

Land of the free. Social contrasts in the Dutch ‘outlands’ (A.D. 1200–1900)¹

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SUMMARY

In the Netherlands, most high and dry land was settled and cultivated as early as the prehistoric period. Many lowlands, on the other hand, remained essentially unreclaimed until well into the Middle Ages. Since then these areas, too, have witnessed rapid change, physically as well as socially. Usually in medieval reclamation areas, under frontier-like conditions, settlers managed to become free farmers. This paper discusses the interesting two-faced character of the social developments in some of the ‘outlands’ along the margins of the ‘civilised world’. In some areas elite groups emerged or expanded, and castles and castle-like dwellings were shooting up far and wide, while wilderness areas were rapidly being transformed into highly productive arable land. Elsewhere smallholders and paupers settled, or were forced to settle involuntarily. In the latter cases the local economy was largely based on peat cutting and small-scale subsistence agriculture. Socially, outlands (reclamation areas) therefore took very different paths, which is still recognisable today. The history of these social contrasts is complex and deserves more research. Different opportunities as well as the ability and freedom to exploit them seem to have been key factors.

KEYWORDS

The Netherlands, outlands, frontier, reclamations, social history, Middle Ages, post-medieval period.

INTRODUCTION

Triggered by population growth and rising urban demand, much of north-western Europe during the High Middle Ages (tenth to early fourteenth century) witnessed large-scale reclamation efforts. In the Netherlands the process began in the late tenth century (Henderikx 1989; Borger 1992; Mol 2011; van Doesburg & Groenewoudt 2011), as territorial rulers handed out peat bogs and swamps for reclamation on a large scale. When necessary, drainage was first improved by orders from above. In the mid-thirteenth century, for instance, the Count of Guelders ordered a drainage channel to be dug, the so-called *Gravengracht* (Count’s Canal), to facilitate reclamation enterprises in the eastern Dutch Achterhoek area (Fig. 1).

Before reclamation began, the areas involved were virtually uninhabited, although they were usually being exploited in various ways by the residents of nearby higher grounds. As commoners, they usually held common rights of meadow and pasture in addition to being entitled to collect wood, peat and fodder for private use. Most of them were tenant farmers. Their lords — landowners representing both secular and ecclesiastical elite groups — exploited the outlands for their own benefit, and increasingly



Fig. 1. Location of the regions and sites that are mentioned in the text. Basis: historic landscapes in the Netherlands (adapted from Barends *et al.* 2010).²

Physical geography	Man-made landscape (situation 19th century)	Field-pattern	
		Pluriform	Uniform
Higher parts of the Netherlands			
Plateaus South-Limburg	Open fields		
Sand, boulder-clay	Enclosures and small open fields <1850		
	Common heathland, forests and wetlands 1850		
Fluvial landscape	Enclosures and small open fields		
Coastal dunes	Enclosures and small open fields		
Coastal lowlands			
(Former) peat-and fenlands	Fenland reclamations (strip-fields)		
	Peat-colonies		
	Drained lakes (all >1500)		
Coastal marshes	Old landscapes		
	Reclaimed land (> Late Middle Ages)		

also commercially. This was a potential cause of conflicts. In this context Ingvild Oye correctly observed that ‘the social and economic development of agrarian settlements (in Norway) is better demonstrated here (in outlands) than in the core areas (of habitation)’ (2005, p. 15).

In the Netherlands, most of the higher parts of the landscape had already been settled and largely cultivated since late prehistory. Reclamation of the outlands bordering these old settlement *nuclei* went hand in hand with colonisation. While reclamation was ongoing such outlands may be imagined as ‘frontiers’, a concept used here not as Waselkov and Paul (1981) defined it, ‘[a] transitional area of mixture and interaction’, but rather as an ‘empty’ border zone where pioneers and settlers moved in, and which offered new opportunities. This concept may help one to understand social developments in the areas discussed here. Comparative freedom is probably what allowed groups of settlers in different Dutch reclamation areas from the tenth to the fourteenth century to form a new social class, one of free farmers, or yeomen (*e.g.* Mol 2011, p. 72). Interestingly, changes occurred on both extremes of the social scale. Some reclamation areas witnessed the rapid rise of a new local elite, others

became poverty-stricken ‘refuges’ for the poorest of the poor. The purpose of this short paper is twofold: 1) to identify possible causes of these striking social contrasts, using historical as well as archaeological and landscape evidence, and 2) to create a starting point for future research.

THE RISE OF LOCAL ELITE GROUPS IN RECLAMATION AREAS

Intriguing phenomena in some of the newly reclaimed areas in the Netherlands from the thirteenth century onwards included not only the emergence of new regional elites or the expansion of an existing elite, but also the construction of many small castles, tower houses and moated sites. Most of them have long since disappeared, but every now and then archaeological remains of these structures are recovered, adding to the many hundreds that have already been recorded (*e.g.* Broekhuizen *et al.* 1994; Groenendijk & Molema 1998).

In some areas veritable ‘castle landscapes’ were formed (van Doesburg 2011; in prep.; Spiekhout 2012). A driving force behind these developments was perhaps the ideal opportunities for expansion that lowland reclamations provided to enterprising

individuals. Entrepreneurs seem to have been able to take full advantage of ‘the freedom of the frontier’. Man-made physical obstacles were rare, and social obstacles were either absent or, at the very least, less rigid than in the ‘old’ land, where virtually everything and everyone was tied up in manorial systems, with their strict legal structure (Spek 2004; van Doesburg 2011).

Probably the best-known Dutch ‘castle landscape’ is that along the Langbroekerwetering, a drainage channel which dissects early twelfth-century reclamations in the central Dutch river area. Here, many mostly small, thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century brick tower houses and manor houses sprung up close to each other (Pl. I). They functioned as dwellings as well as storage facilities. All were built on sites of slightly earlier reclamation farms. Renes (2008) pointed out that more than half of the founders were members of prominent families with roots in the adjacent ‘old land’, where these individuals seem to have been stewards on large agrarian

estates owned by ecclesiastical institutions and the Bishop of Utrecht, the territorial ruler of the area. The managers of these estates were the main actors in the reclamation of the neighbouring wetlands, acting as the medieval equivalents of present-day developers (*locatores*). All western Dutch peat bog reclamations studied by de Bont (2008) that were initiated by the bishop proved to have been executed by *locatores*, who received their commission in so-called ‘*cope*’ (purchase) contracts issued by the bishop (van der Linden 1955; Borger 1992). In the Langbroekerwetering area, *locatores* demonstrably received land and privileges in both newly reclaimed and ‘old’ land (van Doesburg 2011; in prep.). Other tower and manor houses were built by descendants of settlers who had succeeded in making their fortune and gaining prestige. This suggests that castle construction in this specific reclamation area may represent both the material expression of an existing elite and the physical manifestation of a newly formed one.



Plate I. *Lunenburg*, one of the many (in origin) thirteenth-century fortified houses (tower houses) in the medieval *Langbroekerwetering* reclamation area (drawing by Abraham de Haen, 1725).