

1 Introduction: family, labour and income in the North Sea area, 500–2000

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Between 500 and 2000, family farms were the key organisation that dominated agricultural and rural production in Europe. Families were the main unit of production and reproduction in society in general until the nineteenth century. Family formation was directly linked to access to farms and other means of subsistence. This strongly affected the organisation of rural society. Firstly, the long period we look at in this volume saw both the emergence and the dissolution of the West European Marriage Pattern of late and non-universal marriage. This had a high impact on household formation, life course, marriage and mobility. Secondly, since farms had a longer life span than any individual or marriage, their reallocation among farmers and the succession of older generations by younger ones had to be prepared. Successors had to be found and sometimes motivated to stay, and young couples had to find a way to form or take over a household. Thirdly, family forms and patterns of co-residence reveal a lot about the way labour was organised. Families provided a huge proportion of the labour inputs into their own farms, both in peasant societies and in modern agriculture. Rural labour markets have, nonetheless, been widespread since the middle ages. The early rural economy was essentially an integrated household economy, where the income of every member depended on the labour inputs of every other member. Fourthly, the rise and subsequent decline of wage labour in agriculture and the development and decrease of proto-industrialisation significantly increased variations in family organisation in north-western Europe. With the development of industrialisation and the welfare state, the allocation of income and labour changed fundamentally for many producers (family wages and breadwinner households), but not necessarily for farmers. Fifthly, household formation was strongly influenced both by manorial lords and by village communities who controlled local relationships. Social support systems, manorial control, and local credit relations contributed to patterns of marriage, inheritance, and intra- and inter-familial cooperation and dominance. Finally, families adapted their allocation of labour to changes in their social and economic environment (social agro-systems) when markets for products became more accessible, local communities became less risk-averse, financial markets pervaded the countryside, and rights on land became tradable by farmers.

The central theme in this volume is the connection and the interaction between production, reproduction and labour in rural societies. The main questions concern the way in which resources became available to the rural family and to its members, and the strategies that were employed to generate these resources. The goal is to understand household formation and the economic behaviour of its members within the context of the structural features of the regional agro-system. Two sets of research questions structure the discussion in the book. The first set evaluates the impact of

these processes on the family as a unit of reproduction and production and the relationships between its members (internal family relations). These issues are essentially dealt with from a socio-demographic perspective. The second set of questions aims to understand how families adapted their behaviour to changing social and economic circumstances. These topics are studied from a predominant socio-economic perspective. The geographic scope of the book covers the different nations and regions of the north-western European countryside. Since the book covers a long time span from the middle ages to the present, we study both peasant societies and modern agriculture. How were family formation strategies related to the economic survival of the family (short-term strategy) and the prospect of improving their income and position (long-term strategy)? Was there a shift in these strategies over time and what accounts for the differences? Changing economic and political structures were one element in family formation differences. Social groups followed diverging strategies. The interests of the landless workers, for instance, were very different from those of the elite who wanted to preserve their property and wealth, or even the small landowners who tried to balance work, resources and family size. In what way did families with market-oriented farms develop different income strategies than small peasants or tenant farmers operating close to the subsistence level? In other words, what happened to family forms in an increasingly commercial and commodified economy around the shores of the North Sea?

Some central concepts in this book should be clarified. In general, we define *peasants* as members of rural, agricultural households who control the land they work either as tenants or as smallholders. They are organised in family bonds and village communities that meet most of their subsistence needs (production, exchange, credit, protection) and they pool different forms of income (from land, labour and exchange). They are ruled by other social groups that extract a surplus via rents, taxation or market transfers. Key terms are (a degree of) household and local autonomy, flexible strategies of income-pooling, household-based village structures and surplus extraction outside local control. A *farmer* differs from a peasant in terms of scale of market-oriented production. A *household* is defined as the basic residential unit in which rural production, reproduction and consumption were organised and carried out. It is often used here as a synonym for *family*, in particular when it concerns the nuclear family, the most common household structure in the past. *Household strategies* are regarded as a set of activities more or less consciously undertaken by family members and directed toward ensuring the longer-term survival of the household unit. We can discern different sets of strategies, such as family formation, labour allocation, income pooling, mobility, consumption and education. Household strategies are bargained, interdependent decisions between household members, configuring the critical decisions affecting the family as a unit. Short-term strategies aim to cope with risk management and economic survival. Long-term strategies try to invest in future income, credit and protection.

The chapters in this volume are structured by a time/space frame explained in the Series Introduction. Each chapter follows the same canvas: the authors examine the central research questions at four different levels. The first section on *the family and demography* examines demographic patterns, household dynamics, household

composition and life course(s). What was the connection between family cycle and household composition? What were the patterns of marriage and migration? How prevalent was domestic service? All rural societies shared the fundamental value of linking marriage to the accumulation of resources necessary to establish a new household. However, they were subject to different constraints related to regional agro-systems. Secondly, we look at *the family and its members*, at inter-household relationships. How was family labour organised? What were the relations between old and young, male and female? These relations affect the allocation of resources to individual family members and the practices of inheritance (property transmission). The third section on *family and income* aims to find out how families tried to guarantee an adequate income for the present, the immediate future and/or the long term. What are the external opportunities and constraints on the family concerning income systems, labour markets, exchange and credit relations? Finally, we question the relationship between *the family, the local community and the state*. This level relates the family to village society and institutions (such as commons and poor relief), the Church and the state (such as tax systems). In a concluding chapter, the editors of this volume present an integrated analysis of these four sets of research questions. 

Each chapter (region/period) focuses more on the dynamic interaction between the research topics than on a detailed presentation of more or less isolated information. This approach allows us to develop a comparative and integrated view on the interplay between the family and the economy and to reconstruct a historical demography of the rural family in the north-western European countryside. Because of this comprehensive characteristic, bibliographical and statistical information has been limited. Interested readers should consult the quoted references and overviews published in the first volume of the regular CORN Series (*Rural History in the North Sea Area. An Overview of Recent Research (Middle Ages – Twentieth Century)*) edited by Erik Thoen and Leen Van Molle).

When preparing this volume, the editors met in Ghent on several occasions to discuss the outline and content of the book and its successive chapters. That makes this book a joint endeavour; a truly collaborative and comparative exercise. This resulted in joys and setbacks, both intellectual and practical. The joint concluding chapter is built on ongoing group discussions and marks the possibilities and limits of a jointly drawn and executed research programme. We express our thanks to Jean-Pierre Devroey and Anne Nissen-Jaubert for their extensive overview of rural demography during the early middle ages, Susie Speakman Sutch for the painstaking language revision, Wouter Ronsijn for the practical support, Bart De Wit for drawing the maps, and last but not least Erik Thoen for his continuous encouragement as director of this book series.