

# Balance between City and Countryside in the Netherlands

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The Low Countries are seen as one of the few European regions in which a relatively large number of cities developed at an early date. Generally this urbanisation is understood to be a result of a process of commercialisation and specialisation, and in the view of some this urbanisation might have continued into modern industrial times. However in the Netherlands, as elsewhere, continuous urban growth was not general before the mid-nineteenth century. Why some cities experienced growth while others languished remains an interesting and relevant question. In this article some recent studies on urban decline in the Low Countries are evaluated. Why and where did this happen and what were the societal consequences of de-urbanisation? Three studies on Zeeland form an intriguing starting point for a discussion on decline in Dutch urban development that could be seen as a-typical, but is arguably part of the regional and temporal variety of the Dutch society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Tourists love towns such as Sarlat, Conwy, Sienna, Tallinn, Middelburg and Zierikzee for their historical atmosphere. The mediaeval churches and towers, the narrow streets with houses and storehouses dating from a Golden Age all attract a lot of visitors. The vast number of monuments in these cities give the sightseer 'a sense of history'. Of course, this effect is mostly the result of suggestion and the authenticity of a large part of this urban beauty is debateable. Over the last twenty or thirty years many buildings have been restored, renovated or entirely rebuilt, preparing these cities for the arrival of the tourist. What interests us here is the question of why so many buildings from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries can still be found in some cities, while in other European towns most of the pre-1800 buildings disappeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is not likely that the town councils



View of the demolition of St. Peter's church (Sint Pieterskerk) or the Old Church (Oude Kerk) in Middelburg, looking from the square towards the nave, 1834.

Zeeuws Archief, Zeeuws Genootschap, *Zelandia Illustrata* II-0596.

of some cities had a significantly better historical awareness than elsewhere, or that the inhabitants appreciated these monuments so much that they decided to spend a lot of money on them. Nor is it likely that war damage is responsible for the loss of old buildings in other cities. In fact, the demolition of old neighbourhoods was often planned and deliberate as these buildings were seen as obstacles to new developments. The old city centres had to give way to new urban initiatives. New activity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought down most of the older parts of some towns, while elsewhere the old buildings remained simply because no one was concerned about them.

It is tempting to regard this as a kind of modernisation paradox. In towns where the inhabitants did not feel the need to expand or rearrange the urban space the old buildings remained intact, with the ultimate effect being that these once sleepy towns are now buzzing tourist attractions. This paradox occurred to me while reading the results of a research project on Zeeland led by Paul Brusse and Wijnand Mijnhardt. This project resulted in four interesting books that will be discussed here alongside some other recent publications on the theme.<sup>1</sup> In 1984 Jan de Vries drew attention to these once 'languishing centres' and their subsequent attractiveness to tourists after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup>

### The urbanised Low Countries

Generally, the Low Countries are regarded as one of those regions of Europe in which a large number of cities developed at an early date. As De Vries pointed out, urbanisation here started well before 1500, and by the late sixteenth century what is now known as the Netherlands already had nineteen cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, with another six in what is now

1 P. Brusse, *Gevalen stad. Stedelijke netwerken en het platteland Zeeland 1750-1850* (Zwolle, Utrecht 2011); J. Dekker, *Onderdanig en opstandig. Desurbanisatie en de politieke verhoudingen op het platteland in Zeeland 1750-1850* (Zwolle, Utrecht 2011); A. Neele, *De ontdekking van het Zeeuwse platteland. Culturele verhoudingen tussen stad en platteland in Zeeland 1750-1850* (Zwolle, Utrecht 2011); P. Brusse and W. Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template for Dutch History: De-urbanization and the Balance between City and Countryside* (Zwolle, Utrecht 2011). Recently the theme was touched

upon in other Dutch books that appeared in 2010-2011, notably in: P. Kooij, *Town and Countryside in a Dutch Perspective* (Groningen, Wageningen 2010); G.A. Collenteur et al. (eds.), *Stad en regio. Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. Pim Kooij bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar economische en sociale geschiedenis aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen* (Assen 2010); Hanno Brand et al. (eds.), *Stedelijk verleden in veelvoud. Opstellen over laatmiddeleeuwse stadsgeschiedenis in de Nederlanden* (Hilversum 2011).

2 Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500-1800* (London 1984) 149.

Belgium, making 25 in total.<sup>3</sup> Roughly a quarter of the population lived in these cities.<sup>4</sup> Around 1800 in the Netherlands and Belgium there were 36 cities that exceeded the 10,000 inhabitants threshold, with an equal number in both countries. While some cities grew quickly, in others the population decreased and by 1800 had fallen below the 10,000 threshold, despite having exceeded it in 1600 or 1700. In the Netherlands there were two newcomers to this 10,000 or more category, while three cities near Amsterdam lost this position.<sup>5</sup> In Belgium eighteenth-century urban growth was stronger than in the north of the Low Countries, where the economy was stagnating. It is clear that between 1500 and 1800, even in the highly urbanised Low Countries, some cities were exhibiting urban decline. In the southern Netherlands in the sixteenth century, six cities decreased in population. In the seventeenth century, five cities in the Dutch Republic lost some of their inhabitants and in the eighteenth century five cities in the southern Netherlands lost inhabitants, while eleven cities did so in the north.<sup>6</sup>

No city in Europe experienced continuous urban growth before the early nineteenth century. While in most the population increased due to the influx of rural migrants, some cities attracted few new-comers, and others even lost inhabitants. Clark summarised the development in the Dutch Republic between 1750 and 1800 as a ‘full-blown decline’, explaining this by reference to the competition from rural and foreign manufacturers, the relatively high wages in the western parts of the country and the alternative investment opportunities in agriculture.<sup>7</sup> Most authors have remained sketchy about what happened in the declining cities and neglected examining the consequences for the surrounding countryside, as well as the cultural and political implications. However, this is precisely what Brusse and Mijnhardt wanted to address. They introduce their Zeeland case study as a model for the analysis of de-urbanisation, drawing ‘attention to the seldom acknowledged rural face of Dutch history in the formative period around 1800’.<sup>8</sup>

### **Zeeland and the urban system**

Paul Brusse, Jeanine Dekker, Wijnand Mijnhardt and Arno Neele studied stability and discontinuity in urban growth in the Dutch province of Zeeland between 1750 and 1850, not just as an economic or demographic process,

3 Figures by Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization*, 271-272. I have excluded Lille and Valenciennes as they are not part of modern Belgium.

4 De Vries, *European Urbanization*, 28-39.

5 P. Kooij, ‘Peripheral Cities and their Regions’, in: P. Kooij, *Town and Countryside*, 29-43.

6 De Vries, *European Urbanization*, 271-272.

7 P. Clark, *European Cities and Towns: 400-2000* (Oxford 2009) 125-126.

8 Brusse and Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template*, 9-11, back cover.

but including the political and cultural implications of the changing balance between the city and rural areas. Brusse, Dekker and Neele each studied a specific topic and wrote a monograph. Subsequently Brusse and Mijnhardt worked these into a synthesis, a fourth volume. Their perspective was wide and their ambition was to add to the understanding of urban-rural relationships and to scrutinise the general idea of continuous Dutch urban development. They formulated several questions in their desire to understand and explain the way the cities in Zeeland declined and how this affected the surrounding area. What was the precise nature of the phenomena? Was the decline the same in every city? What were the causes? Did trade relationships or investment patterns change? What happened to the inhabitants of these 'languishing centres'? Did they leave town, and if they did, where did they go? Finally, viewed from the countryside, what happened to the power structure, the local customs and to the circulation of ideas?<sup>9</sup>

It is clear from these questions that the authors see cities as parts of an urban system. Brusse and Mijnhardt give important consideration to the nature of cities and their interconnections. They define the cities carefully: Brusse explains that juridical and morphological aspects are insufficient to explain the economic and social dimensions, and therefore adds the number of inhabitants and occupational structure to his criteria. This leads him to consider four cities in Zeeland that had some political autonomy before 1795, more than 2,500 inhabitants in 1815, and less than 10 percent of the population working in the primary sector (agriculture or fisheries) in 1807. Three of these cities received in-depth analyses in the project: Middelburg (the provincial capital), Vlissingen and Zierikzee. The fourth town, Goes, was not studied because – as Brusse states – it was supposed to be a regional agricultural market town and did not show clear signs of urban decline.<sup>10</sup>

The authors draw a clear distinction between different types of cities. They distinguish centres of international trade, industrial cities and centres of regional trade, and hypothesise about the consequences of these differences. They expected the development in these various types of cities to differ. To explain the differences in development, two investigations were conducted. The first looked at the trends and possible shifts in the networks in which the cities operated, while the second analysed developments in the surrounding countryside to determine whether it had been transformed during the period of urban decline. Did decline affect the agricultural sector and rural industries? Were urban functions transferred to the villages? Were the cultural and political perceptions and ambitions of the urban or rural populations altered?

Their hypothesis was as follows: each type of city developed and maintained a different relationship with the surrounding countryside.

9 *Ibid.*, 13-14.

10 Brusse, *Gevallen stad*, 25-27.

International trade centres competed with international trading cities elsewhere in the world and took part in international business cycles. The industrial cities flourished or declined in competition with the rural industries in the south or east of the Republic, or further away. The regional trading towns competed with neighbouring cities, but essentially flourished in conjunction with the surrounding countryside. If the prices for agricultural export products were good, the regional trading towns flourished because they acted as agricultural markets.<sup>11</sup>

At this point Brusse and Mijnhardt had some conceptual options. No city stands alone – they are always part of a system, or even of a number of systems. Urban centres interact with the surrounding rural areas due to the need for primary resources – such as food and building materials – and they interact with other towns and cities with which they trade various goods and services. Thus, a fairly complex system develops that can be approached in several ways. Cities are often seen as multifunctional centres, interacting with their surroundings, as described by German geographer W. Christaller in his ‘central place’ theory. In Christaller’s model, cities provide services and goods to the surrounding areas, including smaller centres and neighbouring villages. According to this theory there is a hierarchy, with one central city at the top, where services and goods are most abundant, diverse and distinct. The smaller towns in the surrounding area are served by the central city, but at the same time they produce many kinds of basic products and supply them to the central city for processing and redistribution. Brusse and Mijnhardt, however, do not explore this element in their analyses – which is surprising for a project on the balance between city and countryside – as they do not concentrate on the direct geographical links between cities and their surroundings in Zeeland.

Seen from a different angle, cities are parts of a network system – nodes in an urban web. In these city networks, the number and intensity of relationships between cities are important. These include the flow of goods, people, services, information and power between cities. A hierarchy can be distinguished in these networks. Some cities are central, being closely connected to many other cities, while others are more peripheral, having few and weaker connections to the urban system. Jan de Vries’s *European Urbanization*, published in 1984, provides an influential contribution to the research on urban networks in Europe in the Early Modern period, and the urban network concept has since been widely adopted, but with some variation.

In their work, Brusse and Mijnhardt try to clarify the concept by distinguishing between different networks, all of them developing around different types of cities in Zeeland. In doing so, they follow Clark

11 Brusse and Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template*, 15-20.

and Blockmans. Clark prefers always to use the concept in a restricted sense, such as a 'Mediterranean urban network' or the 'urban network of the Hanseatic league'.<sup>12</sup> Recently, Blockmans further elaborated on these networks, concentrating on harbour cities. He distinguished between two types in Western Europe: regional harbours and gateway harbours, the latter connecting different maritime areas, linking trade networks from the Mediterranean with the Atlantic, or linking trade flows from the Baltic with the North Sea and beyond. The commercial functions of these gateway cities differed from those of smaller harbours. The latter received their long-distance imports through the former and distributed these on a regional scale, while, in return, products were gathered in regional harbours and exported to the gateways.<sup>13</sup> Brusse and Mijnhardt's use of the urban network approach thus accords with modern research on primary mercantile cities, and therefore less on rural-urban relations.

### It is in the economy

Analysing the economic and demographic aspects of urban development in Zeeland, Brusse launches a fairly strong attack on Jan de Vries, whose view of urbanisation he summarises as 'one continuous process'.<sup>14</sup> Brusse scrutinises the demographic development of the three towns selected. There were a number of different sources through which to trace the development between 1569 and 1859, the choice of which leads to conflicting interpretations. The author seems to proceed carefully here and uses registers of the number of houses, hearth-tax registers and various censuses. In most cases he explains exactly what he did and with which geographical unit the figures are concerned. He is less clear on one occasion when he accepts the credibility of the hearth-tax register from 1626 for Middelburg, while refusing to use this type of source for Vlissingen.<sup>15</sup> The picture that emerges is of strong population growth around 1600 in Middelburg, reaching 17,000 inhabitants, followed by near stagnation during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and a sharp decline between 1795 and 1815 from 17,700 to 11,500 inhabitants. The population of the other two towns fluctuated around 6,000 inhabitants, declining in the late eighteenth century, although in Vlissingen the population increased between 1795 and 1810, probably because of the military forces guarding this harbour town. All three towns show a rise in population between 1820 and 1850.

12 Clark, *European Cities*, 40-41, 46-47.

13 Wim Blockmans, 'Zeehavens als drijvende kracht van de stedelijke regio's', in: Brand, *Stedelijk verleden*, 13-26.

14 Brusse, *Gevallen stad*, 12.

15 *Ibid.*, 34.



J. Arends, View of the shipyards of the Dutch East India Company on the Balkengat in Middelburg, 1778. Zeeuws Archief, Zeeuws Genootschap, *Zelandia Illustrata* II-0460.

In history migration is a determining factor in urban growth, but unfortunately it is not very well documented. As is generally known, early modern towns did not grow due to a birth surplus, but due to a migration surplus. Brusse analysed the church registers of Vlissingen and some smaller parishes for the period from 1740 to 1810 to see what they revealed about migration, finding that they offer hints of the general direction of the migrants' movements. Most migrants arrived in Vlissingen from rural areas and smaller towns in Zeeland. Their destinations after leaving Vlissingen are less easy to determine. The capital Middelburg seemed to be one destination, but where people went around 1800 remains unclear. Brusse supposes that a minority moved to the countryside in Zeeland while most moved to other towns and cities in the Dutch Republic.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of Goes from the systematic analyses means that Brusse's explorations concentrate on towns that participated in international trade, thus stressing the importance of such towns that belonged to maritime networks but neglecting their relationship to the surrounding region, the *Hinterland*. Brusse embarks on an important and fascinating reconstruction of the trade networks around the three larger harbours. Apparently these three harbour towns participated in different trade networks. Middelburg concentrated on transatlantic trade, Zierikzee on the North Sea and Vlissingen on the slave trade. Middelburg and Zierikzee exported grain grown in the fields of Zeeland and textiles of mostly Flemish and Brabantine origin. Flanders and Brabant formed the natural *hinterland* for these ports, which supplied these regions with products imported into the Dutch Republic and were also outlets for their products. Brusse does not use the word 'gateway', and from his description it is clear that these harbours did not perform the gateway functions to which Blockmans refers. However, the formal structure of the Dutch East Indian Trading Company and the West Indian Trading Company (VOC and WIC) resulted in the participation of Middelburg in long-distance commercial activities, not just concerning the region between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, but in establishing commercial contact between continents.

It is evident that the position of Zeeland in the trade networks changed over time. Although the number of ships from Middelburg sailing the Atlantic routes decreased in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the city remained important to the Bordeaux wine trade. Vlissingen lost its interest in the slave trade but seemed to regain some importance in relation to smuggling across the Channel in the late eighteenth century. Zierikzee gradually lost its position to Middelburg as a trading centre for Flanders, as well as to ports in Holland, notably Dordrecht and Rotterdam. The small-scale harbours of Zeeland became increasingly vulnerable to political and military events. The

16 *Ibid.*, 98-106.

various wars in the eighteenth century and the politics of Maria Theresia in the southern Netherlands already caused serious problems for the merchants of Zeeland. However, after the French invasion of 1794, followed by the opening of the Scheldt, they were unable to adjust to the radical change in circumstances. Brusse illustrates this with some intriguing source material on the occupational structure of Middelburg, such as that the service sector shrank by some 60-70 percent between 1797 and 1812.<sup>17</sup> However, what is not clear is which part of this service sector was involved in international trade and which part was active in the interregional or regional transfer of goods.

The economic development of the countryside is described by using the results of earlier studies.<sup>18</sup> Agriculture in Zeeland was highly productive. Brusse estimates that 70 percent of the rural population found work in this sector. Wheat and madder were exported internationally. The wheat was sold on the Middelburg corn market and mostly shipped from there; the madder (used for dyeing textiles and leather red) was shipped to Rotterdam and sold there to the international market. Prices varied, rising sharply during the Napoleonic Wars, but showing a dip between 1817 and 1825. However, this resulted in only small changes in agricultural production, such as a small increase in labour intensity. In Zeeland, dairy farming and the cultivation of madder increased, resulting in a small additional demand for labour. However, Brusse calculates that the number of people who left Middelburg and Vlissingen around 1800 was much greater than this agricultural sector could absorb.

At this point it would have been interesting to see what happened to the population and occupational structure in Goes, the regional market centre. Did its functionality as a central place change, did it grow in pace with the region? Did its attractiveness to migrants and investment change? Omitting Goes seems a regrettable decision.<sup>19</sup> Incorporating this regional town into the research would have meant paying more attention to Christaller's central place theory, alongside the urban network approach. It could also have resulted in an extensive comparison with the towns and cities analysed by Bruno Blondé, who studied the changing fortunes of certain Brabantine towns and their position in the urban system in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Blondé discussed urban growth in combination with stagnation and decline, incorporating central place theory and a network approach. He shows that trading centres such as Mechelen and Leuven, as well as the capital Brussels, were growing, while towns such as Nijvel, Tienen and Waver, which were small agricultural and commercial regional centres, showed

17 *Ibid.*, 80-83 and 105.

18 P. Priester, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw circa 1600-1910* (Wageningen 1991); P.J. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in*

*West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 1650-1850* (Wageningen 2000).

19 Brusse, *Gevalen stad*, 126-130.

stronger urban development in the later decades of the eighteenth century, and the population of the textile centres of Antwerp and Lier grew relatively slowly. However, peripheral agricultural towns in the Campine area such as Turnhout and Herenthals showed barely any growth at all. Blondé explained these differences by analysing the specific location of these cities in the urban system, the development of their functionality as central places and their attractiveness to migrants and investment within the urban network; the latter being responsible for most of the dynamics in the cities, and the former especially explaining the urban development of the regional centres.<sup>20</sup>

Rising prices and a growing demand for agricultural products on the international market resulted in higher incomes for most farmers in Zeeland. One of Brusse's most interesting chapters concerns the changing material culture among farmers, who bought increasingly luxurious carriages, gold and silver, carpets, paintings, clocks and mirrors. However, there were some regional differences. The farmers of Schouwen-Duiveland, with the central city of Zierikzee, bought almost twice as many luxury goods as their colleagues from Walcheren. In the early nineteenth century things were not going well in Walcheren (near Middelburg and Vlissingen), with other rural parts of Zeeland being more prosperous, but as Brusse states this is not the whole story. The piety prevalent among the people of Walcheren meant that for religious reasons they were reluctant to flaunt their success.<sup>21</sup>

### Grassroots politics?

Urban citizens from Middelburg, Vlissingen and Zierikzee dominated the local and provincial government, including the countryside. This dated back to the sixteenth century and remained so until halfway through the nineteenth century. The shifting demographic and economic balance between city and countryside, the changing ideas on rural and urban society and even the institutional changes in the revolutionary years between 1795 and 1815 did not alter this. Despite this continuity, Dekker's book on the political events and relationships in rural Zeeland provides interesting reading.

In the eighteenth century the urban elite politically dominated almost 70 percent of the rural territories. The villages in the countryside belonged to what was called an *ambachtshoerlijkheid* – a manorial territory over which a lord held authority. This may appear to be an aristocratic form of rule, but these lords were actually urban patricians. They levied taxes, leased lands and

20 B. Blondé, *Het Brabantse stedelijke netwerk (ca. 1750-ca. 1790)* (Brussels 1999) 244-246.

21 Brusse, *Gevalen stad*, 179-184.



▲  
Cornelis Kimmel, *Going to market* (oil on canvas),  
1855 (photographer, Ivo Wennekes, Middelburg).  
Zeeuws Museum, collection Zeeuws Genootschap,  
Middelburg.

hunting rights, had the right of labour services and at the same time were required to organise and pay for dike repairs and the maintenance of churches, and in some cases to donate to the poor. In some territories the owner of the *ambachtsheerlijkheid* personally dealt with daily problems and settled disputes, but in most of the territories the lord simply appointed judges, delegated his powers to local elites and was absent from the locality for most of the year, spending only a couple of weeks on the manor during summer. It became a tendency among the owners to delegate an increasing amount of authority to local potentates, mostly wealthy farmers. The lords kept the most profitable parts of their rights to themselves and only intervened in local matters when it was really necessary.<sup>22</sup>

In the latter half of the eighteenth century a number of villages, especially in Schouwen-Duiveland, came increasingly under the control of local rulers. Here, some families from Holland and Flanders held a number of *ambachtsheerlijkheden*, while elsewhere the territories belonged to the rich burgher families of the urban centres of Zeeland. Dekker uses this absentee ownership to explain why the locals gained control over their territories in this part of Zeeland at a relatively early stage. The urban elites did not seek possession of an *ambachtsheerlijkheid* for economic reasons alone. In some territories there was profit involved, but Dekker stresses that it was primarily status that these rich urban citizens were after – desiring a form of conspicuous consumption. These rich urban patricians represented the rural inhabitants in the regional courts, which provided status, but they also pursued a number of ways to display their wealth and standing, including the addition of the name of their possessions to their family name. In the early nineteenth century this was still an important sign of distinction.<sup>23</sup>

The supposed feudal rights were abolished after the Batavian revolution in 1795. The owners of the *heerlijkheden* lost their privileges and administration reverted to the local mayors. In most villages these were the people who already held responsibilities in the name of their former lords, so there were only small changes in the composition of the rural administrations. The new constitution accorded formal status to the factual situation, investing the rich farmers with executive powers. However, incorporation into the French Empire (1810-1814) restored the urban influence. A large number of the newly appointed *maires* in the villages of Walcheren were born in Middelburg, while in Schouwen-Duiveland they came from smaller towns. This slowed the rise of a rural elite for some decades, but the process resumed after 1814. Dekker analyses the local governments in the rural areas, while the political developments and the composition of both water boards and urban municipalities remain outside the scope of the book. She does not try to

22 Dekker, *Onderdanig en opstandig*, 69-74.

23 *Ibid.*, 42-53.



▲  
Cornelis Markee, View of the North Road (Noordweg) of the estate of St. Laurens with crops in the field and the Dutch Reformed church in the distance, 1767. Zeeuws Archief, Zeeuws Genootschap, Zelandia Illustrata II-0956.

evaluate her findings in relation to earlier works on the urban elite of Zierikzee or mobility among lords in Zeeland.<sup>24</sup>

Dekker examines extensively the political discourses – the orthodox Calvinist ideology and the conservative discourse – both strongly developed in the rural areas – and the modern democratic discourse. During conflicts with authorities farmers defended their interests through formal requests, which Dekker's analyses showing that farmers opposed several innovations, expressing conservative opinions. Conflicts were rare, but tensions could mount, as they did during the famous *Psalmoproer* in 1778, when the rural population rebelled because their religious freedom was threatened. Dekker analyses how the conservative ideas developed and reveals them to be part of and influenced by a European-wide conservative strand of thinking. Well-known international authors were cited in some petitions or pamphlets. However, in religious matters the arguments were not so sophisticated. In conflicts over religious matters the leaders were often farmers and labourers and there was a kind of grassroots politics in this domain. However, as Dekker shows, these people were sometimes advised by the urban elite and occasionally there were coalitions of citizens sharing the same pietistic religious zeal. The modern democratic discourse remained relatively weak. There were, Dekker states, very few revolutionary protests in the years between 1795-1813.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, in 1840 a quite radical liberal voice emerged among the self-conscious rural elite.

## Rural culture

Arno Neele studied the cultural aspect of the urban-rural balance, writing a very interesting and innovative PhD thesis on the subject, approaching the theme from three perspectives: the private sphere, the public sphere and the public cultural discourse. He directs his enquiries to the developments in material culture, the cultural infrastructure of organisations and institutions and the development of ideas about Zeeland and its identity. Urban-rural relations or rural-urban interactions are central to all three perspectives. Most of his concepts and interpretations spring from the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Jurgen Habermas and Reinhart Koselleck. This combination explains the attention paid to reading societies, the distribution of books, cupboards, beds and jewellery, the roles of rural ministers and rich farmers, as well as to the

24 For example, H. van Dijk and D.J. Roorda, *Het patriciaat in Zierikzee tijdens de Republiek* (Zierikzee 1979); H. van Dijk and D.J. Roorda, 'Sociale mobiliteit onder de regenten van de Republiek',

*Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 84 (1971) 306-328.

This contribution provides extensive coverage of Zeeland.

25 Dekker, *Onderdanig en opstandig*, 137-138.

different discourses on sovereignty, agriculture and the authentic countryman, formulated in relation to Zeeland.

Neele states that the appreciation of the countryside not only related to the decline of the cities of Zeeland, but also to changing ideas about urban and rural areas across Europe. A new interest in the countryside developed when agriculture flourished and followed shortly after a period during which Zeeland's cities collapsed. The discovery of the positive aspects of the countryside was not a direct result of this urban decline but was influenced by the cultural climate in Europe. This period saw the rise of new ideas of equality, citizenship, civilisation, economic progress, healthiness and a romantic vision of an Arcadian lifestyle. Urban patricians and their families became increasingly interested in the countryside and its inhabitants, and from 1800 writers delved into rural culture, with its dialects, costumes and folk customs. This inspired the rural population, not only in their political awareness, but in creating a self-conscious rural identity, dressing in special clothes and cultivating in particular the golden headdress. The development of these lace bonnets, with their curved or twisted golden threads and gold pieces, revealed a strong urban-rural distinction, being worn less and less by women in the city and increasingly by rural women. In the nineteenth century, the golden headdress became the symbol of the rich rural traditions of Zeeland.<sup>26</sup>

In the eighteenth century there was no great difference in the furniture found in houses in the city and the countryside of Zeeland. However, in the nineteenth century differences emerged. The urban population separated various domestic functions into different rooms while farmers did not; for example, they continued to sleep in their Dutch cupboard beds. Most of these changes in material culture developed along socio-geographical lines, not socio-occupational lines. The rural population sought a form of distinction in contrast to the cultural development of the urban elites, increasingly cultivating their own rural customs. While the urban middle class saw the countryside as a symbol of a traditional healthy environment, the rural population saw the city as an antipode and resisted urban progress, modernity and civilisation.<sup>27</sup>

In some respects Walcheren, with the regional capital Middelburg, seemed a region apart. Here the urban-rural differences were the strongest. In these parts no reading societies developed, nor a department of the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen*. In most villages religious assemblies, called conventicles, developed. These forms of society, stressing an intensely religious life, were open to a wider social swathe than a reading society. What restricted participation in the conventicles was the emphasis on puritanical and pietistic behaviour, not formal education. These conventicles also existed

<sup>26</sup> Neele, *Ontdekking*, 73-78.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86, 90-91.

in Schouwen-Duiveland, but alongside other forms of sociability, so they were not such a strong phenomenon in this region.<sup>28</sup>

Neele's study stands out because the three different approaches combined fit together very well. The discourse on Zeeland's identity, autonomy and the role of agriculture in society makes sense of the developments in the material culture and the development of sociability. Even the development of the pietistic strand of Protestantism is recognisable in the taste for religious books. Neele analyses eighteenth-century inventories to identify which books were bought and read, and he does the same using nineteenth-century bookshop delivery records. Generally speaking, the people in Zeeland did not differ in their taste in books from people elsewhere in the Republic, except for their strong religious interest. The growing appreciation among the urban middle classes and elites for agriculture and the rural parts of the country, and the growing self-consciousness among the rural population in Zeeland, was not the result of de-urbanisation and the changing balance between city and countryside in Zeeland in a quantitative sense. Rather, the economic and demographical developments strengthened a wider European intellectual trend that was also visible in Zeeland.<sup>29</sup>

### Towards a new template?

Brusse and Mijnhardt claim to present a new template for Dutch history. They advocate strongly the importance of the rural parts of the Netherlands in the years around 1800, that is, between 1750 and 1850. I believe, contrary to their sweeping statements, that no one who has followed the debates on the economic history of the Netherlands will be surprised. The same phenomena were at work in the Low Countries as elsewhere in Western Europe. Most small towns witnessed periodic growth, stagnation and decline between 1550 and 1850. Clark has demonstrated how in the later decades of the eighteenth century some industrial towns lost business to competition from the new industrial regions in the north and the Midlands of England. Where this occurred, the relationship with the surrounding countryside was redefined, opening up more options for rural activities. In agricultural areas in the same period most central towns flourished. Infrastructural improvements, changing market conditions and international developments (for example, the Napoleonic Wars) created an environment of growth for regional market towns.<sup>30</sup>

28 *Ibid.*, 58-62.

29 *Ibid.*, 163.

30 P. Clark, 'Small Towns in England 1550-1850: National and Regional Population Trends', in:

P. Clark, *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 1995) 100-102. By the way, Clark uses a 'central places' theoretical approach alongside a network approach.

The interesting aspect of the claims made by Brusse, Dekker, Mijnhardt and Neele is their extension from the demographic and economic strands of reasoning to those of politics and culture. The authors state that in the latter part of the eighteenth century rural powers dominated the country. This was not just the case in Zeeland, as power relations between the rural (eastern) and urban (western) parts of the Republic changed around 1800. They extrapolate their argument from Zeeland, using it as the basis for an explanation of Dutch societal developments between 1813 and 1850. In the early nineteenth century the newly born kingdom developed a neo-aristocratic character that did not differ from the European norm. De-urbanisation and rural growth brought an end to ‘Dutch exceptionalism’.<sup>31</sup> Generations of Dutch historians, from Robert Fruin to Johan Huizinga, avoided writing about the period 1750 to 1850.<sup>32</sup> The Golden Age was over: the storehouses were neglected, slowly turning into ruins, then giving way to new urban initiatives. Brusse and Mijnhardt state that during this period the Netherlands was in step with Europe, participating in the same economic, political and cultural trends.

The authors formulate an interesting hypothesis here, one that deserves further research. For the present, however, I remain unconvinced. The extrapolations from their case study are often too bold, too daring and sometimes expressed in suggestive rhetoric: ‘Urban decline was almost universal in the Netherlands’, ‘dramatic changes’, ‘the new equilibrium that arose after the fall of the cities’.<sup>33</sup> They tend to regard commerce and competition between cities as zero-sum activities:

Wherever there is trade, there is a network, but there is also competition, which means winners and losers. Urbanization in one area will often go hand in hand with de-urbanization somewhere else.<sup>34</sup>

Brusse and Mijnhardt see this phase of de-urbanisation as not only a shift from urban to rural, but as the triumph of the rural east over the urban west. They seem to forget about the development of cities in the east of the country, exchanging the ‘Hollandocentric’ historiography they attack for a ‘Zeelandocentric’ view.<sup>35</sup> Their enthusiasm is overdone and their conclusions omit the ideas of ‘temporality’, ‘place’ and ‘centrality’, overlook variety in terms of economic specialisation and ignore the different types of cities they themselves defined at the beginning of the book. On a more abstract level one could argue that the changing setting of cities and villages involved a process touching on the concepts of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’, but this is not acknowledged. At the same time, the authors have a peculiar view of urban history, believing

31 Brusse and Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template*, 90.

32 *Ibid.*, 64-65 and again on 99.

33 *Ibid.*, 20, 36 and 39.

34 *Ibid.*, 16.

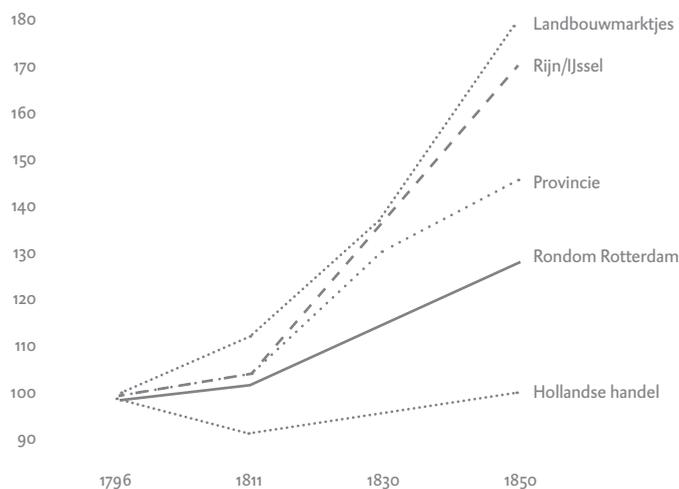
35 *Ibid.*, 68-69.

that this does not situate the city in its regional context enough. In Brusse and Mijnhardt's vision, urban history is overly occupied with the city itself. I feel that their suggestion is too strong. In recent years there have been numerous publications that have approached cities as 'open systems' rather than 'closed worlds'.<sup>36</sup> On a conceptual level, the city as a central place has become as important as the city's network.

The authors do have a point in differentiating between types of cities and analysing the way cities are connected with the wider world, including the surrounding rural areas. Recently Merijn Knibbe analysed regional variety in urbanisation in the Netherlands between 1796 and 1850 using such an approach. Despite the short period covered, his findings are interesting enough to mention now. He differentiated between seven urban clusters in the Netherlands. In the western parts of the country, *de Hollandse handelssteden* (including Middelburg and Vlissingen) witnessed slow growth between 1796-1850 and de-population between 1796-1811, but neither the capital, The Hague, nor the cities near Rotterdam showed urban contraction. All the other Dutch urban clusters showed continuous growth. Knibbe formulated the urban clusters in terms of different types of cities, either with a specific place in the Dutch urban network or as a central place within a region. This suggests a variety of explanations, highly interesting hypotheses on the basis of which to further explore Dutch de-urbanisation.<sup>37</sup>

#### Inwoneraantallen van clusters van steden in Nederland (1796 = 100), 1796-1850

[Population figures of the cluster of towns in the Netherlands (1796 = 100) 1796-1850 (taken from Knibbe, *Regionale verschillen* [Regional differences], 328)]



36 Griet Vermeesch, 'De haas en de schildpad. Stad en staat in pre-industrieel Europa', *Tijdschrift voor Stadsgechiedenis* 5 (2010) 56-71.

37 Merijn Knibbe, 'Regionale verschillen in urbanisatie-dynamiek in Nederland, 1796-1850', in: Collenteur, *Stad en regio*, 323-332.

One of the interesting aspects of the books on Zeeland discussed here is their interrelatedness. In his analysis of cultural developments Neele points to political shifts and economic changes. In her research on power structures and political discourses Dekker signals some of the economic developments, and Brusse, after analysing economic relations and agricultural development, offers important remarks about cultural effects. There might seem to be something of a circular argument throughout these books, but this is not the case. The findings refer to different scales, different perspectives. On some points the interrelationships remain a little weak. Reading Neele, it is apparent that the book trade was an important business, but Brusse does not consider it. Dekker writes about the search for autonomy in an institutional and juridical sense, but does not refer to the more philosophical debates on the topic among the regional elite analysed by Neele.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, these multifaceted studies provide a pluralistic view of Zeeland and in doing so form a consistent quartet, almost offering a holistic account, though Brusse and Mijnhardt dissociate themselves from earlier attempts by Dutch historians to write *histoire totale*.<sup>39</sup> Their ambition is different, but certainly not less.

Today the tourist brochures on Zeeland advertise their towns as places where ‘the old times are revived’. About Middelburg it is said that ‘in the historic centre of Middelburg the attractions are within walking distance from the shopping centre’, and about Zierikzee, ‘Wandering through the narrow streets, one almost feels history’.<sup>40</sup> Development did not stop in 1850. Pim Kooij relates nineteenth-century urban infrastructural initiatives to the order of the Dutch urban hierarchy. He looks for innovations, such as gas or electricity works, cinemas, motorcars and bicycles in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In these respects the cities in Zeeland developed a little later than the largest Dutch cities. There were no gas or electricity works before 1900 and no motorcars were registered in Zeeland before that date. However, Middelburg did have a branch of the Groningen-based Fongers bicycle factory in 1884. The large Dutch department store Vroom & Dreesmann opened in Middelburg in 1902, the same year these stores opened in other regional capitals and towns, such as Dordrecht, Leeuwarden and Leiden. Kooij typifies these cities as ‘sub-top’ in the Dutch urban hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the towns in Zeeland were in step with their equals. I bet Johan Huizinga loved these cities. ◀

38 Dekker, *Onderdanig en opstandig*, 84-94; Neele, *Ontdekking*, 103-107.

39 Brusse and Mijnhardt, *Towards a New Template*, 35-36.

40 <http://www.vvzeeland.nl/nl/vvveere>, <http://www.vvzeeland.nl/nl/zierikzee> and <http://www.visitmiddelburg.nl> (consulted January 2012).

41 P. Kooij, ‘Where the Action is’: The Introduction and Acceptance of Infrastructural Innovations in Dutch Cities 1850-1950’, in: Kooij, *Town and Countryside*, 67-79.

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#### List of reviewed publications:

- Brusse, Paul, *Gevalen stad. Stedelijke netwerken en het platteland. Zeeland 1750-1850* (Balans tussen stad en platteland 1; Zwolle: Waanders, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2011, 247 pp., ISBN 978 90 400 7790 6).
- Brusse, Paul, Mijnhardt, Wijnand W., *Towards a New Template for Dutch History: De-urbanization and the Balance between City and Countryside* (Balance between City and Countryside 4; Zwolle: Waanders, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2011, 115 pp., ISBN 978 90 400 7796 8).
- Dekker, Jeanine, *Onderdanig en opstandig. Desurbanisatie en de politieke verhoudingen op het platteland in Zeeland, 1750-1850* (Balans tussen stad en platteland 2; Zwolle: Waanders, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2011, 224 pp., ISBN 978 90 400 7796 8).
- Neele, Arno, *De ontdekking van het Zeeuwse platteland. Culturele verhoudingen tussen stad en platteland in Zeeland 1750-1850* (Balans tussen stad en platteland 3; Zwolle: Waanders, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2011, 223 pp., ISBN 978 90 400 7796 8).