Gelre : dynastie, land en identiteit in de late middeleeuwen

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Summary

Guelders. Dynasty, territory, and identity in the late middle ages

Current theories on state formation and the development of national identities often put emphasis on centrality and unity. Political and cultural centralization and uniformity would contribute to the development of states and national identities, while particularism and diversity would thwart them. Political, territorial and national entities are constructs, created by political centres that accumulate and centralise military, economic and ideological power. Thus, two of the most influential scholars on state formation, Charles Tilly and Michael Mann, conceive state formation as a process of accumulation and centralisation of power, while they conceive the state as an autonomous subject that submits society. On the subject of national identities, scholars like Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith relate the development of identities to the unifying agency of a political centre, a common culture, language and history, of shared memories or a shared ideology.

Yet, with regard to the late medieval political landscape of Western Europe, the elements centrality and unity seem problematical. It had a complex, composite character, with a multitude of shifting and intersecting layers of political entities and identities. Exemplary is the county (since 1339 duchy) of Guelders, the theme of this book. At first sight, Guelders, lying on the Meuse, the lower Rhine and the IJssel, seemed an incoherent entity, imbued with particularism, with loose borders, and many exclaves and enclaves. It was divided in four quarters, with four capital towns, each quarter acting more or less autonomously. Within each quarter, citizens and knights tenaciously held to their own rights and privileges. Even so, notwithstanding its lack of centrality and unity, its particularism and complexity, Guelders existed; it functioned as a political entity with its own identity.

How can we explain this? According to us, to understand the existence and functioning of a political entity like Guelders, the focus on centrality and unity, on processes of accumulation and centralisation of power, is inadequate. We must focus on the need for regulation, and the resulting construction of political structures on central, regional, and local levels, top-down, as well as bottom-up, and on how the dissimilar political structures interacted. How did individuals, on different geographical and social levels, construct and conceive political structures, and to what extent did they identify with them? In order to answer this question, we use the terms ‘political community’ and ‘political identity’.

Our main question is: what was the relation between the construction of a Guelders political community, and the construction of a Guelders political identity between 1100 and 1600? We use the word ‘political community’ as an alternative to ‘state’. The political scientist David Easton defines a ‘political community’ as "a group of persons who seek to solve their problems in common through a shared political structure". ‘Political community’, in this sense, has less formal, systematic and centralistic implications, and thus seems more appropriate to the late medieval context, than the term ‘state’. Now and then, we use the terms ‘state’ and ‘state formation’: not to refer to accumulation and centralisation of power, but to refer to the abstraction, formalisation and depersonalisation of political structures at the end of the middle ages and during the early modern period.

We use the term ‘political identity’ as an alternative to ‘nation’, or ‘national identity’. The word 'nation' is too heavily charged with emotions. What is more: in the scholarly debate, ‘nation’ is often exclusively associated with modern nationalism, and/or with large political units, like France and England. In this book, ‘political identity’ refers to the ways in which

people construct, perform and conceive a political community in their doings and thinking, and to the ways in which they identify with that community.

Identity includes three elements: praxis, imagination and identification. The identity of a person refers to who he is. His singularity generates in a process of continual interaction between acts and thinking. In this respect, Willem Frijhoff stresses the dynamic character of identity, and the relation between praxis and imagination. A person's identity, however, also refers to identification, or feelings of solidarity: to the persons, groups, or abstract entities like peoples, nations, and cultures he identifies with. This third element (identification) is a specification of the first two (praxis and imagination), for identifications are always part of a person's self-image and his acts. Yet, contrary to a person, a political community cannot perform itself, nor act, think, imagine, or identify with others. The political community can only exist when individuals perform, conceive and imagine it, when they identify with it, and act as its members. The term 'political identity' refers to this. Thus, in the end, a political identity only exists as a part of a person's individual identity.

A late-medieval political community like Guelders can also be called a 'territory'. In this book, we use the terms 'territory', or 'land' in addition to 'political community'. However, 'territory' has a more specific meaning than 'political community': it is a political community with a geographically defined political structure. More specific: a late medieval territory is a cluster of goods, rights and persons that, due to its internal structure, formed an independent, geographic unit. Territorialisation is the clustering of goods, rights and persons into a territory.

The structure that bound the territory of Guelders together was four-part, consisting of the following elements:

1. a dynasty: a successive series of counts and dukes;
2. a landscape of domains, castles, cities, jurisdictions, etcetera, created by the successive counts and dukes (the physical structure);
3. networks of local elites, initially grouped around the dynasty, but from the fourteenth century onwards also on a territorial base (the social-political structure);
4. images from, discourses about, and identifications with the dynasty, the physical, and the social-political structure (the mental structure).

This book is set up according these four elements. The first part (chapters 1 and 2) deals with the dynasty, the second part (chapters 3 and 4) with physical and social-political structure, and the last part (chapters 5, 6 and 7) with the mental structure.

Part I deals with the dynasty: with the name of the dynasty, its symbols and ancestry, questions of succession, and with the dynastical, memorial culture. The dynastical identity was rooted in continuity, blood relationship and status. The family name 'Guelders', passing down from father to son, expressed the continuity of the dynasty. The same goes for its coat of arms: the five-leaved flower, and from the 1230's onward the lion. The counts and dukes were not just individual leaders, or magistrates, but links in an unbroken chain of predecessors and successors, bringing together the past, the present and the future. Since the thirteenth century, the counts and dukes claimed the imperial privilege of female succession, in order to secure the integrity of this chain. The dukes from the house of Egmond (1423-1538) commissioned the writing of genealogies and judicial expositions in order to prove the blood relation between them and the old Guelders dynasty that had run out in 1371.

The continuity was also visualised by burial places of the deceased counts and dukes in churches and cloisters. The princely graves and monuments were not just objects from a distant past; they were *lieux de mémoire*, functioning in a dynamic memorial culture. Religious institutions, like the churches of Wassenberg, Zutphen, and Arnhem, the Cistercian cloisters Kamp, Roermond and Grafenthal, and the Carthusian cloister Monnikhuizen were

repertories of dynastic memory: here, the Guelders counts and dukes were commemorated, here were the monuments, inscriptions and books of memory with their names and the dates of death. The memorial culture, practiced in these churches and cloisters, was of great significance to the counts and dukes. They erected monuments, created memorial services, and favoured churches and cloisters in which their predecessors lay buried.

The status of the dynasty was connected to its glorious past and noble descent. Rainald I (1271-1326) and his son Rainald II (1326-1343) both referred to their illustrious, even royal descent. The dukes from the house of Egmond (1423-1538) identified with the old Guelders dynasty, but also with the aristocratic families of Egmond and Arkel. They were eager to demonstrate their blood relationship with the dynasty of Guelders, but at the same time, they wished to enhance the status of the families of Egmond and Arkel. Through these families, they would descend from the Trojans, and the famous Frisian king Radbod.

The dynastical idea, with its connotations of continuity, blood relationship, and status, was also crucial to the imagination, discourse, and agency of the Guelders political elites, and chroniclers. During the questions of succession in 1371, 1423 and 1538, the political stands of the towns and knights were partly motivated by the idea of continuity, and by the blood relation of the pretenders with the old Guelders dynasty. Moreover, historians stressed in their chronicles the indigenousness of the dynasty of Guelders. According to them, the ancestors of the dynasty were not illustrious figures from abroad, like the Trojans: the ancestors were the local, indigenous lords of Pont, who would have lived near the town and castle of Guelders. The descent was humble, but at the same time heroic, because, in a distant past, two sons of the lord of Pont would have slain a local dragon, delivering the people from its terror. Consequently, the people made these two sons ‘prefects of Guelders’. And, what is more: according to the chroniclers, the dynasty of Guelders was in the eleventh century enriched with imperial blood.

The second part of this book is about the physical and social-political structure of the territory: the domains, castles, towns, jurisdictions, and also the networks of political elites: the knights and magistrates of the towns. The driving force behind the construction of the physical structure of late medieval territories was the growing stream of revenues local and regional aristocrats managed to appropriate. More than the Emperor, they profited from the demographic, economic, and institutional changes during the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries: population growth, urbanisation, reclamations, the disintegration of manorialism, and the intensification of trade. Due to the increasing revenues, some aristocrats, like the counts of Guelders, managed to create physical networks of domains, rivers, castles, towns, et cetera, and became princes of territories.

Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the counts and dukes of Guelders clustered their scattered goods and rights, and thus created the physical structure of the territory. They were successful in generating more and more revenues, originating from their domains, from appropriated regalia, like the levy of tolls, and from ordinary and extraordinary aids. Due to this, the successive counts and dukes could obtain new goods and rights, commit aristocrats, ministerials and citizens to them, build castles, and create administrative districts administered by salaried officials. In due course, this process of expansion, clustering, and structuring, brought in new financial sources, namely the ordinary and extraordinary aids, levied on all the newly formed territory.

In the first half of the fourteenth century, the physical structure was more or less finished. The territory was subdivided in geographically defined districts, sometimes with a castle or a town as administrative centre. The laws of the towns, districts and regions of the territory were written down. The towns of Guelders were divided in two juridical networks: one centred around the municipal law of Zutphen, the other around the municipal law of

Roermond. Many local aristocrats had handed down their jurisdictions to the counts and dukes, and had become their vassals.

However, the territory of Guelders did not only consist of a dynasty, and a physical network of goods and rights, but also of social-political networks of local elites: aristocrats, ministerials, knights, and towns. From the twelfth century onwards, a network of aristocrats and ministerials developed around the count of Guelders. We have called this the 'princely network'. They served the count personally, administered his domains, acted as witnesses and guarantors, and fought for him. From the thirteenth century onwards, they also acted as counsellors, officials, guarantors of credits, and as payers of extraordinary aids. Since around 1300, these aristocrats and ministerials were called 'knights'. At this time, the towns also joined this princely network. Aristocrats, ministerials (or knights), and towns joined the network to pursuit justice, peace and order.

At the end of the thirteenth century, and in the beginning of the fourteenth century, the knights and towns for the first time consented with the levy of extraordinary aids, in order to free the counts from their debts, to free pawned parts of the territory, and to secure the integrity of the territory. As a result of this, the towns in particular conceived the territory of Guelders more and more as a common good, in the sources mentioned as 'the common land'. They identified with this common land, and consequently sought to extend their influence on the administration and rule of the territory. They even conceived themselves as the defenders of the integrity and independence of the territory. In order to extend their influence, and to defend their privileges, and the integrity and independence of the land, the towns, in the fourteenth century, created a new social-political network, not centred around the prince, but on a territorial base. In the sources, this network is sometimes called 'the land'. Indeed, the towns of Guelders were too small to exert influence on an individual level. The only way to do this was to collaborate on a wider, territorial level.

The territorial network was a tool for the towns to make clear their wishes, and to put pressure on the count, or duke. They asked him not to pawn or sell parts of the territory, not to appoint officials from abroad, asked the right to advise him, and asked supervision on the mint. A major feature of this network was, that the members did not identify with the prince as an individual, but with the political community as a whole, the common land, including the dynasty. Repeatedly, they referred to the interests of the dynasty, of the individual members of the network, and to the interests of the territory.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the political structure of Guelders changed fundamentally. The princely network, until then extending steadily, contracted under the regime of duke Rainald IV (1402-1423). To administer the central government, duke Rainald made use of only a small group of confidants. As a result, many knights who threatened to lose their influence on the central government now joined the territorial network of towns. The outcome of these changes was a new, dualistic political structure, with on the one hand the duke and a small group of confidents and counsellors, and on the other the large, territorial network of towns and knights. The Guelders political community developed more and more into a state, in which the political structure was not determined anymore by the personal relations between the prince and the members of his network, but by the anonymous relations between the government and the subjects.

The towns Arnhem, Nijmegen, Roermond and Zutphen were the heads of the territorial network. In the second half of the fourteenth century, each of them had managed to bind a group of small towns, for whom they acted as representatives. Thus, four groups of towns, or quarters, with four capital towns had come into being. Therefore, the territory, or territorial network consisted of four parts. It was layered, with a constant tension, and interaction between the regional, or quarterly levels, and the territorial level. The knights, who

joined this network at the beginning of the fifteenth century, conformed to this system of quarters. Thus, a knighthood of Arnhem, a knighthood of Nijmegen, a knighthood of Zutphen, and a knighthood of Roermond came into being.

The capital towns, the small towns, and the knighthoods considered themselves to be the representatives, and supervisors of the land. After all, duke Arnold (1423-1465) was *chosen* by them. The same counts for duke Willem II (1538-1543). Duke Charles (1492-1538) became duke thanks to the initiatives and efforts of the territorial network. In the years 1570, when the duchy became involved in the Dutch Revolt, the authority of the territorial network grew further. In 1581 it co-signed the famous Act of Abjuration. Since then, Guelders was a duchy without a duke; the authority of the counts and dukes, built up in the course of centuries, now definitely transferred to the territorial network.

The third part of this book deals with the mental structure of the territory: on the images from, discourses about, and identifications with the dynasty, the physical network, and the social-political networks. Interacting with political and institutional developments, constantly new words, ideas, symbols and narratives became attached to Guelders. Through these associations, the inhabitants could construct images of their political community. They could reduce its complexity to a simple image, or a series of images. And through these images, they could comprehend their political community, and identify with it.

The prince and his dynasty evoked images of, and identifications with Guelders. However, the role of the prince was mainly passive. He did not actively propagate a certain image of Guelders, but the name of his dynasty, the weapons of armour, and his genealogy induced feelings of individuality and solidarity: they stirred the imagination of historians and political elites, who appropriated them to construct their own images of Guelders: images they could identify with. The prince and his court did not function as a centre, spreading a common political identity, but as a mirror, on which local elites, and chroniclers projected their images, identifications, and feelings of singularity and solidarity.

One of the most crucial aspects of the Guelders political identity was the idea that the gathering of domains, jurisdictions, tolls, and towns formed a well-defined territory, a complete whole, with the name of the dynasty: Guelders. At the end of the twelfth century, this gathering was called for the first time a *terra*. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, this *terra* was called for the first time 'Guelders', and from the fifteenth century onwards, the inhabitants were also called 'Guelders'. Some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century chroniclers referred to the territory with the word *patria*.

The towns and knights were eager to preserve the unity and integrity of the territory. They were obsessed with the idea of territorial unity and integrity. Repeatedly, they warned the count or duke not to alienate towns, castles, or other parts of the land. Nevertheless, Guelders, was a unity in diversity: images of, and identifications with the dynasty and the territory coexisted, or overlapped with images of, and identifications with the different towns, regions, and quarters. For example, the fifteenth century historian Willem van Berchen imagined his native town Nijmegen as an ancient, imperial town, founded by Julius Caesar. He strongly identified with Nijmegen, but at the same time, he identified with the Guelders dynasty and territory, connecting them with the story of the dragon-slayers. He identified with Guelders, not in spite of, but due to his identification with Nijmegen. Local and territorial identities were not necessarily incompatible, on the contrary: they could reinforce each other.

Since the end of the fifteenth century, humanists became interested in the antiquity of Guelders. They imagined Guelders as a part of the ancient *Germania*, with its inhabitants descending from the ancient Batavians or Sicambers. This humanist discourse was more than an intellectual game. It was a way to relate their feelings of solidarity with their region and with Guelders to new, modern, humanist images. They elaborated the older, widely shared

idea of the territorial network of towns and knights as representatives of the territory, to the idea of a Guelders people, from time immemorial rooted in the territory. They also related the rights and privileges of the members of the territorial network to the humanist idea of freedom: the freedom of the people of Guelders from ducal tyranny and foreign rule.

The main aspects of the development of a Guelders political community and identity were not centralisation and unification, but cooperation, imagination and identification on local, regional and territorial levels. According to the prevailing theories on state formation and the development of national identities, the obstacles for the construction of a Guelders political community and identity would have been manifold. The political structure of Guelders was very particularistic. Moreover, historians gave voice to a multiplicity of images of Guelders. The count, or duke and his court never had the ambition to create a collective historical image of Guelders. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the urban elites, the pursuit of the independence, integrity and unity of the territory, and the writings of Guelders historians reveal to us the existence of a vital and dynamic political community and identity.

How did the existence of a political identity relate to the political particularism and the multiplicity of images? It appears that particularism was not an obstacle, but a contributor to the development of a political identity. The protection of the particular interests of mainly the towns against the increasing power of the territorial princes could only be effective within the framework of the existing political community, i.e.: the territory, structured around the count, or duke and his network of knights and towns. Using this territorial network, individual towns could maintain and extend their influence in opposition to the central government. Therefore, the pursuit of particular and local interests encouraged the identification with the political community of Guelders and the formation of a political identity.

The existence of a political identity appears most directly in fifteenth and sixteenth century historiography. Writers imagined Guelders as a political community, symbolized by, for example, the ancient Batavians or Sicambers, the antiquity of Nijmegen, or by the dragon-slayers of Guelders, and kept together by the prince, or by the territorial network. The absence of a collective image did not imply the absence of a political identity. On the contrary: the multiplicity and flexibility of the imagination multiplied the possibilities to identify with the duchy. They made it possible to link one's personal or local identity with the imagined political community of Guelders.