



0 Yeomen and farmers in the Wadden Sea coastal marshes, c. 1500–c. 1900

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I. A farmer's paradise?

Large-scale commercial farming took a relatively early start in the Wadden Sea coastal marshes (Knottnerus, 1996; 1997; 2001; Nitz, 1989; Bierwirth, 1967: 42–58; Wiese and Böltz, 1965; Auhagen, 1896). At the end of the Middle Ages property relations, scale of holdings and patterns of production were quite diverse. By the middle of the eighteenth century agrarian capitalism completely dominated the scene, leaving limited room for smallholders.¹ Relatively large farms from 30 to 60 hectares mainly produced grains and cash crops for urban markets. Large herds of store-cattle and substantial quantities of cheese and butter found their way to London, Amsterdam and Hamburg. The typical landholder could be depicted as a gentleman farmer, who combined farm-management with a bourgeois lifestyle, whereas farm hands and seasonal labourers did the actual work (Botke, 2002; Folkers, 1956: 26; Swart, 1910: 1–2, 224; Sering, 1908: 156, 439–440; 483–484). Foreign visitors were stunned by their observations. In their eyes the coastal marshes were a farmers' paradise. The British radical Thomas Hodgskin visited Northern Germany in 1820. He claimed that he had seen no other place on the Continent where the people were more happy and prosperous than in the Elbe-River marshes and in Ostfriesland: 'The proprietors [...] resemble very much in their hearty manners English farmers. In Hadeln, however, they are the principal people, while an English farmer is often of little importance' (Hodgskin, 1969: vol. 1, 256–258).

In the classical Marxian account aristocratic landowners instead of farmers play a prominent part in the creation of large holdings. The landowner "'clears" [...] the land from its excess mouths, tears the children of the earth from the breast on which they were raised' (Marx, 1973: 276). Many contemporaries have shared this judgement, however gloomy. Smallholders were reduced to wage earners, whereas landowners simply consolidated the vacant holdings, which were then let on lease to capitalist farmers. The alternative – the 'peasant road' to capitalism – was thought to be rather painful and protracted (Hussain and Tribe, 1984).

In the marshes and fenlands along the German and Dutch coastal fringe, however, developments seem to have taken a third direction. So did they in many other parts of Europe, where fertile farmlands bordered the urbanized core zones (Abel, 1955; Lucassen, 1987). Successful farmers, who usually descended from yeoman families and large leaseholders, gradually appropriated 70 to 90% of the cultivated land without any major

¹ Agrarian capitalism is defined here as an historical constellation in which social relations and economic structures in a specific region are dominated by large agrarian holdings mainly using hired labor and producing for external markets. Cf. Archer Brown, 1990; Albritton, 1993; Zmolek, 2000; as well as the subsequent discussion in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*.



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social upheaval (*table 1*).² Until the 1820s the redundant peasant population could easily be absorbed by the growing demand for hired labour and trade products. By then, a typical rural working-class came into being, impoverished but obstinate and persistently clinging to traditional beliefs and semi-urban patterns of consumption. The wealthy farmers had a long history of political participation and cultural persistence. They were deeply aware of their own identity, which sharply distinguished between their own fortune and the perceived misery of the upland peasants. Even the local farm hands held the latter in contempt. As the sociologist Rudolf Heberle rightly observed, the farmers' modern attitude was

'entangled with "pre-capitalist" passions: a quick temper and a certain combativeness [...], strangely associated with urban manners and an aristocratic lifestyle, but also with a desire for conspicuous consumption and an inclination towards pomposity, which were, however, counterbalanced by a generosity with money and a preference for commercial speculation, stock-jobbing and risky farm operations' (Heberle, 1963: 52–53).³

The possibility of an inherent peasant path to capitalism was already acknowledged by Lenin, who considered the American 'farmers road' as an important alternative to agricultural modernization from above, the latter being represented by the British and the Prussian example in which aristocratic landowners took a leading role. Others, among whom the Russian agronomist A. V. Chayanov, were more sceptical about the willingness of peasants to give up subsistence-farming. Historians, on their part, went in search of the roots of agrarian capitalism in medieval and Early Modern Europe. Recent discussions following the line of the Brenner debate have thrown some doubt on the potential development of agrarian capitalism from below (Ashton and Philpin, 1985; Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden; 2001; Thoen, 2002). Even in the most highly developed parts of Western Europe the absence of powerful landlords is supposed to have resulted in the prevalence of 'commercial peasants' stuck in small-scale commodity production. Whenever this was the case, only the massive input of urban capital was able to separate the peasants from their traditional property rights. In a recent contribution Bas van Bavel stated that the collaboration between landlords and successful tenant farmers was decisive for the development of agrarian capitalism in the Low Countries (Van Bavel, 2001a; 2001b). Judging from his material from the central river clay districts, he concluded that large-scale commercial farming was increasingly successful since the decline of feudalism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Neighbouring fenland districts dominated by peasant landownership, on the other hand, were struck by morcellement and agricultural stagnation. The rise of agrarian capitalism in the adjoining coastal districts, where most farms were in the hands of bourgeois investors and local gentlemen, seems to support his conclusions (Priester, 1998; Van Cruyningen, 2001; Thoen, this volume). Our material from the Wadden Sea Region gives proof to the existence of an alternative path, starting later, but having the same outcome. Apparently, the triumph of agrarian capitalism took place irrespective of landholding arrangements. At its latest since the sixteenth century successful farmers using hired labour were able to enlarge their holdings at the expense

² The term 'yeomen' is used here for the category of middle-range freeholders that exercised political and ecclesiastical franchise.

³ The original passage was skipped from the American 1945 translation. Cf. Heberle, 1970. For a contemporary account: Allmers, 1979: 126, 152–153.



of medium-sized family farms. By the eighteenth century landholding differentiation had given way to genuine polarization, leaving only a relatively limited share of the village territories to smallholders and family farms.

Following a general introduction on the area we will concentrate on varying patterns of land distribution and diverging landholding arrangements during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Subsequently, the inherent tendency towards engrossment of agricultural holdings after about 1650 will be examined. Finally, we present a number of general mechanisms as well as local contingencies, which might explain the successful rise of a classical 'kulak' class in our area.

II. A non-feudalized region

During the Late Middle Ages the coastal marshes were one of the largest non-feudalized regions in Europe. Reaching from the Zuyderzee to Southern Jutland, the amphibious coastal fringe harboured about 50 largely autonomous districts, ranging from independent peasant communities to pristine republics under the rule of local abbots, village chiefs and podesta's. Since the twelfth century laws and privileges of the ancient marshland districts had been extended to the newly reclaimed fenlands. Immigrants from Holland settled down behind the Weser and Elbe-River banks. Immigrants from Ostfriesland occupied the coastal marshes to the North. Personal freedom prevailed; vassalage and serfdom only played a minor role (Bloch, 1961: vol. 1, 248–267, vol. 2, 445; Aubin 1965: 115 ff., 349–401; Slicher van Bath 1978: 259–280; Van Lengen, 2003).

The local population had learned to cope with the amphibious environment since the early Iron Age or even earlier. Initially, farm-dwellings and infields were located on natural holms and riverbanks or on artificial dwelling mounds (*terpen*, *wierden* or *wurten*). During the eleventh or twelfth centuries people began to build embankments around their village territories. At the same time, settlement was extended to the adjoining bogs and peat-moors, which were systematically reclaimed and brought under cultivation. In the course of the years, the dikes were heightened and enlarged. By the sixteenth century most of them had reached a height of two to three meters, offering a certain degree of protection that enabled individual farmers to settle down in the village outfield. The coastal area was relatively densely populated, its inhabitants were proud and wealthy, their manners of life constituted a rural counterpart to Hanseatic civic culture. The former salt marshes and reclaimed peat-moors (fenlands) were fertile, as compared with the upland bogs and moors. The numerous harbours were easily accessible to small-scale commercial shipping. Countless ditches, bottomless roads and inland bogs, on the other hand, impeded road-traffic. Fuel and timber were scarce and had to be imported. Powerful communal arrangements were indispensable. Dike repairs and military defence required a compulsory organization, particularly on the parish level. Nevertheless, the agricultural system was largely individualized. The open-field organization had been restricted to infields near the villages and remote meadows at an early age. By the sixteenth century most of the remaining commons had been enclosed or let on an annual base. State officials, local communities and foreign investors went great efforts to embank saltings and river forelands, which were subsequently parcelled out.



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Originally, pastoral farming prevailed, but on former beach ridges and riverbanks, in recent embankments and on the newly reclaimed fenlands arable could increase up to 40 to 50% of the total cultivated area. This mainly took place in the districts East of the Weser River, where grain exports started as early as the thirteenth century and began to boom after 1450 (Poulsen, 1988). Timber-framed farm-buildings were introduced here in order to store the growing harvest in the loft. In the West the original long houses remained in use until the seventeenth century, supplemented with barns and haystacks. Large three-aisled farms, modelled after the medieval granges in the Southern Netherlands replaced the latter (Glüntzer, 2002). As a rule, arable farming expanded since the sixteenth century, largely due to dike-building programs and extensive drainage schemes. The main crops were barley, oats, fava beans and oilseed rape. A number of waterlogged districts, on the other hand, specialized on dairy farming. Sometimes farmers even refrained from corn growing, as they preferred imported rye from the Baltic above locally grown cereals. Everywhere graziery and horse breeding were an additional source of income. From the fifteenth to the early eighteenth century, large herds of oxen were driven southward from Jutland. Cattle from the upland districts supplemented these imports. After having been fattened on the fertile marshland meadows, the cattle were sold to urban markets. The large Frisian, Hannoverian and Holstein horses had a military reputation all over Europe (Wiese and Bölts, 1965: 1–129; Gijbers, 1999).

In the Middle Ages, the local gentry and leading clergymen usually made political decisions. In the ancient Frisian districts between Zuyderzee and Weser the leading role of the gentry as military entrepreneurs and major landowners was uncontested. Tenants were often obliged to take part in military expeditions during prolonged civil wars or to render labour services and deliveries in kind. Additionally, there were about 120 monasteries in the area. Ecclesiastical foundations owned at least 20–30% of the land under cultivation. Leasehold was largely commercialised; tenants were legally free and subjected to customary law and judgement by a jury of peers. Political leaders could only assert their claims by mobilizing their supporters. Moreover, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the rise of a self-confident stratum of wealthy yeomen, who made themselves heard in public affairs (Slicher van Bath, 1958; Bergsma, 1988). In most of the eastern districts, on the other hand, the gentry were relatively weak. Instead, wealthy yeomen and traditional clan-leaders came to the fore. This was particularly the case in Dithmarschen, Hadeln, Wursten and other districts near the Elbe River, where Hanseatic influence was profound (Stoob, 1959). Local community leaders identifying with urban patricians shared the bourgeois' life-style and their anti-aristocratic attitudes. Other districts, such as Kehdingen, were characterized by a mixed system, in which the local gentry shared its power with successful yeomen-farmers. Only at the edges of the coastal area, in the Oste-River marshes, the Haseldorfer and Kollmarer Marsch (Northwest of Hamburg), second feudalism raised its head. But even there, tenant farmers fiercely resisted the attempts by their landlords to (re)impose labour services and to restrict their traditional privileges (Lorenzen-Schmidt, 1995).

The political autonomy of the ruling elite was curbed during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as the coastal districts were incorporated into territorial states. The provinces of Fryslân and Groningen were conquered by the Habsburgers and became



part of the newly founded Dutch Republic after 1579.⁴ Denmark dominated the eastern realm; in 1559 a military coalition conquered Dithmarschen – the last of the peasant republics. Native rulers such as the Counts of Oldenburg and Ostfriesland, the Duke of Saxony-Lauenburg and the Archbishop of Bremen were able to retain the territories in between. By the eighteenth century, however, they had been replaced by major powers, such as Prussia, Denmark, Sweden and Hannover (Britain), who ruled their outer provinces from a distance. Yet, the distinctive features of marshland society remained largely untouched. The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were the golden age of district assemblies (*Landschaften*) and regional estates (*Landtage*). Sometimes yeomen were formally enfranchised in order to win their loyalty and to legitimise the regime. Usually they participated in representative institutions responsible for drainage arrangements, coastal defence, parish-government, tax collection and the administration of justice. Everywhere ‘communalism’ was the rule (Blickle, 2000). Only where either the prince or the landowning gentry managed to gain unrestricted power, the yeomen’s influence was greatly reduced. The former was the case in the County of Oldenburg and parts of Ostfriesland (Esens and Wittmund), the latter in the province of Fryslân and to a lesser degree in Groningen and parts of the Elbe-River marshes.

As far as we know, family farms were the rule until the beginning of the Early Modern Age. In the fenlands and in predominantly pastoral districts holdings could be quite substantial, ranging from 10 to 30 hectares. The initial peat-moor reclamation units might even have been larger, but were split up at an early date. Recent research suggests, however, that twelfth-century Dutch immigrants considered 21 hectares as the norm (Fliedner, 1970: 25, 38–39; Wassermann, 1985; Nitz and Riemer, 1987, 21 ff.; Hofmeister, 1991: 25; Van der Linde, 2000). Wherever substantial arable farming was to be found, typical holdings tended to be smaller, ranging from 5 to 20 hectares. In the province of Fryslân in 1479 a yeoman-farmer had to own at least 11 hectares or 20 heads of cattle if he was to be enfranchised. Members of the gentry, on the other hand, were obliged to have at least 37 hectares. In Groningen the ownership of five to eight hectares or six cows seems to have been sufficient to become a judge. As the number of successful farmers increased during the sixteenth century, the minimum requirements to be enfranchised were fixed at 12–18 hectares (depending on the local measure) (Postma, 1934: 179–181; Westendorp, 1974: vol. 2, 521, 531; Formsma, 1988: 115–116).

Apparently, actual landownership was very fragmented due to egalitarian succession rules. Female descendants were allotted with at least half the portion that male relatives got. In order to counteract the inherent tendency towards morcellement endogamous marriage strategies and intricate financial arrangements were an absolute requirement. As a consequence, successful yeomen as well as gentry families maintained an intricate web of cognative kinship relations (Noomen, 1994: 76–77; Auhagen, 1896: 718–721; Sering, 1908: 431–515; Swart, 1910: 291–307; Sievers, 1976: 33–34, 56–56; Norden, 1984: 239–246; Lorenzen-Schmidt, 1987: 177–181). Up to the end of the Middle Ages the majority of the coastal population might be described as peasants, who lived off the land and marketed their surplus production. Even on the unembanked saltings, in the

⁴ The former Dutch province of Friesland has been officially renamed to Fryslân in 1997.



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amphibious fenland districts and right up to the edges of the peat-moors modest quantities of cereals for home consumption were grown. Notwithstanding the fact that the number of large holdings of over 20 hectares was limited, they covered half to three quarters of most village territories. Agricultural exports were quite substantial (Jürgens, 1914; Kaufhold, 1998: 473, 479–515, 550–552; Van Tielhof, 1995: 76–85, 198–203). For the time being, increasing commercialization and lingering self-sufficiency went hand in hand. This began to change, however, as soon as population started to grow again during the sixteenth century.

III. The distribution of farming-land

In the following section we shall concentrate on the actual distribution of farming-land among various categories of holdings, instead of the distribution of size categories among the total number of holdings.⁵ This has an advantage over the usual method, which underestimates the impact of successful commercial farming. As we shall see, minor changes in the distribution of landholdings had major social implications. From the sixteenth century onwards, the growing size of the large farms greatly reduced the acreage available to others, thereby forcing smallholders onto the market, either as labourers, or as petty commodity producers. While the variation between individual holdings merely increased, the actual polarization of agricultural production was well on its way.

Most studies on early-modern marshland farming agree that holdings measuring 20 hectares or more might be considered as large farms.⁶ On holdings this size the labour-

⁵ The figures in this section have been derived from the various sources: *Fryslân*: Faber, 1972: 209, 414–415, 424, 427, 440–441, 475, 485–487, 490; De Boer, 1907: 102–104; Postma, 1934: 44, 67–68; Spahr van der Hoek, 1952: vol. 1, 104; H. Spanninga, personal communication. *Groningen*: Ligterink, 1968: 427–434; Hoppenbrouwers, 1987; 1991; Feenstra, 1981: 133–134, 146–153; 1994: 164; Formsa, 1982: 54; Arkema et al., 1992: 127–128, 130. *Ostfriesland*: Ecke, 1968; 1980; Ohling and König, 1954; Mammen, 1963; Engelbrecht, 1982: 91; Heyken and Heyken, 1985; Völger, 1852: 8–9. *Oldenburg (including Jever and Butjadingen)*: Swart, 1910: 368–371; Onken, 1919–1920: 303–304, 309; Schaub, 1963: 52; Petri, 1994: 156, 195–201; Norden, 1984: 248–298; Krämer, 1985: 87–96. *Duchy of Bremen (including Osterstade, Hadeln, Kehdingen and Altes Land)*: Thiel, 1901, 70; Pieken, 1991: 448–449; Lenz, 1964; Mangels, 1957: 20, 62; Klenck, 1986: 257–261; Poppe, 1924: 122; Hauschildt, 1988: vol. 1, 111; Bohmbach, 1976; 1981. *Dithmarschen*: Stoob, 1959: 188; Sering, 1908: 141; Gietzelt, 2000: 144; Hansen, 1897: 225–227, 243–249. *Nordfriesland (including Eiderstedt, Nordstrand and Pellworm)*: Prange, 1988: 59; Kuschert, 1981: 136; Falkenstjerne and Hude, 1895–1899; Petersen, 1906–1907: 9; Zimmermann, 1977: 15–31; Hansen, 1974: 220; Von Chamisso, 1986: 119, 191, 215–232; Volquardsen, 1965a; 1965b: 45–53; Kuenz, 1978: 326–329; Panten and Melfsen, 1982: 170.

⁶ Early-modern population figures were approximately 30 to 50 per square kilometer of the area involved, including artisans and tradesmen. Seasonal migrants and foreign servants accounted for an additional labour supply, which may have added another 5 to 10 persons on a yearly base. The amounts of wasteland were limited. Presuming that the labour supply was evenly distributed among landholdings and that one out of every two inhabitants (including children and elderly people) actually did some farm-work, we may assume that each 20 hectares farm employed 4 to 7 able-bodied persons at least. Thus we may conclude the farmers family was able to meet up to half of the labour requirements of a 20 hectares farm.



input by servants and labourers normally exceeded family efforts. Likewise, we shall treat holdings cultivating more than 40 hectares as very large farms or large landed properties. Holdings measuring 10 to 20 hectares might be treated as middle-sized family-farms, holdings less than 10 hectares as smallholdings. It might be assumed that the majority of smallholders with less than 5 hectares were dependent on additional wage-work or market gardening: they are defined as crofters. As a rule, at the beginning of the Modern Age middle-sized and large farms dominated coastal society, though their respective share in the village territories varied sharply. Additionally, most coastal villages had a restricted number of large landed properties, occupying 10 to 30% of cultivated area, as well as dozens of cottages whose occupants were dependent on additional wage-work or trade. These crofters, artisans and tradesmen were usually known as small people or cotters (*scamel ruters, keuters, Kätner, Warfsleute*). Regulations for contract work are known at least since the fourteenth century. By the end of the sixteenth century these miscellaneous bands of reapers, ditchers and threshers had become part of a growing class of agricultural labourers, most of their time working for the wealthy farmers, who increased their acreages plot by plot.

As we indicated before, regional differences were quite pronounced. In several districts large farms of over 20 hectares predominated from the very outset. On the fenland island of Nordstrand (Schleswig-Holstein) they covered 72% of the cultivated area in 1436. Holdings of over 40 hectares accounted for a quarter of the acreage, whereas smallholders were totally lacking. Consequently, many seasonal workers from the mainland were needed to complete the harvest. Cotters accounted for a mere 37% of the population as late as 1581. On the nearby peninsula of Eiderstedt large holdings were predominating as well, but here the number of crofters and landless villagers was more substantial. Farms of over 20 hectares covered about two-third of the area in 1575, 35–40% was used by farms of over 40 hectares. In the village of Hohenkirchen (Seignory of Jever) in 1547 69% was in the hands of large farms, but large landed properties as well as smallholdings were lacking. In the whole district of Jever (including Knyphausen) in 1587 large farms accounted for 65% of the area under cultivation. Other districts were characterized by smallholding. In the Land Hadeln, where arable farming prevailed, in 1566 only 40–50% was covered by large farms, whereas crofters with less than 5 hectares accounted for half the population at least. In Dithmarschen holdings were even smaller, probably due to an unusual agnatic clan system that was in force until the tiny republic was defeated in 1559. According to local succession rules, legacies had to be split up infinitively between male descendants. Female descendants, on the other hand, only got a dowry, which prevented the spouses from different families to join their portions into a new household, as was the case in most other coastal districts. Holdings of over 20 hectares accounted for a mere 30–40% of the area, typical farms measured only five to ten hectares, half of the holdings were smaller than five hectares. In the district Osterstade, where similar succession rules applied, large farms played only a minor role (see below).⁷ Around the Dollard Bay smallholdings prevailed as late as 1660, due to the effects of subsequent storm surges that had destroyed the former fenland landscape. In Ostfriesland

⁷ Theoretically, the figures from Dithmarschen, Land Hadeln and Osterstade may only reflect the fragmentation of ownership units. It is unlikely, however, that the majority of petty landowners did not live off the land they owned. Cf. Hausigk, 1995: 59; Pieken, 1995: 54–55.



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holdings of over 20 hectares covered 50% of the marshland in the western district of Greetsiel, but 67% and 84% in the northern districts of Berum and Esens. As indicated before, large farms tended to be more numerous in areas with mainly pastoral farming than in the districts where mixed farming prevailed. The large farms in the mainly pastoral districts in Fryslân covered 50–70% of the cultivated area in 1511, but in the mixed farming districts near Harlingen only 25–40%. In the province of Groningen large farms accounted 75–80% of the Middag district in 1540, but only 50–55% in the nearby Humsterland district. Adjoining districts showed the same contrast.

Initially, crofters were only a minority of the population. But as population figures rose during sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, their numbers rapidly increased. In the eighteenth century they were supplemented by an additional group of landless labourers, artisans and tradesmen (known as *inwoners*, *Häus-* or *Häuerlinge*, *Mietsleute*, *Einwohner* or *Insten*) (Lorenzen-Schmidt, 1986a; Hinrichs et al., 1988: 51–53, 55–58, 62–64; Wolf, 1989: 20–38). About 1550 30–50% of the rural population had less than five hectares. This proportion increased to 50–70% around 1600, 60–80% in the second half of the seventeenth, 70–90% in the eighteenth, and 80–90% in the nineteenth century. A few examples might suffice: in the district of Greetsiel (Krummhörn) the number of crofters and local crafts- and tradesmen climbed from 38% around 1550 to 61% in 1606–07 and – after a severe crisis during the Thirty Years War – 73% in 1663, in Osterstade (near Bremen) from 34% in 1535 to 59% in 1595 and 89% in 1677, in Alte Land from 42% in 1524 to 73% in 1588, in Eiderstedt from 40–45% in 1538 to 70% in 1597. Though population growth stagnated after the middle of the seventeenth century, the number of small people tended to increase further. The growing number of crofters, artisans and tradesmen, however, did not change the overall distribution of the land within the village territories, as their holdings accounted for less than 10% of the cultivated area. Moreover, they cannot be regarded as farm-labourers in any modern sense. Most crofters held one or two cows and some sheep, which they could graze on dikes and roads or on the farmlands after the harvest. As far as we know, most of them had a personal relationship with their more successful neighbours, who counted on their work force, provided them with grazing lands, strips of meadow, draught-animals and a baking oven and sometimes even lent them a few heads of cattle. They were also dependent on their wealthier neighbours for credit and legal protection (Knottnerus, 1992; Knottnerus, forthcoming; Stoob, 1959: 372, 376). Migrant workers from upland districts supplemented the local work force.

Particularly the large landed properties measuring 40 to 100 hectares or more had to rely on hired labour. These properties mainly consisted of former monastic granges, demesnes, ecclesiastical properties and noblemen's estates, which were let on long-term lease (the so-called *Meierrecht*) or managed by the owners and their representatives. In the latter case, the landowners often favoured immigrants from Holland as managers, sharecroppers and tenants (cf. Heyken and Heyken, 1985). Working arrangements on such estates may have served as an example for other large farms. Successful tenants were often intermarrying with wealthy yeomen. The average size of the large landed properties was varying: in the eastern districts of Ostfriesland (Esens, Wittmund, Jever) they measured merely 40 hectares, but in the commercialized district of Greetsiel the average size was growing from 60 hectares in 1583 to 70–75 hectares in 1625. Individual



estates were ranging from 40 to 120 hectares. Comparable figures have been observed in Fryslân and Groningen. In Fryslân a mere 30–40 hectares were considered to be sufficient for a landed estate, in Groningen many members of the gentry held about 50 hectares; often the state-owned demesnes were even bigger. The petty noblemen in Osterstade (Duchy of Bremen) hardly distinguished themselves from common yeomen. They had to lend a hand on their farms, which contributed to their nickname ‘bean-squires’ (Auhagen, 1896: 716; Thiel, 1913: 35–41). The noblemen at the Elbe River, on the other hand, were far better off. Nineteen estates in the district of Neuhaus measured about 100 hectares on average. In Kehdingen estates were much smaller, yet one hundred noblemen owned a third of the cultivated area in 1603. In Land Hadeln five demesne farms measured 68 hectares on an average. In Nordfriesland and Dithmarschen the gentry had a marginal existence, but state-owned demesnes and private estates were quite extensive: several demesnes cultivated 200 to 300 hectares; gentlemen’s farms measuring 100–150 hectares were not exceptional (Leister, 1952: 67, 76–78). The largest properties could be found in the County of Oldenburg, where thirteen demesne farms were 170 hectares on average, the largest one measuring almost 500 hectares. As late as 1820 the 258 hectares that by then had been left were considered as ‘probably the largest holding in the entire coastal fringe from the Eider to the Schelt Rivers’ (Arends, 1974: vol. 2, 65, 223). In the long run, however, demesne farms and large landed properties were not very successful, probably due to mounting labour and supervision costs. As we shall see, most of them were dissolved after 1650, let on lease or sold to genuine farmers.

IV. Landholding arrangements⁸

In the Frisian districts to the West leasehold or *lanthure* may already have been known since the tenth century or even earlier. During the High Middle Ages a class of tenants came into existence who were legally free but dependent on their landlords as far as protection and public representation were concerned (Swart, 1910: 247–72; Hauptmeyer, 1997: 1098; Algra, 2000: 275, 285–286). The remaining labour duties and payments in kind, which were rather insignificant, were usually converted into cash payments during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Moreover, the western districts were characterized by an abundance of short-term leases, typical of commercialised and pastoral areas. Many detached lands were let on lease by family-members and neighbours, probably in an effort to undo the effects of egalitarian succession rules. Holdings were often split up, rearranged and encumbered with all kinds of rents and mortgages in order to buy off the siblings’ claims (Spahr van der Hoek, 1952: vol. 1, 130–131; Stöver, 1942: 86–88, 91).

⁸ In the following section I have tried to standardize the wide variety of contemporary terms describing long-term tenure and leasehold arrangements in the northern coastal areas of the late medieval and early modern periods. I used ‘hereditary tenure’ to indicate all variants of the Northwest-German so-called *Meierrecht*, ‘hereditary leasehold’ to indicate all (other) sorts of hereditary lease, and ‘long-term leasehold’ to refer to all other solid – i.e. non short-term – types of leasehold.



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In the eastern coastal districts, on the other hand, lease holding was the exception. Apparently, suitable legal arrangements were lacking here. Though commercial leasehold became widespread during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it happened to be a short-lived phenomena. Peasants feared the imposition of feudal dues, urban investors had to deal with local communities inclined to protect their members against foreign creditors. Moreover, the territorial princes who took control of the coastal marshes during the sixteenth century were eager to support peasant property rights in order to secure regular tax payments. As a rule, only church lands, noblemen's possessions and state demesnes were let on long-term lease. Lands that had once been granted as hereditary fiefs or burdened with a rent-charge were often treated as alodial property by the grantees. This contrasted sharply with the situation in the more or less feudalized hinterlands, where the majority of the peasants were hereditary tenants who were legally – and sometimes also personally – dependent on the aristocratic landlords. Here, short-term leasehold emerged as well, but the lessees were usually townsmen and other wealthy investors, who could not infringe upon their subtenants' hereditary rights. By the sixteenth century the prevailing hereditary arrangements (the so-called *Meierrecht*) were largely uncontested (von Boetticher, 1986: 220–227; Hauptmeyer, 1997: 1123–1130; Saalfeld, 1998: 641–647). Alternatively, potential investors could turn to taking landed property in pledge, which often required, however, that the pledgee took the farm management into his own hands (Planitz, 1935: 35–37, 104–128, 185–189). Also the imposition of annual rent payments on landed property (the so-called *Rentenbriefe*) became more common since the fourteenth century. The rent market spread from the cities towards the surrounding countryside and began to boom as soon as state power and legal security grew. Yet, even close to the city of Hamburg landowners used to build a cottage on their properties in order to uphold their rights. This lasted until 1620, when official registers of debts and pledges were introduced. On the island of Nordstrand the official registers go back to 1559, in Eiderstedt to 1591. We may conclude, therefore, that successful investment in agriculture was dependent on the development of suitable legal arrangements and corresponding institutions (Poulsen, 1988: 93–98, 115–121, 150–151; 1990; this volume; Hofmeister, 1979–1981: vol. 2, 163; Lorenzen-Schmidt, 1986b; Finder, 1922: vol. 1, 130; Klasen 71–75, 85–90; Bauche, 1978: 161; Stein, 1985: 98; Sering, 1908: 162, 166–168, 275–277).

Generally, the distinctions between tenants and freeholders were often vague. Contrary to freeholders, tenants were normally excluded from political and ecclesiastical franchise. As far as they were legally free, however, they were able to negotiate favourable conditions quite comparable to yeoman farmers. In most cases the tenants owned farm-buildings, cattle and equipment. Whenever the landlord terminated the lease, he was obliged to take over the buildings at market value. And as these became more costly during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, due to the introduction of brick walls, extensive panel-work as well as enlarged barns and byres, landowners found it even more difficult to expel their tenants. Moreover, sixteenth-century inflation tended to reduce the real value of rent payments and leases, encouraging tenant-farmers to hold on to their farms. The landlords on their part tried to negotiate for shorter terms, considerable rent increases and substantial recognition fees. In the long run, however, their efforts were largely in vain. Territorial princes tried to prevent excessive rent increases for the same reason as they supported peasant property rights. As a result, most leases were silently continued



Yeomen and farmers in the Wadden Sea coastal marshes, c. 1500–c. 1900

and transferred at will, even if the renewal of the tenancy agreement involved some negotiation. Wherever peasant ownership prevailed, the actual land market was largely restricted to detached plots. Yeoman families usually clung to their hereditary farmsteads. Moreover, traditional pre-emptive rights gave neighbours and kin a lead against foreign investors. The constitution of the island of Nordstrand from 1572, for example, explicitly stated that a property could only be alienated after the rightful claimants had refused to take control:

He, who wants to buy, must loudly cry.
He, who wants to sell, must loudly ring the bell.
If the ringing is loud, then (one may) bid and outbid.
Land-exchange is irreversible; buying can be made undone
(Hansen, 1974: 154, 217–219).

This began to change, however, as soon as urban capital penetrated rural society. State officials, wealthy townsmen and successful yeoman families bought dozens of properties and leased them out to their former owners. Territorial overlords, or, in the case of the Netherlands, cities and provincial governments confiscated ecclesiastical properties and unembanked foreshores. They also appropriated peasant holdings whenever the owners could not uphold their dike-reaches and tax-payments. As public funds were running out, these landed properties were often resold to private investors. In the province of Fryslân extensive demesnes were brought under the hammer since the 1630s. Most of the buyers were noblemen and state officials with their families. In the province of Groningen private investors had to wait until the 1760s. The city of Groningen sold the mass of its extensive demesne lands in the countryside as late as 1810. By then wealthy farmers were the main buyers (Kalma et al., 1968: 170–171; Schroor 1996: 16; 1997: 20). The Count of Ostfriesland also kept many demesnes to himself, but the most successful owner of state demesnes was the Count of Oldenburg (see below, section V.4.).

At least eight different landholding and credit arrangements can be distinguished, which largely define the range of property relations – to be treated in more detail below – in our area:

a. Most frequent in the Wadden Sea Region were long-term leases to tenants known as *landsaten*, *meier(s)*, *Heuerleute*, *lansten*, *fæster* or otherwise. Leasehold probably developed from older and fuzzier arrangements of indeterminate duration. According to these long-term arrangements homestead and infields were considered as a whole – be it real or fictional – from which no part could be split off. Farm-buildings were owned by the tenants, which made it difficult to have the latter expelled. Often landowners were not even allowed to terminate a lease. In case of serious crop failure they were obliged remit part of the rent. Similar arrangements applied all over the feudalized hinterland, albeit with many restrictions on farm management and succession. The marshland farmers, on their part, were able to negotiate quite favourable conditions at an early age. Particularly in Groningen and Ostfriesland several models of hereditary leasehold became the rule during the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (*vaste huur*, *beklemming*, *Beherdichheit*, *Heuer* or *Erbheuer*). Initially, the tenancy agreements



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had to be renewed every six or twelve years, but as these agreements tended to become hereditary recognition fees were often limited to those occasions when the next generation took over. Moreover, rents tended to become fixed, as inflation came to a standstill after the 1620s. This was also the case on state demesnes and ecclesiastical properties farther to the East. Given the favourable conditions, freeholders short of money were often prepared to sell their proprietary rights in exchange for a long-term lease (Formsma, 1981; Priester, 1991: 106–113; Swart, 1910: 247–291; Onken, 1919–20: 325–328; Saalfeld, 1998: 641–647; Sering, 1908: 305–338; Van der Woude, 1982: 203–205; Fiedler, 1987: 197; Sievers, 1976: 33–34, 49–54; Hofmeister, 1979–1981: vol. 2, 100; Auhagen, 1896: 864; Goens, 1929: 48–49).

b. Short-term leases (also *Heuer* or *Landmiete*) for detached plots and individual homesteads, ranging from one to seven years (depending on the rotation schemes) largely played a subsidiary role. Temporary arrangements such as these were probably known since the High Middle Ages; they became frequent in the western districts since the sixteenth century, partially under the influence of Roman Law and especially in those cases where morcellement had taken place. Thus the negative effects of egalitarian succession rules could be made undone (Swart, 1910: 247–249, 262–265). To the East short-term leases probably became more frequent too, but most land registers do not account for them. Apparently, they were very popular among cattle-traders and upland farmers who were keen to get hold of marshland meadows for the sake of grazieri (Auhagen, 1897: 819; Sering, 1908: 447).

c. Short-term leases for complete farms, including house, byre and barns also played a subsidiary role. Only in the province of Fryslân they became the rule since the seventeenth century. These commercial arrangements, usually for a period of 5 to 12 years, seem to have been a sixteenth-century innovation, inspired by Roman Law with its unambiguous property rights. It may have developed earlier, however, from pledging. Short-term leases proved an important alternative to landlords who were not able to find tenants prepared to take over the farm on the conditions preferred by the owner. Yet, agreements like these must have required painstaking interference by the owners and their superintendents, who had to maintain the farmhouse with its dikes and ditches and had to prevent that the fields became exhausted by the tenants. This may explain, why these arrangements were popular around countryseats on which the urban elite spent the summer. They were also popular on state demesnes in Ostfriesland, Oldenburg and Schleswig-Holstein. In the course of the nineteenth century short-term leases became the rule, under the influence of the introduction of modern civil law.

d. The leasing out of complete farms with their inventories, including cattle and equipment, to so-called *Holländer* or *Käsemeier* ('cheese-tenants') was not very common. Yet, it offered an interesting opportunity for landlords who wanted to improve their farms by means of introducing the latest agricultural innovations. The agreement normally applied for one year and involved some form of sharecropping. During the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century letting out became a convenient solution for noblemen's estates and state demesnes, particularly in Ostfriesland and further East, where dozens of skilled 'Hollanders' were available. These wealthy immigrants were known for their superior cultural heritage. They took part in an interregional network of former countrymen, which gave them an advantage above local tenants. However, a pledgee could also lease out a farm to its original owners, benefiting from their hope to get it back after a few good harvests. Once they failed, the new owner could always let



the farm on short-term lease. Apparently, however, the actual involvement with the farm management was quite demanding. Arrangements such as these became outmoded as soon as the urban investors adapted to a more refined way of life. Nevertheless, comparable arrangements survived in the Baltic, where immigrants from the Wadden Sea marshes settled on large landed properties (Leister, 1952: 82–84; Iversen, 1992; Knottnerus, 1994: 33–44).

e. Investments in specific feudal dues instead of acquiring a whole farm originally must have formed an obstacle to agricultural growth, because the actual landholders did not receive anything in return for their annual payments. During the Late Middle Ages these arrangements offered a popular investment opportunity for wealthy townsmen, noblemen and ecclesiastical foundations. Feudal relics such as tithes, fiefs, labour duties and land-tax exemptions mainly survived on the fringes of the coastal area, particularly in the Elbe- and Weser-River Marshes and parts of Nordfriesland (Schwabstedt). In most cases, however, the remaining tithes and labour duties were rearranged or bought off during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often being transferred into normal leases or annuities. Sometimes neighbours simply purchased the claims resting on their lands, in order to terminate them for once and for all. Sometimes a farmer acquired a hereditary fief, which gradually lapsed into long-term lease or actual ownership (Von Lehe, 1947). Others tried to benefit from the land-tax exemptions resting on former manors. The Seignory of Jever, for instance, witnessed a vivid trade in tax exemptions that had been originally granted to community officials: in 1684 a third of the marshland area was exempted. As such, the trade in ancient privileges encouraged the rise of a class of successful gentleman farmers (Onken 1919–1920: 344; cf. Allmers, 1896: 92, 104).

f. The imposition of annual payments (*renten*) on the land by way of a mortgage offered an important alternative to lease holding, because it provided successful farmers with the financial means to enlarge their holdings. Originally, it was a convenient solution resulting from the medieval ban on taking interest on debts and mortgages. Yet, as we saw before, annuities became more common in the eastern districts than in the West, where commercial lease holding had made an early start. Though the provinces of Fryslân and Groningen witnessed a vivid trade in annuities from the second half of the fifteenth century, this boom came to a sudden end after the change to Protestantism in the 1580s and 1590s. Modern credit arrangements took over the role that annuities had played before (Feenstra, 1994: 149–151). In the eastern districts, on the other hand, the transition took much more time, despite the fact that the Lutheran Reformation gained foothold at an early age.

g. Successful farmers profited from various other forms of credit, such as advances on the coming harvest, share-cropping, secured loans, debentures, undivided legacies, postponed dowries, annual rent payments and written engagements of various kind. In case of misfortune, such credit arrangements could all be transformed into leases, which did happen occasionally. Apparently, in the western districts these modern solutions were adopted earlier than in the eastern realm. In sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century Germany complaints about usury were still frequent. Wealthy merchants often took the harvest in pledge even before it was gathered (Beninga, 1961–1964: 700; Jürgens, 1914: 14; Hansen, 1974: 134, 234). Later, creditors got used to more sophisticated tactics. As soon as personal liability and bailing were accepted, secured loans and mortgages became the normal solution to the financial requirements of successful farmers eager to enlarge their holdings.



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V. Divergent tendencies (1500–1650)

Landholding arrangements developed in very different directions, largely under the influence of the shifting power balance between farmers, landlords and government officials. Wherever the state was dependent on popular support against the nobility, the position of the actual landholders was much stronger than in districts where government officials and landowners shared a common interest. The former was the case in the province of Groningen (V.2.), parts of seventeenth-century Ostfriesland (V.3.) as well as in the districts East of the Weser River (V.6.). The latter was the case in the province of Fryslân (V.1), the County of Oldenburg (V.4.) and the fenland districts around Bremen (V.5.). The classical situation, in which landlords and farmers worked together, was to be found around the city of Emden (V.3.) as well as in the newly embanked forelands (V.7.).

V.1. Fryslân

Tenancy was most widespread in the western province of Fryslân, where, according to a sixteenth-century survey, only a minority of the agricultural population owned their farmlands; the majority were (short-term) leaseholders. Yet, land-ownership was very scattered and highly commercialised. Even the richest nobleman owned a mere 600 hectares, dispersed over dozens of villages. In 1511 15 to 35% of the lands were occupied by freeholders, in 1711 their share had dropped to 5 to 20% or even less. Moreover, most farm buildings had been transferred into the hands of the landed gentry or urban patricians. Agricultural investments were facilitated by the early introduction of Roman Law, according to which the landlords could freely dispose over their properties. Apparently, many leaseholders became financially dependent on their landlords during the seventeenth-century agrarian crisis. The burden of taxation in the Dutch Republic was quite heavy, leaving the farmers no other choice than to go to their landlords for money. As a consequence, the latter became more involved in actual farm management. They acquired the farm-buildings and renovated them, thereby reducing the farmers to sheer tenants at will. Besides, landownership became tied up with social prestige and political power. Members of the ruling gentry forestalled all farmsteads that were equipped with political votes. The introduction of entails on landed property served to prevent the dissolution of noblemen's estates. As a result, in Fryslân short-term lease became the standard, just as in the marshland districts around the Rhine, Maas and Scheldt Rivers as well as in Zeeland and coastal Flanders. As such, the province of Fryslân remained more or less the exception in the Wadden Sea Region (Faber, 1972: 216–222, 492; Spahr van der Hoek, 1952: vol. 1, 126–131, 170–173, 333; Kuiper, 1993: 71–73; Formsma, 1981: 58–61, 68–70, 110–116; cf. Knibbe, 1989; Vanhaute, this volume).

V.2. Groningen

In the province of Groningen tenants were rather better off than in Fryslân. True enough, two-third of the farmers in district of Humsterland 1550 were leaseholders. Seventy years later their share had risen to 75%. One of the most successful urban landlords is known to have acquired no less than 50 farms. Just as in the neighbouring provinces, lease holding was commercialised at an early age. In Groningen and Ostfriesland state demesnes and ecclesiastical properties were rented out to the highest bidder since



the 1580s (Feenstra, 1994: 165–166; Feith and Brugmans, 1911: vol. 2, 400, 402–403, 727). Unlike in Fryslân, however, tenure at will did not develop further. Apparently, most sixteenth-century tenancies were let on short-term lease, but customary property rights remained largely undisputed. The most important group of landowners consisted of public institutions. Following the change towards Protestantism in 1594 23% of the cultivated area had been confiscated by government institutions, whereas the remaining ecclesiastical foundations accounted for another 16%. According to the 1721 land survey, the local gentry in the three main districts owned a mere 18%. A sample of 12 parishes reveals that 31% was owned by the government or by ecclesiastical foundations, 32% by noblemen or townsmen and 41% by local families; another 14% was tilled by the owners. In the Oldambt district urban patricians held undivided sway as the gentry was lacking here. According to another estimation 95% of all the lands in Groningen was let on lease (Feenstra, 1988: 193; Schoor, 1996: 16; 1997: 13–17). Probably as a consequence of the power equilibrium between local gentry, urban patricians and state officials, the tenants were able to hold on to their lands. In the course of the years long-lease agreements (*vaste huur* or *beklemming*) began to prevail. The most successful yeomen farmers were even allowed to participate in public affairs. Moreover, the growing power of the stadtholder after 1750 guaranteed that leaseholders could not be evicted. As a result, the remaining short-term agreements were converted into hereditary leaseholds. Step-by-step leaseholders became the actual owners of the land, paying only a fixed ground rent to their former landlords (Formmsma, 1981: 94–97).

V.3. Ostfriesland

In several districts urban capital had a revolutionizing impact on the rural economy at an early date. This was particularly the case around the city of Emden, where hundreds of protestant merchant families from Holland and Flanders found refuge since the 1550s. In Ostfriesland lease holding was already widespread at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The richest patrician in Emden owned about 700 hectares, one of the burgo-masters 184 hectares. The noblemen Frederic of Hinte left about 1530 441 hectares and 13 house-yards scattered over 20 villages. The development of existing tenancy arrangements into long-term leasehold was well on its way in 1543, when the nobleman Eggerik Beninga complained that successful tenants rented large farms, conspiring to acquire the farm-buildings and to hire the cows of their less fortunate neighbours. According to his estimations, the maximum size of their farms had recently increased from a mere 20 to at least 35 or 40 hectares. The Countess of Ostfriesland acknowledged these problems and tried to forbid selling hay, hiring-out cows, partitioning the farms, subletting the farmlands and selling the farmhouses above their actual value (Kappelhoff, 1977: 84; Swart, 1910: 205–208; Wiemann, 1969: 451–453; Lamschus, 1984: 24 ff.). Even then, legal measures did not have any lasting effect. Urban capitalists began to invest in land-ownership and long-term leasehold properties, which they sublet to farmers. Contrary to customary rural law, the claims of city residents were not nullified by lapse of time. As a consequence, the latter had an advantage in comparison to rural investors. Successful farmers moved into the cities, leaving the land to their most energetic neighbours. Unproductive holdings were split up and combined into larger ones. Noblemen and state officials also invested in agriculture itself, exploiting large landed properties and letting out complete farms, which were equipped with huge aisled barns after the latest fashion.



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Hereditary leasehold (*Beherdichheit*) became the rule, just as in the neighbouring provinces. By the middle of the seventeenth century most of lands – including church lands and state demesnes – were in the hands of wealthy townsmen and state officials (Swart, 1910: 201–203, 206–208, 265 ff.; Feith and Brugmans, 1911: vol. 1, 331, 373; Beninga, 1961–1964: 694–696, 764; Wiemann, 1969: 446). Consequently, the scale of holdings grew rapidly: in the Greetsiel district farms of over 20 hectares increased their share of the cultivated area from 50% around 1550 to 61% in 1583 and 77% in 1625. Farms of over 40 hectares were even more successful. They were absent in 1550, but enlarged their share from 23% in 1583 to 43% in 1625. In the course of the sixteenth century, a class of capitalist farmer-entrepreneurs came into being, which gained a voice in public affairs. Leaseholders having 30 to 40 hectares were taxed as if they were ‘wealthy burghers or rentiers’, the richest yeomen more than a city burgomaster (Ecke, 1968; Engelbrecht, 1982: 101–114, 115–162; Swart, 1910: 232).

Yet, the situation around Emden might have been exceptional. In the more remote parts of Ostfriesland the scale of holdings did not increase at all until mid-seventeenth century, despite the fact that long-term leases were widespread. Most of these lands were formally owned by the state. Rent increases were restricted, as tax-rises were far more effective to the purpose of filling the treasury. Apparently, long-term leasehold (*Heuer*) had developed from earlier short-term agreements. In the district of Wittmund in 1586 93% of the marshland was held on long-term lease, in the village of Dornum at least half the area (Swart, 1910: 274–275; Mammen, 1963: v–vii; Heyken and Heyken, 1985: vol. 1, 554–562; Droste, 1981). Particularly the aftermath of the Thirty Years War had a devastating effect on the financial situation of the rural population. So did the 1686 and 1717 storm surges. Many long-term leaseholders were forced to sell their holdings to wealthy townsmen or civil servants, because they could not redeem the pledges and mortgages incurred. Apparently, these investors bought long-term leases in order to sublet them to their former proprietors on short-term lease. In three villages of the district of Esens the amount of (short-term) leaseholders rose from about 25 to 30% in the 1660s to at least 60% in 1710 (calculated from Heyken and Heyken, 1985; cf. Jakubowski-Tiessen, 1992: 195–198). After 1750 many holdings were resold to successful farmers or repurchased by their occupants. Nevertheless, short-term lease remained important well into the nineteenth century. In 1895 38% of the cultivated area used by large farms in Ostfriesland was let on (short-term) lease. In the marshland districts we may assume higher figures as compared to the inland districts, where peasant property prevailed. Unlike their colleagues in Fryslân, however, leaseholders in Ostfriesland did not play the second fiddle; in many respects they barely distinguished themselves from genuine yeomen farmers (Arends, 1974: vol. 3, 396–400; Swart, 1910: 33–35).

V.4. Oldenburg

In addition to Fryslân the County of Oldenburg offers another example of a territory in which tenants saw their property rights restricted, albeit largely due to the fact that not the gentry but the state acted as the major landowner. In the Seignory of Jever tenants still held a position more or less comparable to Groningen and Ostfriesland. In the village of Hohenkirchen (Seignory of Jever) in 1542 87% was held on lease (*Heuer*), in 1587 74%. During these years the lord managed to increase his share from 19% to



32%, whereas private landowners saw their share falling from 45% to 20%. The parish churches accounted for the rest (22%). Between 1495 and 1624 the acreage of state property, mostly leased out to hereditary leaseholders (*Erbheuerleute*), quadrupled (Swart, 1910: 368–371; Onken, 1919–1920: 303–304).

State intervention was far more pronounced in the districts of Butjadingen and Stadland. During the sixteenth century the Count of Oldenburg was able to acquire about 40% of the land under cultivation, partly by confiscating ecclesiastical properties, private farms and newly embanked forelands, partly by compelling their occupants to transfer their property rights to the state (Allmers, 1896: 63–68). The latter is illustrated by the fate of the yeoman farmer Lubbe Onnen in Butjadingen. He privately owned a number of parcels, loans and pledges, and he was entitled to thirteen years of leasehold on another parcel of land, yet he was dogged by debts, due to the fact that he owed a substantial dowry to his sisters. As a solution to his financial problems the Count of Oldenburg in 1546 offered to take over his properties, in return for a long-term lease (Rüthning, 1927: nr. 762). Similar agreements between farmers and individual landlords must have been common to all coastal districts. In Oldenburg, however, the territorial prince was the main beneficiary. As a result, the Count was able to reallocate his possessions into substantial estates, which were managed by a superintendent or else leased out. These large landed properties, covering about 10% of the Butjadingen and Stadland districts, were mainly used for graziery and horse breeding. The remaining forelands were parcelled out into large leasehold-farms. In spite of compulsory labour services by the tenants, however, estate management suffered from diminishing returns as the economic situation deteriorated. Most estates were subdivided and sold around 1650, others had fallen to the Danish crown in 1667. Labour services were subsequently converted into money payments. Still, the extent of (long-term) lease holding tended to increase further, because the state was obliged to take over abandoned holdings. Merchants and state officials also took their share, benefiting from the fact that many farmers went bankrupt due to storm surges and crop failures. Just as in Ostfriesland, however, many long-term leases seem to have been converted into short-term agreements. Between 1750 and 1850 in Butjadingen about 60–80% of the area under cultivation was let on lease (Allmers, 1896: 82–122; Swart, 1910: 236, 278–284; Onken, 1919–1920: 309–312; Ramsauer, 1931; Wiese and Bölts, 1965: 140–141, 170–172, 180–183; Norden, 1984: 219, 245, 247; Stöver, 1942: 90–92).

V.5. Bremen

The city of Bremen and its surroundings formed a third example of a district where state power – in this case the state power of a city republic – paralleled the interests of the landlords. Private urban investments in rural property started as early as the thirteenth century. At the beginning of the seventeenth century citizens from Bremen owned half of the cultivated area in the district of Hollerland. Ecclesiastical foundations as well as foreigners, most of them noblemen from the surrounding territories, had acquired the rest. Peasant property was almost non-existent. Yet, contrary to the rural districts around Emden, the waterlogged fenlands near Bremen hardly offered any prospects for agrarian capitalism. Hereditary tenants (*Meier*) clinging to their hereditary farmsteads and traditional property rights dominated the scene up to the nineteenth century (Fliedner, 1970:



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111, 170; Schwarzwälder, 1975: 87, 281, 301; Meyer, 1977: 100–102, 357–359). As a consequence, wealthy citizens tried to find additional investment opportunities in neighbouring territories, largely in the form of cash advances, loans, mortgages and annuities. Extensive re-allotment schemes were conducted in the district of Osterstade as early as the sixteenth century, which enabled commercial graziers for the urban market. About 1630 probably 35 to 40% of the lands were in the hands of foreigners living outside the district borders, another 14% consisted of hereditary tenancies, owned by gentry, church or state. Nevertheless, petty landholding prevailed: farms over 20 hectares accounted for no more than 15–20% of all cultivated land in 1665 (Pieken, 1991: 36–51, 377, 453; Thiel, 1913: 47–49, 79). The citizens' investments seem to have been more substantive in the County of Oldenburg. In 1624 merchants from Bremen claimed that they had lent 200,000 guilders to tenant farmers in the Weser River marshes, who paid their rents in butter and cheese. One of these tenants (a wealthy Mennonite from Dutch descent) litigated for almost thirty years before the imperial court of justice decided about his claim that a large shipment of cheese had been not paid. Several citizens acquired tenant farms in Oldenburg (Knotnerus, 1994: 34, 42; Schwarzwälder, 1975: 255; Goens, 1929: 14, 31).

V.6. East of the Weser River

In the eastern districts the picture was even more diffuse. It seems that leasehold did increase since the close of the Middle Ages, but apparently at a lower pace than in the West, and with significant regional variety. In Nordfriesland and on the northern banks of the Elbe River the land-market became largely commercialised in the course of the sixteenth century. Successful investors were able to acquire up to 4 or 500 hectares and dozens of farmsteads, which were mostly let on short-term lease. In Eiderstedt a quarter of all landholders in 1597 were leaseholders (*Landsaten*). On the nearby island of Nordstrand 1581 about 11% of the area was held on long-term lease (*Festeland*) and probably a comparable amount on short-term lease (*Heuer* or *Landmiete*). After the re-embankment of the island in 1654 by investors from Brabant short-term lease became the rule (Heimatbuch, 1981: vol. 2, 140–141, 150; Petersen, 1906–1907: 9; Hansen, 1974: 83–84, 173, 191, 215, 220, 243, 278; Hanssen, 1965: vol. 2, 367). In Dithmarschen, on the other hand, evidence about lease holding is scarce. Apparently, townsmen did obtain large tracts of land during the seventeenth-century crisis. Yet, most of these lands seem to have been resold to successful farmer-entrepreneurs. As late as 1882 only 7% of farmland was given out on lease as against 34% in Eiderstedt. The marshlands North of the Elbe River had fallen back to a mere 7% (Hausigk, 1995; Hansen, 1897: 230–232; Sering, 1908: 16, 447, Appendix, 98).

South of the Elbe River the expansion of lease holding was curbed by the growing power of the gentry. Rent payments and short-term leases had been introduced at an early age, but the latter evolved into long-term leasehold (*Hauer*), probably because the territorial rulers were inclined to protect their rural taxpayers against aristocratic claims. Moreover, the number of *Heuerleute* or *Landpächter* did not increase any further as soon as aristocratic landlords began to impose feudal duties and labour services on their tenants. Consequently, urban investors unable to compete with the gentry tended to retreat from the land-market. The remaining leaseholders were apprehensive not to be turned into ordinary hereditary tenants (*Meier*). In the Alte Land 27% was held on long-



term lease during the seventeenth century, another 2% in fief. In Neuhaus at least 10–15% of the cultivated area was held by hereditary tenants, in Kehdingen long-term leaseholders probably held the same amount. As a rule, however, the attempts to integrate tenant labour into the demesne economy were bound to fail, as they did in Oldenburg (Fiedler, 1987: 196–197; Brümmel, 1975: 63, 86; Siemens, 1951: 283–296; Hofmeister, 1979–1981: vol. 2, 101–102; Klenck, 1986: 275–276, 328; Poppe, 1924: 162–163).

V.7. Commercial embankments

The most pronounced examples of capitalist agriculture were to be seen in the newly embanked polderlands. In order to reclaim huge tracts of unembanked salt marshes the sovereigns called on wealthy state officials, townsmen and foreign investors, who acquired extensive privileges in exchange for a portion of the foreshores taken from the peasant communities. Normally, the work was carried out by hundreds of navvies instead of conscripted peasants, while civil engineers were in command. An early example was the district of Het Bildt in Fryslân (1506), where a group of noblemen from the city of Dordrecht financed the reclamation of more than 5,000 hectares of salt marsh. Other famous projects were the embankment of the Zijpe Bay (1597) and the reclamation of Lake Beemster in Noord-Holland (1608–1612), the latter with the help of 42 drainage mills. Dutch projects served as an example for other regions farther East, particularly in Oldenburg and Nordfriesland. Land-surveyors parcelled out the land into substantial patches, which were usually let on short-term lease to wealthy farmers. Often the landlords provided for the farm buildings that were constructed after the latest fashion. An exception were the so-called *Bildtmeiers* in Fryslân, who were able to hold on to their original hereditary rights. As a rule, polderland-holdings were much bigger than the farms in the old-established villages: in Lake Beemster they measured 17 to 25 hectares, in Germany often 30 to 40 hectares. In the eighteenth-century embankment holdings measuring 50 to 60 hectares were not exceptional. Smallholding was virtually absent here. Soon the agricultural regime in these newly reclaimed areas served as an example for the surrounding districts. The initial expenses were often covered by abundant yields of oilseed rape, delivered to the Dutch oil-mill industry. The polderland farmers tended to surpass most of their inland colleagues in status and wealth. In time, they often became the actual owners of the land (Van der Ven, 1993: 123–126, 131–136; Baars, 1981; Ciriaco, 1994; Ey, 1987; Knottnerus, 1992; Gietzelt, 2000: 206–209, 227; Hanssen, 1965: vol. 2, 412–444).

VI. The seventeenth-century crisis and its effects

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were a Golden Age for the inhabitants of the marshland districts. Notwithstanding the fact that the share of ‘full-grown’ holdings of over 20 to 25 hectares did increase at the expense of smaller ones, the latter remained numerous for some time. Smallholders were tempted to quit subsistence farming. Instead, they became accustomed to purchase imported foodstuffs, textiles, fuel and timber, instead of using their own inferior products. Activities such as grinding, brewing, baking, spinning and weaving were increasingly left to specialized artisans, particularly in the western districts, where peat was more easily available and productive technologies



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were more advanced. After about 1650 this situation began to change. Many rural families suffered from the effects of the Thirty Years War and the agrarian crisis that followed in its wake. Falling prices, mounting tax burdens and dike-charges, crop failures and severe storm surges had a devastating effect. The stocks of cattle were repeatedly decimated, due to subsequent outbreaks of cattle-plague and foot-and-mouth disease. Consequently, the cattle-imports from Jutland came to a standstill in the early 1700s. Some freeholders were forced to sell their lands as their credits ran out. Others were eager to sell, because patronage and clientele gave them a better chance than merely clinging to their properties.

By and large, large landowners, urban investors and farmer-entrepreneurs did relatively well. The area under leasehold was increasing, especially in the mainly pastoral districts, such as parts of Fryslân, Butjadingen and Eiderstedt. Despite the fact that land prices were falling, landownership seems to have offered relatively secure investment opportunities, especially when compared with the alternatives available. Moreover, it attributed to the owner's prestige and his political influence. In the Dutch Republic the centre of political power shifted to the landed gentry and their urban allies. The remaining yeoman-farmers were often effectively disenfranchised. Tax burdens were much higher here than in the German and Danish coastal districts, leaving the farmers no other choice than to turn to investors and moneylenders. Consequently, landholding patterns became more or less polarized. 'Full-grown' farms were on the winning side, in spite of frequent bankruptcies and re-allocations. Their average size as well as their share in the village territories was growing rapidly. Medium-sized farms and smallholdings from 5 to 20 hectares, on the other hand, were on the wane. Usually, smallholders did not have enough money to undo the effects of the cattle plague that killed most of their cows. In relative terms they suffered greater losses during storm-surges than their richer neighbours. Crofters, artisans and tradesmen were prejudiced by the partition of the remaining commons and foreshores. By the nineteenth century, most smallholder families had been reduced to landless wage earners. Labour was scarce, however, so that wage earners were able to earn a decent living. Often farmers had to rely on additional seasonal migrants.

Surprisingly, the remaining large landed properties were rather unsuccessful. Apparently, marshland farming dictated a scale optimum, beyond which profits were declining. Wages and supervision costs tended to outweigh the proceeds. After 1650 many properties were split up and leased out to genuine farmers. Only where farm ownership was entangled with seignorial rights or where it enhanced the owner's social prestige, the latter was inclined to remain directly involved in its exploitation. In the western districts, the land market was biased by strategic investments. The members of the landed gentry competed for holdings to which specific political, juridical and ecclesiastical franchise rights were attached. As noted before, this was especially the case in the province of Fryslân, where political power had been restricted to the owners of a limited number of franchised homesteads, farms and mansions. In large parts of Groningen the major landowners tried to accumulate political privileges tied to specific farmsteads. As a result, a few landowning families largely monopolized local jurisdiction. In the Oldambt district and in Ostfriesland the urban elite invested in landed property in order to influence ecclesiastical policies or to get their relatives appointed as clergymen. Probably these



strategic investments had a more or less conservative effect, as they fostered the actual involvement in village politics and farm management, instead of leaving them to the farmer-entrepreneurs (Feenstra, 1981; 1988; Engelbrecht, 1982; Blauw, 1995).

It is obvious, therefore, that the mechanisms by which the original peasant holdings were transformed into modern capitalist farms were quite diverse. Institutional arrangements were not only very distinct from one district to the other. Their operation was also contested: landlords, leaseholders and actual tenants each followed their own interests. Political strife, litigation and private enterprise were very much knit up. Landlords often played a part at all three levels. In most cases, however, landlords mainly served as credit-providers for successful yeoman-farmers and leaseholders. To the peasants, the sale (or purchase) of property-rights might have been just another alternative to loans, annuities and mortgages. Many landowners and creditors were in fact family-members and other locals. To them landed property merely represented a secure investment and an additional source of income.

VII. The triumph of agrarian capitalism

As large farms were increasingly successful, particularly after the middle of the eighteenth century the tendency towards lease holding was reversed. Rising grain prices caused an unprecedented agricultural boom, which mainly benefited large farmer-entrepreneurs. Hereditary leaseholders were well under their way to become the actual owners of the land; short-term leases were enfranchised or converted into long-term lease. Landowners, on their part, were eager to sell, as they saw their earnings melting away under the heath of inflation (Priester, 1991: 115–116). Large farms were growing in size, whereas the number of medium-sized farms melted away. Smallholders under 10 hectares could only survive by specializing on dairy-farming, pig-breeding, market gardening or providing transport facilities. By the nineteenth century the ruling elite of capitalist farmer-entrepreneurs dominated the coastal scene completely, though they were still outnumbered by their less successful colleagues. Inherent social tensions, however, were mitigated by the growing demand for hired labour necessary to complete the shift towards arable farming. The introduction of new crops, extensive drainage schemes, marling and other technical improvements required much labour. By the early nineteenth century, about 60 to 80% of the coastal area was used for arable farming (Knottnerus, 1997: 98, own calculations). Working-class families were able to compensate for the declining real wages by growing staple foods on their own small plots. Consequently, a dual economy came into existence: large commercial farms became dependent on relatively cheap wage earners, largely fed by a potato-growing subsistence sector. Contract work and seasonal trade such as peat-digging and diking supplemented daily farm work. In the eastern districts servants and farm hands often demanded excessive meals in order to compensate for scarcity at home (Knottnerus, forthcoming). Genuine proletarianization did not occur before the nineteenth century, when rising food prices, continuing population growth and seasonal unemployment led to a general decline in the standards of living. Even then, most local workers were better off than many of their upland colleagues, notwithstanding the fact that coastal society had become highly stratified (Schaer, 1978; Nissen, 1988; Wolf, 1989; Paping, 1995: 99–118; Cramer, 1906).



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The triumph of the large commercial farm was a general phenomenon. A survey of several coastal districts will show that developments that started from a different outset and at a different pace had similar outcomes, despite the variety in agricultural regimes and landholding arrangements.

VII.1. Fryslân and Groningen

In both the provinces of Fryslân and Groningen the remaining middle-range farms gave way to large ones during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, despite the fact that landholding arrangements were diverging sharply. In Fryslân short-term lease prevailed: in 1884 60–70% of all holdings in the coastal districts were let on lease. The landlords often owned the farm-buildings; they were actively involved in farm management and played an important part in public life. In Groningen long-term hereditary leaseholders or *beklemde meiers* dominated the scene. They owned their farm-buildings and were considered as the actual owners of the land. Their farms covered at least 75% of the territory. Short-term leasing and subletting remained rather unimportant until the second half of the nineteenth century; in 1910 about 30% of the area was given out on short-term lease. The most successful gentleman farmers became part of the liberal bourgeois elite that dominated village politics as well as provincial government (Blauw 1995: 64–112, 251–253; Kuiper, 1993; Formsma, 1981: 98–108; Priester, 1991: 107–108; Botke, 2002).

Tax registers from Groningen show that farms of over 30 hectares were increasingly successful since the middle of the seventeenth century at the expense of medium-sized farms and smallholdings. Particularly in the Dollard area smallholding soon gave way to large-scale arable farming. At the close of the eighteenth century large farms accounted for 80–90% of the coastal area in both provinces. They were even bigger in the amphibious fenland districts of Fryslân: here dairy farms of over 40 hectares dominated, whereas smallholders became marginalized. In the arable districts farm size had increased as well, but so had the number of crofters. Farms of over 40 hectares were also numerous in Groningen. Around the middle of the eighteenth century farms of over 40 hectares occupied a third, and in the nineteenth century at least half of the Groningen marshland districts (De Vries, 1974: 135–136; Knottnerus, 1991; Spahr van der Hoek, 1952: vol. 1, 103–109; Faber, 1972: 209–215, 486–487; Priester, 1991: 93–99, 505–506, 512–513; Paping, 1995: 71–73, 317–320). An educated gentleman-farmer from Fryslân recalled in 1841:

‘Since I came here 48 years ago ten farms have successively been broken down, their fields were let on lease or combined with adjacent farms; each time when this happens, the villagers tend to say: another place of livelihood has been cleared away, and indeed, the well-to-do take advantage of the situation in order to increase their assets, purchasing more land’ (Hellema, 1978: 265).

VII.2. Ostfriesland and Oldenburg

Similar developments took place in Ostfriesland and Oldenburg, where most long-term leases had been converted into short-term agreements during the eighteenth century. Initially, medium-sized farms prevailed. As late as 1620 a property of nine hectares (or alternatively eighteen hectares of tenancy) was enough to be enfranchised for the regional



parliament in Ostfriesland. But most of these medium-sized farms were bound to disappear. In the village of Oldendorp (Rheiderland) they were usurped by their larger neighbours after 1650. In Manslagt (North of Emden) arable farms over 20 hectares gradually increased their share in the village territory from 41% in 1550, 59% in 1583, 60% in 1625, and 73% in 1779 to 87% in 1904. At first the number of crofters and smallholders doubled, subsequently most of them were reduced to landless labourers. In three neighbouring villages most of the medium-sized farms had already ceased to exist in 1719. During the nineteenth century the majority of farms of less than 40 hectares disappeared as well (Arends, 1974: vol. 3, 391; Swart, 1910: 229, 363–364, 373–376; Wiese and Bölts, 1965: 139; Ecke, 1968; 1980; Kappelhoff, 1982: 32–46).

In the former Seignory of Jever the shift towards larger farms started later than in Ostfriesland, though holdings under 21 hectares were considered ‘incomplete’ at an early age. After 1725 farms of over 30 hectares were growing in size at the expense of the smaller ones. Smallholdings remained rather unimportant: the large majority of the rural population consisted of crofters (Onken, 1919–1920: 303; Hinrichs et al., 1988: 111–112, 183). In the district of Butjadingen, where a shift from pastoral to mixed farming took place during the eighteenth century, large farms held 55% of area in 1613, 65% in 1729 and 85% in 1846. In the same period of time, farms of over 40 hectares saw their share growing from a quarter to half of the acreage. Most cotters held out, but the number of small and medium-sized farms was rapidly decreasing after 1729, as many farmers went bankrupt due to the effects of storm-surges, cattle-plague and crop failures. Other families were extinguished by malaria and left their holdings to surviving neighbours and relatives (Stöver, 1942: 73–76; Krämer, 1985: 90–92; Norden, 1984: 90–92). At the wake of the nineteenth century typical farms in Ostfriesland and Oldenburg measured at least 20 to 40 hectares, in some districts up to 50 or 60. The scale of the holdings was growing further, whereas landholding patterns became polarized. By 1900 most elderly farmers recalled dozens of large farms having been dissolved since the days of their grandfathers.

VII.3. The Elbe- and Weser-River marshes

Though comparable figures are lacking, general indications from the Elbe- and Weser-River marshes seem to prove our point.⁹ As has already been told, most landholders in this region were yeomen-farmers. Lease holding remained rather unimportant, probably due to the delayed introduction of modern civil law. Generally, tax registers determined the size of the ‘full-grown’ farm (*Pflug, Hufe*) at an early date. In the Vierlande (near Hamburg) a complete farm measured 19 hectares, in Butjadingen 23 hectares, in Land Wursten 24 hectares, in Krempermarsch 26 hectares and in Land Hadeln 47–50 hectares. In the Wilstermarsch, where dairy farming prevailed, 35 hectares applied for a full-grown farm. Typical holdings tended to be much smaller, but bit-by-bit the ‘full-grown’ large farms grew at the expense of medium-sized and small ones. In the 1770s typical large farms in the Alte Land comprised 17–20 hectares, in Kehdingen 37–38 hectares.

⁹ Figures after Finder, 1922: vol. 1, 129; Swart, 1910: 236–237; Von der Osten, 1900/03: vol. 2, 32; Heimatbuch, 1981: vol. 2, 70–71; Siemens, 1951: 335; Poppe, 1924: 76; Bierwirth, 1967: 61–69.



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The largest farms in Land Hadeln in the 1790s measured 80–90 hectares, typical holdings probably 30–45 hectares, the smallest ones in the more remote fenland villages at least 15 hectares. Contemporaries commented that successful farmers were hungry for land at the expense of the remaining smallholders. The gentleman farmers of Hadeln and Kehdingen were known to be quite enlightened, but they were also notorious for their ordinary bragging and excessive consumption (Gerdt, 1939, 24; Allmers, 1979: 274–275; Klenck, 1986: 250).

In the districts close to the city of Hamburg, however, engrossment was impeded by the development of fruit-culture, market-gardening and small-scale dairy-farming. Though the number of full-grown farms tended to be constant since the sixteenth century, smallholding increased rapidly since the eighteenth century. In the Alte Land in 1907 a mere 36% of village territories close to Hamburg had remained in the hands of large farms, as opposed to 68% in the most distant villages. The village of Moorburg (now part of the city's harbour) had only four large farms in 1814, covering just a quarter of the village territory. On the corn-growing river island of Billwerder and in the Vierlande district, on the other hand, most large farms remained intact (Siemens, 1951: 295; Lorenzen-Schmidt, 1986c; Wolf, 1989: 23; Finder, 1922: vol. 1: 129). Quite spectacular, on the other hand, were the developments in Osterstade at the Weser River (near Bremen), where – probably due to archaic inheritance rules – smallholding was dominant as late as 1665. Up to the nineteenth century large farms had increased their share from 15–20% to 60–70%, then the process of engrossment was partly reversed due to a switch back towards graziery, dairy farming and market-gardening (Pieken, 1991: 453; Tienken, 1901: 39).

VII.4. Dithmarschen

The Schleswig-Holstein coastal marshes were no exception to the rule that farm size tended to grow. As we saw before, in Dithmarschen smallholding prevailed until the sixteenth century. The situation began to change, however, as the government ordered the introduction of partible inheritance laws in 1560. Popular protests against supposed usurers and foreign investors were ignored. In the parish of Marne (Süderdithmarschen) farms of over 20 hectares increased their share in the village territory from 33% in 1590 to 56% in 1620. After a temporary setback during the Thirty Years War their share grew from 45% in 1668 to 72% in 1798. This happened mainly on account of the largest ones of over 40 hectares, which occupied 43% of the cultivated area. In Norderdithmarschen large farms took in 37% of the cultivated area in 1560 and 48% in 1638. Apparently, major changes took place since the last decades of the seventeenth century. In 1707 65–75% of the area had already been taken in by large and very large holdings. Detailed figures from the village of Wellinghusen show that the largest farms were most successful. Contemporaries observed that many farmsteads had been abandoned during the eighteenth century. Consequently the number of crofters grew as well, being supplemented by a growing number of landless villagers after 1750. Smallholding tended to disappear. Farm sizes further increased after 1800, resulting in the rise of the typical gentleman-farmer entrepreneur, described by Heberle (Hansen, 1897: 222, 238; Bolten, 1979: vol. 4, 450; Witthohn, 1984; Hausigk, 1995: 57–94; Lorenzen-Schmidt, 1987: 196–197).



VII.5. Nordfriesland

In the district of Eiderstedt developments were even more spectacular than in Dithmarschen. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century two-third of the small- and medium-sized dairy farms (*Milchereien*) were usurped by their more successful neighbours. Typical large-scale holdings measuring 25–35 hectares gave way to even larger ones, ranging on an average from 40–50 hectares in the arable districts to at least 60–100 hectares in the mainly pastoral districts. Their share in the village territories increased from about 65% in 1617 to 80–90% in 1795. During the nineteenth century this tendency was reversed, when extensive graziery came into vogue and several very large farms were being dismantled. Contrary to many other districts, the extent of short-term lease remained substantial (Kuschert, 1981: 136; Volkmar, 1976: 60 and Appendix IX; Hanssen, 1965: vol. 2, 407). On the reclaimed island of Pellworm large farms increased their share from 57% in 1684 to 64% in 1706, 69% in 1828 and 74% in 1854. None of the surviving full-grown farms was smaller than 40 hectares. The number of medium-sized holdings was cut by half, whereas smallholding had increased. Figures from other marshland districts are lacking. Yet, the tendency towards agrarian capitalism seems to have been prevalent, except for the Wiedingharde district, where medium-sized farms remained numerous until the nineteenth century. Particularly the gentlemen-farmers in the recently embanked polderlands might be considered as capitalist entrepreneurs *pur sang*. Here, as in Eiderstedt, short-term lease remained frequent (Von Chamisso, 1986: 182–184, 215–232; Hanssen, 1965: vol. 2, 341, 367, 416, 460).

VIII. Explanation

By the nineteenth century ‘the farms had been largely consolidated, at the same time their mean size had often been tripled, smallholdings had disappeared’. This was the conclusion by the agricultural historian Friedrich Swart in 1910. And, so he added,

‘Marshland farms with 30 to 60 hectares are immediately confronted by a large working class. Thus, the contemporary marshland economy is a product of the Early Modern Age. The same development took place all over the North Sea coast from Holland up to Jutland, in some districts faster and more thoroughly, in others slower. As such, it might be considered as a counterpart to the formation of the East-Elbian estate economy’ (Swart, 1910: 224).

According to my findings Swart’s conclusion still stands. There are a number of possible explanations for these converging tendencies. Some of them are rooted in the ecological context of marshland farming, others follow from the growing importance of distant markets and modern technologies. Additional explanations involve institutional arrangements, reproductive strategies, investment schemes and status considerations.

1. The tough marine clay soil required a minimum number of draught-animals, as has been stressed by Jan Luiten van Zanden (1985: 320; 1991). In most districts, four to six horses and an additional ploughboy were needed. Those landholders that could not sustain sufficient animals and servants were dependent on their richer neighbours (Auhagen, 1897: 808). On the other hand, the introduction of the swing plough in Groningen and Ostfriesland in the end of the seventeenth century did not result in smaller



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holdings, though it required only two or three horses and could be navigated by one man alone. Moreover, smallholders used to borrow each others' horses (Van der Poel, 1967: 23–25; Arends, 1974: vol. 2, 392–396; Knottnerus, 1991: 65; Hanssen, 1965: vol. 2, 347).

2. Wars, floods, cattle plagues and crop failures must have caused the ruin of thousands of smallholders, as they could not mobilize sufficient assets to overcome such crises (Jakubowski-Tiessen, 1992: 195–198). Of course, the effects of disasters lowered the costs of acquiring a farm, providing an opportunity for healthy newcomers who were prepared to invest their own labour and accumulated savings. As farms grew bigger, however, substantive assets were needed (Folkers, 1956s).

3. Malaria endemics were responsible for high mortality rates, which diminished the number of landholding families and contributed to an accumulation of wealth in the hands of the survivors (Norden, 1984; Knottnerus, 2002). The number of farm hands, on the other hand, was supplemented by immigration.

4. Coastal weather conditions were rather unstable. As a consequence, farming was very dependent on a flexible labour supply. The harvest could easily be spoiled by rain; the sensitive clay soils could only be ploughed when they relatively dry but not yet hardened by the sun. As a rule, large farms had better chances to meet their labour requirements than medium-sized ones. Not only did they have more resources to support a working class clientele, which could supply sufficient helping hands during harvest times. They were also able to pay higher contract wages whenever these helping hands were needed.

5. Access to product markets was dependent on the scale of the holdings: large farmers were able to store their products until prices went up. They were better informed; they had cheaper transport facilities and were able to negotiate at wholesale prices.

6. Access to financial markets was unevenly distributed: large farmers could get credits more easily, their more extensive social network and their political influence at the village level added to their solvency. The German historian Lorenzen-Schmidt (1988) has worked out a model on nineteenth-century trade recessions, implying that loans, debts and bankruptcies had the effect of increasing the scale of holdings.

7. The increasing scale of production and the change towards arable farming during the eighteenth century may have favoured large farms: labour-saving innovations such as horse-driven churns, winnowing-mills, riddles and threshing rolls – typical for the western districts – could only be conducted by 'full-grown' farms (Van der Poel, 1983: 37–44, 46, 62; Priester, 1991: 99–103, 118).

8. Family policies led to a concentration of holdings, due to endogamous marriage strategies originally meant to counteract morcellement. Reproductive strategies worked in the same direction, as a research project by Eckart Voland has shown (Voland, 1995).

9. Status considerations could have led to an outspoken preference for extensive large-scale farming, instead of more intensive methods. The well-known agricultural historian B.H. Slicher van Bath has referred to a 'pastoral way of thinking', which implied distaste for manual labour (Slicher van Bath, 1963: 129–131). The sociologist E.W. Hofstee, on the other hand, presumed that average nineteenth-century mixed farmers wished to imitate their neighbours who had successfully specialised in corn-growing (Hofstee, 1947; Priester, 1991: 99–100).

10. Village regulations and customary law might have favoured local landholders as against foreign investors, smallholders and crofters. In several coastal villages – especially



to the East – newcomers were not allowed to settle down if they could not pay a substantial recognition fee.

11. State regulations often implied restrictions on farm partition, in order to keep the number of substantial taxpayers at a constant level. The Count of Oldenburg and the Countess of Ostfriesland were the first to introduce such measures in the 1540s, soon to be followed by other German princes who tried to avert a possible reduction of their limited tax revenues (Saalfeld, 1998: 645). Complaints about the partition of existing farms remained common until the nineteenth century. Yet, most government officials seem to have endorsed these partitions, because the resulting parts were usually absorbed by the surrounding farms.

12. Embankments of foreshores often favoured large farmers, as they were in a better position to meet the financial obligations connected to the newly reclaimed lands. In several coastal districts (Groningen, parts of Ostfriesland, Hadeln, Kehdingen, Süderdithmarschen) the landowners maintained traditional rights to the adjoining foreshores, whereas in other districts these rights were claimed by the state.

13. Finally, landlords also contributed to engrossment wherever they tried to rearrange their landed properties in order to create larger holdings. For one part, landlords may have been motivated by status considerations, on the other hand they expected successful tenants to pay higher rents. Their actual involvement in agriculture, however, was sometimes counterproductive, as the situation in Fryslân can prove. Here, contrary to the adjoining districts, the introduction of convertible husbandry in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century was largely prevented by restrictions on converting pasture into arable lands.

IX. Conclusion

Did landlords really matter? Did their involvement help to create larger holdings? I think it did, but often unintentionally. In many cases, non-peasant landowners merely advanced the money to successful farmer-entrepreneurs, either as conventional landlords or as genuine moneylenders. In my opinion, the gradual disappearance of smallholding in the coastal marshes is mainly due to a step-by-step integration into international markets, which triggered off all kinds of economies of scale.

Our material suggests that the development towards commercial farming started in the late Middle Ages. Several districts came to be dominated by large holdings at an early age, though on the whole smallholding and medium-sized family farms prevailed. Additionally, every coastal district had a limited number of large landed properties whose owners relied on hired labour by their peasant neighbours. Large farms were increasingly successful during the sixteenth-century agricultural boom. Opportunities for the export trade were ubiquitous; the rapidly growing number of crofters and landless villagers provided an adequate supply of hired labour. Puzzling, however, is the different pace at which capitalist farming developed. Despite the fact that the ecological, demographical and commercial circumstances in our area were largely identical, several districts witnessed major changes in landholding patterns, whereas others seem to have been largely unaffected by the growing pressure of the market until the eighteenth century. Part of the explanation may lie in the tenacity of traditional institutions such as kinship



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ties, village regulations and ambiguous land holding arrangements. Equally important were the emergence of open land markets and clear-cut property rights, the availability of capital and the willingness of its owners to invest in agrarian ventures (e.g. Ostfriesland). Finally, we need to acknowledge that the rise of capitalist farming did not always result in an upheaval of land holding patterns. Especially where large farms were already widespread, capitalism could pull in smoothly.

The process of engrossment became irreversible during the agrarian crisis, which set in after about 1650. Regional differences narrowed, as soon as districts that had hitherto been dominated by small- and medium-sized farming made up their arrears. Large landed properties, on the other hand, were dissolved. By the middle of the eighteenth century capitalist farms were the rule in every one of the coastal districts, leaving a shrinking portion of the village territories to smallholders and family farms. Until then, the transition to capitalist farming had been funded – to a greater or less extent – by non-peasant investors. After about 1750, however, most farmer-entrepreneurs took their fate into their own hands. Henceforth the ‘farmers road’ to capitalism held sway.

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