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What is This?
Kinship, Property, and Identity: Noble Family Strategies in Late-Medieval Zeeland

Arie van Steensel

Abstract

The practices of marriage and inheritance and the representation of kinship among the medieval nobility are often studied separately, despite the argument that changes in conceptions of kinship accompanied the evolution of family structures, property transmission systems, and political organization. This article combines the practical and ideological aspects of kinship by analyzing its meaning for the nobility in late-medieval Zeeland. It demonstrates that the variety in power, wealth, and status among the noble families resulted in different reproductive strategies according to their standing and objectives. Regional institutions and property structures had a great impact on aristocratic family strategies in Zeeland, but did not result in different family structures or conceptions of lineage compared to the surrounding principalities.

Keywords

medieval nobility, kinship, marriage and inheritance, family strategies, Zeeland, Low Countries

In 1534, the knight Jan Ruijchrok van den Werve requested the count’s permission to divide his feudal estates in Holland and Zeeland among his two sons and five daughters, or to assign annuities (renten) from these properties to them. According to custom, his estates in Holland should have devolved on his eldest son, but since his (allodial) properties in both counties suffered from heavy inundations in the preceding years, he sought to dispose of his feudal properties by will to provide all his children with a substantial inheritance. The jonkheer Cornelis de Cock van Opiejen had other worries: in 1555, considering that “nothing is more certain than death and nothing more uncertain than its hour,” he drew up his last will and testament on his sickbed in The Hague. The childless nobleman bequeathed his estates in Zeeland and a house in Middelburg to his nephew Anthonis Crabel, on condition that Anthonis incorporate Cornelis’s coat of arms into his own, and henceforth bear the surname Crabel van Opiejen.1

The two examples illustrate the divergent concerns of the late-medieval and early modern noble families. On one hand, nobles strove to provide their offspring with a livelihood; on the other, they tried to reduce the risks of natural and social extinction. In order to attain these objectives, nobles

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had to circumvent the institutions that governed the transmission of property, but the strategies that they developed differed according to their motives. Cornelis sought to create a fictional continuity of his lineage by conferring his name and arms to his inheritor. Jan was more concerned with the well-being of his children; he opted to divide his properties among them, rather than to allow them devolve to his eldest son alone, who would then succeed him and have sufficient means to maintain a noble lifestyle. It is this tension between the different familial reproduction strategies among the nobility in late-medieval Zeeland that are teased out in this article.

Recent studies have suggested that the later medieval and early modern periods were characterized by a trend toward better established family strategies among western Europe’s nobility, and more consistent patterns of property devolution and succession to offices and political privilege. These developments led to a greater emphasis on patrilineality—that is, the integral transfer of power, wealth, and status in the male line of descent. This view thus assumes a coevolution of, on one hand, marriage regimes, inheritance practices, and ideas of kinship, and, on the other, systems of property holding and political organization. The complex interrelatedness of these factors, explaining the interplay between individual choices and broader social change, is yet to be fully disentangled, particularly when taking into account regional institutional differences and variations in familial reproduction strategies among the late-medieval rural and urban elites.

The case of the nobility in late-medieval Zeeland, one of the coastal provinces of the Low Countries, provides a fitting case study to interrogate the assumptions about noble family strategies and conceptions of kinship, because of the processes of urbanization, commercialization, and state formation that affected the position of the nobility in its society. After outlining the evolution of the noble population in Zeeland, the question will be addressed as to how noble families tried to maintain their privileged social position through marriage and inheritance. This entailed circumventing rules and social norms to transfer estates, political contacts, and social status from one generation to the other or from one family or individual to the other. Second, it will be briefly discussed how different family solidarities evolved among the noble families in late-medieval Zeeland. Finally, it will be explored as to how the practices of kinship related to the conceptions of kinship among the nobility, by analyzing the representation of ancestry through names and heraldic iconography. Lineage was an essential aspect of noble identity, as it justified the social superiority of the nobility and drew a line between nobles and commoners. The analysis not only sheds light on noble kinship in late-medieval Zeeland but also elucidates certain peculiarities in comparison to the surrounding principalities, thereby contributing to research on the nobility in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands.

Nobility in Late-Medieval Zeeland

Zeeland was a relative small county that comprised several islands between Holland, Brabant, and Flanders. It formed a personal union with Holland. Both counties came under Burgundian rule in 1428 and were incorporated into a growing territorial complex which gradually became more economically and politically integrated. Zeeland was part of the highly urbanized and commercialized coastal Low Countries and, being geographically favorably situated, profited from the international trade routes to the Flemish and Brabantine cities. Still, the two largest towns of Zeeland, Middelburg and Zierikzee, remained relatively modest, with just over 6,000 inhabitants at the end of the fifteenth century. But possibly almost half of the county’s estimated population of 85,000 lived in towns in this period.

In contrast to Flanders and Holland, where cities and towns were the dominant political force, the nobility enjoyed a relative strong position in late-medieval Zeeland. The nobles’ power and privileges were based on their dominance over the countryside as seigneural lords. They derived their authority from the seigneurie banale that they held in liege from the counts of Zeeland. These
seigneurial rights partly originated from landed lordship, but they were no longer related to landownership in the late-medieval period. The lords (*ambachtsheren*) were entrusted with the low jurisdiction, only a few mighty lords held high lordships. On the basis of their fiefs, the lords were summoned for the States of Zeeland and enjoyed significant fiscal and honorable privileges. Typical for lordships (*ambachten*) in Zeeland was that ownership was reserved for noblemen until the early fifteenth century. Moreover, lordships could be split in cases of inheritance, sale, or other form of alienation.5

The *ambachtsheren* in Zeeland were responsible for gathering taxes in their lordships; the comital aids were levied as a land tax. For this reason, the count’s receiver registered all fief holders along with the size, location, and origins of their lordships. These lists allow to identify the noble fief holders in Zeeland and ascertain their lines of descent, although registration was far from complete. Besides, non-noble lords have to be filtered out of the initial lists of fief holders by corroborating the details from the receivers’ accounts with information from various other sources. In this way, a fairly accurate list of noble lords in Zeeland for the sample years 1431, 1475, and 1535 have been compiled. The reconstruction of these cross-sections of the noble population makes it possible to uncover its structure and dynamics of change.6

Identification of nobles active in Zeeland in 1431 remains incomplete due to deficiencies in the sources, but a number of 190 individuals can be identified. The noble population was relatively stable in the fifteenth century, as 205 nobles are counted for 1475, but its numbers decreased by 27 percent, to 151, in 1535. The composition of the Zeeland nobility was highly differentiated through variations in power, wealth, and status. It is important to take these differences in social profile among the nobles into account while analyzing their family strategies. For analytical purposes, the nobles are therefore classified into upper, middling, and lesser strata according to multiple criteria, such as property, offices, kinship ties, knightly titles, and noble lifestyle.7 Nobles in Zeeland shared the same personal legal status obtained by birth—full nobility required four noble grandparents—or princely elevation, but ultimately nobility depended on one’s ability to wield political, economic, and social power. It was essential to command recognition of one’s honor or esteem by upholding a noble lifestyle.8 The lower end of the nobility in particular came under increasing pressure in the later Middle Ages, since their financial resources to maintain a noble lifestyle were limited. In general, however, the nobility maintained its dominant political position throughout the later medieval period.

The continuity and renewal of the nobility can be unraveled by reconstructing the genealogical ties between the individuals from the three subpopulations. Figure 1 shows the number of nobles who had direct descendants in the next sample year as well as the number of newcomers in 1475 and 1535. Two important observations can be made: first, the renewal rate of the noble population was relatively high. In 1535, only 89 of 151 nobles were direct descendants of 39 nobles from the subpopulation of 1431. This means that in 1431, 151 nobles (79 percent) had no descendants a century later, and 62 nobles in 1535 were newcomers. Second, despite the disappearance of many noble families, the internal growth of the nobility was strong. In 1535, 59 percent of the nobility still descended from the population of 1431. This gave the noble population continuity, and implies that noble power became concentrated in the hands of fewer families.

The picture changes slightly, though, if one looks at families as a unit rather than individuals. The number of noble families in Zeeland decreased by 46 percent from 1431 (125 families) to 1535 (68 families). Only 34 families (27 percent) from 1431 can be found among those of 1535.9 This percentage is slightly higher than in other regions, but the fact that the lower echelon of the Zeeland nobility is included in the computations may partly account for the differences.10 Besides, noble lineages are not to be found in the sources as such; their reconstruction depends on the historian’s conception of family and lineage, as well as his or her methodological approach.11
The renewal rate of the noble population in late-medieval Zeeland is, firstly, explained by a high extinction rate that existed among noble families; on average, 38 percent of noblemen died without male heir because of natural causes or because they remained unmarried. Another, more elusive, factor affecting the noble population was social extinction, meaning that noble families gave up or lost their noble status.12 There are many examples of lesser-noble families who could not maintain a noble lifestyle and who sold their lordships, especially from the late fifteenth century onward. But the scale of this development is difficult to determine; the families in question often quite literally disappear from the sources. The loss of noble families was partly compensated for by the growth of the existing families, but other factors included upward social mobility and geographical mobility. Only a few non-noble families managed to join the noble ranks in late-medieval Zeeland. No more than seven individuals were knighted by or received a letter of ennoblement from the prince between 1420 and 1550. They were mostly state officers or members of the urban elites who aspired to noble status. The new nobles and their offspring constituted only 2 percent of the noble population of Zeeland in 1475 and 10 percent in 1535.13

These ennobled families constituted only a quarter of the total number of newcomers among the nobility of Zeeland between 1431 and 1535. A clear majority of the newcomers were noble families from the surrounding principalities that had acquired properties and/or offices in Zeeland and that sometimes took up residency in the county. Geographical mobility was thus by far a more important factor in the renewal of the noble population than social mobility.14 Medieval noblemen had never been bound to territorial borders in their socioeconomic activities, but the incorporation of Zeeland into the Burgundian–Habsburg personal union gave a strong impetus to geographical mobility.15 It became easier to acquire feudal estates over borders because the various principalities came under the same lord, and more importantly, it became politically strategic to acquire properties in various principalities. There is little evidence that the dukes directly encouraged or brokered cross-border marriages; rather, it was the noblemen themselves who took the initiative in creating new familial networks.

Figure 1. Continuity and Renewal of the Noble Population in Late-Medieval Zeeland.
Among the foreign newcomers in Zeeland were a considerable number of high noblemen and noble state officials of lesser status, but they maintained their own distinct social and professional networks. It is therefore incorrect to assume that a new Burgundian–Habsburg supraregional state nobility was formed, although the mightiest noble families from the various provinces became increasingly integrated through intermarriage from the mid-fifteenth century onward. Zeeland clearly became part of the horizon of foreign noble families, even though not all noblemen with properties took up residence in the county. The share of noblemen who did not regularly reside in Zeeland rose from 6 percent to 31 percent between 1431 and 1535. This development affected the position of the nobility in society, as the absentee lords took less interest in local and regional political and administrative affairs.

**Noble Marriage Patterns**

The Burgundian–Habsburg princes rarely played a direct role in the acquisition of properties by foreign noblemen in Zeeland. There are a few examples of princely patronage, whereby lordships were sold to noblemen who did not previously have interests in Zeeland, but on the whole nobles themselves took the initiative to acquire (feudal) properties in the county. To do so, they most often established relations with Zeeland noble families; almost all newcomers obtained their estates in the county by marriage or inheritance. Hence, marriage was a key element in the strategies of noble families in and outside Zeeland to consolidate and enlarge their patrimony. The choice of spouse was not solely determined by material interests, but the result of a range of political, economic, social, and legal considerations, including strengthening political ties and elevating the social status of the family. Overall, the strategies of the noble families in Zeeland predominantly led to endogamous marriage patterns, but that is not to say endogamy was an end in itself.

The power, wealth, and status that came with nobility were primarily transferred through marriage and inheritance, making noble marriages a matter of the head rather than the heart. Moreover, because of the various interests at stake, it was usually not the future spouses who chose liaisons: as is proven by marriage contracts, it was fathers, mothers, and brothers who were directly involved in negotiating an agreement, while other relatives acted as witnesses. The forming of a new couple also forged a new alliance between two kin networks. From this perspective, marriage strategies structured the noble population and strengthened its cohesion; it was a means of social self-definition, and to a certain extent determined the redistribution of power and wealth. Crouch puts it neatly: “[t]he family was the heart that pumped blue blood around society.”

The nobility in late-medieval Zeeland was far from homogeneous, and therefore marriage patterns varied according to status differences between families. Besides, the choice of a marriage partner was to a certain extent determined by specific circumstances, such as the state of the marriage market and the family situation of potential partners. The variation in patterns is set out in Table 1, which gives a breakdown of the status of the marriage partners of nobles according to the classification of the research population. Nobles who married within the Zeeland nobility predominantly married partners of equal status. Those who deviated from this pattern were younger brothers, noblemen who could marry an heiress, and members of families who were moving in the noble hierarchy. Examples of noblemen of the middling stratum marrying non-noble partners are few. Four examples are known for 1475 and three for 1535 in which case noblemen married daughters of state or urban officials. The two daughters of the impoverished nobleman Guido van Blois (d. 1527) were also married to non-noble comital officers. The category “other” in Table 1, therefore, mostly comprises noble partners of equal status drawn from the surrounding principalities of Brabant, Flanders, Hainault, and Holland. Those noblemen ranked as middling nobility increasingly found their spouses outside Zeeland; the overall relative share of foreign partners grew from 45 percent in 1431 to 69 percent in 1535. Consequently, the noble families in Zeeland became less entwined.
The mighty nobles classified under the upper stratum mostly found their spouses from outside Zeeland, as the number of suitable partners within the county was very limited. For them, marriage was not merely a means of begetting offspring, it was a means to strengthen political connections, to enlarge possessions, and to prove high social status. These considerations resulted in a highly endogamous marriage practice that strengthened the internal cohesion of the high nobility in the Burgundian–Habsburg Netherlands. Adriaan van Borssele (d. 1468), Lord of Brigdamme, for instance, first married Maria van Kats, the sole heiress to her father’s properties and those of her maternal grandfather Floris van Borssele (d. 1447). With the consent of the Philip the Good, these properties were largely transferred to Adriaan before Maria’s death. He married for a second time in 1457, to Anna of Burgundy (d. 1508), the Duke’s illegitimate daughter. Adriaan died unexpectedly during the marriage of Charles the Bold with Margaret of York in 1468 in Bruges, leaving no posterity. A long-lasting legal conflict over his inheritance ensued between Anna of Burgundy, who remarried to Adolph of Cleves, Lord of Dreischor (d. 1492), and a distant relative of Adriaan, Hendrik van Borssele, Lord of Veere (d. 1474). The case was initially to be resolved by a marriage between Anna’s stepson, Philip of Cleves (d. 1528), and Hendrik’s granddaughter and heiress, Anna van Borssele (d. 1518). The involvement of Adolph of Cleves and Anna’s father Wolfert (d. 1486) in the Flemish revolt against Maximilian of Austria undermined this plan, and so a marriage was arranged in 1485 between Anna and Philip of Burgundy (d. 1498). The latter was a son of Anthony, bastard of Burgundy (d. 1504), and Anna of Burgundy’s nephew.

Whereas high-noble families established ties with foreign noble and even princely families, the marriage networks of those families ranked as middling nobility typically had a (intra)regional character. For instance, the members of the families of Blois van Treslong, Van der Maalstede, Van Oostende, Van Reimerswaal, and Van Renesse had the same objectives as upper-noble families, but their marriage alliances were confined to families from Zeeland and the immediately surrounding principalities. For smaller knightly families, such as Crabel, Van den Abeele, Van Botland, Van Bruelis, and Van Stapel, it was more difficult to enter into intraregional marriages. Apart from material interests, social status was an important consideration for these noblemen, as they typically showed a preference for spouses from established knightly families—that is, from families who had knights among their members and who were summoned for the States of Zeeland. A comparably strong homogamous marriage pattern has also been established for the knighthood of late-medieval Holland.

For the noble families that were particularly active in state service, yet another distinctive marriage pattern can be discerned. Noble state officials more easily crossed social boundaries and married with partners of non-noble origin in order to construct and consolidate professional networks. A fine example is the family of Van Kats, whose successive generations were active as counsellors of the Court of Holland and Zeeland in The Hague, and who also held the office of bailiff in several towns in both counties. Laurens van Kats (d. 1442) was married to Elisabeth van Heenvliet, who came from an established noble family in Zeeland. He found partners of high-noble birth for his

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eldest son Jan, who married Maria van Borssele, and his daughter Haze, who was married to Jan van Wassenaar, Lord of Voorburg in Holland. However, his second son Jacob married a daughter of Godschalk Oom, a non-noble member of Dordrecht’s ruling elite and an important officer in The Hague, who aspired to noble status. Laurens’ son Lieven married a daughter of a commoner, Poppe Haymansz, who was a burgomaster of Zierikzee and councilor of the Court of Holland and Zeeland. Finally, the fourth son, Wolfert, married with Margaretha van der Buttinge, one of the two daughters of a petty nobleman from Walcheren with ties to Middelburg’s ruling families. This pattern of marriages was repeated by successive generations, showing clearly that the Van Kats family used marriages to build up and maintain political alliances and professional networks that focused on the Court in The Hague and the urban ruling elites. Another characteristic of these socioadministrative networks was that many of its (noble) members attended university. It should be emphasized, though, that only a minority of the Zeeland nobility held comital or urban offices, and so the number of families that established marital bonds with non-noble families out of professional ambitions remained fairly small.

The prevailing marriage patterns among the lesser stratum of the nobility are difficult to determine, as the identity of partners is only sporadically documented. It may be assumed that these lesser-nobles had the same objective—of securing their social status—as the more distinguished noble families, and there are indeed several examples of marriages between noble families of lesser status in Zeeland. However, the sociopolitical dividing line between petty noblemen and rich townsmen and peasants was eroded by increasing economic parity, and intermarriage with non-noble families occurred frequently, even at first marriage. Some members of lesser-noble families did manage to marry into knightly families. A clear gender-bias cannot be established, but an age criteria can: it was mostly younger brothers and daughters who married partners of lesser status. Upward mobility within the noble hierarchy proved to be difficult and was not only dependent on marriage strategies. For instance, Jan van Wissenkerke and his sons, who lived in Middelburg and enjoyed the patronage of the Lord of Veere, built up a strong power base and accumulated considerable wealth as comital, urban, and ecclesiastical officials in the mid-fifteenth century. Even though two of Jan’s eight sons, Hendrik and Anthonis, married with daughters of knightly families, none of his offspring succeeded in entering the higher ranks of the noble hierarchy.

Finally, marrying into noble families was of utmost importance for state officials and townsmen who aspired to noble status. Nobility was not merely a legal status but required social recognition to which ties with established noble families contributed. The few that entered the noble ranks in Zeeland were all knighted or ennobled by the prince, but in general they came from families that had already invested in living a noble lifestyle and established ties with noble families for two or three successive generations, since social recognition of their new noble status was required. Some examples are Jan Ruijchrok van den Werve (d. 1474) who married Zoete van Domburg (and of whom the abovementioned Jan was a descendant), Klaas van Kats (d. 1521) who married Getrude van Botland (his grandmother was an illegitimate daughter of Laurens van Kats), and Jeronimus van Serooskerke (d. 1571) who married Klaas’s granddaughter, Eleonora Micault. These newcomers had outstanding administrative careers, and this influenced their marital strategies. A number of foreign ennobled state officials also married into the Zeeland nobility, such as Eleonora’s father, Jean Micault (d. 1539), receiver general of all the Emperor’s finances and treasurer of the Order of the Golden Fleece; and Jan Pieters (d. 1521), president of the Great Council, who was married to Margaretha van Reimerswaal. The networks of noble state officials were clustered around the state institutions and comital offices. Thus, on first sight, the marriage patterns among the noble families in Zeeland suggest a strong social cohesiveness among the nobility as a group, but a closer look reveals the existence of multiple marriage networks that corresponded with the variance in nobles’ sociopolitical profiles. In fact, it was through patronage networks rather than kinship networks that the upper and lesser echelons of the nobility in Zeeland cohered.
Legitimate and Illegitimate Children

The majority of noblemen in late-medieval Zeeland entered into marriage. At least 189 nobles from the 274 members of the upper and middling strata of the research population married once, and 39 married twice or more. Of the 29 nobles who never married, 6 were clerics, and the marital status of 23 others is unknown.33 The marriage percentage of at least 83 percent is relatively high compared to other west European regions. In parts of Germany, for instance, only about half of all sons and daughters of the high nobility were allowed to marry.34 In Zeeland, however, exclusion from marriage was not an important factor in the strategies of the noble families. How did they then try to curb the size of their families or at least to reduce the number the children who were entitled to a part of the inheritance? Unfortunately, the sources do not answer the first part of the question with certainty. It is difficult to determine whether nobles postponed marriage or practiced any other forms of contraception to reduce fertility.35

The relatively high marriage rate among the noble population in Zeeland explains its strong internal growth. This can be further exemplified by analyzing the number of heirs of the members of the research population, as shown in Table 2. The numbers do not reflect the composition of the families but rather the minimum number of identifiable heirs at the time of the nobles’ deaths. The incomplete numbers for the lesser stratum of 1535 are omitted, but despite these shortcomings, it can relatively accurately be calculated that 62 percent of the nobles ranked as upper and middling nobility were succeeded by legitimate male heirs. The remaining noblemen left heiresses or no children at all due to infertility or singlehood, or because they survived their children. Child mortality rates were high among noble families in the Middle Ages, as the numerous silent witnesses on memorial paintings testify.36

Noblemen with more than eight surviving sons (as for example the above mentioned Jan van Wissenkerke) were exceptional, but at least 71 percent of the couples with children had more than two surviving children.37 In cases where there was more than one son, the patrimony had to be distributed among sons and/or a dowry had to be provided to daughters. This was sometimes considered undesirable, and a well-known preventive strategy among the medieval nobility was to let “redundant” children take up a religious life. Younger brothers and daughters would then give up the idea of marrying and of claiming an inheritance, while being able to support themselves. Although entering into church or convent still required a financial outlay, the integrity of the patrimony was preserved for the next generation.38

It is hard to estimate the total number of nobles in late-medieval Zeeland who joined the secular clergy or took up monastic life. Remarkable examples among the high nobility were Philip of Burgundy (d. 1524), Lord of Blaton, who was elected bishop of Utrecht in 1517, after a diplomatic,
military, and administrative career, and his nephew, Maximilian of Burgundy, who was abbot of Middelburg (1518–36). Furthermore, at least twenty-one noblemen from Zeeland can be identified as canon, deacon, or priest in the period from 1420 to 1550. One of Jan van Wissenkerke’s sons, Huge, for instance, was deacon of Walcheren in 1449. Only two noblemen are known to have entered a convent. One, Jan van Haamstede, the eldest son of the Lord van Haamstede, may have had religious motives to enter the Carthusian cloister of Zelem, Liege, in 1410; he transferred his properties and rights to his younger brother, Floris.

For noblewomen, monastic life was the only way of giving up the worldly life. Unfortunately, it is by no means possible to identify all the noblewomen from Zeeland who entered monasteries throughout the Low Counties. A mere twenty-four religious noblewomen can be identified. Members of the high nobility entered the exclusive convent of St. Waudru in Mons, Hainault, while the convents of Rijnsburg and Leeuwenhorst in Holland and that of St. Victor in Biezelinge, Zeeland also enjoyed popularity among noble families. The evidence does not support the idea that younger sons and daughters in Zeeland entered into church and convent because they were systematically excluded from marriage for reasons of poverty or unfavorable sex ratios: witness the high marriage rates among the nobility. It was, rather, an element in the strategies of noble families to protect the integrity of their patrimony and to strengthen their sociopolitical networks. For this reason, it is understandable that some nobles renounced a religious life as circumstances changed.

The lack of sons was a tragedy for any family involved, as it entailed the end of a noble lineage, but it also opened up possibilities for others to strengthen their position. Heiresses were particularly sought after as marriage partners, even though daughters were excluded from the inheritance of feudal properties in Zeeland until 1477. Numerous foreign noblemen acquired properties in Zeeland by marrying heiresses and obtaining the count’s permission to acquire feudal properties via their spouses. For instance, Anseau van Træzegenies acquired the lordships of his father-in-law Gillis van Arnemuiden in 1439, while Anton van Lalæng, Lord of Hoogstraten, acquired the high lordship of Borssele after marrying heiress Elisabeth van Culemborg. Feudal properties normally returned to the count in the absence of sons, and exceptions only came—at a high price—for those who wished to devolve their properties to daughters. In one case, the petty noblemen Frank van Schengeen successfully appealed, in 1464, against the decision of the Court of Holland and Zeeland not to grant him permission to transfer his lordship on Zuid-Beveland to his son-in-law Boudewijn van der Waarde. Frank argued that this did not harm the count’s interests, as he was still young enough to remarry and produce a son of his own; or otherwise, he could have one of his natural sons legitimized.

Sons born out of wedlock could also profit from a situation in which their father lacked legitimate offspring. In the case of Adriaan van Borssele, Lord of Brigdamme, one of his three illegitimate sons gave up his ecclesiastical career after the death of his father. Jacob van Borssele (d. 1503) married a noblewoman, Agnes van Raaphorst, in 1470, and was legitimized in 1476. He succeeded his father to the offices of chatelain and bailiff of Gouda. In 1459, Frank van Borssele, Lord of Sint-Maartensdijk (d. 1470), who was briefly married to Countess Jacqueline of Bavaria, obtained permission from Philip the Good, to devolve the high lordship and town of Kortgene to his illegitimate son and namesake. The younger Frank van Borssele (d. 1505) married a daughter of the Lord of Wassenaar and was legitimized in 1487. With the support of their fathers, bastards of high noblemen could achieve social recognition of their position as members of the knighthood and start a new family line. This was less likely for bastards of noblemen of lesser status, although Albert of Bavaria granted the illegitimate sons of Willem van Kampen the right of inheritance in the early fourteenth century. Illegitimate children were normally ruled out of their father’s inheritance, and no exceptions were made if they had legitimate half-brothers. Nevertheless, noblemen often made sure that they provided their illegitimate offspring with some properties, annuities, or office.
Illegitimate children were very common among the nobility, irrespective of status, throughout the late-medieval period. There is no evidence that their number increased in the fifteenth century, after Duke Philip the Good set an impressive example with at least twenty-six bastards, neither did their role in society change. There is no evidence speaking for the emergence of a *batardocratie* in Zeeland. Despite the legal and social discrimination, illegitimate sons fulfilled important tasks for the family, and were relatively often responsible for violence, probably because they had little to lose in case of persecution. Furthermore, the upper nobility used their bastards to strengthen their political networks: Hendrik van Borssele, for example, married off his four illegitimate daughters to his clients among the lesser nobility and urban elites.

**The Transfer of Property**

The noble families’ strategies were often aimed at circumventing the rules that governed the transfer of property. The transmission of feudal properties between generations fell under feudal inheritance law, which at the end of the thirteenth century had already attained a distinctive character in Zeeland compared to the surrounding principalities. Its most important characteristic was that all sons had equal rights—thus, *primogenitus* was not favored, as he was in Brabant, Flanders, or Holland. Furthermore, daughters, brothers, and other family members were barred from inheriting feudal properties, meaning that in the absence of sons or substituting grandsons, the possessions reverted to the count. It was only at the end of the fifteenth century that the last stipulation was changed under pressure from the nobility. Zeeland’s new law (*keur*) of 1495 allowed daughters and other kin to act as legal successors in feudal properties.

Feudal law in Zeeland was in general detrimental to the economic position of the noble families because the patrimony had to be split each generation, diminishing their main source of income. In particular, the lesser-noble lords were under pressure from the ongoing fragmentation of lordships and were often forced to sell their remaining properties to nobles with more financial resources. But there were various ways to ease the effects of feudal law. The first strategy was expensive and mainly reserved for the mightiest lords who held high lordships. They could persuade the count to convert their “bad Zeeland” fief into a “good Holland” fief, ensuring that the feudal rules of inheritance of Holland applied to it. The fief would then devolve to the eldest son—or, in the case of absence of sons, his daughter(s)—and an undesirable split of the lordship would be averted. A second option, also dependent on deep pockets and a good relationship with the count, was to dispose of one’s feudal properties by will. This could be done in cases of the absence of legitimate male heirs, or to divide an inheritance among sons, at one’s own discretion. The childless Anna of Burgundy, Lady of Ravenstein, for instance, paid an amount of 2,400 pounds of 40 groats to the prince in 1489 to freely dispose of her inheritance. Anna’s numerous lordships were later inherited by her half-brothers, Philip and Baudoin of Burgundy, and her niece, Anna van Borssele, at her death in 1508. Arnoud van Trazegnies (d. 1494) bequeathed his properties on Walcheren to his eldest son, Jan, and those on Noord-Beveland to Karel. Lodewijk renounced his right to inheritance and entered a convent in Ghent. In general, testamentary disposals were not used to exclude younger sons from inheritance, but rather to protect the integrity of estates and provide all children with a means of living nobly.

A more informal way of preventing the reversion of fiefs to the count was common among lesser-noble families. Brothers would hold their father’s patrimony jointly until they begot their own heir. If one of the brothers died without heir, his portion would tacitly pass to his surviving brothers. However, this practice fell into disuse from the mid-fifteenth century onward. The Burgundian dukes improved the administration of fiefs and compelled all new fief holders to register their enfeoffment within a year of inheritance. This policy was profitable for the dukes, but is also likely...
to have hastened the demise of petty noblemen in Zeeland, who previously could better maintain their position by way of such informal inheritance practices.

Of course, if they were rich enough, they could still appeal to another customary privilege—that close kin had the first right of takeover when the count sold lordships that had reverted to him. The Flemish nobleman, Lodewijk van Brugge, Lord of Gruthuse, experienced this in 1456, when his acquisition of the lordship of Haamstede on Schouwen was successfully disputed by Jan van Hodenpijl, a nephew of the former Lord of Haamstede. This right of retrait lignager was formalized in the law of 1495, in which provisions were made for the inheritance of feudal property by daughters and other close relatives before they could be sold to a third party. This legal device protected the interests of noble families, as the lordships of deceased family members could be repossessed and so remain with the family. It is striking that the Zeeland nobility objected to the limited possibilities of inheritance of fiefs, but did not strive for changes that favored primogenitural succession.

The intergenerational transfer of allodial assets was governed by customary law, which was written down from the late fifteenth century onward. In contrast to feudal law, it mandated that sons and daughters had equal rights. Those who received their share inter vivos, for instance as a marriage gift, lost their entitlements, unless they brought in their share again for a post mortem division. In case of death without descendant heirs, allodial properties returned to the parents or their descendants as representative heirs. If one of the parents was no longer alive, the inheritance would be split according the principle of paternapaternis, materna maternis, meaning that the interests of the lineal family were respected. This intestate inheritance law was closely linked to common marriage property law, according to which a community of allodial assets was created between husband and wife. If one of the partners died after begetting children, the conjugal property was split between them and the surviving partner.

As was typical for Europe’s elites in the later Middle Ages, this communal property regime was not very popular among the Zeeland nobility. They therefore drew up marriage contracts with stipulations that ensured that the property of the couple remained separated, and they also arranged the path of succession. In general, the bride transferred a dowry (either immovable or liquid assets) to the groom, often her share of her parent’s inheritance, which was then managed by her husband. Meanwhile, the husband and his family provided a dower, also called a douarie or lijftocht (often in the form of an annuity or a right of usufruct of the husband’s landed property; it generally had to be increased if any children were born), to guarantee his wife a lifetime income should she become widowed. In case the marriage remained childless or one of the partners died prematurely, the dowry would be returned to the women’s family. In short, the marriage exchange was only realized after a legitimate heir could act as successor both to his father’s and to his mother’s properties. The marriage contracts were designed to protect the interests of the partner’s families in the absence of legitimate offspring.

The marriage between two noble families was a complicated transaction, in which not only the material contribution but also the power and status of the families were taken into account. These matters often impeded marriages between noblemen and daughters from families of higher status. Unfortunately, the small number of extant marriage contracts from the nobility in Zeeland does not allow a detailed reconstruction of this economy, in which allodial assets played an important role, or the tracing of changes in marriages practices. Furthermore, the exchange of smaller marriage gifts, the trousseau and “morning gifts,” are often not mentioned in the contracts. It is clear, though, that by providing a dower the noble families strove to prevent an undesirable transfer of immovable properties from one family to another. The integrity of the patrimony was further protected by the provision of liquid dowers rather than immovable assets. The fact that women were excluded from the inheritance of feudal properties meant that the marriage of a daughter would not lead to a division of lordships, although feudal properties were sometimes heavily burdened by dowers.
In a number of instances, noble families opted to conclude double marriages of their children to prevent the alienation of property through feudal incidents. Adolph (d. 1540) and Anna of Burgundy, the children of the Lord of Veere, married Anna and Jan van Glimes-Bergen, children of the Lord of Bergen op Zoom. This strategy was not reserved for the high nobility but was found among families of lesser status too. Klaas van Kats (d. 1521) and his sister Avezoete were married to Gertrude and Cornelis van Botland, respectively. Other variants of interfamilial ties were marriages of cousins with two sisters or marriages between successive generations of the same family. These marital unions were concluded to reduce the risk of alienation of property because of childlessness or marriage. Nevertheless, the considerations of the noble families were often thwarted by the vagaries of nature; it always remained to be seen whether a marriage produced male heirs and so ensured the continuity of the lineage.

Noble families thus faced the tricky task of balancing two objectives: on one hand, they strove to keep the patrimony as intact as possible within the lineage; on the other, they sought to provide all their children with a livelihood to support their noble dignity. This was exactly the dilemma that Jan Ruijchrok van den Werve faced when he divided his properties more evenly among his children in 1534. His act was not exceptional, as in general nobles cared more about their children than about the wider family. This is also illustrated by the fact that after 1477, when heiresses could inherit feudal properties in Zeeland, lordships were not transferred to collateral male family members but to daughters and their children. Only if no legitimate heir was produced would the properties return, not to her husband and his heirs, but to her family. For example, Jan van Kruiningen (d. 1513) redeemed the lordships and tithes that devolved to his granddaughter, Anna, from her mother, Charlotte of Burgundy, in 1509. However, Anna van Kruiningen herself died without issue in 1505, and her feudal properties then passed to her uncle Adolph of Burgundy, as first heir, rather than to her widower Joost van Kruiningen (d. 1543). In general, nobles preferred to be succeeded by daughters in their estates rather than by male collaterals.

The inheritance practices among the noble families in late-medieval Zeeland do not point to a strong sense of patrilineal identity, although the intergenerational transfer of feudal properties normally favored male over female. Typical for Zeeland was the absence of male primogeniture in feudal law, but this regional variation in inheritance and succession rules did not result in distinct family structures among the nobility in the Low Countries. Noble families simply developed different strategies to negotiate institutional barriers in order to secure their children’s future and the continuity of the lineage.

**Kindred and Lineage**

The medieval family was a multilayered social organization, and kinship had different legal and social meanings. The conceptions of kinship therefore require clarification. The word “family” in a narrow sense can be understood as a couple, possibly with children, who normally live together. In a broader sense, it can also mean lineage or kindred. The nuclear family was the basic unit for the transmission of nobility, property, and social networks, but a wider range of relatives were part of the family as bilateral or cognatic kindred (the *maagschap*). The family in this sense of the word theoretically comprised all relatives within the fourth German-canon degree of kinship, and as such was recognized in marriage, inheritance, and criminal law in medieval Zeeland. The kindred, based on consanguinity, was of course a rather abstract entity; the actual number of kin fluctuated both for in individuals in the living present and also for successive generations. The entire kindred was never involved with individual nobles, but kin members played an important role in their lives. First, they would give consent to marriage contracts and testaments as potential inheritors. Second, they could involve each other in conflicts and feuds, as the whole *maagschap* was liable for the deeds of individual members in cases of murder or grievous bodily harm. Kin ties could also be activated...
when the honor of the family was at stake. The legal liability of kin members was restricted at the end of the fifteenth century; the law of Zeeland of 1495 banned revenge on innocent kin members, and they were also relieved from contributing to atonement payments.

For the exercise of informal power and violence, the Zeeland nobility relied on the members of the *maagschap* as well as on friends and kin (*vrienden en magen*) who were related through marriage—kinship based on affinity—and other social bonds. The alliances were not strictly defined in a legal sense, but they appear as sociopolitical networks, including also friends and clients, in the sources during the feuds and political conflicts which were rife in Zeeland until early sixteenth century. Kinship ties created mutual interest and dependencies, and so disputes often ran along family lines. It would, however, be unwise to assume that relatives were always at peace with each other within the kinship structure. There are also numerous instances of intrafamilial disputes, which mostly arose over property ownership.

Noble feuds were sometimes conflated with broader political conflicts, as was the case with feud between the families of Van Borssele and Van Haamstede in Zeeland. The two families with their supporters always favored rivaling claimants to the throne, despite the multiple marital bonds established between the two factions. The Van Haamstedes, for instance, supported the incumbent Countess Jacqueline of Bavaria between 1418 and 1428, while the Van Borsseles sided with her opponents, John of Bavaria and Philip of Burgundy. An example of small-scale intrafamilial violence was the family of Van Schengen, two branches of which came into conflict around 1469: witness the several fights for which they were prosecuted. Familial solidarity among the Zeeland nobility thus had its limits, and it requires careful investigation to understand how changing constellations of kin, friendship, and client relationships were maintained.

While the kindred expressed the horizontal dimension of the family at a certain point of time—the “parage”—the second conception of medieval kinship pertains to the vertical dimension, the descent, or lineage of an individual. Lineage went back in time; it lent and legitimized noble power and status. The meaning of noble lineage has been debated by historians since Duby’s provoking thesis of a rapid transformation of aristocratic kin organization in France in the eleventh century. He argues that the *mutation lignag`ere*, coincident with broader social and political developments, was the triumph of the patrilineage, meaning that the hereditary male line prevailed over cognatic descent and the kindred. The new form of familial organization was characterized by an emphasis on male primogeniture and the marginalization of daughters and younger sons, as well as the emergence of geographic family names and strong patrilineal identity linked to seigneurial power. Historians have raised doubts about various aspects of Duby’s thesis, mostly questioning the timing, interrelatedness, and scale of the changes he observes.

While the idea of changing aristocratic kinship structures in the eleventh century no longer holds, a trend toward greater emphasis on agnatic descent and primogeniture has been identified as a strategy of noble families to institutionalize their seigneurial and political power. This development accelerated from the late fourteenth century onward, as inheritance practices focused on the transfer of indivisible estates and political privileges. This evolution was expressed in a patrilineal family consciousness that stressed the succession of fathers by sons in property, office, and social status. Moreover, these developments not only concerned the titled nobility but also noble families of lesser status. As the narrow conception of lineage was closely linked to the transmission of seigneurial power and feudal titles, it has been dubbed *topolignée* or *lignée seigneurial* by historians. In the case of late-medieval Flanders, for example, the patrilineal lineage was a cornerstone of nobility, because feudal properties and noble status were passed from father to son.

To what extent does the case of late-medieval Zeeland fit into this narrative? It is first important to note that full nobility in Zeeland required four noble grandparents, which means that nobility was transferred bilaterally. Feudal inheritance law was another distinctive regional factor; it stipulated that feudal properties devolved equally on male heirs. The seigneuries in Zeeland originated in the
patrimonialization of lordly rights by local *potentates* in the twelfth century, who divided the rights equally among their sons.74 This patrilineal system of inheritance persisted until the late-medieval period, but it lacked the primogenital trait found in the surrounding principalities. Exceptions were only made for indivisible high lordships, (hereditary) offices, castles, and feudal titles: in these, the eldest son generally succeeded his father, but other sons would still share equally in the inheritance. They were often able to found a new family branch and acquire additional property through marriage or purchase. For example, only the eldest son of the family of Van Reimerswaal bore the title of Lord of Lodijk, where the family’s stem castle was located. And the office of Viscount of Zeeland was held in liege from the Count of Zeeland by the childless Adriaan van Kruiningen from 1451 until his death in 1479. He was succeeded by his nephew, the Lord of Kruiningen, who, on his turn, was succeeded by his eldest son, Joost van Kruiningen, in 1513. All in all, the inheritance practices of the noble families in Zeeland underwent no significant changes between the late thirteenth century and mid-sixteenth century. The patrilineal system of devolution of feudal properties persisted throughout this period, albeit that these patterns were often breached by circumstances.

**Lineage and Noble Identity**

Ancestry conferred dignity and status on members of noble families; it was a source of social distinction. The remembrance and propagation of high birth and memorable deeds of past generations was thus of great importance.75 The representation of lineage (often object of manipulation) was not only essential for the outward justification of noble social superiority but also for consolidating one’s rank within the noble hierarchy. How did the noble families in late-medieval Zeeland propagate their ancestry? Did they put an increasing emphasis on the paternal line in the representation of lineage? An analysis of antroponomic systems, the use of heraldic arms and genealogical literature as signs of distinction helps to answer the question as to whether an agnatic conception of lineage and noble identity became more widespread during the period in question.

In the case of medieval Zeeland, only little evidence can be found of chronicles or genealogical literature that served to enhance the social distinction of noble lineages. As in neighboring Holland, chroniclers showed little interest in the ancestry of noble families. It was not until the last quarter of the fifteenth century that noble chronicles and genealogies appeared in which a number of Zeeland families are included. A few high-noble families clearly tried to construct an illustrious genealogy, sometimes even dating back to the antiquity. This expression of family consciousness does not show a change in the conception of kinship; the interest in history and lineage rather gave the high nobility a means to redefine its identity and vie with its new Burgundian–Habsburg peers. It is particularly interesting that the authors of these chronicles were humanists who were more interested in the ancient origins of peoples and regions than in noble genealogy as such.76 For example, Philip of Burgundy, Lord of Blaton, was the patron of the humanist Gerard Geldenhouwer (d. 1542) from 1514 to 1524, who resided at Philip’s court in Souburg and his episcopal castle at Duurstede.77

Lineage was more commonly expressed and visualized in name and blazon. These markers delineated a group of individuals who were related in past and present through a shared name and coat of arms.78 Family names already existed in the thirteenth century and spread among the late-medieval nobility—as in general society—although these were not surnames in the modern sense of the word. In Zeeland, 65 percent of the nobles belonging to the cross-section of 1431 bore a family name, a share that rose to 90 percent a century later. It was the lesser-noble families in particular that increasingly adopted a fixed family name instead of solely using a patronym as second name.79 A family name articulated the ties between kin and created a sense of identity and honor, but its use was rather ambivalent. Nobles in general stuck to their family name, even if they no longer possessed the property it was derived from. Several cadet branches of the family of Van Borsselle, for example, used this family name, despite the fact that the high lordship of Borssele was held in fief by Jasper van
Culemborg after 1470. The patrimony of the family of Van Renesse was confiscated by the count in the late thirteenth century, but later generations retained the name. What was uncommon was that members of this family carried a double family name by adding that of their actual lordship. For example, Jan van Renesse van Wulven (d. 1492) added the name of the castle Wulven in Utrecht that he acquired through his wife.

This last example shows a strong link between family name and the core patrimonial estate, but nobles were not consequently addressed by or used their family names. Members of the high nobility were normally referred to by their feudal title, which did not always correspond with their family name. Moreover, noblemen distinguished themselves within lineages by using the names of their castles or lordships. For instance, Arend van Haamstede (d. ca. 1464) was commonly referred to as Arend van Moermond, and Olivier van der Maalstede (d. 1476) was addressed as Olivier van Everingen. This practice sometimes resulted in the formation of a cadet branch with its own (double) name.80 With regard to the lower echelons of the nobility, the use of toponymic designations in the sources does not always mean that these individuals carried a full-fledged family name. The Dutch word “van” (from) was not a noble particle. It was often used to identify someone by his geographical origin, rather than acting as a surname per se.81 Since many petty noblemen in the sixteenth century adopted the geographical designation of their lordship as fixed family name, families could bear the same name without being (closely) related. This development could point to a stronger link between lordship and lineage, but (geographically determined) proper family names also became more common among the non-noble population in this period.

Noble families had different considerations when bearing a family name. The selected group of high-noble families that descended from “good house and noble stock” (goeden huys en edelre-stemme) attached great value to the name of their lineage, whereas families that could not boast a grand ancestry more easily settled with family names that were derived from their estates. It is revealing in this respect that newly ennobled families were referred to by family names that were based on the location of the castle or lordship they acquired, as in the case of the families of Ruij-chrok van den Werve, Van Serooskerke, and Van Hoogelande. Michiel van Wissenkerke, who was knighted around 1470 and acquired a lordship in Nieuwerve, changed his name from Van Wissenkerke to Van Nieuwerve; this confused a comital clerk, who referred to him as Michiel van Wissenkerke/Nieuwerve. Klaas Lievensz opted to stress his descent by adopting the family name of his grandmother, Cornelia van Kats, who was of noble birth. Klaas’s daughter, Lievine van Kats, was married to an ennobled state official, Jan Pieters—who bore a fossilized patronymic as surname—and their children referred to their maternal noble lineage using the surname “Pieters dit Cats.”82 Newly ennobled families lacked lineage and the dignity and honor that accompanied its name, but they underlined their newly acquired social status by naming themselves after their feudal lordships.

The noble family names did not convey a narrow understanding of lineage as simply patrilineage—that is, a successive line of eldest sons. To a certain extent, this line emerged in the first names of noblemen, because as a rule in Zeeland, the eldest son was named after his paternal grandfather, meaning that ideally two first names alternated between generations. This naming pattern was also common in Holland, but differed from custom in Brabant where a Leitname was passed from father to son. More than the family name, the first name gave expression to one’s place within the kin network, and it also confirmed relations with prior generations. Couples, however, sometimes deviated from the usual naming pattern by calling the eldest son after his maternal grandfather or godfather. It was also common to name daughters and younger sons after relatives from both the father’s and the mother’s side. The ideal naming pattern was also frequently breached by the early death of children, even though some families would give the same first name to more than one son. Finally, it should be remembered that these naming patterns were not exclusive to the nobility.83
Noblewomen kept their father’s family name after marriage, denoting their own lineage, although they were normally referred to in relation to a feudal title or a male relative. This was different for married women’s coats of arms, which incorporated the heraldic weapon of their husband into their own, symbolizing the alliance between two lineages. On the other hand, noblemen would quarter their own shield if they married a spouse of higher status or inherited a significant lordship from their mother. Wolfert van Borssele received the title of count of Buchan at his marriage with the Scottish princess Mary Stuart, Countess of Buchan, and incorporated this alliance in his blazon, but he had to revert to his original coat of arms after the death of his wife in 1465.85

Heraldic arms had lost their original military function in the fifteenth century, but were still important in identifying individuals (and not only nobles). Moreover, they yielded information about the lineage and alliances of a particular person, which could be manipulated by (temporarily) quartering the arms or by adding brisures.86 The variation in the shields allowed the identification of fathers from sons, as well as the sequence of sons. Jan van Haamstede (d. ca. 1438), for instance, had a quartered shield in 1402, incorporating his father’s arms as well as those of his mother, from whom he inherited the lordship of Montigny in Hainault.87 Interpreting the arms of the lesser nobility is more challenging. For instance, the families in Wemeldinge all had a sal tare in their arms, often individualized with another element, but it is impossible to tell the exact interrelatedness of these families.88 Nevertheless, a coat of arms gave expression to power and status based on lineage, and often also to alliance and lordship.

Arms were applied to seals, clothing, silverware, armor, walls, paintings, stained-glass windows, monuments, manuscripts, and so on, to mark the noble identity of the bearer and call into remembrance his or her ancestry. Most often, as on seals, the personal coat of arms was an emblem by which an individual could be identified. This is, for example, the case on the Triptych of the Micault Family (ca. 1550; Jan Vermeyen), ordered by a son of Jan Micault for the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in the St. Michael and St. Gudula Cathedral, Brussels, where his father was buried. Jan Micault can be identified by his shield on the left panel, while his wife Lievine van Kats can be recognized by her split shield with her father’s and husband’s arms on the right. By portraying the couple and all their (deceased) children, the memorial painting does not bear witness to a strong conception of patrilineage/lineage, even though the work was ordered by Klaas Micault to keep the memory of his parents alive.89

On grave slabs, tombs, and monuments, which became more ornamented in the sixteenth century, it was not only the personal coat of arms of the deceased that was applied but also the arms of his or her grandparents and, from the sixteenth century onward, sometimes even the eight great-grandparents. The slab of knight Willem de Vriese van Oostende (d. 1462) in the parish church of Hoedekenskerke, bears eight arms, emphasizing in an hierarchical way his descent in paternal and maternal line. In general, grave monuments give no indication of a strong preference for the paternal line, although there are a few examples of noblewomen and petty noblemen bearing just a single personal shield. The same conclusion can be drawn for memorial iconography donated by nobles to churches and convents. Olivier van der Maalstede (d. 1476) and his wife Meyne van Oostende were portrayed praying on a window in the convent of the Brothers of the Cross in Goes, with the arms or their four quarters.90

The way in which noble families in late-medieval Zeeland represented their ancestry was thus the outcome of several considerations. An agnatic bias existed in the transmission of name and blazon, but nobles appear to have highlighted their bilateral descent rather than exclusively the paternal line. Multiple conceptions of lineage could exist side by side. The condition made by Cornelis de Cock van Oprijnen in his testament of 1555, that Anthonis Crabel should incorporate Cornelis’s name and coat of arms in his own name and arms in order to become his inheritor, does not indicate a greater stress on patrilineality either, but rather a concern for the continuity of the lineage among the lesser nobility which appears to have been a novelty compared to earlier centuries.
Conclusions

Kinship structures among the nobility in Zeeland remained fundamentally cognatic throughout the later Middle Ages. This becomes clear from the customary systems of property devolution and marital property regimes, which were devised for passing on wealth, power, and status between lineages as well as upon new generations. In this respect, noble families sought to protect both the interests of all their children and those of the lineage. The transmission of lordships in Zeeland followed a patrilineal pattern, but feudal law did not acknowledge primogeniture. Furthermore, the kindred upon which nobles relied was composed of bilateral relatives, and in practice also by affinal kin. With regard to the contemporary conception of lineage among the noble families in Zeeland, descent along the paternal line took precedence over the maternal line because name, blazon, feudal titles, and lordship were predominantly transmitted from father to sons. Still, noblemen did not exclusively focus on the patrilineage in the representation of their ancestry and family honor, but emphasized both patrilineal and matrilineal descent.

From a chronological perspective, there is no evidence that strongly links the ways in which noble families in Zeeland articulated and visualized their lineage through name and blazon, either with the emergence of territorial lordships in the eleventh and twelfth centuries or with the growth of central state power from the fifteenth century onward. Less than a quarter of the nobles in late-medieval Zeeland were actually active in state service, making it unlikely that state mechanisms of succession in office, rank, or political rights affected conceptions of kinship among the nobility.91 Some evidence does point toward a greater emphasis on ancestry by noble families in the course of the sixteenth century, particularly among the lower echelons of the nobility, as ways of representing the lineage and creating a dynastic identity by high-noble families trickled down.

Similar developments took place in Holland and—earlier or later—elsewhere in Europe, although they should not be projected back on earlier periods.92 This concern for ancestry and the (fictional) continuity of the lineage was not directly related to changes in the inheritance systems of property or power, but rather with the way in which nobles distinguished themselves in society. Most of the nobility in the coastal Low Countries, apart from the high lords, lost its military role—one of the defining aspects of noble identity—as well as access to the chivalrous culture of the princely court. Moreover, the rise of state officialdom and urban elites, resulting in new forms of interaction between nobles and non-nobles as well as a growing economic equivalence, eroded the sociolegal boundaries in society. Noble families were necessitated to find new ways of socially demarcating and ideologically justifying their privileged position, which were primarily found in lineage—that is, name and blazon linked to lordship.

The case of late-medieval Zeeland demonstrates that regional institutions had an important impact on the patrimonial and matrimonial strategies of the nobility. Noble families, however, easily adapted to new institutional contexts, as the influx of foreign nobles in Zeeland illustrates. The objectives and practices of noble families varied according to sociopolitical profile; the existence of distinct marriage networks among the nobility in Zeeland is just one example. The integrating and structuring effects of the family strategies on the nobility were significant, but should not be overestimated. Finally, marriage regimes, inheritance practices, and conceptions of kinship found among the nobility were not necessary noble in nature, but instead explained by the nature of their power and wealth that noble families sought to transmit, and the rules that governed this transmission. Similar family strategies are thus to be encountered among the wealthy urban and rural elites in the coastal Low Countries.

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Notes
1. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Archief van de Graven van Holland, no. 727, f. 2v-3r (August 23, 1534); Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, Familie Overschie de Neeryssche, no. 639 (April 24, 1555).
6. The cross-sections are made up of all noblemen, minor heirs, heiresses, and widows active in the selected years. Further relevant biographical data have been systematically gathered for these individuals. A. van Steensel, “Exploring the Possibilities of the Prosopographical Method. The Noble Population of the Late Medieval County of Zeeland,” Medieval Prosopography 26 (2005): 334–51.
7. A. van Steensel, Edelen in Zeeland. Macht, rijkdom en status in een laatmiddeleeuwse samenleving (Hilversum: Verloren, 2010), 82–8. This stratification model of course has no explanatory power.
14. Among the foreign newcomers were also ennobled state officials who sometimes married into the Zeeland nobility. Examples are Anthonis Michielis, Pieter Lanchals, Cornelis Cruesink, Jeronimus Lauwerijn, Jan Pieters, Jan Micault, and Ferrand de Gros.


17. Van Steensel, Edelen, 104.


22. Buylaert, Eeuwen, 137.


24. For these families: Van Steensel, Edelen, 237–41.


31. Van Steensel, Edelen, 241–3. There is a slight bias in the thirty-five identified marriage partners for the lesser stratum of the noble research population, because marriages with non-noble townsmen or noblemen higher in the noble hierarchy are more often documented.


31. Van Steensel, Edelen, 94, 179–80, 243–48. The family of Van Serooskerke, who were active as the count’s receivers and bailiffs of Zierikzee, also maintained close ties with the (noble) ruling families of Antwerp.


40. Van Steensel, *Edelen*, 256–60. Not all religious noblewomen were unmarried daughters; the Lady of Statenisse entered the convent of Westroijen, Tiel, after the death of her husband Jan van Heenvliet (d. 1410).

41. E. Koch, “Entry into Convents and the Position on the Marriage Market of Noble Women in the Late Middle Ages,” in *Marriage and Social Mobility in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. W. Prevenier (Ghent: Rijksuniversiteit Gent, 1992), 66–68.


51. Legal devices to circumvent the effects of primogeniture were popular among the late-medieval English nobility; Ch. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages. The Fourteenth-Century Political Community* (London, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 138–43.


57. When dowers or dowries were assigned on feudal properties, the marriage contract had to be approved by the count as feudal lord; Van Steensel, *Edelen*, 151, 268.


66. Crouch, *Nobility*, 136–37, 155. The word “‘clan’” is also used in some cases, referring to descent groups that recognize to be descendents of one ancestor, although the exact lineage is unknown.


82. Ibid., 351–52.


**Bio**

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