Noblemen in an urbanised society:  
Zeeland and its nobility in the late 
Middle Ages

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Noblemen in an urbanised society: Zeeland and its nobility in the late Middle Ages

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The Low Countries became one of the most urbanised regions in late-medieval Europe. This article analyses the consequences of urbanisation and also state formation for the nobility in Zeeland. Noble lords remained the dominant political power, the result of their position in the States of Zeeland, but only a significant minority of the nobility was active in state service or urban government. The Zeeland towns offered the nobility a range of opportunities for service, and political, economic and familial networks developed across social boundaries. The nature of these ties depended on the status and objectives of those involved, making late-medieval society in Zeeland more complex than merely a division between nobility and burghers. Zeeland also illustrates the regional diversity within the Low Countries in the position of the nobility in urban society. It refutes the idea that they were transformed into a state nobility and shows that the chances of social mobility for the inhabitants of the small towns of Zeeland were slight.

Keywords: medieval nobility; state formation; urbanisation; social mobility; Low Countries; Zeeland

The division between town and countryside was once regarded as a distinctive characteristic of medieval European society. The feudal-aristocratic and urban-bourgeois worlds were assumed to be distinguished by their different political, legal, economic and social structures. However, these oppositions between town and countryside, bourgeoisie and nobility, have now been rejected by historians. The seemingly natural identification of the nobility with the countryside was never entirely the case in the medieval period, as ties always existed between rural nobility and urban elites. Urban-dwelling noblemen and ennobled townsmen could be found across Western Europe in the later Middle Ages, although the extent to which this was the situation varied widely.

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The Low Countries are a case in point in this respect. The region was for a long time at the political and economic periphery of medieval Europe, as a result of which feudal structures were relatively weak and the process of urbanisation began comparatively late. But by the end of the Middle Ages, the coastal territories belonged to the most urbanised regions of Europe and were at the heart of a thriving commercial economy. These circumstances are thought to have weakened the political and economic position of the nobility in the late-medieval period. Under pressure from the fourteenth-century demographic and economic crisis as well as through the process of state formation, the nobility were eventually subsumed into a new political elite, made up of noble and non-noble elements. Although members of the urban elites aspired to nobility, an alternative civic identity with its own culture, values and lifestyle also emerged in the cities.

This general view of the late-medieval nobility of the Low Countries is almost entirely based on evidence from Flanders, and it is necessary to consider the extent to which it holds true for other parts of the region. This article addresses this question by identifying the nobility as a link between town and countryside in the county of Zeeland in the period from 1400 to 1550. First, it will determine how the rise of towns and the integration of Zeeland into wider structures resulting from the personal union of the Burgundian-Habsburg houses changed the balance of power in the county. The processes of urbanisation and state formation are known to have had a major impact on the structures of feudal power. However, it needs to be clarified exactly how the political power of the nobility was challenged by the towns and the state, and whether the alterations in the balance of power corresponded to the efforts of the towns to exert more economic and legal control over the rural hinterlands. Secondly, the article maps the personal ties between noblemen, state officials and members of the urban elites in Zeeland, examining the extent to which social boundaries were crossed and redefined in urban society, as well as the nature and durability of the relations between nobles and non-nobles created by marriage, political networks and shared economic interests. These questions produce different answers, as relations varied according to the status and objectives of those involved. The potential of the Zeeland towns for the nobility as places of political and economic exchange, as well as religious and cultural activity, also needs to be taken into consideration.

This article sheds new light on the position of the nobility in town and country in late-medieval Zeeland. It demonstrates the extent to which this relationship and the circumstances that shaped it differed from those in the neighbouring principalities. By drawing comparisons with developments in Flanders and Holland, it offers explanations for regional variation in the presence of the nobility in urban society. In this way, the case of the nobility of Zeeland


contributes to a better understanding of the significance of social hierarchies and the potential for social mobility in the cities and towns of the coastal Low Countries.

Zeeland in the late Middle Ages

Zeeland is less well known to historians than its neighbours Brabant, Flanders and Holland, but this relatively small county underwent the same processes of state formation, urbanisation and commercialisation in the late-medieval period. The county comprised several islands, of which Walcheren, Zuid-Beveland and Schouwen were the most important. Zeeland was only considered an independent principality at the end of the thirteenth century. The Count of Holland had authority over Zeeland, although he held the southern part – ‘Zeeland west of the Scheldt’ – in fief from the Count of Flanders. After a long series of disputes, the latter formally relinquished his rights to the Count of Holland in 1323. About a century later, in 1428, the duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, took possession of Zeeland after a fierce struggle with the incumbent countess, Jacqueline of Bavaria. This shift in power marked the integration of Zeeland into the territories under the personal control of the dukes of Burgundy and an acceleration of the process of state formation, which involved the consolidation and unification of the Burgundian territories through a process of institutionalisation. This process extended the control of the central state power over inhabitants and resources. However, none of the evolving central institutions that embodied the Burgundian-Habsburg state was established in Zeeland, and the opportunities for personal contact between ruler and subjects also became less frequent in the fifteenth century.

Zeeland attracted special interest because of its strategic position from a military perspective as well as its economic potential. It played an important role as a point of transit in the international and regional trade to the Flemish, Brabantine and Dutch cities and hinterlands; this brought considerable prosperity to the seaport towns and villages in the later medieval period. The people of Zeeland themselves were involved in shipping and offshore fishing, while the agrarian (grain-production) and industrial (salt-extraction and madder industry) sectors of the economy were also significant. The Zeeland towns experienced strong economic and demographic growth from the mid-fourteenth century onwards, although they remained small in comparison to the Flemish and Brabantine metropolises. Middelburg and Zierikzee passed the 5000-resident mark in the fifteenth century, and numbered some 6000 to 7000 inhabitants in 1569. Midway through the sixteenth century the smaller Zeeland towns comprised on average only a few thousand inhabitants, but were probably only half that size a century earlier. For example, Goes may have had 2800 residents in 1485, and Vlissingen about 4000 in 1569. The density of towns was nonetheless relatively high in 1569. The density of towns was nonetheless relatively high in 1569.

Zeeland. A considerable proportion – possibly up to 50% – of an estimated total population of 85,000 lived in towns in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

At the end of the thirteenth century the nobility in Zeeland was made up of families with knights and esquires (\textit{ridders en knapen}) within their ranks, and families of petty noblemen who were merely seigneurial lords (\textit{ambachtsheren}). These nobles shared the same personal legal status of birth – full nobility required four noble grandparents – or princely elevation; nobility depended on one’s ability to wield political, economic and social power.\textsuperscript{13} In particular, it was essential to command recognition of one’s honour or esteem by upholding a noble lifestyle.\textsuperscript{14} The socio-political and economic privileges enjoyed by noblemen varied according to their status, and were not formally regulated but defined according to custom. The late-medieval nobility in Zeeland was thus heterogeneous in composition. It should be understood as a varied group of individuals with the same legal standing who were embedded in overlapping social networks, but who at the same time belonged to families that differed markedly from each other in terms of power, wealth and status.

The composition of the nobility evolved over time through natural factors as well as through social and geographical mobility. The changes in the composition and structure of the noble population can be mapped by identifying for specific years all active noblemen, minors who were heirs, and noble widows who could be linked to the county of Zeeland by residence, office or property. For the purposes of analysis, these noblemen have been further classified into upper, middling and lesser nobility.\textsuperscript{15} For this article, cross-sections of the nobility in Zeeland have been taken for 1431, 1475 and 1535; the genealogical ties in each of the populations for the three sample years have also been reconstructed. For 1431, 190 individuals of noble rank have been identified, but the nature of the sources for this period hinders a full identification of the nobility. The noble population remained relatively stable in the fifteenth century: 205 nobles have been identified for 1475. Their number decreased from the late fifteenth century: in 1535, only 151 nobles could be identified. It was the lower echelons of the nobility in particular that came under increasing pressure in the later Middle Ages, since their financial capacity to maintain a fitting lifestyle was limited. Finally, the noble population of Zeeland comprised mainly indigenous noble families, but there were also foreign nobles who acquired properties or offices but often decided not to reside in the county. The proportion of these absentee lords rose from 6\% in 1431 to 31\% in 1535.\textsuperscript{16}

Noble office-holders

The nobility initially held a fairly autonomous position in medieval Zeeland, as they could play the contending counts of Holland and Flanders against one another. In 1290, there was an


\textsuperscript{15} See for this methodological approach: A. van Steensel, ‘Exploring the Possibilities of the Prosopographical \textit{Method. The Noble Population of the Late Medieval County of Zeeland}, \textit{Medieval Prosopography} 26 (2005): 334–51. For 1475, for instance, 13 supra-regional, powerful nobles are classified as upper nobility because of their offices, properties, kinship ties and noble lifestyle, 89 individuals from regional knightly families as nobility of middle rank, and 103 petty local seigneurial lords as lesser nobility.

\textsuperscript{16} Van Steensel, \textit{Edelen}, 77–81, 86–90, 98.
unsuccessful rebellion, involving almost all noblemen, against Floris V, Count of Holland, who exerted his authority over Zeeland Bewestenschelde more effectively than his predecessors. The authority of the succeeding counts – from the Hainaut-Bavarian (1299–1428) and Burgundian-Habsburg (1428–1572) dynasties – was rarely directly disputed. Succession crises in 1345–54, 1418–28 and 1477–92 led to political unrest and armed conflicts in which the nobility and towns were involved, but the nobility never took a unanimous stand, often splitting into rival factions that supported competing pretenders to the throne. The configuration of the ‘triangular relationship’ between the count, nobility and towns in Zeeland depended on shifting alliances as far as the nobility and towns actually acted as collective entities – and their respective military and financial strengths. Structural changes in the balance of power can be revealed by analysing the links between the groups and the involvement of the nobility and towns in comital and urban administration. Patterns of office-holding are therefore examined, before turning to participation of these groups in the States of Zeeland.

The growing distance between count and subjects was bridged by his officials. From the late thirteenth century onwards, the count appointed receivers who administered his domains and collected taxes, bailiffs who represented his authority in towns, and dyke reeves who oversaw water management. Furthermore, the count appointed the Viscount of Zeeland, whose function was prestigious though mainly ceremonial, and who presided over the count’s feudal court (graafelijke vierschaar) in his absence, assisted by a sheriff, a prosecutor and a number of vassals. The receivers were the count’s most important representatives and formed indispensable links between him and his subjects in Zeeland. The receivers were recruited from both indigenous and foreign families, often belonging to the nobility of Zeeland. Certain regional offices were introduced by the count to curtail the power of the nobility in Zeeland, but noblemen rapidly monopolised these offices. They were often appointed to office for long or successive terms, sometimes even for life. The viscount and sheriff of the vierschaar were always of noble birth, because these offices were held as noble fiefs from the count.

The nobility maintained a strong control over the regional offices until the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The ensuing decline of the number of noblemen who held comital offices is explained by several factors (Table 1). First, the composition of the noble population changed from the mid-fifteenth century onwards; the increasing number of absentee lords showed little interest in local matters and seldom aspired to regional office. Second, from the reign of Duke Charles the Bold (d. 1477) onwards, the offices were mostly

leased out for three-year periods. This practice increased the turnover among the office-holders, but also gave non-noble state officials and townsmen the opportunity to bid for office. The town councils became particularly successful in leasing offices as a means to increase their authority in the town and its hinterland. Finally, noblemen were less successful in obtaining offices because of a change in their relations with the count. Where offices had often been granted to them as reward for services or as part of financial transactions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, only a few noblemen had direct access to the count in the sixteenth century. Active lobbying of state officials and councillors became necessary to secure an appointment, but most of the noblemen lacked the right contacts and political networks in The Hague and Brussels.22

Despite the strong reliance of the count on noblemen for the administration of medieval Zeeland, only a small proportion of the nobility succeeded in obtaining an appointment as receiver, town bailiff or dyke reeve. The number of offices was limited and power was often concentrated in the hands of powerful noblemen who held several offices simultaneously. Hendrik van Borssele (d. 1474), lord of Veere, for instance, was bailiff of Goes (1448) and Zierikzee (1452–8), as well as dyke reeve of Schouwen (1452–8), the Oostwatering of Walcheren (1438–74), and of Beoosten and Bewesten Yerseke (1447–74). He resigned the Bailiwick of Goes to his son-in-law David van Baarsdorp, and several of his clients, belonging to the family of Van Wissenkerke, were appointed to other regional offices.23 In sum, only a minority of the noblemen in Zeeland ever exercised formal authority in this way, and the number of those who held a regional office decreased after the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

The chances of being appointed councillor of the Court of Holland in The Hague or as official at the central institutions in Brussels and Mechelen were even slimmer. These institutions emanated from the count’s court as well as the Burgundian ducal court.24 In the fifteenth century, there was a relatively constant proportion of Zeeland noblemen represented in the principal institutions; in The

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22 Van Steensel, Edelen, 199–201.
Hague in particular, they played essential roles as *stadtholders* and councillors. However, the presence of Zeeland noblemen in the state institutions declined from the sixteenth century onwards, a period that saw a general decrease in the number of noble state officials in favour of non-noble prelates, jurists and financial experts (even though some of these latter subsequently joined the ranks of the nobility). Noblemen gradually disappeared from legal and financial offices in the Low Countries, but the highest political, military and diplomatic positions continued to be reserved for them. For instance, no nobleman was appointed as councillor of the Great Council of Mechelen from 1504 or as member of the Privy Council from 1531. The power of the nobility was concentrated in the Council of State, of which the lord of Beveren, the lord of Bergen, the Count of Buren, the Count of Hoogstraten and the lord of Molembaix were members. These powerful noblemen, who were members of the Order of the Golden Fleece, came from the highest echelon of the Burgundian-Habsburg nobility. The fact that they all had substantial holdings or in some cases even resided in Zeeland shows that the county was well integrated into supra-regional noble networks.

Relations between prince and noble officials were often precarious. The Burgundian dukes, for instance, relied heavily on the lords of Veere who controlled most of the militarily strategic island of Walcheren. Philip the Good and Charles the Bold required Hendrik van Borssele’s maritime potential and his administrative, military and financial support, while the nobleman received offices, properties and money in return for his services. The co-operation was often strained, however: Philip confiscated Hendrik’s estates in 1434 for wrongdoings that are no longer known, although he was quickly pardoned in recognition of his loyalty to the duke. There were complaints in 1454 that the lord of Veere ruled much of Zeeland, thereby harming the duke’s interests. In 1468 and 1473, before chapters of the Order of the Golden Fleece, Hendrik faced questions about the fact that he served the French king as admiral. In 1466, Philip had appointed Hendrik’s son Wolfert (d. 1486) as admiral of most of the Low Countries, to make use of the lords of Veere in his maritime policy. Wolfert was also appointed *stadtholder* of Holland and Zeeland in 1477, but he failed to quell the political unrest in the counties. After disagreements with Maximilian of Austria (d. 1519), Wolfert sided with Louis of Bruges, his brother-in-law, and Adolph of Cleves, who supported the revolt of the Flemish cities against the duke and noblemen loyal to him. In the end, Wolfert could only prevent the confiscation of his estates by marrying his daughters to noblemen who maintained friendly ties with Maximilian. The interests of the prince and nobility were not easily aligned, but ultimately good relations with the prince were essential for the upper nobility in order to maintain their power and wealth in competition with their peers.

The States of Zeeland

It was an ancient privilege of noble vassals in Zeeland to be consulted by the count on important political matters. From the mid-fourteenth century onwards, delegates from Middelburg and

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Zierikzee were also regularly invited to the count’s great council (commune consilium). Consultation between the count and the people of Zeeland gradually became more formalised. By the end of the fifteenth century, the States of Zeeland were a more or less institutionalised representative body, and comprised the nobility, the Abbot of Middelburg and the towns of Middelburg, Zierikzee, Reimerswaal, Tholen and Goes. The Abbot of Middelburg, who was initially summoned as fief-holder, was regarded as the representative of the first estate.\textsuperscript{29}

The participation of the nobility in political decision-making gives an indication of its power and influence. A varying number of noblemen was summoned by the count, depending on the matters discussed at the meetings (dagvaarten) of nobility and towns. He brought together all his fief-holders – who were all noblemen until 1430 and predominantly noblemen thereafter – to propose extraordinary subsidies, or beden. These subsidies could only be granted by the fief-holders if the request was made by the count on the soil of Zeeland, most often in the centrally situated village of Kats. This type of dagvaarten continued to be held throughout the later medieval period, although the number of fief-holders attending decreased significantly. The decision-making process was dominated by the most powerful lords, rendering political participation by the many lesser lords nothing more than a formality. Not surprisingly, only major fief-holders were obliged to attend the dagvaarten about the beden from 1507 onwards.\textsuperscript{30}

A second type of dagvaarten concerned weighty political, diplomatic and financial issues, for which the nobility and towns were summoned. In general, the count only assembled for council the more important noblemen and those who held offices, but it is difficult to determine who exactly participated in the count’s great council. These meetings were held jointly with the nobility and towns of Holland in cases of common affairs. In the second quarter of the fifteenth century, under Burgundian rule, these dagvaarten became distinct from the count’s council, which developed into the Council of Holland and Zeeland. The knighthood and towns of Holland and Zeeland thus formed a consultative body with which the duke of Burgundy or his representatives conferred on political and financial matters. In contrast to Zeeland, the knighthood (ridderschap) of Holland, who distinguished themselves from the other nobles through their knightly lifestyle, established themselves as part of the States of Holland in the mid-fifteenth century, although the States’ members were summoned personally.\textsuperscript{31} The noblemen of Zeeland who were called upon for the dagvaarten were also designated ridderschappen in this period, but they never formed a clearly distinguishable and politically defined knighthood.

The noblemen from Zeeland who were summoned for the joint dagvaarten can be identified in the comital accounts for the period from 1434 to 1498.\textsuperscript{32} For this period, 89 summons have been counted, of which only four relate to years after 1482, when combined assemblies of the


\textsuperscript{30} Van Steensel, \textit{Edelen}, 204.


\textsuperscript{32} W. Prevenier and J.G. Smit, eds., \textit{Bronnen voor de geschiedenis der dagvaarten van de Staten en steden van Holland voor 1544}, 6 vols. (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1987–2006) [hereafter Dagvaarten], while the sources for Zeeland, \textit{Bronnen voor de geschiedenis der dagvaarten van de Staten en steden van Zeeland tot 1574}, are being prepared for publication. I am grateful to Hans Smit for granting me access to the unpublished material.
States of Holland and Zeeland became exceptional. A total of 146 noblemen were summoned once or more during this period; on average, 17 noblemen were called upon, with a maximum of 40 noblemen for a dagvaart in 1476. Only a minority of the Zeeland nobility was summoned for this type of joint dagvaarten of Holland and Zeeland: 27% of the population that is the subject of this study in 1431, and 39% in 1475. Moreover, 61% of the 146 noblemen were called upon fewer than 10 times. Only the upper nobility and noble office-holders were summoned regularly. The sources do not reveal how many noblemen in fact attended the dagvaarten, but the repeated summons suggest that many were lax in attending to this obligation. The decision-making process was thus dominated by a few powerful and influential noblemen, and the remaining nobility were thus less willing to attend.

This trend becomes clearer after 1482, when the distinct types of dagvaarten merged into the assemblies of the States of Zeeland. The number of noblemen who participated in political decision-making decreased significantly, although this did not affect the political power of the nobility. A small group of leading noblemen, often serving as state officials, represented the nobility as a whole. The most powerful nobles or their representatives deliberated in the States with the Abbot of Middelburg and the towns. After 1464, another reason for the decline in noble participation in the States of Zeeland was the rise of the States General, in which representatives of all the Burgundian-Habsburg lands were united. The States General became the main consultative body, where the prince expressed his fiscal demands to his subjects and discussed political and economic affairs. The nobility of Zeeland and the Abbot of Middelburg appointed a representative (pensionaris) who looked after their interests and attended the assemblies. On only a few occasions did noblemen personally attend the States General.

This development – from a personal summons to noblemen towards representation by a small group of leading nobles – was not exceptional. The same pattern has been noted in neighbouring Holland. In the fifteenth century, a sizeable group of noblemen – the knights – was summoned for the States of Holland, but only seven to 10 nobles, all state officials, attended regularly. It was only this core of the nobility that participated in the assemblies of the States of Holland in the sixteenth century. The situation was different in Flanders, where 192 noblemen can be identified as having attended the States of Flanders between 1384 and 1506. Of this group, only 52 individuals represented the nobility; they were members of the most powerful families. The remaining 140 nobles represented the third estate as members of urban and rural governments. The nobility of Flanders did not form a homogenous second estate; many noblemen took up urban and rural office to look after their interests. This practice was less widespread in Zeeland or Holland, although there were examples of towns sending noble delegates to the States of Zeeland.

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33 Dagvaarten, 4: 644, 646, 696; 5: 168.
34 Van Steensel, Edelen, 206–9.
Lordship, landownership and taxation

The political privileges and local authority of the Zeeland nobility rested upon their position as seigneurial lords (ambachtsheren). The countryside was divided into numerous lordships (ambachten), which encompassed lesser judicial privileges, fiscal liberties and several other honourable and profitable seigneurial rights. The ambachten, all held in fief from the Count of Zeeland, could be divided in cases of inheritance, sale or other forms of alienation. Under the feudal law of inheritance, lordships had to be divided equally among all sons; consequently, the number of lordships multiplied rapidly at first. The resulting small lordships had little value, and many fief-holders sold their rights to more fortunate nobles in the later Middle Ages. This process accelerated in the mid-fifteenth century as the rules of enfeoffment were tightened and several of the socio-political privileges became restricted to owners of an ambacht of a minimum size.\textsuperscript{39} The nobility retained its dominant position in the countryside throughout the Burgundian-Habsburg period. The proportion of lordships in the hands of noblemen remained relatively stable at around 80%, even though the lesser lords were losing ground (Figure 1). Some towns purchased lordships to extend control over their rural hinterlands; the number of townsmen who acquired lordships only grew slowly.\textsuperscript{40}

Comital aids (beden) were levied as a tax on land in Zeeland irrespective of the status of the owner. In contrast to the surrounding principalities, the nobility in Zeeland did not enjoy tax exemptions. Nevertheless, the lords in Zeeland benefited significantly from the taxation system. They were responsible for gathering the beden in their lordship and were entitled to a share of the tax. On average, the lords kept 35\% of the tax on land, but the benefits of this fiscal privilege varied between the islands. It was as high as 44\% in parts of Zuid-Beveland, while on Schouwen it was a mere 5\%. Wealthy noblemen aimed to increase their lordships because of the income they made; smaller lords, who generated negligible profits, often sold their fragmented properties.\textsuperscript{41} The level of the beden of which the lords were entitled to have a share was fairly stable throughout the Burgundian-Habsburg period; it only doubled during the reign of Charles the Bold.\textsuperscript{42}

This peculiarity of the fiscal system in Zeeland made it financially unattractive for noblemen to become major landholders.\textsuperscript{43} They would have missed the benefits of their fiscal privileges if they did, because then they would have been obliged to pay the tax on land and would have lost the opportunity to collect it from other landowners in their lordships. Hence, large-scale landownership was limited among the Zeeland nobility; the few exceptions involved land for which noblemen were personally tax-exempt and newly reclaimed land, over which they did not enjoy seigneurial privileges for taxation. The tax burden thus fell principally upon the landowning peasants and townsmen. Nevertheless, the townsmen increased their landed interests in the later Middle Ages. After a disastrous fire in the mid-fifteenth century, the town council of Middelburg even sought to lure wealthy landowners from the countryside into the town by paying the beden for them.

\textsuperscript{39} Dekker, Zuid-Beveland, 386–97, 470–91; Van Steensel, Edelen, § 3.1.
\textsuperscript{40} Van Steensel, Edelen, 118–20.
\textsuperscript{41} Dekker, Zuid-Beveland, 457–63, 470; Van Steensel, Edelen, 109–16.
\textsuperscript{42} The total tax burden doubled in the same period as the introduction of the new levies, which had to be entirely transferred by the lords to the count’s receiver; A. van Steensel, ‘Edelen, belastingheffing en politieke verhoudingen in laatmiddeleeuws Zeeland’, in Bourgondië voorbij, ed. Damen and Sicking, 169–71; cf. J.B. Henneman, ‘Nobility, Privilege and Fiscal Politics in Late Medieval France’, French Historical Studies 13 (1983): 17.
\textsuperscript{43} A rough estimate shows the following distribution of land around 1500: peasant ownership 45–65\%, townsmen 20–30\%, noblemen 10–15\% and clergy 5–10\%; Van Steensel, Edelen, 136–42. These numbers are comparable to those given for Holland: Van Nierop, Nobility, 98.
Charles V (d. 1558) partly forbade this practice in 1524, arguing that the townsmen invested their capital in land at the expense of the trade that brought prosperity to the town.\footnote{W.S. Unger, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van Middelburg in den landsheerlijke tijd*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1923–31), 2: 18–23; J.H. de Stoppelaar, *Inventaris van het oud archief der stad Middelburg, 1217–1581* (Middelburg: Altorffer, 1883), no. 1184.} In 1464, the Middelburg citizens together held at least 26% of the land on the island of Walcheren; similarly, the citizens of Zierikzee possessed 30% of the land on Schouwen in 1535. After the inundations of 1530–2, members of the Antwerp and Mechelen commercial elites invested heavily in the reclamation of Zuid-Beveland, where they became major landowners at the expense of the peasants.\footnote{C. Dekker and R. Baetens, *Geld in het water. Antwerps en Mechels kapitaal in Zuid-Beveland na de stormvloeden in de 16e eeuw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2010), 219–25.}

Lack of documentation makes it difficult to reveal the precise development of landownership and exploitation of estates in late-medieval Zeeland, but a few observations can be made. First, the preference of townsmen for landownership can be explained by the fact that, from an investor’s perspective, a plot of land was still more profitable than a lordship.\footnote{Van Steensel, *‘Belastingheffing’*, 189–91.} Second, the land market was easily accessible, whereas *ambachten* could only be inherited or acquired with the count’s approval. Third, noblemen and burghers had different economic and political interests and cultural values, which explains their respective preferences for lordships or landownership.\footnote{Van Steensel, *Edelen*, 148–50.} For a nobleman, the political rights and social status attached to the possession of lordships exceeded their pure economic value. It was not until the end of the sixteenth century that non-noble townsmen became important holders of *ambachten* in Zeeland. By that time, lordships no longer brought the same financial benefits.

The fact that almost all lordships were in noble hands gave the nobility a huge advantage in the States of Zeeland. Throughout the Burgundian-Habsburg period, the nobility accepted the growing financial demands of the princes without much opposition. Noble lords – in particular those holding numerous lordships – profited directly from the gathering of the *beden*, while landowners had to pay the taxes. As the towns did not directly contribute to the *beden*, they had no say in the negotiations between count and nobility. This is in marked contrast to the situation in

\[\text{Figure 1. Relative distribution of lordships in Zeeland, 1431, 1475 and 1535}\]

\[\text{Charles V (d. 1558) partly forbade this practice in 1524, arguing that the townsmen invested their capital in land at the expense of the trade that brought prosperity to the town. In 1464, the Middelburg citizens together held at least 26% of the land on the island of Walcheren; similarly, the citizens of Zierikzee possessed 30% of the land on Schouwen in 1535. After the inundations of 1530–2, members of the Antwerp and Mechelen commercial elites invested heavily in the reclamation of Zuid-Beveland, where they became major landowners at the expense of the peasants.}

\[\text{Lack of documentation makes it difficult to reveal the precise development of landownership and exploitation of estates in late-medieval Zeeland, but a few observations can be made. First, the preference of townsmen for landownership can be explained by the fact that, from an investor’s perspective, a plot of land was still more profitable than a lordship. Second, the land market was easily accessible, whereas *ambachten* could only be inherited or acquired with the count’s approval. Third, noblemen and burghers had different economic and political interests and cultural values, which explains their respective preferences for lordships or landownership. For a nobleman, the political rights and social status attached to the possession of lordships exceeded their pure economic value. It was not until the end of the sixteenth century that non-noble townsmen became important holders of *ambachten* in Zeeland. By that time, lordships no longer brought the same financial benefits.}

\[\text{The fact that almost all lordships were in noble hands gave the nobility a huge advantage in the States of Zeeland. Throughout the Burgundian-Habsburg period, the nobility accepted the growing financial demands of the princes without much opposition. Noble lords – in particular those holding numerous lordships – profited directly from the gathering of the *beden*, while landowners had to pay the taxes. As the towns did not directly contribute to the *beden*, they had no say in the negotiations between count and nobility. This is in marked contrast to the situation in}


\[\text{\footnote{Van Steensel, *‘Belastingheffing’*, 189–91.}}\]
Holland and Flanders, where the cities and towns dominated the States and where rulers sought to protect their landowning citizens from taxation at the expense of the countryside. As the noble landowners were exempt from taxation in these principalities, they had no obvious interest in the deliberations on taxation.49

Charles the Bold made an unsuccessful attempt to introduce new forms of taxation – mainly excises on the sale of primary necessities levied in the towns. A new tax on beer, approved by the States of Zeeland in 1472, led to a riot in Zierikzee in which two ducal representatives – including a nobleman, Michiel van Heenvliet – were killed and thrown from a window of the town hall.50 From the late fifteenth century onwards, however, the beden were sometimes split, one part to be paid by the countryside and the other by the towns. The burden placed on the towns reflected their financial strength, as they normally bore between half and two-thirds of the total sum. Middelburg and Zierikzee then each paid a share of 25%, while 10 minor towns contributed smaller shares.51 However, despite a major contribution to the comital beden, the towns did not gain more political influence. The nobility and abbots of Middelburg could still vote in favour of new beden for the countryside, and the towns were unable to prevent them. It was not until 1544 that the towns succeeded in establishing a formal say in the management of the finances of the States of Zeeland.52

The struggle for the countryside

The nobility in late-medieval Zeeland maintained its dominant position in the countryside, but the number of noble office-holders markedly decreased from the early sixteenth century onwards, altering the balance of power in the countryside. An important change occurred in the administration of law in the late fifteenth century, when the urban judiciary of Middelburg and Zierikzee replaced the count’s court (grafelijke vierschaar), which had become an ineffective institution as it could only be convened in the presence of the count. The Burgundian-Habsburg princes assembled the court a mere 10 times from 1433 to the last meeting in 1501.53 Understandably, the irregular administration of the law was a recurrent cause of complaint. A provisional arrangement was made in 1477, granting some of the smaller towns the right to enforce criminal justice. At the same time, the receivers of Zeeland were tasked with criminal investigation in the countryside.54 In the end, with the count’s consent, Middelburg in 1490 and Zierikzee in 1512 assumed responsibility for criminal investigations and justice in the countryside.55 The count ceded important legal powers to the towns, although he maintained important controls through his receivers and bailiffs. The nobility was confronted by a gradual expansion of urban legal powers over the

countryside, and noblemen eventually lost their positions as feudal judges in the count’s court to the aldermen of the municipal courts.

The towns of Zeeland, moreover, increasingly sought to extend control over their hinterlands in order to protect the economic interests of their citizens. The towns obtained economic privileges from the count and purchased rural lordships. Furthermore, they became more involved in the management of the dykes and drainage systems, which gave the magistrates a say in tax matters and the legal means to prosecute those who committed offences against the dyke laws. Middelburg in particular had an aggressive policy of purchasing lordships to secure access to the sea and to counter industrial and commercial activities in the surrounding villages. This inevitably led to legal conflicts with noble lords. The magistrate of Middelburg took the lord of Arnemuiden to court in 1507 over the establishment of a brewery in Arnemuiden, and in 1536 over the erection of a crane to unload ships. The town also lobbied fiercely with the count against the economic growth of rival ports in the towns of Vlissingen and Veere. Likewise, Zierikzee brought several suits against noble lords before the Court of Holland and the Great Council.

Relations between towns and noblemen were not always hostile. The towns relied upon powerful noblemen as brokers for their interests at the highest political level. For instance, the lord of Ravenstein mediated between the duke and the people of Zierikzee in the aftermath of the riot of 1472. Middelburg frequently bestowed gifts on the upper nobility for their services. In 1495, for instance, Jan van Kruiningen received a sum of 200 pounds towards the restoration of his castle in gratitude for his efforts on behalf of the town. Another reason for towns to be on good terms with the noble lords was that, from the last quarter of the fifteenth century onwards, the Burgundian-Habsburg princes typically left the annual task of appointing new aldermen in the hands of some of the upper nobility. This was unsatisfactory to the towns, as it gave the lords great influence over the composition of the magistracy and, therefore, urban politics. Political relations in late-medieval Zeeland were thus more complex than a straightforward opposition between nobility and towns.

**Nobles in the towns of Zeeland**

Relations between nobles and townsmen were multi-dimensional, and towns performed a range of functions for the nobility. The urban markets offered nobles consumer goods and luxury products; the town was also the arena for political events, and for cultural and religious activities. For their part, nobles resided in towns, took up urban offices, acquired citizenship and married into urban families. These interactions with urban society resulted in interpersonal ties and social networks, and an analysis of these illuminates the position of the nobility with regard to town and country.

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56 Dekker, Zuid-Beveland, 574–6.
The presence of the nobility was most obvious in the seigneurial towns, which powerful noblemen held from the count, functioning as fiefs with powers of high jurisdiction. There were seven of these towns at the end of the fifteenth century, mostly small urban settlements with fewer than 1000 inhabitants, except for the port towns of Veere, Vlissingen and Brouwershaven, which were formidable economic competitors with Middelburg and Zierikzee. Hendrik van Borssele, lord of Veere, acquired Vlissingen, Domburg and Westkapelle in 1453 after lending shortly before his death. Van Borssele’s son, Wolfert, secured full rights over Brouwershaven in 1477. Hendrik and Wolfert recognised the economic significance of the towns, as they owned a fleet of ships and wished to stimulate commercial activities. Veere, at the northern end of Walcheren, became an important port for traders from Scotland, the Baltic region and France, while Vlissingen, in the south, became a base for herring fishermen and merchants shipping goods to France and England. Apart from holding five towns apiece, they also held about 10% of the total number of lordships in Zeeland. In 1470, 55% of Hendrik’s income came from his towns and 45% from his rural possessions. The economic position of the lords of Veere was exceptional, but their example highlights the potential for the nobility in the coastal Low Countries to profit from urban trade and industry.

The upper nobility normally resided in their castles, but possessed several townhouses that were used as short-term residences. For instance, Frank van Borssele (d. 1470), lord of Sint-Maartensdijk, acquired a house in The Hague, the seat of the Court of Holland and Zeeland. Several other noblemen had residences in Middelburg, Utrecht, The Hague, Ghent and Brussels, where they stayed during visits to these administrative or economic centres. Adolph of Cleves, lord of Ravenstein, had a hôtel on the Coudenberg in Brussels. He mostly resided in Zeeland after he fell into disfavour with Maximilian of Austria in 1482, and he purchased a house in Zierikzee shortly before his death. The upper nobility did not settle permanently in the towns of Zeeland.

63 Sicking, Neptune, 47–9.
67 Van Steensel, Edelen, 318.
but this was not uncommon in the Flemish cities, where, for instance, the lord of Gruuthuse lived in a fortified palace in Bruges.68

The residence patterns of the other nobility were more diverse. A considerable number of noblemen alternated between life in the countryside and a stay in a town, or were permanent town-dwellers. Noblemen who were appointed as urban officers often became urban citizens. In the fifteenth century, for example, the castle known as the Torenburg in Goes was successively inhabited by the town’s bailiffs, Wolfert van der Maalstede (d. 1447) and David van Baarsdorp (d. 1477). In some cases, noble families established themselves more or less permanently in towns over successive generations, sometimes outside Zeeland, as did Jan van Reimerswaal (d. 1479) and his son Willem (d. 1515), who were bailiffs of Rotterdam.69 But in all cases, these noblemen also possessed one or more manors in their lordships in the countryside.70 There was also a significant group of noblemen, mainly belonging to the lower stratum of the noble population, who lived permanently within the town walls. The majority of these noble families moved into the towns from the fourteenth century onwards, while a minority were ennobled members of the urban ruling elites. They sometimes had properties in the countryside, but their life was mainly led in urban society; they became citizens and were elected to municipal offices.

The registration books (poorterboeken) recording new citizens give some insight into the noble presence in towns. Citizenship conferred the right to participate in the urban political and economic life, and there are examples of citizenship awarded to noblemen for services rendered to towns. Anthonis van Bruelis was granted the status of citizen (poorter) of Zierikzee in 1475 for his role in subduing the riot in the town, but he never actually moved to Zierikzee. The poorterboeken of the Zeeland towns are now fragmentary survivals, and the references to noblemen are therefore incomplete. For the period from 1389 to 1524, 18 nobles were granted citizenship in Zierikzee, 14 in Middelburg and six in Goes.71 That the number of grants remained relatively low during the fifteenth century is corroborated by other sources.72 But the process had a cumulative effect, because children of noble townsmen obtained citizenship by birth.

In general, the noblemen who themselves settled in towns were swiftly integrated into the urban political elite. Michiel van Nieuwerve, for instance, became a citizen of Middelburg in 1399, after which he and his son held the offices of burgomaster and alderman respectively. Several other petty, non-knights, noble families in Middelburg and Zierikzee followed the same trajectory. The number of noble burgomasters gives an indication of power of the nobility in urban society, because only citizens could be appointed or elected members of the town council. Table 2 sets out the numbers of noblemen and their terms of office from 1400 to 1550. Two burgomasters were elected yearly in each town: 29% were of noble origin in the case of Middelburg and 6% in that of Zierikzee. Between 1525 and 1550, all burgomasters in Zierikzee were commoners, and in Middelburg the office was held by noblemen on only six

69 Van Steensel, Edelen, 97, 190, 318.
70 Hendrik van Wissenkerke (d. 1469), a citizen from Middelburg and comital office-holder, owned two houses in Middelburg, some small houses in the village of Arnemuiden and two manors in parishes of Kouwerve and Wissenkerke; Van Steensel, Edelen, 101.
71 Van Steensel, Edelen, 314–15; Dekker, Landstede, 297–8. Until the mid-fifteenth century, Middelburg accepted buitenpoorters, who only resided within the town walls for a short period during the year but enjoyed the privileges of a full citizen; Unger, Bronnen, 1: 40, 43; D. Nicholas, Town and Countryside. Social, Economic, and Political Tensions in Fourteenth-Century Flanders (Bruges: De Tempel, 1971), 12, 238–42.
72 For instance the mention of place of residence in fiscal registers, such as the Valor Feodorum (1474).
occasions. Middelburg was more attractive for noblemen than Zierikzee, both politically and economically, but noble political participation decreased drastically in both towns after 1525. Noblemen were rarely active in the small towns. The magistracy of Goes, for example, never counted noblemen among its members.

The participation of lesser noblemen in the town councils of Middelburg and Zierikzee shows that their move into the towns was not just an economic strategy but also a way of strengthening their political power. Although noble magistrates were common in the fifteenth century, there had been some friction between the count and the people of Middelburg in the preceding century. The count of Zeeland had stipulated in 1348 that he would not appoint noble lords as aldermen of Middelburg; Count Albrecht reiterated this in 1385, after appointing a knight, Huge Blok, as alderman. The citizens of Middelburg were attempting to guard themselves against noble outsiders, imposed upon them by the count, rather than objecting to the participation of noble citizens in urban government per se.

The patterns of noble activity in the towns of late-medieval Holland were comparable to those in Zeeland. In Leiden, about a third of the fourteenth-century ruling elite had their origins among the lesser nobility. These families merged with non-noble families and gradually lost their status. Only a few members of the knighthood took up urban offices, and the overall participation of noblemen in urban government decreased significantly in the early sixteenth century. The case of Flanders was different, because the large size of the cities had an important impact. Here, an increasing number of noblemen took up urban residence from the fourteenth century onwards, but ennobled townsmen also constituted a considerable part of the urban noble population. This dual ‘urbanisation’ of the nobility was followed by the growing participation of noble families in urban politics. The proportion of noble families that obtained the office of alderman rose from 12% in 1350 to 44% in 1500. It should be noted, though, that the ruling elites of the smaller Flemish towns counted but few noblemen among their ranks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in office</th>
<th>1400–49</th>
<th>1450–99</th>
<th>1500–50</th>
<th>1400–1550</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middelburg</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zierikzee</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of nobles</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

73 Van Steensel, Edelen, 315–17.
74 Dekker, Landstede, 338–9.
75 De Stoppelaar, Inventaris, no. 39, 76.
77 Janse, Ridderschap, 395; Van Nierop, Nobility, 158–9.
Social mobility and social networks

Interaction between nobles and non-nobles in urban society did not significantly increase the chances for upward social mobility in late-medieval Zeeland. The renewal of the noble population was, in any case, more the result of geographical than social mobility, because the majority of the new noblemen in the county came from other regions. Between 1430 and 1550, only seven individuals were dubbed by the prince or received letters of ennoblement; three of them were towns- men. For instance, Klaas van Kats (d. 1521) received letters of ennoblement in 1492, and Jeronimus van Serooskerke (d. 1571) was knighted around 1545. Both originated from Zierikzee, from families active in urban government and state service. Their direct forebears had aspired to noble status by marrying into noble families, acquiring lordships, seeking the patronage of high noblemen and leading a noble lifestyle.

The count of Zeeland kept strict control over grants of nobility. Until the late fifteenth century, this status was usually only granted for service in battle. The Burgundian dukes also granted letters of ennoblement to reward loyal state officials for their services, or, from the late fifteenth century onwards, dubbed them during princely entries or other ceremonies. The knightly title became a reward for state rather than military service. The newly ennobled naturally had to prove their new status by displaying an appropriately noble way of living, but there are no examples of urban families in Zeeland becoming recognised as noble solely by imitating the *vivre noblement* over two or three generations. The Middelburg family of Van der Hooge, regarded as noble at the end of the fifteenth century, may appear to have attained this status in this way, but they were in fact descended from an illegitimate scion of the Van Borssele family.

This pattern of ennoblement – living a noble lifestyle, integrating into noble families and networks, and achieving recognition as a noble by the established nobility – was the most important means of achieving upward social mobility in Flanders. Informal processes of ennoblement were possible because nobility was first and foremost a matter of social perception and customary law. The intercession of the prince was not necessarily required to obtain noble status in Flanders. Of the 128 new noble families that Buylaert identified for the period from 1376 to 1500, at least 38 originated in the towns and were gradually ennobled. Overall, at least 69 ennobled families in this period had urban backgrounds. This particular pattern of ennoblement did not apply generally, for the Low Countries as a whole, but it was linked to the size of the Flemish cities and the strong noble component among its ruling elites. These noble networks were absent in the towns of Holland and Zeeland, making the chances of gradual ennoblement in these places slight. The low number of ennobled townsmen in Zeeland, however, conceals the fact that a number of non-noble families unsuccessfully pursued social promotion.

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80 Among them were several ennobled state officials: Anthonis Michiels, Pieter Lanchals, Cornelis Cruesink, Jeronimus Lauwerijn, Jan Pieters, Jan Micauld and Ferrand de Gros.


In any case, marrying into noble families was an important step toward obtaining noble status. This implies that intermarriage between noble and non-noble families was to a certain extent accepted in late-medieval society. Members of the upper nobility married exclusively with partners of equal standing, but marriage strategies among noble families of lesser status varied. Noblemen who pursued a career in state service, for instance, made efforts to build up kin networks that comprised non-noble state officers and members of urban government. Individuals of the Van Kats family, who served as councillors, bailiffs and military commanders in successive generations, found their partners equally among noble and non-noble families in Zeeland and Holland. For townsmen who aspired to enter noble ranks, matrimonial ties with noble families were essential. For example, Klaas van Kats – his grandmother was an illegitimate daughter of the nobleman, Laurens van Kats, and he chose to bear her surname – married a noble lady, Gertrude van Botland. They had two daughters: Lievine was married to a high Habsburg state official, Jan Micault (d. 1539), who was dubbed by Charles V; Catharina was married to a Flemish noble state official, Gelein van Haveskerke (d. 1529). There was an acceptance of mixed marriages such as these, as further illustrated by the matrimonial ties that frequently bound lesser noble townsmen (for example, the families of Van Wissenkerke, Van der Buttinge and Van Grijpskerke) and members of the urban elites, although this may not always have been a matter of choice.

The interaction between nobles and non-nobles in the towns of Zeeland did not result in an amalgamation of social groups through kin relations. As in late-medieval Bruges, nobles of different standing and origin maintained distinct familial networks. Patronage networks that cut across social boundaries were far more important in aligning the interests of noble and non-noble families in the towns. These networks are hard to elucidate, but sometimes conflicts reveal reciprocal ties between the upper nobility and (noble) townsmen. Around 1454, for instance, a letter of complaint was written to the duke of Burgundy about the power of Hendrik van Borssele, lord of Veere, on the island of Walcheren: he had succeeded in having his clients appointed to regional and local offices. This gave him the opportunity to influence urban politics and safeguard his own interests. Four brothers of the Middelburg-based noble family of Van Wissenkerke simultaneously held the offices of receiver of Bewestenschelde, dean of Walcheren, bailiff of Middelburg and burgomaster of Middelburg respectively. In the absence of state institutions, the towns were the focal point of the patronage networks in Zeeland.

The upper nobility sometimes became involved in political struggles within the town walls through their ties with urban officials. In the 1510s, Adolph of Burgundy, lord of Veere, played a role in a feud between Lieven Hugenz and Jacob van Domburg in Middelburg.

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Lieven was a long-time burgomaster of the town, who received letters of ennoblement in 1512. From 1509 onwards, he was in conflict with Jacob van Domburg, a knight from a noble family that had been settled in Middelburg for several generations. The hostilities were unresolved in 1513, when Lieven and Jacob, both burgomasters at the time, agreed to submit themselves to arbitration. The conflict now became part of an open power struggle in Middelburg’s town council. Adolph of Burgundy, as one of the count’s representatives in electing new magistrates, ruled that Jacob van Domburg should chair the town council, because knights should be given priority over non-knightly noblemen. The lord of Veere therefore ruled in favour of his client and against Lieven Hugenz, who had previously held this position through seniority. The position became more complicated when Lieven Hugenz was knighted by the prince in 1515; he possibly enjoyed support from the princely court, as a counterbalance to the influence of the lord of Veere in Middelburg. Jacob van Domburg was, however, not re-elected as burgomaster. In 1517, the citizens brought a lawsuit against him before the Great Council of Mechelen. He was accused of corruption, extortion and other abuses of power, and also of passing on confidential information to the lord of Veere, thereby thwarting plans to establish a Scottish market in Middelburg. The Great Council ruled in favour of the town, and in 1524 the governess Margaret of Austria forbade Jacob van Domburg from fulfilling any office in Middelburg again.

The upper nobility acted as power-brokers, as they helped noble and non-noble town officials and magistrates to advance their positions and careers, while these clients were in turn used to protect their patron’s local interests. The scope and durability of these networks of patronage varied according to the interests and loyalties of those involved and the political circumstances of the time. However, political and economic relations between the upper nobility and men of lesser (noble) status were never sealed by marriage. Marriages across social boundaries only occurred between nobles on the one hand, and non-noble state officials and urban magistrates on the other, to reinforce professional and political networks. Only a minority of the noble population in Zeeland, however, was involved in state service or urban government. The argument that state formation and urbanisation led to the incorporation of the nobility into a new power elite in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands does not hold. Instead, there were several, sometimes overlapping, social networks clustered around state institutions and town councils, which varied in character, durability and composition.

Noble versus civic culture?
To what extent did the interaction between nobles and non-nobles in urban society affect their respective cultural attitudes and values? Civic culture and urban identity in the late-medieval Low Countries have been examined principally in the context of the rivalry between state power and urban autonomy; but political tensions and a strong civic identity did not rule out a lively socio-cultural exchange between nobility and urban elites. The existence of these

92 The Lord of Veere was also directly involved in a conflict over the appointment of a son of Lieven Hugenz as sheriff of the graafelijke vierschaar in Zeeland in 1513: A. Wijffels, ‘Of een Zeeuw, academische jurist en deskundig in het oude vaderlandse recht, nobel dient geacht?’, in Miscellanea Forensia Historica, ed. J.M.I. Koster-van Dijk and A. Wijffels (Amsterdam: Werkgroep Grote Raad van Mechelen, 1988), 357–87.
94 Unger, Bronnen, 2: no. 482; De Stoppelaar, Inventaris, no. 1288.
socio-cultural networks is most clear in the Flemish cities, where wealthy townsmen imitated a noble lifestyle, whereas noblemen joined typical urban associations.\textsuperscript{96} Again, the scope of these socio-cultural networks must be put into perspective, as only a minority of the noble and urban population participated in them. It is noteworthy, though, that the interaction between nobles and non-nobles in the urban society of the Low Countries was not regarded as detrimental to noble status and identity.

The evidence from Zeeland is too fragmentary to draw far-reaching conclusions on the question of social interaction and demarcation, but some observations can be made. First, the relatively small size of the Zeeland towns and the wealth of its populace were reflected in the scale and character of urban cultural activities. The middle groups – typically the bearers of urban identity – were not as significant and well-off as those in the larger Flemish and Brabantine cities. It is no surprise, therefore, that princely entries, religious processions, meetings of shooting fraternities and other festivities never matched the grandeur of the well-known examples of the southern Netherlands.\textsuperscript{97} The Flemish and Brabantine cities often took the initiative in organising tournaments in co-operation with the princely court. Members of the urban elites were keen to participate in these activities, but distinctions in the social hierarchy were upheld by organising separate courtly-knighthly and civic tournaments. In Bruges, both noble and non-noble citizens joined a jousting company known as the White Bear (the Witte Beer), which was an example of both civic pride and the townsmen’s appetite for noble activities.\textsuperscript{98} Urban tournaments testify to the absence of any strong antagonism between nobility and towns in the coastal Low Countries. By comparison, this was not the case in some German lands, where relations between the aristocracy and powerful towns were politicised. The nobility here formed tournament companies that organised jousts in the towns as a form of social demarcation. Only full noblemen (that is, those of four quarters of nobility) were allowed to participate, provided that they were not citizens or engaged in trade.\textsuperscript{99}

The Zeeland towns were never the location for knightly tournaments in the later Middle Ages, as far as is known. They lacked the regular presence of the princely court, and the resources of the urban elites were too limited to organise tournaments. Noblemen from Zeeland had to travel elsewhere to show off their military capabilities. The lord of Reimerswaal, for example, took part in a tournament held during the formal entry of Philip the Fair (d. 1506) into Antwerp in 1494.\textsuperscript{100} And yet, despite the absence of courtly splendour and urban affluence in Zeeland, the nobility did take part in typical urban activities. The lord of Veere was among the nobles who participated in the


\textsuperscript{97} Smit, \textit{Vorst}, 350.


\textsuperscript{100} Van Steensel, \textit{Edelen}, 383.
annual archery contests organised by Middelburg’s shooting fraternity. The competition – aimed at shooting a popinjay from a high pole with a bow – was followed by a shared meal. Noblemen were also involved in founding chambers of rhetoric. The members of these recreational and literary associations, resembling the older religious fraternities and testament to the urban culture of the Low Countries, wrote poems and performed plays during urban festivities. From the late fifteenth century onwards, Jacob van Kats, his son Willem, Klaas van Ruiven and Hendrik van Bruelis, key noble figures in the regional administration, were part of literary and intellectual networks that went beyond social boundaries. They actively promoted the chambers of rhetoric and the spread of literature in the towns and villages of Holland and Zeeland. These literary activities were quite distinct from the taste of the Burgundian high nobility for illuminated manuscripts, a taste which might also be found in the fifteenth-century library of Wolfert van Borssele.

A final instance of noble participation in urban associations was membership of religious fraternities. From the late fourteenth century onwards, several respected noblemen from Walcheren became members of the Brotherhood of Our Lady, founded in the Westmonster church in Middelburg. The yearly fraternity feast was an important event for the brothers and the guild also maintained votive lights, prayers and masses for deceased brothers. Gillis van Arnemuiden (d. 1438) endowed the guild with landed property to fund the weekly commemorative prayers and memorial masses. Noblemen also entrusted the care for the salvation of their souls to religious institutions in the towns, although they were in general buried in their own parish churches. Wolfert van Borssele, for example, paid the friars of Middelburg for anniversary services to commemorate several members of his family members who were laid to rest in the friary. Wolfert himself was buried in the chapel of his castle at Zandenburg. The family of Van der Maalstede was instrumental in the foundation of the monastery of the Brothers of the Cross in Goes in 1429, where some members of the family were probably interred. A stained-glass window was installed in the monastery, depicting the donors Olivier van der Maalstede (d. 1476) and his wife, Meyne van Oostende. The presence of noblemen in the towns often continued after their death, through memorial foundations in urban religious and charitable institutions. Towns became important places of socio-cultural and religious activities for the nobility of Zeeland. To some extent the towns substituted for the princely court, since only the upper nobility had access to the Burgundian court.

In general it can be concluded that noble and civic values were not mutually exclusive in the late-medieval Low Countries. However, the intensity of the interaction between nobles and non-nobles in the towns of Zeeland never compared to that in the Flemish and Brabantian cities, where a considerable proportion of the urban elites were of noble rank. Moreover, only a minority of the nobility participated in urban cultural and religious activities, and their objectives varied according to their status. It was the professional networks of state officials and urban magistrates in

101 Van Steensel, Edelen, 315.
104 De Stoppelaar, Inventaris, no. 255, 670. Anna of Burgundy, lady of Ravenstein, was member of the brotherhood of St Anna in Ghent: P. Trio, Volksreligie als spiegel van een stedelijke samenleving. De broederschappen te Gent in de late middeleeuwen (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 215.
particular that blurred the boundaries between noble and urban culture. This interaction appears not to have been detrimental to the status of the noblemen involved, and may have benefited townsfolk who aspired to nobility. In this respect, economic developments rather than social interaction dissolved boundaries between noblemen of lesser status and townsfolk. It is revealing that the privileges of the nobility were reinforced in the new Law (Keur) of Zeeland in 1495, because ‘nobles should not be less privileged than the citizens of the various towns’.  

**Conclusion**

The example of the nobility of Zeeland shows that the developments in one principality cannot easily be taken as representative of the coastal Low Countries as a whole. Regional variations in the structure of the noble population, the concept of nobility and the social and marriage strategies of noble families are explained by differences in the political and social institutions, the size of cities and towns, and the presence or absence of state institutions. Most remarkable is that, in contrast to Flanders and Holland, the great seigneurial lords in Zeeland dominated political decision-making in the States, even though the towns gradually gained more political and legal power in the fifteenth century. The relatively small size of the towns and the fact that the nobility could exercise financial power created a balance of power in Zeeland different to that in surrounding principalities, where cities and towns outweighed the nobility. Furthermore, the urban ruling elites in Zeeland and Holland lacked the strong noble element of the Flemish cities; the processes of gradual ennoblement through informal social recognition were in consequence virtually absent from the northern counties.

The regional approach to histories of the nobility of the late-medieval Low Countries also demonstrates that studies of state institutions and urban elites have overlooked the fact that only a minority of the nobility took up state or urban offices. The same is true of studies of the Burgundian-Habsburg upper nobility: their conclusions are not generally applicable to the noble population as a whole. The effects of state formation and urbanisation on the structure of the noble population have been overestimated: the nobility remained more heterogeneous than is often suggested. Nor can the idea that the nobility in the Low Countries became dependent on the state for survival be sustained: the nobility was never entirely transformed into a state nobility. The social status of a nobleman determined to a large extent the type of relations he had with townsfolk. For example, powerful noble lords such as the lords of Veere acted as patrons for members of the urban elites, but would never marry beneath their standing. Intermarriage only occurred at a lower level, as local noblemen or noble state officials married into non-noble families active in state service or urban government.

State service was nonetheless politically and financially very rewarding for a significant but small group of noblemen, and it was also an important mechanism of upward social mobility. The integration of principalities into the Burgundian-Habsburg state gave major political incentives to the formation of a supra-regional, titled nobility and to noble networks tied to the state institutions. In this way, in the early sixteenth century, noble status became more connected to state service, while, quite paradoxically, the number of noblemen active in state service decreased.

had convergent political and material interests and a common ideology.\textsuperscript{108} Social and legal boundaries were not easily erased, however, and it is important to differentiate between noblemen, according to their political and socio-economic profiles, in order to understand the ties they maintained with non-noble state officials and urban magistrates.\textsuperscript{109}

The lesser noblemen who moved into the towns of Zeeland were mainly attracted by the potential of urban trade and industry. They integrated with the urban elites and often became indistinguishable from them, even though some remained aware of their social origins (and their environment reflected that). The examples of the families of Van der Hooge and Van Domburg show that noble families that moved into the towns could in later generations reinvest in their noble estate and climb the noble hierarchy. It appears that noblemen took up urban offices in Middelburg and Zierikzee soon after obtaining citizenship, indicating that there was a political motive behind the move to the towns. It is important to acknowledge that only a small segment of the urban population in Zeeland – those men active in princely service or urban government – aspired to noble status and its corresponding costly lifestyle. Within the town walls, economic capacity was as an important a factor as prestige in determining one’s position in the socio-political hierarchy.\textsuperscript{110} Finally, the noble and ennobled townsman in Zeeland cannot be described as an ‘urban nobility’ (\textit{Stadtadel}). As other historians have also pointed out, this notion does not account for the differences in status and objectives of the noblemen in an urban society, and unjustly treats them as a distinct and homogeneous group.\textsuperscript{111}

The urban ruling elites in the coastal Low Countries were initially of non-noble origin. Even in Flanders, it was not until the second half of the fourteenth century that a significant number of noblemen moved to the cities and took up urban office.\textsuperscript{112} This was unlike the situation in certain parts of Italy, Germany and France, where landowning nobles and urban knights were a constitutive part of the early urban communes.\textsuperscript{113} In medieval Castile, the urban knights and lesser nobility profited from royal patronage and military service to dominate the urban ruling elites.\textsuperscript{114} These differences in development are partly explained by the relatively late rise of the towns in Holland and Zeeland in the thirteenth century, which coincided with the disappearance of the servile \textit{ministeriales}. Furthermore, the lesser noblemen who were to the first to move into the towns of the Low Countries never formed a distinct group within the upper echelons of

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\item \textsuperscript{112} Nicholas, \textit{Town}, 350–1; Buylaert, \textit{Eeuwen}, 266–80.
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urban society; they lacked the opportunities to accumulate wealth and power to challenge the political ascendancy of merchants and craftsmen. Only the larger Flemish and Brabantine cities attracted noble families of higher standing in the later Middle Ages, and their wealthy elites were also more successful in obtaining noble status. That there were comparatively few nobles in the urban society of Zeeland can therefore be explained by their absence from the major towns during the formative years of these municipalities; and, from a political and economic perspective, by the lack of attractiveness of towns to the higher nobility.

There was no outright antagonism between the nobility and the cities and towns of the coastal Low Countries. The nobility and towns never really acted as collective entities, due to their heterogeneous composition and because of the political and economic interaction between noblemen and townspeople. Instead, the noble and civic worlds existed alongside each other in late-medieval Zeeland, although social boundaries, while often crossed, were ultimately not easily erased. Despite the political and economic connections of noblemen and townspeople, of which the intensity and durability depended on the position and objectives of those involved, social overlaps among nobility and urban elites were limited. Marriage into non-noble urban families sometimes was a strategic choice for noblemen in state service, but more often than not it was for lesser noblemen a first step towards losing their privileged social status. On the other hand, the chances of moving into the nobility were also slight for the Zeeland townspeople. Ties between noblemen and townspeople became weaker over the course of the sixteenth century, which in turn may have contributed to the decrease in noble participation in the administration of the county of Zeeland in this period.

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