MACHT IN DE METROPOOL

Politieke elitevorming tijdens de demografische en economische bloeifase van Antwerpen (ca. 1400-1550)

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Power in the Metropolis. Political elite formation during the demographic and economic efflorescence of Antwerp (c. 1400-1550)

Janna Everaert

Current historiography endorses a narrative in which the political elites of the so-called gateway-cities (i.e. towns that function as hubs for long-distance trade) of pre-industrial Europe became more ‘open’ in the wake of commercial efflorescence: as these trading hubs expanded, their city councils became populated with merchants. In this view, gateway cities were an exception to a general trend toward oligarchy which characterised many, if not most, city councils between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Yet according to the existing literature, Antwerp challenges these received ideas about elite formation in gateway towns, as the participation of merchants in urban government is presumed to be very limited when Antwerp transformed from a medium-sized Brabantine city into the leading economic centre in Western Europe during the late fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. In fact, scholars disagree whether the economic expansion had any impact at all on the composition and profile of Antwerp’s political elite. This dissertation addresses these questions with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Antwerp political elite between 1400 and 1549.

During this period, the city council consisted of twelve aldermen, a number that was increased to sixteen aldermen in 1490. From 1409 onwards, those aldermen elected two mayors. The external mayor (the buitenburgemeester), which had to be an external candidate, became the most important one of the two mayors as he represented the city towards the outside world, acting as a spokesman, for example, at the princely court. His counterpart, the internal mayor (the binnenburgemeester), was chosen among the aldermen themselves. He was responsible for Antwerp’s internal affairs. Each year the city council was renewed by the Duke of Brabant in his capacity of overlord of Antwerp: half of the aldermen were replaced, while the other half remained in office. Up to 1477, the duke suffered no restrictions in his appointment of aldermen. After that date, the duke was obliged to choose the replacements from a list of candidates proposed by the city council and the districts masters (wijkmeesters, representatives of the poorterij (i.e. the well-to-do citizenry minus the craftsmen)). Together, these aldermen and mayors were responsible for the day-to-day government and the policy of the city.
This urban political elite did not rule in a vacuum. Various historians have suggested that there must have existed a dialogue, invisible in the sources, between the Antwerp city council and several interest groups, namely the craft guilds and the merchants. While a direct analysis of urban governance is impossible because of a lack of relevant source material, my research suggests that the city council did not want to offend these groups, as both groups contributed to Antwerp’s prosperity but the political aspirations of the craft guilds were rebuffed. In several many large towns in the Southern Low Countries, craft guilds had secured official representation in the city council, but Antwerp’s growing community of craftsmen did not secure similar privileges. Except for a short-lived period of co-rule between craftsmen and poorterij (1477-1485) after the so-called Evil World-revolt (Quaeye Werelt) in 1477, the craft guilds were formally excluded from power. Although the city council is likely to have taken the wishes and complaints of corporate milieus into account, craftsmen did not make a mark on urban politics. The officeholders in the city council therefore formed the central player who had to weigh up the interests of different groups. This dissertation’s primary focus is thus with the social profile of the Antwerp aldermen and their collective identities.

Thanks to the registers of the aldermen (schepenregisters) and the book of the aldermen (wethoudersboek), in which the annual renewal of the city council was recorded, this dissertation proceeds from an exhaustive survey of all men (hereafter called officeholders) who occupied the 2177 available seats as aldermen or mayor in the city council between 1400 and 1549, that is, from the beginning of Antwerp’s commercial expansion until its apogee. This resulted in a research population of 341 individuals stemming from 162 different families. A wide range of primary sources and (un)published research provided information on the socio-economic background and family ties of this political elite.

A first conclusion is that the composition of the city council of Antwerp differs less strongly from that of the other pre-industrial gateway cities than earlier scholars assumed. Just as was the case in other commercial hubs, Antwerp saw a trend in which an increasing number of merchants joined the city council as the town became an economic hotspot. That said, this influx was less pronounced and somewhat delayed by a combination of factors. For example, there were a number of formal requirements which candidate aldermen had to meet in order to join the city council, including the restriction that they had to have citizenship of the city and had to be born in the Duchy of Brabant. As the Antwerp trading community consisted mainly of foreign merchants at the turn of the sixteenth century, it took a generation or more before these foreign traders – if they even settled – could enter the city council. Merchants with local roots, then, were rare as the local Antwerp trading community did not reach full maturity before the second half of the sixteenth century. As a result, there was an increase in the number of merchants in
Antwerp’s city council by 1550, but this trend was cut off prematurely by the Dutch Revolt and the concomitant end of Antwerp’s commercial hegemony.

Since there were few merchants in the Antwerp city council before 1550, the question remains who ruled the city during this period and whether they together formed a ‘patriciate’, as is traditionally assumed in the extensive historiography on late medieval Netherlandish towns. The available evidence reveals that the officeholders of Antwerp formed a strongly interwoven group who often intermarried. For the citizens of Antwerp at the time, it must have been a clearly recognizable group in urban society.

In the century and a half covered by this dissertation, this group consisted of some fifty-odd families, some of which were influential and long-lived political dynasties. The names of these families must have been well-known in the urban community, given that some of the most influential families lent their family names to a street or a city palace. As the number of politically active families remained more-or-less stable over time in absolute terms, the political elite of did not become a much more exclusive group. In relative terms, however, a trend towards oligarchy took shape as the political elite’s recruitment base remained stable while the population of the city increased tenfold from c. 10,000 inhabitants in 1400 to no less than 100,000 around c. 1550. This restricted political elite consisted of a core and a periphery. The periphery was made up of individuals and families who had to settle for a few offices in city council, while the core was constituted by true political dynasties that often remained in power for a very long time, even if their influence also fluctuated from one generation to the next. Antwerp’s political elite thus appears to have formed a kind of ‘patriciate’ in the sense that it was a recognizable milieu.

Yet this term is not appropriate to describe the Antwerp political elite, as its connotation with stability and sustainable concentration of power hides more than it reveals. While the number of politically active families and the balance of power among those families was surprisingly stable over time, this group saw a high social turnover. Because of emigration, the extinction of families in the male line, changing family fortunes and political conflicts, the political elite in Antwerp saw a constant attrition in the political families that constituted it, thus opening up opportunities for newcomers to engage in urban politics. To contemporaries, this social renewal was probably less visible, as newcomers came in only one or a few at a time and the established political elite had a strong grasp over who could join its ranks. As a result, newcomers to the political arena had a socio-economic profile that greatly resembled that of established political dynasties.¹

¹ This part of my research is already published in English. See Everaert, ‘Power in the Metropolis’. 
Then again, this socio-economic profile is again more complex than terms such as ‘patriciate’ and ‘oligarchy’ would suggest. On an economic level, the political elite of Antwerp comprised of a handful of families who had risen from the corporate milieu of the craft guilds to the *poorterij*, a few merchant families and, above all, a large group whose wealth was mainly based on land ownership, rents, and annuities. While landed wealth was the basis of the Antwerp political elite, it did not shape the urban landscape. Unlike what was the case in some northern and central Italian cities, where, spatial concentrations of properties in the town served as the basis for political power, membership of the Antwerp city council was not linked with the control of this or that neighbourhood by this or that political dynasty. In fact, the patterns in the ownership of urban properties by leading families saw a marked shift in the period under discussion. The established political families initially controlled much of the old city centre, but they were gradually bought out by the burgeoning milieu of exceptionally wealthy merchants. Political dynasties shifted their interests towards the more peripheral parts of the city, where they also had room to experiment with the building of imposing palaces. All things considered, the officeholders and their families dealt with their urban real estate in an striking economical way as they took advantage of the opportunities offered by the overheated Antwerp real estate market, up to the point that even their palatial residences were frequently sold if the price was right.

The Antwerp aldermen and their families were also very present on the real estate market in the rural Brabantine hinterland of the city, where they bought and leased agricultural land and forests. In addition to these investments, which were economically motivated, the Antwerp political elite was also interested in the Brabantine countryside of Antwerp for social reasons. Several members of Antwerp’s political elite acquired seigneuries and castles in that countryside. In contrast to many northern Italian cities such as Venice, where participation in the city council was a source of noble status, this was not the case in the Netherlands. In Brabant, nobility required the possession of a rural lordship. Unlike urban real estate, which fell under alodial law and the concomitant principle of partible inheritance by all heirs, those lordships were more often than not feudal estates that were inherited intact by the eldest male heir to the exclusion of younger sons and daughters. While the political dynasties regularly sold their town houses or plots of agricultural land, the sale of the feudal lordship from which the family derived its nobility was something they assiduously tried to avoid.

The Antwerp political elite was thus fused with the nobility of its hinterland. In fact, late medieval Antwerp is the most extreme example of noble participation in urban government known to historians of the Low Countries. From the early fifteenth century onwards, between one third and half of Antwerp’s aldermen stemmed from a noble family. This extremely high figure is partly the result of the lack of official
craft guild representation in urban government, as nobles had less room to spread out in the government of towns where guilds did claim seats in the city council. Another factor was that the succession to the Duchy of Brabant was frequently contested in the early fifteenth century, as several political families received the title of knight from claimants to the ducal title in exchange for their support. In the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the share of nobles increased even further to about three quarters of the officeholders. Most of the noble officeholders hailed from existing noble families who had moved to Antwerp. The growing economic and political importance of the city had a pull-effect not only on merchants and craftsmen, but also on the regional nobility. In turn, this opened up some perspectives for the city's most prominent families to establish a foothold in the milieu of noble families who controlled access to the market of seigneurial estates, and thus to become noble themselves. This increase in the number of noble aldermen and mayors was thus partly caused by the ennoblement of established political families, who obtained this status for their support of the monarch, and through marriages with noble families.

In conclusion, the Antwerp political elite was not a patriciate that defined itself exclusively through its control over the city council. The city council certainly acted as an anchor to create a certain sense of community and a political network, but many political families also had other priorities. The status of a large part of the political elite, especially the smaller, peripheral families, was determined by the offices they fulfilled within the urban community. A small group combined this with trading activities, while other families lived as non-noble rentiers. However, the leading dynasties of the political elite, whose marriages formed the glue that connected all politically active individuals and families, transcended this urban level. The leading milieus within the Antwerp urban government were progressively fused with the networks of the Brabantine countryside and its noble elites. In other words, the Antwerp political elite was a closely knit group, but at the same time, its social profile was complex, as it covered a wide spectrum of positions of wealth, power, and social status. The Antwerp political elite had enough tentacles to keep in touch with the leading groups in society - the craft guild elites, the merchants, the Brabantine nobility and the prince. Combined with the persistent repression of the political aspirations of the craft guilds, this entrenched position was apparently sufficient to endow the Antwerp political elite with structural stability that was only disrupted by the Dutch Revolt.