Repertoires of Access in Princely Courts, 1400-1750

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Introduction*

In the past four decades, the accessibility of those in power has become an important topic in historiography, particularly at the pre-modern court. Whereas most specialists of late medieval and early modern politics tend to agree that the study of access is the key to understanding power relations in these periods, opinions seem to differ as to exactly how the concept should be approached. For want of a clear definition, access has remained a rather vague category, the importance of which is often assumed rather than thoroughly explained. Similarly, the association between access and power is usually taken for granted, whereas the mechanisms behind it remain obscure. Scholars still struggle to understand how access was used by subjects to represent their claims in premodern centres of power, and the ways in which it was articulated and performed. By taking the full complexity of proximity to the monarch into account, this chapter means to broaden the scope and to explore how the many varieties of access enabled medieval and early modern people to express their voices and concerns.

The Key to Power?

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the study of princely courts and households – after having lain under the dust for years – has been introduced anew into historical research concerning premodern politics. It did not take long before social, cultural, and economic historians also began to acknowledge the enormous potential of this topic of research. During the past few decades, then, the field of court studies has become a fully-fledged branch of

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historiography.¹ One development running parallel to this evolution is the rise of the concept of “access to the ruler” and the growing conviction that the study of it is fundamental for being able to unravel the early modern decision-making process in all its dimensions. In the 1980s the work of David Starkey provided a turning point in the research. In his view, having access to the monarch was of crucial importance in the political framework of the Ancien Régime.² Subsequent to earlier explorations by Carl Schmitt and Geoffrey Elton, it was Starkey who strongly posited that the right to access – and the possibility for personal interaction that issued forth from it – constituted an essential component of both the acquisition and the exercise of power.³ It was of inestimable importance in the struggle among courtiers for individual advancement and representation. On the other hand, a lack of access could influence the course of this struggle in a negative sense. Starkey argued that the way in which the rule of successive English monarchs manifested itself – whether it be more “accessible” or “distant,” according to the author – was defining for the workings of the political order in its entirety. Choosing one of either extreme led to varied policy-making with regard to the distribution of power, and demanded varied strategy in terms of those who wanted to acquire power. Both ways of acting, Starkey says, can essentially be traced back to contrasting methods of dealing with the relationship between prince and subject and, consequently, to contrasting visions concerning the nature and the legitimacy of monarchical rule.⁴

By now many historians have subscribed to Starkey’s argument, and they have also added important insights concerning the nature of what has often been called the “politics of access.”⁵ In this way access has grown into a dominant explanatory factor in research with regard to early modern decision-making. In many studies the influence or power of courtiers is described in terms of proximity to the ruler. Without a doubt, access has become one of the most employed concepts in the steadily expanding field of court studies. Is access, though, always an indication of power? In the past the requisite caveats were already being made for this automatic association. In the influential collection *The Princely Courts of Europe*, John Adamson observes that “access and intimacy did not always equate with political power” but were, on the contrary,

1 See, for example, the overviews in Fantoni (2012).

2 Starkey (1987). See also Starkey (1973; 1977).

3 Cf. Schmitt (1954a; 1954b); Elton (1976).

4 See Starkey (1987), especially p. 8.

5 See, for example, Loades (1986) 85-95; Gunn (1993); Kettering (1993); Asch (1995); Weiser (2003); Jiménez (1996); Le Roux (2000); Hengerer (2004); Raeymaekers (2013).

always dependent on the nature of princely authority.⁶ Jeroen Duindam, too, argues that access and political influence were not necessarily directly proportional, let alone mutually interchangeable.⁷ Although both authors are of the opinion that the acquisition of access was, without a doubt, one of the most efficient ways for acquiring power, Adamson as well as Duindam postulate that access is only one aspect in a broad array of factors that have to be taken into account in research on the matter. Such reservations indicate that, despite its ubiquity in studies on the early modern court, the importance of access is still subject to debate. One of the reasons for this may be that it appears impossible to arrive at a clear-cut or workable definition of the concept. Over the years it has acquired a wide variety of meanings, rendering it difficult for scholars to reach a compromise on its nature and impact. How, then, can we move the debate forward?

The primary goal of our contribution, then, is to widen the scope of access as an analytical category by focussing not so much on its connection with the explicit exercise of power, but rather on the interconnected and complex practices in which the idea of access itself was shaped, expressed, and represented, for example in the visual and material culture surrounding the monarch. Thus, by examining the broad spectrum of manifestations of access from a cultural perspective, this contribution is mainly concerned with what we have termed the “culture of access.” As will be explained in the following paragraphs, we argue that access should be viewed as a dynamic *process* – a constant interplay of spaces, strategies, personalities, rituals, artefacts, and events – that was “enacted” through a diverse repertoire of performances. By studying the latter, we may achieve a much more nuanced and thorough understanding of the meaning of access and of the ways in which it impacted the relations between rulers and ruled. This approach is one that the authors of this contribution, aided by a group of like-minded scholars, have introduced in a recently edited collection of essays.⁸ In the following paragraphs, we build upon the wide-ranging expertise brought together in that volume, and explain how the idea of repertoires of access might contribute to the study of power relations in the late medieval and early modern world.

6 Adamson (1999) 109.

7 Duindam (2003) 234. See also the discussion on pp. 161–80.

8 Raeymaekers and Derks (2016). The volume itself contains the proceedings of an international conference on the same topic, which took place at the University of Antwerp on 8–9 November 2012.

The Culture of Access

Although historical research has convincingly revealed that “access” was an important factor in constantly changing power relationships, it has still proven difficult to designate general characteristics and norms. The reason for this difficulty is simple: we still do not know enough about how access worked in everyday practice and how it evolved. These lacunae may seem strange, in view of the variety of case studies concerning the politics of access at certain courts, but as yet there are no available systematic analyses of access in its entirety. In current literature the use of access is still seen, above all, as an important thematic line for penetrating into the complex organisation of the premodern centre of power. In this time period the princely court was a nebulous composite of political arrangements and social structures, as a result of which analysing it in its entirety is difficult to achieve. The great advantage of the notion of “access to the ruler” for historians is that it puts them in the position to approach the manifold nature of arrangements characterising courtly life in context, and to lay those structures bare. That may well explain the success of the concept of access. By directing their gaze at the topic of access researchers are able to describe how rulers and the people around them lived with one another, how they gave shape to their immediate lived surroundings, which groups knew how to keep access under strict control, and how access functioned as an instrument for political and social distinction. In this success for scholarship, however, there also lurks a paradox: although access is by now used by an entire pleiade of historians for analysing the multiform political world of the court, and is put forward as an explanatory factor for the nature of power relationships, many questions still remain concerning the meaning and scope of the concept. In spite of the broad consensus among researchers concerning its importance, access still continually escapes their grasp as well as their definitions. How access works in a concrete way and how defining it was in the development of early modern courts has, as a result, remained underexposed.

In the scholarly literature concerning access the emphasis thus lies specifically on reconstructing political relationships and on their role in the decision-making process. Seldom is the question posed, though, regarding what is involved in regulating access. Most studies take as their point of departure a somewhat restrictive conception of early modern politics, which largely mistakes the ritual and cultural dimensions of access. To this day, as a consequence of this misunderstanding, religious rites, architectural layouts, behavioural codes, and ceremonial solemnities have been insufficiently included in the analysis of access. Recent work has suggested, however, that the political

reality of the early modern court was more multiform and diffuse than has been previously assumed.⁹ Political power in this society was inextricably connected with reputation and social status. It was therefore no coincidence, either, that the ruler and his élites used their immediate surroundings to communicate their positions and claims to power. This made the princely court into a performative space, constructed by successive generations so as to convey certain messages. In a forum of this kind, rituals, objects, buildings, and clothing all were ways in which the rank of an individual or a group could be made visible in the hierarchy.¹⁰ In this way they confirmed or defined power and position, so that these also became realities for the public in attendance. The neglect of this cultural dimension in the study of access is especially notable, because pre-modern courtiers were in fact obsessed with just these very performative actions and artefacts.

Another important argument for widening the perspective on access concerns the question as to continuity and discontinuity in dealing with access. Which developments are we able to distinguish in the rules, rituals, and cultural representation of access? Because existing case studies concentrate more often than not on the organisation of access in a certain era, they generally create little clarity concerning the dynamics of its regulations. The question is not only which forms of access prevailed at a certain court but also which social and political processes were coupled to these forms. Changes to being open or closed were often instigated by means of conscious policy of the rulers – to keep a grasp on their private surroundings – yet were also influenced by the expectations of the élites. Without support from the most important groups of the realm, governing was an onerous business. Often these groups each had their own opinions and claims concerning the degree of access at court. Regulating access in the early modern period was in that respect no one-way street but arose precisely in the interaction between the prince and his subjects. In this way it was always a process of *negotiation*. An important line for charting the difficulties that occurred during this process is the analysis of how access became formalised. Varied cases show that more formality in access was always supplemented with informal structures. Sometimes both kinds of measures were even at odds with each other, but generally they were clearly complementary.¹¹ Each formal measure for screening off rulers was, after all, inevitably followed by new informal stipulations so as to maintain a certain

9 See, for example, Asch and Birke (1991); Adamson (1999); Duindam (2003); Pečar (2003); Hengerer (2004); Horowski (2012).

10 Cf. the seminal studies by Stollberg-Rilinger (2008; 2000).

11 Cf. Hengerer (2004); Butz and Hirschbiegel (2009). On formality and informality in early modern politics see also Stollberg-Rilinger (2013).

flexibility and freedom of action. This process of formalising access can be pursued by way of court ordinances, the building of architectural divisions such as cabinet rooms, privy chambers, and enfilades, the handing out of symbolic keys, and the giving out of certain court offices. In short, whoever intends to trace the fault lines in the history of access cannot get around approaching the many forms and functions of access from a comprehensive historical framework. In the next paragraph we discuss what such a framework might look like.

Repertoires of Access

We have already pointed out that the notion of “access” is often made one and the same with the notion of “power,” though without much critical sense, as if the connection between both concepts speaks for itself and the one always implies the other. All this is, among other things, the result of the fact that historians who use the concept are inclined to concentrate exclusively on politically oriented sources. In this way the perceptions of contemporaneous political figures and diplomats weigh heavily on the importance of access. However, it is questionable to what extent these perceptions and reality connect to each other. For that reason, we argue that the debate on the importance of access should not focus solely on its relationship with power, but also on the ways in which the idea of access was visualised, ritualised, symbolised, negotiated and performed. A study of this kind, which consciously takes socio-cultural practices as its starting point, necessarily uses an integrative method that combines a wide and very diverse set of historical sources. This allows for a more comprehensive insight into the function of access in the practice of early modern politics. Central to this approach is the idea that access should be viewed as a performance that may be understood by studying the diverse cultural repertoires through which it was enacted, taking into account the spatial, visual, and material dimensions concerned. The following repertoires can be identified and developed:

1 *Articulating Access*

How was access organised in a spatial sense? Since the emergence of the spatial turn in the historical sciences, it is clear that we not only have to know *where* precisely things happened, but that we also have to acquire insight just as much into *how* and *why* these things took place *in these particular spaces*.¹²

¹² Cf. Warf and Arias (2009), especially the introduction. See also the pioneering work of Lefebvre (1991).

This is also valid for the early modern court. If access is viewed as a yardstick for defining which persons could and could not approach the prince in person, then the term can be taken quite literally. In this sense it is interesting to examine in what way physical access to the prince and his everyday lived space was facilitated, or in fact hampered, in practice. Put another way: what impact did the organisation of space have on the accessibility of the monarch? To answer that question a study of the princely residence is likely the most logical (yet not the only) point of departure. At almost all early modern courts the access to the princely quarters was constrained with the help of barriers like thick walls and strictly monitored gates and doors. A series of entryways, interior courts, staircases, and antechambers marked the route that led from the outermost palace walls to the proverbial *sanctum sanctorum*: the private quarters of the prince. An enfilade of chambers and halls functioned as a sluice in which visitors were sorted out beforehand so as to separate the rank and fashion from the *hoi polloi*.¹³

A well-devised type of palace architecture, in other words, contributed to the management of access to an important degree and could simplify access to the prince or, in fact, tie it into knots. In designing the residence – and also, by extension, its surroundings – court architects always took this concern into account to a greater or lesser degree. Over the course of the ages old buildings were adapted to new ideas concerning access, seclusion, and openness. At the same time, the fact needs to be taken into account that princes did not always stay behind the closed doors of their palaces. They went hunting, visited the town, took part in processions, went on horse rides, and so forth. On top of that, many of them travelled regularly, taking their lodging in tent camps, or in the residences of nobles they befriended, or in public buildings, abbeys, or monasteries. In these circumstances access to the prince had to be organised in another way. For example, studies on princely residences and joyous entries in French cities have underscored that in urban surroundings there was a clear tension between, on the one hand, being rigidly screened off on behalf of the political process and, on the other hand, being relatively open for ceremonial interaction with the urban population.¹⁴ The visibility and the perceived accessibility of the ruler in the urban context, as these authors argue, also constituted an important factor in the ruler's self-fashioning. In this case it becomes clear that the concept of access was in no way static but rather particularly dynamic in nature, and that it also must be researched in that sense. At the same time, it is clear that the contemporaneous perception of the importance

¹³ See, for example, Fantoni, Gorse, and Smuts (2009); Asch (2009).

¹⁴ See, for example, Murphy (2016a; 2016b); Berland (2016).

of access did not always agree with reality. Audrey Truschke has demonstrated that European diplomats, for instance, reported triumphantly about getting free access to the court of the Mughal emperor in India, but that that access led to little diplomatic success in practice.¹⁵

2 *Regulating Access*

How was access regulated? At most premodern courts, in addition to a well-devised organisation of space, a number of regulations existed which elaborated to the last detail either how the prince was to be screened off or in fact made accessible. In these regulations the court ceremonial and the accompanying ritual performance of accessibility played an important role. In order to be able to grasp the impact of access, it is important to examine in what way access was regulated by way of rules, agreements, and conventions, and – even more important – how in the process norms were related to practices. At almost every court in the late medieval and early modern periods, court ordinances were provided that stipulated who got access to the monarch, and who did not. These ordinances defined as well which courtiers were allowed to enter the princely quarters, in which sequence that happened, and at which moments during the day.¹⁶ On top of that, they established who was allowed to speak to the prince, and how one was supposed to do so. The same was valid for the flow of affairs during public meals and audiences. Michael Talbot has convincingly shown how the Ottomans regulated the access to the sultan by way of a fixed sequence of spaces and rituals.¹⁷ Talbot argues that the Ottoman court sent out important political messages to visitors as well via this ceremonial trajectory. Diverse sources – as well as the fact that ordinances regularly had to be promulgated anew – show, however, that the rules were in practice often trespassed against or gone around. Contemporaneous paintings and drawings show that the princely residence in the premodern era was as a rule a microcosm of busyness, in which courtiers as well as visitors and coincidental passers-by took part.

The palace complex needs to be imagined as a place where a significant hustle and bustle ruled every day (see Figure 6.1). Nobles, councillors, and servants all crossed paths at the entry gate, while coaches rode up and off. In the interior courts shops and market stalls were frequently set up where various merchants brought their wares to the man on the street. In the maze of corridors, staircases, and antechambers, visitors met to schmooze with one another

¹⁵ Truschke (2016).

¹⁶ Cf. Kruse and Paravicini (1999); Pangerl, Scheutz, and Winkelbauer (2007).

¹⁷ Talbot (2017). See also Talbot (2016).

FIGURE 6.1 A view of the palace of Versailles (after Jacques Rigaud). Source: Optica print by John Tinney. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, CCo 1.0 [accessed online 28.02.2019: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.402033>>].

or to exchange bits of political news with the courtiers present. The palace gardens were also opened up to the public at set times.¹⁸ In these kinds of circumstances it was nearly impossible to keep all the entrances and passages of the princely residence under surveillance 24 hours a day. In addition, one can suppose that balls, parties, ceremonies, parades, tournaments, and other festivities presumably attracted great throngs of not only desired but also undesired spectators to the palace. Although there is scarcely any proof for it, it can be assumed that the gatekeepers and porters were not averse to bribery.¹⁹ In that context even the most screened-off parts of the residence proved not to be entirely safe from unauthorised persons and witnessed the many contemporaneous reports concerning robberies or undesired visitors.

One cannot lose sight of the consideration that the palace walls were not as impenetrable as might be thought in the first instance. The question arises, though, to what extent the “infiltrations” described here – in which various persons, wanted or not, could enter or penetrate the princely residence – were

¹⁸ Duindam (2003).

¹⁹ Cf. Raeymaekers (2013) 198.

significant. Undoubtedly many (un-)invited guests hoped to catch a glimpse of the prince, draw his attention, perhaps even be addressed by him during their visit. That chance existed yet was extremely small. Having access to the residence was not the same as acquiring access to the monarch, and even if one succeeded in approaching him, he could in no way just simply be addressed. In his study about Charles II of England, Brian Weiser puts forward that "historians [tend to view] access in a binary manner: rulers are seen under the simple rubric as being either strict or easy of access. (...) But (...) in the sense of the ability to come into contact with the king, [it] was a more nuanced phenomenon."²⁰ Weiser rightly argues that the importance of access was not so much in physical proximity *per se* as in the possibility for interacting with the prince. Mark Hengerer, too, has emphasised the complexity of the concept and makes the case for shifting the focus of academic research to the connection between access and communication.²¹ In an era in which long-distance communication was limited to correspondence – an efficient yet vulnerable medium and, on top of that, subject to lags in time – physical proximity proved to be an enormous advantage, though naturally only useful if communicating with the prince was possible (and permitted). More than *finding the prince*, access was a question of *finding the prince's ear*.

3 *Monopolising Access*

Who was entitled to access, and – perhaps even more important – who was not? The many strategies that existed at the early modern court for controlling and regulating the accessibility of the prince indicate that access was viewed as a desirable commodity. Nevertheless, it is clear that some persons were more assured of the right to access than others. While the majority of his contemporaries could only hope for an occasional meeting with the prince, others were entirely unable to spend time in his proximity, let alone interact with him. And yet there were a small number of persons who enjoyed free and unhampered access. In many cases these individuals held a high position in the household, whereby they were not only able to supervise compliance with extant rules in the matter of access but were in a position as well to manipulate or go around them.²² In this way some among them were assured of a right to, or even a monopoly on, access to the prince. Ronald G. Asch has pointed out that this special status not infrequently went hand in hand with a special emotional relationship between the prince and the individual in question.²³

²⁰ Weiser (2003) 13.

²¹ See Hengerer (2004; 2016).

²² See, for example, Spangler (2016) and Duindam (2003) 90-110.

²³ Asch (2016).

Without a doubt, quite a lot of family members, confessors, advisors, teachers and lovers of European princes readily made use of this privileged bond in order to acquire an influential position. Asch argues, on top of that, that this right to access sometimes was transferred from generation to generation, whereby in some cases it became an exclusive privilege that was reserved for certain families. In these kinds of circumstances, the *politics of access* was strongly interwoven with the *politics of intimacy*. In that sense the striking presence of favourites at European courts in the sixteenth and seventeenth century is characteristic for the strong impact that access could have upon early modern political life.²⁴ Some princes could deal with this phenomenon better than others. For example, princes still in their minority could be quite susceptible to the influence of third parties. The fierce contemporaneous criticism of these individuals demonstrates that a visibly unequal distribution of the right to access could also bring with it major political unrest.²⁵

4 *Visualising Access*

How was access visualised? Various studies show that quite a lot of traditional acts and customs that were in vogue at the early modern court can in fact be seen as expressions of the interaction between looking for rapprochement, on the one hand, and maintaining distance, on the other hand. The representation of the process of access by means of rituals seems to be a constant that was present at all princely courts to a greater or lesser degree. The well-devised court ceremonial that was in fashion at all European princely courts, and which generally integrated detailed rules of access, can be viewed in this light as the example *par excellence*. Yet in the visual and material culture of the early modern court, too, we often find an externalisation of the process of access. That which most leaps to the eye, naturally, is the architecture of the princely residence itself, where walls and gates held back undesired intruders, and where antechambers and *enfilades* provided for the regulation of the flow of desired visitors. Even the decoration and the specific iconography of the residence contributed to the representation of access. Paintings, tapestries, and other forms of visual art frequently displayed scenes in which the interaction between the prince and the outside world take centre stage. The cycle of frescos in the so-called *Camera Picta* in the Castello San Giorgio in Mantua provides a nice example of this and can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of the accessibility of the duke of Mantua and of his willingness to communicate with his subjects.²⁶ Access was further made visual by means of other cultural

24 For general studies on favourites, see Elliott and Brockliss (1999); Kaiser and Pečar (2003); Hirschbiegel and Paravicini (2004).

25 See, for example, Williams (2006); Persson (2016).

26 Antenhofer (2016).

FIGURE 6.2

Charles-Alexandre of Croÿ (1581-1624), Marquis of Havré and Duke of Croÿ, was one of the *gentilhommes de la Cámara* [Gentlemen of the Bedchamber] of Archduke Albert of Austria (r. 1598-1621), sovereign ruler of the Habsburg Netherlands in the early seventeenth century. The key on the Marquis' tunic is the symbol of his office and represents his privileged access to the personal quarters of the Archduke. Source: Flemish School, 17th century (c.1610), oil on canvas: 78 × 43 5/8 inches, 195 × 109 cm. The Weiss Gallery, London [accessed online 28.02.2019: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles-Alexandre_de_Cro%C3%BF_Marquis_d%27Havr%C3%A9_and_Duc_de_Cro%C3%BF..jpg>]

artefacts. During the festivities surrounding princely births luxury goods, relics, and decorative partitions were always employed to accent the elevated status of the prince and the elites.²⁷ At the same time these visual markers also made clear who belonged to the immediate circle of the prince. Another example is the famous golden or iron key, so prominently present in portraits of leading courtiers, which gradually evolved from an actually functioning instrument into a decorative object that possessed in the first instance a symbolic function (see Figure 6.2). Yet in the decorative treatment of uniforms, door-knobs, banquettes, and weapons as well as of other rather ordinary objects or

²⁷ Thiry (2016).

those used every day, references to the process of access might, or might not, be hidden.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated that our approach may further the research into premodern power relations in two ways. First, it mitigates the need for a broad, systematic analysis of access by studying and – even more important – problematising the concept from diverse perspectives. Secondly, it demonstrates that access is in the first place a process of negotiation, which was presented and visualised in varied ways, and which in this light constituted an important component of the political culture of the early modern court. In this sense the study of the culture of access allows us to better comprehend early modern politics itself.

We are very much aware of the fact that a number of important topics, strongly related to the broader phenomenon of “access,” could be added to the list of repertoires. One might, for example, consider correspondence or petitions as “alternative” forms of access that deserve to be studied in their own right. Yet, we do not intend to offer an exhaustive survey of all possible angles with regard to the role of access. Our contribution aims to juxtapose a number of extant and new lines of research that jointly expose the multiform nature of the phenomenon. Neither does this chapter intend to suggest an all-encompassing definition, nor to offer a comparative analysis. By bringing together a number of perspectives on the culture of access in diverse courts and time periods, it wants to lay bare differences and similarities and to spotlight recurrent patterns and topics. In this way it aims to generate debate about the importance of access for our knowledge of the world of the late medieval and early modern court. There is still much that we do not know. Yet this is also what makes our search for a key to better understanding this centre of power so captivating.

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