1 Warfare and the age of printing

General introduction

The impact of the new medium of the printed book on military history cannot be overestimated. This catalogue describes some ten thousand books from the period 1500 to 1800 originating from nine Dutch Defence institutions and collections. For the most part the books come from the Ministry of Defence’s estate. This rich inheritance and the books themselves give us access to four hundred years of military history. Many works – some by authors whose writings have long since sunk into oblivion – contain military knowledge in its archetypal form. The importance of the printed book to military affairs emerges from the original knowledge found in the professional military literature as well as from the rich military book culture.

In comparison to other countries where scores of military libraries were lost during the Second World War, the Netherlands ranks high on the list of national estates whose military libraries retain military works wrote J.G. Schönau (1902–1964) in 1958. Fifty years later the Ministry of Defence’s estate of old editions is larger and even more interesting than could have been expected.

Schönau can be considered a pioneer for his initiation of interest in ‘the military literature of far-off times’ both within the Ministry of War and the army and among the civilian population. ‘This task definitely belongs to the Ministry of War libraries. And compiling a special catalogue is a precondition,’ he wrote.

By 1958, Schönau was the Ministry of War’s ‘super librarian’. The Ministry of Defence hired him in 1939 as librarian of the Royal Netherlands Military Academy (kma) collection in Breda. He had previously worked at the Haarlem City Library for nine years. That library’s collection dates from 1596 and contains an important set of old printed works. Schönau therefore had enough experience to conclude that the Ministry of Defence’s estate was an important cultural inheritance, for which reason he urged that the entire collection be made accessible. With the publication of this catalogue the Ministry of Defence’s wish, dating back to the end of Second World War, is at last fulfilled.

Schönau was appointed the Ministry of War’s ‘general service librarian’ in 1946 and seven years later was promoted to head of the Ministry’s Bureau of Military-Scientific Library System. In 1962 he was also appointed librarian of the departmental library (in those days belonging to the Dutch Army and Navy). After Schönau’s death active curatorial interest in the Ministry’s holdings of historical military books slumped, which only goes to prove that as well as being the pioneer in this area he was also the driving force behind the interest in the preservation of the Ministry of Defence libraries’ cultural heritage.

The catalogue’s history, in the true sense of the word, dates back to the year 2000 when it was decided to publish a catalogue of the Army Museum’s collection of books predating 1801. Work on it began the following year. It should be noted that this was an elaboration upon an earlier unfinished Army Museum project dating from the years 1960–1970. The new project soon expanded into a collaboration between the Army Museum and the Royal Netherlands Military Academy (kma) enabling the eventual inclusion of nine Defence collections.

The collection of books which these institutions collectively possess is of great national and international importance.
The oldest extant book that the Ministry of Defence deposited with the Army Museum dates from 1534. The oldest institution from which books have been handed down directly is the Raad van State (the Council of State) which was occupied with military affairs from 1588 to 1795. Many of the books from the various institutions are part of very old historical collections deposited there, such as: the Ministry of War, the Ministry of the Navy, the Staff School and the Department of the Grand Master of Artillery. After 1813 the Ministry of War’s library was built around the books of the Council of State. The Department of the Grand Master of Artillery’s library also dates back to the sixteenth century. From 1818 to 1826 and from 1839 to 1841, the position of the Grandmaster was fulfilled by Prince Frederick, preceded by William Frederick.

Many books in the special collection once belonged to historically important people, including Stadtholder Prince Frederick, Stadtholder Prince William V, Constantijn Huygens, King Louis Napoleon and Admiral Jan Hendrick van Kinsbergen.

Besides their distinguished provenance, some of the books are of historical importance for their content and are of great material importance because of their rarity or uniqueness. The catalogue contains the original editions and/or editions published during the lifetime of the authors, many of whom were prominent during the period mentioned. These include Albrecht Dürer, Hugo de Groot, Constantijn Huygens, Antoni Van Leeuwenhoek, Isaac Newton and Simon Stevin. Many of the books are works of art for which no expense or effort was spared, for example a seventeenth-century atlas of European cities by Frederick de Wit that was unknown and probably unique. Finally, it is noticeable that many of the books are not about military subjects; books on many related topics have been in the Ministry of Defence’s possession for hundreds of years. One of the most remarkable of these books is an eighteenth-century Bible in Tamil.

While this catalogue does not contain any incunabula, in terms of their content, their relationship to the first printed military books is clearly present. Three of the oldest post-incunabula works in this catalogue are later, and also very important, editions of the two most remarkable of these books is an eighteenth-century Bible in Tamil.

The Army Museum possesses a 1534 Paris edition of De re militari by Roberto Valturio (circa 1413–1483). The first edition of this book, which appeared in Verona in 1472, is the earliest printed military book.’ The oldest book in this catalogue, and in the Army Museum’s possession, is an undated collection of plates from circa 1511 which is the work of Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus (4th century AD).

The first edition of this work, also known under the title De re militari, appeared in Utrecht in 1473 and is the second military book ever printed. Further, of the illustrated text editions by Vegetius, the Royal Netherlands Military Academy possesses a 1535 edition and the Army Museum an edition from 1536. The latter book from the Royal Netherlands Military Academy originates from the Ministry of Defence’s historical estate. The oldest extant book from the Ministry of Defence’s cultural legacy deposited with the Army Museum is a 1531 Paris edition of Hippiatria sive marescala by Lorenzo Rusio (1288–1347) about horse diseases. Like the work of Vegetius, this work came into being long before the invention of printing and was widely distributed throughout Italy as a manuscript.” The first printed edition appeared at the end of the fifteenth century. In short, this catalogue provides a representative picture, of the bibliographic nature of military literature from the time the first military book was printed.

Most of the other sixteenth-century works in this catalogue were originally published in Italy or in Italian or came into being, either partially or wholly, under Italian influence. The same can be seen at the collection level. Of the three collections in which sixteenth-century books are present, the majority are from the Italian school. This is not the result of any particular collection policy but rather of the history of the printed military book.” Naturally, a few words about this would be fitting here.

In the period 1492–1570, more completely new military works were published in Italy (89) than in England (81), France (77) or Spain (70). Of these, no fewer than 67 came from Venice.” From 1524 to 1624, the number of books on military architecture printed in Venice alone was equivalent to the number printed in the whole of Europe during the same period.” Opinion regarding an explanation for this varies.” The fact is that soon af-