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**Sumptuary legislation, material culture and the semiotics of ‘*vivre noblement*’ in
the county of Flanders (14th – 16th centuries)**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question addressed in this contribution is a simple one: how was nobility structured in a society in which this particular form of social identity was not yet regulated by the princely state? Historians of the Southern Low Countries all agree that in the later Middle Ages, being noble was still first and foremost a form of social recognition. In the kingdom of France, for example, the princely state had successfully established a monopoly to determine who was noble and who was not in the fifteenth century, but a similar system was only fully established in the Southern Low Countries at the turn of the seventeenth century.² In the preceding centuries, one was basically noble if one was considered as such by his contemporaries. This social judgement was also a legal one, as nobility was grounded in customary law. Persons who were asked to prove their noble status did so by invoking testimonies of undisputed nobles. In 1398, for example, Guillaume de Tenremonde, a noble inhabitant of the city of Lille, had expressed his desire to join the Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Since one had to be noble to be admitted to this prestigious knightly order, Guillaume asked six high-ranking noblemen from various regions of

the Low Countries to vouch for him being kin to them and '*extrait de noble sang et lignee.*' The French prior of the Hospitallers readily accepted this as proof that Guillaume de Tenremonde fulfilled the requirements to join the order.³

To understand nobility as a social and legal status, it is therefore necessary to understand how people profiled themselves as nobles and how that claim was evaluated by others. This question is not easily answered, because the Southern Low Countries was one of the most densely urbanized regions of Western Europe. The urban landscape shaped a social context in which nobility was certainly not only a matter of sheer wealth. In fact, the leading families of the towns of Flanders or Brabant were often much richer than members of the local nobility.⁴ The county of Flanders counted some fifty-odd towns, all ruled by conglomerates of very wealthy families, while the nobility only consisted of approximately 250 noble houses. Hence, the challenge is to explain why only a small segment of the economic elite enjoyed a noble status. Also, the question must be answered as to how some families succeeded in becoming noble. As it was inevitable that noble houses disappeared due to migration or lack of male heirs, the nobility only survived as an institution because its ranks were constantly replenished by the adoption of commoners.⁵

This issue is by no means new. In fact, the conventions that structured social consensus whether someone was noble or not in late medieval Low Countries are the subject of an old and intense historiographical debate. The controversy is to a large extent a consequence of the paucity of the sources. The surviving literary and ideological writings on nobility may daunt historians by their sheer volume, but in contrast, precious few documents are preserved that inform us on nobility as a social practice. The rules that shaped the attribution of noble status to specific individuals and families belonged to the realm of customary law.⁶ In the later medieval era,

customary law functioned primarily in an oral context, which makes it difficult to retrace the specific rules that pertained to nobility. In the Low Countries, the registration and codification of customary law was ordered by Emperor Charles V in 1531 and this only started to yield significant results in the second half of the sixteenth century. In consequence, little or no legal documents survive which refer explicitly to those rules and their application.⁷

In this setting, it is unsurprising that the issue of noble identity formation has provoked fierce discussion and precious little certainties. In the past decades however, a historiographical consensus has emerged. In this view, the rules of nobility are thought to revolve around appearance. Staying noble or becoming noble required specific investments to uphold or to adopt a lifestyle that was considered to be exclusive for the established nobility. The key elements of this noble lifestyle are supposedly the possession of large-scale landed property, fiefs or seignories, military service, a patrilineal family structure, marriages with members of other noble families and, last but not least, a specific material culture that entailed amongst others clothing, riding horses, carrying swords, hunting, the use of heraldry and specific behavioural patterns in speech, posture and consumption (e.g. eating swans and herons or the ostentatious openhandedness known to contemporaries as '*largesse*').⁸ By emulating this extremely costly noble lifestyle – referred to by historians as '*vivre noblement*' – commoners could profile themselves as nobles, and were in due time perceived as such. In short, recent research on the nobility of the Southern Low Countries tends to define ennoblement as a form of social mobility that proceeded by appropriation.⁹

This article intends to redirect this paradigm towards a new line of enquiry with an in-depth study of the social construction of nobility in fourteenth and fifteenth-

century Flanders, the dominant principality of the later medieval Low Countries.¹⁰ The linchpin of this particular conceptualisation of nobility, that is, the assumption that a specific form of material culture could function as an effective barrier between nobles and commoners, needs critical revision.

Our argument will consist of three sections, the first of which can be described as an intellectual history of the notion of '*vivre noblement*.' We will argue that historians were wrong to assume that this particular concept of 'living nobly' was firmly established in late medieval Flanders. It only came into being in the sixteenth century and its conception was closely connected with the growing ambitions of the princely state to establish a monopoly on the attribution of noble status in society. As the theoretical construction of '*vivre noblement*' was born from the turmoil of a rupture with the later medieval era, it is certainly not self-evident to apply this concept on the history of the nobility of the fourteenth and fifteenth century.

This line of thought will be continued with a study of the diffusion of the elements that are supposed to be a prerogative of the nobility. This analysis will show that a surprising number of the above-mentioned elements of the supposedly noble lifestyle were in fact widely accessible to commoners with a modicum of wealth and landed property. They were undeniably markers of social distinction, but it must be very much doubted that those elements constituted a lifestyle that was more or less exclusive to the established noble houses. The idea that the social composition of the nobility was shaped by the extent to which commoners mastered certain patterns of conspicuous consumption does not hold up to close scrutiny for the county of Flanders. The only element that did function as a decisive marker between nobles and commoners was seigniorial lordship. At the turn of the sixteenth century, being or becoming noble was entwined with the possession of a signiory, a

property right which entailed the exertion of public power over its inhabitants. In late medieval Flanders, nobility was still intrinsically connected with the social pre-eminence that flowed from the exertion of seigniorial power, as it had been in the High Middle Ages.

The last, concluding section of this article is dedicated to the consequences of this historiographical revision for the interpretation of the material culture of late medieval elites by historians, art historians and archaeologists.¹¹ Contrary to what is suggested by the historiographical concept of '*vivre noblement*,' in Flanders, the discussed forms of material production and consumption were not unilaterally charged with noble connotations. Instead, they were open to more than one interpretation, depending of the social context of its use. For a nobleman, the ownership of large estates, deer parks, horses, hunting dogs and so on, helped to *propagate* the noble status he essentially derived from seigniorial lordship, while for a commoner, those elements *constituted* a high social status in a more general sense. This article will conclude with a discussion of the polysemic nature of the material culture of late medieval elites, borrowing from anthropological perspectives on the value of objects and from social semiotics, that is, the theory on the social production of meaning.

2. THE PRINCELY STATE AND THE BIRTH OF A NORMATIVE NOBLE LIFESTYLE

The nobility of premodern Europe has provoked heated discussion and will undoubtedly continue to do so, but historians agree to this much: nobility was not a form of social status in the modern sense of the word, that is, a strictly individual quality. Instead, it was what contemporaries and historians alike tend to describe as an 'estate,' a social identity that was firmly anchored in the sphere of public

authority. Indeed, the very existence of nobility was only legitimised by the fact that nobility was a part of the societal order ordained by God. Contrary to the popular assumption that this particular concept was not fundamentally questioned before the end of the *Ancien Régime*, nobility was subject to intense intellectual debate among medieval scholars. The existence of a distinct form of social inequality rooted in bloodlines was only accepted because nobles were supposed to fulfil a critical task in society. By definition, being noble was the quality attributed to those people who by rights participated in the governance of a given principality by providing the ruler with counsel and the military support necessary to uphold the peace (the so-called '*consilium et auxilium*').¹² This ideological framework for the definition and legitimisation of noble status is best known by the popular image coined by Adalberon of Laon († 1090), in which he envisioned a three-tiered society of '*oratores*' (the clergy as the first order, charged with providing spiritual services), the '*bellatores*' (the nobility as the second order, defined by its military obligations towards society) and the '*laboratores*' (the third order, burdened with all economic duties), all united under and contributing to the rule of law of the prince.¹³

While this image has never been more than just that, an ideological construct that did little justice to the complexity and dynamics of medieval society, the theoretical underpinnings of nobility deserve our full attention. The intellectual conception of noble status as an intrinsic part of the public realm had very practical consequences for the individuals and families that constituted the nobility of the later medieval Low Countries. The institutional framework for popular representation, for example, usually echoed this tripartite view of society with convocations of the so-called Three Estates, namely the clergy, nobility and the third estate. In some regions of the Low Countries – and the county of Holland in particular – the participation to the gatherings as representatives of the Second Estate even

became the pre-eminent focal point for the social demarcation of the nobility as a distinct group.¹⁴ In Flanders, the Three Estates as a representative body was introduced in the 1380s, but it would always remain a marginal phenomenon.¹⁵ From the early fourteenth century onwards, the popular representation of this county was completely dominated by the three capital cities Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. Nevertheless, it is clear that here too, the social reality of nobility was distinctly shaped by the public nature of noble status. For one thing, it stimulated a prompt and thorough integration of foreign noblemen who had settled in the county of Flanders. This was certainly not self-evident in a period in which regional identities became highly charged by the political unification of the Low Countries. The various principalities that constituted the emerging composite state known as the Burgundian-Habsburg Low Countries were extremely preoccupied with the preservation of their own judicial and political organization within the new union. The prince was frequently asked to take an oath during public ceremonies that he would respect the particular nature of the principality, amongst others by refraining from appointing foreigners as officers in this region.¹⁶ The attitude towards noble immigration in those principalities formed a remarkable exception to this concern with the preservation of regional identity, precisely because noble status was inextricably entwined with the public sphere. In Flanders and the neighbouring duchy of Brabant, a foreign nobleman who became charged with an important office or who acquired a substantial estate in this county by marriage or inheritance, was henceforth perceived as a full member of the local nobility and in consequence summoned for military levies and gatherings of the Second Estate, side by side with nobles born and bred in this principality. In short, contemporaries made no legal difference between the 'Flemish nobility' and 'the nobility in Flanders,' precisely because noblemen were by definition supposed to be involved in the rule of the

realm.¹⁷

Given the ideological conception of the nobility as a social group both privileged and burdened with assisting the prince in fulfilling his obligations to his subjects, it is not surprising that the prince usually enjoyed the undisputed right to confer noble status to commoners. For the various duchies and counties of the Low Countries, this usually took the form of granting a knightly title. During the high Middle Ages, nobility and knighthood were separate concepts, as knights were mounted warriors with a rather modest social status, usually employed in the service of powerful lords. Nearly everywhere in Western Europe, knighthood would slowly evolve from a military designation to a personal title which implied by definition a noble status for its bearer. Nobles and knights started to share the same position in the above-mentioned scheme of the three orders.¹⁸ The timing of this fusion of nobility and knighthood differed widely for different parts of the Low Countries, but for Flanders, it is clear that at least at the turn of the fourteenth century, a knighted commoner was henceforth considered a nobleman.¹⁹

In theory, the right to knight commoners allowed the comital dynasty of Flanders to shape and reshape the social composition of the Flemish nobility in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Yet, the counts of Flanders were remarkably reticent to grant a knightly title to commoners. Nearly all beneficiaries belonged to families which were already considered noble, which suggests that knighthood was primarily seen as an accolade for a specific segment of the established nobility. Even on the rare occasions when the count knighted entire groups of people, usually at the eve of battle or in its aftermath, only a minority of the beneficiaries was not yet noble. When Maximilian of Austria, consort of Mary of Burgundy, Duchess of Burgundy and countess of Flanders, knighted 17 Flemings after his victory against the

French in the battle of Guinegatte in August 1479, only two of them were commoners.²⁰ Ennoblement by the acquisition of knighthood was in fact so uncommon that it received special attention from chroniclers.²¹ An indiscriminate use of the princely prerogative to knight commoners was clearly not tolerated by the established nobility of the Low Countries. Treatises written by noble courtiers vigorously defend the principle that the prince was only allowed to bestow a knightly title if the beneficiary was recommended to him by at least six nobles, a directive that fits remarkably well with the customary procedure to prove one's noble status by testimony of established nobles.²²

Generally speaking, it is clear that the counts of Flanders had the ability to confer noble status by granting knighthood, but it is equally clear that they rarely did so. A similar conclusion can be reached for patents of nobility. The formal granting of nobility was introduced at the end of the thirteenth century as the exclusive prerogative of the sovereign princes of Western Europe. Because the Scheldt river, the formal boundary between the German Empire and the kingdom of France, ran through the county of Flanders, both the emperor and the king could grant patents of nobility to inhabitants of this county. They have very rarely done so, probably because of the highly independent position of the Flemish counts vis-à-vis the French king and the emperor. A third player entered the field in the early fifteenth century with the Dukes of Burgundy. After the death of count Louis of Male in 1384, the county of Flanders was inherited by his daughter Margaret and her husband Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and youngest brother to Charles V of France. Their offspring would rule over the county until 1482, when the Burgundian Low Countries fell to the house of Habsburg. As this collateral branch of the French royal house of Valois would unite the various principalities of the Low Countries under its rule, thus giving birth to one of the most important power blocks of fifteenth-century Europe, it

is unsurprising that from 1424 onwards, the Dukes usurped the sovereign right to grant patents of nobility. However, the overall impact of those patents on the social composition of the Flemish nobility was negligible before the sixteenth century. Of the 437 noble houses attested in this county between 1350 and 1500, only three or four derived their noble status from such a formal grant.²³

The conception of nobility as an intrinsic part of the public sphere provided princes with several instruments to intervene in the social composition of the nobility, but it is clear that the rulers of fourteenth and fifteenth-century Flanders were not able or willing to deploy a structural policy in this respect. Becoming noble was still first and foremost a social phenomenon in the later Middle Ages. It was only in the last quarter of the sixteenth century that the princely state developed a stronger grip on the nobility, a process which is illustrated by the increasing number of formal grants of nobility issued in the Southern Low Countries.²⁴

Graph: formal grants of nobility in the Low Countries (1555-1633) (after P. Janssens 1998)

[see sheet]

This growing involvement of the state led to a watershed in the history of the premodern nobility at the turn of the seventeenth century. The Habsburg state would now not only interfere actively in the social renewal of the nobility with patents of nobility, it also developed an institutional framework to monitor the established nobility. In 1595 and 1616, two ordinances were proclaimed that put an effective end to customary nature of nobility.²⁵ From now on, noble status was strictly supervised by the princely state in the Southern Low Countries. As had been the case much earlier in England or France, one now had to be able to prove one's

noble status in a 'heraldic trial,' conducted before a princely court of law. Genealogical evidence, often falsified, was combined with testimonies on one's noble lifestyle to judge on the formal validity of someone's claim that he belonged to the legally defined noble order. Subsequently, an official verdict would be administered by the court, a copy of which the successful litigator could use as decisive proof in future disputes that might arise on his noble status.²⁶ The customary context of nobility, in which proving one's noble status revolved around the testimony provided by undisputed nobles, was now replaced by a system in which an attestation issued by state officials was the cardinal touchstone to judge one's claims to nobility.²⁷

This transformation of the legal framework for the nobility deserves our full attention, because the first known references to '*vivre noblement*' in the Southern Low Countries are closely connected to the first attempts of the princely state to extend its reach over this particular aspect of society. The concept of an exclusively noble lifestyle, usually referred to by expressions such as '*vivre noblement*,' living '*nobiliter*' or '*more nobilium*,' frequently occurs in legal documents from later medieval France or Central Europe,²⁸ but it is conspicuously absent in Dutch sources before the sixteenth century.²⁹ The very first reference known to historians to '*vivre noblement*' or '*edelijc leeven*' (its Middle Dutch equivalent), dates from the very end of the fifteenth century. It concerns a sumptuary law, issued on 20 October 1497 by Philip the Fair, titular Duke of Burgundy and count of Flanders from 1482 to 1506.

The ordinance of Philip the Fair has attracted much attention from historians. It is often described as the very first sumptuary law known for the Low Countries.³⁰ From a European perspective, this is unusually late. The oldest sumptuary laws for England and Germany date from the fourteenth century and in the Iberian peninsula, this type of legislation was already known in the thirteenth century. The focus of the

sumptuary law of 1497, however, is very much in accordance with its European counterparts since it dealt with sartorial distinctions. This particular preoccupation of sumptuary legislation is unsurprising, as dress was one of the most powerful markers of social identity in premodern society.³¹ All the sumptuary laws on dress and other forms of conspicuous consumption that were regularly proclaimed in the various parts of later medieval Europe propagated the idea that social status should be reflected in external appearances. One's social identity was supposed to be expressed through specific forms of material culture.³²

Much suggests that the observance of the specific sumptuary stipulations was a rarity, but historians agree that those ordinances provide a particularly strong testimony of the active reflection on the social order and of the will to stabilise that order by reserving certain patterns of consumption to persons with a specific social status.³³ In this respect, it deserves our full attention that the oldest sumptuary law of the Low Countries had precious little interest in providing the noble order with exclusive sartorial privileges. Firstly, it stipulated that the wearing of garments made of damask, satin or velvet was only allowed to knights of the Order of the Golden Fleece, barons or knights banneret, excluding the ordinary knights and esquires. Thus, its first preoccupation was with the social differentiation *within* the nobility, namely the high nobility vis-à-vis the lower nobility. Next to this, the decree reserved certain garments – namely '*pourpointz, cornettes, barrettes et sayons*' – for men and women '*vivans noblement et destat*.'³⁴ The ordinance provides no further definition of this privileged group, apart from an aside that it included the ducal officers and their relatives, who were certainly not always noble.³⁵ The use of the expression '*vivre noblement*' must have been a novelty, because contemporaries felt the need to clarify it. Shortly after the proclamation of this ordinance in their city, the urban government of Bruges issued an addendum that informs us how they

understood this particular stipulation of the ordinance:

As for those people living nobly and people of estate, whether they can dress in jerkins, cornets and robes etc., that those burghers living of their rents and are reputed to live nobly, and the merchants who do not engage in the work of artisans and are reputed to be people of estate, and their wives as well; and if there are some of the principal guilds, such as the butchers and similar ones, who do not engage in manual labour in their trades, they are considered to be of the same estate as the burghers, and they are reputed to be people of estate, on the judgment of the officers.³⁶

The ordinance and its exegesis by the Bruges city council may contain the first known reference to the expression 'living nobly' in the Southern Low Countries, but it is clear that the issue was not the social distinction between nobles and commoners. Flemish society clearly understood the sumptuary stipulations for the '*vivans noblement et destat*' as a means to highlight the social distinctions between the social elite in the broad sense of the word – that is, the nobility and the richest burghers – and those groups in society who were well-off but who debased themselves with manual labour. In consequence, the concept of '*vivre noblement*' does not enter the stage as a lifestyle exclusive to the nobility as existing historiography would have it, but precisely as a common denominator for the nobility and the highest strata of the urban and rural elite.

Obviously, it would be a mistake to interpret the decree of 1497 or the highly concurrent sumptuary ordinances issued in 1531, 1546 and 1550 as innocent reflections of the functioning of dress as a social marker in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Flanders since they aimed to cement a highly charged interpretation of the

social hierarchy.³⁷ The ordinances also explicitly charge princely officers with the sanctioning of transgressors, an adumbration of the attempts of the Habsburg state to establish a firm hold on the attribution of noble status in the second half of the sixteenth century.³⁸ Nevertheless, the conspicuous absence of different sartorial regulations for nobles and commoners seems to be in keeping with social practice. Indeed, several fourteenth-century chroniclers were struck by the fact that the wealthy inhabitants of the Flemish towns were at least as well dressed as the nobility.³⁹ This went as far as the carrying of swords by members of the urban elite.⁴⁰ One chronicler even saw the outbreak of civil war in Flanders in 1379 as a consequence of the arrogance and haughtiness of the city dwellers who 'were better dressed than the nobles,' thus subverting the divine order of society.⁴¹ The idea that dress should reflect one's social status was very much present in Flanders, as elsewhere in late medieval Europe, but contemporaries were fully aware that dress would do little or nothing to demarcate the nobility from the rest of the elite.

Dress was not the only issue that would be subjected to the growing aspirations of the sixteenth-century state to monitor the attribution of social status. A few decades after the sumptuary legislation of 1497, this preoccupation also found an expression in the game laws issued for the county of Flanders. On 20 January 1534, Emperor Charles V issued an edict in which he reserved the hunt on big game for the prince and the hunt on smaller animals (in particular hares and rabbits) for nobles and those persons who had received a special patent to do so.⁴² The sumptuary laws might have refrained from marking out certain types of dress as the exclusive prerogative of the nobility, but the ordinance of 1534 conceived hunting as an exclusive privilege of the noble order.

This is a remarkable action, for it was a patent breach with the customary traditions of the county of Flanders. The rupture with the existing situation was recognised in the edict itself, as this piece of legislation was expressly presented as a reaction to the unpalatable fact that hunting had become everyman's business in late medieval Flanders (*'la chasse est devenue commune'*). The ordinance does not hesitate to describe this situation as a subversion of the natural order, but it was in fact the general rule in the later Middle Ages. The hunting and eating of game was closely associated with the nobility, but it was certainly not limited to it. The right to hunt was in the Low Countries not primarily connected with social status, but with the possession of certain properties. In consequence, many commoners with landed estates shared the passion for the hunt with nobles.⁴³ A similar observation can be made for the keeping and eating of swans and herons, another form of conspicuous consumption that is often considered typical for the nobility. The Bruges patrician Hendrik Braderic († ca. 1368) for example, used a part of his very considerable fortune to buy the manor of Boneem, a large estate near Damme. Together with this property, he had acquired the highly prestigious ownership of the swans breeding in the moats and he soon made arrangements with his noble neighbour, the lord of Moerkerke, to distinguish their swans with a personal mark.⁴⁴ Seen in this light, the hunting ordinance of 1534 gains special significance as the very first attempt of the princely state to define *'vivre noblement'* as historians tend to understand it today, namely as a specific lifestyle that was exclusive to the nobility.

At the end of the sixteenth century, this offensive of the princely state would touch upon another domain of elite culture, namely heraldry. The installation of an institutional framework for the nobility with the edicts of 1595 and 1616 was coupled with an attempt to establish a new heraldic culture in the Low Countries. Similar to

what had been the case with the hunting laws of 1534, the two ordinances lamented that noble privileges – among which the use of heraldic emblems – were increasingly usurped by commoners. To halt this perceived devolution of heraldry, the ordinances provided specific rules that would henceforth allow to distinguish the heraldic emblems of nobles vis-à-vis commoners by reserving the use of the helmet, crest and mantle as ornaments to the coat of arms for the nobility. As was the case with sumptuary legislation, princely officers were charged with the implementation of the new heraldic rules. In the following centuries, the various regional and central courts of law and the heraldic officers would indeed expend considerable time and energy to enforce the new heraldic regulations.⁴⁵

Contrary to what had been the case with hunting, the princely state did not try to reclaim the entire practice of heraldry for the nobility. That was clearly not feasible for the Southern Low Countries. Unlike the situation in later medieval England or Scotland, where heraldry remained ‘indissolubly connected with military vocation and service,’⁴⁶ the use of heraldic emblems was widespread among commoners in the Low Countries, Germany and Italy.⁴⁷ Heraldry had come into existence in the twelfth century as a way for aristocratic warriors to recognise each other in the chaos of the battlefield, but its use was in many regions no longer limited to persons and groups with military aspirations. In the county of Flanders, heraldry became mainstream among the urban elite as early as the thirteenth century and in the later Middle Ages, only the lower classes of Flemish society did not participate actively in heraldic culture.⁴⁸ The popularity of heraldry among the wealthy families of the various Flemish towns and castellanies is unsurprising. Similar to the nobility, they saw patrilineal descent as the cornerstone of their familial identity. Heraldry was an ideal marker to express this sense of belonging to a specific house (a ‘*geslachte*’ in Middle Dutch),⁴⁹ because it was an emblematic token that was

common to all persons that shared a real or imagined ancestor in the male line.⁵⁰ In this setting, the ordinances of 1595 and 1616 could only hope to establish a heraldic subculture for the nobility, supposedly by putting an end to the usurpation of the noble prerogative to adorn the coat of arms with the helmet and mantling. This too however, was a highly fictitious interpretation of established heraldic practices in late medieval Flanders. The use of helmet-crests and heraldic battle cries (the so-called device) was in fact widespread among commoners, while not all noble families did use those adornments.⁵¹

As such, it becomes clear that in Flanders, the idea of noble exclusivity in dress, hunting or heraldry was a post-medieval construct. It was an invented tradition that took shape in the context of a fundamental redefinition of the legal framework of nobility in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. The emergence of '*vivre noblement*' as a specific lifestyle that functioned as a social barrier between nobles and commoners was in fact inextricably entwined by the growing aspirations of the Habsburg rulers to dismantle the customary rules that had shaped the social composition of the nobility in the fourteenth and fifteenth century and to replace it with a legal system in which the ascription of noble status was firmly defined as a monopoly of the princely state.

3. LAND AND LORDSHIP AS CONSTITUENTS OF NOBILITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL FLANDERS

It is clear that many elements that historians tend to associate with the performance of nobility, did not function as distinctive markers in this respect. Luxury clothing, landed estates with hunting opportunities, swords and armour, horses and so on, it was all purchasable to the wealthy commoners in the highly urbanized society that was late medieval Flanders. This was recognised as much by contemporaries. At the

turn of the sixteenth century, the Flemish nobleman Antoine de Baenst used one page of the administration of his estates to muse on the corruptive power of money: 'Be warned that there is no danger like that coming from a villain, no presumption like that from an enriched poor man. Everyone be on his guard' (*'Nota bene. Qu'il ny'a dangier que d'ung villain, ne orgueil que d'ung povre enrichy. Chascun s'en garde'*).⁵² Here, we see the same moralistic discourse that was voiced in the sumptuary laws, one that propagated the idea that one's appearance had to be in perfect accord with one's station in life, the latter being intrinsically stable and preordained by the divine organization of society.⁵³

That Antoine de Baenst was captivated by a discourse that fiercely scolded the aspirations of what he saw to be presumptuous upstarts, indicates that he was fully aware that nobles like himself did not distinguish themselves as such by a supposedly noble lifestyle. Yet, there is little reason to think that Antoine's writings were inspired by an acute sense of crisis, in which he and other nobles were haunted by existential doubts, faced as they were with an urban elite that equalled them in wealth and political power. Recent research on the Flemish nobility shows that its social composition was in fact remarkably stable. Between 1350 and 1500, the nobility of this county always oscillated around an average of 255 noble houses.⁵⁴ As was the rule with the premodern European nobility, the social turnover within the Flemish nobility was considerable – the nobility of 1476-1500 only consisted for 41,6 percent of families that already belonged to the Flemish nobility in 1350-1375 – but there was certainly no devolution of the nobility as a social institution.⁵⁵ The marked fixity of the noble population in this highly commercialized economy indicates that being noble was shaped by constituents that were far less transitory than patterns of luxury consumption.

The question must now be answered to what extent nobility was structured by three other elements that are usually included in '*vivre noblement*' as a historiographical concept, namely fiefs, the ethos of military service and seigniorial lordship. The best point of departure in this respect is a text written by Roeland de Baenst († 1484), the father of the aforesaid Antoine de Baenst. In 1480, when he was approximately 65 years old, this nobleman used the experience he had acquired in his long career as a comital bailiff to write a treatise on Flemish feudal law.⁵⁶ As an introduction to his work, he wrote a paragraph in which he connected feudal law with his own noble identity:

As feudal property is the highest and the most lordly thing on earth, and few people are familiar with it [i.e. feudal law], I want to elaborate on those feudal rights, since they are useful and necessary. Without fiefs, the world cannot be governed and nobility would not last, because everyman would soon want to be equal. One might realise this by looking at burghers who are unfamiliar with feudal law and who are, in consequence, all of equal estate. If they would have a lord, being their lord by homage, they would not last, because if their lord or their children would die, the property would be divided. As a result, the property would have many lords in a short span of time, and each man would want to claim his part of it. Therefore, it is proper that the eldest son inherits the seigniorship of the estate by himself and be the only lord, thus keeping the property intact, so that he might possess it legitimately, having authority over everyone, providing for his brothers and sisters and protecting and furthering his lineage as he ought to do. In this way he is the head of his house, which has to abide by him, and the land must be ruled in similar fashion, because otherwise, all lands would become internally

divided. In this way, nobility came into existence, and for all those reasons, it is good and fitting that every land and every high-ranking house is kept unified under one head, as the world, the land, the estate and the lineage cannot survive without it, no more than a man can live without a head.⁵⁷

Compared to the popular theoretical treatises on nobility that circulated in the fifteenth-century Low Countries, this focus on nobility in relation to the customary rules that regulated fiefholdership is an original one. Most writings in this genre tend to elaborate on personal virtue as the source of true nobility. In consequence, most literature had little or no connection to the social reality of noble status, because its true goal was to invigorate the morality of the aristocratic audience.⁵⁸ We will argue that the rather cryptic text of Roeland de Baenst provides a remarkably accurate synthesis of the constitutive framework for noble status in late medieval Flanders.

At first sight, the line of enquiry provided by Roeland de Baenst seems to lead to a dead end. He deemed it fitting to write on nobility in his treatise, because nobility would be inconceivable without feudal law. However, it is clear that in itself, feudal landownership had little or nothing to do with nobility. As discussed above, the Flemish nobility usually consisted of approximately 250 noble houses on a given moment between 1350 and 1500, but estimations suggest that the county of Flanders counted no less than 10,000 fiefs, covering more than one quarter of the surface area of the principality.⁵⁹ The large majority of those fiefs was in possession of commoners, both burghers and well-off peasants, who derived no claim to nobility whatsoever from their fiefholdership. Even among the more important fiefs, only a minority was held by nobles. Of the 165 principal fiefs attested in the castellany of Courtrai, one of the fifteen administrative districts of the county, only forty-four were in 1475 in possession of a member of a noble house (26 percent).⁶⁰ With the

secondary and tertiary fiefs (i.e. fiefs that were held from other fiefs), the share of the nobility must have been even lower. The possession of a fief was certainly not limited to the nobility, and as a corollary of that, military service as mounted warriors too was certainly not a noble privilege.

It should not be doubted that martial prowess was an important issue in the life of a Flemish nobleman. In a trial conducted in 1485, a Flemish nobleman still proudly boasted that he had followed his liege in battle 'as a nobleman has to do' (*'comme ung noble homme doit faire'*).⁶¹ Up to the middle of the sixteenth century, the subsequent rulers of the county convoked the nobility when embarking on a military campaign.⁶² However, this military duty was not exclusive to the nobility. Every fiefholder, noble or not, who held an estate large enough to sustain the expenses to field one horseman and two footmen also had to answer to the summons in person. Contemporaries usually described the mustered troops as the *'nobles et fievéz,'* the nobles and the fiefholders.⁶³ In consequence, there were many families outside the nobility that cultivated a strong military tradition. Wills and marriage contracts reveal that those wealthy fiefholders fought in full armour and on horseback and that they conceived this military service within a patrilineal framework, as did the nobility. They often expressly stipulated that their armour, weapons and destriers were not subject to division among all heirs – this being the tenet of allodial inheritance law – but that they must be inherited solely by the oldest male heir so that he could continue the military tradition of his house.⁶⁴ It were members of this group of wealthy fiefholders that sometimes obtained a noble status by receiving a knightly title in the aftermath of a battle.

It is clear that Roeland de Baenst had something more subtle in mind than a direct connection between fiefholdership and nobility. In his text, he attributed a pivotal

importance to feudal law as a constituent of the societal order, because this legal system contributed to the rule of law. His point of departure was the statement that a society could only prosper if it was governed by a single ruler. With this, he adhered to a biblical line of thought that was central in medieval political theory (Matthew 12.25: *'Omne regnum divisum contra se desolatur et omnis civitas vel domus divisa contra se non stabit'*). The obvious application concerns the succession to principalities and the family as a social organization, but Roeland de Baenst also implemented it to legitimise a third institution, that is the social inequality between nobles and commoners. That he thought of nobles as mainstays of the public order is of course partially derived from the classic social ideology that dictated that nobles owed military and political assistance to their liege lord. As such, they helped the prince in protecting the commonweal. There was also a second reason why Roeland de Baenst thought that the nobility derived its legitimacy from this paradigm of political unity. In the valediction of his treatise, Roeland de Baenst once more implored his fellow noblemen (*'ghij edele ende ghij moghende'*) to guard and maintain feudal law because it was the source of 'your nobility and your power' (*'hu edelheit ende hu moghenthede'*).⁶⁵ This tautological conception of nobility and power is also present in the paragraph quoted above, as Roeland de Baenst speaks of the importance of feudal law for the preservation of 'the seigniorship of the estate' (*'de heerliche vander stede'*).

This focus on nobles as lords (*'heere'* in Middle Dutch; *'seigneur'* in Old French) is the crux of this treatise on nobility, because it refers to the exertion of power by nobles in their own right, distinct from their capacity as princely agents. According to Roeland de Baenst, the source of their lordship was the seigniorship (*'heerliche'* in Middle Dutch). Seigniorships were estates that conferred its owner with judicial power over all persons under the seigniorships' jurisdiction. When the lord

had low or middle jurisdiction, he had to leave the sanctioning of serious breaches of the peace to the comital bailiff, but if he had high jurisdiction, he was entitled to deal with crimes that were punishable by death.⁶⁶ Indeed, Flemish lords often executed individuals within the boundaries of their seignior.⁶⁷ In short, seignories encapsulated to varying degrees the public authority in a locality that belonged elsewhere to the prince and according to Roeland de Baenst, the exertion of this lordship was at the very heart of being noble. That he described this connection from a feudal perspective, is the logical consequence of the fact that seignories were usually, but not always, fiefs. In itself, a seignior could perfectly be allodial in nature, or as contemporaries put it, only held in fief 'from God and the sun.'⁶⁸ However, a basic principle of Flemish customary law was that allodial properties were divided equally among all heirs, male or female.⁶⁹ In the long run, repetitive division would of course undermine the seignior as an institution. The Flemish nobility has avoided this threat by dedicating allodial seignories to the prince, who subsequently returned it to them as a fief. Flemish feudal law was essentially primogenitural in nature, as the oldest son received the main estate, only leaving smaller endowments for younger sons and daughters.⁷⁰ A seignior that was made a fief was protected against division, because it would henceforth inherit from oldest son to oldest son. Because of this gradual enfeoffment of the seignories, there were few allodial seignories left in late medieval Flanders. This, and the obvious importance of the feudal rules of inheritance for the continued existence of seigniorial lordship, made an introduction to a treatise on feudal law a fitting place for Roeland de Baenst to muse on the nature of nobility.

It cannot be doubted that feudal law was important to the nobility, since it harnessed family properties in a patrilineal framework that guaranteed the continued

prosperity of the noble house. Its primogenitural nature entrusted a nobleman with the care of the source of familial lordship and with the keepership of his younger brothers and sisters. In the long run, it defined him as the successor of previous generations and the progenitor of the following ones. As a Flemish would-be nobleman wrote in 1564 on the cover of his genealogical notes: '*Generatio praeterit et generatio advenit; terra autem in aeternitatem stat*' (Ecclesiastes, 1.4).⁷¹ Yet, in itself, feudal primogeniture cannot have functioned as a marker for the nobility, because nobles only constituted a minority among the Flemish fiefholders. Feudal primogeniture only contributed in a more general sense to the perpetuation of the social inequality between large-scale fiefholders vis-à-vis social groups whose properties were subject to allodial customary law. In consequence, the self-definition of individuals as members of a lineage was also to be found outside the nobility.⁷²

The question that must now be answered is whether the key contention of Roeland de Baenst – the idea that the nobility distinguished itself from other fiefholders by lordship – withstands critical scrutiny. First, it is clear that if nothing else, seigniorial lordship conferred considerable prestige to its owner. Historians have been struck by the tenacity and aggression with which lords defended their seigniorial rights against infringements of overzealous comital bailiffs.⁷³ The title of 'lord of ...' was also meticulously included in administrative documents and funerary monuments by anyone who could claim it.⁷⁴ Flemish eponymic culture too, testifies to the importance of seigniorial lordship for the social status of its proprietor.⁷⁵ Aristocratic family names were usually toponymic in nature, because aristocrats originally derived their surnames from the ancestral estate.⁷⁶ In early fourteenth-century Flanders, those surnames had already petrified into hereditary family names, a development that is commonly associated with a strong patrilineal conception of kinship structures.⁷⁷ Even if a house had lost possession of the estate, they usually

retained the family name derived from it. However, many families tended to derive alternative surnames from the seigniories they happened to possess at that moment. The fifteenth-century nobleman Jean de Saint-Omer, for example, also appears in the sources as *'Jean de Reninghe,' 'Jean de Morbecque'* or *'Jean de Waelscapelle,'* all derived from the seigniories in his possession. Last but not least, it should be noted that Roeland de Baenst was certainly not the only one in late medieval Flanders who deemed lordship pivotal to noble status. The customary title of address of high-ranking nobles was *'hoghe ende moghende heere'* or *'noble et puissant seigneur.'*⁷⁸ This power was clearly understood to be seigniorial authority. In a trial held around 1470, for example, the nobleman Lewis of Luxemburg, count of Marle, referred to *'la terre et seigneurie de Bourbourg, laquelle il tenoit noblement en toute justice haulte, moyenne et basse.'*⁷⁹ There was no such thing as 'living nobly' in Flanders before the sixteenth century, but it seems that a seigniorial authority could be 'held nobly.'

A quantitative analysis confirms that this discursive association of nobility with lordship was rooted in social practice. To this day, there is no research available on the social status of the owners of the Flemish seigniories that transcends the level of a case-study. Seigniories only appear on a regular basis in the feudal administration and for many Flemish districts, little or no feudal registers are preserved. Allodial seigniories are even more difficult to trace, because they were by definition excluded from this source type. To verify the importance of seigniorial lordship for noble identity formation, we focused on the so-called Liberty of Bruges, the district that included the surrounding countryside of the city of Bruges. Given the fact that the Liberty held something in between 11,4 and 18,9 percent of the Flemish population, it was undoubtedly the most important castellany of the county.⁸⁰ An analysis of the available sources yielded a list of 65 seigniories situated in this region.⁸¹ For 51

seigniories, the owner is known for the sample year 1501. In ten cases, the seignior was the property of an ecclesiastical institution or the prince. The social profile of the remaining 41 laymen is remarkable: no less than 40 of them belonged to noble houses, the exception being Willem Barbezaen, lord of Erkegem. A member of a patrician family from Bruges, Barbezaen was married to the daughter of Jean de Rebreviettes, lord of Thibouville and a scion of a respected noble house.⁸² This particular commoner clearly had access to the networks of the uncontested nobility.

Overall, seigniorial lordship was firmly under control of the nobility in late medieval Flanders. In fact, this near-exhaustive monopoly can only be explained if the owners of those seigniories were noble precisely because they possessed a seignior. Given the fact that the nobility of late medieval Flanders was subject to an average rate of attrition of 14,2 percent per 25 years, more than half of the noble population was replaced within a century. In this setting, one would expect that at least some of the seigniories traditionally controlled by established noble houses would sooner or later be inherited or bought by families who were not noble. That the possession of a seignior was still a noble privilege at the turn of the sixteenth century, indicates that commoners who came to possess a seignior soon succeeded in renegotiating their social position. Indeed, case-studies seem to confirm that the procurement of seigniorial lordship was crucial for processes of ennoblement. In the early fourteenth century, the wealthy commoner Zeger Boetelin married to Marie de Fléchin, heiress to the seignior of Heule in the castellany of Courtrai, and at least from the 1360s onwards, he and his family were considered to be noble.⁸³ That the acquisition of Heule was crucial for their successful deployment as an established noble house, is indicated by the fact that the Boetelins tended to adopt '*Van Heule*' as a new family name. This was certainly not limited to this particular family. In fact, this very pattern can still be discerned two centuries later, at the end of the fifteenth

century. When Gerard van Axpoele, the last male member of the old noble house of Axpoele, had died in 1488, the two seigniories of Axpoele and Hansbeke were inherited by his only daughter Pauline, who was married to a commoner, master Pieter de Wale († 1499), a highly trained state official from the city of Ghent. Pieter de Wale and his offspring with Pauline van Axpoele were soon explicitly referred to as being noble and strikingly, they profiled themselves henceforth as the house of 'De Wale said of Axpoele' (*'De Waele gheseit van Axpoele'*).⁸⁴

The main purpose of such modifications to the family name was not to present oneself as the continuation of a noble house extinct in the male line. In the case of the De Wale family, that might have been part of it, but the Boetelin family had not inherited the seigniorie of Heule from the old noble house of Van Heule. Above all, it had to propagate lordship, since the new family name referred to the seigniorie now under that family's control. This is confirmed by an ingenious attempt of Jan de Grutere († 1515), an ennobled patrician from Ghent, to entrench his lordly status in his very family name. After Jan de Grutere had inherited the seigniorie of Eksaarde from his uncle, the nobleman Jan van Vaernewijck, he introduced a curious new spelling of his family name, styling himself henceforth as *'Jan de Gruutheere, tijdelic heere van Exaerde.'*⁸⁵ In doing so, he did much more than simply stressing his position as the new temporal lord of Eksaarde. The conventional spelling of the name, *'De Grutere,'* literally means 'he who gruits beer,' which is in all likelihood derived from the professional activity that had propelled this family towards economic and political prominence as early as the thirteenth century. The new spelling of *'De Gruutheere,'* must be understood as 'gruit-lord,' imbuing the very family name with seigniorial connotations. This ploy was successful, as the noble spelling of this family name became widespread in the following centuries.⁸⁶

The key contention of this article is that lordship was at the heart of nobility in late medieval Flanders, but this should not be understood as a mechanistic interpretation in which the social composition of the nobility was directly and totally determined by the rate of circulation of seigniorial ownership. Nearly every seignior was under noble control, but not every nobleman possessed a seignior. Women and younger brothers and sons of a noble house usually relied on their kinship to the family head to share in the renown of his lordship. Next to this, some noble families did not longer own a seignior.⁸⁷ The noble house of Van Menen, for example, saw the ancestral seignior of Menen confiscated in 1288 after a conflict with the count of Flanders. The family nevertheless maintained its foothold in the Flemish nobility until the very end of the fourteenth century, undoubtedly helped by the fact that the count allowed them to lease the office of receiver of the seignior of Menen.⁸⁸ The attribution of noble status was not only a question of who possessed a seignior, but also of the remembering of who had done so in the past.⁸⁹

Also, a hypothesis that deserves further research is that some noble houses might have derived their pre-eminence as lords not from a seignior in the strict sense of the word, but from the ownership of a castle with a certain geopolitical importance. The feudal estate of Dudzele, near the city of Bruges, provides an interesting example. The property entailed several seigniorial rights, but it was not a fully fledged seignior. Yet, its owner was widely known as 'the lord of Dudzele,' probably because of the imposing castle situated on the estate.⁹⁰ Since castles were iconic symbols of power, they too made its owner a lord. Indeed, the medieval French word '*donjon*,' used to describe the castle keep, was derived from the Latin '*dominium*' or lordship.⁹¹ Of course, a castle was not a clear-cut concept, as it distinguished itself only in a gradual sense from more modest forms of fortified residences. The late medieval Flemish countryside was sprinkled with hundreds of

moated sites, that is, farmsteads situated on a slightly raised area and bounded by a wide moat.⁹² As some of those sites were ostentatiously boosted with crenelated gateways, turrets and so on, there might have existed a grey area between strongholds that provided its owner with undeniable lordship – and in consequence, with noble distinction – and the more common manors that served as residences for respected country dwellers or as countryhouses to the wealthy families of the Flemish towns.⁹³ Nobility was sufficiently connected to seigniorial lordship to function as a stable and durable distinction to a specific group of families within a broader economic elite, but the social boundaries of the Flemish nobility were never strictly delineated as they were also shaped by constituents such as kinship and social memory and perhaps also by the existence of forms of power that closely resembled seigniorial authority.

4. MATERIAL CULTURE, SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND NOBLE IDENTITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL FLANDERS

While seigniorial lordship was only one element in the set of customary conventions that shaped the ascription of noble status, it cannot be doubted that it was the lodestar of the ideology of nobility. As such, the conceptualisation of nobility in late medieval Flanders was still very much in keeping with the customs of the preceding centuries. Indeed, the written sources from the eleventh and twelfth century speak not so much of '*nobiles*,' but rather of the '*domini*,' the lords.⁹⁴ The economic value of seignories had declined considerably with the social and economic transition of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, but their symbolic value was still at the heart of being noble in the later Middle Ages.⁹⁵ As such, it is clear that the tendency to associate the ownership of fiefs and particular forms of dress, architecture or consumption with noble status leads to a highly distortive interpretation of the

material culture of the upper layers of Flemish society. In this part of medieval Europe, material culture has to be understood in a more complex context of social use and hence in the theoretical framework of material culture studies.

In a noted essay on the cultural patterns of the European nobility, Werner Paravicini pointed out that social communication concerning the noble status of specific persons and families essentially revolved around a complex sign system that encompassed a plethora of objects, concepts and actions, ranging from specific titles of address, heraldic symbols, clothing, armour, horses, falcons, hunting dogs, fortified residences, the hunting and consumption of game, specific patterns of speech and bodily behaviour, knightly exploits in warfare, jousting and travelling to specific forms of memorial culture and religious charity. It is also clear that the extent to which all those elements were associated with noble identity varied widely in both a geographical and chronological sense.⁹⁶ As such, the performance of nobility is identified as a process of semiosis, that is, the endowment of signs with meaning. Classic semiotics, which emerged in the early twentieth century with the linguistic studies of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), defined a sign as a combination of a *signifier* (a sound pattern) and a *signified* (the concept communicated with that sound pattern). In the century that followed, semiotics asserted itself as an independent scholarly discipline vis-à-vis linguistics by expanding the concept of a *signifier* from a sound pattern to every communicative object, it being auditive, olfactoric, tastable, tactile or visual in nature.⁹⁷ In doing so, semiotics realigned itself in a close relation to history, archaeology and anthropology. As a consequence of this interdisciplinary crossover, a semiotic perspective now lies at the basis of material culture studies.⁹⁸

The point of departure for the development of social semiotics and the subsequent

paradigm shifts it provoked in other disciplines was the observation that in social practice, words, icons and other signs are very often vaguely defined and subject to variations and shifts in meaning, dependent of the specific context of use.⁹⁹ As such, the key contention of social semiotics is that signs tend to derive their precise meaning from the social position of the persons who deploy them and their power relations with the other actors in the communicative relation. In consequence, signs are by definition the site of competing voices and interests.¹⁰⁰ This perspective is highly relevant for a better understanding of nobility in late medieval Flanders.

Most tokens included in the discussed paradigm of '*vivre noblement*' were not crucial to profile oneself as a nobleman. They contributed to narrowing the gap with the nobility, but they could not truly bridge that gap. Undoubtedly, it was necessary to wear costly clothes, to carry a sword, to flaunt a heraldic emblem, to ride a horse and so on, all funded by the ownership of large landed estates, to be perceived as a nobleman, but in itself, it was insufficient. A successful claim to nobility also required lordly status, noble ancestry or a formal grant by the prince. Without one or more of those three elements, this particular lifestyle could only provide commoners with social prominence in a more general sense. In contrast, that lifestyle did something different for individuals that were commonly perceived as nobles. In their case, the ownership of fiefs, horses, swords, armour, hunting animals and so on, helped to convey that noble status to others. For example, the heraldic emblem of a wealthy commoner did not carry the same message as the heraldic emblem of a nobleman. In the first case, it expressed the belonging to a family that conceived itself as a coherent patrilineal network. In the case of the latter, the emblem did more: it also propagated the noble status of its owner, because this sign was fueled by the public knowledge that this person and his family controlled a source of seigniorial lordship or used to do so in the past.

Indeed, anthropologists focusing on the construction of value have since long recognised that the meaning of objects is fused with the social relations that makes those objects circulate. This is obviously the case for gifts and heirlooms, but it is also, albeit to a lesser degree, present in commodified objects.¹⁰¹ In the market-oriented society that was late medieval Flanders, all elements that historians often associate with noble identity, ranging from a sword or a fur-lined mantle to a seignior with high jurisdiction, were commodified objects in the sense that they were purchasable to the economic elite of that society. However, much suggests that seigniories were 'enclaved commodities,' objects of which it was deemed improper to subject them frequently to commodity exchange.¹⁰² As seigniories were at the very heart of the cultural framework of nobility, families tended to do everything in their power to keep the seignior within the patrilineal line of succession. If that line ended because of a lack of male heirs, the seignior in question remained an heirloom, because Flemish feudal law stipulated that it must be inherited by someone related to the previous owner. Only a few examples are known of the selling and buying of seigniories in late medieval Flanders, which suggests that it only entered the realm of commodity exchange in the case of acute financial embarrassment.¹⁰³ This attitude was in fact not restricted to seigniories. We already discussed the habit of Flemish nobles and fiefholders to encapsulate the transmission of their sword, armour and horses in this patrilineal framework and a similar observation can be made for the iconographic marker that constituted the heraldic emblem of a noble house. As such, the reluctance to yield certain aspects of their material culture to other exchange formats than gift or inheritance, firmly entwined those objects with the self-definition of those families as seigniorial lords.

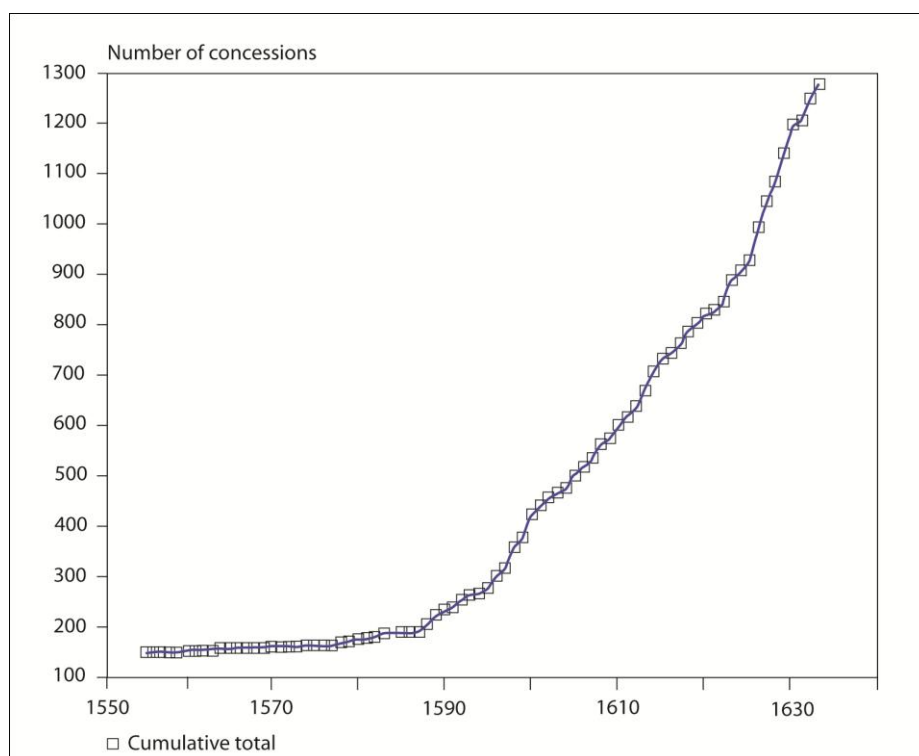
That objects tended to imbibe the social status of its owner, was recognised as such by contemporaries. As discussed above, the ownership of a large fief was certainly not exclusive to the nobility, but a trial held in the 1480s makes clear that if such an estate was in the hands of a noble family for a considerable time, it became a carrier of the noble identity of the family in question. This issue came to the fore in the fierce legal dispute that arose over the deathbed wishes of the nobleman Godevaart Vilain († 1481). He had pledged much of his extensive properties in Flanders and Brabant to religious foundations, to the chagrin of Vilain's feudal heirs, namely his noble nephews Jan van Kruiningen and Jean de Montmorency. In the trial, they not only claimed that their uncle had been delirious when making his will, they also stated that

during his life, the aforesaid late lord Godevaart Vilain had owned and possessed several noble holdings, large fiefs and seigniories, which had fallen and devolved to him with the death of his father and mother and other people [...], those fiefs, lands and seigniories having been property of lord Godevaart's predecessors for a very long time and even for more than a century without ever having been disposed of to the benefit of others than the legal heirs, it thus being clear that those aforesaid fiefs and seigniories must not be owned by strangers, nor others who do not belong to this particular bloodline and lineage.¹⁰⁴

In sum, that the nobility remained a stable phenomenon despite the progressive commercialization of society, was partially derived from what one might call the fetishism of specific objects by the previous generations of nobles.

The increasing commercialisation and urbanisation of Flemish society in the

late Middle Ages had endowed a relatively large segment of society with considerable purchasing power and social self-consciousness. In this setting, nearly every sign commonly associated with nobility had become more accessible to wealthy burghers and country-dwellers than was the case in most parts of late medieval Europe. However, the precise meaning communicated with those signs differed widely along the social spectrum. The lack of exclusivity of those sign languages did not lead to a devolution of noble status, because the necessary means to endow those signs with noble meaning, that being seigniorial lordship or noble ancestry, was not so readily commodified.¹⁰⁵



Graph: formal grants of nobility in the Habsburg Low Countries (1555-1633) (after P. Janssens 1998)

¹ We thank Martha Howell, Werner Paravicini, Paul Janssens, Chris Given-Wilson and our colleagues at the Departments of History and Archaeology at Ghent University for their help and comments.

² As such, this region differs from the neighbouring principalities, where such a monopoly can be discerned as early as the fifteenth century. For the Northern Low Countries, see A. Janse, *Ridderschap in Holland. Portret van een adellijke elite in de late Middeleeuwen* (Hilversum, 2001), 74-81. For France, see J.B. Wood, *The nobility of the election of Bayeux, 1463-1666. Continuity through change* (Princeton, 1980), 25.

³ Brussels State Archive, Fonds de Lalaing – charter collection, nr. 45. For other examples, see Archive Départementale du Nord (Lille), B 1555, nrs. 12491-2.

⁴ For a quantitative analysis, see R. Van Uytven, 'Classes économiques, hiérarchies sociales et influence politique aux Pays-Bas du sud du X^{IV}e au X^{VII}e siècle', in A. Guarducci (ed), *Gerarchie economica e gerarchie sociali secoli XII-XVIII* (Florence, 1990), 373-377 and Table IV. The degree of urbanization of the county of Flanders is estimated at 36 percent in the fifteenth century. See P. Stabel, *Dwarfs among giants: the Flemish urban network in the Middle Ages* (Leuven, 1997), 19-43.

⁵ The conceptualisation of nobility as an institution is based on G. Melville, 'Institutionen als geschichtswissenschaftliches Thema: Eine Einleitung', in G. Melville (ed), *Institutionen und Geschichte: Theoretische Aspekte und mittelalterliche Befunde* (Cologne-Vienna, 1992), 1-24.

⁶ This discussed in J. Gilissen, *La coutume* (Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 41) (Turnhout, 1982), 22-8 and 32-3. For a more extensive discussion of nobility in literary works, see F. Buylaert and J. Dumolyn, 'Shaping and reshaping the concepts of nobility and chivalry in Froissart and the Burgundian chroniclers' *The Fifteenth Century*, IX (2010),

forthcoming.

⁷ For a general discussion, see R.C. Van Caenegem, 'Aantekeningen bij het Middeleeuwse gewoonterecht', *The Legal History Review*, LXIV (1996), 97-111.

⁸ This view was introduced with J. Bartier, *Légistes et gens de finances au XVIème siècle: les conseillers des ducs de Bourgogne Philippe Le Bon et Charles le Téméraire* (Brussels, 1952-1955), 2 vols. and subsequently adopted in various publications. It was conceptually elaborated upon in P. De Win, 'Queeste naar de rechtspositie van de edelman in de Bourgondische Nederlanden', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, LIII (1985), 223-274; J. Dumolyn and F. Van Tricht, 'Adel en nobilitiseringsprocessen in het laatmiddeleeuwse Vlaanderen: een status quaestionis', *The Low Countries Historical Review*, LXV (2000), 197-222 and W. De Clercq, J. Dumolyn and J. Haemers, "'Vivre noblement": material culture and elite identity in late medieval Flanders: the case of Peter Bladelin and William Hugonet', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXXVIII (2007), 1-31.

⁹ For a review of the introduction of this concept in the historiography of the premodern Low Countries, see W. Frijhoff, 'Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving', *Trajecta*, VI (1997), 99-118.

¹⁰ With approximately 660,000 inhabitants, Flanders provided 25,8 percent of the population of the Low Countries. The French-speaking province of Walloon Flanders (approximately 73,000 inhabitants) is not included in this study, as its legal customs vis-à-vis the nobility differed from Dutch-speaking Flanders.

¹¹ Such a revision is in order, because the paradigm of '*vivre noblement*' exerts considerable influence on the interpretation of medieval material culture. See for example J.C. Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the close of the Middle Ages. Studies in society and visual culture* (University Park (Pennsylvania), 1998), 2-84 and L. Gelfand, 'Piety, nobility and posterity: wealth and the ruin of Nicholas Rolin's reputation', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, I (2009).

¹² For the best analysis of noble status as a public property, see H. Kaminsky, 'Estate, nobility and the exhibition of estate in the later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, LXVIII (1993), 689-692. For

nobility as a contested concept in later medieval thought, see K. Schreiner, 'Religiöse, historische und rechtliche Legitimation spätmittelalterlicher Adelherrschaft', in O.G. Oexle and W. Paravicini (eds), *Nobilitas. Funktion und Repräsentation des Adels in Alteuropa* (Göttingen, 1997), 376-430.

¹³ For a general introduction, see G. Duby, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris, 1978) and A.J. Gurevich, *Categories of medieval culture* (London - Boston, 1985), 153-210. This social imagery would remain popular in the Low Countries until the sixteenth century. See H.-J. Raupp, 'Visual comments of the mutability of social positions and values in Netherlandish and German art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', in W. Blockmans and A. Janse (eds), *Showing status: representations of social positions in the late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 1999), 278-280, 305.

¹⁴ Janse, *op.cit.*, passim.

¹⁵ W. Prevenier, *De Leden en Staten van Vlaanderen (1384-1405)* (Brussels, 1961), 24-6, 57-75, 237-8 and W. Blockmans, 'La représentation de la noblesse en Flandre au XVe siècle', in J. Paviot and J. Verger (eds), *Guerre, pouvoir et noblesse au Moyen Age. Mélanges en l'honneur de Phillipe Contamine* (Paris, 2000), 93-4.

¹⁶ See W. Paravicini, 'La cour, une patrie? L'exemption du droit d'aubaine accordée par les ducs de Bourgogne aux officiers de leur hôtel (1444-1505),' *Revue du Nord*, LXXXIV (2002), 250-254, 266.

¹⁷ For a more extensive discussion, see F. Buylaert, 'La noblesse et l'unification des Pays-Bas. Naissance d'une noblesse bourguignonne à la fin du Moyen Âge?,' *Revue Historique*, DLIII (2010), 3-25.

¹⁸ R. Barber, 'When is a knight not a knight?', in S. Church and R. Harvey (eds), *Medieval knighthood V. Papers from the sixth Strawberry Hill conference 1994* (Woodbridge, 1995), 13-7.

¹⁹ See P. Thomas, 'Comment Guy de Dampierre, comte de Flandre, anoblissait les roturiers au XIIIe siècle (1282)' *Bulletin de la Commission historique du Département du Nord*, XXXIV (1933), 254-70.

²⁰ Chronicle of John, lord of Dadizele (Private collection of the Arickx family), fol. 56 v.

²¹ See for example G. Doutrepont and O. Jodogne (eds), *Chroniques de Jean Molinet* (Paris, 1935-1937), I, 463.

²² C. Potvin and J.-Ch. Houzeau (eds), *Oeuvres de Ghillebert de Lannoy, voyageur, diplomate et moraliste* (Leuven, 1878), 414. For a discussion, see J. Conell (ed), *L'instruction d'ung jeune prince: a critical edition and analysis* (Ann Harbor, 1984).

²³ This estimation is based on the survey of the patents of nobility provided by P. Janssens and L. Duerloo, *Wapenboek van de Belgische adel van de 15e tot de 20ste eeuw* (Brussels, 1992), 4 vols., and the recent reconstruction of the social composition of the late medieval Flemish nobility in F. Buylaert, J. Dumolyn, P. Donche, E. Balthau and H. Douxchamps (eds), 'De adel ingelijst. "Adelslijsten" voor het graafschap Vlaanderen in de veertiende en de vijftiende eeuw' *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, CLXXIII (2007), 47-187 and F. Buylaert, *De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België. Klasse der Letteren) (Brussels, 2010), in press.

²⁴ P. Janssens, *L'évolution de la noblesse belge depuis la fin du Moyen Age* (Brussels, 1998), 206.

²⁵ For an edition, see L. Arendt and A. De Ridder (eds), *Législation héraldique de la Belgique, 1595-1895. Jurisprudence du Conseil héraldique, 1844-1895* (Brussels, 1896), 139-216.

²⁶ L. Duerloo, "'Seer groote ongheregheltheden ... aengaende de titulen.'" Evaluatie van de rol en het belang van het heraldisch proces', in J. Verbesselt e.a. (eds), *De adel in het hertogdom Brabant* (Brussels, 1985), 89-90.

²⁷ Janssens, *L'évolution de la noblesse belge*, 319-321.

²⁸ The literature is vast. See in particular K.K. Klein, 'More nobilium se gerentes' *Vereins für siebenburgische Landeskunde*, LIX (1934), 108-113; E. Dravasa, "'Vivre noblement.'" *Recherches sur la dérogeance de noblesse du XIVE au XVE siècles*, *Revue juridique et économique du Sud-Ouest (série juridique)*, XVI (1965), 135-193; XVII (1966), 23-129; J.

Mourier, 'Nobilitas, quid est? Un proces à Tain-l'Hermitage en 1408' *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, CXLII (1984), 255-269 and Kaminsky, *op.cit.*, 389.

²⁹ This analysis is based on the extensive data provided by E. Verwijs and J. Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch woordenboek* (Den Haag, 1885-1941), 11 vols.

³⁰ The ordinance is discussed in Van Uytven, *op.cit.*, 369-70'; De Win, *op.cit.*, 250 and W. Blockmans, 'The feeling of being oneself', in Blockmans and Janse (eds), *op.cit.*, 12-14.

³¹ For a general introduction to the social meaning of dress in this period, see F. Piponnier and P. Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages* (New Haven - London, 1997), 114-140.

³² An overview and discussion of sumptuary legislation is provided by N. Bulst, 'Zum Problem städtischer und territorialer Kleider- Aufwands- und Luxusgesetzgebung in Deutschland (13.- mitte 16. Jahrhundert)', in A. Gouron and A. Rigaudière (eds), *Renaissance du pouvoir legislative et genèse de l'État* (Montpellier, 1988), 29-57 and M. Rubin, 'Identities', in R. Horrox and W.M. Ormrod (eds), *A social history of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), 399.

³³ See in particular A. Hunt, 'The governance of consumption: sumptuary laws and shifting forms of regulation', *Economy and Society*, XXV (1996), 413-414.

³⁴ For an edition, see L. Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed), *Inventaire des archives de la ville de Bruges* (Bruges, 1871-1876), VI, 480-482.

³⁵ This is extensively studied for the fifteenth century in W. Paravicini, 'Soziale Schichtung und soziale Mobilität am Hof der Herzoge von Burgund', *Francia*, V (1977), 127-182

³⁶ This ordinance was proclaimed on 20 November 1497. See L. Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed), *Cartulaire de l'ancien grand tonlieu de Bruges faisant suite au cartulaire de l'ancienne estaple: recueil de documents concernant le commerce inférieur et maritime, les relations internationales et l'histoire économique de cette ville* (Bruges, 1901-1908), II, 312-313: 'Als van den lieden edelic levende ende van state omme te mueghen draghene wamboysen, cornetten ende rocken, etc., dat de poorters levende up huere renten ghereputeirt zyn edelic levende, ende de coopliden die hem niet en moyen met consten van ambochten zyn ghereputeirt lieden van state, ende ooc huerlieder wyfs; ende zynder eeneghe van den

principalen ambochten, als vleeschauwers ende andere ghelicke, die hemlieden metter handt van hueren ambachte niet en moyen, die syn van also groote state gherekent als de poorters ende zy also ghereputeirt lieden van state ter discretie van den officiers.'

³⁷ The ordinances are edited in M.J. Lameere and H. Simon (eds), *Recueil des ordonnances des Pays-Bas. Deuxième série – 1506-1700* (Brussels, 1902-1910), III, 271-272; IV, 214-215; V, 80-81 and 128-129.

³⁸ Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed), *Inventaire des archives de la ville de Bruges*, VI, 482.

³⁹ See for example J. Kervyn de Lettenhove (ed), *Oeuvres de Froissart. Chroniques* (Brussels, 1873-1877), IX, 158. For other examples and a discussion, see P. Arnade, 'Urban elites and the politics of public culture in the late-medieval Low Countries', in M. Carlier e.a. (eds), *Core and periphery in late medieval urban society* (Leuven – Apeldoorn, 1997), 39.

⁴⁰ W. Blockmans, 'To appear or to be', in Blockmans and Janse (eds), *op.cit.*, 484-485 and M. Boone, "'Cette frivole, dampnable et desraisonnable bourgeoisie": de vele gezichten van het laatmiddeleeuwse burgerbegrip in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden', in J. Kloek and K. Tilmans (eds), *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip 'burger' in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2002), 35-37.

⁴¹ J.-J. Lambin (ed), *Dits de cronike ende genealogie van de prinsen ende graven van der foreeste van Buc, dat heet Vlaenderlant, van 863 tot 1436, gevolgd naer het oorspronkelijk handschrift van Jan van Dixmude* (Ieper, 1839), 253-254.

⁴² Lameere and Simon (eds), *op.cit.*, III, 440-441.

⁴³ De Win, *op.cit.*, 241-243. See also Janse, *op.cit.*, 349-353.

⁴⁴ Mechelen City Archive, "GG Documens divers IV-1" fol. 21 r. – 22 r.

⁴⁵ For an detailed analysis, see L. Duerloo, 'Het blazoën ontsmet. Adellijke heraldiek als toe-eigening van eer en deugd, 1550-1750', *The Low Countries Historical Review*, CXXIII (2008), 637-638.

⁴⁶ M. Keen, *Origins of the English gentleman. Heraldry, chivalry and gentility in medieval England, c. 1300 - c. 1500* (Stroud, 2002), 6.

⁴⁷ See O. Cavallar e.a. (eds) *A grammar of signs: Bartolo da Sassoferrato's Tract on insignia*

and coats of arms (Berkeley, 1994), 53, 109-110, 145-6.

⁴⁸ See in particular E. Warlop, *Héraldique* (Brussels, 1985), 26.

⁴⁹ For an example of the explicit use of “*geslacht*” (i.e. lineage, house) to describe the families of the Bruges urban elite, see Bruges State Archive, “Fonds Familiearchief” nr. 470.001, fol. 37 v.-39 r. and 40 r.-41 v.

⁵⁰ For an extensive discussion on the noble house and heraldry as its iconographic expression, see J. Morsel, ‘Geschlecht und Repräsentation. Beobachtungen zur Verwandtschaftskonstruktion im fränkischen Adel des späten Mittelalters’ and W. Paravicini, ‘Gruppe und Person. Repräsentation durch Wappen im späten Mittelalter,’ both in O.G. Oexle and A. von Hüben-Esch (eds), *Die Repräsentation der Gruppen. Texte, Bilder, Objekte* (Göttingen, 1998), respectively 259-326 and 327-389.

⁵¹ For a quantitative analysis, see R. Mathieu, *Le système héraldique français* (Paris, 1946), 201-203. See also Duerloo, ‘Het blazoen ontsmet,’ 61 and Duerloo, “‘Seer groote ongheregheltheden’”, 91-96. According to the highly influential treatise of Bartolus de Saxoferrato (*Tractatibus de Insignis et Armis*, 1356), it was only prohibited to adopt a heraldic emblem that was already in use by another individual. For a discussion, see M. Pastoureau, *Figures et couleurs. Études sur la symbolique et la sensibilité médiévales* (Paris, 1986), 115-122. See also C. Chaussier, *Le droit ancien et actuel des armoiries non nobles en Belgique. Droit armorial non noble en Belgique du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Brussels, 1980), 11.

⁵² For an edition, see L. Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed), *Coutume des pays et comté de Flandre. Coutume du Bourg de Bruges* (Brussels, 1883), III, 195-196.

⁵³ See O.G. Oexle, “‘Die Statik ist ein Grundzug des mittelalterlichen Bewusstseins.’ Die Wahrnehmung sozialen Wandels im Denken des Mittelalters und das Problem ihrer Deutung’, in J. Miethke and K. Schreiner (eds), *Sozialer Wandel im Mittelalter. Wahrnehmungsformen, Erklärungsmuster, Regelungsmechanismen* (Sigmaringen, 1994), 45-70 and V. Honemann, ‘Gesellschaftliche Mobilität in Dichtungen des deutschen Mittelalters’ in K. Andermann and P. Johaneck (eds), *Zwischen Nicht-Adel und Adel* (Stuttgart, 2001), 47-49. For the Low Countries, see W. Blockmans, ‘To appear or to be’, in Blockmans and Janse (eds), *op.cit.*, 486-487.

⁵⁴ Buylaert, *De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen*, chapter 3.

⁵⁵ This rate of renewal was not uncommon for noble elites in late medieval Europe. Compare with the estimations bundled in Ph. Contamine, 'The European nobility', in C. Allmand (ed), *The New Cambridge Medieval History. Volume VII c. 1415-1500* (Cambridge, 1998), 100-101.

⁵⁶ For the considerable contribution of the nobility to the development of feudal law, see D. Heirbaut, 'Who were the makers of customary law in medieval Europe? Some answers based on sources about the spokesmen of Flemish feudal courts' *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, LXXV (2007), 262-263 and 273.

⁵⁷ Bruges City Library, Mss. 442, fol. 15 r.: *'Omme dat leengoet dat hoecste ende heerlichte dinc vander werelt es ende niet lettelt menichte van lieden bekent zijn, so willic verclaers doen van den rechten want zij nuttelic ende noetsakelic zijn gheweten, want en ware leengoede de werelt ne soude niet zijn gheregiert, edelhede ne soude niet ghedueren want elc zoude in corten jaren willen wesen heven goet. Dit mach men beseffen bij den porterscepe van den steden die thofrecht niet en weeten ende by dien zijn vele porters van ghelike state. Adden zij eenen heere, die by leene haeren heere ware, zij en mochten niet ghedueren, want storve haerelieder heere of haerelieder kinderen, men soude gaen deelen de stede. Zoe soude in corten daghen de stede hebben vele heeren ende elc soude zijn deel van dier stede willen hebben. Hier omme eyst orborlic dat de outste zone hebbe de herlichede vander stede alleene ende blive alleene heere zo dat de stede eendrachtich blive ende dat hy se houde in rechte te syne dat hy ghebot hebbe over al ende dat hy goede zijn broeders ende zusters in andere goet ende dat hij mach zijn gheslachte bescermen ende behoeren vorderen ende oec hoeft zijn van al tgheslachte om van hemlieden ghedient te zijne ende aldus eyst oec van lantscepe, want aldus souden oec alle landen in ghescille worden. In deser manieren begoenste eerst de edelheede, ende al dus zoe voert ghehouden in elc lant ende in elc hoghe gheslachte eenpaerlic bleven een hoeft ende by dese redene eyst bequamelic gode ende horborlic der weerelt ende niet meer en mach lant, stede noch gheslachte ghedueren zonder hoeft dan de mensche zonder hoeft leven.'*

⁵⁸ See in particular C.C. Willard, 'The concept of true nobility at the Burgundian court', *Studies*

in the Renaissance, XIV (1967), 33-48 and A.J. Vanderjagt, "Qui sa vertu anoblist." *The concepts of noblesse and chose publique in Burgundian political thought* (Groningen, 1981), 45-73.

⁵⁹ See R. Opsommer, "Omme dat leengoed es thoochste dinc van der weerelt." *Het leenrecht in Vlaanderen in de 14^{de} en 15^{de} eeuw* (Brussels, 1995), I, 115, 142-143.

⁶⁰ Archives Départementales du Nord (Lille), B 4008/3.

⁶¹ Brussels State Archive, "Fonds Grote Raad", "Eerste aanleg" nr. 72 (statements of defence).

⁶² Buylaert e.a (eds), "'Adelslijsten" voor het graafschap Vlaanderen', 71-73.

⁶³ G. Doutrepont and O. Jodogne (eds), *op.cit.*, I, 57.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of those stipulations, see D. INSTALLÉ, 'De theorie omtrent adel getoetst aan de Mechelse situatie', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen* 104 (2000), 75-9 and J.R.J. DE WILDE, 'De financiële perikelen van de adellijke familie van Erpe-Van Zuylen, heren van Laarne tijdens de Tachtigjarige Oorlog', *Castellum* 24 (2007), 5.

⁶⁵ Bruges City Library, Mss. 442, fol. 31 r.

⁶⁶ For a general introduction, see J. Mertens, 'Heerlijkheden,' in W. Prevenier and B. Augustyn (eds), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Vlaanderen tot 1795* (Brussels, 1997), 552-557 and A.S. De Blécourt, 'Heerlijkheden en heerlijke rechten', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, I (1918), 72-75.

⁶⁷ E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst (eind 13de - eerste helft 16de eeuw)* (Ghent, 1988), I, 405 has doubted that lords could still execute people in late medieval Flanders, but explicit references to such executions can still be found for the 1460s. See Archives Départementales du Nord (Lille), "Lettres reçues et dépechées" B 17690.

⁶⁸ D. Heirbaut, *Over lenen en families (ca. 1000-1305). Een studie over de vroegste geschiedenis van het zakelijk leenrecht in het graafschap Vlaanderen* (Brussels, 2000), 24.

⁶⁹ See the classic analysis provided by E.M. Meijers, *Het ligurische erfrecht in de Nederlanden*.

II. *Het West-Vlaamsche erfrecht* (Haarlem, 1936), 33-35, 58.

⁷⁰ See in particular Heirbaut, *Over lenen en families*, 212-213.

⁷¹ Bruges State Archive, "Fonds De Schietere de Lophem" file 1. See also D. Crouch, 'The historian, lineage and heraldry', in P. Coss and M. Keen (eds), *Heraldry, pageantry and social display in medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2008), 17-18.

⁷² For a discussion for forms of primogenitural practices of other groups than the nobility in the Southern Low Countries, see in particular M.C. Howell, *The marriage exchange. Property, social place, and gender in cities of the Low Countries, 1300-1550* (Chicago-London, 1998).

⁷³ J. Van Rompaey, *Het grafelijk baljuwsambt in Vlaanderen tijdens de Bourgondische periode* (Brussels, 1967), 502-505, 514-515.

⁷⁴ See J. Dumolyn and K. Moermans, 'Distinctie en memorie. Symbolische investeringen in de eeuwigheid door laatmiddeleeuwse hoge ambtenaren in het graafschap Vlaanderen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, CXVI (2003), 332-349.

⁷⁵ For an introduction, see P. Geary, 'Foreword', in G.T. Beech, M. Bourin and P. Chareille (eds), *Personal names Studies of Medieval Europe. Social identity and familial structures* (Kalamazoo, 2002), VII.

⁷⁶ S. Wilson, *The means of naming. A social and cultural history of personal naming in Western Europe* (London, 1998), 132, 135.

⁷⁷ See the contributions in M. Bourin and P. Chareille (eds), *Genèse médiévale de l'antroponymie moderne. t. III. Enquêtes généalogiques et données prosopographiques (Études d'Anthroponymie médiévale Ve et VIe rencontres – Azay-le-Ferron 1991-1993)* (Tours, 1995).

⁷⁸ Ordinary nobles were addressed as "edele ende weerde heere" or "noble et discret seigneur."

⁷⁹ Brussels State Archive, "Fonds Grote Raad" register 790, nr. 32, fol. 117 r. - 121 v.; nr. 52, fol. 186 r. - 187 r.

⁸⁰ T. Soens, *Waterbeheer in een veranderende samenleving. Een ecologische, sociaal-economische en politiek-institutionele studie van de wateringen in het Vlaamse kustgebied*

tijdens de overgang van de middeleeuwen naar de moderne tijden. Testregio: het Brugse Vrije (D. Phil. Ghent, 2006), I, 27.

⁸¹ The point of departure for this analysis was Bruges City Archive, feudal register “Burg van Brugge” (1501), which has been complemented with various other primary sources, as well as the data from earlier attempts to survey the Flemish seigniories (E. Van den Bussche, ‘Les seigneuries de la cour féodale du Bourg de Bruges’ *La Flandre*, XVI (1885), 57-76; H. De Limburg - Stirum (ed), ‘Chanoine de Joigny. Manuscrit relatif aux seigneuries de Flandre’, *Handelingen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Oudenaarde*, VII (1926), 305-384; VIII (1927), 31-96, 165-180, 245-264, 265-280 and De Ghellinck Vaernewyck (ed), ‘Les seigneuries de la Flandre’ *Annales du Cercle Archéologique et Historique d’Audenaarde*, IX (1935) 71-96, 175-226).

⁸² See G. Du Fresne de Beaucourt (ed), *Mathieu d’Escouchy, Chronique* (Paris, 1863), II, 220.

⁸³ Brussels Royal Library, Mss. 7810, fol. 107 r.

⁸⁴ Brussels State Archive, “Fonds Rekenkamers” nr. 1180, fol. 403 r. and Ghent City Archive, series 93/1, cartulary A, fol. 61 v.

⁸⁵ The first document with this new spelling dates from 1496. For an edition, see A. De Ghellinck d’Elseghem Vaernewyck (ed), *Chartes et documents concernant la famille van Vaernewyck* (Ghent, 1899-1919), II, 540-4. See also the feudal registration acts submitted by Jan de Grutere in 1503-1504. Brussels State Archive, “Fonds Rekenkamers” nr. 1091, fol. 16 v. – 17 r.

⁸⁶ See the documents edited in L. Van Lerberghe and J. Ronsse (eds), *Audenaerdsche mengelingen* (Oudenaarde, 1845-1854), II, 353-354.

⁸⁷ See also Janse, *op.cit.*, 154-155.

⁸⁸ T. Soens, *De rentmeesters van de graaf van Vlaanderen. Beheer en beheerders van het grafelijk domein in de late Middeleeuwen* (Brussels, 2002), 151, 188-189.

⁸⁹ For a discussion of social memory as a constituent of nobility in the premodern Low Countries, see De Win, *op.cit.*, passim and F. Buylaert, ‘Memory, social mobility and historiography. Shaping noble identity in the Bruges chronicle of Nicholas Despars († 1597)’

Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire, LXXXVII (2010), in press.

⁹⁰ Buylaert e.a (eds), "'Adelslijsten" voor het graafschap Vlaanderen,' nrs. 747, 883, 1290, 1744, 1833.

⁹¹ See O.H. Creighton, *Castles and Landscapes. Power, Community and Fortification in Medieval England* (London-Oakville, 2002), 68; Vale, *op.cit.*, 181-184 and M. Johnson, *Behind the castle Gate. From Medieval to Renaissance* (London-New York, 2002), 122-123.

⁹² For an archaeological analysis, see F. Verhaeghe, 'Moated sites in coastal Flanders', in F.A. Aberg and A.E. Brown (eds), *Medieval moated sites in North-West Europe* (London, 1981), 127-171; Idem, 'Moated sites in Flanders. Features and significance', in T.J. Hoekstra, H.K. Janssen and I.W.L. Moerman (eds), *Liber castellorum. 40 variaties op het thema kasteel* (Zutphen, 1981), 98-121 and J. Bourgeois, 'Les sites fossoyés médiévaux de la région de Comines-Warneton (province de Hainaut, Belgique)' *Revue du Nord*, LXXXV (2003) 141-59.

⁹³ F. Verhaeghe, 'Les sites fossoyés du Moyen Age en Basse et Moyenne Belgique: état de la question', in M. Bur (ed), *La maison forte au Moyen Age. Actes de la table ronde de Nancy-Pont-à-Mousson, des 31 mai -3 juin 1984* (Paris, 1986), 102, 111-112.

⁹⁴ See E. Warlop, *The Flemish Nobility before 1300* (Kortrijk, 1976), vols. III and IV. A similar plea to stress the continuity with the definition of nobility in the later Middle Ages was developed for the county of Namur by L. Génicot, *L'économie rurale namuroise au bas Moyen Age. II. Les hommes, la noblesse* (Leuven, 1960).

⁹⁵ For an analysis of the developments that led to a decline of the economic value of seigniories, see Thoen, *op.cit.*, I, 384-417, 492-503, 605-613; II, 1051-1062 and Idem, 'A "commercial survival economy" in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (Middle Ages - 19th century)', in P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. Van Zanden (eds), *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages - 19th century) in light of the Brenner debate* (Turnhout, 2001), 102-157.

⁹⁶ W. Paravicini, 'Gab es eine einheitliche Adelskultur Europas im späten Mittelalter?', in R.C. Schwinges, C. Hesse and P. Moraw (eds), *Europa im späten Mittelalter. Politik – Gesellschaft – Kultur* (München, 2006), passim and in particular 401-405, 424-429 and 433.

⁹⁷ For a discussion, see T. van Leeuwen, *Introducing social semiotics* (London – New York, 2005), 3-24 and the introduction to S. Bouquet and R. Engler (eds), *F. De Saussure. Writings in general linguistics* (Oxford, 2006).

⁹⁸ See the various contributions in I.R. Hodder (ed), *The meaning of things. Material culture and symbolic expression* (London – New York, 1997) and in L. Meskell and R. Preucel (eds), *A companion to social archaeology* (Oxford, 2004).

⁹⁹ This was largely stimulated by the leads provided by Valentin Voloshinov (1895-1936), one of Saussure's earliest critics. For a historiographical survey, see the introduction to the Harvard University Press edition of his work: L. Matejka and R.I. Titunik (eds), *V.N. Voloshinov. Marxism and the philosophy of language* (Cambridge (Mass.) – London, 1986). However, it should be noted that the development of social semiotics is not limited to the reception of Voloshinov's work. For an example of a 'theory of social meaning' rooted in Saussurean semiology rather than Voloshinov's critique of it, see P.J. Thibault, *Re-reading Saussure. The dynamics of signs in social life* (London – New York, 1997), xvii-xix, 285-290 and 340-343.

¹⁰⁰ See in particular R. Hodge and G. Kress, *Social semiotics* (Cambridge, 1988), 5, 12, 15-19, 37-40 and Thibault, *op.cit.*, 251-254.

¹⁰¹ See the classic contributions of A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,' and I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', both in A. Appadurai (ed), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 11-13, 18-21, 64-91.

¹⁰² For an introduction to the cultural framework of market transactions in the medieval Low Countries, see M. Howell and M. Boone, 'In but not of the market. Exchanging movables in late medieval society' in M. Boone and M. Howell (eds), *In but not of the market. Movable goods in the late medieval and early modern economy* (Brussels, 2007), 9-16. For the definition of the concept of enclaved commodities, see Appadurai, *op.cit.*, 24 and A. Weiner, *Inalienable possessions. The paradox of keeping while giving* (Berkeley, 1992).

¹⁰³ For a discussion of some rare examples, see J. Dumolyn, 'Pouvoir d'État et enrichissement personnel: investissements et stratégies d'accumulation mis en œuvre par les officiers des

ducs de Bourgogne en Flandre,' *Le Moyen Age*, CXIX (2008), 80, 87-88.

¹⁰⁴ Brussels State Archive, "Fonds Grote Raad" register 803, nr. 155, fol. 1269-80: '*audit feu messire Godevart Vilain en son vivant cometoient et appartenoient plusieurs nobles tenements, grans fiefs et seigneuries que lui estoient escheus et succedéz par le trespas de ses pere et mere et autres gens [...], desquelz fiefs, terres et seigneuries les predecesseurs dudit feu messire Godevart avoient joy par longue espace de temps et mesme d'aucuns passé cent ans sans ce qualifiez en eussent disposer au proffit d'autres que de ledits hoirs apparans ne que lesdits fiefs et seigneuries eussent este posseszez par estrangers, ne par autres que ceulx de ledit sang et ligne.*'

¹⁰⁵ The focus on seigniorial lordship as the pivotal element in the construction of noble identity in Flanders has also the benefit of providing venues for comparisons with other regions. See for example the similar plea for a focus on lordship in the study of the English gentry in P. Coss, 'Hilton, lordship and the culture of the gentry', in C. Dyer, P. Coss and C. Wickham (eds), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages. An exploration of historical themes* (Oxford – New York, 2007), 44-48.