Summary

In the period 1576-1796 the assembly of the States General was the highest constitutional body of the alliance of the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands. It took decisions in all matters the allies had made common, even if those decisions were prepared elsewhere. Towards foreign countries and conquered regions it represented the sovereign power. The consequences of decisions taken by Her High Mightiness’s were felt in all corners of the Republic and the rest of the known world.

The archives of the States-General from this period, which have a size of about 1200 m³, were created and used by the States-General in order to make their power felt in the world. They document that world and that power, but are not a direct image of it. The States-General documented the world only to the extent that it helped them to attain their goals; together with their correspondents they did not represent the world as it was, but as they would and could see it. They imagined the power relations and their own exercise of power not as they were, but as they ought to be according to the agreements the allies had made and recorded. They documented preferably not the predominance of Holland, but the formal equality of the provinces.

In the course of four centuries, the archives of the States-General have constantly been adapted to changing ideas and needs. They do not merely represent the activities, power relations and attitudes of the records creators, but also those of keepers and users of more recent times. Clerks and archivists have frequently rearranged them, removing some documents and adding others. What we see is partly an image of past events, but also partly a reflection of our own time. The archives of the States-General consist of many layers of meaning, which partially overlap and overshadow each other. Each stratum is worth investigating, but also generates curiosity in the layer underneath. Researchers who are peeling these archives off layer by layer, are likely to be confronted with always new surprises.

Most of the archives of the States-General are preserved, but the environment in which they have originally been created, managed and used has largely disappeared or changed beyond recognition. Since this environment constitutes an interpretative framework, its intellectual reconstruction is crucial for the sound interpretation of these archives. It can be broken down into five contexts: the physical context, the organizational context, the functional context, the context of the business processes, and the social context. These contexts constitute the interpretive framework of the archives, but can also only be reconstructed for the greater part on the basis of these archives. This is a methodological challenge that calls for great caution, especially since the archives have later been rearranged from non-contemporary point of view.

The physical environment of the archives was the Binnenhof (Inner Court) of the palace of the count of Holland in The Hague. There, the records were received and drafted by the Clerk, put ready for use in meetings by the Agent, and stored in the registry by the bailiff. They were in the vicinity of the meeting rooms of the States-General, but also not far from the archives of other government bodies of the Republic and Holland. The cabinets, premises and buildings where the archives were kept express the meaning of these archives and from these archives part of their own meaning as well.

The States-General assembled in meetings of different compositions, in ordinary, extraordinary, and Great assemblies, and they had their decisions prepared, implemented and sometimes even taken by committees, conferences and deputations. All these actors have, individually or jointly, contributed to the creation of the archives; in the archives their activities and their cooperation is depicted. This influence is much less visible than in the archives of the nineteenth-century bureaucratic state, when government agencies were organized along the lines of fields of policy. Moreover, the structure of the older archives have sometimes been rearranged in order to fit in a new organizational structure.

The functions carried out by the States-General and the organization of the implementation of those functions had a more radical impact. The scope of activities of the States-General was unlimited, but the
domain in which they were obliged to cooperate was neatly demarcated. The form of material and the
arrangement of the records was not so much determined by the functions performed as such, but by the
organization of the business processes aimed at implementing those functions. These business processes
were focused on the provision of (legal) acts, and hence on the promulgation of the deeds and other
documents embodying these acts.

The archives of the States-General were part of their recordkeeping system, which also included the
Registry officials and the resources they used (including procedures, methods and knowledge). The clerks
and agents of the States-General have highly influenced the actual form, composition and arrangement of
the archives. This especially applies to the clerks Fagel; a good comprehension of their activities and their
documentary collections is indispensable for a good understanding of the States General archives. The
influence of registry officials, however, was limited by the demands of the decision making process, by the
particularities of ancient regime public and private law, and by the administrative and cultural conventions
of the time. The resolution system and the methods and techniques applied have not been invented by
them, but developed and perfected.

For a good understanding of the content and meaning of the records, an analysis of the composition and
the development of the various series of which the documents are part of is indispensable. This justifies
the detailed description of those series, partly even at the individual item level. Inconspicuous formal
characteristics can nevertheless uncover peculiarities in the decision-making process, changes in power
relationships and prejudices of archivists.

Power and order are central themes in this book. The archives of the States-General are both
representations and instruments of power, not only of political power, the power to manage and control
developments in society, but also of memory power, the power to determine how that society is
memorized. Order is a central instrument of power, not only because order is a prerequisite for control
and monitoring, but also because order is the most characteristic expression of a culture. By consequence,
the study of cultures that differ from ours asks for much tolerance for the complex and the
incomprehensible. Uncritical application of our own classifications to the constitution and the archives of
the ancien regime can easily erase what was precisely so characteristic for that time.

This book describes and analyzes the archives of the States-General within the context of their creation
and original use. It should help researchers in finding answers to questions concerning the composition,
structure and content of the archives of the States-General and the value and importance of these archives
as a historical source. It should help them to establish the relationship between the activities that the
States-General have taken on the one side and their archives on the other, it should help them in doing
research on and in these archives, in finding the documents which are most relevant to them, in
determining their search strategy. But this book is not only a tool for using a major historical source, but
also a biography of the States-General as a reflection of their archives: it is also about the organization,
functions and practices of the States-General and the Dutch constitution under the ancien regime in
general.