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## **Gaining entrance to the Venetian patriciate in the seventeenth century : The van Axel and Ghelthof families from the Low Countries**

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Maartje van Gelder

## Gaining entrance to the Venetian patriciate in the seventeenth century : The van Axel and Ghelthof families from the Low Countries

- 1 When the perceptive Amsterdam merchant and poet Jan Six van Chandelier travelled to Venice on a business trip in 1650, he visited many colleagues and friends from the Low Countries. Like many early modern travellers Six van Chandelier documented his journey, but instead of recording his experiences in a classic travel journal, he composed a series of poems. He dedicated two satirical poems to Andrea (Adriaan) Ghelthof,<sup>1</sup> making puns on the merchant's last name, which in Dutch literally means « court of money ». In the first poem Six van Chandelier jokingly expressed the hope that the Venetians, badly in need of money because of the lengthy war over Crete with the Ottomans, would not guess the meaning of Ghelthof's name, for then they would take him to be an easy fountain of riches. The second poem is very similar, although more vulgar, likening Ghelthof to a horse, that produces money as if it were excrement.<sup>2</sup> The poems were not just mere puns on Ghelthof's name, but direct references to the merchant's actual wealth, which appears to have surpassed that of most of his fellow traders in Venice.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 It is tempting to read Six van Chandelier's poems as comments on a conscious strategy of Andrea, the first of the Ghelthof family to settle in Venice, to use his financial means to forge a closer bond with the host state. Yet the Ghelthofs' financial position was just one – albeit a very important – aspect of this immigrant family's integration into the Venetian upper class. Almost fifty years after Six van Chandelier's visit, the Ghelthof family was in fact admitted to the Venetian patriciate in return for a sizeable financial contribution.<sup>4</sup> This contribution will show that only the carefully managed intergenerational transfer of economic and social capital enabled newcomers to enter what at first glance was a well-defined caste.
- 3 Research in the past decades has greatly enhanced our understanding of the workings of the different echelons of Venetian society : studies on demography, marriage behaviour and the self-definition of the patrician and the citizen classes have challenged the traditional view of Venice as a hierarchical and closed society.<sup>5</sup> In recent historiography Venetian society is instead depicted as being fluid and permeable, with the suggestion even that the city may have maintained its relative peace and order not by being a closed hierarchy, but rather because of « its malleability, diversity, and adaptability, the fuzziness of its social boundaries ».<sup>6</sup> Yet the greater porosity of Venetian social categories does not mean that boundaries were completely permeable or easily transcended.
- 4 This contribution traces the ways in which two immigrant families – merchants from the Low Countries – gained entrance to the Venetian patriciate during the seventeenth century. The van Axel and Ghelthof families succeeded in making the transition from being *forestieri* to Venetian nobles after a protracted process of affiliation to Venetian society, involving more than one generation. I will focus on why these families chose to leave the Low Countries and what made Venice an attractive place of settlement. Subsequently I will describe the way they constructed relations with (noble) Venetian families, examining how individuals took great care in expanding, maintaining and transmitting the immigrant families' wealth, status, and social relations to the next generation.

### Cosmopolitan Venice

- 5 Depicting Venice as a cosmopolitan society has been a persistent trope for centuries. Historians of Venice, wishing to stress the city's social and ethnic diversity, have frequently cited the French ambassador, Philippe de Comynes, who remarked at the end of the fifteenth century

that « most of their people are foreigners ». <sup>7</sup> Yet his observation was not intended as a celebration of the city's multi-ethnicity, but part of his account of the Venetian political system, in which he contrasted the powerful political elite with the multitude of resident, subaltern foreigners. In a time when centralized monarchies increasingly became the norm, Venice stood out as an oligarchic republic, run by a small group of noble families. From a legal perspective, Venetian society was organized into three orders : the nobility or patriciate at the top (circa 5 %), followed by the class of *cittadini originari* – Venetian citizens by birth (circa 7 %). Members of this last group had access to jobs in the Venetian bureaucracy and formed a secondary elite. The remaining majority of Venetian inhabitants or *popolani*, whether native or foreign, had no specific political or professional privileges. The specific political make-up of the Venetian state and the concentration of political power in the hands of a small elite was what struck De Commynes, and what dictated the Venetian attitude toward immigration.

6 This attitude was especially conspicuous in issues related to trade. Because international commerce was deemed the backbone of Venetian prosperity, the political elite had created a substantial and intricate body of legislation that made Venetian maritime trade – especially with the Levant – the exclusive privilege of Venetian patricians and *cittadini*. <sup>8</sup> In line with this economic agenda, the Venetian state strove to control the settlement of foreign traders and restricted their participation in international trade from and through Venice. The most well-known and visible expression of this agenda is the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, the combination of inn, market place, and customs office at Rialto where German traders were obliged to live. Yet by 1600, significant shifts in the global economy meant that the Venetian elite had to loosen and adapt its strict policies regarding trade and immigration.

7 With the rise of the trading centres in Northern Europe and the increasing importance of Atlantic commerce, the Mediterranean ceased to be the crucial commercial link between East and West. Within the Venetian domain, it became clear that the city's own mercantile community was no longer at the forefront to provide certain goods or commercial services. By 1602, the patricians on the Venetian Board of Trade lamented that foreigners and outsiders, referring to English, Netherlandish and Jewish merchants, had become masters of all commercial shipping. <sup>9</sup> Five years later they were much more specific, reporting that the « Netherlandish nation nowadays does [the] greatest amount of trade and one could say, that [this nation] more than all the others makes commerce blossom in this city ». <sup>10</sup> Obviously the increased importance of foreign traders with connections to the new European trading centres was putting a strain on Venice's traditional protectionist commercial policies.

8 The economy was just one aspect of Venetian society that had to deal with major changes in the seventeenth century. By the first half of the seventeenth century the Venetian patriciate was experiencing a demographic crisis, caused by the tendency of noble families to restrict marriages in an attempt to maintain the family property intact and further aggravated by the plague epidemic of 1629-1631. <sup>11</sup> In the reduced group of patricians, differences in prosperity grew more and more marked as marital alliances caused wealth to be concentrated in the hands of just a few families. Consequently it became more and more difficult to find men who were willing and able to hold unremunerated offices in the Venetian government, which often required substantial personal expenditure. The necessity of recruiting new men of wealth into the nobility coincided with a desperate need for state revenue as a result of new Venetian-Ottoman conflicts during the second half of the seventeenth century. The financial pressure stemming from the War of Crete (1645-1669) and the Wars of Morea (1684-1699 and 1716-1718) forced the patricians to resort to an exceptional solution, admitting new families who could pay an entry fee in cash of 60,000 ducats and an investment of another 40,000 ducats in the *Zecca*, Venice's Mint. <sup>12</sup>

9 The last time a group of new nobles had been admitted to the Great Council had been at the end of the War of Chioggia in 1381, when thirty new families were granted the status of patricians as a token of appreciation for their contribution to the war effort. Thereafter the patriciate remained a circumscribed hereditary group for almost three centuries, until 128 new families were admitted between 1646 and 1718. <sup>13</sup> The aggregation of such a large number of new

families provoked negative reactions from members of the established nobility, who expressed their disapproval in anonymous hand-written pamphlets or *cronachette*. Anonymous members of the established patriciate, opposed to the aggregations, often produced these chronicles. They consisted of information from the petitions submitted by families wishing to become patricians, mixed with a substantial dose of gossip. The writers of the *cronachette* protested that the newcomers had just exchanged the counter of their shops for the hall of the Great Council, rising straight from « servility to the most conspicuous condition that exists in this patria ». <sup>14</sup> This was exactly the kind of critique directed at the Ghelthof family at the time of their aggregation : anonymous authors of *cronachette* expressed their disgust that the son of an Antwerp tailor, who had come to Venice as a mere trader's apprentice, could acquire the status of Venetian nobleman. <sup>15</sup>

10 Recent research by Dorit Raines has shown, however, that the inclusion of a large number of new nobles should not be seen as an abrupt break with tradition, but rather as the legal culmination of a longer process of *rapprochement* between the established nobility and those families that requested to be admitted. <sup>16</sup> This, as we shall see, was also the case for both the van Axel and Ghelthof families. In his analysis of the mechanisms by which the new families were aggregated and of their subsequent relations with members of the Venetian patriciate, Alexander Cowan has called attention to seemingly contradictory patrician reactions : the expressed outrage, in fact, did not form an obstacle for intensive intermarriage between the established patriciate and the newly admitted families. <sup>17</sup>

11 The changes in Venice's position thus were significant in this period : the most successful men in the field of overseas trade were all foreign merchants, who had settled in Venice to improve the city's commercial links with their homes. While Venetian pragmatism dictated that these traders were accommodated to maintain a viable level of international commerce, at the same time the wealth and commercial prominence of these immigrants proved difficult to swallow for the more conservative members among the Venetian elite. <sup>18</sup> No wonder, then, that the aggregation of rich foreign merchants to the patriciate provoked heated debate. Before taking a look at the process of integration and aggregation by the van Axels and Ghelthofs, let us first examine the background of the Netherlanders settling in Venice.

## Settling in Venice

12 The Netherlanders were relative newcomers to the Mediterranean. It is important to note that « Netherlandish » refers to persons from the conglomerate of provinces that constituted the Netherlands or Low Countries, before they became divided during the war of the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648). The war resulted in the foundation of the Dutch Republic in the North and the Spanish or Habsburg Netherlands in the South. The adjective « Netherlandish » most accurately describes the identity of the merchants trading with and in Venice : the majority was born in the Spanish Netherlands and had traded in Antwerp, the commercial centre of the Low Countries until the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Once the war started to destroy the economy of the South, they and their families emigrated and settled in other commercial centres, including Frankfurt, Cologne, London, and Amsterdam. The « Antwerp diaspora », as their dispersal has been dubbed, thus formed a supranational network that linked those who had stayed behind in Antwerp with relatives and friends in all the major trading centres of early modern Europe. <sup>19</sup>

13 What attracted the Netherlandish traders to Venice was the city's location at the crossroads of overland and maritime trade routes, linking North with South and East with West. They sought to profit from this strategic position, which could allow them to distribute commodities from the Netherlandish markets to the Mediterranean and vice versa. During the first half of the sixteenth century, a small number of merchants from the Netherlands traded with Venice. After the Venetian galley route to Bruges and Antwerp fell into disuse at the start of the sixteenth century, commerce between Venice and the Netherlands was primarily conducted by Antwerp merchants, using the land-based trading routes via Germany. <sup>20</sup> By the 1580s a few Antwerp merchants started to experiment with maritime trade to the Mediterranean. This

- new line of commerce, however, did not generate enough profit and quickly was abandoned, mainly because the war against Spain severely damaged Antwerp's trade in these years.<sup>21</sup>
- 14 The final decade of the sixteenth century proved to be pivotal in the relation between the Venetian state and merchants from the Low Countries. Severe grain shortages, triggered by bad harvests, caused problems in all Mediterranean cities. Venice also had to find ways of averting the risk of food riots, for example by seeking to obtain grain from Northern Europe. However, Venetian attempts to directly import grain from Danzig and Amsterdam were no success. Instead the Venetian state enlisted foreign traders to help provide enough cereals for its people.<sup>22</sup> Netherlandish merchants who previously had been engaged in overland trade now saw a golden opportunity : they had the necessary experience to deal with Venetian institutions, while their contacts in northern harbours – through their widely scattered family members and colleagues – gave them access to grain and the means to transport it.<sup>23</sup> Once maritime trade started, others arrived to take advantage of the newly established trade routes, and consequently the number of Netherlandish traders in Venice increased in the 1590s.<sup>24</sup>
- 15 They formed a relatively small community in the Italian metropolis, ranging between twenty to fifty merchant families. Shared origins, kinship ties, and commercial contacts reinforced the bonds among the merchants in Venice, while also linking them to similar communities of Netherlanders in a wide variety of European trade centres.<sup>25</sup> This allowed them the use of multiple trade routes and gave them access to different markets. Although their origins and business interests were relatively homogeneous, the merchants' religious affiliation was not. Catholics as well as Protestant Netherlanders settled in Venice. Reformed services were condoned, and as long as no native Venetians were present or in danger of conversion, these heterodox traders suffered no hindrance from the Venetian authorities. Their religious heterogeneity posed no obstacle to a strong internal cohesion among the Netherlanders, and both Catholic and Protestant traders formed part of the *nazione fiamminga*, as the Netherlandish merchant community was locally known.
- 16 In general the merchants had a preference for endogamic matches that strengthened economic alliances. Illicit relations between Netherlandish merchants and Venetian women were therefore much more frequent than actual intermarriage. Nevertheless, a few traders did seek a marital bond with Venetian families, for themselves or for their offspring. If they had contracted marriage with a native Venetian, the merchants often stressed this point in their petitions to the authorities as a demonstration of their voluntary participation in Venetian society. Adolfo van Axel, however, was certainly stretching it a bit when he applied for citizenship in 1628 and claimed that he had taken a Venetian citizen as wife : he had, in fact, married Catherine, the daughter of the Netherlandish merchant Stefano van Neste who himself had acquired the *cittadinanza de intus et extra* (« citizenship at home and abroad ») status only fifteen years earlier.<sup>26</sup>
- 17 Obtaining Venetian citizenship was a step towards greater economic equality for a foreigner residing in Venice, allowing him to participate in international trade on the same terms and conditions as native Venetian merchants.<sup>27</sup> Officially one had to fulfil the requirements of twenty-five years of residence in the city and full payment of taxes, but citizenship requests by international merchants could count on leniency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries : Stefano van Neste, for example, had lived in Venice for twenty-eight years, but had never paid any taxes until the moment of his citizenship request.<sup>28</sup> Including foreign merchants as citizens – even if they could not meet all requirements – was one way in which the Venetians tried to counter the « strettezza de negotiatori » and maintain the viability of international commerce. From the merchants' point of view, citizenship was not the only way of obtaining a better economic position, since collective petitions by the *nazione fiamminga* also gave individual Netherlandish traders access to fiscal and commercial privileges.<sup>29</sup> Yet for some immigrant merchants and their families, such as the van Axels, obtaining citizenship was just the start of forging closer bonds with Venetian society.

## van Axel family

- 18 Because it was often the result of a long-term trajectory, the admittance of these Netherlanders throws light on their position and aims during their stay in Venice, but it also brings into focus the attitude of the established patriciate to their inclusion. To start with the latter, the new families can be roughly divided into three different types : Terraferma nobility, citizens from the ranks of the Cancelleria Ducale, and rich merchants. The first two categories evoked relatively little opposition, since the social origins of the nobility from the Terraferma were similar to those of the Venetian patriciate and the *cittadini* were the only other privileged group in Venetian society outside the patriciate : the citizen families applying for admission often had a long tradition of occupying government posts in the Republic.<sup>30</sup> Rich *popolano* merchants, however, were considered to be of lower social standing, even if they could compete with the Venetian elite in material wealth, while traders of foreign origin seeking patrician membership were regarded with particular suspicion.<sup>31</sup>
- 19 A case in point is the van Axel family : when their request for patrician status was put to the vote in the Great Council on 25 May 1665, it resulted in 558 votes in favour, 286 against, and 14 abstentions. Only two other new families met with more resistance. In comparison, the Suriano family, who were Venetian citizens, only received forty votes against and six abstentions.<sup>32</sup> Even if a significant number of Council members voted against their acceptance, the van Axels did succeed in gaining entrance to the nobility. The connections they had formed with Venetian society in the decades preceding their aggregation, made them acceptable to the majority of patricians in the Great Council.
- 20 Adolfo van Axel was the first of his family to settle in Venice, probably around 1609, and for more than a decade he worked for the firm of his relatives, the van Castre brothers who were also originally from Malines.<sup>33</sup> By 1621 he had set up his own firm with the Netherlanders Antonio Retano, Paolo van Gansepoel, and Michiel van der Castele, and by 1630 he worked with his brother Francesco and his father-in-law Stefano van Neste in the firm van Neste and van Axel, trading in goods such as currants, salt, Venetian mirrors, and wool.<sup>34</sup> Within a few decades, Adolfo had established himself as an active trader with a wide range of both social and economic relations with his compatriots in Venice. Adolfo's legal status in Venice was enhanced when he was granted citizenship in 1628, which can be seen as the confirmation of his economic integration.
- 21 That securing close contacts with the Venetian patriciate and steadily climbing the Venetian social ladder was a family affair becomes apparent from the efforts surrounding the marriages of Elisabetta van Axel, Adolfo's daughter. Adolfo van Axel died in 1637, when his children were still too young to marry. In his testament he left the job of finding suitable husbands for his daughter Elisabetta to his three executors : his wife, his father-in-law, and his brother Francesco van Axel.<sup>35</sup> That they were looking for marriage partners outside the community of Netherlanders or traders is confirmed by her first marriage to Francesco Sebastiani from Padua in 1645. Yet the van Axel family's aspirations to become connected to the Venetian nobility took proper form in Elisabetta's second and third marriage. After Sebastiani had died, she married the nobleman Giovanni Battista Barbaro on 25 August 1655, with whom she had three sons.<sup>36</sup> The marriage took place at the van Axel residence, the fifteenth-century palazzo in the parish of Santa Marina, which the family had bought in 1652 from the patrician Soranzo's : another sign of the increasingly patrician lifestyle the van Axels were adopting.
- 22 After Barbaro's death, Elisabetta van Axel married another Venetian nobleman, Antonio Boldù, son of Andrea, in 1662.<sup>37</sup> Raising her sizeable dowry was the responsibility of the entire van Axel family firm, which during the 1630s and 1640s had been managed by her uncle Francesco van Axel and Stefano van Neste, and, after the latter had died, was carried on by Francesco and his two nephews Giovanni Battista and Tomaso Adolfo, sons of the late Adolfo.<sup>38</sup> In his testament Francesco van Axel referred to his niece's dowry, stating that Elisabetta's wedding to Barbaro had been « at great expense of the van Axel house ».<sup>39</sup> Yet these costs obviously represented an investment to the Netherlandish family, and intermarriage with established noble houses such as the Barbaro and Boldù was a way of better positioning

themselves at a time when entrance into the patriciate had become a possibility. Not only did the van Axel family forge bonds with the old patrician families, in the years leading up to their aggregation they were also in close contact with newly aggregated families. For instance, in 1650, the van Axel firm did business with Vincenzo Fini, whose family had been admitted to the patriciate just one year earlier.<sup>40</sup>

23 Well-connected with old and new elite Venetian families as the van Axels were by the 1660s, the last will drawn up by Francesco van Axel in 1663 makes explicit where the family's future should lie. He specified that he and his nephews had separated themselves intentionally from the van Axel house run in Amsterdam by his only surviving brother, Uberto (Lubbert).<sup>41</sup> From now on the focus should be exclusively on Venice. After his death, Giovanni Battista and Tomaso Adolfo were to continue the Venetian firm together and Francesco impressed on them that under no circumstances were they to let the family name be extinguished.<sup>42</sup> His exhortations did not go unheeded : despite the opposition from part of the patriciate, Giovanni Battista and Tomaso Adolfo van Axel successfully requested admission to the patriciate in March 1665. By the time of Francesco van Axel's death on 12 October 1665, his nephews could rightfully claim the title of « nobili veneti ».<sup>43</sup>

24 In their request to be aggregated, Giovanni Battista and Tomaso Adolfo took care to explain that their family was worthy of the patrician title. Of course they mentioned their family's commercial importance as well as the fact that they had contributed ships and money to the Venetian state during the War of Crete.<sup>44</sup> Aware that they had to overcome the distrust among patricians against foreign newcomers, the van Axels pointed out that their family already had obtained nobility in the province of Flanders in the twelfth century. And not only had they always been good Catholics, among their ancestors they could even count crusaders.<sup>45</sup> In an attempt to minimize their foreignness, Giovanni Battista and Tomaso Adolfo mentioned that they both had been born in Venice and pointed out that one sister had married into the patriciate while the other had entered a Venetian convent. The recent tumultuous past of the Low Countries and the Venetian myth of the Serenissima became interwoven in the part of their petition where they explained that their father had fled his country because of the military violence and religious instability during the Revolt, exchanging the Catholic city of Malines for the peace and security offered by the Venetian state.

25 Once they had been accepted into the patriciate, Adolfo's sons, like his daughter before them, became wealthy potential marriage partners for other noble families and the next year saw them both getting married. Giovanni Battista wed a girl from an established Venetian family, Margherita Bembo, while Tomaso Adolfo married Arcanzola Casseti, of a family that had become Venetian patricians quite recently, in 1662. It seems highly probable that the van Axels had concluded promises for a future marriage with both the Bembo and the Casseti families before their aggregation, thereby securing the support of the members of these houses in the Great Council.<sup>46</sup> The inclusion into the patriciate, however, had come at great financial costs, bringing the family to the brink of bankruptcy.<sup>47</sup>

## Ghelthof family

26 The aggregation of the second family of Netherlandish origin took place in 1697, during the second phase (between 1685 and 1718) that newcomers were accepted. By this time *popolano* families met with far less disapproval, and the Ghelthof petition provoked only 131 negative votes, against 802 positive ones and ten abstentions.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the admission of the Ghelthofs also aroused some animosity, as we have seen above. The first member of the Ghelthof family to settle in Venice was Andrea, who arrived in the late 1630s, starting a firm with his Netherlandish partner Paolo Ramacher.<sup>49</sup> It was Andrea's success in trade, connecting Venice with the Low Countries, Spain and the Americas, which attracted the attention of the poet Jan Six van Chandelier in the early 1650s. Very soon afterwards, in 1652, Andrea Ghelthof died, leaving his business to his nephew Marino, who traded in partnership with one Francesco Bourel. Marino Ghelthof's last will, drawn up in February 1689, reads like an instruction book to his heirs on how to attain and maintain patrician status.<sup>50</sup>



- 27 The testament, which Marino dictated eight years before the family's aggregation, shows that the Ghelthofs not only had the necessary financial means to enter the patriciate, but that they had the support of certain members of old noble families as well. In his last will, for instance, Marino Ghelthof thanked the patrician Tomaso Corner for having taken him into his confidence and begged him to extend his protection to his daughter and her husband, expressing the hope that Corner's sons would continue to watch over the Ghelthof house. After having dealt with the economic and social prerequisites, Marino advised his heirs on how to preserve the family line as best as they could. This required specific instructions, since he had no male offspring, but only one surviving daughter, Maria, who was married to his former apprentice Giovanni Francesco Anverix. Anverix had taken the Ghelthof name when he married Maria, signing documents with the double last name Anverix Ghelthof from that moment on. In a section, which mirrors the wishes expressed in Francesco van Axel's testament, Ghelthof explicitly told the couple not to return to Antwerp. Instead he wanted them to remain in Venice and await the opportunity to seek admission to the Venetian nobility under the exclusive name of Ghelthof.<sup>51</sup>
- 28 Upon writing his testament, Marino Ghelthof was clearly intent on constructing a new Venetian noble lineage, pairing his enormous wealth and connections to any future male offspring from his daughter's union with his former apprentice. Maria and Giovanni Francesco's firstborn son would receive an annual legacy of 1,000 ducats and was to be named Marino after his grandfather. This name should then be passed on to each firstborn male child in the following generations. Throughout his testament we can read his preoccupations with a lack of male heirs, causing Marino to explicitly suggest the option of inheriting along the female line under the name of Ghelthof. His son-in-law and daughter dutifully followed his wishes and on 16 September 1697, Giovanni Francesco Ghelthof presented his petition to be aggregated, which was duly accepted by the Great Council.<sup>52</sup>
- 29 After the admission of Marino Ghelthof's son-in-law, some chronicles were quite positive, not disguising Anverix humble origins, but praising his character and good qualities, which made him worthy of the patrician status.<sup>53</sup> Others, however, expressed their disgust at the fact that the son of an Antwerp tailor could acquire the status of a Venetian nobleman and sought to discredit the family. Rumours circulated about the mysterious death of Marino's other daughter, who fell to her death in a Venetian theatre, and voices talked about a Jewish confidante who had convinced Marino not to marry Maria to the nobleman Tomaso Corner, but to one of his staff members.<sup>54</sup> Even if these last rumours were true, Marino's expressions of trust and friendship towards Corner in his last will point out that they continued to maintain close connections. In the *cronachette* the Ghelthof family was also singled out as an example of those new patricians who were guilty of wasting their money, thus becoming a further burden to the Venetian state, instead of boosting its financial basis.<sup>55</sup>
- 30 Although obtaining aggregation clearly was an important step, the concerns of these former immigrant families did not end upon entering the patriciate. The next generation of Ghelthofs did not have to worry about becoming noble, but about how to preserve their status and precious family name. In July 1737 Maria Ghelthof, daughter of Marino and by now widow of « nobil uomo » Giovanni Francesco Ghelthof, dictated her last will. It clearly shows that although she had been blessed with two sons, matters were by no means simple.<sup>56</sup> Maria Ghelthof's two daughters had entered convents on Venetian territory, thereby conforming to a Venetian tradition to limit the expenses of dowries. Trouble started with her first-born, dutifully named Marino, who had never married and instead had squandered away much of his father's inherited wealth on travels to the Levant. She decided that he should inherit no more than a few pieces of furniture. Moreover, explicitly referring to her father's last will, she made sure that the family's lineage and wealth would be carried on through her second son, Pietro Marino. She included a *fideicommissum* in her testament that prescribed that the Ghelthof estate was to be bequeathed to Pietro Marino and his descendants perpetually.<sup>57</sup> In practicing a policy of restricting marriage to one son and entrusting the family's property and wealth to a *fideicommissum*, by the third « Venetian » generation the Ghelthof family

had not only obtained noble status, but also incorporated long-standing patrician practices of intergenerational transfer.

## Conclusion

- 31 Of all the Netherlandish merchants in Venice, not all chose to settle there permanently or to invest such amounts of money, time, and energy in integrating into the patriciate. Some immigrant families simply died out, others opted to return to their fatherland or to maintain that level of ambiguity, of never fully assimilating, which constituted such an important aspect of their role as intermediaries in early modern international commerce. The van Axel and Ghelthof families represent the most extreme form of successful integration in Venice. These cases offer examples of how immigrants over the course of two or three generations could penetrate the higher strata of Venetian society. They show that families belonging to those categories that were most mistrusted, namely foreigners with a mercantile background, could legally and socially become part of the patriciate. The trajectories pursued by the van Axel and Ghelthof families are further prove of the permeability of Venetian social boundaries.
- 32 Long before aggregation to the patriciate became a concrete possibility, members of both families sought to construct and preserve a stable social lineage, which in future could hold its own among the Venetian elite. This process involved different generations of the immigrant families and entailed forming bonds with established and new noble families. Consequently, by the time the van Axels and Ghelthofs requested admittance to the Venetian nobility, they enjoyed the support of a lobby within the patriciate strong enough to overcome the significant opposition, which applications by foreign commoners could evoke. The necessary financial investments, though, did make serious dents in the families' wealth.
- 33 The testaments of Francesco van Axel and of Marino and Maria Ghelthof can be read not just as settlements of property and goods or as a representation of their contacts and relations, but also as social mission statements : key issues in these last wills were the severing of ties with the Low Countries, the explicit focus on a Venetian future for the whole family and the instructions for the next generations on how to obtain or maintain elite status. Venice's reduced commercial power, the demographic crisis of the patriciate, and the financial pressures of the wars against the Ottomans made this process of social climbing possible, by allowing immigrant merchants to take advantage of the increased Venetian social permeability. Yet it was the conscious and multigenerational efforts of both the van Axel and Ghelthof families that ensured them a place among the Venetian elite, right up until Napoleon defeated the Venetian Republic in 1797.

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## Notes

1 Netherlandish names were spelled in many different ways in early modern Italy. We can find, for example, Ghelthoff, Geltof, Gheldhof and Geldhof. I have chosen to give the version most common in Venetian documents : Ghelthof.

2 Jacobs 1989, p. 112-114 : « Op den toenaam van Adriaan Geldhof : / Wist heilge Mark uw naam, hy loofde ghy vol geld stakt, / En hield u, Geldhof, voor een paardeken, dat geld kakt ».

3 See, on the community of merchants from the Low Countries, Van Gelder 2009a.

4 Van Gelder 2009a, p. 202-203.

5 See on the patriciate, for example, the work by Stanley Chojnacki, Alexander Cowan, and Dorit Raines. For the less-studied citizen class, the work by Anna Bellavitis and Grubb 2000 form a good starting point.

6 Dursteler 2003, p. 153.

7 De Commynes 1969, p. 493. Examples of recent works citing De Commynes to underline Venetian multi-ethnicity are Lanaro 2006, p. 41 ; Olard 2007, p. 156 ; Horodowich 2008, p. 77.

8 Arbel 1995, p. 1-2.

9 Archivio di Stato di Venezia [hereafter : ASVe], Senato Mar, reg. 141, 15 July 1602.

10 ASVe, Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia [CSM], Risposte, reg. 141, 16 January 1606 (*more veneto*, meaning that the Venetian new year started on 1 March), p. 192r-192v. For a discussion of the social and economic characteristics of this merchant community and their relation with the Venetian Republic, Van Gelder 2009a.

11 Hunecke 1991 and Davis 1962, p. 54ff.

12 The aggregation of new families started in 1646 with a petition from the wealthy *cittadino* family Labia, requesting admission to the nobility. After various deliberations in the Great Council, the Labia were accepted in July of that same year, opening up the way for other families. The new families were admitted in the periods 1646-1669 and 1685-1718, Raines 2006, p. 633-653 and Raines 1991, p. 838-839.

13 See, on honorary membership and the addition of new families to the patriciate before 1646, Cowan 1985, p. 56-57.

14 Raines 2006, p. 763-775, on the chronicles discussing the origins of new families.

15 ASVe, Misc. Codici I, Storie Venete, 43/i (formerly Misc. Codici 740/1), c. 10r. See also Raines 2006, p. 747-748.

16 See Raines 2007 and Cowan 1985, p. 55.

17 Cowan 1985 and Cowan 2007.

18 See Van Gelder 2009b.

19 Still fundamental on this topic is Brulez 1960.

20 Stabel 2003.

21 Brulez 1959, p. 125-136.

22 Van Gelder 2004.

23 Van Gelder 2004, p. 50-54.

24 Van Gelder 2009a, p. 99-106.

25 Van Gelder 2009a, p. 110-130.

26 ASVe, Collegio, Risposte di Dentro, b. busta 19, 3 April 1628 : « [...] havendo anco preso per moglie dona cittadina venetiana, et con essa procreato molti figlioli ».

27 On Venetian citizenship, see Bellavitis 1995 ; Bellavitis 2001 ; Grubb 2000. Specifically on immigrants and Venetian citizenship, Mueller 2010.

28 Van Neste was allowed to pay his taxes retroactively, Van Gelder 2009a, p. 138.

29 On the practice of collective petitions, Van Gelder 2009b.

30 See, for the social origins of the new families, Cowan 1985, p. 58-59 : out of a total of 128 new families, seventy were either newcomers to the city of Venice or were of recent immigrant origin.

31 No English families ever resided long enough or had acquired sufficient standing to request admission. In addition to the two Netherlandish families, there were eight other foreign families from other Italian states or from Germany, who sought entry, Cowan 1985, p. 63.

32 For the vote on the van Axel aggregation, see Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana Venezia [hereafter : BNMV], Cod. Marc. VIII, b.183 (8161) Cod. Marc. It. VII, 183 (=8161), « Famiglie create patritie Venete », c. 112. For the Suriano family, Cowan 1985, p. 67.

33 Van Gelder 2009a, p. 196-197.

34 Van Axel had set up a firm with the Netherlanders Antonio Retano, Paolo van Gansepoel, and Michiel van der Castele in April 1621, ASVe, Notarile Atti [NA], b.10803, c. 387r-400r, 9 October 1640. By the time of van Axel's death in 1637, his relation with Retano had soured, see Adolfo's testament of 3 January 1636 (*m.v.*) and the codicil drawn up one day later, ASVe, Notarile Testamenti [NT], b. 757. See, for the partnership between the van Axel brothers and van Neste, ASVe, NA, b. 10783, c. 947r-947v, 12 November 1630 ; ASVe, Collegio, Risposte di Dentro, b. 25, 21 July 1634.

35 ASVe, NT, b.757, 3 January 1636 (*m.v.*). His second daughter entered a Venetian convent, showing that the family conformed with the Venetian elite's marriage pattern.

36 The Avogaria di Comuni Comun, the council that had to approve non-noble women as suitable marriage partners for Venetian patricians, had given its consent a week earlier, ASVe, Avogaria di Comuni [AC], Matrimoni e figli, Giovanni Battista Barbaro q. Giovanni and Partitum Declarationum (1589-1663), b. 108, c. 77v.

37 The wedding to Antonio Boldù took place at the church of San Gregorio on 28 September 1662. The dowry was registered as being 1,000 ducats in cash, 2,000 ducats in jewellery, furniture valued at 1,800 ducats as well as a large amount of land on the Terraferma, including the land Elisabetta had bought from the Barbaro family with the 2,000 ducats which her uncle and brothers had added to her dowry when

she married Giovanni Battista Barbaro, ASVe, AC, b. 120/10, 21 September 1662. Because of official limits, the actual dowry may well have exceeded the registered amount.

38 See, for example, ASVe, NA, b. 10798, c. 482r, 20 July 1638 ; b. 10798, c. 450v-451v, 8 July 1638 ; b. 10799, c. 628r-628v, 16 September 1638.

39 ASVe, NT, b. 936, 10 October 1665.

40 ASVe, NA, b. 10822, c.31v-32r, 12 March 1650.

41 Lubbert van Axel was a merchant and ship-owner in Amsterdam, Brulez and Devos 1986, nos. 3241 ; 3542 ; 3559 ; 3569 ; 3576.

42 ASVe, NT, b. 936.

43 ASVe, NT, b. 936. The death of Francesco was reported to the notary by the « Ill.mi ss.ri Gio Batta, e Tomaso Adolfo van Axele nobili veneti, nipoti, et heredi del sr. Testatore ».

44 See, for the aggregation of the van Axel family, the almost identical descriptions in two *cronachette*, BNMV, Mss. Italiani, VII, 942 (9014) Cod. Marc. It. VII, 942 (=9014), c. 36r ; Mss. Italiani, VII, 949 (7908) Cod. Marc. It. VII, 949 (=7908), c. 72-73.

45 BNMV, Cod. Marc. VIII, b.183 (8161) Cod. Marc. It. VII, 183 (=8161), c. 112. The van Axel brothers paid 50,000 ducats in cash and invested the same amount in the *Zecca*.

46 Raines 2006, p. 747.

47 See Mss. Italiani, VII, 949 (7908) BNMV, Cod. Marc. It. VII, 949 (=7908), c. 72-73.

48 BNMV, Cod. Marc. VIII, b. 183 (8161), Cod. Marc. It. VII, 183 (=8161) « Famiglie create patritie Venete », c. 197.

49 See, for example, ASVe, NA, b. 10797, February 1637, c. 828r-828v ; October 1640-February 1641, c. 538v-539r, 18 December 1640.

50 ASVe, NT, b.167, 28 February 1689.

51 ASVe, NT, b. 167, 28 February 1689 : « Voglio, et ordino, che all' hora sia procurato di mettere tutti li effetti insieme, et inclinando li soprannominati miei figlia, e genero amatissimi di continuare ad habitar in questa città di Venetia, ne andar più ad habitar in Anversa, se sarà aperta la porta per aggregare a' questa Serenissima nobiltà, voglio si debbano fare con il solo cognome di Ghelthof e niun altro cognome unito ».

52 Marciana, Cod. Marc. VIII, b. 183 (8161) BNMV, Cod. Marc. It. VII, 183 (=8161), c. 197.

53 See, for example, ASVe, Misc. Codici I, Storie Venete, 43/iv ; BNMV, Cod. Marc. It. VII, 942 (=9014), c. 25r ; BNMV, Cod. Marc. It. VII, 949 (=7908), 151.

54 ASVe, Misc. Codici I, Storie Venete, 43/i (formerly Misc. Codici 740/1), c. 10r. See also Raines 2006, p. 747-748.

55 Raines 2006, p. 68, based on ASVe, Misc Cod. III, Soranzo, reg. 15.

56 ASVe, NT, b. 151, 1 July 1737.

57 Pietro Marino married two patrician daughters : first Maria da Ponte and after her death Bianca Pizzamano.

### ***Pour citer cet article***

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### ***Droits d'auteur***

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### ***Résumé***

This contribution traces how two immigrant families from the Low Countries, the van Axels and Ghelthofs, gained entrance to the Venetian patriciate during the seventeenth century. Venice's reduced commercial power, the demographic crisis of the patriciate, and increasing financial pressures made this process of social climbing possible. Yet it was the conscious and multigenerational efforts of both the van Axel and Ghelthof families that ensured them a place among the Venetian elite. Long before aggregation to the patriciate became possible, members of both families sought to construct and preserve a stable social lineage, which could hold its own among the Venetian elite. This process involved different generations and entailed forming bonds with established and new Venetian noble families. By the time the van Axels and Ghelthofs requested admittance to the Venetian nobility, they enjoyed the support of a lobby within the patriciate strong enough to overcome opposition.

### ***Entrées d'index***

***Keywords*** : Republic of Venice, immigrant traders, Venetian patriciate, family strategies, social hierarchy