6 The Low Countries
Constitution, Nationhood and Character according to Hugo Grotius

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In their mission statement the organisers of this conference profess their intention to challenge the widely accepted wisdom that concepts of nation and nationality in the way we understand them are only from the second half of the eighteenth century. It is obvious from almost every branch of art and intellectual thought that national sentiments achieved enormous prominence and flowering in Europe in the nineteenth century. Consequently, the view that nationality and the nation-state are typically nineteenth-century developments has achieved almost canonical status among historians. Given the rules of the historian’s trade, which prescribe a constant, critical self-evaluation of the historical discipline, this means that it is time to scrutinise our treatment of these concepts, as is the aim of the present volume. For indeed, the premodern sources provide many grounds for tracing the origins of ideas and sentiments of nationality back to at least the early modern period, if not further.

Early modern texts abound with geographical characterisations that correspond roughly with the nation-states of modern Europe. Human character types attracted a great deal of attention in early modern literature; there is even a separate branch of early modern literature devoted to it, of which we will see one example later on in this article. ‘National’ character figures prominently among the character types in this literature.

On the other hand, there are many reasons for caution, for the differences with present-day perceptions and conceptualisations of nationhood are pervasive and fundamental, and have not by coincidence led to the view referred to above. To quote an example from the recent inaugural oration by Geert Janssen in Amsterdam: in spite of the enormous number of immigrants in Amsterdam at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the cohabitation of people from so many ethnic and geographical backgrounds does not seem to have caused any serious problems; indeed this cohabitation is rarely referred to or conceptualised explicitly in the sources. Religious affiliations, for example, seem to have been far more important to contemporary observers than the category of nationhood or ‘national’ background. Secondly, the early modern perception of nationhood must have been very
different from ours and not, or at least to a much lesser degree, tied to the nation-state in its various aspects.

With respect to method this means, to state the obvious, that a critical study of original sources will be crucial to this re-evaluation of our histories of nationhood and nationality. If we are to make any progress, we should turn to the primary materials and to the things that the sources themselves tell us and how they tell us. In a historical debate with potential repercussions on current political debates and sentiments, it is particularly vital to strive for, and depart from, the most factually reliable interpretation of the past ‘on its own terms’. Otherwise our research will not be able to fulfill what is arguably its most important role in society in the present (and which is difficult enough to achieve in any case), i.e. to prevent social and political debate from falling into the pitfalls of Hineininterpretierung and confusing present with past concerns and perceptions. To study the past on its own terms is not a concern for irrelevant academics in secluded libraries, but the fulfillment of a desire for truth which should inform every current social and political debate that involves historical information.

In this chapter I shall look at some early-seventeenth-century perceptions of ‘Dutch’ or Low Countries’ nationhood. My main source will be Hugo Grotius’s various utterances that relate to this question. I will look at two of his works in particular, the well-known De Antiquitate Reipublicae Batavicae, or ‘De oudheid van de Bataafse nu Hollandse Republiek’, published in 1610, and Grotius’s less well-known Annales, the first part of the Annales et Historiae, or ‘Chronicle’ of the Dutch Revolt, written between 1601 and 1612. Although these works were composed by the same author at roughly the same time, they do not profess precisely the same view regarding what Grotius considers to be ‘his’ nation.

In order to draw some conclusions from the information from Grotius we need at least one external point of reference to confront it with. Therefore I shall briefly discuss the views on nationhood in general and the Low Countries in particular as expressed in the Scotsman John Barclay’s Icon Animorum of 1614, a text from the character literature that I referred to earlier that also discussed ‘national’ characters.

Backgrounds

The States of Holland were the sovereign assembly that acted as ruler of the province of Holland. Holland in turn was the leading province in a confederation made up of seven nominally independent provinces that had
very recently emerged out of a rebellion against their former overlord, who was the distant successor of the original counts or dukes, whose territories had passed, in most cases through the hands of the dukes of Burgundy in the fifteenth century, into the hands of the Habsburg world empire in the sixteenth century. Discontent among the nobility, the towns and the populace regarding the Habsburg civil and religious policies from the 1560s onwards had led to a revolt.

The constitutional justification for this resistance was the claim that in each of the provinces of the Low Countries the Habsburg ruler had no more formal power than the original count or duke whose rights he had inherited. This meant, in the eyes of the towns, the nobility and the provinces, that the Habsburg ruler had to respect the limitations set upon his power by the medieval charters or ‘privileges’ and had to uphold and defend the specific rights of individual provinces, towns and noble families that were inscribed in these privileges. In the famous Joyous Entry of Brabant, a restatement and extension of the privileges signed by Duchess Joanna at her accession in 1356, a clause was even introduced that should the duke violate any of the conditions formulated in the charter, his subjects would be exempt from their duty to obedience until the violation was corrected. This clause was later extended to apply in all provinces in the Burgundian and Habsburg Netherlands as well.

The later Burgundian rulers and their Habsburg successors, especially Philip II, sought to centralise political, judicial and fiscal authority, and this drive clashed with the preservation of the ‘ancient’ privileges. For example, Philip II imposed taxation without the prior consent of the provinces (the ‘10th penny’); he imposed a special court for the prosecution of heresy (the Inquisition) that violated the time-honoured rights of the individual towns in the Low Countries to judge their own citizens by their own local courts, even if they were accused somewhere else; and he appointed non-Netherlanders from his own service to offices that were not open to foreigners, thus also frustrating the ambitions of Netherlandish noblemen. The towns, nobility and provinces argued that these and similar acts constituted a violation that invoked the above-mentioned clause on disobedience, and that moreover by this violation the ruler had acted against the interests of his subjects, instead of protecting them as ‘a good father protecting his children’. This in turn, they argued, meant that his regime had become a tyranny against which armed resistance was justified.

The Deposition (Verlatinge) of 1581 by the rebellious provinces assembled in their own States-General officially declared Philip II stripped of his power. For the time being, until a new sovereign or a new form of government
was found, the provincial States of the various provinces acted as sovereign powers. Only matters relating to all the provinces together, such as those concerning the war against the former overlord or the appointment of the stadholder, were dealt with by the States-General as the representative assembly of the individual provinces; this level wielded sovereign powers only by delegation from the provincial level. For difficult decisions, delegates to the Generalty had to confer first with their colleagues at home, which could turn the decision-making process in the States-General into a (very) lengthy affair. The office of the stadholder (formerly the ruler’s representative when he was elsewhere in his large agglomerate realm) was continued and invested with powers including the supreme military command and certain judicial authority. Moreover, many provinces shared the same stadholder. In matters of war, except the declaration of war and peace, the stadholders enjoyed a great degree of independence. This enabled, in particular, the Nassau commanders William Louis and Maurice to develop a modern and singularly effective army organisation, which from circa 1590 gave the cooperating provinces the upper hand in the war against Habsburg. In 1609 the Habsburg rulers accepted the conclusion of a truce for twelve years with the United Provinces as if they were a sovereign power. This event established the provinces as *a de facto* – but not *(yet)* *de iure* – new sovereign power on the European political stage.²

However, even from the early stages of the Revolt, serious differences of opinion regarding the most desirable political and religious organisation existed within the emerging confederate republic. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of a new state on the European stage, and a republic at that, was unheard of, and constituted one of the great political and historical marvels of the time.

**Hugo Grotius**

Such a new commonwealth needed an account of its history and legitimacy presented in a grand manner for an international audience. The humanist prodigy Hugo Grotius (Hugo de Groot, 1583–1645) was an obvious candidate to produce this piece. Born in Delft in 1583, he proceeded to the University at Leiden at the early age of eleven. He became one of the star students of the university, a pupil of Joseph Scaliger and concluded his studies in Leiden with the publication of editions of two classical texts and his inclusion as part of an official government embassy to the king of France in 1598. Back in The Hague he embarked on a legal career, first as a lawyer, from
1607 as the *advocaat-fiscaal* (public prosecutor in financial cases) of the States of Holland. He enjoyed the patronage of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the leading man in the States of Holland. At the same he also served as a learned counsellor, and sometimes spokesman, for the interests of the States of Holland.

In 1601 he became the States of Holland's historiographer, as successor to Janus Dousa; after Dousa's death in 1604 this appointment was formalised. In this capacity Grotius produced two histories of the revolt from which the new commonwealth arose and which will occupy us below. He also prepared a defence of the capture of a valuable Portuguese vessel in the Strait of Malacca in 1603 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). In 1613 Grotius became pensionary (political counsellor) of the city of Rotterdam and in that capacity, a member of the States of Holland. In the mounting politico-religious tensions of the Truce period he first tried to maintain a neutral stance but later aligned himself firmly with the ‘Staatsgezinde’ and ‘Remonstrant’ side in the conflict. After the defeat of this party in 1618, Grotius was tried and imprisoned for life. He escaped from prison in 1621 (the famous escape in the book chest) and went to Paris where he lived as an independent scholar and published his soon world-famous *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, ‘On the Law of War and Peace’. In 1631 he made an attempt to return to Holland, but had to flee once again. He was now employed by the Swedish crown as their representative to the French crown (from 1634). This mission was not a great success, and Grotius was revoked in 1644. On the way back from Sweden his ship was caught in a storm, and Grotius died in Rostock on 28 August 1645.3

*De Antiquitate Reipublicae Batavicae* (1610)

At the time the Twelve Years’ Truce was concluded in 1609 the *Annales et Historiae*, on which Grotius had been working since 1601, were growing steadily but were far from finished. Moreover, there seems to have been a political agenda behind them that did not suit the celebration of the *de facto* recognition of the United Provinces as an independent state that marked this moment. In any case, for whatever reason, on this occasion Grotius published another, much shorter account of the Dutch revolt and its backgrounds under the title *De Antiquitate Reipublicae Batavicae* (1610, ‘The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic’).4 The work is primarily a defence of the sovereignty5 of the States of the province of ‘Holland and West-Friesland’ (the area covered by the present-day provinces of North Holland and South
Holland, here to be called Holland). The intended import of this argument is in fact threefold: first, that the Revolt was legitimate because Philip had violated the constitution (the privileges) and the sovereignty of the States; second, that present-day Holland (and the other provinces) are legitimate states since their present form of government is a restoration of the form of government that they had enjoyed ever since Roman times; and third, that supreme power in the United Provinces resides with the provincial level.

To support this position, Grotius presents and interprets a collection of historical and legal evidence showing that the Low Countries’ mixed constitution, which divided power over many institutions instead of concentrating it in the hands of one, had in fact existed since Batavian (Roman) times and had in unbroken succession survived until the Habsburg rulers violated the rules, partly written, partly unwritten, on which it was founded. In addition he identified ancient Batavia with the modern-day province of Holland and presented the ancient Batavians as the embodiment of the virtue, courage, loyalty and simplicity that he claimed for his compatriots (and set as exemplum for them to follow). This defence of the provincial sovereignty of Holland is in fact a restatement of the arguments produced by the States’ spokesman François Vranck in 1587 to defend Holland’s provincial sovereignty against the claims to central power made by the earl of Leicester, the commander of the military assistance sent to the Dutch by Elizabeth I of England.6

For our purpose, De Antiquitate contains important information. First, who are the ‘we’ in the text? A straightforward answer to this question is possible: the people of the province of Holland. The work defines the province as the unit endowed with sovereign power. Other provinces in the Low Countries, such as Friesland, Brabant, Flanders are (or were) neighbouring nations of equal standing. For the Batavians or Hollanders as a people Grotius uses both gens and nation, and these words refer to units the size of a province. Friesland, Brabant, etc. are neighbouring gentes or nationes of Holland.

Their non-autocratic form of government is presented as a crucial characteristic of the peoples in former Lower Germany. This form of government is a ‘mixed constitution’ in which there is day-to-day government by a prince assisted by a small council of advisers; major decisions are voted on in a large council of delegates from the entire population. This large council, which meets only occasionally, has the power to appoint or depose the prince, which means that ultimately they ‘own’ the sovereignty. This council is equivalent to the assembly later called the States; the small council could be identified with the later Council of State (but this point is not made so
explicit).7 We need to note that this constitution contains an important monarchical element (the prince or commander), but that this element is not sovereign. In practice, supreme power is shared between prince and States in mutual respect, but when they clash, the States are the senior party. For Grotius this arrangement is an unalienable characteristic of all the gentes in the Low Countries.

In a few places in the text the word Batavians is also applied in a wider sense to the United Provinces as a whole, which indicates that in this text it is possible for Grotius to think of the ‘Dutch Republic’ as a gens, but these are exceptional cases. It should also be noted that in spite of valid historical claims from historians in Gelre (modern Gelderland), Grotius has appropriated the Batavian identity for the province of Holland. In De Antiquitate the discussion (which had been the object of debate earlier in the sixteenth century) over whether Gelre or Holland was the location of ancient Batavia is passed over in silence.

In 1630 a new edition of De Antiquitate appeared, which was extended with antiquarian notes by Petrus Scriverius that serve to corroborate Grotius’s argument with detailed scholarly evidence and even some archaeological data. Although this is not the place for a full discussion of these notes, one anomaly from them might serve to illustrate the difference between Scriverius’s perception of the area important for ‘Batavia’ and the territory of the modern Dutch nation-state. In his description of Lower Germany on the so-called Tabula Peutingeriana, a late ancient Roman road map, Scriverius enumerates the ancient place names on two roads through Batavian territory towards the North Sea coast. The locations on the northern road in Holland, Utrecht and Gelderland, from Nijmegen (Noviomagus) to the west are all duly summed up, although Scriverius could not identify all of them. In the enumeration of places on the southern road however, Scriverius erroneously replaces all locations between Aachen and Nijmegen with the places east of Nijmegen on the northern road. He thus omits, among others, Coriovalum (Heerlen), Blariacum (Blerick) and Ceuclum (Cuijk) or, in other words, roughly the area covered by the modern province of Limburg. Although for him this area must have been far outside ancient Batavia, and by 1630 most of it was controlled by Habsburg or its Catholic allies, it was not outside Belgica and would have been no less relevant to mention than the places east of Nijmegen on the northern road (between Nijmegen and Xanten) that were also outside the area controlled by the United Provinces. The fact that he overlooked this error even in the printing proofs of the book seems an indication that this area was less relevant to his view of ‘his’ country. However, in the
description of the siege of Maastricht in the *Annales* by Grotius himself there is nothing in the text to suggest that the author thinks of the area as being outside the Low Countries.

**Annales et Historiae de rebus Belgicis (1601-12)**

The *Annales* are the first part of Grotius’s *Annales et Historiae*. They recount the Dutch Revolt from 1566 to early 1588 (21 years) and consist of five books totalling 114 pages in length. The *Historiae* cover the next 21 years from 1588 to 1609 in 18 books of 453 pages. These describe the rise of the Republic from 1588 onwards under the joint leadership of Prince Maurice and the chief politician of the province of Holland, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. The *Annales* are supposed to function as introduction to the *Historiae*; Grotius writes that, since they are further removed in time, and the chief ‘characters’ in the narrative are no longer active, his freedom to write was greater in the *Annales* than in the *Historiae*. Because of this and because of their more limited length, the *Annales* are the more attractive source for our purposes. The *Annales et Historiae* were written at the request of the States of Holland, and over the years Grotius received in total the considerable sum of 1800 guilders for this work. The choice of Latin suggests that a foreign audience was addressed, in addition to a domestic one.

The *Annales et Historiae* are written in close imitation of Tacitus’s literary style and sceptical political outlook; the titles *Annales* and *Historiae* are a very explicit indication of the use of this model. The imitation of Tacitus points to a desire to follow international literary fashion and to give the contemporary history of the Low Countries the status and weight of world history, just as Tacitus’s account had made the Julio-Claudian period one of the key eras in world history. Finally, the imitation of Tacitus should give Grotius’s work the qualities of perceptiveness and sceptical realism that belong to the contemporary literature on Reason of State, of which ‘Tacitism’ was an important branch. This position usually implies a critical view of religion (of whichever denomination), its role in society, and the claims that religious and ecclesiastical institutions made on the agendas of secular rulers. The ‘Tacitists’ were among the first to call for the submission of religion to politics (the forerunner in many ways of the modern separation of state and church) and Grotius is no exception.

In 1612, Grotius submitted the *Annales et Historiae* to the States. However, after review by a committee of two advisers, the States decided not to publish the book. Unfortunately, neither a report on the *Annales et Historiae* by this
committee nor minutes of meetings in which the matter was discussed are known. Thus we do not know the exact reasons for not publishing the *Annales et Historiae*. Grotius subsequently undertook a revision of the text, which he finished only in 1637. Due to difficulties with the publisher, the work appeared only long after Grotius’s death, in 1657. It is a stout volume of almost 600 pages. By that time, however, it was no longer really a work of contemporary history, and the *Annales et Historiae* had to compete with Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft’s similarly grand and Tacitist history of the early Revolt, which, however, was written in Dutch and thus more easily accessible. In spite of a Dutch translation in 1681 and English and French translations from the 1660s, the *Annales et Historiae* relatively soon became more or less forgotten.

In the *Annales* the ‘we’ behind the text is different from that in *De Antiquitate*. The *Annales* are primarily concerned with Belgica or the Low Countries as a whole, that is, all seventeen provinces of the *Bourgondische Kreits* together. In the comparison with *De Antiquitate*, this creates a linguistic distinction between Belgica and Batavia, the ‘Low Countries’ and ‘the Dutch Republic’ respectively, which conforms to the more general understanding and usage in Grotius’s time. However, the words *gens* and *natio* are mostly used, as in *De Antiquitate*, to refer to the inhabitants of a province, although the cases that speak of a *gens Belgica* are less rare than in *De Antiquitate*. A relatively clear and consistent distinction between the use of *gens* and that of *natio* can be discerned: *gens* refers to the people of the province in a more informal sense, while *natio* generally refers to a province as a formal, legal entity (e.g. the body politic represented by its States). This use of the word *natio* shows quite clearly that for Grotius the idea of ‘logical’ unity of a people, a specific geographical territory, and a political organisation exists; and that this unity is the province.

With respect to culture, identity and character, however, the introductory chapter contains an extensive discussion of the character of the people in the Low Countries as a whole:

The conjunction with Spain brought a huge growth. But already at that time men with better insight predicted, with a certain amount of fear (since the rulers’ resources had grown enormously), a change in the political conditions. This they based on the customs of the Spanish, which they had studied during their service with them in wars, and on their differences with themselves. For as long as they were joined as neighbouring peoples by equivalent origins and identical wishes, they interacted easily and in fraternal relationships. Between Spaniards and the Netherlanders, however, most things are different, and they collide the more sharply in
those matters that they have in common. Both peoples had in all ages been distinguished for martial valour; except that the latter had lost the habit of it, while the former were kept vigorous by continuous discipline and rewards through campaigns in Italy and across the Ocean. But the Dutch, frugal indeed and willing to suffer hard labour in their zeal for profit, with this in view seek peace and trade, but not so as to put up with injury. No people is more abstinent with respect to others’ possessions; their own they defend stoutly. For this reason, in their little corner of the world there are cities exceedingly numerous and strengthened, originally near the sea and the rivers; later everywhere, strengthened by a multitude of newcomers and progeny. And thus, after the furies from Scandinavia had been driven off, they survived for eight centuries unconquered by foreign arms and unplundered.

[...]

Possession of Spain, after under various conquerors it had drawn much from their customs, at length returned to the Goths. Old and new writers describe those to us as of undaunted spirit in the face of trials and dangers, ever since they mixed their character of origin with that of their dwellings; eager – uncertain whether more for glory than for wealth, so arrogant as to be contemptuous of others, respectful, however, of things sacred and fairly loyal in return for benefits, but so passionate for revenge and wild in victory that against an enemy nothing is shameful, nothing forbidden. With the Lowlanders, this is all just the other way round: they are a people of innocent craftiness and furthermore in customs, as in position, a blend of Germany and France: not free of the faults of both, not without their virtues. You will neither easily fool, nor rashly insult them. That they have never been second to the Spanish in religious devotion is shown by the fact that ever since the time they took up Christianity, they have collectively resisted the pressure of Norman violence to change their creed. Not infected by any condemned error until our times, they attached so much value to their faith that it was necessary to prescribe a limit to the possessions of ministers of the gospel. Generally, for both peoples honouring and admiring princes was innate. But the Dutch think laws superior, under which pretext there was often disorder. The people of Castile love to be ruled even a bit more strictly than the other peoples of Spain, and yet the liberty that they demand for themselves, however great or small it be, they do not tolerate in others. Hence a very great danger, with the attention of princes divided as if over two realms: the
Dutch were not able to tolerate anyone superior in influence, nor the Spaniards any equal.14

Thus, according to Grotius the people of the Low Countries are unwarlike, focused on trade and commerce, marked by an ‘innocent craftiness’, abstinent of other people’s possessions, but intolerant of injury. There is a high degree of urbanisation; they have a weak internal organisation, and there is little coherence and solidarity between cities and provinces. They attach great importance to religion, liberty and constitutional government (as opposed to autocratic).15

This passage leaves no doubt that there is a common Low Countries’ ‘culture’ (mentality, identity) shared by all the provinces. However, it subsequently appears that the Walloon provinces are not an entirely integrated part of this cultural realm: apart from a different language (French), they are credited with a very warlike spirit, unlike the other gentes:

soldiers from the Walloons this time; which name applies to a number of regions in the Low Countries that share a border with France and are distinct from the rest by their use of the French language and a more warlike character.16

Similarly, Luxemburg places itself outside the group by its unwavering loyalty to the crown:

Luxemburg, where private interests made the governors dependent on the Spanish crown and the population is traditionally uncompromising in its loyalty to its princes.17

Although the Dutch language is not separately discussed in this passage or elsewhere in the Annales, it is attractive to conclude that for Grotius the common character described in the fragment above applies first and foremost to the Dutch-speaking provinces. He adds that, for some, the Low Countries are a subdivision of Germany, for others, a potential part of France.18

An interesting passage is that in which Grotius expresses his regret and indignation at the separation between North and South. According to him, the Pacification of Ghent in 1576 was

in this entire history, the only time that one could hope for a happy outcome, if at least together with the weaponry, the internal hatred would
be put down. However, when I look at it more closely, I see as the surest root of evil the competing ambitions of the nobility, and a vice in the population which resembles it, the impatient love of their own religion, which will never acquiesce in agreements or the present situation. As long as these exist, there will always be party strife and instruments to use against liberty.  

The implied ‘unhappy outcome’ then must be the separation of North and South.

For our purpose, however, it makes sense to contrast this with the observation that in the *Annales* most of Grotius’s attention and concern are with the provinces of Holland, Zeeland, Flanders and Brabant. The North and East receive noticeably less attention; and we have already seen that in Grotius’s perception the Walloon provinces and Luxemburg are different groups too. Therefore, although Grotius’s regret at the separation of North and South leaves no doubt that the cultural unity of the Low Countries was a thing that mattered to him, there are grounds to think that he perceived Holland, Zeeland, Flanders and Brabant as a distinguishable subgroup within the whole of the Low Countries, and, indeed, as their centre of gravity.

We have seen above that the provinces were very anxious to preserve their own sovereignty, which they regarded as the basis and guarantee of their freedom. The downside of this tendency was a dangerous lack of coherence and solidarity among the rebellious provinces, towns and nobility and to a considerable degree among the ‘United Provinces’. This internal disunity and lack of solidarity appear to have been among the stereotypical characteristics of the Low Countries at the time, both in their own eyes and those of some foreigners. The South-Netherlands scholar Justus Lipsius (1547-1606) refers to this disunity in his infamous advice to the Habsburg government to conclude a peace or truce; in a 1595 letter to Francisco de San Víctores de la Portilla, Lipsius points out that the internal division among the northern provinces is so great that once their external enemy is removed internal conflict will break out and a reconquest of the North will be easily possible. This ‘lesson by Lipsius’ is still referred to in 1648-49 in the diaries of the Frisian stadholder William Frederick. Grotius alludes to this tendency with frightening frequency in the *Annales* and sometimes connects it with the nature of Calvinism, which he depicts as stubborn and intolerant of different persuasions. Grotius is out to define the political community (*natio* as defined above) as decidedly secular in nature. Holland and the Dutch Republic are not religious communities (although they can have religious identities as attributes).
Finally, it is important to note that in the *Annales* the antithesis against which the Dutch character and identity are defined, are two other peoples: not just the Spaniards, but the English as well. In the first book, the Dutch character is defined in contrast to the Spanish character, in book 5 to the English character. Regarding that comparison, Grotius says:

Like a governor in the province assigned to him, Leicester entered into secret deliberations, especially with other Englishmen as to how he could extend his power. However, the nature and culture of the English and the Dutch are quite different: just as willingly as the English [*Angli*] resign themselves to servitude, so vehemently do they compensate this humility by brutality once they have reached a high position. Lowlanders [*Belgae*] command and obey moderately, and no nation [*gens*] is more strongly attached to its leaders or turns against them with greater anger if the respect gets lost.22

The inclusion of this comparison reflects the tensions of the Leicester period (1585-88) that also produced the arguments in favour of provincial sovereignty that are restated in *De Antiquitate*. It follows from this that the culture and identity as well as the political independence of the Dutch Republic are defined, at least by Grotius, in antithesis to both Spanish and English identity.

**Barclay’s *Icon Animorum* (1614)**

In the once very popular book *Icon Animorum* (1614), the Scotsman John Barclay (1582-1621) describes the character and behaviour of his European contemporaries.23 For a study of the history of nationhood and nationality, the *Icon* might be found a confusing text. On the one hand, the two introductory ‘theoretical’ chapters bring up the idea of a national character only at the very end and as a subdivision of the characters belonging to the subsequent *ages* of mankind, which might strengthen the idea that I noted at the beginning of this article that nationhood is not a very important category in seventeenth-century thought. Next however there follow seven chapters (out of a total of sixteen24) which describe the national ‘spirits’ of France, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, Eastern Europe, and the Turks and Jews.

As part of his chapter 5 on Germany, Barclay discusses the Low Countries (§22-28). He distinguishes the Republic from the loyal South, but says
that the people retain the same genius and dispositions (5.23); while in 5.26, however, we hear that the nobility of the South have adopted many Spanish character traits. Barclay mentions the Lowlanders’ intolerance of autocracy and their rebellion, and the effect this had on their energy and valour in foreign trade. Next he devotes an entire paragraph to their drinking habits including (again) the information that drink is given to babies, their industrious nature, their excellence in learning, the difference between the ‘republican’ and courtly political cultures of the North and South, respectively, the tendency of the population to attach greater importance to the show of liberty than liberty itself, the region’s high degree of urbanisation, and the popularity of William of Orange.

Conclusion

With respect to the question whether nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of nationhood can be traced to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ones, we can conclude that in Grotius’s mind, the logical unity of a people, a specified territory, and a political organisation existed, and did so at the level of the province (e.g. Holland, Brabant; not a unit the size of a nineteenth-century nation-state), and that moreover this entity is the bearer of sovereignty. The Latin words for a people are natio when used in the formal ‘constitutional’ sense and gens when used in a wider sense. These words apply to the provincial unit in most cases, although gens Belgica is found for the inhabitants of Low Countries as a whole. Belgicus and Belga are the regular words for ‘Lowlander’ and ‘Low Countries’; Batavus and Batavia for Hollander and Holland (which is also sometimes found in the wider sense of the ‘Dutch Republic’).

Accordingly, the more formally constitutional argument in De Antiquitate focuses on the province of Holland and the legitimacy of its sovereignty. The Annales, on the other hand, do not display this exclusive focus on Holland. Grotius describes a shared Low Countries history and character or culture that apply to all seventeen provinces (with the possible exception of the Walloons and the Luxemburgers, who are described as partly different in character); which means that the above provincial unit of people, territory and government does not also ‘own’ its cultural identity, but is part of a much larger cultural and linguistic space. On a more speculative note, however, it seems possible to distinguish another subgroup in his perception (apart from the Francophone South) consisting of Holland, Zeeland, Flanders and Brabant, which attract most of his interest and concern. This
would automatically create a third subgroup of the North and East, probably including the former bishopric of Utrecht. Thus the geographical make-up of the Low Countries in Grotius’s mind does not even remotely resemble that of the modern nation-states of the Netherlands and Belgium.

The comparison with John Barclay’s discussion of the Low Countries’ character shows, first, that national character is defined only as a subcategory to the chronological ages of mankind, but is nevertheless important, given the space devoted to it in the book. With respect to the Low Countries’ character and the then-current stereotypes of it, the foreigner Barclay’s description in many ways confirms that by Grotius (e.g. dismissal of autocracy, drinking, urbanisation, trade and industry) and indeed applies this character to the Low Countries as a whole, not to individual provinces. He distinguishes only between the political cultures of North and South. Thus, in the eyes of observers both at home and abroad, the Low Countries were a recognisable whole at the level of their cultural identity. At the constitutional level and that of practical politics, the Hollander Grotius perceived them as a collection of separate entities, which could cooperate but often failed to do so, and within which subgroups might be discerned without any resemblance to the map of the present-day nation-states. While the roots of the idea of a national identity may be found in early modern historiographical texts like those of Grotius and Barclay, the concept went through a profound transformation in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Notes


5. The term sovereignty used in the sense of ‘supreme power’, not in the sense of Jean Bodin’s concept of sovereignty, which has no place in the political vocabulary of the Low Countries at this time, as the States themselves argued against Anjou and Bodin during the negotiations over Anjou’s accession as prince of the rebellious provinces; see E.H. Kossmann, ‘Volkssoevereiniteit aan het begin van het Nederlandse ancien régime’, in E.H. Kossmann, *Politieke theorie en geschiedenis. Verspreide opstellen en voordrachten* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1987), 59-92.

6. For this discussion, see Grotius, *Antiquity*, Intr., 4 and literature references there.


12. *Hugonis Grotii Annales et historiae de rebus Belgicis* (Amsterdam: Blaeu, 1657 and 1658). There is no modern edition, but the 1658 quarto edition is not rare and is available in many libraries. An inaccurate English translation by ‘T.M.’ was published in London in 1665: *Hugo Grotius, De Rebus Belgicis: or, The Annals, and history of the Low-Country-Wars*. Other translations were made into French (1662) and Dutch (1681). The author of this article published a new Dutch translation of the *Annales*: Hugo de Groot, *Kroniek van de Nederlandse Oorlog. De Opstand 1559-1588* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2014) and is working on a new edition with an English translation of the *Annales*, to be published in the series *Bibliotheca Latinitatis Novae*. For references to further scholarship, see the 2014 translation.

13. Consisting since 1548 of (in simplified enumeration): the counties of Artois, Flanders, Namur, Hainaut, Zeeland, and Holland; the dukedoms of Brabant, Gelre, Limburg, Luxemburg; the seignories of Mechelen, Utrecht, Overijssel, Friesland and Groningen; the areas of Lille and Doornik.

It is interesting to compare the image of the Lowlanders contained in the Spanish literature of the period, as discussed by e.g. Y. Rodríguez Pérez, *De Tachtigjarige Oorlog in Spaanse ogen* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2003). Here the Flamencos (=Belgae) are presented as simple-minded and credulous, fickle or precisely stubborn; prone to feasting and drinking. For a rather nuanced Spanish description of the Low Countries’ character, see the army captain Alonso Vásquez in Brouwer, *Kronieken van Spaanse soldaten uit het begin van den Tachtigjarigen Oorlog* (Zutphen: Thieme, 1933) 85-126. Vásquez also mentions the stereotypes of the Lowlanders as tradespeople (89) credulous and superstitious (90, 122-3), prone to drinking (89, 92; even giving drink to babies), and ungrateful (91). He discusses their simplicity (106), the independence and equality of women (92-93), and their eagerness for learning (92, 111), which he connects with both the Lowlanders’ strong piety and their capacity for heresy; public chastity (114); good care for the poor (117); and constitutional government and loathing of kings (103, 125-6). According to Vásquez, however, the war has turned them into valiant soldiers.

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15. Grotius, *Annales et Historiae*, 24 (Kroniek, § 1.61, p. 51 see also § 3.27, p. 121).
16. Ibid., 48 (Kroniek, § 2.65, p. 98).
17. Germany: e.g. ed. 1658- 4°, 4, 11, 21, 31; De Groot, *Kroniek*, § 1.11, 1.28, 1.55, 2.15 (pp. 16, 21, 27, 45, 61). France: e.g. 1658, 4, 34, *Kroniek*, § 1.11, 2.24 (pp. 16, 67).
21. Cf. the characteristics mentioned by Vásquez, note 15 above.