

The limits of agrarian capitalism in Guelders (ca. 1450-1550)

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In previous decades, scholars such as Bas van Bavel studied the emergence of agrarian capitalism in the Guelders river area, Flanders, and Holland. As far as these regions are concerned, the concept proved to be useful for capturing the dynamics of certain areas that were characterised by market-oriented, specialised, and extensive agricultural production on large leasehold farms, proletarianization, a rise in wage labour and accumulation of means of production. Regions in the eastern Low Countries, however, remain remarkably absent in discussions on agrarian capitalism. These regions are generally assumed to have remained traditional peasant societies until the nineteenth century, even though Jan Bieleman and Theo Spek argue they underwent fundamental changes in response to market dynamics from the fifteenth century onwards. This paper presents new data on the borderlands between the Guelders river area (characterised by agrarian capitalism) and the Achterhoek (an assumed traditional peasant society in the eastern Low Countries) to offer new insights in the relation between the Achterhoek and previously studied regions. The data derives from the accounts of the lords of Huis Bergh who owned lands in both regions. My main question concerns how the lease-systems in both regions differed and what this can tell us about the relation between the two supposedly different “social agrosystems” found in the Guelders river area and the Achterhoek. Based on the accounts, I study aspects of the landed properties leased out by the lords of Huis Bergh, focussing on the leaseholds’ sizes, prices, and terms, as well as their distribution among tenants.