Origins and Transformations. Recent Historiography on the Nobility in the Medieval Low Countries I

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Abstract

The medieval Low Countries are not usually associated with nobility and knighthood, but historical research in the past decades has proven that they should be. This series of essays gives a historiographical overview of the recent literature on the nobility in the medieval Low Countries and links it with major international debates on the subject. This first of the three sections into which this survey is organised deals with the origins and evolution of the nobility, knighthood and ministeriality during the central Middle Ages. The early history of the nobility in the medieval Low Countries would benefit from trans-regional approaches in order to understand general patterns of development and regional peculiarities, and would offer an opportunity to confront different historiographical traditions by making comparisons with other European regions.

Introduction

The medieval Low Countries are not usually associated with nobility and knighthood. The region was for a long time at the political periphery of western Europe, and in the late Middle Ages, the coastal principalities became better known as lands of cities and towns. The Low Countries were not the focal point of, for example, the process of incastellamento or the emergence of chivalry, nor did a strong court nobility develop in the relatively small principalities. But the nobility was certainly not absent. Its presence was clearly visible in rural and urban society, and nobles played an important role in shaping political, economic and socio-cultural relationships.

In the past decades, a good number of studies have been devoted to various aspects of the history of the nobility in the medieval Low Countries, but the challenging task of writing a synthesis still has to be undertaken. It might, in this respect, be more apt to speak of the history of the nobilities, since the medieval Low Countries were composed of several independent principalities and regions, which only became politically unified under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty in 1543. The formation of the Seventeen Provinces of the Netherlands was an outcome that could not have been foreseen in the preceding centuries. Hence, writing a history of the nobility in the medieval Low Countries requires a comparative approach and is further complicated by the fact that the narrative cannot be centred on the relationship between crown and nobility, as is common in English and French historiography. At the same time, the divergent developments of the nobilities in the various regions of the Low Countries make it possible to formulate a comparative explanation of how medieval noblemen acquired and maintained their social dominance and privileged position in society over time.

This survey article is the first of three contributions aiming to summarise recent historiography on the nobility in the medieval Low Countries. Starting with the early medieval history of nobility, ministeriality and knighthood in these regions, the series does not intend...
to list an exhaustive bibliography of all publications relating to nobility, nor to discuss all of its aspects in detail, but to provide an outline of recent research along with references to the literature, which can serve as a starting point for those interested in medieval nobility or the medieval Low Countries. The research field is discussed in both a chronological manner and a thematic manner, linking it where possible with debates in international historiography and tentatively identifying areas for potential further research. In particular, the early history of the medieval nobility addressed in this essay is a topic characterised by a lively debate among historians, a debate in which the Low Countries have not figured prominently of late. This is unfortunate, but at the same time, it opens up the possibility of advancing the debate on some key issues and of revising the current understanding of the origins and transformations of the nobility in the medieval Low Countries.

Nobiles, Milites and Ministeriales in the Low Countries

After the collapse of the Carolingian Empire in the 9th century, the north-western part of the European continent eventually became divided along the river Scheldt between West and East Francia with the Treaty of Ribemont in 880. The weakened French and German crowns had no vital interests in these borderlands, and the disintegration of royal authority in Flanders, Frisia, Holland and Lower Lotharingia allowed for the emergence of new regional principalities, as mighty local lords succeeded to expand their domains. Between the 10th and 13th centuries, the Low Countries became a patchwork of prince-bishoprics, duchies and counties, while its most northern regions were not subject to any territorial lord following the establishment of the ‘Frisian freedom’ in the early 12th century. It is, therefore, important to avoid reading the later, politically unified Low Countries back into the central medieval period. The fragmented territories of the Low Countries also had different political, economic and cultural orientations because of feudal ties and trade relations: the eastern regions were directed towards the German lands, and the western and southern regions more towards France and England. Finally, the principalities showed a wide geographical diversity: the variety in landscape and soil conditions between the coastal and inland regions was a crucial factor in the development of economic and social structures.

Powerful local lords played a leading role in the formation of new territories in the Low Countries during the central Middle Ages. Their history is relatively well known, due to the voluminous studies of Genicot on Namur, Van Winter on Gelre and Warlop on Flanders, which all appeared in the 1960s. Complemented by exploratory articles on other principalities, this research sheds light on the early history of the nobility, knighthood and ministeriality in various regions of the Low Countries. Nevertheless, the origins of the nobiles who appear in the sources from the 10th century onwards remain obscure. The lords, dukes and counts who seized territorial power were most likely descendants of the Carolingian royal aristocracy or were local potentes linked to this aristocracy. Although the word ‘nobilis’ appears to indicate an individual’s personal qualities in the sources, Van Winter regards the small number of families, who were unevenly spread over the Low Countries, as belonging to a nobility of birth. Near to nothing is known about the origins of lower ranking nobiles.

By the end of the 13th century, the image becomes clearer. As elsewhere in Europe, knighthood had developed into a defining element of nobility in the Low Countries, and the titles of ‘knight’ and ‘squire’ were now hereditary titles of honour for noblemen. This noble knighthood, characterised by an internal hierarchy, had evolved into a relatively closed and self-conscious social group. Although the political and socio-economic processes behind this evolution have not yet been properly examined and fully understood, it is evident that the pace, intensity and outcome of this transformation of the aristocracy varied significantly.

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between the principalities, leading to striking differences in the social composition of the knightly nobilities. The formation of a knightly nobility was most pronounced in the coastal and southern lands of Flanders, Brabant, Hainault, Holland and Zeeland. Here, from the late 12th century onwards, noblemen increasingly bore the title of *miles*, even though this title only gradually became equated with the noble status over the course of the 13th century. In Guelders, the old nobility continued to distinguish itself socially from the knightly families of servile origin until the end of the 16th century. The knighthood was thus composed of noble knights and non-noble knights of free or servile status. However, it is unclear to what extent these old legal distinctions retained political and social significance in the later Middle Ages. Finally, in Friesland and the Ommelanden – the free northern regions that were not subject to a territorial lord – *nobles* and *potentes*, who were also familiar with chivalric ideas, appear in the sources from the 13th century onwards. The question remains, nonetheless, to what extent these regional aristocrats – who from the mid-13th century were referred to as *capitales* or *hoofdelingen* – formed a relatively closed social elite in the later Middle Ages.

**From a Feudal Revolution to a Social Transformation**

The question of continuity, whether institutional or biological, between the late-Roman senatorial nobility, the Carolingian aristocracies and the nobility of the central Middle Ages, was much debated between the 1950s and the 1970s, but it has subsequently attracted less attention from historians. This is not the case for the second point of historiographical debate (on which there is no consensus among historians either); that is, the question as to when and how the post-Carolingian families of *nobles* transformed into a noble knighthood, thereby fusing in varying degrees with *milites* and *ministeriales*. The Low Countries have not figured prominently in these international discussions during the past two or three decades, and this then raises the question to what extent the long-established narrative of the early history of the noble aristocracies in the Low Countries holds up in the light of newer views and interpretations.

The ideas of Duby were for a long time authoritative for the interpretation of the formation of a noble knighthood during the central Middle Ages. He devised an all-embracing theory about the radical transformation of French society around the turn of the first millennium. Essentially, Duby argues that the dissolution of public order after the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire resulted in a violent period during which regional and local lords acquired public authority (the *bannum*). The caste lords sought to provide a stable territorial basis for the local seigneurial power that they wielded. Duby also traces a change in noble family structures (*la mutation familiale*) towards vertical lineages and the emergence of primogeniture: a reorganisation of kinship relations focusing on the devolution of territorial lordships. Finally, he concludes that the *milites*, the non-noble, heavily armoured, mounted warriors who served the noble castellans, rose in social status from the 11th century onwards, while the members of the old nobility increasingly bore the title ‘miles’. By the end of the 12th century, noble status was fused with that of knighthood. This formation of a noble knighthood was thus part of broader political and socio-economic developments, the so-called ‘feudal revolution’.

Genicot was one of the first to criticise the idea of a merging of nobility and knighthood; he emphasises the strong link between nobility and heritable freedom (*libertas*) in his study on Namur. Subsequently, other historians have nuanced Duby’s thesis by pointing out
regional and temporal variances in the interlocking processes that he traced. A revision of the idea of a feudal revolution was initiated by Barthélemy in the 1990s; he took strong issue with Duby’s assumptions. His core insight is that documentary sources have their own genesis; they do not necessarily reflect social changes. Thus, he challenges the idea of sudden structural institutional transformations around the millennium – a système seigneurial – as an answer to a crisis of public order, proposing instead the idea of continuity throughout the central Middle Ages. Knighthood had since Carolingian times been a characteristic of the ruling elites, and nowhere did the word ‘miles’ become a fixed title in France before the end of the 11th century. He contests, therefore, the whole complex of arguments that Duby constructed about the rise of knighthood from the retinue of noble castellans, as milites existed before the term appeared in the sources. He also questions the evidence of an upward social mobility of knightly families in the 11th century, the proliferation of seigneurial lordships and the transformation of noble family structures. In short, Barthélemy seeks to deconstruct the idea of a noble knightly class separated from the rest of the nobility before the later Middle Ages.

The polemic debate on the feudal revolution did not go unnoticed in Belgium and the Netherlands, but overall it found little resonance with historians there. In general, the picture of the early history of the medieval nobility in the Low Countries that emerged in the 1960s still stands uncontested. Janse briefly discusses the emergence of a noble knighthood in 12th- and 13th-century Holland, but his important study focuses on the late-medieval nobility of this county. Hence, in the light of the new theoretical and methodological perspectives provided by the work of Barthélemy and others, a revisiting of the history of nobility, knighthood and ministeriality in the Low Countries during the central Middle Ages is much needed. The grand narrative of a feudal transformation can no longer serve as a point of departure for the interpretation of the social developments in this period, a conviction demonstrated by Crouch, amongst others. Instead of identifying external factors that explain the development of an open aristocracy into a closed social elite defined by chivalry, Crouch persuasively argues that in medieval England, this ‘social transformation’ was driven by a process of growing noble self-consciousness and self-representation. As such, he turns the argument around by arguing that the emergence of a hierarchical noble knighthood around 1200 provoked a reorganisation of society as a whole around the principle of nobility.

**Conclusions: Bringing the Low Countries Back In**

The new methodological insights and theoretical perspectives on the study of medieval nobility and knighthood stemming from recent historiography offer an excellent starting point to revisit the origins of the regional noble aristocracies in the Low Countries, and their transformation during the central Middle Ages into nobilities defined by chivalry. Undertaking this challenging endeavour would not only benefit our understanding of a formative period in the history of the principalities of the Low Countries, but also open up the opportunity to evaluate and refine the interpretations of concurrent developments in France and England put forward by, for example, Barthélemy and Crouch. This would require evidence to be re-examined without relying on the idea of a feudal revolution as the dominant interpretive paradigm.

Furthermore, the focus should be less on the privileges that defined nobility and the question whether to classify the medieval aristocracy as a legal order or social class, than on what strategies the nobles, milites and ministeriales in the various regions of the Low Countries developed to differentiate themselves within society. How did their self-awareness as a social group evolve during the central Middle Ages? What factors triggered changes in the way nobles and knights were perceived by society at large? Themes integral to these questions are noble
lifestyle and social conduct, as well as the transfer and diffusion of chivalry, understood as a self-conscious code of noble behaviour, particularly in border regions far from the influence of the German imperial court or French royal court. On the other hand, it remains to be seen if the Low Countries are rightly viewed as peripheral to the history of the nobility in the central Middle Ages, particularly since this account does not fit with the emergence of the tournament in the southern regions around 1100 and the flourishing of a chivalric culture at the princely courts in the 13th and 14th centuries.26

A second reason for reconsidering the early history of the nobility in the Low Countries is the improved understanding of political and socio-economic developments, especially concerning the emergence of political and social institutions and the evolution of property rights.27 New studies would allow for a more systematic analysis of how regional differences in, for example, political organisation, the division of landed property and/or inheritance law had a bearing upon the evolution of the nobility, knighthood and ministeriality.28 As they are border regions between France and the German lands, and because of their political fragmentation, the medieval Low Countries were characterised by a strong institutional variety. Depending on the questions asked, comparisons with the bordering French or German lands can be necessary to explain how regional institutions and conditions shaped the evolution of the early nobilities in the Low Countries. Finally, noble families across regional borders had many characteristics in common as well, implying the need to explore trans-regional socio-cultural interactions.

A case in point is the differences between the principalities in terms of the persistence of social and legal distinctions and the inclusiveness of the nobility as a social group. Why were the presence and social prominence of the knightly ministerials who emanated from the familia of worldly rulers particularly significant in the prince-bishoprics of Sticht and Liège? Why did noble and knightly families not intermarry in the eastern principalities (Guelders, Sticht, Namur), where ministeriality continued to exist into the 16th century? Was knighthood not from the onset a typical feature of nobility? And to what extent did a knightly ministeriality as a social group, as opposed to the nobility, actually exist in the 12th and 13th centuries? A better understanding of the practices of noble political and economic power is also necessary to appreciate the role of supra-regional social networks that, despite all legal and institutional peculiarities, facilitated the cultural transfer of ideas about nobility and its conduct.

Finally, there is a pressing need to bring the Low Countries back into international debates on the nobility of the central Middle Ages, in order to initiate a confrontation of French and English historiography with that of Germany. The general idea that the old high nobility in the German lands remained separated (as Herrenstand) from a new noble knighthood (Ritterstand) (comprising free noble families of lower status and once-servile ministerial) that emerged in the 12th century is no longer accepted, as the linear perspective on the rise of knightly ministerial families into nobility has been called into question. Instead, recent studies emphasise regional and temporal variations in the formation of a noble knighthood, including knights of servile ministerial origins. The pace and outcome of this 13th-century development depended on the position of the existing nobility, the power of the prince and the proximity to France.29 In the light of the debate on the milites in the French lands, it is, moreover, a question of whether knighthood was the main catalyst for the elevation of ministerials into noble ranks in the German lands (including the eastern Low Countries) before the end of the 13th century.

In sum, that a restructuring of the regional aristocracies in the Low Countries into knightly nobilities took place during the central Middle Ages is beyond dispute, but the underlying causes of this highly regionalised process are yet to be fully revealed. In this respect, the Low Countries, subjected to both German and French influences, offer a good
case study to assess new approaches to the early history of the nobility and society in the central Middle Ages and, finally, give a better insight into the evolution of the nobility in this period that is essential for understanding the evolution of the nobility in the following centuries.

Short Biography

Arie van Steensel is a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University, specialising in the medieval and early modern history of western Europe. He is particularly interested in the history of the nobility in the Low Countries and the urban history of England, Italy and the Low Countries.

Notes

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1 The Low Countries, for example, are rarely mentioned in general surveys of the history of European medieval nobility; Aurell, *La noblesse;* Morsel, *L’aristocratie.*
3 For the most part, this literature is in French or Dutch, but references are made to the available translations and contributions in English.
5 Blom and Lamberts (eds.), *History of the Low Countries,* 14–32.
12 Van Winter, *Ministerialiteit en ridderschap,* 105–109; cf. Noordzij, *Gelre,* 165–170. Before the first nobles appear in the sources, there existed already a local elite with a military function who operated during Frankish rule. The status and origins of these men of standing, called *homines franci,* is still debated, but they had strong ties with the Frankish kings and held properties of a considerable size. The free knights who descended from these *homines franci* retained their position until the later Middle Ages in Guelders, belonging neither to the nobility nor to the ministeriality. See, for the relevant literature: Van Bavel, *Manors and Markets,* 57–59; Kuiken, *De Liudgeridden,* 7–34.
In general, see Werner, *Naissance de la noblesse;* Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility.*
15 Duby’s key contributions are collected in Duby, *La société chevaleresque* (see especially pp. 83–128), some of which are translated into English: *The Chivalrous Society.* His major study is on the region of Mâconnais in Burgundy: Duby, *La société aux Xe et XIIe siècles.* Duby was indebted to Schmid, *Herrschaft, Geschlechterbündnis.*
Barthélemy, D., and Edwards, G. R. (trans.), 18–20; and see Duby’s response in La société chevaleresque, 9–33. Genicot’s main articles are collected in Genicot, La noblesse; see also Idem, ‘La noblesse médiévale’, 173–201.

For a historiographical introduction to Duby’s work, see Evergates, ‘The Feudal Imaginary’, 641–653; and Crouch’s critical discussion of Duby’s thinking in The Birth of Nobility (especially pp. 106–116). For surveys of the research on the early French nobility: Bissen, ‘Nobility and Family’, 597–613; Reuter, ‘The Medieval Nobility’, 177–202. The literature relating to Duby’s influential thesis is vast and does not to be discussed here, but for a critique on Duby’s idea of a change in noble family structures, see Bouchard, These of My Blood; Stafford, ‘La Mutation Familiale’. Finally, for the work of two other very influential authors on chivalry: Keen, Chivalry; and Flori, Chevaliers et chevalerie.


Barthélemy, ‘Qu’est-ce que la chevalerie’, 15–74; Idem, The Serf, the Knight, 192–194; see, for his most recent views on chivalry: Idem, La chevalerie, in which he traces knightly elements back into the Carolingian period but acknowledges that ‘La chevalerie classique s’apérit à partir des 1130 autour des princes, dont les largesses financent des cours, des adoubements et des tournois, et qui se flattent de bien traiter les chevaliers tout en accroissant peu à peu leur emprise sur eux’. See, for a recent defence of the feudal revolution: Bissen, The Crisis of the Twelfth Century; cf. Crouch, Captives in the Head of Montesquieu, 185–189.


23 Janse, Ridderschap in Holland, 30–35. He expresses doubts about the availability of sources to reconstruct the history of nobles and milites in the period before the mid–12th century.


25 See, for example, the distinction made between the nobility as a closed legal order and the knighthood as an open social class: Van Winter, ‘The Knightly Aristocracy’, 313–329.

26 From the 11th century onwards, the princes and knights from Hainault, Namur, Flanders, Picardy and Brabant participated in tournaments with their counterparts from northern France; Crouch, Tournament, 2–8, 27–29. Vale, The Princely Court, 2–9, emphasises the importance of the interplay between the king of England, the king of France, the German emperor and the non-sovereign princes of the Low Countries in shaping the history of regional nobilities in the 13th and 14th centuries.


28 Sources for the period before 1200 are often too thin to answer all questions, but monastic administrative and narrative sources especially (for instance, charters and chronicles) deserve more attention from historians interested in the history of the nobility: Bijsterveld, Do ut des, 52, 125. Sources for the central Middle Ages are generally richer in the southern parts of the Low Countries; see the useful online portal ‘Narrative Sources from the Medieval Low Countries’ (www.narrative-sources.be). Monasteries and convents have attracted little attention from historians in recent years, but see: Van Bavel, Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer, 62–65, 209.


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