

## Demographic behaviour of landowning farmers in eighteenth-century Zeeland

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### Introduction

Social relations in the south-western province of Zeeland in the seventeenth century are comparable to those in the English countryside of the same period. The system was that of landlord – capitalist tenant farmer – wage labourer. Most of the fertile marine clay land was owned by urban capitalists who leased it to commercial farmers. They exploited their holdings with the help of large numbers of wage labourers, most of whom had no land of their own. The vast majority of farms were arable, growing wheat, barley and rape for the urban markets in Holland and Zeeland. During the period 1690–1750, when agriculture was hit by a severe economic crisis, an important change took place. Urban landowners began to sell their land because decreasing rents and rising taxes had made landownership no longer profitable. Most of the land that they sold was purchased by tenant farmers working relatively large areas.<sup>1</sup> In spite of falling grain prices, these farmers succeeded in making profits because they had lower costs per hectare than farmers working smaller areas of land and they produced a larger surplus to sell on the market. In particular, when cereal prices rose because of bad harvests, these farmers were able to make large profits which were then invested in the purchase of more land.

This development was especially pronounced in west Zeeland-Flanders, the most south-westerly part of Zeeland. In 1665, farmers owned less than 10% of the agricultural land there but by around 1800 this had increased to some 45%. Only a minority of the farmers had succeeded in purchasing land, but those who did bought a great deal. In 1750, the 25 wealthiest farmers together owned more than 1,400 ha.<sup>2</sup> These farmers became a rich and powerful rural elite, but the basis of their wealth, the ownership of land, also caused problems. According to the law of inheritance, all children had to

<sup>1</sup> P.R. Priester, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw circa 1600-1910* (Wageningen 1998) 142–150.

<sup>2</sup> P.J. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 1650-1850* (Wageningen 2000) 104, 113–116, 250.

receive an equal part of the estate when the farmer died. In order to comply with this all the possessions had to be divided up among the children with the result that the holding would need be split up, leading eventually to social degradation of the family. As a result it would become increasingly difficult for children and grandchildren to preserve the success and status of their ancestors.

The history of the 25 wealthiest landowning farmers and their descendants in west Zeeland-Flanders during the period from about 1750 to 1850 has been studied to find out how they dealt with this problem. They had several options, some of which were of a demographic nature, such as restricting the number of children through celibacy, late marriage or birth control, or contracting only endogamous marriages, that is exclusively marrying partners from the same social group. This paper discusses how the ownership of land influenced these aspects of demographic behaviour in this group of farmers.

### **Celibacy and age at marriage**

The West European marriage pattern was widespread in the Netherlands. People married only when they were certain that they had sufficient income or property to sustain a family. This meant that a substantial number of people never married and those that did marry did so at a relatively late age. Because children were almost only conceived within marriage, the level of celibacy and the high age at first marriage resulted in a low number of children. This marriage pattern would appear to be very well suited to landowning farmers who wished to prevent the breaking up of their estates by limiting the number of children. Research has shown that the rate of celibacy and the mean age at marriage of landowning farmers in the north-eastern province of Drenthe were considerably higher than those of other social groups in the same area.<sup>3</sup>

Farmers in west Zeeland-Flanders, however, behaved differently. Celibacy was very uncommon among this group with only 1% of women and 3% of men still single at the age of 50, and many of those who remained single were physically or mentally handicapped.<sup>4</sup> Mean age at marriage was low, as is shown in Table 1. During the eighteenth century men married at the age of 26–27 years and women at 22–23 years. Elsewhere in the Netherlands the mean age at marriage of farmers was much higher. For instance, in the South Holland village of Maasland, farmers were nearly 30 when they married and their wives were 26 years old.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Verduin, *Bestaanswijze en huwelijks- en voortplantingspatroon in het negentiende-eeuwse Drentse zandgebied* (Assen 1972) 105.

<sup>4</sup> Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 264.

<sup>5</sup> D.J. Noordam, *Leven in Maasland. Een hoogontwikkelde plattelandsamenleving in de achttiende en het begin van de negentiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1986) 112–113.

The low level of celibacy and relatively low age at marriage, however, do not mean that west Zeeland-Flanders farmers did not conform to the West European marriage pattern. During the eighteenth century their wealth made it easy for them to purchase or to rent a farm, so there was no need for them to postpone marriage for a long time. Table 1 also shows that between 1820 and 1850 those who married did so at about the same relatively high age as the farmers from Maasland. The reasons for this change will be discussed at the end of this paper.

Table 1 Mean age at first marriage per 30-year period, 1730-1849

	Men		Women	
	N	Age	N	Age
1730-1759	37	26.9	47	22.9
1760-1789	80	25.6	90	22.1
1790-1819	94	27.1	130	23.1
1820-1849	111	29.5	127	26.6

Source: Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 265.

No evidence has been found that any form of birth control was practised. In combination with the small number of people remaining unmarried and the low age at marriage, particularly of women, this resulted in a high number of children. On average, west Zeeland-Flanders farmers had eight children, four of whom reached maturity.<sup>6</sup> This implies that each time an estate had to be divided, the family possessions were divided into four portions, leading to rapid social decline. This decline could be slowed down by endogamous marriages, with partners exclusively from the same group of wealthy farmers.

### Partner choice

There were groups of landowning farmers who tried to maintain their economic status by only marrying partners from within their own group. An example of this is the Scholten group from Winterswijk in the east of the Netherlands. These very rich farmers, who owned vast estates, exclusively married partners from other Scholten families.<sup>7</sup> To see whether west Zeeland-Flanders farmers show the same behaviour, the occupations of 216 fathers-in-law of farmers' children were extracted from the 1748 census and 1750 tax records.<sup>8</sup> The records showed that most of these farmers' children indeed contracted endogamous marriages, with 88% of the sons and 85% of the daughters marrying children of other wealthy farmers. A minority married

<sup>6</sup> Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 267.

<sup>7</sup> G. Wildenbeest, *De Winterswijkse scholten: opkomst, bloei en neergang. Een antropologische studie naar het fatum van een agrarische elite* (Amsterdam 1983) 156, 162.

<sup>8</sup> Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 270.

partners from lower (artisans, shopkeepers) or upper middle class (merchants, brewers, solicitors, doctors) families.

Although they did not exclusively marry partners from within their own group, the vast majority of their husbands and wives belonged to the same wealthy social stratum. Even the fathers-in-law who belonged to the 'lower' middle class often proved to be quite wealthy; a 'humble' carpenter owned at least 24 ha of land and a bargeman even owned 70 ha.<sup>9</sup> So partner choice was a way of slowing down the process of social degradation for these farmers. Wealthy partners brought in enough capital to compensate for at least part of the loss caused by dividing the inheritance. However, this could only slow down the process of social degradation, not stop it entirely.

The fact that in the long run the descendants of landowning west Zeeland-Flanders farmers were not able to maintain themselves at the same social level is shown by Table 2, which shows the occupations of farmers' sons from three 30-year birth cohorts. This table shows that landowning farmers' families suffered a slow social decline. Farmers' sons from the last cohort often became shopkeepers, artisans or even labourers. The same development can be discerned for the husbands of the daughters of farmers. Whereas 80% from the first cohort were farmers, this was the case for only 59% of those from the last cohort. The decline was not spectacular, more than 60% of the men and women from the last cohort managed to maintain themselves at the same social level. However, this decline was a slow continuous process that could not be stopped. One of the causes was the system of partible inheritance combined with the relatively high number of children, which eroded the family capital.

*Table 2 Occupations of farmers' sons from three 30-year birth cohorts, 1730-1819*

	N	Farmer %	Uppermiddle class %	Lowermiddle class %	Labourer %
1730-1759	40	97	3	-	-
1760-1789	78	82	12	6	-
1790-1819	119	64	4	24	8

Source: Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 279.

### **Inheritance and the economic situation**

Both the social decline and the rise in the age at marriage that took place in the first half of the nineteenth century can be explained by the interaction between the inheritance system and the economic situation. As already stated, in west Zeeland-Flanders there was a system of partible inheritance, which meant that each child had a right to an equal part of the inheritance of his or

<sup>9</sup> Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 271.

her parents. Farmers in this region, however, practised a special variation of this system. They distinguished between landed property and agricultural holdings. The inheritance as a whole was divided into equal parts, but the holding was bequeathed to only one of the children. If the assessed value of the holding was more than the share of the inheritance this child was entitled to, he or she had to compensate the other children, paying his siblings a sum based upon the market value of the land. If he could not pay this sum immediately, it was converted into a loan over which the inheritor had to pay interest to the other children.<sup>10</sup> Often this meant that one child inherited the farm buildings and all or most of the land, while the other children received money and moveable goods or a claim on the sibling who had inherited the holding.

This inheritance system differed fundamentally from the way landowning farmers in the east of the Netherlands handled the division of their inheritances. In the east one child – usually a son – received all the land, while his siblings were simply excluded from inheritance.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that these siblings, who inherited almost nothing, must have had difficulties in finding partners and founding their own families. In west Zeeland-Flanders, however, all children received a sum of money at least and were thus able to start up their own farms or find some other occupation. This explains why members of farmers' families in the east remained single or married very late, while in west Zeeland-Flanders they almost always married and usually at a comparatively early age. It was not landownership as such that influenced demographic behaviour but the way ownership of land was transferred to the next generation. In west Zeeland-Flanders, all the children received an equal share financially and thus all had an equal chance of founding a family. In the east of the Netherlands, all children but one were excluded from the inheritance and thus were often forced to remain celibate.

During the eighteenth century this system functioned well. Because of the favourable economic conditions in the second half of the century, landowning farmers' families were even able to increase their possessions. The wealthiest ones owned several farms and were able to bequeath a holding to each of their children. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, they were confronted with serious problems. In the first place, rich merchants and industrialists from Belgium began buying land in west Zeeland-Flanders which pushed up the price of land. At the same time, the interest rate rose from an average of 3.8% in 1780–99 to 4.7% in 1820–39, while cereal prices dropped.<sup>12</sup> Because land prices and interest rates rose, those children who in-

<sup>10</sup> Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 287.

<sup>11</sup> H. de Haan, *In the shadow of the tree. Kinship, property and inheritance among farm families* (Amsterdam 1994) 224, 227.

<sup>12</sup> Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 111–112, 300.

herited land had to pay larger sums of compensation and interest to their siblings, while at the same time the profitability of their farms decreased because of the lower cereal prices. It became more and more difficult for them to fulfil their financial obligations. In the period from about 1800 to 1835, landowning farmers had difficulty in maintaining themselves and some even had to sell their land and descend the social ladder. They became shopkeepers or wage labourers, and after 1840 many of them emigrated to the United States.

These changes not only caused social degradation of some of the farmers' families, they also caused a change in demographic behaviour. During the eighteenth century land had been easy to purchase, but in the nineteenth century it became scarce and expensive. People had to postpone marriage until they were able to purchase a farm, so the mean age at marriage rose to the level common elsewhere in Western Europe. Economic adversity forced these farmers to change their demographic behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to determine whether a relationship existed between the ownership of land and demographic behaviour. It was to be expected that landowning farmers would try to prevent the splitting up of their estates by adapting their demographic behaviour in two ways: limiting the number of children and a high level of celibacy. At first sight, it appears as if landownership did not influence the demographic behaviour of the west Zeeland-Flanders farmers. Only a tiny minority of landowning farmers' children remained celibate. Nor did landowning farmers attempt to limit the number of children by marrying late; in fact they married relatively early and had many children. The economic situation, however, did influence their behaviour. The adverse economic circumstances in the first half of the nineteenth century forced them to adapt their behaviour and marry later. Thus it might be concluded that the economic situation rather than landownership was the more important variable in influencing demographic behaviour.

However, a comparison of demographic behaviour and the inheritance systems prevalent in west Zeeland-Flanders and in the east of the Netherlands shows that landownership did, indirectly, influence demographic behaviour through the way in which ownership was transferred at a farmer's death. In the east, all children but one were excluded from inheritance and therefore married late or not at all. In west Zeeland-Flanders, although the family holding was kept intact, each child received an equal financial share at least and was able to set up his or her own household. In favourable economic circumstances this meant that farmers' children married relatively early, and

since they practised no form of birth control had many children. There were no reasons for limiting the number of children because land was easy to purchase, compensation sums were relatively low and cereal farming was profitable.

When the economic circumstances became less favourable, the inheritance system influenced demographic behaviour in a different way. The system had been designed to preserve the unity of the agricultural holding while at the same time guaranteeing each child an equal part in the inheritance. A consequence of this system was that the successor often had to pay compensation to his siblings. In the first half of the nineteenth century, rising land prices caused the compensation sums to increase, while falling cereal prices made farming less profitable. Thus it was a combination of the economic situation and the inheritance system that caused financial problems and forced farmers to change their demographic behaviour. Since this inheritance system had been introduced in order to regulate the division of landed property in both a just and efficient manner, it is true to say that landownership did influence the demographic behaviour of farmers, although only indirectly.