INTRODUCTION
“BOUNDARIES: REAL AND IMAGINED”
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Where does the ocean end and the sky begin? Leonardo da Vinci answered this question by postulating the existence of a ‘common boundary’ between the two. Such speculation is at the heart of the question of how a boundary is defined, or, more precisely, how the existence of a boundary is defined.1 Traditionally, the term boundary applies to the demarcation between a physical place and another physical place, most commonly associated with lines on a map, and usually used synonymously with the term border. As the essays in this volume show, however, a boundary can also function in a more broadly conceptual manner. A boundary becomes not an “imaginary line” but a tool for thinking about how to separate any two elements, whether ideas, events, etc., into categories by which they become comprehensible and distinct.2 It is the task of the scholar not simply to discern the boundaries, but, and perhaps more importantly, to understand the process of delination, and its consequences. With its maverick history and grass-root political traditions, the Netherlands provides an auspicious setting to examine the historical function of boundaries both real and imagined.

I. Real

Da Vinci’s question about the earth and the sky can be answered in many ways. One school of thought posits that a boundary must exist between them, as we can clearly see that they are distinct entities. The Netherlands’ best known boundary feature is its three-dimensionality,

whether it be the literal construction of its physical identity by means of land reclamation from the sea, or that it was the first country to declare its air space off limits in wartime (as Maartje Abbenhuis details in her contribution to the volume). In a country where the historical boundary between land, water and air is, at best, indistinct, the answer to da Vinci’s question is not self-evident.

Legal boundaries became important when mankind ceased to be nomadic. For most of human existence, the boundary was meaningless because the value of land lay in the wildlife and edible plants that it contained, and once these were consumed the land no longer had value. Grazing only slowly changed this pattern as the areas over which animals might graze—particularly in semi-arid regions—were so large as to render the creation of policeable boundaries impossible. Once people settled, however, and land acquired inherent value, boundaries became mandatory as a means to avoid conflict and to establish political and economic control. As Benjamin Schmidt says in this volume, “boundary-making, even if rhetorical, implies agenda-setting prerogatives…[it is] a process of strategic representation that, broadly speaking, relates directly to issues of political and economic hegemony.”

Delineating physical boundaries was never an easy task. Where peoples lived continuously over long periods of time, memory might be relied upon to a degree, but it was fallible. Surveying systems were developed to make precise measurements possible, but even these relied on agreed-upon markers—and war and natural disasters might sweep these away, along with the records of individual land ownership. Sometimes nations have clear physical boundaries which they agree to—coastlines, rivers, or mountain chains (the Pyrenees between Spain and France being one of the best examples), but these are exceptions. It certainly was not the case in the Low Countries.

It is an interesting political and cultural question exactly when borders really started to matter. While the water and the sky are eternal, coun-

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