The volumes in this new series are written by an international research team (CORN/Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area) coordinated by scholars of Ghent University and the University of Leuven (Belgium) in collaboration with Utrecht University (The Netherlands).

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This series of four volumes is the first collectively written synthesis of the comparative rural history of Northwestern Europe.

CORN (Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area) is a research network founded in 1995 and coordinated by scholars from Ghent University and the University of Leuven (Belgium) in collaboration with Utrecht University (The Netherlands). It consists of different research units that primarily aim to study long-term developments of rural societies from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. It focuses on the North Sea area from a comparative and an interdisciplinary point of view.

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These topics are studied from a predominantly socio-economic perspective. Families adapted their behaviour to changing social and economic circumstances. These issues are essentially dealt with from a socio-economic perspective of reproduction and production and the relationships between its members. The first set evaluates the impact of these processes on the family as a unit and within which structural boundaries, land was made useful for agriculture. The goal is to interpret household formation and the economic behaviour of its members within the context of the structural features of the regional social agro-system. Two sets of research questions structure the chapters in this book. The central issue in this volume is the relation and the interaction between society and external changes, such as the rise and fall of the market, trends in population, and European integration. The organisation of society formed a crucial element in the remarkable development of the countryside in the North Sea area in the last 1500 years. Vital questions are: who owned the land? Who gained the profits from its exploitation? How was the use of rural resources controlled and changed? These questions have no simple answers, because the land has been subjected to competing claims, varying from region to region. In early times peasants mostly possessed and worked their holdings, but lords took much of the produce, and had the ultimate control over the land. In more recent times the occupiers and cultivators gained stronger rights over their farms. Neither lords nor peasants were free agents because communities governed the use of common lands. In the highly urbanised North Sea region towns and townships had considerable and increasing influence over the countryside. Change came from within society, for example from the tension and negotiation between lords and peasants, and the growing importance of the state and its policies. This volume also looks at the interaction between society and external changes, such as the rise and fall of the market, trends in population, and European integration.

Agriculture and nourishment are, from early times and up to now, crucial elements in the development of market systems. Shortage and surplus gave shape to different forms of exchange and sale, to the dynamics of supply and demand, and to expanding interconnections between regions and social groups. Farmers learned to adapt their production to market conditions and to the shifting needs and tastes of a growing and demanding public. But the path from a self-supporting way of life to the present forms of market integration in the complex, global world was far from uniform and linear. Food production, market structures and market mechanisms changed over time and differed between regions and countries of the North Sea area. This volume aims at exploring and unravelling the complexity of the agro-food market, from the field to the table.