THE EMPEROR'S PRECEDENCE
JACOBUS DE MIDDELBURG AND HIS TREATISE
‘DE PRAECELLENTIA POTESTATIS IMPERATORIE’ (1500)

by

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In his Nijmegen thesis ‘Survey of Dutch Political Publications in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century’ Geurts describes, within the framework of the transitional period between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Jacobus de Middelburg’s work. In contrast to ‘realists’ like Philip of Leyden, Jacobus de Middelburg once more evokes the great medieval vision of one undivided, universal imperium, governed by pope and emperor. His disquisition is called: De Praecellentia Potestatis Imperatorie; the woodcut of the title page shows an emperor, kneeling while he receives from the pope the imperial crown and sword, the insignia of his office. This indicates clearly the author’s aim: he pleads for the emperor’s precedence over all other sovereigns of Christianity; pope and emperor stand like sun and moon in the Christian firmament. The reader who sympathizes with the Caesar is not left uncertain about how he should react. A distichon (by Erasmus?) urges him to receive this booklet favourably, because it protects Caesar, the defender of the Christian world. Although the final folio states that the work was printed in 1502,

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2. The treatise was printed in Antwerp by Dirk Martens van Aalst, About this printer A.F. van Isegem, Biographie de Thierry Martens d’Alost, Malines-Alost 1852, nr. 44. For places where copies may be found see W. Nijhoff and M.E. Kronenberg, Nederlandsche bibliographie van 1500 tot 1540, I, s-Gravenhage 1923, p. 43; see also Aanvullingen, I, p. XXVIII; II, p. XXIV and III-3, p. 88. In the Netherlands there are copies in the Municipal Library of Rotterdam (which was consulted), Royal Library The Hague, University Library Amsterdam (also consulted); in Belgium Museum Plantijn Antwerp, Praemonstr. Abbey Averbode, Library of the diocese of Bruges, Royal Library Brussels two copies (Only one of the two copies of Brussels, Nijhoff-Kronenberg. Aanvullingen, II, p. XXIV, turned out to be there (signature UB 3815)). In 1852 Van Isegem, o.c., pp. 215-216, came across three copies in private collections in Ghent and Alost. The wood-cut, 115 x 110 mm, has been incorporated in W. Nijhoff, L’art typographique dans les Pays-Bas pendant les années 1500 à 1540, II, Den Haag 1926, Text, p. 5-6; Pictures nr. 13. See also E.M.H.W. Cockx-Indesteghe, Jacobus Anthonii Middelburgensis..., in H.D.L. Vervliet, Post-Incunabula and their Publishers in the Low Countries, A Selection based on Wouter Nijhoff’s L’Art typographique’ published in Commemoration of the 125th Anniversary of Martinus Nijhoff on January 1, 1978, The Hague: Boston-London 1978, pp. 180-181, with some manifest errors.
4. C. Reedijk, o.c., p. 300.
it is clear from a letter addressed to Jacobus de Middelburg by Erasmus, that the manuscript was ready in 15015. Moreover, at the end of the treatise there is an epilogue directed to Bishop Henry of Bergen (1480-1502), which is dated October 13th, 1500 in Brussels. So, the small treatise must have been written before this date6. In the letter cited, Erasmus promises the author that he will write an introduction in return for benefactions which he has received. This introductory letter of recommendation precedes the apology. It states that Bishop Henry, a patron and employer of Erasmus, has died7. In addition, an elegy which Erasmus wrote on the bishop's death has been included in the treatise8.

The work was dedicated to this bishop of Cambrai, offspring of the influential De Glimes family from Bergen-op-Zoom. Henry of Bergen was one of the most important councillors of young Philip the Handsome; according to Lalaing he was even cief de son conseil9 and Jacobus de Middelburg was his vicar-general10. In the treatise Erasmus addressed his elegy on the occasion of Bergen's death to Anthony, Henry's brother11.

Before discussing form and contents of this treatise, an attempt will first be made to cast light on the author's personality. Little is known about him. Besides vicar-general of the bishop of Cambrai he also calls himself cantor of Saint-Gudule in Brussels, son of a certain Anthonius and of Zealand-Middelburg extraction. On Walcheren he possessed St. Anne's chapel in the Church of Domburg. Further-

8. De praecellentia, fol. 1 verso: Ad amplissimum patrem Antonium de Berghes, Abbatem divi Bertini. De morte fratris episcopi Cameraeuse Carmen elegiacum Erasmi. Also see C. Reedyk, o.c.c., p. 301. Why Reedyk speaks of an epitaphium and not of a carmen elegiacum, as is stated, is not clear.
9. On the Glimes family, see A. Uyttebrouck, Le gouvernement du duché de Brabant au bas moyen âge (1355-1430), II, p. 691 nr. 106 (Notices biographiques des conselliers): Jean de Glimes, seigneur of Bergen op Zoom (see also nr. 23). There lit. According to C.P.J. Slootmans in the Bibl. Nat. de Belgique Henry became a Knight of the Golden Fleece in 1493. This is incorrect. In 1493 the Order of the Golden Fleece did not hold an assembly; neither is his name listed among the knights in Het Gulden Vlies, vijf eeuwen Kunst en Gescheidenis, catalogue of the exhibition 14th July-30th September 1962 in Bruges, p. 35 etc. During the 14th Chapter of the Order in 's-Hertogenbosch (1481) John III, his brother, was indeed knighted by Maximilian (nr. 94). There is a double portrait of Bishop Henry and Sir John van Bergen (Municipality of Bergen op Zoom), see Erasmus en zijn tijd, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen Rotterdam, exhibition catalogue 3rd October-23rd November 1969, nr. 40. Further about Henry of Bergen the Dict. de biogr. franc. 6 (1954) col. 6-7; Dict. d'hist. et de géogr. eccl. 8(1935) col. 464-466; Dupont, Histoire de Cambrai 2, 5e partie; the catalogue Erasmus en zijn tijd, 11: Roeping (no pagination!) and in the various biographies of Erasmus. About Henry as chef de conseil: A. Lalaing, Voyage de Philippe le Beau en Espagne en 1502, taken up in M. Gachard, Collection des voyages des Souverains des Pays Bas, I, Bruxelles 1895, p. 190.
10. Thus De praecellentia, fol. 2 and the opening lines of both letters from Erasmus, ante, notes 5 and 7.
11. About him, J.C. Margolin, Guerre et Paix dans la pensée d'Erasme, Introduction, choix de textes, commentaires et notes, Paris 1973, pp. 104-110. Also acts as councillor to Philip of Hapsburg. In July 1493 Anthony was installed as abbot by his brother Henry; he died in 1532.