Friday, 19 September 1572, was a day like any other for Wouter Jacobsz, with some good, and mostly bad news. Yet the proposition that any day could be rated as ‘normal’ in Holland since the outbreak of the Revolt is one Wouter would have angrily rejected. Until the summer of 1572 Wouter Jacobsz had led an uneventful life as prior of a convent of Augustinian canons at Gouda. Yet after his hometown had surrendered to the Orangist rebels in June 1572, he had fled and found asylum in Amsterdam, the only major town in Holland that remained loyal to Church and King during the rebellion of 1572. During his unsolicited exile he kept a diary, in which practically every day from August 1572 to July 1578, he jotted down the facts he observed, the rumours he heard, as well as his private reflections, increasingly gloomy and pessimistic, about the civil war.

On this particular day Wouter admitted he could not well describe the diversity of the tidings (nyemaren) people recounted. The good news was that there had been talk of the Prince of Orange losing five or six thousand men (during the failed relief of Mons in Hainaut, 5–12 September 1572). But was it true? ‘These tidings continued among the common people’, he wrote, ‘yet so far no authentic letter to the Stadholder has confirmed them’. The bad news was that others said that the rebels at Brill, Enkhuizen and Hoorn were fitting out a great fleet of men of war to set upon either the King’s ships or the town of Amsterdam. There were also tidings that the Danish Sound had been closed for (rebel) ships from Waterland in North...
Holland, and that war had broken out between France and England. In the evening, new grief arose from talk that sixteen hundred rebels were pouring into Enkhuizen from Bremen and Hamburg; people also said that no less than six hundred rebels were being lodged at ’s-Gravezande (the site of a monastery related to Wouter’s own) and other villages around Delft. ‘In sum’, Wouter concluded,

it was said that anxiety had overwhelmed the country, forcing everybody to despair were it not for the exhortation of the Lord, saying: ‘and when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet’.²

Historians have investigated the role played by pamphlets, plays, and prints in the shaping of public opinion during the Revolt of the Netherlands.³ Yet it becomes immediately clear, when reading Wouter Jacobsz’s diary, that written information – let alone printed information – played only a limited role in the daily provision of information for the inhabitants of the Low Countries during the Revolt. This chapter explores the theme of ‘rumour’ in three big cities, Antwerp, Ghent and Amsterdam, in the western commercial and urbanized ‘core-provinces’ during the first dozen years of the Revolt. The main sources, partly overlapping in time, are Wouter Jacobsz’s diary (Amsterdam 1572–78) and two of the greatest chronicles of the Revolt, those by Godevaert van Haecht (Antwerp 1565–74) and Marcus van Vaernewijck (Ghent 1566–68).⁴

All three texts abound with references to rumour as a key source of information. Early modern chroniclers, like modern professional historians, were highly sensitive to the sources of their information. A small scrap of paper, preserved by chance in the manuscript of Godevaert van Haecht’s chronicle in the Antwerp archives, sheds light on how van Haecht gathered and recorded news items:

² Mark 13, 7; cf. Matthew 24, 6; Wouter Jacobsz, Dagboek, 18.
⁴ Marcus van Vaernewijck, Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566–1568, ed. F. Vanderhaegen, 5 vols. (Ghent, 1872–81); Godevaert van Haecht, De Kroniek van Godevaert van Haecht over de troebelen van 1565 tot 1574 te Antwerpen en elders, ed. R. van Roosbroeck, 2 vols. (Antwerp, 1930).