



Trends in Rural Social and Economic History of the Pre-Industrial Low Countries

Recent Themes and Ideas in Journals and Books of the Past Five Years (2007-2013)¹

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Rural social and economic history of the Low Countries has long been in the shadow of more dominant urban-focused histories. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the high level of urbanisation seen in parts of the Low Countries from the high Middle Ages onwards. However, it may also be connected with problems in the discipline of rural history itself – arguably a major one being the tendency towards a) localism and b) description rather than analysis. Probably a way of rectifying this situation is by becoming more explicit and systematic with our use of comparative history – both in regions of the Low Countries, but also in creating links with wider historical processes across Western Europe as well. This paper makes a small contribution by bringing together important themes and ideas that have linked research in our various regions of interest over the past five years.

Although undoubtedly there have been a number of skilled Dutch and Belgian historians of the past focusing on the social and economic history of the pre-industrial countryside of the Low Countries, the discipline has arguably been traditionally dominated by urban historians. Given that areas such as Flanders exhibited a dense network of cities and towns by the high Middle Ages and had high proportions of urban-dwelling populations, this makes sense. Furthermore, cities such as Antwerp grew in the sixteenth century into

commercial metropolises with international trading links, while the ‘Dutch Golden Age’ has been inextricably linked with themes of urbanity. It is logical then that rural history has always played a more peripheral role in the social and economic historiography of the Low Countries. Rural history has never entirely been absent from the mainstream of the discipline, however. Arguably one of the most significant contributions to the history of the countryside has come from the so-called ‘Wageningen School’ – particularly influential from the 1960s to the 1980s and being the intellectual home to renowned rural historians such as Bernard Slicher van Bath and Ad van der Woude, and including those still publishing such as Jan Bieleman. Through the series ‘AAG Bijdragen’, this group was able to produce fifty monographs on different regions of the Dutch and Belgian countryside.

Despite being highly regarded within social and economic history circles in the Low Countries however, the group did not achieve high levels of international recognition – unsurprising given many of their works were written in Dutch, a language not accessible to many academics. Furthermore, one could say that a weakness of this school was that despite being founded by Slicher van Bath (author of an influential general economic history of pre-industrial Western Europe), much of the work did not place developments in the rural Low Countries in a comparative perspective. This is not a criticism – they were merely doing the same as rural historians elsewhere across Europe. Rural history in the twentieth century tended to be very insular with scholars rarely willing to cross borders in the historiography. Even if one reads classic works from the likes of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie or Pierre Goubert, one will find that ninety percent of the literature cited is in French and based on French social and economic developments in isolation. British rural historians are still notoriously insular – and this is a pity since British rural history has arguably the strongest tradition in Europe, given their access to medieval manorial records.

It is fair to say furthermore, that the influence of the Wageningen School on the social and economic history of the Low Countries has waned significantly in the twenty-first century. The group is still going and still publishing on the Low Countries of course, but it is likely that the group will broaden its geographical focus in the next few years.² If that is the case, it does beg the question, in which direction is the discipline of rural history for the Low Countries heading? Talented rural historians are to be found in universities all across Belgium and the Netherlands, but still one has the

1 The author wishes to thank Prof. dr. Bas van Bavel and Prof. dr. Maarten Prak for some financial support during the writing of this article, and the reviewers at the *BMCN - Low Countries Historical Research* for some helpful comments.

2 See the NWO project of Prof. dr. Ewout Frankema on the long-term roots of underdevelopment in Africa; <<http://www.nwo.nl/onderzoek-en-resultaten/onderzoeksprojecten/27/2300172427.html>>.

impression that rural concerns play ‘second fiddle’ to urban interests in the field of economic and social history. One of the most important developments for rural historians of the Low Countries however, has been the emergence of the CORN publication series at the end of the twentieth century, with Erik Thoen of the University of Ghent highly influential behind its set-up. All publications are written in English, thereby disseminating to a wider international audience. More than that though, its members and contributors come from many different countries in North-western Europe, and it is this cross-border cooperation that allows rural social and economic developments in the Low Countries to be placed within a more general European context. Systematic comparison is the future of the discipline it seems.

In that sense, this review paper aims to continue along this theme of comparison. Although rural history is still not as significant as urban history in the context of the Low Countries, probably a good move for the future direction of the discipline is to realise some of the general trends that link our research together. In this paper the material produced explicitly focusing on rural social and economic history of the pre-industrial Low Countries over the past five years is organised into some broad theoretical themes. By understanding what links our research in terms of ideas and concepts, we may begin to create a more analytical rural history – more interested in explanation of societal processes rather than mere description of what is happening, and therefore easier to place within wider Western European trends.

The road to commercialisation and capitalism in the Low Countries

Commercialisation is an appropriate place to begin given that the most important piece of work produced in the past five years associated with the rural society and economy of the pre-industrial Low Countries is dedicated to explaining and assessing the impact of this phenomenon – that is *Manors and Markets* written by Bas van Bavel of Utrecht University.³ At present Van Bavel is probably the only social and economic historian who could have written a book like this, which will likely be the ‘go-to’ source for general inquiries into the social and economic history of the pre-industrial Low Countries for quite some time. The book is hardly a ‘neutral’ text (not necessarily a bad thing), and is influenced by older Marxist scholarship (particularly the ideas of Robert Brenner) and the Annales School (with an emphasis on long term development), but at the same time draws deeply from the well of the fashionable New Institutional Economics. That is not to say it is a perfect

3 B. van Bavel, *Manors and Markets: Economy and Society in the Low Countries, 500-1600* (Oxford 2010).

book, or one that will escape criticism. The *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* has already devoted a whole issue to respondents from across Belgian and Dutch institutions.⁴ Yet with such strong and provocative hypotheses, Van Bavel is likely aware that this goes with the territory of writing something influential for a generation of scholars – and better that, than being quietly ignored.

Probably more than those of any other scholar of the pre-industrial countryside of the Low Countries (and perhaps even of Western Europe), Van Bavel's monograph, but also his publications in their entirety have emphasised the importance of drawing comparisons and putting historical developments into relative perspective.⁵ His previous publications focused mainly on the Central Dutch River Area, Flanders and Holland, but *Manors and Markets* broadens the comparison, taking in other parts of the Low Countries including Drenthe, the Veluwe, Zeeland, the Frisian coastal marshes, the Campine and with sporadic references to other areas. If there is to be a criticism of the book, it still did not devote enough attention to Walloon regions of the Southern Low Countries, while Groningen and Frisia also seemed to get short shrift. Furthermore, there is still some lack of clarity over the boundaries Van Bavel uses in order to distinguish between different regions.⁶

The main theoretical contributions of Van Bavel are more important, however, and two-fold. First of all, the major hypothesis put forward in the book is that the Low Countries can be divided into a number of (perhaps what Erik Thoen would term) 'social agrosystems', which during the pre-industrial period each developed distinctive social, economic and ecological constellations. The point made is that divergent economic development between the regions (often very close together) was connected to different arrangements of favourable or unfavourable institutions, which importantly received their distinctive characteristics from divergent conditions of occupation and settlement. In that sense, the institutions laid down during

4 Various, 'Debate: Manors and Markets: Economy and Society in the Low Countries', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* (hereafter TSEG) 8 (2011) 61-138.

5 Important publications of the last five years include B. van Bavel, 'The Transition in the Low Countries: Wage Labour as an Indicator of the Rise of Capitalism in the Countryside, 14th-17th Centuries', in: P. Coss, C. Dyer and C. Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: An Exploration of Historical Themes* (Oxford 2007) 286-303; 'The Emergence and Growth of Short-Term Leasing in the Netherlands and Other Parts of Northwestern

Europe (Eleventh-Seventeenth Centuries): A Chronology and a Tentative Investigation into its Causes', in: B. van Bavel and P. Schofield (eds.), *The Development of Leasehold in Northwestern Europe, c. 1200-1600* (Turnhout 2008) 179-213.

6 A point made for treating 'Holland' as a whole in P. van Dam, 'Fuzzy Boundaries and Three-Legged Tables: A Comment on Ecological and Spatial Dynamics in Bas van Bavel's *Manors and Markets*', TSEG 8 (2011) 103-112. Also unclarity over the term 'Guelders River Area' in J. Mol, 'Hoven en hun economische lange termijnbetekenis', <<http://www.contactgroepsignum.eu/node/2073>> (2012).



▲ Map of villages engaged in fishing for plaice in the sixteenth century, as used in the book discussed, *Shaping Medieval Markets* by Jessica Dijkman. Adriaen Coenen, Visboek. Special Collections, National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.

different phases of the Middle Ages were important for how the Low Countries would come to develop in the early modern period both socially and economically – path dependency in practice.⁷ In effect, this kind of theoretical framework for the development of the Low Countries can almost be seen as a ‘mini’ framework of the sort employed in some quarters for explaining the global ‘Great Divergence’ (the economic development of Europe in comparison to Asia and Africa) as a counter to the prevailing framework of Kenneth Pomeranz and the ‘California School’.⁸ The second theoretical contribution, particularly significant for rural historians, is that Van Bavel goes against a prevailing philosophy that urbanisation is a necessary proxy for commercialisation. What he is able to show actually is that some of the earliest and most highly commercialised regions of the Low Countries were essentially rural; citing of course the Central Dutch River Area as a highly commercialised region with very low levels of urbanisation. For Van Bavel, the main drivers of pre-industrial economic and social developments were essentially rural – good news for rural historians of course, and something that has stuck in the craw of some urban historians.⁹

Given the significance and provocative nature of the hypotheses and theories brought forward from *Manors and Markets*, it is best to begin to assess the rural literature on commercialisation and capitalism of the past five years in light of this book. One of the easiest ways this can be done is by looking at some of the recent literature on medieval Holland. One theoretical contention in *Manors and Markets* is that certain regions performed well economically over many centuries when they had certain favourable institutional frameworks – often born out of high levels of freedom, high levels of equality¹⁰, and an equilibrium between social actors where no dominant interest group could manipulate institutions to their interests. Van Bavel sees the early-modern flourishing of Holland as a rural story set in the settlement and occupation history from the Middle Ages – and this interpretation has become well supported with other empirical evidence. *Shaping Medieval Markets*, a recent monograph from Jessica Dijkman, is one such supporter.¹¹ In an important

7 Made explicit in B. van Bavel, ‘The Medieval Origins of Capitalism in the Netherlands’, *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN - LCHR*) 125:2-3 (2010) 45-80.

8 See J.L. van Zanden, *The Long Road to the Industrial Revolution: The European Economy in a Global Perspective, 1000-1800* (Leiden 2009).

9 See the prickly response in P. Stabel, ‘Old Regions and New Regions in the Economic History of the Medieval Low Countries: A Comment on the

Notion of Economic Change in Bas van Bavel’s “Manors and Markets”’, *TSEG* 8 (2011) 114-124.

10 For a systematic reconstruction of property distribution in medieval Holland: B. van Bavel, ‘Rural Development and Landownership in Holland, c.1400-1650’, in: O. Gelderblom (ed.), *The Political Economy of the Dutch Republic* (Aldershot 2009) 180-190.

11 J. Dijkman, *Shaping Medieval Markets: The Organisation of Commodity Markets in Holland, c. 1200-c. 1450* (Leiden 2011).

book, her research has shown using a broader comparison with England and Flanders that markets in Holland were both flexible and less subject to manipulation from dominant interest groups and furthermore, rural and informal marketing opportunities were numerous, with few institutional barriers to overcome. A recent important co-authored article has iterated more explicitly the importance of this favourable institutional arrangement of markets for the later development of Holland.¹² Richard Unger has also loosely lent weight to this argument, by highlighting the quality of integration in these markets.¹³ Such a positive story over commodity markets has been supported by the work of Jaco Zuijderduijn on medieval capital markets; he has shown through his monograph and a string of publications that access to credit in rural Holland was widespread and flexible in comparison to other regions such as the Florentine *contado* and furthermore, has offered empirical evidence for some of the lowest interest rates in late-medieval Western Europe.¹⁴ A further argument has been made that some inhabitants of late-medieval and early-modern Holland invested in capital markets as an effective way of protecting themselves against exogenous crises, in contrast to methods like scattering of agricultural parcels or spreading asset portfolios.¹⁵ A positive spin on the institutional setting of Holland in the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period has also been made in one innovative *Past and Present* article and a rare example of economic historians using their expertise to directly answer cultural questions. Oscar Gelderblom and Bas van Bavel pour scorn over Simon Schama's previous link between the spread of Calvinism and the trend of 'cleanliness' in the Dutch Republic, instead

12 J. Dijkman et al., 'The Organisation of Markets as a Key Factor in the Rise of Holland from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century: A Test Case for an Institutional Approach', *Continuity and Change* (hereafter C&C) 27 (2012) 347-378.

13 R. Unger, 'Maritime Transport and the Integration of Low Countries Grain Markets in the Late Middle Ages', in: P. van Cruyningen and E. Thoen (eds.), *Food Supply, Demand and Trade: Aspects of the Economic Relationship between Town and Countryside* (Turnhout 2012) 101-122.

14 J. Zuijderduijn, *Medieval Capital Markets: Markets for Rents between State Formation and Private Investment in Holland (1300-1550)* (Leiden 2009); 'Accessing a Medieval Capital Market:

The Capacity of the Market for Renten in Edam and De Zeevang (1462-1563)', *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 11 (2009) 138-164; J. Zuijderduijn, T. De Moor and J.L. van Zanden, 'Microcredit in Late Medieval Waterland: Households and the Efficiency of Capital Markets in Edam and De Zeevang (1462-1563)', in: S. Cavaciocchi (ed.), *La famiglia nell'economia europea. Sec. XIII-XVIII* (Florence 2009) 651-668; 'Small is Beautiful: On the Efficiency of Credit Markets in Late Medieval Holland', *European Review of Economic History* 16 (2012) 3-22.

15 J. Zuijderduijn and T. De Moor, 'Spending, Saving or Investing?: Risk Management in Sixteenth-Century Dutch Households', *Economic History Review* 66 (2013) 38-56.

showing the trend to have been developed simultaneously with the emergence of specialised dairy farming descending down the social hierarchy.¹⁶

Elsewhere, some of the most interesting recent research on commercialisation in Flanders has come from Reinoud Vermoessen. It has long been known that population pressure and extreme fragmentation of landholdings in many parts of early-modern Inland Flanders led to what Erik Thoen termed a ‘commercial-survival’ mode of production whereby peasants produced labour intensive crops on their tiny holdings (often combined with proto-industries) and oriented surplus towards urban markets.¹⁷ Vermoessen has added to our knowledge of this particular type of commercialisation by homing in on different stratifications within rural society itself (mainly around Aalst, East Flanders), and has shown how commercial-survival mode of production was actually facilitated not by an influx of urban capital, but by so-called *paardenboeren* – wealthy peasants distinguished from the rest by their ownership of animals and willing lenders to poorer neighbours.¹⁸ This kind of research fits with other recent work showing a real diversity of credit and lending instruments emerging across different regions of Flanders from the late fifteenth century onwards.¹⁹ Indeed it is becoming apparent just how personalised and reciprocal credit and labour markets were in rural Flanders, especially after 1750, where smallholders often would exchange labour for access to capital goods.²⁰ Sometimes this close farmer-labourer agreement

16 O. Gelderblom and B. van Bavel, ‘The Economic Origins of Cleanliness in the Dutch Golden Age’, *Past and Present* 205 (2009) 41-69.

17 See E. Thoen, ‘A Commercial-Survival Economy in Evolution: The Flemish Countryside and the Transition to Capitalism (Middle Ages-19th Century)’, in: P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants into Farmers?: The Transformation of Rural Economy and Society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages-19th Century) in Light of the Brenner Debate* (Turnhout 2001) 102-157.

18 R. Vermoessen, ‘Paardenboeren in Vlaanderen. Middelaars en commercialisering van de vroegmoderne rurale economie in de regio Aalst, 1650-1800’, *TSEG* 7 (2010) 3-37.

19 E. Thoen and T. Soens, ‘Credit in Rural Flanders, c. 1250-c. 1600’, in: T. Lambrecht (ed.), *Credit and Rural Economy in North-Western Europe, c. 1200-c. 1850* (Turnhout 2009) 19-38; T. Lambrecht, ‘Rural Credit and the Market for Annuities in Eighteenth-Century Flanders’, *ibid.*, 75-98.

20 R. Vermoessen and A. De Bie, ‘Boeren en hun relaties op het achttiende-eeuwse Vlaamse platteland’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 121 (2008) 430-445. For earlier work on reciprocal relationships: T. Lambrecht, ‘Reciprocal Exchange, Credit and Cash: Agricultural Labour Markets and Local Economies in the Southern Low Countries during the Eighteenth Century’, *C&C* 18 (2003) 237-261.



Most research on commercialisation in the pre-industrial countryside focuses on Flanders and the provinces of Holland, but the central Dutch River Area has recently been studied. This view of Gorinchem and the river tax on the river Merwede is used in the book discussed, *In het kielzog van moderne markten* by Job Weststrate.

G. Braun and F. Hohenberg, *Civitas orbis terrarum I* (Cologne 1572).

Regional Archive, Gorinchem.

would extend to food²¹, or even the materials to produce linen in the winter.²² The trend towards homing in on different stratifications within rural societies has also been performed in an article focusing on the spatial distribution of farm lands in seventeenth-century Sinaai (Flanders), where it is argued that the tendency towards scattering of parcels was not ubiquitous and different villagers arranged their parcels according to their own income strategies.²³

If there is to be a slight criticism of current research focusing on commercialisation in the pre-industrial countryside in the Low Countries, it is not over the quality (which is high) but the regional bias. Even now, research tends to be very Flanders- and Holland-centric, linked partly to the imbalance of archival source material and partly to the fact that Holland and Flanders offered more international connections (for example, see the wealth of *voc* documents kept in The Hague). A nice antidote to this trend has been the appearance of a monograph on market development and shipping along the Central Dutch River Area in the late Middle Ages, taking in the Waal, the Rhine, and the IJssel.²⁴ Indeed, in the fourteenth century cities such as Zutphen did profit from north-south trade via the Zuiderzee as well as the aforementioned rivers.²⁵ Even this book however, does not escape entirely from Flanders and Holland – in fact, one of the most significant arguments it puts forward is the increasing orientation of the ‘river-towns’ such as Culemborg, Nijmegen, Arnhem and Wezel on the west rather than eastwards. Furthermore, it was noted elsewhere that although the level of transportation along these central rivers was substantial in the late Middle Ages, very little of the produce was of *Gelderse* origin.²⁶

One encouraging recent trend has been a heightened focus on commercial developments in Brabant in the early modern period. It has been shown, for example, that even seemingly small developments such as the emergence and the proliferation of the potato (grown intensively by smallholding peasants for self-consumption) made a great contribution to

- 21 T. Lambrecht, ‘Peasant Labour Strategies and the Logic of Family Labour in the Southern Low Countries during the Eighteenth Century’, in: Cavacciochi (ed.), *La famiglia nell’economia europea*, 637-649.
- 22 E. Vanhaute et al, ‘Werk potverblommen of de dood, het gemeyn dat word teveel gekloot: boeren, landbouw en plattelandssamenleving’, in: J. Dumolyn and T. Mampaey (eds.), *België: een geschiedenis van onderuit* (Berchem 2012) 36.
- 23 L. Vervaet, ‘Agrarisch woon-werkverkeer in zeventiende-eeuws Sinaai. De ruimtelijke organisatie van landerijen op het vroegmoderne Vlaamse platteland’, *TSEG* 9 (2012) 2-26.
- 24 J. Weststrate, *In het kielzog van moderne markten. Handel en scheepvaart op de Rijn, Waal en IJssel, ca. 1360-ca. 1560* (Hilversum 2008).
- 25 W. Frijhoff, M. Groothedde and C. te Strake, *Historische atlas van Zutphen* (Nijmegen 2011) chapter 8.
- 26 J. Weststrate, “‘Eyn yeder schyff uss den Lande van Gelre”. Het Gelderse aandeel in het laatmiddeleeuwse verkeer op Rijn en Waal’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Gelre* 99 (2008) 106.

increased commercial interaction between urban centres and the countryside. Johan Poukens has shown that potato cultivation freed up more land formerly reserved for the household, thereby allowing peasants to benefit more fully from rising grain prices after 1750.²⁷ Following on from these findings, Poukens also offers a more provocative thesis by disputing the view of Erik Thoen and Robert Brenner that such peasants were coerced into using the market as a last resort²⁸, and aligns himself with an earlier ‘Industrious Revolution’ view made by Jan de Vries showing aspirational consumption within the countryside.²⁹ A response to this article will be interesting. Elsewhere, the works of Bruno Blondé have really shone some new light on the connection between transport and commercial developments in Brabant between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁰ One of his key conclusions in a paper written with Bart Ballaux was that transportation developments in early-modern Brabant did not contribute in themselves to surging economic growth in the sixteenth century (despite technological innovations), yet at the same time were not impediments to growth.³¹

Further to the east in the Southern Low Countries, one recent article has attempted to reconstruct the medieval development of leaseholding in some of the regions pertaining to the Principality of Liège; a significant essay given that divergent leasehold developments have been given a dominant role in Van Bavel’s interpretation of the different pace of commercialisation seen in the pre-industrial Low Countries. Although seemingly there is much work to be done on this issue in an under-studied geographical area, the paper must be lauded for its willingness to make comparisons and look at explanations rather than description. A significant proportion of Alexis Wilkin’s article focuses on the Hesbaye region, and one clear conclusion that supports other general works is that secure small peasant property structures were generally a barrier to the emergence of ‘modern’ leasehold, but also limited leasehold’s

27 J. Poukens, ‘Tout-à-la-fois cultivateurs et commerçans: Smallholder and the Industrious Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Brabant’, *Agricultural History Review* 60 (2012) 153-172.

28 Thoen, ‘A Commercial-Survival Economy’; R. Brenner, ‘The Low Countries in the Transition to Capitalism’, *ibid.*, 275-338.

29 J. de Vries, ‘The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution’, *Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994) 249-270; ‘Peasant Demand Patterns and Economic Development: Friesland, 1550-1750’, in: W. Parker and E. Jones (eds.), *European Peasants and their Markets: Essays in Agrarian Economic History* (Princeton 1975) 179-196.

30 B. Blondé, ‘At the Cradle of the Transport Revolution?: Paved Roads, Traffic Flows and Economic Development in Eighteenth-Century Brabant’, *Journal of Transport History* 31 (2010) 89-111; ‘Feeding Cities: Transportation Costs, Paved Roads and Town-Countryside Relationships in Eighteenth-Century Brabant’, in: Van Cruyningen and Thoen (eds.), *Food Supply*, 123-141.

31 B. Ballaux and B. Blondé, ‘Landtransportprijzen en de economische ontwikkeling van Brabant in de lange zestiende eeuw. Een braakliggend stuk prijzengeschiedenis’, *TSEG* 4 (2007) 57-85.

economic impact.³² The emergence of the lease on its own is not enough to explain agrarian capitalism it seems – but rather the social context through which it operates. This is supported by an article reconstructing the land and credit markets in the early-modern Campine region: factor markets took their essential importance and characteristics from very particular social conditions.³³ The same factor market institutions could have an entirely different meaning in another social context.

Perhaps one limitation of the research on commerce is the paucity of material being produced for the period before the high Middle Ages. One exception is the excellent research now being undertaken on land and landholding for the early-medieval Ardennes.³⁴ For a long time it has been assumed that the early-medieval Ardennes (after widespread abandonment in the late Roman period) was based around an economy of large royal single-block estates; yet a reassessment of the evidence of donations to monasteries has suggested a much more complex tenurial structure – and that local lordships and aristocratic kinships might have had a more important and earlier role than previously attributed to the region. It remains to be seen whether this has wider significance.

The relationship between city and countryside

In the international literature on the subject of the city and its rural hinterlands, there is now an awareness that urban-rural relationships could be entirely divergent across pre-industrial Western Europe.³⁵ While in some places towns and cities had perhaps a ‘positive’ stimulating effect on the surrounding countryside in terms of demand³⁶, urban-rural relationships

- 32 A. Wilkin, ‘The Role of the Secular Canons in the Introduction of Leaseholding in the Thirteenth Century: Case Study: The Liege Area’, in: Van Bavel and Schofield (eds.), *The Development of Leasehold*, 57-80.
- 33 E. Van Onacker, ‘Bedrijvige boeren? Peasants en de land- en kredietmarkt in de vijftiende en zestiende-eeuwse Kempen’, *TSEG* 10 (2013) 40-70.
- 34 J.-P. Devroey and N. Schroeder, ‘Beyond Royal Estates and Monasteries: Landownership in the Early Medieval Ardennes’, *Early Medieval Europe* 20 (2012) 39-69. Also J.-P. Devroey, ‘La hiérarchisation des pôles habités et l’espace rural: Autour des possessions de l’abbaye de Prüm (893) en Ardenne belge’, in: M. Gaillard et al. (eds.), *De la mer du Nord à la Méditerranée: Francia Media, une région au cœur de l’Europe* (Luxembourg 2011) 175-206.
- 35 D. Curtis, ‘Florence and its Hinterlands in the Late Middle Ages: Contrasting Fortunes in the Tuscan Countryside, 1300-1500’, *Journal of Medieval History* 38 (2012) 472-499.
- 36 B. Campbell et al., *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region, c. 1300* (London 1993); G. Grantham, ‘Espaces privilégiés: Productivité agricole et zones d’approvisionnement dans l’Europe pré-industrielle’, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 52 (1997) 697-725.

could also be more exploitative and extractive – an idea well-established by the Stephan Epstein literature on Italian city-states.³⁷ In the past five years, some interesting pieces have been written on towns and their rural hinterlands in the context of the Low Countries, and what has been made apparent is that even in this small geographic entity, urban-rural relationships were variable.

An excellent example of the work being done on this issue is a volume from 2010 entitled *Stad en Regio* and focusing on the dominant town of the north, Groningen.³⁸ What is made apparent in this collection of papers is that while the notion of a ‘city-state’ did not really apply to much of the northern parts of the Low Countries with cities exhibiting often quite weak jurisdictions over their hinterlands, Groningen was a big exception. As is made clear in the papers by Henk Hurenkamp, Richard Paping and Meindert Schroor, the Groningen administration used a variety of techniques in order to subdue its countryside including land consolidation³⁹, investment in land reclamation, market monopolies and staples (in the *Ommelanden*), taxation on produce and property, and investment in peat-extraction ventures.⁴⁰ Other literature however, has made it clear that domination and subjection was not always inevitable. In fact, following on from an interesting article by Marjolein ’t Hart on the Oldambt back in 1998⁴¹, more recent articles have shown how rural societies such as the Oldambt used equitable configurations in power and property as a foundation for local resilience against urban oppression.⁴²

Other works on urban-rural relationships in the Low Countries have shown the countryside to be less subordinate to the whims of the city than one might imagine. A good example of that is the well-researched monograph by Michael Limberger of the relationship between Antwerp and its surrounding

37 S. Epstein, ‘Cities, Regions and the Late Medieval Crisis: Sicily and Tuscany Compared’, *Past and Present* 130 (1991) 3-50; Idem, ‘Town and Country: Economy and Institutions in Late-Medieval Italy’, *Economic History Review* 46 (1993) 453-477.

38 G. Collenteur et al. (eds.), *Stad en regio* (Assen 2010).

39 Urban office-holders had significant property in parts of the Groningen countryside; H. Feenstra, *Spinnen in het web. Groningse regenten in relatie tot het omringende platteland tijdens de Republiek* (Assen 2007).

40 H. Hurenkamp, ‘Groningen van stadstaat tot stad van het noorden’; R. Paping, ‘Parasiteren op het platteland? De stad Groningen en de Ommelanden in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw’; M. Schroor, ‘Van wad tot

warendorf. Groningen en zijn achterland, 1400-1600’; all contained within the ‘*Stad en regio*’ volume mentioned in note 37.

41 M. ’t Hart, ‘Rulers and Repertoires: The Revolt of a Farmers’ Republic in the Early Modern Netherlands’, in: M. Hanagan, L. Page Moch and W. Te Brake (eds.), *Challenging Authority: The Historical Study of Contentious Politics* (Minneapolis 1998) 197-212.

42 D. Curtis, ‘The Impact of Land Accumulation and Consolidation on Population Trends in the Pre-Industrial Period: Two Contrasting Cases in the Low Countries’, *Historical Research* (forthcoming 2013); J. van den Broek, ‘Graven bij Stootshorn. De verbinding tussen Groningen en het Oldambt gedurende de oorlogsjaren 1580-1594’, in: Collenteur et al. (eds.), *Stad en regio*, 99-113.

hinterlands as it began to grow into the sixteenth-century behemoth and international trading centre.⁴³ What Limberger was able to show is that while Antwerp was able to apply jurisdictions and consolidate property in its very close countryside, its geographical scope of influence was still quite small – especially when one compares it to the great Northern Italian city-states of the late Middle Ages.⁴⁴ The only area of more distant financial investments that Antwerp was able to make in the countryside were those in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and in Zeeland – helping finance the reclamation of new lands, particularly after the terrible storm floods of the sixteenth century.⁴⁵ Dekker and Baetens show that it was mainly merchants and high office-holders who made these investments (in Zuid-Beveland) and many belonged to the international elite traders who had even provided loans to governments and cities.⁴⁶ There was, it seems, a real fear that the vital port of Antwerp would become difficult to access without these investments.

One limitation with the current literature addressing the relationship between city and countryside in the pre-industrial Low Countries however, is the continual bias towards urban-orientated explanations of historical phenomena. A similar general point in response to a recent book by Wim Blockmans⁴⁷ has been made urging scholars of the urban-rural dynamic not to sideline the agency of rural societies in this relationship.⁴⁸ A good example of this problem can be found in the literature that actually focuses on the de-urbanisation process seen across much of the Low Countries from roughly 1750 onwards. Recently this issue has been explored through a research project directly concerned with the ruralisation of Zeeland during this period including Paul Brusse, Wijnand Mijnhardt, Jeannine Dekker and

43 M. Limberger, *Sixteenth-Century Antwerp and its Rural Surroundings: Social and Economic Change in the Hinterland of a Commercial Metropolis* (c. 1450–c. 1570) (Turnhout 2008).

44 M. Limberger, 'Feeding Sixteenth-Century Antwerp: Food Imports, Local Supply, and the Agrarian Structure of the Town's Rural Surrounding', in: Van Cruyningen and Thoen (eds.), *Food Supply*, 31–47.

45 C. Dekker and R. Baetens, *Geld in het water. Antwerps en Mechels kapitaal in Zuid-Beveland na de stormvloed in de 16de eeuw* (Hilversum 2009). A chronology also seen for urban investment from wealthy Delft and Dordrecht burgers; R. Rutte, 'Nieuw land – nieuwe samenleving – knappe nederzetting.

Dorpen in de vijftiende- en zestiende-eeuwse bedijkingen in de zuidwestelijke delta', *Historisch-Geografisch Tijdschrift* (hereafter HGT) 28 (2010) 71–95; 'Wording en vorm van de dorpen in de bedijkingen van Voorne-Putten en de Hoekse Waard (13e–17e eeuw)', HGT 26 (2008) 53–66.

46 Dekker and Baetens, *Geld in het water*, 220–231.

47 W. Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100–1560* (Amsterdam 2010).

48 T. Soens, E. Van Onacker and K. Dombrecht, 'Metropolis and Hinterland?: A Comment on the Role of Rural Economy and Society in the Urban Heart of the Medieval Low Countries', *BMGN - LCHR* 127:2 (2012) 82–88.

Arno Neele.⁴⁹ Paul Brusse is by expertise a rural historian with publications on the rural economy of the early-modern Over-Betuwe⁵⁰, and furthermore, explicitly notes in his recent co-authored synthesis that previous scholars have often failed to fully address the essentially ‘rural face’ of Dutch history around the end of the eighteenth century.⁵¹ However, although the Zeeland project has produced an impressive series of publications, it is surprising that on de-urbanisation in Zeeland the work taken as a whole falls into the same trap of creating quite urban-based and urban-focused explanations for historical change. The authors are aware that the relationship between city and the countryside can be very different and dependent on context, and yet these relationships are entirely defined through the city themselves – taking on terms such as ‘international trading cities’, ‘industrial cities’, and ‘regional trading towns’. It seems as though these classifications come from urban centres’ relationship to other urban centres as part as an urban network, rather than their integration with very distinct and divergent types of rural society.⁵² Despite being part of a volume entitled *Town and Countryside*, the same ‘urban systems’ approach is used for Pim Kooij’s chapter on Dutch cities before 1900.⁵³

Furthermore, despite an apparent awareness that pre-industrial relations between cities and the countryside in the Low Countries were entirely divergent – some being mutually beneficial while others more exploitative – there is as yet very little attempt at explaining the mechanisms behind this divergence. Why were some cities better able to subdue or influence their hinterlands than others for example? Again this story is often told with an urban bias. For example, a recent article has attempted to explain intensification of agriculture in the rural hinterlands of Brussels in the thirteenth century, not highlighting urban demand but urban financial investment in the countryside.⁵⁴ While this might be correct, we are left with

49 P. Brusse, *Gevalen stad. Stedelijke netwerken en het platteland. Zeeland 1750-1850* (Utrecht 2011); P. Brusse and W. Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template for Dutch History: De-urbanization and the Balance between City and Countryside* (Utrecht 2011); J. Dekker, *Onderdanig en opstandig. Desurbanisatie en de politieke verhoudingen op het platteland in Zeeland, 1750-1850* (Utrecht 2011); A. Neele, *De ontdekking van het Zeeuwse platteland. Culturele verhoudingen tussen stad en platteland in Zeeland 1750-1850* (Utrecht 2011).

50 P. Brusse, *Overleven door ondernemen. De agrarische geschiedenis van de Over-Betuwe 1650-1850* (Wageningen 1999).

51 Brusse and Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template*, 9-11.

52 M. Duijvendak, ‘Balance between City and Countryside in the Netherlands’, *BMGN - LCHR* 127:3 (2012) 33-35.

53 P. Kooij, ‘Peripheral Cities and their Regions in the Dutch Urban System until 1900’, in: *Town and Countryside in a Dutch Perspective* (Groningen 2010) 29-44.

54 P. Charraudas, ‘Champs de Légumes et Jardins de Blés: Intensification agricole et innovations culturelles autour de Bruxelles au XIII^e siècle’, *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales* 28 (2007) 11-32.

no idea as to why urbanites found it so easy to invest in such agricultural projects. It is clear in other research that rural societies did have real agency in the city-countryside relationship and could defend themselves in the face of urban encroachment – as demonstrated for late-medieval *châtellenies* in Flanders.⁵⁵ Elsewhere, early-modern Ghent was not able to fully exploit its rural hinterlands for basic produce such as grain because of the omnipresence of small peasant farms – instead looking further south to Artois, Cambrai and Picardy.⁵⁶ The same need for grain imports has been plotted expertly also for the towns of Holland.⁵⁷ Moreover, what happened to rural dwellers as a result of increased urban influence? Were they dispossessed of their property? Did they change occupations? Did this stimulate rural-urban migration? These issues were left unresolved in the medieval Brussels story, although Piet van Cruyningen has shown in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West-Zeeland-Flanders region for example, that urban investment not only led to the establishment of large tenant farms, but also urban demand exacerbated rural inequality at a local level as larger farmers with more capital sold their produce directly at urban markets while small farmers under pressure had to accept the low prices offered by grain merchants.⁵⁸

Another route into the city-countryside dynamic is instead to isolate particular social groups. Some interesting work has recently been produced, which among other things, has tentatively suggested there may have been a negative relationship between the landownership of ‘old’ rural monasteries in the medieval Low Countries and the extent of urbanisation. Urban institutions were more inclined to support ‘new’ (often urban-orientated) foundations such as hospitals or mendicant houses instead.⁵⁹ That is not to say we should unequivocally say that medieval urbanisation was ‘bad’ for monastic institutions or necessarily led to inevitable decline. Johannes Mol in his work on Aduard has suggested that this monastery directly benefitted from close proximity to the urban centre of Groningen – possibly orientating its *uithoven* (farms) towards production for such demand.⁶⁰ Elsewhere it has been shown

55 J. De Rock, ‘La châtellenie de Courtrai: Quelques aspects du rapport entre ville et campagne dans la Flandre au bas Moyen Age’, *Revue du Nord* 372 (2007) 729-754.

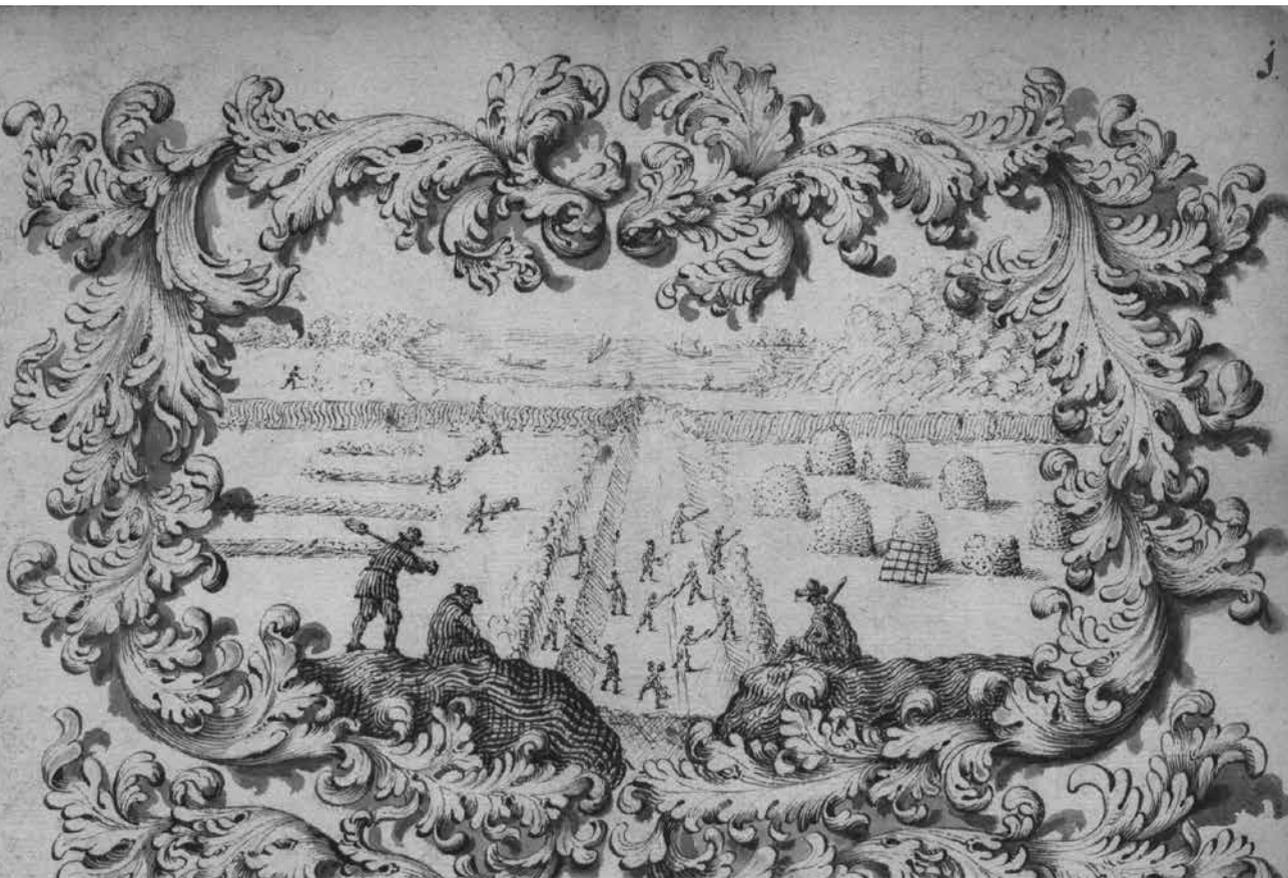
56 J. Dambruyne, ‘Interregional Grain Trade in the Low Countries and its Economic and Social Effects on Sixteenth-Century Ghent’, in: Van Cruyningen and Thoen (eds.), *Food Supply*, 49, 79.

57 M. van Tielhof, ‘The Rise and Decline of the Amsterdam Grain Trade’, in: Van Cruyningen and Thoen (eds.), *Food Supply*, 85.

58 P. van Cruyningen, ‘Farmers’ Strategies and the West-Zeeland-Flanders Grain Trade, 1648-1794’, in: Van Cruyningen and Thoen (eds.), *Food Supply*, 171.

59 A. Rijpma, *Funding Public Services through Religious and Charitable Foundations in the Late-Medieval Low Countries* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Utrecht University 2012) 102-113.

60 J. Mol, ‘Bezitsverwerving en goederenbeheer van de abdij van Aduard’, in: J. Mol and J. Moolenbroek (eds.), *De abtenkroniek van Aduard* (Hilversum 2010) 173-202.



▲ In the sixteenth century a road was constructed to connect the dominant town of Groningen with the surrounding region, Oldambt. Image used in the book discussed, *Stad en Regio* by G. Collenteur (ed.) Groningen Archives, Groningen.

that even in the late-medieval and early modern period, 'old' monasteries such as the Abbey of Marienweerd in the Betuwe region of the Central Dutch River Area benefitted from focusing production of hops on urban markets in Holland and Nijmegen.⁶¹ Another example of isolating social groups in the urban-rural relationship is some recent work on St. John's Hospital in Bruges and their relationship with tenant farmers in the countryside. Interestingly it is shown that this urban institution exploited its farms for non-market access to basic foodstuffs – showing how proximity to urban centres did not inevitably lead to increased specialised commercialisation.⁶²

A final aspect of the urban-rural relationship discussed recently in the literature is that of migration. Traditionally it has been accepted that during stages of the pre-industrial period, land became consolidated into fewer hands, accompanied by a process of proletarianisation of former peasants, which in turn lead to outward rural-urban migration to cities in the search for work. Recent comparative literature between the Betuwe and the Oldambt region of Groningen however, has shown that such migration was not inevitable – and some rural societies were actually better 'set-up' to retain their agricultural labouring population.⁶³ Furthermore, other literature has even shown that long-distance migration of rural people was not necessarily towards towns and cities: a link has been drawn between rural peasants of German origin and eighteenth-century migration in search of work on the polders of Watergraafsmeer, producing vegetables for markets in Amsterdam.⁶⁴ Finally, another important piece of work recently published in the *Past and Present* journal has made significant revisions to previous conceptions of differences between 'English' and 'Continental' forms of settlement-based poor relief systems (that is the right to secure relief from a certain locality, even as a migrant). Anne Winter and Thijs Lambrecht force home the point that such systems were not monolithic and inflexible in the Southern Low Countries, not imposed from a top-down supra approach, but actually based around bottom-up solutions to migration problems and dictated by very local or regional circumstances.⁶⁵

61 E. de Jonge, 'De hopteelt in Gelderland (15e-19e eeuw). Het telen, oogsten, eesten en verhandelen van een ingrediënt', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Gelre* 103 (2012) 78.

62 L. Vervaeet, 'Het laatmiddeleeuwse domeinbeheer van het Sint-Janshospitaal van Brugge in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen', in: J. Van Acker, W. Lammens and A. Lehouck (eds.), *Novi Monasterii* (Ghent 2012) 155-163.

63 Curtis, 'The Impact of Land Accumulation'.

64 H. Kaal and J. Van Lottum, 'Immigrants in the Polder: Rural-Rural Long Distance Migration in North-Western Europe: The Case of Watergraafsmeer', *Rural History* 20 (2009) 99-117.

65 A. Winter and T. Lambrecht, 'Migration, Poor Relief, and Local Autonomy: Settlement Policies in England and the Southern Low Countries in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 218 (2013) 91-126.

Water management and land reclamation

Of all the strands of the rural history of the Low Countries, water management (somewhat unsurprisingly) has had the richest historiography. Indeed, much of the older literature tended to play up an idealistic vision of a ‘poldermodel’, where large reclaimed polders were precariously managed and organised through a network of local and regional institutions based around consensus and collective action.⁶⁶ Although some recent works still play up this story, most of the recent literature has become sceptical of such an interpretation.

Probably the most path-breaking work on water management over the past five years has been performed by Antwerp historian Tim Soens on Coastal Flanders, who has put forward some clear and challenging hypotheses – general ideas and frameworks which may be tested on regions outside his specialism. In both his 2009 monograph *De spade in de dijk* and in subsequent articles, Soens has made explicit attempts to empirically test the connection between things like equality, consensus and the effectiveness of water management structures.⁶⁷ Although a simplification of his main theses, a general argument to be taken from Soens’ work is that initially in the high Middle Ages, water management structures in Coastal Flanders were more effective, since land was distributed more equitably between smallholding farmers, thereby giving each an incentive to invest time and labour in maintaining the water defences. Through the transition into the late Middle Ages and the early modern period however, land came to be consolidated in fewer hands – often absentee urbanites. Not only did this change property constellations at the owner level, but it led to the emergence of large tenant lease farms at the user level as well.⁶⁸ Soens argues that water management structures broke down as a result of property structures transformation – less people had a direct incentive to maintain dikes, absentee owners were not interested in investing rents in the system, and the situation was exacerbated by outward migration through widespread expropriation. Perhaps this

66 Even some recent works play up this poldermodel story; see D. Bos, M. Ebben and H. te Velde (eds.), *Harmonie in Holland. Het poldermodel van 1500- tot nu* (Amsterdam 2007).

67 T. Soens, ‘Dijkenbouwers of rustverstoorders? De Vlaamse graven en de strijd tegen het water in de laatmiddeleeuwse Vlaamse kustvlakte (veertiende-zestiende eeuw)’, *BMGN - LCHR* 122:3 (2007) 321-356; *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en*

rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580) (Ghent 2009); ‘Floods and Money: Funding Drainage and Flood Control in Coastal Flanders from the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries’, *C&C* 26 (2011) 333-365.

68 E. Thoen and T. Soens, ‘The Origins of Leasehold in the Former County of Flanders’, in: Van Bavel and Schofield (eds.), *The Development of Leasehold*, 19-38.

trend only ceased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with more sophisticated forms of central state taxation.⁶⁹

Soens' work is stimulating and interesting, and one hopes that these kinds of ideas linking equality and water management will be tested elsewhere. Certainly recent literature on Holland has become sceptical of the old poldermodel story – instead showing (certainly early modern) water management structures in the region often to have been entirely inequitable and imbalanced in their functioning.⁷⁰ What we do have at the moment are two processes outlined in the literature. We know that property distribution was (in a relative sense) quite equitable in Holland all the way up to 1550, before becoming more polarised in the second half of the sixteenth century thanks to new forms of urban investment in land.⁷¹ We also know of a number of serious flood events occurred in the course of the sixteenth century in Holland and nearby coastal regions.⁷² An interesting route now would be to investigate the interconnectivity of the two developments. Are the theories of Soens widely applicable to other coastal regions? Soens himself has begun to move down this comparative road by comparing the connection between inequality and social distribution of flood risks in medieval and early-modern Coastal Flanders, the Central Holland Peatlands, and Romney Marsh in Southern England. This approach has led Soens to argue convincingly that unequal distribution of flood risk was often the result of unequal or deteriorating land rights (leading to unequal access to the essential decision-making processes) and the collapse of peasant societies corresponded with an increase in environmental problems.⁷³ Piet van Cruyningen has further supported this view that resilience of water management systems was connected with equality, although has also nuanced this view even further by emphasising that success also depended on the institutional framework in

69 E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'The Social and Economic Impact of Central Government Taxation on the Flemish Countryside (End 13th-18th Centuries)', in: S. Cavaciocchi (ed.), *La fiscalità nell'economia europea secc. XIII-XVII* (Prato 2008) 957-971.

70 P. van Dam, 'Water en land', *BMGN - LCHR* 124:3 (2009) 459-466; M. van Tielhof, 'Op zoek naar het poldermodel in de waterstaatsgeschiedenis', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 122:2 (2009) 149-161.

71 Van Bavel, 'Rural Development and Landownership in Holland'.

72 J. de Bruin and D. Aten, *Een gemene dijk? Verwikkelingen rond de dijkzorg in West-Friesland. De watersnood van 1675-1676* (Purmerend 2004);

J. Buisman and A. van Engelen, *Duizend jaar weer, wind en water in de Lage Landen* (2 vols.; Franeker 1996-2000); A. de Kraker, 'Flood Events in the Southwestern Netherlands and Coastal Belgium, 1400-1953', *Hydrological Sciences Journal* 51 (2006) 913-929.

73 T. Soens, 'The Social Distribution of Land and Flood Risk along the North Sea Coast: Flanders, Holland and Romney Marsh Compared (c. 1200-1750)', in: B. van Bavel and E. Thoen (eds.), *Rural Societies and Environments at Risk: Ecology, Property Rights and Social Organization in Fragile Areas (Middle Ages-Twentieth Century)* (Turnhout 2013) 171-172.

which equality existed. Those water management systems (even in contexts of equality) were less effective if each individual landowner was responsible for maintenance of their dike, in contrast to a true communalisation of water management.⁷⁴ The institutions also apparently depended on a level of flexibility in the tools and instruments required to guarantee financing of the costs – as plotted for the long-term development of the Rijnland waterboard in Holland.⁷⁵ There is, of course, still further room for empirical testing of this hypothesis, perhaps using recent material on flooding and water management from the German coastal marshes.⁷⁶ One of the issues remains being able to distinguish whether the increased vulnerability to flooding was connected entirely to changes in social structures, or was simply the consequence of more severe and unpredictable climatic events⁷⁷, though Soens very recently has acknowledged this and convincingly reiterated an interpretation based on ‘social allocation of flood protection’.⁷⁸

Still a large amount of research on land reclamation and in particular water management of the Low Countries has a geographical bias towards the region of Holland. A number of monographs have appeared in the past five years, often focusing in detail on the development of a particular set of polders or a regional waterboard (*hoogheemraadschap*) in the early modern period.⁷⁹ Fewer studies go back further than the late Middle Ages, though one exception is a monograph produced at Wageningen focusing on the earliest development of the oldest part of Amsterdam from eleventh-century peat reclamations.⁸⁰ Another significant monograph has also made us rethink the conception of

74 P. van Cruyningen, ‘State, Property Rights and Sustainability of Drained Areas along the North Sea Coast, Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries’, in: Van Bavel and Thoen (eds.), *Rural Societies and Environments*, 203.

75 M. van Tielhof, ‘Financing Water Management in Rijnland, 1500-1800’, in: Gelderblom (ed.), *Political Economy*, 197-222.

76 For example: M. Allemeyer, *Kein Land ohne Deich. Lebenswelten einer Küstengesellschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen 2006).

77 A. de Kraker, ‘Storminess in the Low Countries, 1390-1725’, *Environment and History* 19 (2013) 149-171.

78 T. Soens, ‘Flood Security in the Medieval and Early Modern North Sea Area: A Question of Entitlement?’, *Environment and History* 19 (2013) 209-232.

79 B. Wouda, *Een stijgende stand met zinkend land. Waterbeheersingssystemen in polder Nieuw-Reijerwaard, 1441-1880* (Hilversum 2009); S. Zeischka, *Minerva in de polder. Waterstaat en techniek in het Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland (1500-1856)* (Hilversum 2007); H. van Zwet, *Lofwaardighe dijckagies en miserabele polders. Een financiële analyse van landaanwinningprojecten in Hollands Noorderkwartier, 1597-1643* (Hilversum 2009); J. van Es, *Grenswater. Geschiedenis van het Groot-Waterschap van Woerden, 1226-1995* (Utrecht 2009).

80 C. de Bont, *Vergeten land. Ontginning, bewoning en waterbeheer in de westnederlandse veengebieden (800-1350)* (Wageningen 2008).

early reclamation in Holland. Many scholars reliant on the older works of Van der Linden⁸¹ tend to emphasise the free nature of peasant colonists here, yet recent work has shown significant archaeological evidence for manorial *hoven* as early as the ninth and tenth centuries.⁸² Following interesting research by Adriaan de Kraker on storm floods in Zeeland, some recent works have focused more explicitly on responses to inundations in parts of Holland – including Texel.⁸³ Slight adaptations to earlier hypotheses on rural economic development in medieval Holland have also been made; authors are now suggesting arable farming lingered on longer than previously assumed, despite soil subsidence and drainage problems.⁸⁴

Small revisions to previously held beliefs have also been made in recent papers outside the confines of Holland. One article focusing on the development of institutions for water management in the Veluwe has shown the importance of late-medieval reclamations (stimulated by the Duke of Gelre) in crystallising and formalising early water boards – though has disputed the role previously given to colonists of Holland origin and instead shows the influence of *Gelderse* aristocrats and urban ministers from Arnhem in the process.⁸⁵ Other work on parts of the early-modern Veluwe has emphasised furthermore, that contributions to the water-management structures in the region were not necessarily linked to landownership (as seen elsewhere) but only payable by those profiting through peat extraction.⁸⁶ It

81 See his recent H. van der Linden, 'De Oudhollandse veenstreek: zijn unieke – canonwaardige – plaats in de Nederlandse historie', *HGT* 27 (2009) 97-108.

82 M. Dijkstra, *Rondom de mondingen van Rijn en Maas* (Leiden 2011) 291.

83 V. Wikaart et al., *Nijet dan water ende wolcken. De onderzoekscommissie naar de aanwassen in de Verdrongen Waard (1521-1523)* (Tilburg 2009); M. van Tielhof, 'Texel, kerstavond 1593. De ramp die Tesselschade haar nam gaf', in: M. Damen and L. Sicking (eds.), *Bourgondië voorbij. De Nederlanden 1250-1650. Liber alumnorum Wim Blockmans* (Hilversum 2010) 311-324; C. Rooijendijk, *Waterwolven. Een geschiedenis van stormvloedden, dijkenbouwers en droogmakers* (Amsterdam 2009).

84 M. Gubbels, 'Boeren, bezit en bodemproblemen. Verklaringsmodellen voor de transitie van de Hollandse economie in de late middeleeuwen', *Historisch Tijdschrift Holland* 42 (2010) 65-84; W.

Ettema, 'Boeren op het veen (1000-1500). Een ecologisch-historische benadering', *Historisch Tijdschrift Holland* 37 (2005) 239-258.

85 A. Reichgelt, 'Omme sgmennen lants beste wylle. Het ontstaan van het Waterschap Veluwe (1328-1575)', *TvW* 20 (2011) 1-10; Idem, 'Om onse renten ende heerlickeheit toe vermeereren. Ontginningen op de noordoostelijke Veluwe, 1333-1433', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Gelre* 103 (2012) 45-68. Also H. van Boven (ed.), *Veluws water. Tien eeuwen waterbeheer op de Veluwe* (Utrecht 2007).

86 A. van Schuppen, 'Verenigd in het veen. Het Veenraadschap van de Stichtse en Gelderse venen als institutie voor collectieve actie, 1546-1650', *Leidschrift* 25 (2010) 23. For this point in comparative perspective: M. van Tielhof, 'Betrokken bij de waterstaat. Boeren, burgers en overheden ten zuiden van het IJ tot 1800', in: E. Beukers (ed.), *Hollanders en het water. Twintig eeuwen strijd en profijt* (Hilversum 2007) 63, 65, 73.

is also clear that reclamation of land across parts of the Low Countries was stimulated and performed by all kinds of social interest groups – not just the famous ‘cope’ contracts with territorial lords seen in the Utrecht and Holland peat-lands. Early reclamation in the peat area of the Wold-area in south-east Groningen was stimulated in the eleventh century in the first instance by transfers and grants from the Utrechtse Domkapittel, and appeared in sources listing their incomes until well into the fifteenth century.⁸⁷ Theo Spek, furthermore, has shown the importance of the Bishop of Utrecht (together with large old abbeys) in imposing manorial-based reclamations in the early-medieval Salland.⁸⁸ Elsewhere, the process of reclamation in the Kromme Rijn area of Utrecht from the high Middle Ages onwards has recently been associated with simultaneous tendencies towards castle-building, constructed by upwardly mobile nobles who supported the Bishop of Utrecht.⁸⁹ The complexity and diversity of the reclamation and occupation process across many regions of the Low Countries is highlighted nowhere better than in a recent article focusing on high-medieval peat colonisation in Northern Overijssel, where on the surface it appears that colonists were ‘free farmers’ from outside the region – but on closer inspection it seems that these peasants were happy to accept certain extra-economic obligations and stipulations in exchange for their right to reclaim.⁹⁰ Manorial-based reclamations had a greater role to play in the Northern Low Countries than previously assumed.

The commons and collective action

The study of the commons over the past five years has clearly been dominated by the research agenda of Tine De Moor at Utrecht University. Her capacity to draw links between quite disparate historical processes across long periods and commitment to analytical rather than descriptive research means she has become one of the most influential figures working on the commons, not just

87 K. Kuiken, ‘Van niemandsland tot meerschap. Duizend jaar waterstaat in Haren bewesten de Hondsrug’, *TvW* 19 (2010) 45-56.

88 T. Spek (ed.), *Mens en land in het hart van Salland. Bewonings- en landschapsgeschiedenis van het kerspel Raalte* (Utrecht 2010) 95.

89 J. van Doesburg, ‘Medieval Castles in the Dutch Central River Area: Towers of Power?’, *Concilium Medii Aevi* 14 (2011) 63-78. See also J. Renes, ‘Woontorens in het Langbroeker landschap’, *Het Kromme Rijngebied* 42 (2008) 11-17; T. Hermans, ‘Woontorens Zuid-oost Utrecht’, *ibid.*, 2-10.

90 J. Mol, ‘De middeleeuwse veenontginningen in Noordwest-Overijssel en Zuid-Friesland: datering and fasering’, *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 14 (2011) 49-90.

for the pre-industrial Low Countries but arguably also for Western Europe as a whole. While De Moor's first papers were more concerned with why collective institutions for resource management appeared in parts of Western Europe⁹¹, as well as drawing links between different types of formalised collective action such as the commons, guilds, beguinages and waterboards, arguably her more recent papers focusing on the actual performance, workings and success or failure of the commons are more convincing. Two articles of the past five years stand out in particular, both concerned with endogenous and exogenous pressures that shape the functioning and effectiveness of the commons.⁹² One of the key points to be taken from De Moor's work on the commons is the notion that the commons were rarely 'open access' or a 'free for all'. In fact what is now apparent is that commons were sometimes used and manipulated to serve the interests of more powerful interest groups, while weaker groups could be excluded at times. Another point that De Moor brings across is that sustainable management of the commons and common resources often required a high participation rate.⁹³ Thus for example, if only a few select elite groups owned sheep or cows, only a restricted part of society would be interested in maintaining optimal collective grazing systems. Obviously this is an important point, given the increased stratification and polarisation of many rural societies across Western Europe from the late Middle Ages onwards.

The work of De Moor could stimulate more rural historians of the Low Countries into the trendy terrain of 'collective action', yet at the moment De Moor stands alone in the quality and ambition of her research. Some work has recently linked up with De Moor's themes, but often the papers are hard to find or in obscure journals. For example, one interesting thesis to appear in the *Historisch-Geografisch Tijdschrift* focusing on the *Drie Larens* on the border of Drenthe and Groningen has alluded to a link between the formalisation of territorial boundaries in the area around the twelfth century, the increasing influence of the growing economic centre of Groningen, and the appearance of formalised local communes known as *marken*.⁹⁴ Other work has focused on the

91 T. De Moor, 'The Silent Revolution: A New Perspective on the Emergence of Commons, Guilds, and Other Forms of Corporate Collective Action in Western Europe', *International Review of Social History* 53 (2008) 179-212. For recent criticism see D. Curtis, 'Tine De Moor's Silent Revolution: Reconsidering her Theoretical Framework for Explaining the Emergence of Institutions for the Collective Management of Resources', *International Review of the Commons* 7 (2013) 209-229.

92 T. De Moor, 'Avoiding Tragedies: A Flemish Common and its Commoners under the Pressure of Social and Economic Change during the Eighteenth Century', *Economic History Review* 62 (2009) 1-22; 'Participation is more Important than Winning: The Impact of Social-Economic Change on Commoners' Participation in 18th-19th Century Flanders', *C&C* 25 (2010) 405-433.

93 De Moor, 'Avoiding Tragedies', 17.

94 P. de Hengst, 'Dorpen tussen Hondsrug en Hunze. Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van de "drie Larens"', *HGT* 28 (2010) 56-67.

issue of water boards and whether they can truly be considered as institutions for collective action – showing how they were not always developed from below.⁹⁵ Elsewhere, it has been suggested that a key element of the ‘success’ of institutions for collective action was the effective implementation of supervision and sanctions – a situation noted for parts of early-modern Gelderland and Overijssel in contrast to an earlier negative interpretation of environmental degradation by Jan Luiten van Zanden.⁹⁶

One interesting monograph to appear in the past five years was produced by Leiden historian Anton Kos in 2010, focusing on the development of the commons of the Gooi area northwest of Utrecht.⁹⁷ The work of Kos, while detailed and scholarly, can hardly be considered ‘trendy’. In fact, it barely links up with the modern and current ideas surrounding collective action at all. While De Moor’s work grapples with the abstract ideas of Elinor Ostrom and the New Institutional Economics, the monograph of Kos belongs to an older tradition of medieval erudition. Kos has studiously consumed a wealth of archival manuscripts in order to paint a picture of how the Gooi commons functioned, but arguably more can be done. The development of the commons is not placed within an adequate sense of social and economic context – indeed, we rarely get a sense of what ‘type’ of pre-industrial society the Gooi was. The reason being of course is that the study lacks comparative analysis. As a result, we end up knowing a lot about Gooi and its commoners, but for more significant sociological questions or questions with societal relevance we are left with very little.⁹⁸

Landscape and settlements

If one goes back to the central thesis of Bas van Bavel’s synthesis of the social and economic history of the pre-industrial Low Countries, *Manors and Markets*, he argues that the divergent development of different regions within the Low Countries can be traced back to the Middle Ages in a very path-dependant

95 C. Tolle, ‘Tweedracht maakt zacht. Conflicten binnen een Fries waterschap (1533-1573)’, *Leidschrift* 28 (2010) 57.

96 A. Tukker, ‘Sanctionering en controle als sleutel tot overleving. Gemene gronden in Gelderland en Overijssel van de vijftiende tot de achttiende eeuw’, *Leidschrift* 28 (2010) 126-128. In response to J.L. van Zanden, ‘Paradox of the Marks: The Exploitation of Commons in the Eastern Netherlands, 1250-1850’, *Agricultural History Review* 47 (1999) 137-143.

97 A. Kos, *Van meenten tot marken. Een onderzoek naar de oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de Gooise marken en de gebruiksrechten op de gemene gronden van de Gooise markegenoten (1280-1568)* (Hilversum 2010).

98 T. De Moor, ‘What do We have in Common?: A Comparative Framework for Old and New Literature on the Commons’, *International Review of Social History* 57 (2012) 269-290.

manner – with each society inheriting their distinctive characteristics very early on in the settlement and occupation phases. What this does is bring the work of landscape historians, historical geographers⁹⁹, and archaeologists back into the mainstream of Dutch and Belgian social and economic history – in particular the work of medievalists. So to use this kind of logic, the earliest appearance of small settlements in the sandy Campine region of Brabant in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were developed through the concession of certain freedoms for its inhabitants¹⁰⁰ – freedoms and autonomy which later gave Campine societies more control over the functioning of local institutions such as the commons.¹⁰¹

A summary of the archaeological material by Frans Theeuws for the early-medieval region of the *pagus Texandrië* (roughly coterminous with the sandy area of Belgian and Dutch Brabant) has revealed that the concentration of settlement into real villages here had already begun in the seventh century (at least in part) – interesting given the general conception of settlement concentration in Western Europe is the rough period 800-1200¹⁰² – but then later in the eighth century these settlements became smaller and curiously further isolated farmsteads remerged.¹⁰³ At the moment, however, one of the most prominent topics in the literature is not the emergence of settlements but their disappearance and abandonment. While work on deserted medieval villages and *Wüstungen* across late-medieval Western Europe was often concerned with issues like plague, pestilence and migration, however much of the work on deserted settlements in the Low Countries is concerned with flooding and ‘drowned villages’. A number of interesting articles have

99 An important recent synthesis of historical geography in the northern part of the Low Countries is J. Renes, *Op zoek naar de geschiedenis van het landschap. Handleiding voor onderzoek naar onze historische omgeving* (Hilversum 2010).

100 K. Leenders, ‘Late dorpsvorming in het Brabantse zand’, *HGT* 29 (2011) 73-80; ‘Vier generaties dorpen in het Brabantse zand’, *Noordbrabants Historisch Jaarboek* 28 (2011) 1-18; D. Vangheluwe and T. Spek, ‘De laatmiddeleeuwse transitie van landbouw en landschap in de Noord-Brabantse Kempen’, *HGT* 26 (2008) 1-23.

101 M. De Keyzer, ‘Tenant Farmers and Commons: Friends or Foes?: The Function and Transformation of the Commons in a Traditional Peasant Society; The Campine Area within the Low Countries (1500-1600)’, *World Economic History Congress Paper: Stellenbosch* (2012) 1-26.

102 See, for the general survey: D. Curtis, ‘The Emergence of Concentrated Settlements in Medieval Western Europe: Explanatory Frameworks in the Historiography’, *Canadian Journal of History* 48 (forthcoming 2013).

103 F. Theeuws, ‘Settlement Research and the Process of Manorialisation in Northern Austrasia’, in: S. Gasparri (ed.), *774, ipotesi su una transizione* (Turnhout 2008) 211.

appeared in lesser-known journals on this issue: the flooding of the Dollard in north-east Groningen and the terrible storm floods that hit settlements in early-modern Western Brabant and Zeeland are good examples.¹⁰⁴ Such cases are nicely reconstructed but more descriptive than analytical. A more productive route would be to tie up some of the research on settlements with more international and contemporary research on the resilience and vulnerability of societies against exogenous threats (such as flooding) – looking instead at the question why inhabitants of some settlements were unable to stop or limit environmental shocks.¹⁰⁵ Some excellent work more focused on the social and economic reasons behind settlement desertion has been performed by archaeologists working on the abandoned fishing village of Walraversijde in Coastal Flanders.¹⁰⁶ Plotting its fate over the long term, it seems the site went through different phases, exhibited changing social hierarchies, and its decline was not just connected with water, but also warfare and the disruption to trading activities.

There are other signs that the study of the landscape and environment is beginning to be more explicitly linked to debates in social and economic history. Erik Thoen, who for a long time has been interested in developing historical geography, now heads a research department at Ghent under the name ‘Economy, Ecology and Demography’. Together with Bas van Bavel, he has compiled a volume of papers dedicated to rural societies at risk from environmental degradation – many of which focus directly on the Low Countries. The importance of this volume is that it tries to systematically assess which types of societies were better able to stave off such crises.¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere, Petra van Dam has continued on her theme of environmental change in late-medieval and early-modern Holland to show how changes within the economy such as the move towards commercial peat mining and urban investment in newly reclaimed lands impacted upon the ecosystem – ending the centuries-

104 S. Kluiving and A. de Kraker, ‘Verdronken nederzettingen in westelijke Noord-Brabant. Bouwstenen voor een toekomstige inrichting van het landschap’, *HGT* 28 (2010) 59-70; K. Leenders, ‘Lost Villages – The Dutch Way. De dynamiek van land en water en de verdronken oorden in westelijk Noord-Brabant’, *TvW* 16 (2007) 2-10; J. Kuipers, *Valkenisse. Geschiedenis, archeologie en topografie van een verdronken dorp op Zuid-Beveland* (Poortugaal 2012); O. Knottnerus, ‘Verdwenen dorpen’, *Groninger Kerken* 28 (2011) 3-8.

105 D. Curtis, *Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-Industrial Settlements* (Farnham forthcoming 2014).

106 The bibliography is well-summarised in D. Tys and M. Pieters, ‘Understanding a Medieval Fishing Settlement along the Southern Northern Sea: Walraversijde, c. 1200-1630’, in: L. Sicking and D. Abreu-Ferreira (eds.), *Beyond the Catch: Fisheries of the North Atlantic, the North Sea and the Baltic, 900-1850* (Leiden 2009) 91-122.

107 Van Bavel and Thoen (eds.), *Rural Societies and Environments*.

old practice of off-grazing for rabbits among the dunes and leading to the construction of extremely large fences to enclose and contain the animals.¹⁰⁸ One interesting contribution has followed on from Frans Verhaeghe's work by focusing on the emergence and proliferation of medieval moated sites in Coastal Flanders.¹⁰⁹ These sites proliferated roughly between 1200 and 1350 across the landscape, yet were abandoned at various stages during the late Middle Ages. In that respect, the fact they were mainly located not on lordly manors but often belonged to small farmers, gives archaeological credence to Tim Soens' documentary tracing of consolidation of landholding there in the late-medieval transition. The main argument asserted in the article is that moats represented a) a process of cultural emulation down the social hierarchy and b) an assertion of certain freedoms by the owners. Interesting theories, of course, but such ideas have already been postulated for moated sites in England – and it would have been interesting to draw comparisons.¹¹⁰

Undoubtedly much progress in the sub-discipline of landscape and settlement studies will be made in the next few years, largely thanks to technological developments – in particular, continuing sophistication and improvements made to the 'HISGIS' digital mapping project, where more parts of the Low Countries (especially for Friesland and Groningen in the north) are being added to the database.¹¹¹ As a result, some impressive publications have been produced through this system: see the remarkable inventory and history of medieval *stinzen* (noble fortified tower houses) in Friesland.¹¹²

Plague, famine and warfare

One of the most significant contributions in the past five years to our understanding of disease and famine in the pre-industrial Low Countries came from an edition of the CORN publications devoted entirely to the potato harvest failures of the nineteenth century. Eric Vanhaute's paper on Flanders

108 P. van Dam, 'Rabbits Swimming Across Borders: Micro-Environmental Infrastructures and Macro-Environmental Change in Early Modern Holland', in: B. Scott (ed.), *Economies and Ecologies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden 2010) 63-92.

109 D. Tys, 'Medieval Moated Sites in Coastal Flanders: The Impact of Social Groups on the Formation of the Landscape in Relation to the Early Estates of the Count of Flanders', in: K. De Groote, D. Tys and M. Pieters (eds.), *Exchanging*

Medieval Material Culture: Studies on Archaeology and History Presented to Frans Verhaeghe (Brussels 2010) 289-298.

110 S. Oosthuizen, 'Medieval Greens and Moats in the Central Province: Evidence from the Bourn Valley, Cambridgeshire', *Landscape History* 24 (2003) 73-88.

111 <<http://www.hisgis.nl/>>.

112 P. Noomen, *De stinzen in middeleeuws Friesland en hun bewoners* (Hilversum 2009).

and Richard Paping and Vincent Tassenaar's paper on the Netherlands were representative of a broader theme and goal of the book in the sense that they were trying to show how the consequences of the potato harvest failures were more severe for some societies than for others – and this was highly dependent on the intrinsic arrangements of the societies with regard to things like property structures, power alignments and modes of economic exploitation.¹¹³ The impact of the potato diseases in the nineteenth-century Low Countries was logically dependant on the extent of different societies' reliance on the vegetable – which in turn was dictated by very particular economic arrangements. Those regions such as East Groningen and the Central Dutch River Area were badly afflicted as a result of their large tenant farm structure, worked by (almost) proletarianised agricultural labourers. In the bad times the only way impoverished labourers could survive was through intensive production of potatoes on their own micro-plots – in the Oldambt labourer families frequently ate potatoes three meals a day. Elsewhere, Paping and Tassenaar show that other regions such as Drenthe, for example, were less afflicted through the stability of their small peasant-farmer property structure. This focus on arrangements within rural societies themselves as being the key for creating successful coping strategies against exogenous crises such as disease and pestilence has also been employed in a recent article that appeared in the journal *Continuity and Change*.¹¹⁴ The quality of this article is that it is more analytical than descriptive – looking at the causal mechanisms behind successful hazard prevention by comparing well-known cases of societies severely debilitated by crop failures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Flanders with those societies where crop failures apparently did not have harsh short-term consequences or long-term structural damage. Regional divergences across the Low Countries in the consequences of plagues and crop failures has definitely established itself as a recent theme. This is illustrated by work on dietary trends after the Black Death, where it is shown that increased meat consumption was not a general pattern in rural Flanders after 1350, but actually dependent on the type of 'social agrosystem' present in particular regions.¹¹⁵

113 E. Vanhaute, 'So Worthy an Example to Ireland: The Subsistence and Industrial Crisis of 1845-1850 in Flanders', in: C. O'Grada, R. Paping and E. Vanhaute (eds.), *When the Potato Failed: Causes and Effects of the Last European Subsistence Crisis, 1845-1850* (Turnhout 2007) 123-148; R. Paping and V. Tassenaar, 'The Consequences of the Potato Disease in the Netherlands, 1845-60: A Regional Approach', *ibid.*, 149-184.

114 T. Lambrecht and E. Vanhaute, 'Famine, Exchange Networks and the Village Community: A Comparative Analysis of the Subsistence Crises of the 1740s and the 1840s in Flanders', *C&C* 26 (2011) 155-186.

115 E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'Vegetarians or Carnivores?: Standards of Living and Diet in Late Medieval Flanders', in: S. Cavaciocchi (ed.), *Le interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale. Secc. XIII-XVIII* (Florence 2010) 495-527.

With regard to the effects of warfare on rural societies of the Low Countries, Erik Thoen's seminal article of some thirty years ago never really achieved the amount of follow-up work that it should have warranted.¹¹⁶ However, some recent pieces have continued along this very theme; for example, one article has given much support for a story of rural communities suffering under the weight of violent conflict caused by the military campaigns of Charles the Bold – where an explicit strategy to destroy the enemy was indeed to lay siege to local infrastructures and inhabitants.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere, a stimulating monograph on the fate of the Hainaut region of Wallonia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has recently appeared.¹¹⁸ In this offering it is demonstrated that warfare, as well as having quite obvious direct consequences such as death and destruction, also had more long-term structural consequences too. Here the constant conflicts between Spanish and French troops in the period 1635 to 1713 completely ruined many of the smallholding peasant farmers – leading to a polarisation of society between an elite group of large farmers able to withstand the crises, and mass ranks of the impoverished landless. The system was put under further pressure with eighteenth-century population pressure, leading to transformation in agricultural techniques. This work goes against a previous view that had seen pre-industrial Hainaut as stable and unchanging over the *longue durée*.

Marriage practices, the household, and female labour

Marriage, the formation of households and female labour inputs in the pre-industrial Low Countries in recent years has been more restricted to scholars working on cities and towns, or at least on very macro comparisons such as the speculative '*Girlpower*' paper by Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van

116 E. Thoen, 'Warfare and the Countryside: Social and Economic Aspects of the Military Destruction in Flanders during the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period', *Acta Historiae Neerlandicae: The Low Countries History Yearbook* 13 (1980) 25-38.

117 F. Viltart, 'Exploitez la guerre par tous les moyens!: Pillages et violences dans les campagnes militaires de Charles de Téméraire (1466-1476)', *Revue du Nord* 380 (2009) 473-490.

118 F. Delleaux, *Les censiers et les mutations des campagnes du Hainaut français: La formation originale d'une structure socio-économique (fin XVIIe - début XIXe siècle)* (Namur 2012). Also *Idem*, 'Le censier et la laine: Codicile à une étude sur l'élevage ovin en Hainaut au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue du Nord* 384 (2010) 53-58. On large pastoral sheep farms: E. Vanlandschoote, 'L'élevage ovin entre pratiques collectives et entreprises individuelles dans le Hainaut au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue du Nord* 375-376 (2008) 371-392.

Zanden.¹¹⁹ Other work such as that of Jan Kok and George Alter has addressed the countryside more explicitly, but generally focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after the Industrial Revolution.¹²⁰ One interesting hypothesis put forward in research on rural Flanders has been that in the selection of marriage partners, people consciously thought about the level of mortality in the family of origin when making their decision to marry.¹²¹ More often than not though, recent literature from the discipline of historical demography has been urban-focused and set after 1800.¹²²

However, a few more rurally-specific studies have been produced since 2007. Some of the best work has been produced by Richard Paping for the eighteenth and nineteenth century countryside in Groningen. He was able to show the unrestricted nature of marriage practices in the province of Groningen during the nineteenth century. Groningers married early in their twenties and almost ten years earlier than their counterparts to the south in Drenthe, an area dominated by small farmers.¹²³ Probably much of this had to do with the lack of opportunity for social mobility in Groningen: large farms were not partible through the tradition of *beklemrecht* in the region, and thus

119 T. De Moor and J.L. van Zanden, 'Girlpower: The European Marriage Pattern and Labour Markets in the North Sea Region in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period', *Economic History Review* 63 (2010) 1-33.

120 G. Alter, M. Oris and M. Neven, 'When Protoindustry Collapsed: Fertility and the Demographic Regime in Rural Eastern Belgium during the Industrial Revolution', *Historical Social Research* 32 (2007) 137-159; J. Kok, S. Yang and Y. Hsieh, 'Marital Fertility and Birth Control in Rural Netherlands and Taiwan, 19th and Early 20th Centuries', in: Y. Chuang, T. Engelen and A. Wolf (eds.), *Positive or Preventive: Fertility Developments in Taiwan and the Netherlands, 1850-1950* (Amsterdam 2006) 199-235; M. Creighton, C. Matthys and L. Quaranta, 'Migrants and Diffusion of Low Marital Fertility in Nineteenth-Century Sart, Belgium', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42 (2012) 593-614.

121 B. van de Putte, K. Matthijs and R. Vlietinck, 'Mortality in the Family of Origin and its Effects on Marriage Partner Selection in a Flemish Village (18th-20th Centuries)', in: T. Bengtsson and G. Mineau (eds.), *Kinship and Demographic Behavior in the Past* (New York 2008) 37-72.

122 Select examples from well-known authors: B. Van de Putte, 'The Influence of Modern City Life on Marriage in Ghent at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Cultural Struggle and Social Differentiation in Demographic Behaviour', *Journal of Family History* 32 (2007) 433-458; J. van Bavel et al., 'Family Size and Intergenerational Social Mobility During the Fertility Transition: Evidence of Resource Dilution from the City of Antwerp in Nineteenth-Century Belgium', *Demographic Research* 24 (2011) 313-344.

123 E. Karel and R. Paping, 'The Rural Succession Myth: Occupational Careers and Household Formation of Peasants' and Farmers' Offspring around 1800', *TSEG* 4 (2011) 44-75.

the whole farm often was inherited by the eldest child.¹²⁴ This left a significant proportion of society with no chance of building up any property – thus making a delayed marriage-strategy based around the construction of an estate pointless here. A similar method of using systematic comparative analysis of different ‘social-agrosystems’ to explore divergent trends in marriage patterns and family or household arrangements has also been used in an article focusing on unmarried mothers in different parts of the Southern Low Countries.¹²⁵ Interestingly, one of the conclusions here was that unmarried mothers in general had more difficulties in the economically polarised regions than in regions which, for example, had more opportunity for household proto-industrial occupations – where the unmarried mother could live for longer in her parent’s house and contribute through spinning.

Linking the themes

Rural social and economic history of the pre-industrial Low Countries is becoming ever increasingly less reliant on description and more analytical – taking on board sociological theories and ideas with real relevance for contemporary societies. This is easier said than done however. How in the future are we going to aid this process further? As suggested in the introduction, much of this should depend on developing systematic comparative research – taking our classical skills with the manuscripts and in the archives, but putting them to better use by testing strong, clear, even provocative hypotheses. Comparative research is facilitated by establishing cooperation with our peers and academic networks, and the CORN network has been one of the most important ways in which research has been placed within wider international contexts. The trend towards open-access publishing furthermore, could stimulate more open data sharing.

More than networking however, it is clear that analytical comparative history of the pre-industrial countryside in the Low Countries can only take place by thinking comparatively – placing all of our findings in our regions of expertise relative to what is going on in other societies around them. To take one example, many rural historians are able to use a variety of sources

124 R. Paping, ‘Gender and the Intergenerational Transfer of Property and Social Position in the 18th and Early 19th Century Northern Dutch Countryside’, in: M. Durães et al. (eds.), *The Transmission of Well-Being: Gendered Marriage Strategies and Inheritance Systems in Europe (17th-20th Centuries)* (Bern 2009) 291-313. Also related: R. Paping, ‘Taxes, Property Size, Occupations and

Social Structure: The Case of the 18th and 19th Century Northern Dutch Countryside’, *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine* 40 (2010) 215-248.
125 S. Langhe, M. Mechant and I. Devos, ‘Regionale verschillen in het leven van ongehuwde moeders op het platteland in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1730-1846’, *TSEG* 8 (2011) 2-28.

to reconstruct property distribution within a certain area. Frequently, they represent this kind of information in ‘sizes of farms’ or ‘sizes of estates’ – 1-2 hectares, 3-5 hectares, 5-10 hectares and so forth. Yet this kind of information ultimately is useless without a standardised categorising system. The point about ‘equality’ is that it can never be viewed in definite terms and in isolation – any assessment of how equal the distribution of a resource is only makes sense when placed next to distribution of a resource elsewhere. It only has value in a comparative sense. So we end up with situations whereby one historian conceives of a ‘large farm’ as something over 20 hectares, when in another area ‘large farms’ are actually something like 100 hectares. Yet both historians will still talk about their areas exhibiting high levels of inequality. The point I am making here is that we need a comparative mentality – starting with standardised ways of judging data between regions.¹²⁶ Many criticisms are made of the Gini-index for statistical distribution, but at least it allows us to place our findings in the wider context.

Such a comparative mentality can only be fostered by a wider group of rural historians beginning to think along the same analytical lines – taking the same lines of inquiry to see the bigger picture. This is where the recent trends in the research comes in – how do we link our findings together? It is interesting that the same themes that keep arising – whether we are talking about commons, or water management, or urban-rural relations – are issues of equality, participation and freedom. Tim Soens has shown that water management structures became less effective in the transition from the medieval to the early modern period in Coastal Flanders, as property distribution became polarised and distributed inequitably between social groups – hindering participation. Tine De Moor has noted in Inland Flanders that commons only functioned effectively with optimum levels of participation, linked primarily to distributions of material goods such as land and animals, while in the Campine region the durability and sustainability of the commons has been attributed by Maïka De Keyzer to high levels of freedom and an equilibrium exhibited between social interest groups. Daniel Curtis has shown that rural societies’ ability to withstand urban exploitation (for example, the Oldambt against Groningen) was connected to levels of equality and wide local political participation in the region. It has been shown the alleviation of environmental degradation and population pressure in late-medieval Holland was linked to the emergence of favourable sets of institutions grounded in a backdrop of equality, wide participation and access to services and resources, and freedoms for economic

126 An attempt at systematically comparing social distribution of landholdings between regions is found in P. van Cruyningen, B. van Bavel and E. Thoen, ‘The Low Countries, 1000-1750’, in: B.

van Bavel and R. Hoyle (eds.), *Social Relations, Property and Power: Rural Economy and Society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000* (Turnhout 2010) 169-197.

decision-making. Successful episodes of popular rural protest against elite encroachment (for example in thirteenth-century Drenthe) have been linked to longstanding traditions of freedom and equality.¹²⁷ In that sense, perhaps the key to understanding regional divergences in the Low Countries during the pre-industrial period may not be dictated by institutions per se (in the neo-institutionalist or New Institutional Economics tradition), but actually by social context providing fertile conditions for the emergence of favourable institutions in some areas but also laying the foundations for the development of unfavourable institutions in other areas. It is unfortunate then that rural history continues to be dominated by agrarian and economic concerns, rather than social, cultural or political ones, which are generally more the domain of urban historians.¹²⁸

Conclusion

In sum, what is the future of the discipline of rural social and economic history for the Low Countries? Where do we go from here? If we take the significant synthesising work of *Manors and Markets* as a reference point and a stimulant for further research, probably three key issues come up. According to Van Bavel's provocative thesis, many of the divergences seen across regions of the Low Countries were forged at an early date – from the earliest points of settlement and occupation. Thus, the first point is that the study of rural societies in the early Middle Ages becomes much more significant and integrated into wider debates on social and economic history, especially good news for archaeologists who will be able to test the ideas Van Bavel espouses.¹²⁹ Yet very little of the literature reviewed above is from the period before 1100. The second point relates to the geographical imbalance of the research currently performed. If one looks over the research reviewed in this paper for the period 2007 to 2013, there is a massive imbalance in the quantity

127 B. van Bavel, 'Rural Revolts and Structural Changes in the Low Countries, Thirteenth-Early Fourteenth Centuries', in: R. Goddard, M. Müller and J. Langdon (eds.), *Survival and Discord in Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of Christopher Dyer* (Turnhout 2010) 249-267.

128 One obvious exception with the bringing together of farming and politics (although not 'pre-industrial') is the unusual P. van Cruyningen, *Boeren aan de macht? Boerenemancipatie en machtsverhoudingen op het Gelderse platteland, 1880-1930* (Hilversum 2010).

129 For example the NWO-funded project at Leiden and Utrecht entitled 'Charlemagne's Backyard?: Rural Society in the Netherlands in the Carolingian Age. An Archaeological Perspective' set up by Prof. dr. Mayke de Jong and Prof. dr. Frans Theeuws.

(and some might say quality) of research on what is now the Dutch-speaking parts of the Low Countries in comparison to what is now the French-speaking parts (with some notable exceptions).¹³⁰ Van Bavel was criticised for his lack of attention to the French-language literature in his book, and yet surely this is only reflective of wider, more general academic trends. Such a chasm has not always existed in the field of rural social and economic history of the Low Countries however; one only has to think back to older works of Leopold Genicot on the region of Namur, or the collective publications of George Despy or more latterly Jean-Pierre Devroey on the early-medieval economies of the Southern Low Countries to know that. Probably a way of stimulating new research on parts of pre-industrial Wallonia then is to make it more explicitly and systematically comparative – particularly in light of key debates currently discussed for rural regions of the Low Countries further north. Much recent rural social and economic history of the Walloon regions of the Low Countries is well-researched in an empirical sense, with good levels of traditional scholarship, but missing a final ingredient turning descriptive material into analytical material.¹³¹ This links onto the third and final point – that is a need for rural social and economic history of the Low Countries to move away from a continual and somewhat entrenched bias towards Flanders and Holland. Regions such as the Ardennes or Drenthe might seem ‘peripheral’ when considered in terms of important international debates on pre-industrial economic developments, but as scholars such as Kenneth Pomeranz have reminded us not so long ago on the ‘Great Divergence’ debate, the explanation of divergent economic developments might not be found in the ‘core areas’ (i.e. Yangzi Delta vs. Northwestern Europe) but in their relationship with the peripheries.¹³² ◀

130 Acknowledged in J-P. Devroey, ‘Early Medieval Land Structures and their Possible Impact on Regional Economic Development within the Low Countries: A Comment on ‘Manors’ in Bas van Bavel’s *Manors and Markets*’, *TSEG* 8 (2011) 78-89.

131 See some typical examples in S. Glansdorff, ‘Hansur-Lesse, un village entre Famenne et Ardenne du XVe au XXe siècle’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 89 (2011) 347-360; F. Chantinne and R. Vanmechelen, ‘Haillot (Ohey), des origines mérovingiennes à l’exode rural (VIIe-XIXe siècles)’, *De la Meuse à l’Ardennes* 41 (2009) 113-174.

132 K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton 2000).



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