

Historical consciousness and Hanseatic identity in Deventer 1578-1672

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the Deventer identification with the Hanse as an interregional identity that for the most part existed outside the borders of the Dutch Republic, in order to nuance and extend the discussion on the formation of a proto-national Dutch identity in the seventeenth century. There will be a particular focus on the role of history writing and conceptions of time in relation to seventeenth century identity formation.

Keywords

Hanseatic League, Deventer, Identity, Time, History, Early Modern

INTRODUCTION

On the 22nd of July 1581, representatives of most provinces in the Low Countries met in Antwerp at an assembly of the States General of the Netherlands. Among other things, the result of this assembly was that four days later, in The Hague, the provinces of the northern Netherlands signed the Act of Abjuration and formally declared their independence from the Spanish Habsburg crown. However, not all those present signed. Under pressure from its principal cities, and Deventer in particular, the States of Overijssel declined to follow the lead of the other provinces in declaring their independence. The States of Overijssel were by no means alone in this decision. Drenthe and the Ommelanden, as well as nearly all of the southern provinces also did not sign the act.

The argument that the cities of Overijssel gave in support of their decision not to sign the Act of Abjuration is a particularly interesting one however. A radical action such as renouncing Philips II as their rightful lord, the cities argued, should not be undertaken without the consent, or at least not without the consultation, of the Holy Roman Emperor and, especially interesting, of the Hanseatic League. The insistence on the approval of the Hanseatic League, as well as that of the emperor, inserts a curious new element into the discussion on provincial particularism versus cooperation and the emerging attention to an overarching Dutch identity after the Dutch Revolt. Moreover, this argument by the Overijssel cities raises questions about what role of importance the declining Hanse could possibly have had to be ascribed such an influential position:

What did the Hanse mean to the citizens of those Overijssel towns? And, considering that by the late sixteenth century the Hanse began to matter very little for the Deventer economy and could by the seventeenth century be considered mostly a 'thing of the past', what does this say about the role of history and memory for Deventer's identity?

The Hanse and Deventer

Although the Hanseatic League is commonly said to have survived until its last formal gathering in 1689, the once so prosperous coalition was only a shadow of its former self for most of the seventeenth century. The study of the decline of the Hanse and the failing participation of many of its members from the 16th century onwards is primarily based on the analysis that participation in the league was determined by expectations of economic and political gains.

Hendrik Slechte has described Deventer as a town with some Hanseatic prestige, but not one whose history had been shaped by the Hanse. Although it had a prominent place at the yearly Hanseatic councils and was the unofficial representative of all Dutch Hanseatic cities, Deventer attended only infrequently and played a largely passive role. Slechte concludes that Deventer 'definitely felt connected to the Hanse' but participated primarily for the protection of their own interests. For Slechte the remembrance of the Hanseatic past in the seventeenth century mostly served to stress the prestige the town once had, and to create a mythical Deventer-Hanse relation to improve the contemporary position of the town.

Yet there is more to this story. For instance, in the 1620's, some forty years after a series of iconoclasm had hit the Deventer churches, a large restoration project was set up for the Lebuin Church. During this project, many remaining Catholic ceiling paintings were covered up and oftentimes replaced with Protestant iconography. One chapel however survived this rigorous renovation. The chapel of the Deventer 'Bergenvaarders' guild (merchants trading in the Hanseatic kontor in Bergen, Norway) remained intact, including the images of the Saints Olaf and Gertrude, respectively the patron saints of Norway and of traders.

The repainting of parts of the church with imagery that suited the new religious order, as well as the careful retention of some elements from the Catholic tradition that could be incorporated in the new Protestant church

suggests that, after the initial fury of the iconoclasm in the 1580's at least, we might speak of a systematic attempt to construct and express a new identity. What does it say that precisely these saints would survive the Calvinist take-over of the Lebuin Church? It suggests that even as late as the early seventeenth century there was still a need for some figures who, even if they had lost most or all of their significance within a religious framework, mattered as symbols for identification and for crossing a bridge both between places and times.

Other elements of Hanseatic identification in the seventeenth century include the references to Deventer as a Hanseatic town in many forms of popular literature, such as the Deventer Almanacs and the poetry of the Calvinist preachers Jacobus Revius and Arnold Moonen. Moreover, maps produced outside Deventer often depicted Deventer with the qualification of 'Free Imperial Hanseatic City', showing that the identification of Deventer with the Hanseatic League also served as a point of recognition of Deventer for outsiders. Or consider the placement of a stained-glass window, again in the Bergenvaarders Chapel in the Lebuin Church, filled with Hanseatic iconography. The stained glass would not have been publicly visible and thus probably connected to a more private devotion. This suggests that the identification with the Hanse went beyond a mere realist political strategy, especially when it came to the memory of the Hanse.

Reimagining identities

Though the identification with the Hanse was certainly on the decline during the seventeenth century, remembering the Hanseatic past of the town remained pertinent, as we have seen. In contrast to Slechte's remarks, it may very well have been the downfall of Deventer as an economic center, the hardships of the eighty years' war and the growing demands towards a more unified Netherlands with a shared proto-national identity that refueled the Hanseatic aspect of Deventer's (historical) identity.

That Deventer was becoming primarily a participant in the Dutch political and social structures did indeed not prevent the town from perceiving itself as being in-between two political communities. In 1615, for instance, Deventer took part in the negotiations between the States General and the Hanse concerning a treaty 'for the conservation and upkeep of free navigation, commerce and traffic in the Baltic- and North sea.' Deventer was also seen as an intermediary step towards the rest of the Netherlands from the perspective of the Hanse, judging from the correspondence between the city of Lübeck with Nijmegen and Deventer, where the city council of Lübeck asked these cities their opinion on inviting many other Dutch cities (such as Amsterdam) into the Hanseatic league. As late as 1672, we see that the Stadholderate and the States General were unsure about where exactly the loyalties of the Overijssel cities lay. Given their quick surrender to an approaching army from Münster, Stadholder William III clearly felt the need to punish such disloyalty to set a clear example. The preacher and poet

Arnold Moonen directly commented on this perception of being at a crossroads between east and west, identifying Deventer with the Roman two-faced god Janus.

However, there were many different perceptions of Deventer's position and identity. In his *Daventria Illustrata*, a history of Deventer, the Contraremonstrant and staunch Orangist preacher and historian Jacobus Revius tried to establish a strong connection between Deventer and an overarching Dutch culture, and in particular to a Calvinist and humanistic one. On the other hand Gualterus Sylvanus, in his *Korte Beschryvinge der Stadt Deventer*, laid the Hanse at the foundation of the city of Deventer, claiming that the town had been the first settlement of the Germanic Hanseatic tribe. Moreover, Deventer's situation, according to Sylvanus, is characterized by a threefold relation to the other Overijssel towns of Zwolle and Kampen:

The alliances are threefold: one with the Hanseatic cities that has lasted since 1097. One with the Emperor and the Empire to which they contributed their possessions, their rights and privileges in defense against the Turks and to receive protection in dire times, together with the other cities, in 1495. For this reason they [Deventer, Zwolle and Kampen] are called Free Imperial cities. And also mint in the fashion of the Empire. The third alliance is the society with the united provinces, which has started Anno i...

It is interesting that for Sylvanus the Hanse, the Empire, and the Republic take on an equal status. However, such an apparent equality is misleading, considering that the strongest marker of identification is only implied in this context, hidden behind the explicit mentioning of these three identities. The identity that Sylvanus deems prior is precisely the local identity of the relation between Deventer, Zwolle and Kampen, which becomes visible through the other three identities.

The Deventer almanacs and prognostications are also a useful source. Using astrological predictions, these prognostications provided practical information about the weather and astronomical phenomena, as well as implicit political messages and hopes for the future. We may discern some form of identity formation not only in the actual predictions, but also in the astrological methodological premises that were applied by the prognosticators. In one prognostication from 1600 by Rodolphus Grapheus we can find an explanation of which European states fell under which astrological constellations. Under the sign of Cancer we find Holland, Zeeland, Frisia, Northern France, Emden, Groningen, Overijssel, Deventer, Kampen, Zwolle, Lubeck and Hamburg. There is a clear focus on the region around Deventer, considering that the province of Overijssel is described in most detail with a distinction between the three principal towns and the province itself, even if they all belong under the same sign. Moreover, the position of these places as intermediary between Holland and Zeeland on the one hand and the Hanseatic cities of Lübeck and Hamburg on the other is telling. Another

significant element is that these provinces and towns were seen as part of one group falling under the same constellation, whereas other provinces in the Southern Netherlands such as Flanders and Brabant were placed under a different star sign. Makers of Almanacs were thus implicitly constructing an identity of Deventer, one which was oftentimes connected to the Hanse.

The role of history

As the seventeenth century progressed and the Dutch Republic continued to establish its position as the relevant political and economic reality for Deventer, the Hanseatic identity of the town became mostly a historical identity rather than a lived experience. The apparent opposition between the States General and the Hanseatic League, besides a division between east and west, had also become a division between present and past. What then was the relation between history and identity?

The role of history in the development of identity has been explored by numerous scholars, especially concerning the construction of a Dutch national identity in the later years of the revolt against Spain through history writing. These seventeenth century histories were often written to impart upon their readership the values that were to define the Dutch as a nation. Erika Kuijpers has analyzed the links between local history writing and the efforts to create a common Dutch historical narrative. Local historians had a social, sometimes implicit, function 'as brokers between popular memories, oral tradition and a canonic version of the past that focused on church and state as the best guarantors of religious orthodoxy'.

Present events had an influence not only on the content of historical works, but also on how time and history were conceptualized in a broader sense. These conceptions were already slowly changing in the seventeenth century as the result of scientific and technological advancements. However, focusing on particular cultural and social cases can still provide useful insights into the changes in historical consciousness. Recently, Brecht Deseure and Pollmann have argued that a change in historical consciousness from a direct, static connection to the past to an almost historicist feeling of discontinuity and disconnection came about as the result of an actual rupture with the past social, political and religious order. They continue:

'in the 1600s these feelings did not, apparently, lead to a lasting sense of change. Instead, within a generation or so people reshaped their image of the past in such a way that it could be reintegrated with their present selves'.

Yet the mode of relating to the past that we find exemplified within the Deventer source material apparently defies such theories about a strong dichotomy between continuity and change. There is neither a recognition of the past as something static and absolute, nor is there the overwhelming sense of an unpassable rift between past and present. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Deventer perception of itself as a

prominent Hanseatic city was no longer a truly lived experience, in the sense that there was no longer any substantial participation and political influence of Deventer within the Hanse nor any substantial mercantile relations. Yet the Hanse was more than just a memory that one could nostalgically refer to. The seventeenth century Deventer burgher would be constantly confronted with elements from this past, now seemingly out of place in the new political and economic realities of Deventer as a fortress city on the frontier of the Dutch Republic

This marks a striking engagement with the ideas of anachronism that were starting to become common in early modern thought through humanist historiography. Our contemporary relation to the elements of the past is one that sees such elements as dead relics that we can invigorate through narratives of commemoration. For the sources examined within the Deventer context, there is an engagement with these anachronisms that is not one of commemoration, precisely because these historical elements were considered alive and actively relevant for the Deventer identity.

I argue that this complex engagement with the history of the town was the necessary result of the town's renewed sensemaking of its political engagements in the early seventeenth century. This first of all implies that when we study the changes in historical consciousness, we need to look beyond grand influences such as new scientific theories and nation-wide experiences of rupture and focus also on the particular struggles of certain places. Moreover, it implies that the structure, and not only the content, of our conception of the past is important for the identity formation process.

Lastly, we can see that such conceptions of history in turn informed the identity formation process in Deventer. Through this model, wherein anachronisms could find a place within the present not as something dead yet also not as something completely living, Deventer could manage to reconcile its different identities and loyalties. It collectively found a way of dealing with its history that, although being an opposite identification with that of the Netherlands (east rather than west) still managed to find a place within this new structure, not just as a memory of something dead and past, but as something that still mattered. Historical reflection within the specific circumstances that the town found itself in gave Deventer a mode of reimagining its identity and the collection of different 'foreign' elements that needed to be incorporated to give a reasonably coherent account of itself.

CONCLUSION

In short, in seventeenth century Deventer we can find a wide variety of media through which the processes of identity production, and specifically the production of a Hanseatic identity, took place. From textual sources such as histories, chronologies, astrological prognostications, almanacs and poems in praise of the town, to the visual arts in the form of murals and heraldic imagery, to everyday objects and places such as coinage, maps,

taverns and the city hall; all of these agents and spaces were used to simultaneously express, produce and negotiate the identity of the place one lived in.

This identification, as artificially constructed as it may sometimes appear, did not merely serve a political or economic purpose. Although towns such as Deventer often liked to project themselves as a Hanseatic and imperial city because of the prestige that came with such titles, for most of the sources examined in this thesis that claim does not entirely hold.

Moreover, the case of Deventer in the seventeenth century adds a new, interesting dimension to the debate on national identity formation in the early modern Low Countries. Rather than posing an opposition between proto-national identity and local identity, this case shows the available space within early modern identity formation for an interaction between these aforementioned levels and other 'outsider' identifications, such as with the Hanseatic league.

Lastly, particularly the reconciliation of a Hanseatic identity with the new political order of the Dutch Republic required a new sensemaking not only of the present conditions, but also of the past, which in turn involved a renewed conceptualization of of history in general. The same mechanisms that allowed for a reconciliation of past and present also informed the general sensemaking of the multiplicity of political engagements and identities that were developing in Deventer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hence we can speak of a reciprocal connection between the experience of time and the processes of sense making and identity formation.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Kerrewin van Blanken was an undergraduate student working under the supervision of Jeroen Salman when the research in this report was performed. The topic and the research design were proposed by the student. The archival work, analysis of the results, as well as the formulation of the conclusions and the writing were done by the student with help from the supervisor.

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