

AHEAD OF ITS TIME? FRIESLAND AS PRECURSOR OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CRISIS

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In this half hour or so I will take you into some structural characteristics of the Interfrisian society and economy by means of five recurrent interdependent themes, viz. insularity, family structure, high mobility as a result of overpopulation, decentralisation and marginalization.

First theme: Insularity

Let me start with some geography. Anyone who takes a first glance at a map of the coasts of the German Bight can't miss in having strong maritime associations when seeing the chain of islands as well as their counterparts: 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. They more or less had the appearance of a continental archipelago. The coastal marshes (*Marschen, klaaigebieten*) of the Wadden Sea region, from Dutch West-Friesland in the province of North Holland up till Blåvands Huk in Jutland, measure some 9500 km² and were formed and influenced by the sea during the past three millennia. In

fact these endiked marshes or polders forming the mainland borders of the Wadden Sea very nearly mark the maximum extent of the influence of the sea about 2600 BC. I need not tell you that all corners of the coastal marsh polders once were part of the Wadden Sea whereas some riverine marshes alongside the Weser and Elbe owe their existence to the interaction between salt and fresh water. In places like nearby Central Westergo as well as Middag-Humsterland, Wangerland and Eiderstedt (Utholm and Everschop) today's irregular ditches are yesterdays gullies. 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, then again just incidentally and briskly, owing to catastrophic storm surges. Lying on the western edge of the Eurasian continent at about 54° N implies that the region has a mild maritime climate with a mean annual precipitation of about 750 millimetres.



Moreover the absence of substantial relief – a prerequisite for the development of a 'wadden sea' – together with a precipitation surplus result in a generally rather sluggish natural drainage and in consequence a growth of peat-moors. Coastal marshes and mostly sandy pleistocene hinterlands (*Geest*) initially were separated by a belt of these well-nigh impenetrable peat-moors (*venen, Fehne, Moore*, compare *fens* in English) of varying width. It is important to realize that these high-moors (since vanished or turned into low-moors as a result of drainage, cultivation, subsidence or decay) originally functioned as an effective barrier to foreign intruders coming from overland, before being settled, drained, cultivated, dug and thereby partially turned into lakes and meres, or in some cases covered again by a layer of sea clay. For most of their history the inland borders though were never clear.

The coastal marshes themselves were – and often still are – indented by several estuaries and bays more or less dividing them into peninsulas. North of the Elbe, marshes and *Geest* (as in Wursten east of the Weser mouth) are often contiguous. The Danish marshes are practically uninhabited. Here, farms and villages traditionally were located on the edge of the moraine land, halfway between the pastures of the marshes and the fields of the *Geest*.

From the 5th century BC onwards the high fertility of their soils, as well as the wealth of fish and waterfowl attracted colonists from elsewhere. 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 Middle Ages). Hence the Frisian coastal districts along the German Bight belonged to the most densely populated areas in Western Europe. More so, a combination of wealth and threatening overpopulation, probably aggravated by the threat of Viking raids, between 800 and 1200 AD resulted in a massive wave of *Innere Kolonisation*. This colonization movement – starting somewhere in this neighbourhood between Harlingen and Texel – diffused to the central parts of Holland and eastward through the till then impenetrable peat-moors fringing Friesland, into the marshes and bogs alongside the Weser and Elbe rivers. Apart from Old-Frisian law texts referring to the cultivation of new lands, we find traces of this massive and mostly decentralized 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.

Destruction of the bogs – till then functioning like sponges – and climatic change (higher temperatures, more storm surges and precipitation) jeopardized an already delicate balance between man and nature. Dike-building as a necessary answer to the advancing waters, in itself caused higher water levels and thereby new flooding. It moreover created an environment studded with numerous lakes and divided into peninsulas, separated from each other by broad bays and inlets. Not to mention the destruction of the coastal peat-landscape of Northern Friesland in the 14th century, nor even the high mortality levels caused by endemic malaria. This in itself was the result of the mixing of salt and fresh waters, sluggish drainage, periodical flooding by inland waters and incidental flooding by sea water. Except for the Frisian Islands, the rule for centuries was that the nearer to sea you were, the higher mortality levels used to be. At the end of the Middle Ages, to overdraw the picture, Friesland more than ever was 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 main-stream developments in Western Europe. This more-or-less blocked its development into a viable and separate political unit. Thus Frisia, though considered a political entity, never developed into a state. Only once, that is to say in 1499, emperor Maximilian extended Albrecht of Saxony's commission as hereditary governor of the Frisian districts to practically the whole coastal area from the Vlie-estuary till Jutland (excluding only West-Friesland and Eiderstedt).

Second theme: The nuclear family

Along the coast from Holland to East-Friesland, Butjadingen and further to the northeast the so-called nuclear family at least from the Late Middle Ages onwards was the rule. This stood in stark contrast to inland areas, like Overijssel, Brabant of Westphalia. There extended families prevailed, generally consisting of three or even

more generation households, often with in-living unmarried uncles, aunts or even cousins. Cohabitations like these imply limited risks of poverty and destitution to their individual members. Without being able to deliver sufficient evidence in our brief space, we presume a connection between the development of the nuclear household on the one hand and the relative isolation of the Frisian districts towards their hinterlands. Apart from this isolation enforced by the insular character of this part of the world, it was firstly the commercial success of farming in a fertile though hazardous environment and secondly their well-nigh constant struggle against the elements that together may have created an atmosphere of independence and self-support in its population. Presumably with the outcome that already in pre-Modern times Friesland was a rather autonomous and individualistic society. I will reveal a few examples that shed some light on this hypothesis.

In 1850 the West-Frisian lawyer and later burgomaster of Leeuwarden Johan Hendrik Beucker Andreae (1811-1865), in an essay on poverty, condemned the widespread Frisian custom of thoughtless marrying at an early age (p. 185), very often without any prospect of a decent livelihood. Half a century later (1899) – when census for the first time offered a reliable insight in housing conditions – Fryslân and Groningen among the Dutch provinces counted by far the highest percentage of 'éénkamerwoningen' (one-room houses, more than 50% of all dwellings) spread evenly over rural districts and towns. A direct link can be assumed between the widespread nuclear families (husband, wife and children) on the one hand and the proliferation of these so-called camerens. Already in 1500 one quarter of all dwellings in Leeuwarden belonged to this category of poor-people dwellings. It fitted to an early economic independence of young adults and the forenamed practice of wedding at an early age, not to mention the so-called Frisian individualism. Again the roots of the last-named phenomenon seem to me as being essentially economical. In the arable corner (Bouhoeke) of Friesland – as well as in the Fencolonies - labouring on a temporary base (*irregular work, that is*) was a widespread phenomenon in the brickworks and in the fields. And although parts of the Geest and high-moor colonies were to become ill-famed as pockets of poverty and socio-political unrest at the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, 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 lay their hand 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 formal owner.

Third theme: Over-population and high mobility

Because of its fertility and their richness in all kinds of fish and fowl the marshes attracted quite a few people and – considering the colonization movement, inland as well as in the direction of Northern Friesland – must have been relatively over-populated. Not everyone was able to find work in primary activities and part of the labour-surplus found its way in non-agricultural activities like trade and commerce, usually associated with urbanization as a phenomenon. However, during the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern times the Frisian districts could hardly be called urbanized, compared to e.g. Northern Italy, the Île de France, Flanders, Holland or the Rhineland. Much of the labour-surplus though found its way in rather decentralized activities such as inland navigation and the rapid rising of commercial

peat-digging from the 16th century onwards. Originating in Northern Flanders and the Campina as purveyors to the great Flanders and Brabant towns in their nearby fens and bogs, commercial peat-cutting advanced northwards and entered Fryslân (It Hearrenfean/Heerenveen) via Utrecht (Rhenen/Veenendaal) in 1550. From here it expanded into the province of Groningen, where the town of the same name became owner, originator, organizer and model of the Fen colonies, which subsequently (from 1633 onwards) diffused into North-western Germany.

Both activities, inland shipping as well as peat-digging, involve a strong mobility. The French agronomist Georges Blondel in his famous work on German agriculture (1897) pointed at the fact that 'ses colonies – peat colonies – sont pour la marine une pépinière d'excellents matelots et d'excellents ouvriers des constructions navales. elles fournissent à l'émigration un contingent notable et contribuent ainsi à entretenir parmi les Frisons un esprit salubre d'initiative et d'entreprise'. He could have pointed at the flowering of overseas shipping in the Groningen Fencolonies in the mid 19th century.

In the first case mobility is the obvious result of the mobile character of shipping itself. Furthermore the gradual depletion of the peat and a consequent need to open up new areas for peat-cutting, involved moving one's home too. Small wonder that the Frisian population, from the moment we have reliable figures (from 1750 onwards) at our disposal, has proved to be the most mobile and moving-prone part of the Dutch population. Not to mention the seasonal workforce flowing in every year from the Westphalian hinterland.

Fourth theme: Economical and political marginalization

Trading, overseas and inland shipping as well as commercial farming were the cornerstones of wealth in Early Modern Friesland, up till the middle of the 19th century one of the wealthiest parts of Western Europe, not to mention the world. In and around towns manufacturing industries flourished. Albeit less rich and urbanized than adjacent Holland or Flanders, Friesland – especially its western parts – nevertheless attracted a lot of seasonal as well as permanent migrants from the Westphalian and Hessian as well as the Upper Saxonian and Prussian hinterlands. They came here to work as mowers, brick-makers, fishermen, boatmen, textile-workers, peat-cutters or whalers, or else tried to sell their home-made textiles as hawkers and often settled down in the towns as small tradesmen and shopkeepers. The world-wide chain of clothing-stores C & A (Brenninkmeyer) for instance, was established in 1841 by Westphalian textile traders from Mettingen in the Frisian town of Sneek.

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. The Frisian Islands and their opposite mainland before 1800 were themselves the main providers of skippers and other crew to the Baltic trade that was dominated by Amsterdam ship-owners.

The cultural heritage of the area in many ways reflects its history as an early-modern society, firmly based upon a modern, commercial agricultural economy of dairy-farming, cattle-breeding and cereal production and on 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 politically and economically (and East-Friesland and the North-Frisian Islands in many ways economically) formed part, marginalized and within the Republic Fryslân and Groningen lost weight. Though population growth accelerated between 1750 and 1860) it differed from the urbanization that took place elsewhere in Europe (esp. Britain) in that it was mainly the rural population that grew. While around the middle of the 19th century this reruralization stopped elsewhere in the Netherlands and Germany, it continued in the Frisian districts. Moreover the balance between the *Marsch and Geest*, between coastal area and hinterland shifted in favour of the hinterland.

At the outbreak of the great agricultural crisis the Frisian areas so to say received a double blow. For a start, they were impeded by their aloofness from the main consuming markets (Randstad Holland, Belgium/Northern France, Ruhr/Rhine). This problem was aggravated by traditionally high wage-levels. There moreover was hardly a base for industrialization apart from the traditional arts and crafts and as far as the other ways of employment were concerned, their irregular often seasonal character, didn't fit into modern ways of producing. Innovation levels were low and Frisians mass-products like brick and salt were no match for the mechanized brick-works alongside the great rivers using reverberatory kilns fired by cheap Ruhr-coal instead of the Frisian rotary kilns fired by expensive English coal. Not to mention the traditional Frisian luxury goods like clocks, silver- and glasswork that broke down, as a result of a shrinking home market and even more competing, mass fabrication. Economic marginalization was accompanied and in a way completed by romantic views of a free, proud and autonomous Friesland, vested in doctrines and redefinitions of a so-called great past, rooted in agriculture and peopled by yeoman farmers under the benign rule of a rural nobility. This reconstruction of a glorious past starting in Fryslân around 1825 (and promoted by such organizations as Het Friesch Genootschap) under the influence of Romanticism, *completely neglected the non-agricultural and urban aspects of the Frisian past*. Almost systematically the Friesland of townfolk, of day-labourers, of boatmen, of ship's crew and fishermen, of peat-cutters or brick-workers has been neglected, while their toil and mobility have probably had more influence on Frisian history and society as it is than over-romanticized stadtholderate, nobility and yeoman farming!

At the moment the glorious historical exposition – that laid the foundations of the Fries Museum – was held in 1877 in Leeuwarden, the Frisian economy was on the brink of collapse. In 1904 nobleman Theo van Welderen Rengers was just about the only member of the political and social elite that warned against job-hunting and lack of industrial initiatives and innovation. He was one of the leaders of the cooperative movement that lay at the base of an extensive 20th century – though by now practically disappeared – agricultural industry, finance and insurance sector. I won't tire you with examples of governmental administrators convinced of the unfitness of the Frisian for working in factories (before and just after World War II) while at the same time between 1880 and 1960 in balance more than a quarter million of Frisians

left this province in search of employment and a better living. One-fifth of them migrating to overseas destinations.

Fifth theme: Decentralized

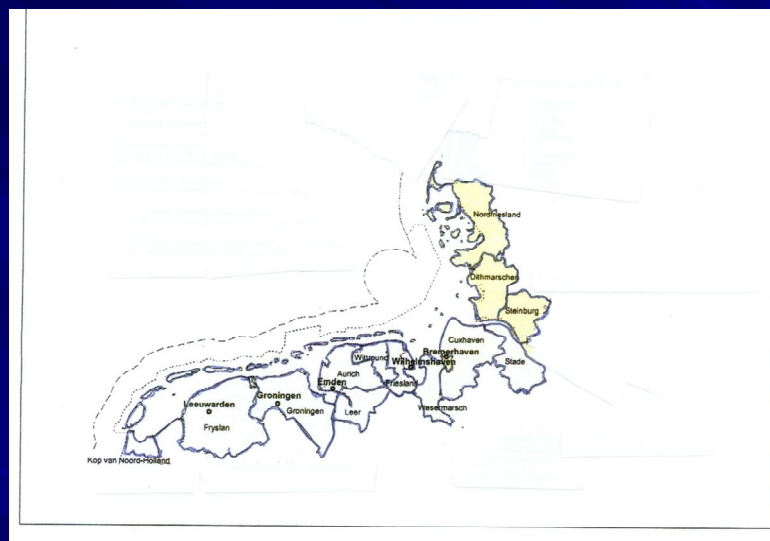
Another specific Frisian aspect aggravated the problem of keeping pace with economic developments in Western Europe in general, viz. its decentralized character. This meant more than the geographical fragmentation I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture. Nowhere in the heavily urbanized Dutch Republic towns possessed so little political power as was the case here in Fryslân. The eleven towns, true enough, all were represented in the Provincial Estates, but together they only formed one quarter against the three rural quarters Oostergo, Westergo and Zevenwouden. The supposed cultural unity of Fryslân seems at odds with its decentralized character, but is in fact still one of the most striking characteristics of Frisian culture and society. Decentralization has a long standing in Friesland. The 11th century Frisian districts west of the Weser counted twelve or so minting centres and market places. In 1234 Premonstratenze abbot Emo of Wittewierum mocked about 'gens a quator monetis a Stauria usque Lavicam', considering four minting-places to much for an area of barely 3000 square kilometres. Various authors such as Ubbo Emmius (1616) and Seerp Gratama stress the proliferation of tens of towns and hundreds of villages (see map of Jacob van Deventer). Frisia itself presents a striking example of the differential urban development, between Fryslân with its eleven towns and 'vlecken' on the one hand and Groningen with one dominating town on the other hand, forming more or less a city-state. The last example being the exception to the almost Frisian rule that practically nowhere in the Frisian district one town has risen to dominance. This decentralized character up till recently was echoed widely amongst the representatives in the States of Friesland. 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 they more than once have stood in the way of economic reconstruction and development in Friesland. The opposition between towns and countryside moreover had a political dimension in which social-democrats dominated the towns, whereas their Christian-democrat counterparts dominated the countryside.

Epilogue

I will come to a conclusion. We have gone through some peculiar characteristics of Frisian society in the Wadden Sea area and its immediate hinterlands. I won't say the mainly Westfrisian experience I've sketched here can be transposed directly on economic developments in the other Frisian districts, let alone on the contemporary European crisis. The part of this province Fryslân we're in now (Northwest-Fryslân) since 1795 experienced the least population growth of all the regions in the Netherlands.

It is time to show some statistics. Whereas the population of the Netherlands since 1795 augmented by a factor 7.5; the Frisian population has grown by only 3.9 and Northwest-Fryslân with a mere 2.3 (e.g. +129%). Not everywhere in the Frisian districts population growth has been this low, but there nevertheless are many similarities among the Frisian districts as far as demography is concerned. The coastal areas around the German Bight from Northern Friesland up till the town of Den Helder (in the so-called Head of Holland) in 1815/1821 counted some 800.000

inhabitants living on 18.755 square kilometres. Nowadays the same area counts some 3.020.000 inhabitants. The population of the Northern Netherlands (viz. the provinces of Fryslân, Groningen and the Head of Holland, that is the northernmost part of the province of North Holland, incl. the island of Texel) since 1815 experienced a decline of its share in the entire population of the Netherlands from 14.8 down to 8.0%.



As far as Germany is concerned a similar comparison is more difficult to make, because of frequent, often drastic territorial changes since 1821. Even so, I will give it a try. In 1821 the area's share of population in that of the German Reich amounted 1.6%, while its population share in the German Federal Republic today amounts to some 2.1%. However, taking into consideration the loss of Silesia, Posen, East Pomerania, West- and East-Prussia, the population-picture on the German side was less positive. Even more so, considering the fact that while in the Northern Netherlands the adjacent high moors around 1815/1821 practically all had been developed, in Germany they more or less were still in their infancy. For this reason I have made a comparison too between the North Sea marshlands or clay districts (kleigebieden, Marschen) during the same period of some two centuries in the Netherlands and in Germany. The population in the northern Dutch marshes augmented from 201.000 in 1815 till 615.000 in 2010 (i.e. plus 205%). At the beginning of the 19th century the marshes counted 62% of the population of the Northern Netherlands a percentage that today has declined to 46%. Again the German marshes are more difficult to compare, in view of manifold administrative changes. Based on 13 of 21 Samtgemeinden (enlarged municipalities) situated in the Germany North Sea marshes west of the rivier Elbe, a population growth of the area of only 152% since 1821 can be discerned. At the same time their share in the

population of North-western Germany declined from 3.6 till 1.9%. Presenting more exact figures would exceed scheme and time of this lecture, demanding more thorough research. My conclusion none the less points to many similarities as far as the demographical and economic developments of the Frisian areas are concerned. A lot dynamics literally pass by the Frisian areas across the North Sea, the Weser and Elbe rivers. The German language has a proper expression for this phenomenon: *Übertiefung*. The report *The Wadden Sea Region. A socio-economic analysis* <http://www.safecoast.nl/editor/databank/File/WaddenSeaRegional-analysis-En.pdf> issued in June 2004 confirms my analysis.

Culture survives and thrives best in an economically sound environment. But there is more to it. These days the capital of Fryslân, Leeuwarden, is in a crucial phase in its competition with four other Dutch cities to become European Cultural capital in 2018. The common Frisian economic and socio-cultural experience of the past, that I have tried to picture you during the past 45 minutes, can support the Leeuwarden candidacy. It can help in a way that the Frisian experience during the past two and a half centuries of an early modern society in relative and sometimes absolute economic decline is in fact a precursor of the contemporary European experience on the world-stage. We Frisians, coastal dwellers, know what it is to live in a potentially dangerous environment, more so against the background of climate change. We also know what it is to be rich and lose importance. And we know how it is to cope with deep social gaps and frustrations and how to combine as an early modern society new developments with old and lively traditions. On the other hand we experienced too, what kind of false romantic ideas and misconceptions can accompany such a process of losing importance. Viewed from these perspectives I am very glad that the Ynterfryske Rie/Friesenrat has put economy and its perspectives and future development of our beloved Frisian areas on its agenda by making it the theme and primary subject of this meeting.

Tige tank!