

Advisers or Decision-Makers?

The Agency of Dutch Urban Administrative Officials, c. 1500-1700

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This article analyses the unique position of secretaries and pensionaries in the governments of cities in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Northern Netherlands. At the centre of our analysis stands the tension which arose from the discrepancy between these officials' extraordinary access to government knowledge and their formally subordinate and sometimes even foreign status. With particular attention for cases of conflict between these urban administrative officials and their 'political' superiors, this article explores the agency of secretaries and pensionaries in influencing urban governance through (informal) power, discretionary space, and influence on policy-making. This broad study argues that local context and individual networks provided urban administrative officials with considerable scopes of action, which adds a new facet to our understanding of late medieval and early modern governance in its day-to-day practice.

Dit artikel analyseert de unieke positie van secretarissen en pensionarissen in zestiende- en zeventiende-eeuwse stadsbesturen in de Noordelijke Nederlanden. De spanning die voortvloeit uit de discrepantie tussen de informatiepositie van deze ambtenaren enerzijds, en hun ondergeschikte en soms zelfs buitenlandse status anderzijds, is de focus van ons onderzoek. Met bijzondere aandacht voor enkele conflicten tussen stadsambtenaren en hun 'politieke' superieuren, verkent dit artikel de *agency* van secretarissen en pensionarissen om stedelijk beleid te beïnvloeden door middel van hun (informele) macht, discretionaire ruimte, en rol in het beleidsvormingsproces. Onze brede studie suggereert dat stedelijke ambtenaren een aanzienlijke handelingsruimte konden verkrijgendankzij zowel lokale omstandigheden als hun persoonlijke netwerken. De besproken voorbeelden voegen een nieuw facet toe aan ons begrip van laatmiddeleeuws en vroegmodern openbaar bestuur in zijn dagelijkse praktijk.

Introduction¹

In 1663, the Leiden burgomasters and aldermen drafted a new instruction for the urban pensionary (*pensionaris*). The pensionary provided the local government with legal advice and represented the city abroad, most prominently as part of delegations to the States of Holland. From this instruction, it appears that Leiden's magistrates took issue with the autonomy displayed by their subordinate. They explicitly stated that henceforth the pensionary would advise the Leiden deputies *deliberatyf* rather than *decisyf*: he was meant to consult rather than to decide!² Such tensions between urban magistrates and their officials were not a new phenomenon. Pensionaries, the city's highest administrative officials, and secretaries, who managed the urban chancery, formed a crucial factor in processes of professionalisation and expansion of government in late medieval and early modern cities. As such, they occupied a unique position within urban governments. Their extraordinary access to government knowledge could prove difficult to reconcile with their formally subordinate and sometimes even foreign status.

Taking this inherent tension as point of departure, this article analyses the important but sometimes neglected group of secretaries and pensionaries of cities in the late medieval and early modern Northern Netherlands. To what extent could these administrative officials influence urban governance, structurally as well as in its day-to-day political practice? What agency did urban secretaries and pensionaries have, and should we classify their role as 'decisive' rather than supporting or 'deliberative'? By 'personal agency', we mean the scope of individual choices that enabled urban administrative officials to – intentionally or unintentionally – shape the structure of their own offices as well as to influence urban politics on a broader scale.³ To this end, secretaries and pensionaries could resort to (informal) power, discretionary space, and influence on policy-making. The agency of urban administrative officials developed within the institutional and legal framework of their offices, in interaction with other actors such as family and colleagues.

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2 Rudi van Maanen, 'De pensionaris als archiefvormer', *Nederlands Archievenblad* 88:4 (1986) 194–203, 196.

3 Petri Karonen and Marko Hakanen, 'Personal Agency and State Building in Sweden (1560–1720)', in: idem (eds.), *Personal Agency at the Swedish Age of Greatness 1560–1720* (Finnish Literature Society 2017) (*Studia Fennica Historica* 23) 13–44, 18–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21435/sfh.23>.

Over the recent decades, the historiography on urban administrative officials in the Low Countries has undergone a significant shift in focus. Earlier studies primarily sought to identify individual officeholders and the range of their duties, combing the archives for prosopographical information.⁴ More recently, historians have adopted a conceptual approach influenced by the work of Max Weber, which places urban civil servants in the broader history of bureaucracy.⁵ These studies demonstrate that rather than fitting in a neat linear trajectory towards modern rationalisation, urban administrative officials operated under a complex and variable combination of patrimonial and professional practices. Contemporaries, for instance, did not see a fundamental contradiction in the coexistence of venality and requirements for formal academic qualifications for office holding.⁶

- 4 Hendrik Kokken, 'De Leidse Pensionaris, 1477-1494', in: Jan Marsilje, P.J.M. de Baar and J.F. Jacobs (eds.), *Uit Leidse bron geleverd. Studies over Leiden en de Leidenaren in het verleden, aangeboden aan drs. B.N. Leverland bij zijn afscheid als adjunct-archivaris van het Leidse Gemeentearchief* (Gemeentearchief Leiden 1989) 124-129; Jeannette Bos-Rops, 'Het ontstaan van het stedelijk pensionariaat in Gouda; een eerste verkenning', in: *Excursiones Mediaevales. Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. A.G. Jongkees door zijn leerlingen* (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen 1979) 39-58; Eric Ketelaar, 'Clerc (secretaris) en pensionaris van de stad Dordrecht', *Holland. Regionaal-Historisch Tijdschrift* 3:3 (1971) 53-66; Frederik Hugenholtz, 'Clerc (secretaris) en pensionaris van de stad Leiden. Bijdrage tot de kennis van de stedelijke ambtenaren in de late middeleeuwen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 66 (1953) 220-234; Walther Stein, 'Deutsche Stadtschreiber im Mittelalter', in: *Archiv der Stadt Köln, Beiträge zur Geschichte vornehmlich Kölns und der Rheinlande. Zum 80. Geburtstag Gustav von Mevissens dargebracht von dem Archiv der Stadt Köln* (Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln 1895) 27-70.
- 5 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte*, ed. by Edith Hanke and Thomas Kroll (Mohr Siebeck 2005) (Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe 22) 157-234. See, recently, Edward Page, *Weber's Scorecard: State Development, Bureaucracy, and Officialdom in Europe since Charlemagne* (Oxford University Press 2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198904274.001.0001>.
- 6 Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Professionalization of Public Service: Civil Servants in Dordrecht, 1575-1795', *Journal of Urban History* 36:3 (2010) 345-367. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144209359146>; Griet Vermeesch, 'Capability, Patrimonialism and Bureaucracy in the Urban Administrations of the Low Countries (c. 1300-1780)', in: Jan Hartman, Jaap Nieuwstraten and Michel Reinders (eds.), *Public Offices, Personal Demands, Capability in Governance in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009) 53-78; Arie van Steensel, 'Het personeel van de laatmiddeleeuwse steden Haarlem en Leiden, 1428-1572', *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 9 (2006) 191-252; Aris van Braam, 'Bureaucratiseringsgraad van de plaatselijke bestuursorganisatie van Westzaandam ten tijde van de Republiek', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 90 (1977) 457-483; Oebele Vries, 'Geschapen tot ieders nut. Een verkennend onderzoek naar de Noordnederlandse ambtenaar in de tijd van het Ancien Régime', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 90 (1977) 328-349.

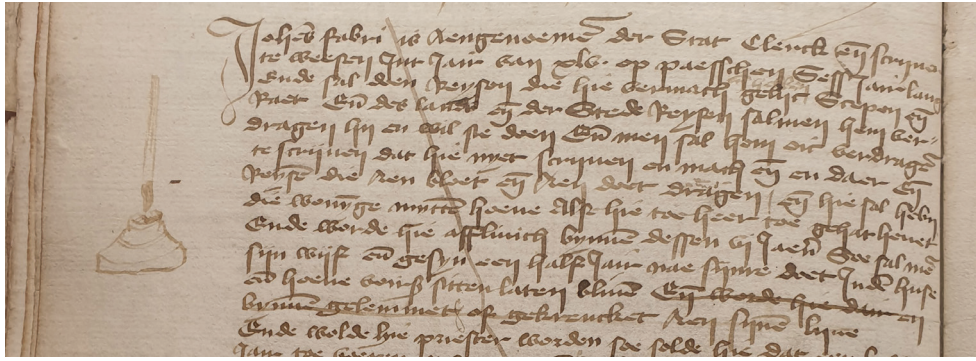


Figure 1. Illustration of pen and inkpot next to the contract of secretary Johannes Fabri in the town book of Kampen, 1445. © Stadsarchief Kampen, arch. nr. 00001 Stadsbestuur Kampen 1251-1813, inv.nr. 11, f. 164v.

With few exceptions, these studies share an institutional and government-centred perspective. They are interested predominantly in urban authorities' capacity for governance, for instance by measuring expenditures on public services and tracing the structural differentiation of offices.⁷ To complement these findings, this article presents an actor-centred perspective. It investigates the personal agency of administrative officials as part of early modern urban governance. We aim to demonstrate that their special position within cities' institutional landscape provided secretaries and pensionaries with considerable scope of action beyond the formal constraints of their offices. Their choices and actions could be driven by a sense of duty as much as by the ambition to secure their family's status and economic wellbeing.⁸

Due to the widely fluctuating availability of relevant source material, recent studies of urban civil services in the Low Countries tend to adopt a broad perspective, combining insights and case studies from several cities.⁹ Similarly, this article brings together cases from a range of cities from the Northern Netherlands. Adopting a bird's-eye view allows us to combine our findings in a more generalised picture of the agency of secretaries and pensionaries.¹⁰ At the same time, this broad scope takes into account the

7 For a stronger actor-centred perspective, see: Arie van Steensel, 'De middeleeuwse stadspensionarissen van Haarlem en Leiden, circa 1447-1572', *Holland. Historisch Tijdschrift* 38:2 (2006) 76-96.

8 Karonen and Hakanen, 'Personal Agency', 20.

9 Manon van der Heijden, *Civic Duty: Public Services in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2012); Vermeesch, 'Capability,

Patrimonialism and Bureaucracy'; Van Steensel, 'Het personeel'.

10 Pauser and Scheutz have demonstrated the value of an analytical synthesis of the urban secretary in Austria: Josef Pauser and Martin Scheutz, 'Frühneuzeitliche Stadt- und Marktschreiber in Österreich – ein Aufriss', in: Andrea Griesebner, Martin Scheutz and Herwig Weigl (eds.), *Stadt – Macht – Rat 1607. Die Ratsprotokolle von*

differing organisation of urban governments in the regions bordering the North Sea and the interior.¹¹ In the major towns of Overijssel (Zwolle, Kampen, and Deventer), for instance, urban governments did not introduce the office of pensionary in the studied period, suggesting that secretaries retained a more influential position here than in the cities which invested in the expensive office of pensionary (Figure 1).¹² Furthermore, chronologically, our analysis covers a period of significant political and social change, most prominently the Reformation and the transition from Habsburg rule to the Dutch Republic. While the broad geographical scope of this study does not allow in-depth analysis or structural comparison of institutional changes over time, our case studies provide material to test Weber's hypothesis that bureaucracies can survive instances of fundamental political upheaval relatively unchanged.¹³

In terms of sources, our approach faces a paradox. Although secretaries produced the majority of the material which historians now encounter as the town's archive, with few prominent exceptions they did not write about themselves. For the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, therefore, findings with regard to the day-to-day practice of the office often stem from adjacent lines of research that require an in-depth familiarity with the archive of an individual town.¹⁴ From the sixteenth century onwards, however, the growing body of documentation on governmental practice in the records – such as minutes and resolutions – also provides us with better insight into the administrative offices of the towns. Especially conflicts and disruptions have produced paper trails in the archival records. These tensions can shine light on quotidian practices which otherwise rarely find their way into our

Perchtoldsdorf, Retz, Waidhofen an der Ybbs und Zwettl im Kontext (Verein für Landeskunde von Niederösterreich 2008) 515–563.

11 Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Diane Webb, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press 2023) 153–156. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009240581>.

12 Peter Bakker, *Kamper kronieken. Stedelijke geschiedschrijving in de Noordelijke Nederlanden (ca. 1450–1550)* (Verloren 2024) 44; Van Steensel, 'Het personeel', 216–217. In 1588, 's Hertogenbosch employed a second pensionary to handle the mounting workload: Stadsarchief 's-Hertogenbosch (hereafter NL-HTSA), Archiefnummer 0001 Stadsbestuur van 's Hertogenbosch, 1262–1810 (hereafter 0001), inv.nr. 1034.

13 Compare Page, *Weber's Scorecard*, viii.

14 Bakker, *Kamper kronieken*; Rudolf Bosch, *Stedelijke macht tussen overvloed en stagnatie. Stadsfinanciën, sociaal-politieke structuren en economie in het hertogdom Gelre, ca. 1350–1550* (Verloren 2019); Geertrui Van Syngel, *Actum in camera scriptorum oppidi de Buscoducis. De stedelijke secretarie van 's-Hertogenbosch tot ca. 1450* (Verloren 2007); Jeroen Benders, *Bestuursstructuur en schriftcultuur. Een analyse van de bestuurlijke verschriftelijking in Deventer tot het eind van de 15de eeuw* (Verloren 2004); Jean Streng, 'Stemme in staat.' *De bestuurlijke elite in de stadsrepubliek Zwolle 1579–1795* (Verloren 1997); Jan Marsilje, *Het financiële beleid van Leiden in de laat-Beierse en Bourgondische periode c. 1390–1477* (Verloren 1985).

sources.¹⁵ While the general corpus of urban minutes in the large selection of cities discussed in this article is too extensive for a systematic analysis on a granular level, zooming in on such prominent conflicts allows us to gain a more detailed understanding of the agency of urban administrative officials in this period.

As starting point of our analysis, we will define the characteristics of the urban officials in the Northern Netherlands that are the focus of this article. Section two zooms in on the tension between trust and qualifications, discussing the changes in the employment of secretaries in Overijssel towns around 1600. In the city of Zwolle, we argue, the magistrate's need for reliable personnel converged with the secretaries' interests for financial and social security, leading to the establishment of professional dynasties in the urban chancery. Section three focuses on tensions between officials and their 'political' superiors within and outside of the city, as highlighted in the introduction. Combining a broad perspective with cases of individual officials allows us to shed light on the critical role of urban administrative officials in late medieval and early modern urban government.

Urban administrative officials

Urban secretaries have been characterised as 'driving forces in the political and social life of cities and states'.¹⁶ Yet why would they deserve such a glowing endorsement? After all, secretaries belonged to the category of offices which the seventeenth-century scholar and burgher of Zwolle, Paulus Buis (c. 1570-1617) characterised by their lack of power (*'imperium'*) and jurisdiction (*'iurisdictio'*).¹⁷ We can thus differentiate between subaltern or 'serving' offices (*'stadtsdienaren'*) and the 'political' offices of the magistrates and councillors who exercised legal and governmental power. However, since the group of subaltern offices includes anyone working for the city, from pensionary to gatekeeper, some scholars suggest further subdivisions according to positions and functions in the service of their town.¹⁸ While these models provide a better overview of the variety of urban offices, they run the risk of becoming so detailed that they lose their analytical purpose.

15 On the relation between conflicts and sources, see: Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'Conflict Management and Interdisciplinary History. Presentation of a New Project and an Analytical Model', *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15:1 (2018), 89-107.

16 Ketelaar, 'Clerc', 53.

17 Paulus Busius, *De republica libri tres. Quibus tota Politicae Ratio nova et succincta methodo ingenuae eiusdem praxi applicatur* II (Franeker: Rombertus Doyema 1613) cap. XIII, 77.

18 Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Professionalization of Public Service', 346-348; Van der Heijden, *Civic Duty*, 142; Van Steensel, 'Het personeel', 199.

In this article, we utilise elements from both approaches, but refrain from constructing general classification schemes of urban offices. Our goal is to demonstrate that secretaries and pensionaries occupied a unique position in urban governance, which justifies defining them separately as ‘urban administrative officials’. As salaried employees of the town’s government, pensionaries and secretaries indeed differed crucially from ‘political’, elected officials such as the burgomasters (*‘burgemeesters’*), aldermen (*‘schepenen’*), and treasurers (*‘tresoriers’*), as well as from the sheriff (*‘schout’*) or bailiff (*‘baljuw’*) who represented the town’s sovereign or overlord as chief prosecuting officer.

A strict focus on formal access to power and jurisdiction, however, obscures the unique position of urban administrative officials in local governance. Their access to political secrets made secretaries and pensionaries exceptions to the common logic and practice of premodern urban governance in which magistrates across Europe strove to limit access to the *arcana* of urban politics to an inner circle of the governmental elite.¹⁹ As we will argue in more detail below, it was their knowledge of sensitive information and their resulting special relation with the magistrates which set urban administrative officials apart from the broad range of practical functionaries such as supporting clerks, medical personnel, or city guards. While pensionaries required in-depth knowledge of their town’s politics to represent the urban government legally or diplomatically, secretaries were the focal point of the town’s pragmatic literacy. They were thus deeply familiar with all facets of urban politics – arguably even more so than the annually rotating burgomasters, aldermen, or councillors. Leiden’s secretary Jan van Hout (1542–1609) took a leading role in re-organising the municipal administration and archives, as well as in reforming the city’s poor relief. The exceptional documentation of his activities prevents us from generalisations, but his case demonstrates the potential scope of influence a secretary could have on urban institutions.²⁰

The earliest references to urban pensionaries and secretaries often speak of the ‘town scribe’, *‘clerk’*, or the office of the *‘clercambocht’*. Sixteenth-century contemporaries usually referred to the more influential ‘middling’ administrative offices (*‘middelbare ambten’*) as ‘secretary’.²¹ The secretary’s office

19 Eberhard Isenmann, ‘Ratsliteratur und städtische Ratsordnungen des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit. Soziologie des Rats – Amt und Willensbildung – politische Kultur’, in: Pierre Monnet and Otto Gerhard Oexle (eds.), *Stadt und Recht im Mittelalter* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2003) (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 174) 215–479, 359–364. See also: Jacob Soll, *The Information Master. Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System*

(University of Michigan Press 2009). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.243021>.

20 Eric Ketelaar, *Archiving People. A Social History of Dutch Archives* (Stichting Archiefpublicaties 2020) 109b–112b; Van der Heijden, *Civic Duty*, 112, 160.

21 Jeroen Benders, ‘The Town Clerks of Deventer and Zutphen (IJssel Region, Eastern Netherlands) c. 1300 to the Late Fifteenth Century’, *Quaerendo* 41:1–2 (2011) 79–88, 87.



Figure 2. A secretary takes notes during a hearing of the Hamburg city council, illumination in the *Stadtrecht* (the town law) of Hamburg, 1497 (Hamburg Staatsarchiv, 111-1 Senat Cl. VII Lit. La Nr. 2 Vol. 1c, fol. 142v). Source: Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel. <http://diglib.hab.de/mss/ed000058/start.htm?image=00288>. Public domain.

comprised a wide array of tasks which the contract of Kampen's secretary Antonius Vrye in 1485 summarised as 'to read, travel, and write in the scriptorium downstairs, in the court house, and furthermore in any place the council demands of him'.²² The office holder's foremost responsibility was to take care of all the urban government's legal, administrative, and diplomatic writing. They kept the town books, issued documents and deeds for individual burghers, recorded the minutes of the magistrates' meetings, and penned the town's political correspondence. Besides producing documents, secretaries also had to preserve and order them as the keepers of the town's archive. The documented efforts to collect and retrieve vast amounts of documents from the private homes of recently deceased secretaries provide particularly illustrative examples of the free reign that some individuals held over the urban archives.²³ Thus, while secretaries lacked formal jurisdiction or political power, their practical tasks were deeply intertwined with the day-to-day decision-making of the urban government (Figure 2).

Their duties also led secretaries beyond the confines of the *scriptorium*. They were, for instance, responsible for important public readings, such as the annual proclamation of the urban law. Without this 'renewal' of the law, it would lose its validity.²⁴ More important in this regard, however, was the secretaries' duty to 'travel', that is, their responsibility to represent the town on diplomatic missions as well as before external courts of law. In many cities, this duty fell increasingly frequently to the pensionary, or '*syndic*' as the office was called elsewhere in the Holy Roman Empire. From the fifteenth century onwards, cities began to hire these academically trained legal advisors who represented the city abroad as specialised 'travelling secretary'.²⁵

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006911X570170>;
Ketelaar, 'Clerc', 54, n. 7; Hugenholtz, 'Clerc', 227.

- 22 Stadsarchief Kampen (hereafter SAK), arch. nr. 00001 Stadsbestuur Kampen 1251-1813 (hereafter 00001), inv.nr. 11, f. 156r. Original: 'lesen reysen ende schryven beneden In die Schryffkamer, Jnt Richthuys ende voirt tot allen plaetsen dair die Rait dat van hem begeert'. See also the lists of emoluments for secretaries: Bakker, *Kamper kronieken*, 36-45; Het Utrechts Archief (hereafter HUA), arch. nr. 701 Stadsbestuur van Utrecht 1122-1577 (hereafter 701), inv.nr. 36, fs. 10v-13r.
- 23 SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 311. See, more generally: Van Maanen, 'De pensionaris als archiefvormer'; Ketelaar, *Archiving People*, 104a-116b.
- 24 SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 306, f. 5v, 6r, and 7r; Jan Wagenaar, *Amsterdam in zijne Opkomst* III

(Amsterdam: Isaak Tirion 1767) 37, 307-311. On the performance of public reading, see: Ulrich Meier, 'Ad incrementum rectae gubernationis. Zur Rolle der Kanzler und Stadtschreiber in der politischen Kultur von Augsburg und Florenz in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit', in: Rainer Christoph Schwinges (ed.), *Gelehrte im Reich. Zur Sozial- und Wirkungsgeschichte akademischer Eliten des 14. und 16. Jahrhunderts* (Duncker & Humblot 1996) (*Zeitschrift für historische Forschung. Beiheft* 18) 477-503, 497.

- 25 Johannes Melles, *Ministers aan de Maas. Geschiedenis van de Rotterdamse pensionarissen met een inleiding over het stedelijk pensionariaat 1500-1795* (Nijgh & Van Ditmar 1962) 2-3; Van Steensel, 'De middeleeuwse stadspensionarissen', 77-78; André Krischer, 'Syndici als Diplomaten in der

Over time, the increase in work and the quantity of urban officials resulted in more functional differentiation and specialisation. In Utrecht, for instance, the division of offices was instigated by mr. (*meester*) Nicolaes de Clerck, who until 1551 had acted both as secretary and pensionary.²⁶ However, overlap between the two positions remained possible, and their intricate knowledge of legal and governmental affairs at times provided both pensionaries and secretaries with the capabilities to head diplomatic missions.²⁷ In 1566, for instance, the Amsterdam secretary Peter Vloitsz., together with his colleague Jan Cornelis Buyrman, who represented Holland's Noorderkwartier, travelled to Denmark as part of an embassy together with two royal ambassadors.²⁸ Even though magistrates provided such officials with strict instructions concerning the contents of negotiations, secretaries and pensionaries had to be trusted to make *ad hoc* decisions regarding the 'how'.²⁹ We will now have a closer look at the important topics of trust and the qualifications that were intricately connected with the wide-ranging responsibilities of urban administrative officials.

Professional dynasties?

In the early 1630s, Zwolle citizen Johann Holt applied to be considered for the office of town secretary.³⁰ His letter of application proved uncommonly detailed. In order to convince the magistrates of his aptitude, Holt produced three lines of argumentation which he substantiated with documents copied from the urban archive. First, he referred to his family's history in the town's service. His grandfather, great-uncle, and father had served the town as

Frühen Neuzeit. Repräsentationen, politischer Zeichengebrauch und Professionalisierung in der reichsstädtischen Außenpolitik', in: Christian Jörg and Michael Jucker (eds.), *Spezialisierung und Professionalisierung. Träger und Foren städtischer Außenpolitik während des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Reichert 2010) (Trierer Beiträge zu den historischen Kulturwissenschaften 1) 203–227.

²⁶ HUA, 701, inv.nr. 13–25, fs. 16v–17v. 'Meester' is a title used by academic law graduates.

²⁷ See also: Van Steensel, 'De middeleeuwse stadspensionarissen', 78.

²⁸ Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsarchief (hereafter GAS), 5039: Archief van de Tresorieren Ordinaris, inv.nr. 861.

²⁹ Christian Manger, 'Behind the Scenes: Urban Secretaries as Managers of Legal and Diplomatic Conflicts in the Baltic Region, c.1470–1540', *Journal of Medieval History* 48:4 (2022) 571–586. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2022.2098528>; Tobias Boestad, 'Les plumes de la Hanse. Rôle et capacité d'action des notaires municipaux aux diètes hanséatiques (c. 1360–1450)', *Revue historique* 706:2 (2023) 179–204. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3917/rhis.232.0179>.

³⁰ For the following, see: Collectie Overijssel locatie Zwolle (hereafter NL-ZLCO), arch. nr. 0700 Stadsbestuur Zwolle, archieven van de opeenvolgende stadsbesturen (hereafter 0700), inv.nr. 691, no. 95.

secretaries, which is why the magistrate had promised his mother to favour one of her sons when filling the vacancy. Second, he invoked his status as burgher of Zwolle. He argued that ‘from time immemorial, in this town of Zwolle it has been stipulated and observed that for any office or benefice the son of a native burgher will be preferred to others’.³¹ However, the council’s guarantees came under the condition that the candidate was ‘competent’ (*bequaem*) for the office. Lastly, therefore, Holt pointed out his professional qualifications. He had studied in Leiden and afterwards he had gained – unspecified – practical experience in The Hague.

Holt’s application combined elements of professionalism and patrimonialism, mixing formal qualifications such as a university degree and relevant work experience with expectations of favouritism thanks to ancestry and social status. While modern observers may file the existence of secretary ‘dynasties’ such as the Holt family under unprofessionalism, nepotism, and corruption, we argue that such arrangements can also shed light on the internal logic of premodern urban governance.³² Holt’s application, this section proposes, exemplifies a convergence of interests between the urban government of Zwolle and its secretaries. The former sought qualified and trustworthy personnel, which the latter saw as an opportunity to secure their family’s financial security and status in the town.

How did towns select their secretaries? First, there was the question of qualifications. Only from the seventeenth century onwards, we can draw on regulations containing formal requirements for the office of secretary.³³ However, surviving contracts, biographies of individual secretaries, as well as administrative and financial records show a general trend from the fifteenth century onwards. With the secretary’s role growing from scribe to legal advisor, diplomatic delegate, and, at times, public notary, so did cities’ demand for academically educated personnel. In 1570, for instance, the magistrates of Kampen instructed their burgher Reyner Jacobsz. that in order to become the town’s secretary, he was to study law for a year, then for two years ‘repair to a good legal practitioner to learn the style and practice [of the court], and the office of the notary’, before studying law for another year.³⁴ From the late sixteenth century onwards, some towns also requested secretaries to learn

31 NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 691, no. 95. Original: ‘dat altijt voor oldts binnen dese Stadt Zwolle gestatueert ende geobserveert is, dat tot alle officien ende beneficien een gebooren borgers soene voor anderen worde geprefereert’.

32 Toon Kerkhoff et al., *A History of Dutch Corruption and Public Morality (1648-1940)* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2020) 1-14; Van Nederveen

Meerkerk, ‘Professionalization of Public Service’, 353-356.

33 NL-HTSA, 0001, inv.nr. 1047, § 4.

34 SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 306, f. 168v-169r. Original: ‘by eenen guiden prcatizyn sich tbegeven, omme de practyck ende extenderen offte officium Notarius to moegen leren’.

French, probably to lend support in their diplomatic relations. Groningen's syndic Bernhard Atting explicitly demanded such language skills from the syndic or pensionary to appropriately represent the magistrate abroad.³⁵ The timeline and specific requirements for secretaries varied between cities, but a general picture emerges in which academic credentials or practical legal expertise became a necessary requirement for the office.³⁶ Even in cities such as Leiden, where permanently employed pensionaries took over many responsibilities as legal advisers and diplomats, the majority of secretaries possessed an academic degree.³⁷

Where did urban governments find such qualified candidates? According to Holt, the magistrates of Zwolle had since 'time immemorial' recruited secretaries from the citizenry, but a comparison between employment contracts, the town's financial accounts, and the registry of new burghers tells a different story. Until the late sixteenth century, many of Zwolle's secretaries took up citizenship only after assuming the office – including Holt's own grandfather, who became a citizen eight years after his appointment as the town's secretary.³⁸ Zwolle's recruitment practices were shared by many cities in the Low Countries and the Holy Roman Empire in general. In his study of the town scribes of Göttingen, Peter Hoheisel argues that urban governments had to recruit many of their secretaries from outside the town, because those of their own burghers who possessed the means to graduate from school or even university had their eyes on higher – political – offices.³⁹ While only rarely entirely excluding burghers from the office,

35 NL-HTSA, 0001, inv.nr. 1047, § 2; SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 306, f. 24v and 176v; NL-ZLCO, 700, inv.nr. 66, 555 and 597. Bernhard Alting, *Syndicus, ofte tractaten over 't ambt van de Syndicquien, ende Pensionarisen* (Groningen: Hans Sas 1645) 9.

36 Van der Heijden, *Civic Duty*, 164; Van Synghel, *Actum in camera scriptorum*, 318-329.

37 Van Steensel, 'Het personeel', 216-217. Vice versa, practical experience also remained relevant for the pensionary, see: idem, 'De middeleeuwse stadspensionarissen', 90.

38 For Holt's grandfather, see: NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 66, f. 274v and inv.nr. 962, 55. The majority of secretaries who were registered as new burghers took the citizen's oath within the first four years of office: NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 962, 12 (Spaen van Camphusen, secretary in 1451, burgher in 1454), 30 (Gert Bruninck, secretary in 1495, burgher in 1499), 51 (Gisbert Roelinck and

Herman Graet, both secretaries in 1553, burghers in 1555). Henrik van Tyll only became burgher in 1535, after a brief stint as secretary between 1530 and 1531, probably in connection to his starting political career (45). Only Albert Jonge became burgher in 1539, two years before he stepped into the town's service (47). For secretaries whose names do not show up in the burgher registry, it remains unclear if they were born burghers or if they never received citizenship. See for later periods: Streng, *Stemme in staat*, 130-131.

39 Peter Hoheisel, *Die Göttinger Stadtschreiber bis zur Reformation. Einfluß, Sozialprofil, Amtsaufgaben* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1998) (Studien zur Geschichte der Stadt Göttingen 21) 105-106. See also: Van Steensel, 'Het personeel', 216. For alternative explanations, see: Stein, 'Deutsche Stadtschreiber', 64-66; Meier, 'Ad incrementum', 489-490.

therefore, urban governments frequently hired foreigners – personnel from outside the town – to lead their chanceries. Leiden's urban authorities thus formed a rare exception when they demanded candidates for the office to have been burghers (*'poorters'*) for a minimum of seven years.⁴⁰

Considering the political significance that urban communities attached to citizenship, secretaries' external origins provided magistrates with a dilemma. Urban bylaws throughout Europe postulated a minimal duration of formal citizenship before appointment to any of a town's political offices.⁴¹ Such regulations limited access to the town's closely guarded political *arcana* to actors who were integrated in a network of family and friends, which exerted control and surveillance among its members. Yet, as established above, their work in and outside of the chancery made secretaries familiar with the town's internal politics and diplomatic relations. Therefore, obligations 'to keep confidential all secrecy of the council's sentences and letters' figured universally in secretaries' oaths of office, a stipulation that was particularly emphasised when an official stepped into the service of a new employer.⁴² Some cities also added stipulations of exclusivity to their contracts. The secretary should 'nevermore, as long as he has not been released from his oath and service by aldermen and council, seek or accept service for other lords and towns'.⁴³ In short, urban authorities extended extensive trust to their administrative officials.

Urban governments found different ways to manage the challenge of finding trustworthy personnel. Prosopographical research as well as studies from northern German towns suggest that magistrates utilised networks of academics and (foreign) urban elites to recommend potential candidates for their chanceries.⁴⁴ The intention to integrate their secretaries more strongly into the urban community may also have motivated the council and aldermen of Deventer to grant at least some of their town scribes citizenship free of charge.⁴⁵ The urban authorities of Zwolle, however, adopted a different

40 Pauser and Scheutz, 'Frühneuzeitliche Stadt- und Marktschreiber', 522-523; Van Steensel, 'Het personeel', 211-212; Hugenholtz, 'Clerc', 221.

41 With a stronger emphasis on 'citizenship practices': Maarten Prak, *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c. 1000-1800* (Cambridge University Press 2018) 27-49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316219027>.

42 Collectie Overijssel locatie Deventer (hereafter NL-DVCO), Archiefnummer 0690 Stad Deventer, periode Middeleeuwen (hereafter 0690), inv.nr. 133, f. 20r. Original: 'alle heymelickheit des Rades van sentencien ende brieven heymelick holden'.

NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 66, f. 278r; HUA, 701, inv.nr. 13-25, f. 17r; Van Steensel, 'Het personeel', 201.

43 NL-DVCO, Archiefnummer 0722 Rechterlijk archief Deventer, inv.nr. 46c, unnumbered. Original: 'en sal dieselve nummer meer, soe lange hie van Schepen vnd Raeth syns eedes vnd dienstes nit verlaten is, andere heren oder steden, dienst begeren noch annemen'.

44 Manger, 'Behind the Scenes', 577-579; Bakker, *Kamper kronieken*, 330.

45 Benders, 'Town Clerks', 80-81; Frans Berkenvelder, *Stedelijk burgerrecht en burgerschap. Een*

strategy. From the 1580s onwards, the town's council and aldermen entered contracts with several burghers about the future of their respective sons. The city would provide the beneficiary with a stipend for a university, under the condition that upon completion of his studies, he would afterwards serve in a position as 'priest, rector, schoolmaster, or secretary'.⁴⁶ In the register of the town's offices, these contracts were recorded under the section on secretaries, suggesting a connection to this office in particular.⁴⁷ In another variant of this contract, aldermen and council secured potential candidates with specialised skills. They financed travels abroad for some to 'learn French in speech and writing', to subsequently be appointed as secretary.⁴⁸ Traces of similar arrangements have also been preserved in the archive of Kampen. Here, the oldest example dates back as early as 1560, suggesting a potentially longer but less well-preserved tradition.⁴⁹

At least since the fourteenth century, urban governments in towns of the Empire were familiar with university scholarships, mainly financed by ecclesiastical institutions or individual inheritances.⁵⁰ Until 1600, however, examples of agreements that explicitly obligated the beneficiary to serve the town appear to have been very sporadic to non-existent.⁵¹ A potential explanation for this new measurement may have been a scarcity of qualified personnel, although the evidence is fragmented and often anecdotal. In

verkennde inventarisatie in Deventer, Kampen en Zwolle (1302-1811) (Waanders 2005) 199.

- 46 NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 66, f. 279v-282v. Not all such stipends were listed in this register. Already in 1552, the town's accounts noted payments to secretary Derck Soonsbecke to support his studies (NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 6078, f. 139v) and, in 1601, Herman Holt received payments to complete his practical education and studies in The Hague (NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 6088, 207 and 330).
- 47 Council and aldermen also handed out similar grants without specific conditions attached to them, but at least one of the beneficiaries, Jacob Wyfferdinck, also became the town's secretary. NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 66, f. 5v, 6r, and 116v.
- 48 Ibidem, f. 279r. Original: 'omme midtler wyle die fransoyse spraecke toe leeren Jnt spreekende ende schreven'.
- 49 SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 306, f. 24v, 168v-169r and 176v. Through the bishopric of Utrecht, the magistrate of Deventer also sent students to the universities

of Leuven and Perugia but the intended study time of six to seven years suggests prospects of higher offices: NL-DVCO, 0690, inv.nr. 2-1, entries for 12 December 1550 and 9 March 1555 as well as inv.nr. 131-1.

- 50 Bert De Munck and Hilde De Ridder-Symoens, 'Education and Knowledge: Theory and Practice in an Urban Context', in: Bruno Blondé, Marc Boone and Anne-Laura Van Bruaene (eds.), *City and Society in the Low Countries, 1100-1600* (Cambridge University Press 2018) 220-254, 245. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108645454.008>; See also: Stephanie Irrgang, 'Studienförderung und Stipendienwesen an deutschen Universitäten im Mittelalter', in: Matthias Asche (ed.), *Studienförderung und Stipendienwesen an deutschen Universitäten von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Steiner 2013) (Jahrbuch für Universitätsgeschichte 15) 19-36.
- 51 Klaus Wriedt, 'Studienförderung und Studienstiftungen in norddeutschen Städten (14.-16. Jahrhundert)', in: Heinz Duchhardt (ed.), *Stadt*

Kampen, secretaries were prohibited from being elected into the council in 1576, in order to sustain the work of the secretariat.⁵² For the city of Zwolle, Jean Streng found a quantitative decline of academically trained burghers during the first half of the seventeenth century.⁵³ It may have been more than coincidence that the councils of Zwolle and Kampen sought to increase the ties between secretaries and the citizenry in a period of great social and political conflict. The magistrates' silence on their decision-making leaves us to speculate, but the wars of the Dutch Revolt significantly reduced the region's urban populations. At the same time, confessional disruptions not only broke ties to universities such as that of (Catholic) Leuven, but also divided many citizenries internally. In 1590, for instance, the Groningen secretary Johan Julsing describes in his diary a feeling of degrading trust between secretaries and magistrates due to his support for the Jesuits in the town.⁵⁴ Together, these factors put the council of Zwolle in a particular need of trustworthy personnel.

At this point, we return to the family Holt and the question of personal agency. In 1553, the council and aldermen of Zwolle promised Johan Holt Senior employment as secretary under the condition that he would study at a university or, alternatively, step into the service of a secretary or notary in another town for a while. This case constitutes the only instance of such an agreement with someone who lacked citizenship and the entry explicitly states that Holt was to undertake his studies on his own costs, 'outside of the city's expenses' ('buten der stadt koste').⁵⁵ Yet, after having won citizenship, the Holt family benefitted from Zwolle's stipends over several decades, and extracted the urban authorities' promise to fill the office with a member of the family's next generation.⁵⁶ Johan Holt was not alone in securing his descendants' careers. In 1599, Tyman Vriese gained the city's second secretary position and put his family on a trajectory parallel to that of his colleague.⁵⁷ Both families continued to provide Zwolle with secretaries until the end of the seventeenth century, even after they had become part of its ruling elite.⁵⁸ In other words, when Johan Holt Junior underlined his status as citizen and his family's history as secretaries in his application, he described an office which his ancestors and predecessors had actively helped to shape as *de facto* hereditary.

und Universität (Böhlau 1993) (Städteforschung A 33) 33-49, 38, 48. In Ghent, such stipends are already attested for the fifteenth century, see: Van der Heijden, *Civic Duty*, 164.

52 SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 306, f. 24v.

53 Streng, *Stemme in staat*, 212-213.

54 Jan van den Broek (ed.), *Het geheime dagboek van de Groninger stadssecretaris Johan Julsing 1589-1594* (Van Gorcum 2006) 52-53.

55 NL-ZLCO, 0700, inv.nr. 66, f. 274v-275r.

56 Ibidem, f. 117r, 279v, 280v, and 298r.

57 Ibidem, f. 297v-299r.

58 Streng, *Stemme in staat*, 178.

Being at the right place at the right time, the secretaries of Zwolle utilised the city's need for qualified and trustworthy personnel to secure their families' future and finances. In turn, integrating the secretaries into the citizenry or even the ruling elites' networks provided urban magistrates with means of (social) surveillance and control, ensuring their officials' reliability and trustworthiness towards the urban government.⁵⁹ The case of the Haarlem secretary Jan van Weert, who excused his embezzlement of the town's funds with his alcoholism, presents only a particularly vivid example of the risks connected to the secretaries' extraordinary access to the town's secrets and finances.⁶⁰ The following section, therefore, turns to a number of conflicts which stemmed from the influence gained by urban administrative officials.

Power and conflict

In 1525, Utrecht's secretary Valentijn van der Voort evocatively displayed his extraordinary access to political knowledge in a thinly veiled threat. Faced with potential dismissal by the city's (short-lived) new government, he argued that letting him go would be to the great detriment of Utrecht's authorities, as after forty years of service he 'knew all the city's internal and external secrets and legal claims'.⁶¹ Cases of explicit conflict such as the example from Utrecht rarely show up in our sources, and most secretaries seem to have displayed great concern for the diligent execution of their duties. In the 1540s, the secretaries and clerks of 's-Hertogenbosch risked a large-scale legal conflict as well as physical harm when they refused to open the urban registers to the sheriff ('*schout*'), appointed by the city's overlord, Emperor Charles v.⁶² At the end of the century, secretary Michiel van Woerden called for a reformation of the Haarlem chancery since, due to its accessibility to the public, 'one is forced to write everything that is secret or of importance outside of this room'.⁶³ Nevertheless, the case of Van der Voort illustrates that urban administrative officials could instrumentalise their knowledge in situations of conflict. How common were conflicts between different actors in urban governments in this period? To what extent could burgomasters and aldermen control their

59 For a similar discussion of the pensionary office, see: Van Steensel, 'De middeleeuwse stadspensionarissen', 92-93.

60 Noord-Hollands Archief (hereafter NHA), arch. nr. 3993 Stadsbestuur van Haarlem (hereafter 3993), inv.nr. 1317.

61 HUA, 701, inv.nr. 823, f. 1v. Original: 'want hy soe voer ende nae over voertich Jarn der Stadt

gedient heeft ende alle der Stadt secreten ende saicken van Rechtforderingen ende anders buyten ende bynnen weet'.

62 NL-HTSA, 0001, inv.nr. 1046.

63 NHA, 3993, inv.nr. 1232. Original: 'datmen es gedwongen genoech alles dat secret ende van Jmportans es te moeten laten scrijffuen buyten decamere'.

subordinates, and which institutional mechanisms helped them to keep their administrative officials in check?

Some conflicts could be subtle. In many Overijssel towns, secretaries retained their broad array of functions, which sometimes led to internal frictions. In Deventer, for instance, the magistrates and the 'sworn community' (*gezworen gemeente*, often shorted to *meente*) differed in their opinions regarding the secretaries' responsibilities. The *meente* consisted of representatives who were elected from the town's eight neighbourhoods or 'streets' and possessed a vote in matters of law and finances. In 1557, they demanded that wages would be withheld from secretaries who failed to appear before the council, unless their absence served the town and its inhabitants rather than outside lords.⁶⁴ One year later, the *meente* renewed its criticism in stronger language, demanding the secretaries' oath be amended to prohibit them from taking up cases against Deventer's citizens within or outside of the city. They should 'in particular, take good care of the scriptorium, serve the burghers, and not travel abroad unless with the permission of the burgomasters'.⁶⁵ The timing of this complaint suggests that it was motivated by the news that the late secretary Nicolas Verheyden had lost one of the town books. According to the Deventer citizenry, secretaries should serve their urban community exclusively and with all due diligence, rather than to work on their own account.

Tensions around urban administrative officials' loyalties could become much more serious when their experience and skills made them indispensable and allowed them to accumulate greater direct influence on urban politics.⁶⁶ In 1547 Dirk Hendriksz. Duyst, a member of the Delft city council (the *veertigen* or 'forty'), sent a lengthy list of complaints about the town's two secretaries to the regent in Brussels, Mary of Hungary. Secretaries mr. Cornelis Aertsz. van der Dussen and mr. Hugo van den Eijnde reportedly heard witnesses without the aldermen being present, profited from their inside knowledge of the treasurer's finances, and produced correspondence to which the town's burgomasters attached their seal without controlling its contents (Figure 3). According to Duyst, many of these abuses were related to power struggles between the town's internal factions, in which a few big brewers used the secretaries' political influence to outcompete smaller entrepreneurs. In response to these complaints, the regent issued several ordinances to restructure Delft's government. Henceforth, all criminal cases

64 NL-DVCO, 0690, inv.nr. 2-1, entry for 16 Febr. 1557.

65 Ibidem, entry for 11 Febr. 1558. Original: 'In sonderheit die schrif Camer wall waernemen, ende den Borgeren flitich dienen Ende niet vthreisen den mit oerloff des Burgermeisters'.

The council implemented respective additions to the secretary's oath of office in 1562 and 1578: ibidem, inv.nr. 133, f. 20r.

66 Van Steensel, 'De middeleeuwse stadspensionarissen', 93.



▲
Figure 3. Portrait of Cornelis Aertsz. van der Dussen (1481-1556), secretary, alderman, and councillor of Delft, painted by Jan van Scorel 1525-1549. Source: Geldersch Landschap en Kasteelen, on loan from a private collection. Public domain. <https://tinyurl.com/yzcwzcjk>.

had to be treated in the full court, and witnesses could only be interrogated in the presence of at least two burgomasters or aldermen. The secretaries were forbidden to give their own opinion during meetings.⁶⁷

Most egregious, therefore, was the two secretaries' refusal to limit their activity in the urban government's meetings to the production of minutes. Instead, they actively gave their opinion, which often proved decisive. In the introduction of this article, we encountered a similar example from Leiden, where a particularly overbearing pensionary irritated the urban magistrates. In the case of Delft, however, rumour on the streets even suggested that if one wanted to influence Delft's policies, it was more profitable to be in the secretaries' favour than to seek the support of the local sheriff, burgomasters, or aldermen.⁶⁸ Particularly revealing in this context is the fact that in 1550, secretary Cornelis Aertsz. was elected as alderman but protested vehemently against this appointment, as it meant that he would have to give up his office as secretary.⁶⁹ This was common practice, as illustrated by examples from Leiden, where two secretaries and a pensionary laid down their offices to become councillors.⁷⁰ Aertsz.' protest against his election as alderman, especially in light of Duyst's list of complaints, is illustrative of the influence and related profits he wielded as urban administrative official.

Two examples from the town of Kampen, however, remind us that the division of power between administrative and political offices was not always as one-sided as suggested by this extraordinary case. In 1557, Henrik van Vyenden used the end of his temporary contract as secretary of Kampen to negotiate new terms of employment. Apart from securing a better salary and a life-long contract, Van Vyenden demanded 'not to be elected into the council as long as he lived'.⁷¹ The new contract omits the reasons behind the secretary's reluctance to become part of the town's government. However, since Van Vyenden originated from Münster and had only entered the town's service in 1551, it is improbable that he attempted to defend a position of power comparable to Delft's well-connected and partial secretaries.⁷² While we can thus only speculate about Van Vyenden's reasons, his wish appears to have been aligned with the interests of Kampen's governing elite. In 1576, its magistrates and *meente* issued a general prohibition against electing

67 Juliaan Woltjer, 'Een Hollands stadsbestuur in het midden van de 16e eeuw: brouwers en bestuurders te Delft', in: Dick de Boer and Jan Marsilje (eds.), *De Nederlanden in de late middeleeuwen* (Spectrum 1987) 261-279; Gerrit Verhoeven, *De derde stad van Holland. Geschiedenis van Delft tot 1795* (WBooks 2015) 197-202.

68 Woltjer, 'Een Hollands stadsbestuur', 269.

69 Ibidem, 271.

70 Secretaries mr. Simon van Baersdorp (1638), Albrecht van Hoogeveen (1648), and pensionary Joachim van Wevelinchoven (1664), see: Dirk Noordam, *Geringde buffels en heren van stand. Het patriciaat van Leiden, 1574-1700* (Verloren 1994) 19.

71 SAK, 00001, inv.nr. 306, f. 23v. Original: 'van niet syn leventlanck Jnden Raeth gecoren to worden'.

72 Ibidem, f. 22v.

secretaries into the council. The city, they argued, ‘urgently requires the service of the secretaries and, in other times, one has felt that the change of secretaries happens to the detriment of the town in that office’.⁷³ For Kampen’s magistrates, the benefits of personal continuity in the chancery appear to have outweighed their fear of the office’s potential political influence.

Apart from internal disputes, their role as legal and diplomatic representatives of a city could also put urban administrative officials in conflict with external powers. In 1515, for instance, Dordrecht’s urban authorities contested the Habsburg government’s attempts to re-establish the quotes determining the partition of the general tax on real estate called *verponding*. Appealing directly to the Great Council of Mechelen against infringements of their privileges, the city’s regents bypassed the governor (*stadhouder*), the president of the Court of Holland, who identified as the main culprit for this transgression the urban pensionary, mr. Floris Oem van Wijngaerden.⁷⁴ The governor complained to the chancellor about the pensionary’s offensive tone, upon which the latter was summoned to Brussels. This attempt to bring Dordrecht back in line was unsuccessful, but in 1518, Emperor Charles v himself issued an angry letter to the city’s authorities, all the way from Saragossa in Spain. He had been informed that Oem van Wijngaerden ‘wrongly explained the privileges, ordinances, and written laws’ of their city. Following his bad advice, the burgomasters and aldermen would have acted against Charles’ law and authority, to the detriment of his subjects, neighbouring cities, as well as Dordrecht itself, ‘which he would in no manner accept’. Within twelve hours of receiving the emperor’s letter, the pensionary had to be banished from the city and to be punished ‘in body and property’ if he ever were to return or to involve himself with the city’s affairs again.⁷⁵

The accusations against the pensionary are hard to substantiate, but they speak volumes of the power and influence which others ascribed to the office. Furthermore, the conflict’s aftermath demonstrated Oem van Wijngaerden’s influential personal network. The later Pope Adrian vi, Cardinal of Tortosa and one of Charles v’s close advisors, was prepared to plead with the emperor on the pensionary’s behalf. He addresses Oem van

73 Ibidem, f. 24v. Original: ‘den dienst der Secretarien grotelick van noeden heft, ende men tot anderen tyden wel gespoert, dat die veranderinge der Secretarien tot ongerieff der selven Stadt in soedanen dienst geschiet’.

74 On Oem van Wijngaerden: Serge ter Braake, ‘Korte biografie van meester Floris Oem van Wijngaerden (ca. 1467-1527)’, *Holland. Historisch Tijdschrift* 37:2 (2005) 63-77; idem, *Met recht en*

rekenschap. De ambtenaren bij het Hof van Holland en de Haagse Rekenkamer in de Habsburgse Tijd (1483-1558) (Verloren 2007), especially 396-397.

75 Matthys Balen, *Beschryvinge der stad Dordrecht* (Dordrecht: Symon Onder de Linde 1677) 811. Original: ‘Pensionaris van onze stad Dordrecht, de Privilegien, en de Keuren der zelviger Stede, als ook de Beschreven Rechten verkeerdelyk uytleyd [...] het welk Ons geenszins en staat te lijden’.

Wijngaerden as his ‘most beloved friend’ and characterises the 1518 letter as ‘exorbitant’.⁷⁶ When Charles v returned back north in 1520, he decided in Dordrecht’s favour in nearly all hanging disputes, restoring Oem van Wijngaerden in his former position. On 4 October 1521, the triumphant pensionary once more attended the meeting of the States of Holland as one of Dordrecht’s deputies.⁷⁷

In situations of conflict, norms and realities of power that otherwise remain obscure come to the forefront. As revealed by these examples, urban administrative officials could instrumentalise their information position to influence local politics and finances. This stretching of the – theoretically – supporting role of these officials resulted in tensions but also opportunities for the cities that employed them. A capable secretary or pensionary could use his knowledge and rhetorical skills to the advantage of a city, as proven by the case of Oem van Wijngaerden. However, as indicated by the examples from Leiden and Delft, if secretaries grew too influential, this could also erode the power of local governmental elites. Urban administrative officials thus operated within a dual field of power, exerting agency vis-à-vis internal as well as external ‘political’ actors.

Conclusion

Urban administrative officials in the late medieval and early modern Northern Netherlands occupied a position of power and influence, both within and outside of the city walls. Understanding their position as part of the logic of premodern governance requires us to move beyond formal instructions or urban bylaws in order to appreciate the power dynamics at the local level. Their inside knowledge of governmental correspondence, financial accounts, and secret administrative documents afforded pensionaries and secretaries a degree of agency that potentially allowed them to move beyond a mere ‘serving’ position and to shape the character of their offices. At the end of this article, we would like to return to the question we set out to answer: What agency, defined as their (informal) power, discretionary space, and influence on policy-making, did these officials possess? Were they mere advisors or could they also be ‘decisive’, and which factors shaped their agency? The cases analysed in this article indicate that at least two factors played a crucial role in determining the potential agency of urban administrative officials: first, the local context in which they operated; second, the individual actor and their network.

76 Ibidem, 811–813. Original: ‘Alderliefste Vriend’.

77 Melles, *Ministers aan de Maas*, 4–5; Robert Fruin, ‘De verpondingen van 1496 en 1515 en haar

voorbereiding’, in: Petrus Blok, Pieter Muller and Samuel Muller Fz. (eds.), *Robert Fruin’s verspreide geschriften vi* (Martinus Nijhoff 1902) 138–175.

In the town of Zwolle, the families Holt and Vriese could turn the secretariat into a de facto hereditary office because their interests aligned with that of the local council. On the one hand, such an arrangement depended on the short-term political interests and power-relations in each individual town. In 1667, for instance, the urban authorities of Dordrecht intervened against the hereditary character of the secretary's office, probably because its conflation with the pensionary's office at the time invested the respective family with too much political influence.⁷⁸ On the other hand, we need to consider the broader regional history to understand the local context. In the case of Zwolle, the crisis of the Eighty Years' War may have strengthened the hand of the secretaries. In Holland, in contrast, soon after the start of the Dutch Revolt, an influx of well-educated migrants caused the populations of cities to explode. Lacking access to 'political' offices in the urban government, Brabantine migrants and their offspring constituted a new pool of candidates for administrative offices that was not present in the war-torn East.⁷⁹ Scarceness of sufficiently skilled and qualified candidates afforded the urban secretaries in Zwolle or Kampen a greater degree of agency to shape their own working conditions than might otherwise have been the case.

A capable secretary or pensionary could use his knowledge and rhetorical skills to the advantage of a city, defending its interests against the central authorities or foreign powers. Arguably more so than their formal education, it was their often long-lasting practical experience in the chancery and their deep familiarity with the city's affairs which provided administrative officials such as Jan van Hout or Floris Oem van Wijngaerden with a scope of action beyond the formal constraints of their position. Especially as indicated by the latter example, personal networks could play an important role. The pensionary's close relations to the later Pope Adrian VI even managed to turn the emperor's opinion in his and Dordrecht's favour. Clearly, this success would have granted him a large degree of agency vis-à-vis Dordrecht's regents. Conversely, such powerful officials could also threaten to use secrets against the city if they did not get their way, as is visible in the conflict surrounding the secretaries of Delft.

Embedding administrative officials in urban networks of power, therefore, could ensure their loyalty, but also create a situation in which their opinions became decisive. Recent publications highlight the active political roles of individual secretaries and pensionaries once they rose above the urban level to be invested with the (in)formal powers of ministers of the

78 Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Professionalization of Public Service', 354-355.

79 See, for instance, the case of Jacob de Vogelaer, Amsterdam secretary between 1655 and 1688,

and wealthy descendant of Antwerp families: Maurits den Hollander and Bob Wessels, *Palace of Commerce: Amsterdam's City Hall in the Seventeenth Century* (Verloren 2025) 43-44.

early modern state, perhaps best illustrated by the case of the Dutch grand pensionaries.⁸⁰ While the latter have received well-deserved attention in historiography, this article suggests that similar mechanics were at work at the urban level, even before the Dutch Revolt. Based on a selection of illustrative cases, this article demonstrates that urban administrative officials possessed both the qualifications and the agency to act above their pay grade long before they rose through the ranks of the state.

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