“Open fields” in Mediaeval and Early Modern Flanders and the organisation of labor.

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Introduction

1/ Research limits and methods
- Little archaeological research on rural mediaeval Flanders
- Little amount of sources, most only post 1300
- Sources:
  - largely retrogressive
  - Hypothetical / comparative

2/ Goal of presentation: Elements for the goals for the organization of field patterns

Social agro-system
- Importance of labour-structure in the rural society
- Importance of social structure
- Importance of survival needs: access to food and heating
- Importance of environment (soil)
1/ ‘KOUTER’ TYPE

= micro-openfield (10-50 ha) as small ‘infield’ and common field characteristics’ with a majority of acreage in commons or/ and bocage (second stage)
The occurrence of the ‘kouter’ place name in Flanders (Lindemans)
• The village-‘kouter’ in the village Meigem (W of Ghent) reconstructed

Reconstruction: Thoen
Kouter te Wannegem-Lede
De dorpskauter van Sint-Martens-Latem

After: A. Verhulst
"Dries" types

Illustration: Thoen
Figure 5
Fragment d’une carte de la commune de Oosterzele a°1733 (FL. Or.). Remarquez le hameau de ‘dries’ divisé en deux parties (‘voorste dries’ et ‘achterste dries’) et le grand ‘Wiendick cauter’ (à droite sur cette carte) qui se trouve entre le village de Oosterzele et celle de Scheldewindeke. Le centre du village et l’église se trouvent en haut de cette carte.
(Source : State Archives Gent: Kaarten en plannen n° 1120)
• The manorial ('hof')-'kouters' in the village Dikkele (W of Ghent) reconstructed
Social and economic evolution in the sandy areas

- In this area: there was a huge demographic growth in the 11-12th centuries: reclamations (see also towns)
- Evolution towards important peasant property rights (part of demographic ‘strategy’): low rents per acreage
- Loss of common fields
- Important polarization of the society: investments of townsmen in ‘moated sites’. Result: every village 2-5 large holdings 13-14th c
- A majority of small holdings: driven towards collaboration in a (limited) ‘open field’ system.
- A likely ‘physical’ move of the small holders towards the ‘dries’ hamlets that became more numerous. Archaeological ‘proof’ so far: a disappearance of a lot of middle sized holdings in that area during 12-13th (oral comm.W.De Clercq)
Character of collaboration on the micro-openfields?

Most important: a shortage of capital in a polarized society

1/ Shortage of Manure:
- Openfield agriculture was necessary for keeping cattle and sheep together for manure (see: water sources, gate, compare ‘stable-sod manuring’ in es-region)
- Importance of manure: In Fla in later MA smallholders could manure only every 5-7 years despite the high yields…

2/ Shortage of horses.
There was in that area we called a ‘convivium’ between smallholders and large holdings due to a lack of capital especially horses or other animals for plowing and transport. Small holders had a loan- and labour relationship with larger farmers. These farmers plowed the land and did transport (e.g. of manure) and the smallholders paid it back via wage earning for several days a year…. (about 1 month/person per ha).
Why did it not develop towards a ‘patchwork’ or a ‘champion’ area?

1/ Part of plowing was in Flanders replaced by spade cultivation, esp. since the 13\textsuperscript{th} century. We have data that 1/3\textsuperscript{rd} of the land in Flanders was cultivated with the spade in 18\textsuperscript{th} c. Flanders! This was especially possible in the \textit{light soils} around Ghent.

2/ Bocage was more necessary to avoid erosion

3/ There was a need for firewood for survival. Too much woodlands had disappeared and hedges had a function for survival.

4/ A need for fences for cattle breeding by small holders (‘one cow’-peasants)

5/ More larger holdings in that area that could also ‘plow’ the enclosed land.

6/ Intensification possibilities (after crops, industrial crops….)

Contrary to the sandy-loamy area! (except the last point 6)
Evolution towards a “patchwork” of openfields in the sandy-loamy area

Heldergem en 1427

Illustration: Thoen
Soils and areas in Flanders

Illustration: Thoen
Hillegem 18de eeuw
The relationship between open landscapes and the “labour/capital –’convivium’” between large and smallholders ‘proved’? A retrogressive analysis.
Reconstruction of the cultivated lands of 3 large farmers in the village Makegem (Fl. Occ., next to Courtrai) in the 18th century with indication of the land of smallholders plowed by larger farmers. Indication of open and enclosed landscape based on the s.c. Ferraris map.

A1 B1 C1 = land cultivated by larger farmers
A2, B2, C2 = lands owned by small holders cultivated by the larger farmers.
(data delivered by Thijs Lambrecht; Sources: terriers et probate inventories of Makegem)
The ‘Poldertype’: coastal and polder area

‘POLDER’TYPE a ‘patchwork’ of micro-openfields covering the majority of the acreage in the village and a minority of bocage.

Derived from a (badly known) system with undiked commons (marshlands and peatlands).

Under pressure of increased ecological stress soils were changed into marslands and slowly embanked. It is likely that “common field” characteristics existed in the beginning when from c. 1000 landowners maintained the dikes that had become necessary and at about 1350 most of the coastal area was diked. Commonly organized institutions for the maintenance of the valuable infrastructure were slowly taken over by the absentee landowners (often living in towns).
However, we do not know if a ‘common field’ with ‘Flurzwang’ here system ever existed. What we know is that there were until c. 1250 larger nucleated villages which were shrinking after 1300 in a fast way. A landscape developed with dispersed larger holdings and a property system based on lease holding developed from 1250 to c. 1650. A social agro-system with a huge polarization (with many non possessing wage earners being the consequence) was the result and the holdings that survived concentrated the land around there holdings and disposed of the necessary horses for plowing and transport (which was possible in that property structure) so that a real ‘common’ field system was not necessary. A landscape developed with large fields, little hays but a relatively a lot of large trees came to existence.

The right of gleaning the field by the poor of the village, was the only known common right that survived in the 16-18th century since polarization made the amount of real poor larger in this social agro-system was higher and even increasing.
Conclusion:
Despite the largely speculative character of this presentation, we wanted to stress the role of the (changing) social organization (which was regionally and over time in a different way organised) in the evolution of open landscapes, focusing especially on the role of capital and capital distribution in the rural society. This social organization adapted the environmental diversity into different or comparable landscapes.