

SUMMARY OF EUCALAND PROJECT WP 2.

SEARCHING FOR SYSTEM IN THE HISTORY OF AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES IN EUROPE THE HISTORICAL PART OF THE EUCALAND PROJECT

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Working Group 2 within the Eucaland project tried to summarise the history of the agricultural landscapes of Europe. It is not difficult to fill a book with local and regional case studies, but many of such books already exist. During the work it became clear that the knowledge of the history of the landscape was very unevenly spread over Europe. In some countries, the agricultural landscape has been a popular object of historical research for many decades. In other countries, this type of research questions is still very new.

To bring system in the potentially enormous amount of data, it was decided at an early stage in the project to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches. The top-down approach was based on the main forces behind the developments of landscapes, that were divided into forces of change and forces of stability.

The interrelated factors of demographic and economic fluctuations and technological development, and the changing centre-periphery relations were identified as the main forces of change.

The periods of demographic and economic growth can be seen as the main formative periods in the history of the European landscape. Examples are the High Middle Ages (10th-early 14th century), the 'long sixteenth century' (ca 1450-ca 1650) and the period from ca 1750 to the 20th century. The growing degree of economic integration during these periods explains developing centre-periphery relations, when ever more regions become connected to the European core-regions.

There are two factors that in general tend to stabilise landscapes. One is physical geography that acts as a restraint to the possibilities for change. The same is true for existing landscape structures. The investment in an existing structure limits the possibilities for change. Regional and local political and legal institutions take an intermediate position. Particularly institutions and legal frameworks can act as forces of stability, but local leaders and groups can also stimulate new activities. Local and regional structures explain much of the unique answers with which different regions respond to forces of globalisation.

To validate this model, as well as to give it substance, variety and nuance, systematic information was collected (the bottom-up approach). For this aim, a schedule was developed early in the process. In the vertical direction, the schedule gave time periods, with an overlapping classification of centuries and time periods (i.e. Roman period, High Middle Ages etc). In the horizontal direction, the schedule offered the possibility to distinguish between different regions. Schedules were filled in by the members of

Working Group 2 for Croatia, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain. For some countries this information was partly based on new research.

The framework of geography and chronology formed the basis for the description of the histories of European agricultural landscapes. It was surprising to what degree developments in different parts of Europe fitted in the framework. This must have been partly due to the degree of economic integration in some of the main formative periods in the agricultural landscapes: the High Middle Ages, the ‘long sixteenth century’ and the period from 1750 onwards. These formative periods showed reclamations all over Europe. Also the periods of crisis, with the late medieval agrarian crisis, following the disastrous decline of population by the Black Death, was a European phenomenon.

A long-term characteristic in the European geography is the existence of economic core-regions. The high medieval core regions were northern Italy and north-western Europe. From the sixteenth century, the north-western core grew in importance, itself slowly moving from Antwerp to Amsterdam and then to south-east England. Nowadays, geographers often speak of the Blue Banana, the European core-region that covers the arc from southeast-England to northern Italy, showing an almost incredible degree of continuity since the Middle Ages.

Instead of most European landscape maps and descriptions that show a non-hierarchical jigsaw puzzle view of regions, the core-periphery model asks for a description of regions in their relations to other regions and in particular to the core. Many developments in the European landscapes can be described – and partly explained – within this perspective. An example is the shift of the grain-producing open fields from England and parts of the Mediterranean to the eastern Baltic during the early-modern period. Another example is the rise of regional specialisations in agriculture that is elaborated by the present author elsewhere in this volume.