

DEBATE

Manors and Markets.

Economy and Society in the Low Countries 500-1600

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OXFORD

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Economy and society in the Low Countries (500-1600): a synopsis

The recent publication *Manors and Markets. Economy and society in the Low Countries 500-1600* by Bas van Bavel offers an international audience a first-hand account of more than a thousand years of social and economic developments in one of the most dynamic regions of medieval Europe. Inspired by the book, and challenged by its provocative arguments, several historians engage in an in-depth discussion of its methodological and analytical strengths, and Van Bavel's basic assumption that a mix of region-specific social relations and institutions dating back to the period of initial land reclamation can explain regional trajectories of economic growth and decline, social welfare or polarization. Through the issues they raise, the different contributions gradually define the research agenda in the field of social and economic history for years to come. Opening this debate, Van Bavel first gives an overview of the main argument developed in *Manors and markets*.

The Low Countries formed a patchwork of varied economic and social developments in the Middle Ages, with some regions displaying a remarkable dynamism. *Manors and markets* charts the history of these vibrant economies and societies, and contrasts them with alternative paths of development, from the early medieval period to the beginning of the seventeenth century. It also offers an explanation for the differences in long-term development, differences which are most apparent at the regional level. The various reviews in this volume, and also my reply to them, discuss the methodological and analytical aspects of the book; this synopsis is primarily meant to summarise the contents of *Manors and markets*.

The book first introduces the various explanations offered in historiography for the patterns of social change and economic development in the pre-industrial period, and for the regional differences in this process. It proposes employing a combination of new institutional economics and an analysis of the social distribution of power and property in order to understand these differences better. It argues that the relevant factors are located at the regional level and show a strong path-dependency. This approach is tested on the Low Countries, starting from the hypothesis that the regional socio-institutional structures formed in the early and high Middle Ages exercised a determining influence on later development, resulting in distinctive paths of regional development.

In order to understand the genesis of these regional structures, chapter 2 investigates the landscapes and soils, and discusses the interaction between land, water and men in the Low Countries. This interaction contributed to

the wide diversity of landscapes found here, with the medieval Low Countries consisting of some 25 distinctive regions. The chapter discusses how these regions were occupied and reclaimed after the post-Roman population dip, and describes the ethnic composition and the growth of the population in the early Middle Ages. Occupation was concentrated in a few fertile and easily reclaimed regions, while others remained virtually empty. Some coastal regions, which formed a kind of frontier area, were occupied in the high Middle Ages, often requiring challenging hydrological feats. In all these regions, which formed the stage for further development, growing population pressure and increasing interference with nature caused ecological problems, but the associations and authorities were mostly able to limit the negative effects.

Each of these regions received its specific social organisation during the process of occupation in the early and high Middle Ages. Chapter 3 discusses the social distribution of power and property – which formed the core of this regional structure – and shows how this influenced or even determined long-term developments at the regional level. In the infertile regions, small-scale landowners remained well-entrenched, but the fertile regions occupied in the Frankish period saw the build-up of large-scale properties of the king and religious institutions. These large properties were often organised the style of manors, defined here as large landholdings characterised by a non-contractual, coercive relationship between the lord and the occupants of the land, with the latter being tied to the land, although many varieties of arrangements existed. The chapter analyses the causes of the rise of manorial organisation and its decline in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. In coastal regions like coastal Flanders or Holland, occupation and reclamation typically occurred somewhat later, from the high Middle Ages onwards. These regions did not see the spread of manorialism at all; they were characterised by a free population and ample scope for self-determination. Ordinary peasants and townsmen organised themselves into villages, towns, guilds, commons, and other associations. Their genesis was helped by the dissolution of central power, and the rise of competing authorities like princes and banal lords.

Within these social and organisational structures, agriculture was shaped. Chapter 4 shows how in the early Middle Ages manorial organisation, in combination with increasing population numbers, formed the main motor behind the growing importance of cereal growing. The variety of food, including meat, dairy, game, fruits, and nuts gathered in the wild, increasingly gave way to the dominance of grain, except for some coastal regions, like Frisia and Flanders, where livestock farming retained its importance much longer. Population pressure and the rise of lordships and villages also stimulated the communal organisation of farming. These developments augmented the physical output, but mostly had a negative effect on living standards. Produc-

tion also became more specialised in industries, as they slowly shifted from the individual households to manors and castles, where centralised production developed, linked to the power of lords and religious institutions. From the twelfth century onwards, industries shifted to the towns, as in Flanders, connected to further specialisation and scale enlargement, and promoted by the rise of markets.

The rise of market exchange in goods, from the tenth century, and in land, labour, and capital in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries is one of the key issues discussed in the book. It especially focuses on the institutional framework in which the exchange was organised, in order to better understand the slow pace and regional unevenness of this process. It shows that a balance between social actors was crucial in the emergence of a favourable institutional framework. The strong position held by towns, merchants, craftsmen, and even peasants and their associations formed a main element in this balance in some regions. Public authorities, if held in check by such counter-balances, could also contribute to the security of exchange and accessibility of markets. The effects are charted by way of various indicators. The chapter shows how first in Flanders, and later especially in Holland, the markets offered a relatively high mobility of production factors, integrated labour markets, cheap credit, and low transaction costs.

The rise of market exchange, and the related competition, was the main dynamic force of the later Middle Ages and the motor behind social changes. Chapter 6 shows how its force was refracted by the regional prism of power and property, resulting in a sharpening of the distinctions between regions. Some rural areas saw the rise of large tenant farmers and a multitude of pauperised wage labourers, including coastal Flanders and the Guelders river area, while others saw the fragmentation of peasant holdings combined with proto-industrialisation, as most evident in inland Flanders. In the towns, which grew rapidly – in what was becoming the most urbanised part of Europe – similar differences can be observed, although they are less pronounced than in the countryside. Craftsmen and peasants sometimes succeeded in protecting small-scale production and their ways of self-determination, occasionally by extreme measures such as revolts, but gradually lost out to the growing financial power of merchant-entrepreneurs and their Burgundian and Habsburg rulers. Moreover, growing population pressure undermined real wages, and poor relief and the actions undertaken by public authorities were barely able to curb the negative effects on welfare.

The combination of increasing population pressure and the growth of markets transformed agriculture, but again in highly varying directions, shaped by the socio-institutional organisation of the region in question. Specialisation for the market increased greatly, but it took different forms per region. Some saw the rise of labour-intensive cash crops, and others that of extensive livestock farming. Only in the latter regions did some gains in agricultural

labour productivity occur, albeit at huge social costs. There were greater gains in productivity in industries, as a result of technological innovation, scale enlargement, and the growing use of wind, peat, and coal. While big towns like Bruges, Antwerp, and Brussels specialised in the highly skilled fabrication of luxury products, first Holland and later the Meuse valley led the way in large-scale industrialisation, with the latter region in the sixteenth century laying the foundations for factory industrialisation.

The final chapter reconstructs the patterns of economic growth and the shifts of the economic core regions in the medieval Low Countries. They show that the centre shifted from the Guelders river area and the Meuse Valley in the early Middle Ages to Artois and southern Flanders in the high Middle Ages, and Flanders and then Holland in the later medieval period. The chapter argues that neither climate, demography, nor politics was crucial in these shifts, instead, it was the socio-institutional organisation at the regional level. The resulting growth was mostly extensive. If intensive growth occurred, as happened in these core regions, it did not last long and often went hand in hand with social polarisation, not resulting in higher standards of living for the majority of the people. As a result of polarisation, the social balance – which was crucial in the emergence of favourable institutions and the rise of these economic cores – was destroyed, explaining their decline and the continuous alternation of economic cores.

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