

2.4. Rural Elites: towards a comparative history of rural elites in pre-modern Europe, Part I

Panel organiser: Soens, Tim, University of Antwerp, Belgium; Thoen, Erik, Ghent University, Belgium

In contrast to urban historians who often discern a rather homogenous 'bourgeois' elite-model throughout much of pre-modern Europe, historians of rural society are usually more hesitating in defining something as the rural elite. Recent studies tend to stress the striking regional divergences in the organization of agriculture and society, which persisted well beyond the middle of the 19th century. Elite groups existed in peasant smallholding economies with a strong communal organization, as well as in areas of 'grand' commercial farming, but it remains to be questioned whether these elites had much in common, except local predominance. Can we find common denominators of rural elites throughout different agro-systems in pre-modern Europe? And do we see an increasing convergence of these elites from the later middle ages to the beginning of the 19th century, perhaps influenced by non-rural – urban bourgeois or state-bound – models of social interaction, economic and political dominance and cultural behaviour? In 2009/2010 two major comparative research projects on Rural Elites in pre-industrial Europe were initiated. On the one hand the Rural Elites in a Changing Society project was funded by the Flemish Research Foundation and framed within the CORN-Comparative History of the North Sea Area research network. This project studied regional divergences in the organization and dynamics of village elites in the pre-modern Low Countries by linking them to equally regionally divergent patterns of rural commercialization. On the other hand, the project Ländliche Eliten, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, united specialists from Oldenburg University, archives and museums in a collaborative effort to study the life and literary culture of the northwest German peasant-bourgeois elite from the late 17th century to the early 19th century. The goal of this session is not only to present and compare the results of both major research projects so far, but also to invite experts of other regions to reflect on the regional diversity of rural elites in pre-modern Europe and the (im)possibility of constructing encompassing typologies of rural elites. By comparing elite configurations in different regions of Europe, this session will be able to assess the impact of variations in economic commercialization; state power; local lordship; the proximity and influence of cities; legal traditions (e.g. inheritance systems) and the social coherence of village communities on the nature and reproduction of rural elites.

Chair: Van Molle, Leen, University of Leuven, Belgium

Monday 19.8.2013 // 1400 – 1530 // Session 2 – Room A 201

2.4.1. Rural Elites in the East-Frisian Coastal Marshes (1648-1806)

Cronshagen, Jessica, Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg, Germany

Schmekel, Frank, Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg, Germany

A very fertile land, shaped by sluices, canals and dykes characterizes the Coastal Marshes of North-West Germany. These environmental circumstances favoured the rise of a rural elite called the Hausleute. Due to an agrarian surplus they were allowed to be successful farmers as well as traders. During the 17th and 18th century East-Friesland was a rural region – only 15% of the people lived in small towns – but nevertheless it was integrated in the European Market. The North Sea trade reached remote villages and towns like Emden by water and was flanked by a quite solid trade by land. While the main export-goods were grain, cattle, bricks, horses, butter, milk and wool, there was a lack of wood and manufactured products. Things like textiles, earthen-ware, tobacco, tea, coffee, herbs and sugar were offered in different ways. A lot of regional markets, pedlars, grocers, catalogues, agents and auctions allowed the Frisian upperclass to take part in European fashions. In combination with a selfish Hausmann-confidence the rural elites established a specific early modern consumption-culture. European and global artefacts were adapted in regional culture and patterns of distinction. This should not be understood as a one-way-street but as interplay. East-Frisian elites for example ordered porcelain in China shaped in a European style and decorated with a local coat of arms. Hence, there is no look on a local elite without thinking a global dimension.

2.4.2. British farmers and the public sphere, 1815-1914

Hoyle, Richard W., University of Reading, UK

There was never an English or British farmers' party. Instead farmers were associated with the Conservative Party which was, in effect, a coalition of landowners (who offered leadership) and farmers (who offered electoral numbers) whose interests were by no means the same. Both could believe in Protection as a means to maintain domestic prices, but the Conservative landowners were opposed to any statutory implementation of tenant right and supported the maintenance of the game laws. Farmers' societies

were supposed to eschew political discussions. The National Agricultural Union, founded in 1893, was the last kick of the idea that landlords and tenants formed a single interest. By this time farmers were well aware that their interest was not that of the landlords. Farmer's societies formed in the last quarter of the century tried to slip domination of the landlords. So much is well known. But questions arise. How far were farmers allowed to take part in the public debate about agriculture and, in particular, about landlord-tenant relations? In what forums did they do so? We will argue that farmers could occasionally act as a unified force before 1850. But in the later nineteenth-century we will also show that landlords could intimidate and even evict farmers who followed political careers as representatives of farming interests. Finally though, the farmers' interest was overwhelmed by the widening of the franchise in 1884 and by the beginning of the century there was no prospect of a farmer's party. But it was farmers rather than landlords who spoke on behalf of agriculture in Britain in the twentieth century.

2.4.3. Gardens as exponents of rural elites. Peasant miners and ironmasters in Sweden 1600-1830

Ahrland, Åsa, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden

Through history gardens have played an important role for elites to manifest themselves in the landscape. In 17th century Sweden a new elite, mainly industrialists from abroad, emerged in the mining areas north and northwest of Stockholm. This group produced iron in large quantities for the European market. Extensive ironworks were laid out. An architectural concept developed characterized by a strong hierarchy. The spatial organization with tree planted avenues and the manor surrounded by its gardens in the center, mirrored the patriarchal nature of the works. Iron production was not new to the area. Since medieval times peasant miners had produced iron, working in cooperative teams. Peasant miners were in general wealthier than traditional peasants, as they were part of a market economy. Forming an élite in the peasant community, their standing was often manifested in grander buildings and in elaborate gardens, not unlike the homesteads of the clergymen. The gardens of the early 17th century ironworks show great similarities with the gardens of the peasant miners. However, over time the gardens of the two groups are diverging, those of the ironmasters become architecturally more advanced complying with new ideas on garden art. This is particularly articulated with the introduction of the landscape garden, only embraced by the outmost elite in the late 18th century and early 19th century, in this case the ironmasters. This study shows how gardens and horticulture is an important key to express the stratification of the rural society.

Participants

Ahrland, Åsa

Åsa Ahrland PhD, senior lecturer at the Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning and Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). Focusing on the intersection between nature and culture and the relationship between man and landscape, her research concerns parks, gardens and other cultural landscapes, where man's desire to control and enjoy the environment has created complex structures with underlying meanings and functions. Her thesis (2005) investigates professional gardeners in 18th century Sweden.

Cronshagen, Jessica

Jessica Cronshagen studied History and Social Sciences in Osnabrück. Between 2006 and 2010 she was research fellow of the protestant foundation "Evangelisches Studienwerk Villigst" and finished her PhD-thesis on rural elites in the North-West-German Coastal Marshes in 2010. Now she holds a post-doc-position in Oldenburg in a project about dissenter-generations in reformation Europe. Her main interests are rural social history, religious pluralization, radicalism and early-modern generation/life cycles-concepts.

Hoyle, Richard W.

Richard Hoyle is professor of Rural History at the University of Reading, UK, and is editor of Agricultural History Review. Currently he also serves as President of EURHO. His research interests lie mainly in the early modern period, but he enjoys trespassing on other people's territory too.

Soens, Tim

Tim Soens is Associate Professor of Medieval and Environmental History at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). He has studied Medieval History at the University of Ghent, where he obtained his PhD in 2006, investigating water management and the inter-

action of man and nature in coastal Flanders (1300-1600AD). Within the Antwerp Department of History, Tim Soens has developed a new research line 'Environment and Power', concentrating on the historical relationship between human societies and the natural environment, and the way this interaction was steered by evolving power constellations and formal and informal institutions.

Schmekel, Frank

Frank Schmekel studied History, German and Education Science in Potsdam and Oldenburg. He currently is stipendiary of the Volkswagen Foundation and works in an interdisciplinary project concerning about Early-Modern rural elites in North-West Germany. Key aspects of his work are globalization, material culture and the analysis of cultural-historical exhibitions.

Thoen, Erik

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.

Van Molle, Leen

Leen Van Molle is full professor of social history at the University of Leuven, Department of History, research group MoSa (Modernity & Society 1800-2000). She is chair person of the Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History, University of Leuven. Her research focuses on Belgian and comparative social history of Europe from 1800 to the present, especially rural history, the rural-urban divide, the construction of social identities, co-operative saving and lending, gender and the methodology of oral history. In 2005 she was visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia).