Expressing Civic Pride in Stone: Church Towers and Town Halls in the Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Low Countries

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1   Introduction

Several years before the completion of Utrecht's Dom tower in 1382, the cathedral's preacher and canon Geert Groote penned a protest against its construction, '*contra turrim Trajectensem*' (Fig. 1). His well-known treatise condemned the expensive project as not only a waste of money, but also an impetus for all manner of vices. In particular, he wrote, it would feed the vanity of the citizens of Utrecht, because the tall tower would fill visitors with awe and make them desirous to know its height. The burghers surely welcomed the praise of foreigners and prided themselves

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on the construction of this marvel in their city.[1] And yet, the cathedral did not serve as the city's parish, for their daily services citizens had their own parish churches. Groote's account testifies that although the Dom tower was not commissioned by the city, but by the bishop and the cathedral chapter, Utrecht's inhabitants identified with the building. His warning that the tower would attract admiration far and wide is borne out by its frequent portrayal by fifteenth-century painters, most famously Jan van Eyck in the *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*. In this paper, I will examine monumental architecture in the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages as an important visual expression of civic pride.[2]

The swell in civic building on a monumental scale in the Low Countries in this period was to a great extent spurred by inter-urban competition. Architecture became a matter of urban prestige and a measure by which cities and towns were compared with each other. The example of the Dom, however, reminds us that civic pride is also an elusive concept, which is hard to pinpoint: in this case the tower was cherished by a wider urban community, even though the tower was not a communal project stricto sensu. Instead, the cathedral's direct relevance to the city was limited since it did not serve as one of the city's parishes. In a way, Utrecht citizens 'appropriated' a monument that was not strictly theirs. That raises the question in which ways civic pride was expressed in stone? Architectural historians have long acknowledged that it was an important catalyst for the erection of monumental architecture, however

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[1] Geert Groote, *Geert Grootes Tractaat 'Contra turrim Traiectensem' teruggevonden*, trans. and ed. R.R. Post (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 26. *Omnis ergo vanus appropinquans civitati vel eam pertransiens hac altitudine et magnitudine visa ammirabitur et intuitu turris subsistet, oculos curiose girabit ad singula, altitudinis quantitatem nitetur perpendere et que apprehendere curiositate non potuerit, ab incolis vestigabit. Consurgent laudes turris male mirande, gloriantur cives quamvis inaniter, superbit vulgus de turri, in glora iactant structores ad mala scioli, similiter et provisores ad superbiam construendam archetectonici.*

[2] Merlijn Hurx, *Architecture as Profession. The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century*, Architectura Moderna 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

Fig. 1   Utrecht, tower of the cathedral (Domtoren) with on the foreground one of the city's four parish churches, the Buurkerk, 1321–1382 (Hurx)

interpretations are often difficult to substantiate, because documenta-
tion for the late medieval period is often erratic. Written sources are
usually ambiguous or inarticulate: An often-repeated commonplace in
the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is that a new project was to be an
'adornment (*cirate*) to the city'.[3] An obvious explanation for the lack of
sources, is that monuments spoke for themselves; the society in which
they were erected was likely well-aware of the power balances behind
their construction. Buildings could convey multi-layered messages and
represent various groups of the community. The example of the meat hall
of Brussels erected in between 1566 and 1570 shows how complicated
matters could be. Due to their monumentality, meat halls are usually
regarded as an important expression of civic prestige and the might of
the butchers' guilds.[4] However, in Brussels the meat hall, which stood
behind the Maison du Roi, was owned by the king. Because of the dilap-
idated state of the medieval building, the butchers of the guild sent a
petition to Philip II in 1565 in which they asked for the erection of a
new hall. They not only needed the king's permission, but it was his
administration that was to organise the work. A committee formed by
a member of the Council of Brabant, the Chamber of Accounts, the
king's receiver of Brussels and the master craftsmen of the king agreed
that the old building could not be saved, and soon produced a design for
an entirely new building. Before construction started, negotiations took
place on the financial contributions by each of the parties involved: the
butchers pledged to contribute 2000 pounds, while the city supported the
project with 1200 pounds as it was regarded to be a great adornment to
the city and would be convenient for its citizens (*grootelycken ten cirate
vander stadt ende orbore vand gemeynten*).[5] In total, their contribution
was expected to cover about one-third of the cost, the remaining sum
came from the king's coffers. In turn for their support, both the guild

[3] This term was common and continued to be used well into the eighteenth
century. Merlijn Hurx, 'De zeventiende-eeuwse modernisering van het stadhuis van's-
Hertogenbosch', *Bulletin KNOB* 106 (2007): 53–67, here 54.

[4] Konrad Ottenheym, 'Meat Halls and Fish Markets in the Dutch Republic', in *Public
Buildings in Early Modern Europe*, Architectura Moderna 9, ed. Konrad Ottenheym, Krista
De Jonge, and Monique Chatenet (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 273–284.

[5] Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, Rekenkamer, 140, f. 249r; Alexandre Henne and
Alphonse Wauters, *Histoire de la ville de Bruxelles* (Brussels: Éditions "Culture et
civilisation", 1968, first printed in 1845), 3 vols, here vol. 3, 69–70.

and the city wanted several adjustments to be made to the first design. Their wishes concerned the position and accessibility of the building and not the decorative programme. The building was lost in the bombardment of 1695 by the French troops of Louis XIV, but a remaining plan of the building shows that the entrances of the 28 shops were decorated by coloured coat-of-arms and gilded letters of all the territories of Philip II, thus presenting the meat hall as an exclusively royal building (Fig. 2).

My aim in this paper is to consider architecture as a medium of discourse between cities and the various groups within the city. I will explore several case studies in the Low Countries in which this becomes more tangible. I will first briefly treat church towers and then turn to town halls, which were generally regarded as the prime markers of urban autonomy in the late medieval Low Countries.
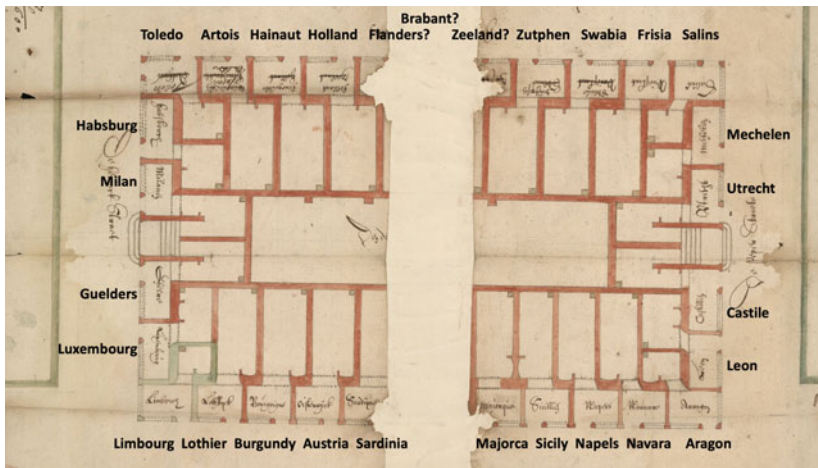

Fig. 2 Jan van Hovele, plan of the meat hall of Brussels with the surrounding streets. The north is at the bottom, ca. 1568. I have indicated all the mentioned territories of Philip II (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, Kaarten en plattegronden in handschrift, 844, edited by the author)

2   PRODIGY TOWERS

Late medieval prodigy towers are one of the most remarkable architectural features in the Low Countries. Nowhere else in Europe existed such a high density of colossal west towers of churches. Some were intended to be more than 150 metres tall. Very few were completed, but their massive unfinished trunks testify to the overly ambitious spirit in which they were conceived. The surviving drawing of the tower of St. Rumbold's in Mechelen, for example, shows that it was intended to be almost 170 metres tall (Fig. 3). Soon, even small towns such as Zierikzee and Veere in the county of Zeeland undertook to build towers on a similarly massive scale. Even more conspicuous was the projected west front of the church of St. Peter in Leuven. Two preserved elevation drawings and an eight-metre-tall model reveal that it was to have three towers ascending to heights of approximately 150 metres. The only prodigy tower started in the fifteenth century that did reach its intended height, was Our Lady in Antwerp. Here only the north tower of the twin-towered west front was built: it reached the height of 123 metres.[6] While church towers served various important functions to the city, their size was clearly not prompted by functional needs. They were used as bell tower but could also serve the city as a lookout for fires, and their thick walls provided safe storage for the city's most important documents.[7] Yet, in the eyes of Groote their monumentality was completely unnecessary: and interestingly, when he was writing the Dom's stone lantern was under construction. There was no functional need for this third storey, as already the blocky second storey housed the bells. To hang the church bells, a far more modest timber structure could suffice, as St. Bavo's in Haarlem shows: a free-standing timber bell tower that stood behind the church was constructed in 1479. After 1520 when the new crossing tower was finished, both towers served as bell tower, until the timber structure was taken down in 1804.[8]

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[6] Hurx, 'Architecture', 120–122.

[7] Jan Kuys, 'Weltliche Funktionen spätmittelalterlicher Pfarrkirchen in den nördlichen Niederlanden', in *The Use and Abuse of Sacred Places in Late Medieval Towns*, ed. Paul Trio and Marjan De Smet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), 27–45.

[8] Henk Verhoef, '"Van sonderling geluyd, van kostelijk metael". De klokken van de Bavo', in *Het grote Bavoboek. Vijf eeuwen Grote of St.-Bavokerk in Haarlem*, ed. Daan den Hengst, Henk Kaan, and Koen Vermeij (Zwolle: Wbooks, 2021), 511–521, here 513–514.

Fig. 3 Mechelen, the unfinished tower of St. Rumbold reaches the height of 97 metres, 1452-circa 1465, 1482-circa 1530 (Hurx)

The oldest examples of such heavy church towers were erected in Bruges at Our Lady and St. Salvator's church. Of the two, the tower of Our Lady is the tallest, surpassing the height of 115 metres (Fig. 4). In contrast to most other towers in the Low Countries, it was not built on the axis of the church, but it was attached to the north side aisle. Dendrochronological research reveals that construction started somewhere at the end of the thirteenth century.[9] It went up quickly and in the third quarter of the fourteenth century the trunk was finished. The original tall spire was added in the first half of the fifteenth century. Possibly the tower was meant as a challenge to the tall belfry of the cloth hall, which was the most monumental civic building of the city.[10] It went up in

[9] Vincent Debonne, 'Uit de klei, in verband. Bouwen met baksteen in het graafschap Vlaanderen 1200–1400' (PhD diss., KU Leuven, 2015), vol. 2, 14.

[10] Thomas Coomans, 'Belfries, Cloth Halls, Hospitals and Mendicant Churches: A New Urban Architecture in the Low Countries Around 1300', in *The Year 1300 and*

roughly the same period, the brick trunk dates from the last decades of the thirteenth century and was raised in the middle of the fourteenth century with a second storey. Only the octagonal lantern, which was clad with stone, was added later, in the 1480s (Fig. 5). The towers in Bruges did not immediately lead to contest in the construction of vast towers in the county of Flanders. In Kortijk (St. Martin's), Oudenaarde (St. Walurga's) and Ghent (St. Bavo's, formerly St. John's, and St. Michael's) the axial towers were built all in the fifteenth century. Also, in the neighbouring duchy of Brabant, the oldest large church towers date from the end of the fourteenth century. St. Gommarus' in Lier was built from 1378 on and the towers of Bergen op Zoom and Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-over-de-Dijle were likely begun in the same period.

Interestingly, rather than in the prosperous urban centres in the southern Low Countries, the competition to erect such heavy church towers took off in the north (Fig. 6). In Holland, the axial towers of the Old Church in Delft and Our Lady in Dordrecht were begun some fifty years earlier, in the first half of the fourteenth century. They were substantially larger than the early towers in Brabant. The tower at Dordrecht was the most ambitious early project in Holland: the dimensions of its base of 15 by 15 metres suggest that it was originally intended to rise over 100 metres (Fig. 7).[11] It seems likely that the fourteenth-century Dom tower inspired patrons in Holland to embark on such ambitious projects. At the end of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries several other towers were begun in the upcoming towns of Leiden, Delft and The Hague. St. Peter's in Leiden collapsed in 1512, but foundations show that it had a ground plan of at least 11 by 11 metres.[12] In The Hague the trunk of the hexagonal tower, which had a diameter of 14 metres,

the Creation of a New European Architecture, Architectura Medii Aevi I, ed. Alexandra Gajewski and Zoë Opačić (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 185–202.

[11] Hurx, 'Architecture', 119.

[12] John Veerman, '"Den thorn valt"', in De Pieterskerk te Leiden. Bouwgeschiedenis, inrichting en gedenktekens, ed. Elizabeth den Hartog and John Veerman (Zwolle: Wbooks, 2011), 72–90, here 87.

Fig. 4   Bruges, choir and tower of Our Lady, the tower was begun around 1290 and the trunk was finished in the third quarter of the fourteenth century. The spire was built in the first half of the fifteenth century, but the current spire dates from the nineteenth century (Hurx)

Fig. 5 Bruges, belfry of the cloth hall, begun in the last decades of the thirteenth century, second storey dates from the middle of the fourteenth century, and the octagonal lantern was added in the 1480s (Hurx)

was constructed rather quickly, between 1420 and 1424.[13] The tallest axial tower, however, is that of the New Church in Delft. Built between 1396 and 1496 it soared about 108 metres upon its completion, and thus was almost as tall as the tower of Utrecht Cathedral itself (112 metres) (Fig. 8).
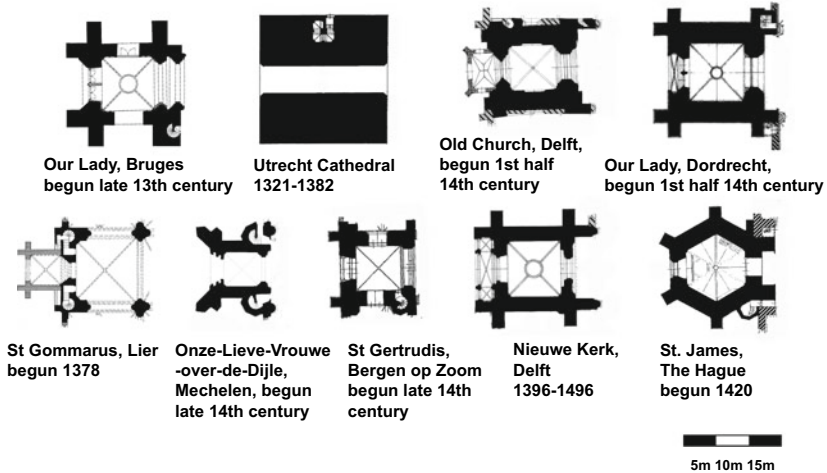

Our Lady, Bruges begun late 13th century

Utrecht Cathedral 1321-1382

Old Church, Delft, begun 1st half 14th century

Our Lady, Dordrecht, begun 1st half 14th century

St Gommarus, Lier begun 1378

Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe -over-de-Dijle, Mechelen, begun late 14th century

St Gertrudis, Bergen op Zoom begun late 14th century

Nieuwe Kerk, Delft 1396-1496

St. James, The Hague begun 1420

5m 10m 15m

Fig. 6 Selection of plans of the largest church towers in the Low Countries begun between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century drawn to the same scale. Not included are the twin-towered west fronts of St. Gudule's in Brussels, begun in 1415, and Our Lady in Antwerp, started in 1422 (Hurx)

[13] Charles Boissevain and Chris Nigten, *De Grote- of Sint Jacobskerk van 's-Gravenhage* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1987), 83–85.

Fig. 7   Dordrecht, tower of Our Lady, begun first half of the fourteenth century (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort)

Fig. 8 Delft, tower of the New Church/St Ursula, 1396–1496 (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort)

2.1   *Tower Competition in Delft*

No sources exist that unambiguously confirm that the tower of the New Church in Delft was built to outdo Utrecht, but the continual struggles of the county of Holland with the prince bishopric of Utrecht, both in political and economic terms, may have provided a particular impetus for its construction. It is interesting that the seventeenth-century city description of Delft, *Beschryvinge der stadt Delft* (1667), written by the Delft politician and writer Dirck van Bleyswijck not only mentions that the tower was taller than all other towers in Holland, but that he also recounts that from the top of the tower on a clear day it was possible to see the Dom tower on the horizon, thus invoking a kind of image of two opposing towers.[14] In addition, he mentions that the tower of the New Church was so admired that even in the prince bishopric of Utrecht it served as a model for the axial tower of St. Cunera's in Rhenen.[15] In reality the tower closely followed the model of the Dom tower, with its two distinctive blocky storeys and a tall, open octagonal lantern. However, Van Bleyswijck was usually well-informed and made use of medieval sources, and therefore his remark likely provides insight into the competitive climate of fifteenth-century Delft. A contemporary clue is provided by the Chronicle of the New Church, written in the early sixteenth century. It recounts the interdict of the church by the Bishop of Utrecht in 1498, just two years after the tower was finished. The sanction lasted for several weeks, and fully disrupted the religious services of the parish. Interestingly, the chronicle explains that the interdict was the work of a rich Utrecht burgher who was close to the episcopal court. Allegedly, he was owed money by several cities of Holland and to force them to settle their debts, the New Church was sanctioned. The chronicler explains that the reason why only the New Church was affected was because the church was the most prominent and best-known church of Holland. This explanation seems hardly credible, but it shows that the chronicler, who was

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[14] Dirck van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der stadt Delft* (Delft: Arnold Bon, 1667), 222. For the construction of the New Church see: Herman van der Kloot Meyburg, *De Nieuwe Kerk te Delft, haar bouw, verval en herstel* (Rotterdam: Brusse, 1941).

[15] Van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge*, 222.

likely himself a parishioner of the New Church, believed the church to surpass all other churches in Holland.[16]

As well as rivalry between cities, the fervour for tower-building was also fired by competition between churches in the same city. The wardens of the New Church were probably not only thinking of Utrecht when they erected their tower, but also wanted to outstrip the 75-metre tower of the Old Church. Indeed, this church was more prominent than the New Church, because of its age and the fact that it belonged to the most affluent parish of the city. The wardens of the Old Church did not lack ambition themselves, as is testified by a papal bull issued by Pius II in 1459. In response to a supplication from Delft to obtain the remains of saints for the Old Church, Pius granted permission to collect relics, considering that the church had very few of its own, despite being 'renowned, large, imposing and adorned as a cathedral'.[17] The formulation seems to suggest the wish to elevate the status of the church to a level equal to cathedrals. This description was doubtless prompted by the Delft churchwardens themselves, and its competitive tone was not lost on the bishop of Utrecht. His letter approving the proclamation of an indulgence for future worshippers of the new relics repeats the papal bull's reference to the Old Church almost verbatim but avoids comparison with a cathedral. Indeed, none of the prosperous cities in the western Low Countries had a church with the status of a cathedral in the Middle Ages. It would take until in 1559 when, as part of king Philip II's efforts to combat the spread of Protestantism, fourteen new dioceses were established. Several of the largest parish churches were promoted to the rank of cathedral, among them St. Bavo's in Haarlem, St. John's in 's-Hertogenbosch, St. Rumbold's in Mechelen, St. Bavo's in Ghent and Our Lady in Antwerp.[18]

[16] Dinant Oosterbaan, 'Kroniek van de Nieuwe Kerk te Delft', *Haarlemse Bijdragen* 65 (1958): 1–326, here 250.

[17] Gerrit Verhoeven, *Devotie en negotie. Delft als bedevaartplaats in de late middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1992), 34. *insignis, ampla, speciosa et plurimum etiam ad instar cathedralis ecclesie adornata existit.*

[18] Jan Kuys, *Kerkelijke organisatie in het middeleeuwse bisdom Utrecht* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2004), 43.

2.2   *The New Church's Tower in Delft as a Joint Effort*

While competition with Utrecht likely played a role in the erection of the tower of the New Church, the commemorative inscriptions of the eight gables crowning the tower, which celebrate the tower's completion, remain silent on such a rivalry (Fig. 9). These verses in Middle Dutch are unique in the Low Countries: no considerably lengthy texts adorning monuments are found elsewhere in the Low Countries. They were installed together with twenty escutcheons in 1496. Together, they give dues to all political powers and parties who took part in the completion of the tower. The then ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands, Philip the Handsome, is mentioned and represented by three coats of arms, that of the count of Holland, the duchy of Burgundy and the Archduchy of Austria. In Van Bleyswijck's city description the verses are recorded. They recount that Philip was eighteen when the gables were made, and they celebrate him as the count of Holland, and wish him protection against his enemies.[19]

The verses and escutcheons of Philip are followed by the coat of arms of the schout or bailiff of Delft and his wife, the parish priest and two churchwardens, the recently deceased bishop of Utrecht, David of Burgundy (d. 1496) and his successor Frederick of Baden. Finally, the city of Delft and the craftsmen who built the tower are also honoured by their coat of arms (Fig. 10).[20] Dirk de Vries proposed that the order in which these parties are represented may be interpreted as a political statement, because the bishops do not immediately follow upon the ruler despite their high status. However, it is unclear if the sequence was meant to challenge the bishops' authority, because the verses speak rather positively

[19] Van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge*, 218–219.
Den Hartoge Philips Edel Lants-Heere,
Van den Roomschen Edelen Coninck geboren,
Hy was 18. Jaren oudt luttel meere,
Doen dit gemaect wert, elck macht horen,
Dat die Edele jonge Jeucht vercoren,
Was Prince ende Grave van dese Landen,
God behoede hem voor tsviants handen.

[20] Dirk J. de Vries, *Met het oog op het Laatste Oordel. De geboorte van het individu in de westerse kunst*, Clavis Kleine Kunsthistorische Monografieën Deel XVII (Utrecht: Clavis, 2014), 37–40.
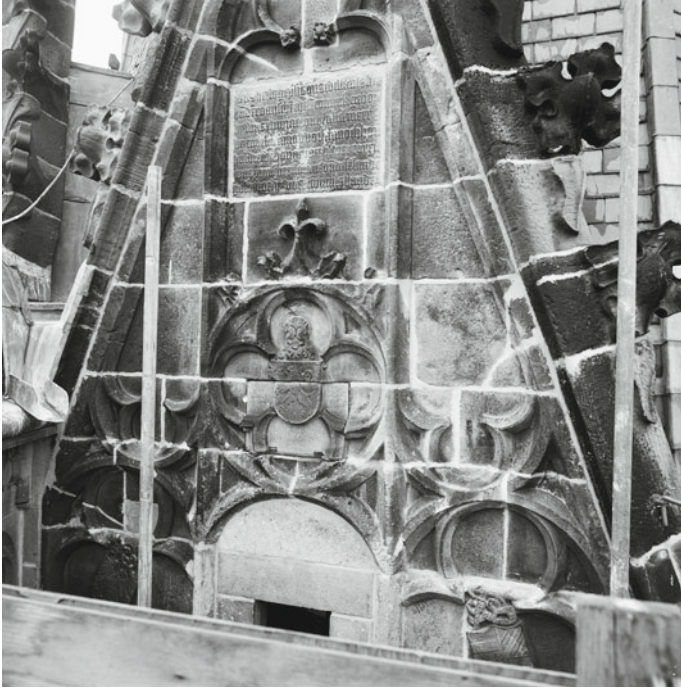
Fig. 9 Delft, New Church: commemorative inscription, and escutcheons of Philip the Handsome on the northern gable crowning the tower the New Church. It shows the lion of Holland in the centre immediately below inscriptions. On the lower left the eagle of the Archduchy of Austria is depicted and the coat of arms of the duchy of Burgundy is visible on the lower right. The photo was made by G. J. Dukker during the restauration works in 1987 (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort)

about them: David of Burgundy is praised, while Frederick is referred to as being 'very beloved'.[21]

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[21] Van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge*, 219.
 Davit Heer van Utrecht die gepresen,
 Sterft int selffde Jaer dats wel bekendt,
 Ende weder eendrachtich gecoren Heer te wesen,
 Den Heer van Baten seer bemint,
 Een Heer tot Utrecht wel versint.

Fig. 10   Delft, New Church: escutcheons of the masons and the master builder on the southeast gable (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort)

The inscriptions are impossible to read from street level, and even from the top level of the tower they must have been difficult to decipher. It is unclear what the intended audience is, other than that the verses were evidently made to honour God, and Mary in particular, and therefore were not primarily intended for human eyes. However, an abbreviated adaptation of these verses was also recorded by Van Bleyswijck. According to him it was composed by the same rhetoricians' chamber that provided the verses for the tower. Possibly multiple variations circulated in Delft, and the contents of the commemorative inscriptions were known in the town at the time when the tower was completed.[22]

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[22] Van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge*, 220–221.

What is important here, is that both the texts and coats of arms present the tower as a joint effort. They represent the natural political order, rather than giving voice to the pride of its citizens.

3   ARCHITECTURE FOR THE CIVIC ADMINISTRATION

The second category of architectural projects that I want to discuss are town halls. They have often been seen as the prime architectural expression of urban prestige, mirroring a growing self-awareness of the cities. Until the fourteenth century, city authorities often gathered in various places, but from the second half of the century purpose-built town halls were erected to accommodate a diversity of government functions that had previously been scattered across cloth halls, patrician homes and inns. As multifunctional complexes that housed council halls for the burgomasters and aldermen and the court of justice, town halls often also incorporated commercial functions such as a city meat hall, cloth hall and public weigh house. The growing political importance of town halls over cloth halls owes not only to the collapse of the cloth trade, but also reflects a shift towards a more professional form of government, leading cloth merchants to be gradually supplanted by other groups, especially university-educated professionals, in the civic administration.[23]

An early example of the sudden ardour for erecting government buildings is the new aldermen's house in Mechelen begun in 1374 (Fig. 11). Its freestanding position on the market square gives it a monumental presence, but architecturally it still harks back to the design of private residences, with its stepped gables, corner turrets and crenelations all characteristic of contemporary patrician houses.[24] In the same years, a new and influential architectural model was developed in Bruges. It iterates several conventional features such as corner turrets and battlements, but joins them with a lavishly decorated façade featuring alternating tall windows and strips of superimposed pairs of monumental statues. The overall effect has often been compared in the literature to a metalwork

[23] Raymond Van Uytven, 'Flämische Belfriede und südniederländische städtische Bauwerke im Mittelalter: Symbol und Mythos', in *Information, Kommunikation und Selbstdarstellung in mittelalterlichen Gemeinden*, ed. Alfred Haverhamp and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1998), 125–159, here 153.

[24] Krista De Jonge, 'Bouwen in de stad', in *Gotiek in het hertogdom Brabant*, ed. Krista De Jonge, Piet Geleyns, and Markus Hörsch (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 101–136, here 122.

reliquary shrine (Fig. 12).[25] This sculptural screen provided a fitting cere-monial background for official public events, and particularly for 'Joyous Entries', when the new prince stood in front of the town hall on Burg square and confirmed the city's privileges, and the citizenry swore an oath of fealty to their sovereign in return. The iconographic programme of the façade well expresses the magistrate's loyalty to the rightful ruler: apart from biblical figures it depicted the consecutive Flemish counts. At the same time the façade conveys the city's legitimate authority as the deputy of the count of Flanders, going back to the semi-legendary founding father of the county, Baldwin Iron Arm.[26] Sasha Köhl has argued that this new feature could have been prompted by the specific political circum-stances of the time. With the marriage of Margaret of Flanders with Philip the Bold in 1369, the Valois prince became heir apparent as count of Flanders. This meant not only the arrival of a new dynasty, but also that the county was to become part of a larger territorial complex. The façade was to underline Bruges as seat of the Flemish counts, but it was also intended to remind Philip and his wife of keeping in mind the political and economic interests of the city.[27]

3.1   A Town Hall for the Capital

The town hall of Bruges served as an example for the town halls of both Brussels and Leuven. The former was constructed in two campaigns between 1401 and 1455 and surpassed every other civic building in the Low Countries in terms of sheer size, ornate façades and number of statues (Fig. 13).[28] The design introduces several features that were new in secular architecture, such as the ground-level arcade that spans the entire length of the façade, interrupted only by the base of the tower,

[25] Sasha Köhl, 'Princely Architecture: Town Halls in the Burgundian Netherlands', in *Staging the Court of Burgundy. Proceedings of the Conference "The Splendour of Burgundy"*, ed. Anne van Oosterwijk et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 191–200, here 192.

[26] Köhl, 'Princely Architecture'; Van Uytven, 'Flämische Belfriede', 154.

[27] Sasha Köhl, 'Brussels Town Hall in Context. Architectural Models, Historical Background, Political Strategies', *Studia Bruxellae* 12 (2018): 236–254.

[28] Sasha Köhl, *Das Brüsseler Rathaus. Repräsentationsbau für Rat, Stadt und Land* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2019); Alphonsine Maesschalck and Jos Viaene, *Mensen en bouwkunst in Boergondisch Brabant—Het stadhuis van Brussel* (Kessel-Lo: private publisher, 1960).

Fig. 11 Mechelen, aldermen's house, begun in 1374 (Hurx)

Fig. 12   Bruges, town hall, 1376–1421 (Hurx)

and the openwork parapet crowning the façade. The conspicuous tower
is another new feature that reappears at several later town halls, although
the one in Brussels is exceptional for its lofty height of 96 metres and
its pierced tracery spire.[29] Although the current statues of all the dukes
of Brabant that decorate its façade are all reconstructed, the sculptural
programme was intended to show the city's allegiance to the ruler, just

[29] Earlier and contemporary examples of town halls with a tower in Flanders include
those in Dendermonde (1377–1395), Sluis (1390–1396 and 1423–1427) and Aalst
(tower, early fifteenth century). However, their fortified character belongs more to the
Flemish tradition of robust belfry towers.

like in Bruges. As Sascha Köhl argues, the monumentality of the façade and its decoration conveyed multiple messages to a variety of audiences. They marked the building as a public site and emphasised the legitimacy of the magistrate to its own citizens, but at the same time the town hall presented Brussels as the capital of Brabant.[30] Like in Bruges, the end of the dynasty of the Dukes of Brabant and the arrival of the Valois, may have prompted the magistrate, to erect the new town hall to express the central importance of Brussels in the duchy.[31]

It is therefore no surprise that Brussels' vast new town hall provoked an immediate reaction from the oldest city of Brabant. In the very first year of construction, the city of Leuven sent its workmen to visit the building site in Brussels.[32] It would take until 1438, however, before the first stone of Leuven's new town hall was laid. Documents show that it was originally planned to have a large tower, 'just as in Brussels' (*gelijc te Bruxele*).[33] However, in 1448 this design was abandoned, probably due to foundation problems, and instead six lower octagonal turrets came to crown the building. In its architectural competition with Brussels, the smaller dimensions of Leuven's town hall were compensated by its even more lavishly decorated façades (Fig. 14), which were completely covered with statues in ornate-canopied niches. Ultimately, the result looks more like an emulation of Bruges, resembling even more closely the features of a blown-up reliquary shrine. Leuven did not simply wish to compete with Brussels on an architectural level, but the project stressed its position as the first capital city of Brabant, and the ancient seat of the ducal court. Interestingly, the other two capital cities in the duchy, Antwerp and 's-Hertogenbosch did not join this competition and continued to rely on existing buildings that were adapted to their function as town hall well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Köhl proposes that this lack of enthusiasm can be explained by the fact that these cities could not claim similar close ties with the ducal court.[34]

[30] Köhl, 'Das Brüsseler Rathaus', 146–148.

[31] Köhl, 'Brussels Town Hall'.

[32] Alphonsine Maesschalck and Jos Viaene, *Mensen en bouwkunst in Boergondisch Brabant—Het stadhuis van Leuven* (Leuven: Vrienden Stedelijke Musea, 1977), 57–58.

[33] Maesschalck, 'Viaene, Stadhuis van Leuven', 79. ...*groten thorne, gelijc te Bruxele in middel vander stat huys aldaer steet*...

[34] Köhl, 'Das Brüsseler Rathaus', 148–149.

Fig. 13   Brussels, Jacob van Tienen and Jan van Ruysbroek, town hall, 1401–1455 (Hurx)

Fig. 14 Leuven, Matheus de Layens, town hall, 1438–1468 (Hurx)

3.2   *Expressing Autonomy or Loyalty?*

Both the Brussels and Leuven town halls prompted civic authorities in a number of smaller centres in the Low Countries around the middle of the fifteenth century to undertake the construction of new monumental government buildings of their own. In the north, in Holland, Gouda erected a freestanding structure in the centre of a triangular market square (Fig. 15). The front façade combines several conventional elements such as corner turrets and a stepped gable, but the pinnacles and crowning turret at the top of the gable clearly distinguish it from residential architecture. Construction of a new town hall likewise started in this period in Middelburg, in Zeeland (Fig. 16).[35] There, the elaborate sculptural programme and central tower are reminiscent of Brussels, but it also introduced a prominent new feature in the form of highly ornate gables that were added in the early sixteenth century, and which marked the position of the entrance to the meat hall on the market side and the main entrance to the council halls on Noordstraat.

With their growing economic importance as outports of Antwerp, even small centres in the Scheldt estuary such as Veere could afford to build lavish edifices for their governments.[36] In Veere, the enterprise was undertaken with the support of the lord of Veere (Fig. 17).[37] The façade's alternating scheme of windows and statues resembles Bruges, but in this case the seven figures represent the House of Borssele and their successors of Burgundy-Beveren, underlining the town's dependence on the lords of Veere for its privileges.[38] The prominence of small centres such as Veere in town hall construction testifies that these buildings should not be understood as simply the ultimate expression of civic autonomy. On the contrary, their sculptural programmes usually exalted a city's loyalty to the rightful prince.[39] In several other cases, the erection of a new town

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[35] Ruud Meischke, 'De stedelijke bouwopgaven tussen 1450 en 1530', in *Keldermans, een architectonisch netwerk in de Nederlanden*, ed. Jan van Mosselveld et al. (The Hague: Staatsuitgeverij, 1987), 87–103.

[36] Meischke, 'De stedelijke bouwopgaven'.

[37] Willem Unger, *Het stadhuis van Veere* (Middelburg: Gemeente Veere, 1934), 9–11.

[38] Marloes Matthijssen, *Zeven heren en vrouwen verbeeld. De zestiende-eeuwse stadhuisbeelden van Veere* (Veere: Museum De Schotse Huizen, 2013), 17.

[39] Köhl, 'Princely Architecture'; Van Uytven, 'Flämische Belfriede'.

Fig. 15 Gouda, town hall, circa 1448–1459 (Hurx)

hall was even undertaken jointly by the civic authorities and the territorial lord. In smaller places like Hoogstraten and Culemborg (Fig. 18), it was the local lord—Lalaing—who initiated the construction of a prestigious new building for the civic administration.[40] Indeed, many larger and more powerful cities such as Antwerp, Lille, Ghent, 's-Hertogenbosch and Amsterdam were rather late in joining the competition.

[40] Köhl, 'Das Brüsseler Rathaus', 159; L. Sillevis and Piet Beltjes, *De bouwgeschiedenis van het stadhuis te Culemborg*, Culemborgsche Historiebladen, eerste serie, nr. 1 (Culemborg: A.T Verschoor v/h Blom & Olivierse, 1939).

Fig. 16 Middelburg, Anthonis I Keldermans and Rombout II Keldermans, town hall, 1452–1521. The building was reconstructed after the bombing of 1940 (Hurx)

Fig. 17 Veere, Evert Spoorwater, town hall, begun 1474 (Hurx)

Fig. 18   Culemborg, town hall, begun 1534 (Hurx)

4 Conclusion

Written sources remain usually mute on the intentions for erecting monumental architecture in this period. However, the starting dates of construction and recurring architectural features show that cities were closely following developments elsewhere. In some cases, as in Leuven, the wish to emulate a nearby project, the town hall of Brussels, is even clearly articulated in the accounts. Both church towers and town halls were an expression of the prosperity of their respective communities. These monuments should be understood as an instrument of inter-urban competition, but as well as a means of maintaining a power balance *within* the city. Rather than merely articulating civic pride, they conveyed multi-layered meanings, challenging and acknowledging the existing power balance at the same time. For instance, the initiative for constructing ornate new town halls in the fifteenth century lays with the towns. While these buildings clearly expressed their power, the iconographical programme of their façades often acknowledged the dependence of the city on the prince for their privileges. However, their buildings were also a message to the ruling lord to keep the city's interests in mind. In contrast, in smaller towns founded by high nobility, it was clearly the local lords who were the driving force behind the erection of town halls in the late fifteenth century. They were therefore not meant to under-line the freedom of the town, but rather their dependence on their lord. This ambiguity seems to have been convenient or even strategic, after all, pride, as Geert Groote reminds us, was basically a sin.

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