

Agrarian capitalism in the North Sea Lowlands in the early modern period  
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The North Sea Lowlands, the reclaimed wetlands along the southern North Sea coast, are an area characterized by a challenging environment, requiring specific institutional arrangements to deal with the risk of flooding and evacuation of excess water. By 1700, in many parts of this coastal zone, large-scale commercial farms employing considerable numbers of wage labourers had become predominant, particularly in regions such as the Flemish coastal plain, Zeeland, the Guelders river area, and Friesland. As Bas van Bavel has demonstrated, the development towards this type of rural economy began in the fifteenth century. It received an enormous boost, however, when huge amounts of urban capital were poured into large-scale draining projects. On the new polders, wealthy urbanites created large holdings, but here, and also on the older reclaimed wetlands, prosperous farmers also contributed to the transition of farming.

The paper will focus on the changes during the early modern period and a comparative approach will be applied. Agrarian capitalism did not develop everywhere in the North Sea Lowlands. In Groningen, the English Fens, and parts of Northwest-Germany, peasant farming remained predominant until well into the eighteenth century. By comparing the diverging development trajectories of these regions, the variables can be discerned that determined those trajectories. The most important of those were environmental constraints, social property relations at the beginning of the early modern period, and divergent institutional arrangements for water management.