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THE PRESERVATION OF ANCIENT  
SETTLEMENTS AND LANDSCAPES  
IN THE NORTHERN COASTAL DISTRICTS  
OF THE NETHERLANDS

In prehistoric times the geographic conditions in the coastal area south of the North Sea caused the formation of a flat, yet richly varied landscape. Although the sea from time to time claimed back the fertile alluvial deposits which the floods had left behind on the peat bogs and lower sands man ventured into those parts ever and ever again. From the very beginning of the newer stone age he left traces of habitation there.

Early in our era moreover, he began to make a habit of settling on artificial dwelling mounds wherever that was advisable and possible. Non until the building of dikes was started — which was as late as the 11th century — and the population no longer had to confine herself to those heights which until then had been the only protection for life and stock, when storm-swept tides threatened to wipe away all the human activity, would there be any communal life to such an extent that all the available soil could be cultivated.

Many questions remain for those who are interested in the “terpen” or “wierden”, like these mounds are called, as the best source of information about the most ancient history of the people, living on them — the Frisians. The exploration is therefore carried on with great zeal, stimulated by the “Vereniging voor Terpenonderzoek”. Nowadays it is generally agreed that from about 400 B.C. there has been a continuous, though perpetually threatened occupation of the clay region between the Vlie and the Eems, and also, that in these parts the emphasis has always been on cattle-raising. Preferably people would settle on high alluvial grounds, on banks of sandy clay along tidal streams and bays, covered with so called “kweldergras” and separated from the open sea by shoals and mud flats.

Amazingly well-preserved remains of terp farms have been found. Big buildings in many cases, providing ample living room and shelter for herds of cattle and divided into three aisles by the two rows of posts which, in pairs, supported the roof; their walls were made of wattle, daubed with loam or cow dung. The ground plan corresponds entirely with that of the Frisian farms from the 15th and 16th centuries.

The characteristic placing of the cattle in two rows, facing the outer walls, is still typical of the Frisian cow sheds, as also of those in the adjoining regions which formerly belonged to Friesland, id est from Holland “proper” to beyond the German East Friesland.

The partial occupation of the later Netherlands by the Roman legions, up to the Old Rhine, which runs from Wijk bij Duurstede past Utrecht and Woerden to Katwijk, has caused a caesura in so far that many terp finds bear witness to



Fig. 1 - Plan of the dwellingmound Hogebeintum. The centre with the village church raises more than 8 metres above the surrounding, flat fields. Halfway the «terp» the ringway, on the outer rim some farmhouses. The origin of the settlement goes back as far as the 4th century before Christ. The mound was partly dug off in 1908-1910; at this occasion a rich Anglo-Saxon cemetery was found, famous for its jewelry.

a strong Gallo-Roman cultural influence. It was in this period of the Roman domination that many terpen approximately reached their final extent, height and plan.

This plan is a most remarkable one. In many cases it is characterized by a circular road and ditch, and a radical arrangement of the farms. The farmyards converge towards the centre of the wierde, where in most cases a big pond is found, the so-called "dobbe" of "feit". If the terp is very big and has a large population, the centre of the wierde is also the meeting place of the judges. A fighting ring is also there, for settling conflicts by single combat, under the law, so to speak. If such a village was deemed worthy of the status of "kerkdorp"

(church village), so that room had to be found for a parish church and a house for the priest, there is again a marked tendency to put this in the centre of the terp ring, which is indicated by the "ossenweg".

One is tempted to believe that this name "ossenweg" is derived from "axenwei", or "eswei", old-Frisian for "axe road", which, according to an old Frisian legend, encircled the "axenhove" with a magical ring within which justice had to be administrated close to a well. It was this ringroad which in the past was also followed by processions.

A different explanation supposes dat "axenhove" might be "Asgenhove" = "Asegan hova", that means "court of the Asega", the "law-speaker" or village-judge. "Axenwei" or "eswei" could be "aiwis wei", "way of the law".

A more easy explanation brings the oxen in connection with the "axenwei", which in great numbers were kept by the Frisian terp-dwellers and sold in the autumn to foreign traders, or brought by themselves upstreams the Wezer, Eems, Rhine, Meuse or Schelde.

The abundance of terp finds gives us a vivid idea of the surroundings in which the terp dwellers lived their by no means carefree lives, what implements they used, how they dressed to protect themselves against the harsh and windy climate, by what trinkets and ornaments the rich distinguished themselves from the poor. An indispensable complement to all this are the old Frisian laws that have reached us from the turn of the 12th century. They show us that private property was fully developed with regard to both live and dead stock, but all the same restricted by the insecurity of the "kwelders", the alluvial grounds beyond the edges of the "terpen". Here were the "hemrikken" of various communities, separated by a network of tidal streams and flooded more than once a year. Nearest to the sides of the "terpen", which were used for agricultural purposes, were the meadows or "fennen"; further away were the hayfields or "meden". Not until these were protected by dikes could the right to use them be turned into proprietary right. In practice this probably made little difference in a community, founded on a division into farms, and not on personal property.

On the eve of the first dike building there appear the liberal donors who gave so many Frisian estates — even whole farms complete with serfs — to abbeys and monasteries at Fulda, Werden, Corvey, Echternach and other places. Next to the classical authors, and the hagiographers who came after them, we owe to those institutions the oldest Frisian patronymics and place-names. The patronymics do not differ much from those of the kindred German tribesmen. Apart from the place-names on -wurt and suchlike endings, names on -heim and -ingen also occur, and a few on -huson or -wald. The endings -wurt, -heim and -ingen are often confused. It seems they had not yet been fixed, at least not in comparison with present forms.

Setting aside their linguistic importance, the monastic records are excellent sources of knowledge about everyday life on the Frisian "kwelders", from the 8th up to the 11th century. They make us understand that the "terpen", the largest of which rose to a height of 25 feet, and which often covered several hundred acres, were considered a sufficient adaptation to the hydrographic situation, and supported a community able to yield regular annual contributions, both in kind and maney, even though in times no doubt catastrophes like floods, cattle diseases and crop failures levied a heavy toll in lives and property.

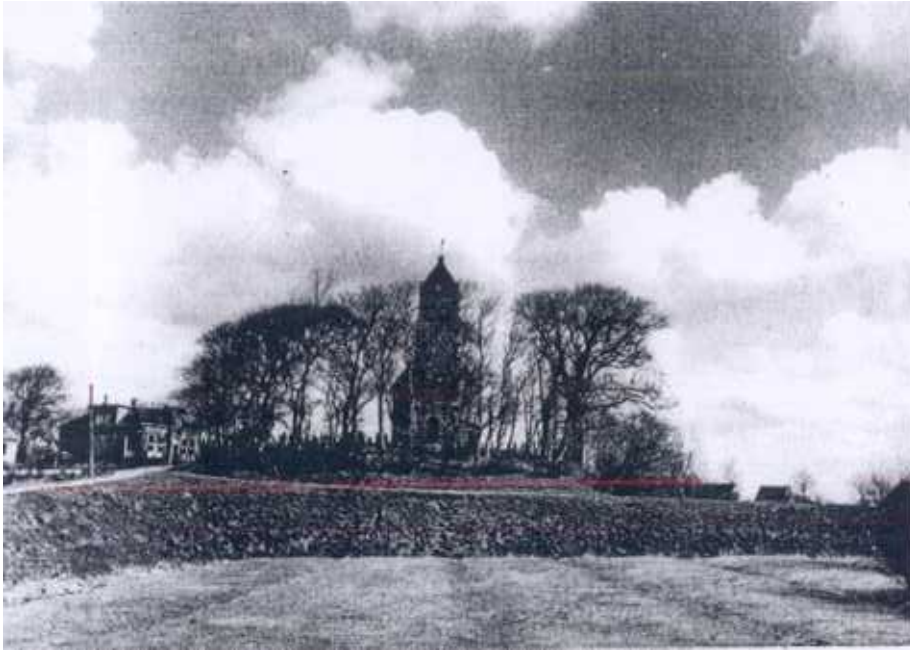


Fig. 2 - View on Hogebeintum, seen from the West. The damage, done to the village by digging away part of the mound is clearly visible.

Now the discovery of the value of terp-soil, as an extremely phosphorous fertilizer, caused since the forties of the 19th century a flourishing trade in dwellingmounds, which lasted until the third decade of our century. Most of the 1200 dwelling mounds in the two northern provinces of the Netherlands disappeared completely or partly in the holds of the ships, which transported the soil to more southern regions, where new lands were to be reclaimed or old lands to be improved. Still many "terpen" remained because of the villages or hamlets, built on their top. These mounds do not only merit attention for their archaeological or historical value but also on account of their importance for the landscape and the significance of so many houses, farms, churches and churchyards, with their gardens, trees and lanes supported by these mounds. The mixture of beauty, curiosity and charm, offered by the "terpen" to the visitor is so unique that we should be very carefull with them.

One should expect that the danger for the "terpen" diminished quite a deal since terp-soil is not bound anymore for commercial object. But new menaces came above the horizon by the need for modern way of life. This involves bigger houses, broader streets, cutting trees, filling up ditches. Moreover the enchantment of the old Frisian landscape has a hard struggle against the agricultural methods of our days. Nobody knows if our grand-children will yet see the same Friesland, that still is common to us and not change the last five hundred years as much as it will change the next fifty.

The Law for the Preservation of Monuments in the Netherlands, promul-

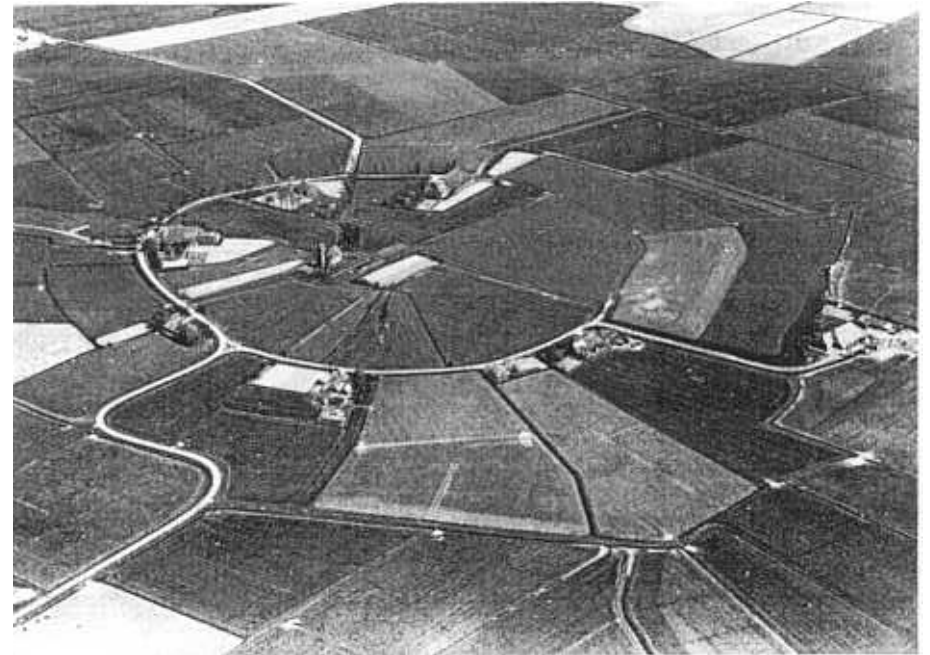


Fig. 3 - Dwellingmound of Marsum near Appingedam. Except for the churchyard, demolished 60 years ago. The original plotting of roads and grounds still exists.

Fig. 4 - Dwellingmound of Hallum. The dense building around the church prevented damage, caused by digging away the fertile soil.



gated in 1961, created the possibility to protect not only buildings, but even whole parts of towns, villages and hamlets. Still everyday practice forbids, to regenerate all the country side of the terp-regions to one open-air museum and as far as I can foresee the future is not clear at all aybe we struggle at last for a balance, where the Netherlands, as the most densely populated country of the world, spares some room foor matters which yield other crops than butter, tomatos and tulips.

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PROTECTION D'INSTALLATIONS MÉDIÉVALES ET DE SITES  
DANS LE NORD DES PAYS-BAS.  
RÉSUMÉ.

*Les conditions géologiques de l'espace côtier du Nord des PAYS-BAS poussèrent la population à concentrer ses habitations sur des tertres artificiels et à être séparée de ses élevages de bestiaux. Par leur langage, leurs coutumes, le style de construction de leurs fermes, les Frisons montrent un caractère archaïque et il en est évidemment de même pour leurs demeures sur les tertres, qui sont dispersées dans les provinces de Friesland et de Groningen.*

*L'aspect et l'étendue de la plupart de ces tertres n'ont pas été modifiés depuis le Moyen Age et ils présentent donc, à tous points de vue, un réel intérêt. Sur le faite de nombreux tertres — en Friesland on les appelle « terp », en Gronigen « wierde » — s'élèvent, en outre, des églises fort typiques, en tuf ou en briques, entourées de cimetières avec des arbres en couronne.*

*Depuis le milieu du XIXème siècle, des centaines de « terps » ont été grandement endommagés ou ont même complètement disparu, à cause du travail continuel effectué sur un sol extrêmement fertile et, seule, l'utilisation d'engrais artificiel mit une fin à cet état de choses (mais non durant les vingt premières années de notre siècle). Mais, à cause du manque d'engrais, le travail de la terre recommença en 1940; il fut ensuite interdit par la loi en 1943.*

*La nouvelle loi sur les monuments (aux Pays-Bas), qui date de 1961 a prévu également la protection des « terps ». Néanmoins, il est très difficile de résister à la modification des routes et voies d'accès, à la démolition des vieilles maisons, des fermes, à la coupe des arbres et des haies.*

*En outre, le vaste paysage entre les « terp-islands » est souvent altéré par de nouvelles constructions, souvent même par des quartiers érigés sur de nouvelles routes autour des vieux centres.*

*Mais il faut dire que les « terps » des Frisons appartiennent à la partie du pays où l'industrie est rare et où la mécanisation des méthodes agricoles provoque souvent des affaissements de terrain. Aussi, y a-t-il encore de l'espoir pour que cet ensemble plein de richesses dans un paysage au charme antique, que l'on ne rencontre qu'en Friesland, soit finalement préservé.*