

Landschapsonwikkeling in Brabant

Recensie: K.A.H.W. Leenders, *Van Turnhoutervoorde tot Strienemonde: ontginnings- en nederzettingsgeschiedenis van het noordwesten van het Maas-Schelde-Demergebied (400-1350), een poging tot synthese* Dissertatie Universiteit van Amsterdam (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1996).

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Despite a number of excellent studies of medieval Holland, Zeeland, Flanders, and Brabant, a small enclave sandwiched between these larger entities has been largely overlooked or ignored. In an attempt to fill in this gap in our knowledge, Leenders focuses on the region bounded by Antwerpen, Bergen op Zoom, Westmaas, Geertruidenberg, and Turnhout and carefully reconstructs its history from the late Roman period to the middle of the fourteenth century. The study examines the change from an area essentially devoid of a human presence in 400 AD to one densely populated and equipped with complex human structures by 1350. Included in this transformation were the processes of reclamation and settlement of wilderness accompanied by an intensification of the interactions between humans and their environments, the development of a whole series of social, economic, juridical, and spatial structures within the area, and the extension into this area of ties to a political and economic world outside.

In the first three chapters, Leenders sets the stage and outlines the task before him. He begins with an extensive description of the institutional structure of the study area for the middle of the fourteenth century, focussing in turn on *schepenbanken*, *parochies*, *dorpen*, *gemeynten*, *heerlijkheden*, and *steden*. Indeed, one of the major themes of the book is to explain the development of this structure during the Middle Ages. Next he outlines the physical geography of the area a millennium ago because an essential part of this study is to trace the changing interrelations between these and other physical features and the occupants of the study area. Among other things, Leenders distinguishes between a low-lying section comprising one third of the study area in the north and west with primarily clay and peat at two meters or less above sea level, and a higher-lying section of mostly sandy soils rising to as much as 30 meters above sea level. Originally, the higher-lying portion saw considerable peat as well, especially along its numerous small rivers and brooks.

In chapters four through eight, Leenders documents the transformation of the area through five chronological stages. For the first stage, 400-550, he depends primarily on archaeological evidence. Surveying all relevant finds from the Iron Age into the early Middle Ages, Leenders concludes that Roman Age settlement ended by 400 and that no evidence exists of further occupation in the area until the middle of the sixth century. During this period, woodland replaced former clearings, while peat continued to accumulate along the northern and western edges and in the many valleys elsewhere. A sparse layer of settlement resumed during the second stage, 550-1000, attested by Leenders' thorough investigation of place and water names, supplemented by archaeological evidence. For the most part, occupation took place in dry locations where good soil was available, primarily in the southeastern sandy-soil region, though a narrow strip of settlement also ap-

peared along the Schelde north of Antwerpen. The intensity of occupation picked up considerably during the third stage, 1000-1150, as population growth to the south and east began to spill over into this remote, peripheral region. Besides using archaeological and toponymic evidence, Leenders now focuses on the spread of *allodia*, wholly-owned property without feudal attachments, for the most part land that had been reclaimed from wilderness. The importance of allodial property began to diminish by 1150, either becoming excessively fragmented through partible inheritance or beginning to be assembled into new property complexes with feudal attachments. For the fourth stage, 1150-1245, Leenders examines the establishment of parishes up to 1350, revealing two particularly active phases: one around 1150 especially along the southern edge, part of the diocese of Kamerijk; a second around 1250 for the remainder of the study area, part of the diocese of Luik. Throughout this stage, the population of the study area continued to grow. At the same time, the area was divided between a northward-expanding duchy of Brabant and a southward-expanding county of Holland, with both of them reaching their maximum extent in the study area by 1200. The Land of Breda and the Land of Strijen developed as relatively independent entities within the border zone between the two principalities. The final stage, 1245-1350, saw a dramatic expansion of human activity in the study area. Partly because personal servitude had ended here by the beginning of this stage and partly because surrounding areas had seen an explosion of population, what had until then been a remote and peripheral area suddenly became the center of considerable attention by outsiders. Leenders maintains that an original preference for sandy soils ended in this period; now sand, peat, and clay alike were reclaimed and put to use. In the higher-lying center, south, and east, peat was dug away on a massive scale for the production of fuel or salt, initially by people who had arrived for these purposes from Flanders, while in the north, peat was reclaimed for agrarian purposes. This final stage also saw the first appearance of urban life in the study area.

In chapter nine, Leenders returns to the themes of wilderness, settlement, and the great reclamations. Initially, the area consisted of wilderness that individuals reclaimed and occupied on their own initiative, accounting for the large number of allodial properties. From the middle of the twelfth century, ducal and comital authority flowed in from the south and north, laying claim to all remaining wilderness which increasingly was given out to developers for payments of *tijns* or *census*. Chapter ten summarizes the study, supplemented by abbreviated versions in English and French.

Leenders' work has much in common with modern studies of neighboring districts for the same period because of his willingness to use evidence from physical geography, archaeology, and toponymic research, while his discussion of *allodia* offers insights that go beyond most comparable work. Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in his coverage of hydraulic matters scattered throughout the study. Among other things, he considers the impact of human intervention in the peat areas, leading to a significant drop of the water table in the sandy soil area and a much more devastating impact of flooding because of subsidence of the surface in the peat bogs in the north. Still, his earlier study, *Verdwenen venen* (1989), covers much of the same material more extensively. For the most part, Leenders has succeeded at what he set out to do. This work is comprehensive in scope and based throughout on solid and painstaking research. The *bijlagen* provide extensive documentation to many of the themes covered in the book, while the numerous maps and tables effectively enhance the generally well-written text. There is, however, a fair amount of repetition. For example, almost exactly-worded descriptions of the five main types of *allodia* appear on pages 212 and 272. Other things too are repeated from time to time. Repetition often is difficult though not necessarily impossible to avoid in studies as thematically structured as this one is. But this really is a minor criticism and does not seriously detract from an otherwise excellent study.

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