



# Margareta of Austria

## *A Princess with Ambition and Political Insight*

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The most important phases in the life of Margaret of Austria were the result of decisions made by others: by her father Maximilian I (1459–1519) and her nephew Charles V (1500–1558), both of whom acted in the overall interest of the Habsburg dynasty. As the case of Margaret of York has shown, it was a fate no different from that of other noble women, yet despite traditional expectations that viewed the female sex in terms of obedient daughters, loyal wives and responsible mothers, women of that period often enjoyed a surprising degree of liberty, which each could exercise according to individual inclination and personality. This is particularly true of Margaret of Austria who spent the second half of her life (1507–1530) in the Burgundian Netherlands and through her achievements attained considerable renown throughout Europe. Her influence on the politics of the territories she administered was considerable and she actively sought to extend her personal authority. That today we are able to form such a clear picture of Margaret is due solely to her amazing energy and willpower. Her fascinating personality is still to be felt in Mechelen, the city she made her residence, and in Brou close to Bourg-en-Bresse, where her body is buried.<sup>1</sup> Through her love of music, art and poetry, she transformed her palace, the so-called *Hof van Savoyen*, into a centre of courtly culture, with a reputation that extended far beyond the boundaries of Mechelen.

From a historical point of view, Margaret of Austria is an important link between two of Europe's leading noble families, whose ties with one another were

made official only in 1477 when the Habsburg heir Maximilian of Austria married Mary of Burgundy (cat. 9, 10). Margaret's roots in both regions, Austria and Burgundy, are reflected in her numerous honorary titles, in official documents and dedications. Robert Péril's large woodcut showing the 'Triumphal Entry of Charles V into Bologna' in 1530 cites only the most important: 'Archduchess of Austria, Duchess and Countess of Burgundy, Dowager Duchess of Savoy, Regent and Governor General of the Imperial Netherlands' (cat. 40).

As the only daughter of the ambitious Habsburg dynasty and thus its only female pawn in the marriage game, Margaret spent a number of years at foreign courts, first in France, until her marriage to the future Charles VIII was dissolved, then in Spain as the consort of Juan of Aragon–Castile (ill. 13), and finally in the south-west of modern France, as wife of Duke Philibert II of Savoy (ill. 14). The young and attractive princess spoke fluent French and Castilian; though unclear if she ever mastered Dutch, it is probable that she was at least able to understand it. In Jean Lemaire de Belges' poem 'The first letter of the green lover' (*Le première épître de l'amant vert*), the author makes Margaret's pet parrot proclaim that he speaks French, Dutch, Castilian and even Latin, mirroring the many languages mastered by his mistress. According to her parrot, Margaret left him behind in Savoy to visit her father Maximilian in 'noble Germany' (*Elle va veoir la noble Germanie*).<sup>2</sup> It seems, however, as if Margaret never learnt to speak or even read German. Any German publications she considered sufficiently important to be included in her extensive library

<sup>12</sup> Conrad Meit, *Medallion with portrait of Margaret of Austria, painted and gilded terracotta, 1528, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer, cat. 49.*





13 Margaret of Austria  
as Princess of Aragon-  
Castile, 1507-1509, in:  
Michele Riccio,  
*Changement de fortune  
en toute prosperité*,  
Vienna, Österreichische  
Nationalbibliothek,  
cod. 2625, fol. 18v.



14 Margaret of Austria  
as Duchess of Savoy,  
Vienna, Österreichische  
Nationalbibliothek,  
cod. 2625, fol. 21.

were translated into French, including Maximilian's autobiographical *Theuerdank* and an unidentified chronicle on the Habsburg-Austrian House (cat. 38).

Margaret's extensive knowledge of the social conventions of the leading courts in Europe was to prove invaluable when she became Duchess of Savoy and of course for her later role as Regent of the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> In France, as indeed in Spain and Burgundy, there were noble women who actively participated in the everyday political life of the court. Anne of Beaujeu (1461-1522) acted as regent for the French Dauphin, who subsequently became king Charles VIII; in Spain Isabel of Castile (1451-1504) ruled together with her husband Ferdinand of Aragon (1452-1516), while in the Netherlands Margaret of York unofficially represented the interests of the Burgundian family.<sup>4</sup> Thus during the years spend roaming the courts of Europe, Margaret of Austria was able

to observe these influential women 'at work'; they became her role-models.

The situation was somewhat different in the duchy of Savoy. There, Margaret's third husband, Philibert II (1475-1504), devoted most of his energies to hunting and other courtly pleasures. Having little interest in the business of ruling, he left control of the territory to his half-brother René, who misused this trust to his own ends. Following his removal, Philibert's wife took up the reins of power and displayed great talent and interest in politics. Margaret surrounded herself with qualified and loyal advisors from Piedmont and Savoy, who were to remain with her when she later moved to the Netherlands. Among the most important were Mercurino di Gattinara, Louis Barangier and Laurent de Gorrevaud. During these years as acting head of state, Margaret acquired considerable experience. Jean Lemaire de Belges, her court histori-





ographer, jestingly called her the ‘first minister of her husband’ – during the early sixteenth century both men and women acknowledged a change in traditional gender roles.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the amount of time Margaret spent in other European countries during her early years, it was in her native Netherlands that she spent the greatest part of her life. Margaret of York’s court at Mechelen was home for varying periods of time: following the death of her mother (March 1482–April 1483), after her marriage to Charles VIII was dissolved (June 1493–January 1497; ill. 15), and after the death of Juan of Aragon–Castile (January 1500–October 1501). Following her return from Savoy in 1506 she spent the rest of her life, more than twenty-three years, in the Burgundian Netherlands. As the daughter of Mary of Burgundy and as the direct descendent of the dukes of Burgundy she was considered a *princesse*

*naturelle*; in other words, Margaret received from the citizens and the States General of the Netherlands the recognition and support that had, initially, been denied her father. In contrast to Margaret, Maximilian of Austria was considered a foreigner.<sup>6</sup>

#### Governor General and Regent of the Netherlands: the First Phase (1507–1514)<sup>7</sup>

Following the sudden death of her brother Philip the Fair (1478–1506; cat. 14), Margaret, a widow of twenty-seven, was recalled to the Netherlands by her father in order to represent his interests there. Her new powers extended to the administration of the Netherlandish territories as well as to the care and education of her nieces and nephew: Eleanor (°1498), Charles (°1500), Isabel (°1501) and Mary

15a-b Margaret of Austria as Queen of France deposed by Fortuna, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms. 2625, fol. 2v-3.

(<sup>o</sup>1505). Since Maximilian could not assume the position of regent for his seven-year old grandson Charles, on 18 March 1507 he appointed his daughter Margaret as Governor General of the Netherlandish duchies and territories.

Margaret's official assumption of duties is forcefully described in Jean Lemaire de Belges' chronicle of 1507.<sup>8</sup> He gives a reports on the actual journey and the ritual confirmation of privileges in the most important cities of her realm: Leuven, Brussels, Mons, Valenciennes, Douai, Arras, Lille, Ghent, Bruges, Middelburg (Zeeland), Breda, Hoogstraten and Antwerp, etc. The glorious conclusion took place on 5 July 1507, with Margaret's Joyful Entry into Mechelen, the administrative capital of this heterogeneous territory.

Because Margaret was only appointed Governor General (*procurateur.general*) at first, her powers were severely restricted and she was required to strictly adhere to the orders of her father Maximilian. The most important decisions were made by the Secret Council (*conseil privé*), a committee headed first by Jean le Sauvage, and from November 1511 by Gerard de Pleine, Lord of La Roche. It was only in 1514, and at Margaret's suggestion, that her confidant Mercurino di Gattinara was appointed President of the *conseil privé*.

Two years after her appointment as his representative, Maximilian slowly began to relax his grip. On 22 April 1509 Margaret finally became Regent of the Netherlands (*régente et gouvernante*). This position gave her additional powers. She was, for example, now entrusted with the financial signet, which considerably enhanced her image with those responsible for financial administration. However, in many respects Margaret still could not act without her father's explicit agreement and instructions. This applied both to negotiations with the States General and to military confrontations with enemy powers. Among the latter, the smoldering conflicts with the duchy of Guelders (1508–1511) and with France deserve mention, both of which weighed heavily on the political and economic situation in the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup>

The intensive exchange of letters between Margaret and Maximilian I reveals the extent to which she participated in day-to-day political life, and with what determination she presented her own opinion about the conflict with France.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas initially she argued for a stop to the fighting and a peace treaty, the failure of the Treaty of Cambrai (1529) brought about a change of attitude and she adopted a strong anti-French stance. She subsequently put considerable effort into negotiating an alliance between the emperor, England and Spain, but without success. Towards the end of her first period as regent, the conflict escalated: on the one side, the pro-French noble faction around Charles's tutor, Guillaume de Croÿ, Lord of Chièvres (1458–1521), and on the other, the pro-England party around Margaret herself. Towards the end of 1514, Chièvres' party triumphed as France and England drew politically closer. When in the midst of this difficult situation Margaret overreacted and exceeded her powers by arresting a member of the Order of the Golden Fleece whose sympathies lay towards France, the internal conflict spiralled out of control. Shortly afterwards she was relieved of her position as regent. Early in 1515, her nephew Charles was declared of age and thus eligible to assume responsibility for the Burgundian Netherlands. Andrea Pearson has convincingly argued that this manifestation of problems related to the exercise of authority reveals the tensions and contradictions that resulted from the new role of women as political decision-makers.<sup>11</sup>

This deep rupture in Margaret's political career was in my opinion the motivation behind her decision in the summer of 1516 to have her entire movable possessions systematically ordered and documented. The extensive lists testifying to this undertaking are today kept in the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille.<sup>12</sup> However, contrary to what has hitherto been assumed, these unbound sheets do not constitute an inventory in the proper judicial sense, but rather their purpose was to give a complete overview of all Margaret's possessions. It is possible that Margaret thought she might have to leave her residence in Mechelen, or that she at least wanted to be prepared should it be necessary.

As it happened, Margaret's future was indeed about to change, but for the better. Following the death in January 1516 of his grandfather, Ferdinand of Aragon, Charles became King of Spain (cat. 24). In order to oversee his interests there, he headed south from the Netherlands on 8 September 1517, having previously, on July 23, called into being a regency counsel whose task it was to regulate his business in his absence.



### Governor General and Regent of the Netherlands: the Second Phase (1517–1530)<sup>13</sup>

As Jochen Fühner has shown in his recent study of the decrees issued by Charles V after 1517, Margaret was given far fewer powers than during her first regency. Indeed, it would be two years before she was reappointed regent with sole responsibility for governing the Netherlands.

The creation of a regency counsel under the presidency of Claude Carondelet (1467–1518) was intended to hinder any attempt on Margaret's part to make her own decisions, as she had been accustomed to doing at the end of her first regency. She was initially just one of a number of members with voting rights in this important council. Though it had the authority to call a session of the States General, and the Great Council of Mechelen was answerable to it, the *conseil privé* could not make decisions related to foreign policy nor could it fill important offices – Charles retained these privileges for himself.

Dissatisfied with such a restrictive role, Margaret repeatedly petitioned her nephew to extend her powers. But it was only after the death of Carondelet on 24 July 1518, that Charles acceded to her wishes, without however giving her the official title of regent. She was permitted to sign all official letters with 'Par le Roy, Marguerite', and assumed responsibility for financial administration; at the same time she took control of the *conseil privé*.

Margaret was clearly concerned that her new status be more widely known: 'both for our honour as well as for the good and success of royal interests'.<sup>14</sup> She however continued to 'work' on Charles, in part directly, in part through Gattinara, until finally, following the death of Maximilian on 12 January 1519, her wish was granted. On 1 July 1519 Charles decreed officially that Margaret was, for a second time, elevated to the position of Regent of the Netherlands:

*regente et gouvernante, en nostre nom, de tous nosdits pays d'embaz [...] en luy donnant povoir, auctorité, faculté et plaine puissance [...] de vacquer et entendre au régime et gouvernement de nosdits pays et subgetz...*<sup>15</sup>

(regent and governess, in our name, of all our aforementioned low countries... giving her power and authority, full discretion and empowerment [...] to implement make decisions regarding the rule and good government of our aforementioned lands and subjects...)







17 *Fortitude*, Vienna,  
 Österreichische  
 Nationalbibliothek,  
 ms. 2625, fol. 10.

Charles declared that in his absence Margaret was to be his *alter ego*. As regent and head of the *conseil privé* she was invested with the power to make decisions without consulting him; moreover, the most important administrative groups in the Netherlands answered to her: the courts, government councils, the financial administration, the civil servants and the imperial troops. On 19 October 1520, and again on 15 April 1522, Charles revised and confirmed her role as regent. It seems that whatever conflicts had existed between him and his aunt had been ironed out. In 1522 the emperor expressly paid tribute to the character and political achievements of his aunt; clearly Margaret's engagement for the good of the family had once again found complete recognition (ill. 16):

[...] *considerant aussi les grands vertuz, prudence, experience et bonne conduite qui du temps de nostre minorite et depuis avoient este et estoient en la personne de nostre tres-chiere dame et tante [...] et la paine, soing, cure et dilligence quelle avoit prinse et prenoit pour l'adresse et conduite de nosdicts affaires [...] eussions continue nostredicte Dame et tante oudict regime et gouvernement [...].*<sup>16</sup>

([...] considering as well the great virtues, prudence, experience and fine leadership which during the time of our minority characterised and has subsequently characterised the person of our very dear lady and aunt [...] and the pains, care, cures and diligence that she extended and has continued to provide to the leadership and conduct of our aforementioned affairs [...] we therefore wish to retain our said Lady and aunt in the aforementioned management and government [...].)

Margaret's continual battle for power – even in the face of great difficulties – does however show that her devotion was not driven solely by ideals of self-sacrifice, but that she clearly identified herself with her role as the 'mother of the nation', and was – more than willingly – to accept the burden of responsibility (cat. 17).

Margaret remained Regent of the Netherlands until her death on 1 December 1530. She did not renounce her position to retire to the Convent of the Annunciation she had founded in Bruges, but contin-

ued to fulfill her duties to the best of her ability, always in the hope that in the long term a peaceful solution to the war would be found (cat. 57b). She remained true to herself to the very end, for this same desire is found in Jean Lemaire de Belges's early poetic characterisation (1507) of Margaret of Austria at the start of her political career:

*La clere face doncques de la princesse, resplendissant de grace et debonnaireté et toute ardant d'amour à la chose publicque, desgella les glassons des durs cueurs obstans, embellist les chemins de paix, annichila les tourbillons bruyneux de la trahison couverte, fit apparoir les belles couleurs de justice et de concorde, chassa toute chose nuisible qui tend ses epies par nuyt. Si esclarist et rechauffa de vryae amour et sainte voulenté les cueurs de tous bons subiectz de la maison d'Austriche, Castille et Bourgoigne.*<sup>17</sup>

(The stainless image of the princess, therefore, resplendant with grace and sophistication and burning with love for public affairs, melted the ice of hardened hearts, beautified the roads to peace, dispersed the turbulent clouds of clandestine treason, made the beautiful colours of justice and concord appear, chased away the harmful things which set their traps by night. Thus enlightened and radiated the heat of true love and holy will to the hearts of all good subjects of the house of Austria, Castile and Burgundy.)

My special thanks to Kathleen Wilson – Chevalier, Andrea Pearson, Jochen Fühner, Walter Prevenier and Wim Blockmans.

This essay has been illustrated with miniatures from Michele Riccio's *Changement de fortune et toute prospérité*, a manuscript which the author dedicated to Margaret; see Debae 1995: 509–512.

1 Hörsch 1994; Freigang 2003. This essay has been illustrated with miniatures from Michele Riccio's *Changement de fortune en toute prospérité*, a manuscript which the author dedicated to Margaret; see Deboe 1995: 509–512.

2 Lemaire 1505/1948: 6 and 12–13

3 Margaret's early years are only briefly discussed here; see further: Bruchet 1927; De Boom 1935; Tamussino 1995.

4 Checa Cremades 2004.

5 Tamussino 1995: 90.

6 Blockmans and Prevenier 1998.

7 For Margaret's first regency, see: Königsberger 1980 and Tamussino 1995.

8 Lemaire 1507/2001.

9 See the contribution by Wim Blockmans in this volume, p. 42–47.

10 Le Glay 1839.11 Pearson 2005: 172–173.

12 Eichberger 2005.

13 For Margaret's second regency, see: Rabe and Marzahl 1996; Fühner 2004, chapter III; my thanks to Jochen Fühner for kindly granting me access to his unpublished Ph.D. thesis.

14 *Recueil des Ordonnances*: 1898, vol. II/1 1518: 204, cited from Fühner 2004: 55; my thanks also to Andrea Pearson for giving me access to her unpublished book.

15 *Receuil des Ordonnances*: 1899, vol. II/1 1519, 2–684, quoted in Fühner: 55.

16 *Recueil des Ordonnances*, vol. II/2 1522: 167–168; quoted in Fühner 2004: 59, Fn. 60.

17 Lemaire 1507/2001: 61.