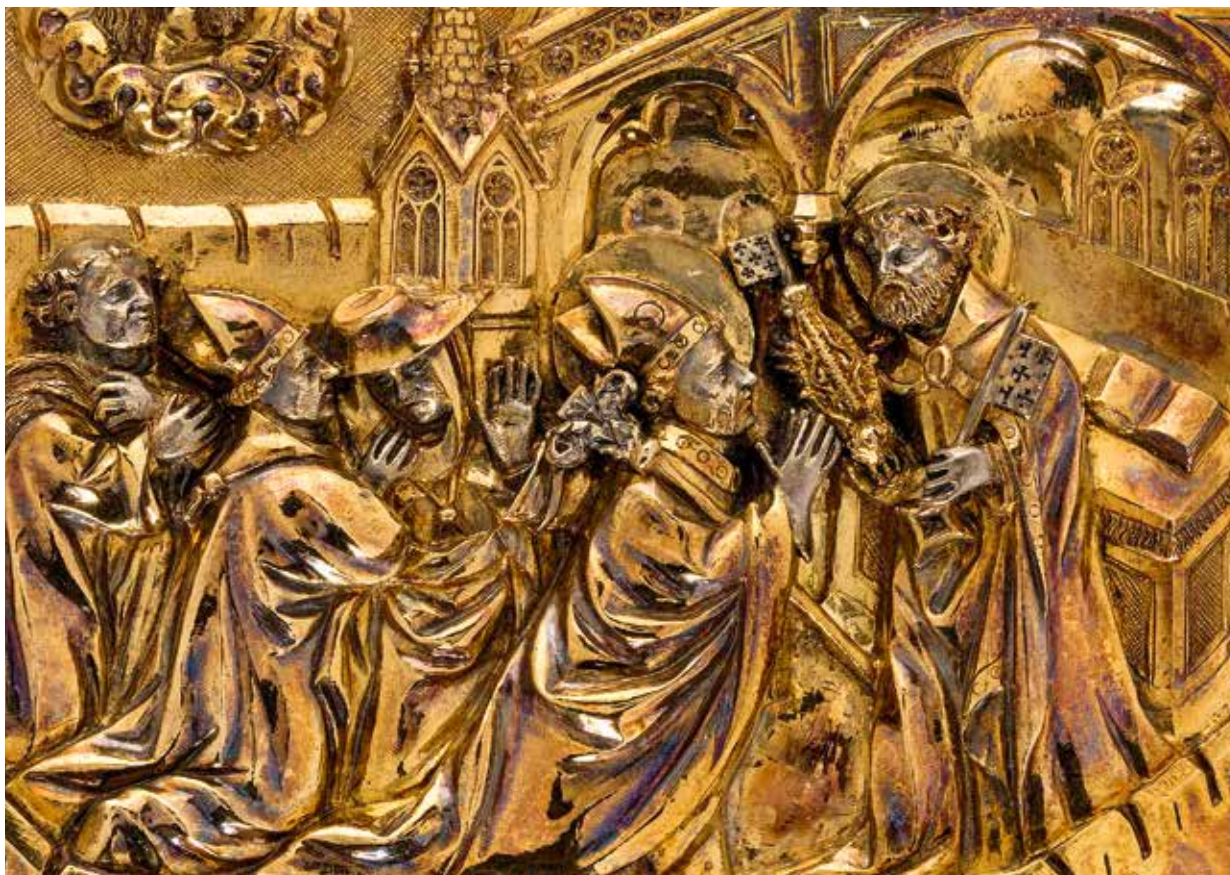
the cloisters, had written down an astonishing story about this place. In a description of the monuments and historic buildings of Maastricht that was brimming with local pride, the headmaster claimed that his hometown had had a Christian chapel as long ago as the time of the apostles, who proclaimed the gospel in the Roman empire. That chapel had stood on the precise spot where the Church of St. Servatius was built, on the saint's grave. Servatius was said to be a distant cousin of Jesus Christ. In short, no other city in all of the Low Countries was so inextricably linked with the early days of Christianity as Maastricht, no other church had such a tangible association with the resting place of its saint as the Church of St. Servatius, and no other saint had such close ties to Jesus Christ as Servatius. Headmaster Matthaeus Herbenus told an impressive story, which the canons of the Church of St. Servatius, who were tasked with welcoming pilgrims from far and wide and guiding them around the city, would have been only too happy to pass on.

Whether Servatius really did exist, and was indeed Bishop of Maastricht in the fourth century, is difficult to prove on the basis of historical evidence. Nevertheless, from the early Middle Ages, the legends of a bishop in Maastricht called Servatius grew. The most famous of these accounts came from the pen of Gregory of Tours. This historian, whose works were read throughout medieval Europe, credited Servatius with having made a pilgrimage to Rome during his time as Bishop of Tongeren. According to this legend, Servatius visited the final resting place of Saint Peter the Apostle on the Vatican Hill to pray for Tongeren to be spared from the Huns. Watching by the shrine, Servatius had a vision in which Saint Peter spoke to him. The apostle predicted that invasions of the steppes by the Huns would bring about the downfall of Gaul. Servatius is said to have hurried home to move his bishop's seat from Tongeren, in Gaul, to Maastricht. It was there that he died. According to Gregory, miracles instantly occurred by the grave of Maastricht's very first bishop, in a sign that nature revered his sacred resting place. Even when a thick layer of snow fell, Saint Servatius' grave remained uncovered.

In the centuries that followed, this legend of Servatius was embellished with new stories, several of which were eventually written down. All these accounts referred to the relics kept at the Church of St. Servatius, relics that according to unverifiable oral traditions came from Saint Servatius. By far the most impressive story was that Saint Peter had given Servatius the key to the Gate of Heaven when he was in Rome. With this gift, Peter the Apostle, Rome's first pope, gave Servatius, the Bishop of Maastricht, the power to forgive repentant sinners at his own discretion, guaranteeing them access to

16th-century Maastricht as depicted in the Braun and Hogenberg atlas, with a view of the Church of St. Servatius (1).

Simon de Bellomonte, *Panorama of Maastricht* (detail), 1575, tinted engraving, 368 x 503 mm. Historisch Centrum Limburg



Saint Peter, holder of the Keys of Heaven, who admitted the souls of the dead to heaven, handing one of his keys to Saint Servatius, who is kneeling.

Anonymous, *Saint Servatius Receiving the Key of Heaven from Saint Peter* (detail), part 2 of the *Saint Servatius Plaques* (8-piece), 1403, silver-gilt, 10.7 x 13.8 x 2.5 cm. Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg

heaven. This fabulous story made Bishop Servatius and his church in Maastricht a source of hope for all those penitent Christians burdened by the inevitable venial sins of every earthly mortal that their souls would find peace in heaven. And this comforting story was based on the presence in the treasury of a giant solid silver key. Weighing two pounds, and thirty centimetres in length, with a skilfully created openwork grip with delicate floral motifs and a huge square bit with five wards in the form of a Greek cross, it appeared to the faithful that this had to be the key to heaven that Saint Peter had entrusted to Servatius. Combined with a series of other fabulous relics, the magnificent giant key – which had actually been commissioned by Charlemagne shortly after the year 800, and made by a medieval master silver caster in the imperial city of Aachen – made the Church of St. Servatius a quintessential place of pilgrimage.

### **Guests at the treasury of the Church of St. Servatius**

Arent the pilgrim was deeply impressed when, following early Mass on the morning of Monday 1 May 1525, a canon dressed in full regalia took him and the seven other pilgrims from Holland to the treasury 'beside the

high altar'.<sup>4</sup> This was a narrow, hidden space encased in sturdy masonry right next to the sanctuary, accessed via a narrow staircase behind a locked door, 'where we were shown a magnificent key, of curious manufacture, such that no artist in the entire world might understand how it was made'. The canon explained the origins of the apparently unearthly giant key as he showed it to the visitors; 'then we were told this is the key that was brought to the holy bishop Servatius after the death of Saint Peter'.<sup>5</sup> And Jan Govertsz noted in his travel journal that they had been told that the key 'was brought to Saint Servatius from heaven by the holy angel'.<sup>6</sup>

'We were shown many quite beautiful relics', Arent observed with pleasure in his journal that evening.<sup>7</sup> In the hidden treasury, the pilgrims had also seen Servatius' crozier and the pilgrim's staff he had taken with him to the Holy Land, which he had used to strike the ground, upon which a healing spring appeared from the earth, the canon had told them. 'And we were also shown the cup from which Saint Servatius was wont to drink, from which cup many people received good health', Arent noted, referring to the ancient glass drinking vessel that had been offered to pilgrims to prevent ailments and cure fevers, 'and we drank from that cup'.<sup>8</sup>



The Dutch pilgrims were then led from the hidden treasury beside the sanctuary to a low-lying chapel in the northern cloister that could only be accessed in the company of a canon, 'where we all fell to our knees',<sup>9</sup> listening to the canon, 'who read the *Confiteor* as if he were celebrating Mass', Arent drily recorded in his journal.<sup>10</sup> After a solemn *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* the reliquaries were opened one by one, and the canon showed the pilgrims 'the head of Saint Servatius': a silver reliquary in the form of a mitred bust, which was carried in a procession around the Vrijthof

'And we were also shown the cup from which Saint Servatius was wont to drink, from which cup many people received good health'

square on Saint Servatius' Day. The pilgrims also saw Servatius' everyday chalice and holy day chalice, as well as his portable altar 'on which he would read Mass whenever he travelled hither'.<sup>11</sup> They were then shown the gilded shrine which, in times of disaster, the canons would carry through the town as a reliquary chest known as the *Noodkist*, or 'Chest of Distress', to beg for God's



Saint Servatius' late-Roman drinking vessel, which the pilgrims were allowed to drink from. Arent the pilgrim also drank from this cup.

Saint Servatius' cup, early to mid-1st century AD, marbled glass, h. 5.1 x d. 11 cm. Treasury of the Basilica of St. Servatius, Maastricht

mercy, after which the people would be blessed with Saint Servatius' key to the Gate of Heaven. All the relics of Saint Servatius came from this shrine, excavated in a dim and distant past, the canon told them. It was also found to contain 'Saint Servatius' cloths': his sudary, winding cloth and grave cloth. But the pilgrims were not able to see these fragile items with their own eyes: 'these cloths are shown only once every seven years', Arent was informed by the canon, 'and they were kept in a secret place, so we were not permitted to see them'.<sup>12</sup>

But the viewing of the relics was not at an end, for the canon showed the pilgrims a monstrance containing a drop of the Virgin Mary's milk, a cross made of the wood of Noah's ark, the top of Mary Magdalene's skull encased in a buffalo horn, a fragment of the loin cloth worn by Jesus at the Crucifixion, a double monstrance containing locks of hair from the Virgin Mary and John the Apostle, a large silver reliquary containing the right arm of Saint Thomas, which had touched the wounds of Christ crucified, 'and many other relics that I will not describe', Arent wrote, completing his enumeration of the wonderful treasures that the pilgrims had seen that morning at the Church of St. Servatius. 'After this, we rode away from the city of Maastricht on this day in May, and we ate ripe cherries'.<sup>13</sup>

### The power of an image

When Arent and his companions had crossed the stone bridge over the river Maas and, having taken a short ride through Wyck, passed the Hoogbrug Gate on the other side, they emerged on a country road to Aachen and Cologne. Having not yet eaten breakfast due to their 'long sojourn in Maastricht to see the shrine', they ate the provisions they had bought in the waggon, in order to expedite progress on the next stage of their long journey.<sup>14</sup> The pilgrims looked back with satisfaction on the spiritual experience they had had viewing the relics at the Church of St. Servatius.

The display of sacred images – physical remains in the broadest possible sense – to churchgoers, and pilgrims in particular, was an essential religious act in the late Middle Ages. When viewing relics, pilgrims would internalise the image, rather than merely seeing it. After beholding Saint Servatius' head, and seeing his key to heaven, his bishop's crozier, pilgrim's staff, portable altar, his daily chalice and his holy day chalice, Arent left the Church of St. Servatius a changed man. Henceforth, he would forever carry the sanctifying qualities of Saint Servatius in his heart. For this same reason, pregnant women would visit the Church of St. Servatius when the image of Christ was solemnly presented to the people. They would return home afterwards with the likeness of Christ imprinted on their unborn child. Similarly, Arent internalised the healing powers of the images he had



seen. Like grace, healing was an important motive for Arent the pilgrim, who wrote in his journal that he wished to travel to the sacred places that 'our healer Christ Jesus' had trodden with his sacred feet. In essence, therefore, it was enough simply to have seen the sacred in order to return from a pilgrimage strengthened in body and spirit. Physical contact with the sacred was the icing on the cake, and whenever it was permitted, Arent described his contact with the sacred relics with great ardour. But it was not necessary to touch them, for believers had unconditional faith in the spiritual and physical healing power of simple *beholding*, certainly in the late Middle Ages, when society was still Christian through and through.

It was for this same reason that the display of Saint Servatius' cloths during the septennial Pilgrimage of the Relics – the highly popular celebration of the special time of grace instituted by the church during which pilgrims could obtain remission of a significant number of years in purgatory – made such an incredibly deep impression on the many pilgrims from far and wide who flocked to the Vrijthof, even though they could only see the relics from a great distance. The sacred power of the visual was intensified by the fact that the canons revealed the cloths from the gallery in the outside wall of the choir of the Church St. Servatius, high above the Vrijthof, making the revelation of the cloths, held up to heaven, the literal high point of the Pilgrimage of the Relics.

A wealthy merchant from Metz who made a pilgrimage to Maastricht, Aachen and Kornelimünster during the Pilgrimage of the Relics in 1510, described the emotions that took hold of the crowds packed onto the Vrijthof at the moment when Servatius' cloths were shown to the pilgrims from the gallery: 'there were so many people that it was a miracle; and then the church bells

rang; and the city's minstrels sounded their trumpets; and all the people sounded their pilgrims' horns, which is wondrous to hear, and there were barely any among us whose eyes were dry'. Afterwards, this pilgrim rushed on horseback along the country road to Aachen, which teemed with pilgrims, in order to witness the equally intense emotion in the dense crowd of thousands gathered there as the Virgin Mary's swaddling clothes were shown from the gallery in the outside wall of the choir of the cathedral, whereupon 'the earth trembled with the noise of the pilgrims' horns and the roar of men and women crying out for grace, and there was not a person there whose hair was not raised and to whose eyes tears were not brought'.<sup>15</sup>

### Water from hell

Just outside Maastricht's city gate, eagerly anticipating seeing the statue of Mary, full of grace at Aachen cathedral, Arent and his companions were warned of the danger of ambush on Gulperberg, where brigands awaited the coin-laden luggage of pilgrims to the Holy Land. The pilgrims recruited thirty men at an inn to deter the bandits, and celebrated their safe passage by visiting an inn in Aachen, where they paid their escort. Jan Govertsz attributed the foiled villains' misfortune to the fact 'that we had attended Mass and seen the relics in Maastricht'. Giving alms to the poor and attending Mass does no harm, the devout chaplain cheerily concluded.<sup>16</sup>

In Aachen, the Dutch pilgrims who had spent so much time at the Church of St. Servatius in Maastricht paid a remarkably short visit to the Cathedral, after which they treated themselves to a full tourist experience in the form of a visit to the famous springs, which seethed so much that Arent thought the water must bubble up 'from hell'. The following morning, they attended early

Saint Servatius' three cloths being shown to the pilgrims on the Vrijthof from the gallery of the Church of St. Servatius, during the septennial Pilgrimage of the Relics.

Tinted print in the *Block Book of Saint Servatius* of c. 1460. Prints Department, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels



Replica of a late-medieval pilgrim's horn made of fired white clay, which pilgrims would blow on the Vrijthof as the textile relics of Saint Servatius were shown.

Centre Céramique –  
Maastricht Museum

Mass, and after greeting Mary, full of grace holding wax candles, they departed for Cologne. The pilgrims hired eight hoodlums from Aachen to protect them, at two guilders apiece. Their escort was not, however, able to prevent the waggon from being plagued the entire way by three armed, masked riders, who intimidated the pilgrims during their midday meal by stationing themselves in front of the inn door. The pilgrims did not dare to make a stop in Düren to see the skull relic of Saint Anne. Arent spent the journey 'in a state of great anxiety'. In Cologne, the tormented pilgrims took an entire day viewing the skulls of Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins at the Church of St. Ursula, and on 4 May attended morning Mass at the Cathedral, where they prayed to the bones of the Three Kings for



the success of their pilgrimage, before boarding a Rhine barge and embarking on the voyage southwards, which would take several days. On arrival, as soon as they set foot on dry land, the pilgrims felt the impact of the Lutheran Peasants' War, which had been turning the Catholic world on its head since the autumn.

### Peasant armies and iconoclasts

The boat trip on the Rhine was comfortable, and the golden-yellow Rhine wine served at inns along the banks was so syrupy and sweet that Arent and his companions had immediately filled their pilgrims' flasks. So their disillusionment was all the greater when, at Mainz, as night fell, having set forth to find an inn with good food, they were turned away from two villages by peasants armed with arquebuses and the Lutheran Bible. The pilgrims were alarmed when they heard drummers approaching, and as shots were fired they were already conferring 'as to whether we should hide that night among the wheat or in a vineyard', until an innkeeper finally admitted them.<sup>17</sup>

The deeper the pilgrims ventured into Germany, Arent and his companions noticed as they continued their journey by land, the more often they were refused entry to towns and villages. They passed the large abbey at Maulbronn, where the peasants, protesting against the tithes they were obliged to cede to churches and monasteries and against their slavish working conditions, had smashed all the statues of saints and torn up all the missals. On wild heathland close by, the pilgrims' waggon was halted by a forty-strong peasant army. 'We begged and pleaded, in gentle words, all the while repeating that we knew nothing of their affairs', Arent wrote in his journal.<sup>18</sup> And because they swore that they were merely on their way to the Holy Land, the peasants let them go, after confiscating their wine, and taking an arquebus and sword. Several days later, thousands of peasants were slaughtered on that same heath by the armies of aristocratic landowners. According to Arent's journal, that day the pilgrims saw a large cloud of smoke rising above the heathland behind them.

Hans Weiditz,  
*A Brigand Killing a  
Pilgrim as He Plunders His  
Pilgrim's Haversack*, 1531,  
woodcut in letterpress,  
117 x 166 mm.  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

### On foot through the Alps

Once they had arrived among the gentle slopes of the Swabian Alps, the Dutch pilgrims continued their journey on foot, trudging past Lutheran towns that kept their gates firmly locked to Catholic pilgrims. They slept in dilapidated village pubs, where they had to shake the straw from their hair in the morning. In Ulm, they were finally admitted to an inn. There, the pilgrims saw to their dismay that meat was being eaten on a day of fasting 'as if it were Sunday'.<sup>19</sup> They demonstratively ordered fish.

The Alps grew higher and higher, and as the Lutheran towns disappeared from view, they suddenly found themselves on a difficult ascent through the steep green valleys of Tyrol where, on seeing the white mountain ridges, the surprised pilgrims made a bet as to whether this was chalky white rocks, or snow lying there in mid-May. Arent's fellow barber Adriaan decided to settle the matter. He climbed up from the valley, and returned with his arms full of snow, upon which the men, delighted at this 'novelty', began a snowball fight. The pilgrims climbed up and down, following unmetalled paths, with views of peaks that were three thousand metres high.



Pilgrims arriving in a German village. A woman chases away a pilgrim who has arrived at her door.

Jörg Breu (possibly),  
*Arrival of Two Pilgrims in a Village*, before 1538, woodcut in letterpress, 132 x 150 mm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Pieter Balten, *Landscape with Two Pilgrims*, 16th century. Pen and ink drawing on paper, 24.3 x 32.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York