

## Abstract

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*Land ownership and the market for land from a microeconomic perspective. The case of the Brussels countryside in the fifteenth and sixteenth century*

In recent historiography, land ownership and the transmission of property through a rural land market has been investigated from two viewpoints. On the one hand, from a micro-economic perspective, the possession of property and ownership of land throughout one's life-cycle, ties in with the debate surrounding the role of the household as an economic actor in history. This debate originated in the micro-historia of the eighties. The macro-economic perspective, on the other hand, has been used to explain the development of agrarian capitalism. From this point of view, it has been argued that during the transition from the late middle ages to early modern times, the ownership structures of the European countryside underwent significant changes. On the one hand, there was a strong accumulation of landownership; on the other hand an increasing segment of the rural population (cotters) was confronted with dwindling farm sizes. Many of them owned little or no arable land whatsoever. In turn, this evolution led to a more market-oriented form of agriculture and the emergence of agrarian capitalism. Although the same general tendencies existed across Europe, the process described above showed vast regional differences, in speed as well as in effect.

For this paper, I propose to examine land ownership and the market for land from a micro-economic perspective aided by the insights given by the New Institutional Economics. Several questions will be investigated. Which institutions (in the broadest sense of the word) were active, and affected the workings of the land market? How did the existing 'social agro system' influence the land market? What can explain the takeoff of both the land and credit markets in Overzenne during the late fifteenth century? Did institutional constraints lessen, as Martha Howell has suggested, or did a more efficient credit market spur on the market for land? What prompted households to enter into either the land or credit market? How does the life-cycle theory as developed by Chayanov hold up for the peasant communities in Overzenne during the transition from the middle ages to the early modern era? How did exogenous shocks (wars, subsistence crises etc...) affect the decisions made by households? Were some households forced to sell off their property due to heavy indebtedness? Did a more efficient credit market induce the over-leverage of some households?

One of the main problems encountered when investigating the rural land market during the Old Regime are the sources. When investigating the land market in a particular locality, the aldermen registers might seem a logical starting point at first. These sources contain detailed information about a vast array of transactions between private persons, including property deeds. However, using aldermen registers for investigating the land market has two major drawbacks. First, since land transactions only make up a relatively small percentage of the total number of transactions, vastly outnumbered by rent transactions, one would almost be looking for a needle in a haystack. Second, while the aldermen registers of major cities in the Southern Low Countries are available from as early

as the fourteenth century, this is not the case for localities in their hinterlands. In rural Flanders, Brabant and Hainaut, most aldermen registers are only fragmentarily preserved from the mid-sixteenth century on. Hence, a year-to-year view of the land market would only be possible from the start of the seventeenth century onwards. Manorial accounts, on the contrary, do not possess the drawbacks mentioned above. Most of them are preserved from the early fifteenth century onwards. In addition, since one had to pay a conveyance tax either when selling real estate or when rents were issued on property, and those receipts were transcribed in the manorial accounts, this particular income entry gives an instant overview of the market activity in a particular year. Thus, using manorial accounts gives us the possibility of investigating both the rural land and credit markets relatively swiftly in a particular locality on a year-to-year basis for a longer period. The main drawback of manorial accounts is that not every land transaction in a particular locality is recorded, since the conveyance tax was only levied on 'cijnsgronden'. Thus, the transmission of freehold land and fiefs escapes the scope of this source. Then again, this should not pose too much of a problem regarding the asset management of households since the possession of freehold land by peasants was relatively limited in the Southern Low Countries.

The domain of Overzenne, situated in the west of the duchy of Brabant, between the rivers Zenne and Dender in close proximity to Brussels, provides an excellent case-study for investigating the role of the household as a formal economic actor in the Southern Netherlands during the transition from the middle ages to early modern times. First, the receipts of the above-mentioned conveyance tax (pond- or coopgeldt) provide us with insight into the market for 'cijnsgronden' in four parishes (Ternat, Lombeek, St-Katherina Lombeek and Wambeek) and let us follow the yearly mutations in landownership between families. Furthermore, for the fifteenth and early sixteenth century two 'cijnsregisters' (drawn up at fifty-year intervals) are preserved in the National Archives in Brussels. The combination of both dynamic and static sources provides us with insight into both the ownership structure of 'cijnsgronden' in the four parishes at specific moments in time and the mutations in between.

About 4000 transactions were recorded in Overzenne between the early fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century. This is quite noteworthy given that on average the four parishes together comprised only 260 households. Thus on average about 20 percent of the households were active, either as buyer or seller, on the land or credit market in a particular year. When only the taxable households are considered (on average about 155 households), this percentage rises to 35 percent. These percentages should of course be adjusted downwards for two reasons. First, since in any given year one household could buy, sell or mortgage multiple plots of land, the participation of households is slightly overestimated. Second, the 4000 transactions are not evenly spread over time.

During the first half of the fifteenth century, the number of registered transactions was relatively low (about 10 per year on average). From the end of the fifteenth century, on the contrary, the average number of transactions rises considerably (30 to 40 per year). This means that household participation in the early fifteenth century was probably lower than the above-mentioned estimate and vice versa for the first half of the sixteenth century. In addition to being large in number, the records also offer very detailed information about both the transaction itself (e.g. surface area, soil type, owners of neighbouring plots) and the contracting parties. This includes the name and surname of the buyer and the seller as well as their respective blood relatives.

The abundance of data gives us the ability to pose several questions, three of which will be examined in our paper. First, which percentage of land was transferred per single year and which factors can explain the observed fluctuations herein? Second, how did the rise of the credit market (which was nearly absent in the early fifteenth century but made up the bulk of the transactions in the first part of the sixteenth century) affect the land market? One could expect for example that a.) established landowners could enlarge their holdings more easily (since they could mortgage their existing property), b.) land prices would rise and c.) the average property size would diminish. Third, can we discern distinctive strategies, patterns and (social) profiles of both buyers and sellers?

This question ties in with the above-mentioned historical debates concerning both the accumulation of land and the part played by the average household in the pre-modern factor markets. To conclude: I propose to investigate the rural land and credit markets in Overzenne during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from a micro-economic perspective. Since only data concerning 'cijnsgronden' will be used, the above-mentioned approach will provide very insightful information about both the inner workings of two rural factor markets and the asset management of households during the transition from the middle ages to early modern times.