

The rural land market in the Duchy of Brabant Fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.

Nicolas De Vijlder, Ghent University
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Introduction

In 2006, for the Corn publication 'Rural history in the North Sea area, an overview of recent research', Erik Thoen and Peter Hoppenbrouwers made a 'status questionis' of Rural Historiography in Belgium and the Netherlands respectively.¹ Besides the fact that they both observed a strong path dependency as to research themes from Belgian and Dutch agricultural historians, Thoen and Hoppenbrouwers separately concluded that much research remained to be done concerning the commercialisation and commodification of the rural countryside in the Low Countries during the middle ages and the early modern period. In the Southern Low Countries in particular, the lack of literature is occasioned by an absence of usable sources as Thoen stated: 'the fact that our knowledge of economic development of rural society is fairly poor is partly due to a lack of statistical data about that [land] market'.² In Great Britain, on the contrary, the commodification of the rural land market is a well-established research subject. The (changing) distribution of land and by extension the rural land market received broad interest by scholars in the past few decades.³ Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton pointed out that this was caused by the fact that research on the land market tied in with the long-running debate in British historiography about the origins of agrarian capitalism.⁴ Since 2006 however, a number of works have been published concerning the commercialisation and commodification of the countryside in the Low Countries.⁵ Still, notwithstanding some

¹ E. Thoen, The rural history of Belgium in the Middle Ages and the Ancien Régime. In: E. Thoen and L. Van Molle, eds., Rural history in the North Sea area. An overview of recent research, Middle Ages – twentieth century, Turnhout, 2006, pp. 177-215; P. Hoppenbrouwers, Dutch rural economy and society in the later medieval period (c.1000--1500): an historiographical survey. In: E. Thoen and L. Van Molle, eds., Rural history in the North Sea area. An overview of recent research, Middle Ages – twentieth century, Turnhout, 2006 pp 249-283.

² E. Thoen, The rural history of Belgium, p 194.

³ For example: Smith 1984, Allen 1988, Hoyle 1990, J. Whittle 2000 J. Mullan and R. Britnell 2010

⁴ B. Campbell and M. Overton, English agrarian history before 1850: an historiographic review. In: E. Thoen and L. Van Molle, eds., Rural history in the North Sea area. An overview of recent research, Middle Ages – twentieth century, Turnhout, 2006, pp 35-73.

⁵ Examples of recent work concerning the commodification and commercialisation of the countryside are: R. Vermoesen, Markttoegang en 'commerciële' netwerken van rurale huishoudens : de regio Aalst, 1650-1800, Ghent, Academia Press, 2011, W. Ronsijn, Commerce and the countryside, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Ghent University, 2011. and B.van Bavel, Manors and Markets, Oxford, Oxford University press, 2010.

existing studies about limited periods and areas, the rural land market in the Southern Netherlands still remains uncharted territory.⁶

Research question

During the transition from the late middle ages to the early modern time, the ownership structures for land on 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 was confronted with dwindling farm sizes. In time this evolution led to a more market-oriented form of agriculture. The larger estates produced a surplus which was sold on the commodities market, whereas cotters (for their survival) were forced to generate other forms of revenue in order to sustain in their subsistence. These strategies could range from producing cash-crops such as flax, working as labourers on nearby farms, developing proto-industrial activities themselves or a combination of all the above. Of course, the route of survival that was chosen, depended largely on the economic context. In coastal Flanders, with the predominance of large-scale market-oriented farming, working as a farmhand was predominant. In inland Flanders, the absence of large farms and a high degree of urbanisation, created the ideal prerequisites for producing cash-crops and developing proto-industrial activities as alternative income-yielding strategies.⁷ The aforementioned redistribution of property took place through the land market, which experienced a remarkable boost during the transition from the late middle ages to the early modern period. From a New Institutional Economics perspective, this surge in activity can be explained by the disappearance of several institutional constraints, such as the disappearance of communal land or the decreased grip of the extended family on the land, and the formalisation of property

6 See for instance: E. Scholliers and F. Daelemans, *De Conjunctuur van het Domein: Herzele 1444-1752*. Brussel : VUB. Centrum sociale structuren en economische conjunctuur, 1981, F.G. Scheelings, 'Pachtprijzen in midden- en zuidwest-Brabant in de zestiende eeuw. Enkele methodologische beschouwingen bij het schetsen van een landbouwconjunctuur', In: *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis*, LXVe jaargang, vol. 1-2, Antwerpen, 1982, pp. 41-64. and F. Daelmans, *Pachten en welvaart op het platteland van Begisch Brabant (15e-18e eeuw)*. In: A.A.G. *Bijdragen*, 1986, pp. 173-175. E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst*, 1987. P.Vandewalle, *Le marché immobilier dans la région de Dunkerque, 1590-1900*. In: M. Dorban and P. Servais, *Les mouvements longs des marchés immobiliers ruraux et urbains en Europe (XVe-XIXe siècles)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994, pp.9-30. B. Van Maelzaeke., 'De financieel-economische politiek van het hospitaal in de 15de en 16de eeuw' In: *Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Oudenaarde en van zijn Kastelrij en van den Lande Tusschen Maercke en Ronne*, 29, 2002, pp. 261-292. M. Limberger, 'Credit, the land market and the connection between the rural and urban economy. The use of Perpetual annuities in Aartselaar (Brabant) from the fourteenth to sixteenth century. In: P.R. Schofield and T. Lambrecht, *Credit and the rural economy in North-western Europe, c.1200-c. 1850*. Turnhout, 2009, pp.63-74. F. De Wever, 'Rents and Selling Prices of Land at Zele, Sixteenth-Eighteenth Century.' In: H. Van der Wee (ed.), *Productivity of land and agricultural innovation in the Low Countries, 1250-1800*. Leuven, University Press, pp.43-65.

7 E. Thoen, 'Social agrosystems' as an economic concept to explain region differences. An essay taking the former county of Flanders as an example (Middle Ages - 19th century). In: P. Hoppenbrouwers and B. J. P. Van Bavel (eds.) *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late Middle Ages - 19th century)*. Turnhout, Brepols, 2004.

rights.⁸ Nevertheless, transaction costs were still high, due to an incomplete market knowledge, a limited number of market parties and a high cost of capital.

Given these two evolutions, two simple (yet crucial) questions might be raised. First, what compelled peasants to buy or sell land, given the still relatively high transaction costs? Second, did the peasants' strategies change when confronted with a more mature market, i.e. with lower transaction costs?

To answer these questions, I will analyse material evidence from the ducal domain of Overzenne, a locality situated approximately 15 kilometres west of Brussels in the Southern Low countries, as a case study. The choice for this locality was prompted by two factors. First, as I will show later, the domain of Overzenne was (in terms of population numbers) hardly affected by the general economic and political crisis of the 1480's. Since population remained reasonably stable throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century, population pressure should therefore not have had any effect on the observed fluctuation in price nor on the average plot size over the period under investigation.

The second reason for selecting Overzenne as a case study stems from the source problem one encounters when investigating the rural land market in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. When researching 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 (generally 5% of the transaction price) 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. As a result, using manorial accounts of the domain of Overzenne gives us the possibility of investigating both the rural land and credit markets relatively swiftly on a year-to-year basis for a longer period. The receipts of the conveyance tax (pond - or coopgeldt) mentioned above

8 B. Van Bavel, *Manors and Markets*, Oxford, Oxford University press, 2010. pp. 162-178.

provide us with insight into the market for 'cijnsgronden' in three parishes (Ternat, St-Katherina-Lombeek and Wambeek) and allow us to track the yearly mutations in landownership between families. While the Duke collected 5% of the value of the transaction in other Brabantine domains (for example 'Het Land van Mechelen' or the manors of Tervuren en Vilvoorde), this wasn't the case in the domain of Overzenne. Here, the receipts of the 'coopgeldt' were split evenly between the Duke and the local lord. Thus, the revenues recorded in the manorial accounts only accounted for 2,5% of the total price.⁹ The main drawback however is that not every land transaction in a particular locality is recorded, since the conveyance tax was only levied on 'cijnsgronden'. Consequently, the transmission of freehold land and fiefs escapes the scope of this source. Then again, this should not pose too much of a problem since the possession of freehold land by peasants was relatively limited in the Southern Low Countries.¹⁰

This paper is structured as follows. First, a short contextualisation of the domain of Overzenne and the three parishes which make out our test-case is given. Next, I will discuss the general tendencies of the land market during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. I will show that during the transition from the middle ages into the early modern time, the land market underwent significant changes. This in turn had profound effects on the economic decisions to be made by the peasants. Finally, it will be investigated how those changes in the 'rules of the game' affected the peasants' behaviour towards the land market.

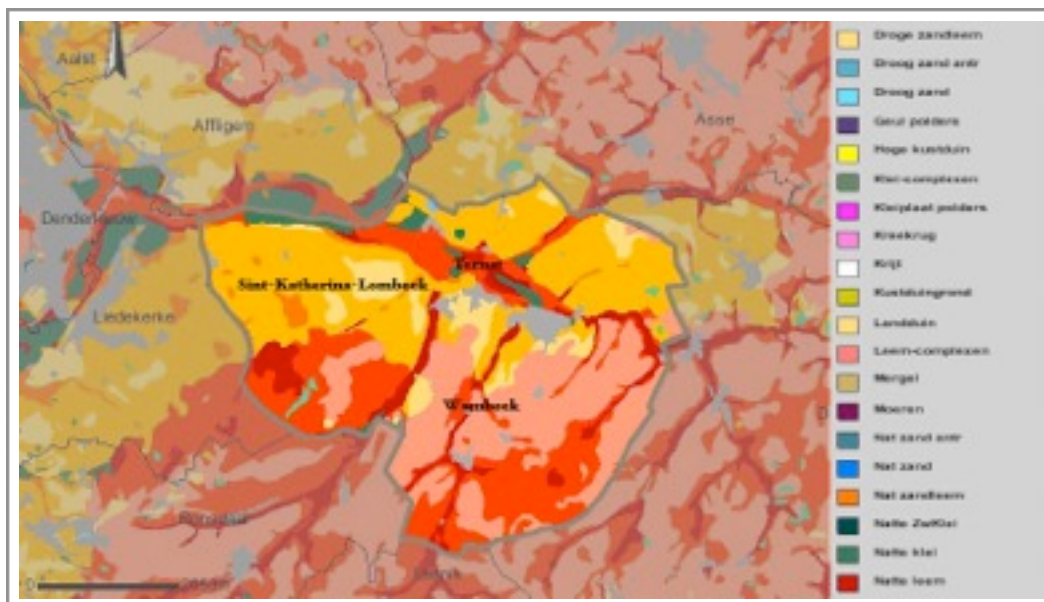
⁹ State Archives Brussels (SAB), Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742.

¹⁰ The feudal court of Brabant could be used to investigate the transfer of fiefs.

Ternat- Wambeek and St-Katherina-Lombeek : contextualisation

The ducal domain of Overzenne is situated in South-Brabant, approximately 15 kilometers west of Brussels. In total, it consisted of 14 parishes.¹¹ Neatly girded by the Dender to the West and the Senne in the East, the domain itself is itself traversed by a dense structure of brooks, creeks and smaller waterways. As is the case for the whole southern region of the duchy of Brabant, and as can be seen on map 1, the soil in the three parishes of our case study mainly consist of loam. Ranging from wet sandy loam in the North to plain loam in the South. Notice how clear the valleys can be traced through the wetter soil consistency (dark red and dark orange). The combination of its high propensity to retain water and nutrients, in combination with good drainage qualities make this soil-type highly fertile and suitable for arable farming and the cultivation of wheat.

Map 1: Soil quality in Ternat-Wambeek and St-Katherina-Lombeek.¹²



During the early middle ages, the three parishes which form our research context, were part of the domain of the Abbey of Nivelles. During the high middle ages the Duke of Brabant gained a foothold through the Van Wezemaal family who constructed a castle in Ternat. The total

¹¹ Asse, Kapelle-op-den-Bos, Hombeek, Zemst, Merchtem, Liezele, Lippelo, Malderen, Steenhuffel, Wambeek, Sint-Katherina-Lombeek, Ternat, Wolvertem and Rossem. Three of those (Ternat, Wambeek and St-Katherina-Lombeek) form the geographical context for this paper.

¹² Source: <<http://geo-vlaanderen.agiv.be>> Consulted on 2/1/12.

surface of the domain was about 27,5 square kilometres, a quarter of which (6,8 square kilometres) were still woodland and heath around the middle of the thirteenth century.¹³

The most drastic change of soil exploitation (and at the same time the most drastic increase in available arable land) within the test region took place during the second half of the thirteenth century, as a result of population pressures, when large strips of wood-and heathland were gradually converted into cultivated land.¹⁴ After this enterprise, the total surface area of the three parishes covered with woodland and heath decreased to about 4,8 square kilometres. At the end of the seventeenth century, land allocation within Ternat, Wambeek and St-Katherina-Lombeek was as follows; arable land amounted for 67 per cent of the total acreage, woodland and heath covered about 19% of the total surface, with pasture covering the remaining 14 per cent.¹⁵

Previous research tends to state that the systematic conversion of heath and woodland into arable land was initiated by the local lord (the family “Van Wezemaal”).¹⁶ Still, one could question the supposed independence of the lord, since the conveyance tax levied on these new tracts of land were in equal measure due to the Duke as to the local lords. Nevertheless, the land-use conversion led ‘from above’ resulted in an orthogonal parcellation (with average plot sizes between 1-2 ‘dagwand’ or 3300 m² to 6600 m², well accessible by different roads (‘Lindesveldstraat’, ‘Terlindenstraat’, ‘Kouterstraat’) and drained by intricate ditch-systems which in turn were connected to the larger brooks.¹⁷ Conversely, a conversion instigated ‘from below’ would have resulted in a much more organically structured field-complex.

For the remainder of the paper, we have the intention to investigate how the land market evolved against a backdrop of a changing distribution of landownership within society, which took place during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Before we can do this it is of prime importance to gain insight in the possible supply and demand for land. In the previous paragraph I already pointed out that total acreage of ‘cijnsgronden’ within the test-region did change in the high middle ages, but not afterwards. How about demand? From an economic perspective a steadily rising rural population (increased demand) combined with the same restricted supply could in itself very well cause a rising price per acre.

13 J. Verbesselt, ‘Het Kadaster, studiebron voor Dorpsgeschiedenis, Wambeek, Ternat en Sint-Katherina-Lombeek. In: Eigen Schoon De Brabander, 1986, p.300

14 J. Verbesselt, *ibidem* p.300.

In the manorial accounts, the newly constructed fields were still referred to by their previous soil use: ‘Breembos’, ‘Klein Beuken’, ‘Groot Beuken’ ‘Buesip’ and ‘Lindeveld’.

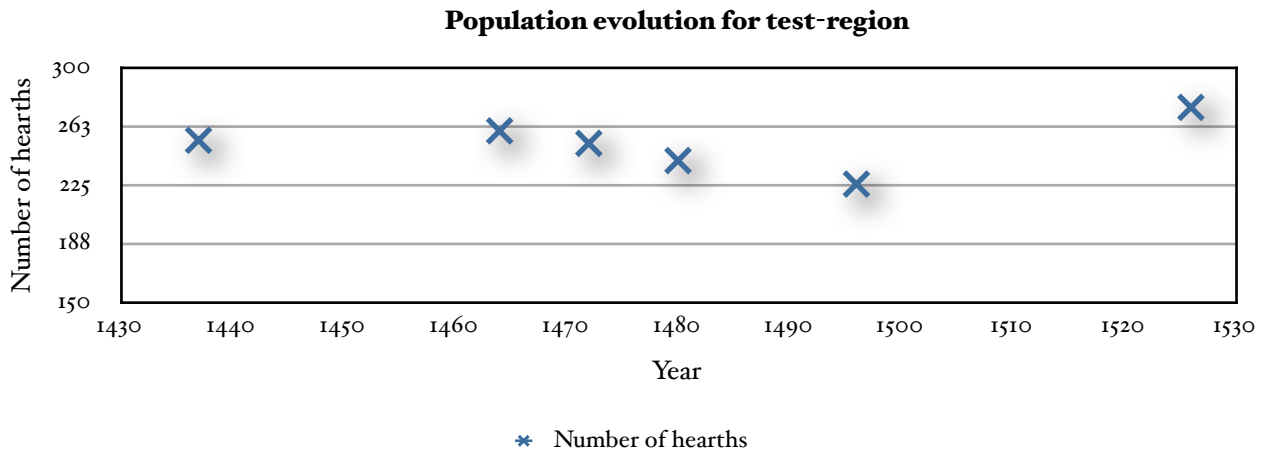
15 J. Verbesselt, *ibidem* p.295

16 J. Verbesselt, *ibidem* p.325

17 SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Censal Register of Overzenne, 44916.

However, during the period under investigation in this paper, roughly from 1400 to 1550 population pressure in the domain of Overzenne was nearly absent. In the fifteenth century, on average, about 250 hearths were counted. During the political and military troubles of the last quarter of the fifteenth century, population decreased just slightly (minus 15 hearths or about 6,25% between 1480 and 1496). This is quite remarkable since in both inland Flanders and the countryside around Leuven, two areas flanking the test region respectively to the east and west, the rural population declined between 35-50 per cent during the same period.¹⁸ Even the surrounding parishes in the west of Brabant were apparently struck harder than the domain of Overzenne.¹⁹ As was the general tendency in the Southern Low Countries during the first half of the sixteenth century, the population recovered from this late medieval demographic crisis. The number of hearths in Wambeek, Ternat and St-Katherina-Lombeek rises, from 225 hearths in 1496 to 274 hearths in 1526. Still, when comparing figures between the first half of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century, the population in our test-region grew only modestly from 1.265 to 1.370 inhabitants.²⁰ As a result, we can safely assume that an increased demand due to a rising population was virtually non-existing.

Graph 1: Population in parishes Wambeek, Ternat and St-Katherina-Lombeek (1437-1526)²¹



¹⁸J. Cuvelier, *Les dénombrements de foyers de Brabant, Quatorzième et Seizième siècle*, Bruxelles, s.n., 1912.

E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst*, 1987, pp.155-160.

¹⁹ Population in other West-Brabantine parishes declined on average with 30-35 per cent. Source: F. Daelemans, *Boeren in oorlogstijd, de sociale economische en demografische gevolgen van de oorlogen op het platteland in Brabant (15e-18e eeuw)*. In: *Mensen in Oorlogstijd*, Brussel, UFSAL, 1988, p. 86.

²⁰ During the same period, rural households in inland Flanders had on average between 2,25 and 3,35 children. Consequently, population number were calculated using an estimation of 5 people per hearth. E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst*, 1987, p.113 and p. 1119.

²¹J. Cuvelier, *Les dénombrements de foyers de Brabant, quatorzième et seizième siècle*, Bruxelles, s.n., 1912.

Long term evolutions.

Over a period of 150 years, from 1403 to 1553, the conveyance tax that forms the basis of our analysis was levied on approximately 3131 transactions.²² For our analysis two 30-year samples, one from 1404 to 1434 and another from 1523 to 1553, were chosen. During both periods the rural economy grew, respectively after the plague stricken fourteenth century and the social and political crisis of the late fifteenth century.²³ During this one and a half century the land market in Overzenne underwent significant changes, as will be shown later on.

Graph 2 gives a summary of the average number of sale transactions per year that were registered in our three parishes. As to be expected, the first half of both the fifteenth and sixteenth century were periods with an increasing number of transactions, given the economic growth. The second half of the fifteenth century on the other hand, was marked by a steep decline in the average number of land sales. This comes as no surprise since the second half of the fifteenth century is generally described as a period of economic and social crisis in Brabant.²⁴ Research on the rural credit market in the rural hinterland of Antwerp saw similar fluctuations in the number of credit transactions.²⁵

22 State Archives Brussels (SAB), Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4373-4742.

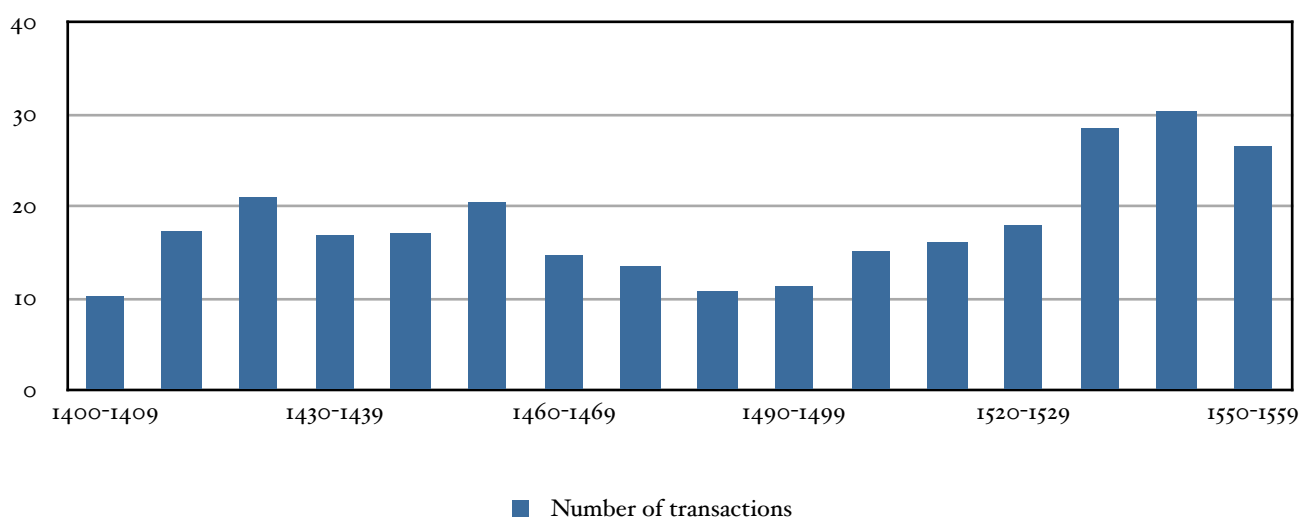
23 Although the effects of the plague in the Southern Low countries shouldn't be overestimated. H. van Werveke, 'De Zwarte Dood in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1349-1351)', *Mededelingen de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie Wetenschappen, klasse der letteren*. 12, 3 (1950). W. P. Blockmans, in 'The social and economic effects of plague in the Low Countries, 1349-1500', *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis* 58 (1980), pp. 833-863. E. Thoen and I. Devos, 'Pest in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden tijdens de middeleeuwen en de moderne tijden', In: *De pest in de Nederlanden*, Koninklijke Academie voor Geneeskunde van België, 199, pp. 109-133.

In any case, the fourteenth century was clearly a period of economic downturn. See: E. Thoen, *Landbouweconomie en bevolking in Vlaanderen gedurende de late Middeleeuwen en het begin van de Moderne Tijden*. Testregio: de kasselrijen van Oudenaarde en Aalst (eind 13de - eerste helft 16de eeuw), Gent, 1988, p. 1022.

24 R. Van Uytven, 'Politiek en Economie. De crisis der late XVe eeuw in de Nederlanden.' In: BTFG, 53 pp 1097-1149; J. Cuvelier, *Les dénombremments de foyers de Brabant, quatorzième et seizième siècle*, Bruxelles, s.n., 1912; H. Van Der Wee, *The Growth of the Antwerp market and the European Economy, (fourteenth-sixteenth centuries)*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1963; M. J. Tits-Dieuaide, *La formation des prix céréalières en Brabant et en Flandre au XVe siècle*, Bruxelles, 1975, pp 315-318; F. Daelmans, *Pachten en welvaart op het platteland van Begisch Brabant. (15e-18e eeuw)*. In: A.A.G. Bijdragen, 1986, pp. 173-175.

25 M. Limberger, *Credit, land market and the connection between rural and urban economy: the use of perpetual annuities in Aartselaar (Brabant), from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century*, In: P. Schofield and T. Lambrecht (eds), *Credit and the rural economy in North-western Europe, c.1200-c.1850*, 2009, pp. 66-68.

Graph 2: Average number of sale transactions per year²⁶



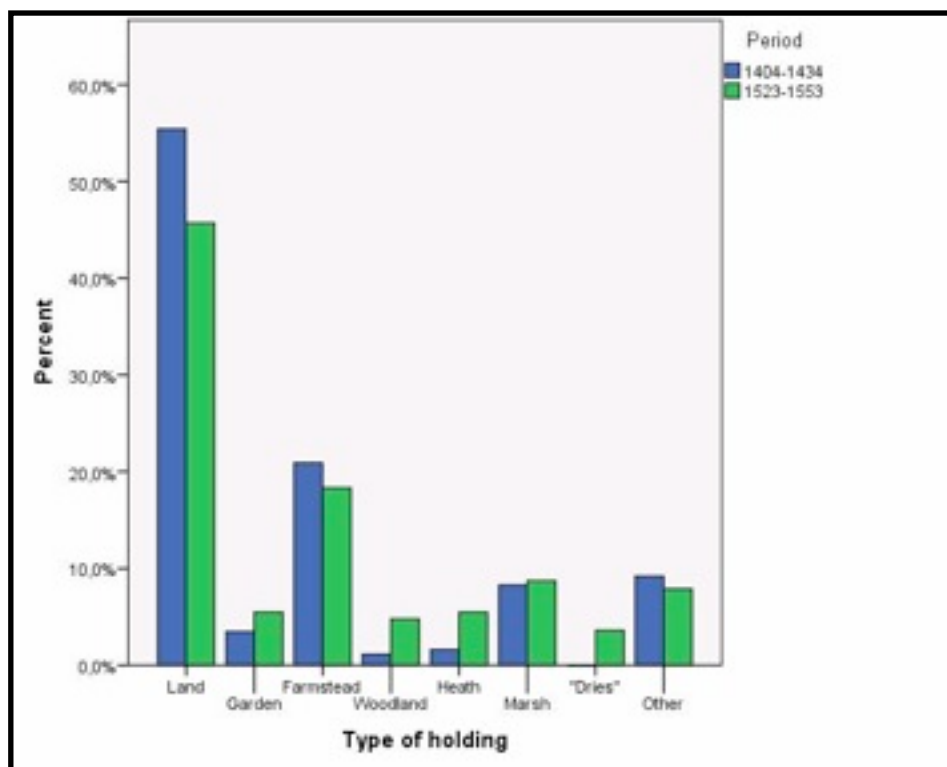
Despite the fact that the first half of both the fifteenth and sixteenth century are generally described as being periods of economic growth, the average number of transactions per year were very different. In the early fifteenth century, on average 16 land sales per year were recorded in the three villages. A hundred years later, between 1523 and 1553, during a period of economic growth, around 25 land sales per year were recorded (a growth of 56,25 per cent), within the same community. Keep in mind that over the same period, population only rose with 8%. Next to an apparent higher participation of the rural community, we also notice a diversification of the types of holding that were transferred on the market. (Graph 3 and Table 2) In both periods, land followed by farmsteads were by far the predominant type of holdings to exchange hands. However, when comparing both periods the declining importance of both types of property is noticeable. The total number of plots of land and farmsteads sold rose in absolute numbers, but relatively speaking it declined quite sharply.²⁷ Other types of land such as gardens, heath, woodland, orchard and even hop-gardens grew in importance. The rise in the number of transactions would imply that the number of square metres used for these purposes has increased. As a result, the diversification of land use (i.e land that was being used for other purposes than arable farming) increased. This evolution is in part the result of the growing demand for foodstuffs from Brussels. The cultivation of hop for example was capital intensive and highly specialised. The mere fact that no transactions of hop-gardens occurred during the whole of the fifteenth century, but several of them were bought and sold in the first half of the sixteenth century when at the same time the population of Brussels recovered from a

²⁶ State Archives Brussels (SAB), Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742.

²⁷ See table 2 for exact numbers.

demographic low-point, is probably no coincidence.²⁸ Moreover, it is a clear indication of the growing economic importance of Brussels for its hinterland. More research will of course be necessary to further substantiate this claim.

Graph 3: Holding types in sales transactions ²⁹



The marked rise in the number of sold gardens, could be explained in two ways. Research by Charruadas showed that villages in the immediate vicinity of Brussels (St-Jan-Molenbeek) saw a surge in the cultivation of pulses and other vegetables on large gardens surrounding the farmsteads, during the 14th century.³⁰ The rising number (both in absolute and relative terms) of sold gardens could consequently be interpreted as a result of the growth of the population of Brussels. Demand for vegetables increased, therefore peasants were more eager to get hold of those tracts of land on which they could cultivate them. Since demand for gardens went up, the price rose and more peasants were inclined to sell. Although this line of thought might seem plausible from an economic point of view, it begs the question why peasants would be inclined to sell land which by definition (they were the lots adjacent to their farmstead) were an integral

²⁸ All holding types representing less than 2 per cent of all transactions are summed up in the column 'Other'. For example, since hop-gardens only amounted to 0,9 percent of all transactions, they were grouped with mills, orchards and ponds in the final category.

²⁹ State Archives Brussels (SAB), Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

³⁰ P. Charruadas. Molenbeek-Saint-Jean: Un village bruxellois au Moyen Age, Brussels, 2004. pp.97-115.

part of their farm. Selling those plots of land would literally imply giving up the last straw. From this perspective, the rising number of sold gardens, could act as an indicator for the increasing impoverishment of certain groups within the rural society.

The receipts of the conveyance tax not only gave information about the type of land that was sold, but in many cases also specified the acreage of the sold plot. Already at the start of the fifteenth century average plot sizes in the Overzenne region were very small (0,8 hectares on average). As can be seen in table 3, average plot size even diminished between periods 1 and 2. This is especially true for land, woodland and heath, since average plot size decreased approximately by half. Not only did the average plot size diminish, the spread between the largest and smallest plots decreased as well (see also graphs 4 through 7 in the appendix). Comparing the average plot size of sold gardens would lead us to believe this type of land followed the same tendency. The small number of transaction in the earlier period implies that mean and median aren't significant, as far as garden, woodland and heath are concerned. However, in most cases minimum and maximum are lower in the latter period compared to the earlier period, which would lead to the conclusion that average plot size actually did decline.

Table 4: Average plot size per type of land in hectares ³¹

Type of land	Periode	Mean	Median	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Land	1404-1434	0,80257	0,62880	210	4,951	0,079	5,030
	1523-1553	0,50691	0,31440	216	3,122	0,022	3,144
Garden	1404-1434	0,90437	0,11950	3	2,436	0,079	2,515
	1523-1553	0,25432	0,12420	14	1,229	0,028	1,258
Woodland	1404-1434	2,43645	1,72910	4	5,030	0,629	5,659
	1523-1553	1,10956	1,25750	17	2,122	0,079	2,201
Heath	1404-1434	0,83087	0,62880	7	1,729	0,157	1,886
	1523-1553	0,49044	0,31440	24	1,100	0,157	1,258

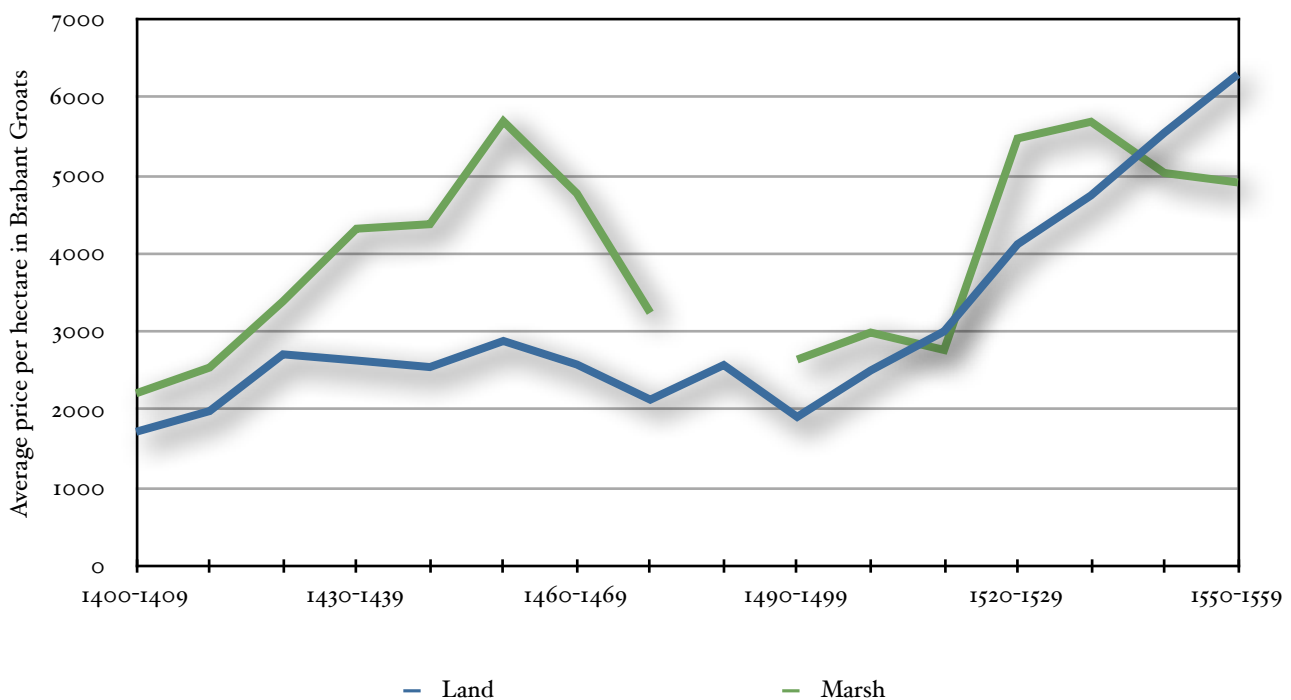
So far, evidence not only seems to suggest that Overzenne had a social property distribution comparable to inland Flanders at the start of the fifteenth century. It was even further

³¹ Note: Only those types of land where the average acreage between both periods were significantly different (Mann-Whitney test (using exact estimations) p-value 0,1) are shown in this table. SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

solidified through parcellation (and as the box-plots suggest standardisation) of holdings throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. However, in inland Flanders this parcellation went hand in hand with a rising population. As we have seen, this was not the case in Overzenne, since population density between 1404-1434 and 1524-1553 increased only from 46 people per square kilometre to 50 per square kilometre.

To get a clear grasp of the living standard of the late medieval and early modern peasant within the region of South Brabant, it is interesting to compare the average price per hectare of land through time. Did land prices in Overzenne follow the same upward trend as most foodstuffs and industrial goods during the first half of the sixteenth century?³² As can be seen on graph 8, the average price of land fluctuated heavily throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Still, some general trends can be distilled.

Graph 8: Average price per hectare (index)³³



First, as to be expected, marsh (due to the deposition of nutrients during the winter months when the fields were under water) was more expensive than ‘average’ land. Second, although the late medieval crisis remained relatively unnoticeable in terms of population numbers, land prices were clearly impacted by the economic and social crisis that swept the Brabantine countryside. Prices declined from about 2.300 Brabant groats per hectare between 1470-1489,

³² H. Van der Wee, *The growth of the Antwerp market and the European economy (fourteenth-sixteenth centuries)*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1963. pp. 170-210 and pp. 269-331.

³³ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, *Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742*.

to 1.910 Brabant groats at the end of the fifteenth century. As such, the economic and social crisis in Brabant in the second half of the fifteenth century is clearly noticeable in the nominal price evolution of both land and marsh. From the end of the fifteenth century onwards a clear recovery is noticeable, with land prices dramatically increasing from 1.910 Brabant groats to 6.295 Brabant groats at the middle of the sixteenth century. Consequently, land prices in Overzenne seem to correspond with the fiscal land value in the nearby parish of Groot-Bijgaarden in 1570.³⁴

As previously mentioned population density within the three parishes changed little during the fifteenth and sixteenth century (around 50 people per square kilometre), and thus wasn't a driving force behind the price movements of land and marsh. This doesn't mean population density didn't matter. Comparing Overzenne with Herzele provides an indication as to what effect population density had on land prices. Herzele, situated 20 kilometres west of Overzenne, with a comparable soil consistency had a population density of about 75 around 1560, typical for the social-property system of inland Flanders.³⁵ Being 50 per cent more densely populated, apparently made a huge difference with land prices being on average 20 to 30 per cent higher in Herzele.

However, graph 8 showed average land prices in absolute terms. Consequently it doesn't take into account the rising prices of the goods the land produced. However, the growth of the Brabantine cities in the first half of the sixteenth century (the most renowned example is Antwerp of course, but the population numbers of Leuven and Brussels followed along similar lines) brought with them an increased demand for foodstuff.³⁶ This led to marked increases in grain prices from the first half of the sixteenth century. Previous research has shown that those were a big driving force behind the evolution of land prices up until the nineteenth century.³⁷ Consequently, land prices, expressed in litres grain enable us to track the real price movements

34 Using the registers of the 100th penny tax, Limberger calculated that the fiscal value of land per hectare was about 6.680 Brabant groats in Groot-Bijgaarden. Other surrounding villages such as Asse, Zellik and Sint-Kwintens-Lennik give similar prices. Source: M. Limberger, Mapping fiscal land values. Alva's 100th-penny tax and its use as a source for the reconstruction of land values in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century. Paper presented at the symposium: "The Economic History of the Low Countries before 1850", Antwerp, November 2004.

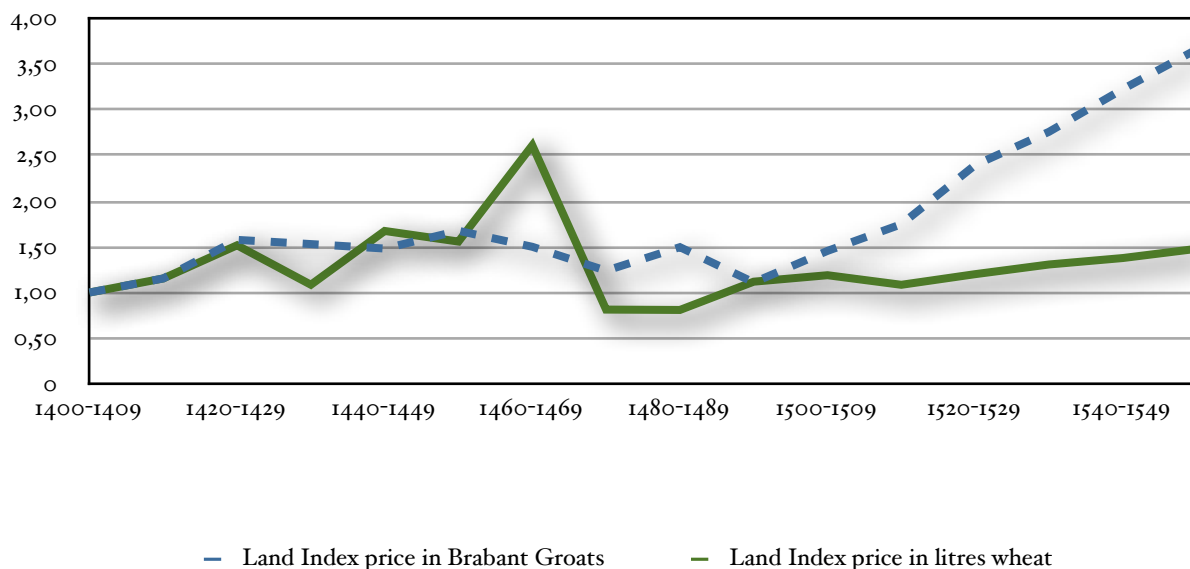
35 J. De Brouwer, Demografische evolutie van het land van Aalst : 1570-1800, Brussel, Pro Civitate, 1968, 232p.
E. Scholliers and F. Daelemans, De Conjunctuur van het Domein: Herzele 1444-1752. Brussel : VUB. Centrum sociale structuren en economische conjunctuur, 1981, p.175

36 H. Van der Wee, The growth of the Antwerp market and the European economy (fourteenth-sixteenth centuries), The Hague, Nijhoff, 1963. and J. Cuvelier, Les dénombrements de foyers de Brabant, Quatorzième et Seizième siècle, Bruxelles, s.n., 1912, pp. I-LVII. B. Blondé and M. Limberger, De gebroken welvaart. In: De Geschiedenis van Brabant van het hertogdom tot heden. 2004, Waanders, pp.307-330. For the influence of Antwerp on its rural hinterland see: M. Limberger, Sixteenth-century Antwerp and its rural surroundings, Turnhout, Brepols, 2008.

37 J. Heffer, Le prix de la terre dans le Missouri (1860-1870), In: Histoire et Sociétés Rurales, 2009, pp 81-108.
E. Scholliers and F. Daelemans, De Conjunctuur van het Domein: Herzele 1444-1752. Brussel: VUB. Centrum sociale structuren en economische conjunctuur, 1981, pp.59-62.

of land. In other words, it enables us to estimate the real cost for peasants to enlarge their holdings. If land prices went up, without the prices for agricultural crops following the same trend, it would have become progressively more expensive for peasants to enlarge their holdings.

Graph 9: Average land prices per hectare in Brabant Groats and litres wheat (index)³⁸



Graph 9 compares the land price index in Brabant groats in nominal terms and in real terms, the latter being calculated in litres of wheat. Whereas in nominal terms prices for land seemed relatively stable throughout the first half of the fifteenth century, this seems no longer to be the case in real terms. From 1440 onward, real land prices increased massively. As a result it became harder for peasants to enlarge their holdings through the land market. Under the assumption that land productivity and yield per acre remained the same, the expected break-even point for a peasant in the second and third quarter of the fifteenth century, was on average three times longer than of a peasant in the first of fourth quarter of the sixteenth century.³⁹ From the 1470s onwards however, real prices fell drastically, below the levels attained at the start of the fifteenth century. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century real prices started a slow upward moving trend, which continued well into the first half of the sixteenth century. Between our two sample periods the average price per hectare land in litres

³⁸ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742.

³⁹ The cost recovery time regarding land purchases is defined as number of times wheat had to be sown, harvested and sold before the acquisition cost were earned back. Working under the assumption that all net grain yields were sold on the market and excluding cost of credit. Figures were calculated as follows: $4.036,32/1.168 = 2,33$ and $5.671,31/1.168 = 3,28$. Source for data concerning net yield per hectare: M.J. Tits-Dieuaide, *La formation des prix céréalières en Brabant et en Flandre au XVe siècle*, Bruxelles, 1975, pp 315-318. And M.J. Tits-Dieuaide, *Cereal yields around Louvain, 1404-1729*. In: H. Van Der Wee and E. Van Cauwenberghé (eds.), *Productivity of land and agricultural innovation in the Low-Countries, 1250-1800*. Leuven, University Press, 1978, pp. 100-101.

wheat rose about 41 per cent, from 4.036,32 litres to 5.671,31 litres. With a net yield per hectare of about 11,68 hectolitres, these figures imply a cost recovery time of about 3,45 and 4,85 respectively. To conclude, since real land prices rose, and to the extent that land productivity did not increase in the same way, access to land got more expensive.

In the previous paragraphs, we saw that three important evolutions occurred in the South Brabantine land market during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. First, the total number of land transactions rose with about 40 per cent between 1404-1434 and 1523-1553. During the same period, the population only rose with 8%, which seems to imply a higher percentage of the community interacting with the land market. Second, during the same timeframe average traded property size halved. Third, between the early fifteenth and the middle of the sixteenth century, real prices per hectare increased with 50 per cent, without a substantial increase in land productivity.⁴⁰ Consequently, it seems that expanding the family farm in the first half of the fifteenth century would be significantly easier than in the first half of the sixteenth century. Yet apparently market participation was higher between 1523-1553 than between 1404-1434. These results give rise to a number of questions as to the evolution of the behaviour of market participants, which will be addressed in the following paragraph.

⁴⁰ M.J. Tits-Dieuaide, Cereal yields around Louvain, 1404-1729. In: H. Van Der Wee and E. Van Cauwenberghe (eds.), *Productivity of land and agricultural innovation in the Low-Countries, 1250-1800*. Leuven, University Press, 1978, pp. 100-101.

Peasants activity on the land market

Identifying different social strata within a village community in the late middle ages is never an easy exercise. In the ideal scenario we would have tax lists at our disposal, but these are absent for Overzenne and most of Brabant during the fifteenth century. For the sixteenth century, we are much better informed about individual wealth through the tax assessment lists of Alva's hundredth penny tax. However, these tax lists are not preserved for the parishes under consideration. As a result, for the time being, the manorial accounts themselves are used to identify some social strata within the peasant community. This was done in three ways. First, the receipts of the conveyance tax themselves give us some indication as to the social position of either the buyer or the seller (nobility, clergy etc...). Second, since the transactions were carried out by the aldermen of Wambeek, their names were transcribed together with the transactions in the accounts. The third way how I determined social strata was through the rent transactions, on which a conveyance tax was due as well. Persons who were active as a creditor at more than 4 different times during a 30-year period were considered as being part of the upper social strata within the community. The same goes for families, but they had to be creditor at least at eight different years during a 30-year period.⁴¹

Earlier research on the dominance of either the (local) elite or the peasants showed varying results, depending on the socio-economic context. Phillip Schofield noticed a dominance of local elites (both economical and political) on the rural land and credit market in fourteenth century Suffolk.⁴² Michael Limberger as well saw a predominance of local elites, in combination with burgers on the rural credit market in sixteenth century Aartselaar.⁴³ Craig Muldrew on the other hand stated that the factor-markets in rural seventeenth century England levelled out socio-economic differences.⁴⁴ Erik Thoen and Tim Soens likewise

⁴¹ This methodology was chosen to avoid marking people wrongfully as part of the upper strata. Those who invested in different annuities but only during one year (for example due to sudden excess liquidity due to an inheritance) were not considered to be part of the upper tier of the peasant society. Furthermore, I fully realise that the methodology described in the text mixes a socio-political division of society with a socio-economic one. Yet, the number of transactions where nobelmen and clergy were either buyers or sellers amounted to less than 2 percent of the total transactions between 1404 and 1553. As a results, I opted to define both the socio-economic and socio-political upper strata of the community as the same upper tier group.

⁴² P.R. Schofield, The social economy of the medieval village in the early fourteenth century. In: *Economic History Review*, 61, 2008, pp.38-63.

⁴³ The relatively high percentage of burgers was caused by the economic growth of Antwerp in the first half of the sixteenth century. M. Limberger, Credit, land market and the connection between rural and urban economy : the use of perpetual annuities in Aartselaar (Brabant), from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, In: P. Schofield and T. Lambrecht (eds), *Credit and the rural economy in North-western Europe, c.1200-c.1850*, 2009, pp. 66-68. and M. Limberger, *Sixteenth-century Antwerp and its rural surroundings*, Turnhout, 2008.

⁴⁴ C. Muldrew, Credit and the ChamberChambers: Debt Litigation in a Seventeenth-Century Urban Community. In: *Economic History Review*, 46, 1993, pp 23-38.

observed a high peasant participation on local land markets in inland Flanders.⁴⁵ As can be seen in tables 6 and 7 (appendix) the lower tier of the community were the predominant buyers and sellers in both periods. However, the lower tier of the community was much more prone to sell land than to buy it, and vice-versa for the upper tier of society (table 9). Most of the people in group 1 also bought land just once during their lifetime, whereas around half of the upper tier bought land multiple times during each 30-year period.⁴⁶

Table 9: Buy/sell ratio (1404-1434/1523-1553).⁴⁷

Period	Social position of buyer	Buy / sell ratio
1404-1434	Lower tier (group 1)	0,73
	Upper Tier (group 2)	1,92
1523-1553	Lower tier (group 1)	0,74
	Upper Tier (group 2)	1,83

In both periods we observe that the average plot size of the transferred holdings for both social groups in the case they were buyers weren't significantly different.⁴⁸ In case they were sellers, we see a significant difference in the average size of the holdings they sold. Lower tier peasants on average sold 0,96 hectare during period 1 whereas the upper tier of society only sold 0,60 hectare land on average.⁴⁹ Since group 1 were as a whole were net-sellers between 1404 and 1434, distribution of land most definitely shifted between both groups. For the second period there is no significant difference between the average plot size sold by group 1 and 2. Still, the lower tier group were net-sellers, so again distribution must have shifted between both groups. Further evidence for a redistribution of property within the community is given in table 10. In the second period, both the upper and lower tier of the community intensified their activity levels on the land market. Whereas activity levels of the lower tier rose with approximately 40 percent, the upper tier stepped up its activity levels with more

⁴⁵ E. Thoen and T. Soens (2004). Appauvrissement et endettement dans le monde rural: étude comparative du crédit dans les différents systèmes agraires en Flandre au bas Moyen Age et au début de l'Epoque Moderne. Il mercato della terra: secc. 13-18. Prato, Instituto Internazionale die Storia Economica "F. Datini": pp. 703-720.

⁴⁶ See table 9 in appendix.

⁴⁷ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

⁴⁸ In the first period, group 1 bought plots with an average size of 8.356m², versus 9.390m² for group 2. In the second period, the lower tier group bought plots with an average size of 6.968m², versus 7.261m² for the upper tier group.

⁴⁹ A t-test for independent samples gave the following results. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances: 0,002 significance for t-test for Equality of Means: 0,033. For full statistics see appendix (Statistics 1)

than 78 percent. Consequently this evolution even enhanced the change in property distribution between upper and lower tier.

Table 10: Changing activity levels of lower and upper tier (1404-1434/1523-1553).⁵⁰

	Lower Tier	Upper Tier
	Percentage change (p2 versus p1)	Percentage change (p2 versus p1)
Buyers	41%	78%
Sellers	39%	87%

What could explain this behaviour? Why were the lower tiers of the rural society more inclined (or forced) to sell than the upper tiers? For coastal Flanders, Soens observed a similar shift in the distribution of land within society. Among others, the dike maintenance became increasingly more expensive in this highly fertile, but low-lying area of the Southern Low Countries. Small landholders couldn't sustain this capital intensive form of agriculture and were thus forced to sell their lands.⁵¹ But, this explanatory model only works in the specific geographical context of coastal Flanders. Macro-economic shocks could play a role as well. Zvi Razi pointed out that in times of economic crisis: *“Large- holders suffered losses along with everyone else in the village when the harvests failed, but they were able to sustain these losses better than other villagers. During these crises they not only succeeded in feeding their families, but were able to lend money and corn to their poorer neighbours and to buy and lease their lands. Middleholders [and smallholders], when the harvests failed, as they often did in the pre-plague era, could not make ends meet, and often they had no choice but to sub-let or sell land. Among the poorest families, the incomes which cottagers and smallholders obtained from their land or small workshops were too low to satisfy the needs of their families. In order to subsist, poor villagers had to supplement their incomes by working on the demesne or on the farms of better off villagers.”*⁵²

The evidence seems to suggest that a likewise evolution occurred in Overzenne, but contrary to the observations of Razi, both periods under consideration were not characterised by prolonged economic hardship. This begs the question why group 1 was a net seller.

⁵⁰ Calculated using tables 8 and 9.

⁵¹ T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)*, Ghent, Academia Press, 2009.

⁵² Z. Razi, (1981). “Family, Land and the Village Community in the Later Medieval England.” *Past and Present*, 93, 1981, pp. 3-36.

Diverging reasons for selling.

At the start of the fifteenth century, nominal land prices were low and leasehold was relatively expensive.⁵³ The upper tier of the community, sold land more after and inheritance than group 1.⁵⁴ Given the high lease prices, the relatively limited credit possibilities (see next paragraph) and the low net worth of land, lower tier peasants were less inclined to sell land after they inherited it. Consequently, they'd rather hold on to them and cultivated those plots themselves. In the second period, characterised by high nominal land prices and low real lease prices however, the reverse was true. Sellers from the lower tier of the rural community were much more eager to sell land after they received it from an inheritance, as can be seen in table 10. What can explain this high percentage of post-mortem land sales, in particular with the low tier group? In rural historiography, acting out of the joint ownership that arose between siblings and last-living parent after the death of one parent has been singled out as one of the most important reasons for the percentages of post mortem sales.⁵⁵ But then why would there be such a difference between the upper and lower tier of the community? Perhaps because holdings of the low tier peasant were smaller and thus harder to split evenly between the remaining relatives. Even working under the assumption that post mortem sales of group 1 were equal to those of group 2 (therefore supposing indivisibility of their holdings wasn't a factor of influence in the decision of selling land after an inheritance), the buy/sell ratio would still remain negative at 0,874.⁵⁶

⁵³ F. Daelmans, *Pachten en welvaart op het platteland van Begisch Brabant. (15e-18e eeuw)*. In: A.A.G. Bijdragen, 1986, pp. 173-175.

⁵⁴ The receipts of the conveyance tax indicated when a plot was sold as a result of an inheritance. Although we should be aware that the results for the first period could be biased, since during the early fifteenth century, the manorial accounts gave less frequently other information about the transaction than the names of the buyer(s), seller(s), the location of the plot and the price at which it was sold.

⁵⁵ P. Godding, *Le droit privé dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux du 12e au 18e siècle*, Académie royale de Belgique, Bruxelles, 1987, pp. 270-272 and M. Howell, *Commerce before capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 49-145.

⁵⁶ Calculated as follows: Number of post-mortem sales by group 1, under the assumption that percentage of post-mortem sales of group 1 equals that of group 2: $(116/24,7) * 15,1 = 71$.
Total group 1 sales between 1523 to 1553, corrected with new post-mortem sales: $470 - 71 = 399$
New buy/sell ratio: $349/399 = 0,874$

Table II: Cross-tabulation Reasons for selling/Seller Cross (1404-1434/1523-1553).⁵⁷

Period	Reason for selling		Count	Seller		Total
				Lower tier (group 1)	Upper tier (group 2)	
1404-1434		Post-mortem	Count	8	3	11
			% within Seller	2,4%	3,8%	2,7%
		Inter-vivos	Count	329	75	404
			% within Seller	97,6%	96,2%	97,3%
1523-1553		Post-mortem	Count	116	22	138
			% within Seller	24,7%	15,1%	22,4%
		Inter-vivos	Count	354	124	478
			% within Seller	75,3%	84,9%	77,6%

Furthermore, the 22,4 per cent post-mortem sales of land in sixteenth century Overzenne are substantially higher than those of fourteenth century Suffolk and fifteenth through sixteenth century Norfolk.⁵⁸ This ‘cash-in’ strategy wielded by both social groups, but especially by the lower tier, can be explained as follows: after peasants were bequeathed a plot of land, selling the land and using the money either to invest in annuities or use it for day to day expenses probably seemed a proper alternative as to holding on to the land, given the high nominal prices. A similar line of thought was constructed by John Mullan and Richard Britnell, to explain the declining take-up of inheritances by heirs: *‘It was more commonly the result of the facility with which heirs could obtain alternative and superior assets’*.⁵⁹

Opting out of buying land?

In the previous paragraph I mentioned that the reason the lower tier of the rural society was less active as a buyer than as a seller, can be explained not only through diverging motives for selling but also because they might be less active as a buyer than the high tier group. On the one hand, this could be because they actively opted out of the land market, and chose to lease land. For example when buying land in relative terms, taking into account the cost of capital, was more expensive than leasing it. On the other hand, they could be prevented from market participation by lack of funds or their inability to acquire credit. Whether it was more profitable to buy land than to lease it depended on different factors, such as the difference between lease

⁵⁷ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

⁵⁸ Only 12 per cent of all sales in Hinderclay were post-mortem. Own calculations using P.R. Schofield, The social economy of the medieval village in the early fourteenth century. In: Economic History Review, 61,2008, p.46. For the fifteenth through sixteenth century, Whittle had the same proportion as Schofield. J. Whittle, The development of agrarian capitalism, land and labour in Norfolk, 1440-1580, Oxford, Clarendon press, 2000, pp. 85-178.

⁵⁹ J. Mullan and R. Britnell, Land and family. Trends and local variations in the peasant land market on the Winchester bishopric estates,1263-1415. Hatfield, University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010,pp.89-90

prices expressed as a yield and the cost of capital as well as the availability of free- and leasehold land. Within the three parishes, leasehold must have been a proper option for peasants, due to the prominent presence of religious institutions (the Abbey of Nijvel, the Abbey of Affligem and the Abbey of Groot Bijgaarden) in the surroundings.⁶⁰ Creating an economic model to quantify whether buying or leasing land was the cheaper option doesn't fall within the scope of this paper. Furthermore this would require an in depth analysis into which elements prevented or ameliorated access to credit, and the workings of the rural credit market in general.⁶¹ As for now, I will only briefly discuss the access to credit and the relative price difference between the land and the lease market.

Access to credit

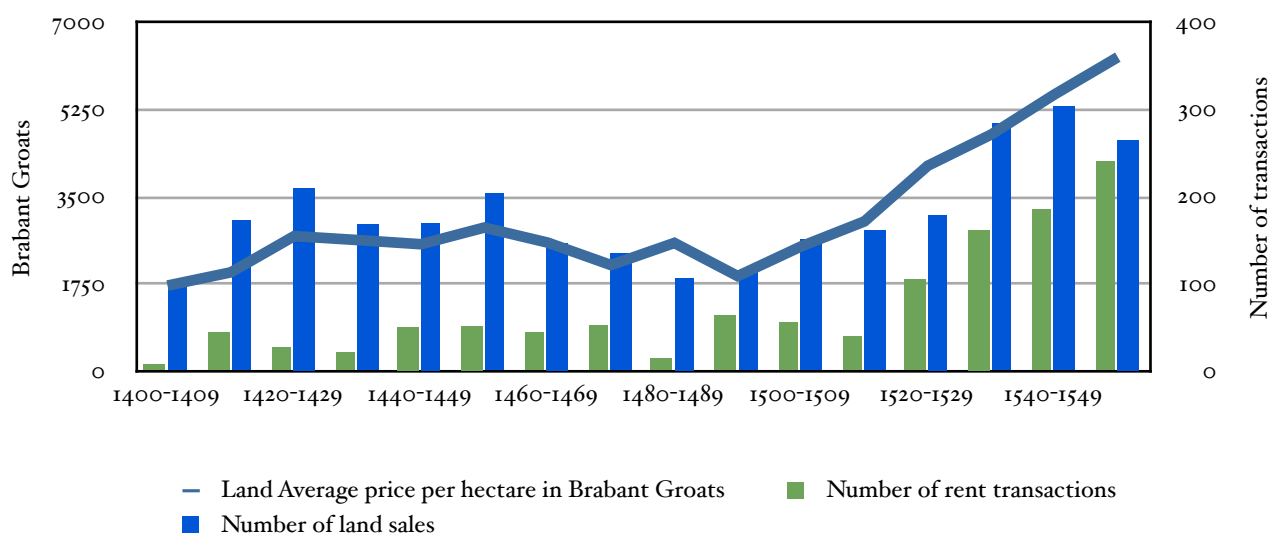
The receipts of the conveyance tax which were used to analyse the land market in Overzenne, did not only contain sales transactions. When an annuity was sold with a 'cijnsgrond' as collateral, the conveyance tax was due as well. The rural credit market underwent significant changes between 1403-1434 and 1523-1553. In the fifteenth century, we have on average 40 rent transactions per decennium. Compared to Aartselaar for example, a small parish of only 350 inhabitants situated 10 kilometres south of Antwerp, the number of rent transactions per year in Overzenne were relatively low.⁶² Between 1523 and 1553 a boom in the credit market is clearly visible with on average 173 annuities sold per decennium. The rising number of annuity sales from the last decennium of the fifteenth century onwards, indicates that accessing credit during the second period became increasingly less difficult.

⁶⁰ 'Abbaye de Grand-Bigard' in: *Monasticon Belge*, IV, vol. I, 1964, pp. 219-242; P. Lindemans, 'Pachthoven der abdij van Groot-Bijgaarden. Het Hof ter Bruggen', in: *ESB*, XXI, 1938, pp. 161-169; P. Lindemans, 'Pachthoven der abdij van Groot-Bijgaarden. Het goed te Berchem', in: *ESB*, XXII, 1939, pp. 193-212; P. Lindemans, 'Pachthoven der abdij van Groot-Bijgaarden. Het Waarboomhof te Groot-Bijgaarden', in: *ESB*, XXIII, 1940, pp. 161-162; P. Lindemans, 'Pachthoven der abdij van Groot-Bijgaarden. Het hof te Bever te Strombeek', in: *ESB*, XXIII, 1940, pp. 193-199; P. Lindemans, 'Pachthoven der abdij van Groot-Bijgaarden. Het hof te Nieuwenhove te Zellik', in: *ESB*, XXIV, 1941, pp. 315-320; P. Lindemans, 'Pachthoven der abdij van Groot-Bijgaarden. De hoven te Dilbeek', in: *ESB*, XXV, 1942, pp. 97-110.

⁶¹ Obviously solvency and landholding are factors to take into account, but even social bonds could play an important role. E. Thoen and T. Soens, *Credit in rural Flanders, c.1250-c.1600: its variety and significance*. In: P.R. Schofield and T. Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the rural economy in North-western Europe, c.1200-c.1850*, pp. 19-38. P.R. Schofield, *The social economy of the medieval village in the early fourteenth century*. In: *Economic History Review*, 61, 2008, pp. 38-63

⁶² On average, there were four annuity sales per year in Aartselaar, which is about the same as in Overzenne. However, the population of Wambeek, Ternat en St-Katherina-Lombeek was significantly higher. M. Limberger, *Credit, land market and the connection between rural and urban economy: the use of perpetual annuities in Aartselaar (Brabant), from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century*. In: P. Schofield and T. Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the rural economy in North-western Europe, c.1200-c.1850*, 2009, pp. 66-68.

Graph 10: Average price per hectare and number of land and annuity sales per year



Even more interesting is the interaction between the average price per hectare in Brabant Groats and the number of rent transactions.⁶³ Seemingly, the rise in nominal land prices in the first half of the sixteenth century, spurred on the market for credit. In other words, the rise in both nominal and real land prices was sustainable, in other words didn't cause a collapse in the average number of land transactions per year, because credit was readily available. Within this rural community, the upper tier of society was by far the biggest creditor, whereas both the upper and lower tier were in equal measure debtor.⁶⁴ The willingness of the upper tier to extend such an amount of credit, was due to the fact that the collateral values were rising (nominal land prices went up). For the same reason, lower tier debtors were willing to take on debt. Although this 'willingness' should be nuanced. A particular moment in someone's life-cycle, could cause a pressing need to enlarge one's holdings and therefore force them to take on additional debt (all the more so if no leasehold was available).

Land and lease market, two interconnected barrels?

Previous research on the South-West Brabantine region indicated rising lease prices, both in real and nominal terms from 1445 onwards.⁶⁵ As for the sixteenth century, with its steeply rising nominal land prices, but only moderately rising real prices, nominal lease prices increased only moderately during the first half of the sixteenth century. Consequently, real

⁶³ Correlation coefficient of 0,93.

⁶⁴ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742 .

⁶⁵ F. Daelmans, Pachten en welvaart op het platteland van Begisch Brabant. (15e-18e eeuw). In: A.A.G. Bijdragen, 1986, pp. 173-175.

lease prices decreased.⁶⁶ When peasants were confronted with the need to enlarge their holdings, a phenomenon which occurred either when a new household was created, or when an existing household saw their both their demand for food and the supply of labour increased (e.g. a child was old enough to work on the family's farm), families were confronted with a tough decision. They could decide to purchase land through the market and thus satisfy their need for additional land indefinitely (or at least until the next child was old enough to work the land) or they could take out a lease for a fixed period, with payments payable either in kind or money.⁶⁷

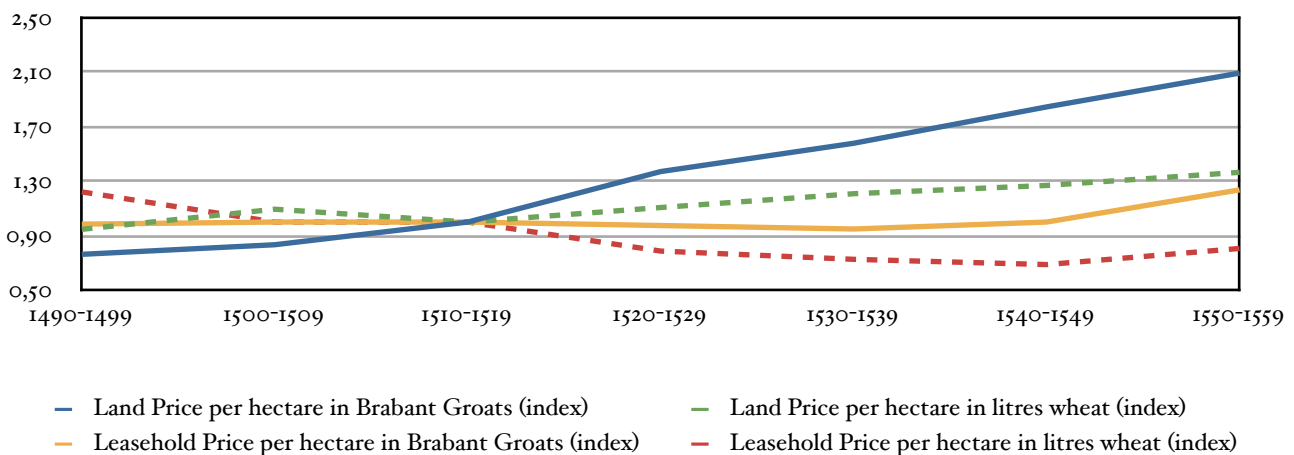
Research on capital management of families in the early modern time showed that the upper classes of society were much preoccupied with the transfer of wealth through generations. The middle and lower classes on the other hand, were much more preoccupied with securing their own livelihood.⁶⁸ Following this line of thought, the lower tier of the rural society would be much more focused on securing their own livelihood through acquiring land the cheapest way possible, (wether it be buying or leasing) whereas the upper tier of the community was much more inclined to adhere to an intergenerational view of wealth, and thus accumulate and invest for future generations. Land that was not used by the families themselves, could be leased out to their less well-off neighbours.

⁶⁶ F.G. Scheelings, 'Pachtprijzen in midden- en zuidwest-Brabant in de zestiende eeuw. Enkele methodologische beschouwingen bij het schetsen van een landbouwconjunctuur', In: *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis*, LXVe jaargang, vol. 1-2, Antwerpen, 1982, pp. 41-64. and F. Daelmans, *Pachten en welvaart op het platteland van Begisch Brabant. (15e-18e eeuw)*. In: *A.A.G. Bijdragen*, 1986, pp. 173-175.

⁶⁷ Whether payment was due in money of kind depended on the preferences of landlord.

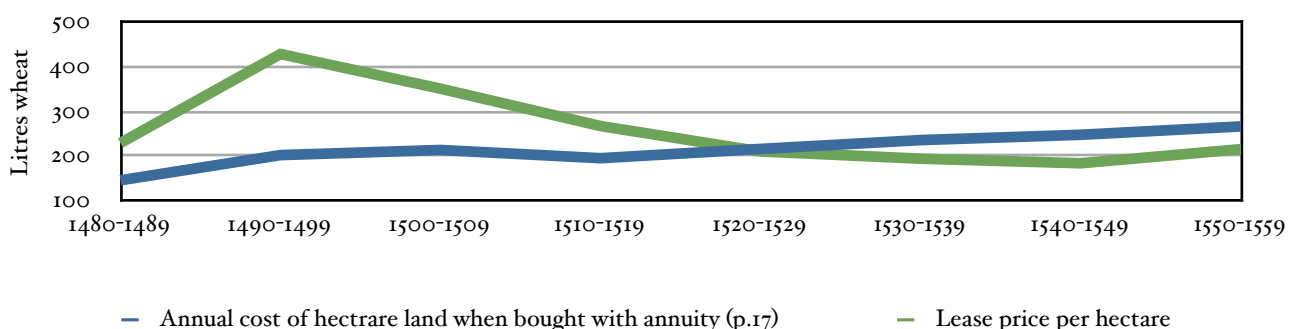
⁶⁸ J. Hanus, *Tussen stad en eigen gewin, stadsfinanciën, renteniers en kredietmarkten in 's-Hertogenbosch (begin zestiende eeuw)*, Amsterdam, Aksant, 2007, p.65.

Graph 11: Evolution of land and leasehold prices - South Brabant 1490-1559 (1490-1499=1).⁶⁹



Whereas land was relatively cheap, both in relative and nominal terms during the period 1490-1510 (as a consequence of the economic and political unrest in the late fifteenth century and its aftermath during the first decennia of the sixteenth century) it became progressively more expensive from the second quarter of the sixteenth century onwards. The price for leasehold in real terms on the other hand decreased from 1490 until 1540. As a result, the trade off between buying or leasing land shifted progressively in favour of the latter, from the perspective of the middling peasant.

Graph 12: Financing cost per hectare of land in litres wheat. 1490-1559.⁷⁰



When taking into account the cost of capital, the same picture emerges. From 1520 onwards, leasing land became progressively cheaper than buying. The implications of these findings are far-reaching. When confronted with the need to enlarge their holdings, peasants who were

⁶⁹ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4739-4742 .

F.G. Scheelings, 'Pachtprijzen in midden- en zuidwest-Brabant in de zestiende eeuw. Enkele methodologische beschouwingen bij het schetsen van een landbouwconjunctuur', In: Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis, LXVe jaargang, vol. 1-2, Antwerpen, 1982, pp. 41-64. and F. Daelmans, Pachten en welvaart op het platteland van Begisch Brabant. (15e-18e eeuw). In: A.A.G. Bijdragen, 1986, pp. 173-175.

⁷⁰ Between 1500 and 1553, annuities were commonly sold at an interest rate of 5,7% (penny 17). SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4739-4742 .

focused on subsistence were better off leasing an additional plot than buying it. As a result we can conclude that relative price differences between leasing and buying played an important role in the shifting property distribution that occurred during the transition of the middle ages into the early modern time.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this paper, the land market in South-Brabant underwent significant changes during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The type of holdings diversified, average transferred plot size declined, and prices (both in nominal and real terms) rose. The goal of this paper was to determine how peasants' behaviour towards the market changed, considering these aforementioned evolutions.

Comparing the early fifteenth century with the first half of the sixteenth century, activity levels of both the upper and lower tier of the community increased. However, the market participation of the upper tier rose twice as much as that of the lower tier. Considering that the latter were net sellers whereas the former were net buyers, a significant shift in property distribution within the community occurred.

The key in explaining this difference is the diverging attitude towards landholding between the upper and lower tier groups. Comparing the number of post-mortem sales between the lower and upper tier groups, it seemed that when leasing land was relatively cheap and both nominal and real land prices were relatively high (as they were between 1523 and 1553, lower tier peasants were inclined cash-in and consequently sold land after an inheritance. The upper tier group sold land as well after an inheritance, but not in equal measure. The reverse occurred between 1404 and 1434, when land prices were low and lease prices high. Consequently it seems that the upper tier group held an intergenerational view as to wealth and land holding, whereas the lower tier (faced with a semi-constant battle for subsistence) was mainly focused on survival. The latter was consequently always trading-off buying versus leasing land, and chose whichever was more profitable. As I have illustrated, when taking into account the cost of credit, buying land was the most cost-effective option until the 1510s. From 1520 onwards however, it became increasingly interesting for small-scale farmers to lease land, which explains the declining market participation compared to the upper tier group.

Parallel to the rising land- and declining lease-prices, both the number of plots and annuities sold in Overzenne grew impressively. As is the case in other Brabantine parishes, creditors were mainly limited to the upper tier of the community. Their willingness to extend such an

increasing amount of credit was caused by the rising value of collateral (nominal land prices went up). At the same, this increased availability of credit helped fuelling the rising land prices.

To conclude, within the rural historiography, several explanatory models have been constructed, which have focused either on socio-economic, geographical and institutional factors (or a combinations of these three) to explain the diverging property distribution within society, throughout the transition from the middle ages into the early modern time. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that an additional level of analysis could be added. Since land was transferred through the market, a microeconomic analysis of the behaviour of market participants provides rural-historians with insightful information on how and why this aforementioned shift in property distribution occurred.

Appendix

Table 2: Population in Wambeek, Ternat and St-Katherina-Lombeek.⁷¹

Year	Total number of Hearths	Total number of people (= number of hearths*5)
1437	253	1.265
1464	259	1.295
1472	251	1.255
1480	240	1.200
1496	225	1.125
1526	274	1.370

Table 3: Holding type (1404-1434/1523-1553)⁷²

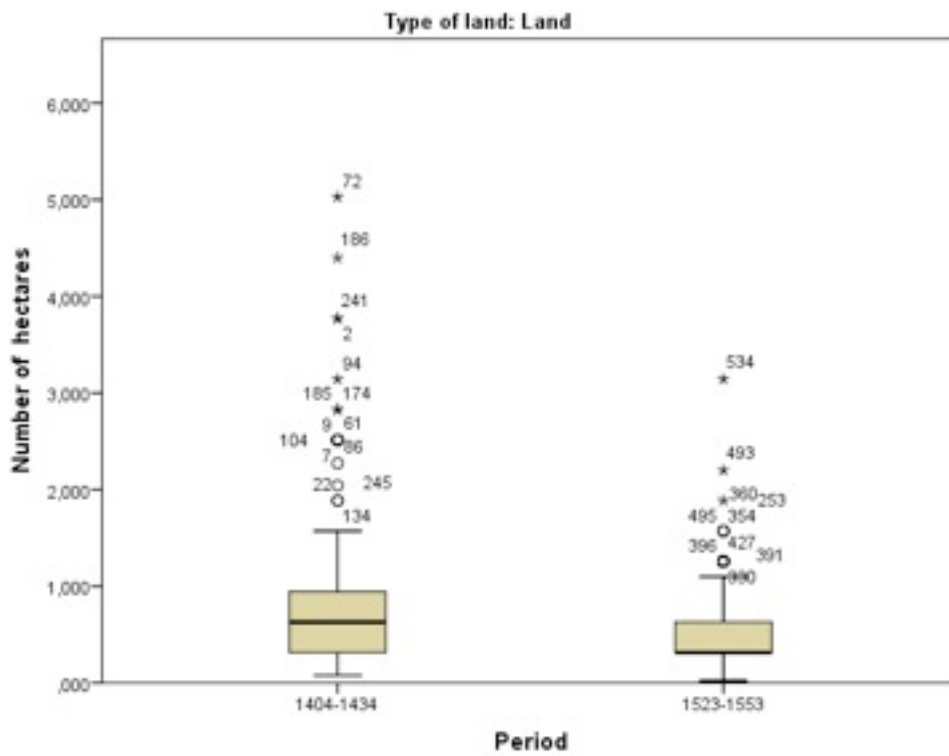
		Period	
		1404-1434	1523-1553
Land	Count	241	267
	% within Period	55,4%	45,7%
Garden	Count	15	32
	% within Period	3,4%	5,5%
Farmstead	Count	91	107
	% within Period	20,9%	18,3%
Water meadow	Count	15	4
	% within Period	3,4%	0,7%
Woodland	Count	5	28
	% within Period	1,1%	4,8%
Inheritance	Count	11	3
	% within Period	2,5%	0,5%
Heath	Count	7	32
	% within Period	1,6%	5,5%
"Kouter"	Count	2	16

⁷¹J. Cuvelier, Les dénombrements de foyers de Brabant, Quatorzième et Seizième siècle, Bruxelles, s.n., 1912.

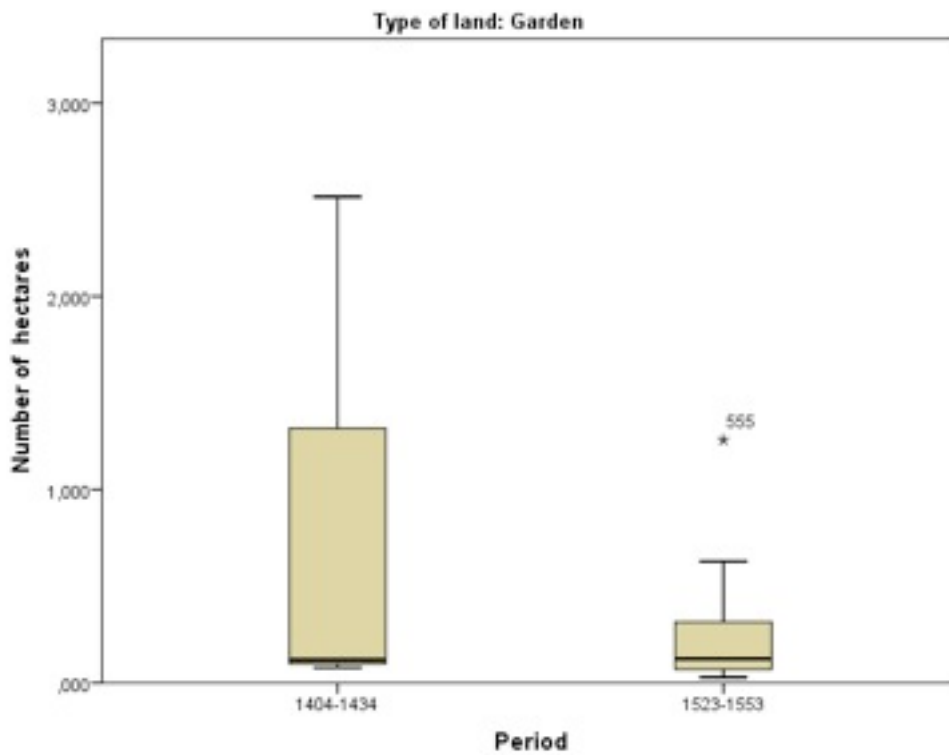
⁷²SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

	% within Period	0,5%	2,7%
Orchard	Count	0	6
	% within Period	0,0%	1,0%
Not Specified	Count	10	6
	% within Period	2,3%	1,0%
Mill	Count	1	0
	% within Period	0,2%	0,0%
Pond	Count	1	4
	% within Period	0,2%	0,7%
"Meers"	Count	36	51
	% within Period	8,3%	8,7%
"Dries"	Count	0	21
	% within Period	0,0%	3,6%
Pasture	Count	0	2
	% within Period	0,0%	0,3%
Hop-gardens	Count	0	5
	% within Period	0,0%	0,9%

Graph 4: Land - plot size⁷³



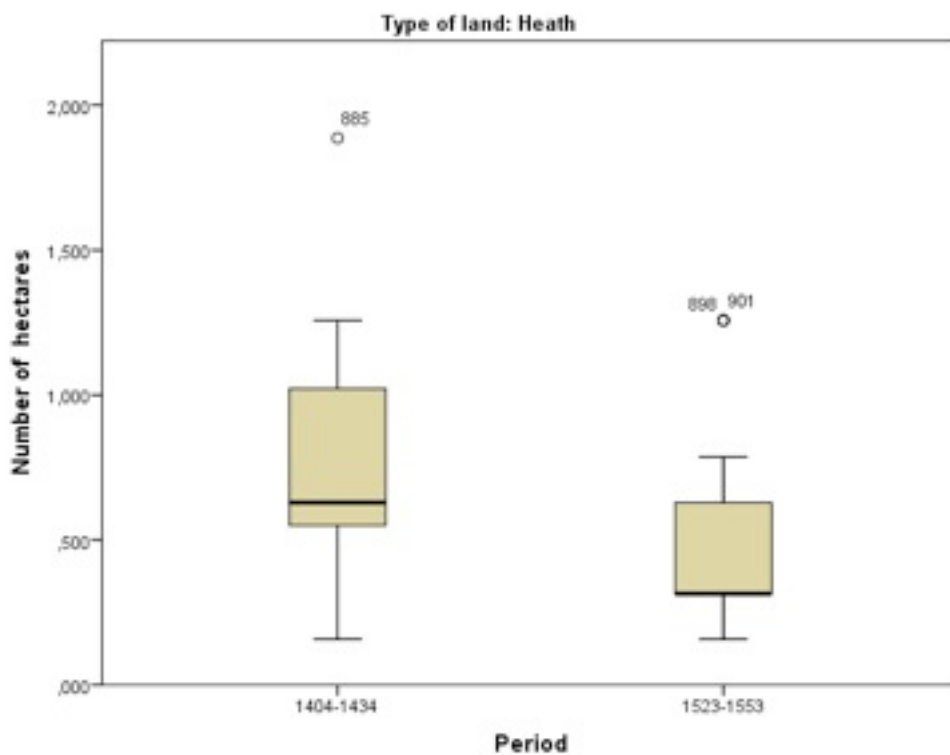
Graph 5: Garden - plot size⁷⁴



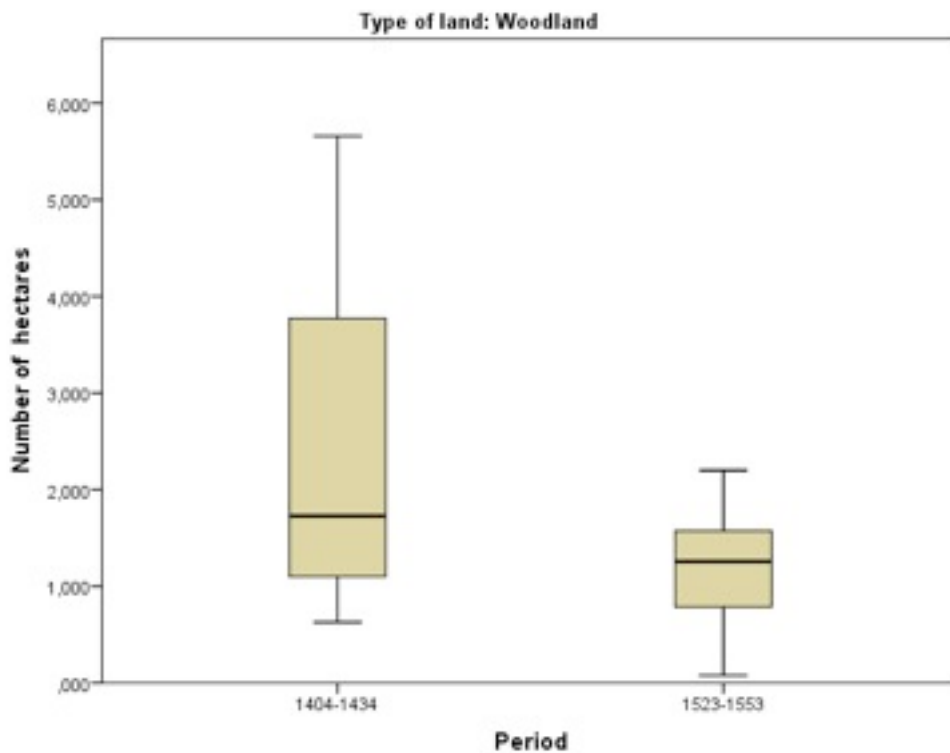
73 SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

74 SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

Graph 6: Heath - plot size⁷⁵



Graph 7: Woodland - plot size⁷⁶



⁷⁵ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

⁷⁶ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

Table 4: Average acreage per transaction.⁷⁷

Type of land	Period	Mean	Median	N	Type of land	Period	Mean	Median	N
"Kouter"	1420-1429	0,865	0,865	2	Heath	1410-1419	0,534	0,314	5
	1440-1449	0,262	0,314	3		1420-1429	0,820	0,629	7
	1450-1459	1,209	0,629	13		1430-1439	0,472	0,314	3
	1460-1469	0,472	0,472	1		1440-1449	0,419	0,393	9
	1470-1479	0,498	0,393	3		1450-1459	1,461	0,707	12
	1480-1489	0,201	0,201	1		1460-1469	0,025	0,025	1
	1490-1499	1,965	1,965	2		1470-1479	0,727	0,707	8
	1500-1509	0,908	0,511	10		1480-1489	0,550	0,550	4
	1510-1519	0,157	0,157	1		1490-1499	0,812	0,707	6
	1520-1529	3,353	0,629	3		1500-1509	0,672	0,629	9
	1530-1539	0,393	0,393	4		1520-1529	0,734	0,629	9
	1540-1549	1,115	1,258	11		1530-1539	0,587	0,314	17
	Total	1,064	0,590	54		1540-1549	0,750	0,472	29
	Garden	1410-1419	1,297	1,297		2	1550-1559	0,540	0,432
1420-1429		0,120	0,120	1	Total	0,730	0,472	127	
1430-1439		0,156	0,079	3	Land	1400-1409	1,381	0,786	39
1440-1449		0,330	0,330	1		1410-1419	0,901	0,629	95
1480-1489		4,716	4,716	1		1420-1429	0,732	0,550	70
1490-1499		0,314	0,314	1		1430-1439	0,587	0,440	35
1530-1539		0,531	0,393	4		1440-1449	0,693	0,314	60
1540-1549		0,399	0,157	11		1450-1459	0,628	0,511	56
1550-1559		0,038	0,038	1		1460-1469	0,911	0,629	47
Total		0,604	0,157	25		1470-1479	1,279	0,629	47
Hay Land	1400-1409	1,886	1,886	1		1480-1489	0,498	0,432	12
	1410-1419	0,277	0,277	1		1490-1499	0,802	0,629	39
	1430-1439	2,201	1,100	5	1500-1509	0,767	0,550	43	
	1440-1449	0,751	0,943	5	1510-1519	0,393	0,393	2	
	1450-1459	0,544	0,472	8	1520-1529	0,829	0,393	51	
	1460-1469	0,629	0,629	2	1530-1539	0,602	0,330	88	
	1470-1479	0,576	0,629	3	1540-1549	0,704	0,346	71	

⁷⁷ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742 .

Type of land	Period	Mean	Median	N	Type of land	Period	Mean	Median	N
	1490-1499	2,122	2,122	2		1550-1559	0,633	0,314	37
	1500-1509	0,354	0,354	2		Total	0,796	0,472	792
	1530-1539	1,572	1,572	1	Marsh	1400-1409	0,786	0,472	6
	1540-1549	0,472	0,472	2		1410-1419	0,786	0,629	9
	Total	0,991	0,629	32		1420-1429	0,561	0,472	7
Woodland	1410-1419	5,659	5,659	1		1430-1439	0,293	0,157	3
	1420-1429	1,729	1,729	2		1440-1449	0,291	0,314	10
	1430-1439	0,629	0,629	1		1450-1459	0,566	0,484	11
	1440-1449	0,629	0,629	5		1460-1469	0,629	0,629	2
	1450-1459	0,747	0,629	4		1470-1479	0,472	0,472	4
	1460-1469	0,079	0,079	1		1490-1499	0,880	0,629	5
	1470-1479	0,603	0,314	3		1500-1509	0,472	0,472	2
	1480-1489	4,401	4,401	1		1510-1519	0,472	0,472	2
	1490-1499	1,310	0,943	3		1520-1529	0,873	0,629	9
	1500-1509	1,192	0,943	6		1530-1539	0,815	0,314	11
	1520-1529	0,786	0,786	2	1540-1549	0,884	0,629	13	
	1530-1539	1,314	1,572	7	1550-1559	1,258	1,258	7	
	1540-1549	1,300	1,258	13	Total	0,716	0,484	101	
	1550-1559	0,786	0,786	1	Pasture	1450-1459	0,157	0,157	1
	Total	1,234	0,943	50		1460-1469	0,629	0,629	1
Orchard	1450-1459	0,629	0,629	1		1470-1479	1,572	0,550	4
	1520-1529	0,629	0,629	1		1490-1499	0,629	0,629	1
	1540-1549	0,550	0,550	1		1500-1509	0,681	0,629	3
	1550-1559	0,393	0,393	2		1520-1529	0,393	0,393	2
	Total	0,519	0,629	5		1530-1539	0,576	0,629	3
						1540-1549	0,747	0,786	4
						1550-1559	0,838	0,629	3
						Total	0,807	0,629	22

Table 5: Average price of land and marsh⁷⁸

Period	Land				Marsh			
	Avg. price per hectare in Brabant Groats	Index (price in Brabant Groats)	Avg. price in litres wheat	Index (price in litres wheat)	Avg. price per hectare in Brabant Groats	Index (price in Brabant Groats)	Avg. price in litres wheat	Index (price in litres wheat)
1400-1409	1720	100%	3155	100%	2212	100%	4057	100%
1410-1419	1985	115%	3641	115%	2542	115%	4663	115%
1420-1429	2711	158%	4786	152%	3390	153%	5984	147%
1430-1439	2632	153%	3424	109%	4319	195%	5619	138%
1440-1449	2548	148%	5281	167%	4377	198%	9072	224%
1450-1459	2882	168%	4915	156%	5694	257%	9710	239%
1460-1469	2581	150%	8236	261%	4771	216%	15224	375%
1470-1479	2131	124%	2566	81%	3244	147%	3906	96%
1480-1489	2574	150%	2553	81%				
1490-1499	1910	111%	3529	112%	2644	120%	4886	120%
1500-1509	2504	146%	3753	119%	2990	135%	4481	110%
1510-1519	3005	175%	3422	108%	2767	125%	3151	78%
1520-1529	4120	240%	3789	120%	5474	247%	5034	124%
1530-1539	4745	276%	4123	131%	5688	257%	4942	122%
1540-1549	5548	323%	4346	138%	5032	227%	3941	97%
1550-1559	6295	366%	4663	148%	4911	222%	3638	90%

Table 6: Social position of buyers (1404-1434/1523-1553).⁷⁹

Period	Social position of buyer	Frequency	Percent
1404-1434	Lower tier (group 1)		247
	Upper Tier (group 2)		150
	Institution		18
	Total		415
1523-1553	Lower tier (group 1)		349
	Upper Tier (group 2)		267
	Total		616

⁷⁸ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4742 .

⁷⁹ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

Table 7: Social position of sellers (1404-1434/1523-1553).⁸⁰

Period	Social position of seller	Frequency	Percent
1404-1434	Lower tier (group 1)	337	81,2
	Upper Tier (group 2)	78	18,8
	Total	415	100,0
1523-1553	Lower tier (group 1)	470	76,3
	Upper Tier (group 2)	146	23,7
	Total	616	100,0

Table 9: Number of bought plots.⁸¹

Periode				Number of transactions		Total
				I	>I	
1404-1434	Buyer	Lower tier (Group 1)	Count	215	32	247
			% within Buyer	87,0%	13,0%	100,0%
		Upper tier (Group 2)	Count	82	68	150
	% within Buyer		54,7%	45,3%	100,0%	
	Institution	Count	7	11	18	
		% within Buyer	38,9%	61,1%	100,0%	
	Total	Count	304	111	415	
% within Buyer		73,3%	26,7%	100,0%		
1523-1553	Buyer	Lower tier (Group 1)	Count	254	95	349
			% within Buyer	72,8%	27,2%	100,0%
		Upper tier (Group 2)	Count	126	141	267
	% within Buyer		47,2%	52,8%	100,0%	
	Total	Count	380	236	616	
		% within Buyer	61,7%	38,3%	100,0%	

⁸⁰ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

⁸¹ SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .

Statistics 1: Average size sold lots.⁸²

Group Statistics (Period = 1404-1434)						
	Seller	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Surface in square metres	Lower tier	168	9647,38	10868,508	838,524	
	Upper tier	43	6031,84	4053,863	618,208	

Independent Samples Test (Period = 1404-1434)						
			Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
			F	Sig.		
Surface in square metres	Equal variances assumed		9,47	0,002		
	Equal variances not assumed					

Independent Samples Test (Period = 1404-1434) (Continued)								
t-test for Equality of Means								
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Surface in square metres	Equal variances assumed	2,14	209,00	0,03	3.615,54	1.689,18	285,53	6.945,55
	Equal variances not assumed	3,47	182,96	0,00	3.615,54	1.041,78	1.560,10	5.670,99

⁸² SAB, Chamber of Accounts, Manorial Accounts of Overzenne, 4733-4734 and 4739-4742 .