



Annals of the War in the Low Countries

by Hugo Grotius, edited, translated, and with an Introduction by Jan Waszink, Bibliotheca Latinitatis Novae, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2023, 447 pp., with 25 illustrations, €120.00 (hardback), ISBN 9789462703513

Helmer Helmers

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BOOK REVIEW

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The lawyer, scholar and diplomat Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) is not best known as an historian. Grotius's reputation as one of the founders of international law, however, would not have been achieved without his deep study of history, which informed much of his other writing. As a young man Grotius not only produced several historical works, he also served as the official historiographer of the States of Holland. For ten years Grotius intermittently laboured on the history of the Dutch Revolt which the States had commissioned him to write, in between his many other duties and projects. In 1612, the fruit of his prestigious position, the *Annales* (5 books) *et Historiae* (18 books) *de rebus belgicis*, was finished and submitted to his patrons.

One reason for the fact that Grotius's historical work has had much less impact than his *De jure belli ac pacis* or *Mare Liberum* is that it was never published during his lifetime. While the States rewarded him lavishly for the work, they decided not to publish it, to Grotius's everlasting frustration. Thus his 'aristocratic history of the Dutch Revolt',¹ fell mostly on barren ground. Grotius continued to work on the manuscript in later life, and was definitely proud and protective of the text, but never succeeded in publishing it. When his sons finally had the *Annales et Historiae* printed after his death, in 1657-8, the content had lost much of its topicality, did not spark great public controversy, and was less likely to affect other histories than it would have had it been published 45 years earlier. Another reason for the limited impact of Grotius's history, surely, is that the rather voluminous work was written in convoluted, Tacitean Latin, whereas other contemporary histories of the Dutch Revolt were readily available in various European vernaculars already during Grotius's own lifetime. While translations in French, English and Dutch of the *Annales et historiae* appeared in the first decades after the publication of the Latin edition of 1657, they did not penetrate the market in ways that vernacular editions of previous histories by Van Meteren or Bor did. In more than one way, then, limited accessibility negatively affected Grotius's place in both the Dutch historical canon and the history of historiography.

While Jan Waszink's new book, *Annals of the War in the Low Countries*, cannot undo the book's unfortunate publication history, it does do everything possible to rehabilitate and understand Grotius the historian. Waszink's book is in the first place a bilingual Latin-English edition of the five books constituting the *Annales*-part of the *Annales et historiae*, which cover the years 1559 to 1588. It tells the familiar history of the Dutch Revolt, but in a remarkably unfamiliar way: in a dense narrative stripped of overt partisanism and confessionalism. Waszink has painstakingly and accurately translated Grotius's difficult Latin, and the edition offers both the original (from the 1657 edition) and the translation on opposite pages, facilitating easy comparison, followed by annotations that mostly explain the historical references in the text. The second part of Grotius's work, the *Historiae*, is, understandably,

¹Cornelia M. Ridderikhof, 'Een aristocratische geschiedenis van de Opstand: Grotius' *Annales et Historiae de rebus Belgicis*'. *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 10 (1994), 277-287.

not part of this edition. The *Historiae* were more voluminous, covering fewer years (1588-1609) in many more pages, and their inclusion would have made for an unwieldy volume. The *Annales* more than suffices not only to provide the reader with a good taste of the style and content of Grotius's complete text. Even in Waszink's modern English, this does not make easy reading and some readers might wish that Waszink had deviated a bit more radically from the Latin to increase the readability. Yet Grotius's text in Latin remains a text for study rather than pleasure, and Waszink's faithfulness to the original does serve a purpose: style plays an important part in his introductory study. To eliminate style is to eliminate the core of what the text has to say to us, because on Waszink's reading it is part and parcel of Grotius's significance as an historian. The fine bilingual edition, then, is subservient to the editor's own scholarly work that surrounds it.

Indeed, *Annals of the War in the Low Countries* can be regarded as the crowning achievement of decades of scholarship. Having published various articles and a Dutch-language edition (2014), Waszink has been working on Grotius's *Annales et Historiae* for about twenty years, and his insight and erudition shine on every page. The edition proper is preceded by an extensive, 121-page introduction, and followed by no fewer than 7 appendices with relevant additional material, including fascinating material such as Waszink's translations of the reports made by the two censors of the Roman index in 1658, which Waszink himself discovered and published previously (see Appendix 2 and § 11.5).

The introduction is the main attraction of the book. A rich book in and of itself, it begins by addressing the most urgent question: why did the States of Holland decide not to publish the history they themselves commissioned? Since the reviewing committee's report has been lost, any answer to this question must remain speculative, but Waszink builds a convincing case. He focuses on two related aspects of the text: the book's politics in the context of the so-called Dutch Truce Conflicts (1609-1619), and its Tacitist approach to history. He rightly highlights Grotius's partisan political role in the religio-political conflicts of the 1610s as a major complication: exactly at the time when a States committee decided on the fate of his history, Grotius manifested himself as a staunch defender of John of Oldenbarnevelt's politics in opposition to the contraremonstrants. In the process, he managed to repulse many influential figures, including the King of England and his ambassadors. The content of the book, too, was more than enough to make the States shy away from publication. Waszink shows how Grotius's utterly secular, reason-of-state approach to the history of the Dutch Revolt led him to represent central figures such as William the Silent, Elizabeth I of England, and her governor in the Netherlands, the Earl of Leicester, as machiavellians who used religion as a mere instrument to pursue their own interest. This, evidently, made the book vulnerable to criticism, even more so because such an approach entailed an anti-Calvinist, *politique* reading of history that suited Grotius's own politics in the Dutch domestic conflicts of the 1610s. Yet of course, a sceptical and realist approach was also part and parcel of Tacitism, since 'in a Tacitean world, *all* human political behaviour is morally defective' (32). If such a view may still have been permissible when Grotius started writing in 1604, it had become extremely problematic when he sought publication in the polarised context of the 1610s.

Having presented his analysis, Waszink continues to analyse 'the tacitist nature' (34) of the *Annales et historiae*. He situates Grotius among other historians and Tacitists, analyses his Tacitean political judgement, his penchant for revealing hidden motives and strategies of the main characters in his history, as well as his imitation of Tacitus's style, which amounted to extreme brevity, the frequent use of *sententiae*, and a certain 'ruggedness' (48) which made his Latin so difficult to read. It is in this part that the introduction loses some of its thrust, and starts to show signs of hasty writing

and publication. Waszink has clearly not been infected by his subject's Tacitean brevity. He devotes five pages, for example, to an investigation of the question of whether Grotius, like Tacitus, employed 'dramatic structuring' in the *Annales*, only to conclude that he did not, or not really, or maybe a bit. Subheadings like 'other' and 'other aspects' start to appear which more than anything else signal that the information could have been structured more efficiently and intelligibly. The subjects covered in Chapter 9, also entitled 'Other Aspects', should have been integrated in the previous argument. It is a bit of a waste that the important discussion on the relationship between the *Annales et Historiae* and Grotius's other work (72-79) is now relegated to a few subparagraphs in an anonymous chapter. More rigorous editing, then, would certainly have been in order: besides the compositional flaws, there are frequent typos and fragments which the press might easily have prevented.

Such superficial qualms aside, the content of the remainder of the introduction remains excellent. Chapters 10 and 11, on the sources and the reception of *Annales et Historiae* are both hugely informative. Waszink demonstrates Grotius's use of Van Meteren's *Commentariën*, based on Grotius's own copy preserved in the Lund University Library and a textual comparison (Appendix 3). While the Lund copy was known to previous scholars, Waszink himself has also discovered a copy of Giustiniani's *Bellum Belgicum* with annotations in Grotius's own hand in the University Library in Nijmegen. This is the kind of research that requires dedication and patience, and Waszink has evidently had both.

The history of historiography in general has in recent years experienced something of a renaissance. This is especially true for the Low Countries. Several monographs in English, including Jasper van der Steen's *Memory Wars in the Low Countries* (2015) and Nina Lamal's *Italian Communication on the Revolt in the Low Countries* (2023) have done much to connect this history to broader, international debates on, for instance, memory, international news publication, and official historiography. Tacitism and reason of state, too, remain of great scholarly interest. At least in part because of the limited accessibility and visibility of his historical work, Grotius, an international figure par excellence, has hitherto remained tangential to such recent literature. It is owing to Jan Waszink's invaluable and indefatigable scholarship on the *Annales* that the obstacles to its study are now finally removed. There are no more excuses not to read Grotius the historian.

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Helmer Helmers
Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam, Netherlands

 helmer.helmers@huc.knaw.nl

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