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Tussen Oranje en Spanje : de leefwereld van Bredase regenten 1550-1700

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Citation

Meij, C. O. van der. (2012, October 25). *Tussen Oranje en Spanje : de leefwereld van Bredase regenten 1550-1700*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/20034>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



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Issue Date: 2012-10-25

Summary

During the period of the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648) the town of Breda lay at the fault line of the Low Countries from which there later emerged two separate nations. The town was (re)captured no less than six times in eight decades: 1568, 1577, 1581, 1590, 1625, and finally in 1637. As a consequence, the town suffered heavily: it was more or less depopulated several times. At the same time Breda was also turned into a heavily defended army garrison. Economically, the town fared somewhat better despite the ongoing political struggle. It survived the ravages of war: partially as a gateway to the burgeoning Holland staple market, and partially due to the large military presence.

Since 1544 the barony of Breda was the private domain of the foremost noble family in the Netherlands: Nassau-Orange. From this manor, which consisted primarily of the town of Breda but also a number of smaller villages in the surrounding countryside, they gained a large portion of their personal wealth due to a host of manorial rights. After a lapse in administration due to the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt, this income increased steadily from the seventeenth century onwards. Breda was administered by the *Nassause Domeinraad*: this body was originally situated in the town itself but later moved to The Hague.

The baron of Breda also appointed a host of officials including the bailiff, stewards and the city's councilors. The bailiff or *drost* was often of noble origin himself. From 1590 the *drosten* settled in Breda and took matters into their own hands. This changed with the first Stadholderless period (1650-1672) when the *drosten*, increasingly important courtiers as well, left the affairs in Breda to their substitutes. These substitutes were drawn from one of the principal families of the town, causing major frictions within the town's oligarchy.

The city's councilors, who were annually elected on the advice of the *drost* or his substitute, also doubled as a magistracy. They were in turn supported by a Council of Ten, who advised mostly on financial matters. There was no corporation or fixed body of men to choose from in Breda. The town's council is therefore not representative of the so-called *vroedschap* model in Holland, but represents much more the *Zuid-Nederlandse* model. This once again demonstrates the town's strong Brabantine origin. The changing political regimes (Dutch or Spanish) meant any form of stability in government was difficult to maintain. There were simply not enough men of sufficient social standing to fill out all the posts. At the top, however, a few experienced men (mostly the mayors) dominated the city's council.

The Dutch Revolt principally introduced a new religious divide between two neighbouring sides of an artificially created border running across the old duchy of Brabant. Breda could not choose for itself - except in 1577, when it joined the Revolt - but at its heart the town remained a catholic stronghold throughout. Calvinist preachers, who were nominated by the baron as well, tried their utmost to turn the populace around (especially in the seventeenth century) but largely in vain: at most 15-20% of the town's population was protestant. The ruling authorities represent-

ing the *Nassause Domeinraad* were unwilling to interfere in religious affairs out of fear of alienating the catholic population too much. This in turn led to increasingly acrimonious relations between the officials of the protestant church and the councilors towards the end of the seventeenth century. Each regime wanted its own religious denomination to dominate the city's council but both sides could not work without the other because of a lack of enough experienced men of stature. Only after 1637 was this finally achieved in favour of all protestants. An oligarchy was also difficult to maintain in these ever-changing circumstances exacerbated by the nature of the Revolt.

The patriciate of Breda had been very fragmented from the later middle ages onward. The presence of the *Nassause Domeinraad* meant noblemen and high ranking officials dominated the town as a social class. The political body of Breda was also subservient to the needs of the *Nassause Domeinraad*. Apart from new religious divisions between catholics and protestants, there were also pre-existing divisions caused by origin, wealth and experience. If there was a town's patriciate, this consisted mainly of old catholic families. In time, they were excluded from the city's council but by then, in the second half of the seventeenth century, they simply turned their attention to the neighbouring countryside or even further afield (the old duchy of Brabant) to remain in office.

The nature of the town, a manor situated in what was later to become the Generality lands, also meant it was a true bureaucrat's paradise. Not only had the *Nassause Domeinraad* many positions to fulfill but there were also the offices representing the Generality regarding the army and tax collection. All of this meant Breda was continually inundated by strangers: people from outside the town or even outside of Brabant. With their financial income as a secure base - as opposed to the lesser wealth of the town's economic middle-class - they quickly entered the town's council over the head of true 'Bredanaars'. This caused further ruptures in the make-up of both the oligarchy and the local patriciate. However, in time it also created something of a Brabantine patriciate of '*passanten*' (or passers-by) which was not confined to any one town in particular.

In between war and religion affecting their personal lives important decisions had to be made regarding other important matters of life and death. In this, the men and women of Breda increasingly turned towards their families for mutual support. Children were most vulnerable at the time but also taken well care off by family members when orphaned: a suitable education was always guaranteed. Whatever their occupation or vocation, sons often followed in the footsteps of their fathers. Elaborate measures were undertaken to ensure this in administrative posts as well; boys were often trained as clerks. In choosing their partners, the patriciate had some freedom of movement although they were often reigned in by the wishes of the family. An untimely death, for which extensive preparations were made through wills, could however overturn all of this.

Despite of this the town of Breda was all a pleasant place to live in with large patrician's houses, nice gardens and a beautiful countryside. Enough time and money was spent on embellishing their homes, which were adorned with pictures, furniture etc. Personal wealth was mostly tied up in real estate. The oligarchy was rich in means but could not compete in wealth with strangers or successful local merchants. In the course of the seventeenth century Breda already resembled much the situation elsewhere in Brabant of later in the nineteenth century of either being a catholic, being rich (these two could combine) or being a patrician. The patriciate was mainly middle-class in nature; retired tradesman were very much the exception

here. To combine resources though, stock companies were created with leading members of the oligarchy for the economical development of the countryside. In their social lives these different groups did not intermingle much either. The town's councilors were more often than not looked down upon by the patriciate (or *old borgers*), who increasingly felt like bystanders. Scandals emanating from city hall, especially in the seventeenth century, ruffled their feathers even further. Even when appearing in church, the councilors managed to undermine their own status by disagreements over the seating arrangements. Any cultural activities were largely undertaken in separate spheres too, with music an interesting - and possibly harmonious - exception. What was ultimately left therefore in this war-ravaged and deeply divided town was a true struggle for power and survival amongst the oligarchy. This resulted in a culture of fierce political infighting and intensely heated debate amongst the councilors, to the detriment of the citizenry and the town's reputation.

