

## 5.5. Rural Elites: towards a comparative history of rural elites in pre-modern Europe, Part II

**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 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: Thoen, Erik, Ghent University, Belgium**

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 // 1300 – 1500 // Session 5 – Room A 027

### 5.5.1. Coqs de villages or ugly ducklings? Tenant farmers and their role in late medieval village communities: the Campine area (Low Countries)

**Van Onacker, Eline, University of Antwerp, Belgium**

Tenant farmers have been at the core of rural historiography. Their – presupposed – commercial and progressive attitude made them a fascinating object of study. Their coqs de village status, their dominance of village life on an economic and political level only further enhanced this historiographical fascination. But tenant farms were not confined to commercially oriented regions in which they dominated everything and everybody around them. Tenant farms were also a presence in some peasant societies, characterised by smallholders and the extreme importance of commons. How did tenant farms function in a society dominated and designed by peasants, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? The case-study chosen for this study is the Campine area, a sandy peasant-dominated region in the Low Countries, in the proximity of sixteenth century metropolis Antwerp. This region was home to several tenant farms, mainly owned by the powerful abbey of Tongerlo. To what extent did these tenant farmers dominate and control village life, on a political and on an economic level? How often did they fill in village offices, for example as village aldermen? How should we understand their economic relationship with their fellow-villagers? Did the Campine tenant farmers create dependency through labour or credit relations, as was the case in more commercial regions or was their economic impact rather limited? So to sum it up, were the Campine tenant farmers the pivot of village communities or were they rather a presence at the verges of Campine society?

### 5.5.2. Between the countryside and the city. Rural Elites in the Midlands of Valencia in the 15th Century

**Aparisi Romero, Frederic, University of Valencia, Spain**

The main aim of this paper is to offer a general picture of the rural elite of the Midlands of the kingdom of Valencia during the

15th century according to their economic activities and their strategies for social promotion. The wealthier families of the rural communities benefited not only from the consolidation of the regional economic system but also from the integration of the kingdom in the international trade networks. Thanks to a hierarchized urban net, the market was not a stranger to these families. In relation with this, we will try to analyse the influence of the cities and towns. What kind of attraction did the urban world exercise over the leading families of the rural communities? Was it confined to economic aspects or can we assume that the bourgeois and even the noble families became the example to emulate, in a cultural way as well? If this is true, did the rural elite adopt specific patterns of consumption, different from the rest of the members of the rural community? And did the difference in standards of living separate the well-to-do families from the rest of the village community? Finally, it should be questioned what these well-to-do families had in common with the rest of the European rural elites in this period.

### 5.5.3. Rural elites in transition? Local upper classes in western Tyrol and Vorarlberg 1750-1850

**Kasper, Michael, University of Innsbruck, Austria**

The elites in the peasant society in central-alpine villages, markets and agricultural towns are the focus in this paper – also the question how the prevailing "rulers" circumvented with social and political changes around 1800. A central role in the definition of local elites always plays the question of the distribution of power in the regional rural societies. The ones can be called elites who shape the key social areas and influence the progress of the society. It examines, who were the elites in rural areas and how their political functions, offices and careers, their family structures and their marriage patterns looked like. The local elites of the rural area can be reconstructed on the basis of financial circumstances, the professional backgrounds, of the political activities and lifestyle. Between these factors often particularly close relationships can be stated, because sufficient funds were often an important basis for the access to public office. With this basic information in a further step changes in lifestyles, patterns of thought and behavior can be detected, and the people can be placed in a social, kinship and family context. Using these data, finally, conclusions on values, attitudes, structures and social transformations in alpine, rural areas in the modern age can be drawn. Tyrol and Vorarlberg were jointly selected as the study area, because there were numerous connections and similarities between the two regions around 1800. Thus, both regions, each having an independent parliament, were managed by the Gubernium in Innsbruck.

### 5.5.4. Rural „bourgeoisie“ in the 18th century Low Countries?

**Vermoesen, Reinoud, University of Antwerp, Belgium**

This contribution will shed some light on the late early modern networks of the rural elites of both peasant dominated and market orientated regions in the (Southern) Low Countries. In the former region, large farmers were a minority group of households embedded in a sea of peasants, whereas in the latter area, tenant arable farmers dominated the local scene. It has already been established that farmers in peasant regions played an important role in the factor markets, alongside their dominant position in local circuits of reciprocal exchange. In addition, their colleagues of the tenant farms were almost fully engaged with the factor markets. Therefore both categories held key positions in the flows between countryside and the omnipresent urban network. In this study the credit and commodity flows between the farmer categories and the urban network will be investigated. From this actor perspective, albeit modest in scope, this study will elaborate on the important debate on the widening commercialization of the early modern economy. How can we label these flows between the farmers and the urban network: entrenched in anonymous markets? Or rather based on symbiotic alliances with townsmen?

#### Participants

##### Aparisi Romero, Frederic

Frederic Aparisi Romero, BA (2005) and Mphil (2008) by the University of Valencia. From January of 2011 to August of 2012 he has been lecturer in the University CEU Cardenal Herrera. He is currently finishing his PhD thesis with the title "From the Countryside to the City. Raising and consolidation of the Valencian Rural Elite (14th-15th Centuries)".

##### Kasper, Michael

Michael Kasper, Teacher Training in "History, Social Studies, Civics" and "Geography and Economics" at the University of Innsbruck; Doctoral studies in history at the University of Innsbruck; Director of the Montafon Museums and Research Assistant at the University of Innsbruck, Department of History and European Ethnology; Research Focus: Regional History of Western Austria (Tyrol, Vorarlberg and surrounding areas), social history of rural areas, agrarian history, oral history.

##### 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 interaction 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.

##### 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 Onacker, Eline

Eline Van Onacker is scientific collaborator at Department of History of the University of Antwerp, Belgium. Framed within a comparative research project on rural elites in the later Middle Ages, supervised by Erik Thoen (Ghent University) and Tim Soens (University of Antwerp), she is currently finishing her PhD on rural elites in the Campine Area.

##### Vermoesen, Reinoud

Reinoud Vermoesen is guest lecturer and collaborator at the Centre for Urban History, University of Antwerp. In 2008 he obtained his PhD at the same University with a thesis on the commercial networks, production and consumption strategies of rural households in Early Modern Inland Flanders.