

## **Conference Report**

***Ländliche Eliten. Bäuerlich-bürgerliche Eliten in den friesischen Marschen und den angrenzenden Geestgebieten 1650-1850*, a collaborative research project supported by the VolkswagenStiftung initiative 'Research in Museums' 2010-2013**

**Conducted at the Carl von Ossietzky-Universität Oldenburg, Institut für Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit, 20-22 September 2012**

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It was a great pleasure to represent HERA FEM and to participate in the three-day conference directed by Prof. Dr Dagmar Freist of Carl von Ossietzky-Universität Oldenburg, Department of Early-Modern History. This conference on rural elites in early-modern Europe used different approaches to their self-presentation and self-fashioning in order to study practices rather than simply attempt to uncover motives. The conference was part of a larger joint research project of university, museums and archives on rural elites, fashions and other artefacts that is funded by the VW-Stiftung. The premise of the conference was that, according to Freist, 'based on a number of findings so far we can argue that rural elites developed specific forms of social distinction which disconnected them clearly from rural society, and wealthy farmers come across as something like rural patricians. Thus, these forms of self-fashioning seem to challenge the social order of early modern estate society'. Freist introduced the conference with a discussion of social dynamism that challenged normative ideas of a God given social order, privileges and status. She argued that estate society became more differentiated with the impact of new rising social groups. The performance of field specific social practices, according to Freist, was not an imitation of, for example, the nobility, but an overwriting of the script of the élite by rising social groups. They acclaimed the position of a social elite by performing the expected social and cultural practices and in the process they created themselves as a specific and recognizable group rather than imitating what was already there.

How does this show itself? How does self-representation work? How can we group people by working with material culture? In some parts of Germany intermarriage between the rural areas and the towns was not considered positively. How does marriage work across groups and affect consumption? 24 speakers came together with a good number of masters, doctoral and other students as well as museum and archive professionals.

The region that formed the focus of the study is the Frisian Marshes, an area in which wheat and livestock generated wealth in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the speaker Gerd Steinwascher noted of the area, 'the German Northwest is a very exciting area for examination. Spiritual and secular state formations, mixed denominational, Catholic and Lutheran religious conditions are encountered as well as the manor and free peasants or sovereign tenant farmers'.

As doctoral candidate Frank Schmekel reminded the group, the term 'hausleute' in North-West Germany does not denote a peasant, but rather a figure who is somewhere economically and socially between a farmer and a trader. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards they were allowed to own and sell land in this region. Although very few of the *hausleute* went far from their own region, they 'were very aware of their dependency on global economic developments'. They were, according to Schmekel, 'a social group between local rootedness and global involvement'. They are therefore extremely interesting in terms of the topics of distinction and consumption for the early-modern period that the HERA *Fashioning the Early Modern Network* is also researching.

Looking at surviving material culture such as imported Chinese porcelain, Schmekel argued that their consumption by local farming elites represented 'a real interplay between different regions of the world', and that they were 'glocal' players to use the term of Roland Robertson. Some such farmers owned scales to covert currency as well as almanacs of markets in multiple languages, markets being important sites of the transfer of information as well as goods. Schmekel talked about the allure of the foreign to the *hausleute*. He quoted from a contemporary document: 'the public predominantly loves the foreign without respect for the quality or the beauty of a thing'. It was not so simple. Two hatters from Norden in a supplication against Dutch hats were discovered to be importing Dutch hats themselves and pretending that they were of local production. In May 1774 the potter Schmeding complained about the dressmaker Meyer who 'dares to deal in all kinds of foreign earthenware'. Meyers fights back by stating that the potters have inferior products both technically and aesthetically. Clearly it was quite common to have foreign goods in this marketplace and there was a rising diversity of shopping. High quality was not equivalent to a high price and the prices also dropped. The local farmer 'high flyers', as Schmekel called them, needed supra-regional trade and colourful investments in their position.

Other paper-givers analysed what some described as the 'self-consciousness' of the wealthy farmers and the peasant population, 'furthered by their individual agronomy' in a system of farming using dykes and with very fertile soil. Surplus grain was exported to Hamburg and the Netherlands. Wealth grew greatly from 1650 to 1700 and from 1750-1808. Farmsteads became filled with luxury goods from the Netherlands as well as Hamburg furniture, and assemblies and dances were held with modern music. Many of the well-to-do developed secondary incomes as millers, publicans and merchants (Gunter Mahlerwein). The rich farmers did not, however, simply wish to copy their 'social betters'. The conference offered, then, a thorough repudiation of simple theories of emulation in fashion.

We learned, for example, that wealthy farmers might choose to spend much of their money on church fittings, tombs and bas-relief sculptural escutcheons (Christine Aka). The rural elites of this region, then, can be understood through an interplay of public and private in 'well-placed culture, which becomes an agent and an

ambassador of a social system' (Uwe Meiners). Prof Dr Meiners analysed a wonderful surviving set of painted *boiseries* from a rich farmer household inset with religious paintings and cupboards for decorative china, which was 'an indication of both religious self-understanding and precise material consumption'.

Comparative perspectives were useful at the conference. Erwin Karel and Richard Paping, speaking of Dutch farmer elites in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, noted that wealthy farmers were often second after nobles in the tax lists of the Netherlands. They also spoke of bankruptcies; the 'chance to become rich under capitalism also means added risk of bankruptcy'. They also emphasised that people connected with a 'rural' identity might not be farmers at all but engaged in other trades.

We learned much concerning the interpretation of rural life. Reiner Prass argued that village elites might already know how to use written documents 'without necessarily being able to read them' in early modern Burgundy and Minden-Ravensberg. Comparing rural areas in what is today Belgium from the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Kristof Dombrecht and Eilene van Onacker, two doctoral candidates from Belgium, emphasized striking differences in forms of political representation and culture. Lutz Volmer gave a nuanced semiotic analysis of the "niederdeutsche Hallenhaus" (which he compared to the *gulfhaus*) – an elaborate dwelling house attached to an aisled barn in the Cloppenburg area. He argued that their 'simplicity' has been mis-read in terms of social spaces and complexity of interactions. His use of Latour to re-read the architecture was striking.

Section V of this conference was devoted to the question of fashion and the social order in the early modern period. I presented a paper entitled 'In defence of my tail': young men's hair and fashionability in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England'. The paper was a counterpoint to the mainly German regional papers presented. It argued that the interplay of custom and fashion was of importance to a young man up from the country in 1760s London in explaining his engagement with fashion to his family at home in the countryside.

Philippe Jarnoux of the University of Brest spoke in English so I can report in more depth on his paper. He commenced with some important historiographical points. In the 1960s historians studied the economic and social point of view; material culture seemed to be a function of the economic conditions and not a topic in itself. He noted that the French cultural history tradition of the study of fashion concerns mainly urban life. Peasants of lower Brittany did not speak French and consumed differently than in a centre such as Paris or even a large rural town. 10-20% of them were well off; others very poor. It was fascinating to learn that although the Breton peasants were close to the ports bringing back colonial goods, they chose not to consume most of them. More important to the peasants was the household and the 'visualisation of furniture' therein – rich peasants amassed quantities of fairly limited types – chairs, beds and wardrobes, for example. Most important were the large marriage chests (*armoires*) of cherry wood that were carried publicly through the streets and processed into peasant houses. They also very much preferred to

acquire silver ceremonial cup-vessels which were probably also related to marriage and births. As not so many survive, they must have later been melted down. Between 1689-1790 about 11% owned silver and this seems to be the only luxury object consistently cultivated by the peasant. The form is quite similar to other European c18 two-handled low cups with lids. The spread of earthenware dishes is significant and generally suggests also the innovation of a sideboard or dresser.

Peasants also liked to acquire a great quantity of certain goods – bedding, shirts, clothing – but not luxury clothing or ‘rare and specialised furniture’. In terms of clothing the second-hand market was very large and this made those who wore the new and clean clothes more striking. Rarity and novelty are of little interest but rather accumulation is the preferred model. Exceptions are local priests, who behaved more like urban folk. They were often the sons of rich peasants and they drank tea and coffee unlike the locals. The conference delegates were quick struck by this fact that is not typical in Western Europe. Prof. Dr. Heide Wunder pointed out that areas like Lithuania also have distinctive consumption patterns that must be analysed in and on their own terms.

Jarnoux provided a great deal of fascinating information about how an 18<sup>th</sup> century peasant acquired fashionable accessories and small luxuries. Many were bought after Mass as well as at the ‘Pardons’ or religious feasts and pilgrimages. The fairs were key – people would have money from selling their cattle and hawkers were present. The striking point he made was that ‘there were few links between colonial activities and rural distribution of consumer goods’ in rural Brittany. Jarnoux will soon publish a fascinating account of the attack and murder of a pedlar, Hubert Jenniard, killed by soldiers in Crozon in 1761. The magistrate investigated and recorded that he had on him the following: 18 rings, 72 knives, 4 mirrors, 16 snuffboxes, 16 scissors, 7 ivory needles, 42 shoe buckles, 12 kerchiefs, 16 combs, 9 flutes, 12 pens, 6 earpicks, 1 crystal flask, 5 brushes, 5 bells, 5 crosses and 170 pairs of buttons. This is a striking list for the *Fashioning the Early Modern* participants as it demonstrates how important small accessories and instruments of grooming were to fashion at this time and the very large amounts of certain fashion items carried into the countryside by one pedlar.

To a Breton peasant, wealth was not a means to start a great deal of consumption. It was instead ‘a guarantee against social and economical crisis’ and secondly used to assert a social position. In Breton society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there is little evidence of a consumer revolution. Change is ‘slow and progressive’. The main issue is to be the first in the village, not in the outside world, even when peasants become prominent in Paris, at the time of the Estates General for example. The city is seen as a foreign society, according to the speaker.

Much of the conference was conducted in German with short English summaries for the non-German speakers. Several of the PhD candidates presented and questioned in English and indicated their connection to the broader trends in global history that are accelerating around the world at the moment. The connection with the local

museum and archival communities in Cloppenburg, Oldenburg and Jever was particularly noteworthy at this conference.

Professor Dr Freist summed up the proceedings in the following ways, all of which are very useful to the questions being investigated within *Fashioning the Early Modern*:

1. The comparative and interdisciplinary approach to 'rural elites' in early modern Europe has proved extremely fruitful.
2. Rural elites differ around Europe and they are also differentiated within themselves. We cannot speak of a homogenous group.
3. The analysis of social distinction should not be limited to the analysis of what people possessed in terms of luxury goods. Social distinction also comprises forms of behaviour, habitus and social practices.
4. Material culture has different roles in social interaction: it can be instrumental in signifying social status, it can be part of a Habitus, it can also be a culturally impregnated way of claiming a specific social position within a specific field or social group.
5. Rural elites were linked to supra-regional markets but they did not always engage in global forms of consumption.
6. The engagement with supra-regional markets and access to "global" consumer goods triggered a process of adaption and "re-modelling" of consumer goods according to local tastes, custom and traditional ideas of social prestige. A fruitful theoretical perspective on these processes is offered by the concept of glocalisation.
7. Rural elites had access to media on politics, science and fashion.
8. Rural elites created their own infrastructure for social and cultural events and exchange.
9. We need to be careful how to label rural elites. Can we call them a "rural-bourgeois" elite? What alternative terminology is there?

HERA FEM is already permitting an interaction with this German research grouping; its web-site is used for Masters teaching in the following course conducted by Prof. Dr Freist: '*Wer sind die Schönsten im ganzen Land? Konsum, Mode und Modediskurse am Beginn der Moderne im europäischen Vergleich*'.

HERA FEM and Peter McNeil would like to thank Dr Freist for the opportunity to interact with Ländliche Eliten as well as the gracious hospitality in Oldenburg including a visit to a *geisthaus* (Villa GeistReich).

The proceedings will be published.

See: [www.ländliche-eliten.de](http://www.ländliche-eliten.de)

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