MYTH, HISTORY, AND IMAGE IN THE LOW COUNTRIES
IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY*

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[... ] we understand our special calling: This
great Republic will lead the cause of freedom.¹

It is obvious that not every country in the world endorses this statement by President George W. Bush. Overall, there is usually some discrepancy between the self-image of a country's inhabitants and the image outsiders have of that same country, or between internal and external perception. Whether it is a country, a town, or a group; all operate from a certain self-image, which often is based on myths² and stereotypes. In turn the manner in which these myths and stereotypes are used is influenced by the interaction with other people. To a large extent, this interplay assists in determining the innate identity of a people or nation.³

These days, it seems as if country and citizens, image and self-image, are identical. For example, the Dutch like to think that they are the

¹ This article was translated by Transatlantic Translations.
² Myths are not deliberately fictitious, but they do give an imaginative reworking of the past to guide contemporary moral or political conduct. See the excellent article by L. Cruz and W. Frijhoff, "Introduction: Myth in History; History in Myth" in this volume.
tolerant, hard-working, and honest nation others believe it to be, but is the outsider’s view of the Netherlands the same as the Dutchman’s image of his own country? Within the boundaries of the present-day Netherlands, the inhabitants of the different provinces have different images of themselves. People from the southern regions see themselves as more affectionate and friendly than the ‘arrogant’ inhabitants of the western provinces. But within a province, each town has its own self-image which is different from that of other towns. Thus, each identity is an imagined community of a group of people who think they belong to each other because of the same language, history, customs, etc. Yet this identity is always a combination of image and self-image, in which myth and reality are mixed.

However, the question is whether identity and the notion of identity are interchangeable. Is identity always imagination, does imagination have a certain relation with reality, or does it have more to do with myth? In any case, identity often determines the way a country or a group acts. But images and self-images are both subject to change and it is up to the historian – who is himself not exempt from this process – to get to the bottom of those identity changes.

If there are so many different images in this day and age, imagine what it must have been like in the days when the ‘Burgundic’ Netherlands were still politically divided. In the first half of the Sixteenth Century there was no such thing as a national character, or rather, the concept of the patria was very elastic. In Kiliaan’s Dictionarium Tetragrammaton (1562), the fatherland is defined as “stede, het dorp,

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6 For the idea of historians as “propagators and consumers of myths, and not just debunkers,” see Cruz and Frijhoff, “Introduction,” 13.
7 The identification with ‘Burgundy’ and ‘Burgundians’ lasted until the seventeenth century, although Charles V already had given up his claim on the duchy of Burgundy after its recovery by the French in 1544: Corps universel diplomatique du droit des gens, ed. J. Dumont, Vol. IV (Amsterdam-The Hague: Gerard Wetstein, 1723), 284. For a general overview of the history of the ‘Netherlands’ in the 15th and 16th centuries, see the articles in Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden, 5 Nieuwe Tijd (Bussum: Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1980), 419–507.