“Vivre Noblement”: Material Culture and Elite Identity in Late Medieval Flanders

Material goods mediate relationships; such is their social utility. People show and advance their status through material display and conspicuous consumption. As Grassby says, material culture sheds light on how people understood themselves. Material culture and the re-organization of cultural space become delicate tools that individuals deliberately and interactively use to develop their cultural identity and social standing. Since material culture is not an independent, stable referent for evaluating cultural history, both material culture and cultural space have to be studied as a multifaceted creation that perpetually communicates with the social environment. The social nature of material culture is evident at both the discursive and material levels. By re-defining or creating space in a dominant manner, individuals encroach on existing physical and social frameworks of culture, replacing them with new cultural categories to focus their identities.1


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Individuals’ identities can be studied through their representations—that is, written evidence about them (chronicles and archival documents) combined with the archaeological artifacts, architectural space, and art history associated with them. Cases in point are Peter Bladelin (c. 1410–1472) and William Hugonet (c. 1420–1477), two late medieval self-made men, who rose from wealthy, though non-noble, families to become high-ranking officials at the Burgundian court, with access to the small inner circle around the Valois dukes of Burgundy. In 1448, Bladelin, having obtained a license from Duke Philip the Good, founded a large new town of 200 hectares and built a castle at Middelburg, near Bruges in the county of Flanders (Figure 1). Bladelin served as an important financial councilor for the duke; after 1452, he bore the title Lord of Middelburg. Following his death, the fief was bought by the powerful William Hugonet, chancelor of Burgundy.

This article examines how these men interacted with their material environment in an attempt to understand their place within the culture of fifteenth-century political elites in Western Europe. This case study of Middelburg shows that “new men” in governmental administrations invested their economic capital in the construction of an elite identity. Through radical transformation of their physical environment and interaction with material culture, these two parvenus created a powerful self-image that stressed their recently gained power and authority. Thus did Bladelin and Hugonet establish material links with the highest noble ranks. They also negotiated their social position by imitating the patterns of display exhibited by the duke and the high-ranking nobles at the court of Burgundy. In this fruitful dialogue between man and material culture, material culture and architectural space were socially shaped, while at the same time material culture and architectural space socially shaped the men themselves.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLANDERS The fifteenth century witnessed increased social mobility among the elite groups in medieval Flanders. The centralizing dynasty of the Valois dukes of Burgundy, Philip the Good (1419–1467) and Charles the Bold (1467–1477), tried to construct a “modern state” by employing the services of the well-trained urban political elites of Flanders. In the later Middle Ages, class bar-
riers between the nobility and the *roturiers* (commoners) began to break down, and a new social group of officials came into prominence. Like other emerging states, the Burgundian state needed specialists in law, administration, and finance. In time, it developed a professionalized bureaucracy, which strengthened its grip on society.  

Eventually, the prince rewarded his loyal servants with money, power, and prestige. As they accumulated wealth, the upper layers of this group of councilors and officers sought to become a new “state nobility.” The process of state formation provided them with forms of “capital”—in the broad sense of “auxiliary means” or “resources,” as defined by Bourdieu—that they could invest to enable their own social and cultural strategies.

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Bourdieu distinguishes different types of capital. Economic capital includes money and forms of direct property; cultural capital covers educational qualifications, tastes, and cultural goods; social capital comprises social relationships and networks; and symbolic capital is the acknowledgement, perception, or recognition of the other types of capital. Thus, in the service of the state, the upper echelon of officers gained money and political influence, while they consolidated their social networks.³

Nobility was a specific form of “symbolic capital.” As manifested in public space, it determined how the public perceived other forms of capital. The highest-ranking officers generally pursued noble status, vivre noblement, not only for themselves but also for their descendants. Imitating the nobility, they tried to construct their families around a patrilineal heritage. For bourgeois upstarts aspiring to a higher social standing, elements of this symbolic capital included lordship over a village or town, the accumulation of landed property, alliances with daughters of uncontested noble families, a noble lifestyle, conspicuous consumption, magnificent urban residences, and rural castles. Mimicry of the splendor and culture of the Burgundian court—including the establishment of religious foundations—was fundamental to this process of upward social mobility. All of these elements of noble symbolic capital involved material components. Attention to material culture can reveal how these officials deployed their capital, as the cases of Bladelin and Hugonet show.⁴

BLADELIN AND HUGONET: BURGHERS IN THE SERVICE OF THE DUKE

Bladelin’s life is reasonably well documented. He descended from a non-noble family in Veurne-Ambacht, a rural district in the western part of the county of Flanders. His father, also named Peter, became a rich burgher in the commercial gateway city of

Bruges and built a castle, called “De Leeste,” near the town. Bladelin the younger began his political career in the service of the city where he was appointed councilor in 1430. Between 1436 and 1440, he was treasurer of Bruges, an office awarded exclusively to rich burghers since it carried a personal financial responsibility. During the 1436 revolt of Bruges against Duke Philip the Good, Bladelin acted as the duke’s agent within the city, trying to find a compromise between the central government and the urban elites, to the detriment of the middle-class rebels. After the revolt, Bladelin collected the fine that the rebellious city owed to the duke. In 1435, he married Margaret van de Vageviere, daughter of a wealthy Bruges family. In 1440, the duke rewarded Bladelin for his services by granting him the office of general receiver of all finances, one of the most important financial posts in the Burgundian state. 5

In 1444, the duke appointed Bladelin treasurer and governor general of Burgundian state finance. Around 1447, he became the treasurer of the illustrious knightly Order of the Golden Fleece, founded by Duke Philip the Good. Financial officers could use the large sums of money in their care for their own personal investment, and Bladelin took full advantage of his opportunity. According to Chastelain, a Burgundian chronicler, Bladelin was “riche de biens de fortune outre mesure” (wealthy beyond measure). In 1446, he also became master of the Burgundian court (maistre d’ostel), making him responsible for the practical organization of the pageantry at the Burgundian court. He probably also operated as an advisor for the renovations of the ducal residence in Bruges from 1446 to 1452. 6


In 1452, as a clever diplomat, he prevented the people of Bruges from joining Ghent in rebellion against the duke, although the Ghentenars took revenge by destroying his countryseat in the village of Wingene. Once again he acted as an intermediary between the ducal court and Bruges. Thanks to this position, and his financial means, he could climb the ladder of the Burgundian state in a spectacular way. He used his different official functions to operate as a power broker between the government and its subjects. In 1464, 1465, 1467, 1468, and 1472, for example, he was one of the ducal officers commissioned to appoint new mayors and aldermen in Bruges. By then, he had acquired a “noble” identity in the city registers of Ghent. Between 1468 and 1470, Bladelin must have been knighted. He died in April 1472. In his will, he presented himself as “knight, lord of Middelburg in Flanders, counselor and master of the court of our lord the Duke of Burgundy, Count of Flanders,” without mention of his bourgeois background or his connections with his hometown of Bruges.\(^7\)

After Bladelin’s death, several noblemen tried to take advantage of his lucrative heritage. To keep up their status, noblemen had to accumulate economic capital—financial and economic profits, yielded by seigniorial incomes, or rewards and gifts, granted by the empowering lord. But Bladelin’s heirs did not succeed in accumulating economic capital; they lost their wealth in a judicial battle over his testament. In 1476, William Hugonet, chancelor of Duke Charles the Bold, bought out the heirs for an enormous sum of money, thereby becoming the new lord of Middelburg.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Some of the material that follows is a summary of Haemers, “Middelburg na Pieter
Like Bladelin, Hugonet descended from a non-noble family, which participated frequently in the city politics of Mâcon, Burgundy. As an intelligent, university-trained jurist, he entered the service of Duke Philip the Good in 1455 and garnered further social recognition in 1467 through his marriage to Louise de Layé, the daughter of a noble family from the Beaujolais. He climbed further up the political hierarchy in the regime of Philip’s successor, Charles the Bold, who, in 1471, knighted him and appointed him to head the ducal administration as chancelor of Burgundy. At the time of his appointment, Hugonet had served Charles the Bold for only six years, but he had become a trusted friend. As chancelor, Hugonet carried out the duke’s autocratic policy, serving as a chief architect of the political ideology of the central state. Charles the Bold systematically rewarded him with gifts, money, and fiefs (he became lord of Sailliant, Espasse, Liz, etc.). Hugonet’s new political position required that he own property throughout the Burgundian empire. He bought houses in Mechelen, Brussels, and Bruges, becoming viscount of Ypres in 1474, and obtained the fief of Middelburg, the finest jewel in his crown, in 1476.

Like Bladelin, Hugonet set great store by outward appearances. He displayed his influential position by accumulating symbolic capital and inhabiting a prestigious castle. But Hugonet’s close connection with the duke and his policies also ruined his career. After Charles the Bold was killed in battle at Nancy in 1477, the Flemish cities imprisoned the officials of his autocratic regime, which had reduced the urban elites’ power. Bruges occupied Hugonet’s castle of Middelburg in March 1477. Considering him responsible for the duke’s policies, the burghers of Ghent exe-

cuted him in April 1477. Because Hugonet’s political authority was based on his relationship with Charles the Bold, he could not survive—politically or physically—the dramatic death of his master.10

Shortly after the revolt of 1477, the city of Bruges bestowed the property of Hugonet on his heirs, his widow and children. But after a new revolt in 1483, the Bruges rebels once again seized his castle and his fief. They occupied the castle to emphasize the city’s power over the countryside. Collaboration with the rebels earned John De Baenst, an ambitious noble and one of Bladelin’s former heirs, the right to live in the castle and enjoy its prestige. In the late 1480s, the castle of Middelburg became a pawn in the war between the rebels and the new count of Flanders, Archduke Maximilian of Austria, husband of Mary of Burgundy, Charles’ heir. Maximilian was imprisoned in Bruges in 1488. Later that year, Bruges captured and partially destroyed the castle. Only after the civil war ended in 1492 could William Hugonet II take possession of it and, under the auspices of the Habsburg dynasty, restore it. For almost a century, descendants of this “noblesse de robe” family inhabited the fief of Middelburg.11

The castle was the crowning achievement of both Bladelin and Hugonet, a public statement proclaiming their standing, their power, and their close relationship with the upper class. The several privileges that the dukes awarded to Bladelin and Hugonet to enhance the prestige of their official rank also increased the power of the Burgundian state. How exactly did Bladelin and Hugonet employ their power to construct their elite identities?

FOUNDING A NEW TOWN Like other high-ranking officers, Bladelin invested much of the money that he had gained from

serving the state in landed property. In 1433, he began buying land in Heile parish and elsewhere. That same year, his brother-in-law, Colard le Fevre, bought the Hof van Middelburg from the abbey of Middelburg in Zeeland. In 1440, Bladelin bought this fief from Le Fevre and united it with other fiefs, such as the Brieven van Aartrijke and the Paddepoele in Maldegem. For ten years, Bladelin accumulated different parcels with the purpose of uniting them. In 1444, the duke assembled this complex into a single property called the Hof van Middelburg in Vlaanderen, giving it to Bladelin as a fief and manor. It was ducal policy to grant important fiefs to chief officers to assist them in their efforts to achieve noble status.12

Bladelin possessed several other seigneuries: He was lord of Poelvoorde, Cappelhout, Poedelberch, Ten Paercke, Scaecx, Ter Heule, Gorinchem, and Vijve, all of them relatively small Flemish fiefs. He tried to accomplish a similar accumulation and concentration of land in the vicinity of Courtrai and on the isle of Cadzand. This attempt to buy divided parcels and unite them into a single feudal possession was typical of successful, late medieval officers in Flanders. Village lordship augmented both (noble) symbolic capital and personal authority.13

After 1448, Bladelin constructed the new town of Middelburg and the castle next to it. Bladelin’s urban planners laid out the new town in a symmetrical, rectangular plan divided by a regular grid of streets. The plan divided the town into six main plots, in which living areas, commercial workshops, and religious and administrative buildings were carefully situated (Figure 2). The street grid remains intact to this day, the modern plots similar to those

12 The small rural estate, hof van Middelburg, which was established in 1280, located in the parish of Heile, and owned by the abbey of Middelburg-in-Zeeland (Holland), later became the site of the new town. Bladelin kept the name Middelburg but added the suffix “-in-Flanders” to distinguish it from another Middelburg. G. Claeys, *Het hof Bladelin te Brugge* (Bruges, 1988), 15–16. Dumolyn, “Pouvoir d’Etat et enrichissement personnel: investissements et stratégies d’accumulation mis en oeuvre par les officiers des ducs de Bourgogne en Flandre,” *Le Moyen Age*, CXI (forthcoming).

indicated on Van Deventer’s 1550 map. Although planners and surveyors of new towns generally favored symmetry and a rectangular site, the layout of Middelburg’s street grid had a striking axially; the main street of the town ran directly to the entrance of the castle domain. The same road continued beyond the populated area toward Bruges in one direction and Aardenburg in the
other, thus connecting the castle—the dominant centre of the private space—with the central areas inside (marketplace, harbor, and church) and the public space outside the town. Presumably, the city planners took optimal advantage of a pre-existing (Roman?) road connecting Bruges and Aardenburg as a central axis in their design. This axiality emphasized the special position of the castle and its owner in the physical and mental conceptualization of the town.\(^{14}\)

The urban planners used significant spatial elements, like a moat, a wall, and town gates to distinguish the new town from the countryside and illustrate its distinct prestige. They separated the new power center from the countryside, which did not possess privileges as did the young town. A moat completely surrounded the city, and later (1466), with the permission of the duke, the lord added gates and a wall. At the southwestern side of the town, the city moat was connected with the moats of the castle. The large waterworks that surrounded the castle consisted of two large rectangular moats, separated from each other by an earthen bank, which set the castle in a wide watery landscape. A bridge spanned the 25-meter-wide moat between the castle and the town. The city hall that Bladelin constructed was yet another symbol of Middelburg’s status, independent of the surrounding area. It was, for all intents and purposes, a new city, ruled by the inhabitant of the castle.\(^{15}\)

Both castellans had to develop a strategy to keep their town economically viable. This micro-region had no need for another major centre of production or commerce; it already had such important economic and strategic cities as Bruges, Damme, Sluis, and Aardenburg. In 1465, Bladelin obtained the duke’s permission to organize an annual fair in his town. He also ordered the digging of a small canal to connect Middelburg to the river Lieve, an important economic vein connecting Ghent with the ports around the Zwin, and thus to Damme, Bruges, and the sea. Bladelin and later Hugonet selected certain crafts to be the economic base for the city. Bladelin attracted coppersmiths from Dinant—recently sub-

\(^{14}\) Nicola Coldstream, *Medieval Architecture* (New York, 2002), 126. These later new towns were inspired by the symmetry of Greek and Roman models of city planning.

\(^{15}\) Verschelde, *Geschiedenis van Middelburg*, 34. In 1458, Bladelin received the duke’s permission to establish a mayor and seven aldermen in Middelburg. See Louis Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Coutume du Franck de Bruges* (Bruges, 1880), III, 209–212.
jugated by the duke—where metal working was a specialty, and weavers of high-quality tapestry and other workmen to move inside the city walls. These high-end crafts made the city economically less vulnerable to agricultural crises; the families of craftsmen remained active in the city for the next 120 years.¹⁶

Specialized craft production also implied access to particular resources as well as to markets. Licensing the installation of crafts in the new town was crucial to the creation and use of elite identity in elite networks, since skilled artisanship was considered as much a political activity as an economic or artistic one. For instance, the ducal family ordered tapestries from local weavers during a two-week stay at Middelburg Castle. In 1472, presumably for services that Bladelin had rendered him during his exile, the English King Edward IV granted Middelburg lucrative trade privileges, such as the wool staple of northern England and the right to sell copper within a wide area. In short, the economic incentives improved the status of the new town. Towns were not only political entities; they were also nexuses of economic markets.¹⁷

Bladelin did not create this late medieval town for economic reasons. He constructed it to express his dominance over the area and to justify his noble aspirations. Historians have noted that the founding of medieval cities was much rarer in the late Middle Ages than in earlier periods, especially in northwestern Europe. Cauchies, who compared the investments of Bladelin and Jean de Lannoy, another high-ranking Burgundian nobleman, argues that a quest for glory and eternity, along with rivalry within his own social class, drove Bladelin to found the town. Bladelin’s aspirations to noble status seem to have motivated him to possess


Middleburg and its castle as icons of feudal lordship. Although economic success was a sine qua non for Middelburg’s future viability, Bladelin—in contrast to most other nobles, who mostly invested in landed property—seems to have created the town as an arena to project his social and political ambitions and to display his new identity as a nobleman.¹⁸

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS Both Bladelin and Hugonet were wealthy enough to initiate cultural, religious, and charitable projects that enhanced their social standing. Their power and social status also allowed them to invest in the cultural and spiritual capital that were essential to “vivre noblement.” Hugonet’s enormous collections of books and tapestries was a sign of his intellectual (and luxurious) life style. Bladelin was famous for the triptych that he commissioned, one of the masterpieces of the Flemish Primitives. His portrait (now in Berlin) was painted by Rogier van der Weyden at some point between 1456 and 1461. Art historians suspect that in 1470, Hugonet likewise commissioned a portrait—this one by Hugo van der Goes—that turned out to be a masterpiece (also in Berlin). The two masterpieces are exceptional because their owners occupy the middle, rather than one of the wings, of the canvas, next to a nativity scene, with a castle and town in the background. Bladelin and his wife appear on the left panel of the triptych, which also features shops selling copper. This painting contains references to all of the secular and religious underpinnings of the idealized feudal lordship to which Bladelin aspired: the production of religious art, the castle, the town, the close connection with a powerful feudal overlord, and commercial prosperity. The triptych served Bladelin as a mode of self-representation.¹⁹

¹⁸ Many medieval cities were creations of local lords, but most of them were established in an earlier period. See Joseph Morsel, L’aristocratie médiévale: La domination sociale en Occident (Ve–XVe siècle) (Paris, 2004), 225. New towns in the late medieval period are rare in North-western Europe. According to Rutte, status, ideology, strategy, politics, and economics were the prevailing motives for founding new towns in the late medieval Low Countries (Reinout Rutte, “Falen of slagen: Motieven bij laat-Middeleeuwse stadsstichtingen,” Historisch-Geografisch Tijdschrift, XVIII (2002), 1–11). Jean-Marie Cauchies, “Deux grands commis bâtisseurs de villes dans les Pays-Bas Bourguignons: Jean de Lannoy et Pierre Bladelin (vers 1450/60),” in “De Jacques Coeur à Renault.” Gestionnaires et Organisations. Collection Histoire, Gestion, Organisations (Toulouse, 1995), 38.

To establish his religious credentials, Bladelin built a church dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul in the heart of the town between 1452 and 1460. He patronized the church himself, but his foundation held much more significance. Like the acquisition of landed property, the jurisdiction over a town, and the possession of a castle, the establishment of a church was also a pillar of feudal lordship in the townscape. In 1452, Bladelin founded a hospital dedicated to St. John in his new city and probably the archer’s guild of St. Sebastian in 1460. In 1470, he received permission to add a chapter of six canons, a parish priest, and two chaplains to the church of Middelburg. In their wills, both Bladelin and Hugonet donated rents to the hospital—just as the Burgundian duchess, Mary of Burgundy, and her husband, Maximilian of Austria, did in 1481—“for the salvation of their soul.”

Bladelin and Hugonet participated in a common upper-class practice, designed to commemorate the noble deeds of the deceased and to keep their presence vivid, even long after their deaths. William II Hugonet continued the spiritual pursuits of his predecessor by establishing a Poor Clares cloister at Middelburg in 1515; his sister was the first abbess. According to his last will, Bladelin arranged to be buried in the church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Middelburg and, if he died outside his city, to be carried to the church by forty local paupers. It was typical for the comital councilors in Flanders to be buried in the great collegiate churches established and patronized by the counts of Flanders, except for those noble councilors who still preferred the parish church in their own lordships. Together with the masses offered for his salvation, the (still existing) luxurious tomb of Bladelin oc-

THE MIDDELBURG CASTLE: ARCHITECTURE IN DIALOGUE WITH A NOBLE.IDENTITY The single most dominant expression of noble aspirations and claims to public space was the castle of Middelburg. It is the clearest example of the personal building program that both of these men undertook and of their urge for a noble lifestyle. Apart from the construction of a new town, both Bladelin and Hugonet had initiated large private building programs for castles and urban residences. In 1435, Bladelin built his large residence in the Bruges Naaldenstraat. He also possessed smaller castles at Wingene and Oostkamp, villages near Bruges. Hugonet was the owner of houses in Mechelen, Brussels, and Bruges, but he also restored the castle of Sailliant in Burgundy.\footnote{Bartier, Légistes et gens, 240.}

Castles, as the centerpieces of seigniorial space, should be viewed as the residential, administrative, and defensive focus in their landscapes. Their symbolic power often surpassed their military importance. Coldstream notes that by 1300, the castle fortress had given way to less military, more palatial residences, which evolved into the aristocratic residential palaces of the sixteenth-century Renaissance. Yet the symbolism of warfare persisted. These buildings, still called castles, maintained all of the symbolic martial details: towers, gatehouses, moats, and drawbridges. Few were seriously defensible, but a castle’s crenellation served as an announcement that, socially speaking, the owner of the house had arrived. Castles were visible manifestations of seigniorial authority and conspicuous consumption.\footnote{Morsel, L’aristocratie, 100; Matthew Johnson, Behind the Castle Gate: From Medieval to Renaissance (London, 2002), 122–123; Coldstream, Medieval Architecture, 168; Creighton, Castles and Landscapes, 65.}

Middelburg castle was built between 1448 and 1450; today
only the foundations remain. The castle was heavily damaged during an assault by the Flemish cities, directed against Maximilian of Austria, in 1488. The residence was re-occupied after the attack but repeatedly seized during the Dutch Revolt of the sixteenth century and (re-)occupied by armies of different origin during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Excavations revealed that a part of the southern wing was repaired in the fifteenth century, possibly following the 1488 destruction, but it never fully recovered from the attack of 1604 by the Spanish commander Ambrogio Spinola, which totally destroyed large sections of it. The southern corner tower was never rebuilt; it was replaced by earthworks, most likely during the twelve-year truce when the lordship of Middelburg constituted a part of the Spanish territory. As a strategic fortress in the front line between the Spanish and Dutch troops during the Dutch Revolt, the castle became a victim of military misfortune after 1579. In 1607, a witness from Damme described it, once “the most beautiful, biggest and most important fief of the Franc of Bruges,” as a “ruin, . . . desolated and destroyed. . . . ready to be totally dismantled.” By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the castle had totally fallen into disrepair. It disappeared quickly, and the site became a quarry for bricks. Today only the foundations are left.\(^{24}\)

A close examination of the archaeological excavation results, particularly such material remains as foundations and building materials, provides insight into the social meaning of the edifice. Although no standing walls are preserved on the site, the architectural design of the castle, the pattern of access, and the choice and spatial deployment of building materials, revealed from the excavations and from a plan made in 1702, suggest a determined and

\(^{24}\) Our knowledge of the castle’s layout is based on both archival and archaeological data. A plan dating from c. 1608 for the reconstruction of the city defenses and an elaborate plan with drawings by Senneton de Chermont, a French military engineer, in 1702, offer especially detailed information (Fonds Middlebourg, 14, Archives de l’Armée de Terre, Vincennes [France]). The excavated parts of the castle fit perfectly with these documents. Moreover, they add substantial architectural information for those parts of the castle that had already been destroyed or had disappeared after 1604. See De Clercq, Pedro Pype, and Steven Mortier, “Archaeologisch onderzoek in Middelburg-in-Vlaanderen: Drie jaar opgravingen op het opper- en neerhof van het kasteel van Pieter Bladelin,” Jaarboek van de heemkundige kring Het Ambacht Maldegem, X (2004), 272–294. Fonds Maldegem Ambacht, charters Maldegem en Middelburg, charter of 26 Mars 1607, State Archives of Ghent; Gilliodts-Van Severen, Coutumes des pays et comté de Flandre. Quartier de Bruges: Coutumes des petites villes et seigneuries enclavées (Brussels, 1891), III, 222–223.
highly symbolic conceptualization. The re-organization of space and the use of architectural “levels” as nonverbal communicators established the lord’s identity and transmitted it to the outside world. To create this effect, the castle and the surrounding domain were deliberately built to be seen in stages, from the viewpoint of the town (Figure 3). The castle domain consisted of two parts laid out on the main axis that runs through the landscape and the city. Both of these parts were made of brick with a parament of fine white sandstone from the Gobertange quarries (province of Brabant-Wallon, Belgium) under and just above the waterline.

Visitors could come directly from the center of the city, its commercial and religious core, into the castle (the de facto heart of the town) after crossing the moat via a bridge that gave access to the first part of the castle domain—the lower court. They would gradually, and increasingly, confront the status and identity of the owner while progressing through the different stages of the castle and its environs. The first stage was marked by a material and mental barrier, the large moat that separated the world of the citizens from that of the lord. The next stage was the front of the outer court, with its distinctive architectural features. Excavations and maps show that the lower court was a T-shaped construction; its longest side faced the city, creating the impression of a much larger building. The entrance was flanked by two small half-rounded towers, and two other small, 270-degree towers on the corners. The spatial patterning of building materials found in the moat at the front-side of the lower court showed an intense clustering of finely hewn white sandstone. The other end of the lower court included a gallery and an herb garden.\(^{25}\)

Just inside the complex proper, where riders finally left their horses, visitors were once again confronted with the identity of the owner in a sort of reception room. Judging from the spatial patterns in the archaeological discoveries, this room was paved with tiles bearing Bladelin’s emblem and the motif of the firesteel, a decorative element introduced by John the Fearless, Philip the Good’s father, and adopted by Philip as the emblem of the Order of the Golden Fleece. This was a startling departure from the normal architectural style of lower courts, which typically housed

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Fig. 3 Plan of the Castle of Middelburg, Showing the Spatial Pattern of Finds and the Gradual Identification of the Owner

Reconstruction based on excavations and a plan made in 1702

- Supposed parts: not excavated or not on 1702 plan
- Plan based on 1702 map (gun-holes probably not 15th century)
- Excavated parts
- New viewpoint / change in perception

Rooms, stoves with emblems of the Lord, the Duke and allies
Front of the inner court and moat
Emblems of Bladelin and the Order of the Golden Fleece
Moat

Private residence of the Lord
Decorated front of outer court

100m
personnel and facilities, and did not feature an elite design. The presence of the elaborate floor points to the unique nature of the Middelburg castle complex. Even at the outer stages of the castle, in the interior of the lower court, the floor and other architectural elements played an essential role in advertising the lord’s identity. These shifts in architectural design displayed the power of the castle’s lord, impressing Bladelin’s and Hugonet’s guests even before they entered the actual domain. In addition, the walls became narrower at the entrance to the building, as if hastening visitors toward the main goal—the upper court and the residence of the castle’s lord.²⁶

The lower court was separated from the upper court by another moat, 8 meters wide, part of the double-moated waterworks that surrounded the castle. The entrance to the upper court became visible only at the bridge. Massive rounded towers at the corners, a three-quarter-rounded stair tower, and a large half-rounded tower, grouped closely together, flanked the entrance. The front wall with its five towers (three large ones and two smaller staircases giving access to them) contrasted with the other walls, which had no towers, except for a half-rounded tower in the middle of the southwestern side. Placing all of these impressive architectural elements on only one side of the building created an asymmetrical design, an overpowering display that heightened visitors’ awareness of the owner’s identity and power. In the next stage, beyond another moat, stood massive towers 12 meters wide, even grander monuments to the lord’s identity.²⁷

The upper court, which was not revealed until the end of the prolonged entrance, consisted of a square enclosure around which the buildings were arranged. The main residence, consisting of the rooms where the lord lived and met with his guests, was situated on the side opposite the entrance to the court, accessible via a

²⁶ Jacques Laurent, “Le briquet de la maison de Bourgogne,” Revue française d’héraldique et de sigillographie, I (1938), 55–64. For John the Fearless, see Schnerb, Jean sans Peur: Le prince meurtrier (Paris, 2005). On the Order of the Golden Fleece and its objectives, see Baron de Reiffenberg, Histoire de l’ordre de la Toison d’Or depuis son institution jusqu’à la cessation des chapitres généraux (Brussels, 1830); Bernhard Sterchi, Über den Umgang mit Lob und Tadel: Normative Adelsliteratur und politische Kommunikation im burgundischen Hofadel, 1430–1506 (Turnhout, 2005); Raphaël de Smedt, Les chevaliers de l’Ordre de la Toison d’Or au XVe siècle (Frankfurt am Main, 2000).
²⁷ The corner towers had a diameter of 12.5 meters and consisted of masonry 2.30 meters thick.
grand staircase. The staircase almost literally lifted visitors to the higher level of the lord’s private space. Within the main building, rooms were built on three different stages. Some of these rooms had large fireplaces, and others contained highly decorated stoves displaying the heraldic motifs of the lord and his allies. These technologically innovative heating systems were not only rare and expensive; they also featured materials that flaunted the lord’s identity (as discussed below).

IMITATING NOBLE CULTURE  The plethora of decorative elements and architectural embellishments in the Middelburg castle all heightened the status of the residence and its lord; they conveyed the immaterial message of power, status, and nobility. People can conquer space only by dividing, organizing, and reducing it to their own scale, by actualizing its subdivisions. As Lefebvre argued, space is a mix of conceptual, perceptual, and representational attributes. The Middelburg castle’s architectural divisions or barriers were symbolic steps through which the many layers of the lord’s identity became apparent.28

This ambitious private architectural project also bears a striking resemblance to the building program and material culture of the Burgundian dukes, whose castles, designed landscapes, gardens, deer parks, and large townhouses were intended to display their power and to make them the center of attention throughout their territories. In Dijon, Rouvres, Argilly, or Germolles in Burgundy, artists and gardeners embellished the interiors and exteriors of ducal residences, developing them into remarkable spaces of artistic innovation, as well as magnificent symbols of the centralized Burgundian state. Painters such as William de Ritser graced the ducal residence in Ghent with the heraldic emblems of Burgundy—the firesteel and the slogan, “Jamais outré (never further).” The luxury of the palace reflected the authority of the dukes and legitimized their claim to power. Moreover, by investing heavily in the Ghent residences and granting specialized duties

to local corporations, the dukes attempted to link urban power elites financially to the court and the Burgundian state apparatus. Other high-ranking officers of the Burgundian state also moved to Ghent and Bruges and invested in city dwellings, all of them contributing to the ducal “theatre-state.”

Striking parallels can also be drawn to areas outside the Burgundian sphere. The “New Castles” in England also exemplify the social advancement of such self-made men as merchants, civil servants, and financiers. Luxurious castles were the symbol of their arrival. The English nouveaux riches of the later Middle Ages constructed many residences designed to accommodate household, family, and guests and to reflect the owner’s achievements as a state official, soldier, or recently ennobled gentleman, and they were built to a scale comparable to, and sometimes surpassing, those of long-established families. The licenses to add crenellations, given by Richard II, allowed certain English dignitaries to express their social advancement. Powerful officials, such as Edward Dalyngrigge, lord of Bodiam, who climbed the social ladder through service in the wars of Edward III, as well as by increasing wealth, (re)built castles broadcasting their new social position. These buildings had a rectangular plan featuring an open court, with square or round towers and imposing gatehouses. They were constructed as units and always completed in a relatively short time. The fact that they were often built on new level sites and had only one defensive ward indicates their function as symbols of power rather than defensive structures.


Johnson noted the similarity in the building programs by Lord Dalyngrigge at Bodiam Castle, Lord Cromwell at Tattershall Castle, and Lord Dudley, Earl of Leicester, at Kenilworth Castle. Cromwell was a mid-fifteenth-century treasurer, like Bladelin, who, as Johnson shows, contrived his building program to be an important step in negotiating his social position. In Johnson’s words, “The castle reveals itself gradually to the visitor, giving access circuitously. Status was communicated through movement through the building.” Castles such as Middelburg and its English equivalents were highly visible, physical manifestations of seigniorial authority in an imitative age.31

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES THROUGH MATERIAL CULTURE Material objects from Middelburg castle point to a much more intensive process of identity construction than has been found in the castles of the English nouveaux riches. Many objects served as material signs of immaterial elements of identity, social networks, and power relations. The floor tiles found at the lower court, for example, and the stove tiles from the residence reveal patterns of networking, imitation, and display of wealth designed to associate the self-made man with the duke and the highest nobility. These significant emblematic markers expose the social aspirations of the inhabitants of the castle and their relationship with the network of high-ranking people around his court, the natural “habitat” of Bladelin and Hugonet. The floor tiles consist of three different types, all of which were made in a nonlocal clay of pink-greyish color, containing flakes of mica and unidentified black inclusions (Figure 4). The surface of the tiles is tin-glazed, covering a white background on which illustrations in blue and purple (cobalt-oxide) were painted. One type of rectangular tile depicts two intersecting banderols—one with the initials “PB” and the other with small leaves (bladelin means “small leaf” in Middle-Dutch). Another type of floor tile is square; it, too, is inscribed with “PB.” In this series, the two letters are interwoven with a bundle of small leaves.

This symbol seems to have been Bladelin’s favorite emblem, since it is also on his tomb in the church of Middelburg and on the ceiling of the gallery in his Bruges residence (Figure 5a). These same emblems appear on some clerical robes and probably also on a painting that has disappeared from the church, indicating a deliberate emblematic cross-referencing in secular and religious space.\textsuperscript{32}

The third group of floor tiles shows a circle in the centre of a square and a one-quarter circle in each corner, each containing one-quarter of a letter. In the layout of the floor, the points where four tiles join at each corner form the “P” or “B” in alternating order. The circle in the middle contains a firesteel striking a flintstone. Flames of fire shoot in various directions. The firesteel, being the unique symbol of the duke and the Order of the Golden

\textsuperscript{32} Martens, “Pieter Bladelin en Middelburg,” 17.
Fleece, is also found in the palaces of the Burgundian dukes. The large ceiling beams of the great room of Bladelin’s house in Bruges were also decorated with the heraldic devices of the duke and the firesteel (Figure 5b).\(^{33}\)

Like the nobles at court, Bladelin ordered his tiles from Spain. To say that this material was expensive would be an understatement. The Valencia region, and particularly the production area of Manises, was renowned for its tin-glazed tiles, which were produced using traditional Moorish methods and used in elite architecture throughout Western Europe. In the late fourteenth century, dukes Philip the Bold and John of Berry invited Spanish craftsmen John of Valence, John of Gironne, and John le Voleur to make tiles on command for their castles and palaces. Because of its typically Spanish mica-rich material, Bladelin’s tiles can be traced to Spanish craftsmen working in their hometown of Manises. Bladelin may have had connections to these artists, or at least a network of their contacts that he could access. These special tiles have been found only in a few places. The (slightly older) tin-glazed tiles found on the site of the ducal residence in Arras are decorated with the arms of Burgundy. A more close connection, however, can be observed in the tin-glazed tiles in the palace of the duke of Berry.\(^{34}\)

Similar patterns of interwoven letters appear on lead-glazed tiles in the Hôtel-Dieu at Beaune (Burgundy), built in the middle of the fifteenth century by Nicolas Rolin, the chancellor of Burgundy. On these tiles, the letters N(icolas) and G(uigone) are interwoven, indicating the names of the chancellor and his wife, thereby stressing the strength and lasting character of their mar-


Fig. 5  

a Emblem (P)ijeter (B)ladelin in the Ceiling of the Gallery at the “Hof Bladelin,” Bladelin’s Residence in the Bruges Naaldenstraat

b The Ceiling Beam in the “Hof Bladelin,” Decorated with the Firesteel and the Heraldic Motifs of the Dukes of Burgundy
riage. Besides his important office, this contemporary colleague of Bladelin at the ducal court was also a bureaucratic careerist who made his fortune from his loyal service to the duke. Like Bladelin, this non-noble jurist developed an important building program that continues to mark his identity.  

The next remarkable discoveries are the several stove tiles specifically made to order (Figure 6). These niche-like, semitubular pieces were the main building blocks of innovative heating systems originally from Eastern Europe that the Flemish elites installed in Ghent and Bruges after the mid-fifteenth century. Because stoves took a central position in important chambers, such as audience areas and dining rooms where lords met their guests, the heraldic motifs and emblems referring to the lord and his allies would be conspicuous. These rooms, where semipublic functions sometimes occurred, were hierarchically superior to less specialized halls.  

Several stove tiles from Middelburg offer tangible evidence of the relationship between material culture and the construction of identity. The first series of stove tiles depicts the combined heraldic symbols of Louis of Bruges, lord of Gruthuse and his wife (Figure 6a). In 1472, this powerful nobleman became earl of Winchester, when the fleeing English King Edward IV found accommodation in Louis’ pompous palace in Bruges. In the 1460s and 1470s, Louis of Bruges had significant political influence at the Burgundian court, and from 1463 until 1477, he was governor of the county of Holland. He was also renowned as a rich art patron. As loyal confidants of the duke in the city of Bruges who sought to increase their political influence there, Bladelin and Louis were often together. As a sign of their political cooperation, and as a ges-

Fig. 6 Stove Tiles with Arms of Gruuthuse (a, c), Maximilian of Austria and Maria of Burgundy (b), and Related Pieces Found in Brussels (d) and Bruges (e)

Sources Figure 6d: Anna Buyle, “Méér over de fragmenten van een kacheltegel uit het Hof van Hoogstraaten te Brussel: het embleem van Isabella van Portugal,” Monumenten en Landschappen, IX (1990), 55; Figure 6e: City Archaeological Service of Bruges.
ture typical of Burgundian gift exchange, Gruuthuse might have provided stove tiles for Bladelin’s castle.\textsuperscript{37}

The firesteel on these tiles cross-reference Gruuthuse with the duke, the Order of the Golden Fleece, and Bladelin. Since Gruuthuse was received as a member of the Order in 1461, these tiles can be dated after this year and before the death of Bladelin in 1472. The firesteel also appears on stove tiles found in palaces of state officers and noblemen in Brussels, situated near the ducal court (Figure 6d). Excavations at the Prinsenhof, the ducal residence at Bruges, in 2004, discovered a fragment of a stove tile decorated with a double-headed eagle and a chain of firesteels (Figure 6e). The presence of the stove tiles in the castle of Middelburg symbolized the social network and the social capital of the lord. They materialized the “immaterial” social capital that the lord of the castle possessed.\textsuperscript{38}

The last series of stove tiles excavated in Middelburg show the heraldic motifs of Mary of Burgundy and the single-headed eagle, the pre-eminent symbol of the Habsburg dynasty (Figure 6b). In April 1477, a few months after the death of Duke Charles, the nobles of the Burgundian court arranged a marriage between Mary and Maximilian of Austria, whom they expected to be a competent military leader in the war against the French king Louis XI. Since Mary died in 1482, the production of the stove tile would seem to date before that year, although it might have been the result of a later propaganda effort. However, the tiles were

\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, Malcolm Vale, “An Anglo-Burgundian Nobleman and Art Patron: Louis de Bruges, Lord of la Gruthuyse and Earl of Winchester,” in Caroline Barron and Nigel Saul (eds.), \textit{England and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages} (New York, 1995), 115–131; Martens (ed.), \textit{Lodewijk van Gruuthuse: Mecenas en Europees diplomaat ca. 1427–1492} (Bruges, 1992). In 1452, Bladelin and Louis together prevented Ghent rebels from entering the city of Bruges. As a result, the privileges of Bladelin’s city were extended (Haemers, \textit{De Gentse opstand}, 301).

most likely a gift from the duchess to the Hugonet family, maybe as a part of their religious foundation of 1481 in the church of Middelburg. Again, this princely favor shows that, despite the decapitation of William I Hugonet, his descendants still had the patronage of the Habsburg dynasty. Hugonet’s pursuit of a noble lineage had attained its final goal: His family was elevated into the higher society of the Habsburg state.39

The tiles show a pattern of material culture limited to the ducal court and its members. The Middelburg objects were highly significant emblematic markers, indicating aspects of identity, status, and power. While some of these objects were typical examples of the gift-exchange common in Burgundian culture (for example, the Gruuthuse tiles), others were clearly made on the orders of the owner (for example the Bladelin tiles). By deliberately using these tiles in the architectural space of his castle, Bladelin not only expressed a certain level of status through their cost and rarity, but he also participated in a cultural tradition that derived from the milieu of the highest nobility. By depicting his personal initials in association with the emblems of the duke of Burgundy, he both honored the dynasty and underlined his noble status by symbolically intermingling himself, his membership in the noblest of noble orders—the Golden Fleece—and his feudal overlord, the duke of Burgundy. Thus was his identity represented. Immaterial relations became materialized and exposed.

**CONSTRUCTING MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL IDENTITIES** Bladelin and Hugonet successfully exploited the opportunities offered by the emergence of the modern state in Western Europe. Their bureaucratic competence and their close relationship with the duke of Burgundy resulted in personal financial profits that they invested in symbolic capital—the acquisition of a noble status. To confirm their new social standing, these self-made men had to embrace “vivre noblement.” They assumed a noble life style, which included specific types of clothing and behavior. However, as this article demonstrates, they also employed a much more extensive material culture to establish their new identities, not the least of which was Bladelin’s creation of a new town. Bladelin claimed his social position by claiming space. This act of dominance was un-

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39 William II Hugonet was one of Emperor Charles V’s councilors (Haemers, “Middelburg,” 260).
precedent in late medieval Flanders. Moreover, Bladelin and Hugonet crowned their social-climbing achievements by copying the architectural patterns and material culture of ducal residences.⁴⁰

Space is a reification of social relations. A new city and a grand castle, fashioned with the icons of feudal lordship—a crenulated town and castle conforming to specific patterns of material culture—contains a social meaning that derives, literally,

⁴⁰ Kaminsky, “Estate Nobility,” 702–703; Van Uytven, “Showing off One’s Rank in the Middle Ages,” and other essays, in Blockmans and Janse (eds.), Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Age (Turnhout, 1999), 20–34.
from the materiality itself. Bladelin’s space acquired meaning precisely as a result of its ability to display social status. In turn, the castle and its rich furniture legitimized Bladelin’s and Hugonet’s newly gained social position as self-made men. In their dialogue with material culture, socially shaped space became a theater of social relations. The morphology of the city and the castle of Middelburg are suitable expressions of a noble ideology.\footnote{Arnade, Howell, and Simons, “Fertile Spaces,” 542. On the influence of social identity on the creation of (urban) space, see Boone and Stabel (eds.), \textit{Shaping Urban Identity in Late Medieval Europe} (Louvain, 2000); Blockmans, “Reshaping Cities: The Staging of Political Transformation,” \textit{Journal of Urban History}, XXX (2003), 7–20.}

Noble identity involved conspicuous consumption and the display of symbolic capital. Identity, however, is also the product of social and political action and interaction. The material expressions of status and identity generated by Bladelin, Hugonet, and other self-made men in the fifteenth century were more than just the consumer habits of wealthy men. The meaning of their use of material culture becomes clear only within narrative contexts. Their history must be situated against a social and historical background in which conscious personal aspirations and contemporary cultural movements play prominent roles. Identity found expression through material culture and architecture, and luxurious residences were conspicuous statements in elite society.\footnote{Grassby, “Material Culture,” 596; Matarosso, \textit{English Castle}, 133; Johnson, “Self-Made Man,” 215; Emery, “Late-Medieval Houses,” 157; Kaminsky, “Estate Nobility,” 709.}

Bladelin and Hugonet continuously manipulated material culture to create an environment that emanated noble identity. Material culture contributed to “vivre noblement” identity, which, in turn, contributed to material culture. Thus was cultural identity materially translated into a readable symbolic language. For new power holders like Bladelin and Hugonet, the social stigma of relatively humble origins needed the overcompensation of an exuberant way of life to purvey noble distinction. Middelburg was an ideal place to live the noble life, and it was also close enough to the economic source of social success, the Bruges market and its financial networks, for self-made men like Bladelin and Hugonet to thrive.