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Adel in Friesland 1780 - 1880

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SUMMARY

Johan Huizinga has pointed out that Dutch culture already in the Golden Age had a bourgeois character; and indeed it is not easy to fit the Dutch nobility into the picture of Dutch cultural history. It is indubitable that the leading elite of the Seven Provinces in the 17th and 18th century consisted of the patricians in the cities of the province of Holland who had acquired great wealth in the trade capitalism which made the small Republic an economic and naval world power. In Holland, the self-conscious patricians saw themselves as the equals of the nobles, yet even in this province, nobility and patriciate differed in life style and rarely intermarried. After 1650 the nobility of Holland began to decrease in numbers and gradually dwindled into insignificance, because no more ennoblements took place.

Recent studies by English, French and German historians have analysed the important differences between regional aristocracies within France, Germany and England. Accordingly the study of the Dutch nobility must take provincial diversities into account. In line with the so-called Wageningen school in the study of Dutch rural history, this study of the Frisian nobility emphasizes its existence as a separate regional elite. Concentrating on a regional nobility as a social group implies a detailed study of the main aspects of that group, such as size, composition, patterns of landownership and inheritance, political power and collective mentality. In order to give an adequate analysis of these complex phenomena, Max Weber's well-known model for studying social inequality will be used. This model includes four dimensions: the demographic conditions and composition of the nobility ('size'), its economic position ('class'), its political power and influence ('party') and, finally, its social and cultural position ('status') as expressed in its style of living, its honour and its mentality.

Before the Batavian Revolution of 1795, Friesland was one of the seven independent provinces of the Republic of the United Netherlands. In the 19th century, it became a province of the centrally governed Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Frisian nobility of the *Ancien Régime* comprised mainly a rural elite. Around 1780, the nobility in Friesland was a powerful ruling class. Their modest but characteristic lifestyle was an important criterion of true aristocratic descent. The wealthiest families lived mainly on the land, which they rented to farmers producing for the market. This market consisted largely of trade in dairy products and formed the backbone of a relatively prosperous agricultural economy that was both commercialised and specialised. Frisian noblemen had their stately homes in the country and, together with the wealthy families of non-noble descent, administered justice and ruled the thirty rural districts (*grietenijen*) of the province. Unlike the nobility of Holland the Frisian nobility dominated their provincial parliament, the States of Friesland,

during the Dutch republic. The Frisian cities were much less powerful than the cities of Holland. The yearly convention of the States of Friesland took place in the provincial capital, Leeuwarden, where the whole Frisian nobility assembled. The delegates of the province of Friesland in the States-General of the Republic were also noblemen. Like the patriciate of Holland, the Frisian nobility of around 1780 was a closed and ruling oligarchy. Traditionally, the Frisian nobles were very class conscious: they deliberately avoided marriages with wealthy Frisian burghers.

The central question of this book is how the nobility succeeded in maintaining its political, social and cultural hegemony in Friesland between 1780 and 1880. Like the English aristocracy and the elites in other Dutch provinces, the Frisian nobility went through a demographic crisis in the 18th century. The death rate among adults and children was high, whereas the frequency of marriages declined because strict social endogamy was maintained in the choice of marriage partners. During the 19th century, demographic conditions became more favourable again, and the number of noble families dying out declined. The establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1813 was an important fact for the continuity of Dutch nobility. King William I and King William II gave many patricians a noble status. This policy did not impart a more aristocratic character to Dutch and Frisian society, however. In fact, a kind of 'national elite' came into existence which upheld distinct bourgeois virtues. The members of this elite had privileged access to important and representative posts in the bureaucracy and constituted the majority in parliament and government. In the province of Friesland too, the old and the new nobility, though still overrepresented in provincial and local government during the 19th century, increasingly tended to conform to this bourgeois lifestyle.

Paradoxically, the drastic shrinking of the Frisian nobility at the end of the 18th century had favourable consequences for its economic position during the 19th century: the remaining families inherited the possessions of those families that died out and thus increased their wealth. The nobility also acquired large fortunes because of a change in the marriage strategy, which now made alliances with patricians and wealthy burghers an acceptable bargain. Economically, the increasing demand from England for butter and meat favoured the big landowners. Moreover, the growth of the population and the strong demand for land enabled the latter to raise rents steadily. Just as in the English form of rent capitalism, the Frisian noble landowners carefully avoided pruning away the profits of their tenants. Nonetheless they had large incomes from their estates and around 1850 the majority of the Frisian landed nobility belonged to the wealthiest families of the Netherlands.

In order to keep their estates together, Frisian families could not fall back on those legal systems of inheritance (still in force elsewhere in 19th century Europe) which ensured some form of

primogeniture. By co-operation, this flexible practice could avoid division of the estate. This flexible practice became increasingly hard to maintain because of the individualization of family property in the 18th century and was to decrease in child mortality, an important factor which made it difficult for noble families. By demography, it could take place. This was to be difficult, but it tended to be individual interests than by a

Between 1780 and 1813, the Frisian nobility was divided. From 1780 onwards, various political positions were taken by his part on this political scene within the province, but managed to create a bond with the Frisian aristocracy. Most Frisians were *primus inter pares* and they were too powerful.

The Batavian Revolution affected the Frisian nobility and of this period. In the next decade the aristocracy lost its estates, but after these difficulties the noblemen again began to take positions. Nevertheless, the role and its days as a virtuous circle since 1813, when William I established a centralized state (Belgium).

During the period 1813-1848, the Frisian elite seem to have lost their political power. Loyal to the Dutch, Frisian nationalist sentiments were in local and provincial politics. The influence of revolutions elsewhere led to a very liberal constitution in 1848. Around 1860 onwards, the Frisians, liberals and conservatives took positions in parliament and only the Frisian nobility remained in local administration in the provinces. In the decades after 1860 it had a class, totally dedicated to the Frisian provincial nobility who did not have an academic degree in order to enter the political network.

The Great Depression

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primogeniture. By co-operating closely, however, family members could avoid division of their property for quite some time. Despite this, this flexible practice of inheritance and property management became increasingly harder to maintain on account of the individualization of family life which had already begun in the 18th century and was to increase during the 19th century. The decrease in child mortality, which led to larger families, also was an important factor which led to the division of large estates. There were of course substantial differences in wealth between noble families. By demographic chance sudden transfers of property could take place. The management of large properties turned out to be difficult, but it tended to be motivated more by shared individual interests than by a policy inspired by aristocratic class.

Between 1780 and 1880 the Frisian nobility was politically divided. From 1780 until 1795 rival factions competed for various political positions. Stadholder Prince William V played his part on this political scene. He did not have sovereign power within the province, but through his system of patronage he managed to create a bond between himself and a minority of the Frisian aristocracy. Most Frisian nobles preferred to see him as a *primus inter pares* and they were concerned that he would become too powerful.

The Batavian Revolution of 1795 ended the power of both the Frisian nobility and of the Stadholder and his clientèle. During the next decade the aristocracy had to live a life of leisure on its estates, but after these difficult ten years an increasing number of noblemen again began to accept political and administrative positions. Nevertheless, the nobility had to assume a more modest role and its days as a virtual ruling class were over, particularly since 1813, when William I, son of the former stadholder, finally established a centralized government in the Netherlands (and Belgium).

During the period 1813 - 1848, most nobles of the provincial Frisian elite seem to have become reconciled to the loss of their political power. Loyal to their sovereign and possibly because of Frisian nationalist sentiments, they accepted numerous positions in local and provincial administration. In 1848, under the influence of revolutions elsewhere in Europe, William II gave way to a very liberal constitution. After 1848, and especially from around 1860 onwards, the Frisian nobility divided politically into liberals and conservatives. Only liberals were elected into parliament and only they were appointed in governmental positions. Increasingly, the Frisian nobility turned away from local administration in the rural districts, and especially in the two decades after 1860 it had all the characteristics of a real leisure class, totally dedicated to a *dolce far niente*. Members of the provincial nobility who *did* aspire to a political career, had to have an academic degree in order to gain access to a supraregional political network.

The Great Depression in European agriculture between 1873

and 1896 did not make the Frisian nobility sell its land, but the social unrest during this period caused an increasing absenteeism on the part of the big landowners. In addition, the traditional paternalistic ties between landlord and tenant became weaker. After 1860, and particularly after 1880, noble families began to leave Friesland. The majority settled in The Hague or in the neighborhood of Arnhem, where socialism was no threat to their life of leisure.

As an estate, the Frisian nobility never had any real privileges. Its social prestige derived mainly from the admiration and respect with which it was looked upon by the rich burghers and farmers of the Frisian middle class. Especially in the 19th century, some extremely wealthy burgher families tried to assume the life style of the rural nobility, though without a similar identification with rural society. The rural nobility accepted the duty of *noblesse oblige* though its interpretation of it was undoubtedly paternalistic. The provincial nobility, at least in the countryside, was culturally dominant, but, significantly enough, increase in wealth was only to a minor degree turned into status consumption. Newly built stately homes, for instance, remained relatively modest in Friesland.

During the 19th century the Frisian nobility underwent a process of change, particularly concerning its cultural forms and mentality. At the end of this century the differences of lifestyle between the Frisian upper middle class and the nobility had almost disappeared. Indeed, the *embourgeoisement* of the nobility manifested itself in various domains. A typical example is the strong decrease in interest for a military career among Frisian noblemen. Ever more commonly noble families chose the provincial capital as their permanent residence. As regards family life, a certain convergence between nobility and upper middle class customs can be detected, for instance in the ways in which feelings of love between husband and wife were expressed and in the degree to which parents participated in the education of their children.

At face value, descent and family tradition - the two criteria which helped to distinguish the nobility from the upper middle class - remained intact. But, whereas the father was still a typical landed nobleman who regularly visited his tenants and preferred talking about horses and hounds, his sons or daughters might radically break with family tradition. The son, like a *bourgeois-gentilhomme*, locked himself up in his study to read the Classics. Whereas the mother preferred a religious meeting in the family circle, her daughter paid social calls or travelled abroad. At the end of the 19th century, wealth, education and social position determined the lifestyle of a Frisian noble family, not descent. B.G. Niebuhr described the Frisian nobility as the one with the most simple lifestyle in all Europe. With this characterization we can agree, and we may add that the Frisian nobility also became the most bourgeois one in all Europe.

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