Review

Janna Everaert, *Macht in de metropool. Politieke elitevorming tijdens de demografische en economische bloeifase van Antwerpen (ca. 1440-1550)*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2023, 302 pp. ISBN 9789463726870.



Anyone hoping to research the history of Antwerp during its early modern heyday has to come to terms with the fact that the Spanish Fury of 1576 destroyed a significant proportion of the city's archives. Fortunately, the aldermen's records (*schepenregisters*) survived. In her book *Macht in de metropool*, Janna Everaert overcomes this obstacle by taking a consistently comparative approach and shifting her focus from the city's interior to its exterior, making use of the surviving aldermen's records. This significantly adds to the value of her study.

As Everaert outlines in her introduction, Antwerp was a peculiar case. Whereas most gateway towns in late medieval and early modern Europe typically counted large numbers of merchants among their political leadership, this was not so in Antwerp. This is particularly noteworthy considering Antwerp's rise to the top of the Northwestern European commercial network in the first half of the sixteenth century. To ascertain the reasons for this phenomenon, the author has conducted a comprehensive investigation into the lives and careers of 341 individual aldermen and burgomasters who served the city between 1400 and 1550, stemming from around fifty families at any point in time. Everaert excludes from her dataset the merchants who formed the economic elite, insofar as they did not hold office.

In the first chapter, the author outlines Antwerp's political structures. During the earliest years of the period under study, the city was occupied, and therefore ruled, by the Count of Flanders. Whereas guild revolutions in other Flemish towns had paved the way for participation of the crafts in local governance, this did not happen in Antwerp, with the exception of a few years (1477-1488). Even when the city was returned to Brabant in 1406, this situation did not change, although the guilds held significant influence in other towns

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in Brabant. Various mechanisms, including petitions, allowed merchants and artisans to raise issues with the council, but they had no formal part in any decision-making process. Limited data prevent the author from determining the wealth of the average alderman, but the available materials suggest that, economically speaking, they were less prominent than the wealthiest members of the merchant community.

The second chapter corroborates the portrait of this urban political elite that had already been sketched in earlier studies, by for example Koen Wouters in the early 2000s. Whereas 81 percent of Amsterdam's *vroedschappen* had a commercial background during the city's period of growth (1578-1630), this was true of only 16 percent of Antwerp's rulers during a similar, albeit earlier period (1490-1559). However, it adds an important dimension because, from the middle of the sixteenth century, more merchants joined the ranks of the aldermen. Nonetheless, their numbers remained significantly lower than elsewhere. Antwerp's ruling elite was a tight-knit group, with many families connected through marriage. Nevertheless, it was also an open group that did not display a straightforward tendency towards closure (oligarchy). Everaert proposes four explanations. The first two are demographic: the all-male composition of public administration made it more likely that ruling dynasties became extinct. At the same time, a large influx of immigrants, including wealthy individuals, created upward pressure. The third reason is financial. The partible inheritance system meant that every child received an equal share of any fortune, so ruling families might lose the capacity to stay in office. The main posts offered little reward and therefore required their occupants to fund their own livelihoods from their private capital. The final reason was political conflict, with turmoil leading to an increased influx of new names. This was an obvious reason why contemporaries emphasised the need for concord.

The spatial distribution of the political elite is examined in the third chapter of the book. Two theories are tested. In 1960, Gideon Sjoberg proposed that elites in pre-industrial cities tended to cluster in the centre, close to the seats of power, such as churches and government buildings. James E. Vance claimed in 1977, on the contrary, that elite families had begun to move away from the centre towards new residential areas as early as the Renaissance. The evidence for Antwerp supports Vance's theory more than Sjoberg's, but I would add that this shift was gradual rather than sudden. Personally, I found this the least exciting chapter because it focuses more on residential patterns, which is not the main topic of the book.

The book's greatest merit lies in the final chapter. Most studies of the urban elite confine themselves firmly to the urban arena. In this fourth and longest chapter, however, Everaert investigates the links between the Antwerp elite and the outside world. The outcome is enlightening. On the one hand, she demonstrates that a significant proportion of elite families were also involved in the governance of villages, as well as the provincial and 'national' administrations of Brabant and the Low Countries. Her analysis of the rural real estate (not estates) and ownership of seigneuries demonstrates that the Antwerp ruling families had strong ties to the countryside. They were also committed to the aristocratic lifestyle. Several were buried in the churches of their seigneuries, rather than in Antwerp. Many – as many as half – held titles of nobility. Some entered office with one, while others obtained a title during or after their service. These ennoblements suggest strong bonds

between the Antwerp political elite and the Dukes of Brabant, who, as sovereigns, could distribute such titles.

Janna Everaert has produced a valuable addition to the literature on late medieval and early modern Antwerp. Even after reading her book, however, I am still unsure whether I fully understand what made Antwerp's political elite so different from similar elites in other towns and cities in the Low Countries. Before reading her book, I was not even aware of this issue. I suspect that a more complete understanding of the internal political dynamics in both Antwerp and Brabant is needed for a full answer. Everaert's book will provide anyone undertaking such a project with plenty of food for thought.

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