Beyond the Crisis of the Nobility. Recent Historiography on the Nobility in the Medieval Low Countries II

Arie van Steensel*
Utrecht University

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. The second of the three sections into which this survey is organised concerns the history of the nobility in the later Middle Ages, a period characterised by commercialisation, urbanisation and state formation. The intensity of these processes varied across the different principalities, but recent research suggests that, overall, the nobility showed great resilience to political and economic challenges and maintained its dominant position in late-medieval society.

Introduction
The nobilities in the various principalities of the Low Countries had formed relatively closed social groups by the second half of the 13th century. Their internal hierarchy was most clearly expressed in the attribution of lordly, knightly and courtly titles, the right they exercised to maintain specific political and honorific privileges, and the practice of endogamous marriage. The restructuring of the noble elites, however, was a continuous process, accelerated in the later Middle Ages by two external factors: the socio-demographic crisis of the 14th century and the emergence of the central state. The consequences of these processes for the nobility in the Low Countries are comparatively well known thanks to a renewed interest in state formation and power elites in the past two decades, as well as to the availability of in-depth studies (drawing on richer source material) of the nobility in a number of the coastal principalities. Although it is tricky to extrapolate general developments on the basis of regional case studies, the new insights prove earlier assumptions about a late-medieval crisis of the nobility to be untenable.

Most historians now favour the idea of a late-medieval restructuring of the nobility, which manifested itself in a process of increasing social differentiation. This is reminiscent of the social transformation of the nobility in the central Middle Ages. Morsel, for example, has indeed argued that a ‘sociogenesis’ of the nobility occurred in the 15th-century German region of Franconia. Here, the ‘social and discursive invention of the nobility’ was the result of princely and urban pressure on the noble families, which became more organised and clearly demarcated as a distinct social group in society. In other words, nobility became a category of perception and action. Thus, notwithstanding the general agreement that the late-medieval political and economic conditions did not plunge the nobility into a general crisis, the debate continues on how noble families adapted themselves to a continually changing landscape and how these strategies altered the political, economic and social characteristics of the nobility.

This article surveys the recent historiography on the nobility in the late-medieval Low Countries relating to the question to what extent the processes of commercialisation, state
formation and urbanisation affected the social composition of the nobility and its role in society. These three themes are addressed separately, without aiming to offer an exhaustive bibliographical review or a synthesis of the available studies, which is well beyond the scope of this contribution. Nevertheless, by outlining recent empirical findings on the economic and political history of the nobility in the Low Countries and new methodological approaches to the subject, this historiographical overview is intended to encourage historians of different backgrounds to engage themselves with the question of how the nobility sought to maintain their economic, political and social dominance during the later medieval period.

The Economic Resources of the Nobility

From a European point of view, the late-medieval Low Countries can be considered exceptional insofar as the depiction of them as societies in crisis is unjustified, even though the various regions sometimes experienced very different political and economic fortunes to one another. The consequences of economic developments for the economic evolution of the nobility are rarely directly addressed in the recent literature. However, the impact of the 14th-century demographic and economic developments on the nobility does play a role in the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The most common view, in brief, is that the position of nobles as seigneurial lords and other landowners with extensive holdings weakened in the later Middle Ages, as their incomes declined steadily and their expenditures on (luxury) consumption goods increased. Brenner, for example, uses the idea of social-property systems to explain how the distribution of property (land) and the (feudal) means of surplus extraction of the lords determined the outcome of regional economic developments. These systems, he maintains, imposed specific reproductive strategies on the (noble) landowners and peasants, who all sought to maintain their established socio-economic positions. In addition, Bois argues, on the basis of his study of late-medieval Normandy, that the authority and seigneurial rights of the lords were undermined by princes and towns, making it impossible for them to increase their income through non-economic obligations.

To what extent did the noble lords in the Low Countries experience a crisis of seigneurial revenues? The answer to this question can be derived from three extensively researched case studies. The first, by Thoen, on the rural economy and society in Flemish castellanies of Oudenaarde and Aalst, confirms that there was a structural fall in the real incomes of the noble lords in the 14th century and perhaps even earlier. Revenues could not be increased by adjusting the feudal rents or lease prices, because of inflation and decreasing productivity. Moreover, the count and towns progressively encroached on the jurisdiction of the lords. Hoppenbrouwers, on the other hand, sketches a rather different picture in the case of Heusden in Holland. Although recognising the importance of the short-term lease of land as a source of income for the lords, he argues that the level of these leases were the result of supply and demand. Furthermore, he questions the simple distinction between lords and peasants, as surplus-extraction relations were complex and shaped by regional conditions. This view, finally, is corroborated by Van Bavel's case-study on the Guelders River area. He also demonstrates, in great detail, how regional specificities in the early occupation and reclamation history had a bearing on late-medieval property relations and the exploitation of landownership.

Three observations can be made about these case studies. First, the outcomes of the socio-economic and demographic developments in the later Middle Ages were partly determined by the property structures and social relations that were already in place. Manorialism had almost completely disappeared from the Low Countries by the early 14th century, but its earlier intensity had been to a large extent decisive for the share of noble landownership
and the nature of seigneurial rights in the late Middle Ages. In Guelders, for example, more than half of the land was in the hands of large (noble) landowners, whereas the noble lords in relatively late reclaimed Holland owned not more than ten per cent of the land. Second, landownership was not the most important condition for noble dominance everywhere. The noble lords in Zeeland, for instance, were not major landholders, but enjoyed seigneurial rights of key political and economic significance. Finally, the social distribution of landownership remained relatively stable in the late-medieval period. In general, the investments of townspeople in landed property in the Low Countries did not result in important shifts in rural property relations before the early 16th century. The number of non-noble lords—generally, towns and religious institutions, as well as townspeople and state officials aspiring to nobility—grew even more slowly and posed no threat to the nobles’ strong grip on local lordships.

Many questions remain about the development of the real income of the noble lords during the 14th and 15th centuries, but historians have concluded that the crisis of the 14th century had no strong impact on the size and structure of the nobilities in the Low Countries. In late-medieval Flanders, for example, the nobility showed continuity and resilience to the challenges that came with commercialisation, entailing that the economic profile of the nobility co-evolved with its social composition. Economic change led to a growing social differentiation within the nobility in other regions, but ultimately, social mobility was not determined by economic factors alone. Furthermore, the different responses of noble families to economic circumstances show that reproduction strategies varied and changed over time. Noble landholders in some regions recognised the opportunities derived from short-term leasehold, while others invested in land reclamation or sought to diversify their income by stimulating and facilitating rural and urban industrial activities. Of course, the competition between noble families resulted in some winning and others losing, but the empirical observations refute the idea of a general crisis of the nobility. They also give a more detailed account of the economic aspects of the history of the nobility; still, the exploitation of land and rights by noble families and their economic strategies set against the backdrop of broader socio-economic developments are aspects of a field that certainly deserves more attention.

Noble Power and the State

A second strand of research relevant to the study of the late-medieval nobility concerns the process of state formation, a topic on which a vast body of literature has emerged in the past two decades. In the well-studied case of the Burgundian-Habsburg state, which eventually united all the Netherlandish principalities, historians have looked beyond the state elite proper and reassessed the (often uneasy) relationship between the state and noble and urban elites. The nobility in the Low Countries played a significant role in the process of territorial expansion and administrative centralisation; but at the same time, the prince and his expanding bureaucratic apparatus infringed upon the traditional position and privileges of noble lords. The nobility’s political-administrative role has, predominantly, been approached from an institutional perspective. In addition to the noble presence at the princely court, the appointment of noblemen as state office-holders and their participation in representative institutions, attention has been drawn to the patronage networks formed around the new state institutions. Nevertheless, these studies often overlook the fact that only a minority, albeit a significant one, of the late-medieval nobility in the Low Countries fulfilled any formal administrative office during their lifetime.

It was both a right and a duty of noblemen to assist their lords as councillors. However, from the outset, the dukes, counts and bishops also required the professional services of clerks, jurists and financial experts at their courts and in their chanceries. Access to the
princely court was essential for nobles if they were to exert political influence, while the prince, in turn, was dependent on the political, financial and military support of his noble subjects. However, personal contact between the prince and his noblemen became less frequent over the course of the 15th century with the expansion of the Burgundian personal union. The opportunities for noblemen in the Burgundian lands to become ducal councillors also became increasingly scarce. Duke Philip the Fair only appointed non-noble jurists to the Great Council in 1504, while the Privy Council lost its last noble members in 1531. However, 12 high noblemen were nominated for the Council of State, which was set up by Emperor Charles V in 1531 as one of the three central administrative bodies. In addition, noblemen were appointed councillors to regional courts, which had separated themselves from the princely courts and developed into regional administrative institutions headed by a governor or stadtholder, and assumed a more judicial character in the 16th century. It was exactly the limited group of high-ranking noble state officers who wielded great influence at the princely court that could also act as mighty power-brokers and intermediaries between the central and regional state institutions.

The nobility in the Low Countries, furthermore, fulfilled administrative, legal and fiscal responsibilities as regional and local office-holders. Noblemen sought these princely offices to strengthen their power base, but the number of noble appointees varied in time and place. With the exception of the office of landdrost (the duke’s steward), for instance, few noblemen in Guelders fulfilled ducal offices. The ministerial families, in contrast, were better represented among these officials in the later Middle Ages. In the county of Hainaut, about 80 per cent of the bailiffs, castellans and provosts were of noble birth in the 15th century. In general, the nobility in the Low Countries held on to their strong position as princely officials, but since the number of offices was limited, only a small minority succeeded in obtaining an appointment. In the Burgundian-Habsburg lands, the practice of leasing out offices led to increased mobility among office-holders from the last quarter of the 15th century, and apart from the competition of well-trained commoners, the need for active lobbying of state officials to secure appointments became an impediment for noblemen who lacked access to the right political networks in the central state institutions.

Historians differ in opinion about the impact of state formation on the social composition of the nobilities in the Low Countries. They agree, however, that no opposition between an old noblesse d’épee and a new noblesse de robe existed in the Burgundian-Habsburg state institutions. Loyal service to the prince became an important stepping stone for upward social mobility, but the number of state officials who were ennobled by letter or by conferment of knighthood remained fairly limited during the Burgundian-Habsburg period. Moreover, the ennobled officials generally already had strong ties with established noble families; the process of ennobling was gradual in nature. In some particular cases, the ennoblement of state officials met with resistance against the backdrop of larger political conflicts. The Flemish Pieter Lanchals, to give an exceptional example, who made an impressive career in state service, was killed by the Bruges rebels in 1488 for his loyal support for Archduke Maximilian of Austria.

There is no doubt that the integration of the Low Countries into the Burgundian-Habsburg personal union spurred the formation of supra-regional noble networks, in particular, of families belonging to the upper nobility. To interpret this process solely as a result of princely policy underestimates the weight of noble family strategies. Cross-border ties between noble families were neither new in the 15th century nor typical for the Burgundian Netherlands. The opportunities for the lesser nobilities to expand their economic bases and social networks across borders were fewer, but the continuous expansion of the personal unions also made such endeavours worthwhile from a political perspective. It was also easier to obtain feudal properties in different principalities belonging to the same feudal lord.
Regional socio-political networks of noblemen, state officials and members of the urban ruling elites emerged in the Burgundian Netherlands over the course of the 15th century. These networks were rarely reinforced by marriages between socially higher and lower noble families. Intermarriage between families of noblemen of lesser standing and families of non-noble state officials or urban elites that strengthened political-administrative networks were not uncommon. So, social-political networks were shaped by vertical ties of patronage between mighty lords and their clients at the regional or local level, rather than by horizontal ties of kinship. Still, it is important to realise that not all noble families were part of these networks. Notwithstanding the shared political and economic interests within networks, social boundaries were not easily crossed. Labelling the political networks in the Burgundian Netherlands, which could have a markedly noble persuasion, as forms of ‘state nobility’ overlooks their lack of social homogeneity. The formation of trans-regional noble networks and the geographical mobility of nobles are themes that need closer examination, in particular, for the eastern and southern regions of the Low Countries.

Until the first half of the 16th century, many noblemen actively participated in the regional Estates. These representative bodies had partly developed out of the princely courts from the late-14th century onwards (and partly out of consultations between towns) but achieved a more than merely consultative role as their political independence grew. Initially, noblemen were personally summoned to deliberate with the prince and town representatives about political matters of importance, but by the last quarter of the 15th century, the second Estate – the nobility of knighthood (ridderschap) – was represented by a small but significant number of leading noblemen and noble state officials. In some cases, noble magistrates were also present at the meetings as town representatives. The political influence of the nobility in the Estates varied from region to region, according to their own interests in the deliberations and the relative power of the towns. In Flanders and Holland, the Estates were dominated by the cities and towns, while the nobility had the upper hand in Zeeland and the eastern regions. In all cases, being summoned to the Estates as a nobleman or member of the ridderschap was a political privilege, which worked as a social criterion too. In the 15th and early 16th centuries, membership of the ridderschap became restricted to noble families who exhibited a knightly lifestyle.

One of the principal duties of noblemen was to perform military service for their lords. Until the late-15th century, the princes in the Low Countries relied heavily on the nobility for the defence of their territories. Noble warriors rode to the battlefield to fight in person and were indispensable in mobilising and financing troops. The battlefield was the arena par excellence where a nobleman could show off his prowess and courage. Brave service and valour were rewarded with knightly honour or, in exceptional cases, with promotion to the status of banneret (baanderheer), who could carry his own square banner. In order to prove their chivalric qualities, noblemen from the Low Countries also engaged in deeds of arms far outside the borders of the land, taking part, for instance, in crusading journeys into Livonia and elsewhere. However, due to changes in military practices and techniques, and to personal preferences, the participation of the nobility in military expeditions gradually decreased from the late-15th century onwards. Nevertheless, the high noble lords in the Low Countries remained essential to the Habsburg prince as military commanders, as well as for recruiting and financing mercenaries.

The princes struggled to impose their monopoly of power on their (noble) subjects, and feuding and private warfare remained common phenomena in the Low Countries until the early 16th century. In some cases, the princes themselves were drawn into conflicts between noble families, which would result in periods of party strife. In times of dynastic crisis, noble networks could link up with local (urban) factions to form complex regional
parties that strove for power. In Holland, for instance, the strife between the *Hoeken* (Hooks) and *Kabeljauwen* (Cods) flared up regularly in 14th and 15th centuries, as they supported rival pretenders to the comital title. Since the princely and noble families in the Low Countries were closely related, party strife sometimes developed into supra-regional conflicts. The accumulation of resources in the hands of the state may also have spurred on the competition among noblemen in the Low Countries, as was the case in the late-medieval German lands. For example, during the reign of Duchess Mary of Burgundy (1477–1482), different competing noble cliques struggled for power at the princely court, and many of the nobility in the southern borderlands defected to the French King Louis XI, who invaded Burgundy, Picardy and Artois after the death of Charles the Bold in order to fortify his claims to some of the Burgundian principalities. After Mary’s death in 1482, a number of mighty noblemen who lost out at the princely court then sided with the Flemish cities and towns in their revolt against her authoritarian widower Maximilian of Austria, who claimed regency and guardianship for his infant son Philip the Fair. The various forms of noble involvement in feuding and political conflicts are well known, but a comparative synthesis of these studies is desirable.

**Noblemen in an Urbanised Society**

The third factor that changed the political and socio-economic landscape of the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages was the growing importance of cities and towns. Historians have now abandoned the idea of clear-cut distinctions between town and countryside, burghers and noblemen, in favour of focusing on the dynamic interplay between them. The noble presence in the towns of the Low Countries dates back to the 12th century, when noblemen and ministeriales belonging to the *familia* of bishops who settled in Liège and Utrecht. From the late-13th century, noblemen of lesser standing also moved into towns, attracted by the new opportunities offered by urban power and trade. At least in the northern Low Countries, these families swiftly made their way into urban ruling elites. In the later medieval period, numerous noblemen alternated their rural life with stays in towns, either because they held an urban office or because they wished to have access to urban markets and services. Some wealthy noblemen would possess town houses in different places. The political and economic potential of towns was also recognised by noblemen, in particular, by those who themselves were lords of towns.

The ties between noblemen and towns were diverse in the highly urbanised coastal Low Countries. The question, however, remains whether the interaction between noblemen and the urban elites actually resulted in social integration. Recent studies on noble and urban social networks suggest that social dividing lines were not easily erased; witness, for example, the low occurrence of intermarriage. Furthermore, the number of noble and ennobled townsmen remained limited, with the exception of the large Flemish and Brabantine cities. In Ghent and Bruges, noblemen of different backgrounds were increasingly involved in urban social networks, and more than half of the ennobled families in the late-medieval county of Flanders had urban backgrounds. The composition of these noble groups were, however, too diverse to regard them as a proper urban nobility. These major cities offered exceptional chances for upward social mobility and also, paradoxically, for those who desired noble status.

The regular socio-cultural interaction between noblemen and townsmen did not result in erosion of social boundaries, which consequently allowed each social group to maintain a recognised place within the urban community. The princely court, in conjunction with the urban elites, organised tournaments, while noblemen participated in urban shooting festivities and acted as members of chambers of rhetoric. Thus, relations between the
nobility and towns in the Low Countries were far from antagonistic, unlike the typical situation in German lands, where the knighthood often defined itself in opposition to urban society. As a consequence, the rise of cities and towns cannot be interpreted as a threat to the position of the nobility in the Low Countries. Although the towns changed the political landscape and were able to accumulate much more capital, urban interests were not necessarily opposed to those of the nobility. Besides, the most successful townsmen, often surpassing the majority of the nobility in wealth, still aspired to the ideal of nobility. It should nevertheless be emphasised that further research is necessary to determine the factors that shaped the relationship between nobles and the town, thereby taking into account the regional differences in the size of towns and rate of urbanisation. Finally, an important aspect that deserves to be explored further is to what extent urban culture and identity in the Low Countries was indeed defined in opposition to noble culture, as is sometimes suggested.

Conclusions: Towards a New Synthesis?

The picture of the nobility in the late-medieval Low Countries is richer than that of earlier periods. This is mainly due to the availability of a number of recent regional studies, which have the advantage of providing empirically well-supported accounts of and explanations for the evolution of the nobility, its heterogeneous structure and the role of nobles in society. Up until now, this research has focused on the core-regions of the Burgundian-Habsburg Low Countries (Brabant, Flanders, Holland, Hainaut and Zeeland), while the politically less integrated and less urbanised principalities have been somewhat overlooked. Hence, the predominant regional approach has also led to a fragmented picture of the nobility, in which regional particularities sometimes tend to be overvalued. It is, therefore, desirable that the regional approach be complemented with studies providing a systematic comparison between the evolution of the nobility in the various principalities and an analysis of trans-regional interactions between noble families.

A synthesis of the nobility in the late-medieval Low Countries requires the development of novel methodological approaches. The research-intensive prosopographical approach adopted in the regional studies, for instance, is unfit for comparative research, which also has to deal with the various working definitions of nobility derived from local noble privileges or from sources peculiar to certain regions, entailing that comparisons between different regions are hampered by conceptual incongruence. There are different ways of viewing what nobles had in common – for example, as a kind of family resemblance – rather than assuming that they shared an essential quality. The nobility may have not existed in the medieval Low Countries, but the idea of nobility brought together a very diverse group of individuals under a single header. How exactly the processes of state formation, commercialisation and urbanisation patterned the social composition and economic profile of this privileged group remains subject to debate, but exploring this question will certainly reveal much about late-medieval society at large.

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

*Correspondence: Utrecht University, Drift 6, 3512 BS Utrecht, The Netherlands. Email: a.vansteensel@uu.nl.


Janse, Ridderschap in Holland, 129–158; Buylaert, Eeuwen van ambtie, 36–38; Van Steensel, Edelen in Zeeland, 145–158.

Buylaert, ‘The Late Medieval “Crisis of the Nobility”’, 1–18. This in contrast to older views, which held that the late-medieval Flemish nobility was driven into a crisis affecting their very existence, with only a small number of families surviving and strengthening their position through state service; Dumolyn, ‘Nobles, Patricians and Officers’, 432–452.


Burgers, De grafelijke Raad in Holland en Zeeland, 114–145; De Hemptinne and Duvosquel (eds.), Chancelleries princeses.

18. The study of the relationship between the Burgundian dukes and the various regional nobilities is facilitated by the database Prospographia Burgundica (prospographia-burgundica.org) developed under direction of Professor Werner Paravicini. For the supra-regional nobility, see: Cool, Mannen met macht, passim.

19. Van Rompaey, De Grote Raad, 155, 162–168; Kerckhoffs-De Heij, De Grote Raad, vol. 1, 8, 23–25, 33–39, 76–79. Also, see the comprehensive bibliographical introductions by M. Vale, G. Small and W. Paravicini to the revised editions of Vaughan, Philip the Bold; Idem, Philip the Good; Idem, Charles the Bold.


22. These calculations are made by Véronique Flammang. Also see: Cullus, ‘Les officiers de justice’, 75–89; Desmaele, Cauchies and Mariage (eds.), Les institutions publiques.


27. Restrictions remained in some regions. For instance, in Hainaut, where foreigners had to deal with the droit d’arbaine; Paravicini, ‘La cour, une patrie?’, 247–294.


Hoppenbrouwers, ‘Ridders en hun ruiters’, 327–349; Boës, Warfare in Medieval Brabant; De Graaf, Oorlog om Holland; Waale, De Arkelse oorlog; Vale, War and Chivalry.


Paravicini, Die Preussenreizen; Mol, ‘Frisian Fighters and the Crusade’, 89–110; Paviot, Les ducs de Bourgogne; Caron and Clausel (eds.), Le banquet de Faisan.

Glaudemans, Om die wrake wille; Vrolijk, Recht door grate.


Zmora, ‘Feuds For and Against Princes’, 121–141.


Zotz, ‘Adel in der Stadt’, 22–50; Dutour (eds.), Les nobles et la ville, passim; Gamberini, Oltre la città, passim. A comparative European study on this topic is much desired.


Bibliography


Boffa, S., Warfare in Medieval Brabant, 1356-1406 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004).


van Eeckenrode, M., Les États de Hainaut sous le règne de Philippe le Bon (1427-1467) (Heule and Brussels: UGA, 2011).


de Graaf, R., Oorlog om Holland, 1000-1375 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004).


© 2014 John Wiley & Sons Ltd


