

Carla de Wilt, *Landlieden en hoogheemraden. De bestuurlijke ontwikkeling van het waterbeheer en de participatiecultuur in Delfland in de zestiende eeuw*. Waterstaat, cultuur en geschiedenis 3 (Dissertatie Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2015; Hilversum: Verloren, 2015, 410 pp., ISBN 978 90 8704 512 8).

Recently, water management has firmly gained ground as a historical topic in its own right, but one which also contributes to other historiographical questions, as is clear from the works of Soens (*De spade in de dijk*, 2009) and Van Cruyningen (*Dealing with Drainage*, 2015). *Landlieden en hoogheemraden* by Carla De Wilt is especially indebted to Van Dam and Van Tielhof's study on the Rijnland water boards (*hoogheemraadschappen*), *Waterstaat in stedenland* (2006), which strongly focuses on the interaction between man and nature in water management. The Dutch *poldermodel* – a tradition of consultation often linked to the country's water managing past – has even been linked to the country's economic performance in Prak and Van Zanden's *Nederland en het poldermodel* (2013). However, precise information on the culture of governance and the true extent of consultation in water management institutions has been largely lacking.

The book under review tackles this lacuna and focuses on the development of governmental organisation in Delfland during the sixteenth century and on the interplay between the local, regional and central level. Special attention is paid to the sometimes conflictual relationship between the local (*ambacht*) and regional level (*hoogheemraadschappen*). The amount and intensity of conflict was not identical in all of the Delfland *ambachten*. De Wilt's central thesis is that differences in the culture of participation can explain differences in the level of tension. To prove this point, she investigates three very distinct *ambachten*: Maasland, Monsterambacht and Berkel.

After explaining in much detail the functioning and evolution of local and regional water management, the author devotes a chapter to each of these three regions, reconstructing geographic conditions, demography and property distribution, *ambacht* government, water management, and the culture of participation. This last subject is reconstructed by an analysis of the economic background of officeholders and the mutation rate of offices, which allow De Wilt to assess whether participation culture was open, broad or elitist. In a next chapter, she brings all of this together by an examination of water-related litigation. A clear trend was present throughout the sixteenth century: more and more individuals and less and less collectivities were brought to court. Within this general trend, important local differences can be pointed out. From her analysis it appears that the subregions with a more

elitist participation culture (Monsterambacht and Berkel) were characterised by less court cases, as the elites functioned as a mechanism of social control. In the more open Maasland participation culture, court cases were much more frequent. De Wilt also points to the relevance of the differences in the complexity of water management in these regions. Where management was more difficult and where specific individuals held final responsibility (as in the Maasland), conflicts were much more prone to arise.

The argument is explained in a clear manner and in a beautifully illustrated book. The amount and the meticulousness of archival research is commendable, and the author clearly has an impressive insight into a wide array of sources. Furthermore, its focus on the culture of governance, also in the early period of water management – the main focus is on the sixteenth century, but earlier developments are described as well – its comparative angle, and the focus on different cultures of participation ensure that this work forms a useful complement to what we already know about water management. Moreover, its appeal should not be limited to those researching water management, as the shift from collective to individual responsibility in judicial sources noticed by De Wilt will be of interest to all those studying collective action organisations such as commons or even guilds.

Some minor remarks can be given regarding the analysis, especially the parts focusing on reconstructing property distribution. A division is made between land use (of land owned and leased by the farmer) and land ownership, but land use is indicated with the word *landbezit*, which is highly confusing. All farm sizes are furthermore given in *morgen*, whereas giving them in hectares would make international comparison easier and would be more comprehensible for the lay reader. A final remark concerning property distribution links up with the evolution of land ownership throughout time. De Wilt ascertains that in most *ambachten* the number of large farms diminishes to the advantage of middle-sized (and to a lesser extent small-sized) farms. Whether this implies an increasing or decreasing level of inequality remains vague, as no Gini or Theil indexes (tools allowing us to assess the precise level of inequality) are calculated. Establishing a more precise link between the level of inequality and the amount and extent of litigation would have added to the wider appeal of this work.

The most important shortcoming is that the detailed and skilled analysis of the sources is not embedded within a more theoretical framework nor guided by international literature. The author is rather hesitant in using her own adeptly executed case study to make grander statements linking up with larger historiographical debates. Comparisons with developments in other regions are only haphazardly given and are often limited to research on the Rijnland. The work of Soens (*De spade in de dijk*, 2009) is mentioned, for example, but the question of how his findings relate to the Delfland case is never explored in depth. Furthermore, it is a missed opportunity that the author never touches on larger debates. For example, an explicit reflection

on what this work teaches us about the absence or presence of a culture of consultation and its relation to the coming into being of a *poldermodel* is lacking. This topic would furthermore lend itself to an analysis on the effectiveness or efficiency of institutions, a focus much present in historical research since the rise of New Institutional Economics. An explicit reflection on, for example, Acemoglu and Robinson's theory (*Why Nations Fail*, 2012) on the importance of inclusive institutions, or the critiques of Ogilvie ('“Whatever Is, Is Right”?: Economic Institutions in Pre-Industrial Europe', 2007) on institutional efficiency and the relevance of the distribution of power, might have given this work a wider appeal.

All in all, De Wilt's work provides us with a detailed and meticulous analysis of an intriguing case study covering a topic that has been mostly neglected, and is laudable in its handling of the source material, but it would perhaps have benefitted from a more ambitious positioning in historiographical debates.

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