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## Het hoofd van de stad

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## English summary

The aim of this book is to lay bare the role and position of the interwar mayor in the Netherlands. Until now, the Dutch interwar mayor has largely been portrayed as the ceremonial figurehead of local government. In big cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, social democratic commissioners distinguished themselves by their enterprising and energetic actions, reducing the mayor to the role of maintaining public order. Only after the Second World War a new type of mayor is said to have entered the scene: a 'modern', powerful manager, well-suited to the task of reconstruction. This study, however, argues that already during the interwar years the mayor's position was in transition, with mayors developing new ways to exert public influence.

Since the introduction of the Municipal Law of 1851 the Netherlands has had a system in which the mayor 1) presides over the city council, 2) chairs the board of mayor and commissioners (BMC), whose members are elected by the council, and 3) is formally in charge of the municipal police force. The Dutch mayor was – and in fact still is – appointed by the Crown, though the Minister of the Interior was in charge of the procedure. Local government, not to mention voters had neither formal nor informal say in the appointment of a mayor. The appointment therefore had a strong national, political character, with the national government in The Hague making the appointment, thus reinforcing the ties between the local level and the (national) state.

Instead of being in charge of a certain policy area like the commissioners, the mayor's task was first and foremost to ensure cooperation between the commissioners. As municipal politics politicised from the last decade of the nineteenth century onwards, the mayors' 'neutral' stance enabled them to mediate between different political factions. The fact that they were appointed by the national government for a six-year term, with council elections being held every four years, made them a stabilising factor. The majority of mayoral posts was in the hands of liberal or non-partisan politicians, who were thought of as ideal impartial arbiters within a political climate of growing polarization. They were 'born to be chairmen,' drawn as they were from the upper ranks of society, educated at one of the Dutch faculties of Law, and radiating authority through their upper-crust demeanour. These liberal and non-partisan mayors predominantly focused more narrowly on their administrative and mediating duties, keeping a low profile beyond these bounds.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands now witnessed mayors who found the time to exert power and influence on affairs that were not strictly governmental. Although mayors were confronted with ambitious commissioners who exercised more policy prerogatives than they could, and although the national government continuously strengthened its grip on local government, leaving the mayor less latitude to set out his own policy agenda, changes and shifts in the local and national power relations opened up possibilities for the mayor to adjust his position. Mayors found new ground to (re)affirm their position outside the 'traditional' political arena, within the sphere of urban governance. Whereas urban government refers to the political-governmental framework, made up by institutions like the Board of Commissioners and the city council, urban governance refers to a whole range of other organisations involved in 'running the (big) city' which can be located at the intersection of government and civil society.

This study explores the mayor's position in urban government and urban governance during the interwar years from the perspective of Willem de Vlugt, mayor of Amsterdam between 1921 and 1941. Mayor De Vlugt was the first confessional mayor of one of the Dutch big cities, which before had all been governed by liberal, predominantly patrician mayors. De Vlugt (1872-1945), in contrast, was one of the many self-made men in his generation of Orthodox Protestants politicians who rose to important positions after the turn of the century. Son of a carpenter at the National Shipyard in Amsterdam, De Vlugt started working as a construction worker, soon setting up his own construction firm. In 1915 De Vlugt was elected as a member of the city council on behalf of the Antirevolutionary Party (ARP). Between 1918 and 1921 De Vlugt acted as Public Works commissioner under mayor Jan Willem Tellegen (1915-1921). By then De Vlugt had established himself as a prominent member of the Amsterdam business world, acting as chairman of the board of directors of the leading excavation company ABM and as member (and later as president) of the board of directors of publishing house and the orthodox Protestant daily, 'De Stand-aard'. Once appointed as mayor, De Vlugt would accept a position as member (and again later on: president) of the board of commissioners of Amsterdam shipbuilding company NSM and of aircraft manufacturer Fokker.

Central to this study are the five different roles the mayor fulfilled: 1) his role within the local governmental bodies as chairman of the city council and board of mayor and commissioners; 2) his role as head of the local police, leaving him in charge of local public order policy; 3) his role as governor that is, his role in determining local government policy with the commissioners and as head of the board of curators at the University of Amsterdam; 4) the mayor's role as a promoter of his city's business interests; and 5) the mayor's role as 'first citizen,' to whom fellow citizens could turn to with their grievances and whose authority and social standing enhanced the standing of local government. These five roles made the mayor a key figure in Amsterdam local politics and society. Therefore, an investigation into these roles not only sheds light on the mayor's position in a period of transition, but can also provide new insights into the history of Amsterdam during the interwar years.

This study portrays Amsterdam as a city struggling with the many challenges it faced during the interwar years. Amsterdam, and more in particular its government, was confronted with the rise of modern culture, the emergence of a new political culture, the ever growing influence of the national government on local affairs, and the need to redefine its economic position. Within these dynamics the mayor's position was subject to redefinition, and opportunities arose for the mayor to manifest himself outside the local political arena, in the field of urban governance. Mayor De Vlugt turned out to be an important mediator, mediating between local and national government, government and citizenry, and government and the local business community.

How did Amsterdam deal with these challenges and how did it affect the mayor's position? First of all, the emergence of a new political culture, characterised by public debate, an international orientation, and a political and sometimes very physical militancy, forced the mayor to reconsider his position as head of the city council, the board of mayor and commissioners, and the local police. De Vlugt accepted the mayoralty in a period of great political, socio-cultural and economic turmoil. On a political level Amsterdam as well as other Dutch municipalities witnessed the effects of the introduction of general suffrage (1919) and proportional representation (1917) which ended the liberal dominance in the council and *ВМС*, which would now be dominated by social democrats. Ideally, the mayor's position as head of the council and board of mayor and commissioners changed from a rather authoritarian chairman leading the debates into a mediator who tried to ensure a smooth cooperation between the members of the different political parties. This was not going to be an easy task, considering the growing polarisation and the fact that De Vlugt, was, as with an increasing number of mayors in the 1920s and 1930s, himself imbued with a clear party political profile. In order to be able to act properly as a mediator, to transcend his religious and partisan background and become a mayor of all citizens of Amsterdam, De Vlugt used the old customs and traditions surrounding his office as a hold. De Vlugt effectively used these symbols to radiate authority. At the same time his appearance evoked memories of the Golden Age, when Amsterdam had been the centre of the world: De Vlugt resembled the marksmen on Rembrandt's famous painting 'Nightwatch' and was once even caricatured as such.

One key to his success can be found in his excellent relations with social democratic leader Wibaut. Wibaut and his social democratic colleagues dominated municipal politics from 1914 onwards, issuing, among other things, an impressive program of public housing. De Vlugt seldom interfered in the commissioners' activities and instead concentrated on facilitating a smooth cooperation between the social democratic, Roman Catholic, Protestant and liberal members of the Board of mayor and commissioners. As such, the Orthodox Protestant mayor fitted perfectly well in the – traditional – role he was expected to play in Amsterdam, mediating between different parties. Liberal colleagues of De Vlugt in The Hague and Rotterdam, on the other hand, did not fit well in the politicised environment of municipal politics. Mayor J.A.N. Patijn of The Hague (1918-1930) and mayor A.R. Zimmerman

of Rotterdam (1908-1923), both patrician, non-partisan conservative liberals, lacked the willingness to cooperate with the social democrats. No matter what their opinion was – so it seemed – the social democratic commissioners in The Hague would often find mayor Patijn as their opponent. In Rotterdam poor cooperation between the powerful social democrats and the mayor hampered the former in the execution of their ambitious urban politics. In Amsterdam the emergence of influential commissioners like Wibaut, De Miranda and Boekman did not affect the mayor's position of power in a negative way. On the contrary, De Vlught's authority to a certain extent was based on his ability to maintain order and peace within the city's governmental bodies in a period of political polarisation.

Second, Amsterdam and De Vlught together struggled in their relationships with The Hague. For centuries, the (unofficial) capital city and the central authorities maintained a tense relationship, largely based on Amsterdam's record as the centre of protest against national government. Tensions heightened during the interwar years because of the city's reputation as a 'red' and revolutionary stronghold. The Hague frowned upon the city's expensive fiscal policy, which had been – with few short interruptions – in the hands of a social democratic commissioner from 1918 onwards. At first, De Vlught supported the national government's efforts to force the city in a strict austerity policy, but eventually, when municipal financial autonomy was seriously threatened, he changed his stance. The mayor, often portrayed as the national government's watchdog on the local level, now acted as an advocate of the interests of his city. De Vlught complained to the national government about the lack of financial support and used every opportunity to publicly denounce the national government for cutting down the municipal autonomy and for not giving the city the financial support it needed and deserved. Eventually, just before the German army invaded the Netherlands, The Hague and the Amsterdam city government managed to reach an agreement on the outstanding state subsidies.

Third, during the interwar years big cities like Amsterdam experienced the emergence of a 'modern' culture. An ever-growing amount of movie theatres, featuring new productions from the United States and Soviet Russia, the introduction of new, and highly-debated dance styles like the Shimmy and Charleston and indecent revues presented new challenges and choices. Concern about the immoral character of certain elements of this modern culture, especially concerning its influence on the youth, was widespread. City councils debated the admissibility of dancing in public bars and restaurants, plays and revues with a particular sexual undercurrent. As far as the moral order was concerned, members of the social democratic party joined confessional politicians in contesting the influence of certain elements of modern culture on adolescents in particular. De Vlught was evidently involved in these debates, because of his formal responsibility to maintain public order and uphold public decency. De Vlught advocated a strong policy of government censorship. The mayor did not hide the fact that he, at least partially, based his decisions on his Orthodox Protestant faith, suspending at these moments his non-partisan role in local government. De Vlught's rather strict moral policy met with criticism from

the city council where communists, some social-democrats and liberals opposed the mayor's alleged efforts to impose his faith on the citizens of Amsterdam. De Vlugt, however, made full use of his independent position, which allowed him to follow his own opinion and ignore political sentiments in the city council. By the early 1930s, policy on moral issues would be implemented at the national level, as nationwide regulations concerning movie censorship and dancing were decreed.

Fourth, Amsterdam struggled with its position as centre of trade and finance. The city was badly in need for a new connection with the Rhine to ensure transit trade with the German hinterland. Amsterdam also explored new economic opportunities, most importantly through the development of Schiphol airport and the redevelopment of the Amsterdam harbour. The city government tried to attract new, big high-grade industries to provide more opportunities for employment in Amsterdam. Mayor De Vlugt set himself up as an agent of the city's commercial interests. He exerted himself to reach an agreement with the national government on the construction of a new connection of the Amsterdam harbour with the Rhine and even travelled to communist Moscow to reach an agreement with the Soviet Russian government on an order for two ships with Amsterdam's biggest shipbuilding company NSM, where De Vlugt acted as chairman of the board of directors. It remains unclear whether or not De Vlugt travelled to Moscow on behalf of the municipal government or the NSM, but in any case, he managed to ensure employment in Amsterdam's shipbuilding industry and was applauded for his efforts upon his return to the Netherlands. As head of the board of governors of the University of Amsterdam, which De Vlugt did not consider merely as an honorary post, in contrast to some of his predecessors, the mayor actively promoted the interests of the university, among other things by strengthening the bond between the university and Amsterdam's commercial community. As such, a mayor like De Vlugt was part of a many-branched network of urban governance: the world of science, trade and finance, church, local and national politics and administration. The mayor's authority to a large extent depended on his ability to utilise these networks. Moreover, the mayor's key position within these networks turned him into a public, very visible figure who rose above his formal governmental duties. Mayors were involved in stimulating big business, defending the interests of science, reducing socio-political conflict, enforcing public morals and promoting the city at home and abroad.

The political, social, cultural and economic developments discussed here, clearly had an affect on the mayor's position. At the same time, these dynamic circumstances also created opportunities for the mayor to readjust his position according to his own views and preferences. In Dutch historiography the postwar mayor stands out as a dynamic, energetic manager in contrast with the prewar conservative, authoritarian magistrate of which De Vlugt is thought to classically represent. Although De Vlugt certainly held conservative views on, for example, public morals and exuded tradition in his outer appearance, he also distinguished himself through his activities on the level of urban governance. De Vlugt was, among other things,

involved in the city's relations with The Hague and Amsterdam's economic and intellectual future.

In spite of these initiatives, De Vlughts mayorship was not an unqualified success. In the 1930s De Vlught failed to reach an agreement with the national government in regard to the city's finances. At the end of his mayorship De Vlughts friendly relationship with W.A. de Graaf, a senior civil servant in the department of Public Works – the department De Vlught headed in his years as a commissioner – stood in the way of a proper settlement of a dispute between De Graaf and the social democratic commissioner De Miranda. De Vlughts negligent behaviour was one of the reasons behind the escalation of this conflict, which eventually caused an abrupt end to De Miranda's impressive political career. And during the German occupation De Vlught gradually faded away as a key player within the Amsterdam city government. In the aftermath of the famous February Strike in 1941 the Germans dismissed De Vlught because he had not managed to prevent a strike within the Amsterdam civil service.

Nonetheless, in his time De Vlught was a very popular mayor. Amsterdam newspapers of all denominations repeatedly hailed his indefatigable dedication, impartial stance, humour and debating technique, hailing him as an 'Amsterdammer' in the true sense of the word. The people of Amsterdam nicknamed him 'Vader Willem': a father who cared for his citizens by showing compassion, concern and empathy for their situation in a time of political, socio-cultural and economic change. His life story, a self made man who worked his way up from carpenter to a successful business man, and his authenticity as an Orthodox Protestant, antirevolutionary politician, resonated in a city in search for its future, a future in which it hoped to regain and retain its position and reputation as a centre of trade, finance, culture, science and industry, and as a laboratory for those developments and ideas that sooner or later would penetrate other parts of Dutch society.