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From early modern prosperity to relegation to the periphery

Meindert Schroor

Abstract

In studying the cultural history of the Waddenland, some basic recurrent socio-economic themes stand out. As such, characteristics like insularity, individualism, a high degree of mobility, decentralisation and marginalisations are often cited, but are they actually valid and if so, to what extent? Are they only applicable as far as the southwestern parts of the Wadden Sea region are concerned, or do they apply in the same way to its northeastern parts? It is a fact that since the second half of the nineteenth century, the area as a whole has lost importance from an economic and demographic viewpoint. A century-old area of attraction turned into an area of emigration. How far have these age-old cultural-historical traits survived and how far are they still visible? Is determining a common past – nowadays mostly forgotten – useful for the future of Waddenland? The paper elaborates on these characteristics as potential subjects for further research, among which some themes even seem to exhibit similarities – though not elaborated upon — with the contemporary ecological and socio-cultural crises in Europe and the Western world in general.

Keywords: basic characteristics, perception of the past, from area of attraction to area of contraction, research themes

The coastal lands around the Wadden Sea — the Waddenland — are now reckoned among the less prosperous regions of northwestern Europe. Since 1880, large parts of this area have been characterised by relative decline, having experienced substantial emigration at least into the early 1960s. Moreover, the recent economic crisis seems to have hit these peripheral

regions harder than their inland counterparts, thereby fuelling already existing perceptions and images of backwardness and decline. These ideas differ greatly from the actual historical development of Waddenland until the late nineteenth century: a Waddenland of which roughly two-thirds once belonged to so-called Frisia, a rather loose, more socio-cultural than political collection of regions between Alkmaar and Cuxhaven (West and East Frisia) in the west and between Tönning and Tønder (North Frisia) in the north.

Setting the scene: Demographic developments as indicators of marginalisation

Demography is an obvious first gauge to measure the social and demographic developments in the different parts of the Wadden Sea region. Some preliminary figures — derived from a number of statistical sources — seem to support the relative decline of the region as a whole (Statistisk Tabelværk 1835; Ramaer 1931; Aagesen 1952-53; Uelschen 1961; Statistisches Landesamt SH 1972; Schroor 2008; CBS 2010; LSKN 2011; Statistikamt Nord 2011). Whereas the population of the Netherlands between 1795 and 2010 grew by a factor of 8.0, the population of the province of Fryslân grew by only a factor of 3.9, and Northwest Fryslân (i.e., the triangle Hallum-Leeuwarden-Harlingen) by a mere 2.3 (i.e., +129 percent). Not everywhere in the Wadden Sea region has population growth been this low, but there are nevertheless many demographic similarities. The coastal areas around the German Bight from Northern Frisia down to the town of Den Helder saw their population increase from some 800,000 inhabitants in 1815/1821 to 3,020,000 inhabitants in 2010. The population of the Northern Netherlands (including the Top of Holland, that is, the northernmost part of the province of North Holland together with the island of Texel), containing the Dutch part of the Wadden Sea region, saw its share of the population of the Netherlands decline between 1815-2010 from 14.8 percent to 8.0 percent. Whereas the Danish marshes are still practically uninhabited — except for the Danish Wadden Islands, where population has grown from 3,300 inhabitants in 1880 to 4,000 nowadays — their margins have seen substantial population growth in the past 150 years up to about 200,000 inhabitants today. The bulk of the growth, though, is accounted for by Esbjerg, which was founded only in 1868.

Making a similar comparison for the German part of Wadden Sea region is not as simple due to frequent, often drastic territorial changes since 1821. In that year, the area's share of population in the area of the German Zollverein

as it was before 1871 amounted to 1.6 percent, while its population share in the German Federal Republic today amounts to some 2.1 percent. However, taking into consideration the loss of Silesia, Posen, East Pomerania, West and East Prussia and excluding Luxembourg and Northern Schleswig, the growth figure of the German marshes was far less impressive.

A comparison can also be made between the Dutch and German Wadden marshlands (that is, the Dutch and German parts of Waddenland) over the past two centuries. The population of the Dutch marshes grew from 201,000 in 1815 to 615,000 in 2010 — a growth of more than 205 percent. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, they accounted for 62 percent of the population of the Northern Netherlands, whereas this percentage has now declined to 46 percent. Again the population of the German marshes is more difficult to reconstruct in view of their manifold administrative changes. In Lower Saxony the ten districts containing marshes (apart from other landscape types) experienced only a slight decrease in their portion of the total population from 1821 to 2010 (from 17.6 percent to 15.9 percent), as the population grew by 282 percent. Based on 13 of 21 *Samtgemeinden* (enlarged municipalities) in the marshes west of the river Elbe, the area's population grew by only 152 percent since 1821 (from 80,704, to 203,702 inhabitants).¹ At the same time, their share in the population of northwestern Germany (Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein) declined from 3.6 percent to 1.9 percent. The relative decline seems all the more dramatic considering the fact that since 1821, at least two initially non-existent important population centres have developed in the marshes: Wilhelmshaven (pop. 84,586) and Bremerhaven (pop. 118,276). Though offsetting much of the loss, they have not been included in these figures that nevertheless contain two older urban centres in the marshes: Emden (pop. 51,445) and Cuxhaven (pop. 52,876). Presenting more exact figures exceed both the scope and space available for this contribution, but at first glance the similarities are evident.

Lagging behind demographically can be considered an indicator of a steady and profound decline of Waddenland in relation to their regions at the national level or even in the context of northwestern Europe. On the face of it, this occurrence throughout the area presumes a certain socio-economic and cultural unity of the Wadden Sea region as well as an earlier state and appearance of prosperity. This chapter will attempt to gain insight into the supposed wealth of old to address some structural characteristics of its society and economy by means of five recurrent and interdependent

¹ The 13 *Samtgemeinden* consist of Jemgum, Emden, Krummhörn, Jade, Butjadingen, Lühe, Wursten, Nordholz, Cuxhaven, Hadeln, Nordkehdingen, Drochtersen and Jork.

themes: insularity, individualism, high degree of mobility, marginalisation and decentralisation. The focus will be mainly on the areas west of the Elbe river, considering the knowledge and research experience of the author and then again especially on the Dutch part of Waddenland, though every now and then the scope will broaden to the whole of the Wadden Sea region. Finally, this contribution is meant as a first step towards a research agenda, for most of these themes seem interesting enough to deserve further critical investigation into their validity in general and their applicability regarding the cultural-historical and societal dimension of the entire Wadden Sea region or parts thereof.

Insularity

We start with the geography of Waddenland. Anyone who takes a glance at a map of the coasts of the German Bight cannot but have strong maritime associations, seeing the chain of Frisian islands as well as their continental counterpart: a mainland heavily indented by bays, river mouths and inlets. The more we turn to the past, the more these littoral lands seem to be dismembered from each other and from the mainland. Especially up to the sixteenth century, they more or less had the appearance of a continental archipelago, consisting of real islands in the North Sea and marshy peninsulas on the mainland. The extent of the marshes in themselves is proof of the maximum and direct influence of the sea, as a rule formed through steady sedimentation under normal tidal conditions, now and again incidentally and briskly, owing to catastrophic storm surges. Lying on the western edge of the Eurasian continent at about 54° N, the region has a mild maritime climate with a mean annual precipitation of about 750 millimetres.

From the fifth century BC onwards, the high fertility of the soil as well as the wealth of fish and waterfowl attracted colonists from elsewhere (Pentz 2000) not only during Roman times but more so in Carolingian and Ottonian times (not to mention the occupational gap during the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages). In these times the Frisian coastal districts along the German Bight were among the most densely populated areas in Western Europe. Between 800 and 1200 AD, a combination of wealth and threatening overpopulation — probably aggravated by the threat of Viking raids — resulted in a massive wave of *Innere Kolonisation*. This colonization movement – starting somewhere between Harlingen and Texel – diffused to the central parts of Holland and from there spread eastward through the then-impenetrable peat-moors fringing Friesland, into the marshes and bogs

Figure 12.1 Map of the Frisian coastal districts between Vlie and Jade by Pieter van der Keere, 1617.

Courtesy of Tresoar, KvF 59c

alongside the Weser and Elbe rivers (Borger 2007). Apart from Old Frisian law texts referring to the cultivation of new lands, we find traces of this massive and mostly decentralised colonisation movement in our landscape as well as in the names on the maps: from, for instance, Exmorra, Eemswoude and Schildwolde west of the river Ems to Simonswolde, Altenbruch, Francop and Blankenmoor to the east of it.

The cultivation of the bogs, which had until then worked as sponges, and climatic change (higher temperatures, more storm surges and precipitation) jeopardised an already delicate balance between man and nature. The building of dikes as a necessary answer to the advancing waters caused higher water levels and thereby new flooding, and created an environment studded with numerous lakes. Then there was the destruction of the coastal peat-landscape in the Western Wadden Sea (in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) and Northern Frisia (in the fourteenth century), and high mortality levels caused by endemic malaria over the whole area — a result of the mixing of salt and fresh waters, sluggish drainage and periodical flooding by inland waters often in combination with incidental flooding by seawater. Except for the Frisian Islands, the rule for centuries was that the nearer to

the sea you were, the higher the mortality levels were (Knottnerus 2002; Schroor 2014).

At the end of the Middle Ages, Frisia west of the Elbe was more than ever a society on its own; a fragmented archipelago of nuclear regions, engaged in environmental challenges and occupied with its so-called Frisian freedom, seemingly cut off from mainstream developments in Western Europe. This more or less blocked its development into a viable and separate political unit. All in all a consistent story, told by various historians, but how did this geographical environment affect the social and economic development of the Wadden Sea country? Was it really the geography? And in what ways does opportunity make the thief, as seems to be the case with the immense popularity of skating in at least the western parts of these wetlands, to name but one trivial example? What was the position of the intermediate moors? Did they really act as barriers, or were they links between the coastal zone and the hinterland? Are there any differences in this respect with the North Elbian, especially Danish part of Waddenland, where sand and clay mostly were adjacent to each other?

Individualism

Along the coast from Holland to East-Friesland, Butjadingen and further towards Denmark, the so-called nuclear family at least from the Late Middle Ages onwards was standard in coastal North-western Europe (Page Moch 1992). This stood in stark contrast to adjacent and more distant inland areas of Waddenland, like Overijssel, Brabant or Westphalia. There, extended families prevailed, generally consisting of households of three generations or even more, often with cohabitating unmarried uncles, aunts or even cousins. Cohabitations like these imply limited risks of poverty and destitution to their individual members, whereas in nuclear families only the two parents — or worse, the widowed — had to bear all the burdens. A direct link can be assumed between the widespread nuclear families (husband, wife and children) on the one hand and the proliferation of so-called *cameren* (one-room dwellings) in at least Friesland and Groningen. By 1500, one-quarter of all dwellings in Leeuwarden already belonged to this category of poor people's home. An interesting question would be if there is any connection between the development of the nuclear household on the one hand and the relative isolation of the Frisian districts towards their hinterlands. There seem to be some other clues, such as the commercial success of farming in a fertile environment, or a nigh-constant struggle against the elements

in hazardous surroundings — factors that, put together, may have created an atmosphere of independence and self-support among the population, presumably with the outcome that even pre-modern Friesland was a rather autonomous and individualistic society. An example may shed some light on this assumption.

In 1850, the West Frisian lawyer and later burgomaster of Leeuwarden Johan Hendrik Beucker Andreae (1811-1865), condemned in an essay on poverty the widespread Frisian custom of thoughtless marrying at an early age, very often without any prospect of a decent livelihood (Beucker Andreae 1851). Half a century later (1899) — when census data for the first time offered a reliable insight into Dutch national housing conditions — Fryslân and Groningen counted by far the highest percentage of one-room residences (*éénkamerwoningen* or *cameren*) referred to above (more than 50 percent of all dwellings). These were spread evenly over rural districts and towns (Faber 1904). This form of housing was suited to early economic independence of young adults and the aforesaid practice of wedding at an early age, and also seems to underlie Frisian individualism, expressed furthermore in the extreme proliferation of private polders (up until 1970), in inland shipping on one's own account, and in the densest concentration of mediaeval church villages (often tiny) in Europe. The roots of early marrying at least seem to me as being essentially economical. In the marshes of Fryslân and Groningen — as well as in the Fen Colonies (in the raised bog area of Friesland, Groningen and East Frisia) — labouring on a temporary base (that is, irregular work) was a widespread phenomenon in the brickworks and in the fields. And although parts of the Geest and Fen Colonies were to become infamous as pockets of poverty and socio-political unrest at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Beucker Andreae furthermore stressed another essential difference between Marsch and Geest: in the marshes, poverty was harsher because, whereas in the sandy areas squatters and day labourers could get their hands on wood, sods and an allotment to cultivate their own food and build their own shelter, in the clay districts just about every square metre had been registered and had its official owner. Similar conditions seem to have existed on the East Frisian peninsula (Krömer 1991; Schroor 1992).

Overpopulation and high degree of mobility

Because of their fertility and wealth in all kinds of fish and fowl, the marshes attracted quite a few people and, considering colonisation movements inland

(the cultivation of the moors) and towards Northern Frisia, from Carolingian times at least must have been relatively overpopulated. Not everyone was able to find work in primary activities. Most of the labour surplus found its way into other non-agricultural activities like trade and commerce, usually associated with urbanisation as a phenomenon. However, during the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern era, the Frisian districts could hardly be called urbanised compared to places like Northern Italy, Île de France, Flanders, Holland or the Rhineland. In large parts of the Waddenland, non-agricultural activities were rather decentralised, inland navigation and rapidly expanding commercial peat-digging being the main ones. Originating in Northern Flanders and the Campina, commercial peat-cutting (to be sold to the great towns in Flanders and Brabant) advanced northwards and entered Fryslân (Heerenveen) about 1550. From here, it expanded into the province of Groningen, where the town of the same name became owner, originator, organiser and model of the Fen colonies, which subsequently (from 1633 onwards) diffused into northwestern Germany.

Both activities — inland shipping as well as peat-digging — imply a high degree of mobility. In the lower parts of the Netherlands, in the Wadden provinces *a fortiori*, the role of inland shipping up to the Interbellum can hardly be overstated (Verslag 1911). Mobility is the obvious result of the mobile nature of shipping itself. Furthermore, the gradual depletion of the peat and a consequent need to open up new areas for peat-cutting involved moving home. Small wonder that the population of Fryslân and Groningen — from the moment for which we have reliable figures available, i.e., between 1750 and 1920 — proved to be the most mobile and moving-inclined part of the Dutch population, ignoring the seasonal workforce flowing in every year from the Westphalian hinterland. Though this picture has changed since, it seems interesting enough to be analysed and compared to other parts of Western Europe and the Waddenland in particular.

Economic and political marginalisation

Some two centuries ago, the Waddenland was one of the wealthiest parts of Europe. Trading, overseas and inland shipping, and commercial farming were the cornerstones of wealth in Early Modern Fryslân and Groningen. In and around towns, manufacturing industries flourished. Although less rich and urbanized than adjacent Holland or Flanders, the northern provinces — especially the marshes — nevertheless attracted many seasonal as well as permanent migrants from the Westphalian and Hessian as well

Figure 12.2 Brickmaking, a traditional activity in the marshes. Female workers at a brickworks near Harlingen, about 1900.

Courtesy of Museum Hannemahuis

as the Upper Saxonian and Prussian hinterlands. They came to work as mowers, brickmakers, fishermen, boatmen, textile workers, peat diggers or whalers, or else they tried to sell their homemade textiles as hawkers and often settled down in the towns as small tradesmen and shopkeepers. For example, C&A, a worldwide name in clothing retail today started by the Brenninkmeyer family, was established in 1841 by Westphalian textile traders from Mettingen in the Frisian town of Sneek (Lucassen 1984).

As stated before, the demographic developments since have been characterised by stagnation and relative contraction and are an expression of a steady economic and political marginalisation.

Together with workers from the area itself, the migrants played an essential role in developing the adjacent moorland into the fen colonies of Friesland, Groningen and Ostfriesland that became a model for fen colonies elsewhere in Western Europe. Before 1800, the Frisian Islands and the mainland opposite them were themselves the main providers of skippers and other crew to the Baltic trade that was dominated by Amsterdam shipowners.

The cultural heritage of the area in many ways mirrors its history as an Early Modern society, firmly based upon a modern, commercial agricultural economy of dairy farming, cattle breeding and cereal production and other commercial activities such as inland shipping, fisheries, brick and tile-making, the production of ceramics and textiles, luxury goods or peat cutting, as well as the processing of local or imported primary products like cheese, butter, salt, sweets, sugar, coffee and tea. The wealth of the area was reflected in its architecture, its extensive production of luxury goods like embossed silver and glass, clocks, pottery, majolica and even books and atlases. After 1750, the Dutch Republic — of which Fryslân and Groningen were politically and economically a part — marginalised these two provinces. While Fryslân from 1860 onwards lost importance, developments in some parts of Groningen followed a different course. In this province, the political emancipation, the development of a merchant fleet and a process of industrialisation in the 'city jurisdictions' of Groningen, especially the Fen Colonies, experienced a growth spurt. The traditional Ommelanden, however, which mostly belonged to the marshes, developed like Friesland.

The outbreak of the great agricultural crisis in 1878 hit the Frisian areas doubly hard. For a start, they were impeded by the fact that they were not connected to the main consuming markets (Randstad Holland, Belgium/Northern France, Ruhr/Rhine). There was, moreover, hardly any base for industrialisation apart from the existing arts and crafts, and as far as other ways of employment were concerned their irregular and often seasonal character did not fit into modern ways of producing. Another constraint was the traditionally high wage levels, which acted as a brake on innovation. Mass products from the marshes like brick and salt were no match for the mechanised brickworks alongside the great rivers using reverberator kilns fired by cheap Ruhr coal instead of the Frisian rotary kilns fired by expensive English coal. Also, the market for traditional Frisian luxury goods like clocks, silver and glasswork, all relatively fragile, faced pressures as a result of a shrinking home market and even more through competing mass fabrication.

All in all, between 1880 and 1960, more than 400,000 inhabitants of Friesland and Groningen left their province in search of employment and a better life, one-fifth of them migrating to overseas destinations. This new, more externally oriented mobility must have had its impact on the economy and mentality of the population and on the landscape, especially in the marshes, which were on balance the biggest losers by far. Did the same mechanisms and developments occur in the German and Danish parts of the Waddenland? And if so, to what extent and how? And what were the effects on the existing social structures and mentalities caused by large-scale emigration?

Decentralisation

Apart from the preciously named aspects of Frisian society, another specific trait aggravated the problem of keeping pace with economic developments in Western Europe in general: the historically decentralised character of the province of Friesland. This goes beyond the geographical fragmentation mentioned as the first theme. Nowhere in the heavily urbanised Dutch Republic (1579-1798) did towns possess so little political power as was the case in Friesland. It's true enough that the eleven towns were represented in the Provincial Estates, but together they only formed one quarter as compared to the three rural quarters of Oostergo, Westergo and Zevenwouden. The supposed cultural unity of Friesland as seen through the eyes of fellow Dutchmen and many Frisians themselves seems at odds with its decentralised character but is in fact still one of the most striking characteristics of Frisian culture and society (Schroor 2007).

Decentralisation has a long tradition in Fryslân and seems to be one of the main characteristics of the Waddenland as a whole, though not everywhere! As such we find the most striking differences between neighbouring Fryslân and Groningen. The eleventh-century Frisian districts west of the Weser numbered twelve or so minting centres and marketplaces. In 1234, the Premonstratensian abbot Emo of Wittewierum mocked about 'gens a quator monetis a Stavria usque Lavicam' (i.e. Fryslân), considering four minting places too much for an area of barely 3,000 square kilometres. (Jansen et al. 1991). Various authors stress the proliferation of dozens of towns and hundreds of villages. (Emmius 1616; Gratama 1795). The result was a striking differential urban development between Fryslân with its eleven towns and 'vlecken' on the one hand and Groningen on the other, with one dominating town forming more or less a city-state. This latter example is the exception to the almost Frisian rule that not a single town in the Frisian districts could rise to dominance. Until recently, this decentralised character was replicated widely among the representatives in the States of Fryslân. Frisian resentments against towns were not, it should be noted, limited to Fryslân, but reigned supreme in the German Frisian districts too, e.g. towards Bremen (Prüser 1951). However, by regularly ignoring Leeuwarden's position as the best place in Fryslân in maintaining or reaching minimum threshold values in matters of employment and services, successive provincial authorities can be held responsible for the loss of economic weight, wealth and political influence that has continued up until virtually the present day. The establishment of a university in Franeker (1585) instead of in the capital and largest town Leeuwarden is perhaps the oldest and most telling example of this anti-urban distributive policy.

Figure 12.3 Historical map of Franeker, birds-eye map of Franeker by Pieter Bast (1598). Note the industrial suburb in the southwest (upper right) and the ships in the canals. The university was housed in the quadrangle at #3.

Courtesy of Tresoor KvF 285

There are reasons to believe that more mixed conditions existed on the East Frisian peninsula (e.g. Emden versus the other towns, especially Aurich and Norden; Marsch versus Geest and Moor) and probably elsewhere along the coast. (Kappelhoff 1994). The case of city-state Groningen illustrates that decentralisation does not seem to be the necessary political outcome of the aforementioned geographical fragmentation (Schroor 2007). Was it a different factor then? And how did political unity/disunity affect the history and fragmentation of Waddenland?

Epilogue

In this chapter we have discussed some peculiar characteristics of Frisian society in the Wadden Sea region and its immediate hinterlands, thus providing a provisional framework for further and more substantial scientific research into the cultural-historical essentials and character of this highly

fragmented region. The experience of the Dutch Wadden (and East Frisian) marshes does not seem to be applicable unequivocally to the other parts of the Wadden Sea region. However, in view of the corresponding geographical and economical structure of the German and Danish parts of the Wadden Sea, at least some socio-economic similarities may be expected.

In this contribution we have tried to formulate research questions based on supposedly common socio-economic and cultural traits that can be useful as workable hypotheses in order to gain insight into the character of Wadden society on the islands as well as on the mainland. They all require a broad, profound and critical analysis based on a multitude of different sources and a regional and sometimes even local approach, which apart from demography and economy extends to behavioural and social sciences as well. So far it appears a lot of dynamics have indeed passed by the marshes across the North Sea and through the Weser and Elbe rivers in their vicinity as well as through the great rivers such as the Rhine, the Meuse and the Scheldt to the south. It seems clear that the area was better at harnessing such dynamics before 1880, and nowadays this seems forgotten by its population. Research, while in the first place necessary to get a better idea of the socio-cultural characteristics and possible cohesion of the area, can at the same time be helpful in putting an end to the almost amnesic, widespread idea of a long-standing backwardness of Waddenland among its population. The outcome, potentially, is that the Waddenland will come to be seen as at least as valuable in cultural-historical terms as the Wadden Sea is from an ecological point of view.

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