

Leasing at the cost of nature? Short-term leasehold between agrarian capitalism and environmental stewardship in the late medieval Low Countries

Arnoud Jensen, University of Antwerp

Abstract

From its spread in the 13th century onwards, short-term leasehold became one of the most common and powerful institutions of land management in Western Europe and beyond. Furthermore, short-term leasehold is often strongly connected to the commercialisation of agriculture and short-term profit-seeking, and thus the rise of agrarian capitalism. As a consequence, it is often primarily framed as exploitative of natural resources.

However, when looking closely at early short-term lease-contracts, these extensive documents often contain a multitude of clauses, not just on the payments, but also on water management, upkeep of the soil and care for the present fauna and flora. These clauses have often been ignored in previous research, or even outrightly dismissed as stereotypes.

When considering the lease-contracts in their full form, a new interesting picture emerges, and the question rises whether short-term leasehold could also entail forms of environmental stewardship, and if so, in which conditions? And how did these forms of environmental stewardship interact with other potential objectives or consequences of leaseholding: namely with risk-management and with profit-making. Typically, profit-making is considered the antithesis of sustainable management, yet in some conditions they might have reinforced one another.

The balance between environmental stewardship or profit-making in leasehold needs to be investigated, as well as the way these different aspects might have reinforced each other in some contexts. Is there actually a strict distinction between a more 'capitalistic' logic, geared towards profit maximalisation, and a more 'moral' logic, focused on provisioning and/or long-term sustainability of both the land and the actors involved? Here, a first case-study is presented, in which the lease contracts of several large institutions in the Low Countries, in the period 1200-1400, are analysed to investigate this relation between profit-seeking and long-term environmental management of the lease plots.