‘Our Valiant Dunkirk Romans’: Glorifying the Habsburg War at Sea, 1622–1629

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There is a natural tendency to think of civilian morale as an issue little influencing policy-makers before the Revolutionary wars of the late eighteenth century. But even in the age of mercenaries and military contractors, governments were well aware that success in war to some extent depended on the willingness of ordinary folk to bear the burdens it entailed. Public opinion might be little considered when deciding whether or not to go to war, but once the decision to fight had been taken every effort was made to convince tax-payers, in particular, that it was in their interest to see it through. This was true as much of monarchical governments now often thought of as ‘absolutist’ as of republican regimes or limited monarchies. Indeed, a work that resolutely disdained the many-headed mob could still insist that the prince or his ministers should “le manier et persuader par belles paroles, le séduire et tromper par les apparences ... ou par le moyen de bonnes plumes, en leur faisant faire des livrets clandestins, des manifestes, apologies et déclarations artistement composées, pour le mener par le nez” (“manipulate and persuade [the multitude] with fine words, seduce and deceive it with appearances ... or by means of skilled pens, having them write clandestine pamphlets, manifestos, artfully composed apologies and declarations in order to lead it by the nose”).¹

In our own dark days of spin and PR it is tempting to consider all communication a species of propaganda, rather than *vice versa*, just as in the broad sunlit uplands of liberalism there was a tendency to see newspapers somewhat naively as reflections of public opinion.² When I began my own research on

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1 G.N.P. [Gabriel Naudé, Parisien], *Considérations politiques sur les coups d’État* (Rome, 1639), p. 158. Translation derived in part from that of Joseph Klaitz, *Printed Propaganda under Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy and Public Opinion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 8.

2 With regard to the early-modern Flemish press the two extremes are best exemplified on the one hand by K. Van Damme with J. Deploige, ‘Slecht nieuws geen nieuws. Abraham Verhoeven (1575–1652) en de “Nieuwe Tijdinghen”: periodieke pers en propaganda in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden tijdens de vroege zeventiende eeuw’, *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 113:1 (1998), pp. 1–22, and Vincent van Zuilen, ‘The Politics of Dividing the Nation? News Pamphlets as a Vehicle of Ideology and National Consciousness in the Habsburg

the Flemish press during the Eighty Years War, my working assumption was that the press would reveal what those in power wanted the populace to think was happening: that I could provide an account of the government's propaganda war to set beside accounts of policy-making, diplomacy, the army and the fleet.³ By the time I read in Habermas that before the 1690s public communication was a question of governmental display *to* the people rather than rational interaction *by* the people, exposure to sixteenth and seventeenth-century pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs, and (above all) state papers had already convinced me that this was much too facile.⁴

The relationship between propaganda and information was far more intricate, and both these sides of news publishing have to be given their due. With these caveats in mind, I would now like to look at a more obviously propagandistic aspect of one early seventeenth-century newspaper, namely the coverage of maritime warfare in Antwerp's *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* during the opening decade of the second half of the Eighty Years War. In doing so, it will become apparent that the newspaper did not follow an overall propaganda 'line', but provided a forum for two distinct, and not fully compatible, views of the heroism of those Flemings who served the Habsburgs at sea.

The long and inconclusive war between the revolted provinces of the Netherlands and their repudiated sovereign, the king of Spain, was brought to a temporary halt by the Twelve Years Truce of 1609. When the Truce lapsed, at the end of April 1621, the strategic circumstances were quite altered. The biggest difference was that Habsburg forces were already heavily committed in the Thirty Years War, in Bohemia and the Palatinate, while the Dutch were particularly interested in creating a south-eastwards buffer and source of supply in the Rhineland and Westphalia. Although neither side had found acceptable terms on which to prolong the Truce, it was only with misgivings that they armed for war. There was no great desire on either part to go on to the offensive, and secret talks to find an acceptable basis for a new truce continued until

Netherlands (1585–1609); in *News and Politics in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)*, ed. Joop W. Koopmans (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 61–78; and on the other by Maurits Sabbe, *Brabant in't verweer. Bijdrage tot de studie der Zuid-Nederlandsche strijdliteratuur in de eerste helft der 17de eeuw* (Antwerp: V. Ressler, 1933).

3 Just such an account is now available in Monica Stensland, *Habsburg Communication in the Dutch Revolt* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

4 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); for a more developed statement of my own views on the interaction of public communication and reason of state see Paul Arblaster, 'Dat de boecken vrij sullen wesen: Private Profit, Public Utility and Secrets of State in the Seventeenth-Century Habsburg Netherlands', in *News and Politics*, ed. Koopmans, pp. 79–95.

August. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that both sides wanted war, but neither found the timing convenient.

At first it looked as though, by unspoken agreement, the Habsburgs and the Dutch would fight their conflict out in Germany. The opening move of the commander in chief of the Habsburg Army of Flanders, Ambrogio Spinola, was to lay siege to Dutch-garrisoned Jülich. It was only in May 1622, after a year of mutual confrontation on German soil, that hostilities resumed within the Low Countries, with Frederick Henry of Nassau, the younger half-brother of Maurice, leading a *chevauchée* through Brabant.⁵ This *brandschatting* specifically targeted undefended villages and homesteads, and the Dutch withdrew when forces were mustered against them. Orders had already gone out to recall Walloon, Flemish and Burgundian troops from Bohemia, but they were still a long way off, and the bulk of the Army of Flanders was engaged in the Rhineland against the forces of Ernest, count of Mansfeld. Once Spinola had concentrated his forces in the Low Countries, in the summer of 1622, he laid siege to Bergen op Zoom. It was not long before disease in the ranks, and the reprovisioning of the town by sea, forced Spinola to raise the siege. In 1623 there was a lull in operations, as both sides awaited the outcome of Spain's marriage negotiations with England, and of the preliminary negotiations (ultimately fruitless) to hold an international peace conference at Brussels that would settle the affairs of the Low Countries and the Rhineland.

Although the first decade of the Revolt had seen atrocities committed by both sides, the removal of the Duke of Alva, and the professionalisation of Dutch forces, had led to a somewhat more gentlemanly war from the mid-1580s onwards. Large-scale contribution raids such as Frederick Henry's expedition of May 1622 were not unknown in the second phase of the Eighty Years War, on both sides, but were far from being the norm. The most enduring image of this conflict is *Las Lanzas*, Velázquez's portrayal of Spinola accepting the surrender of Breda after a siege lasting almost a year.⁶ It is a fitting image for the ideals of a war in which commanders on both sides aspired to live up to the canons of Christian chivalry, however wretched and rapacious their foot soldiers might be. It also conveys something of the leisurely pace of a war of protracted sieges, and of small-scale, localised skirmishing over forage. Seventeenth-century paintings of military life produced

5 Despite contemporary Dutch celebration of this incident, it is one on which Frederick Henry's modern biographer is strangely silent. See J.J. Poelhekke, *Frederik Hendrik, Prins van Oranje. Een biografisch drieluik* (Zutphen: Wahlburg, 1978), p. 71.

6 The painting can be viewed on-line at the website of the Prado, <www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-surrender-of-breda-or-the-lances/> [03/05/15].

in the Low Countries are as likely to show soldiers singing, drinking, playing cards or brawling as fighting the enemy.

It was the expense of such protracted sieges—and, as Bergen op Zoom had shown, their uncertainty—that made the Habsburgs reconsider their strategy. On 1 November 1624, and again on 21 November, Philip IV wrote to his aunt, the Infanta Isabella, governess general of the Habsburg Netherlands, that the siege of Breda was an expensive and uncertain undertaking, but that he left it to her judgement whether it was worth the risk. His advisers had come to see commercial warfare as a surer means of bringing the Dutch to accept a Spanish peace, and in the same missives he insisted that with regard to the war at sea she follow his instructions to the letter.⁷

The wealth of the Dutch derived from their ability to exploit a geographical position at the intersection of Baltic and Atlantic maritime trade, and continental trade by road and river. Their diet relied on control of the Baltic grain trade, and a high-protein combination of cheese and herrings. With courage and ruthless determination they had muscled in on the trade in West Indian sugar and East Indian spices. The Habsburgs were now determined to choke all this off. They were already in control of the Rhineland, and had access to the sea through a few ports on the Flemish coast—Ostend, Nieuwpoort, and most importantly Dunkirk. In the early 1620s, as Olivares came into the ascendant as the chief minister of Philip IV of Spain, a grand strategy was conceived to deal with the Dutch.⁸ A river blockade on the Rhine and Maas would considerably impede Dutch continental trade. The building of forts in the East and West Indies would hamper their interloping there. A Flemish-Spanish trading company, to be established in Seville, would compete with the Dutch in the Baltic. A squadron of royal warships based on the Flemish coast would target the Dutch merchant and fishing fleets. Taken all together, and combined with some vigorous privateering, this strategy would, it was thought, leave the rebels with nothing but cheese on their plates. That such a campaign would also, if prolonged, be detrimental to the wealth of the Habsburgs' own subjects in the Low Countries was clear. The hope was that the Dunkirkers could force the Dutch to agree to a peace compatible with Spanish interests and the king's

7 Brussels, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Secrétairerie d'Etat et de Guerre, reg. 191, fos. 221, 271. Calendared in *Correspondance de la Cour d'Espagne sur les affaires des Pays-Bas au XVII^e siècle*, ed. Henri Lonchay, Joseph Cuvelier and Joseph Lefèvre, vol. 3 (Brussels: Kiessling, 1927), p. 187. See too Miguel Ángel Echevarría, *Flandes y la monarquía hispanica 1500–1713* (Madrid: Silex Ediciones, 1998), p. 223.

8 J.H. Elliott, *The Count-Duke of Olivares: The Statesman in an Age of Decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 78–80, 214–20.

honour more quickly, and much more cheaply, than Spinola's regiments could hope to do.

Even in the seventeenth century it was desirable for such a change in strategy to be presented to the public in such a way as to gain their approval—in this case above all to the wealthy loyalists of Antwerp, the largest mercantile city in the Habsburg Netherlands. They, after all, contributed to the war treasury through their taxes (subject to unanimous approval by the States of Brabant, in which the city's patricians and guilds were represented), and also through their close involvement in the commercial and financial networks that sustained the paying and provisioning of a large number of soldiers.⁹ They had most to lose from a prolonged period of commercial blockade and prize-taking, but they also included many of those best placed to gain from investment in privateering.¹⁰

In 1622 Antwerp's newspaper, the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, in a report dated Ostend, 24 February, presented the new strategy for success against the Dutch in culinary terms: "Profound brains firmly trust that this is the only means to make the Watersnails of Holland pull their Horns into their Shells, whence they will be pricked with a pin". The same edition of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* contained a letter from The Hague, dated 20 February, complaining that "The Ships of the Flemish Coast harm us in the Apple of our Eye. If this continues our nails will be clipped to the flesh". Furthermore, it carried a report from Dunkirk, also dated 20 February, with the morale-boosting claim that "some Seamen have become so rich with Booty that they can henceforth live as hearty and wealthy as Lords. So that the arrival of stout Fellows daily increases". This broadside opens the propaganda campaign for acceptance of the strategy and to encourage investment in privateering.¹¹

For the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* was both an organ of information and an instrument of propaganda. The publisher, Abraham Verhoeven, had sold the idea of a licensed newspaper to the authorities on the grounds that it could enhance

9 Hans Pohl, 'Zur Bedeutung Antwerpens als Kreditplatz im beginnenden 17. Jahrhundert', in Werner Besch *et al.*, eds., *Die Stadt in der europäischen Geschichte: Festschrift Edith Ennen* (Bonn: Röhrscheid, 1972), pp. 667–86; E. Rooms, 'Organisatie van de bevoorrading en de bezoldiging der troepen in dienst van de Spaanse monarchie in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1567–1713)', *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 63.1–4 (1980): *Liber Alumnorum Karel van Isacker S.J.*, pp. 121–47.

10 R.A. Stradling, 'The Spanish Dunkirkers, 1621–48: A Record of Plunder and Destruction', in *Spain's Struggle for Europe, 1598–1668* (London and Rio Grande: Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 213–33.

11 *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 33 (Antwerp: Abraham Verhoeven, 9 March 1622).

the military reputation of the dynasty, and as a result he had obtained a licence in the names of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella,

to print and to cut in wood or copper plates, and to sell, in all the Lands of their obedience, all the News Reports, Victories, Sieges, and taking of Cities which the same Princes should undertake or achieve, both in Friesland or along the Rhine: [... or those] which should occur for the Imperial Majesty in Germany, in Bohemia, Moravia, Austria, Silesia, Hungary, and other provinces lying in the Empire, carried out by the Count of Bucquoy, and Dampierre, or any other Catholic Princes, as well as all the News Reports of Holland, Brabant, and coming from other Provinces over the Maas etc. Forbidding all Printers, Booksellers, Pedlars, and others to reprint or Counterfeit the same in any way.¹²

As far as the authorities were concerned, the purpose of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* was to publicise victories. But there is no simple sense in which this was merely a government mouthpiece. Verhoeven received no subsidies, no official encouragement beyond the granting of a licence, and only indirect support.¹³ Unlike in Richelieu's France, there was no direct patronage or oversight of the press, the Infanta's councillors being happy to rely on the self-censorship of somebody who could always have his licence revoked, or in the worst case be prosecuted for libel or sedition. Those who fed stories to the press seem largely to have been middle-ranking administrative, clerical and military figures with connections to the circle around Spinola.¹⁴ When Spinola's clique fell from favour in the later 1620s, Verhoeven for a few brief years maintained publication despite central government opposition, but in the early 1630s he was forced into bankruptcy.

The inside pages of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* unobtrusively carried much news that was irrelevant to Habsburg war aims, and some that reported on Habsburg failings, losses, and mistakes, or enemy strengths and victories, but the reader

12 Printed as an appendix to several issues of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*; Privy Council original in Brussels, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Geheime Raad Spaanse Periode 1277/70.

13 Paul Arblaster, 'Policy and Publishing in the Habsburg Netherlands, 1585–1690', in *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brendan Dooley and Sabrina A. Baron (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 185–8.

14 Paul Arblaster, 'Abraham Verhoeven and the Brussels Court: Isabel Clara Eugenia's Staple of News', in *Isabel Clara Eugenia: Female Sovereignty in the Courts of Madrid and Brussels*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe (Madrid and London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011), pp. 280–311.

is left in no doubt about who should be winning the war.¹⁵ Verhoeven used the innovation of front-page headlines to draw attention to particularly noteworthy events, and these are mostly Habsburg victories. He made such stories all the more memorable by adding illustrative woodcuts. Whatever his unobtrusive content, Abraham Verhoeven's most obviously visible activity was publicising Habsburg victories, and in this regard the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* was much more Fox News than *Newsnight*.

The maritime theatre was crucial to the war on which Verhoeven was reporting, and accordingly he covered victories in the war at sea in some detail. But unlike the war on land, it was a war in which there was little room for courtesies. With superior naval might, the Dutch blockaded the Flemish ports as best they could, but an artillery fortress at Mardyck kept them away from the immediate approaches to Dunkirk, and privateers often slipped past the blockaders, or in a few notable instances fought their way in or out of port.¹⁶ The Dutch were sometimes willing to treat officers and crews of the royal squadron as prisoners of war, but refused to recognise letters of marque issued by the Brussels admiralty, and gave no quarter to privateers. The Dunkirkers gave no more quarter than they received. In 1621, with the war on land still in its 'phoney' stage, and unreported by Verhoeven, they had sent a herring fleet to the bottom with the crews battened below decks. In 1624 the statutes of the admiralty established at Bergues-Saint-Winoc specified that captives should be treated with "courtoisie & humanité Chrestienne" ("Christian courtesy and humanity"), but the letter of the law was not always applied.¹⁷

Even if captives were treated humanely, the circumstances of their capture were sometimes dubious. One near-windless day in May 1623, fourteen long-boats manned by mariners and marines made their way from the Flemish coast to the islands of Zeeland, arriving after dark and spreading panic on Walcheren and Goes. They landed at Terveer and, finding the booty rather more meagre than expected, seized thirty respectable-looking citizens as hostages and made their way by the Scheldt to the city of Antwerp, where the hostages were held for ransom.¹⁸ It is unclear what possible interpretation of the rules of naval

15 See Arblaster, 'Policy and Publishing', p. 185.

16 For an overview of the war at sea, see R.A. Stradling, *The Armada of Flanders. Spanish Maritime Policy and European War, 1568–1668* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

17 *Placcart et Ordonnance de Roy nostre Sire, sur le faicte de l'Admirauté établie a Bergues St. Winocq* (Brussels, 1624), article 41.

18 Report from Flanders, undated, in *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 60 (19 May 1623), pp. 4–5. I am grateful to Arthur Der Weduwen for drawing my attention to a proclamation issued by the Dutch States General on 8 August 1625 offering rewards for any who intercepted enemy

engagement make this a legitimate action, but it was commented in the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* that “some” saw it as a fitting response to Frederick Henry’s ravaging of Brabant the previous year—answering fire with water.¹⁹

Other events reported by Verhoeven in celebratory tones were no more edifying. At the beginning of October 1622, the thirty-three year-old Jan Jacobsen, son of Admiral Michiel Jacobsen, had put out from Ostend on his first expedition as a captain of one of the king’s frigates. He failed to elude the patrolling blockaders, and was soon in a running battle with nine Dutch warships, which was to last for thirteen hours. He disabled two of them before finally being fought to a standstill, his mast and banks of oars shot away. The Dutch called upon Jacobsen to surrender, and offered quarter, but rather than let one of the king’s ships fall into the hands of the enemy he defiantly exploded his powder store.²⁰ In doing so he disabled the Dutch ships alongside and caused considerable loss of life on board them, but at the cost of destroying himself, his ship, and much of what remained of his crew.

Clearly this is not an action that Christian moralists would consider exemplary, so the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* celebrated it in an alternative ethical register, that of Roman martial valour. The report concludes with the reflection: “the Brethren will make no song of this. Some speak of Scaevolus, Curtios, Romans; in truth our Dunkirkers follow them”.²¹ The Romans referred to were classic exemplars of self-sacrificing valour, in the case of Mucius Scaevola quite literally: having been captured while trying to assassinate the Etruscan king at prayer, he thrust his right hand into the sacrificial temple fire, not wanting it to serve for anything else when it had failed in its most important duty of saving Rome.²² Marcus Curtius is the man who galloped in armour into a deep hole that had opened up in the middle of the Roman Forum. An oracle had said the

longboats on Dutch waterways: *Praemium voor deghene die eenige Chaloupen vanden Vyandt veroveren opte Binnen-stroomen, ofte Rivieren* (The Hague, 1625). The existence of this proclamation suggests that such raids may have become more widespread.

- 19 “sommighe hun laten voorstaen datmen met de Zeeusche wateren de erloosche Brabansche brantstichterije wel eens soude connen bluschen”, p. 5.
- 20 Although Verhoeven’s initial report has Jacobsen setting the match to the powder himself, a later published account had him disabled by a shot through the thigh, and assenting when one of his men asked whether he should explode the powder store: Adriaan van Meerbeeck, *Nederlandtschen Mercurius* (Brussels, 1625), pp. 107–8.
- 21 Report dated Calais, 11 October, in *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 157 (22 October 1622), pp. 3–5. “The Brethren” was one term that Verhoeven used for Calvinists; it might also allude to one of his main rivals in the Dutch-language newspaper industry, Broer Jansz. of Amsterdam.
- 22 Valerius Maximus III.3. English translation in Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, ed. and trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey (Loeb Classical Library 492; Cambridge, MA,

hole could only be filled with the Roman people's greatest strength. Curtius, described by Valerius Maximus as "a young man of the noblest spirit and lineage", interpreted this to mean valour and arms, and acted accordingly to save his city.²³ Both stories are family legends of two lineages—the Scaevolae and the Curtii—important in the later history of the Roman Republic. They are mentioned by Livy, and in turn by Valerius Maximus, two of the mainstays of seventeenth-century Latinity, but in different books and different contexts. The most obvious place where Scaevola and Curtius are mentioned together, in one breath (as in the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*), is in Augustine's *City of God*, where they serve as examples of non-Christian heroism in the service of the earthly city, the reward for which is merely human glory.²⁴ The Christian martyrs, says Augustine, "did not inflict suffering on themselves, but they endured what was inflicted on them; and in so doing they surpassed the Scaevolae, the Curtii, and the Decii".²⁵

An educated contemporary reader of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* would have been expected to pick up the allusions at once, and here there is an interesting duality in the report. For those with only a hazy notion of *romanitas* the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* seems straightforwardly to celebrate Jacobsen as a hero in the Roman mould. For those with a rather deeper humanistic background, the report celebrating Jacobsen's self-immolation contains an allusive undertone distancing it from anything that deserves the name of martyrdom.²⁶ As with so many other stories, the attentive and informed reader gets a much more nuanced picture from the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* than the casual or less well-informed reader. One of

and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 271, 273. The source of the story is Livy II.12.

23 Valerius Maximus V.6. English translation in Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, pp. 513, 515. The source of the story is Livy VII.6.

24 See Maria Berbara, 'Civic Self-Offering: Some Renaissance Representations of Marcus Curtius', in *Recreating Ancient History: Episodes from the Greek & Roman Past in the Arts & Literature of the Early Modern Period*, ed. K.A.E. Enenkel, Jan L. de Jong and Jeanine De Landtsheer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 147–65. I am grateful to Jeanine De Landtsheer for this reference.

25 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, V.14. English version in St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 204.

26 In 1624, when the *Nuestra Señora* blew up taking the Dutch ship grappled alongside with it, this was not reported in the same terms, only that "it happened that the powder of the Spanish Admiral went off and the ships were both blown into the air"; 'Tijdinghe wt der Zee', *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* 107 (29 October 1624), pp. 5–6. It had earlier been reported that the marines and mariners on board the *Nuestra Señora* had sworn to fight to the last man, in 'Waerachtich verhael van den Bloedighen slach ter zee', letter dated from the Downs, 22 May, in *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* 58 (31 May 1624), pp. 3–7. Internal evidence in this last report suggests that the writer of the letter may himself have been a marine.

the newswriters associated with Verhoeven's venture, the English Catholic exile Richard Verstegan, wrote of the "wise man" that "From everything he sees and hears he draws conclusions, with which to instruct first himself, and then others ... He judges nothing by its outward appearance, but by its qualities".²⁷ Those of Verhoeven's readers who were schooled in this Renaissance ideal of personal wisdom would have known how best to read his newspaper.

The report of the explosive death of Captain Jacobsen is not a lone example of the language of Roman valour serving to mask the distance between Christian concepts of just warfare and a brutal campaign of destruction and personal enrichment. Months earlier, on 25 June, the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* had run another story from Calais according to which:

The 14th of this month Captain Wittebol came to Calais at eleven o'clock in the morning, with the Burgundian Flag above, without knowing what Warships were here off the Flemish Coast, and since he came too early to run up to Dunkirk on the tide he tacked about by the town here with his Prize for two hours, with all flags out, showing a Roman courage worthy to be noted or recorded in the Chronicles, for never before has a lone ship dared do or attempt this.²⁸

The later report that links Jan Jacobsen to Scaevola and Curtius contains a second item that refers to the rather more successful Admiral Wittebol as "onsen Cloecken Helt Wittebol" ("our Bold Hero Wittebol", p. 5), and "desen kloecken Romeyn Wittebol" ("this bold Roman Wittebol", p.5). It was reported that Wittebol and his companion Andres Sanchez were not far from shore, their ships laden down with goods and prisoners, "datse daer mede beladen zijn want sy hebben ordre datse gheen meer en moghen laten gaen, moeten allen de Hollanders Ghevanghen op brenghen" ("a burden to them, for they have been ordered not to let any more go, and have to deliver all the Hollanders captive", p. 5). Just what it would mean for a Dunkirker at sea to let prisoners go is not explained.

The *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* contains a number of passing references to "Roman courage", "Roman deeds", and "Dunkirk Romans", but only on one occasion did the alleged *romanitas* of Dunkirkers make it into the front-page headline. This

27 Richard Verstegan, *Scherp-sinnighe Characteren* (Antwerp, 1622), no. 10, 'Character van eenen Wijsen Man'. On Verstegan see Paul Arblaster, *Antwerp & the World: Richard Verstegan and the International Culture of Catholic Reformation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004).

28 Undated report from Calais in *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 92 (25 June 1622), p. 3.

was in an issue devoted to the story of the “Roman deed of Jan Broncast”.²⁹ A twenty-six year-old native of Dunkirk, Broncast had led six companions, each armed with two pistols, in the capture of a Dutch vessel with a crew of twenty-six, armed with eight cannons and eight swivel-guns. Their ability, lightly armed and heavily outnumbered, to overpower the crew and take the ship, which was sailing from North Africa to Holland, relied on surprise. Far from coming alongside with the Burgundian flag flying above, or even (as was more usual for Dunkirkers) a foreign flag that would enable them to get in close, Broncast and his companions, all of them Christian captives ransomed by the Spaniards and waiting for passage home, had enlisted on the Dutch ship before it set sail from Barbary, and smuggled fourteen pistols aboard. Once on the high seas, at seven o’clock one morning they held the crew at gun-point. Broncast made a speech about how nobody would get hurt if they all co-operated, and how the king of Spain was not the enemy of Dutch mariners, but only of the rebel states that falsely claimed sovereignty in part of his patrimony and misled honest men into suffering in their service—an interesting inversion of the Dutch East India Company’s justification for effectively waging a private war against Spaniards and Portuguese in the Indies. The crewmen were then searched for sharp objects, locked in the poop cabin, and Broncast and his companions spent six sleepless days and nights getting the ship to Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where they arrived without further incident on 20 January 1626. Apart from the ship and its guns they had captured a cargo of sugar, honey, aniseed, wool, and various other merchandise. The Seville Admiralty adjudged it good prize, and further rewarded Broncast with a naval commission of his own. Broncast’s actions are, like Jan Jacobsen’s, difficult to condone within traditional Just War thinking; those who would not only condone but praise them would again have to find a non-Christian moral register.

The ambivalence of praising suicidal, deceitful, brutal and merciless behaviour as ‘Roman’ is highlighted by another letter printed in the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, this time written “from the Ships of Dunkirk”. Here there is no mention of “Dunkirk Romans”, but rather of “Genevan Romans”, in a closing exhortation to the Prince of Orange to realise that it is in the nature of the Dutch rebels to treat him and other great lords “like Tarquin’s and Brutus’s children, and choose

29 ‘Een Romeyns stuck van Jan Broncast, gheboren Schipper van Duynkercken, den welcken met ses zijne medegesellen heeft verovert een Hollandts schip met ses en twintich Bootgesellen, acht stucken geschuts, ende 8. Steen-stucken inde Spaensche Zee’, *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 33 (28 March 1626).

new Cincinnatos from the plough, or the cheese dairy”.³⁰ This letter strikes a very different tone about the Dunkirkers themselves, as do other letters written at sea. It may even be intended as a riposte to what had already appeared about them in the pages of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*. Before going into battle they received absolution, “as is wonted”, and then “cried with one voice, let us die for God and for our King of Spain, but not unavenged”.³¹ A few days earlier a Captain Clement Menny (sc. Menin?) had been shot through the head in an exchange of fire with Dutch blockaders. This was reported in a letter from the sea, which stated that “he held himself bold as a Lion to the last, as we also do for God and our King”.³² Yet another letter from a member of the fleet—perhaps one of the Jesuit chaplains who sailed on board—is headed with the words “God before all”.³³ It recounts how the *Sint Carel*, commanded by Vice-admiral Collart, had been one of four ships holed up in English waters under the watchful eye of Dutch blockaders, but managed to elude them despite a lack of wind, the Burgundian colours flying in full view, and being outnumbered and outgunned. Once back under the guns of their home fort, the crew let off three celebratory musket rounds, “to the Honour of God and his Dear Mother, Saint Charles, and the valiant King of Spain”.³⁴

Outside the pages of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, a broadside ballad about the death of Jan Jacobsen went even further, to the point of suggesting that he could be considered a martyr. He not only shed his blood “for God and the king”, he fought to the death “to rejoice with God above”, and chapter 16 of the Book of Judges was explicitly cited, giving Samson’s example as biblical warrant for self-destruction to destroy God’s enemies.³⁵

All this indicates that the Dunkirkers themselves saw their efforts as something along the lines of a crusade, and indeed many of their foremost commanders and admiralty officials were, in a strictly technical sense, crusaders, in that they were admitted to the Spanish Order of Santiago or the Portuguese Knights of Christ, two orders of chivalry founded for the purpose of crusading.

30 ‘Met noch andere Brieven Wordt gheschreven uut de Schepen van Duynkercken’, Undated, *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 67 (21 June 1624), p. 6.

31 “Tijdinghe vande Duynkercksche schepen. Wt het schip van S. Ignatius, by Duynst in Enghelant”, dated 3 June, *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 67 (21 June 1624), p. 4.

32 Letter dated “from the Downs on the 22nd May 1624”, *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 58 (31 May 1624), p. 4.

33 On these chaplains, see E. Hambye, *L’Aumônerie de la flotte de Flandre au XVII^e siècle, 1623–1662* (Leuven: Éditions Nauwelaerts, 1967).

34 Letter dated Dunkirk, 13 October 1624, *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 105 (17 October 1624), pp. 4–7.

35 *Kapiteyn Jacobus. Van den kloekmoedigen kapiteyn Jan Jacobsen, die alleen met zijn volk vogte tegen zeven Hollandsche schepen*, reproduced in Sabbe, *Brabant in’t verweer*, pp. 433–7.

By honouring them in this way the monarchy was assimilating them to Spain's previous experience of waging irregular sea warfare: the raids and counter-raids of Barbary corsairs and Christendom's military orders. But the ambivalence about seeing the Dunkirkers in these terms went to the very heart of the Spanish monarchy's decision-making apparatus. Within the Spanish Council of State there was never full acceptance of prize-taking as a military end in itself.³⁶ Certain strategists and policy-makers saw targeting Dutch commerce as the cheapest and quickest way to curb the bellicosity of the less war-weary seaward provinces of the Republic. The figures show beyond doubt that the destruction of the herring fleet was achieved on a tiny fraction of the time, men and money that besieging Breda was to cost. But there was constant pressure from within the Spanish Council of State to use the royal squadron at Dunkirk for defensive operations, such as the convoying of merchantmen, to which they were ill suited. The strength of the Dunkirkers lay in surprise, manoeuvrability, ferocity, and an ability to out-sail enemies they could not out-gun. None of these fitted them for convoying duties.³⁷

If there were doubts about the use to which royal ships were put, these were even greater when it came to private investment in prize-taking as a profit-making venture. Privateering was the weapon of choice of the Dutch, English and French Protestants who sought to weaken the hold of the Iberian crowns in the West Indies, and Spaniards had never considered these privateers to be anything other than pirates, to be dealt with accordingly. Unusually, the controversial Jesuit thinker Juan de Mariana, rehabilitated by the Olivares regime, had argued that war should be made to pay for itself, through plunder and private investment, burdening the tax-payer as little as possible. He seems to have considered privateering the moral equivalent of citizens' militia duty.³⁸ But to accept the validity of privateering was to risk having to regard interlopers in the

36 Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, pp. 160–61; see too 173–5.

37 R. Baetens, 'An Essay on Dunkirk Merchants and Capital Growth during the Spanish Period', in *From Dunkirk to Danzig: Shipping and Trade in the North Sea and the Baltic, 1350–1850. Essays in Honour of J.A. Faber*, ed. W.G. Heeres et al. (Hilversum: Verloren, 1988), pp. 117–43, esp. 117–18.

38 Juan de Mariana, *De rege et regis institutione libri III. ad Philippum III. Hispaniae Regem Catholicum* (Toledo, 1599; facsimile reprint Aalen: Scientia, 1969), USTC 339782, III, 5, 'De re militari' (301–11). This reading of Mariana's significance derives from Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, pp. 22, citing Alan Soons, *Juan de Mariana* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 65, which in turn relies upon Pierre Mesnard, *L'Essor de la philosophie politique au XVI^e siècle*, revised ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1952), pp. 562, 566. On Mariana more generally, see Harald E. Braun, *Juan de Mariana and Early Modern Spanish Political Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

Indies as subject to the laws of war. It was natural that the Flemish admiralty should adopt the view that was prevalent, indeed customary, in northern waters. It was only with misgivings and debate, and the theoretical justifications offered by writers such as Mariana, that Spanish policy-makers followed them.

The ambivalence of those in power is shared in the pages of the *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*. There is considerable emphasis on the profitability of privateering and the damage done to Dutch trade and fisheries, and the newspaper also highlights the courage of those who took the considerable risks involved.³⁹ But even so, those writers not embedded in the fleet failed to endorse the Dunkirkers' view of the war at sea as a crusade, and chose instead to celebrate it in the language of Roman valour. In doing so they perhaps reflect the ambivalence with which their primary intended readership, the urban middle classes (and in particular the merchants and guild masters of Antwerp) must have regarded a large-scale campaign of prize-taking attended by notorious atrocities. After all, no interpretation of the centuries-old moral teachings of Christianity provides grounds for the glorification of events that include the targeting of non-combatants, the taking of civilian hostages, self-immolation, and hijacking.

39 See e.g. the undated report from Dunkirk in *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*, 31 (18 April 1625), listing the prizes of three recently returned privateers. A dozen more examples could be given.