EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE PROSOPOGRAPHICAL METHOD. THE NOBLE POPULATION OF THE LATE MEDIEVAL COUNTY OF ZEELAND

Arie van Steensel

The most appealing prosopographical studies are not the collective biographies as such but, rather, those in which broader political and social-economic questions are addressed, using the prosopographical method, among others. The prosopographical approach has been traditionally restricted to the study of well-definable and limited groups, often political, ecclesiastical, or intellectual elites linked to a certain institution or place. When it is applied to the study of more heterogeneous groups, the need for clear-cut research questions and a strict delineation in time and space becomes even more pressing. This article explores the possibilities and limitations of the use of the prosopographical method for the study of the nobility in the late medieval and early modern period, emphasising the interaction between the individual actors, on the one hand, and institutions and networks of all kind, on the other. The questions raised will be discussed with the nobility of the county of Zeeland serving as an example.

The nobility in medieval western Europe was far from being a strictly defined legal-political order or socio-economic class. Rather, it was an open and loosely connected social group comprising families or individuals who enjoyed the noble status. The status of an individual nobleman within society, as well as his standing within the noble hierarchy, was based on various factors, such as his family ties, political power, and economic wealth; in other words, on his chances to exhibit a noble lifestyle (vivre noblement) in the public space. This means, in the words of Kaminsky, that “it is clear in general that although all nobles had noble estate, different nobles could have different estates.” Ultimately, the estate of a nobleman depended on its recognition by the public, meaning that the noble’s individuality was to a great extent a public construction.1

The conception of late medieval nobility as the public estimation of one’s estate or social honor implies that the study of this historical phenomenon ideally consists of at least two interrelated themes. On the one hand, the strategies of individual

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noblemen or (noble) families to maintain and enhance his or their estate must be examined; and on the other, these strategies should be situated against the broader background of political and socio-economic developments if they are to be fully understood. In other words, the position and role of noblemen in late medieval society can only be adequately assessed if the whole social structure is taken into consideration. In this article I shall address the question of whether prosopography is a suitable method to unravel the actions of the late medieval noblemen and their position within society; as the exponents of this methodology assert, according to Stone, that it can be employed “to describe and analyze with precision the structure of society and the degree and the nature of the movements within it.”

The late medieval county of Zeeland serves as case study in this article, as my current research concentrates on the political and economic position of the noblemen in that county. My current research forms part of the Leiden University-based project Burgundian Nobility. Princely Politics and Noble Families, c.1430 –c.1530. The project as a whole has a decidedly prosopographical approach, but I shall stick to a critical evaluation of the choice to apply this method to the noblemen active in late medieval Zeeland. After a general introduction to the prosopographical method, attention will be shifted to the application of the prosopographical method to the case of Zeeland. It is not my aim to analyze the collected data at length; instead I will discuss the merits and disadvantages of the method, which are distinguished in theoretical pitfalls and practical difficulties. Finally, I will argue that the application of the prosopographical method to heterogeneous social groups can only yield significant results if certain conditions are met.

**The Prosopographical Method**

The prosopographical method was developed from the early twentieth century onwards. It drew more attention from the seventies onwards as the advance of the computer enabled new means of data collection and analysis, and several initiatives were taken by medievalists in particular. In the Low Countries, prosopog-

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3 Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” *Daedalus* 100 (1971), 47.

4 For further information, see http://www.arts.leidenuniv.nl/history/burgundian-nobility.jsp.

raphy first drew the attention of Roorda, who favored the method but doubted its feasibility due to the labor-intensive and time-consuming research involved. Notwithstanding these practical obstacles, the method was endorsed by several medievalists in the wake of the growing attention for the process of state formation and the inspiring work of De Ridder-Symoens, which resulted in several prosopographical studies on the Burgundian-Habsburg state institutions. The method was also fruitfully applied to other fields, for instance, the study of the canons of the chapter of Oudmunster, the receivers of the count of Flanders, and the Dutch students at Italian universities.

Protopography clearly continues to be popular as a research approach among historians engaged in social and institutional history. To understand the appeal of the method, a closer look should be given to its nature and application. A prosopographical study examines a population with shared characteristics and whose members are identified from the source material according to carefully defined criteria. This requires that the selected group of actors is geographically, thematically, and chronologically well-delineated; and also, a clear research question is needed to establish what biographical information one needs to gather. The data about the lives of the individuals must be collected using a set of uniform questions about, for instance, birth and death, marriage and family, social origin, political functions, property and wealth, education, titles, cultural activities et cetera. The biographical data of the members in the researched group can then be further (statistically)

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examined on correlations between the various types of information to infer general and deviant patterns of behavior as well as other internal mechanisms. Finally, the broader historical context must be taken into account in order to interpret the results and answer the initial research questions.\textsuperscript{11}

Essentially, the core value of the prosopographical method is that disparate information is systematically put together, making it possible to draw general patterns out of isolated and incomplete data. The focus is not on the individual members of the subject population that are all selected according to the same criteria but, rather, on the group as a whole. Therefore, the analysis concerns the shared characteristics of the group, and the conclusions pertain to the aggregate of the members of the population. This presupposes internal cohesion, or at least a single shared characteristic among the individual group members, in order to arrive at meaningful conclusions. For this reason, institutions (courts, universities, monasteries), professions, or social or geographical origins are usually chosen as the starting point for research.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, a valid application of the method depends on the availability of documentation and sources. For the late medieval period in particular, the surviving records do not cover all aspects of life equally and are unevenly distributed among the population, potentially resulting in shaky generalizations and distorted conclusions about the subject population. Hence, a successful application of the prosopographical method and interpretation of the results depends on the subject of study, the formulation of a clear research question, and on the available sources.

**Late Medieval Nobility**

The starting point of every prosopographical study is a research population demarcated according to certain criteria, although the composition of the group and the number of individuals is not necessarily known beforehand. The demarcation poses few problems if all members share an observable feature. For instance, Genet envisaged a sociography of the late medieval and early modern state through prosopographical research, comprising a description of all social groups related to


the state and a social history of its institutions. Following this view, one might argue that the late medieval nobility was a social group related to the state and that a prosopographical approach is warranted for that reason. Several theoretical and practical objections, however, can be made against this assumption. First of all, some noblemen were not—or at least not to the same degree—linked to state institutions, and closely related—the social cohesion among noblemen was far from evident in the later medieval period. A second, more practical, problem is that of the feasibility of the research, as the size of the noble population does not permit a thorough use of the prosopographical method. In some cases, both problems have been sidestepped by limiting the population by one criteria or another. For example, Cools restricted his research into the Burgundian-Habsburg aristocracy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to the small segment of noblemen and others who held offices at the highest echelon of the state institutions. Janse, in his exemplary study on the knighthood of Holland, similarly excludes nobles who were not summoned to the States of Holland and its precursors.

The sheer size of the late medieval nobility, the problem of demarcation, and the often deficient source material have thwarted the application of quantitative methods to the study of the medieval nobility so far. The knowledge about the position and functioning of the nobility is mostly impressionistic and based on qualitative or regional studies, but this has not prevented historians from making sweeping statements about the political power and economic situation of the late medieval nobility. Generally speaking, it is assumed that the nobility lost its dominant position in society during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries due to, on the one hand, the “crisis of the seigniorial revenues” and the transition from a feudal to a more market orientated economy and, on the other, the emergence of the central state and cities as political and economic competitors. Only a small part of the nobility succeeded in preserving its position by taking service with the prince and merging with other power elites. The alleged crisis of the nobility has since been challenged by

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14 Hans Cools, Mannen met macht. Edellieden en de moderne staat in de Bourgondisch-Habsburgse landen (1475–1530) (Zwolle, 2001); Antheun Janse, Ridderschap in Holland. Portret van een adelijke elite in de late Middeleeuwen (Hilversum, 2001). See also the excellent prosopographical study on feuding noblemen in Franconia by Hillay Zmora, State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany. The Knightly Feud in Franconia, 1440–1567 (Cambridge, 1997).

several historians, who point out the different regional economic developments, the interdependence of prince and nobility, and the impact of social mobility.  

The Burgundian Nobility-project aims at testing a few of these assumptions and at providing more empirical evidence about the position of noblemen in the Low Countries during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. A better understanding of the power, wealth, and status of the nobility in late medieval society and the impact of state formation and social-economic developments can only be acquired by mapping the noble population and examining the strategies of both princes and noble families over a longer period. The project will conduct this research for the Burgundian-Habsburg lands of Hainault, Brabant, Holland, and Zeeland.  

Still, not all noblemen living in these territories can be included in the designed database, due to practical limits. The prosopographical analysis will be confined to three cross-sections of the whole noble population, as will be demonstrated for Zeeland below. This method enables diachronic and synchronic comparisons of the position of the nobility in the different regions, making it possible to draw conclusions on patterns of change, regional differences, and structural developments in the Burgundian-Habsburg period.

What added value does the prosopographical method have for the research into the medieval nobility compared to other approaches? For example, several recommendable regional studies on the (public) lives of the gentry in England and the nobility in France have been published, containing only some elements of a prosopographical approach. These studies, however, lack an explicit elucidation of the applied methodology, while some historians knowingly refrained from using the prosopographical method for theoretical and practical reasons. Morsel, for example, chose the "social space" of a Franconian noble family as subject,
while Paravicini published a detailed study on a single Burgundian nobleman.21 The main point is that a prosopographical approach is not always suitable or necessary, although it must be recognized that general conclusions about the noble population as a whole cannot be deduced from case-studies only.22

**Noblemen in the County of Zeeland**

The county of Zeeland, surrounded by Holland, Brabant, and Flanders, comprises several islands of which Walcheren, Zuid-Beveland, and Schouwen were the most important. The Burgundian duke Philip the Good acquired the counties of Holland and Zeeland in 1428, after a fierce struggle with the until-then incumbent countess Jacqueline of Bavaria. The Burgundian dukes and their Habsburg successors progressively took effective control over the territories in the Low Countries. The people of Zeeland came under the administration and jurisdiction of the Council and Chambre des Comptes of Holland and Zeeland, established in The Hague, and the central institutions, the princely court, the Great Council and financial council in Brussels and Mechelen.23 Only a few noblemen originating from Zeeland made it as councillor or state official at the ducal court or institutions, all located outside its borders. Within the county, the receiver of the count was the most important and indispensable representative of the princely power, linking the count with his subjects in Zeeland.

Owing to its geographical location, Zeeland profited from its role in the international transit trade to the Flemish and Dutch cities as well as to the Brabantine hinterland. The international and regional trade brought considerable prosperity to the seaport towns, attracting a substantial number of foreign traders. The people of Zeeland themselves were involved in the shipping trade and offshore fishing, and the agrarian and industrial (e.g., brewing and salt extraction) component of the economy must not be neglected either.24 The towns experienced strong economic and demo-

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24 W. S. Unger, “Middelburg als handelsstad (XIIIe tot XVle eeuw),” *Archief van het Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen* (1935), 6–13; see also Bas J. P. van Bavel and Jan L. van
graphic growth from the late fourteenth century onwards, although they remained rather small in terms of population size, with just a few thousand inhabitants. For example, Goes counted about 3,000 souls at the end of the fifteenth century, while the largest town, Middelburg, numbered some 6,000 to 7,000 residents in 1569.25 Still, the density of towns was relatively high in Zeeland, and the urban trade and industry drew a great number of migrants from abroad and the countryside.

WHO WAS NOBLE?

Nobles shared the same characteristic—a distinct legal status obtained by birth or princely elevation—but this status was yet to be formally regulated and remained customarily defined as well as a matter of public recognition throughout the late medieval period.26 The legal standing that distinguished noblemen from commoners does not suffice to define the nobility, because, as Chris Given-Wilson puts it, “while a man might be born in noble society, he must continue to justify his place within it by leading a lifestyle worthy of his station.”27 Nobility was a relative quality, and consequently the social dimension of the noble status must be taken into account rather than sticking one-sidedly to a legal definition. Nobles held a dominant position in medieval society due to their status, power and wealth, but a great differentiation existed among them in terms of social, political and economic profiles.

The group of people regarded as noble altered over time according to changes in the conception of the noble lifestyle and processes of social mobility. The medieval nobility was far from being a static and monolithic entity. Hence, a practicable demarcation of the research population is not easily given and the effort to do so is further complicated by the fact that the exact rights and privileges the nobles enjoyed on account of their status varied regionally and depended on their position


26 Wood, Nobility, pp. 10–14; Paul Janssens, De evolutie van de Belgische adel sinds de late Middeleeuwen (Brussels, 1998), pp. 103–07.

in the internal social hierarchy. Often it is only by means of these privileges that the nobles can be identified in the sources, as comprehensive lists of noblemen do not exist for the medieval period in general. Therefore, a source-oriented strategy should be adopted, resulting in (at times overlapping) lists of groups of nobles sharing the same external characteristics, e.g., those who bore certain titles, attended the summons of estates, were knighted, possessed a castle, or held seignorial rights as fief. The compilation of the nobility as subject group thus requires straightforward criteria according to which individuals are counted as nobles or as commoners. These criteria can be put into practice by using them as heuristic tools to identify the nobles in the various sources, without a priori answering the question of to what extent these nobles can meaningfully be lumped together as the nobility.

This research restricts itself to the noblemen active in Zeeland during the Burgundian-Habsburg period, which means that they were linked to the county by residence, office, or property. This geographical demarcation does not exclude nobles originating from other regions—the higher segment of the nobility especially showed little interests in regional borders—but I will only examine their activities in Zeeland. The chosen chronological delineation (ca. 1430–1535) seems to begin in medias res from the viewpoint of the existing historical knowledge about the nobility in late medieval Zeeland, but it corresponds with the integration of the county into the Burgundian-Habsburg personal union and the gradual expansion of the princely authority through the evolving state institutions. In some cases, the findings for the period in question only make sense if they are understood as part of developments that exceed time limits of this research.

The key question concerns the thematic demarcation of the subject population: who was noble in late medieval Zeeland? Nobility is understood here as a personal legal status, of which the meaning depended on one’s control over political, economic, and social power. The third variant of the three interdependent forms of power—the ability to command recognition of one’s honor or esteem by upholding a noble life style—was of especial importance for the nobles, but it is difficult for the historian to grasp. The external characteristics of the noble lifestyle and the privileges the nobles enjoyed are used to identify the nobles in the sources, such as the possession of fiefs, titles, noble marriages, military activities, public offices, et


29 This decision is prompted by practical considerations and is compensated by the fact that most of the foreign nobles will be covered by the project as a whole. For a similar approach, see Sablonier, Adel im Wandel, pp. 18–19.

cetera. Some of the characteristics and privileges were basic and nearly universal, but regional variation necessitates the formulation of specific heuristic criteria for each case study separately. In the case of Zeeland, for example, the possession of ambacht—a specific form of seigniorial rights—is an important, though insufficient, indicator of the noble status. This points out another complication, that is, the fact that only a few privileges were strictly preserved for (all) nobles. Multiple criteria therefore should be employed in order to determine the nobility of certain individuals, especially when studying the lower echelon of the nobility and the newcomers.

**Sources and Identification**

A research population is preferably derived from a continuous and homogeneous source, such as serial accounts of an institution containing the payment of wages. Unfortunately, documents listing noblemen in a certain region over a longer period are almost nonexistent for the late medieval period. In the case of Zeeland, the administration of the count proves helpful to some extent, as lists of fief holders were drawn up by the receiver of Zeeland for taxation purposes. At least from the beginning of the fifteenth century onwards, noble status was certainly no longer required to be enfeoffed with ambacht (lordships comprising of the low jurisdiction and significant financial privileges, but not of landownership), but the majority of the ambachtsheren (lords) were still nobles. Some of the non-noble lords were state officials or members of the urban magistrature and can be easily identified.

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34 Over 80% of the ambachten in Zeeland were in the hands of nobles during the Burgundian-Habsburg period; see Arie van Steensel, “Edelen.” A specific difficulty is that, in general, noble privileges were closely linked to the possession of ambacht because of the original requirement for ambachtsheren to be of noble birth. These privileges (such as attendance to the States of Zeeland, the right to keep swans or to hunt) were restricted to possessors of ambacht with a minimum size in the late fifteenth century, so these rights were actually enjoyed on the grounds of enfeoffment rather than nobility. Non-noble ambachtsheren therefore enjoyed these rights too. For an extensive analysis of the ambachten in Zeeland, see Cees Dekker, Zuid-Beveland. De historische geografie en de instellingen van een Zeeuwse eiland in de Middeleeuwen (Assen, 1971), chapter 3.
but the real challenge is to filter out those lords who still held small portions of ambacht but had abandoned the noble lifestyle altogether. In this case, multiple criteria are used to identify the nobles, such as noble birth (by figuring out genealogies) or princely offices. The status of the individuals included in the research population has in all cases been determined separately.

With only a few exceptions, all noblemen in Zeeland were in possession of ambacht, but not all of them could maintain the same lifestyle. For a substantial part of the compiled research population, only their genealogical details, fiefs, and public offices could be determined, making it difficult to give a detailed analysis of the social dimension of their noble status. The reason for choosing a broad definition of the research population is that the inclusion of the lower echelon sheds more light on the grey area between nobility and non-nobility as well as the process in which the maintenance of a noble lifestyle became meaningless or even impossible for certain individuals of noble birth. Processes of social mobility and differentiation within the nobility in a certain region can only be understood if all people of noble birth are included in the subject population, not just the better-documented individuals who clearly exhibited a noble lifestyle.

With the list of noble ambachtsher en as starting point, other sources are used to clarify unclear cases and to identify individuals with shared external features. The nobles who were summoned for the Estates can be traced in the accounts of the receiver for the fifteenth century, while other well-documented characteristics for the higher echelon of the subject population are knightly titles, possession of castles, princely offices, family ties, and military activities. In the framework of the main research question, which inquires about the reproductive strategies of noblemen and the position and role of noblemen in society, I focus on the (public) careers of the members of the subject population, their accumulation and preservation of properties, and their family strategies. Other aspects of the lives and activities of the noblemen are more difficult to retrieve because of the nature of the available sources, and it is doubtful that the prosopographical method is suitable to analyze scattered and unrepresentative records, for example on cultural activities.

For analytical purposes, the research population has been divided into three layers according to the criteria used to identify the noblemen in the sources (see Table 1). It is redundant to elaborate on this stratification model for the argument made here, but it must be stressed that a contemporary classification does not imply that such dividing lines indeed existed in the late medieval period or that the nobility was a closed hierarchical entity. Basically, the high noblemen were those who

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35 Compare the welgeboren (literally the “well-born”) in the county of Holland, in Janse, Ridderschap, pp. 43–47.

wielded important political power, had access to the princely court, and held properties in several regions, such as the families of Van Borssele and Van Bourgondië.\textsuperscript{37} The modal nobles—for example the knightly families of Van Reimerswaal and Van Kats—acted mainly on the regional level, where they held important offices, extensive lordships, and were summoned to the Estates. The activities of the noblemen belonging to lower stratum of the population were mainly restricted to the local sphere, as small lords and holders of local offices. Some families classified as low nobility still held important offices and accumulated wealth, as was the case with the Van Wissenkerke’s from Middelburg. But despite the political influence and wealth of this family, none of its members was knighted or summoned at the Estates as member of the knighthood (\textit{ridderschap}).

Not all nobles active in Zeeland during the Burgundian-Habsburg period are included in the subject population. The core prosopographical research and analysis is limited to three sample years in order to keep the project feasible, giving cross sections of the noble population in 1431, 1475, and 1535 to uncover the structure of the nobility and its dynamics of change.\textsuperscript{38} The three populations are made up of all active noblemen, minor heirs, and widows identified according to multiple source-based criteria. Relevant biographical data are only gathered about these individuals, taking into account that the preserved records are unevenly dis-

\textsuperscript{37} Werner Paravicini, “Expansion et intégration. La noblesse des Pays-Bas à la cour de Philippe le Bon,” \textit{Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden} 95 (1980), 298–314.

\textsuperscript{38} In general, three generations are covered by the sample years, although the exact years were dictated by the available sources. For a similar approach, see Carpenter, \textit{Locality and Polity}, p. 36.
tributed over the members. The total number of noblemen involved in the research otherwise is far larger, because the genealogical links among the three groups are reconstructed as well as, for instance, political and economic networks.

SOCIAL COHESION AND EXPLANATION

The subject population is to some extend a fictitious one, depending on the chosen research procedures and the available sources. When the noblemen in Zeeland are lumped together on account of their shared legal standing and distinguished as social category, that is, the nobility, this does not necessarily mean that these men perceived themselves as socially equal or showed solidarity, acting as a social group (in the sociological sense of the word) with shared interests, regulating values, and frequent interaction. In other words, the aggregate of noblemen was a heterogeneous entity that lacked a strong common identity, a group comprised of individuals with different interests in the noble status. What are the implications of this observation for the use of the prosopographical method?

A first merit of the prosopographical method is that general statements can be made, based on a large group of samples and sometimes derived from rather feeble documentation. Deducing general patterns (such as strategies regarding marriages and wealth accumulation) from the evidence of the whole group may seem self-evident at first hand, but it is more likely that variation in behavioral patterns occurred within the population. High noblemen and noble officials, for instance, had many more possibilities and means to acquire fiefs than local noblemen. A solution to this pitfall of the prosopographical method is to distinguish segments of or groups within the population and analyze them separately, while corroborating general patterns with individual cases. External factors also may have played a decisive role in the formation of the nobility as a social group. Morsel, for instance, has convincingly argued that the upper stratum of the nobility in Franconia only emerged as a cooperative social group with a common identity in opposition to the competing prince and cities—the constitution of the nobility as social discourse and, consequently, as a social reality. The same social construction (Soziogenese) of the nobility may apply for the supra-regional nobility by the active policy of the Burgundian dukes through the erection, for instance, of the Order of the Golden Fleece, and on the regional level for the members of the knighthood (ridderschap) who were summoned to the Estates.

A second problem arising from the mixed composition of the nobility concerns the sources. The quality and quantity of the available records varies strongly over time and among the members of the research population, depending on the

status of noblemen as well as on the type of information. For instance, little or no evidence can be found on the marriages or cultural activities of the noblemen from the lower stratum compared to the well-documented noble families, such as Van Borsssele, Van Kruiningen, or Van Reimerswaal. This means further that only a little of the demanded biographical information, except for the distribution of ambiachten and offices, could be fully retrieved for all the members of the population. Therefore, the most “reliable” quantitative analysis of the prosopographical data restricts itself primarily to the political and economic aspects of noble life, while other general observations, not to mention statistical analyses, are possible only for certain segments of the population. A more cautious approach is to cluster the members of the population according to the heuristic criteria they meet, allowing an interplay between premises and evidence. From this starting point, different ideal-typical noble “profiles,” with corresponding strategies and way of living, are derived. For instance, state officers aspiring to nobility acted in quite a different manner compared to local noblemen from families which had enjoyed a noble status for several generations. At last, individual cases of (deviant) behavior can be contrasted with the general patterns to find explanations.

The prosopographical method takes the individual as the prime unit of analysis and explanation. The position and role of the nobility in society can only be properly explained if not only the motives of the actors but also the context within which the action takes places are accounted for. Social and material structures and all kind of institutions not only serve as context for individual action but also are partly the outcome of the same action. A strong focus on the research group would result in a distorted view of the noblemen’s position in the society of late medieval Zeeland. For instance, external factors (political and social-economic developments), institutions (family, law of inheritance), values (the appreciation of nobility), and the scope of interaction with commoners (especially the state officials and members of the urban elites) must not be neglected. Nobles also cooperated with other elites in case of mutual political and economic interests, although the significance and durability of these networks are not easily established.


41 Michael Hechter and Satoshi Kanazawa, “Sociological Rational Choice Theory,” Annual Review of Sociology 23 (1997), 192–93. Although individuals in general act according to certain patterns (rule-based behavior for example), these patterns, of course, are not necessarily static or compelling.

multiple layers of institutions, networks, interest groups, and families that structured and were restructured by the actions of the members of the noble population must be mapped for a comprehensive understanding of the late medieval nobility. Therefore, the compiled biographical data on the noblemen in Zeeland should be complemented with other historical research, in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of their position and role in society. The aim is not a prosopography in the strict sense of the word that merely focuses on the internal structure of the nobility in Zeeland. Instead, the goal is to map and analyze the interaction of these noblemen with the “outside world.”

SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY

An explication of a method of research should be substantiated by an empirical demonstration. With the research still in progress and the methodological focus of this article, this demand can only be partially met here. No more than some tentative observations regarding the social and geographical mobility among the members of the research population will be presented, in order to illustrate the specific value of the prosopographical method for the research into the noble population of late medieval Zeeland.

The medieval noble population continuously altered in composition and size as a result of the unrelated processes of extinction and mobility. The extinction rate was high among nobles in the later Middle Ages; according to Perroy, the nobility in France lost half its members within any given century. The gap left behind was not necessarily filled by newcomers, as Wood rightly argues, because social mobility bore no direct relation to demographic pressures. The three constructed cross-sections offer an opportunity to establish the renewal rhythm of the noble population in late medieval Zeeland. From the population of 1431, counting 173 noblemen, only 89 members had descendants in 1475 and 35 members in 1535. However, from the cross-section of 1535, including 160 members, 83 nobles descended in direct line from the 35 nobles belonging to the population of 1431. The data show a high (social) extinction rate among the noble families in Zeeland, but the low continuity did not implicate a huge decrease of the noble population (see Table 1). The high number of “drop outs” was first compensated for by internal growth; the number of members of remaining families more than doubled within a time span of a century. A result of this was a process of concentration, especially

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as noblemen from the higher and modal strata took advantage of the situation and enhanced their political and economic position.

The noble population in Zeeland was furthermore strengthened by migration and upward social mobility. The latter factor was of little importance in the county, as only two cases of ennoblement by the prince could be established during the period in question. Examples of successful processes of gradual ennoblement are also rare. Only the originally non-noble families of Van der Hooge and Van Serooskerke fit into this profile, as they succeeded in commanding recognition of their aspired noble status by acquiring ambacht and public offices as well as by living a noble lifestyle over successive generations. All in all, the chances of upward social mobility were actually small and reserved only for the few officials who were in favor with the count. The strong emphasis on upward social mobility and the importance of "state service" in historiography needs to be put into perspective. From the viewpoint of historians studying administrative institutions, social mobility may have increased in the late medieval period, but overall the possibilities of ennoblement most likely diminished for other segments of the population, such as rich farmers and members of the urban elites.

The main explanation for the origin of the newcomers—36 new names in 1475 and 47 in 1535—who joined the ranks of the noble population in Zeeland is geographical mobility. In particular, foreign nobles who belonged to the upper stratum of the population in their home county could gain possessions in Zeeland through marriage or through purchase of princely endowment. For instance, Louis of Bruges, lord of Guuthuse, acquired lordships in Zeeland by purchasing ambachten that were confiscated by or reverted to the count in 1454 and 1474. In spite of his possessions and his marriage to the daughter of the lord of Veere, the most important nobleman in Zeeland, he never settled himself in the county. This pattern was followed by other noblemen, resulting in an increase in the number of foreign noblemen with seigniorial interests in Zeeland from eight in 1431 to thirty-seven a century later. Princely patronage was, interestingly enough, seldom the decisive factor in redistribution of feudal possessions. Therefore, one might be cautious about speaking about state service as the "lifebuoy" for the nobility to survive. The integration of Zeeland into the Burgundian personal union meant that

45 Klaas Lievensz, from Zierikzee, received a letter of ennoblement from Maximilian of Habsburg in 1492, who also ennobled Lieven Hugenz, from Middelburg, in 1512.
47 E.g., the contributions in Zwischen Nicht-Adel und Adel, ed. Kurt Andermann and Peter Johanek (Stuttgart, 2001).
48 See Caron, La noblesse, p. 379.
high noblemen from other parts of the Burgundian lands could more easily acquire the financially interesting ambachten. However, they did not move to Zeeland, as the islands were difficult to access and relatively far away from the centers of power. The impact of this mobility, and of the absenteeism of a significant part of the noble population, on the overall position of the nobility in the county remains to be assessed.

By tracing the origins, family relations, possessions, and other activities of members of the research population, it becomes possible to draw well-grounded conclusions about social and geographical mobility among the noble population in Zeeland. The advantage of the regional perspective is that the whole spectrum of the nobility is taken into account, without putting a one-sided emphasis on those in state service or on the few success stories of upward social mobility. A differentiated approach can also be adopted, due to the threefold classification of the noble population, showing that the aspirations and strategies of noble families were not always identical. Finally, the choice for the individual noble as the prime unit of analysis does justice to the variation in power, wealth, and status among members of the same family and sheds more light on the sometimes irreconcilable individual and family interests.

While some indigenous noblemen, joined by newcomers from elsewhere, succeeded in consolidating or even improving their social-economic position, many other members of the research population disappear from sight. They were mainly noblemen who belonged to the lower stratum of the noble population and who simply are no longer mentioned in the sources. Therefore, it is difficult to retrieve their fate. Although probably half of the disappeared noble lines became extinct due to biological causes, it also frequently happened that families disappeared as the result of "social extinction." Petty noblemen with little ambacht sold their seigniorial possession and gave up their noble status. Often it is argued that this was the outcome of a process of impoverishment, but a less dramatic interpretation may hold too. Although difficult to back up with many examples, due to the lack of sources, research shows that a considerable part of the noble lords from the lower echelon of the noble population in Zeeland sold their ambachten voluntary. Nobility no longer provided relevant political or financial privileges for them, and so they gave up the noble lifestyle altogether, as far as they were still distinguishing themselves from rich farmers or members of the urban elites. This change in appreciation of nobility reflects the political and social-economic developments of the later Middle Ages.

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49 Sablonier, Adel im Wandel, p. 91.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the possibilities of applying the prosopographic method to a relatively heterogeneous research population, more precisely, the noblemen in the county of Zeeland during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This novel approach proves fruitful so far, albeit time-consuming. The database with biographical information provides empirical evidence that is used to test existing assumptions about the late medieval nobility and to put forward new hypotheses. Numerical data can, with some reservation, be derived about the size of the noble population over a longer period and about the development of the nobility’s political and social-economic position in society. Initial quantitative results suggest that the higher and modal strata of the noble population, enriched with a couple of high foreign noblemen and ennobled state officials, succeeded in maintaining their power and wealth during the period in question. This refutes the widespread opinion that the position of the nobility in society was weakened by economic developments, on the one hand, and the rise of the towns and the central state, on the other. The majority of the noble families seem to have adapted themselves pretty well to the changing political and economic field, without becoming dependent on state service, as has been suggested by some historians. The changing framework did have an impact on the structure of the noble population though, as nobles, particularly those from the lower echelon, gave up the pursuit of nobility and its corresponding lifestyle.

The internal structure of the noble population is also revealed by means of the prosopographical method. A number of noble profiles can be constructed with the diverse biographical data, which enables the measurement of variance and change over time and the comparison to other regions. The choice for a relatively broad definition of the subject population, without assuming strong social cohesion or cooperative action among the individuals, does justice to the open and changing character of the nobility as a social group, but it also necessitates a tricky differentiated analysis of the noble population. The size of the noble population is ultimately the Achilles heel of the research into the noblemen in Zeeland, as answering the question of what political and economic role the nobles played in society requires more than a focus on the members of population only. Political and social-economic developments that changed the structure of society also must be taken into account, in order to understand the activities and strategies of the noblemen, and certain aspects of the interaction between nobles and non-nobles may be more effectively revealed by means of other methods of research.