
Urbanization

In the spring of 1673, Sir William Temple published his *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands*. The book was an attempt to explain to his English compatriots, who at the time were at war with the Dutch, the nature of their adversary. Temple knew what he was talking about, having served for two years as Charles II's ambassador in The Hague – and it showed. Temple's *Observations* are probably the best contemporary analysis of Dutch society. In that analysis, towns loomed large. Their love of political freedom, enshrined in ancient customs and privileges, and hatred of religious persecution were identified by Temple as two of the most important explanations for the success of the Revolt that established the Dutch Republic as an independent country. In his discussion of the Dutch economy, he highlighted the role of urban commerce, and the complementarity of towns in terms of their local economic specialization. Commerce was also his main explanation for the particular form of military power in the Dutch Republic, pioneered, Temple explained, in Venice: a reliance on foreign mercenaries, paid for by the profits from trade. His description of the Republic's political system likewise emphasized the crucial role of the towns. The Dutch Republic, Temple correctly observed, was not so much a single country as a 'confederacy of seven sovereign provinces'. 'But', he continued, 'to discover the nature of their government from the first springs and motions, it must be taken yet into smaller pieces, by which it will appear that each of these provinces is likewise composed of many little states or cities, which have several marks of sovereign power within themselves, and are not subject to the sovereignty of their province'.¹ His chapter on Dutch politics therefore starts out with an analysis of Amsterdam's local political system, and the role of the city council and the city's burgomasters.

Temple's brilliantly successful portrait, in other words, depicted the Dutch Republic as a fundamentally urban society.

To a surprising degree, Temple's analysis is supported by modern historical scholarship. The aim of this chapter is to bring together elements of this scholarship to flesh out various dimensions of this feature of the Dutch Golden Age. It will be argued that the Golden Age should be appreciated as a direct result of the urban dimension of Dutch society in the seventeenth century.

An Urbanized Country

The Dutch Republic emerged in a region of Europe where urbanization had already reached remarkably high levels. By 1550, i.e. before the establishment of the Dutch Republic as an independent country, the Low Countries were the most urbanized region of Europe. Much of this urbanization, however, was concentrated in the south and especially in the county of Flanders and the Duchy of Brabant. Antwerp, in Brabant, had emerged in the preceding century as one of the largest cities of late medieval Europe, but Bruges, Ghent, and Brussels were equally substantial by the standards of the era. This also points to a specific feature of urbanization in these parts: rather than finding most of the urban population concentrated in one or two mega-cities, such as Paris or London, the Low Countries were a region of substantial towns. With its urban population scattered across a large number of urban centres, the Low Countries resembled Italy and southern Germany rather than France or England.²

The Dutch Revolt did not change these overall features of urbanization in the Low Countries, but it did shift the emphasis from the south to the north. By 1600 the percentage of urbanites in the north had overtaken that of the south. The first and most important reason was straightforward: possibly as many as 100,000 people, mostly from urban environments, had exchanged the south for the north. The populations of towns such as Haarlem and Leiden now consisted of possibly 50 per cent immigrants from Brabant and Flanders. While the latter areas suffered, Holland's towns blossomed. On top of this flow of refugees, Holland's towns by 1600 were attracting immigrants from other countries as well, including Jews from Spain and Portugal during the 1590s, Germans during the Thirty Years War (1618–48), and an estimated 35,000 French Protestants who settled in the Dutch Republic after

Protestantism was outlawed in France in 1685. In the long run, however, the routine influx of migrants proved much more substantial. And even the refugees might have preferred other destinations, if it had not been for the economic opportunities offered by the Golden Age. Precisely for this reason, Holland's towns were by far the most attractive destinations, especially for migrants who planned to settle permanently. As shown in Chapter 3 of this volume, economic prosperity therefore acted as both a cause and a consequence of immigration.

Even though towns were important in most parts of the Dutch Republic, their growth and high levels of urbanization were primarily phenomena of the western areas, and particularly the county of Holland. By 1700, two-thirds of Holland's population was reckoned to live in towns, while the national average for the Dutch Republic was one-third. This latter figure was already very high by European and indeed world standards, but Holland's urbanization was truly exceptional. The urban population in Holland was distributed over a dozen medium-sized towns, but with their combined populations in the order of half a million in 1650 these added up to more than London (400,000) or Paris (430,000), the largest European cities at the time.³ Their economies were in many respects complementary, and political co-ordination was achieved in the States of Holland, where eighteen towns were represented and entitled to vote, next to the single vote of the province's nobility representing the countryside. The integration of Holland's towns received a further boost from the construction of special waterways on which regular tow-boat services operated, offering comfortable and reliable passenger transport between towns. All this set Holland apart from the rest of the country, which resembled much more the patterns normal in the rest of Europe at the time. The pattern of urbanization suggests that the Golden Age was concentrated in Holland, and this is borne out by other dimensions discussed later in this book, such as global trade and the mass production of paintings. These were not entirely missing in other regions, but took on a much less spectacular form.

An Urban Society

The impact of the towns was visible everywhere. For a start, the Dutch economy relied to an unusual degree on trade and industry. Economic historians are producing increasingly reliable estimates of economic

activities for the pre-statistical era, and Holland and England are among the best-researched regions. We can therefore say now with a reasonable degree of confidence that trade and industry comprised well over 80 per cent of Holland's economy in the seventeenth century. This is not to say that Dutch agriculture was backward or otherwise insignificant. On the contrary, due to the high levels of urbanization, farming itself had gone through a process of commercialization and specialization that made it one of the most productive in the world, bar the rice economies of East Asia. One of the new products introduced in the seventeenth century was tulips. Today the Netherlands remain the dominant producer of flowers, with as much as 50 per cent of the world market. Tulips demonstrate another feature of the Golden Age economy: the strong linkages between sectors. The success of tulips as a novelty luxury encouraged the producers of Delftware (or Dutch porcelain) to design special vases that presented the flowers in the most favourable manner. Delftware as such was in turn the result of a temporary interruption of the flow of Chinese porcelain to Europe, due to the Ming–Qing transition in the middle of the seventeenth century. The sudden halt in imports persuaded local producers in Delft to develop their own imitation of the coveted Chinese product. Delftware continued to serve a niche market even when the Chinese original started to become available again from the 1680s.

Both trade and industry, concentrated in the towns, were experiencing inter-connected changes. These had a lot to do with the steep rise in international and especially inter-continental trade. In the 1590s, the first successful trips to East Asia had been launched from various ports in Holland and Zeeland. These activities merged into the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1602. In 1621 a West India Company (WIC) was launched, mainly active in North America and Brazil, but later concentrating its activities in the Caribbean. Imports were processed in Holland; think of the sugar industry, unknown in the Netherlands before, or the production of various dyes, made for example from Brazil wood. Trade in turn required ships, which were mass produced on shipyards along the Zaan river, north of Amsterdam, serviced by sawmills propelled by wind energy. Although the Zaan region technically remained a rural district, the population of its ten villages together reached 20,000 by 1622 and more than 25,000 by the end of the century.⁴ The villages in this area more generally took on urban features to a remarkable degree. They

built town halls and called their inhabitants 'citizens', a word normally reserved for proper towns.

The importance of towns and cities was also reflected in the social composition and prestige of the various classes in society, and especially at the top. Holland had a nobility, but it was small and untitled, and therefore relatively marginal by international standards. The handful of noble families had a political influence far more significant than their numbers might suggest. However, the real power-brokers, economically and financially, but also culturally and socially, were the so-called regent families, who had grown rich in trade and industry and combined this with a place on one or another town council. Because of the peculiarities of the Dutch state structure, a total of fifty-seven towns had voting rights in the various provincial States assemblies and therefore indirectly in the States General. As a result, the town council of Zwolle, for example, one of three enfranchised towns in Overijssel, discussed peace treaties concluded by the Dutch Republic in 1629, 1648, 1667, and 1697, and more in the eighteenth century.⁵ The members of the town councils therefore had some justification in seeing themselves as the lords of the country. They were collectively known as 'regents'. In the early seventeenth century they usually combined their political and administrative positions with business, but as the century progressed more and more of them took university degrees, usually in law, and lived off their capital investments. They became full-time administrators, often combining their position on the town council with various other board positions in welfare and other institutions. The regents were usually the most prestigious local families. Hard on their heels were the merchants and entrepreneurs, who lived in the same streets and married into regent families. This upper crust grew increasingly rich during the seventeenth century. Family relations between them and the middle class of shopkeepers and artisans were unusual, and extensions of the city walls and the urban space also created a spatial separation between the residential areas of the super-rich and the middle class.

While the Golden Age helped to swell the ranks (and bank accounts) of the rich, it especially increased the numbers of the working classes and the poor, two categories that were in any case difficult to distinguish because the former lived very close to the poverty line, and could be pushed into the ranks of the indigent very easily. Probably the majority of these people would expect to become dependent on poor relief during at least some time in their lives, due to seasonal fluctuations in the

labour market, illness, or simply the family life cycle.⁶ In Alkmaar, a town of 13,000–14,000 inhabitants, north of Amsterdam for which we have good data, inequality increased between 1560 and the middle of the seventeenth century, but Alkmaar had an unusually equal distribution in the sixteenth century. Other towns in Holland also became more unequal during the Golden Age, but the increase was less marked than in Alkmaar.

Urban Institutions

Urban institutions shaped the Dutch Republic on all levels of its society. The country as a whole was dominated by the province of Holland, which paid almost 60 per cent of the Union's revenue and shouldered over 90 per cent of its debts. The States of Holland, in turn, were dominated by the eighteen enfranchised towns, for which the single vote of the nobility offered precious little balance. In five other provinces the votes of the towns and the nobility were in balance, although the peculiarities of the situation in Zeeland actually put the towns there in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the Orange stadholders who were the main political force in the province. Only in Friesland was the combined single vote of the province's eleven enfranchised towns (each of which had fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, apart from Harlingen and the province's capital Leeuwarden) matched by three rural districts with a vote each in the provincial States assembly.⁷

Towns themselves were governed under two distinct models. In the coastal provinces, permanent councils with members serving for life administered local services and covered provincial and national politics. In practice, a lot of the day-to-day business was left to two or four burgomasters, who were elected for one or two years only, but returned after a short waiting period. In Amsterdam the burgomasters who were temporarily out of office still participated in an informal council of 'former burgomasters' who were in effect more powerful than the council. In the eastern provinces of Overijssel and Gelderland, all members of the council had to be elected every year, and they were also controlled by so-called common councils, representing the guilds, militias, neighbourhoods, or a combination thereof. The consent of the common council was necessary for a change in the local constitution, the introduction of new taxes, and similar issues. In the coastal towns,

representation was not written into the local constitutions, but was nonetheless very real. For example, much local legislation in Amsterdam during the seventeenth century was not only developed in response to petitions from citizen associations, like the guilds, but often even copied their text verbatim from those same petitions.⁸ We also know that a lot of informal talks and negotiations took place between town hall and civic organizations, not just in Amsterdam but everywhere.

For these purposes, the town government could call on a dense web of local associations. Many areas of urban life were covered by civic organizations – some voluntary, others compulsory; some of them accessible only to those inhabitants with formal citizenship rights, others to all inhabitants; some quite small, others with hundreds of members. Two of the best-known, most generally available, and largest in terms of membership were the guilds and civic militias. The guilds were responsible for the organization of many, but by no means all, domains of economic life. The most notable exception was trade, which in Holland was largely unregulated (the only regulated aspect of trade was retailing, with many towns having shopkeepers' guilds).⁹ Joining a guild was compulsory for those who wanted to exercise the trade as an independent master; journeymen were not normally accepted as members. To join a guild, it was necessary to acquire formal citizen status in one's town of residence. Contrary to the popular image, most guilds made little effort to restrict entrance of new members, provided they were males; women found it difficult, often impossible, to enter the guild trades. Holland's guilds normally did not discriminate on religious grounds. The number of guilds increased very significantly during the seventeenth century, suggesting that at least they did not prevent economic prosperity. In the creative industries, we actually see a close coincidence between the blossoming of the arts and the multiplication of guilds.¹⁰ Members of guilds maintained social insurance for fellow members and held annual dinners. In Utrecht and Dordrecht they could even be buried together in the guild grave.

Civic militias had long been organized along the lines of the guild model, but were transformed during the Dutch Revolt into much more open organizations with compulsory membership, irrespective of formal citizen status, of adult men. Their task was to help defend the town in times of emergency and participate in the night watch about once a month. The militias in the towns of Holland commissioned collective portraits, in which the officers of the company had themselves

portrayed for posterity. These pictures were displayed in the militia halls. The most famous was, of course, *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt's 1642 portrait of the company of Frans Banning Cocq.¹¹

Some towns had very active neighbourhood organizations. In Haarlem, informal neighbourhoods, usually comprising one or two streets, held dinners every couple of years where the accumulated funds were spent, but also participated in lotteries and discussed issues of common concern. They had no place in Haarlem's constitution but could be a channel for the authorities to communicate with the town's inhabitants – and to regulate their behaviour.¹²

All towns had welfare organizations which were usually administered by middle-class men and women. The most important of these institutions provided money, food, and clothes, and in winter also fuel, to the local poor. In Holland the poor were usually allowed to stay in their own homes. Workhouses, as they existed in Alkmaar, Amsterdam, Delft, Haarlem, Leiden, Leeuwarden, and Groningen, actually housed only small numbers of people and served mainly as a deterrent against begging. Dutch welfare had a reputation of being generous, but for most pauper households it was insufficient to survive. The poor still had to work or find other ways to make ends meet. Remarkably, much of the funding for poor relief was also provided by ordinary people who donated small amounts of money during street collections or by leaving a penny in one of the many poor boxes. Church welfare was, of course, entirely funded by parishioners. Other welfare institutions might be funded with tax money. The Amsterdam civic orphanage, for example, had a stake in the acceptance of new citizens in the city; part of their dues went to the orphanage. The same institutions also exploited the local theatre, and all profits deriving from civic entertainment were divided between them. In various kinds of ways, therefore, urban citizens were active agents shaping the life of their community – and their own lives as well.

An Urban Culture

The growth of Holland's towns created a huge demand for housing. Many of them had to expand their ramparts to accommodate the influx of immigrants. Completely new neighbourhoods were built as a result. The most famous was created in Amsterdam. After an initially small expansion in the 1590s, the Amsterdam council decided

to increase the size of the town substantially in 1609, while another, equally ambitious expansion was built during the 1660s. This expansion required, first of all, the demolition of the ramparts and the building of new defence works in fields to the west and south of the medieval city. In the process, the shanty town that had been built there in previous years was demolished. Speculators, in the meantime, made fortunes from buying up land ahead of the publication of the plans; these included quite a few members of the town council who had been aware of the plans from their initial stages. In other respects as well, the process of designing and executing the project was largely left to the market, simply because the local government lacked the financial and bureaucratic resources to execute a project of this magnitude.

The end result nonetheless looked remarkably well planned. The new area consisted broadly of two zones. The inner ring, closest to Dam Square that was the heart of the old city, consisted of four wide canals where no industries were permitted to settle and houses had to be built to a fairly generous minimum size. These canals were specifically designed to attract the well-off, for whom the housing shortage had become particularly galling, according to the merchant elite members on the council. The outer ring, on the other hand, constructed along a set of much narrower canals, and criss-crossed by alleys and inner courtyards, was to be the settlement for artisans and the working classes. By mid century Amsterdam had once more outgrown its housing capacity and the ring of canals was extended to the east, to embrace all of the old city, with another zone of industry and working-class housing attached to it. Unfortunately, this happened precisely when immigration started to slow down and some of the area remained vacant until another growth spurt started in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹³

Amsterdam was not alone in expanding its territory. Leiden, which became one of Europe's most significant textile centres mainly due to a massive influx of immigrants from the Southern Netherlands, almost doubled in size as a result of additional industrial districts built to the north and east of the old city. As in Amsterdam, these new areas incorporated some luxurious canals, but in Leiden the proportion of working-class housing was much larger. Other towns that were substantially expanded in the first half of the seventeenth century included Alkmaar, The Hague (technically not a town, because it lacked an urban charter), Dordrecht,

Medemblik, Monnickendam, Rotterdam, and outside Holland also Groningen, Vlissingen (Flushing), and Zwolle.

The expansion of urban housing provided a massive boost to the local building industries. Between roughly 1580 and 1630 the housing stock in Holland almost trebled. Most of the new houses were designed and built by carpenters and stone-masons. Even along the Rapenburg, Leiden's most prestigious canal and home to many professors connected to the local university as well as the richest and most influential families on the town council, the most prolific designer of houses that were constructed around the middle of the century was the entrepreneurial stone-mason Willem Wijmoth. Wijmoth was not an architect *strictu sensu*, and his designs never made it into the histories of architecture. Houses became more sophisticated, with separate rooms for designated activities, such as cooking, sleeping, reception, and work. This process had started before 1600 but accelerated due to the extensive building activities. A major improvement of the late seventeenth century was the introduction of the sash window, developed simultaneously in Holland and England. The sash window allowed significantly more outside light to enter the house than previous designs.

Although some private housing was designed by architects, much of the demand for their work came from the public sector. Expanding towns required new gate buildings and other facilities. During the seventeenth century, nine towns built a completely new town hall, while seven others executed major renovations and rebuilding. Pieter Post was the most successful architect for public buildings. His designs included a new town hall for Maastricht, after that city had been conquered by the Dutch in 1632, churches in Haarlem and Middelburg, weighing houses in Leiden and Gouda, and town gates in Leiden and Utrecht; he oversaw major refurbishments of still others.¹⁴ The biggest prize, however, went to Post's former mentor, Jacob van Campen, who got the commission to design a new town hall for Amsterdam. It was to be the largest public building erected in seventeenth-century Europe.

There was a sense of justice in this outcome because Van Campen had been the main force behind the development of a style that would later be called Dutch classicism. This emerged from a theoretical reading of Italian classical authors, Vitruvius above all, and privileged harmonious proportions over the sort of embellishments that a previous generation had preferred. The Amsterdam Town Hall was deliberately planned as a celebration of the town's success. In a poem by Amsterdam's poet

laureate Joost van den Vondel, commissioned for the opening of the unfinished building in 1655, it was hailed as the eighth wonder of the world, a fitting monument for a place that could claim to be in the same league as Venice and Rome as one of history's great cities, but also as the seat – like Venice and ancient Rome – of a citizens' government and as such contrasted by Vondel with royalty.¹⁵ It was, obviously, no coincidence that the great hall of the new building was called 'citizens' hall'.

Amsterdam Town Hall was a tourist attraction and became the subject of numerous paintings, clearly made for the building's admirers. These paintings in themselves were the result of another significant cultural innovation. The single most popular pictorial genre in the Dutch Republic was landscape. These paintings were initially so unique that the English word is a direct descendant of the Dutch '*landschap*'. Most landscapes were painted quickly and therefore cheap, created with a limited palette. Expensive versions sometimes celebrated Italian scenery, but many landscapes were more or less faithful renditions of the Dutch outdoors. During the seventeenth century, a variety emerged that had towns rather than nature as its subject matter. Some of these townscapes looked at an urban setting from afar, as if they were an element in the natural environment of the landscape. At the time, possibly the best-known example was Jacob van Ruysdael's *View of Haarlem* (Figure 1.1), with Haarlem's renowned linen-bleaching industry depicted in the foreground. Dozens of copies, all made by the same studio, have survived, testifying to its popularity. Ruysdael was part of a small but significant element of the Dutch art market, celebrating towns as its special subject. Like landscapes, townscapes – the term was introduced only around 1800 – had emerged from the background into pictorial subjects in their own right. They came in a variety of sub-categories, including the elevated view that Ruysdael used, the street-level view as in Vermeer's *Little Street of Delft*, or the same artist's larger perspective on Delft from the exterior, portraits of specific buildings, perhaps most famously in Jan van der Heyden and Gerrit Berckheyde's series of paintings of Amsterdam's new Town Hall in the 1660s and 1670s.¹⁶

A third cultural area where urbanization had a significant impact was publishing and literacy. In the early modern period, literacy rates were mainly determined by two factors: Protestantism and the percentage of urbanites in the population. Protestantism encouraged its believers to personally familiarize themselves with the holy message by reading the Bible. The most significant publishing project in the



Figure 1.1 Jacob van Ruysdael, *View of Haarlem*, 1650s.

young Dutch Republic was the official translation into Dutch of the Bible, commissioned by the Synod of Dordt in 1618. It was important first of all because it happened at a time when the Dutch language as such was still unsettled. It was trying to distinguish itself from the Low German from which it originated and, frankly, had been all but indistinguishable in the sixteenth century. Now, literary authors and the committee producing the new Bible translation were simultaneously working out the grammar and vocabulary of the newly established nation of the ‘Batavians’. It took the committee almost twenty years to finish the project, but the result became the single most important text

of the Dutch Republic. Any family owning books would at the least own a Bible, and those adhering to the Dutch Reformed Church (about half the population) would read from it on a daily basis. Many families used their copy of the States Bible, as it was called, to record births and deaths; the copy would be passed on from one generation to the next.

Literacy rates were high in towns, because that is where educational facilities – public schools, private schoolmasters, guild apprenticeships – were concentrated. In Amsterdam, by the end of the seventeenth century, over half of adult females and three-quarters of men were able to write at least their own name, suggesting that, even if their writing abilities may have been limited, they must have had elementary reading skills. Significantly, such skills were much greater among locals than among immigrants, suggesting the former had benefited from the opportunities that were locally available.

Another indication of the high literacy rates was the rapid rise of the publishing industry in the Dutch Republic generally, but especially in the towns of Holland where most publishers were concentrated. In the sixteenth century, Deventer had been one of the few towns in the Northern Netherlands with a publishing tradition of some significance, due to the activities of the Brethren of the Common Life in this town. Only a handful of other northern towns boasted a bookshop-cum-publisher. Otherwise, Low Countries publishing was concentrated in the south, especially Antwerp. As in so many other areas, the Revolt and the Fall of Antwerp were to prove a turning point. By 1610 the number of Dutch towns with a bookshop had tripled to twenty-four, and the number of publishers in the Dutch Republic had easily passed the one hundred mark. Much of their output was published in Dutch, for the domestic market. During the seventeenth century, Dutch publishers together published an estimated 100,000 titles. During the second half of the century, increasing numbers of those titles were also exported. The arrival of many Huguenot publishers in 1685 in particular boosted those exports.

Among the many innovations developed by Dutch urban publishers was the newspaper. The first newspapers appeared in the German lands, as the printed successors to merchants' newsletters about foreign developments that might impact on trade. By the middle of the century, Amsterdam had become the news capital of the world, while other towns of Holland were not far behind. News bulletins, mostly of a single sheet, were published in Dutch, French, and English. The business developed to such an extent that some

publishers could afford to specialize entirely in the production of newspapers.¹⁷

Overseas Urbanization

When it came to urbanization, Dutch colonizers entered very different types of societies. In what would be known as North America, as well as in Africa, towns as they existed in Europe were more or less absent. Asia, on the other hand, had a long and successful urban history before the arrival of the Europeans.¹⁸ Chinese cities in particular were probably larger than any in Europe. Urban populations for the Indonesian archipelago are in doubt, and it is therefore not so easy to establish what it was that Portuguese and Dutch merchants found on arrival. It has been claimed that the region was among the most urbanized at the time, but more sceptical voices claim the exact opposite. Likewise, population figures for individual towns fluctuate wildly.¹⁹

As far as the Dutch were concerned, in most places they resided in or near existing settlements. Banten, for example, was a capital city in West Java with a population of possibly 12,000–15,000, where the Dutch East India Company erected a fort on the outskirts in 1685, after taking control of Banten's foreign trade. For its own headquarters, the VOC decided in 1619 to create a city more or less from scratch. In 1619 they captured the town of Jayakarta, or Jacatra, on the eastern border of Banten in the estuary of the Ciliwung River, razed it to the ground, and built an entirely new settlement. The governor-general of the Company and initiator of the project, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, had wanted to call the town New Hoorn, after his home town in the north of Holland. However, the Board of Directors insisted on a name with more general appeal and hence it became Batavia, after the Germanic tribe that were supposed to be the ancestors of the Dutch.

Batavia was built primarily as a fortified warehouse. Its population consisted of Dutch and other European immigrants, some 3,500 a decade after the new city was launched. The other half of the approximately 8,000 inhabitants were Asian Christians, people of Chinese extraction, and increasingly also slaves imported from the Indian subcontinent. Many of these settlers were males, who married Indonesian women and produced mixed-race offspring who came to dominate the town's society and culture. Interestingly, throughout the seventeenth century Portuguese was the shared language of Batavia's inhabitants. By the

early eighteenth century the city had grown to perhaps 100,000 inhabitants, 15,000 of whom lived inside the walls. The others were often soldiers, recruited in the archipelago to help the VOC's military operations, but also slaves working for the Company. The latter by now made up as much as half the town's population. Batavia had many of the civic institutions found in Dutch towns, including citizenship, hospitals, orphanages, and poor relief. One thing that was missing, however, was economic freedom, as the VOC closely regulated and monitored trade.²⁰

Beneath this skin of normal civic life ran a dark vein of anxiety and violence. This was only partly due to the overwhelming natural environment that Europeans were exposed to in the tropics. Still, on average a tiger was killed outside the walls of Batavia once a month. However, the real danger was other human beings. Around Batavia, groups of what we would now call guerrillas were active, and in revenge the Europeans sent out hunting parties to catch them. In 1632, prize money was promised for living (50 reals) and dead (25) fighters. In the early years, Batavia was at war with the neighbouring states of Banten and Mataram – but even more with itself. Extreme inequality and the diversity of its population created tensions that could easily erupt into domestic violence. Masters routinely flogged their slaves, husbands beat up their wives. In both circumstances, inequality was exacerbated by cultural cleavages: the slave masters were Europeans, their slaves came from India; European men had married (or were living with) Indonesian women.²¹

Savage cruelty was likewise in evidence among the European settlers of the New World. Of the Dutch settlements, only New Amsterdam had urban features, however. Its population reached 2,500 before the English took over in 1664, and renamed it New York. Compared to Batavia, that population was much more straightforward. First of all, the Europeans were a majority, and secondly there were no family relationships with the natives. In fact, no natives lived in New Amsterdam itself. Its non-European population consisted of a small group of slaves, all of African origin. As a result, aggression was directed primarily towards the outside world, where the Europeans, at one and the same time, felt vastly superior to the Indian tribes of the area and lived in permanent fear of them. To make things more complicated, the various Indian tribes in the area held grudges against each other, while the Europeans too were competing for beaver furs and territory: the English were making headway from the east, while the French were

closing in from the north. Relations were not always tense, but did erupt into full-scale warfare in the 1640s, when New Amsterdam's governor Willem Kieft deliberately sought a confrontation in which dozens of settlers and thousands of Indians lost their lives. The conflict escalated when the Europeans started to kill not just their warrior opponents, but also their wives and children, violating the basic rules of engagement of Indian warfare. The wall that was built along the northern perimeter of the previously unprotected New Amsterdam would give way, after its demolition in 1699, to what is nowadays perhaps the most famous street in the world, i.e. Wall Street.²²

Conclusion

The Dutch Republic was the most urbanized society of the seventeenth century, in Europe but almost certainly anywhere in the world. This general observation needs to be qualified in two ways. Firstly, within the Dutch Republic the highest level of urbanization was reached in the county of Holland. It was no coincidence, of course, that most of the things that we associate with the Golden Age – economic prosperity, religious toleration, cultural blossoming – were also primarily features of Holland's society and less in evidence in the other parts of the country. Those other provinces depended in many ways – economically, militarily, culturally – on Holland's success, and only grudgingly accepted Holland's leadership. Secondly, intense urbanization was also achieved in other regions in Europe and around the globe; think of the Home Counties of south-east England, or the Yangzi delta region around Shanghai in China. The difference between Holland and those other regions was that, in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, Holland's prosperity was backed up by a powerful state. In that state the other six provinces, although they were not as dynamic as Holland, still had an important role to play, as suppliers of manpower for Holland's fleet and industries, and as a military buffer zone. In turn, towns in these other provinces benefited from the persistence of urban autonomy in Holland. Once Holland's towns, under pressure of massive public debt, started to shift their position towards state centralization in the wake of the French invasion of 1795, urban autonomy was doomed everywhere. During the seventeenth century, however, that autonomy had been a crucial ingredient of the Dutch Republic's Golden Age.

Notes

1. W. Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands*, ed. George Clark, Oxford, 1972, 10, 12–13, 21–3, 36, 52 (quote), 83, 87, 92, 102, 110, 116.
2. J. de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800*, London, 1984, 39.
3. Numbers calculated from De Vries, *European Urbanization*, appendix I.
4. E. Beukers and C. van Stijl (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Zaanstreek*, vol. I, Zwolle, 2012, 118.
5. J. C. Streng, 'Stemme in staat'. *De bestuurlijke elite in de stadsrepubliek Zwolle 1579–1795*, Hilversum, 1997, 112 n. 106.
6. C. H. Parker, *The Reformation of Community: Social Welfare and Calvinist Charity in Holland, 1580–1620*, Cambridge, 1998.
7. See Chapter 6 of this book.
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