Every little bit helps? The leasehold of small parcels of land in late medieval Flanders

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Introduction

- “The rise and breakthrough of short-term leasing can be considered as one to the most important developments in the social and economic history of the countryside (1200-1600)” (van Bavel, 2008)
- “Consequences depending on the arrangement of the lease system and the economic and social context” (van Bavel, Schofield et. al., 2008)
Introduction

• Focus in historiography on the leasing out of large, complex holdings, which only influenced a small proportion of rural society
• Leasing out of small plots of land more significant for rural dwellers
• Focus in historiography on rents without considering the organisation of the lease system by the landowner
Introduction

- Case-study: lease policy of the Saint-John’s Hospital of Bruges (SJH) considering small parcels of land in coastal Flanders between c. 1280-1580
- Lease income defined by the total surface area and the evolution of the rents, but also by the particular organisation of the lease system and the payment practice by the tenants
Saint John’s hospital of Bruges

- Supervision by the city government
- One of the major landowners in the medieval county of Flanders
- Detailed, well-organized accounts from c. 1280s onwards
Saint John’s hospital of Bruges
SJH: Rents

Evolution of the rents (in liters of wheat)
SJH: different rent evolutions (1)

Comparison of the rents for parcels of land and for large farms (per hectare)

- rent parcels of land
- rent farms Zuienkerke
- rent farms Schoondijke
SJH: different rent evolutions (2)

Comparison of the rents for different leased-out surface categories (per hectare)
SJH: different rent evolutions (3)

Comparisons of rents for arable land and for pasture (per hectare)
SJH: different rent evolutions

- 14\textsuperscript{th} century: preference for small parcels of arable land
- 16\textsuperscript{th} century: preference for large blocks or farms with pasture
- this development corresponds perfectly with the structural change of coastal Flanders during the late middle ages and 16\textsuperscript{th} century (cfr. Thoen and Soens)
SJH: organisation of the lease system

• Land use
  – Zuienkerke: c. 10 % pasture
  – Schoondijke: 100 % arable land

• Mean surface area of plots offered to tenants
  – Zuienkerke: 1,25 ha
  – Schoondijke: 0,50 ha

• Accumulation by the tenants?
SJH: organisation of the lease system

Acreage held by the tenants of SJH (in hectare)
SJH: organisation of the lease system

• Why only restricted accumulation by the tenants of SJH?
  – Location of the parcels of land
    • Small, dispersed plots of land
  – Profile of the tenants
    • Leaseholders of SJH sometimes rich urban dwellers
    • Leaseholders of SJH members of the upper strata of rural society
SJH: organisation of the lease system

• SJH offered small, dispersed plots of arable land in coastal Flanders:
  – extremely profitable in the 13th-14th century (first phase of leasehold in the region), a period with high demand for small plots of arable
  – far less profitable from the second half of the 15th century, when demand rose for large farms or large blocks of land, especially pasture

• However, SJH was aware of the different rent evolutions
SJH: organisation of the lease system

• Adaptation of the estate management strategy:

  1. Purchase or creation of large (pasture) farms (18th century maps of Stede te Leke and...
SJH: organisation of the lease system

• Adaptation of the estate management strategy:
  2. Purchase of newly embanked lands at the Flemish coastline at the beginning of the 16th century (c. 180 ha of land)
    • Divided into large blocks of land (mean surface 3,50-5,00 ha of land)
    • Leased out to few, large tenants for high prices
    • Construction of one large leased-out farm (c. 60 ha)
Comparison of the arrears and the stipulated rents (100%)
SJH: total lease income

Estimation of the real lease income (in liters wheat)
Conclusion

- Rents of separate plots in context
- In coastal Flanders: landowners had to respond to specific, changing demands with an adequate organisation of the lease system
- SJH played no stimulating role in the engrossment of farms, however was aware of the different price evolutions (rejection of the backward landlord-idea, cfr. D. Stone, Bishop of Ely (2005) and M. Threlfall-Holmes, Durham Priory (2005))