

THE FAMILY OR THE FARM: A SOPHIE'S CHOICE?

THE LATE MEDIEVAL CRISIS IN FLANDERS

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Flanders as a Test Case of the Malthusian Explanation for the Crisis of the Late Middle Ages

♣ The county of Flanders provides an interesting test case with which to verify the neo-Malthusian Duby-Postan thesis about the so-called late medieval crisis. The reason is that, on the eve of this period, this county was one of the most densely populated areas of Europe. Malthusian theory would therefore lead us to expect a bottleneck between food supply and demand, creating population losses and other crises. Yet few historians believe that Flanders as a whole experienced a profound crisis. Even the Black Death could not disrupt the economy. A plausible and consistent explanation of the gap between theory and history has never been attempted. Did Malthusian checks fail to materialize because of the area's local characteristics? Or does the Flemish experience deny the applicability of the Malthusian model? For a long time Flemish historians could only speculate about these questions. We will show that historians have underestimated the dimensions of crisis in parts of Flanders. Our results demonstrate the need to get past older generalizations in order to formulate better explanations. There was a crisis in Flanders, a crisis that must be explained within the structure of the larger medieval rural economy.

Although Flanders is not large, within it different regions experienced the classical elements of crisis in different ways, so a regional explanation is necessary. We will explain how regions of Flanders differed and why distinct areas grew and declined in varied ways. This diversity requires a definition of local economic and social structures, a theoretical framework we call 'social agro-systemic' areas.

The Regional 'Social Agro-Systemic' Approach

We define a 'social agro-system' as a system of rural production based upon region-specific social relations involved in the economic reproduction of a given geographical area. Social agro-systems in this particular sense were not stable and underwent structural changes. Social agro-systems consisted of many qualifying and mutually influencing factors. They were determined by the different social relations and structures of local society, such as the soil and the environment, the social relations influenced by property rights, property relations, and power structure, labour relations and income policies (and possibilities) of peasants, agricultural techniques, and the relations with other agro-systemic areas. In the later Middle Ages, possibilities for economic growth as well as vulnerabilities to economic decline resulted from an interplay among all these elements; differences in their features reflect regional differences in social agro-systems.¹

Further on, we will show that the effects of the crisis were different in two regions: sandy inland Flanders and the coastal area, two areas which were evolving towards different social agro-systems during the Middle Ages (see Map 7.1). However, before trying to link the economic crisis of the later Middle Ages in Flanders with the differentiating features of these regional agro-systems, we need to describe the regional impact of the crisis phenomena in these areas.

[Insert Map 7.1 here]

¹ The theoretical framework of agro-systems is developed in Thoen, 'Social Agro-systems as an Economic Concept'. This text was last revised in 2010.

Map 7.1. The Former County of Flanders on a Current Map.

The Late Medieval Crisis in Flanders: Data and Regional Difference

Direct demographic information is very poor for medieval Flanders. Series of demographic parameters such as hearth censuses are missing.² Most data are indirect, based on mortality censuses, sources about family composition, archaeological data, and so on. Within the limited context of this paper, we cannot elaborate on demography, but it is nevertheless clear that the number of inhabitants declined in the late Middle Ages in both coastal and inland Flanders.

It is likely that a demographic peak in inland Flanders came at the end of the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, most signs of demographic decline manifest themselves later, between about 1370 and 1410, as the result of high mortality rates.³ The influence of the mid-fourteenth-century shocks of the Black Death was thus not immediately apparent; on the other hand, real demographic and economic recovery came quite late, after the civil war against Maximilian of Austria ended in 1492.⁴

As far as we know from research, the demographic decline did not bring about either abandoned fields or the disappearance of settlements. If we look at the size of landholdings, only a limited process of concentration took place. As Figure 7.1 shows, the majority of very small holdings, created in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, survived the crisis. Often some of the smaller holdings even became smaller since part of the available land was integrated within newly created estates owned by townspeople who emulated the clergy and nobility.

[Insert Figure 7.1 here]

Figure 7.1. Diagram showing the evolution of the size of the holdings in both inland and coastal Flanders (@ represents the size and relative number of the holdings).

Production did not change in any fundamental way as a result of this decline; Flanders retained a fundamentally mixed-farming economy, focused on the production of cereals, combined with significant production for the market.⁵

In coastal Flanders, signs of crisis emerge at the end of the thirteenth century. Here, structural changes were occurring since the thirteenth century. It appears that the smaller holdings gradually disappeared during the later Middle Ages. In some areas this tendency accelerated during the later fourteenth century, near Oostburg, for example, an area which is well documented.⁶ Here many farmsteads went bankrupt and disappeared, their land absorbed into larger holdings. Many larger settlements and villages with churches fell victim to storm surges; some resurrected, others never recovered.⁷ The majority of farms became larger mid-sized concerns. More than before, they turned to

² Thoen, 'Historical Demography'.

³ Thoen, 'Historical Demography', pp. 577–80.

⁴ Due to this late recovery and the relative light effects, Gérard Sivéry labeled the crisis in the Southern Netherlands 'the Burgundian crisis model': Sivéry, *Structures agraires*.

⁵ Data for Inland Flanders in Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, vol. 2, 845–77, and Scholliers, *De Conjunctuur van een Domein*; Meyhuys and Daelemans, *De oudste domeinrekeningen van Herzele 1386–1394*; Van Maelzake, 'De financieel-economische politiek'. For Coastal Flanders, see Verstockt, 'Conjunctuurstudie van een domein in de late middeleeuwen'. The results of this study about the evolution of the size of the holdings are published in Soens and Thoen, 'The Origin of Leaseholding'. Other unpublished data are used as well.

⁶ St Peter's Abbey of Ghent and the hospital of St John in Bruges had numerous estates in this area. Also the water board called *Oude Yevene*, north of Oostburg, left abundant cadastral archives, records analysed by Vanslebrouck, Lehouck, and Thoen, 'Past Landscapes and Present-day Techniques'.

⁷ The North Sea engulfed a large part of the territory of Flanders near the coast in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. Kuipers, *Sluimerend in slik* provides an overview of the actual state of research about lost villages in this area.

breeding cattle, a tendency reflected in growing consumption of dairy products and meat in this area.⁸ Nevertheless, grain production also remained important. The end of the crisis is difficult to detect: it seems that the evolution which had begun before the late Middle Ages continued well into the sixteenth century.⁹ The process of concentration and demographic regression can be traced in the written sources which mention many 'lost villages' as well as 'lost farms'. Archaeology and aerial photography have also uncovered numerous *Wüstungen*, and recent research provides much new evidence of desertion of habitat.

[Insert Figure 7.2 here]

Figure 7.2. Value of wages in rural Flanders (in liters of wheat).

We have been able to trace prices and wages back much earlier in time than the series known until now. They allow us to measure the influence of the crisis much more clearly on a local basis.¹⁰ In our opinion, wages of unskilled workers give particularly useful indications about the changes in the supply of labour.¹¹ In Figure 7.2 we compare the wages, expressed in values of wheat, of unskilled labourers and skilled carpenters working in both areas. The results are eloquent. Although data are scarcer for inland Flanders, they show that around 1300, wages in the coastal area were lower than in inland Flanders. In the course of the fourteenth century regional differences narrowed: workers in inland and coastal Flanders seemed to have earned about the same daily wage. This suggests that wages rose more in the coastal area than in inland Flanders. In comparison with the period around 1300, wages of unskilled labourers near the littoral more than doubled by 1400. No increase of that magnitude occurred in inland Flanders, where wages stagnated. The differences between both areas became even more pronounced in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: in the fifteenth century real wages in inland Flanders were between 20 and 40 per cent cheaper than along the coast. This striking difference is partly due to the fact that the labour supply became tighter in coastal Flanders than in inland Flanders. This evidence of the unequal impact of the later medieval crises begs for an explanation.

Some historians categorically reject the evidence for a price scissors in the southern Netherlands on the whole, when discussing prices of cereals and industrial products.¹² Nevertheless, it is clear that if we start our price series around 1300, industrial products show more upward movement than commodities such as cereals in the later Middle Ages.¹³ Moreover, new data show that a relative decline of grain prices had already begun in the 1270s.¹⁴

Land leases provided another classic index of economic development. In Figure 7.3 we compared leases of parcels in inland and coastal Flanders. The cost of leases was heavy in both areas around the beginning of the fifteenth century. Although for inland Flanders, this graph does not cover the period before 1430, it shows that, during course of the fifteenth century, a divergent movement widened with

⁸ Dehaeck, 'Voedselconsumptie in het Brugse Sint-Janshospitaal'.

⁹ The concentration process continued in the seventeenth century: Thoen, 'De twee gezichten van de Vlaamse landbouw'.

¹⁰ For a long time, wages and prices for Flanders were only available from the second half of the fourteenth century, but data for the earlier period can now be found in Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*. Newer unpublished data for the coastal area in Vandenborre, 'Prijzen, lonen en levensstandaard'.

¹¹ Wages are also influenced by other elements, as we will see below.

¹² Genicot, *La crise agricole*. Price scissors are unequal long-term evolutions of prices such as cereals, meat, industrial products, and wages. In this respect, the works of Wilhelm Abel are still valuable.

¹³ Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, I, 234–99.

¹⁴ This will be elaborated in a later study.

the upward pressure on leasing costs higher in inland Flanders than in the coastal area.¹⁵ Although we cannot explore in the context of this article the full dimension of this split, we can dispose of data which suggest that this divergent evolution started much earlier than the figures show. Indeed, around 1270–1300, leasing prices in the coastal area were already much higher than in inland Flanders. Moreover, the scissors between prices and wages opened with different intensity depending upon the area.

[Insert Figure 7.3 here]

Figure 7.3. Prices of leases in Inland and Coastal Flanders (1375–1545 in liters of wheat).

Some historians have argued that a late medieval crisis resulted from a crisis in feudal relations. In this model, lords, in the broad sense of the word, reacted against the structural changes of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries by increasing their incomes, with negative effects for society as a consequence.¹⁶ In some areas, the aristocracy increased its income in the late thirteenth century; in western Europe this was mainly a reaction to financial difficulties confronting lords. In Flanders, we have shown that between about 1250 and 1300 the falling rate of feudal levy per head brought difficulties to many lords who could no longer expand their demesne incomes through land reclamation. Nor could they profit from the population increase, which they had often stimulated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁷ Near the end of the thirteenth century, various seigniorial groups maximized their opportunities to extract surplus in order to maintain their income. But the struggle between different seigniorial classes had affected seigniorial revenues, albeit differently depending upon the group and the area, and especially depending on their ability to adapt income strategies to changing circumstances.

Although we cannot elaborate this here, an increasing number of foreign studies confirms our view that one of the typical characteristics of the classic feudal period before the later Middle Ages was not arbitrary rent collecting, but rather fixed customary charges, often laid down in perpetuity, and originating from pressures which peasants themselves brought to bear. As the decline in value of the feudal levy per head gradually lowered the incomes of large landowners, they tried to adapt their extraction of surplus through various means at their disposal. Many wanted to change the fixed rents and taxes into variable levies. But this was not easily accomplished and could happen only in areas where seigniorial property and power structures would allow it. It was much easier for lords to change fixed rents in the coastal area than in inland Flanders.

'Long Live the Family': The Rise of a 'Commercial Survival Economy' (CSE) in Inland Flanders

In the rural area of inland Flanders, a specific model of economic and social behaviour emerged before the late Middle Ages. It underwent some changes during the late Middle Ages, but fundamentally it dates back to the period before the crisis, the central Middle Ages (1100–1300).

Inland Flanders consists of lighter sandy and sandy-loamy soils whose formation was not influenced by the sea. Reclamation of land began in the early Middle Ages and earlier. This resulted in a less than rational infrastructure. Aside from the growing shortage of firewood, largely overcome through the creation of a hedgerow landscape, the physical environment in inland Flanders did not burden

¹⁵ The data in Figure 7.3 are based on Verstockt, 'Conjunctuurstudie van een domein in de late middeleeuwen' and Van Maelzake, 'De financieel-economische politiek'.

¹⁶ See e.g. Kosminsky, 'The Evolution of Feudal Rent'; Hilton, 'A Crisis of Feudalism'; Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*.

¹⁷ As clearly shown for Normandy by Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*.

peasants.¹⁸ Smallholdings were by far in the majority, and their size gradually decreased. Many things contributed to the fragmentation of the countryside into a mosaic of smallholdings. Already a common phenomenon in many areas on the Continent, fragmentation in inland Flanders reached a level unusual in Europe for a range of reasons. We cannot go into all the details, but these are the basic reasons.

Firstly, peasants in this area slowly obtained access to most of the property rights of their cultivated lands in the course of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. Existing customary rents were low and even decreasing in value, and rents were often symbolic for newly reclaimed lands. Earlier than elsewhere, lords allowed many of the rents in kind to convert into rents in money which were prone to depreciation. Lords in this area manifested a precocious interest in earning cash money because of the influence of the developing monetary economy in this intensively urbanized area. Moreover, a structural competition between different groups of lords in this area weakened their possibilities for extracting peasant income.

So, from a very early stage, most peasants were de facto owners of farmsteads for which they still paid depreciated seigneurial dues. Especially in the first stage of the Middle Ages, these peasants did not compete with one other; on the contrary, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, communities cooperated in the management of infield-outfield rotations systems.¹⁹ They also frequently lived together in hamlets, called greens, generally situated next to the infield. Peasant solidarity dissolved during the thirteenth century as common fields and common practices lost importance and disappeared.

Many peasants depended upon revenues from part-time work on larger holdings, especially during the slack periods of the agricultural season. Every village had one or a few larger holdings owned by large landlords. Some of them dated back to the early or classic Middle Ages and were former demesne centres, *curtes*. The institutional links between the smaller holdings and the larger manors through services were traditionally limited. These large estates not only delivered additional incomes to the smallholders through wages, they also gave peasants the means to share capital like horses or ploughing in exchange for work on the farm.²⁰ The first concern of these peasants was to assure the survival of their families.

Because of this attitude of family survival — typical for a pre-capitalist society — the peasants were not interested in large holdings.²¹ During the demographic boom of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, they divided their holdings.²² But there were additional, typically Flemish reasons which stimulated the extreme fragmentation of the holdings in this social agro-system. First of all, the low rents encouraged Flemish peasants to invest as much as possible in their own land, leading to intensive husbandry. But beyond this, it became increasingly easy after 1250 for peasants to borrow through the sale annuities, again because of the abundance of cash money in this highly commercialized region, which encouraged children to obtain their own holdings. After marriage, children got their own share of the family estates, which they could then use as collateral for the sale of an annuity. Since customary rents were low, they could borrow quite a lot using their land as collateral.²³ Land *and* credit markets grew very dynamic because of the widespread peasant ownership of land and ready access to capital.

¹⁸ Thoen and Soens, 'Energy: Tension between Ecology and Economy'.

¹⁹ Thoen with Lambrecht, 'Le paysage flamand'.

²⁰ Lambrecht, *Een grote hoeve in een klein dorp*.

²¹ Brenner, 'The Low Countries'.

²² Simple acquisition of property rights encouraged peasants: Brenner, 'The Low Countries'.

²³ Thoen and Soens, 'Appauvrissement et endettement'.

In sum, in inland Flanders there were extra stimuli for an extreme fragmentation of holdings. This could provide explanations for questions we have yet to formulate; for example, why so many of the common fields dating back to the High Middle Ages were eliminated so early in Flanders compared with many other regions.²⁴ They may have played a key function in this economy. Perhaps the abundance of cash and persistently low rents for newly reclaimed land limited the resistance of peasants to their disappearance. Moreover, the precocious fragmentation of holdings and the consequent disappearance of a middle class may have weakened the ability of very small peasants to resist their disappearance. The structure of the village community became too weak. It is also not unlikely that during the thirteenth century, the private appropriation of these commons was not seen as a negative practice by other peasants, if it curbed the tendency of holdings to diminish in size. During the thirteenth century, the struggle for land became the basis of survival. Agrarian individualism became the standard. Unlike the first stage of the classic Middle Ages when infield-outfield and communal practices were common and common fields still functional, the survival economy of inland Flanders was no longer an agro-system based upon community solidarity. The hunt for land raised prices.

Seigniorial power influenced the social relations within an agro-system as well. The word 'seigniorial' is used here in the broad sense of the word: it refers to all non-peasant individuals and institutions owning substantial amounts of land which exercised some form of extra-economic or political power over the peasant population. It is easy to imagine how any changes in the type of lordship affected property relations and thus the social agro-system of inland Flanders. We think that at least two features already mentioned — peasant property rights and the decreasing peasant solidarity — were both affected by seigniorial structures.

Since the second half of the eleventh century and especially since the twelfth century, lords exercised extremely scattered power in inland Flanders. A tactical power struggle took place among the count, numerous secular and ecclesiastical local lords, and of course, given the level of urbanization, increasing numbers of bourgeois investors after the second half of the thirteenth century.²⁵ This struggle prevented a harmonious coexistence between large landownership and the possession of jurisdictional rights. The counts used the towns to eliminate the judicial power of local lords while the larger towns, from the twelfth century onwards, became a judicial threat for the count, which led to many disputes and resulted in civil wars in the later Middle Ages. Judicial power lost its influence over property rights, and this eventually advanced peasant property rights. The result was that the peasant holdings, which were almost free given the restrained customary rents, could survive more easily and much longer here than along the coast.

This competition between different elites gave birth to another institution which undermined village solidarity in inland Flanders. This institution was called the *bourgeoisie foraine* or *buitenpoortelij* (literally 'external burghership'). Since about 1250 it was possible for village people to acquire the status of townsman, and many peasants seized the opportunity.²⁶ In some areas up to 40 and 50 per cent of all villagers were *buitenpoorters* in the later Middle Ages. This institution could only thrive under the protection of the count whose alliance with the Flemish towns created it in order to increase the influence of the towns in the hinterland. The count fostered *buitenpoortelij*, of course, in order to curb the power of local lords in the countryside in favour of the town's and the count's own judicial representatives. Only in a later period, when large towns such as Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres threatened

²⁴ Research on this topic for the Middle Ages in the Southern Netherlands is still very scarce.

²⁵ Thoen, 'A "Commercial Survival Economy" in Evolution', pp. 107–10. The idea that power competition or collaboration had great influence on local economic development has been put forward by Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', pp. 30–75.

²⁶ The influence of the *buitenpoortelij* on power structures has been described in Thoen, 'Rechten en plichten'.

comital power, did the counts put brakes upon this privilege, but they nonetheless continued to encourage *buitenpoortelij* in smaller towns, in an attempt to use them as counterbalances to the power of the large urban centers. *Buitenpoortelij* lost some of its importance in the later Middle Ages, although it survived until the end of the Ancien Régime. It probably undermined the political coherence and internal solidarity of village communities since local inhabitants were split up into people who were *buitenpoorters* and people who were not. Thus we believe that this institution was responsible for, *inter alii*, the early disappearance of peasant solidarity reflected in the loss of the commons. Here as in coastal Flanders, village communities gradually based social relations upon purely economical ties loosely connected to a small administrative backbone.

In both the coastal area and inland Flanders the contrast between unfree and free labour lost its influence upon the organization of work. Since the High Middle Ages, free labour was predominant, and the ties between large and small holdings determined the organization of labour. Since the distribution of large and small holdings was different in each region, labour relations diverged as well. In inland Flanders most workers were non-residents working part time. If they lived in large farms, it was temporarily, during a limited stage of their family life cycle. Generally speaking, wage labour in inland Flanders provided only a part of the peasants' income, because it was combined with the very intensive cultivation of a smallholding, as well as with proto-industrial activity. The latter, mostly wool and later also linen processing, can be traced back to the thirteenth century.²⁷ In later periods there is proof that the large holdings even provided organizational support for proto-industrial activity; this may already have been the case earlier.²⁸ But the interdependence between large farms and smallholdings in the same area was influenced as well by the distribution of capital; it is likely that, in exchange for labour, larger holdings lent horses for ploughing and other goods to the smaller ones.²⁹

This kind of economic and social structure affected labour productivity. Small peasant holdings, which the majority of the holdings were or became in the course of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, probably had very low productivity with a tendency to fall. The cultivation of flax and the processing of linen used labour inefficiently, as did the spade with which a large part of the arable land was turned.³⁰ However, was not this tendency of labour productivity to fall countered by increasing physical productivity?

To a certain extent it was. Recently, historians have concluded that a major intensification of agriculture using mixed farming methods became common in Flanders before the late Middle Ages. Yields per hectare were high from at least 1300: 1500 to 2000 litres for rye and 2500 to 3000 litres for the widely cultivated oats were not uncommon. Since the thirteenth century, smaller farms in particular applied large inputs of labour in order to reduce the fallow in crop rotations and cultivated fodder crops and industrial crops such as dyes, flax, and hemp.³¹ Thus an increasing physical productivity per unit of surface was made possible only through the expenditure of enormous amounts of human labour. This increased labour input was way out of proportion to the increased physical output which a shortage of fertilizer limited until the modern period.³² In sum, it is likely that, despite

²⁷ Linen became much more important after 1500 as a proto-industrial activity and this until the nineteenth century.

²⁸ Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, II, 1004–05; Lambrecht, *Een grote hoeve in een klein dorp*, pp. 101–07.

²⁹ As later in the eighteenth century, see Lambrecht, *Een grote hoeve in een klein dorp*, pp. 113–33.

³⁰ For calculations about the unproductivity of linen processing, see Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, II, 997–99. For the use of the spade in Flemish agriculture, see *ibid.*, pp. 781–83.

³¹ Verhulst, 'L'intensification et la commercialisation'; Thoen, 'The Birth of the "Flemish Husbandry"'.

³² Despite the high labour input, Flemish agriculture could only produce about 1500–2500 litres of rye and wheat per hectare until the late nineteenth century.

the increasing physical productivity per surface unit, labour productivity had declined in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³³

The survival economy of inland Flanders was not a survival economy isolated from markets. We have called this a 'commercial survival economy' or CSE.³⁴ Since the size of peasant holdings gradually declined as holdings split up in times of demographic growth, survival of family members was the prime concern of peasants. They developed different strategies to ensure this survival: intensive cultivation of the land resulting in a high physical output per acre, a constant search for additional sources of income such as wage labour leading to symbiotic labour relations with large farms, and production for the market through proto-industrial activities such as the cropping of vegetable dyes, flax, and so on. The first concern was not investment or profit making which might increase a holding, but rather the survival of family members.³⁵

Further Evolution of the Inland-Flemish Agro-system in the Later Middle Ages after 1250

How did this agro-system react to the crises of the late Middle Ages? In fact, it did not change much at all. The majority of minor farms were preserved. The average size of these smallholdings in some cases increased a little, but most of them still did not exceed five hectares in area. Some peasants lost their land to holders of larger farms. Indeed the number of large farms increased between c. 1250 and 1450 because of purchases of small plots of land by townspeople who wanted to create large farms. These larger farms in this period were all leaseholds, created in emulation of the nobility and to assure the personal provisioning of the richer townspeople in periods of grain shortage or high prices. So, the number of *coqs de village* increased, although their farms were not in general larger than twenty-sixty hectares. These large farms dominated the economies of rural communities through the work they provided and through the offices their holders occupied.

Some big farms worked land with resident servants, but this was not a major trend. From about the fifteenth century until the sixteenth century, the number of larger farms remained more or less the same in the villages; every village had between one and five, with a maximum of about ten, cultivating a large percentage of the total area under plough (between 25 and 50 per cent).³⁶ During this period many large farms decreased in size and giant farms disappeared. This trend nevertheless favoured the bond between large and small holdings, providing smaller holdings with a survival strategy based upon wage earning. The peasant economy became an economy based upon this collaboration between smaller peasants and larger farms.

Since about 1250, leaseholding became common for these larger farms, while small peasants generally held light customary rents.³⁷ As larger giant farms lost land, the detached plots were occasionally leased as well. In inland Flanders leaseholding became common during this period for most of the smaller plots of land as well. Because it was especially the large farms which were taken in lease, the inland market for land to lease was completely different from that on the coast and so too were the relations between large landowners and leaseholders. Indeed, contrary to the coastal area, in inland Flanders there was not yet a competitive market for land since there were candidates for renting a large farm. In general, farms were leased for many generations by the same families, so long as they

³³ Proof of this bipartite evolution from data in the nineteenth century can be found in Thoen, 'A "Commercial Survival Economy" in Evolution'.

³⁴ Thoen, 'A "Commercial Survival Economy" in Evolution'.

³⁵ See Brenner, 'The Low Countries'.

³⁶ Between 25 and 60 per cent of the cultivated area.

³⁷ In our opinion, in the Ancien Régime, larger farms could only survive in the long term with large financial backers since the risks of destruction were so high. Only in the course of the eighteenth century did risks (e.g. from war) decline, allowing larger farms to come into the hands of country people.

paid their rents and maintained a good relationship with the owner.³⁸ Large farmers had few occasions to compete for leased land, since that kind of land was not available to increase their land significantly.³⁹ Therefore these large inland farmers in the CSE system, although they produced for the market, did share the same competitive capitalist mentality which prevailed on the coast. For many of them, the principal concern also was the survival of family members. They competed in the market for the purchasing of land, not for the leasing of it. Except for the oldest son of the farmer, all other members of the family had to begin their independent careers as a small peasant, like other members of the village community.

As was the case before 1250, most peasants in the area kept the largest part of their land and the buildings on their farmsteads in a form of customary tenure akin to full property. Proto-industrialization remained an important additional income for many peasants. The rural flax and linen industry had two periods of expansion: 1370–1420 and after 1470.⁴⁰ As before, inland Flanders was influenced by towns as the power of local lords declined, with the consequence that judicial property rights and the rights over estates were often in different hands.

This made a seigniorial reaction much more difficult. The shift from fixed and stable nominal rents of decreasing real value to adaptable rents like leases was, as we have seen before, not so easily accomplished in the inland area. Secondly, it curbed, for a long time, capital extraction by the count's taxation. Direct taxes collected by the comital state became common in the 1360s. But only from the late sixteenth century onwards did this new financial levy become a pressing burden upon Flemish peasant society. Until then, these taxes remained relatively low. Because the count negotiated the taxes (*beden*) with representative groups of which the large towns had the most influence, these taxes rose only for brief periods, for example, before and after insurrections, unlike in other countries. Historians have overlooked this for a long time.⁴¹ In short, local power structures hindered a seigniorial reaction in Flanders. 'State feudalism', which replaced lordly feudalism in many areas of Europe, could not fully develop.⁴² Thus the CSE system, which originated in the classic Middle Ages, survived and was responsible for the limited symptoms of crisis in Flanders.

Crisis and the CSE Agro-system in Inland Flanders

The CSE agro-system was less vulnerable to crisis: although small peasants were market oriented, they were not dependent upon the market or market prices of cereals. They produced a 'survival basket' of products for their own consumption which also stabilized their incomes: in addition to cereals, most had one or a few cows, some bees, and produced some textiles. This was all part of a survival strategy. Many peasants purchased some grain, at least when prices were cheap, and the price evolution favoured their income more than it damaged it. In short periods of crisis when grain prices rose dramatically, peasants appealed to larger farmers for help. Some industrial and semi-industrial products such as dyes could be sold for better prices during a short-term crisis. Moreover, it is likely that their employment rate was going up as the number of larger farms who needed part-time wage labourers increased. Their market sales allowed peasants to profit from changes in urban industry like the new orientation

³⁸ This has been noticed by Tits-Dieuaide, 'Peasants Dues in Brabant', although she did not give an explanation for this phenomenon.

³⁹ For smaller plots of land competition occurred as much as in the coastal area, but the supply of land which was leased was much too small to influence the agro-system fundamentally (see the high leases in Figure 7.3).

⁴⁰ Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, II, 980–1020.

⁴¹ Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen*, I, 613–36, and the graph in Thoen, 'A "Commercial Survival Economy" in Evolution', p. 136.

⁴² Kosminsky, 'The Evolution of Feudal Rent'.

towards fashionable textiles.⁴³ It is well known that these changes in the Flemish textile industry relied in part upon 'putting out' work to the countryside.⁴⁴ Proto-industrial activities were flexible, well suited to the needs of a majority of the inhabitants of smallholdings, and were fully employed on their own land. Larger farms, in which wages were important to the incomes of smallholders, took advantage of this situation as well. The wages became lower in inland Flanders than in coastal Flanders.⁴⁵ This was almost certainly caused by the fact that wage earning was, for most of the labourers, only a part-time activity; after all, the number of resident labourers was small. The income of these part-time labourers was not solely dependent on employment because they were peasants, and during the months that most labourers were needed on the larger farms, the supply of labour was very high since most members of peasant families hired themselves out in the labour market. These are additional causes which help explain how the CSE of inland Flanders was structurally responsible for the lack of crises.

Features and Origin of the Coastal Agro-system before about 1250: First Signs of Change

The most important environmental feature distinguishing the agrarian system of the coast from that of the inland is, of course, the North Sea. The sea could be a positive force, but usually it was a threat. In the High Middle Ages, and especially between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries, the soils composed of embanked and re-embanked heavy marine clays and sands gradually replaced salt marshes and peat bogs. This was the result of both human intervention and natural changes to the environment: peat bogs settled, partly in response to human drainage systems; storm surges and overexploitation by humans of the natural dune barrier gave the tidal outlets of the sea more occasions to flood and depose sediment. Historians have made various attempts to distinguish successive waves in the influence of the sea from the Carolingian period onwards, but there is no agreement about the exact chronology. It is, however, undeniable that the cost of protecting the area against the sea steadily rose in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, although these costs were not yet rationally used in favour of the environment. Ecology aside, underinvestment in infrastructure by large landowners with short-term profits in mind — and their influence was increasing in the central Middle Ages — increased the cost of maintaining vulnerable coastal infrastructures like dikes. The consequences for the peasants were considerable. Yet peasants invested in significant infrastructure, rationally developed. They were responsible for an extensive and ever expanding network of canals, necessary for draining the area, as well as for transport over water to regional markets.

We still do not know enough about the structures of the rural society in the coastal area before 1300, but it is likely that until about 1250–1300, differences in social structures between inland and coastal Flanders were probably less pronounced than they became in later centuries. In 1300, peasant smallholders were in the majority, or they were at least very common both inland and on the coast. However, in the coastal area there must have been more large holdings (including some giant ones) in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries than in inland Flanders, since flocks of sheep (especially until the twelfth century, often on salt marshes) and stockbreeding (especially since the twelfth century?) were common. A social relation between smaller peasants and larger landowners must have been common too, just as was the case in inland Flanders. Although concrete data about the size of the smallholdings are scarce, many of the small peasants (as in inland Flanders) needed an additional income via various

⁴³ Kosminsky, 'The Evolution of Feudal Rent'.

⁴⁴ Holbach, *Frühformen von Verlag und Grossbetrieb*.

⁴⁵ See Figure 7.2. Other mechanisms probably also helped the larger farms to survive in this CSE system, e.g. the fact that they often worked in proto-industrial crafts (with family members, with wage earners, and even as brokers), the fact that they had good relations with the owners of the farms (who needed these farms for their own survival during the crisis), and the fact that they could often pay part of the rent in kind to religious landowners who did not have to pay indirect taxes when they imported foodstuffs into towns.

power, automatically transferred the private property rights of insolvent peasants to those who could bear these costs, that is, the larger landowners like abbeys, hospitals, and the urban bourgeoisie.⁵¹

So, near the sea, the lordly collaboration model between the count and the upper classes favoured new structures of large landownership. Its corollary was the beginning of the loss of property rights of numerous peasants who, until that time, had virtually, if not always nominally, owned their land. In this period many lost part of their rights by becoming peasant fief holders either of the count or of a religious institution. In this case their loss was only partial because fiefs were hereditary and entrance fees were low. Much more dramatic was the effect of the 'right of abandon', which was applied in the area since at least the twelfth century. To get their land back, the peasants had to pay high customary rents. As we will see below, since about 1250 many peasants not only lost their properties, they also had to become leaseholders if they wanted to continue their agricultural activities. This was clear proof of the effectiveness of the collaboration between the judicial power of the count and local lordly power based on the possession of land and capital.

'Long Live the Farm': The New Social Agro-system or 'Commercial Business Economy' (CBE) after 1250–1300

Although the structures of the society were already clearly under pressure before the second half of the thirteenth century, the CSE system was quickly decaying during the later Middle Ages. During the later Middle Ages the more well-to-do farmers could overcome their problems in the longer term; a large part of the peasant smallholders disappeared and were integrated in larger holdings. As we have noticed already at the beginning of this article, the economy became gradually more and more based on a majority of larger more commercially oriented farms. The number of small peasants was gradually going down.⁵² In some places this evolution is noticeable in the sources as early as the late thirteenth century; elsewhere it took place after 1400 in particular.

The social polarization created a growing class of full-time and resident farm labourers, who, for most of their lives, worked on a large farm. Proto-industrial activities or non-agricultural income strategies such as fishing, peat digging, and perhaps also salt making, which were still very popular in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, gradually lost importance in the course of the later Middle Ages. Peat, the basic product of most of the proto-industrial activity, became scarce. Many peat layers had become less accessible because they were covered with sediments from the sea. Moreover, around the middle of the sixteenth century most of the peat at surface level, the easiest to be cut, was gone. But as farms grew larger and became more commercially oriented, they were also less interested in non-agrarian subsidiary business.

Contrary to what occurred in inland Flanders, the accelerated decrease of peasant property rights to land almost completely changed the property structures of this society.⁵³ In the coastal area since about 1250 there was an unmistakable evolution towards a rural society in which leaseholding dominated. At the eve of the early modern period most peasants had been forced into leasing. As if this was not enough, many of the families, if they were very unlucky, were evicted from their farmsteads, which were gradually absorbed by larger farms in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and even later on in the sixteenth century.

Indeed, the ecological pressure on the coastal area increased in the later Middle Ages. The costs for maintaining the infrastructure were high and further impoverished the peasants. Large environmental

⁵¹ Soens and Thoen, 'The Origin of Leaseholding'.

⁵² Soens and Thoen, 'The Origin of Leaseholding', p. 38.

⁵³ Soens and Thoen, 'The Origin of Leaseholding'.

disasters are known to have permanent consequences, such as the cascade of storms in the late fourteenth century, especially in 1375, 1389, 1404, and 1424.⁵⁴

We have already mentioned that, as far as we can see, even in the coastal area and despite the institutional arrangements via water boards, durable investments by large landowners provoking ecological stability were limited; their profits exceeded their reinvestments by a lot. In the coastal area the failing of large landowners to think on a long-term basis was to a large extent responsible for the disastrous impact of storm surges between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries.⁵⁵ Durable investments in the environment via a well-maintained infrastructure were indeed absent, although the necessity to invest in a sustainable environmental policy became pressing as a consequence of changes in the physical environment. Let us not forget that this was a medieval feudal system in which money was only put into the short-term maintenance of dikes and locks. Undoubtedly this was partly due to the fact that the water boards were more and more dominated by the large landowners, most of whom did not live in threatened areas themselves. What's even more, in the long run they could actually even profit from the floodings, since they were the only ones able to finance new embankments, and this situation offered them opportunities for the enlargement of their estates and consequently for their power in the area. It is only from the second half of the seventeenth century that regular taxes for a durable sustainable environmental policy became common, under the influence of a more centralized government and a new class of more capitalist-oriented towns, people, and investors. It is likely that the influence of central government also increased, but further investigation is needed. At any rate, after 1600 damage from storm surges decreased.

The aforementioned ecological changes and ecological disasters freighted many peasants with difficulties. This impoverishment of peasants was causing losses of peasant property. Many peasants obtained credit by the selling of annuities. This practice became very common, but many peasants could not pay the annuities and lost their land to large landowners from whom they took it back in lease.⁵⁶

The more common application of the so-called 'right of abandon' accelerated this process of impoverishment and expropriation. The implementation of this legal device transferred the private property rights of insolvent peasants to those who could carry the freight, that is, the larger landowners. Indeed, this practice furthered the development of short-lease arrangements benefiting the latter group since peasants who lost their land in property had no other choice than to take this land back in lease. As we mentioned before, the application of this legal system was only possible thanks to the described seigniorial relations based on collaboration between the large landowners, mostly religious institutions, and the centralized judicial power in the hands of the count.

Thus increased ecological pressure, combined with the specific seigniorial power relations and the increased needs of lords for variable rents, caused and accelerated changing property structures in the coastal area on a much larger scale than in inland Flanders. Leaseholding became the typical form of landholding during the late Middle Ages.

The process of impoverishment wiped out the smallest peasants. The prevailing leasing system hindered the division of holdings. Those who survived through leaseholding were forced to compete for land. This stimulated further engrossment and innovation.⁵⁷ It opened the way towards a 'commercial business economy' (CBE). This agro-system consisted of a majority of larger, but not giant, farms. They produced for the markets, and their goal was not survival of the family, but survival of the commercial farm. In coastal Flanders many larger farms emerged out of peasant smallholdings,

⁵⁴ Gottschalk, *Stormvloed en rivieroverstromingen*.

⁵⁵ Thoen and Soens, 'Van landschapsgeschiedenis'.

⁵⁶ This does not exclude other reasons (see above, note 5).

⁵⁷ See the very clear study of Brenner, 'The Low Countries'.

worked with resident servants who were much cheaper. The number of smallholders who needed an additional income was low, which made wage earners expensive. As some scarce data from later periods such as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seem to reveal, there was a constant migration from the coastal area towards inland Flanders, where many sons of farmers tried to buy land to start their own holding. Vice versa, it is likely that the coastal area was attracting multitudes of seasonal workers from inland Flanders, who were needed during harvest time. In this way, both agro-systems supported each other's existence and evolution.

In sum, while in inland Flanders, the CSE survived despite shocks in the later Middle Ages, in the coastal area, the peasant economy which was already under pressure was replaced by a new kind of social relation based on a majority of larger and middle-sized, to a large extent commercially oriented, farms (CBE).

This CBE system affected labour productivity in a different way than in inland Flanders. While difficult to measure, it is likely that labour productivity was higher on commercially oriented farms of middle and large size. This implies that, from the later medieval period onwards, labour productivity must have been increasing in the coastal area, while simultaneously going down in inland Flanders. Compared to inland Flanders, cash crops in the coastal area, such as wheat, and fodder crops, such as vetches, which were often consumed on the spot, clearly demanded less labour, as did cattle breeding, which was gaining importance.⁵⁸ That was probably also the main reason that, with the increasing size of farms, the production of madder (a dye product requiring a lot of labour input) declined in coastal Flanders.⁵⁹

Typically for this area, increasing labour productivity was supported by high physical productivity. A combination of intensive techniques of arable farming, which mostly date back to the period during which the area still had features of a peasant society (CSE), and the switch to more valuable and labour-reducing cash crops such as wheat suggests that labour productivity was growing. In inland Flanders, productivity was probably already declining on the eve of the late Middle Ages and remained low, as the survival economy stood firm.

Until the later Middle Ages, village solidarity within these coastal communities was important. Nevertheless, contrary to what has often been written, the change from a CSE towards a CBE brought about a decline in solidarity.⁶⁰ Here, a parallel can be seen with inland Flanders, where village solidarity eroded within the CSE itself. This evolution manifested itself in the fact that the rural inhabitants of coastal Flanders gradually lost influence in local public administration. Initially, they exercised a certain measure of coercive power via the water boards (Dutch: *wateringen*, *waterschappen*, or *wateringues*), since all local landowners (in the thirteenth century still a majority of peasants) were represented in these boards according to the amount of land they possessed. After the beginning of the fifteenth century they gradually lost this type of influence and power over their own community to the advantage of non-peasant large landowners.⁶¹ This was due to the fact that the new class of large farmers were leaseholders who did not have property rights of the land they cultivated. One should realize that these *wateringen* probably had become more important as channels of local power than other local institutions such as parishes, seigneuries, *schoutbeetdommen*, or bailiwicks. Therefore, the increasing dominance of non-resident large landowners in the water boards probably did contribute much to the diminishing solidarity of the village communities, which were still so very prominent in

⁵⁸ Thoen, 'A "Commercial Survival Economy" in Evolution'; Brenner, 'The Low Countries'.

⁵⁹ See Mertens, 'De meekrapteelt'.

⁶⁰ Soens, 'Het waterschap en de mythe van de democratie'.

⁶¹ Soens, 'Het waterschap en de mythe van de democratie'.

the well-known insurrection of coastal Flanders of 1323–28.⁶² So, village community solidarity eroded and probably not in a lesser degree than was the case in inland Flanders.

The CBE Agro-system and Crisis

The late medieval crisis was much more perceptible in coastal Flanders than it was in inland Flanders. It is likely that the described agro-system (CBE) was more vulnerable to shocks. We have shown it evolving between 1100 and 1700 from a CSE to a CBE system. More and more of these peasants were becoming farmers dependent upon market prices for cereals and cattle they sold. The described expropriation process had driven them into a competitive leasing system. The late medieval price scissors did not favour the farms: as pure wage labourers became more expensive farmers switched as much as possible to resident labourers. Their only way to react against this changing agro-system and the changing economic development was engrossment. The price evolution favoured the bigger commercial farms over smaller semi-commercial farms.⁶³ Proto-industry could not counter this evolution as it declined together with the number of smallholdings. What was left was a very polarized society: many dispossessed poor people living alongside large and middle-sized farms. It is likely that the death rate was highest within the layer of peasants without landed property. Many of them probably moved to inland Flanders, trying to buy a small property there, or else to the towns to find work. A greater scarcity of labour, as well as the fact that many of the wage labourers had to live from their wages to sustain their families, meant that they could not build up their income with revenues from smallholdings or proto-industrial activities. This was responsible for the higher wages in coastal Flanders. It is clear that these high wages also contributed to an increased vulnerability of the CBE system, since bankruptcy was never far for a large number of the farmers.

The economy became commercial, but more vulnerable for another reason as well. Contrary to inland Flanders, this economic system could not profit from a structure of low taxes and other forms of surplus extraction. As we mentioned, the large majority of the holdings became leaseholdings. These leases were much higher than the customary rents paid by the smaller peasants still prevailing in inland Flanders. Moreover the costs which had to be paid to maintain the perilous ecological balance were often high, notwithstanding the fact that a structure for sustainable development was not yet established, as we explained earlier in this paper. The result was that major environmental problems such as storm surges caused a lot of damage in the late Middle Ages. In sum, because of the described specific seigniorial relations the farmers of coastal Flanders could not avoid a high burden of taxes and levies. Here, the efforts by the possessing classes to switch from stable to flexible levies largely succeeded, with a resulting concentration process and the disappearance through bankruptcy of small farms. The decreasing numbers of farmers eventually drove down the price of leases in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Figure 7.3).

'Long live the farm', the motto of farms in the CBE system created in the late Middle Ages, came at the expense of the CSE motto 'long live the family'.

Concluding Remarks

In the past, many models have been put forward to explain the late medieval crisis in Flanders. Often these models also tried to explain the relatively limited effects of this crisis. A new set of data based on regional studies gives us a clearer picture of this crisis and provides for better explanations. Most researchers have written that, in Flanders, the Malthusian check was partly overcome by special

⁶² There is evidence that the peasant revolt was a reaction against new property and power structures; this will be developed in another paper.

⁶³ Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*.

conditions in supply and demand, such as better nutrition.⁶⁴ The regional differences shown in this article make that argument less likely. Others supposed that in Flanders peasants raised production during the crisis through higher physical productivity and new techniques.⁶⁵ Nowadays we know that the most progress in physical productivity occurred in the thirteenth century in both agro-systems, so this explanation is not satisfactory either. Others attributed the light effects of the crisis to the nearness of a dense town network or suggested accidental or monetary explanations.⁶⁶

This paper has shown that an in-depth study of the structures of production and social relations on a regional basis, the so called agro-systemic approach, can help put forward nuanced explanations of the late medieval crisis. Because the former county of Flanders evolved towards different agro-systems, the effects of the crisis diverged from region to region. In the area where the CSE (Flemish commercial survival economy) agro-system survived, the effects were more restrained than in those areas which evolved towards a more commercially organized system, the CBE (Flemish commercial business economy) system.

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⁶⁴ Van Werveke, *De zwarte dood*.

⁶⁵ Slicher van Bath, 'The Rise of Intensive Husbandry'.

⁶⁶ The role of the towns has been underlined by Van Der Wee, 'Typologie des crises et changements'; Blockmans, 'The Social and Economic Effects'; Blockmans, 'Die Niederlande vor und nach 1400'. Monetary explanations can be found in Aerts and Van Cauwenberghe, 'Die Grafschaft Flandern'.

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