Jozef Van Loon, Lo, Donk, Horst. Taalkunde als sleutel tot de vroege middeleeuwen, Leuven (Leuven University Press) 2017, XVIII–364 p. (Studies op het gebied van de Nederlandse taalkunde, 4), ISBN 978-90-7247-497-1, EUR 59,50.

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Lauran Toorians, Loon op 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« and (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«[1]. Van Loon brushes aside this objection and poses »holy grove« as the basic, original meaning of *lo*. Thus, he contents, 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 Roksem (Western-

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[1] Quote and paraphrase from Dennis Howard Green, Language and History in the Early Germanic World Cambridge, New York, NY; Oakleigh, Melbourne 1998, p. 26. This work is not referred to by Van Loon.

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 speakers of late Latin, just like the Franks did in France (and like much later the Normans in Normandy acquired French). Revealing on this subject is the work by Peter Schrijver, another author Van Loon does not refer to[2].

The second part of the book is devoted to the place-name element *donk* (German *Dung*), which is contrasted with *horst*. These two elements appear to be similar in meaning (»elevation«) and occur in – on the whole – mutually exclusive areas. In fact, *donk* is the main subject of this section and despite the general acceptance of the meaning »river dune, natural elevation in a wet area« Van Loon disagrees and argues – to my mind unconvincing – that originally *donk* must have referred to a man-made, artificial island in a river-bed which »around 600–700« came to refer to noble dwellings. As with *lo* he generalises the more specific meaning to be the oldest one which is methodologically very *hazardousto*do. It is obvious that where people settled on a river dune or a dry hillock in a wetland they may well have enlarged this »island« over time and strengthened its sides to prevent it from being washed away. This human activity does not make the »donk«, it only changes its physical appearance. Furthermore, his evidence for a meaning »noble dwelling« is far from waterproof.

A general problem with *donk* is that the word does not have a clear and generally accepted etymology. Because German *Dung* can also mean »half underground room«, with associations of »pit-house« (*Grubenhaus*) as well as *dungeon*, this has led several authors to understand *donk* not as »elevation«, but as »pit«. Van Loon seems to find it hard to make up his mind on this matter, even though he himself – again in passing – remarks that from the outside a pit-house with a turf roof appears as an elevation. The association with manure (*dung*) as already found with Tacitus can be understood if one considers that over a very long period walls and roofs could be plastered (daubed) with wet soil, clay, sand, animal dung and straw to make them wind- and watertight.

With his new interpretation of *donk* Van Loon sets out to tackle two historical problems: first the earliest history and geography of Ghent and second the same concerning the town of Lier (east of Antwerp). The whole discussion fills over two thirds of the book in which the argument gets lost in the details. When looking for other literature to come to grips with the historical geography of Ghent, which indeed is complex, it becomes clear again how selective Van Loon uses the work of his predecessors. One of the points the author wishes to make, is that early medieval saints lives can be valuable sources of historical information. How this can be done has recently been shown in various publications, but again Van Loon in his enthusiasm appears to loose sight of the important *caveat* that saints'

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2 Peter Schrijver, Language Contact and the Origins of the Germanic Languages, London 2014.

lives inform us about the period in which they were written, which in most cases is not the time in which the particular saint lived[3].

Details raise questions as well. An illustrative example is footnote 130 concerning the medieval name *Beila* for a forest in (probably) the present-day province Limburg in Belgium. Admitting that the recent toponymical dictionary »Vlaamse Gemeentenamen« (Brussels, Leuven 2010) does not agree, Van Loon links this name to the place-name *Bilzen* and further suggests a possible relation with »the Old Irish name for holy trees *bile*«. Why all of a sudden an Irish word might be of relevance here remains totally unexplained. Moreover, the etymology of *bile* is unclear and the meaning is »tree, tree-trunk« and in special contexts also »ancient and venerated tree«. Thus, the footnote is superfluous and misleading.

In this book Van Loon raises many interesting points which might lead to further research in all kinds of directions, be it linguistic, onomastic or historical. On the other hand, his answer driven approach forces the reader to question every suggestion and to constantly look for alternatives (what may be stimulating in itself). The eclectic way in which the author uses his material is aptly shown in the bibliography. Why, for instance, frequent reference to Vincent, »Toponymie de la France« (Brussels 1937) but not to more recent work on place-names in France? And why no reference to the important article by A. C. F. Koch, »Gent in de 9de en 10de eeuw. Enkele benaderingen« (reprinted in id., »Tussen Vlaanderen en Saksen« [Hilversum 1992])? Remarkable are the references to David Ellis Evans, »Gaulish Personal Names« (Oxford 1967) and Adalbert Bezzenberger, Whitley Stokes, »Wortschatz der keltischen Spracheinheit« (Göttingen 1894, reprint 1979) as the only sources for Old Irish and Celtic in general and to Karls Brugmann, Berthold Delbrück, »Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen« (Strasbourg 1897–1916) for (Proto-)Indo-European. These are monumental works in their kind, but not the most recent in disciplines which are as lively as any other.

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3 Recent examples are Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, Odrada, Oda, Odulfus: de drie middeleeuwse heiligen van Noord-Brabant, in: John M. Goris (ed.), Heiligen in de Kempen, Turnhout 2001 (Publicaties van hed Centrum voor de Studie van Land en Volk van de Kempen, 14), p. 9–31; various contributions in Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, Véronique Roelvink (ed.), Rondom Sint-OedenRode. Macht, religie en cultuur in de Meierij, Woudrichem 2016; and Lauran Toorians, Communiceren met een heiligenleven: Lebuïnus en de lezer, Madoc. Tijdschrift over de Middeleeuwen 26 (2012), p. 241–249.