

Four Golden Ages

Regional Interdependency in the Low Countries

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Although the Low Countries formed a political unity only for short periods they have been seen by other European nations as a region in its own right. What created some kind of unity, as experienced by the inhabitants? My concept started from the geographical conditions of a delta of three major rivers, in a generally flat area facilitating transport. This was a basic condition for urban growth. The core questions were therefore – what at different times in the various regions, led to that extraordinary level of urbanisation on a European scale? Why and how did the successive ‘golden ages’ come to an end, and what remained in the previous core areas? Why did some regions remain peripheral? How do the various aspects interrelate – geographical conditions, social and political institutional arrangements, economic developments, and how do cultural phenomena fit into these patterns?

As it happens, two single-authored academic books were published in 2010, each presenting a long-term synthesising overview of the history of the Low Countries in the Middle Ages. Bas van Bavel, professor of social and economic history at the University of Utrecht wrote an economic and social history covering the period from 500 to 1600¹; my book deals with political, social, economic and cultural aspects of the period 1100-1560.² The latter is part of a multi-volume series named *De Geschiedenis van Nederland* [The History of Netherland, in the singular], the first volume of which was published in 2004 and the second in 2009.³ Van Bavel and I have been working entirely independently of each other, although we were well aware of each other’s work and fully respect it, including these book projects. This simultaneous publication is notable for several reasons. First, it has been decades since a single author undertook to write such a long-term synthesising but fully referenced book on this region in the Middle Ages. Second, both chose explicitly ‘to break down the historiographical barriers of the nineteenth/

twentieth century nation-states, and their national histories, and those of the traditional periodisations'. Third, both of us chose as a central idea the striking regional diversity in a relatively small area and tried to come to an understanding of the successive shifts in the leading positions.⁴ However, as Van Bavel's research has focused primarily on rural societies and mine on relations between cities and state, we approached our subject from very different, essentially complementary angles. As his has been extensively discussed at a high scholarly level in another review, I gladly refer to that debate.⁵ So Van Bavel's sigh 'each of the reviewers specialises in a specific region [...] each of them may feel that "their" region is misrepresented or underrepresented' could also be mine.⁶ The choice, as I saw it, is between a multi-authored encyclopaedic handbook, and a book with a challenging vision. After the criticism that the previous generation's fifteen-volume *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* had been all too fragmented and lacked coherence, the initiators of *De Geschiedenis van Nederland* now have taken the opposite direction. Each option has its implications.

What's in a name

It is hard to explain in other languages why my choice and that of Van Bavel to deal with regions in the present-day states of Belgium and the Netherlands are historiographical statements because each language's vocabulary is contaminated by its history. In recent years most historical research remains limited to the borders of the existing states, each of them focusing on their own *Sonderweg*.⁷ As I explained at length in the introduction to my book, the region we are dealing with has formed a political unity only from 1815 to

1 Bas van Bavel, *Manors and Markets: Economy and Society in the Low Countries, 500-1600* (Oxford 2010).

2 Wim Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100-1560* (Amsterdam 2010).

3 Arie van Deursen, *De last van veel geluk. De Geschiedenis van Nederland, 1555-1702* (fourth edition; Amsterdam 2006); Marco Mostert, *In de marge van de beschaving. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 0-1100* (Amsterdam 2009).

4 Bas van Bavel, 'The Medieval Low Countries as Testing Ground for New Ideas on Economic and Social Development', *TSEG - The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 8 (2011) 126.

5 *TSEG - The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 8 (2011) 62-137, with articles by Tim Soens, Erik Thoen, Jord Hanus, Jean-Pierre Devroey, Alexis Wilkin, Petra van Dam, Peter Stabel and Bas van Bavel himself.

6 Van Bavel, 'Medieval', 133.

7 See, for example, this Review's glorifying volume edited by Klaas van Berkel and Leonie de Goei, *The International Relevance of Dutch History*, special issue of *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 125:2-3 (2010).

1830, and from 1543 to 1585 for the ‘XVII Provinces’, which did not include the ecclesiastical principality of Liège. Hence it was named by foreigners with *pars pro toto* names such as *Flandes/Fiandra* and Holland, or nonce-words such as the fifteenth-century ‘lands of hither’, or the ‘XVII Provinces’. In sixteenth-century Latin, *Germania Inferior* was used, which corresponds with the term *Niederlande*, used in High-German texts. In those days even the language was often called (*neder-*)*duytsch*, which led to the English word ‘Dutch’. As the language borders never coincided with political or ecclesiastical boundaries, foreigners remain confused up to the present day. They are not to be blamed for that: even Johan Huizinga, as quoted by Catrien Santing, mixed the name ‘Holland’ (the county? the province(s)? no: the present-day state of The Netherlands) with the concept of a ‘nation’. The plural forms ‘Low Countries’ and ‘Netherlands’ refer to the region’s diversity and lack of political integration. This explains why a many readers and reviewers are in disarray with the contrast between the series’ title referring to the present-day state *Nederland*, while I am dealing with what I consider to be the relevant unity of analysis for the period assigned to me. By the way, it is telling that the publisher did not expect to find a market for a series with a scope on the wider geographical area, as had been possible in the 1950s and 1980s.

A geographical unity

What then created some kind of a unity, experienced by the inhabitants of the Low Countries and observed by outsiders? My concept started from the basic geographical conditions of a delta of three major rivers, in a mostly flat area facilitating transport within the region as well and with partners at a greater distance. Waterways are favourable for shipping bulk cargoes and thus for trade. This was a basic condition for urban growth as it developed in particular (sub-) regions in specific contexts. I thought that it was worthwhile to dwell on the explanation of the early and high level of density of population in the south-western parts of the Low Countries, by 1300 only surpassed in Europe by Northern and Central Italy, at a moment when Amsterdam was hardly more than a few streets and a dam. The core questions were therefore, what led, at different times, to an extraordinary level of urbanisation on a European scale? Why and how did these successive ‘golden ages’ come to an end, and what remained in the previous core areas? Why did some regions remain peripheral, as geographical conditions were not invariable in themselves? Which social and political institutional arrangements concur with economic developments, and how do cultural phenomena fit into these patterns?

It was the high level of urbanisation in the Low Countries as a whole, and especially in some of their regions, mostly along the rivers and coasts, that shaped the specificity of these lands, most of which are not especially



Cardili Lectori. S. D.
Magno simul u'it atq; uoluptati fa-
 torum tibi cauidio lector arbitra-
 tus sum, si faciem a'stium Magne illius Ger-
 manie, qua Oceanum attingit, depictam in
 publicu ederem, u'icq; ideo promptius, quod
 ex his regionibus profectos olim sciam inuis
 nei illas ac notissimas gentes Germanos, Cim-
 bros, Sycambros, Fracos, Herulos, Gothos,
 Anglos, Langobardos, Normacos, qui non so-
 lum Britanias, Gallias, Pannonias, Hispanias
 uarijs bellorum calatitatibus affligerant, uo-
 rum & Italian cum Vrbe Roma tantum non
 exciderunt, concusso sapius ad eorum motus
 toto terras un orbe. Initium a Noruegia
 sumptimus, Calibusq; motu An-
 glorum in Gallia portu) ter-
 minauimus, Vale.

VLTRAIECTI
 Harmanus Borculius excudit. An. 57.

Die noordzee

fertile and ruled by several rivalling and discontinuous dynasties at the periphery of major states – as Catrien Santing reminds us with Huizinga’s quote. Up to the present day, the Low Countries have an economy based on its favourable opportunities for export and transport. That is also expressed by contemporaries on the maps they drew for practical use by their shippers, the oldest that have been preserved dating from the sixteenth century. In the book a map has been reproduced of ‘Lower Germany’, designed by Abraham Ortelius in 1571. It shows the whole region from Frisia to Artois in a north-western orientation, along with some neighbouring territories. The delta leading to the North Sea was obviously the unifying idea. This was a common pattern used by mapmakers, many of whom were active in the main cities.⁸ In January 2012, the Royal Library in Brussels acquired a fragment of a detailed map printed from woodcut blocks in Utrecht in 1557, which originally represented the Low Countries in a south-east orientation, labelled in Latin as ‘Great Germany where it reaches the Ocean, from Norway to Calais’. The region, its rivers and cities are seen from the North Sea; the fragment has been cut off along the line from Vlieland to Zwolle and covers the areas southward to Luxemburg and eastward to Koblenz and Trier.⁹ Very recently this map has been proven to be a copy of the oldest preserved fragments of a map printed in Antwerp in 1526 by Jan van Hoirne, who centred his compass not surprisingly on Hoorn, then one of the fast growing harbours for the long-distance shipping routes from North-Holland.¹⁰ The various fragments can be made to complement each other. This whole story illustrates the interregional connections for the dissemination of practical knowledge, while the representations themselves underline the validity of the choice to consider the delta as the infrastructure unifying the Low Countries internally as well as with partners upstream the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt and overseas. The large cities downstream were built with stone and timber from the Rhineland and the upper Meuse and fed with the grains from Artois.

8 H.A.M. van der Heijden, *Old Maps of the Netherlands, 1548-1794: An Annotated and Illustrated Cartobibliography* (Alphen aan den Rijn 1998) 135.

9 http://www.kbr.be/collections/cart_plan/actualite/acquisition/carte_nl.html.

◀ Fragment of the map ‘*Magne Germanie qua Oceanum attingit*’, printed in Utrecht in 1557. On the left, the fragment has been cut off along a line from Harlingen in the North and Marburg in the South.

Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels.

10 Marco van Egmond and Elger Heere, ‘Schatkaart of kaartschat? Queeste naar de oudste kaart van de Nederlanden’, *Caert-Thresoor* 30 (2011) 118-126; B. van ’t Hoff, ‘Jan van Hoirne’s Map of the Netherlands and the “Oosterscher Zee” Printed in Antwerp in 1526’, *Imago Mundi* 11 (1954) 136; this map is preserved in Groninger Archieven, THAG 6835.

Shifting cores

The interconnectedness of regions led to neither convergence, nor to stability. Instead, both Van Bavel and I have been struck by the repeated shifts in the core locations. Our explanations differ somewhat: while he stresses that an institutionalised ‘social balance’ tends to be disrupted from within, I see competitive advantages of particular locations in an ever-changing macro-economic and political environment as decisively leading to the re-location of economic activities. Former cores tended to specialise in high-value services and products such as tapestry weaving for royal and aristocratic courts all over Europe in Arras, referred to in Italian as *arazzo*. The overall trend I observed from the twelfth to the seventeenth century is the on-going expansion of economic activity, even against the general European cycles. Larger markets required ever more transport capacity, favouring the best accessibility for large sea-going vessels; the organisational structures for the production and merchandising needed to improve their efficiency and the cost of labour and transactions had to be as low as possible. Here the interplay between economic and political actors and the freedom of action demanded by merchants and citizens in general to control their dealings themselves emerges. I was fascinated by the interplay between the interrelated but relatively autonomous processes of economic and political expansion and tried to identify the most favourable combinations at any particular stage of development. Political unification reduced transaction costs in the fifteenth century, for example through the introduction of a stable common currency. However, from 1465 onwards dynastic policies tended to disrupt the ‘Golden Age of Burgundy’. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Habsburgs were to suffocate the ‘Golden Age of Antwerp’¹¹ by their fiscal, financial and religious policies.

I consciously paid a lot of attention to the earliest phenomena by which fundamental concepts were elaborated, such as local self-governance, contractual relations between rulers and subjects, rights of political representation, participation and resistance against arbitrary rule. I noted these earliest occurrences in particular circumstances, both in rural communes – and I am grateful to Tim Soens cum suis to have drawn the attention to more cases than the polder-boards I mentioned – and in cities where class antagonisms were most articulated. The particular development of exceptionally active representative institutions, which would remain a typical feature of the Low Countries, evidently could become influential only in highly urbanised areas where so much material and human capital was concentrated that no ruler, bishop or aristocrat could subdue them, nor could they afford to ignore them, so they had to deal with them by bargaining. I do see close

11 Leon Voet, *The Golden Age of Antwerp* (Antwerp 1973).

connections between the specific concentrations of urban populations, economic expansion and political participation. Since the publication of *Metropolen*, a broad empirical analysis has confirmed this correlation through Europe.¹²

The two reviewers have taken very different stands. Tim Soens, Eline Van Onacker and Kristof Dombrecht point correctly to the ‘urban shadow’, and want more attention for the endogenous dynamics of the countryside. In principle, I accept their reasoning, and I value their method of testing the empirical basis of some of my general theses. However, I fail to see how proto-industrial textile manufacturing on peasant smallholdings might function for centuries without a close connection with and steering by urban and export markets. Moreover, it cannot be denied that urban institutions and individuals purchased land for which they claimed tax exemption and judicial immunity at the village level, while burghers initiated numerous activities in the countryside such as peat digging, promoting meat and dairy production, stimulating the production of vegetables, crops for the export textile and beer industries, bricks, chalk and other construction materials. The major cities carried weight in all negotiations between the government and the provinces about the division of taxes, which systematically turned to the detriment of the politically weaker rural communities. Soens cum suis rightly point to the diversity of urban influence. I am happy to learn that the village of Dudzele could mobilise no less than eighty competitive bowmen; is this a case of ‘endogenous dynamics of the countryside’? In this village near Bruges, I suspect the hand of the local lord who owned a castle and was an active member of the noble order in the Estates of Flanders. A general synthesis needs to be built on and tested by empirical analyses. However, it is impossible to get a full grasp on all individual cases.

How should I respond to Catrien Santing who sees no value at all in this book? Three or four times she reproaches me with disregarding the cultural factor, unless ‘instrumentally, explaining the exercise of power’. I thought that the nineteenth-century idea of ‘l’art pour l’art’ had been dismissed long since. I counted 166 pages of entire paragraphs specifically on cultural features. Moreover, I addressed cultural issues such as numeracy, cosmopolitanism and the radically innovative political thought developed in the revolutionary struggles for emancipation of citizens and artisans. I worked with a model in order to highlight the most characteristic features of the region, a method she seems to dislike. Focusing on urban density assumes that most of the creativity would be fostered in such buoyant environments. That is why artists and intellectuals flocked to the main cities, because even they

12 David Stasavage, *States of Credit: Size, Power, and the Development of European Polities* (Princeton, Oxford 2011).

were working for markets. Was it a wrong choice to concentrate on urbanity? Although the Northern provinces lagged behind in this respect, in 1525 22% of the total population there lived in towns of at least 2,500 inhabitants, and in Holland this was 44%. Focusing on the most highly urbanised provinces, Artois, Flanders, Brabant and Holland, meant concentrating on the two-thirds of the total population who made the difference with what was normality elsewhere in Europe. Together they paid 83% of the government taxes in 1540-1548.¹³ Friesland represented 3% of the population, with its capital Leeuwarden housing no more than 5,000 people. Groningen, as the only major centre in the vast surroundings, may have had 10,000 to 15,000.¹⁴ Admittedly I should have paid attention to the Northern Humanism. I also concur that I would have made my case stronger if I had dealt extensively with one or two peripheral regions, such as Friesland or the Pays de Liège, to understand better the reasons for their relative stagnation and clarify their connections with the core regions. This might be a wonderful research project, especially as in both regions at some earlier point there had been a potential for further development via maritime or fluvial trade. Why did Holland and not Friesland become the main port for the Baltic trade? I did say something about this issue with regard to the IJssel cities. After all, writing a book with a challenging thesis might provoke more inspiration for further research than an encyclopaedic overview. ◀

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13 Blockmans, *Metropolen*, 613, table 13.

14 A. van der Woude, 'Demografische ontwikkelingen van de Noordelijke Nederlanden 1500-1800', *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden V* (Haarlem 1980) 135-136.