

**Erik Thoen, Guus J. Borger, Adriaan M. J. de Kraker, Tim Soens, Dries Tys, Lies Vervaet and Henk J. T. Weerts, (eds), *Landscapes or Seascapes? The History of the Coastal Environment in the North Sea Area Reconsidered*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013 (CORN Publication Series 13). x+428 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-54058-0. Pbk € 75.00.**

Logically connected to contemporary concerns over climate change and ecological degradation, environmental history over the past decade has become one of the most significant strands of historical research. *Environmental History* is one of the most frequently cited history journals now, while older established journals such as the *Economic History Review* and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* have become increasingly devoted to issues linked with climate change such as the 'Little Ice Age' or the 'Medieval Warm Period'. Despite the best efforts of academic networks such as the CORN (*Comparative History of the North Sea Area*), rural history still remains a niche and peripheral strand of the overall historical discipline. Yet, as this recent CORN volume demonstrates, a way forward for rural history may be to connect traditional social and economic concerns with the new 'trendy' work and ideas in environmental history.

This volume of 18 papers, largely the product of a conference in Ghent on water management and the coastal environment in 2010, addresses the environmental fortunes and ecological stability of coastal regions in the North Sea area over the very long term of the pre-industrial period. One basic and essential contribution is to (once and for all) categorically dispute the impact of 'marine transgressions' on the environmental development of the coastal areas – that is, the chapters taken together offer evidence counter to a previously-held view that flooding in the North Sea area (from the Roman period to the Middle Ages) was predominantly dictated by geologic processes whereby the sea level rose relative to the land. In turn, the argument against the impact of marine transgressions has consequences for the reconstruction of population and settlement in much of the coastal area between Northern France and Mid-Denmark. Previous scholarship had suggested that occupation remained thin (as a result of these transgressions) from the third century BCE all the way up to the eleventh or twelfth centuries CE. This volume, instead, places the coastal regions within a more 'general' demographic outline for Western Europe – a higher population and exploitation of land up to the end of the Western Roman Empire, followed by a population nadir in the fifth to seventh centuries (although as Dirk Meier notes in his essay, very little concrete information on habitation is available for many coastal areas between 400 and 700 (92)), continued low-level settlement up

to the tenth century, which was only reversed in the late-Carolingian period with intense demographic growth and repopulation in the high Middle Ages. Essentially, this volume suggests that terrible events such as storm flooding were more important than marine transgressions, and that the environmental and economic impact of these events varied from region to region of the coastal area, dictated by strong divergences in social structure. As has been made rather fashionable in the 'disaster studies' literature over the past ten years, exogenous shocks and terrible environmental events have a 'social' and a 'human' dimension. In arguably the most impressive chapter of the book, Dries Tys quite rightly states that 'in order to understand the coastal landscape, we not only have to look to the sea, but also to the land, power(s), and to society' (200).

Many of the chapters in this volume confirm a distinction between water management techniques which were more 'defensive' in nature, that is to say, predominantly protection against the sea and flooding, and those that were more 'offensive' in nature, that is to say, dikes and technology used to reclaim previously sodden and marshy land into a more cultivable, 'productive' (inverted commas are used because 'wastes' and marshes had important functions also for rural medieval peoples), or habitable state such as new polders. Linked to this, one of the interesting questions discussed throughout the volume tends to be over the social conditions that make land reclamation and colonisation more likely. Which social groups push it through? How do such systems become sustainable?

Johannes Mol, in his chapter on Friesland, concentrates on ecclesiastical institutions by focusing in on the reclamation and water management activities of high- and late-medieval monasteries. His use of new GIS mapping (like many other chapters in the book) is highly impressive en route to spatially reconstructing monastic granges, though how he frames his paper is a little unconventional. Initial research in the middle of the twentieth-century thought that the Cistercian orders were the principle frontiersmen of the high Middle Ages, and this view has since been revised. Mol's work turns this position back on its head by asserting the role of monastic orders (with further nuances), but in his pre-amble he pits himself against the older scholarship of Georges Duby without mention of the more recent revisionist literature of (for example) Isabel Alfonso and her classic article entitled, 'Cistercians and Feudalism' from 1991 in the *Past and Present*. The inclusion of a chapter on the Po Valley in Northern Italy is also quite strange for a book dedicated to the North Sea area of Europe, but at least this represents one of the strongest essays in the volume. Michele Campopiano presents a story of considerable complexity and a new spin on the classic work of Bryce Lyon in the *American Historical Review* whereby he shows that the dismantlement

of serfdom and the reclamation of new territories did not bring new freedoms for rural communities – they were simply usurped under new cadres of control by urban governments instead. Campopiano presents a story which in many ways has parallels with that of Dries Tys on coastal Flanders, where the hydraulic systems that emerged there came to be used almost as a socio-political tool – supporting in this case a ‘princely ideology with a powerful territorial position’ (231).

Another interesting chapter was that of Otto Knottnerus on the medieval reclamation of three regions in Northern and Northeast Groningen. What he argues ultimately is that a ‘social balance’ between interest groups was vital in maintaining the sustainability of coastal environments here in the Middle Ages. While the medieval Dollard region (essentially what came to be called Reiderland and the Oldambt by the thirteenth century) descended into a chaotic society of tribal conflict, disturbed by the sheer numbers of peat-land peasant colonists, the system was better maintained in nearby Fivelgo, where a local elite layer served as a negotiating buffer between the diverse interests of the inland colonist peasants and the coastal aristocracies. Knottnerus’s argumentation is significant in that it links up with other work by James Galloway and Tim Soens (two of the most prominent scholars currently working on pre-industrial water management and land reclamation), who show that significant developments in the transition to the late Middle Ages (the waning of manorialism and increasing inequalities in the distribution of landed property, respectively) had knock-on consequences for the commitment and incentive to invest in water management infrastructure.

If there are to be any criticisms of this volume, it is not necessarily on the scholarship itself, which is quite high, but more attributable to the CORN series as a whole. It is becoming increasingly difficult to market these books as a ‘Comparative History of the North Sea Area’, in that there is a distinct bias towards (what is now) the Dutch-speaking Low Countries. If we take away the introduction and final synthesising chapter, as well as two chapters addressing the North Sea area in general, we find that half of the fourteen chapters refer to regions of coastal Flanders and the Netherlands. The problem is that this volume is far from being the worst offender – volume 14 in the series had all its chapters except one focusing on the Netherlands and Flanders! On the one hand, it could be indicative of the general strength of rural history in the Low Countries (which undeniably is high), but is also linked to the fact that 31 out of 38 editors in the published volumes to date are Dutch and Belgian, the series editors are Dutch and Belgian, CORN is funded by the ‘Research Foundation – Flanders’ (FWO), and, of course, the publishing house is based in Belgium. This is all despite a frequent rhetoric offered in

many of the volumes highlighting the commitment to cross-borders investigation. Furthermore, very few of the contributors to the CORN series actually perform 'cross-borders research' (that is transcending national historiographies) themselves. It is laudable that Erik Thoen offers an insightful and considered synthesizing chapter to end the book on a high note (some of the volumes do not, and end rather abruptly with a regional case study), but this is not about the 'evolution of coastal landscapes in the North Sea area' as suggested in his chapter title, but a synthesis of all material relevant to the Dutch-speaking coastal areas of the Low Countries. Other places outside the Low Countries are mentioned cursorily, and only by referring to the papers in the same volume.

It is undeniable that CORN has been one of the key torchbearers for rural history over the past 15 years and more, and has given an international audience exposure to regions where very little English-language literature once existed. Yet, while 10 to 15 years ago, these CORN publications represented the best example of comparative rural history, in 2014, we also now have the COST-financed 'Rural History in Europe' with scholars contributing from all across Western, Central, Mediterranean, and sometimes Eastern Europe. While CORN is crystallising an intellectual divide between the Northern and Southern European rural historical discipline, this new COST series is breaking it down. Such criticisms of the CORN series itself, however, should not detract from the basic fact that this particular volume (no. 13 in the series) is one of the strongest to appear in recent years.

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