OF LIBERTY AND THE UPSTALSBOOM:
URBAN-RURAL ALLIANCES AND SYMBOLS
OF FREEDOM IN EARLY MODERN EAST FRISIA

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Nu hebben wy ’t alles naar onzen zin, wy heerschen zelve over ons.
(“Now everything is as we desire it [and] we govern ourselves”)

Wat regeering is dat? Het canaille heerscht over ons.
(“What sort of government is that? The rabble rule over us”)

With these remarks, two eighteenth-century townsmen circumscribed the possibilities as well as the hazards of cooperating with rural folk in defense of collective liberties. As their Platt suggests, both statements were recorded in East Frisia—in the port city of Emden, to be precise, in February and March of 1727 respectively. Both were uttered by “ring-leaders” in an armed rebellion against the Prince of East Frisia, Georg Albrecht, who in the years since the disastrous Christmas Flood of 1717 had been trying to recover control over fiscal administration from the territorial Estates. The first observation—attributed to Johann Spree, a member of Emden’s city council—expressed a patrician’s optimism on the eve of a military campaign against the prince and his hopes for the political transformation that victory would bring. The rural population had already been mobilized for the effort and, according to Spree, it

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1 Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv Aurich (hereafter cited as StAA) Rep. 4 CIII b 32, “Extract uit een brief van Emden,” 18 February 1727; and ibid., “Extract uit een brief van Emden,” 7 March 1727. Both statements were denounced to princely authorities and preserved in a compilation of treasonous utterances to be used, presumably, for prosecuting “ringleaders.” My thanks go to Hilko Holthuis for his help with translating East Frisian Platt into English.

remained only to assemble sufficient money and matériel. The second, darker perception was attributed to another Emden patrician, Leo van Wingene, who feared that by mobilizing the rural population, the Estates had opened a Pandora’s box of social grievances. Van Wingene added that a noble had already placed himself at the head of these forces and was beginning to act very much like a “new Count” (nieuwe Graff). What would happen if rural folk turned against Emden? Could a charismatic leader mold rural grievances into a force potent enough to challenge the territorial diet? “What will become of us then?”

Anyone familiar with Tom Brady’s work will recognize in these statements the contours of an earlier dilemma. At the close of the fifteenth century, south German cities faced a similar choice between two means of preserving urban liberty. On the one hand, they could “turn Swiss” by federating with rural communes, perhaps even by joining the Swiss Confederation formally. Or they could try to preserve their autonomy the “Austrian way,” by allying with Habsburg imperial power against the mighty princes. Ultimately, the merchants and rentiers who dominated most south German cities cast their lot with the Empire and turned their backs on the villages—not least, Brady argues, because they could not shake their qualms over “turning Swiss in the sense of ordinary folk wanting to be their own lords.” The social, economic, and cultural forces that were pushing south German cities toward oligarchy also moved them to seek friends in high places, not low. But whatever its outcome, their decision would hinge on a strategic calculation of the risks posed by making common cause with rural people—the very dilemma that distinguished Spree’s confidence from van Wingene’s gloom.

In the final decades of the sixteenth century, Emden’s ruling elites chose a very different path. Rather than abandon rural communes to the prince’s mercies, the patricians allied themselves—hesitantly at first, then eagerly—with independent farmers in the surrounding countryside. In part, this was for want of better alternatives: no other town in East Frisia came close to Emden in wealth and population. Still, its collaboration with rural communes produced one of the most potent

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3 “Hae wil het noch met ons gaan?”; StAA Rep. 4 CIII b 32, “Extract uit een brief van Emden,” 7 March 1727.
5 Brady, Turning Swiss, 229.