

The Great Theft from the Franeker University Library, 1648

Haye Bijlstra (photos) and Jacob van Sluis (text)

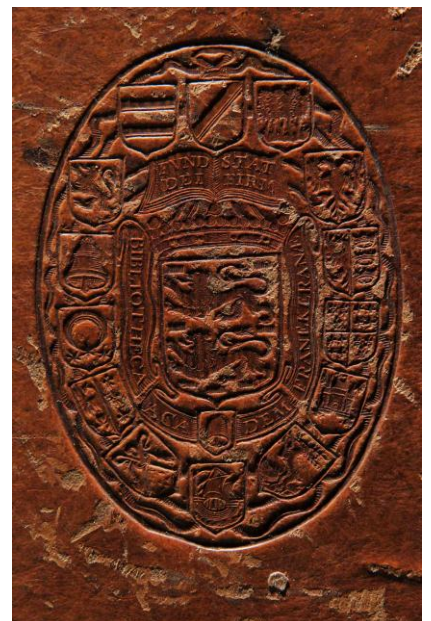
At regular intervals inventories were made of the books belonging to Franeker University Library. With the help of these inventories catalogues were compiled, printed and distributed. A number of catalogues survived, dating back to the years 1601, 1626, 1635, 1644, 1656, 1691 and 1713. These catalogues are a great help in estimating the growth of the collection over these years.

However, not only growth is at stake. On 14th July 1648 Johannes Antonides van der Linden, professor of medicine, took up the post of university librarian. With the help of some fellow professors, he started his work with enthusiasm on 17th and 18th August 1648. Using the latest catalogue, dating from 1644, they undertook a stock check. The shock was enormous when they discovered that 122 books were missing. What was going on here? Could this be careless borrowing? When they found 56 detached book chains behind the wooden panelling, it became clear that this could not just be a case of careless borrowing, it had to be more serious. The professors organized a search, making inquiries in bookshops as far away as Amsterdam. Eight books were found in the room of a student called Nicolaus Amama, the son of a former Franeker professor. After a prolonged lawsuit Amama was found guilty as the chief culprit in December 1651.

The question is whether or not it is fair to identify Nicolaus Amama as the sole culprit. Since the foundation of the university in 1585, there had scarcely been any policy regarding the library and consequently the use of the books had hardly been monitored at all. Borrowing was not allowed, but was nevertheless arranged privately. But even though the policy had been substandard from the beginning, the stock check done in 1648 showed that a lot of books listed in the 1644 catalogue were missing. Johannes Verhel, who used to be librarian prior to Van der Linden and who was still in office at the time of the discovery of the theft, was not held responsible for the resulting disorder. Thanks to Van der Linden a successful campaign was set up to raise funds for the library after the discovery of the theft and measures were taken to arrange proper supervision.

One of the other measures taken after the theft was the appointment of the university's own bookbinder. He used a distinctive stamp (see picture) on the front and back of the bindings. Books were thus more recognizable and less suitable for dodgy re-sale. Presumably, the stamp was not in use before 1648.

The theft of 1648 is described in detail by Lydia S. Wierda, in her book *Armamentarium Totius Sapientiae, een arsenaal van alle wetenschap: De Franeker academiebibliotheek in de zeventiende eeuw* (*Armamentarium Totius Sapientiae: a Source of all Knowledge: the Franeker University Library in the Seventeenth Century*) (Leeuwarden 2005, pp. 18-22). This book also provides a list of the missing books (on pp. 356-364), compiled by comparing the catalogues of 1644 and 1656, thus including the books that had gone missing since the theft discovered in 1648. This list is essential for anyone endeavouring to find the missing books. The description of these books is taken from the catalogue of 1644. We digitized the annotated copy of this catalogue that has been preserved from the time when the library



shelves were checked in 1648. So far, no trace of the books listed in this catalogue has been found. It may be difficult to recognize them, because how can a book from the Franeker University Library's collection be identified? Books were printed in large numbers and people could easily provide the books with different bindings. There are a few options how to find out whether or not a book originates from Franeker University Library. Underneath the titles on our list there are some indications, printed *in italics*; they may provide some help to find the books:

- It was not unusual for two or more books be bound together in one volume or convolute. The chance of different owners deciding to have the same books bound together in one volume is negligible. A convolute matching the description in the Franeker University Library catalogue, therefore almost certainly originates from Franeker.
- Now and again books were donated to the library and, more often than not, a handwritten dedication was inscribed in the book. In the Franeker University Library catalogue this dedication was noted, not only to commemorate the person who had donated the book, but also as an incentive for other possible donors. So, if a book with a dedication corresponding to the dedication in the Franeker University Library catalogue turns up, it will almost certainly have been a part of the Franeker collection.
- The oldest of the Franeker catalogues dates from 1601. Almost without exception books listed in that catalogue have shelfmarks on the right hand side of the upper part of the title page. This shelfmark used to refer to the location of the books in the library in 1601. The first number referred to the number on the bookcase. Following this number, there would be a brace with another number referring to the location of the book on either the upper or the lower shelf. (If the number lined up with the upper part of the brace, the book would be on the upper shelf; if the number lined up with the lower part of the brace it would be on the lower shelf.) Such Franeker shelfmarks are clearly recognizable. The missing books from the 1601 catalogue that should have these shelfmarks are **printed in bold**.
- It will be extremely difficult to trace those books that lack indications *in italics*. The titles of those books that were still missing in 1656, but rediscovered since have been crossed off the list.

It is an illusion to think that all the books can be found. Much remains unclear about the theft. Can we really speak about a large-scale theft? For how much can student Amama really be held responsible? Could the fact that so many books went missing be a combination of theft and carelessness? Almost all the traces have been wiped out. The perpetrators and those responsible are no longer with us and the period of limitation for this theft has come to an end. Nevertheless, it would be great to be able to locate at least some of the missing books. Those who are willing to give it a go, should have the best chances when they begin their search by looking for the copies with the titles **printed in bold**, since these books are likely to have shelfmarks on the title pages. An example of such a Franeker shelfmark is shown on the photograph below, featuring shelfmark 13{¹, which refers to bookcase number 13, first book on the upper shelf.

