

1.5. The open fields of Europe in their social and economic context: origins and use. Part I: Continental Europe and Scandinavia

Panel organiser: Thoen, Erik, Ghent University, Belgium; Dyer, Christopher, Leicester University, UK; Williamson, Tom, University of East Anglia, UK

In the middle ages and early modern period open fields can be found in every country of Europe. These were extensive areas of land given over to arable farming, with provision for common grazing of animals, and were subject to rules enforced by communities. There were many varieties. Sometimes they occupied a high proportion of the land in a village's territory, but in some cases the open fields formed an element in a landscape also containing enclosed land, woodland or expanses of pasture. They were usually cropped according to agreed rotations, in which crops occupied each year a proportion of the land (a half, two thirds or three-quarters) and the rest lay fallow. They were replaced by enclosures, which could be as early as c.1200, but were often delayed until the 18th and 19th centuries. The enclosures could take place gradually, or in a single revolutionary act. The origin, character and function of the open fields were often studied by geographers, while historians were more interested in the process of enclosure. Approaches to the open fields are now commonly multi-disciplinary, and involve much archaeological attention as well as that of historians and geographers. There are debates about the environmental context, as scholars seek to explain the uneven distribution of open fields across varied landscapes. Some attribute the decision to change field systems to lords, or to ethnic groups, or even to the state, while others favour the view that peasants were the agents. Were open fields devised and managed in order to maintain and improve levels of productivity, was their prime function to avoid risk, or was it the consequence of a structural lack of capital? Did the fields impose equality on the cultivators, for example by ensuring that strips were scattered, or was there provision for individuals to make improvements, invest in livestock and implements, and raise their profits? How did tenures and other dimensions of land holding impact on the field organisation? Was the existence of open fields linked with technology, and did those technologies change? Developments within the open fields and in the processes of enclosure, happened at a different pace, and this needs to be explained. The purpose is to examine origin, use and decline of open fields in the context of evolving social relations and economic change. The panel is divided in two parts. Part I deals with continental Europe and Scandinavia. Part II with Europe in general and the UK. These panels are organized by the CORN network (Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area).

Chair: Williamson, Tom, University of East Anglia, UK

Monday 19.8.2013 // 1100 – 1300 // Session 1 – Room A 027

1.5.1. Open fields, environment, peasants and manors. Medieval and early modern field-systems between the Meuse and the Ardennes

Schroeder, Nicolas, University of Oxford, UK

The environment of the region between the Meuse and the Ardennes is highly contrasted. The Ardennes are uplands with hard climatic conditions and relatively poor soil, whereas the Condroz and the Famenne are more fertile lowlands. This had a significant impact on medieval agriculture. In the late medieval Ardennes, ley farming and shifting cultivation were combined to produce predominantly rye and oat. In the Famenne and the Condroz, rotations were more intense, mainly triennial. Spelt, oat and, to a lesser extent, wheat were produced here in the late middle ages. In all these regions, there was a strong social control of field systems and rotations through rules enforced by peasant-communities and manorial organisation. Open fields were but one of these socially controlled agro-systems. Indeed, the social organisation of ley farming and even shifting cultivation was not that different, from both an institutional and 'ideological' point of view, than that of open fields. The paper will try to build upon the regional differences in the studied area in order to see which factors were important in the uneven distribution of field-systems. The focus will be on environmental, agro-biological, agro-technical, and socio-economic aspects (manors and lordship, access to markets or towns, village communities). This comparative study should allow to address the problem of the origins, the developments and the specificities of open fields.

1.5.2. Micro-openfields in Flanders in the middle ages. New hypotheses on their origin and functioning

Thoen, Erik, Ghent University, Belgium

In large parts of inland Flanders an openfield system had developed in the course of the middle ages. However, in some areas the size of the openfields was relatively small; it remained micro-openfields. Only in some areas it developed to a larger openfield system via a so called 'patch work'. In other areas it disappeared in an early period already. The origin, use and function of these openfields is not well known, nor are its links with (changing) settlement patterns. In this presentation we will link the development of openfields with the evolution of the social organization of the Flemish medieval society.

1.5.3. The development and function of Scandinavian open fields

Gadd, Carl-Johan, Gothenburg University, Sweden

The late medieval society is showing differences between eastern and western parts of Sweden. The western parts show open field systems with a variety of irregular strip field systems and different types of settlements. In Scandinavia, originally the normal system of cultivation was continuous cropping (ensåde) which still existed in some areas in the 18th century. The changeover from continuous cropping to an open field system (two- or three-course rotations) happened in Skåne and the Central-Swedish plains in the period 1000-1200, in transitional areas (i.e. between woodland and plains) from the 16th century on. The changeover to a three- or four-field system involved that all strips laid fallow were collected to one field that could be grazed. We will examine the reasons for this change as well as the evolution of the system which increased efficiency, increased productivity and was cost and risk reducing as pointed out by earlier researchers (Mc Closkey). We also will explain why the system eventually was given up.

1.5.4. Openfield systems in 17th century Sweden.

Regular and irregular strip field systems in the Swedish large scale maps; 1630-1655 & 1680-1700

Jupiter, Kristofer, National archives (Riksarkivet), Stockholm, Sweden

The late medieval society is showing differences between eastern and western parts of Sweden. The western parts show open field systems with a variety of irregular strip field systems and different types of settlements. There were many field systems but the one- and three-field crop rotation was dominant. In contrast to the irregular structures in the west the east central parts show a highly regulated strip field system (the so called sun-division) established in the late 13th and early 14th century. The introduction of two-field crop rotation coincides with the introduction of the system and was here the dominant rotation system. The sun division has been thought of as top-down as a way of control for land owners (even though disputed). Both areas are compared. The origin of the irregular strip field system and its organisation and functioning is for the most part unknown and research is scarce. The focus has mainly been on the regulated system in the east. The irregular system or systems have more or less been dismissed as residues of older, primitive strip field systems that gradually developed, bottom-up and resulted in the structures that we see in the 17th century large scale maps. The block-shaped parcels in common field (one field) systems with no fallow have been interpreted as older than the long and narrow strip-shaped parcels. The strip shaped parcels have been explained as a result of farming techniques (plough) but also a result of a transition from one- to three-field crop.

1.5.5. Externalities of the Sun Division

Talvitie, Petri, Department of Finnish and Nordic History, University of Helsinki, Finland

I will analyze the functioning of the 'sun division', which was a Scandinavian version of the European wide open field system. The field system came to Scandinavia in the late middle ages, and it was introduced to facilitate the collection of taxes. The sun division was the only legal field system in Sweden (Finland included) from the mid-14th century onwards. However, in reality it was implemented only in the central parts of the kingdom. The basic principle behind the system was to divide the village resources according to the fiscal burden of an individual household: the more a household paid taxes, the more the members of a household could use the village resources. The most visible expression of the system was the strip system itself, where the widths of the strips varied according to the taxation units of the households. This paper concentrates on the problems of the system, on the externalities or "neighborhood effects" (McCloskey). The study area comprises four parishes, situated in the province of Western Nyland at the northern shore of the Gulf of Finland. At the time Western Nyland was one of the most industrialized regions in Finland with a flourishing sawmill and iron industry. I would scrutinize several types of disputes: a) illegal widening of the individual strips; b) contested enclosures in the common waste; c) disputed pasturing in the common fields etc. I will also prove how these neighborhood effects eventually led to the dissolution of open fields in the mid-18th century onwards.

Participants

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Erik Thoen is professor of rural and environmental history at Ghent University (Belgium). He is a specialist of pre-modern agriculture and rural society in North Western Europe, and founder and chair of the CORN - Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area - Research Network.

Williamson, Tom

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