

Call for Papers
to Session 167

on the XVth World Economic History Congress, Stellenbosch, 9-13 July, 2012:

LAND RECLAMATION IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES: ECONOMICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

A common framework for understanding pre-industrial land reclamation is that population pressure put a strain on the distribution of natural resources, thus necessitating the cultivation of former wastes, woodlands and wetlands. This approach rarely touches upon underlying structures guiding the colonisation process. Furthermore, it distinguishes little between different extents and types of reclamation and fails to explain why some reclamation proved economically and environmentally sustainable and others only short-lived.

In this session we offer a critical four-pronged framework for understanding pre-industrial colonisation and reclamation of land.

1. Access to land and capital. How did reclamation in more egalitarian societies differ from reclamation under polarised social conditions? The social distribution of land and capital might explain variations in the extent and type of land reclamation.
2. Opportunity cost. To what extent can reclamation activity be explained by income strategy? Any decision to colonise new land had to be traded-off against preservation or improvement of existing resources.
3. Institutional arrangements. Which institutions were essential in stimulating land clearances, for example in sharing risks? Can we distinguish between institutional settings favouring short-term gain in reclamations and others favouring a long-term perspective?
4. Political Power. To what extent was reclamation stimulated through coercion or the granting of favourable concessions and freedoms? Much pre-industrial reclamation was not linked to direct agricultural exploitation of the land, but grounded in the extension of political and territorial powers.

In this session, supported by the CORN-network (Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area), we explore how this social and institutional framework altered the impact of other commonly accepted motors of reclamation, like demography, the market, technology, or climate change. The conceptual framework proposed is applicable for all pre-industrial societies, and although the papers focus more on Europe where a long historiography on pre-industrial land reclamation exists, we make broad comparisons with other regions of the world - in particular the Middle East. By combining broad comparative papers and micro-studies focusing on chronology, environmental impact, and economic profitability of reclamation in particular regions, we aim 1) to move away from uncritical demographic explanations of reclamation activity 2) to provide a framework showing which conditions were more likely to stimulate land reclamation, and which conditions could stifle it and 3) to show which conditions

were likely to support sustainable reclamation and which were susceptible to economic failure or environmental collapse.

The organisers of this session are interested in considering any papers linked to the proposed theoretical framework surrounding pre-industrial land reclamation, in particular (though not limited to) papers with a non-European focus.

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