Dienstbaarheid uit eigenbaat: regenten in het makelaarsstelsel van stadhouder Willem III tijdens het Utrechts regeringsreglement, 1674-1702

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SUMMARY

The ambivalent relationship between the Orange family and the provincial administrative elites is a recurrent theme in the history of the seventeenth century Dutch Republic. The elites were extremely powerful as, contrary to its surrounding countries, the provincial States were sovereign rather than the monarch. In the republican form of government, the Princes of Orange fulfilled a subordinate role as stadholder, a highly placed official that had to serve the provincial States. The successive Princes of Orange had nonetheless succeeded in increasing their power to the extent that the role could hardly be referred to as serving. Historians have demonstrated that the princes exercised great influence on the governing bodies by means of informal networks. William III however, was the first prince of Orange who endeavoured to control the provinces by extensively using brokers, persons mediating between him and the provincial elites. These brokers are believed to have served stadholder interests in particular. Jonathan Israel wonders whether the informal network of William III was influential to the extent that the republican form of government was sidelined. His question is striking, the more so since in the past decades research into the brokers in the surrounding countries demonstrated that, in addition to these individuals promoting the interests of the monarch, they looked after those of their provincial clients as well. With a view to the strong position of power of regents in the Dutch Republic, the question rises whether here too the brokers had to take the administrative elite into account to a greater extent.

The then administrative elite were divided into factions, groups of related and befriended regents who competed for power in the governing bodies. In the wake of Daan Roorda, it has often been argued that these factions were pragmatic and materialistic in nature – getting into office was the main aim, also when supporting the stadholder. However, the past years have seen a stronger emphasis on the more ideological motives of the regents. Religion, republicanism and other views on proper government certainly do appear to play a role in the attitude of regents towards the position and performance of the stadholder. This thesis will demonstrate that the possible motives of office holders to whether or not be subservient to the stadholder were during the period of office of William III (1672/1674-1702) often inextricably bound up with the effects of broker systems. Within this context, the then balance of power in the province of Utrecht offers some interesting insights. In the so-called Sticht (diocese of Utrecht), a broker system developed whose effects were largely determined by a factional strife that, in addition to being materialistic, was also religious and political in nature. Brokers had to take into account an area of tension between the expectations of the regents of the stadholder and the actual actions by William III.
A few days after the invasion of the French in the Year of Disaster 1672, the army of Louis XIV was standing at the gates of the city of Utrecht. The States army had meanwhile left the city indefensible and had withdrawn behind the so-called Hollandse Waterlinie (Dutch water defence line). The townspeople were quick to surrender in order to prevent the French from plundering the defenceless city. An occupation of more than seventeen months followed, during which the province was brought to the brink of ruin due to exacting levies under threat of pillage and fire-raising and acts of war. The severe conditions prompted a discussion about office holders who were held responsible for the sudden decline. It highlighted a number of deep-seated contradictions in the Utrecht elite. Tensions between the noble and the bourgeois elite were running extremely high for instance. Both were afraid they were going to be dominated by the other, and they were pursuing a balance of power that would protect their rights and privileges. In addition, a strict Calvinist Voetian faction in the city of Utrecht competed with a more liberal faction. The so-called Voetianen wanted to implement reforms in order to strengthen the position of the public church, which was thwarted by office holders who denounced the strict religious beliefs of the Voetianen. In order to realise these material, religious and/or political objectives, factions were aiming for preponderance in the governing bodies.

The push of Louis XIV’s troops led to a considerable increase of power of William III, especially in the so-called landgewesten, Gelderland, Utrecht en Overijssel. William III grew up during the First Stadholderless Period (1650-1672/1674), when the States of Holland, led by Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt, restricted the political powers of the Orange family. However, when the French threat suddenly increased sharply in the early 1670’s the regents changed their attitude towards the house of Orange. In order to be able to stand up to the foreign threat, the States General appointed the prince chief of the States army in 1672. Also, after the French invasion and under pressure from townspeople, the regents of Holland and Zeeland appointed this ‘saviour of the country’ stadholder. Following this event, William III removed his most prominent opponents from the city governments in many cities. After the French armies had withdrawn from the Sticht in the autumn of 1673, the Voetianen asked the prince to remove his opponents from their public offices here too, pointing out that their rivals were known as De Witt confederates. William III seized upon their request to implement a change to the legislative in the Sticht on 16 April 1674. However, he entirely unexpectedly also submitted a new Government Regulation to the recently appointed regents for them to approve, which contained far-reaching powers for the stadholder. After the States of Utrecht had approved the Regulation, had appointed William III new stadholder and had even
declared the office of stadholder hereditary in the male line, the Prince of Orange had more power in the Sticht than his ancestors had ever had before him.

In the province of Utrecht, William III appointed a large number of office holders whose loyalty to the house of Orange was certain. He appointed various courtiers as regents, including a number of descendents from Orange bastards. In the Equestrian Order (ridderschap) of Utrecht he appointed officers from the States army who had proven their loyalty to the prince on the battle field. So the Orange entourage appeared to be mixing with the administrative elite, but in practice the groups were separated by a large gap. William III concentrated on influencing the States General and the States of Holland, and often sought the company of the States army. He also spent a lot of time with his confidants, at Soestdijk hunting lodge for instance. Courtiers had to stay close to the prince at all times in order to stay in his favour. As such, there wasn’t a lot of time for a public office. At the same time, the prince structured his court life in such a way that only a few regents had access to him. This posed a problem for the office holders of the Sticht, because as a stadholder, the Prince of Orange had the power to determine their careers. In order to avoid this problem, they approached local men who did have contact with the Prince of Orange, asking them to defend their interests at court. In the Sticht, there were actually only two persons who could and wanted to do this, Godard Adriaan van Reede, Lord of Amerongen, and Everard van Weede, Lord of Dijkveld.

Amerongen was born into the Van Reede family in 1621, a prominent and many-branched family that had a great influence within the province thanks to its close ties with the house of Orange. When he was twenty, he inherited Amerongen castle from his father, including the status and responsibilities that went with it. In 1642 he became a member of the Equestrian Order of Utrecht. A year later he amassed a fortune by marrying Margaretha Turnor, the daughter of an English captain. During the 1660’s his position in the Van Reede family became increasingly prominent, and he established a lot of valuable contacts far beyond the Dutch Republic. It was not just his parentage that gave him these contacts; it was also his reputation as a diplomat. Amerongen spent many years at important foreign courts, especially in German principalities. Dijkveld too combined a diplomatic career with a strong provincial position. He was of bourgeois origin, born to a Utrecht burgomaster in 1626. Dijkveld built up a controversial reputation, not only as a bachelor, but also because of his ruthless actions as a diplomat and regent. Since 1653 he had been a member of the Elect (geëligeerden), and he managed to exert a lot of influence on the States of Utrecht, helped by Grand Pensionary De Witt of Holland. In 1674, his rivals managed to persuade William III to remove him from the governing bodies of the Sticht. However, Dijkveld remained active as an ambassador and in that capacity he was in contact with the prince. With his great diplomatic qualities, he managed to win the Prince of Orange’s trust. The latter appointed him
to the Elect again in 1677, giving him an increasingly bigger role in the provincial government. From the end of the 1670’s, Amerongen ruled the noble elite in the Sticht, while Dijkveld forced the bourgeois elite to his will.

Contacts between William III and the noble elite of Utrecht ran via Amerongen. The prince often visited Amerongen’s home when he was stopping over on his way from The Hague to Soestdijk. The Prince of Orange used these meetings to ensure he still had the support of the noblemen in the Sticht. Also, when it came to having to appoint someone, he sought Amerongen’s advice about the qualities of the noble regents. In the meantime, Amerongen was able to make the stadholder aware of applications from members of the administrative elite, many of whom were assigned a public office thanks to him. However, one of the consequences of his diplomatic missions was that he was often absent from the Dutch Republic. In order to compensate his absence from the Dutch Republic, he built up an extensive correspondence network. He hardly had any success with this at the court. Those close to the prince were not really interested in the personal interests of Amerongen. He did manage to maintain his position in the Sticht thanks to the many letters he sent. Many officials and regents in the province of Utrecht were prepared to inform him about and represent him in the governing bodies, in exchange for favours. In addition, his wife Turnor maintained contact with the noblemen of the Sticht and with William III and his entourage. As a result, whenever the prince needed the consent of the Equestrian Order of Utrecht, he continued to contact Amerongen. Partly thanks to the contribution from relatives and friends, Amerongen was able to continue his role as a broker from abroad.

Dijkveld’s position as a broker within the bourgeois elite was controversial. Following the change of the legislative in 1674, important municipal public offices went to Voetianen, who tried to establish close ties with Orange, hoping to look after the interests of the public church. When William III obstructed their politics however, the loyalty of the Voetian faction to Orange came under pressure. This very much concerned the stadholder. Hoping to regain his grip on the bourgeois regents, the stadholder ordered Dijkveld to return to the governing bodies of the Sticht. Dijkveld then had to somehow increase his influence within an administrative elite that did not look favourably on him. In order to change the balance of power within the city government in his favour, he advised the stadholder to replace Voetianen with members of his own faction. Following in Dijkveld’s tracks, regents who had previously been dismissed by the stadholder now returned to their public offices. Within a couple of years, Dijkveld became president of the provincial States and a representative of the States General. Supported by the stadholder, Dijkveld increasingly controlled the bourgeois administrative elite, much to the chagrin of his opponents who accused him of nepotism.
The actions of brokers Amerongen and Dijkveld partly determined the functioning of the form of government. As a stadholder, William III acted as arbitrator in the governing bodies, intervening whenever regents failed to settle issues by themselves. Initially, he did not have to worry too much about the result of the States of Utrecht. Counting on a prosperous career, faction members gave brokers all the space they needed to lead the decision-making process. In addition, all factions had the notion that supporting the prince would improve the unity of the state. As an ‘eminent head’ the prince could end discord and as such prevent another Year of Disaster. Also, the Voetianen portrayed the prince as the guardian of the public church, noblemen regarded him as the protector of their rights and privileges, and nearly all regents felt that, as the chief of the States army, he could guarantee territorial integrity. The decision-making process was therefore for a long time aimed at getting a quick result in favour of the stadholder. However, the limits of the brokers’ influence came to light after people started to revolt against the politics of William III following high tax pressure and a reduction of foreign threats. When as a result of that the decision-making process in the States of Utrecht repeatedly faltered in 1683/1684, the prince ordered Dijkveld to intervene. Many members of the city government were fired, and from now on, important issues were discussed only in committees comprising members from Dijkveld’s faction. This meant that Dijkveld was able to sideline the official decision-making process at decisive moments.

After William III became King of England in 1689, dissatisfaction in the Sticht with the balance of power increased. The prince spent half of the year in England, making regents in the province of Utrecht feel as if he hardly cared about their interests at all. Also, the brokers were involved less in provincial politics. During the 1680’s, Amerongen’s influence had waned. He died in 1691, while staying at the Danish court in Copenhagen as an ambassador against his will. In addition, Dijkveld stayed in The Hague or at foreign courts more often than he used to. He could afford to spend less time in the governing bodies of Utrecht, as his faction members called the shots there. A revealing aspect was that foreign politics were hardly ever discussed in the Utrecht State Chamber anymore, while the office holders had to find resources to maintain the States army. The broker system appeared to perform better than before, but under the skin, opposition to Dijkveld and the stadholder grew. When the prince died in 1702, the regents seized power again. The States of Utrecht abolished the Government Regulation and left the office of stadholder vacant. Dijkveld died a couple of months later.
CONCLUSIONS

In contrast with the existing image of the stadholder patronage systems, during the period of office of William III these networks did not revolve around the court of Orange, but around brokers who played an important role in the provinces - it would therefore be more apt to speak in this case of broker systems. Not only were these brokers clients of William III, they also headed provincial and local factions. As they were the only ones able to link court and province, they found themselves in an influential position. The prince was hardly involved in provincial politics, and he hoped he could force the government bodies into submissiveness by fully relying on the recommendations from brokers. Brokers used their advisory role to strengthen the position of their faction. In the meantime, most regents did not have access to the court of Orange, which meant they had to rely on the support from brokers to find favour with the stadholder. Office holders who needed the prince’s support therefore acted loyally to these brokers. Apart from their clients however, brokers often had little grip on the administrative elite. Members of rival factions rightfully feared that brokers were not so much concerned with their interests. The result was that the limits of influence of broker networks often ran alongside the dividing lines between factions.

Brokers maintained their contact with the stadholder by guaranteeing that decisions of government bodies would be at the advantage of William III. Brokers had a great influence on the decision-making process, much to the satisfaction of and with support from their faction members. However, when office holders resisted the stadholder’s politics, brokers often successfully pressurised their clients into reconsidering their votes. They also tried to convince the stadholder that the resistance was the work of regents who did not form part of their own clientele. They invariably advised the stadholder to replace disloyal regents with members of their faction. This often caused William III to have an unrealistic image of the provincial and local balance of power. However, brokers were faced with the problem that they were in great demand everywhere, from the court to the local governing bodies. In order to compensate for their absence, they set up correspondence networks to gather information and to spur their contacts into acting as their representatives. Also, the brokers kept controversial issues out of the governing bodies by passing them to a committee made up of members of their faction.

William III encouraged regents to act pragmatically towards him. As usual within the highly noble environment the prince lived in, he regarded loyalty as the most important quality of office holders. William III demanded submissiveness from the governing bodies and was hardly interested in how these came about and what the underlying motives were. Regents took advantage of this by sending a declaration of loyalty to the house of Orange along with each application from the stadholder or broker. In practice however, most office
holders had ambivalent feelings towards the stadholder. Members of the administrative elite focused on provincial and local issues, which were more or less material, religious and/or political in nature. To all regents, getting into office was important, but in their relationship with the stadholder, the realisation of religious and political objectives also played a prominent role. As for most regents, they were prepared to subjugate to the stadholder only for as long as they felt they would benefit from a good relationship with the house of Orange.

The regents pointed out that their support for the stadholder was based on their wish to look after the public interest. Within each faction however, office holders interpreted the general interest in such a way that they demanded the stadholder to look after their private interests. All their ideas about the possible role of the house of Orange in the Dutch Republic were at odds with the way in which William III exercised his power. Criticism on the progress of the allocation of public offices and the decision-making process was primarily aimed at the brokers. The regents held the brokers responsible for the prince's decisions. As such, the office holders had found an explanation as to why their ideas about the Orange family did not correspond with practice. At the same time they ignored the fact that both William III and they themselves had never structurally approached each other. The prince was focused on his role in national and international politics and tried to increase his power, emulating his highly noble relatives. The regents on the other hand wanted the stadholder to serve their provincial and local interests. That was not much of a realistic evaluation. The office holders who tried to build up ties with William III often saw their selfish servitude end up in a disappointment.