

Pre-Reformation Europe: 1450-1500

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Introduction

This is the first in a series of articles describing Europe during the rise of the anabaptist movement, through the lives of people whom I can identify as ancestral members of my family tree. The Reformation and the emergence of anabaptist theology led to the establishment of a unique Netherlandic Mennonite ethnological group. Historians often portray the story of these people in religious terms. In contrast, this series of articles will present a narrative dealing with the more secular political, economic, and social dimensions of this group.

Amsterdam

My most distant Netherlandic ancestor was a man named Claes who may have been an armorer living in Amsterdam. We can infer information about Claes from documentation about his son, Jacob Claesz. de Harnasveger. The use of the patronymic "Claes" identifies the name of Jacob's father. Jacob was born around 1480 or slightly later, suggesting Claes was born around 1460. Jacob was a *harnasveger*, or armorer, living in Amsterdam in the early 16th century. It follows that Claes might also have been an armorer living in Amsterdam.

As a child Claes would have possessed a narrow view of world geography. People of his era were familiar with the Christianized regions of western and eastern Europe. They were also aware of the Holy Land, the birthplace of their religion and the location of past Crusades. Adventurers such as Marco Polo had traveled to eastern lands and returned to the European world with stories of his explorations. However, little was known of the vast extent of Asia or the continent east of the Rus people on the Dnieper River, and even less was known about central and southern Africa. The existence of the western hemisphere was unknown. Only a small contingent of Viking explorers had ever reached the northern shore of modern Newfoundland. Finding the environment inhospitable they abandoned their settlement. News of the discovery never reached the rest of Europe.

By the turn of the century Claes and his contemporaries had acquired a much broader geographic horizon, and the European understanding of the world had expanded dramatically. By the 1480s Portuguese and Spanish explorers had scouted the coastal regions of the African continent, illuminating the potential extent of the known world. Within another two decades European explorers had reached the Indian subcontinent, the western islands later called the Caribbean Islands, and finally the mainland continents of the western hemisphere, later designated North and South America.

Claes knew Amsterdam as a flourishing, wealthy economic center. The economic ascendancy of Amsterdam began in the middle of the 14th century when the city established relations with the Hanseatic League, initially exporting cheese and other dairy products in exchange for imports of grain and timber. Trade accelerated with exports of herring, making Amsterdam wealthy.

During Claes' lifetime Amsterdam experienced political turmoil. Burgundian Dukes had ruled the city, part of the Burgundian Netherlands, for over a century, as independent vassals of the Kingdom of France. Following the death, without male heirs, of the last Burgundian Duke in 1477, possession of the Duke's territories, including the Burgundian Netherlands, passed to his daughter. The King of France viewed this political circumstance, particularly the perceived weakness of a female heir, as an opportunity to expand his realm. He sought to gain control of Burgundian territory, with partial success. France was able to wrest away control of outlying parts of the so-called Burgundian inheritance, but the Duchess was able to preserve the core Netherlandic region. Netherlandic independence from France was fatefully, and finally, ensured in 1482 when the Duchess died in a hunting accident (her horse tripped, threw her, and then fell on her, breaking her back). Possession of the Burgundian Netherlands passed, through her husband, to the Habsburg Empire. Had the Duchess not fallen from her horse that day in 1482, Mennonite history might have played out much differently.

Concurrently with the international struggle for Netherlandic independence, the latter decades of the 15th century witnessed the culmination of a 150 year long internal struggle for control of the County of Holland, in which Amsterdam was located. The Hook and Cod Wars pitted wealthy nobles (the Hooks) against the progressive cities (the Cods) for control of the County and the wealth generated by the cities. In 1490 the Cod faction finally prevailed, ending the conflict, and securing the political and economic primacy of the major cities in the County. This resolution was a major milestone in the ascendancy of commerce and trade over noble fiefdoms in Holland, and Amsterdam at its center.

In 1466, around the same time that Claes was born, Desiderius Erasmus, priest, scholar and author, was born in Rotterdam. Erasmus came into prominence at the turn of the century, publishing his views about Catholic Church reform in 1501. Erasmus' view was that the clergy required reform to eliminate corruption, and the church needed to repudiate ceremony, ritual, and superstition, anchoring church teaching more firmly in scripture rather than tradition. His work predated Martin Luther's revolution by two decades.

Amsterdam Summary

Claes lived in an era when the view of the world was expanding, in a region where wealth was increasing through international trade. Amsterdam became an important center for trade and commercial activity. The major cities in the region, progressive engines of economic prosperity, began acquiring political authority that had once rested with the old nobility. A prominent merchant class, with a talent for profitable enterprise, had gained an important foothold. The

city had secured political independence from France but now the Habsburg Empire loomed as the ruling power. Scholars were challenging religious conventions, presaging events that would shape history profoundly. In summary, a social transformation was underway, characterized by challenges to traditional authority, critical evaluation of the Church, the emergence of commercial power supplanting traditional political control of the economy, and a more cosmopolitan view of the world and its possibilities.

Konigsberg-Kneiphof

Two other ancestors, Mathaus Maraun and his future wife Katharina Marquard, were born around 1470, about the same time as Claes, though they lived in Kneiphof, 1200 km to the east of Amsterdam.

Kneiphof, granted its town charter in 1327, was one of three towns that comprised the city of Konigsberg. Konigsberg joined the Hanseatic League thirteen years later and rapidly became a powerful commercial center on the Baltic Sea, shipping grain and timber from eastern Europe to Danzig for trade. A vassal city of the Order of the Teutonic Knights since the mid-thirteenth century, Konigsberg served as the residence of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order as well as the seat of the Catholic Bishop in the region. Konigsberg enjoyed stability and power. It became a center of higher learning, afforded by the wealth of the community.

Konigsberg made an opportunistic move toward independence at the outbreak of the Thirteen Years War in the middle of the fifteenth century. Coveting the same autonomous political status as the commercially formidable city of Danzig, Konigsberg sided with the Kingdom of Poland in the Kingdom's struggle against the Teutonic Knights for control of the region held by the Knights. The Polish Crown won the war, the State of the Teutonic Knights becoming an independent fief of the Crown. Nevertheless, Konigsberg failed in its pursuit of independence and remained under the control of the Knights. No doubt owing to the commercial value of Konigsberg, the Teutonic Knights granted amnesty to the city and returned all its commercial rights after the war.

Following the Thirteen Years War Konigsberg quickly returned to business as usual, thriving as a merchant trading powerhouse. It was during the stable years after the war that Mathaus Maraun was born. He established himself as an important merchant in Kneiphof, with business interests in Danzig, Elbing, and resource rich territories to the east of Konigsberg.

We see evidence of Maraun's importance as a leader of the merchant community in the records of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights. There are instances of correspondence between Maraun and the governmental administration on matters of business and political matters.

Konigsberg-Kneiphof Summary

Mathaus and Katharina were fortunate to live in Konigsberg during a period of great wealth and enlightenment. The city was a wealthy trading center that enjoyed political and commercial stability from the thirteenth century with only a brief period of upheaval during the Thirteen Years War. After the War, stability and prosperity returned. Konigsberg was the seat of commercial, political, and religious power in the region. The city possessed a highly valued merchant class, an important institution of higher education, and unfettered opportunity for the future.