

**‘Social agro-systems’ reflected in landscapes.****The example of ‘inland Flanders’ in the late middle ages and the early modern period.**

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**I. The ‘social agro-systemic’ approach of rural history**

There is an increasing tendency, both in England and on the continent, to focus more on regional differences in agricultural development in the past (see Campbell; Van Bavel; Jessenne, 1999). Regional analyses of agriculture existed before and go back to the beginnings of the Annales-school. Nevertheless, the boundaries used to define these study areas were purely political or pedological. Since the 1980tees one introduced the concept of agro-systems or farm-systems (French: *agro-systèmes*, German: *Betriebssysteme*. For a survey of the use and the history of these terms, see Bieleman, 1999). However, most existing definitions of these agro-systems are in our view still unsatisfactory to be of any practical use for comparative economic history, because mostly they centre on just one part of the economic reality of peasant life, namely the (technical) production methods. The basis of the agro-systemic approach presented in this article will be much more soci(iologic)al; therefore we prefer to label our version of the agro-system a *social* agro-system.

In our definition, a social agro-system, is a rural production system based on region-specific social relations involved in the economic reproduction of a given geographical area. Social agro-systems in this particular sense were not stable at all, but underwent structural changes over time. A social agro-system was built up with many qualifying and mutual influencing factors such as social relations, economic behaviour, etcetera. To a certain extent possibilities for economic growth are determined by the interference of all the elements, whereas differences in their features reflect regional differences in social agro-systems.

**II. The building stones of social agro-systems**

In Table 1, we tabulated the key elements of a social agro-system. Needless to say that Table 1 is meant as a model for description and analysis, that in all its constituent parts does not answer any concrete historical reality.

**Table 1, Key factors to describe regional social agro-systems**I/ soil and environment

- 1/ soil and physical environment
- 2/ the 'cultural' environment (private and esp. public infrastructure)

II/ Social property relations and power structures

- 1/ division of property rights and political power between lords and peasants (including access to commons)
- 2/ division of property rights and political power within peasant communities

III/ Size of holdings [as an important indicator of the social division of wealth] and [additional] labour inputIV/ Labour relations and [peasant] income strategies

- 1/ Labour organisation
  - a/ free labour versus unfree labour
  - b/ labour relations between large holdings and small holdings [cf. under III]
  - c/ importance of non-agricultural activities ('proto-industry')
  - d/ labour productivity
- 2/ [Peasant] income in connection with commercialisation and access to markets
- 3/ Capital input and non-economic surplus extraction by lords and/or state
- 4/ Risk reducing versus risk increasing strategies
- 5/ Family life-cycle strategies (and their demographic consequences)

V/ Agricultural technology

- 1/ Mixed versus specialised agriculture
- 2/ Intensive versus extensive agriculture
- 3/ Collective versus individual use of rural capital
- 4/ Technological complex and tradition

VI/ Links with other agro-systemic areas

- 1/ via permanent migration of people
- 2/ via temporary (seasonal) migration of labour
- 3/ via diffusion of technology
- 4/ via supra-regional power structures, labour relations and market structures

In principle, a fundamental change in any one of these elements can bring about changes in the agro-system as a whole. Elsewhere, we studied the importance of these social agro-systems more in detail (Thoen 2004 ).

### **III. Social agro-systems and landscapes. The goal of the paper.**

What is actually more important in this context is to wonder why and how this social agro-system is reflected in the landscape. It has to be reflected in it since the rural landscape is the “shop floor”, the scene of the “actores” of the social agro-system, the rural inhabitants. Nevertheless, landscape historians know that such a “shop floor” is mostly slowly and gradually adapted to new situations, and is almost always retaining ‘relics’ of the past. What is overlooked by many landscape historians is that these ‘relics’, as far as they are ‘cultural’ and not ‘natural’, are actually often traces of previous agro-systems.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will show

1/that agro-systems clearly had their reflection in the landscapes.

2/it will also show that landscapes react with a time lag compared to the evolution of the social agro-system and that often ‘relics of previous social agro-systems’ survived very long although they had lost their economic and social utility in the agro-system.

We will apply this to the central part of the former county of Flanders – s.c. ‘inland Flanders’, where a specific social agro-system developed during the Middle Ages: a system which we have called a ‘commercial survival economy’ (CSE). This agro-system had clearly discerned itself in the course of the late middle ages and the early modern period from the agro-system in the coastal area, where, out of a quite similar CSE system, another system developed, a system that we called a ‘commercial business economy’ (CBE). In Inland Flanders, the CSE system changed but survived and its features became even more pronounced, as we will show.

As we will see, the influence on the landscape was obvious. Moreover, even during the changes of the system, ‘relics’ of these changes could be discerned in the landscapes. Of course we will only give some examples of these relations between the evolution of the CSE and the landscape.

### **IV. The social agro-system of inland Flanders from c. the 11<sup>th</sup> century towards the early modern period: a ‘commercial survival economy’ in evolution**

Of course it is necessary that we first comment some features of the CSE system of inland Flanders as well as some remarks about its evolution. We necessarily will remain short and schematic.

#### IV a What is a CSE system?

It is logic that a production system (what and how is produced?) is largely determined by the question “why is produced?”. The production incentives and the boundaries of these incentives are very important to understand the way production and social relations were organised.

Actually the choice of the producer is quite limited (see: Brenner, 2001).

1/ The producer can radically choose (or is forced to choose) for a commercial attitude in which the sustainable increase of the income is the most important goal to produce. This production system is a production system based on concurrence between peasants who actually have become farmers. The survival

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<sup>1</sup> Although of course not all the ‘relics’ are ‘economic’. Some traditions which have little to do with social agro-systems can also leave traces for many decades and centuries even when they lost significance (e.g. religious traditions)

of all the family members was not so important. Division of wealth was avoided since it undermines sustainable growth and possibilities for income increase of the production units. The (survival of) the farm is more important than the (survival of the) family (Thoen and Soens, 2006). This system will become the production system in coastal Flanders since the 13th. Many variations exist, which we cannot develop here. It are all Business Economies (BE) or pre-capitalist economies (CE);

2/ The rural producer can choose to or can be forced to first take care of the survival of the family and the family members and look for a 'fair division' of wealth between his children. Survival comes then on the foreground. A sustainable increase of production and of income is not the goal. The survival of the family is more important than the survival of the farm.

The weakness of this system is the danger for ongoing impoverishment.

Many local varieties on this system exist, such as (between others)

2a/ Some societies have tried to protect themselves against the negative aspects of this attitude by protecting the division of wealth (inheritance systems)

2b/ Other societies have tried to protect themselves against the negative aspects of this attitude via solidarity rules. An important one is the regulated use of commons. The abundance of commons is not an incentive towards commercialisation. On the contrary, it favours a survival attitude, as has been proven very clearly in the book of Neeson for England (J.Neeson 1993). Such a survival economy with a lot of commons can be called a SEC system ('Survival Economy with Commons').

2c/ Other societies, mostly those without commons and with less 'solidarity rules', were forced to a certain degree of specialisation and commercialisation. Nevertheless sustainable increase of incomes was not the goal. This system can be called a 'Commercial Survival Economy' (CSE).

All these varieties are varieties of Survival Economies (SE)

#### IVb. The CSE in Inland Flanders from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century

We see that in Flanders a survival economy (SE) is developing in the course of the middle ages. Nevertheless, we know very little about the origin of this social agro-system in inland Flanders.

##### *The dark period of origin: from SEC to CSE?*

Nevertheless, we incline more and more to the opinion that inland (and coastal?) Flanders was developing from a survival system with commons (variation 2b SEC) towards a survival system based on commercialisation (CSE). We know very little about the commons in the high middle ages. Nevertheless, it is clear that a fast evolution took place towards a large disappearance of the commons, who were reclaimed and converted to arable very early by the peasants. This evolution which was largely stimulated by the local lords, although we have not yet a clear view on the mechanisms of this process.

##### *The CSE from the 13<sup>th</sup> century on.*

From the 13th century on, we have a quite good idea of the (still developing) CSE system.

To remain systematic, we will deal with the different features of the system following the scheme in table 1.

#### 1. Soil conditions and physical environment

Inland Flanders is made up of lighter sandy and sandy-loamy soils. The larger part of the area was reclaimed more gradually and often at an earlier stage. This had resulted in a restrained rational infrastructure. The soils were quite easy to cultivate, so the physical environment not a problem for the development of the peasant economy. From the high middle ages, maybe the growing shortage of firewood, became a problem for their survival, but this was partly overcome by the creation of an enclosed 'bocage' landscape, as we will see below.

## 2. Local wealth distribution: large and small holdings: the empirical changes.

Although some larger holdings were still emerging during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially as a result of the purchase policy of the bourgeoisie, the number of smallholdings was by far superior. Their peasant possessors laboured about half the total amount of [cultivated; arable?] land, and their holdings were continuously split-up: the 1571 censuses, which deliver for the first time a general survey, give evidence that in many villages more than 70% of all holdings were smaller than 5 ha. Only 12 % was larger than 12 ha. Although at that time many farmsteads and holdings were temporarily deserted as a result of the wars of religion, the trend as just described was not reversed after the sixteenth century. The subdivisions of holdings went on, and were even accelerated in the second half of the eighteenth century. In that period even the larger holdings of the *coqs du village* tended to become smaller or to be split-up, even if they never completely disappeared.

## 3. Social property relations and [local] power structures

Customary rents and direct exploitation remained the most important forms of tenant holding until the 13th century. Anyway, many customary rents had lost a lot of value during the 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the consequence that the property rights of the tenants became so important that the tenant holders were actually almost full property holders.

Contrary to other areas such as the coastal area, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, only the larger farms, often former centres of demesnes going back to the high and the early middle ages, were leased out (Soens and Thoen, forthcoming). Also, only part of these leases resulted from shifts from peasant customary rents to lease holding, since several of these large farms had been estates, run directly by their lordly owners. The number of large farms further increased between ca. 1250 and 1450, especially because of purchases of small plots of land by townspeople who wanted to create their own large farms. But this evolution did not continue, and came to an end in the fifteenth century. Until the end of the Ancien Régime, the number of large or middle sized farms remained plus minus the same. Leasing of smaller plots of land did also occur from the later Middle Ages onwards, but most of the time this was not a result of 'expropriation' of peasants like in the coastal area. Rather, this practice followed the reduction in size of former large estates, and its aim was to provide for a [temporary?] complement to peasant families' smallholdings – that, as we have seen, tended to become smaller by subdivision from about the end of the sixteenth century. Even if this process was reinforced by expropriations, many peasants in the area still succeeded in keeping at least part of their farmsteads in full property (Thoen, 1999). Only gradually in the course of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, some smaller plots also were 'converted' into leases – often as a consequence of not paid loans, but a large part of the peasants could conserve their farmstead in full property until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

A power struggle between the count, (numerous) secular and ecclesiastical local lords, and bourgeois investors prevented the harmonious coexistence of large landownership and the possession of jurisdictional rights. It eventually furthered peasant property rights since it favoured the light burden of rents. Later on, as a consequence of the same power struggle, even the count could not really ask high taxes until the late 17th century (except during some decades). Partly due to this fact, peasant free holding could, as we described, survive more easily and much longer here than it could in coastal Flanders. Probably the most important side effect was that peasants were attracted easily to this area to create new settlements and to reclaim (for often only a symbolic customary rent!) a lot of the common fields, destroying that way very early the village solidarity! Indeed, the low rents, combined with the fact that most lords were since the 12<sup>th</sup> century especially

interested in money rents due to the presence of the many markets where this money could easily be spent, reclamations were very intensive in the high middle ages.

The weak 'village solidarity' and the fast disappearance of commons in most villages of Flanders (at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup>, most commons had already disappeared) have driven the peasants further to the markets...

#### 4. Labour relations and labour organization; income strategies and levels of investment

Since the high Middle Ages free labour was everywhere predominant. Of course the relation between large and smallholdings determined labour organisation most. As we mentioned, since the middle ages a co-existence with a huge minority of large farms with a huge majority of small holders was typical for inland Flanders. This co-existence was 'sealed' by wage earning. In inland Flanders part-time wage labour of non-resident workers was predominant since the high middle ages, or if they lived-in on large farms, they did so only temporarily, during a limited stage of their family life-cycle. Wage labour generally provided only part of the peasant income because it was combined with the very intensive cultivation of a smallholding, as well as with proto industrial activity, which was very important in Inland Flanders from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The latter can be traced back to the thirteenth century and especially implied linen processing. In the eighteenth century about half the population in one way or another was involved in it. Even large holdings provided for organisational support. But the interdependence of large farms and smallholdings in the same area was also influenced by labour relations related to the redistribution of capital. Indeed, larger holdings lend their capital, especially horses for ploughing, to the smaller ones in exchange for labour (see e.g. Lambrecht 2002).

This also affected labour productivity. Difficult to measure though it is, it seems likely that labour productivity was higher on commercially oriented farms of middle and large size. This implies that from the later medieval period onwards labour productivity must have been going down in inland Flanders (while it was on the increase in the coastal area). Indeed, labour productivity on peasant smallholdings probably was very low. We know how labour-unproductive the cultivation of flax and the processing of linen really were, and that much arable land was worked with the spade!!

We labelled the peasant economy of inland Flanders 'a commercial survival economy'. Since the size of peasant holdings was gradually declining due to the tendency of holdings to be split-up in times of demographic growth (many were even not larger than 1ha!), the peasants' first concern was survival. As we explained, the amount of commons had become very restrained. Therefore they developed different specific survival strategies, such as a very intensive cultivation of the land resulting in a high physical output per acre ('the Flemish Husbandry'), as well as a constant search for additional sources of income, such as wage labour, the maintenance of symbiotic labour relations with large farms, and the production for the market (it was a 'commercial' survival economy!) via proto industrial activities, the production of industrial base materials, such as vegetable dyes, etcetera. But even then their first concern was not investment nor engrossment (on the contrary) nor competition (on the contrary), but survival of the family. Gradually, in the course of the Early Modern Period, all these survival techniques became more pronounced.. It is even not unlikely that the production for the market of these smallholders became very important. Since these smallholders were so abundant, their percentage in the total production of commodities and of rural products which was presented at the (rural and) urban markets, must have been considerable.

#### 5. Demographic evolution

In inland Flanders peasant family strategies were evidently linked to the availability of land. As we have seen, the peasant households of the area were primarily interested in survival. For that reason they preferred a nuclear family strategy: as soon as land was available, children were pressed to start their own family, even when they had to be satisfied with a smaller holding than their parents had. The problem was that since the thirteenth century, land in Flanders generally was scarce and expensive. Therefore marriage and the creation of a new family often had to be postponed due to lack of land in periods when death rates were low (and only

a minimum of land came that way available) and/or credit facilities were limited (and possibilities to get a loan to buy land restrained). Consequently, a West-European marriage pattern with relatively high ages at first marriage and relatively many people who did never marry at all only established itself in inland Flanders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Anyway, their marriage age was still earlier than in the 'competitive' agro-systems such as the CBE system which developed elsewhere, e.g. in the coastal area; see van Bavel, 2002). It improved the interrelation between larger farms and smallholdings in so far as it forced younger adolescents to hire themselves as cheap in-living farmhands for a limited period of their life. However, in the preceding period, say from the beginning of the fourteenth century until into the first half of the sixteenth century, young people probably still could marry at an earlier age because of the high death rates (Thoen, 1988). Related to this particular earlier pattern were very dynamic land *and* credit markets. The most common type of credit supply – by the selling of annuities – presupposed widespread peasant ownership of land (and capital), which acted as a security.

## 6. Agricultural technology

'Mixed farming' was the most popular form of agriculture in inland Flanders since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Yields per hectare were high since at least around 1250, with an average of about 1500-2000 litres of rye, and often even more. Long fallow became scarce especially at the small holdings. Since these holdings were also oriented to the markets, even the smaller holdings did not stick to bread grains (although they produced of course as much as possible of these bread grains). The variety of crops was certainly high and they also produced cash crops, such as dye plants, flax and hemp.

Nevertheless, this high physical productivity was at the expense of the labour productivity which was low at the smaller farms.. Cultivation with the spade, intensive weeding, flax processing.... It all took a lot of time and was not reflected in the prices. Nevertheless, this 'self exploitation' of the rural holdings was possible since these holdings were so small that there was a huge amount of time for it... The 'Flemish Husbandry', , praised by many foreign visitors in the early modern period and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a rich 'physical' system, but was not really reflected in the peasant incomes and social structures!

## V. The Flemish 'commercial survival economy' and its influence on the landscape: two examples.

Actually, some 'reflections' of the described social agro-system into the landscape, were already mentioned and are obvious: an extreme split up of the land into small and mostly irregular plots, a high density of population settlements, the scarcity of common lands and the absence of large woods ...

Nevertheless, we will develop a little further two aspects of this relation between the development of the CSE and the landscape. First, we will commend one of the major features of the rural landscape of inland Flanders, namely the 'Flemish bocage'. Secondly, we will focus on some 'relics' dating back to the period when the CSE system was not yet completely developed.

### V.a.. The Flemish enclosed 'labyrinthian' landscape and its relation with the social agro-system.

#### *The enclosed 'labyrinthian landscape' and its evolution.*

Maps of the 18<sup>th</sup> century give for the first time a complete overview of the importance of wood boundaries and hedges.

#### **Figure 1: part of the map of count de Ferraris (c.1770) showing the 'labyrinthian enclosed landscape'**

A Flemish 'bocage landscape' was very well developed in large areas of inland Flanders. The small parcels were surrounded with hedges, rows of pollard trees or wide wood boundaries, giving shape to a 'labyrinthine'

‘enclosed’ landscape. Most parcels surrounded with wood were in average much smaller than the enclosed plots in England and in Normandy for the same period.

**Figure 2: map of the former county of Flanders with the two sub areas of inland Flanders as well as coastal Flanders.**

Nevertheless there were regional differences within Inland Flanders. In the area in the South-East, open fields remained more common and the bocage was more restrained. In the North-Western part of the area, the open fields were much more scarce and limited to some micro open fields having a size of only a few tens of acres per settlement, the s.c. ‘kouters’ (see below); the rest was bocage. The differences between the two sub-areas can probably be explained by the differences in the manorial structure: in the N-W, manorial structures (which probably caused openfields) were not as developed in the early middle ages; (individual) reclamations in the 11-13<sup>th</sup> centuries were more intensive and old forms of solidarity never developed widely, except on some parts of the ‘infield’ which temporarily were important. In the Eastern part, early medieval manors, which probably had a large amount of openfields, were more common. These openfields survived longer. At the same time in this area parts of the early medieval manorial woodlands also survived which made it less necessary to switch to a ‘bocage’ landscape (see below). In the NW, the early medieval woods were less ‘manorial’ and more easily reclaimed.

There are indications that the bocage landscape as well as the trees in the landscape had become important since the 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Well known is the quotation of an English traveller of the middle 13<sup>th</sup> century about Flanders:

“multas quidem habens arbores, non tamen multas silvas “ (‘there are many trees, but only some woods’)

Nevertheless, some documents show a still increasing importance of wood in that bocage area during the 14-16 centuries, an evolution which probably also continued afterwards. The table in which can be seen the amount of mentions of wood and timber in the leasing contracts of the sandy area of the ‘Land Van Waas’, clearly shows that growing importance. The number of mentions of hedges with coppice wood increased remarkably.

**Table 2 Wood and timber in the leasing contracts of the ‘Land Van Waas’ (number of mentions in the leasing contracts, 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries).**

century	contracts	Hedges with coppice wood	Pollard rows	Timber trees	Temporary fences
15th	17	47%	35%	18 %	12%
16th	18	89%	31%	56%	11%

**Source: Dua, V., 1986**

An other table shows the evolution of coppice wood and pollard rows in the area around Gent in the 14-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Notice the increased importance from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries of valuable wood and timber from oaks.



**Table 3 Coppice wood and pollards in the area around Gent (number of mentions in the leasing contracts 14-16<sup>th</sup>)**

Coppice wood and pollard rows in the area around Gent							
century	contracts	willow		alder		oak	
14th	51	30	59%	17	33%	4	8%
15th	36	17	47%	7	19%	12	33%
16th	89	37	42%	1	1%	51	57%

**Source: Picavet, N. 1996**

(note: pollards are trees cut a few metres above the ground level, giving birth to new branches which are very useful for fire wood, esp. for bread baking)

In sum, trees, hedges and wood boundaries became more and more important. Other data seem to proof that this evolution continued in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### *The links with the social agro-system*

It is obvious, that the growing 'labyrinthine bocage landscape' was related to the evolution of the social agro-system. Unlike the bocage of Normandy and parts of Bretagne (inter alia studied by Antoine), the origin of the wood boundaries, must not be sought primarily in the importance of cattle breeding and the making of enclosures. Many 'enclosures' were often too penetrable to be useful as permanent fences. Of course they had certain role in the mixed farming, especially in the up and down husbandry; also these hedges locally helped to protect against erosion, but these needs were secondary needs in this agro-system. The main goal of the wood boundaries nevertheless was the use as firewood for heating or to fulfil other basic survival strategies such as the baking of bread. To fulfil these basic needs, even the smallest peasant holdings had to plant and to maintain carefully the boundaries of their parcels with wood that provided them with coppice wood. The shadow of these borders made that a few boundaries of the fields were less productive. We know that, in some areas (e.g. Petegem Audenarde), the peasants left a stroke around their grain fields as grazing land. Here the cow(s) was (were) grazing to fulfil other survival needs of the smallholder...

In the probate inventories which we have especially for the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, we see how valuable this wood was in the heritage of the peasants of inland Flanders (see e.g. Hantson, 2005). We can also see that coppice wood was clearly less important in the coastal area where the CSE had lost its importance in the course of the later middle ages. Most probably it was similar in the late middle ages already. This can be deduced of a collection of very valuable forfeiture documents left for the so called Ghent War of 1379-1385. The forfeitures in the area of Courtrai in inland Flanders mention a lot of living as well as coppice wood and enumerate it carefully. Similar documents for the coastal area hardly mentioned the value of the wood....

The importance of the wood boundaries for firewood in our area can also explain why in the sub areas were some smaller scattered woodlands survived (the South East), the ‘bocage landscape’ was not so general as in the areas where woodlands were really scarce (the Western part of inland Flanders).

#### V.b. ‘relics’ of the evolution from SEC to CSE, or the ‘time lag’ of landscapes.

We explained earlier that the CSE system evolved in the high middle ages from a SEC system with commons. In this SEC system, village solidarity was still more important. Although individualism increased with the gaining importance of the market dependence of the peasants (see above), some patterns of solidarity, visible in the landscape, still survived in the CSE system although they had lost most of their importance and were more ‘relics’ than functional reality.

##### *V.b.1. commons*

This is true for most of them, since the 13th century scarcely survived, common fields of Inland Flanders (for a calculation of the surviving commons in the Old Régime, see De Moor, 2002). Most of them were reclaimed and divided in the middle ages. The scarce commons which survived were mostly situated along the rivers and were wet pasture lands. Some of these common pasture lands were situated along the Scheldt river. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the social relations of the adjoining landowners<sup>2</sup> of these commons hardly differed from the inhabitants of the villages further away from the Scheldt river: the majority of the holdings was small, the production methods were the same, with a great importance of proto-industrialisation.

This can e.g. be demonstrated for the Land Van Gavere (see: P-J Lachaert, in preparation)

There is no reason not to accept that the situation was not similar in the later middle ages.

#### **Figure 3. Map of a village near the Scheldt where some commons survived during the Old Régime.**

##### *V.b.2. ‘culturae’ or ‘kouters’ (for details: see Thoen, forthcoming)*

‘Culturae’, which were called from the 12th century in Dutch ‘kouters’, were parts of the infield of the cultural landscape used for intensive grain cultivation. They were s.c. micro-openfields situated in the discussed ‘bocage landscape’. They were cultivated permanently with the plough and heavily manured. They had an acreage of 15 to 60 ha. Originally they corresponded with the directly managed plough lands of the early medieval demesnes. These ‘hofkouters’ (or ‘manorial culturae’) date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and were especially common in the Southern part of our study area.

#### **Figure 4: ‘kouters’ in the neighbourhood of Gent.**

Probably, also since the early middle ages but in accelerated pace in the course of the 10-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, these kind of infields emerged also separately from the large demesnes and were then used by independent free peasants or they originated in relation with the dependent peasants of demesnes (the s.c. ‘dorpskouters’ or ‘village culturae’). These ‘dorpskouters’ were used as an ‘infield’ by smaller peasants to make a common use of the rural capital which became more and more scarce due to the splitting up of the lands in the period on growing demography in the course of the 11-13th centuries (horses, ‘vaine pature’). ‘Furzwang’ (the obligation to cultivate the land in accordance to the same crop rotation and to leave the land fallow at the same time) was a common practice on these ‘kouters’. Later in the 12-13<sup>th</sup>, when capital became more scarce, it became in some villages of the South Eastern part of our study area common practice on the openfields of the areas outside of the ‘kouters’. Nevertheless this Flurzwang did not hinder the evolution towards the CSE

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<sup>2</sup> In some areas common rights were even not inherited by the adjoining landowners but by property holders who often did not live anymore in the neighbourhood of « their » common field. This is clearly a degeneration of the system which proves that it lost its importance in relation with the agro-system, although it proves the large amount of individualism as well (see De Moor, 2002).

system since the openfield became spit up into a large ‘patchwork’ of smaller blocks of land which had to follow the same crop rotation (Thoen, 1988). It was not at all a situation in which the whole village was divided into three blocks which had to follow the same obligatory crop rotation. At the same time an enclosed ‘bocage’ landscape emerged outside the openfields to support the evolution towards the CSE system. Nevertheless the common practices survived at least until the 16th century in some villages. It were relics from the past which had lost much of their original meaning. Nevertheless some of the micro-openfields survived the Old Régime. These lands were, until the 19th centuries ploughed by the larger farmers in exchange of labour on the farm... This way the ‘old’ practices supported the newer (CSE) system in which the intense economic relation between large farms and small holdings played an important part as we demonstrated above.

## VI. Tentative conclusion

It is well known that landscapes are reflections of the past and indeed historical landscapes get since a few years ever more attention as part of the cultural heritage. Nonetheless, in most studies one is rather vague in explaining these historical landscapes. Often one is limiting the explanations to vague expressions such as the fact that landscapes are created by ‘cultural traditions’. This paper demonstrates that landscapes are largely influenced by ‘social agro-systems’, which are the local/regional structures in which societies live together for survival and reproduction. Nevertheless, as we demonstrated for Inland Flanders, traces of former agro-systems remain often visible in younger systems, since these systems were evolving, mostly in a slow pace. Sometimes these landscape ‘relics’ were really integrated in the newer agro-systems, but this is not necessary nor common. Nevertheless, we think that, on the contrary, landscapes hardly ‘hindered’ the evolution of social agro-systems; they were easily adapted to the new social relations.

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