Traditionally, in Dutch historiography great emphasis has been placed on the “civil” character of the Netherlands, with their growth and development as a flourishing trading nation in the 17th century. For that reason, one sometimes forgets that for a long time the Dutch territories belonged to the German Empire and therefore they also have a continental and aristocratic feudal past. The “chivalrous” relationship between the Netherlands and Latvia, or Livonia as it was known in the Middle Ages, described below, often constitutes a relatively unknown chapter of that history.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, the diocese of Utrecht, which covered almost two thirds of the current Dutch territory, featured amongst the most important spiritual principalities of the Empire. This position of power meant that the bishop and his vassals often had to accompany the German Emperor on Crusades. This in turn implied that they were supporting the knightly orders in their territory with considerable donations. This enabled the Teutonic Order to establish a large House in the city of Utrecht and also numerous smaller Houses spread over the entire diocese. From these Houses they tried to supply their fortresses and convents in the Holy Land and elsewhere, both with money and personnel. The German House in Utrecht was to become the centre of its own bailiwick or administrative district: one of the twelve bailiwicks that were established in the German Empire outside the Order’s states of Prussia and Livonia.

The Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Order

In the late Middle Ages, Livonia, in the broad sense, more or less covered the territory of the actual states of Latvia and Estonia. It comprised of five spiritual territories, the Teutonic Order being the largest and most powerful. However, unlike the situation in Prussia, the Order never succeeded in fully imposing its will upon the other territories (the archbishopric of Riga and the dioceses of Dorpat (Tartu), Ösel-Wiek and Courland). In addition to that, the Order had to reckon with the powerful Hanseatic towns of Riga and Reval (Tallinn) which were dominated by German merchants.

The Teutonic Order, which had been founded near Acre in Palestine in 1190 with the purpose of defending Christianity and helping to retake the Holy Sepulchre, was
originally not involved in the Christianisation of Livonia. Although the Order had been active in Prussia since the early 1230’s, they only came to power in Latvia when the Sword Brethren suffered a crushing defeat there in 1236. When their assistance was called upon, the Teutonic Order incorporated the remainder of the Sword Brethren. They then tried to establish their own state. The centre of their domain was situated in Livonia. It stretched out along the river Dune (Daugava) towards the East and along the Livonian river Aa towards the North, whilst in the West a considerable area was also acquired in Courland. The entire state was protected and governed by more than 30 castles. Most of these were manned by communities of Knight Brethren. The castles and convents were each ruled by a commander who was assisted by brethren occupying lower positions. Estonia was only acquired in 1347 when it was purchased from the Danish King; there the Order had to tolerate the influence of a powerful knighthood of secular vassals.

The Master of Livonia was responsible for the government of the Order’s state. At first, the Master resided in Riga and later in the castle of Wenden (Cēsis), about 90 km to the North East of Riga. He was ranked one step below the Grand Master who, until the fall of Acre (1291), had resided in the Holy Land and had been residing in the Marienburg since 1309. Up until the 15th century, the Livonian Master was appointed by the Grand Master. At first the Grand Master had complete freedom of choice, but later his rights were reduced to a choice between two candidates who had been put forward by the Livonian Brethren themselves. After 1438, he was only authorized to confirm the appointment of the Master elected by the Livonian Brethren. This demonstrates the increasing autonomy of the Livonian branch of the Order. Up until 1400 there had been some exchanges of brethren between Prussia and Livonia,
whereas after that date this hardly ever happened again. In fact, since that time the Master of Livonia organised the recruitment and promotion for his own Order branch totally independently. He reigned with the assistance of the Land Marshal and the five most important commanders (of Jerwen, Reval, Fellin, Goldingen and Marienburg).

Brethren who went from the German Empire to Livonia — no candidates were accepted from Latvia and Estonia — usually stayed there for the rest of their lives. They were regularly involved in military campaigns. Until around 1400 they often marched against the heathen Lithuanians. After that they fought the Greek Orthodox Russians because they were considered to be schismatic. Those brethren who possessed skills and had good connections within the Order could make a career as administrator, firstly in a House function and later on as a commander. In the latter capacity they ruled over an entire territory, administered justice, levied tithes and were in command of the local vassals and farmers on behalf of the Order.

One should not overestimate the number of Livonian knights in the Teutonic Order. Before the 14th century their number is thought to have been around 400. In the first half of the 15th century, that number gradually decreased because, according to a detailed inspection report, the total numbers amounted to 198 knight brethren and 66 priests in 1451. The decrease, which also manifested itself in the much larger Order Branch in Prussia, is thought to have been caused by the higher demands made by the knight brethren as to their standard of living. The Teutonic Order had gradually changed from a “Shield of Christianity” to a “Spital des armen Deutschen Adels” (Hospital for the poor German nobility). In other words: it had become a care institute providing shelter for the second-born sons of the lower aristocracy.
A large proportion of Dutch Brethren in the first half of the 15th century

Of the 773 brethren whose family and place of origin could be traced, 77 in total were of Dutch birth. That is 11%, quite a substantial proportion, considering the vast extent of the German Empire as a potential recruitment area. This puts the Low Countries in third place, after Westphalia (56%) and the Rhineland (19%). Of these 77 Dutch brethren, 10 came from Brabant, Limburg. The others all came from Utrecht, Overijssel and Guelders. Consequently, the recruits for the Livonian Branch of the Order tended to come from aristocratic families living in the Eastern part of the Netherlands. This does not entirely coincide with the spreading of the branches of the Teutonic Order over the diocese of Utrecht as the Teutonic Order’s Houses were to a large extent located in the West and the North West, more specifically in Zeeland, Holland and Frisia. It seems that the recruitment groups for Livonia and the bailiwick of Utrecht were not entirely linked, at least in the later years when only few people were sent back and forth between Utrecht and Livonia. One must also bear in mind that the brethren for Livonia and Prussia were recruited at the age of fifteen and that, after having been provided with a sum of money, a horse and armour, they were sent to the East. The young men who were sent there were supposed to never return to cause problems to their families regarding the division of inheritances.

It is remarkable that from the period before 1400 only the names of three Dutch Livonian knight brethren have been passed down through the ages. It is no coincidence that these were men who had reached high positions in the hierarchy. One of them was Johan van Hoenhorst, who was commander (Vogt) of Jerwen in 1322 and was nominated for the position of Master of Livonia in that same year. However, he did not receive the appointment and returned to Utrecht where he subsequently ruled the bailiwick as Master of the Netherlands until 1334. Another was Gerrit Bake, from the region of Zutphen, who commanded the Order Castle in Wenden (Cēsis) from 1385 until 1386. We may assume that men like Hoenhorst and Bake attempted to persuade as many cousins as possible into a career in Livonia.

The fact that we only have a small number of names from the 14th century indicates that the proportion of Dutch brethren must have been very modest at that time. Also before 1400, most of the Livonian brethren came from Westphalia (40%) and the Rhineland (28%). However, in the first half of the 15th century the participation from the Low Countries must have increased enormously, because the already mentioned 1451 inspection report lists no less than 31 Dutch names. That is almost 16%! Because they came from the Lower Rhineland, the Dutch brethren were counted amongst the Rhinelanders within the Order, even though many of them were born in Twente and Bentheim which bordered Westphalia.

Shortly after 1451, the recruitment of Livonian brethren within the Utrecht circuit came to an end. Of all the men listed in 1451 only one, Willem van Hinderstein from Langbroek near the city of Utrecht, would serve as commander. In 1457, he was commander of the relatively small Talkhof. In 1459, he was back in the bailiwick of Utrecht where he assumed the function of commander of Maasland until his death in 1464. After Van Hinderstein only Land Marshall Jasper van Munster from Loppersum near Groningen, managed to obtain a prominent position in the Livonian branch of the Order, presumably thanks to a Westphalian family connection. Van Munster became a Russian prisoner of war in mid 1550’s. After him hardly any brother from the Netherlands succeeded in making a career in Livonia.
A great deal has been learned about the Dutch expeditionary knights of the Teutonic Order in Livonia thanks to the extensive research carried out by a team of scientists into the regional and social origins of the Livonian Brethren in the years 1986–1993. This research has resulted in a comprehensive catalogue with descriptions of more than 1000 Brethren. For the study, as many sources as possible were used, both from Livonia and Prussia and from the various recruitment areas in the German Empire. Because only very little information was found for the 13th and 14th centuries it was not possible to make any firm statements for that period. This exposé deals with the origins and careers of the brethren who were recruited for Livonia from the Dutch territories. The two questions that arise are: Why were 1/6 of the knight brethren in the Livonian convents of Dutch origin in the middle of the 15th century? And: Why was that number reduced to almost zero by the time that Gotthard Kettler, the last Master of Livonia, secularised the Livonian Branch of the Order in 1562 and nominated himself Duke of Courland?

Recruitment campaigns in 1411 and 1434–1435

The letter written by Land Commander Sweder Cobbing in 1422, provides us with a good picture of the actual recruitment practices. In that letter he justifies the costs he incurred in 1411 as the — then still — Land Commander of Westphalia, for recruiting knight brethren from Utrecht and sending them to Livonia. This undertaking had been motivated by a request from the Master of Livonia, Conrad Vietinghoff from Westphalia, who had asked him to recruit new brethren in his area and send them to Livonia via Lübeck. It cannot be a coincidence that this request was made shortly after the Order lost the battle near Tannenberg in Prussia (21st October, 1410). True, no Livonian brethren had been killed during that battle because the Master of Livonia had not been able to reach the battlefield in time. But the Livonian troops were later involved in the retaking of Prussia and many brethren were presumably assigned to reinforce the Prussian ranks. It had therefore become necessary to recruit more brethren. Although Cobbing was Land Commander of Westphalia at that time, he had many interests in Utrecht because he was born in Twente, and he also had been
commander of Ootmarsum for a long time. And so he had travelled to Utrecht to recruit brethren. He had managed to kindle the interest of 33 men in total, from whom he also collected large entrance fees.

A similar campaign must have been conducted in the years 1434—1435. The accounts of the Utrecht Land Commander Herman van Keppel show expenses made to that effect in Arnhem, Doesburg and Deventer "... doe ic die heren kledie die ic vort-sande myt den gueden luden in Lyefflante" (... as I clothe these Lords whom I send to

the good people of Livonia). In this case, it concerned a Utrecht campaign and not a Westphalian one. It is quite obvious that the action was undertaken because of the losses suffered by the Livonian branch of the Order in 1433 as a result of a major plague epidemic. Because of this, the then Master of Livonia, the Dutchman Cisse van den Rutenberg, had been forced to cancel a military expedition into Lithuania. Upon his return, he probably sent a request to his home bailiwick to recruit more new brethren. We may well assume that many of the 31 brethren mentioned in the 1451 report formed part of the group that was sent to Livonia in 1455.

This was the last time such an action was undertaken in Utrecht. In 1454, the Land Commander of Utrecht, Dirk van Enghuizen, had to do his utmost to convince his brother Jan, who had been registered in 1451 as an out of office knight brother in Marienburg, to take his horse, armour and saddle and return to Riga. The reason for Jan's return to Utrecht must be because of the poor promotion chances offered to him in Riga. He had probably hoped to be offered an attractive position in the Utrecht circuit via his brother.
The Dutch Presence in the Teutonic Order II

Utrecht's victories and defeats in the battle for offices between Rhineland and Westphalia

Cisse van den Rutenberg seems to have been the man who managed to send so many Dutchmen to Livonia. He is reputed to be a son of the Salland knight Dirck van den Rutenberg from Zalk situated between Kampen and Zwolle. How he succeeded in reaching the supreme position of Master of Livonia is difficult to explain in a few sentences. He cannot have arrived in Livonia following the 1411 recruitment campaign, because in that case he would not have made it to commander of Mitau by 1413. At that time he belonged to the Rhinlanders who, within the Order, had opposed the Westphalian brethren in the longstanding battle to occupy the important positions and to determine the course of the Livonian Order branch. As far as the latter is concerned, the Westphalia group was inclined to defend the interests of Livonia, by maintaining the peace with Lithuania, for example. The Rhinlanders preferred to follow the Grand Master in Prussia, even when he called for a battle against Lithuania and Poland. Numerically the Westphalian brethren had always dominated, but the Rhinlanders enjoyed the support of the (Rhineland) Grand Master when important positions had to be filled. This could account for the fact that Van den Rutenberg's star slowly began to rise after 1415. He became commander of Marienburg, then in 1423 he moved on to become commander of Reval, and a year later he was elected Master.

As an experienced superior he must have granted favours to some Westphalian brethren, but it is quite obvious that he favoured his

Dutch medieval phantasy miniature of Bellinus, King of the Batavians (Dutch tribe in Roman times), standing near the Roman fort Brittenburg (near modern-day Leyden)
party members and fellow countrymen. It cannot be a coincidence that family members and brethren from his region, such as Matthias van Boningen from the area around Ootmarsum, and Sweder van Reve, were given key positions under his reign. The former was appointed commander of Dobeln (1431) and the latter commander of Goldingen (1432). After the death of Van Rutenberg, Boningen managed to climb the ladder even higher by becoming commander of Wenden.

This situation changed dramatically when on 1st September, 1435, the new (Rhineland) Master of Livonia, Franke Kerskorf, and his army ran into an ambush near the little Swienta (Sventoji) river in Lithuania, where most of the Rhineland superiors were killed. Consequently, the Westphalian party automatically regained control over the Livonian branch of the Order. They seized this opportunity with both hands and in the end the Rhinelander’s chances of occupying any position of importance became very slim. This process is reflected in the career of Matthias van Boningen. In 1436, he was still commander of Jerwen when he was forced to take a step back by being appointed commander of Goldingen. In 1438, when a new (Westphalian) Master was to be elected, he wrote to Grand Master Paul von Rusdorf in Prussia, who was favourably disposed towards him but who was also very weak. He pointed out that if the Westphalian candidate Overberg were to come to power, he would have to leave the country because he might end up in prison if he stayed. It did not come to that. He was, however, forced to relinquish the command of Goldingen and became commander of the less important Rositten. Later he was forced to take another step back and as of 1451 he had to live as an out of office knight brother in Fellin. This was an enormous humiliation for him.

Many other Dutchmen who had reached high positions under Rutenberg suffered the same fate. Having previously been in command of castles, in 1451 they had to accept a life as out of office brethren in one of the large convents. This situation understandably led to escape actions such as those of Jan van Enghuizen and Willem van Hinderstein. This is not to say that some brethren from Guelders and Limburg still did not continue to choose a career in Livonia after the mid 15th century. But just like the other Rhinelander, they had no chance of being appointed to lucrative positions. These positions were reserved for the Westphalian brethren. As of 1440/1450 they dominated the Livonian branch of the Order as they had never done before. It is therefore not surprising that when the Order was secularised in 1562, there were only a few Dutch brethren who made the transition to the position of secular landowners in Livonia. And thus ended the relatively intensive relations between Latvia and the Netherlands via the aristocratic networks on which the Teutonic Order had been founded.