CHAPTER ONE

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

The area in the Low Countries that during the Dutch Revolt and the ensuing war with Spain came to constitute the territory of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, otherwise known as the ‘Dutch Republic’, consisted of two parts that differed markedly in physical features. The maritime side, which included Holland, Zeeland, Groningen, Friesland, the western half of Utrecht and the northernmost fringe of Flanders were for the greater part made up of clay soils and peat, interspersed with lakes, rivers and isolated ridges of sand. By the sixteenth century they were largely situated below sea level. They were protected against flooding by a belt of dunes and an extended system of dikes. The landward side of the United Provinces, which included Drenthe, Overijssel, Gelderland, the eastern half of Utrecht as well as large parts of Brabant and some odd strips of land in Limburg, consisted mostly of slightly elevated, sandy grounds which in places even rose to the height of modest hills. Although this inland part of the Republic was not really littered with forests, it was somewhat more wooded than the lands near the sea. The pattern of economic development and population distribution in these two regions since the Late Middle Ages increasingly diverged. The maritime part of the country in many respects began to have more in common with the neighbouring region to the south, Flanders, than with the lands lying to the east of the chain of hills that ran through the province of Utrecht. Yet, the new state that did eventually came into being in the Low Countries at the end of the sixteenth century was not based on a union between the coastal provinces in the North and the South, but on an alliance between the maritime and inland provinces in the North. Physical, economic and demographic features did not tally entirely with political boundaries.

To understand the evolution of technology in the Netherlands between about 1350 and 1800, it is useful to start with a short overview of the main developments and events that shaped the context in which this evolution occurred. The following sections of this chapter will discuss, successively, the nature and background of the increasing divergence between the maritime and inland parts of the northern Low
Countries since the Late Middle Ages, the growth of the Burgundian-Habsburg state which brought nearly the entire territory of the Low Countries under a single sovereign authority and the outbreak of the Revolt, which resulted in the emergence of two separate political entities: the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands.

Growing divergence

Since the late Middle Ages, the economic structure of the two parts of the Northern Netherlands increasingly diverged. While the landward districts remained overwhelmingly agricultural and to some extent even clung to the regime of self-sufficiency, the seaward region developed a more varied economic structure and along with it, a strong orientation to production for the market. The key area on the maritime side, the county of Holland, also stood out by a high level of urbanization at a very early date.

However, initially it was a disparity in degree rather than in kind. Changes that affected the north and west during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were to some extent paralleled, or even foreshadowed, in the southern and eastern parts of the Netherlands. In long-distance trade and shipping Holland and Zeeland were at first outclassed by the cities situated along the great rivers in the landward region, such as Kampen, Zwolle, Deventer and Zutphen in the Yssel valley, Arnhem and Nijmegen along the Rhine and Waal, and Bois-le-Duc, Venlo, Roermond and Maastricht in the valley of the Meuse. These towns served as nodal points in a trading network that included the Baltic, North-Germany, Westphalia and the Rhineland as well as the Low Countries, England and the northwest coast of France. Nearly all of them were at one time or another closely associated with the Hanseatic League. Aside from being market centers and transshipment points, they often also housed native communities of merchants, boatmen, seafarers or fishermen. Kampen, at the mouth of the Yssel, was probably the largest port and seafaring town in the Zuiderzee region in the fourteenth century. By 1420, it boasted a merchant fleet of at least 120 ships.\(^1\) Moreover, some of these towns in the east and south saw their

\(^1\) Jansen, ‘Scheepvaart’, 90.