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Land of the free. Social contrasts in the Dutch ‘outlands’ (A.D. 1200–1900)¹

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SUMMARY

In the Netherlands, most high and dry land was settled and cultivated as early as the prehistoric period. Many lowlands, on the other hand, remained essentially unreclaimed until well into the Middle Ages. Since then these areas, too, have witnessed rapid change, physically as well as socially. Usually in medieval reclamation areas, under frontier-like conditions, settlers managed to become free farmers. This paper discusses the interesting two-faced character of the social developments in some of the ‘outlands’ along the margins of the ‘civilised world’. In some areas elite groups emerged or expanded, and castles and castle-like dwellings were shooting up far and wide, while wilderness areas were rapidly being transformed into highly productive arable land. Elsewhere smallholders and paupers settled, or were forced to settle involuntarily. In the latter cases the local economy was largely based on peat cutting and small-scale subsistence agriculture. Socially, outlands (reclamation areas) therefore took very different paths, which is still recognisable today. The history of these social contrasts is complex and deserves more research. Different opportunities as well as the ability and freedom to exploit them seem to have been key factors.

KEYWORDS

The Netherlands, outlands, frontier, reclamations, social history, Middle Ages, post-medieval period.

INTRODUCTION

Triggered by population growth and rising urban demand, much of north-western Europe during the High Middle Ages (tenth to early fourteenth century) witnessed large-scale reclamation efforts. In the Netherlands the process began in the late tenth century (Henderikx 1989; Borger 1992; Mol 2011; van Doesburg & Groenewoudt 2011), as territorial rulers handed out peat bogs and swamps for reclamation on a large scale. When necessary, drainage was first improved by orders from above. In the mid-thirteenth century, for instance, the Count of Guelders ordered a drainage channel to be dug, the so-called *Gravengracht* (Count’s Canal), to facilitate reclamation enterprises in the eastern Dutch Achterhoek area (Fig. 1).

Before reclamation began, the areas involved were virtually uninhabited, although they were usually being exploited in various ways by the residents of nearby higher grounds. As commoners, they usually held common rights of meadow and pasture in addition to being entitled to collect wood, peat and fodder for private use. Most of them were tenant farmers. Their lords — landowners representing both secular and ecclesiastical elite groups — exploited the outlands for their own benefit, and increasingly



Fig. 1. Location of the regions and sites that are mentioned in the text. Basis: historic landscapes in the Netherlands (adapted from Barends *et al.* 2010).²

Physical geography	Man-made landscape (situation 19th century)	Field-pattern	
		Pluriform	Uniform
Higher parts of the Netherlands			
Plateaus South-Limburg	Open fields		
Sand, boulder-clay	Enclosures and small open fields <1850		
	Common heathland, forests and wetlands 1850		
Fluvial landscape	Enclosures and small open fields		
Coastal dunes	Enclosures and small open fields		
Coastal lowlands			
(Former) peat-and fenlands	Fenland reclamations (strip-fields)		
	Peat-colonies		
	Drained lakes (all >1500)		
Coastal marshes	Old landscapes		
	Reclaimed land (> Late Middle Ages)		

also commercially. This was a potential cause of conflicts. In this context Ingvild Oye correctly observed that ‘the social and economic development of agrarian settlements (in Norway) is better demonstrated here (in outlands) than in the core areas (of habitation)’ (2005, p. 15).

In the Netherlands, most of the higher parts of the landscape had already been settled and largely cultivated since late prehistory. Reclamation of the outlands bordering these old settlement *nuclei* went hand in hand with colonisation. While reclamation was ongoing such outlands may be imagined as ‘frontiers’, a concept used here not as Waselkov and Paul (1981) defined it, ‘[a] transitional area of mixture and interaction’, but rather as an ‘empty’ border zone where pioneers and settlers moved in, and which offered new opportunities. This concept may help one to understand social developments in the areas discussed here. Comparative freedom is probably what allowed groups of settlers in different Dutch reclamation areas from the tenth to the fourteenth century to form a new social class, one of free farmers, or yeomen (*e.g.* Mol 2011, p. 72). Interestingly, changes occurred on both extremes of the social scale. Some reclamation areas witnessed the rapid rise of a new local elite, others

became poverty-stricken ‘refuges’ for the poorest of the poor. The purpose of this short paper is twofold: 1) to identify possible causes of these striking social contrasts, using historical as well as archaeological and landscape evidence, and 2) to create a starting point for future research.

THE RISE OF LOCAL ELITE GROUPS IN RECLAMATION AREAS

Intriguing phenomena in some of the newly reclaimed areas in the Netherlands from the thirteenth century onwards included not only the emergence of new regional elites or the expansion of an existing elite, but also the construction of many small castles, tower houses and moated sites. Most of them have long since disappeared, but every now and then archaeological remains of these structures are recovered, adding to the many hundreds that have already been recorded (*e.g.* Broekhuizen *et al.* 1994; Groenendijk & Molema 1998).

In some areas veritable ‘castle landscapes’ were formed (van Doesburg 2011; in prep.; Spiekhout 2012). A driving force behind these developments was perhaps the ideal opportunities for expansion that lowland reclamations provided to enterprising

individuals. Entrepreneurs seem to have been able to take full advantage of 'the freedom of the frontier'. Man-made physical obstacles were rare, and social obstacles were either absent or, at the very least, less rigid than in the 'old' land, where virtually everything and everyone was tied up in manorial systems, with their strict legal structure (Spek 2004; van Doesburg 2011).

Probably the best-known Dutch 'castle landscape' is that along the Langbroekerwetering, a drainage channel which dissects early twelfth-century reclamations in the central Dutch river area. Here, many mostly small, thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century brick tower houses and manor houses sprung up close to each other (Pl. I). They functioned as dwellings as well as storage facilities. All were built on sites of slightly earlier reclamation farms. Renes (2008) pointed out that more than half of the founders were members of prominent families with roots in the adjacent 'old land', where these individuals seem to have been stewards on large agrarian

estates owned by ecclesiastical institutions and the Bishop of Utrecht, the territorial ruler of the area. The managers of these estates were the main actors in the reclamation of the neighbouring wetlands, acting as the medieval equivalents of present-day developers (*locatores*). All western Dutch peat bog reclamations studied by de Bont (2008) that were initiated by the bishop proved to have been executed by *locatores*, who received their commission in so-called '*cope*' (purchase) contracts issued by the bishop (van der Linden 1955; Borger 1992). In the Langbroekerwetering area, *locatores* demonstrably received land and privileges in both newly reclaimed and 'old' land (van Doesburg 2011; in prep.). Other tower and manor houses were built by descendants of settlers who had succeeded in making their fortune and gaining prestige. This suggests that castle construction in this specific reclamation area may represent both the material expression of an existing elite and the physical manifestation of a newly formed one.

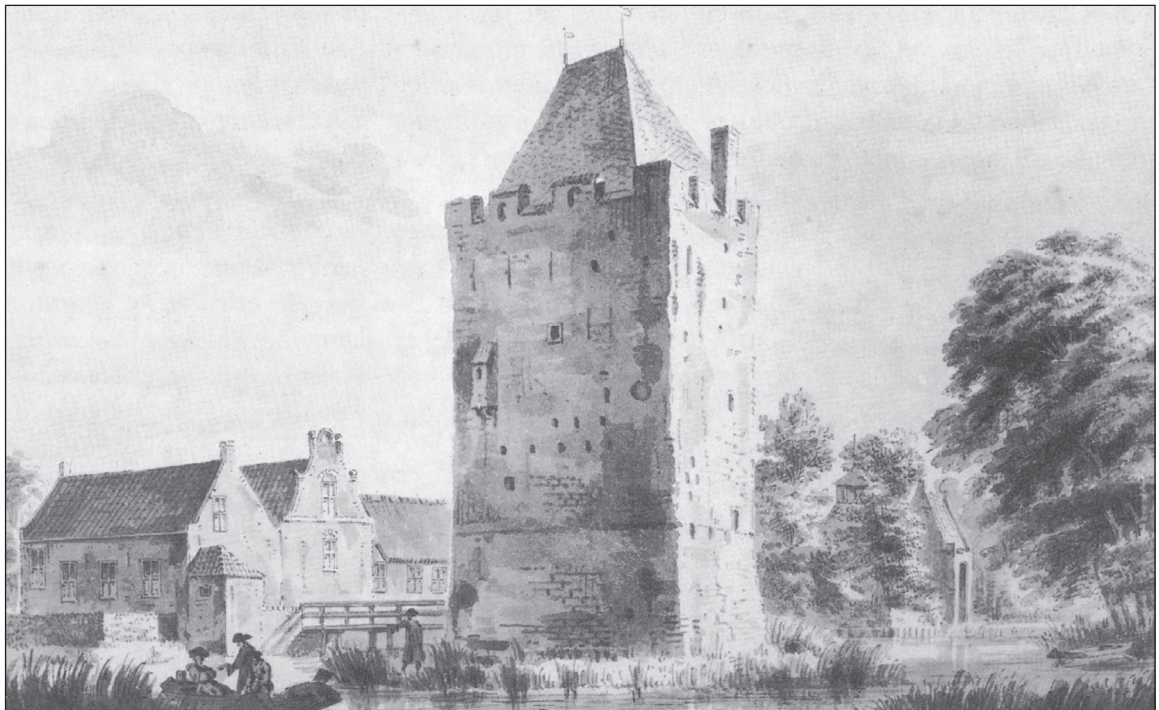


Plate I. *Lunenburg*, one of the many (in origin) thirteenth-century fortified houses (tower houses) in the medieval *Langbroekerwetering* reclamation area (drawing by Abraham de Haen, 1725).

The eastern Dutch Achterhoek area, however, appears to have witnessed the rise of an entirely new aristocracy with roots — mostly — in successful serving families, the so-called *ministeriales*. The counts (later dukes) of Guelders used (and depended on) these families to realise their own ambitions (territorial expansion, wealth and more subjects), and granted them access to knighthood. As a result, the numbers of the Guelders nobility grew substantially in the fourteenth and fifteenth century (van Winter 1962; Gietman 2013; Noordzij 2013). Also in the *Achterhoek* lowlands, the reclamation process seems to have been accompanied in the fourteenth century by the large-scale construction of castles, in this case defensible ones (Werner 1906; Eliëns & Harenberg 1984; Jas *et al.* 2013; Keunen 2013). Some of these castles later became country houses. Most of the area's numerous country houses, however, were established much later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, by wealthy urban families (van Cruyningen 2002; 2005). Many houses were substantially enlarged in the nineteenth century, when their owners were able to acquire large pieces of former common land.

In addition to castles, numerous 'moated sites' appeared in the Achterhoek lowlands, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. These moated sites ranged from fortified manor houses to simple moated farms and granaries. Their date, origin, distribution and sociocultural context are still under investigation (Keunen in prep.).

In the Achterhoek, members of the new regional aristocracy seem to have enthusiastically exploited the opportunities the situation offered, especially in the fourteenth century. Several of these new aristocrats are known to have asserted themselves with increasing independence, or even to have become plain 'robber barons'. In the end they were dealt with by coalitions of those who felt that these aristocrats were impinging too much on the interests of others. The 1362 siege and ensuing demolition of Voorst castle by combined forces of the nearby hanseatic towns of Deventer, Kampen and Zwolle and the territorial ruler and Bishop of Utrecht, Jan van Arkel, is a well-documented case in point (Renaud

1983). Voorst castle was situated further west, outside the Achterhoek in a reclamation area in the delta of the river IJssel (the name Voorst derives from *forestis* which refers to early medieval hunting preserves — forests — or in this case uncultivated wilderness).

Clearly in this case the territorial ruler lacked the means to deal with the situation on his own, and he strongly depended on local support. Obviously, this meant that something was expected of him in return, for example a transfer of reclamation rights. This explains how in the fourteenth century the towns (urban elites) mentioned above managed to secure and assert reclamation rights (Gosses 1903). At that time reclamation in this specific area was booming business (Wartena 1975; Mol 2009). 'Castle landscapes' also developed in parts of the northern Dutch provinces of Groningen and Friesland (*e.g.* Noomen 2009; Spiekhout 2012). Between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century hundreds of '*steenhuizen*' (literally 'brick houses') and '*stinsen*' (tower houses) arose within a relatively small area, some of which later developed into '*borgen*', fortified residences. Regarding their history much still remains unclear. In Friesland, most tower houses were probably built on old land, and many seem to have been founded by monasteries (Noomen 2009). Most tower houses in Groningen, on the other hand, could be found in reclamation areas. Here, the old local elites were probably involved in their construction (Molema 1995). Most northern Dutch tower houses were the property of rich and powerful land owners, '*hoofdelingen*' ('headmen'), who acted — and were regarded — as members of the nobility and had even been able to secure specific seigniorial rights (Alma 2003). Possible explanations for the large number of fortified houses in parts of the northern Netherlands may be weak central authority and the relative lawlessness of this peripheral zone. The local society may even have retained specific 'tribal' elements such as feuds between rival families or family groups (Noomen 2009). This may explain why tower houses, which by then had long been outdated as a defensive concept in situations of 'real' warfare,

were maintained and even newly built up until the fifteenth century. If this hypothesis is correct, the local society would be reminiscent of the situation in the Scottish Borders at a slightly later date (e.g. Goodman & Tuck 1992).

HOME OF THE POOR

To summarise: in some areas the lowland frontier became a playground for the *nouveaux riches*. In other areas, however, it would become a 'paupers' paradise', to quote the cynical title of a recent book on the subject (Jansen 2008), a place to which many modern Dutch families can trace their roots — whether they like it or not, and whether or not they feel proud of their 'authorship' of the landscape. To illustrate this point we will move to the once extensive raised bogs in the north of the country, to the provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel in particular. The reclamation of mires and other marshland there goes back to the late tenth century, or perhaps even earlier. Little is known about the living conditions of these early colonists. There is some archaeological evidence, however, from the areas Peizermaden and Eeldermeden in the north of the province of Drenthe (van Doesburg, Müller & Schreurs 2010). The people who (were) settled here in the early eleventh century, or thereabouts, practiced mixed farming, with an emphasis on dairy farming. Archaeological evidence reveals that conditions were harsh. Originally the settlers lived on isolated farms in houses built of wood and peat sods; later (thirteenth century) these were replaced by smaller dwellings largely constructed of sods. The diet mainly consisted of dairy-based porridge. Imported products such as wheel-thrown pottery, grinding stones and whetstones were virtually absent. In the fourteenth century the area was abandoned, possibly because its hydrological situation deteriorated. Adjoining reclamation areas such as Roderwolde, however, were not abandoned (Zomer 2009). Evidence from Roderwolde suggests that there was no significant improvement in living conditions through time.

The history of these reclamations is still unclear.

The rapid growth of the nearby city of Groningen may offer a partial explanation, while ecclesiastical institutions and the secular elite may also have been involved. At the time of reclamations the Bishop of Utrecht was landlord of Roderwolde, but unlike the Langbroekerwetering area there is no written evidence for planned reclamations coordinated by *locatores* (Zomer 2009) in Roderwolde, or evidence in the landscape for systematic 'cope' reclamation (Borger 1992). Given sociocultural conditions at the time, spontaneous reclamation by local farmers seems unlikely (van Doesburg 2011). Tied up as they were in the manorial system, these farmers would neither have had the means nor been at liberty to take the initiative in activities such as this.

From the mid-sixteenth century onwards (Gerding 1995; Borger 1992, pp. 160–4), thousands of individuals in the vast and remote mires along the German border became involved in commercial peat-cutting operations. These were labourers, members of the rural proletariat, not farmers. Among them were many religious refugees from all over Europe. These large-scale peat extraction operations and associated colonisation movements were triggered by economic growth and fuel shortages in the booming western Dutch cities, such as Amsterdam. Turf was cheap, and so was labour (Mokyr 1980). De Zeeuw (1978) argued that a cheap energy supply was an essential factor in the Dutch prosperity of the 'Golden Age' (seventeenth century). Van Zanden (1997) disputed this, but it is undeniable that early in the seventeenth century urban capitalists from the province of Holland quickly gained control of a large segment of the turf industry (Borger 1992, p. 160).

Contemporary daily productivity quotas reveal that peat-cutting was back-breaking work (Gerding 1995, pp. 34–7). Living conditions were probably poor from the start, although the earliest known reference to people living in small hovels largely built out of turves or sods ('sod cabins': Pls II and III) dates from the early nineteenth century (Lindner 1912). As we saw before, however, there is conclusive archaeological evidence that roughly similar cabins existed as



Plates II and III. Typical examples of the poor housing conditions of peat workers and settlers in Dutch peat marshes and moors (photographs c. 1920).

early as the thirteenth century. Although the Dutch 1901 Housing Act rendered living in a sod cabin illegal, some continued to be occupied until World War II. Although there has been some divergence of opinion on the subject (de Pater 2001) there can be little doubt that especially after World War I many peat workers struggled under miserable conditions. This certainly applies to those who became unemployed once the peat supplies had been exhausted. 'Hands-on' expert Evert Zandstra (1949) wrote a novel about these people and the dire conditions they lived in, entitled '*Volk zonder uren*' ('Hourless People'). It is hardly surprising that the 'peat colonies' districts (Du. '*Veenkoloniën*') became breeding grounds of Dutch communism, in Groningen in particular (e.g. Voerman 1993). In Lower Saxony, Germany, thousands of political opponents of the Third Reich, especially socialists and communists, were imprisoned in labour camps in peat bogs, the so-called *Emslandlager*. 'Peat Bog Soldiers', one of Europe's best-known protest songs, originated in camp Börgermoor (Eisler 1973).

Although peat-cutting was usually succeeded by various forms of agricultural land use, operations revolved around the commercial extraction of peat. Besides, the quality of the land that



remained after the peat supplies were exhausted was usually poor. In fact, with the exception of the peat marshes in the north-eastern Netherlands, where a succeeding agricultural landscape had already been planned in advance (Borger 1992), the lands left behind after peat-cutting operations were closed down were among the few that were truly useless. Again, these areas are characterised by polarity. In the west of the Dutch province of Noord-Brabant regional landlords tightly controlled the swamps as long as they could still produce the valuable peat. Once that had been

depleted, the landlords tried to find an alternative source of income by planting exploitable forests. In the early sixteenth century the earliest known forest plantations in the modern territory of the Netherlands were in this region, in part using pine trees grown from seeds that were imported, together with forestry expertise, from Germany (Renes 1994). Nearby, the other extreme of the social scale is illustrated by the abject poverty of the hamlet Het Heike ('small heathland') that sprang up spontaneously on both sides of the border between the territories of two regional lords. The place was first mentioned in 1636, and it had a bad reputation. In 1841 a caring priest built a church and changed the hamlet's name to St Willebrord. A 1949 Ph.D. thesis was revealingly titled (our translation): 'The village of St Willebrord (Het Heike); a study in human geography and criminology' (Schreurs 1947).

Similar 'pauper' hamlets could be found on other former peat land. A good example in the central Netherlands is the hamlet of Nijkerkerveen, which in 1650, just after peat cutting had ended, comprised five houses. In the nineteenth century the hamlet greatly expanded along an irregular pattern on both sides of the main road, the aptly named 'Vodstraat' ('rags road'), later changed into Kerkstraat/Schoolstraat (Church Street/School Street). Living conditions only began to improve in the second half of the twentieth century (van Dooren 1986). A number of similar settlements in south-east Friesland, in the north, also started in the late seventeenth century on wasteland left after a long period of peat-cutting (Spahr van der Hoek 1960). All these places have in common the fact that they were targeted in the nineteenth century by missionary-preachers who desired to 'civilise' these 'backward' villages. In St Willebrord it was a Roman-Catholic priest; elsewhere the preachers were often non-conformist Protestants, which stimulated the construction of many chapels.

A new phase began in 1823, when a motley group of down-and-outs, vagabonds, beggars, drunks, delinquents, orphans and 'antisocial' families from town and city slums were deported in droves to extensive re-education institutions

('colonies') at Veenhuizen and Frederiksoord in the south of the province of Drenthe (Dorgelo 1964; Berends *et al.* 1984), in a desolate bog area nicknamed 'Dutch Siberia'. These actions were prompted by an agreement between the national government of the time and the '*Maatschappij van Weldadigheid*' ('Beneficent Society'), established in 1818 on the basis of enlightenment ideals by retired army-general Johannes van den Bosch (Schrauwers 2001). Idealism, however, was only one part of it. What the Dutch establishment and government were primarily interested in was combating the unwelcome side-effects of increasing poverty.

Most inmates were set to work as peat and farm workers. Shortly afterwards the Society established more 'colonies' in similar bog and moor areas: Boschoord, Wilhelminaoord and Frederiksoord in south-west Drenthe and Ommerschans and Willemsoord in the province of Overijssel. The activities of the '*Maatschappij van Weldadigheid*' reached as far as modern Belgium (between 1815 and 1830 part of the Netherlands). Here, colonies were established at Wortel (1822) and Merksplas (1825). Some of these colonies were 'unfree' but others were 'free', in that individuals could enter voluntarily. Especially when a harsh winter was expected many a beggar and vagabond would prefer a temporary sojourn in a colony over life in the open air. Some evictees from the colonies (or those who had not qualified for admittance), particularly young individuals, settled in the surrounding area where they lived in hastily erected sod cabins, forming so-called desperado colonies such as those at Nijensleek, Vledderveen, Noordwolde-Zuid and Marijenkampen.

Religion or the gin bottle were the only distractions in this vale of tears – though the two often went hand in hand. They were spoon-fed both booze and religion. While some believe that there is only one path to heaven (the narrow one), there are apparently many such paths running through the peat lands of *Drenthe*. It is still crowded with churches and beliefs, with separatist groups and sectarians, with Apostolics and New-Apostolics, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists, Pentacostalists and other Anabaptists (Newspaper '*Trouw*', October 7 1995).

In 1859, Veenhuizen and Ommerschans were taken over by the Dutch government and transformed into penitentiary institutions. Once symbols of grinding poverty and shame (Jansen 2008), in October 2010 Veenhuizen (still a penitentiary institution) and the other villages of the Maatschappij van Weldadigheid were proudly added to the tentative list of World Heritage properties in the Netherlands.

Outlands such as peat bogs and remote moors housed not only peat workers. They have always also been refuges and hideouts for others from the lowest rungs of the social ladder (Groenewoudt 2009). After the sixteenth century smallholders who were not commoners (in the literal sense) were — gradually — allowed (or tolerated) to use the commons (van Engelen van der Veen 1924, p. 44), and to settle on the margins of existing cultivated areas. In some cases ‘squatter’ settlements grew into new villages, such as St Willebrord and Nijkerkerveen. At first such settlements were very similar to the ‘free colonies’ in the vicinity of the re-education institutions mentioned above. Every now and then bands of ‘Gypsies’ (‘pagans’), mercenaries and vagrants would roam the remote heathlands and moors. The earliest reports about their presence in the eastern Netherlands date from the early fifteenth century (*e.g.* Molhuysen 1840). They were increasingly viewed as a problem, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Lutje Schipholt 1949).

Newly established ‘peat colonies’ in the northern Netherlands were often settled by religious minorities. However, the phenomenon of religious minorities or refugees settling in outlands was not restricted to former peat-cutting areas. The new hamlets and villages founded in the nineteenth century on former common lands to some extent reflected the strong compartmentalisation (‘pillarisation’, Du. *‘verzuiling’*) which characterised the Dutch sociogeographic landscape between 1853 and *c.* 1930, as a result of Roman Catholic emancipation after centuries of oppression (Thissen 1993; van Gorp & Renes 2003; Groenewoudt 2012). New villages in the Achterhoek seem

predominantly to have adopted a Catholic identity (Demoed 1996). The establishment of these villages usually followed in the wake of the foundation of a church by prominent Catholic families, that is, by ecclesiastical patronage in the best medieval tradition.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What the foregoing suggests is that particularly marginal lands — mostly marshy lowlands — in the Netherlands changed rapidly and in fundamentally different directions from the late medieval period onwards. In an earlier paper the first author addressed the process of landscape change (Groenewoudt 2012), while the present paper highlights the social dimensions of this change. Both aspects are closely intertwined. In addition to the transformation observed in many late medieval reclamation areas (tenth to fourteenth century), which involved settlers turning into free farmers, other interesting processes were at work through time at both extremes of the social scale. In some areas entrepreneurs moved in (or were sent in) early and were thus able to optimally exploit the freedom frontiers usually offer, also in terms of social mobility. As a result, local elites emerged in the thirteenth and fourteenth century and went on a building spree of small castles and other moated brick buildings to express their wealth, ambition and newly gained social status (van Doesburg 2011; *in prep.*). It is tempting to regard the Langbroekerwetering cluster of tower houses owned by competing *nouveaux riches* as the rural equivalent of medieval Italian towns like San Gimignano, where prominent families in the twelfth century built no fewer than seventy tower houses to show off their wealth and power (*e.g.* Wickham 1995).

These ‘castles’ usually posed no serious military threat, which probably explains why territorial rulers did not actively oppose the development, while in other cases they may have been unable to stop it. In the same period, but accelerating from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, society’s poorest settled (or were forcibly settled) in peat

marshes and mires (and on degraded sandy soils that had been abandoned centuries earlier: Groenewoudt 2009). Once there, they usually remained poor. Peat workers in particular struggled under miserable conditions. Their exploitation by absentee urban capitalists clearly illustrates the downside of the freedom that frontiers could offer. Outlands have also always been places of refuge and hideouts for various minorities and outcasts. Traces of the resulting socio-economic patterns and disparities can still be recognised today and have left their mark on the landscape.

The phenomenon that newly emerging regional elites and ‘castle landscapes’ occurred in some reclamation areas but not in others deserves to be studied further, for similar social contrasts can be found throughout the world. Crucial factors seem to have been differences in opportunity and in the available facilities and liberty to exploit them. These differences related to sociogeographic, economic and geo-political conditions, all of which changed significantly through time. The presence and involvement in reclamation areas of existing elite groups which had their basis in adjacent settlement areas seems to have been an important factor (van Doesburg 2011; in prep.), as may have been the presence of *locatores*, as the Langbroekerwetering example shows. However, evidence of social mobility is completely lacking for other reclamation areas where these medieval developers were active. A weak central authority that relied on local support was probably another factor stimulating the development of a new regional elite, and a peripheral geographical position may have been a third element. High soil fertility, allowing surplus production, and access to emerging urban markets may have been key factors. In the Netherlands there is clear evidence for agricultural intensification, up-scaling and specialisation to provide for the growing needs of urban populations from the thirteenth–fourteenth century onwards (Groenewoudt 2013). Closely related is a move away from ‘an inward looking self-sufficient agrarian economy towards a more outward oriented proto capitalistic market economy’ (Spek 2004, p. 981; also Theuws 1989; Vangheluwe & Spek 2008; van Bavel 1999; 2010).

Rigid manorial structures were falling apart and made way for new social configurations, first of all, apparently, in new reclamation areas that had never been (fully) integrated components of these structures in the first place.

When trying to explain social change in Dutch reclamation areas in the period 1200–1900, the most pertinent questions are: who controlled uncultivated land, who was involved in the reclamations, and who benefited from them? Perhaps the most fundamental question is: what was the (main) motivation behind the reclamations? Outlands offered different groups of people in different periods different opportunities for economic progress and social climbing. The chronological trend may be broadly summarised as follows: in the High Middle Ages (c. A.D. 1000–1300) land reclamation was carried out by farmers under the supervision of *locatores*, who were either members of an existing local elite or supported by them. Given the opportunity, some of the *locatores* could become a new regional elite, or join an existing elite or perhaps even the aristocracy. In places where only territorial rulers could claim uncultivated land, reclamation could either proceed along similar lines or (also) by the direct sale of reclamation contracts (*copes*) to enterprising farmers and farmers’ sons. Usually these settlers managed to become free farmers (yeomen); in reclamation areas land and freedom could literally be bought. In those rare cases when colonists remained unfree, this did not stop them from acting as free farmers by selling privileges and lands, as happened in IJsselham in the IJssel river delta (Mol 2009, pp. 71–3). This was obviously a potential cause for conflict with the landlord involved, especially when the new land turned out to be highly productive and profitable.

In the early modern period (after A.D. 1500), existing farming communities gradually started to tolerate (or were forced to tolerate) small-scale reclamations by members of the rural proletariat in remote parts of the commons. Squatter colonies were established. Around the same time, the commercial exploitation of peat marshes became economically attractive and thousands of poor peat workers moved to

these empty lands, where they formed a class of paupers. Opportunities for economic and social development were, and remained, limited (former peat colonies still rank among the least prosperous parts of the Netherlands).

Around A.D. 1800 common lands everywhere began to lose their traditional functions. As in earlier reclamations, groups at both extremes of the social scale exploited the new opportunities created by these developments. It is important to establish the specific motives behind a reclamation. Again, in some regions members of the regional elite were interested in, and invested in, making these reclamations.

In the remote mires along the German border, on the other hand, the situation was fundamentally different. What we see here is exploitation, not investment: commercial peat extraction organised by urban capitalists from the western provinces of Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland. Most peat workers, too, were non-local. Once the peat had disappeared they were left stranded on land with little agricultural potential. Most of them lacked both the skills and the funds to make farming profitable. Some stayed nonetheless, becoming poor smallholders. Others resorted to seasonal work on the prosperous farms in the fertile coastal areas. Further options, other than leaving and joining the urban proletariat, were virtually non-existent. Industrialisation in the Netherlands began late, and in areas far removed from the peat colonies (Mokyr 1976).

To better understand the social history of the peat-marsh reclamations mentioned above, the concept of 'internal colonialism' may be helpful (Hechter 1971), which is based on Frank's framework of core versus periphery (Frank 1969; criticised in Mokyr 1980). 'Internal colonialism' means that an internal colony 'supposedly produces wealth for the benefit of those areas most closely associated with the state, usually the capital area' (Abercrombie *et al.* 2000, p. 183). That seems an accurate description of the specific situation in the eastern peat-marsh areas.

Other situations, however, were very different. On the basis of a number of medieval English case studies, Carenza Lewis concluded that the

actions of landowners regarding the exploitation of outlands

were increasingly determined by market and economic imperatives ... What we can see in the differential development of similar zones of *Utmark* (outland) in the Middle Ages is one effect of a period when technological and environmental factors ceased to be the determining factors, and where replaced as the driving force by lordly self-interest and the power of the market (2005, p. 134).

This evaluation also seems to apply to the situation in the Netherlands, and it probably explains in part the striking social differences between reclamation areas. Other important factors were probably regional variation in the influence of the manorial system and in the pace of its decline.

But however important socio-economic factors and motives may have been, such regional differences, of whatever nature, were almost certainly linked in one way or another to landscape differences. When attempting to explain the social patterns that emerged in reclamation areas it is therefore important not to overlook elements as basic as (potential) soil fertility. The agricultural potential of the lowlands which were colonised during the medieval period and afterwards varied significantly. After drainage, some peat lands were suitable for several kinds of agricultural exploitation, the decisive factor being soil chemistry. Where shallow peat covered a clay substratum, highly productive agricultural land and conditions favourable for economic progress could be created by simply removing the peat cover. This was not the case in the inland mires, where the peat overlaid poor sandy soils. Sometimes reclamation required prior complex and carefully planned drainage measures (*e.g.* large drainage channels), and therefore by definition the involvement of wealthy investors. It is therefore likely that in some cases straightforward factors like soil fertility and technical complexity were decisive and explain at least in part the emergence of social contrasts in medieval and later reclamation areas in the Netherlands, and probably elsewhere as well.

NOTES

1. This short article is based on the second part of a paper presented to PECSRL 24, Riga & Liepāja, 23–27 August 2010, with the provisional title ‘The social dimension of landscape versatility’.
2. This classification, although too much based on physical geography, is widely used and shows many relevant characteristics of landscapes from the delta-region. Most of the old landscapes (classified as ‘pluriform’) were characterised by mixed farming, with the highest parts of most landscapes used for

permanent arable, the lower lying regions used as grasslands and, in many cases, with extensive stretches of common grazing and forests. These landscapes have a long history of settlement and agriculture. On the other hand, a number of landscapes have been reclaimed systematically and show a planned settlement and field pattern (‘uniform’). We would like to thank Dr Tom Markus (Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University) for preparing this figure.

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