

Returning to Roermond: Witch Persecution, Storytelling and the Memory of Place

Ilja Simons

Breda University of Applied Sciences, Breda, the Netherlands

e-mail: simons.i@buas.nl

This presentation explores contemporary engagements with the history of early modern witch persecutions in Roermond, a city associated with one of the largest witch trials in the Netherlands. During the trials of 1613–1614, at least sixty-four people, predominantly women, were accused, tortured, and executed. Although traces of this history remain embedded in the urban landscape through physical sites and place names such as Galgenberg and Rattentoren, the witch persecutions long remained largely absent from local heritage narratives and everyday historical awareness. Recently, this history has gained renewed visibility through guided city tours, exhibitions, narrative walks, and plans for a national witch monument. Together, these initiatives point to a process of rediscovery and re-interpretation of a violent and gendered past. Drawing on participant observation of different storytelling practices, the presentation explores how the history of witch persecution is being made visible and meaningful in the contemporary city. It considers which places, stories and voices become part of these narratives, how different storytellers connect the past to the present, and why this heritage appears to resonate now. Particular attention is given to connections between historical persecution and contemporary concerns about gendered violence and injustice. The case illustrates how heritage is continually reworked through storytelling practices, and how previously marginalised histories can become part of the contemporary memory and meaning of place.

