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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From periphery to centre and back again: elite transformations in Mechelen (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries)

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Abstract

This article explores the social history of the political elites of Mechelen, a town that evolved from a seigneurial enclave within the duchy of Brabant to the *de facto* capital of the Burgundian–Habsburg Low Countries between the 1470s and 1530. Proceeding from a quantitative analysis of lists of aldermen, fiscal registers and epitaphs, the article argues that the short-lived functioning of Mechelen as a capital city had great impact on its ruling classes. Mechelen was traditionally ruled by a coalition of craft guilds and prominent citizens, but the latter reoriented their social networks to the court elite, as the latter's presence supercharged pre-existing trends towards ennoblement among the urban elite.

Introduction

Among the towns of the densely urbanized Low Countries, the city of Mechelen is of considerable interest to the long-standing debates on the interactions between state formation and towns between 1300 and 1600. While exceptionally independent in the fourteenth century, Mechelen came to enjoy an unusually central position in the Low Countries when this patchwork of principalities (Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, Holland, Luxemburg and so on) became unified under the rule of the fifteenth-century dukes of Burgundy and their sixteenth-century Habsburg successors. At the turn of the sixteenth century, Mechelen was the city of residence of several state institutions, including the court of the governors of the Low Countries. As the Habsburg sovereigns of the Low Countries had to divide their attention over the ever-growing Habsburg Empire, much of the decision-making process was delegated to the governors of the Low Countries. In this respect, Mechelen can be considered as the first capital city of the Burgundian–Habsburg Low Countries.

Compared to other European towns that functioned as a capital, Mechelen stands out for two reasons. The first is that the town was co-ruled by the

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commercial bourgeoisie and the craft guilds that regulated most manufacture. While such arrangements are also noted for Italian city-states (e.g. Florence) and some of the highly independent German *Reichsstädte* (e.g. Augsburg), the capital cities of the Atlantic kingdoms were usually ruled by an oligarchy of commercial dynasties (e.g. London, Paris), noble lineages (e.g. Burgos) or a mixture of both (e.g. Valencia). Mechelen had also been dominated by a commercial elite, but in the fourteenth century, this elite was forced to cede a number of seats in the city council to representatives of the craft guilds. As a result, Mechelen's most prominent families had to bridge two very different worlds between the 1470s and 1530s: on the one hand, they interacted with the court elite, and on the other hand, they engaged with the city's corporate middle groups. This unusual situation begs the question whether the strategies of those wealthy and politically ambitious dynasties that constituted the Mechelen *poorterij* (citizenry) were geared towards alliances with courtiers and state officials, or more towards the leading families of the Mechelen craft guilds.

This social perspective ties in with the second factor, namely that Mechelen's role as a capital was both fragile and short-lived. London/Westminster and Paris, for example, had developed into the respective capitals of England and France as early as the high Middle Ages, and both cities managed to cling to that privileged position in the following centuries.[1] In contrast, the position of Mechelen as a capital was informal at best. Being a composite union of a string of hitherto independent principalities, the Low Countries were far less centralized than France, let alone England. On the one hand, the composite nature of the Burgundian–Habsburg Low Countries endowed the court of the governors in Mechelen with a special importance, as the court was uniquely important in bringing together prominent members of the leading elites of the various principalities. On the other hand, the relatively limited institutional development of the Burgundian–Habsburg state precluded Mechelen's position as a *de facto* capital from becoming institutionalized.[2] In fact, Mechelen lost its privileged position in 1530 as the governor of the Low Countries came to prefer to hold court in Brussels rather than in Mechelen.

The arrested development of Mechelen as a capital allows historians to investigate how city dwellers coped with the opportunities and constraints that came with the presence of the state's central institutions in the town and how they adjusted again to a more distant relationship with the state. For the political elite especially, fettered as it was by the participation of the craft guilds in urban government, the state's temporary preoccupation with Mechelen as a locus of government may have been a mixed blessing.

First the constraints. Since the seminal work of Charles Tilly, historians have recognized that princely access to the capital that accumulated in cities as centres of trade and industry was important for the military strength of states, and that

[1]The Valois royal dynasty was forced to abandon Paris in 1418, but the city was then the capital of the English government in France up to 1436, and the French crown returned permanently to Paris under the reign of François I (1515–47). S. Roux, *Paris au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2003), 117–18, and G.L. Thompson, *Paris and its People under English Rule. The Anglo-Burgundian Regime 1420–1436* (Oxford, 1991).

[2]The considerable autonomy of the Mechelen court is discussed in J.-M. Cauchies, 'Marguerite d'Autriche, gouvernante et diplomate', in A. Paravicini Bagliani, E. Pibiri and D. Reynard (eds.), *L'itinerance des seigneurs (XIVe–XVIe siècles)* (Lausanne, 2003), 353–76.

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states acted on that insight. Urban historians became sensitive to the attempts of states to tap urban revenues, as this often reshuffled the established political arrangements of urban communities into new configurations in which the state had a firm grip on a town's governing bodies.[3] This aspiration to control was particularly strong for cities that were important capital markets or that often hosted the princely court. Furthermore, mastery over the urban space of the capital city was not only a matter of financial and practical interest, but also an ideological project. At best, it was a source of prestige; at the very least, it was a matter of dynastic pride.[4] Apart from the exceptional period of Étienne Marcel's regime (1355–58), the French crown was careful to maintain control over the *prévôt des marchands* and the *échevins* of Paris, just as the English crown monitored the aldermen of nearby London as an instrument of royal power.[5] A first line of enquiry of this article is thus whether the autonomy of the Mechelen power elite survived the increasingly close bonds with the Burgundian–Habsburg dynasty that ruled the Low Countries.

A second line of enquiry focuses on the potential benefits of a town's status as a capital city to urban elites. That there were tangible benefits is indicated by the eagerness with which many elites of capital cities responded to a state's ideological investment in the town. This is also documented for Mechelen: at least from the turn of the sixteenth century onwards, the political elite was prone to celebrate its privileged relations with the state.[6] This attitude was partially rooted in the economic advantages proper to capital cities. Since the seminal writings of Henri Pirenne, Werner Sombart and Max Weber, urban historians have been aware that not only could pre-modern cities flourish through industry and trade, which allowed the city to be sustained through the purchase of rural supplies on the market, but also through the presence of a state elite that used coercive means to redirect supplies to a city. This usually took the form of rents and taxes that were at least partially invested in the urban economy through luxury expenditure and prestigious building projects.[7] The strong growth of Paris, Madrid and Naples, for example, is largely explained by their function as political centres. Mechelen too benefited from the state's presence between the 1470s and the 1530s.[8] The city had grown from the twelfth century onwards as an export-oriented textile town, reaching a population of *c.* 12,000 to 15,000 inhabitants by 1400. From

[3]See especially C. Tilly and W. Blockmans (eds.), *Cities and the Rise of States. AD 1000 to 1800* (Oxford, 1994).

[4]For the Low Countries, this ideological commitment is best documented for Bruges, one of the favourite residences of the Burgundian court under Philip the Good (1419–67): see M. Boone, 'State power and illicit sexuality: the persecution of sodomy in late medieval Bruges', *Journal of Medieval History*, 22 (1996), 135–53.

[5]For Paris, this is charted in Thompson, *Paris and its People under English Rule*, 49–66. The deference of the London political elite to the English crown was even stronger: see the comparative discussion in F. Rexroth, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London* (Cambridge, 2007), 37–40.

[6]See B. Caers, '"In fide constans"? Politiek van herinnering in het Mechelse stadsbestuur', *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, 29 (2013), 228–46, and *idem*, 'A message in silence: conflicting chronicle reports on a Mechelen craft guild uprising in 1467', *Publication du centre européen d' études bourguignonnes (XIVe–XVIe s.)*, 54 (2014), 109–24.

[7]For an incisive historiographical discussion, see N. Morley, *Metropolis and Hinterland. The City of Rome and the Italian Economy, 200 BC – AD 200* (Cambridge, 2002), 18–20.

[8]J. de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500–1800* (London, 1984), 28–33, 167, 256, 260.

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the mid-fifteenth century onwards, the urban economy shifted from textiles to a wide array of luxury goods, partially in response to the growing number of wealthy state officials, prominent clerics and courtiers that maintained a household within the city walls. By 1530, the town may have had *c.* 28,000 inhabitants, after which demographic decline set in.[9] As Mechelen became a centre of Habsburg government, the urban political elite gained in prestige. The city council ruled over an increasingly populous and prominent city, and it benefited economically by managing and taxing the constant influx of people and wealth.[10] For that reason, the aldermen were willing to grant financial incentives to Habsburg notables who took up residence in the city.[11]

What is less clear is whether the individuals and families who constituted the Mechelen political community also reaped more personal benefits. It is possible that, by sheer proximity, the leading citizens of Mechelen enjoyed career opportunities in central state institutions that were denied to elites in other towns. In a similar vein, the day-to-day interactions of local families with the many noble courtiers and officials in Mechelen may have opened up exceptional avenues to social promotion. This was certainly true for the aldermen of Paris, many of whom came to join the nobility. In London, under the reign of Edward IV (1461–81), it even became customary to knight the new mayor.[12] Thus, brief as it was, the role of Mechelen as a capital may have done more than just dot the urban landscape with sumptuous residences of noble courtiers and state officials. It may have transformed the top layers of urban society, redirecting the energies of entrenched political dynasties away from the craft guilds and towards the world of the court. In the following pages, I provide a tentative exploration of the effects of Mechelen's exceptional trajectory on elite formation.

Unusual arrangements: urban autonomy in an age of state formation

The impact of state formation can be measured first by an outline of the institutional shifts that pushed Mechelen from periphery to centre and back again. The relative autonomy of Mechelen in the fourteenth century sprang from a complex tug-of-war between various claimants to power. The part of western Europe that was to become the Low Countries in the fifteenth century consisted of a patchwork of independent principalities and Mechelen profited from the rivalries between regional powers. Together with the surrounding villages of

[9]R. Van Uytven (with H. Installé) (ed.), *De geschiedenis van Mechelen: van heerlijkheid tot stadsgewest* (Tielt, 1995), 83–4, 119.

[10]It would be erroneous to attribute this development exclusively to the coming of Habsburg government to Mechelen, as this process was common to many towns (see H. Van der Wee, 'Industrial dynamics and the process of urbanization and de-urbanization in the Low Countries from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. A synthesis', in idem (ed.), *The Rise and Decline of Urban Industries in Italy and in the Low Countries* (Louvain, 1988), 307–81. For a critical discussion of the economic impact of itinerant courts on urban economies, see P. Stabel, 'For mutual benefit? Court and city in the Burgundian Low Countries', in S. Gunn and A. Janse (eds.), *The Court as a Stage. England and the Low Countries in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), 101–17.

[11]Van Uytven (ed.), *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 88, 92, 95, 105, 107.

[12]See respectively Roux, *Paris au Moyen Âge*, 101–6, 117–26, and P. Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England, 1000–1400* (Stroud, 1993), 169.

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Nekkerspoel, Nieuwland, Hever, Muizen, Hombeek, Leest and Heffen, the city of Mechelen constituted a seigneurial enclave within the duchy of Brabant. Up to 1331, it was under the *de facto* control of the Berthout dynasty, a family belonging to the high nobility of Brabant, while it was legally dependent on the prince-bishopric of Liège (situated east of Brabant). This uneasy balance of power provided sufficient margin for the Mechelen City Council to improve its position. In 1308, both the prince-bishop of Liège and the Berthout family agreed to grant considerable autonomy to the seigneurie. This independence was subsequently reinforced through clashes between Brabant and the principality of Flanders, a county situated west of Brabant and Mechelen. When the count of Flanders purchased the Berthout claim to Mechelen in 1333, this provoked a conflict with the duke of Brabant, who was also seeking to bring the seigneurial enclave under his control. As this struggle was only settled decisively in favour of the count of Flanders in 1356–57, the Mechelen City Council could play one side against the other.[13] In the following decades, when it was ruled jointly with Flanders, it was protected by distance and custom from Flemish interference. In the course of the fourteenth century, the fifty-odd towns of Flanders became dominated by the large cities of Ghent, Bruges and Ypres, but being a separate legal entity, Mechelen escaped this process. Also, the energies of Louis of Male, count of Flanders and lord of Mechelen up to 1384, seem to have been absorbed by his quest to curb the city-state aspirations of Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. There is no evidence that Louis meddled much in the government of his newly acquired city.

Outside interference only came to Mechelen in the wake of the political unification of the Low Countries under Burgundian rule. Together with Flanders, Artois and some smaller territories, Mechelen was inherited by the Valois duke of Burgundy Philip the Bold in 1384. His successors gradually acquired the adjacent principalities of Brabant–Limburg, Holland–Zeeland, Hainaut, Namur, Picardy and Luxemburg in the 1420s and 1430s. Ruling over a new power block between England, France and the empire, Duke Philip the Good, the grandson of Philip the Bold, tried to strengthen his grip on the towns. Apart from quelling uprisings in Antwerp (1435), Bruges (1438) and Ghent (1453), he interfered in the political organization of various towns, among them Mechelen. Since the 1300s, the political community had always decided autonomously who would serve in the city council each year. But in response to severe problems with the town's finances, in 1439, Duke Philip the Good imposed an ordinance that stipulated that the two burgomasters (*communemeesters*) and the aldermen were henceforth to be chosen by a ducal commission from a list of potential candidates submitted by the city council.[14] Earlier research has shown that, after 1439, aldermen continued to be recruited from

[13]Van Uytven (ed.), *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 58–9.

[14]R. Trouvé, 'Mechelen op bestuurlijk en rechterlijk gebied, tijdens de regeringen van Filips de Goede en Karel de Stoute, hertogen van Bourgondië (1419–1477)', *Publications du centre européen d'études bourguignonnes (XIVe–XVIe s.)*, 16 (1974), 57–9, 17 (1976), 48–58, claims that the ordinance's stipulation that the number of aldermen was to be reduced from 12 to 6 was never put into effect, despite surviving correspondence between Mechelen and the duke concerning this procedure. This is based on an erroneous reading of the charter, which states in effect that each year, 6 aldermen were to be appointed who would remain in office for two years. As only half of the bench of aldermen was replaced per year, the number of aldermen remained fixed at 12. See Stadsarchief Mechelen, stadscharters, nr. 160.

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the same families, but Burgundian interference in the city must have rankled all the same.[15] With the succession of Philip the Good by Duke Charles the Bold in 1467, Mechelen became the stage of considerable unrest. This provoked the new duke of Burgundy into limiting the town's political autonomy even further: the number of aldermen was now reduced from 12 per year to 7, all of whom were to be appointed by ducal officials. Controlling Mechelen was important to Charles, as it was in this city that in 1473 he established his great council or *parlement*, a supreme court of justice that functioned as a court of appeal to the courts of law of each of the principalities that constituted the Low Countries.

In the crisis that rocked the Low Countries after the unexpected death of Charles the Bold in 1477, the city council of Mechelen immediately returned to self-rule, as it was practised before the reforms of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold in 1439 and 1467. The city nevertheless remained a locus of state power. The great council was suspended in 1477, as it was considered an infringement of the legal autonomy of the principalities, but it was re-established in 1503 by the Habsburg dynasty, the heirs to the Burgundian aspiration for state building in the Low Countries. In that year, Mechelen became the site of the cannon foundry of the Habsburg armies, which also located their main artillery depot there from 1518 onwards. More importantly, Mechelen became a court city. From 1477 onwards, it was the permanent residence of Margaret of York (d. 1503), who, as dowager duchess of Charles the Bold, was largely responsible for the education of her grandchildren Philip the Fair and Margaret of Austria, the heirs to Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian of Habsburg. In the early sixteenth century, Mechelen was confirmed in its role as the *de facto* capital of the Low Countries, as it became the permanent residence of Margaret of Austria, who served as governor of the Low Countries for her nephew Emperor Charles V from 1507 to 1530.[16] While Mechelen was not a capital in the sense of being the permanent residence of the sovereign, it was here that the day-to-day governance of the Low Countries took place. Charles V spent his reign travelling around the vast Habsburg Empire, so he had to give considerable leeway to Margaret of Austria and the noblemen that dominated Margaret's council of state.[17] Mechelen lost this privileged position when Margaret's successor, Mary of Hungary, moved her court to Brussels. The great council remained in Mechelen, but it lost much of its authority to the privy council, which was newly established in Brussels in 1531.

During Mechelen's period as a capital, the state chose not to interfere in urban government. On the contrary, in response to considerable unrest among the town's weavers and fullers in 1524, Emperor Charles V gave additional powers to the bailiff of Mechelen (*schout*), technically a representative of the prince, but one who was more often than not recruited from Mechelen's own political elite.[18] It was only

[15]Analysed in C. Derboven, 'Sociale status en politieke organisatie van de schepenen binnen een plutocratisch stadsbestuur. Mechelen, 1426–1476', Ghent University MA thesis, 1983, 123–34, 140.

[16]M. Mast, 'Politiek, prestige en vermogen: de Mechelse magistraat, 1520–1577', Leuven University MA thesis, 1990, 1–3, 10–11.

[17]For an introduction, see W. Blockmans, *Emperor Charles V: 1500–1558* (London, 2002).

[18]J. Haemers, '*Ad petitionem burgensium*. Petitions and peaceful resistance of craftsmen in Flanders and Mechelen (13th–16th centuries)', in J. Solórzano Telechea *et al.* (eds.), *Los grupos populares en la ciudad medieval Europea* (Lonogro, 2014), 371–3. For the bailiff of Mechelen, see L. Th. Maes, *Vijf eeuwen stedelijk*

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in 1548, some two decades after the court was moved to Brussels, that the Habsburg government forced the Mechelen City Council to give up control over its own composition. Henceforth, the city council had to submit a list of potential candidates for the two key offices of burgomaster and alderman, after which the central government appointed its preferred candidates.[19] This measure thus revived the system that was first imposed on Mechelen by Duke Philip the Good in 1439 and which had subsequently been abolished in 1477.

This overview of institutional arrangements leads to a first, somewhat curious observation, namely that any attempt of the state to curb the autonomy of Mechelen dates from either before or after the five decades in which the town functioned as a capital. Each of these interventions was part and parcel of larger programmes to dismantle all urban opposition to the prince. As noted earlier, the reforms of 1439 and 1467 fit into a broader pattern in which Philip the Good and Charles the Bold brought to heel all the independent-minded large cities, ranging from Bruges in the west to Liège in the east. This is also true for the regulations forced on Mechelen in 1548, as they followed Emperor Charles V's political elimination of the craft guilds in the governments of Middelburg (1518), Utrecht (1528), Zwolle (1530) and Ghent (1540).[20] In contrast, the reluctance of the Burgundian–Habsburg government to interfere in the urban politics of Mechelen between the 1470s and 1530s cannot be explained by a temporary halt in the state's aspiration to strengthen its grip on the Netherlandish urban network. Whenever possible, the prince curtailed the political and financial autonomy of towns in Holland, Brabant and Flanders in the 1480s and 1490s.[21] The decision not to rock the boat where Mechelen was concerned is not only remarkable because the city came to function as a capital, but also because the city was co-ruled by craft guilds.

Corporate participation in urban government went back to 1302–08, when an exclusive elite of 20-odd families was forced to accept representatives of the craft guilds in the city council. By 1360, this had crystallized into a system in which the craft guilds filled about one third of all available positions in the city council, leaving the rest to the representatives of the *poorterij*, the aggregate of well-to-do citizens who derived their income from commerce, rents or real estate, rather

strafrecht. Bijdrage tot de rechts- en cultuurgeschiedenis der Nederlanden (Antwerp, 1947), 43–7: the bailiff was prohibited from serving simultaneously as an alderman, but the office was often exercised by members of some of the town's most powerful lineages (Van der Aa, De Clercq, Kerman, Van Cortenbach, Van Oyenbrugghe and so on).

[19]The city council had to submit 4 candidates for the two positions of burgomaster, and 18 candidates for the 6 positions of aldermen. See G. Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen 1580–1585* (Kortrijk and Heule, 1987), 52–4, and also Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 19–28, who points out that as a rule, the central administration appointed those individuals who were recommended by the bailiff of Mechelen. For the other members of the city council, the previous system of co-optation remained in place.

[20]An overview in M. Prak, 'Corporate politics', in idem (ed.), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries. Work, Power, and Representation* (Aldershot, 2006), 84–5.

[21]For important case-studies, see A.J. Brand, *Over macht en overwicht. Stedelijke elites in Leiden (1420–1510)* (Leuven, 1996), and W. Ryckbosch, *Tusen Gavere en Cadzand. De Gentse stadsfinancien op het einde van de Middeleeuwen (1460–1495)* (Ghent, 2007). In Bruges too, the craft guilds were ousted from power (1490).

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than manual labour.[22] The political rights of the craft guilds had been targeted by Duke Charles the Bold in 1467. When he reduced the number of aldermen from 12 to 7, he also stipulated that this office was henceforth reserved for the *poorterij*, so that the craft guilds now only filled 5 to 6 of the 26 available positions in the city council, and positions of minor importance at that. In the power vacuum after the death of Charles the Bold, however, Mechelen had returned to the system in which the craft guilds provided one third of the members of the city council, in part by providing 6 of the 12 aldermen. Strikingly, this restoration of guild power was not challenged when the Habsburg government came to rule the Low Countries from Mechelen. Both in 1525, when the uprising of the fullers and the weavers was repressed by Charles V, and in 1548, when Mary of Hungary did increase state control over the Mechelen City Council, the Habsburg dynasty did not eliminate the political rights of the craft guilds as it had done in various other towns of the Low Countries.

This exceptional policy is perhaps explained by the loyalty of Mechelen in the 1480s, when the Habsburg government had been confronted with a large-scale revolt of Flemish and Brabantine towns. Whereas Ghent, Bruges, Brussels and Leuven had refused to accept Maximilian of Austria as the regent of his son Philip the Fair (who was still a minor), after the death of Mary of Burgundy in 1482, the towns of Antwerp and Mechelen had fielded armies in support of the Habsburg authorities.[23] In recognition of this support, Emperor Frederick III – the father of Maximilian – elevated Mechelen in 1490 from a seigneurial city to a county and granted it the right to include the Habsburg eagle in the town's coat of arms. From this moment onwards, the town also cultivated the motto '*In fide constans*'/'*In trouwen vast*' ('Steadfast in loyalty').[24] This suggests that the Habsburg government had so much confidence in the loyalty of Mechelen that it did not act on its traditional aversion to craft guild participation in urban government. Yet, the Habsburg government also acquiesced in the continued participation of craft guilds in the government of the nearby towns of Leuven and Brussels, which had rebelled against Maximilian of Austria in the 1480s. The most plausible explanation is that in Mechelen, the economic position of the textile guilds – traditionally the guilds that were prone to revolt – had declined drastically vis-à-vis more conservative guilds. Whatever the cause, Mechelen provides a different scenario from Paris and London, where the city council was monitored more closely by the crown.

A trend towards oligarchy: the composition of the Mechelen City Council

Perhaps the Habsburg authorities saw no need to impose restrictions on the ruling bodies of its new capital because the town's leading families were increasingly prone

[22]For the fourteenth century, see D. Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de schepenen te Mechelen in de tweede helft van de veertiende eeuw', Ghent University MA thesis, 1982, 34–7, 40–4, and Van Uytven (ed.), *De geschiedenis van Mechelen*, 60–2. The best discussion of the *poorterij* is provided in Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 54–5, 59.

[23]For a more extensive discussion, see F. Buylaert, J. Van Camp and B. Verwerft, 'Urban militias, nobles and mercenaries. The organisation of the Antwerp army in the Flemish–Brabantine revolt of the 1480s', *Journal of Medieval Military History*, 9 (2011), 146–66.

[24]Caers, '"In fide constans"', 241.

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to align their interests with those of the state elite. Such a process would preclude the need for institutional interventions. For this line of enquiry, it is necessary to study the social composition of the Mechelen political elite, and how it evolved over time. Since the turn of the fourteenth century, urban government had been the responsibility of two institutions. The first was the city council (*Stadsraad* or *Binnenraad*), consisting of 2 mayors, 12 aldermen and 3 to 4 treasurers. In addition, the council included 4 representatives of the *poorterij* and 9 representatives of the drapers' guild (the so-called *wollewerc*), the most important corporate body as the town had emerged as a centre for textile production. The drapers were the merchants and entrepreneurs who controlled the town's textile industry. Control of this guild was shared by the *poorterij* and the craft guilds, just as they shared the office of alderman. The city council met on a weekly basis, and was responsible for the day-to-day governance of the town. The second institution was the broad council (*Brede Raad* or *Buitenraad*), which consisted of the 30-odd members of the city council as well as 2 to 4 jurors (*gezworenen*) for each of the 17 craft guilds that enjoyed political rights. This body of 80-odd members was convened only in special circumstances, either for discussions of issues that were connected to the 'common good' or for the annual audit of the city accounts to check whether the resources of the urban community had been used properly.[25] In the fifteenth century, and possibly earlier, the balance of power shifted towards the city council as the centre of the decision-making process, leaving the broad council only a position of oversight.[26] For that reason, the following discussion is limited to the city council.

Sufficient sources have survived to enable the study of the urban political elite as a social body for the two centuries between the emergence of a division of power between *poorterij* and craft guilds in the 1360s and the impact of the Dutch Revolt on Mechelen in the 1570s and 1580s.[27] I used four sample periods of equal length, each comprising nine years rather than ten, because the rules imposed by Duke Charles the Bold were only in effect for nine years from 1468 up to and including 1476. The first sample period of 1370–78 covers the pre-Burgundian period. The second and third sample periods – 1468–76 and 1477–85 – respectively cover the suppression of the craft guilds and their subsequent restoration. The fourth and last sample period of 1555–63 covers the political elite after the transfer of the governor's court to Brussels and the introduction of new elective procedures

[25]The broad council was briefly abolished in the repression of the Mechelen uprising of 1467 by Charles the Bold, but re-established in that same year. Caers, 'A message in silence', 116–17.

[26]Derboven, 'Sociale status en politieke organisatie te Mechelen', 13, 83–7, 96, and Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 12–17, provide a detailed discussion.

[27]I used the surveys published in V. Hermans, 'Le magistrat de Malines. Listes annuelles des membres', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 18 (1908), 27–112, 19 (1909), 2–92, 85–104, and H. Joosen, 'Dekens en Gezworenen van de Mechelse ambachten. Aanvullende lijsten', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 64 (1960), 54–107, 65 (1961), 145–87, 66 (1962), 177–236, 67 (1963), 157–202, 83 (1979), 115–31. Comparison with original sources confirmed that these surveys are reliable: see Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de schepenen te Mechelen', 37–9 and annex 1–2; Derboven, 'Sociale status en politieke organisatie te Mechelen', 43–4.

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in 1543. Except for the 1468–76 interlude, the political system changed little in those two centuries, which facilitates diachronic comparisons.

For these four sample periods, I identified the holders of the 30-odd most important mandates in the town administration (Table 1). Caution is in order as the degree of reconstruction of the population is only *c*. 85 per cent for 1370–78. However, data are almost complete in the other three sample periods, and overall, the data set allows reliable assessments. For all the families involved, it was possible to assess whether they belonged to the *poorterij* or to the craft guilds.

A first observation derived from these reconstructions is that the Mechelen political elite was embedded in a much broader economic elite. In contrast to most Netherlandish towns, sources survive for Mechelen that allow some rough estimates of the wealth of families and individuals. Around 1366, when Mechelen must have had about 10,000 inhabitants, a collection was held for a new reliquary for St Rombout, the patron saint of the town. While this is not a true fiscal survey, the list of donors and their gifts confirms that while the aldermen were usually well-to-do, they did not dominate the wealthiest strata of Mechelen society. According to the analysis of Dirk Wouters, 10 of the 23 individuals in the top category of donors (gifts with a median value of 174 groats) were politically active.[28] In the second and third categories (with median values of 30 and 14 groats), the members of the city council constituted 51 of 297 donors (17.2 per cent) and 19 of 177 donors (10.7 per cent), respectively.[29] The two tax surveys on housing values that survive for 1544 and 1559 suggest that the situation was still basically the same two centuries later, when Mechelen had about 30,000 inhabitants. The analysis of Marleen Mast confirms that many wealthy burghers did not take up office in the city council. Of the 214 individuals who belonged to the highest category in the tax list of 1544, only 11 were aldermen. In the two categories that followed, respectively 19 of the 585 and 12 of the 1,117 individuals are known to have been active in urban politics. Considered together, most aldermen and jurors belonged to the second highest category (38.7 per cent, versus 24 and 22 per cent for the third and first category, respectively). For 1559, the picture is quite similar, with respectively 34 and 37 per cent of the aldermen and jurors belonging to the second and third highest category.[30]

What deserves special notice is that the differences in wealth between the representatives of the *poorterij* and the craft guilds were not pronounced. Caution is in order because taxes on house values tend to underestimate the wealth of elites (Engel's Law), and the handful of aldermen that were ranked in the lowest categories in 1366 and 1544/59 certainly did belong to the craft guilds. Yet, as a rule, the average wealth of craft guild politicians was only slightly below that of their *poorterij* colleagues, and it was much higher than that of their fellow craftsmen. The individuals who took up seats in the city council for the guilds were thus clearly

[28]This suggests that about half of the male heads of the households of the town's economic elite became an alderman, but as this source lists voluntary donations, the economic elite may have been much larger than 23 individuals. In the tax list of 1544, only about 5 per cent of the economic elite became an alderman. Despite the economic transformation of Mechelen between 1366 and 1544, it is unlikely that the economic elite had grown so radically in size.

[29]Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de schepenen te Mechelen', 47–61, 130.

[30]Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 62–93.

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Table 1. The institutional composition of the Mechelen City Council

	1370–78	1468–76	1477–85	1555–63
Burgomasters	2 (P)	2 (P)	2 (P)	2 (P)
Aldermen	12 (6P, 6C)	7 (P)	12 (6P, 6C)	12 (6P, 6C)
Drapers' deans	2 (P)	2 (P)	2 (P)	2 (P)
Drapers' jurors	7 (4P, 3C)	7 (4P, 3C)/(3P, 4C)[a]	7 (4P, 3C)	7 (4P, 3C)
Poorterij jurors	4 (P)	4 (P)	4 (P)	4 (P)
Treasurers	3 (P)	4 (2P, 2C)	4 (2P, 2C)	4 (2P, 2C)
Total mandates per year	30	26	31	31
Total known mandates per sample period	229/270 (84.8%)	221/234 (94.5%)	269/279 (96.4%)	278/279 (99.7%)

P = *poorterij* C = craft guilds

[a]Our analysis suggests that in this period, a system was in place in which the *poorterij* and the craft guilds each provided three jurors from the drapers' guild, with the remaining seat alternating between them every year, starting with the *poorterij* in 1468–69.

recruited from the corporate elite.[31] This is particularly true for the six aldermen, provided by the bakers, the butchers, the fishmongers, the brewers, the dyers and the tanners. Masters in these guilds were dedicated to capital-intensive activities, and therefore they were generally wealthier than those of many other guilds.[32] Also, while differences in wealth between members of guilds were a given in any craft guild, such inequalities were prone to be pronounced in guilds that cornered the supply of basic foodstuffs and the production of textiles. Those who served as aldermen for the butchers' guild, for example, probably owned large plots of land outside the city walls for the pasturing of livestock, leaving the actual wielding of the butcher's knife to their poorer colleagues. Urban politicians, be they *poorterij* or craft guild, must have shared a lifestyle of affluence with the rest of the Mechelen economic elite that set them apart from the majority of the corporate middle groups.[33] Chronicles suggest that ordinary craftsmen defined themselves as 'the commoners' (*gemeijnte*) in opposition to the 'lords' (*heren*), that is, the *poorterij* and craft guild representatives in the city council.[34]

While most members of the city council enjoyed a similar degree of wealth, the distribution of political power was not equal. The families Bau, Van der Aa, Kerman, Van Oyenbrugghe and De Gottignies, to name but a few, functioned as true political dynasties as fathers, sons, brothers and cousins together provided a constant stream of office-holders to the city council. At the other end of the

[31]Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 62–3.

[32]Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 12–17. For the Brabantine city of 's Hertogenbosch, for example, Bruno Blondé has shown that the median value attributed to butchers, dyers and tanners for tax purposes was well above the median value for the entire corporate community (B. Blondé, 'Bossche bouwvakkers en belastingen: nadenken over economische groei, levensstandaard en sociale ongelijkheid in de zestiende eeuw', in B. Blondé (ed.), *Doodgewoon: mensen en hun dagelijks leven in de geschiedenis: liber amicorum Alfons K.L. Thijs* (Antwerp, 2004), 45–62).

[33]For a general discussion, see P. Stabel, 'Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment', *Journal of Medieval History*, 30 (2004), 187–212.

[34]Caers, 'A message in silence', 122. This discourse is also attested for Bruges, a town that was also co-ruled by a commercial elite and representatives of the craft guilds: J. Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand van 1436–1438* (Kortrijk and Heule, 1997), 162, 216.

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spectrum, there were isolated individuals who only served once, such as one Anselm Roelants, a furrier who served as a juror of the drapers' guild in 1480. While there are no surviving sources to inform us about the actual process of decision-making, it stands to reason that dynasties had access to the experience, networks and expertise of family members who had preceded them as burgomaster, alderman, juror or treasurer and for that reason had an advantage over representatives without any family tradition in politics. This issue can be quantified through a Lorenz curve, in which, for each of the four sample periods, all families with at least one mandate are hierarchically ordered from low to high in a cumulative fashion according to the number of offices they held (Figure 1).

Socially speaking, the balance of power in the Mechelen City Council was quite constant over time. As a rule, the bottom 20 per cent of all families with mandates – usually with only one representative in the council – barely held 5 per cent of all offices, whereas the top 20 per cent held a little more than 40 per cent. In 1555–63, this rose to a full 50 per cent. The political community thus consisted of a core of inordinately influential dynasties and a periphery of less powerful families and individuals. Participation in the town government clearly meant different things to different people. For the leading families, the commitment to urban politics must have been a key constituent of their collective identities. For most other families, it was more likely to be remembered as a special honour that had befallen only one or perhaps a few members of the family. Unsurprisingly, the political dynasties usually belonged to the *poorterij*, just as the isolated individuals were more likely to represent a craft guild. In the sixteenth century, a representative of the *poorterij* fulfilled on average 6.2 mandates in his career; for a representative of the craftsmen the average was 3.8.[35] So not only was the *poorterij* numerically dominant, with a fixed claim to two-thirds of all positions each year, but it also had the advantage of stronger continuity in office when compared to the leaders of the craft guilds. The Mechelen situation was not exceptional: a very similar distribution of power can be found in the Flemish city of Bruges, which shared with Mechelen its orientation towards luxury industries and a political system in which craft guilds co-ruled with an elite of merchants and rentiers.[36]

While the relative importance of individuals and families in urban politics shows continuity, there is a marked change in the number of families active in the political arena. From an institutional perspective, very little changed between the mid-fourteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries: the number of seats in the city council remained quite stable (see Table 1). Yet, the number of families needed to fill those seats differed considerably for the four sample periods: the Mechelen ruling class expanded in the fifteenth century, and then contracted in the course of the sixteenth century (Table 2).

For the sample period 1370–78, about 15 per cent of the office-holders are unknown, so the estimate that the city council was recruited from *c.* 38 families

[35]Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 43–52: this estimate deserves considerable caution, as the tendency among families to pass on first names from father to son makes it very difficult to reconstruct individual careers.

[36]See the analysis in F. Buylaert *et al.*, 'Households, communities, status and class', in A. Brown and J. Dumolyn (eds.), *Bruges. A Medieval Metropolis (ca. 850–1550)* (Cambridge, 2018).

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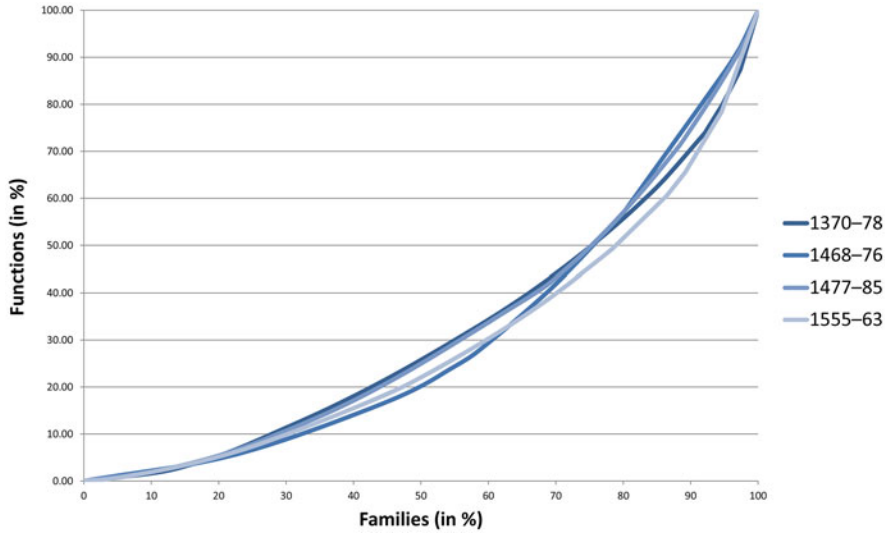

Figure 1. Lorenz curve of the distribution of mandates in the Mechelen City Council

Table 2. The social composition of the Mechelen City Council

Sample period	Total known mandates per sample period	Number of families belonging to the craft guilds	Number of families belonging to the *poorterij*	Total number of families that held mandates
1370–78	229/270 (84.8%)	21 (55.3%)	17 (44.7%)	38 (100%)
1468–76	221/234 (94.5%)	20 (41.7%)	28 (58.3%)	48 (100%)
1477–85	269/279 (96.4%)	29 (48.4%)	31 (51.6%)	60 (100%)
1555–63	278/279 (99.7%)	18 (48.7%)	19 (51.3%)	37 (100%)

must be regarded as a minimum.[37] The actual number of families must have been somewhat higher. During the reign of Charles the Bold, when the craft guilds were only allocated five to six office-holders out of a total of 26, the size of the political elite increased to 48 families, primarily through the greater involvement of *poorterij* families. The subsequent restoration in 1477 of the traditional system as it had developed in the 1360s opened up the city council to an unprecedented degree, as now both the *poorterij* and craft guilds each had about 30 families providing at least one office-holder to the city council. In the 1550s and 1560s, however, access to the city council became more restricted again, with just 37 families, slightly less than the figure for the late fourteenth century. Both the *poorterij* and the craft guilds had lost about 10 families, leaving the remaining 20-odd families in each group to claim more seats in the city council than before. Indeed, the increased weight of the leading families between 1477–85 and 1555–63 is rooted in

[37]The lacunae in the data are not biased towards the craft guilds, as among the 41 missing office-holders, there are 14 jurors of the *poorterij* and 7 deans of the drapers' guild (an office reserved for the *poorterij*).

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a shrinking of the political arena. After Mechelen lost its role as a capital of the Low Countries, the town returned to the state of oligarchy it had known in the late fourteenth century.

Shifting strategies: the pursuit of power and status

The shrinking of the political arena in the first half of the sixteenth century is not easily explained. Religious conflict was not an issue. Until the Dutch Revolt came to Mechelen in the 1570s, its political elite was overwhelmingly Catholic, and there is no evidence of extensive exclusion of Protestant families before those upheavals.[38] What is perhaps more important, at least for the craft guilds, was the demographic and economic decline that set in after the town's heyday around 1530. The tax surveys of 1544 and 1559 suggest that inequality within guilds increased. In 1544, those craftsmen who represented the guilds in the city council were already, on average, wealthier than the 50-odd craftsmen with seats on the broad council, but by 1559, this difference in wealth had increased significantly.[39] This suggests a scenario in which some families in the corporate elite managed to exclude from power those families whose fortunes had plummeted.

Yet, this economic perspective raises many questions about the *poorterij*, which held two-thirds of the available seats in the city council. Did they also suffer from the decline of their hometown? Perhaps, but their fortunes were buffered by large-scale landownership. At least, that is what is suggested by the case-study of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Waver, a village 10 kilometres east of Mechelen, where in 1570 no less than half of the landed property was in the hands of the Mechelen bourgeoisie.[40] As the demographic boom of the sixteenth century constantly pushed grain prices upward, the *poorterij* lineages may have enjoyed more financial stability than craft guild families, whose landownership was by no means negligible, but certainly more limited.[41] However bad the times, the tax lists discussed above confirm that Mechelen had an economic elite that was large enough to join or replace any number of *poorterij* dynasties in the city council. Yet, they did not do so.

To understand why the political community of the *poorterij* decreased from *c.* 30 families to *c.* 20 families between the 1480s and the 1550s, it must first be noted that this was by definition a highly unstable group. While its families were more entrenched in the bench of aldermen than those of the craft guilds, the *poorterij* lineages were only rarely able to stay in office for a century or longer. Of the 17 *poorterij* families from 1370 to 1378, only three still had a representative in the city council in the late fifteenth century. Of the much larger group of 31 *poorterij* families that dominated the city council in 1477–85, only four still provided a

[38]Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 78, 155–6, 159, 314–21, 334, 337.

[39]Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 92. The classic discussion of how processes of economic decline could lead to social polarization among early modern craft guilds is C. Friedrichs, 'Capitalism, mobility and class formation in the early modern German city', *Past and Present*, 69 (1975), 24–49.

[40]Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 59–60, 64.

[41]The only craft guild representatives with considerable rural properties belonged to the wealthy and powerful guilds of the bakers, the butchers and the fishmongers (see Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de schepenen te Mechelen', 82–110, 119 and annex 5).

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burgomaster, alderman, dean, juror or treasurer in the late sixteenth century. As a result, of the 19 families that represented the *poorterij* in the city council in 1555–63, only three could retrace their position of power to the late fifteenth century (Van der Aa, De Gottignies and Schooff), and only two could boast that the family's participation in urban government stretched back to the late fourteenth century (Kerman and Van den Dale). However dominant a lineage was at a given moment, as a rule families disappeared from the political stage after two or three generations. Three possible causes stand out: a family could die out in the male line, lose its fortune or lose interest in urban politics. A typical example of a family that shifted its attention away from town governance is the Bau lineage, one of the most powerful families in late fourteenth-century Mechelen (it held 19 offices in the sample period 1370–78, surpassed only by the Schonejans lineage, which held 29). From this position of power, the family expanded its geographical and social horizons. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the family acquired the seigneuries of Vremde (near Antwerp, where the family had its roots), Boxtel (near 's-Hertogenbosch) and Gutschoven (near Sint-Truiden). Together with the knighthood granted to Jan Bau around 1430, this newly acquired lordship secured the family's ennoblement. Strikingly, the family lost all interest in the Mechelen City Council in the wake of this social promotion. The family kept a foothold in Mechelen, as some of its members were still buried there in the sixteenth century, but they preferred to invest their energies in the management of their increasingly scattered estates and in princely service. Sir Walter Bau, lord of Vremde and Millegem, served as councillor and chamberlain to Duke Philip the Good in the 1450s.[42]

Unfortunately, no sources survive for the *poorterij* of Mechelen or of any similar Netherlandish city that could reveal the criteria for allowing families to claim the positions in the city council that became vacant over time, but earlier research suggests that the families invited by the established political dynasties to join their ranks were those with whom they were already connected through marriage.[43] The observation that political recruitment was embedded in social networks brings into focus why access to the ranks of the *poorterij* became more restricted in the early sixteenth century. The social renewal of the political body of the Mechelen *poorterij* was a constant process, but at the same time a new trend took shape in which the leading families of the *poorterij* increasingly aspired to nobility. Indeed, the ennoblement of the Bau lineage discussed above was part of a much broader trend towards upward social mobility in the Mechelen power elite (Table 3).

In the late fourteenth century, the only noble family that participated in urban governance was the Hofstaden family, a powerful lineage that held 10 positions in 1370–78, or nearly 5 per cent of all available seats in the city council. They formed

[42]For this family, see P. De Win, 'De adel in het hertogdom Brabant in de vijftiende eeuw (inzonderheid de periode 1430–1482)', Ghent University MA thesis, 1979, 241–5; Derboven, 'Sociale status en politieke organisatie te Mechelen', 103, 109, 138; J. Coenen, *Baanderheren, boeren en burgers. Een overzicht van de geschiedenis van Boxtel, Lierde en Gemonde* (Boxtel, 2004), 79–81, and P. Génard (ed.), *Verzameling der graf- en gedenkschriften van de provincie Antwerpen. VIII. Arrondissement Mechelen. Mechelen. Parochiekerken* (Antwerp, 1903), 257, 300–1.

[43]Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de schepenen te Mechelen', 120–6, 138; Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 61–2, 103–4.

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Table 3. The progressive ennoblement of the Mechelen city council

Sample period	The number of families with noble status in the city council	The number of mandates held by noble families
1370–78	1/38 (2.6%)	10/229 (4.4%)
1468–76	3/48[a] (6.25%)	19/221 (8.6%)
1477–85	5/60[b] (8.3%)	34/269 (12.6%)
1555–63	13/37[c] (35.1%)	133/278 (47.8%)

[a]There is one doubtful case, namely that of the Van Duffel lineage. One Willem van Duffel, who served in the city council around 1400 was a knight, but without in-depth research it is not possible to establish whether the family still had noblemen in its ranks in the 1470s and 1480s. If the 10 mandates of this family are not included, the noble lineages only held 4.5 per cent of all known mandates in 1468–76.

[b]If the four mandates of the Van Duffel family are excluded, the noble lineages only held 11.1 per cent of all known mandates in 1477–85.

[c]There is one family of uncertain status, as it is not clear whether the office-holder Jan van den Broecke is identical to the nobleman Jan van den Broecke-Musch, lord of Scherpel and Ooigem, who was buried in the Mechelen Church of Our Lady in 1593 (Génard (ed.), *Mechelse grafschriften*, 284). If the three mandates of this family are excluded, the noble lineages only held 46.7 per cent of all known mandates in 1555–63.

the tip of the spear. In the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, an ever-larger number of families managed to join the nobility. Their ranks were also reinforced by a handful of noble lineages of rural background that decided to settle in Mechelen. Two clear examples are the families Van Cortenbach and De Merode, which both committed to the Mechelen political arena from the 1520s onwards.[44] In most cases, however, it was the well-established members of the Mechelen *poorterij* that acquired noble status. These families all belonged to the *poorterij*, rather than to the craft guilds, and as a rule, they were families that provided an unusually large number of office-holders.[45] In consequence, this noble milieu had a disproportionately strong position in the city council. Whereas only 13 of the 37 families of the city council were noble in 1555–63, they held about half of all mandates. For the top positions in the city council (i.e. burgomaster and alderman), their predominance was even more pronounced. In the early sixteenth century, Mechelen thus saw more than a return to the measure of oligarchy it had known in the late fourteenth century. Its political elite had acquired a social cachet it had never enjoyed in the fourteenth century.

This trend towards nobility must have fuelled the trend towards oligarchy. Of the 19 families that represented the *poorterij* in 1555–63, no fewer than 13 enjoyed noble status, and this suggests that co-optation within this milieu came with new criteria. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, families that hoped to fill a seat in the city council for the *poorterij* had to be socially acceptable to the established political dynasties of the town. This was a hefty requirement for sure, but not impossible to fulfil, since aspiring families and established families roughly had the

[44]De Win, 'De adel in het hertogdom Brabant', 410–16, and Génard (ed.), *Mechelse grafschriften*, 63.

[45]There is one possible exception: the Van Beringen family, which owned the seigneurie of Hollaken around 1395, served in 1477–85 as representatives of the shearers' guild of Mechelen. In 1555–63, the family is listed as *poorterij*. It was not impossible for members of the corporate elite to become noble in the Southern Low Countries, but since 1440, the members of the Mechelen *poorterij* had also acquired the right to enrol in a craft guild on the condition that those individuals did not engage in manual labour, which made it possible for *poorterij* members to represent a craft guild in the city council (Derboven, 'Sociale status en politieke organisatie te Mechelen', 74–82, and Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 149).

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same wealth and shared commoner status. When the nucleus of Mechelen's leading dynasties had become noble, they may have been less inclined to adopt local families to fill the frequent gaps in its ranks. Rather than extending the bonds of friendship and marriage to Mechelen's rentiers and merchants, their new status honed their interest in alliances with the nobility of the town's hinterland. The Bau family again serves as an example. Walter Bau and Jan Bau, who lived in the mid-fifteenth century, respectively married into the families Kerman and Van Oyenbrugghe, two families that were also heavyweights in the Mechelen City Council and that, just like the Bau family, became noble. The following generation that came to the fore in the late fifteenth century, however, made different choices: they married scions of the families Van Ranst and De Harduemont (established noble lineages in the region) and De Herbais (an ennobled political dynasty from Brussels). Their offspring married in the early sixteenth century into the families Van Edingen-Kestergat, Van Cortenbach, Van Berchem, Van der Meere, De Merode and Carondelet, all firmly rooted in the Brabantine and Flemish nobility. Of these families, only Van Cortenbach and De Merode showed an active interest in Mechelen itself.[46]

These choices betray a strong preference for noble endogamy within marriage amongst the Mechelen community. If the marriage partner did come from Mechelen, he or she usually belonged to that exclusive milieu of noble lineages. The Bau family withdrew from the Mechelen City Council, of course, but similar choices can be noted for the De Merode family, which did not withdraw from participation in the city council of Mechelen. Marital alliances were geared towards the families De Gottignies and Schooff (two other noble lineages in Mechelen), Van den Werve (a noble family that was active in the Antwerp City Council) and Van Busleyden (an ennobled family of Luxemburg–French origins that provided one of the top councillors of Margaret of York and Philip the Fair).[47] What is conspicuously missing in these and other case-studies from the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are marriages with *poorterij* families that were not noble or politically active, or marriages with families that belonged to the corporate elite of Mechelen.[48] This stands in stark contrast to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when such marriages were a frequent occurrence. Marriages with the nobility, however, were exceedingly rare at that time.[49]

[46]This genealogical discussion is based on L. Stroobant, 'La famille Bau de Malines aux XIVe et XVe siècles', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 19 (1909), 217–32; idem, 'La famille Bau', *Mechlinia*, 6 (1927), 88–129, 152–66; and De Win, 'De adel in het hertogdom Brabant', 410–16 (this also provides a discussion of the families De Herbais (370–1), Van Ranst (436–9), Van der Meeren (397–406), Edingen (326–7), Berchem (247–51) and De Merode (410–16)).

[47]For a genealogical reconstruction, see V. Steurs, 'Mechelen en de familie van Merode', *Mechelse Bijdragen*, 4 (1937), 16–20. For the Van den Werve family, see K. Wouters, 'De invloed van verwantschap op de machtsstrijd binnen de Antwerpse politieke elite (1520–1555)', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 28 (2002), 35. For Frans van Busleyden, see D. Roggen and E. Dhanens, 'De humanist Busleyden en de oorsprong van het Italianisme in de Nederlandse kunst', *Gentse bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis*, 13 (1951), 127–52.

[48]Other examples are provided in Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 61–2, 103–4.

[49]For an extensive analysis, see Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de schepenen te Mechelen', 120–6, 138, who noted only one marriage to the nobility in 1350–1400, and Derboven, 'Sociale status en politieke organisatie te Mechelen', 101.

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This shift in social orientation suggests a progressive fragmentation of the Mechelen upper class. Since the 1300s, Mechelen had been jointly ruled by an aggregate of different elites, but there were sufficient overlaps through marriage. Yet, as the political elite of the *poorterij* came to prefer alliances with the regional elite at the expense of its traditional marriage partners within Mechelen, the rift with both the rest of the *poorterij* and the craft guilds increased. In consequence, the recruitment of new blood among the political dynasties was reduced to a trickle. In this way, the growing stratification within urban society contributed to the shrinking of the town's political arena.

The key question is whether this process was caused by Mechelen's role as the capital of the Habsburg Low Countries between the 1470s and the 1530s. It is possible that the leading families of the *poorterij* became interested in merging with the regional or supra-regional nobility because they met those nobles at court, in the great council, or at parties in the Mechelen residences of courtiers and state officials.

Because of a lack of sources, I can only speculate on the day-to-day interactions between the urban elite and the state elite in neighbourhoods, churches and so on. The presence of the great council seems to have been of limited importance to the reconfiguration of elite identities. The institution was not very large (only some 20 to 30 councillors) and its personnel were recruited according to a fixed ratio for each of the principalities that constituted the Low Countries and Burgundy. This left little room for members of the Mechelen elite to pursue a career in the great council and to establish strong ties with the highly trained and socially prominent members of this body.[50] Only two examples are known. Engelbert van den Dale, the son of a Mechelen burgomaster, was a councillor in the great council from 1523 to 1540, and Lodewijk van Heyst, who had served as an alderman of the *poorterij*, became a barrister. In contrast, the members of this body had only limited interest in fraternizing with the local elite. In the sixteenth century, those councillors were often members of the confraternity of St Sebastian, which also included several urban politicians, but membership of this group did not often lead to the forging of strong bonds. One councillor married his daughter, Catharina Colin, to the urban politician Baptist Kerman, and Master Joos Claerhout moved from a brief period as a barrister in the great council (1562–63) to a career as the town's advocate (*pensionaris*) (1568–78).[51] Yet, these were exceptions.

If the presence of the state made a difference to the Mechelen elite, it was because of the much larger and fluid institution of the princely court. The Van der Aa lineage, for example, had a foot in both city and court. Sir Jan van der Aa was both an alderman of Mechelen and a councillor to Maximilian of Austria and Philip the Fair, and his relative Adolf van der Aa was sent by Charles V on a diplomatic mission to the Holy See.[52] It is easy to imagine that such families now found their marriage partners in different circles from those

[50]Discussed in J. Van Rompaey, *De Grote Raad van de hertogen van Boergondië en het Parlement van Mechelen* (Brussels, 1973), 62–3, and E. Kerckhoffs-De Hey, *De Grote Raad en zijn functionarissen 1477–1531* (Amsterdam, 1980), vol. I, 10, 74–5.

[51]Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 61.

[52]V. Steurs, 'Het geslacht van der Aa', *Mechelse Bijdragen*, 1 (1934), 56–7.

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of the Mechelen *poorterij* or corporate elite. Unfortunately, it is not possible to assess whether this case-study illustrates the rule or the exception, as there are no in-depth studies available for the courtly entourages of Margaret of York, Margaret of Austria and Philip the Fair. Yet, I can provide a rough measure of whether the timing of the ennoblement of the urban elite corresponds with the presence of the Habsburg dynasty in Mechelen. As a proxy, I used the moment at which a family was first mentioned with a noble title in the lists of aldermen between 1351 and 1550. I ordered this survey per half-century (Table 4).

Caution is in order, but Mechelen's role as the capital of the Low Countries does not appear to have been the prime cause, but rather a powerful catalyst for the ennoblement of families. As early as the fourteenth century, there are examples of families that acquired the trappings of knighthood and seigneurial lordship – the twin pillars of nobility.[53] As a rule, three families crossed the threshold into nobility per 50 years. When the Habsburg state settled in Mechelen, the process accelerated. The turning point was 1488, when Filips Kerman and Gerard van den Dale were both knighted by Emperor Frederick III in recognition of the services rendered by Mechelen in the war against the rebellious Flemish and Brabantine towns.[54] The title of knight was personal, and it was possible, therefore, that ennoblement would be limited to a single individual. Yet both families managed to cement their new status by the acquisition of seigneurial lordships, a source of nobility that could be transferred from one generation to the next. The Van den Dale family became lords of Leefdaal (between Brussels and Leuven) and Wilderen (near Sint-Truiden), whereas the Kerman family ruled over Wasbeke (near Putte, east of Mechelen). In the decades that followed 1530, an unusually large number of *poorterij* lineages also joined the nobility, which suggests that the proximity of the princely court had indeed helped to broaden their horizons. They too came to have knights in their ranks, either through princely service or through a pilgrimage to Jerusalem,[55] and they too got their hands on seigneuries, either through

[53]See F. Buylaert, W. De Clercq and J. Dumolyn, 'Sumptuary legislation, material culture and the semiotics of "vivre noblement" in the county of Flanders (14th – 16th centuries)', *Social History*, 36 (2011), 393–417.

[54]De Win, 'De adel in het hertogdom Brabant', 301.

[55]I have little information on the circumstances in which many members of the Mechelen elite became knighted. In at least two cases, the individuals received the special title of 'golden knight' (*eques auratus*), which could only be granted by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (see Génard (ed.), *Mechelse grafschriften*, 52 (Lancelot de Gottignies: d. 1565), 232 (Engelbert van den Dale: d. 1556)). For a discussion of this title, see M. Damen, 'Patricians, knights, or nobles? Historiography and social status in late medieval Antwerp', *Medieval Low Countries*, 1 (2014), 188. The Guardians of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem could also grant a knighthood to pilgrims with sufficient status. This must have been a popular practice in Mechelen. It is attested for at least two scions of leading political dynasties, namely Karel Bau and Jan van der Aa (see Stroobant, 'La famille Bau', *passim*; Steurs, 'Het geslacht van der Aa', 56) and it is also possible that Antoon van Adegem had received his title in Jerusalem (V. Steurs, 'Het Mechelse geslacht "Van Aedeghem"', *Mechelse Bijdragen*, 2 (1935), 18–22 *passim*). In addition, there were also four knights of Jerusalem that did not belong to the town's most prominent lineages (see Génard (ed.), *Mechelse grafschriften*, 48 (Jan Oem, d. 1522), 165 (Jan Ysewyn, d. after 1565), 166 (Peter and Lodewijk Vranx, resp. d. 15?? and 1555)). For a discussion of this title, see J. Van Herwaarden, 'Pilgrimages and social prestige. Some reflections on a theme', in G. Jaritz and B. Shuh (eds.), *Wallfahrt und Alltag in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Internationales Round-Table-Gespräch, Krems an der Donau 8. Oktober 1990* (Vienna, 1992), 68–70.

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Table 4. The appearance of noble titles in the lists of aldermen per half-century (1351–1500)[a]

1351–1400	**1501–50**
Hofstaden, Van (1353)	Muysen, Van (1508)
Beringen, Van (1395)	Diest, Van (1512)
Duffel, Van (1400)	Broecke, Van den (1514)
	Heelt, De (1515)
1401–50	Schooff (1515)
Oyenbrugge, Van (1414)	Gottignies, De (1518)
Adegem, Van (1430)	Cortenbach, Van (1524)
Bau (1430)	Hoods (1524)
	Merode, De (1529)
1451–1500	Clercq, De (1537)
Aa, Van der (1470)	Pieters van Cats (1537)
Dale, Van den (1488)	Croeser, De (1546)
Kerman (1488)	Lieffelt, Van (1547)
	Berlo, Van (1549)
Total number of families	23

[a]Noble titles are defined as esquire (*jonker*), knight (*ridder*) or lord of a seigneurial estate (*heer van…*). The titles of squire (*schildknaap*) and lord (*heer*) are excluded, as they were often claimed by notables.

purchase or by inheritance from noble family members related through marriage.[56] It is also in the early sixteenth century that established noble lineages became interested in taking up a seat in the Mechelen City Council (De Merode, Van Cortenbach and perhaps also De Gottignies). As early as the late Middle Ages, it was common practice among noble families to maintain a mansion in a city close to their rural estates to enjoy the benefits of city life (medical care, education and entertainment, the availability of luxury goods and so on). Mechelen was no exception, but it was mostly only after the town became a capital that those families also became interested in urban government.[57] That the steady increase in nobles in the city council did not cease after 1530, when the Habsburg court moved to

[56]For reasons of space, I do not provide a full survey. For the acquisition of seigneuries by inhabitants of Mechelen, see especially Mast, 'De Mechelse magistraat', 95–100, who lists 11 families with in total 23 seigneuries for 1520–77. This must be complemented with scattered information in Wouters, 'De sociaal-economische status van de Mechelse schepenen', annex 6; Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch bewind te Mechelen*, 59–61, 333–4; Trouvé, 'Mechelen op bestuurlijk en rechterlijk gebied', 146–7; Steurs, 'Het geslacht van der Aa', 56; idem, 'De heerlijkheid en de heren van Milse', *Mechelse Bijdragen*, 4 (1937), 78–92; idem, 'Het Mechelse geslacht "Van Aedeghem"'; J.Th. De Raadt, 'Itegem et ses seigneurs. Notice historique sur la commune d'Itegem', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 4 (1893), 135, 150–1, 159, 169, 5 (1894), 83–4; and A. Reydams, 'Les pleins fiefs de la ville et de la seigneurie de Malines', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 14 (1904), 164. Caution is in order with F.L. Van den Wijngaert, 'Het feodale Mechelen. Een niet gekende bladzijde uit het verleden van onze stad', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 70 (1966), 31–112, which lists many seigneurial rents that did not include the banal jurisdiction that endowed seigneurial lordship with an aura of nobility (Swivegem near Muizen is an exception). Many noble titles are also listed in the epitaphs for the families discussed: Génard (ed.), *Mechelse grafschriften*, 46, 75, 402 (Van der Aa), 257, 300–1 (Bau), 284 (Van den Broecke), 68, 429 (De Clercq), 253, 257, 300–1 (Van Cortenbach), 80, 427, 493 (De Croeser), 104–5, 232 (Van den Dale), 52 (Van Diest), 52 (De Gottignies), 82 (Van Heelt), 327–8 (Kerman), 63 (De Merode), 251 (Van Oyenbrugghe), 79, 285, 333–4, 431, 440, 491 (Schooff).

[57]For each of the urban churches of Mechelen, epitaphs are known for nobles who were buried here long before the Habsburg state settled in Mechelen (Génard (ed.), *Mechelse grafschriften*, 15, 116, 135, 487, 503).

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Brussels, is quite understandable. At this point, a sufficiently large segment of the *poorterij* elite in the city council had become noble to ensure that this milieu was firmly embedded in the regional nobility. Through existing networks of allied families that were already ennobled, other *poorterij* families could also pursue nobility, while noble lineages continued to find their way to Mechelen. It had become an autocatalytic process.

Conclusion: the reconfiguration of elite identities

The political community of Mechelen of the 1350s and that of the 1550s lived in very different worlds. The former had a worldview that was largely limited to the Mediterranean and Baltic world; the latter had a worldview that encompassed the Americas in the west and Asia in the east. The former lived in a monolithic Catholic world; the latter lived through the Reformation. The former managed an urban economy that was largely geared towards textile production; the latter governed a more populous urban society that derived its income from a diverse array of luxury industries. The former ruled a highly independent seigneurial enclave that was nested in a patchwork of principalities; the latter lived in the Low Countries and contributed to the flowering of a joint Netherlandish 'national' identity by commemorating Mechelen's role as the first capital of the Burgundian–Habsburg dynasty that had brought the Netherlandish polity into being.[58] Last but not least, the urban network in which Mechelen was embedded had also changed. In 1350, the political arrangements of Mechelen had been fairly typical of that of the larger towns of the Southern Low Countries, in which craft guilds participated in urban government. In 1550, Mechelen was, together with Leuven and Brussels, one of the very few cities where corporate representation in the city council had not been completely abolished. Groups articulated their collective identities through their relative position within broader social frameworks (gender, class, religion, power relations and so on), and it is clear that the frameworks that shaped the identities of the Mechelen upper class had changed drastically in the course of two centuries.

Change was not limited to context. The Mechelen political community itself was also transformed. It remained a balanced mix of powerful dynasties and a broad array of lesser families and isolated individuals that were recruited from both *poorterij* and craft guilds, but it had also changed because of intertwined trends towards oligarchy and upward social mobility. The result was a ruling body that, more than ever before, consisted of socially fragmented elites. In addition, the distance between the *poorterij* and craft guilds and the increasingly exclusive networks that supposedly represented their respective interests in the city council had grown. Brief as it was, the role of Mechelen as a capital appears to have contributed to this process. Moreover, the willingness of leading city dwellers to align their

Also, several nobles purchased burgher's rights in Mechelen between 1400 and 1470 (see M. Kocken, *De gekochte poorters van Mechelen (1400–1795)* (Handzame, 1975), 3, 6, 16, 27, 90).

[58]On the issue of political identities, see A. Duke, 'The elusive Netherlands. The question of national identity in the early modern Low Countries on the eve of the revolt', *Low Countries Historical Review*, 119 (2004), 10–38.

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interests with that of supra-local and supra-regional elites helps to explain why the state saw little need for increased supervision of Mechelen. Further research into the composition of the princely courts in Mechelen and of the marriage networks of the urban elites is necessary to confirm this hypothesis, but the available evidence suggests that the leading *poorterij* families became more and more alienated from their traditional commitments vis-à-vis the Mechelen urban community because of the prospect of successful integration into the larger world of the princely court and the nobility. In this sense, Mechelen resembles the more successful capitals of London and Paris, where the experiences of the urban elites were quite similar.

Yet, this case-study does more than just confirm that the presence of the state's central institutions had an effect on the urban social fabric. The story of the Mechelen ruling class provides a powerful warning that states did not so much change the elites of their capitals by initiating social change, but rather by supercharging existing trends that were not unique to the capital. In many Netherlandish, French and English towns, prominent families came to join the *noblesse* or the gentry, albeit at a much slower pace than in Mechelen, Paris or London.[59] Because both Paris and London assumed their position as a capital very early on, it is difficult to measure the aspirations and strategies of its urban elite on their own, but the case of Mechelen, whose role as a capital came very late and was lost soon afterwards, makes clear it that urban elites were exploring the world beyond the city and its hinterland long before the princely court endowed them with exclusive access to the upper class of the Burgundian–Habsburg Low Countries, and they continued to do so long after the court disappeared.

[59]For a comparative discussion of the changing relations between noble and urban elites in England, France and the Low Countries, see F. Buylaert, 'Lordship, urbanisation and social change in late medieval Flanders', *Past and Present*, 227 (2015), 66–75.

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