Illustration on the title page of Geldenhouwer's *Historia Batavica,* possibly depicting ancient Batavians.

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Shifting Borders. Spatial and Ethnographic Imaginary in sixteenth-century Guelders

Lecturer Cultural History

For a long time, scholarship on political geography has been overwhelmingly ahistorical. Political scientists assumed that the modern mosaic of territorialized states, with clear-cut borders and distinctions between inside and outside, was self-evident, and did not need any historical explanation. However, confronted with processes of globalisation and regionalisation, a growing number of scholars advocated a more historicized understanding of political space. Political geographer Andrew Agnew made us aware of "the territorial trap", the mindset whereby scholars tended to take the territorialization of space for granted when it actually needed historical explanation. History @ Erasmus confirms this more dynamic approach to territorialization as the research programme stresses the "very different and often changing conceptions of space in the micro-local and the macro-global" levels.

The sixteenth-century duchy of Guelders is a case in point. Guelders was a complex patchwork of local lordships, towns, regions and feudal networks, all with their own nebulous borders, and all interacting with the boundless universalism (in theory) of the Holy Roman Empire. Significantly, around 1550 geographer Christiaan Sgrooten was baffled when he was ordered to make a map of Guelders. He consulted the ducal administration but the confusion about the borders of the duchy was too great. How did people in Guelders conceptualize the political space they were living in? We will take a look at two ethnographic descriptions of Guelders from the sixteenth century.

Gerard Geldenhouwer was a humanist born in 1482 in Nijmegen. During the years 1530, he was Professor of History and Theology at the Protestant University of Marburg. His life's work

was to reconstruct the ancient history of his country of origin, the Duchy of Guelders. A true humanist, Geldenhouwer consulted ancient sources like Tacitus and Plinius in pursuit of his reconstruction. On the basis of these sources, he claimed that his compatriots descended from the German people of the Batavians. However, as his sources were far from univocal, Geldenhouwer had a hard time supporting this claim. He discovered that Batavians had lived only in certain parts of Guelders and that some sources, confusingly, indicated that his compatriots descended from the German tribe of the Sicambers. Moreover, Geldenhouwer had to admit that the Batavians also lived in the southern part of Holland. This was confusing because, according to him, the weaklings of Holland had nothing in common with the warlike nature of the original Batavians.

The story about the Sicambrian past of Guelders was taken up in 1568 by Hendrik Arents, a humanist and historian from Arnhem. In his work, Hendrik Arents claimed that the German tribe of the Sicambers had lived precisely within the borders of contemporary Guelders. What was more, Hendrik Arents pushed the genealogical origins of the Guelders/Sicambers to a primordial past, namely to the person of Tuisco, the would-be fourth son of Noah. According to the Bible, Noah had only three sons but Hendrik Arents made use of another source to claim the existence of a fourth: a recently discovered manuscript attributed to the Babylonian priest Berossus about the genealogical roots of the European nations. This manuscript introduced the figure of Tuisco. Actually, the manuscript was a manifest forgery, but Arents and other humanist historians preferred to be fooled: the information in the manuscript was exactly what they needed in order to structure the ethnographic and territorial make-up of Europe according to their wishes. Arents was convinced that the territory of Guelders was the home ground of the Sicambers, and with the help of the Berossus manuscript, Arents could demonstrate the primordial history of the current-day Guelders people and territory.

Nevertheless, Hendrik Arents realized that things were less straightforward. In a second edition of his work – perhaps after some critical remarks – he admitted that Guelders was not a mono-ethnic political community, but something more ambiguous. The Guelders territory was a composite of many different towns, he wrote. Accordingly the people of Guelders were a composite of a mixture of peoples, like the Sicambers, the Batavians, the Cananafates, and the Menapians. Unfortunately, Arents did not elaborate on how this insight fitted in with the rest of his narrative.

The writings of Geldenhouwer and Arents offer a regional snapshot of the long history of the construction of political and ethnic borders and identities in Europe. They show us that in the sixteenth century, these borders and identities were still in the making, though they were already less elusive than in previous centuries. Neither the mapmaker Sgrooten, nor the historians Geldenhouwer or Arents were able to turn Guelders into a clear-cut territorial unit or one that was ethnically homogenous. Their failures notwithstanding, they demonstrated the wish and the will to create such units, and to give them primordial credentials.

Further reading

Agnew, John. "The Territorial Trap. The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory." *Review of International Political Economy* 1, 1 (1994): 53-80.

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Larkins, Jeremy. *From hierarchy to anarchy. Territory and politics before Westphalia.* New York, 2010.

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