



Louis Sicking. *Neptune and the Netherlands: State, Economy, and War at Sea in the Renaissance.* Leiden: Brill, 2004. xxii + 552 pp. \$198.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-13850-6.

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The Key to the Netherlands

Any student of early modern state-building, economics, or military history will be greatly indebted to Louis Sicking's monumental study of the maritime history of the Netherlands prior to the Dutch Revolt. This is a work of extraordinary depth and clarity which employs detailed reconstruction of local events to reframe our picture of northern Europe in the sixteenth century. Sicking has much to say about the historiography of the Netherlands and Belgium, but also about the Habsburg-Valois rivalry that shaped sixteenth-century diplomacy, and the interaction of Danish and English politics with the affairs of merchants and monarchs on the North Sea littoral. Thus, while this volume constitutes a substantial contribution to maritime history, and a worthy addition to Brill's History of Warfare series, it is also of considerable importance to scholars of European political life in the sixteenth century.

The point of departure for this study is the "Ordinance on the Admiralty" of 1488, by which Maximilian of Austria and his son Philip the Fair created the office of Admiral of the Netherlands. In essence, Sicking's book is an extended analysis of the ways in which that office developed down to 1558 when it finally left the control of the Lords of Veere. As such, the book offers a sophisticated examination of the maritime, economic and political fortunes of the island of Walcheren and the Lords of Veere. Yet Sicking emphasizes that the origins of the admiralty derive from the struggles of Maximilian to assert his authority throughout the Netherlands against the persistent localism of the cities and estates. As such, the

office was a focus for efforts at administrative centralization in the region. Alongside the legal and administrative reforms initiated by Charles V in the sixteenth century, the admiralty became an essential component of state-building. However, the authority of the admiral was subject to scrutiny and suspicion like that of any potentially overmighty lord, and the appointment of a commissioner of the fleet during wartime became a useful tool for restraining and balancing the admiral's influence. In the 1550s this led to the formation of a dynamic triumvirate in the guise of imperial regent, admiral, and commissioner—that is, Mary of Hungary, Maximilian of Burgundy, and Cornelius de Schepper, respectively. These three worked together to consolidate developments such as the defense of the fisheries, coordination of private maritime fleets, and the creation of a standing fleet for military activity. Their cooperation marked the apogee of centralization in maritime policy. Yet already the conflicting interests of the fishers in Holland and Flanders, the merchants in Antwerp and Amsterdam, and the sailors and administration, had undermined efforts to consolidate the movement towards centralization. In the decade prior to the Dutch Revolt no new initiatives were put forward to resolve these difficulties.

The division of the Netherlands into two separate, warring states allowed these developments to find their own course without the need to coordinate the differing maritime cultures of north and south. Yet Sicking demonstrates in commanding fashion that these diver-

gent trends were to a large extent symbiotic. He firmly rejects the tendency to propose separate genealogies for the northern and southern states in the Netherlands, adopting instead the core-periphery model of Netherlands state formation formulated by W. Prevenier, W. P. Blockmans and H. de Schepper. The diversity of maritime activities within the core—Flanders, Brabant, Holland and Zeeland—were complementary and functioned as a system, even though the immediate interests of the various regions were often conflicting. Thus, the maritime ascendancy of Holland in the later sixteenth century was built upon the geographical security of the province that was brought about by the conquests of Charles V to the north and the co-ordination of interests with Flanders, Brabant and Zeeland, which formed a buffer zone to the south that kept at bay the hostile French. In this last respect, the Netherlands as a whole was part of the larger circuit of Habsburg-Valois diplomacy, as Charles V attempted to coordinate efforts with Henry VIII of England to secure control over the Channel, so that France was entirely circled by Habsburg interests. Yet, into this mixture, Sicking throws the aristocratic codes of honor that so pervasively shaped early modern politics, and the irridentism of the estates and cities that marked out the contours of local administration. As a result, he offers a compelling picture of the relationship between macro- and micro-level concerns in the unfolding of early modern policy.

Sicking introduces his work with a systematic and clear account of his aims, sources, and terminology. The first two chapters outline the origins of the maritime policy represented by the new office of admiral, explaining the differing application and development of administrative reform in relation to the private interests of the admirals and the provincialism of the maritime culture in the Netherlands. The third chapter examines the relationship of the admiralty to the fisheries, particularly with the gradual development of a policy of defending the fisheries through a unified admiralty. This subject opens up the world of consultation and divergent interests at the heart of the institutional struggles towards (or away from) the centralization of the Habsburg administration in the Netherlands. Chapters 4 and 5 consider the larger economic and military concerns of the Habsburg dynasty that lay behind their attempt to coordinate the (often competing) interests of their Netherlands subjects. The final two chapters study the implementation of policy through analysis of the resources available to organize a permanent fleet for war and to regulate and repress piracy and privateering.

As a whole, these chapters present a multi-faceted

treatment of the efforts towards administrative centralization in the early modern Netherlands, and the reasons why these efforts achieved limited success. Astutely, Sicking sees the frustrations and failures to centralize being as equally formative as the process of centralization itself, and that these processes were part of one overall phenomenon. One registers here a tension caused by the problematic nature of the subsequent division of the Netherlands. To what extent were the economic and maritime characteristics of the north, especially Holland, a cause of the subsequent split? Sicking does not set out to answer this question, but he explicitly rejects interpretative models that characterize the region by a north-south bifurcation. His book is a powerful demonstration of how fruitful an analysis can be when it adopts the core-periphery model of economic or cultural development in the early modern Netherlands—and he adroitly points out that it is the sea that lies at the center of the Habsburg-Netherlandic circle, not just the land. In this respect his argument also has a much broader relevance to the historiography of early modern Europe.

The Spanish and the Imperial administrations were acutely aware of the geographical significance of the Netherlands as the key to European trade networks. Distribution throughout central Europe of goods from the New World and of basic food supplies from the Baltic relied heavily upon the access to the deltas that fringed the northern seas throughout the Netherlands. It is this geographical fact, and early modern diplomats' awareness of it, that renders Sicking's account of Netherlandic maritime activities so pertinent, not just as the key to the Netherlands, but as the key to interpreting much of the Europe-wide diplomatic activity in the first half of the sixteenth century. His analysis necessarily proceeds through an enormous amount of documentary evidence collated from an impressive array of disparate primary sources. Previous studies of the maritime history of this region have been restricted in focus, either to one or other state, or to the period beginning with the Dutch Revolt. Sicking's book marks a new departure into largely uncharted territories, though he is well informed as to the contributions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century maritime historians. Yet despite the density of specific source material that is here on display, the book is rendered lucid both by the author's clear exposition of his material and its disposition in a carefully considered chapter structure. At no stage is the reader allowed to forget the broader purpose or relevance of the micro-analyses or statistical evidence recovered by the author's painstaking research in the archives.

Rather like the cartographers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, historians have tended to cover over the sea with diverting pictures and accounts of maritime struggles, but the reality is that maritime history ought to lie rather closer to the center of early modern political, social and cultural history than its current peripheral position would suggest. Yet the culture of seamanship, bulk trade, and fleet administration is largely unfamiliar to many political historians—one finds in this volume a ready guide accompanied by helpful apparatuses, such as a ten-page glossary, a skeleton chronology, maps, illustrations, and a clear introduction setting out the terms of the analysis. For those who wish to pursue

the subject further, there is also an extensive bibliography, both of primary sources and secondary literature. Yet the book is not a simple introduction—each chapter adds extra layers to the topics considered before. The drawback is that only by reading from cover to cover can one gain a rounded treatment of any one topic. The advantage is that one gets a sense of gradually thickening description as one proceeds through the book. Sicking provides an impressive model for making maritime history not simply the key to the Netherlands, but also the key to the early modern European economy along with the diplomacy and cultural life it supported.

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