Noble Identity and Culture. Recent Historiography on the Nobility in the Medieval Low Countries III

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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 part, the third of the three sections into which this survey is organised, discusses the fast-growing and rich multi-disciplinary literature on noble identity and culture. The study of the material, ideological, behavioural and performative aspects of noble status currently predominantly focuses on the princely court but needs to be extended to the nobility as a whole and further integrated with political and socio-economic approaches.

Introduction
The legal-political understanding of nobility has gradually been replaced by a sociocultural perspective, reflecting the growing importance of cultural history in general. Whilst noble status became legally defined in the Middle Ages, it still depended primarily on lifestyle and public acceptance. In the Low Countries, the social status of the nobility was likewise based on social recognition, privileges and deference, which were rooted in social practice and customary law. In other words, nobles were to uphold a lifestyle in accordance with their status, thereby avoiding embarrassing themselves in the eyes of their social environment. Hence, the sociocultural representation of nobility through conduct and lifestyle is now at the forefront of historical research, instead of the customary or formal rule systems that defined the legal status and rights of nobles.1

Even though nobility in the Middle Ages was largely founded on creating a social profile and gaining recognition, an effective claim to this status depended on more than mere public opinion. In fact, only a tiny minority in society could meet the rather more objective criteria for recognition of nobility, such as high birth or the possession of property and rights associated with this status. In the Low Countries, some noble families also manoeuvred between different regional rule systems concerning noble lifestyle and conduct, as well as negotiating the (intergenerational) transfer of nobility and its material preconditions, to which they tuned their reproduction strategies.2 Ultimately, the idea of nobility was itself a strategy to create and impose social superiority; it was an exclusive code of conduct that placed a varied group of individuals under a common header. Nobles’ interpretations of this code were not uniform, and outsiders could attain this social status. Nevertheless, the idea of nobility was far more effective in establishing social differentiation in medieval society compared with the closely related resources of power and wealth, over which the nobility held no monopoly.

This article discusses the recent literature regarding noble identity and culture in the medieval Low Countries, with the aim of providing a starting point for further reading. As a historiographical survey, it identifies the latest research trends and summarises the most
important findings in the field but without offering a comprehensive and critical review of the vast literature available. Scholars of different backgrounds have studied the ideological and material aspects of medieval nobility, and their work can be organised in three themes. The first is that of the princely courts, whether lay or ecclesiastical, which are not primarily viewed as having been a political or judicial institution, but as a place where norms were set for noble behaviour and interaction. The second theme, seen through the lens of the noble court, deals with the ways in which the nobility in the medieval Low Countries justified their privileged position within society’s social hierarchy. Nobles expressed their social status through titles of honour, the exercise of power and their knightly activities, but high birth was perhaps their most important source of pride. Lastly, therefore, the recent research on noble family strategies and their culture of memory is addressed. The significance of the nobility’s concern with conduct and lifestyle was that this whole complex of acts and outward signs marked and reproduced the noble’s individual, familial and communal identity.

The Princely Court and Noble Culture

The princely court, as a centre of authority and governance, was a stage for noble splendour par excellence. The daily ceremonial and other festivities organised at the court offered nobles the opportunity to display their high social status through appearance and behaviour. Historians, art historians, literary historians and archaeologists have described the princely court as a place of sociocultural interaction and rivalry, and they have generated an interest in the material objects and literary and intellectual activities of the court. The court’s functions are no longer primarily understood to have been a means for the prince to discipline the nobility. The noble lords and ladies present at the court were participants, and in this sense, their presence was a prerequisite for the very existence of the court itself.

The princely courts in the medieval Low Countries are well studied, also from a comparative point of view. Furthermore, some studies have been devoted to the literary life and cultural patronage at the courts of Holland and Brabant, while others have examined the organisation and day-to-day running of the courts of Artois, Hainaut and Guelders. Research on the regional princely courts, however, has been eclipsed by the vast literature on the Burgundian court, which was on a par with and arguably stood as an example for all other royal courts in late-medieval Europe. This extensive literature – an even brief overview of which cannot be attempted here – touches upon almost every aspect of court life. Less systematically researched are the consequences of the relationships and cultural interactions between, on the one hand, the regional princely courts in the Low Countries and, on the other, the neighbouring German imperial court and the royal courts of France and England, all of whose participants, as shown by Vale, belonged to the same social milieu. Equally, the understanding of the processes of adaptation of courtly organisation, functions and practices to new circumstances is still unsatisfactory. To what extent was the 16th-century Spanish Habsburg court merely a continuation of the 15th-century Burgundian court – itself greatly influenced by the court of the French King Charles V (d. 1380) – enriched by German and Castilian practices and traditions?

The social codes of conduct typical of the medieval nobility originated at the court, especially those of courtliness (courtoisie) and chivalry (chevalerie). Following on from this, the princes in the Low Countries, like their European counterparts, founded chivalric orders from the late 14th century onwards, both for religious and worldly reasons. The Order (or knightly brotherhood) of St Anthony was probably created by Duke Albert of Bavaria around 1382, while Duke Adolph of Guelders established an order devoted to Our Lady in 1468, out of gratitude for his defeat of his uncle, Duke John of Cleves. But it was the Burgundian
Order of the Golden Fleece, founded by Duke Philip the Good in 1430, that captured the imagination of historians. Older literature emphasises the religious aspects of this order, but the attention has shifted to its political functions. The chivalric order gave monarchical prestige to the dukes, who bestowed the high honour consequent of membership on a select group of noblemen, with whom they met as ‘equals’ at the chapters of the Order of the Golden Fleece.

As old as the idea of nobility was the debate on the nature of true nobility and noble virtues. This debate was held along literary and intellectual lines, for which the princely court provided an apt setting. For example, the nobility of Holland was often criticised by authors at the court, writing from the standpoint of the count. Similarly, at the Burgundian court, the relationship between birth and merit was discussed in chronicles and humanistic treaties circulating among court officials and noblemen. These texts should be understood as teachings about a virtuous life as well as noble and chivalric virtues and in which various contemporary perceptions about nobility and chivalry were reflected and norms of conduct formed.

It remains to be determined to what extent these ideas about true nobility were disseminated outside the princely court, thereby influencing the general perception of nobility in society. The same question goes for the diffusion of courtly fashions, relating to clothing, luxury objects and patronage. The most northern parts of the Low Countries are an interesting case in this respect, as the absence of a princely court in these regions may have impeded the spread of new ideas about nobility and chivalry. The Burgundian courtly ceremonies of honour and ritual acts undoubtedly negotiated and reinforced the hierarchical order at the court, but it is not at all clear whether the wider conception of nobility and social hierarchy changed after the advent of the Burgundian court in the 15th century or whether the court hierarchy merely created a growing gap between the upper nobility and the regional and local noble families of lower rank.

Life at the Noble Court

Compared with the princely courts, the noble courts in the medieval Low Countries have been rather neglected by scholars. There are hardly any case studies on the political and economic functions of the noble court or on the organisation of the courtly household, even though the court was the main environment for nobles to show off their high status through conspicuous consumption and ostentatious leisure. Whilst noble courts are less well documented in the sources, there are opportunities for further research, especially from an interdisciplinary angle.

Noble status was given form in the castle, which evolved from the motte-and-bailey structures of the central Middle Ages into the late-medieval fortified stronghold. Only the wealthiest noblemen could afford to maintain large, fortified structures. In Holland, for instance, the occupation of a moated site (omgrachte hofstede) with a drawbridge and gateway was regarded as sufficient for those upholding a knightly lifestyle; these homesteads no longer had defensive purposes, despite their outward appearance. Acquiring a castle was a high priority for state officials and others aspiring to nobility. The status of the owners was further reflected in the interior of the castle and layout of the court. At the beginning of the 16th century, for example, architectural ideas and cultural fashions from renaissance Italy were implemented at some castles and noble courts in the Low Countries.

Various aspects of the noble way of living are discussed in detail in regional studies on the nobility in the Low Countries, such as banqueting, hunting with dogs or birds of prey, keeping swans and pigeons or breeding horses. The honorary privileges of the nobility differed from region to region, but in all cases, they expressed individuals’ high social status, even if some rights were obtained by non-noble lords as well. The rules concerning the noble lifestyle...
were the product of regional practices and customs, and the Burgundian–Habsburg dukes made no serious effort to impose uniformity outside the relatively closed circle of nobles present at the ducal court. The same goes for the sumptuary laws, which were introduced by Duke Philip the Fair in Flanders in 1497.24

Finally, the noble court provided young nobles with an environment where they could learn the appropriate noble mentality and modes of conduct. Commonly, nobles spent time at different courts during their youth. The education and training of noble youths were primarily practical in nature, and several treatises on ideal upbringing circulated among the nobility in the Burgundian Low Countries.25 With the exception of noble clerics, formal education of the nobility was for a long time limited; there is little evidence of noblemen attending convent or parish schools. From the late 14th century, however, a growing number of noblemen were matriculated at universities. At first, they were mainly individuals aspiring to a professional career in the service of the Church or state, but at the end of the 15th century, it became common for sons of the (upper) nobility to receive some academic training. These young noblemen usually had a tutor—often a humanist scholar—assigned to them by their parents.26 The nobility in the late-medieval Low Countries was not unfavourably disposed toward academic education, but nobles’ interest in it was largely determined by personal ambition.

Noble Kinship and Ancestry

The social composition of the noble population in the various principalities of the medieval Low Countries was subject to continuous change, due to natural causes, as well as to social and geographic mobility. In order fully to understand this social dynamic, historians now look beyond structural factors and try to uncover patterns in the choices that individual nobles and noble families made to secure and increase their power, wealth and status. The family fulfilled a key role in noble reproduction strategies, as inheritance and marriage were important means of acquiring property or offices and of extending social networks.27 The rules that governed the (intergenerational) transfer of lordship and landed property varied in time and place, and differences in feudal and customary inheritance law and marriage property law resulted in region- and status-bound systems of property devolution and marital property regimes.28 The choice of spouse was, therefore, determined by political, social and legal considerations, and noble families also had to take canon law of marriage into account. All in all, a wide variety of marriage and inheritance strategies existed among the noble families in the Low Countries.29 Nobles could choose from a repertoire of strategies, depending on the specific circumstances and status of their family.30

The noble family itself was a multi-layered organisation, and kinship conveyed different legal and social meanings. The nuclear family was the basic unit, but a wider range of relatives belonged to the bilateral or cognatic kindred (the maagschap). A second, vertical conception of medieval kinship pertained to family descent, that is, lineage. In a broad sense, lineage comprised all individuals recognised to have a shared ancestor and was expressed and visualised in name and blazon. Historians also identify a more narrow conception of lineage, patrilineage—that is, a successive line of eldest sons—which was closely linked to the transmission of lordship and feudal titles and is therefore referred to as topolignée or lignée seigneurial. In short, lineage as a collective entity could be subdivided into several family branches, which were symbolically distinguished by variations in family name or coat of arms.31

Lineage went back in time, and as such, it lent weight to and legitimised noble power and status. A noble family’s reputation was maintained by a culture of memory, but ideas of kinship took different forms in the Middle Ages. In Flanders, for example, lineage was mostly
defined as descent through the paternal line, probably also because feudal law in this region acknowledged the right of primogeniture, while noble families in Holland emphasised both their paternal and maternal ancestry. The variations in family consciousness among the nobility still need further scholarly attention. Some members of the upper nobility developed a genuine dynastic ideology, supported by humanists and chroniclers, in which the old age of their lineage was blended with regional histories in support of their contemporary socio-political goals. On the other hand, non-nobles aspiring to noble status sought to link themselves with established lineages and create a fictional illustrious ancestry. By representing and visualising their ancestry, noblemen also distinguished themselves from their peers: the identity of the lineage ran counter to that of the nobility as a social group. At the same time, marital ties – with noble women as vital links – between lineages enhanced social cohesion within the nobility.

Finally, in the pursuit of enhancing and commemorating their descent, noble families established ties with churches and convents. In comparison with the surrounding countries, little is known about donations made by noble families to religious institutions in the Low Countries in the central Middle Ages. Strong ties between noble families and certain religious institutions were established: the chapter of St Waltrude in Hainaut and the convent of Leeuwenhorst in Holland, for example, housed only noble daughters. Convents provided a shelter for unmarried noblewomen, but they were also the focal point of aristocratic social networks. Furthermore, urban convent churches or private chapels were wanted as burial places by noblemen, assuring them of the prayers of the religious community. However, as shown by regional studies on Holland and Zeeland, many nobles, often those of lower standing, were laid to rest in local urban or rural parish churches, expressing the bond they had with their lordship. The ties between noble families and convents and churches were strengthened through the foundation of chapels and altars, as well as by the donation of stained glass windows. Chantries were established by nobles to ensure that memorial services were held for them and their relatives. The commemoration of the dead was supported by funeral monuments and memorial iconography, which further reminded the onlooker of the high standing of the individual and the family. Noble memorial culture would thus provide a good starting point for further research into the evolution of noble family consciousness and communal identity in the medieval Low Countries, but at this stage, no definite conclusion can be drawn on this topic.

Conclusions: Going beyond the Burgundian Court

Huizinga gave a vivid and influential description of French-Burgundian court life in his Autumn of the Middle Ages (originally published in 1919), but at the same time, he portrayed the ideals of chivalry and courtly behaviour ‘as an attempt to play out a dream’. Historians such as Vale and Vanderjagt have since demonstrated the continued relevance of chivalry in the late-medieval Low Countries, rather than setting noble court culture in opposition to socio-political realities. This cross-fertilisation of cultural history with social and political history has led to a better understanding of the Burgundian court as a nerve centre of political and sociocultural interaction; it has encouraged historians to extend interdisciplinary cooperation in studying noble display, conduct and language at the court. If the strong focus on the princely court because of its role in shaping noble behaviour and values is indeed justified, then the question remains how noble culture disseminated from the court and was adapted to local circumstances, not only in the Flemish and Brabantine cities but also in the rural principalities of the northern and eastern Netherlands. This question is even more urgent for the period before the 15th century, in which the interconnected regional princely and
noble courts in the Low Countries probably played a vital role in shaping noble codes of conduct, given that the German imperial court and the French royal court were comparatively remote. Because it was only the upper echelons of the nobility in the late-medieval Low Countries who enjoyed access to the princely courts, the majority of the noble population often remains out of the sight of scholars investigating noble culture. Nobles of lesser standing had to live up to their claimed social status by displaying an appropriate lifestyle as well, even though the symbolic and material representation of their identity through conduct and property is more difficult to demonstrate and speaks less to the imagination. In this context, the occurrence of downward social mobility still has to be properly addressed. In some principalities, for example, the process of the relative closure of the knightly ranks did result in the formation of social groups composed of individuals of noble birth, such as the welgeborenen in Holland and Sticht, the hommes de loi in Namur or the hommes de lignage in Brabant, but who could no longer keep up a corresponding knightly lifestyle. Some of these ‘gentlemen’ were nevertheless able to distinguish themselves from the non-noble population in the later medieval period, and their noble self-awareness was apparent through marriages and other forms of social distinction in local society.

The personal, familial and communal identity of the nobility evolved over time, as nobles acted to safeguard their privileged position in an ever-changing political and socio-economic landscape. Many recent studies make use of Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus to analyse noble lifestyle and mentality. Habitus, understood as embodying those social dispositions and cognitive structures that are acquired and internalised, originates in the sociocultural interaction between groups, and it structures social perception and conduct. The helpfulness of this concept, however, is lessened by the fact that it fails to explain the dynamics of the social rule systems and practices of distinction that gave shape to nobility as an institution. It might, therefore, be rewarding for historians studying medieval noble lifestyle and conduct to draw more inspiration from sociological and anthropological theories on honour, distinction and status. Furthermore, a closer examination of the interplay between noble culture and identity and the nobility’s political and economic position in society may prove useful in explaining the social evolution of the nobility in the various Netherlandish principalities.

All in all, the study of the medieval nobility of the Low Countries and of Europe in general is not only worth pursuing for its own sake. Because it is a comparatively well-documented history, it can – particularly with an interdisciplinary effort – reveal a lot more about medieval society than just the affairs of the noble segment of it, especially as it already touches upon many aspects of political, socio-economic and cultural life in town and countryside.

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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northern Low Countries: Mol, Umgang mit Lob und Tadel: Women of Distinction

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22 Sicking, De stinzen in middeleeuws Friesland.

21 De Bruyn, Ridderschap in Holland.

20 De Clercq, Dumolyn, 'Sumptuary Legislation', 393–417.

Norbert Elias’s work, however, gives a strong impetus to the interdisciplinary study of power, state formation and
court culture; see his classic study Die höfische Gesellschaft, translated into English by E. Jephcott as The Court Society
(Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). For an important critique: Duindam, Myths of Power, who recognises that the court produced
codes of conducts that routinised the interaction between noblemen, but denies that the princes were fully in charge of
this institution.


5 Van Oostrom, Court and Culture; Steiderink, De stem van de meester; Nijsten, In the Shadow of Burgundy; Vale, The
Princely Court; Uyttebroeck, ‘La cour de Brabant’.

6 Essential and valuable research has been conducted and initiated by Werner Paravicini, whose most important contribu-
tions are collected in: Menschen am Hof der Herzöge von Burgund und Noblesse. Studien zum adeligen Leben; see also his
Guy de Brimeu. He is also responsible for the web portal Prosopographia Burgundia (prosopographia-burgundica.org).

7 See, for instance: Paravicini (ed.), La cour de Bourgogne; Van Oosterwijck et al. (eds.), Staging the Court of Burgundy; Tabri,
Political Culture in the Early Northern Renaissance; Eichberger, Legarde and Hüsken (eds.), Women at the Burgundian Court;
Meconi, Pierre de la Rue; Pearson, Envisioning Gender; Niedermann, Das Jagdvesen am Hof; Janssens, ‘La vie de cour’, 150–163. See also:
Cauchies (ed.), À la cour de Bourgogne, and the many other relevant contributions to the series Publications du Centre Européen d’Études Bourguignonnes, edited by J.-M. Cauchies, as well as the themed issue ‘Les étrangers à la
princesses who served as regents: Gorter–Van Royen, Maria van Hongarije; Kerkhoff, Maria van Hongarije; Eichberger
(ed.), Women of Distinction.

8 See for the later 13th and 14th centuries, the valuable study by Vale, The Princely Court, 296–299. The (dis)continuity
between the French, Burgundian, Austrian and Spanish Habsburg courts are briefly discussed in: Duindam, Vienna and
Versailles, 22–24.

9 Van Oostrom, Court and Culture, 162–166; Chaussier and Van Innis, L’ordre des chevaliers; Nijsten, In the Shadow of Burg-
dy, 335–356, 401–402; and see also: Chattaway, The Order of the Golden Tree. For the religious military orders in the
northern Low Countries: Moï, Vichten, bidden en verplegen.

10 Cockshaw and Van den Bergen-Pantens (eds.), L’ordre de la Toison d’or; De Gruben, Les chapitres de la Toison d’Or; De
Smedt (ed.), Les chevaliers de l’ordre.

11 Dünnebeil, ‘Der Orden vom Goldenen Vlies’, 171–183; Haemers, ‘Opstand adelt?’, 586–608; Arnade, Beggars, Iconoclasts,

12 Burgers, ‘Het beeld van de adel’, 469–486; Janse, Ridderschap in Holland, 22–25; Verbij–Schillings, ‘On the Nature of
True Nobility’, 137–159.

13 On noble book ownership, see: Wijsman, Luxury Bond; Van Hoorebeek, ‘La ville, le prince’, 45–67; Jeannot, Le mécenat bibliophile;

14 Van Oostrom, Court and Culture, 142; Château Gaillard. Études de Castellologie, vol. 2, 51–79; Sterchi, Ober den
Umgang mit Lab und Tadel; Bulyaert and Dumolyn, ‘The Representation of Nobility’, 59–84; and see as well: Small,
George Chaletlain; Emerson, Olivier de La Marche.

15 See, for instance: Noomen, De stinzen in middeleeuws Friesland, 90–101.

16 Several important contributions – in particular Paravicini, ‘Le héraut d’armes’, 465–590 – on the role of heralds, who
played an essential role in maintaining hierarchies of precedence, are collected in the themed issue, ‘Le héraut, figure
européenne (XIVe–XVIe siècle)’, Revue du Nord, 88 (2000); Hiltmann, ‘Un État de noblesse’, 251–186; Viltart and
Simonneau, ‘City Heralds’, 93–110; Van Anrooij, ‘King of Arms’, 111–132. Torsten Hiltmann also manages the web portal
Heraudica (heraudica.org).

17 See, for example: Arkenbout, ‘Das tägliche Leben’, 311–326; Hupperetz and Van Winter (eds.), Dagelijks leven op
kastelen; Van Steensel, ‘De middeleeuwe heren’, 7–23. For the courts in Holland, see Antheun Janse’s contributions
to Paravicini et al. (eds.), Hofe und Residenzen.

18 See, in general, for the Low Countries: Janssens, ‘Tussen wonen en versterkings’, 15–111, who refers to the various
regional surveys. More recent publications are: Fray, Villes et bougs de Lorraine; Hupperetz, Olde Meierink and Rommes
(eds.), Kastelen in Limburg; Beausart and Salamagne (eds.), Châteaux Chevaliers. For interdisciplinary approaches to
castle history, see the following journals: Jaarboek Kastelenstichting Holland en Zeeland, Château Gaillard. Études de Castellologie


37–54.

22 Sicking, Neptune and the Netherlands, 100–102.


Many valuable biographical and genealogical contributions are published in local and regional journals. See, for studies that deal with noble lineages from a broader perspective: Coldewej, De heren van Kuyk; Born, Les Croys; Idem, Les Lalaiq; Duvosquet (eds.), Albums de Croys; Van Amstel, De heren van Amstel; Van der Ham, Macht en gezag in het markizaat; Croonen, Familie en macht; Van Ermen, De landelijke bezittingen; Koene, Voor God, graag en geslacht; Brokken (ed.), Heren van Stand; Martens (ed.), Lodewijk van Gruuthuse.

In general, see: Sibbe and Teuscher, ‘Kinship in Europe’, 1–32; and for Flanders: Heirbaut, Over lenen en families.


Two themes that have been comparatively neglected are the entry of noble sons and daughters into the Church or convents, as well as the position of illegitimate children. But see: Koch, De kloosteropt als sluitpost; Idem, ‘Entry into Convents’, 50–68; Kuiken, ‘Bevoorrechte bastaarden’, 133–152.


Buylaert, Eeuwen van ambtie, 67–69, 75–79; Janse, Ridderschap in Holland, 289. It has been suggested that there was a shift from a broad to a narrow conception of lineage in late-medieval German lands: Morsel, ‘Le médiéviste, le lignage’, 83–110.


Women have been relatively neglected in the historiography of the nobility of the Low Countries. A more pronounced gender perspective and an integration of women’s history into current approaches are therefore much to be desired, rather than separate studies on noble women. See the chapter ‘Writing Elite Women into the Burgundian and Habsburg Netherlands’ in Broomhall and Spinks, Early Modern Women in the Low Countries.

Lieven, Adel, Herrschaft und Memoria; Biestveldt, De ut des.


Oexle, ‘Memoria und Memorialbild’, 384–440; Van Bueren, Leven na de dood; Van Bueren and Van Leerdam (eds.), Care for the Here and the Hereafter; Kuiken and Van Poelgeest, ‘Memory ende hueghenesse’, 45–64; Damen and Stein, ‘Collective Memory’, 29–48. Of interest is also the web portal Medieval Memory Online (memo.hum.uu.nl), managed by Truus van Bueren.

Unfortunately, the study of heraldry has attracted little attention recently, but see: Alma et al. (eds.), Adel en heraldiek; Duurlo and Janssen, Wapenboek van de Belgische adel.

Huijzinga, The Autumn of the Middle Ages.


In 16th-century Holland, for example, the nobility increasingly stressed its lineage to compensate for the relative loss of power and wealth; Van Nierop, The Nobility of Holland, 76–82. Janse, Ridderschap in Holland, 289, also ties the decreasing military participation among noblemen with the increasing concern for their lineages.

Bourdieu, La distinction, 191–192.

See, for example: Gietman, Republiek van adel, on the nobility of the eastern regions of the early modern Dutch Republic.

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