

# VIRTUS

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## Building social power in the medieval Netherlands

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Alois van Doornmalen, *De Herlaars in het Midden-Nederlands rivierengebied, ca. 1075-ca. 1400*, *Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen*, CLXX (Hilversum: Verloren, 2019, 439 p., ill., index)

Alois van Doornmalen's book about the Herlaar family offers the reader a glimpse into the construction and maintenance of social power by medieval elites in the Low Countries. The main contribution of this study lies in its original architectural point-of-departure; specifically, the question who was responsible for the construction of the late medieval castle of Ammersoyen. The author uses this seemingly innocuous question to reconstruct genealogical ties, sources of wealth and seigniorial status, political affiliations, as well as to gauge the role of castles in the quite literal building of noble status. In doing so, Van Doornmalen aims to turn this into more than just a micro-level family history, addressing broader issues about the origins of social capital in the medieval Netherlands. Moreover, he pays attention to the liminal geopolitical position of the Herlaar family's centre of power, thereby circumventing an artificial limitation to a single principality. The central argument of his study is that the noble family in question did not so much accumulate social power through clearly defined stages of development. Rather, their standing remained relatively modest and persisted for most of the period under study, only to expand considerably – albeit briefly – in the fourteenth century through some clever political manoeuvring around territorial projects of the various princes who surrounded their familial landholdings and seignories.

The focus is on a single noble family, or rather, those offshoots of the family that were active in and around the Dutch river area between about 1100 and 1400. The author has omitted the branch of the Herlaar family based around Herenthout in present-day Belgium

in order to maintain a certain geographic coherence. The book can be placed in a still modest tradition of family histories of the medieval Netherlandish aristocracy. In the introduction, Van Doornmalen laments the relative scarcity of similar studies, which he rightly attributes to the problematic source material, a lack of theorisation, and an insufficient base for comparison with other parts of the Low Countries (p. 17). On a more general level, the paucity of nobility studies in the Netherlands and Belgium can be explained by the dominant research tradition in these countries. Whereas historians of England and France, for example, have thoroughly explored the medieval nobility for their respective countries since the second half of the twentieth century – to the point of almost becoming a stale topic –, for their Dutch and Belgian colleagues, rural history has long been, and largely still is, synonymous with economic history. Not until Raymond Van Uytven's seminal article in 1976 about the 'triangular' relationship between prince, nobility, and towns did political historians of the late medieval Low Countries turn more and more to the study of socio-political elites in the countryside. Indeed, the last two decades saw the publication of several important monographs and articles about the medieval nobility in Holland, Flanders, Brabant, and Zeeland, among other Netherlandish regions. Yet, barring some notable exceptions like Godfried Croenen's monograph about the Berthout family, these studies tend to focus on the nobility in general, and within a delimited territory. The present book adopts a narrower outlook, hinging on a single family. This might have some drawbacks in terms of representativity, but it has the benefit of allowing a more thematically layered examination of the topic.

Van Doornmalen answers his central question – how the Herlaar family managed to obtain and maintain its possessions and social standing – over the course of five chapters. The book contains a Dutch summary, and, most usefully, a relatively extensive (13 pages) English summary as well. This means that the results may be accessed by an international audience, which is the principal reason for writing this review in English. The author professes to have mainly based his research on published material (edited volumes of charters, chronicles, feudal repertoires, et cetera), but he is slightly underselling his work, which also includes a fair amount of original archival material. Chapters one and two provide background information on key research themes, terminology and methodology, while chapters three through five form the mainstay of the study. In these three chapters, the author delves into the pivotal concept of 'social power' (*maatschappelijk vermogen*), departing from the framework developed by Cornelis Schmidt. Van Doornmalen prefers this concept of social 'power' to that of social 'capital', mainly associated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. However, as the reader will be mostly familiar with Bourdieu's concept, the author could have gone into more detail to explain his preference (p. 24, n. 40). He appears to opt for Schmidt's framework because it subdivides social power into three convenient pillars, of 'socio-political', 'socio-economic' and 'socio-cultural' power. The book's three core chapters do not neatly correspond to this tripartite division, however. Chapter three is devoted to the aspects of socio-political and socio-cultural power, principally the Herlaar political affiliations and genealogical development between 1100 and 1400, with useful recapitulations of the current state of the family's social power for each century. In chapter four, the author deals with the socio-economic component, through a partial reconstruction of the Herlaar land holdings, seigneurial rights, religious patronage, and so forth. The fifth chapter zeroes in on one sub-



Ammersoyen Castle (Ammerzoden) seen from the north-west (drawing, Abraham de Haen, 1732; Gelders Archief, collection Topografisch-historische Atlas Gelderland, no. 1551-411)

theme of the socio-cultural and socio-political aspects, namely the role of building and possessing castles in the construction and upkeep of social capital by the medieval nobility. The summary in the sixth chapter ends with a brief general conclusion.

Following Schmidt, Van Doornmalen concludes that the perpetuation of the Herlaar familial interests was founded, not upon the actions of a handful of exceptional individuals, but rather on conformity and ‘ordinariness’ (*gewoonheid*) of members of this family within their contemporary milieus. The Herlaar were old *nobiles*, with a power base of pre-feudal holdings in the Dutch river area dating back to the eleventh century at the latest. Descendants of the following centuries retained their connection with the family name even after losing the original Herlaar estate. Political affiliations with powerful lords and princes, especially through strategic marriages, brought them some regional influence. The Herlaar mainly attained their socio-political power at the courts of Holland and Guelders, but the pinnacle of their sway during the mid-fourteenth century was relatively short-lived. Despite the liminal geographic nature of the family estates, specifically their possession of a veritable defensive line of castles at the border of Guelders, Van Doornmalen explicitly eschews the label ‘border nobility’ (*grensadel*). The author defines this term as ‘a group of nobles not (originally) bound to one territory, whose lordships and fortresses were located in the borderlands between princely territories’, adding the key proviso that these nobles enjoyed a large degree of political independence (p. 37). On the whole, the Herlaar did not forge a fa-

miliar complex of power in between the various principalities, and did not operate independently enough from princely interests to merit the qualification. Nevertheless, in terms of socio-economic power, relative autonomy appears to have been a key concern, more so than the size and value of landholdings. Meanwhile, architectural analysis of the Herlaar houses, most prominently the castle of Ammersoyen, demonstrates the importance of noble families' social networks on how they communicated their status. The physical appearance and building styles of noble dwellings depended not so much on region as they were determined by interconnections between noble families.

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This book is a commercial edition of the author's PhD-dissertation, which he successfully defended at Leiden University in October 2017. Van Doornmalen has conducted his research as an external PhD-candidate, which is no mean feat. The author has managed to turn his initial curiosity about the medieval castle of Ammersoyen into a fully-fledged academic study of the medieval nobility. Notwithstanding the gracious acknowledgement of his indebtedness to his supervisors Hans Janssen, Antheun Janse, and Peter Hoppenbrouwers, this book is primarily the result of years and years of hard work on the part of Van Doornmalen, and on an entirely voluntary basis at that. The result is an eminently readable book, which synthesises previous works as well as offers lots of new information about this noble family. It contains informative maps and tables, and only a few (black-and-white) pictures, mainly of castles. The latter is a shame, because the chapter about the architectural components of social capital, where the author uses pictographic evidence in his analysis, is the most original one by far. Indeed, the architectural analysis – in which the influence of supervisor Hans Janssen shows through most clearly – is perhaps the main contribution of this study to the field of medieval nobility studies. Having said that, the author could have gone even further into some aspects of this topic, for instance on the role of certain structural characteristics of castles in crafting symbolic power (p. 324). It would have been interesting to explore these symbolic aspects, and the role of space in communicating them, in more detail. In a similar vein, the otherwise laudable and titillating discussion of urban development in the lordship of Ameide could have benefited from incorporating the bottom-up perspective of local communities (p. 234-239).

All in all, though, the book presents an impressive in-depth study of a little-known Netherlandish noble family. The book is therefore recommended to all those interested in the medieval nobility, the nobility of the Low Countries in general, or the political history of the Netherlands in the Middle Ages.

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