

A scholar and a gentleman

*To mark the 500th anniversary of the *Novum Instrumentum Omne*, Aletta Stevens looks back on the remarkable life of Desiderius Erasmus*



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In the centre of Rotterdam, in a square near the Church of St Lawrence, stands the oldest statue in the Netherlands: Hendrick de Keyser's 1622 full-size bronze of Desiderius Erasmus. As a teenager I often passed it, looking up at the towering figure in his distinctive hat and heavy robe with gaping sleeves as he turns over the pages of a colossal book. I knew that he was an important scholar and that the local grammar school, the university and a collection at Rotterdam Library had all been named after him, but I did not realise then the extent to which he was a true Renaissance man: theologian, philosopher, humanist, reformer, author and translator.

Despite being born the illegitimate son of a Roman Catholic priest and a physician's daughter in 1466, Erasmus was cared for by his parents until they died of the plague. He was brought up in Gouda and educated at several monastic schools. After entering the Catholic priesthood, Erasmus received temporary dispensation from his religious vows when, thanks to his exceptional skills in Latin, he was offered the job of secretary to the Bishop of Cambrai in France. He subsequently went on to lead the life of an independent scholar and true European, studying and teaching at the universities of Paris, Turin, Leuven and Cambridge – which is why it is fitting that today's European Union student exchange programme is named after him.

It was during his time in England (1510-15), partly as the Lady

Margaret's Professor of Divinity at Queens' College, Cambridge, that he came into contact with the then leading English humanist thinkers, notably Thomas More and John Colet. The former became a lifelong friend and introduced Erasmus to the English court, but it was the latter's Bible teaching that inspired Erasmus to further his knowledge of ancient Greek. In order to acquire a more profound understanding of the New Testament, he devoted himself

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to an intensive study of the language for three years.

Erasmus had realised that the authorised Bible of the Church in use at that time, Jerome's Latin Vulgate, was an out-of-date translation from 1,000 years earlier, lacking in accuracy and style. In his words: 'Often through the translator's clumsiness or inattention the Greek has been wrongly rendered; often the true and genuine reading has been corrupted by ignorant scribes, which we see happen every day, or altered by scribes who are half-taught and half-asleep.' ('Epistle 337' in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vol 3, 134.)

He decided he wanted to improve the translation by going back to the original Greek, the language in which the New Testament is believed to have been recorded (unlike the Old Testament, which is believed to have been written in Hebrew). Erasmus obtained a number of Greek manuscripts from England and Basel, and set to work. Unlike most translators today, Erasmus was not translating into his mother tongue, but into Latin, a language which he was able to write and speak fluently, the language of Renaissance scholars and Christian clergy. He was known to have formidable powers of concentration and to be able to work at tremendous speed for up to 16 hours a day. For at least four years, Erasmus dedicated himself to producing the translation for which he would be remembered by generations to come.

Milestone

This year, the Netherlands celebrates the 500th anniversary of the publication of this work, entitled the *Novum Instrumentum Omne* ('All of the New Teaching'). It was published by Johann Froben of Basel, Switzerland, featuring designs by Hans Holbein the Younger, in a bilingual edition, with the source text in the left column and the target text in the right column on the same page. In this way, Erasmus not only invited readers to check his translation and spark debate, but also synchronised the Latin and Greek traditions of the New Testament. This was a milestone for religious reformers and scholars. The book consisted of 679 pages, of which approximately half comprised Erasmus's critical annotations to the text and descriptions of errors in the Vulgate (the other half was taken up by the Greek text and the Latin translation).

Froben had been under considerable pressure to publish the work before Cardinal Ximenes's version, which had already been printed in 1514 but was awaiting papal approval. Therefore Ximenes's Complutensian is the first printed modern edition of the New Testament in Greek, whereas Erasmus's version is the first



published one. As Erasmus had to rush the translation to meet the deadline, he began revising it as soon as it was published. In the next 19 years he revised the *Novum Instrumentum Omne* four more times, replacing the word 'Instrumentum' with the now more familiar word 'Testamentum' in the second edition of 1519, and subsequently in all further editions (1522, 1527 and 1535).

Controversy

The work caused considerable controversy. Many scholars fundamentally disagreed with changes being made to the Vulgate text, as they feared this might undermine the authority of the Church. They considered the Greek text to be corrupted and the Latin to be the only true text. Hence Erasmus was attacked from different

quarters and spent much time defending his work.

Today, Basel University Library still holds a copy of Erasmus's 1516 original. It may be viewed online (www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/content/pageview/895604) or downloaded as a PDF. In the preface to the first edition, Erasmus wrote: 'I vehemently dissent from those who would not have private persons read the Holy Scriptures nor have them translated into the vulgar tongues, as though either Christ taught such difficult doctrines that they can only be understood by a few theologians, or the safety of the Christian religion lay in ignorance of it. I should like all women to read the Gospel and the Epistles of Paul. Would that they were translated into all languages so that not only Scotch and Irish, but Turks and Saracens might be able to read and know them.'

Erasmus had a reputation even during his own lifetime as one of the greatest thinkers of the Northern Renaissance

Though some thought it offensive to translate the sacred books into common languages, Erasmus pleaded for making them accessible not just to those able to read Latin, but to ordinary people all over the world, including women. And this is what makes the *Novum Instrumentum Omne* so significant: it is the basis for all subsequent Bible translations into the vernacular languages. Martin Luther used Erasmus's second edition as the basis for his translation into German, published in 1522. The first English translation by William Tyndale (1526) was based on Erasmus's third edition, as was the King James Version (KJV) or the Authorised Version (AV) published in 1611. Benedek Komjáti brought out the Hungarian version in 1533, and Francisco de Enzinas produced a Spanish translation in 1543. In 1624, in their preface to the second edition, the Dutch Elsevir brothers (forebears of the well-known Elsevier publishing company) pronounced it the 'Textus Receptus' or received text.

And what of Erasmus the man? He threw a veil over his illegitimacy and went on to reinvent himself. As a young man in Holland he had fallen in love with a fellow monk, but his deeply pious nature had led him away into a life of constant travel around Europe. He was guided by two principles above all: freedom and peace. He lived in turbulent times and wanted to save Europe from falling apart (how topical in 2016!). He rejected dogmatism, fanaticism and intolerance, ridiculed pompousness and pretence, and believed in free will.

Apart from the *Novum Instrumentum Omne*, he is best remembered for his essay 'In Praise of Folly' (1511), a satirical attack on abuses in society at that time, including those in the Church. It prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation instigated by Martin Luther. As a result of this and his outspoken views, he had as many opponents as he had allies. However, even within his own lifetime, Erasmus was recognised throughout Europe as one of the greatest thinkers of the Northern Renaissance. He fell ill with dysentery in Basel, and died aged 69. He was buried in Basel Minster. 