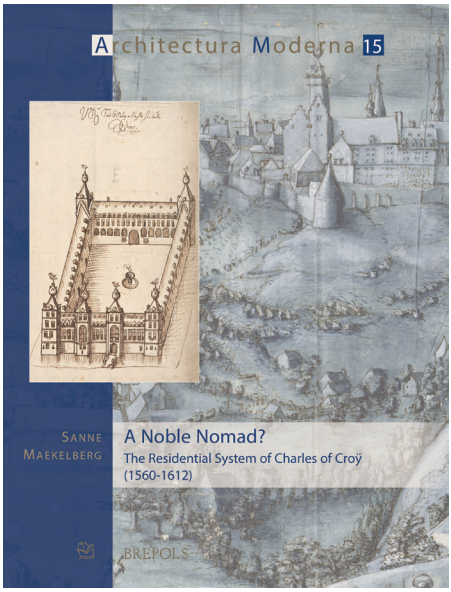
Review

Sanne Maekelberg, *A Noble Nomad? The Residential System of Charles of Croÿ (1560-1612)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2025, 251 pp. ISBN 9782503591377.



Charles III, duke of Aarschot, was the 'last' Croÿ. Despite two marriages, he remained childless. Often, consciously or unconsciously, this sense of tragedy creeps into publications about Charles and his almost frantic attempts to secure his patrimony for the younger Croÿ-Havré branch of the family. This is partly due to his will, recurringly used as an important source, in which the duke lamented about the Croÿ-Aarschot patrimony possibly being inherited by a 'foreign' family (i.e. the Arenberg family, which his sister Anne had married into). Far from being a victim of circumstance, Charles was incredibly wealthy and a political opportunist who, despite some missteps in the 1580's, managed to re-establish himself firmly in the Habsburg saddle. He also was a true Renaissance figure with an impeccable taste in art and architecture.

In recent years, a significant number of valuable publications have appeared on the Croÿ family, encompassing subjects such as their geopolitical awareness as 'border nobility' and their dynastic strategies. Sanne Maekelberg provides an analysis of Charles of Croÿ's architectural heritage. Maekelberg's monograph, published in the *Architectura Moderna. Architectural Exchanges in Europe, 16th-17th Centuries* series, is based on her doctoral dissertation supervised by Krista De Jonge (KU Leuven), who also serves as the series editor. As Maekelberg explains, the Department of Architecture at KU Leuven is housed in the Arenberg Castle in Heverlee, which was formerly the jewel on the duke of Aarschot's crown. As the best surviving example of the Croÿ patrimony, this castle functions both as a source of inspiration and as the author's primary case study.

In a comprehensive and well-written introduction, Maekelberg intertwines the chronological history of the family with the history of its patrimony, demonstrating how the evolution of the dynasty and that of its architectural holdings were fundamentally

DOI 10.51750/emlc.29174 - URL: http://www.emlc-journal.org
Publisher: Stichting EMLC
Copyright: The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

interconnected. Her aim is to tell 'the story of Charles of Croÿ through the residences he inhabited' (31), detailing the lives of buildings, grounds, gardens, as much as the life of the duke himself. The structure of the book follows the geographical scope of the family, with seven chapters (Chapters 2 to 8) each focussing on a particular geographical location and its residence(s). These chapters are preceded by Chapter 1, outlining the concept of the residential system and elucidating the way these residences collectively functioned by means of signalling the duke's status. This first chapter is of particular interest to historians of the nobility. The way in which Maekelberg has reconstructed the itinerary of the duke by means of his correspondence and then placed these findings in the context of the political position of the duke and the dynastic importance of these residences, is nothing short of brilliant. Readers concerned that this approach might come at the expense of architectural history 'pur sang' need not worry as the book provides ample room for detailed architectural analysis. Chapters 2 to 8 provide an overview of construction activities and related topics, with each chapter offering a thematical and chronological approach. Maekelberg explores how the duke's architectural heritage served as a means of expressing power and prestige. At first glance, this may seem a familiar line of inquiry, yet Maekelberg takes it a step further. To examine how these residences operated as sophisticated instruments of communication directed at peers and princes alike, the author draws on the duke's residential system, encompassing his strategic presence at specific locations, the interconnections between those sites, and their significance both for the dynasty and for the duke personally.

The sources used by the author are diverse, with maps, plans, illustrations, accounts and correspondence. Of particular interest are the plans and drawings Maekelberg used, many of which are kept in the university archives. As a sidenote, the duke not only commissioned new designs by his 'court architect' Pierre Le Poivre, but he was also somewhat of an amateur artist himself, for instance drawing his visions for a modern renovation of Heverlee Castle. Unsurprisingly, the *Albums de Croÿ*, a collection of albums mainly featuring Croy residences and seigniories, commissioned by the duke and illustrated with gouaches by Adrien de Montigny, feature prominently. Although these albums unfortunately no longer survive as a coherent collection today, they provide an exceptional representation of the patrimony as it is believed to have appeared during Charles's lifetime. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Charles also commissioned an illustrated genealogy, again with views of his architectural heritage. The author discusses the link between genealogy and architecture in relation to the interior of the residences. In my opinion, it seems the duke's architectural interests and his focus on creating a prestigious network of residences cannot be understood independently of his efforts to consolidate his Croÿ lineage.

A large part of the book's relevance can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the author's creativity, the existence of the beautiful Heverlee Castle, and the duke's role as a prolific archivist. His political position in the Low Countries (as, for instance, governor of the province of Hainaut) and most likely his preoccupation with the administration of his House, have resulted in a substantial corpus of sources. Although Maekelberg states that the duke was already an exception in his own days, some further comparison with European magnates could have been beneficial to contextualise the

duke's accomplishments. It is noteworthy that the Arenbergs, the family with the closest ties to the duke and the eventual inheritors of the Croy-Aarschot estate, play a relatively minor role in the book. Considering the duke's horticultural interests and the creation of extensive gardens surrounding his estates, it would have been interesting to ascertain whether his brother-in-law Charles of Arenberg played a role in the designs of the gardens or in the establishment of the network supplying the duke with plants, trees, and flowers. Similarly, the Arenbergs purchased and restored the castle of Enghien in 1606, around the time of the duke's second marriage and the intensification of his building activities. It would be of great interest to determine whether the duke's expertise had any influence on the Arenberg-Croy couple during the castle's renovation. I wonder if the first chapter should have been better placed right before the conclusion, as the individual chapters detail just how elaborate Charles's plans were. It was only after reading the extent of his activities, and especially his personal involvement, that I fully appreciated the meaning of the Croÿ residential system.

In conclusion, I am left pondering whether is it possible to establish the extent to which the duke's childlessness may have served as a motivating factor in his architectural enterprises. A gendered approach might shed some more light on this question, as in noble dynasties wives typically managed the finances of the house. In contrast to his married contemporaries, Charles was, certainly for a significant part of his life, solely responsible for the management of his house. It is important to consider the way in which this situation facilitated his profound interest in art and architecture. It is a question which warrants further investigation. I strongly recommend reading this book: it is both an important architectural study and a cultural biography of one of the most illustrious noblemen of the Low Countries.

Mirella Marini, UAntwerpen