

# Unity in diversity

*Rural poor relief in the sixteenth-century Southern Low Countries*

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## Abstract

In historiography, the functioning of poor relief has often been explained by focussing on a single prime mover, be it elite ambition to control labour (cfr. Lis & Soly), or the need for social groups to protect themselves because of growing urban anonymity (cfr. Lynch). Recently however, several researchers suggested that the functioning and extent of relief were characterised by outspoken regional differences. In this article we want to further explore this suggestion by using the potential of the Low Countries' countryside as an ideal laboratory to test the impact of regionally diverging social structures on the extent and functioning of relief. Not only did all its communities share the same relief institution, the poor table, it was furthermore characterised by the presence of all types of societies: from very commercial (coastal Flanders), over proto-industrial (inland Flanders), to communally organised (Campine area). By analysing poor table accounts for all three regions we aim to illustrate how the extent of relief was determined by the distribution of power and the level of social homogeneity within a given region.

**Keywords:** Poor relief, Southern Low Countries, Social structures, Rural history

## 1 Introduction

In the sixteenth century – a period of rising prices and lagging (wage) income – poor relief was potentially a strong instrument for soothing the needs that arose from these trying circumstances. However, historiography is quite divided on the precise function of relief and the identity of those who controlled it. Opinions on the reasons and motivations behind the

provision of formal relief can be divided into two basic positions. The 'classical' line of thought, dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, was voiced by e.g. Lis & Soly. Their top-down view portrays formal poor relief as a labour-regulating mechanism in the hands of a commercial or capitalist elite (for example Antwerp or Lyon merchants) directed towards a mass of impoverished recipients. As the sixteenth century progressed, unemployment and poverty were increasingly widespread in European cities. This had its advantages – surplus labour weighed down wages – but it also posed threats, such as the potential for social unrest. The economic and political elites of sixteenth-century cities therefore considered poor relief as a tool with which to prevent upheaval.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, this somewhat dichotomous view of poor relief as an instrument of the rich to discipline the poor was nuanced as focus shifted to the experiences of other social groups and took on a more bottom-up perspective. In this view, prominently propounded by Lynch and Greif, pre-modern cities were much more anonymous than rural communities and lacked informal kinship support networks. Formal poor relief was an alternative to this informal type of solidarity, essential for urban wage labourers, organised not only by the authorities but also by guilds, confraternities, and the like. In this way, they played a vital part in the organisation and delineation of a community.<sup>2</sup>

Both these views are ambitious in their scope but tend to overlook differences in the organisation of poor relief. Several authors have already noted the presence of notable discrepancies in the functioning of poor relief. However, this was often done from an urban-dominated perspective, or engaged only in explaining English exceptionalism: the fact that pre-modern English relief – as opposed to continental models – was tax-based and more elaborate, something which Lindert linked to a specific division

1 C. Lis and H. Soly, *Poverty and capitalism in pre-industrial Europe* (Brighton 1979). See also: G. Maréchal, 'Het openbaar initiatief van de gemeenten in het vlak van de openbare onderstand in het noorden van het land tijdens het Ancien Régime', in: *L'initiative publique des communes en Belgique, fondements historiques (ancien régime)* (Brussel 1984) 497-539. A case study on Bruges can be found in: H. Deneweth, 'De interactie tussen arbeidsmarktregulering, migratiebeleid en sociaal beleid', in: M. De Koster e.a. (eds.), *Werken aan de stad. Stedelijke actoren en structuren in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1500-1900)* (Brussel 2011) 103-118.

2 K.A. Lynch, *Individuals, families and communities in Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge 2003); A. Greif, 'Family Structure, Institutions and Growth: The Origins and Implications of Western Corporations', *The American Economic Review* 96:2 (2006) 308-312. Also relevant is: T. De Moor, 'The Silent Revolution: A New Perspective on the Emergence of Commons, Guilds, and Other Forms of Corporate Collective Action in Western Europe', *International Review of Social History* 53 (Supplement) (2008) 179-212.

of political rights.<sup>3</sup> Another explanation is suggested by Patriquin. He argued – in line with the Lis and Soly paradigm – that poor relief can be understood as an instrument to regulate the labour market. Following the massive expropriation of English peasants during the early modern period, concomitant with the rise of agrarian capitalism, an extended poor relief system had to compensate for the decline of older solidarity mechanisms (notably access to land) to keep the masses of landless labourers available.<sup>4</sup>

More recently though, several studies have pointed out that comparisons at the national level might not be fully adequate to grasp the complexity of pre-modern poor relief systems. A recent article by Winter and Lambrecht on eighteenth-century England and the Southern Low Countries, firmly states that poor relief – in both countries – was characterised by strong local and regional differences determined by differing economic structures and elite interests.<sup>5</sup> Another example is an article by Van Bavel and Rijpma. These authors compare the ratio between social spending and GDP for three different countries (England, Italy and the Low Countries) during the pre-modern period, but also pay significant attention to intra-country differences and strong regional divergences in the extent of relief. Relief was most elaborate in the following two scenarios. Within decentralised systems (as in the Low Countries or Italy) the presence of strong corporations determined the scope of relief, whereas in centralised systems (such as England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century), the interests of those in power were the determining factor.<sup>6</sup> A shift to the regional level as the main unit of analysis to grasp the organisation of poor relief systems therefore seems justified.

The added value of a comparison between the very divergent rural regions in the Low Countries – and more specifically the outspoken differences between coastal and inland Flanders – has already been explored by Thoen and Soens, working on topics such as credit and lease markets, and

3 P. Solar, 'Poor relief and English economic development before the industrial revolution', *The Economic History Review* 48:1 (1995) 1-22; P.H. Lindert, 'Poor relief before the welfare state: Britain vs. the continent, 1780-1880', *European Review of Economic History* 2 (1998) 101-140.

4 L. Patriquin, *Agrarian capitalism and poor relief in England, 1500-1860* (New York 2007).

5 A. Winter and T. Lambrecht, 'Migration, poor relief and local autonomy: settlement policies in England and the Southern Low Countries in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present* 218 (2013) 91-126.

6 B.J.P. van Bavel and A. Rijpma, 'How important were formalized charity and social spending before the rise of the welfare state? A long-run analysis of selected Western European cases, 1400-1850', *The Economic History Review* 68 (2015) 1-29.

recently the impact of the late medieval crisis<sup>7</sup>, but also by De Langhe, Mechant and Devos focussing on life trajectories of unmarried mothers in the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> More generally van Bavel has pointed to the potential of the Low Countries' countryside as an ideal laboratory of sorts, with which the importance of regional differences in socio-economic structures can be assessed, as all types of societies were present: from very commercial, over proto-industrial, to communally organised.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to poor relief, the (Southern) Low Countries were furthermore characterised by the presence and dominance of the same poor relief institution, making a comparison of the function and extent of relief possible. This institution was called the poor table or Holy Spirit Table (*Heilige-Geesttafel*), a parochial organisation governed by laymen.<sup>10</sup> On the countryside this was the only substantial formal relief institution, as other initiatives were rather rare or limited in scope.

In this article we therefore aim to track divergences in the praxis of rural poor relief in three distinct regions and to link these divergences to differences in regional social structures and social context. We aim to show how one institution – the rural poor table – played a different role in different communities, depending on their social relations and economic structures. This will allow us to add some depth to our knowledge of rural social life – something which is still largely lacking for the pre-modern Low Countries. But its relevance is wider. Our three case studies reflect the diversity present on the sixteenth-century countryside: the Campine area, characterised by strong communal ties linked to the continued presence of com-

7 E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'Credit in rural Flanders, c.1250-c.1600: its variety and significance', in: P.R. Schofield and T. Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the rural economy in North-western Europe, c.1200-c.1850* (Turnhout 2009) 19-38; T. Soens and E. Thoen, 'The origins of leasehold in the former county of Flanders', in: B.J.P. Van Bavel and P.R. Schofield (eds.), *The development of leasehold in northwestern Europe, c. 1200-1600* (Turnhout 2008) 31-56; E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'The family or the farm: A Sophie's choice? The late medieval crisis in Flanders', in: J. Drendel (ed.), *Crisis in the Later Middle Ages. Beyond the Postan-Duby paradigm*. (Turnhout 2015) 195-224.

8 S. De Langhe, M. Mechant and I. Devos, 'Regionale verschillen in het leven van ongehuwde moeders op het platteland in de zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1730-1846', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis (hereafter TSEG)* 8: 1 (2011) 2-28.

9 B.J.P. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets* (Oxford University Press 2010). The impact of this work and its insights on current rural history is rather impressive, as can be derived from: D. Curtis, 'Trends in rural social and economic history of the pre-industrial Low Countries', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 128: 3 (2013) 60-95.

10 These poor tables or *Heilige-Geesttafels* were an institution typical for the Low Countries (in all parishes urban and rural), and did not appear elsewhere in the same shape, except in Catalonia. See: D. Guillardian, 'Les tables des pauvres: une voie spécifique aux anciens Pays-Bas?', in: *Publications de la Section historique de l'Institut Grand-Ducal de Luxembourg* (2008) 257-276.

mon lands, inland Flanders, a proto-industrial region with a presence of strong informal ties and networks, and coastal Flanders, a very commercial and much more 'anonymous' society. This implies that we can test the Lynch's claims relating to pre-modern cities and observe whether regions with stronger informal networks were indeed characterised by a less elaborate formal relief system. We can do the same for the suggestions of Lis & Soly and Patriquin, and reconstruct to what extent the characteristics of local elites and their interests determined the functioning of relief.

For this article several villages per region were selected. Each village conforms to the regional characteristics as described in the following section. Ultimately, the selection was made based on the presence of source material, most notably whether there were poor table accounts available.

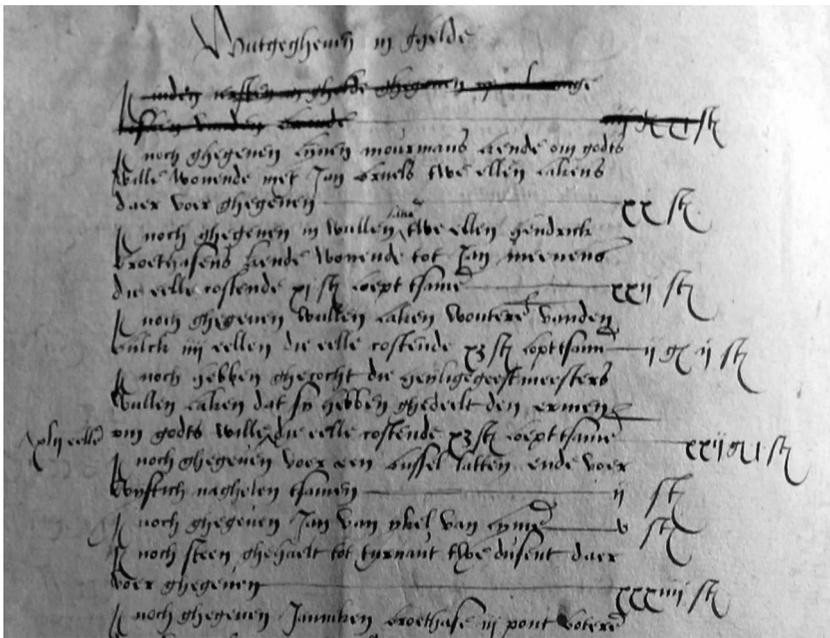


Illustration 1: Fragment of a poor table account from the Campine village of Vorselaar, 1553<sup>11</sup>

11 RAA, Rekeningen van de Heilige Geesttafel van de Sint Pieterskerk te Vorselaar, inv. nr. 396

The following cases were selected: Herenthout, Rijkevorsel, and Vorselaar (Campine area)<sup>12</sup>, Pittem and Lede (inland Flanders)<sup>13</sup>, and Koolkerke and Oostkerke (coastal Flanders)<sup>14</sup>. Our main focus is on the sixteenth century, for which the general evolution will be sketched. We have furthermore opted to perform an in-depth analysis of the period 1550-1570, as source material is only continuously available from 1550 onwards, and stops being so after 1570, due to the Dutch Revolt.

In a first section, we will briefly summarise the most striking and relevant features of the above-mentioned regions, based on the findings of recent research. Secondly, we will focus on the actors of relief: on the one hand the poor masters, their interests and characteristics and how these impacted relief in our three regions, and on the other hand the beneficiaries of relief (the poor themselves) and their profile. In a third section, we will look at the extent of relief. How elaborate was formal poor relief? Which informal support systems were present? Finally, we will zoom in on the structure of relief. Where did the poor tables' money come from, what was it spent on, and how was this connected to regional specificities in social structure? By doing this, we want to prove that a similar institutional outlay was fragmented through the prism of regional structures, leading to very different outcomes, something which can never be fully captured by only looking at one locality or focussing on the macro image.<sup>15</sup>

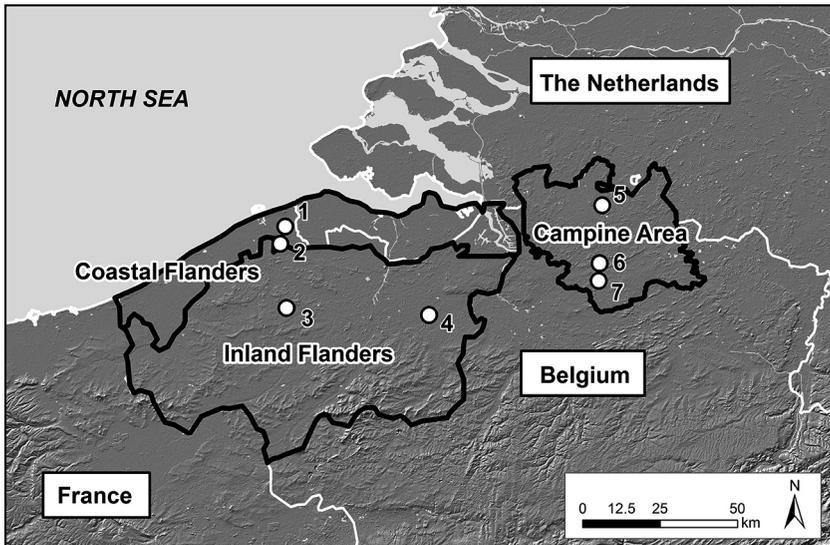
12 Rijksarchief Antwerpen (RAA), Archief van St.-Gummarus en St.-Pieterskerk te Herenthout, 330, 1546-1575; RAA, OGA Rijkevorsel, inv. nr. 4058-4098, 1490-1599 (incomplete); RAA, *Rekeningen van de Heilige Geesttafel van de Sint Pieterskerk te Vorselaar*, inv. nr. 396-402, 1552-1568 (incomplete).

13 Rijksarchief Brugge (RABr), Archief van de proosdij Sint-Donaas, Brugse Vrije, 13839-13840, 1550-1570. RABr, Oud Archief Pittem, inv. nr. 275 B&C, 1551-1570; Rijksarchief Beveren (RAB), OGA Lede, inv. nr. 471-503, 1456-1591 (incomplete).

14 RABr, Kerkfabriek Oostkerke, inv. nr. 149-154, 1530-1590 (incomplete).

15 See: B. Van Bavel, 'The medieval Low Countries as a testing ground for new ideas on economic and social development. A reply from the author of *Manors and Markets*', *TSEG* 8: 2 (2011) 125-137

## 2 Framing regions



*Illustration 2: Case studies in the three selected regions.*

1. Oostkerke, 2. Koolkerke, 3. Pittem, 4. Lede, 5. Rijkevorsel, 6. Vorselaar, 7. Herenthout Map made by Jason Jongepier (Gistorical Antwerp, Hercules Foundation)

### 2.1 Campine area

This sandy, rather infertile region, was situated to the north-east of Antwerp. It was a peasant region, characterised by the continued presence of commons and its accompanying communal structures, implying that village communities had extensive powers. All members of the village community (rich and poor) were allowed on and did use the commons, making them a key-factor in the survival of all social groups. The Campine peasants mainly held their land in customary rent; with leasehold being a mere marginal phenomenon. Wage labour possibilities within the region were limited as large farms were scarce. For those Campiners holding farms of less than 1 hectare (some 20 to 30 percent in most villages) seasonal migration to the booming cities might have been a prominent strategy, but especially the use of the commons was quintessential to their survival. Campine peasants upheld their mixed farming model for centuries, combining animal breeding (strongly based on the presence of common heath

lands) with the growing of different kinds of crops.<sup>16</sup> Village life was – politically, economically, and socially – dominated by the wealthiest 25 percent, the independent peasantry, owning farms of above average size (over 3 hectares or more)—and also involved cottagers, smallholders and – to a small extent – tenant farmers. This elite was – in economic terms – still relatively close to other social groups and not able to create economic dependence, as inequality in this region was relatively low. Gini-indexes<sup>17</sup> (based on the distribution of land use) for Campine villages fluctuated between 0,50 and 0,56, which was very moderate, as Curtis recently suggested that a Gini of 0,65 can be seen as the demarcation point between unequal and egalitarian societies.<sup>18</sup> The Q3/Q1 ratio of 5,1, an indicator for inequality in the middling groups<sup>19</sup>, was modest as well.<sup>20</sup> Our three Campine case-studies, Herenthout, Vorselaar and Rijkevorsel were situated in the heartland of the area and were characterised by all of the above features.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 Inland Flanders

Pittem (close to Kortrijk and Tielt) and Lede (in the vicinity of Aalst) were both two archetypical proto-industrial villages situated in sandy inland Flanders and were prime examples of what Thoen has labelled ‘a commercial survival economy’. These Flemish peasants lived in a society (nearly) without common lands, as these disappeared during the high Middle Ages, but were able to retain strong property rights on their holdings, accompanied by a lively inter-peasant lease market. In the village of Pittem for example, 46 percent of all parcels were leased out.<sup>22</sup> These peasants added to the income of their – often tiny – farms through proto-industrial

16 M. De Keyzer, *The common denominator. The survival of the commons in the Late Medieval Campine area* (Ph.D., University of Antwerp 2014); E. Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack? Village elites and social structures in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Campine area* (Ph.D., University of Antwerp 2014).

17 A Gini-index of 1 suggests complete inequality, whereas a Gini of 0 suggests complete equality.

18 Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*, 87. For the background to the 0,65 number and findings of Gini-indexes on other European regions, see: D. Curtis, *Pre-industrial societies and strategies for the exploitation of resources. A theoretical framework for understanding why some settlements are resilient and some settlements are vulnerable to crisis* (Farnham 2014) 289

19 This ratio broadly represents the extent to which a taxpayer of the third quartile paid more than one of the first quartile.

20 Based on: RAA, OGA Gierle, inv. nr. 344. stukken ivm Xe en XXe penning, 1554

21 Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*

22 Based on analysis of *penningkohieren* of the village of Pittem by dr. Wouter Ryckbosch.

activities, mostly in the flax and linen industry and by working on the holdings of larger farmers.<sup>23</sup> Several middle-sized and larger farms were present as well, securing contact between small peasants and the urban credit and goods markets, a process meticulously described in the works of Lambrecht (focussing on the region around Pittem) and Vermoesen (focussing on the region around Aalst, of which Lede was part).<sup>24</sup> This co-dependence was one of the most striking characteristics of this region. The smallholders needed the elite to secure access to the markets, whereas the region's tenant farmers eagerly needed and used the peasants' cheap labour. Gini-indexes for villages within this region (based on the distribution of land use) fluctuated between 0,51 and 0,62.<sup>25</sup> The Q<sub>3</sub>/Q<sub>1</sub> ratio for the village of Pittem of 6,6 however indicates a larger inequality in the mid-dling groups.<sup>26</sup> This region was characterised by a 'stronger' elite, able to use its stronger position *vis à vis* the market as a means to make lower social groups dependent on them.

### 2.3 Coastal Flanders

The polder villages of Oostkerke and Koolkerke were situated on the fertile clay grounds of coastal Flanders and were characterised by a commercial type of agriculture. The roots of this process can be traced back to the late medieval crisis, which had a severe impact on the coastal region.<sup>27</sup> Coastal agriculture gradually became commercially oriented and leasehold was predominant, with up to 90 percent of land held in lease. Commercialisation and polarisation went hand in hand, as more and more land was accumulated and leased out by absentee landowners, and many coastal inhabitants became nearly landless.<sup>28</sup> Dombrecht has recently reconstructed coastal in-

23 E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late middeleeuwen en het begin van de moderne tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst* (Gent 1988).

24 T. Lambrecht, 'Reciprocal exchange, credit and cash: agricultural labour markets and local economies in the Southern Low Countries during the eighteenth century', *Continuity and Change* 18:2 (2003) 237-261; R. Vermoesen, 'Paardenboeren in Vlaanderen. Middelaars en commercialisering van de vroegmoderne rurale economie in de regio Aalst 1650-1800', *TSEG* 7: 1 (2010) 3-37.

25 Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*, 87. These findings are partially based on a database composed by dr. Wouter Ryckbosch. We sincerely wish to thank him for letting us use these findings.

26 Own calculations based on the findings of the *penningkohieren* for Pittem in the database of dr. Wouter Ryckbosch

27 T. Soens and E. Thoen, 'The origins of leasehold in the former county of Flanders', in: B.J.P. Van Bavel and P. R. Schofield (eds.), *The development of leasehold in northwestern Europe, c. 1200-1600* (Turnhout 2008) 31-56.

28 T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Gent 2009).

equality (also focussing on our two cases) by reconstructing the average yearly income of orphaned children, establishing Gini-indexes (based on the distribution of wealth) that fluctuated between 0,72 and 0,82 during the sixteenth century.<sup>29</sup> These numbers were much higher than in the other regions, clearly illustrating the unique position of these villages. This polarisation went hand in hand with a declining population – especially in periods of crisis. The scarcity on the labour market, caused by population decline, prompted the offset of cattle breeding as an important economic strategy, as this was less labour intensive. Temporary contracts became the norm and migrant labourers became more important as well, causing a decline of wage level and labour circumstances during the sixteenth century.<sup>30</sup> The top of the coastal social pyramid was occupied by large tenant farmers and ‘yeoman’<sup>31</sup>, and people living of rents.<sup>32</sup>

### 3 The actors of relief

#### 3.1 Poor masters

The institution at the core of this article is the rural poor table, also called the table of the Holy Spirit (*Heilige-Geesttafel*), a poor relief institution present in every parish – urban and rural – and governed by laymen, the so-called poor masters. These often cooperated with the parish priest and sometimes had a (paid) clerk, responsible for daily management. Regulations stipulated they had to be suitable for the job, which included writing and financial management, and to be of good fame. They were responsible for the day-to-day management of the poor table’s assets and for decisions on the table’s expenditure. However, important differences can be drawn when it came to the social background of these poor masters. For coastal Flanders, Dombrecht has reconstructed the profile of poor masters in several polder villages. In the sixteenth century 45,5 percent of the poor masters belonged to the richest 25 percent of village society (= the highest quartile), implying that 54,5 percent came from other social groups – with 9,1 percent even belonging to the lowest quartile. According to Dom-

29 K. Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen, lokale elites en ongelijkheid in het Vlaamse kustgebied (14de-16de eeuw). Case-study: Dudzele ambacht* (Ph.D., University of Ghent 2014) 163.

30 E. Thoen and T. Soens, ‘Elevage, prés et pâturage dans le Comté de Flandre au moyen âge et au début des temps modernes. Les liens avec l’économie rurale régionale’, in: F. Brumont (ed.), *Prés et pâtures en Europe occidentale* (Toulouse 2008) 79-99.

31 Large farmers who did not lease their farms, but owned them.

32 Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, passim.

brecht, not much prestige was found in the (unpaid) job and the economic upper class (mostly tenant farmers and rentiers) preferred the office of church warden instead. As the village and parish level was not very relevant on an economic and political level in the coastal region – where all relevant decisions were taken on the regional level of the *Franc de Bruges* – room for manoeuvring for local elites was limited in these areas. Alternatively in a village such as Dudzele for example, prestige could be found in one of the many cultural-religious organisations. As a result, the poor table was led by a broad group of elite and (lower) middle class residents.

A completely different picture emerges when we look at the peasant-dominated regions of inland Flanders and the Campine area. In Campine villages, socio-political offices were much more prestigious and came with a high amount of power, as the village government had extensive responsibilities when it came to steering the village community and managing the village commons. Therefore, for the village elite offices were the most obvious way to weigh on decisions and to distinguish themselves from the lower classes.<sup>33</sup> Most Campine officeholders (up to 80 to 90 percent) came from the wealthiest 30 percent of the village community, the so-called independent peasants: a group consisting of peasants with holdings of over 3 up to 10 hectares. Findings on inland Flanders suggests the same trend, namely the dominance of the wealthiest 30 percent of villagers. The profile of this group was however different from the one of their Campine counterparts, as the inland Flemish village communities were not dominated by better-off peasants but by a broad group consisting of large tenant farmers and middle-to large sized ‘yeomen’.<sup>34</sup> Based on this overview, it seems that the profile of poor masters in the commercial polder villages was more ‘democratic’ than that of the poor masters in the peasant-dominated regions of inland Flanders and the Campine area.

### 3.2 The beneficiaries of relief

Can we also see differences in the groups that were considered worthy of relief by these parochial poor masters? Sixteenth-century rural relief was in general limited to the poor belonging to the community, labelled ‘*huysarmen*’ or ‘*huysweken*’. Village and parish communities were in most cases the same. Some larger villages were divided in more than one parish. In those cases the parish level was the focal point for daily religious, social

33 Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*; Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*.

34 Based on: RABr, Oud Archief Pittem, inv. nr. 275 B&C, 1551-1570, combined with a *penningkohier* of 1569.

and cultural life. It was in the parish church that all inhabitants regularly met and were bound into one community, so the poor tables were an extension of these parish communities. For those not belonging to the community – vagrants or vagabonds as the sources often call them – there was hardly any hope of receiving help from the poor tables.

The classical deserving poor, those structurally unable to work, were however not necessarily the only beneficiaries. Thanks to their level of detail the accounts for the Campine village of Vorselaar and the inland Flemish village of Pittem allow us to get an idea of the longevity of support. For the period 1550-1570 accounts were (discontinuously) preserved for both villages, stating the names of those receiving shoes and individual doles. The findings for the village of Vorselaar are relatively incomplete, but findings suggest that up to 81 percent of the recorded poor were present in several accounts. The number of people popping up only once was highest in 1558 (45 percent), the year following the grain crisis of 1556-1557. This suggests that this Campine poor table was willing to alleviate cyclical poverty, as well as structural. The findings for Pittem are complete for the period 1550-1570 and show a similar image. The Pittem poor were on average present in 3,3 account years, but a presence of over 15 years was also common. And again, people only receiving support during the crisis of 1556-1557 was 18 percent; higher than in the previous and next year (respectively 14 and 13 percent). So, both these peasant regions were characterised by a focus not only on those structurally poor, but also on those hurt by periods of crisis. In the accounts of the poor table of the commercial polder village of Koolkerke no such tendency could be perceived. Relief was much more anonymous and limited.

Let us, secondly, focus on the gender of the beneficiaries. In all regions, women – especially widows with small children and pregnant women – were seen as legitimately claiming relief. It is however difficult to reconstruct which groups or people received relief, as the accounts do not always give us sufficient information on the profile of individual dole receivers. We were however able to reconstruct the gender of relief receivers for three villages (one in each region) during the 1570s to 1590s (table 1). Of course we need to be careful when drawing conclusions from these all in all limited findings, but it seems that in both peasant regions, women were somewhat more likely to receive relief than in the commercial coastal region. Perhaps women – especially when widowed – were more vulnerable in regions where a significant (inland Flanders) or even dominant (Campine area) share of income was derived from agriculture, in contrast to coastal Flanders where complete wage dependency seems to have been the norm.

**Table 1: Gender of relief recipients, 1570s-1590s**

	Male	Female	Unknown
Brecht, Campine area (1572-1573) <sup>35</sup>	61 %	39 %	0 %
Lede, inland Flanders (1574-1576)	64 %	35 %	1 %
Oostkerke, coastal Flanders (1589-1591)	70 %	8 %	22 %

So, when it comes to those directly involved in relief – the administrators on the one hand and the poor themselves on the other hand – the dichotomy between the two peasant-dominated regions and the commercial polder region is most striking. Inland Flemish and Campine relief was steered by the communities' upper layer – even though the profile of these elites was to some extent different. In the commercial coastal region, relief was administered by a more diverse group of people. This might be indicative of a difference in the relevance of relief within these regions, as relief in peasant regions was also somewhat more ambitious, attempting to also alleviate structural poverty and focussing on extra vulnerable groups, such as women. Coastal relief was apparently less ambitious in its scope. Can these same discrepancies be seen when looking at the extent of relief? This question will be addressed in the next section.

#### 4 The extent of relief

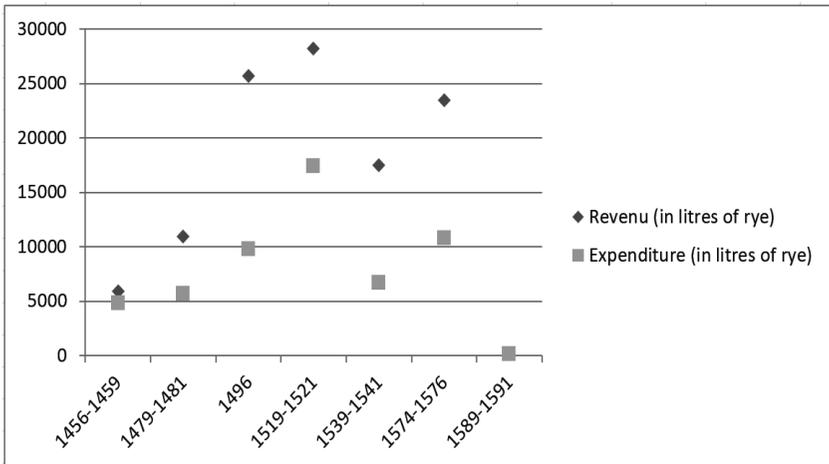
Before we turn to an in-depth analysis of the extent of poor relief, it might be worthwhile to sketch a general image of the evolution of income and expenditure of rural poor tables throughout the sixteenth century. To achieve this, we have used findings for one 'archetypical' village for each region (Rijkevorsel for the Campine area, Lede for inland Flanders and Oostkerke for coastal Flanders); this selection was based on the presence of a long-term series of accounts of the parochial poor table. These accounts are by no means without lacunas, but were preserved throughout the century. When looking at the total revenues (in real terms) over a longer period of time (graph 1-3), for several sample periods, it appears that the general evolution of income followed the same trend in all three regions, rising throughout the

35 The findings for Brecht are not based on the accounts of the table of the Holy Spirit, but on the table for *huysarmen*. The large village of Brecht was one of the few villages that had different relief institutions. According to Marechal, see G. Maréchal, 'Armenzorg te Brecht 1495-1620', *Taxandria* LVIII (1986) 29-74, this institution was more focussed on supporting men, contrary to the table of the Holy Spirit, but since the accounts from the table of the Holy Spirit stem from a different period, it is hard to test this hypothesis. Source: RAA, KABrecht, inv. nr. 274-286.

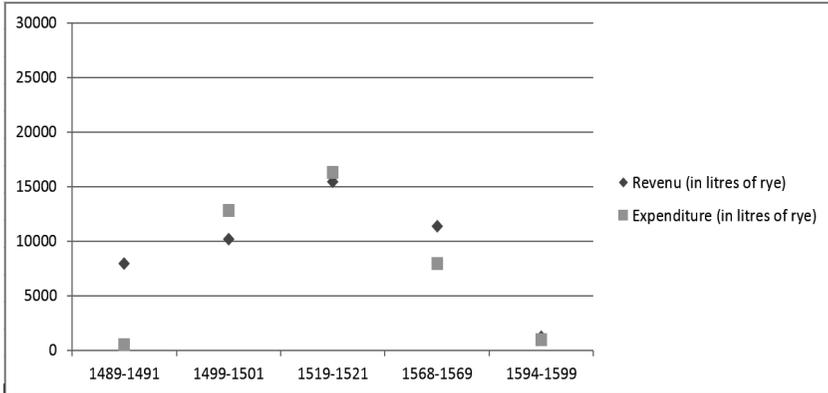
sixteenth century only to be halted by the crisis at the end of the sixteenth century (culminating in the Dutch revolt). While at first sight, the basic evolution of relief was thus remarkably similar in all three regions, below the surface a very diverse relief landscape can be discerned.



Graphic 1: Revenues and expenditure (grain + species, in litres of grain), Oostkerke, coastal Flanders



Graphic 2: Revenues and expenditure (grain + species, in litres of grain), Ledde, inland Flanders



*Graphic 3:* Revenues and expenditure (grain + species, in litres of grain), Rijkvorsel, Campine area

#### 4.1 The extent of social spending

Before we turn to the supply of social spending, let us first try to reconstruct differences in the demand for relief in the three regions. For villages situated in the Campine area we have the hearth counts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries at our disposal, informing us about the number of fiscal poor<sup>36</sup> in every village. These were listed for the years 1437, 1480, and 1496; for the sixteenth century there are, unfortunately, no findings. The findings for 1437 and especially 1480 diverge greatly (fluctuating between 10 and 40 percent), perhaps due to the political and economic turmoil of the period. In 1496, the number of fiscal poor fluctuated around 20 to 25 percent on average. These numbers roughly correspond with the number of 'micro-smallholders', owning less than 1 hectare, that could be found in all Campine villages.<sup>37</sup> However, whether those labelled fiscally poor completely overlapped with the group liable to relief, is very hard to assess. For the village of Vorselaar, we know that on average 23,3 individuals were listed as receiving relief (for the period 1553-1555). This corresponds with 14,3 percent of the total population, but it is of course possible that a larger group benefitted from anonymous doles.

Findings for Flanders are much more difficult to come by, as the hearth counts for this region were not preserved to the same extent. The only systematic number of poor hearths can be found in the hearth count of 1469.<sup>38</sup> For the castellany of Kortrijk, for which findings are most elaborate,

<sup>36</sup> Those poor enough to be exempt from taxation.

<sup>37</sup> Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*, 95.

<sup>38</sup> J. De Smet, 'Le dénombrement des foyers en Flandre en 1469', *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire* XCIX (1935) 105-150.

numbers fluctuate between 2 and 34 percent of all parish hearths, with an average of 14 percent. In the Land of Dendermonde, on average 37 percent of all hearths were labelled poor. The variance of the numbers highly resembles the Campine ones for the years previous to 1496. For one of our villages (Lede), it was possible to link the number of relief receivers to total population numbers. In 1575 30 households received grain from the table (the dominant form of relief), which corresponds with 12 percent of the total number of households, which is quite similar to the numbers for Vorselaar.<sup>39</sup> Coastal poverty is most difficult to reconstruct. The hearth count of 1469 for the castellany of Veurne reveals that around 20 percent of the inhabitants were labelled as fiscally poor. Dombrecht has furthermore shown that 12 to 20 percent of the inhabitants of the villages of Dudzele and Oostkerke died without an inheritance and that the Dudzele poor table paid for the funerals of 10 percent of the adult populations. Poverty therefore seems to have been more or less equally pressing in all three regions

But was the supply of relief equally similar throughout all three regions? It is very hard to reconstruct – on a micro-level – the amount of money spent on relief compared to village wealth. Two proxies were used. The first one is a comparison between the expenditure on relief with total village assets, which can be reconstructed using the 100<sup>th</sup> penny tax (1570).<sup>40</sup> The 100<sup>th</sup> penny tax was a one-off taxation of 1 percent on the total estimated value of the moveable and immovable property of a given village, and it had to be paid by the user of the property. The total sum of this estimation of property value can serve as an – albeit incomplete – indicator of village wealth, and allows us to assess which percentage of village wealth was transferred to poor relief. For a majority of the villages this fluctuated around 15 percent, but there were some outliers (table 2). The coastal villages of Oostkerke and Koolkerke, which were characterised by an almost capitalist agriculture, spent significantly less on relief than the villages in inland Flanders and the Campine area. The coastal village of Dudzele spent somewhat more, but the transition to capitalism followed a more halting pace in this village.<sup>41</sup>

39 J. De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie van het Land van Aalst 1570-1800* (Brussel 1965).

40 As can be found in: P. Stabel and F. Vermeylen, *Het fiscale vermogen in Brabant, Vlaanderen en in de heerlijkheid Mechelen: de honderdste penning van de hertog van Alva (1569-1572)* (Brussel 1997).

41 Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, passim.

**Table 2: Total expenditure of poor tables compared to the 100<sup>th</sup> penny tax (1570)<sup>42</sup>**

Region	Village	Expenditure poor table (stuiver)	Total 100 <sup>th</sup> penny (stuiver) <sup>43</sup>	Expenditure poor table / 100 <sup>th</sup> penny	Expenditure / village in- come <sup>44</sup>	Expenditure / capita (stuiver)
Coastal Flanders	Dudzele (1569-1570)	11522,7	70431,8	16 %		
	Koolkerke (1569)	1250	17701,5	7 %	1 %	2,8
	Oostkerke (1564-1565)	4922	63718,8	8 %		
Inland Flanders	Lede (1574)	5809,2	35770,8	16 %	2 %	4,6
Campine area	Brecht (1571)	6803,5	43998,0	16 %		
	Rijkevorsel (1569)	3398,3	15492,5	22 %	2 %	3,5
	Herenthout (1569)	2883,6	18980,5	15 %		

Furthermore, it was possible for three villages (one in each region) to make a reconstruction of total village income, based on total household numbers and wage information, and see what percentage of this was spent on poor relief. In a recent article, Van Bavel and Rijpma calculated that around 1530 1,2 percent of GDP was spent on poor relief in the Holland, Utrecht, Brabant and Flanders. They do however suggest large local discrepancies.<sup>45</sup> Our calculations do indeed confirm important divergences. Although a

42 The basic findings are based on Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, 237 (with the exception of Herenthout, for which own calculations were done). The calculations of village income were done by us.

43 Findings come from: Stabel and Vermeylen (1997). *Het fiscale vermogen*.

44 The household was our unit of analysis (one household = 5 people). For the reconstruction of yearly income we reconstructed the yearly wage per household (250 working days). Regional wages were derived from: E. Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*, 209 (Campina area); Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking*, 956 (inland Flanders); L. Vervaeet, *Goederenbeheer in een veranderende samenleving: het Sint-Janshospitaal van Brugge, ca. 1275-ca. 1575* (Ph.D., University of Ghent 2015) 169 & 473 (coastal Flanders). Female wages were estimated at 75 percent of male wages (Vervaeet 177). To account for the fact that Campine peasants could also make use of the commons, we followed Humphries estimate that the use of commons could add half a yearly wage to the income (especially linked to cattle breeding opportunities). See J. Humphries, 'Enclosures, common rights, and women: The proletarianization of families in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *The Journal of Economic History* 50:1 (1990) 17-42. The number of households per village was based on J. Cuvelier, *Les dénombrements de foyers en Brabant, 14e-16e siècle* (Brussel 1912) (Campine area); J. De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie van het Land van Aalst 1570-1800* (Brussel 1965) 30-31 (inland Flanders) & Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, 397-398 (coastal Flanders).

45 Van Bavel and Rijpma, 'How important were formalized charity and social spending'.

very imperfect parameter, the poor relief / village income ratio indicates that a larger part of 'village income' was spent on poor relief in the peasant regions of inland Flanders and the Campine area, compared to the commercial polder village of Koolkerke.

**Table 3: The extent of poor relief in villages in the three regions in litres of rye**

Village	Year account / population count	Litres of rye per village inhabitant <sup>46</sup>	Litres of rye per household <sup>47</sup>	Litres of rye per poor household
Rijkevorsel, Campine area	1499/1496	12,4 l	62 l	248 l
Lede, Inland Flanders	1574/1571	18,7 l	93,6 l	/
Koolkerke, Coastal Flanders	1540/1527	7,3 l	36,5 l	/

Next, we can try to reconstruct how much the village poor received and whether this differed. To make an assessment of the extent of relief the expenses<sup>48</sup> have been converted to litres of rye. For three villages we were able to calculate the number of households for a certain year. These could then be compared to the expenditure (table 3). The village of Lede was the most magnanimous, followed by Rijkevorsel. For Rijkevorsel we were also able to calculate the number of poor households<sup>49</sup> and reconstruct the amount of help they received. For the Rijkevorsel account of 1491, it appears that every poor household received the equivalent of 248 litres of rye. Since an average person needed 0,75 litres of rye<sup>50</sup> a day, this implies that one adult male needed 273,75 litres of rye to make it through the year. So, it appears that poor relief in Rijkevorsel, and by extension in Lede, was able to cover a substantial part of a poor household's needs. In Koolkerke, relief was significantly less generous. A general pattern seems to emerge: relief in the communal peasant region was most elaborate, closely followed by the inland Flemish proto-industrial villages. In the commercial polder villages, relief was different and less extensive.

In a recent article, Van Bavel and Rijpma link differences in the extent of relief in decentralised systems (such as the ones in the Low Countries) to

46 The total revenues in species in kind were recalculated in litres of rye (based on the Antwerp market prices of Van der Wee 1963).

47 Population numbers: Cuvelier, *Les dénombrements* (Rijkevorsel); De Brouwer, *Demografische evolutie*, 30-31 (Lede); Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, 397-398 (Koolkerke).

48 Minus the expenses on administration.

49 Based on the hearth counts: Cuvelier, *Les dénombrements*.

50 Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, 105-120.

differences in the strength of regional associations and corporations. Stronger corporations and associations are in their view linked to a more elaborate relief system. In more centralised systems, such as in England, the scope of relief – according to them – depends on the interests of those in power. In this respect, it is striking that the Campine villages with their institutionalised commons, accessible to all village members (including the village poor) and strong communities also invested significantly in poor relief. This was however also clearly in the interest of those in power, namely the independent peasants. They were the main beneficiaries of societal stability, making them in all likelihood more inclined to use poor relief as a tool to achieve this. Due to the fact that their socio-economic position was not fundamentally different from those of their fellow villagers – as they were still peasants – they and their families were vulnerable as well, especially during old age. This can also explain their tendency to invest.<sup>51</sup> The equally 'generous' inland Flemish relief on the other hand did not go hand in hand with formalised corporations, but with strong informal ties of dependency, where the farmer elite secured market access for the small peasants in exchange for much needed labour (especially during the harvest period) of said small peasants on their farms. Poor relief might have been an extra tool in safeguarding this co-dependence and the accompanying labour supply. It seems therefore that the extent of formal relief was not necessarily inversely proportional to the extent of informal networks. The situation in the coastal region, where relief was apparently much more limited, was fundamentally different. Research by Thoen & Soens, recently confirmed by Vervaeet, already pointed to the fact that the polder economy became increasingly specialised in cattle breeding, especially during the sixteenth century, as this was much more profitable since it required less labour input.<sup>52</sup> With a relatively lower need for labour – as grain production and therefore the need for seasonal labourers decreased – and a sufficiently large supply from migrant and local labourers, the need of large (tenant) farmers to use relief as a labour-regulator was perhaps lower. The coastal region was therefore perhaps able to partly 'export' its poverty and need for poor relief, as migrant labourers in all likelihood returned to their villages of origin when their labour was no longer needed, thus burdening the poor tables of their hometowns. This seems to suggest that the region's social structure and accompanying elite

51 Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*, 267-284

52 See: E. Thoen, and Soens, 'Elevage, prés et pâturage', 79-99; L. Vervaeet, *Goederenbeheer*.

characteristics and interests did play a part in steering the functioning of relief, even in decentralised systems.

## 5 Types of relief

We have already determined significant differences in the functioning of poor relief on different levels, most notably on the profile of those handing out relief (the poor masters) and those receiving it (the beneficiaries), but also on the extent of relief. Let us now focus on a last significant area of divergence: were there differences in the way these poor tables gathered their income and were there differences in the type of goods they handed out to the village poor? And how can we explain these divergences when taking into account the specificities of regional social structures?

### 5.1 Income structure

The classical storyline on poor tables and other relief initiatives does not sketch a rosy image, as it emphasises their mostly inert income structure, based on annuities and the leasing out of land.<sup>53</sup> This presumably made them rather inept when it came to dealing with crises or even with the everyday problem of alleviating poverty.<sup>54</sup> This supposedly contrasts with the English case, where the late sixteenth-century Poor Laws introduced a taxation-based income structure.<sup>55</sup> Recently however, the differences between the practical implementation of relief between England and the Low Countries have been strongly nuanced, pointing to the relevance of regional and local differences in both cases.<sup>56</sup> When zooming in on the income structure of poor tables in all localities, we can indeed establish that this was quite inert (graph 4-6). Annuities and leases were the predominant form of income in all cases. For the Campine area this is not quite clear

53 G. Maréchal, 'Het openbaar initiatief van de gemeenten in het vlak van de openbare onderstand in het noorden van het land tijdens het Ancien Régime', *L'initiative publique des communes en Belgique, fondements historiques (ancien régime)* (Brussel 1984) 514-515.

54 W. Blockmans and W. Prevenier, 'Armoede in de Nederlanden van de 14e tot het midden van de 16e eeuw: Bronnen en Problemen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 4 (1975) 501-538; J. Haemers, and W. Ryckbosch, 'A targeted public: public services in fifteenth-century Ghent and Bruges', *Urban History* 37: 2 (2010) 203-225.

55 See for example: P. Solar, 'Poor relief and English Economic Development', 1-22.

56 See: Winter and Lambrecht, 'Migration, poor relief and local autonomy', 91-126; E. van Nedeerveen Meerkerk, and D. Teeuwen, 'The stability of voluntarism: financing social care in early modern Dutch towns compared with the English poor Law, c. 1600-1800', *European Review of Economic History* 18 (2013) 82-105.

from the graph, as the poor masters did not distinguish between leases and annuities<sup>57</sup>, but all income in the Herenthout case stemmed from these sources.

However, two relevant areas of divergence could be identified. The first is the nature of income. The case of Herenthout, in the Campine area, is the only one in which the majority of revenue was collected in kind. This does not only hold true for the village of Herenthout, but for all Campine cases. In Vorselaar for example, in 1554, 50,8 percent of all income was collected in kind, 32,8 percent in species and 16,4 percent was collected in kind and immediately sold on the market. The profits were used to buy other goods that were deemed necessary for the poor.<sup>58</sup> In a society dominated by peasants with a strong grip on their land and a relatively low degree of leasehold and monetisation, this predominance of collections in kind cannot surprise us. In proto-industrial villages, income in species was clearly dominant, caused by a higher degree of market participation. Some proto-industrial villages still collected part of their income in kind, but this was of minor importance. In the case of Pittem it was absent, but in the village of Stekene, 10.7 percent of all income was collected in wheat. A further 8.7 percent was collected in kind, and then sold on the market.<sup>59</sup> The coastal Koolkerke case is characterised by a complete dominance of collections in species. There, the transition to a monetised economy was fully completed.

The most important difference was the varying importance of testamentary income. This variance can be linked to differences in elite characteristics. In the Campine area, a region characterised by a peasant elite, economically not that different from their fellow-villagers, testamentary bequests were absent. In the proto-industrial case, testamentary bequests (also in species) were only responsible for a tiny part of total income but were nonetheless present. The commercial village of Koolkerke in coastal Flanders was characterised by a significant presence of testamentary bequests. The farmer elites in proto-industrial villages and even more so those in commercial villages were wealthy enough to consider gifts as a strategy and perhaps saw it as an extra way to symbolise their dominant position.

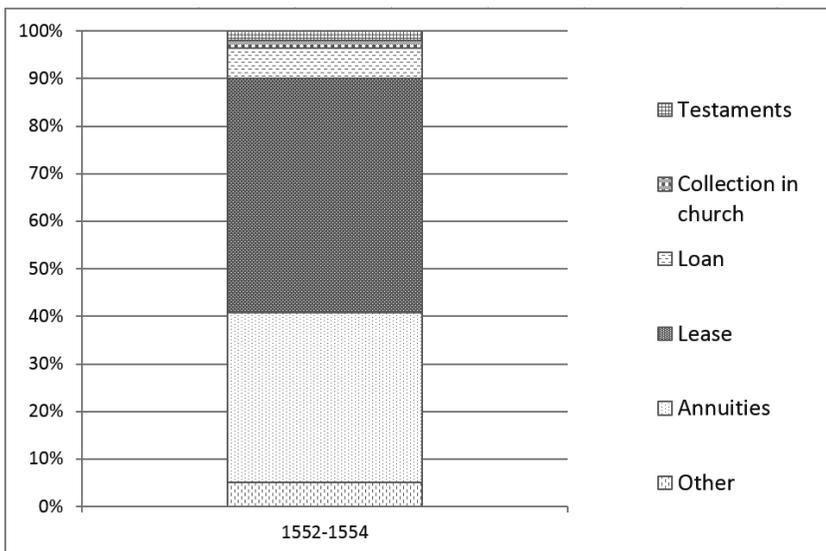
57 Most likely most of the income came from annuities, as leasehold was a phenomenon of minor importance in this region.

58 Source: RAA, *Rekeningen van de Heilige Geesttafel van de Sint Pieterskerk te Vorselaar*, inv. nr. 397, 1554

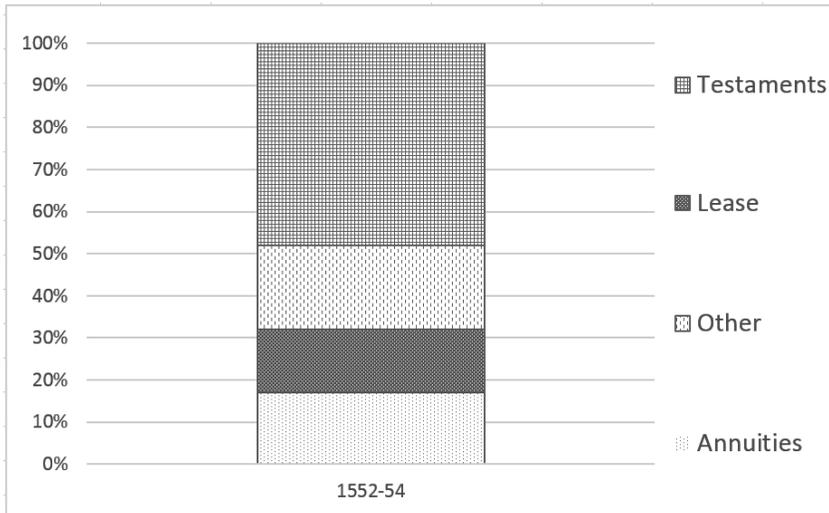
59 Own calculations, based on the findings of Youri Segers. See: Y. Segers, *Armenzorg op het platteland tijdens graancrisissen: Onderzoek naar de efficiëntie van armendissen tijdens de graanduurtes van 1556 en 1565* (bachelor's dissertation, Universiteit Antwerpen 2014).



Graphic 4: Income structure of the poor table of Herenthout, Campine area (average 1552-1554)



Graphic 5: Income structure of the poor table of Pittem, inland Flanders (average for 1552-1554)



*Graphic 6:* Income structure of the poor table of Koolkerke, coastal Flanders (average 1552-1554)

## 5.2 Expenditure structure

Let us now take a look at possible differences in the expenditure structure. A first noticeable difference is the diversity of relief. When looking at graph 7, one village clearly stands out, namely Koolkerke in the coastal region, where relief was the least diverse and mainly consisted of anonymous gifts of money and bread. For another coastal village, Oostkerke, relief was a bit more diverse, with the handing out of grain, money, clothes, and firewood. Relief was however much more diverse in the inland and Campine cases, especially when it came to food: grain was often supplemented by meat, fish, legumes, dairy and beer, all absent from the coastal accounts. Especially in the Campine area, this diversity of relief was even larger due to the fact that all village members were allowed on (and did use) the commons to dig for peat, collect sods, graze an animal, etc. This was in a way a parallel relief circuit, complementing the formal provisioning of the poor tables. In inland Flanders on the other hand, secure and accessible credit through the village's large farmers might have been an addition to the formal circuit. These differences in diversity of relief between the peasant regions on the one hand and the commercial coastal region on the other hand links up with the differences we previously tracked in the extent of relief. The peasant regions thus provided a more balanced care, but this also had a very paternalistic side to it. In the villages of Herenthout (Campine area) and Pittem (inland Flanders) part of the expenditure was on the repayment of food bought by the poor at designated selling points. In

Herenthout this was of minor importance – relief was usually given directly to the poor – but in Pittem this category is not negligible. For Stekene, another inland village, many poor people were not given real money, but poor pennies (*loten*)<sup>60</sup>, only to be spent on certain goods, and allegedly preventing them from squandering money in the village inn or on gambling.<sup>61</sup>

Administration and *teerkosten* (costs made by the poor masters on food and beer for themselves) are another interesting category. Based on the graph, these seem rather comparable in all three regions. This image however needs to be nuanced. The village of Herenthout, with the largest *teerkosten*, is perhaps not representative for the region as a whole as this number is much lower in other Campine villages, such as Vorselaar and Rijkevorsel, staying consistently below 5 percent.<sup>62</sup> The Herenthout poor board was furthermore criticised for their exorbitant spending by the bishop's representative, responsible for inspecting the accounts (in an annex to the 1557 account). After his reprimand, much less was spent on bread and ale for the masters themselves. When it comes to the coastal area, it is important to note that the poor table of Oostkerke spent a lot of money (over 10 percent of all expenditure, and increasing to over 50 percent in the last decade of the sixteenth century) on administration and the organisation of meals for the poor board.<sup>63</sup>

The most interesting feature is the divergence in the presence of *anniversaria* (*jaargetijden*). This implied that someone bequeathed an annuity or piece of land to the poor table and demanded an annual church service for his or her eternal salvation in return. In the coastal case, this was most relevant. Dombrecht has already pointed to the abundance of these *anniversaria* in the accounts of coastal poor tables, and linked this to the need for distinction of local elites. This need for distinction was not limited to donations to poor relief, but was also present in the social differentiation of burial rituals and especially the ringing of church bells in the coastal region. It was very clear for whom the bells tolled in the polder villages: the rich elite of tenant farmers, wishing to affirm their status.<sup>64</sup> The disadvan-

60 Segers, 'Armenzorg op het platteland', 22. For the definition of *armenlootje*, see: 'Middelnerlands woordenboek'.

61 C. Dyer, 'Poverty and its relief in late medieval England', *Past and Present* 216 (2012) 41-78.

62 Van Onacker, *Leaders of the pack?*

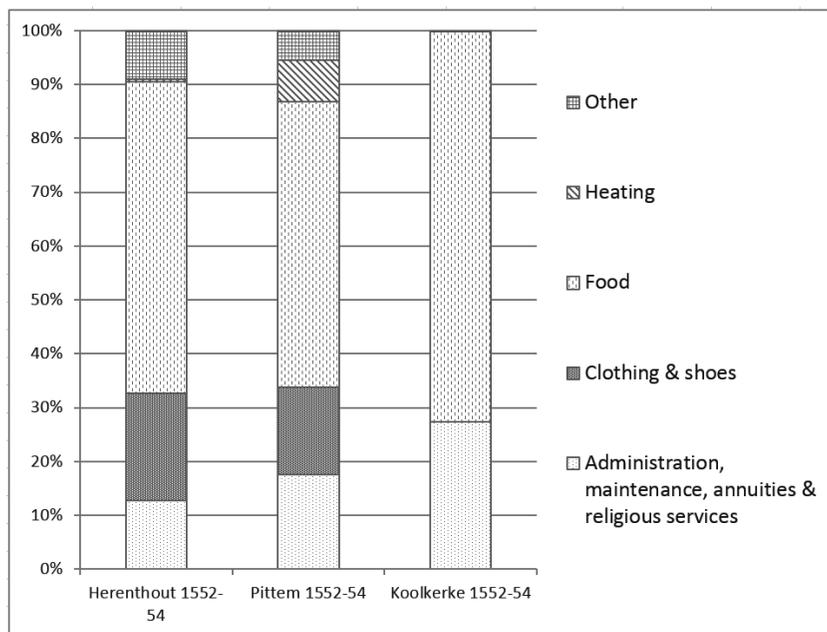
63 Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, 237-238.

64 K. Dombrecht, 'Edel, arm en rijk, maakt de dood gelijk? Sociale ongelijkheid (post mortem) in plattelandsgemeenschappen ten noorden van Brugge (1500-1579)', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* (2013).

tage – from a relief point of view – was of course that these annual masses were costly and although balanced by yearly income – weighed on the expenditure of the tables. In Oostkerke, for example, most relief (distribution of money, grain and clothes) was linked to the stipulations in an *anniversarium* and thus to the individual remembrance of the elite that financed them.<sup>65</sup> This also resulted in a more supply-driven relief system in the coastal region compared to the other two regions, as distributions were more determined by these *anniversaria*. These *jaargetijden* were also present in inland villages. In Pittem the annual masses accompanying these *anniversaria* accounted for roughly between 5 and 10 percent of all expenditure, and several distributions were explicitly linked to them – although the sources are sometimes vague on this. In the Campine case, these *jaargetijden* were of minor importance. They were absent in the village of Rijkevorsel, and only occasionally mentioned for Herenthout. For the village of Vorselaar seven *anniversaria* were recorded in the accounts of the 1550s, but this is still very modest when compared to the coastal area, where numbers were much higher (from 20 to over a 100).<sup>66</sup> The importance of elite-driven remembrance in the practice of poor relief thus diverged enormously between these three regions. In inland and especially in coastal Flanders *anniversaria* were much more present than in the Campine region. This suggests that the inland Flemish and most explicitly, the coastal elites were more inclined to affirm their status through this channel than their Campine counterparts. Both Flemish regions had an elite that was structurally different from the mass of smallholders, whereas the Campine peasant elite was more comparable to their less well-off counterparts. This furthermore had a significant impact on the way relief was organised, as these *anniversaria* were rather strictly delineated, usually consisting of grain and on fixed moments in time. Relief in the coastal region was therefore more supply-driven than in the other regions, where relief was less framed.

65 Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, 336-339.

66 Dombrecht, *Plattelandsgemeenschappen*, 337.



*Graphic 7: Expenditure categories in Herenthout, Campine area, Pittem, inland Flanders, and Koolkerke, coastal Flanders (average 1552-1554)*

## 6 Conclusion

With its impressive regional diversity, covering the whole array between commercial and communal, the countryside of the southern Low Countries, proved to be an ideal test-case to look for the impact of regional differences in social structures on the praxis of poor relief. The three regions on which we focussed – commercial coastal Flanders, proto-industrial inland Flanders and the communal Campine area – were all characterised by the dominance of one particular institution for poor relief: the rural poor table, governed by two poor masters. The income structure was furthermore also comparable, as it was characterised by a dominance of fixed or inert revenues, such as annuities and leases. There is thus clearly a unity in institutional framework when it comes to relief organisation in all three regions.

A first notable difference was found when looking at the background of the poor masters, the ones governing the poor tables. In the peasant regions of inland Flanders and the Campine area, the village elite dominated this office, contrary to the coastal region, where the profile of poor masters

was more diverse. A similar dichotomy between the peasant regions and the coastal commercial region was noted when reconstructing the extent of relief. In inland Flanders and the Campine area relief was more extensive than in the polder villages. These structural differences were also present when looking at the praxis of daily relief, most notably income and expenditure structure. The coastal elites were not very interested in steering rural relief *an sich*, but they did donate to the poor table to a larger degree than their counterparts in other regions, via testamentary bequests for example, but also through *anniversaria*. As already suggested by Dombrecht, the coastal elites were very eager to affirm their status through these highly symbolic channels. This had a clear impact on the functioning of relief, as it was more supply-driven than in the other two regions, where relief was more diverse and also focussed on alleviating cyclical poverty. The more the regional elite was 'distanced' from their fellow-villagers, the more relief apparently took this symbolic form.

We suggested these differences were linked to divergent social structures and the accompanying divergence in elite characteristics and interests. The Campine area was characterised by a relatively low inequality and an elite not very distant from its fellow-villagers. The Campine peasant elite was in all likelihood inclined to invest in relief to secure societal stability and to safeguard their own interests - as they were a peasant elite, they were still vulnerable to the whims of the pre-industrial climate and the risks posed by old age or sickness. The communal ties of this region were therefore clearly underpinned by an elaborate relief system acting as an insurance mechanism. In inland Flanders, where inequality was somewhat higher and the elite was economically more 'distinct', the elite needed the seasonal labour of peasants and therefore used poor relief as an instrument to maintain the balanced co-dependence of which they were the main beneficiaries. This relatively extensive relief system thus strongly underpinned the inland Flemish society, by providing an extra income to smallholding peasants, supporting the viability of the system and perhaps partly explaining the success of its proto-industry, as this was hugely dependent on the ability of peasants to secure income from a diversity of sources. In the coastal polder villages the elite of large (tenant) farmers was rich enough not to worry about their own vulnerability and as there was no shortage of labour (as migrant labour was abundantly present), the incentives to provide relief were perhaps more limited. The relatively limited nature of poor relief might furthermore have been part of a strategy to push out the migrant labourers and ensure they had no incentive to stay when there was no demand for their labour, thus success-

fully exporting the responsibility for relief to neighbouring peasant regions.<sup>67</sup>

A first general conclusion that can be drawn is therefore that in more socially homogeneous regions, where all social groups benefitted to a certain extent from provisioning relief, investment in alleviating poverty was significantly higher. There are some indications that this diversity in relief organisation and extent was discernable in other locales as well, and were indeed linked to differences in social structure and elite interests. Research by Paping on the Groningen countryside points in the same direction, stressing the existence of a 'collective insurance system' in the eighteenth century, where everybody invested in the system as many were likely to benefit from it, which led to high investment ratios. During the nineteenth century this system witnessed a demise. As inequality rose and the gap between farmers and agricultural labourers became almost unsurmountable, a 'supplement system' emerged, where relief functioned as an extra on top of labour income for a much more limited group of people, going hand in hand with a drop in investment.<sup>68</sup> Further comparative research might explore this presupposed link between a higher rate of equality and an elaborate relief system.

Our research furthermore indicates that formally organised poor relief and other communal or informal relief mechanisms and networks were by no means mutually exclusive, as suggested in the Lynch-paradigm. Formal poor relief was most extensive in regions for which we know that communal ties (the Campine area) or informal networks (inland Flanders) were quintessential. Formal poor relief was therefore not necessarily used as an alternative for other networks, as Lynch seems to suggest, but was clearly embedded within the specifics of a region's social structures. In this article we argued that more specifically the relationship between a region's elite and their fellow inhabitants – and the level of dependency and inequality – strongly influenced the way relief functioned. Poor relief reinforced and reproduced the ties and structures that were already in place. This links up with what Lis and Soly stated in the 1980s, namely the importance of elite control on poor relief, but as they focussed on industrial and / or mercantile cities this was strongly linked to the regulation of labour. By looking at

67 In the eighteenth century source material sheds light on discussions arising on the responsibility for poor migrants. See Winter and Lambrecht, 'Migration, poor relief and local autonomy', 91-126.

68 R. Paping, *Rural poor relief in the coastal Netherlands: from a 'collective insurance' to a 'supplement system'* (Groningen, 1770-1860), paper presented at the Rural History Conference Bern (2013) 19.

the economically extremely diverse countryside of the Southern Netherlands, we were able to expand on this image.

All in all the way in which formal relief functioned within pre-industrial societies was thus strongly shaped by the economic and social structures of these societies, and the accompanying relations between elites and lower groups. The similar outlay of poor tables in all three regions was fragmented through the prism of regional socio-economic and socio-institutional structures, resulting in a different outcome and praxis. This links up with a recent research strand on another institution which could be found all over the pre-modern countryside: the common pool resource institution. Institutionalised commons were present in many rural regions, but their functioning, and accessibility diverged hugely. Curtis for example called for 'proper attention for their social context', when assessing the impact of commons in (in)equality.<sup>69</sup> De Keyzer furthermore linked the differences in accessibility of commons in sandy regions to divergences in the distribution of power within these regions. In regions with a power balance – where no social group was able to dominate – access to and use of the commons was much more 'democratic'.<sup>70</sup> As with these other institutions underlying pre-modern society, the way in which formal poor relief functioned was strongly shaped by the economic and social structures of these societies, and the accompanying relations and level of (in)equality between different layers of society.

## About the authors

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69 D. Curtis, 'Did the commons make medieval and early modern societies more equitable? A survey of evidence from across Western Europe, 1300-1800', *Journal of Agrarian Change* (2015) 12-13.

70 M. De Keyzer, 'The impact of different distributions of power on access rights to the common wastelands: the Campine, Brecklands and Geest compared', *Journal of Institutional Economics* 9: 1 (2013) 517-542.

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