CHAPTER ONE
HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

Foundations

The initial phase of academic history in the Northern Netherlands displays a remarkable pattern: in less than three quarters of a century the number of institutes of higher education in this region rose from nought to eleven. Between 1575 and 1648 no fewer than five universities and six so-called ‘illustrious schools’ or athenaeums—academic schools without the right to grant degrees—were established. Two of the five universities began as illustrious schools.

This mushrooming of academies is closely connected to the region’s political history. When the Dutch Revolt occurred, from the iconoclastic fury of 1566 to the beheading of Egmond and Van Horne two years later, the nearest university, Louvain, suddenly seemed very remote: moreover, it remained staunchly Catholic. These two obstacles correspond to two reasons given for the founding of academic schools, reasons reflected in the common characterisation of such a school as a ‘nursery for state and church’: an institution for the education of the governing élite as well as the ministers of the Reformed church.¹

Long before it was clear that the rebel provinces would form an autonomous republic, the first university was established at Leiden in 1575. Subsequent institutions followed in quick succession: Franeker University (1585), Harderwijk Athenaeum (1600), later a university in 1648, and Groningen University (1614). The Deventer Athenaeum was inaugurated in 1630, after more than thirty years of preparation, and it was followed by the Amsterdam Athenaeum two years later. In 1634 Utrecht received its own illustrious school, elevated to university status after only two years, when ’s-Hertogenbosch and Dordrecht in turn made their Latin schools into Athenaeums.² Breda created its

² Vossius to M. Casaubon, dd. 01 04 1636 (Epp. Col. 1, no. 279).
(short-lived) illustrious school in 1646. One might also mention the unsuccessful attempts by Middelburg to set up an illustrious academy in 1592, 1611/1614 and 1648/1650. Furthermore, the Remonstrant Seminary in Amsterdam opened its doors in 1634. Later in the century arrived the short-lived and never-recognised university of Nijmegen (1656), originating in an illustrious school founded a year previously, but ultimately dwindling until its closure in the 1670s. In Zutphen an illustrious school was founded in 1686 by providing an extra year of study for those graduating from the Latin school. Finally, Rotterdam and Maastricht at different times appointed professors, but these failed to organise themselves into regular academic schools.

The initiative to create these institutes of higher education came from different authorities: usually municipal or provincial, but in the case of Harderwijk it was that of the local district government at Gelre. The church too played a significant role, at the level of the city, the clasis (regional church body), the provincial or even the national synod. In order to better understand why the Amsterdam Athenaeum was created, it will be worth examining the reasons for the establishment of other universities and illustrious schools. In addition to the professional benefits to church and state, such institutions lent prestige and wealth to their home city, and aided the finances and social anxieties of local parents. Within this broad spectrum are many variations in emphasis, depending on regional, temporal and ideological differences of the cities involved.

A nursery for the state

In 1575 the province of Holland drew up the foundation charter of Leiden University in the name of Philip II; however, after he had been abjured as Holland’s legal sovereign, each provincial state considered itself the acting sovereign power, and so vested with the authority to grant founding privileges. The Dutch provinces were badly in need of

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4 Frijhoff, ‘Zutphen’.
5 For Rotterdam, there has been some debate concerning the year of foundation: 1669 or 1681. In 1709, the town council set up a committe to inveigle ‘whether and how an illustrious school could and should be erected in this city.’ See Wielema, ‘Rotterdam’, 856–857.