
rezensert von/zompte rendu rédigé par
Lauran Toorians, Loo on Zand

Jozef Van Loon is emeritus professor of the linguistics of German and Dutch at the University of Antwerp. He published a considerable number of books and articles on a wide variety of subjects related to the history of these languages, frequently in relation to onomastics. In the book under review he sets out to gain a better understanding of three place-name elements and to put this understanding to use in interpreting some early medieval historical sources concerning the Southern Netherlands.

The aim of the book is ambitious to say the least. Even though there is a long standing agreement on the general meaning of the words lo (»open space in a wood«), donk (»river dune, elevated place in a wet area«) and horst (»elevated place grown with trees or scrubs«), their etymologies and exact meaning as place-name elements is still debated. Van Loon not only sets out to put an end to these discussions, but attempts to show that his proposals solve historical problems as well. To my mind, he does not succeed. An elementary problem with this book is that the author sets out with a set of answers in his mind and works towards these. Interpretations which do not fit his ideas are set aside without much ado and what is a suggestion or a possibility on one page frequently appears as a fact on the next. Van Loon's use of sources and earlier publications is eclectic to say the least and he seems to rely on (out)dated literature far more than on recent work. It seems telling that he refers to publications from the 1950's as »recent«.

With regard to lo (Old High German lôh, Old English lēah) it is generally agreed that it is cognate with Latin lucus »open clearing, holy grove«. The Germanic forms had similar meanings and developed to mean »open ground« (in English »meadow«). In Old High German the religious meaning, although infrequently, still occurs but – as Green put it – »with the evidence of place-names it is […] difficult to tell whether they refer to an earlier religious site«. Van Loon brushes aside this objection and poses »holy grove« as the basic, original meaning of lo. Thus, he contends, place-names containing this element must refer to pagan cult sites. The caveat as phrased by Green and the many questions raised by archaeologists and historians alike fall on deaf ears and with Tacitus in hands Van Loon proceeds to introduce Wodan (not mentioned by Tacitus) and other deities from both geographical and chronological removed sources to substantiate his point. From there we are led to the enigmatic place-name Hereualdolugo, mentioned in 745 as a place near Rohsem (Western Flanders, Belgium). After a lengthy discussion Van Loon concludes that the place-name means lucus [open air sanctuary] of the Lord of Hosts' in which this »Lord« is supposed to have been Wodan. Later, Van Loon reasons, the site was Christianised.

It is fascinating to see how almost in passing Van Loon concludes that this toponym shows »Proto-Romance flexion«. This does not lead him to the obvious conclusion that in post-Roman and early medieval times the area may well have been Latin speaking. Immigrants introduced Germanic names, but may well have acculturated quickly to become
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