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Het present van Staat : de gouden ketens, kettingen en medailles verleend door de Staten-Generaal, 1588-1795

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Summary

The institutional organization of the Republic of the United Netherlands formed a highly opaque and complex structure. After the departure of the Earl of Leicester, the power of sovereignty officially laid with the States of each of the six – and, after 1595, seven – provinces. Between those provinces, however, a balance of power grew only gradually in a lengthy process that saw frequent changes and was subject to various shifts in emphasis. Only by the time the Twelve Years' Truce was established in 1609 had the States General grown to become indisputably the most important institution of the Generality. In the States General, the deputies of the allied sovereign provinces met every day to discuss matters of their common interest such as the defence of the Republic's territory, the financing of that defence, as well as matters pertaining to foreign affairs.

From the very beginning of its existence, the Republic granted awards to foreign legates, or to those who delivered important messages, or to inhabitants who had rendered distinguished services to the Republic. The States General bestowed them in the name of the united provinces, and as such this task was almost inextricably tied to the rest of the responsibilities of the States General.

After the first quarter of the seventeenth century, gold chains, gold medals, and combinations of a medal and chain (i.e. the *keten*) established themselves as the standard gifts bestowed by the Republic. The 'regular gift' (*ordinaris present*), as it has come to be called, forms the subject of the present study.

Institutional and international context

Within the Republic of the United Netherlands, the States General were not the only instance to bestow awards in the form of chains, medals, or a combination of both. In addition to the provinces themselves, also such Generality institutions as the Council of State (*Raad van State*) and the admiralties granted these honours. In fact, even the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, or VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (*West-Indische Compagnie*, or WIC) extended rewards of their own. Within the Generality, the Council of State

appears to have been the one to take the initiative. The Council was the first to commission the Mint in Dordrecht to strike gold medals to distribute among its representatives. This example was followed by the States General, which over the course of time took this role over entirely from the Council.

The fact that different councils had their own systems of honours on occasion led to a degree of uncertainty. This holds true especially for rewards extended for maritime services. At times the admiralties, provincial diets, and the States General appeared to be competing with each other. For example, in 1639 and 1640 the States of Holland honoured Tromp and De With with a combined chain and medal, regardless of the gifts they might receive from the States General. In other instances, agreements were made and cooperated efforts were undertaken. A recipient could thus receive a medal from one council that was made to hang on the chain that he had received from another instance in recognition of the same services. It remains entirely unclear, however, which instance took the initiative in such cases, and why these cooperative endeavours were undertaken.

After the establishment of the Twelve Years' Truce, contacts between the Republic and foreign courts intensified. Accordingly, it increased in stature within the international diplomatic world. One custom within the established practice of international diplomacy was to give gifts to emissaries upon their departure. For a long period of time, the States General refused to conform to this practice, and they likewise forbade their own legates to accept such gifts. It was not until 1675 that the States General backed down from their earlier position. Within the accepted custom, the value of parting gifts was determined by the rank of the legate. A distinction was drawn between three different ranks: first, the ambassador; second, the *extraordinaris envoyé*; and third, other legates such as ministers or residents, who together made up the remaining class.

The forms which the customary gifts granted to the Republic's legates took on varied. At times, the gift was monetary or came as a predetermined amount of gold, but it was more customary to grant jewellery or objects of art such as medallions, rings, and snuff boxes. These were often inlaid with diamonds or pearls, and commonly bore the portrait or monogram of the patron prince on them. Less common gifts included tableware made of precious metal or porcelain, gold medals, and tapestries. Notably absent among them are the combined gold chain and medal that became a standard in the Republic.

A special honour unknown to the Republic was the inclusion of individuals in an order of knighthood, or their elevation to the status of nobility. Aside from the Danish Order of the Elephant, it was especially the French Order of Saint Michael that was bestowed upon the Republic's subjects. Dutch knights included such maritime heroes as De Ruyter, Tromp, and De With, but also *landsadvocaat* (i.e. pensionary to the States of Holland) Van Oldenbarnevelt, the secretary of two Princes of Orange Constantijn Huygens, and the poet P.C. Hooft.

Proceedings: the 'reward program' of the States General in action

Up until ca. 1625, different kinds of gifts were attributed including gold and silver objects, tapestries, and precious books. A special honour was the right to display the States General Lion on one's family blazon. After ca. 1625-1630, chains, medals, and combinations of a chain and medal developed into the standard gift. Decisions to bestow awards were made during the meetings of the States General. Precedent played an important role in the decision-making process. For quickly retrieving the resolutions of the States General, clerks created lists with references to earlier decisions. In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, these lists gave way to much more expansive compendia in which the entire pomp and circumstances accompanying the reception of foreign legates were set down.

Around the year 1670, we see the formation of a system with a variety of different awards, based on the rank of the respective emissary. Chain and medal combinations were extended with values of f 6,000, f 1,300, f 600, and f 300. At the end of the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth century, dies of different sizes were cut for striking the matching medals.

The States General had fixed suppliers who referred to themselves as the 'goldsmith' or 'jeweller of the High and Mighty Lords (*Hoog Mogende Heren*). They often supplied all the gifts over the course of a period lasting several decades. The chains were fashioned by goldsmiths from The Hague, and gold medals commissioned from the Holland Mint were hung on them. In 1628, these medals were replaced by a medal from assayer-general Laurens van Teylingen bearing the emblems of the States General and the seven provinces.

In order to verify the gold content, the commissioned gifts were periodically assayed during the seventeenth century. As of 1711, however, this became a standard feature of the process. The responsibility for the assay was a part of the assayer-general's duties. Throughout the seventeenth century, chains and medals were made of crown gold of 22 carat. At the end of the century, a transition was made to fine gold of 23 carat 7 grain, presumably in connection with the change from cast to struck medals. The softer fine gold was most probably better suited to the striking of medals than crown gold was, and it no doubt increased the lifespan of the dies.

From seventeenth-century invoices and eighteenth-century assay reports it emerges that goldsmiths, with the approval of the *griffier* (i.e. the secretary to the States General), could buy chains and medals back from departing legates for money. The legate received the monetary equivalent of his gift in cash, while the goldsmith offered the returned gift to the States General again. Goldsmiths were then permitted to include production and assay costs on their invoices, even though the gifts were not fabricated anew but had been bought back. In this way, goldsmiths could earn a profit in the buying and selling of chains and medals. After the gifts had been assayed, they were shown to the assembly of the *Hoog Mogende Heren*.

For the purposes of invoicing, they were weighed before the meeting took place.

All diplomatic gifts were paid out of the so-called '*post van de defroyementen*.' By the middle of the seventeenth century, the amount budgeted annually amounted to f 300,000. Each province was expected to shoulder a part of the costs. The annual contribution for the provinces was determined according to the 1616 agreement; however, it is important to observe that for the *defroyementen*, Holland paid the first half of the total amount on its own, while only the second half was split among all seven provinces in the terms outlined by the agreement. It is worth noting that the contributions from the provinces were not paid into the Generality's coffers; instead, the provinces made their payments directly to the military personnel and other interested parties allotted to them. In practice Holland paid for almost all of the diplomatic gifts. Accordingly, it exercised a great deal of influence on the Republic's foreign policy.

The payment for gifts was not always handled properly. A large number of petitions from the second quarter of the seventeenth century witness that the provinces were regularly behind in their payments. In the 1680s, and especially before the War of the Spanish Succession, the problems in regard to payments took on even greater proportions. In particular the *Noorderkwartier*, i.e. the northern half of the province of Holland, failed to meet its obligations, a situation that led to the bankruptcy of the goldsmith Johannes de Graef.

Up until ca. 1630, the gifts were made to the departing emissaries by a committee from the States General. After this time, the Agents of the States General were responsible for the handing over of the gifts. Matters were different when it came to the chains, medals, and combinations designated for admirals or military officials who had rendered distinguished services to the Republic. They regularly appeared in the assembly in order to accept their rewards.

The people

Over the course of the more than two centuries of its existence, the Republic of the United Netherlands distributed 1,234 distinctions in the form of chains, medals, and combinations of them (see appendix I). Given the lacunae in the available source material, together with the opacity in regard to the practices involved for the bestowal of such awards, one cannot exclude the possibility that this list is not entirely complete.

What is certain, on the other hand, is that the number of gifts that were actually fabricated was decidedly smaller. Decisions concerning awards were regularly modified or repealed, while an award was sometimes also refused by its intended recipient. In addition, the common practice of goldsmiths to buy back chains and medals from departing legates and to offer them back to the States General on a lat-

er occasion means that the number of gifts that were actually manufactured was considerably lower than 1,234. How much lower cannot be determined, however.

If the limited 'other'-category is ignored for the moment, we can identify three clearly distinguished kinds of awards: diplomatic gifts, awards for distinguished services, and rewards for those charged with the delivery of special messages. The first category was by far the most common (70.1%), with the remainder being split almost evenly between the second and third categories (14.4% and 13.0%, respectively). The preponderance of diplomatic gifts was such that the matching medal was commonly referred to as the 'ambassador's medal.'

Until 1630, the States General gave gold medals that were attached to a ribbon or else came as part of a gold chain. However, after the Twelve Years' Truce had expired, the *Hoog Mogende Heren* commissioned no new medals to be struck. This explains why about 80% of the awards bestowed between 1630 and 1650 consist of chains alone, without medals. After 1656, however, these isolated chains disappear entirely from view. With a small handful of exceptions, the awards bestowed all consist in loose medals or in medals together with a chain. A chain that bore no indication of the giver, so it would seem, was no longer considered an appropriate award.

Four case studies provide interesting material to complement our knowledge of the *ordinaris present*. By the time the Twelve Years' Truce was established in 1609, the *Hoog Mogende Heren* had granted gifts amounting to more than a quarter million guilders in gold vessels, chains and medals, tapestries and damask. However, everything suggests that the States General was at that time still a newcomer on the international stage. The *Hoog Mogende Heren* do not appear to have been well informed on the accepted customs, so that they constantly required promptings from the English and French arbiters. Accordingly, it took months before decisions were made regarding the acceptance of gifts from the Archdukes, the distribution of their gifts to the States General's negotiators, and the granting of return gifts.

By the time of the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, the situation was entirely different. The decision to give the three French ambassadors the customary medal-and-chain of f 6.000 strikes one as having been a matter of course; in contrast to 1609, no debates appear to have taken place, nor is there any sign of rancour harboured towards the former enemy. This case study from 1697 also provides insight into the financial background: in order to pay for the subsistence of and gifts for the ambassadors present at the negotiations, an extraordinary petition was made for providing another f 150.000 in funds.

The example of the heroes of Doggersbank makes it clear that awards were not bestowed exclusively upon foreign legates. This particular case is so significant because it represents the one and only occasion on which the stadholder took the initiative. He appeared personally in the assembly of the *Hoog Mogende Heren* in order to propose that the fleet's flag-officers be honoured. Several other particularities

involved in this case provide us with interesting details regarding the manufacturing process. For, at the assay it emerged that insufficient gold had been used for the medals so as to leave them at an inferior value, while also the goldsmith charged with delivering the chains and medals met his end before he was able to complete his commission.

The fourth case study involving Willem Vleertman is also decidedly remarkable. The commander of the trenches received no less than eight chain-and-medal combinations, in addition to five loose medals, within a timeframe spanning less than a decade.

The gifts: chains and medals

Virtually no specimens survive of the chains that were granted by the States General. This is not so for the medals attached to these chains. At first, so-called ‘triumph medals’ were commissioned from the Mint in Dordrecht; these medals had a flat relief and the external features of a large coin, and were struck in the provincial workshops at the occasion of victories won by the Republic. The oldest triumph medals were specimens that the Mint already held, such as the medal to celebrate the relief of Leiden and the medal commemorating the defeat of the Spanish Armada. As of 1594, however, the States General commissioned the mintmaster to cut special dies for triumph medals and to strike gold specimens with them. In this, the *Hoog Mogende Heren* followed the example of the Council of State. Between 1594 and 1629, the States General commissioned twelve different medals. Initially the specimens were distributed among the States General’s own deputies following a fixed pattern. Over the course of time, however, extra specimens were increasingly struck to be bestowed as awards.

In April 1628, the States General had new dies engraved for a medal bearing the emblems of the seven sovereign provinces and the emblem of the Generality. This creation by assayer-general Laurens van Teylingen represented a radical break. With it, the States General had an award medal at its disposal that could not be used by any other instance. Van Teylingen supplied these medals up until his death in 1637, with the chains on which they were hung being crafted by the goldsmiths in The Hague. It needs to be noted, however, that Van Teylingen’s medal still did not represent the break that scholars have tended to see in it. In fact, between 1630 and 1654, the States General awarded nearly no medals at all, but granted chains almost exclusively. The true change thus came in 1654, when goldsmith Johannes van der Maa supplied models for a cast medal. Although the images on his creation as such were probably quite similar to those on the Van Teylingen medal, the significance in Van der Maa’s medal lay in the fact that, as of 1655, it formed a standard element in the *ordinaris present* of the *Hoog Mogende Heren*.

The award medal of the States General continued in existence until the fall of the Republic in 1795, with only two modifications. In 1660 the existing medal was replaced by specimens bearing the new coat of arms of the Generality that had been introduced at the time of the peace negotiations in Munster. Furthermore, the face bearing the Generality weapon, which formerly had been the medal's reverse, now became its obverse side. A second modification took place in 1747, when the coat of arms of hereditary stadholder William IV was placed in the middle of the weapons of the provinces.

Between 1654 and 1691, the award medals of the States General were cast in The Hague. After that time, they were struck – first, in 1693, on a drop-hammer press, and then, after 1704, on a *balancier* or screw press that was set up in one of the rooms next to the Kloosterkerk. In order to be able to grant awards of different values, the *Hoog Mogende Heren* began to commission moulds and dies of different sizes. Thus, in 1667 a pair of dies of a diameter of 65 mm was cut for striking medals of a lesser value than those cast with the existing mould with a diameter of 70 mm. In 1691, only one set of dies was engraved with a diameter of 60 mm, but from 1704 onward two different formats (66 and 56 mm) were once more available. Between 1706 and 1710 Johannes Drappentier, with great difficulties, created a set of dies to strike medals of an even larger format (85 mm).

The last chains with the States General's award medal were bestowed in the course of the year 1795. The following year, the National Assembly commissioned a medal of its own. Up until 1805, the Batavian Republic continued the tradition of the Republic of the United Netherlands to grant gold chains with medals to departing legates and their secretaries. However, with the arrival of Louis Napoleon in the summer of 1806, this long-standing tradition was brought to an end. Not long after the new king acceded to the throne, he created orders of merit that in practice supplanted the role of the award medals and chains.

Conclusion and final remarks

When we compare the awards granted by the States General between 1588 and 1795 with the system of decorations that is currently maintained (with such orders of merit as the Military Order of William, the Order of the Netherlands Lion, and the Order of Orange-Nassau taking the highest places), we are immediately struck by the enormous differences.

Differences are found first of all on the institutional level. There are no decrees establishing the form and regulations of bestowal for the triumph medals that the *Hoog Mogende Heren* had struck beginning in 1594. The same holds true for the 'ambassador's medal' cut by Van Teylingen, for the medal that replaced his creation in the second half of the seventeenth century, and for the distinctions granted

in the form of chains or combinations of chain and medal. Nowhere in the resolutions of the States General do we find equivalents for the nineteenth-century laws with multiple articles regulating the institution of the three orders of merit in the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

On the organizational level as well, the differences are considerable. There was almost nothing in the way of rules or other prescriptions. The one exception is formed by the rather summary compendia from the archives of the *griffiers* from the Fagel-family, in which the value of the parting gifts was set. However, it is worth noting that these compendia may not even have been commissioned by the States General. Nor do we find any trace of public servants whose special task it is to see to the bestowal of chains and/or medals. On the financial level, there were indeed certain provisions in place during the age of the Republic. The Republic's *Staat van Oorlog* or budget included the *post van de defroyementen* from which also the gifts of State were to be paid. All the same, there was no systematic control to verify whether or not payments had been made, so that they were often effected with considerable delays.

Differences can also be detected in terms of setup and structure. In the Republic, no criteria were established for granting the awards. Precedent played a defining role in determining whether or not a distinction would be granted, and what value the award ought to have. As of the last quarter of the seventeenth century, in any case, we see the presentation of gifts of different values. On a practical level, however, these varying rewards cannot be compared with the different classes in the modern orders of merit. The latter, after all, stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other, with later merits leading to promotion to a higher class. That the practice of the *ancien régime* was entirely different is illustrated by the example of Willem Vleertman. Each of the awards that the States General bestowed on him stood entirely on its own, so that earlier gifts were of no consideration when Vleertman rendered new services to the Republic and as such did not lead to the reception of a higher reward.

Significant differences apply also to the bestowal of gifts. There are no nominations and the decisions to bestow awards were taken in the secluded assembly of the States General. Also diplomas and certificates appear to have been entirely absent.

A final point of difference concerns the decorations themselves. The awards bestowed by the States General took the form of gold chains and medals. The medals carried symbolic depictions in the form of the emblems of the Generality, of the seven united provinces, and, as of 1747, of the hereditary stadholders. They also bore the motto of the Republic. In contrast to the crosses and stars of the modern orders of merit, the medals and chains of the Republic had intrinsic value, and differences between various presents could be measured monetarily. This is precisely why many such gifts were not kept, but disappeared into the smelting pot. Finally,

we have no prescriptions concerning the way in which the chains, medals, and combined medal-and-chain bestowed by the States General were to be worn.

In light of this, we must conclude that the awards bestowed by the States General cannot be described as a 'merit system' in the modern sense of the term. The entire process surrounding these awards was simply not carried out in a manner that was sufficiently systematic. All the same, it is necessary to place also the gifts of the States General within the context of their time – the context, that is, of the Republic of the United Netherlands, which only began to be shaped gradually after 1588 and would continue to exist for over two centuries. The decisions made were at times the outcome of difficult and lengthy deliberations, not founded on grand and spirited declarations based on set principles, but on decisions with an *ad hoc* character in which precedent had a crucial role and the search for *retroacta* was the order of the day. Against this background, it is important to pay attention to the provisions that *were* indeed in place in the Republic, to consider whether there was development and growth, and to see whether there was any degree of coherence in regard to the awards bestowed by the States General. This study has revealed that there was indeed development and growth. After a chaotic initial phase devoid of clarity, it is possible starting with the 1630s to speak of a regulated process. Beginning at that time, the States General had their own 'medal of the union' and delivered their commissions to set goldsmiths who had a monopoly for supplying the *present van Staat*.

A new phase appears to announce itself around 1655-1660. At this time, the States General no longer granted loose chains without medals, but only chains with medals or else medals alone. An important step is formed by the new medal that was adopted in 1660. This medal displayed the coat of arms of the Generality that had been introduced during the peace negotiations in Munster. The coat of arms no longer figured upon the reverse of the medal, but on the obverse, so that the Generality's blazon rather than those of the seven provinces would be displayed when the medal was worn by its recipient.

Around the same time, we also observe a standardization of the 'regular parting gift' (*ordinaris afscheidspresent*), with the value of the gift being determined no longer by the significance of a legate or by the length of his mission, but on the basis of his rank alone. The standard value of the parting gifts amounted to f 6.000, f 1.300, f 600, or f 300. For bestowing awards of varying values, the *Hoog Mogende Heren* commissioned dies of different sizes to be cut. Beginning in 1668, two different formats were available, and as of 1710 this even increased to a total of three. The increasing standardization was accompanied by a growing need to establish details concerning the bestowal of the awards. At first this took the form of lists with references to earlier resolutions, but around 1700 elaborate compendia began to develop. This process of standardization had the concrete result that the bestow-

al of awards eventually was a matter of course for nearly 70% of the cases.

A final important step towards uniformity and regulation was taken in September 1711 when the States General decided that all gold ‘gifts of State’ were to be assayed. From that point in time and on, it became possible to check the quality of the chains and medals in an effective manner.

In light of the above, it is possible to speak of a coherence in regard to the different awards that the States General bestowed. This relationship is not such that we can speak of a ‘merit system’ in the modern sense of the term, but within the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century context there nevertheless was a gradual albeit decided growth towards a system of honours. In the end, it is difficult to determine precisely when the definitive turn was made, but anyone who compares the chaotic practices of ca. 1625 with the situation around the year 1675 cannot but conclude that much had changed in the intervening time.