RUDOLPH AGRICOLA AND THE ORGAN
OF THE MARTINIKERK IN GRONINGEN

The almost legendary fame of the organ of the Martinikerk of Groningen
even today can to an important degree be traced back to the person of
Rudolph Agricola. Like many legendary matters, this one also is based
on tradition and not on authentic data.

The first report which connects Agricola’s name with the origins of the
organ in the Martinikerk appears about a century after his activities as
municipal secretary. ¹ This report, which is later repeated by many
authors, suggests that Agricola himself built the instrument. By this time
the legend had already begun to develop. It is clear that Agricola could
not have built the organ with his own hands, even together with others, in
addition to his no doubt full agenda as secretary of the city of Groningen.
An operation of such magnitude as the rebuilding and enlargement of the
Martini-organ requires more time than he could have had available.
Besides, strict rules were then in force with regard to the practice of a
trade, and they would have made this kind of extemporaneous activity
impossible.

The building or rebuilding of an important organ was in these times an
event of the first order within the community and also far beyond. It is not
strange that it was freshly remembered even after the lapse of a century.

Although Agricola cannot possibly have built the organ himself, the
reports mentioned earlier indicate that he did make an important
contribution. A letter from the city council of Kampen to the magistrates
of Groningen tells us that Agricola had been at Kampen around 1480 for
the commissioning of a major reconstruction of the organ of Our Lady’s
Church there. Agricola’s presence shows that he served as an adviser to
this project. This letter tells us that the actual work was contracted to
master Johan, organbuilder then Damme; this last expression refers to the
town of Appingedam² The letter is undated but was most probably
written in 1481. By that time the organ in Kampen had already almost

¹ Hic (sc. Agricola) organum propria manu, miro vocalium concentu, grataque
auribus melodia suauem (sic), in aedibus sacrís Diui Martini Groningae construxit...’
(Kempius, De origine... Frisiae, 1588, p. 154).
² Kampen, Gemeentearchief (= Municipal Archives), Inv. nr. 219, Minuten II, no.
367.
been completed; thus Agricola's visit for the signing of the contract must have taken place no later than 1480.

According to this letter, it was impossible for the instrument to be used because master Johan had not finished his work in accordance with the contract. Master Johan was now staying at Groningen. Thus the magistrates of Kampen request the city council of Groningen to remind him of his obligations and to send him to Kampen without delay. Master Johan's precipitate departure from Kampen and the fact that Agricola is explicitly mentioned in the letter suggest an important project at Groningen involving both men.

There is little doubt that this project had to do with the organ of the Martinikerk of Groningen. Archivalia in Groningen which could confirm this have been lost. The Kampen letter is the only, albeit indirect source. In combination with the reports based on tradition, the information in this letter offers sufficient evidence for the involvement of Agricola and master Johan in the rebuilding and enlargement of this organ.

Johan then Damme resided in Appingedam, and he had taken religious vows. Unfortunately little more is known about him because pre-reformation church records in the northern Netherlands have largely disappeared. We do know, however, that in 1484 master Johan signed a contract for building a new organ in Genemuiden. He worked on this instrument with three assistants for eighteen weeks and finished it in 1485.3 These meager data lead to the conclusion that master Johan was an organbuilder of more than regional significance. The fact that Agricola was his adviser at least twice during the short period of his municipal secretariate shows that master Johan must have been not only his favorite organbuilder but also a highly competent one.

Just as little is known about Agricola's rôle as adviser. He must have acquainted himself with the newest developments in organ building during his travels abroad and particularly as an organist at Ferrara. No doubt this will have influenced the nature of his rôle as adviser. It may also be assumed that the projects which he guided were among the most advanced in the northern Netherlands. Twenty years later, when a new organ was being planned for St. Michael's Church at Zwolle, one of the stops of the organ in Our Lady's Church at Kampen was cited as an example.4

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3 Nanninga Uitterdijk, 'Nieuwe klokken en een nieuw orgel voor de kerk te Genemuiden', 375-376.
4 Zwolle, Gemeentearchief (= Municipal Archives), Boek van aeneming van de Stad-deneren, fol. 208 sub littera O.