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Edelen in Zeeland : macht, rijkdom en status in een laatmiddeleeuwse samenleving

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Summary

Nobility in Zeeland. Power, wealth and status in a late medieval society

In the tripartite order of medieval society, the nobility occupied a privileged place as protectors of the worldly realm. It has long been assumed that the position of the West-European nobility was weakened in the later Middle Ages by processes of state formation, commercialisation and urbanisation. Noblemen were allegedly impoverished by the so-called lordly revenue crisis in the fourteenth century, while their role in government was affected by the rise of professional bureaucrats of bourgeois origin. The significance of chivalry and military prowess would also have faded out in the later Middle Ages because of changes in the techniques of warfare.

Though the narrative of a crisis of the late medieval nobility in Western Europe is no longer taken for granted, it still exerts influence on historiography. The point of this book is not to refute the assertion of a crisis, but rather to show how the position of the nobility evolved in late medieval society. The case of Zeeland is particularly interesting in this respect, as the county was one of the highly urbanised and commercialised coastal provinces of the Low Countries. Zeeland was incorporated into the Burgundian personal union under Duke Philip the Good († 1467) in 1428 and later became a part of the Habsburg empire of Emperor Charles V († 1558). The research into the nobility in Zeeland has been conducted as part of the *Burgundian Nobility. Princely Politics and Noble Families, ca. 1430-1530* research programme, which aims to analyse from a comparative perspective the position of the nobility in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands in the context of the process of state formation.

This book sketches the contours of the noble population in Zeeland between 1400 and 1550. The central question is how the political and socio-economic position of the noblemen evolved in a period characterised by the processes of state formation, urbanisation and commercialisation. Three sub-questions are raised to shed light on the causes, chronology and patterns of change in the position of the nobility. Firstly, who were the nobles in late medieval Zeeland and how did the size and structure of the nobility as a group evolve? Secondly, what was the foundation of noble power and wealth in Zeeland and how did it develop over time? And thirdly, what strategies did the noblemen adopt to secure the status of nobility for themselves and for their progeny? The questions are approached from two perspectives: that of the nobility as a group, and that of the individual nobleman and his family. This two-level analysis demonstrates that the nobility in Zeeland was far from a cohesive body or a strong social group. The individual nobleman is therefore taken as the prime unit of analysis and explanation. The position and role of the nobility in society can only be properly explained if not only the motives of the actors but also the context within which the action took place are accounted for. Social structures and institutions not only served as the context for individual action but were also partly the outcome of the same action.

The medieval county of Zeeland is of comparative interest because of its specific political history and social institutions that shaped the position of the nobility and determined the privileges they enjoyed. Zeeland comprised several islands, of which Walcheren, Borssele, Zuid-Beveland, Noord-Beveland, Wolphaartsdijk, Schouwen, Duiveland and Tholen were the most important. The county was divided into three regional districts: Bewestenschelde, Beoostenschelde and

Tholen. The rights over Zeeland Bewestenschelde had long been disputed by the Count of Flanders and the Count of Holland, because of its military-strategic importance and economic potential. The noblemen in this part of Zeeland could play off the counts against each other to strengthen their own independence. It was only in 1323 that the county was permanently unified and the authority of the Count of Holland over the whole of Zeeland was recognised. The incorporation of Zeeland into the Burgundian-Habsburg personal union brought structural changes to the relation between the prince and his subjects. The increasing size of the realm meant that opportunities for personal contact became less frequent, while this gap was filled by new administrative institutions and officials.

Zeeland was relatively small in size compared to the surrounding provinces of Brabant, Flanders and Holland. Owing to its geographical location, the county derived advantage from its role in the international transit trade to the Flemish, Brabantine and Dutch cities and hinterland. International trade brought considerable prosperity to the seaports, attracting a substantial number of foreign traders. The people of Zeeland themselves were involved in the shipping trade and in offshore fishing. The county also had an important agricultural sector and exported grain and livestock. The industrial component of the economy should by no means be neglected, as Zeeland had a number of important industries such as salt extraction, brewing and ship-building. The urban centres experienced strong economic and demographic growth from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards. Little quantitative material is available about population numbers. Zeeland had an estimated 85,000 inhabitants around 1470, of which a considerable proportion – possibly up to 50% – lived in towns. Compared to the neighbouring Flemish metropolises, the Zeeland towns remained relatively small. The two capital cities of Middelburg and Zierikzee never reached the 10,000 citizens mark in the late medieval period, while the smaller town of Goes had about 2,785 souls in around 1485.

The first *nobiles* in Zeeland are mentioned in eleventh-century sources, while the first *milites* in the sense of knighted noblemen are referred to as such in the early thirteenth century. The origins of these noblemen are uncertain, but at the end of the thirteenth century they are clearly distinguished in families with knights and esquires (*ridders en knapen*) within their ranks and in families of petty noblemen who were merely seigneurial lords (*ambachtsheren*). The nobility as a group therefore had a heterogeneous character. Nobility is understood here as a personal legal status obtained by birth or princely elevation, of which the meaning depended on one's control over political, economic, and social power. The third variant of the three interdependent forms of power – the power to command recognition of one's honour or esteem by upholding a noble lifestyle – was of especial importance for the nobles. Medieval nobility was a relative quality because of its social dimension. There was a high degree of differentiation among noblemen in terms of their political, economic and social profiles.

The noble population of late medieval Zeeland is difficult to demarcate; the group of people regarded as noble altered over time according to changes in the conception of nobility and processes of social mobility. Although their legal standing distinguished noblemen from commoners, this status was not formally regulated in the Middle Ages and continued to be defined according to custom, as well as remaining a matter of public recognition. The rights and privileges the nobles enjoyed on account of their status varied regionally, and depended on their position in the noble hierarchy. As no comprehensive lists of noblemen in late medieval Zeeland have been preserved, it is by means of the noble rights and privileges that noblemen can be

identified as such in the sources. A complicating factor is that few privileges were strictly preserved for (all) nobles; therefore multiple criteria should be employed in order to determine the nobility of certain individuals, especially regarding the lower echelon of the nobility and the newcomers.

The noble population of late medieval Zeeland is thus compiled by translating the noble rights and privileges as well as external attributes of the noble lifestyle (e.g., noble birth, titles, possession of fiefs, noble marriages, military activities, public offices, hunting with dogs or birds of prey) into straightforward heuristic criteria that are used to identify the nobles in the various sources. This source-oriented approach results in lists of noblemen sharing the same external characteristics, such as those who bore lordly or knightly titles, were summoned for the estates, possessed a castle, held certain public offices or were enfeoffed with certain seigniorial rights. The same criteria are used for analytical purposes to classify the noblemen into high, modal and low strata, according to their individual position in the three-dimensional modal of power, wealth and status. This stratification model evidently has no explanatory power. Neither does this classification imply that clear dividing lines existed in late medieval Zeeland or that the nobility was a closed hierarchical entity.

The research restricts itself to the nobles active in Zeeland during the Burgundian-Habsburg period, which means that they were linked to the county by residence, office or property. This geographical delineation does not exclude nobles originating from other regions. The nobles active in Zeeland between 1400 and 1550 are too numerous to be examined in detail in their entirety. The core prosopographical research and quantitative analysis are therefore limited to three sample years, giving cross-sections of the Zeeland noble population in 1431, 1475 and 1535 to uncover its structure and dynamics of change. Relevant biographical data are systematically gathered for the members of the main research population made up of all active noblemen, minor heirs, heiresses and widows in these three years. The activities of the higher echelon of the nobility are better documented, as the sources preserved are unevenly distributed over the nobles.

The subpopulation of 1431 – the identification of the nobles active in this year remains incomplete due to the deficiencies of the source material – comprises 188 nobles of whom twelve are classified as high, 76 as modal and 100 as low noblemen. For 1475, thirteen high, 89 modal and 103 low noblemen have been identified, while the subpopulation of 1535 includes eleven high, 73 modal and 67 low nobles. By reconstructing the genealogical links among these nobles, it is possible to unravel the continuity and renewal rate of the nobility. The noble population appears to have been relatively stable in the fifteenth century, but the total number of nobles decreased clearly by 27% between 1475 and 1535, from 207 to 151. Just 89 nobles (59%) from 1535 were direct descendants of 39 nobles from 1431. This means that 145 nobles from 1431 had no descendants in 1535, while 62 nobles from 1535 were newcomers compared to 1431. Overall, the number of noble families decreased by 45% between 1431 and 1535, from 124 to 68 families. This percentage is slightly higher than in other regions, but the fact that the lower end of the Zeeland nobility is included in the research population may account for this.

Several factors explain the high renewal pattern of the noble population in Zeeland. Firstly, mainly for biological reasons, 38% of the noblemen had no legitimate male heir on average. Besides the biological extinction, a process of social extinction or downward social mobility can be discerned. Many families attributed to the lower echelon of the nobility gave up their noble status from the mid-fifteenth century onwards as its rights and privileges lost

meaning for them. The costs of maintaining a noble lifestyle were basically higher than the advantages. The loss of noble lines was largely compensated for by internal growth and by processes of geographical mobility and upward social mobility. Most of the newcomers in Zeeland were noblemen from other countries who acquired properties in the county through purchase, marriage or inheritance, or who were appointed to public offices by the prince. Medieval noblemen were never restricted to particular boundaries in their socio-economic activities, but the incorporation of Zeeland into the Burgundian-Habsburg personal union gave a strong incentive to geographical mobility. As the new members of the noble population in Zeeland did not necessarily establish themselves in the county, the number of absentee lords therefore rose from 6% in 1431 to 31% in 1535 – a process that affected the presence of the nobility in society.

Upward social mobility was not an important factor in the constant renewal of the noble population in Zeeland. Only seven individuals were knighted by or received a letter of ennoblement from the prince in the Burgundian-Habsburg period. They made up 25% of the newcomers among the members of the subpopulations of 1475 and 1535. These new nobles were usually state servants or urban magistrates who already aspired to noble status by living a noble lifestyle, and they often enjoyed the patronage of high noblemen. Cases of families that were gradually recognised as being noble by living nobly and intermarrying with noble families were virtually absent in Zeeland, mainly because the lack of state institutions and strong urban social networks of noble persuasion. The regional context of this study therefore puts into perspective the emphasis placed by institutional studies on social mobility and the formation of a new state nobility, even though important princely officers acquired properties in Zeeland, such as Jacob Cruesink, Ferrand de Gros, Pieter Lanchals, Jeronimus Lauwerijn, Jan Pieters and Jan Micault. In the case of Zeeland, the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries should be characterised as a period of geographical rather than of upward social mobility.

How can the evolution of the noble population in late medieval Zeeland be explained? Did the changes in its composition relate to the development of the economic and political power bases held by the nobility? The economic power of the Zeeland noblemen predominantly rested on their control over the countryside as seigneurial lords. Only few seigneuries with high jurisdiction existed in medieval Zeeland. The main lordships (*ambachten*) had a specific character as they comprised the low jurisdiction, fiscal privileges and several other honourable and profitable seigneurial rights. However, lordship was not connected to land ownership. The lordships were held in fief from the Count of Zeeland and could be split in the case of inheritance, sale or other form of alienation. Feudal inheritance law in Zeeland stipulated that feudal properties should be evenly divided among all sons, as a result of which the lordships became fragmented and many small lords sold their part. This process accelerated from the mid-fifteenth century onwards as the rules of enfeoffment were tightened and several of the socio-political privileges restricted to estates of a minimum size.

Nobility was no longer a requirement for the possession of lordship in the fifteenth century, although the majority of the lords (*ambachtsheren*) were of noble origin. During the Burgundian-Habsburg period, the nobility held around 80% of all the lordships in fief. As the overall number of noblemen decreased in the same period, the nobles ranked as high and modal nobility reinforced their position as feudal lords. The eleven high noblemen held 56% of the lordships in 1535, while the share of the 67 nobles who belonged to the low nobility was as low

as 6%. The possession of lordships was a matter of noble status, local authority and political privileges, but above all of feudal revenue. Apart from the income from the administration of justice and various seigniorial rights (e.g., over hunting, fishing, mills, and water use), the most important sources of revenue were the fiscal rights. Lords were responsible for collecting the *bede* or aides, a princely tax on land, in their lordship and turning it over to the count's receiver. They were allowed to keep a share of the tax revenues for themselves, ranging from 5% on Schouwen to 79% on Wolphaartsdijk. On average, the lords received 35% of the land tax, making the fiscal privileges a significant source of income, particularly because the *bede* was levied annually and the tax level was gradually raised from the reign of Duke Charles the Bold († 1477) onwards.

The income base of the nobles in Zeeland was diverse. Apart from their feudal income, they also enjoyed rents from tithes that they leased from the count or religious institutions. Noblemen also invested in land reclamation and often supported trade and industries in their lordships in order to levy feudal dues. Although some noblemen were important landowners, the nobility as a group only possessed an estimated 5 to 10% of the total arable land. Contrary to popular assumption, the peasants were the most important landowners in medieval Zeeland. This situation is explained by the specific fiscal privileges of the *ambachtsheren*. Only a few noblemen could effectively take advantage of the growing urban economic production. The lords of Veere were an important exception to this rule. As lord of a number of small harbour towns such as Veere, Vlissingen, Westkapelle, Domburg and Brouwershaven, Hendrik van Borssele and his successors recognised the importance of stimulating trade and commerce and made huge profits. Overall, the income position of the nobility remained strong in late medieval Zeeland. It is difficult to relate the noble revenues to the development of wages and prices of non-agrarian products. The sources nonetheless give no indication of widespread financial problems among the nobles. The fact that many low noblemen sold their lordship and gave up their noble status only indicates a relative loss of economic position rather than a real loss of income. The social dividing lines between petty nobles, wealthy urbanites and rich peasants eroded due to the growing economic equivalence among them.

One of the rights that low noblemen lost in the early sixteenth century was the right to be convened in the States of Zeeland to decide upon the *beden*. The Estates of Zeeland became a more institutionalised representative body at the end of the fifteenth century. The count had summoned noblemen from the thirteenth century onwards to discuss important political and economic matters, while the towns joined the deliberations in the fourteenth century as they gained political and economic weight. These representative meetings had no fixed composition yet. Three types of summons can be discerned in the fifteenth century in which noblemen were involved. Firstly, there were meetings during which the count petitioned his (noble) fiefholders for taxes. Secondly, the count summoned the most important nobles as advisers and towns to discuss key political matters. Finally, there were joined meetings of the knighthood and towns of Zeeland and Holland until about 1482. The noblemen regarded as the knighthood of Zeeland were roughly those who are counted as high and modal noblemen. The overall participation of noblemen in the Estates of Zeeland diminished at the end of the fifteenth century, as a few important noblemen dominated the decision making process. Contrary to the situation in the surrounding countries, the nobility as a group held a strong position in the Estates of Zeeland compared to the towns. The latter did not directly or regularly contribute to the princely aides in the Burgundian-Habsburg period.

The exercising of public authority was closely connected to noble status in the Middle Ages. The Zeeland nobles administered the low jurisdiction at local level as seigneurial lords, but also had opportunities of being appointed to princely offices. They could serve the count as receiver, bailiff or dike reeve at regional level. The receiver was the most important officer in the county and was an essential representative of the princely power, linking the count with his subjects in Zeeland. The regional functions were mainly held by nobles, but there was a clear change in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The towns became more effective in having their non-noble candidates appointed by the prince and only a few noblemen still had the right contacts to be appointed by the prince. At central level, the expanding Burgundian-Habsburg state apparatus gave new opportunities for nobles to be appointed as stadtholder or councillor of the Council of Holland in The Hague, as high official at one of the central administrative institutions in Brussels and Mechelen, or as councillor at the court of the prince. The Zeeland nobles were proportionally represented in these institutions during the fifteenth century, but their number decreased in the early sixteenth century as the overall noble presence in the central state institutions declined. However, some very high state offices – members of the *Conseil d'Etat* – as the Lord of Veere, the Marquis of Bergen op Zoom, the Count of Hoogstraten, the Count of Buren, and the Lord of Molembeix had various interests in Zeeland around 1535.

State service was only granted for a minority of the noblemen in Zeeland. From the subpopulations of 1431, 1475 and 1535 respectively 19%, 24% and 13% of the members fulfilled at least one princely office. These numbers refute the idea that the late medieval nobility became dependent on state service for survival, as many reputable families never held any significant office. The numbers also show the decline of noble participation in the Habsburg administration. Noblemen did not, however, disappear from the state institutions and their support remained indispensable for the prince. It was for this reason that Philip the Good established the Order of the Golden Fleece. It was a means to ensure himself of the loyalty of the most important nobles in his countries. The high nobility in particular retained a strong position as councillors, governors and diplomats. Many of the newcomers among the nobility in Zeeland were ennobled state officers, demonstrating that noble status was an important ideal for which they strove.

The early sixteenth century also saw a change in the military activities of the nobility in Zeeland. Noblemen were obliged to provide military services to the count as his fiefholders. The wielding of arms was intertwined with the medieval chivalrous ethos and lifestyle. In the fifteenth century nobles were regularly called upon by the dukes to join them on the battlefield, especially by the bellicose Charles the Bold. Moreover, nobles fulfilled various military functions and were instrumental in the recruitment of troops for the prince. The heavy cavalry, however, lost its function at the end of the fifteenth century due to tactical developments and technological changes in warfare. The noblemen who remained active in military service were usually commanders in the sixteenth century. For instance, Wolfert van Borssele and his successor were appointed admiral by the Burgundian-Habsburg princes. The strategically situated island of Walcheren was the maritime power base of the Lords of Veere and the prince often sought their naval support as they had a huge fleet at their disposal.

The fate of the nobles in Zeeland was not solely determined by external factors, but by the way they responded to changes in the political and socio-economic environment. How did noblemen build and consolidate their political power and financial base? What familial strategies were

developed to secure the noble estate for the offspring? Did the way noblemen marked their noble status and enhanced their social distinction change in a period in which new state and urban elites emerged? The family was the focal point of the nobles' social reproduction strategies. Nobility as well as properties, functions and social contacts were transferred from generation to generation. The noble family in medieval Zeeland had several layers. At the centre was the nuclear family, followed by blood relatives and in-laws, and finally by the kin (*maagschap*) that comprised the bilateral extended family into distant degrees of relation. The scope of the family's involvement in important decisions and interference with individual members' life depended on the specific circumstances.

The social reproduction strategies of the noblemen varied according to their social position. Those classified as high noblemen – like scions of the families of Van Borssele, Van Haamstede en Van Kruiningen as well as the newcomers from the families of Van Bourgondië, Van Glymes-Bergen and Van Lalaing – wielded grand political power, held important offices, had access to the princely court and owned properties in several regions. As a result of the supra-regional outlook of the high nobles, they sought their marriage partners among reputable foreign families to strengthen their position and status. High noblemen also acted as patrons and power brokers, using public and private resources to build up networks of friends and clients to protect their interests and to exercise informal power. Finally, the high noblemen were able to display their noble status through the possession of castles, through participating in chivalrous activities at the princely court, and through various forms of conspicuous consumption.

The families of Van der Maalstede, Van Reimerswaal, Van Renesse, and Van Oostende were typical for the modal stratum of the noble population. They acted mainly at regional level, drawing their partners from regional noble networks, holding regional offices, participating in the Estates of Zeeland, and serving in the ducal army as knights. Some noble families ranked under the modal stratum were more active in state service than others and were oriented towards the professional and social networks of the state institutions. The families of Van den Abeele, Van Kats, and Ruychrok van den Werve, for instance, established durable ties with non-noble civil servants and members of the urban elites through marriages. These noblemen also invested in formal (academic) education and access to certain social networks to advance their careers. Some of them acquired great profits from state service.

The activities of the low nobility were mainly restricted to the local level. The families of Crabel, Van Grijskerke, Van Noordgouwe and Van Wissenkerke, for instance, settled in the towns where they became magistrates. Especially the Van Wissenkerkes who were clients of the Lord of Veere acquired great wealth and important offices, but none of the members of this family was knighted or summoned to the Estates of Zeeland. For the majority of the low stratum of the noble population it is difficult to determine whether they invested in the display of their social status at all. Notable exceptions were the ennobled state servants and members of the urban elites who were keen to have their new social status recognised by marrying noble partners, acquiring feudal properties and exhibiting a noble lifestyle. Without exception, the ennobled families, like the descendants of Jan Ruychrok, Klaas van Kats and Jeronimus van Serooskerke, served the prince in various offices. State service catalysed upward social mobility in late medieval Zeeland.

From the analysis of the social reproduction strategies of the nobles, it follows that endogamy was mainly the result of the nobles' marital strategies to choose partners who would contribute greater power, wealth and status. Endogamy was not a distinctive aspect of nobility

as such. Marriages with partners of non-noble status were not exceptional, as intermarriage with state officials or members of the urban elites made sense for noble families active in state service. At least 84% of the nobles belonging to the research population married at least once in their lifetime. Consequently, there is no reason to assume that nobles systematically renounced matrimony to curb their number of children. Such a strategy would prevent the fragmentation of the patrimony, but did not make sense in Zeeland because of the feudal inheritance law that stipulated that all sons inherited an equal share. In the absence of male descendants, the feudal properties returned to the count. The Zeeland nobles had several strategies to circumnavigate this rule and they received new privileges in 1477 according to which daughters and other relatives could inherit feudal properties in the absence of sons. Overall, nobles tried to pass their properties evenly to their descendants. But they also protected the interests of the family by drawing up marriage contracts and testaments, which stipulated that properties should be returned to the family line from which they originated in the event no children were born.

Apart from the contemporary family network, noblemen also had a sense of belonging to a lineage (*geslacht*) in time – the idea of sharing the same forefathers. Patrilineage was important as the coat of arms, family name and feudal properties were predominantly handed down along paternal lines. This specific family consciousness was expressed by the use of the coat of arms – signifying the noble line – on seals, grave monuments and paintings. The emphasis was, however, not one-sided on the paternal line; the heraldic emblems of both the father's and the mother's line featured on tombstones and paintings. Noblemen sometimes even changed their surname or coat of arms to integrate elements referring to their mother's lineage. Noble identity in Zeeland was not founded on a strong patrilineal conception of the lineage that was linked to a specific name and place. The evidence is not abundant, but it appears that in the sixteenth century nobles paid more attention to the representation of their ancestry in order to mark their privileged social status. Other symbols of noble distinction such as knightly titles and military bravery became less easily to obtain in this period.

The noblemen in Zeeland were also embedded in social networks based on friendship and patronage. These networks served political and economic ends and comprised nobles as well as commoners. The support of relatives, friends and clients was indispensable during political crises, such as the strife between countess Joanne of Bavaria († 1436) and Duke Philip the Good that divided the nobles in Zeeland into two camps, or the combined urban and noble rebellion against Maximilian of Austria († 1519) after the death of his wife Mary of Burgundy in 1482. Despite the significant political differences, long-lasting noble parties did not evolve in late medieval Zeeland. The help of family and friends was also essential in protecting one's interests, especially in a period in which feuding and violence were common. Finally, relations with higher placed patrons were essential for those who aspired to a career in princely service. Solidarities among noblemen were based on social networks and mutual interests rather than on the shared noble status and identity.

The lifestyle of the nobility did not undergo radical changes during the Burgundian-Habsburg period. It is clear that only the upper strata of the noble population had access to the princely court and could observe its splendour. Chivalrous culture was increasingly linked to the court, meaning that only high nobles could participate in the tournaments organised by the courtiers. The high noblemen could also be elected members of the Order of the Golden Fleece. The remaining nobles in general did not enjoy the privilege of access to the princely court. The idea of chivalry as a code of conduct still had real significance in the fifteenth century. The

number of nobles that were knighted at the battlefield gives an indication of this. The subpopulation of 1475 comprised 39 knights, while this number dropped to eighteen in 1535. Besides the decrease of the number of knighted nobles, the meaning of the title altered. Knighthood was no longer earned by feats of arms on the battlefield, but became a reward for loyal state service by high noblemen and non-noble officers.

The position of the nobles in the late medieval society of Zeeland underwent gradual changes, because of external political and socio-economic developments. This book traces how processes of state formation, urbanisation and commercialisation influenced the power, wealth and status of the nobility, but also how nobles consolidated their position by adapting to the changing political and economic field. The size and composition of the noble population clearly altered during the period in question, as the requirements for access to the noble state became more formalised. The noblemen from the lower echelon in particular gave up the pursuit of nobility and its corresponding lifestyle. Different developments converged in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, which meant that the overall participation of nobles in government, their political influence and military role decreased. However, this did not result in an impoverished nobility as the majority of the nobles maintained their political and economic power base.

The specific institutions in Zeeland, such as the type of lordship, feudal law of inheritance, and land tax, were of great influence on the structure of the noble population, the social reproduction strategies of the nobles, and the appreciation of nobility. In this respect, this book also contributes to a better understanding of the power structures and social relations in late medieval Zeeland. Although nobility and towns sometimes opposed each other in the Estates of Zeeland and competed for the economic and juridical control over the countryside, the relations between noblemen and townsmen were far from antagonistic. Interaction and co-operation across social boundaries occurred on several levels, most notably among the nobles and non-nobles who were active in state service. The late medieval nobility in Zeeland should not be understood as a strong social and co-operative group, but rather as a group of individuals with the same legal status but different political and socio-economic profiles and belonging to several overlapping networks. The identity and lifestyle that nobles shared became less connected to chivalry and more related to loyal state service in the sixteenth century.