

# Preventing Total Ruin in the Countryside?

*Famine and Economic Policies of the Estates of Brabant during the Subsistence Crisis of 1740-1741*

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## Abstract

Between 1739 and 1742, hundreds of village communities petitioned the Estates of Brabant for tax reductions during one of the largest subsistence crises of the eighteenth century. This exemplifies the important intermediary role provincial governments like the Estates played, especially in the Low Countries. Yet research on famine prevention mostly focuses on either the local or central levels of government. This article looks at the rural crisis management of the Estates of Brabant between 1739-1742 through their policy decisions and their response to the mass petitioning of local communities. Through geographical and quantitative analysis, it becomes clear that while not everyone was impacted the same, the Estates attempted to limit economic damage above all. At no point was hunger in the countryside their primary concern.

Between 1739 and 1742, over 227 Brabantine rural communities – nearly half of the Brabantine countryside – sent in 251 petitions to the Estates of Brabant, the institution governing the province of Brabant in the Southern Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Petitioners spoke of fields where no grass would grow, livestock dying in large numbers, and a harvest that had

<sup>1</sup> Coppens assessed that the late-eighteenth century Brabantine countryside counted some 590 different sovereignties, which roughly coincided with individual village communities. Herman Coppens, 'Schepenbanken en dorpsbesturen', in: Raymond Van Uytven et al.(eds), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795*, 2 (Brussels 2000) 672.

shrunk to a mere third of its regular size.<sup>2</sup> These petitions provide a close-up perspective on the acute emergency that hit Brabant and most of Western Europe. Between 1739 and 1742, weather-induced harvest failures led to a major subsistence crisis in large parts of Northwestern Europe.<sup>3</sup> While such climatic shocks often threatened premodern food security, researchers are increasingly looking at the other factors contributing to a famine's impact. Among these is the role of measures taken by societies or institutions against challenges such as a weather-induced harvest failure. Scholarly consensus is that policy could have a profound influence on famine vulnerability.<sup>4</sup>

Both cities and the countryside were threatened by acute shortages in the grain supply, but these two contexts have seen divergent scholarly approaches. In the rural case, research has focused on household survival strategies within the village community, with attention to individual and communal famine resilience. This resilience is translated to different (collective) coordination mechanisms, which could include the state and market, as well as common pool institutions and institutional poor relief.<sup>5</sup> Vanhaute and Lambrecht have shown that especially these local relief measures and exchange networks, which varied greatly between one community and another, played a crucial role in securing the food supply of those unable to secure their own subsistence during grain shortages. In this context, the central authority is often characterized as distant and detached from rural reality. Central government institutions are portrayed as only off-handedly trying to provide food to the countryside.<sup>6</sup> This portrayal is considerably different from their role in the historiography on famines in an urban context.

2 Rijksarchief Brussels (hereafter: RAB), T010 *Staten van Brabant. Supplement*, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: Rekwesten gericht aan de Bestendigde Deputatie (betreffende belastingvermindering wegens misoogst in 1740), 1740-141.

3 John D. Post, 'Climatic variability and the European mortality wave of the early 1740s', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15:1 (1984) 6, 9-10. Daniel Curtis et al., 'Low Countries', in: Cormac Ó Gráda and Guido Alfani (eds), *Famine in European history* (Cambridge 2017) 119-140.

4 C. Pfister and R. Brazdil, 'Social vulnerability to climate in the 'Little Ice Age'. An example from Central Europe in the early 1770s', *Climate of the Past* 2:2 (2006) 115-129.

5 Jessica Dijkman and Bas Van Leeuwen, 'Resilience to famine ca. 600 to present. An introduction', in: Idem, (eds), *An economic history of famine resilience*; Tim Soens and Maïka De Keyser, 'From the resilience of commons to resilience through commons. The peasant way of buffering shocks and crises', *Continuity and Change* 37:1 (2022) 1-11; Esther Beeckaert, 'Subsidies to the rescue. The funding of poor relief in Flemish village communities during the crisis of the 1840s, a comparative analysis', *TSEG* 15:4 (2019) 5-31.

6 Eric Vanhaute and Thijs Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community. A comparative analysis of the subsistence crises of the 1740s and the 1840s in Flanders', *Continuity and Change* 26:2 (2011) 170-171.



Illustration 1 One form of local solidarity could be 'gleaning', where the rural poor would collect leftover crops from the fields

(source: Jean-François Millet, *Des glaneuses*, 1857. Paris, Musée d'Orsay, RF 592).

Vanhaute and Lambrecht identified the goal of public actor interventions as part of a "larger panorama of social distress circumvention."<sup>7</sup> As the threat of social unrest – the much-feared food riots – was more significant in the cities, the governmental institutions acted accordingly and focused on urban centers.<sup>8</sup> While they aimed to provide food *through* urban market centers, in reality they provided it *to* urban market centers.<sup>9</sup> Dearth policies usually involved trade embargoes and monitoring grain stocks and granaries. The grain-consuming brewing sector was closely regulated. Institutions cracked down on grain merchants, who were (accused of) hoarding grain stocks and profiteering off the price surges.<sup>10</sup> These measures had to strike

7 Vanhaute and Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community', 170-171.

8 Karin Van Honacker, *Lokaal verzet en oproer in de 17de en 18de eeuw. Collectieve acties tegen het centraal gezag in Brussel, Antwerpen en Leuven* (Heule 1994).

9 Francis Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van het Ancien Régime. Hun invloed op de besluitvorming op sociaal-economisch gebied (1770-1794)', in: Jan Craeybeckx and F. Daelemans (eds), *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis van Vlaanderen en Brabant. Sociaal en Economisch*, vol. 3 (Brussels 1988) 177-178.

10 Jessica Dijkman, 'Coping with scarcity. A comparison of dearth policies in three regions in northwestern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', *TSEG* 14:3 (2017) 5-30; Christiaan

a compromise between the interests of two groups in urban society: those who might suffer financially and those whose survival was threatened by grain shortages. This balancing act during grain crises has not yet been studied for the countryside, with Vanhaute and Lambrecht concluding that the role of supralocal institutions in rural subsistence crises was mostly superficial.<sup>11</sup> Was rural crisis management then truly an afterthought for the premodern state?

Only a minority of studies about central institutions also incorporate the provincial level. However, historians agree that significant interaction existed between the central and provincial government bodies in the Southern Netherlands. The Provincial Estates were the executive power within their province and played a crucial part in governing the Southern Netherlands: they functioned as advisory organs, legislative initiators, and appointed spokesmen of the local concerns within their province.<sup>12</sup> This cooperation was not without friction: the Estates' interaction with the central authorities was characterized by a plethora of protests, on the one hand, and a fiscal tug-of-war, on the other.<sup>13</sup> The Estates could legally refuse the tax plea and thus held the power to substantially damage the finances of a central government which was constantly in search of money.<sup>14</sup> Provincial estates are however rarely included in famine studies, and conversely, crisis management during subsistence crises does not play a major role in literature about the Estates. Even Zelck's in-depth investigation of the socio-economic policies of Brabant's Estates remains limited to a period where a subsistence crisis on the scale of 1740-1741 did not

Vandenbroeke, 'De graanpolitiek in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 45:2 (1967) 380-381.

11 Vanhaute and Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community', 170-171.

12 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van het Ancien Régime', 177-178; René Vermeir, 'Early seventeenth century representative institutions and law making in the Habsburg Netherlands', in: Erik De Bom, Randall Lesaffer and Werner Thomas (eds), *Early modern sovereignties. Theory and practice of a Burgeoning concept in the Netherlands* (Leiden 2021) 297.

13 Francis Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw. Hun invloed op de besluitvorming op sociaal-economisch gebied, 1772-1794' (unpublished master's thesis Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1986) 125.

14 Herman Coppens, *De financiën van de centrale regering van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden aan het einde van het Spaanse en onder Oostenrijks bewind (ca. 1680 - 1788)* (Brussels 1992) 370-371; Vandenbroeke, 'De graanpolitiek in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', 379; Klaas Van Gelder, Thomas Jacobs and Nirmala Patel, *Regime change at a distance. Austria and the Southern Netherlands following the War of the Spanish Succession (1716 - 1725)* (Leuven 2016) 260.

occur (1772-1794).<sup>15</sup> Yet it was the Estates that received and handled the hundreds of petitions sent in between 1739 and 1742, forming a direct link between the local and provincial levels still absent in current literature concerning premodern famines. Did the Estates then take the local situation, which could vary greatly during crises, into account?

This article concentrates on the relief measures taken by the Estates of Brabant during the grain crisis of 1740-1741. Who benefited from them: those who might face financial losses or those for whom hunger was the primary concern? Who was petitioning the Estates? The focus rests on the countryside, as the petitions of 1739-1742 show that more so than the central institutions of the Austrian Netherlands, the provincial estates were well connected to the countryside. This kind of interaction is especially interesting as it is a typical example of early-modern *petition-and-response*, present across Europe.<sup>16</sup> It challenges the currently dominant view in famine historiography that supralocal institutions did not engage in regionally differentiated policy on the rural level. By combining a traditional analysis of the Estates' resolution books with a quantitative and geographic approach to the *petition-and-response* process surrounding the Brabantine petitions, it becomes clear that while the Estates of Brabant did engage with communities individually, they did so on the same terms as their overarching policies. The entire interaction between petitioners and provincial policymakers was tainted by social privilege.

After an introduction of sources and methodology, this article dissects the various actors and the context of their actions during the 1740-1741 crisis. First, I attempt to assess the impact of the crisis on the rural population. The next section discusses how this corresponded to the petitions and the discourse presented in them. Attention then moves to the Estates, with an investigation of the Estates' general crisis measures and the role of their large-scale tax remissions. Their impact on the Estates' finances are studied, as well as how they were applied in practice. Finally, I relate the results of these analyses to which interest groups were really represented in the Estates of Brabant.

15 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw'.

16 David Zaret, 'Petition-and-response and liminal petitioning in comparative/historical perspective', *Social Science History* 43:3 (2019) 433.

## Sources and methodology

I study this interaction through two kinds of sources. The first group consists of the administrative output of the Estates of Brabant, in the form of resolution books, contemporarily compiled records of the Estates' day-to-day affairs.<sup>17</sup> As they contain the Estates' discussions and resolutions, listed in a rigid structure (organized per session with lists of attendees), the resolution books can shed light on the Estates' overarching policy lines, the chronology of its crisis management, and who was behind these decisions. These sources also contain enough fiscal information to make a quantitative assessment of their policy possible. This evaluation is highly relevant, as the foundation of the Estates' power was their near-absolute control over fiscal matters; Estates' policy often *was* fiscal.<sup>18</sup>

The second group of sources stands in stark contrast to the rigid resolution books. The petition dossiers form a heterogeneous corpus, with extreme variability in the kind of information a dossier can provide. Sometimes, the only trace left from a petition is its response recorded in Brabant's resolution books. The petitions (and adjoined files) received by the Estates of Brabant between 1739 and 1742 took the level of the rural community as their point of departure – villages, sometimes even the smallest hamlets – and share two vital characteristics: firstly, they all demand tax moderation or even total remission on the important *twintigste penningen* of the crisis years. This demand makes sense, of course, as one of the Estates' foremost competences was fiscality. In the context of 1740-1741, such remission requests were explicitly linked to harvest failures, not only in the presented discourse, but also inevitably by the nature of their demand. Since the *twintigste penningen* – hereafter 'twentieths' – was a tax based on the theoretical worth/yield of immovable assets and land, for many rural communities it amounted to a tax on harvests.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, it is possible to link the petitions to their village of origin.<sup>20</sup> By using an estimation of their historical boundaries (see map 1) in a

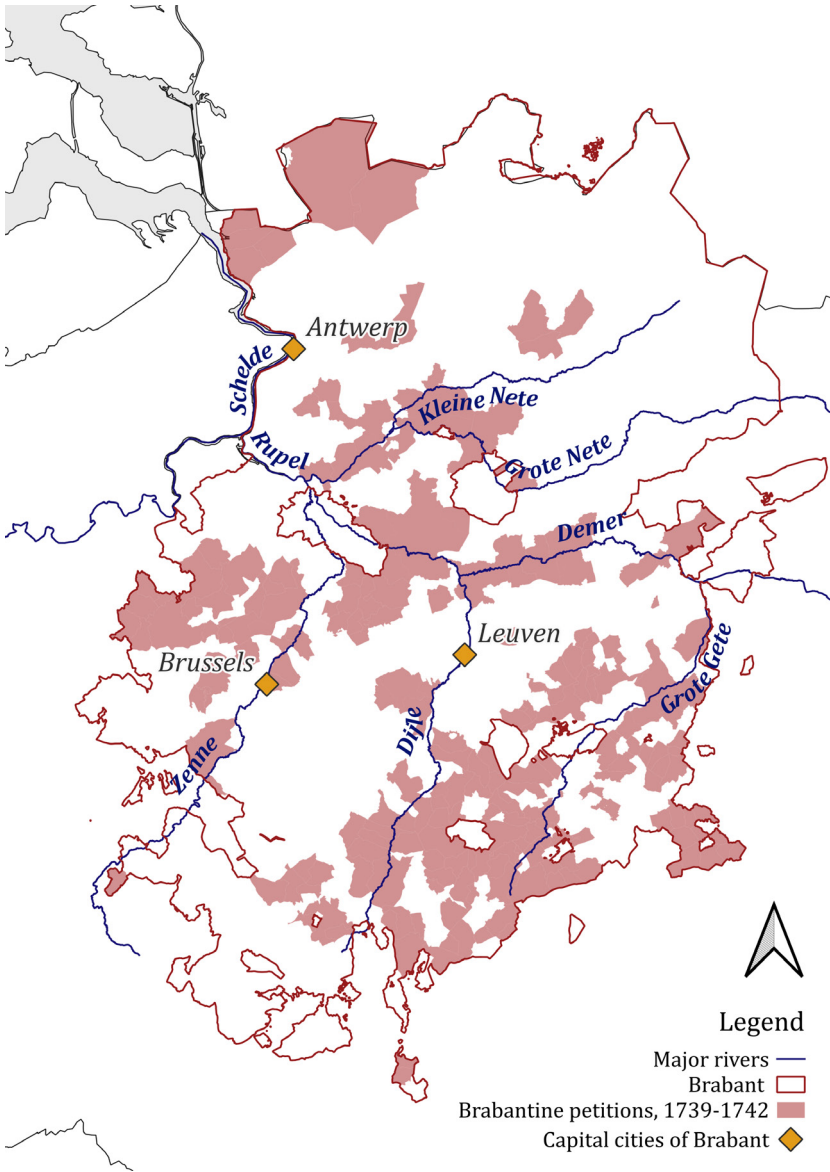
17 RAB, T44 *Staten van Brabant. Registers*, no. 59-62: *Régistres des résolutions originaux des États*, 1739-1742.

18 Zelck, *De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw*, 189; Beatrijs Augustyn, 'Staten van Brabant', in: Raymond Van Uytven et al.(eds), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795*, 1 (Brussels 2000) 115.

19 Augustyn, 'Staten van Brabant', 21.

20 R.J. Stapel, 'Historical atlas of the Low Countries. A GIS dataset of locality-level boundaries (1350-1800)', *Research Data Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences* 8:1 (2023) 1-33.





Map 1 Village communities that petitioned the Estates of Brabant to reduce taxes because of harvest failure, 1739-1742.

(Sources: RAB, T010, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1740-1741; RAB, T44, no. 59-62: 1739-1742; Stapel, *Historical atlas of the Low Countries* (2023). Map made by author.)

GIS environment, we can construct a geographical representation of the petitioning village communities. HGIS, or the combination of historical practice with geographic information systems, allows researchers to overlay layers of data onto one another and relate them to historical maps. I combine fiscal data extracted from the resolution books' tax registers with area estimates from the Historical Atlas of the Low Countries to assess fiscal pressure (expressed through a tax coefficient: tax per hectare of land) for each petitioning community. This puts the remissions they eventually received into proper perspective.

The petition corpus stretches from 1739 into 1742. This period is the traditional demarcation of the crisis, coinciding with the years of climatic stress. Already in 1739, problems were voiced to the Estates by way of petitioning, yet some petitions asking for tax remission because of harvest failure only reached the Estates by 1742. Tax was usually remitted on the previous fiscal year. Especially in 1740 and 1741, large amounts of village communities asked for tax remission on the 1740 twentieths. Together, in their discourse and sheer volume, the petitions of 1739-1742 constituted a major part of the information the Estates of Brabant received about the rural aspect of the crisis.

## Reconstructing the crisis of 1740-1741

According to petitioners from Neerijse, the crisis began with a lack of animal fodder following the early winter of 1739-1740. This dearth led to a shortage in draft animals, which in turn exacerbated the harvest failure caused by the long winter of 1740-1741. Years of high prices culminated in a price surge in 1740, simultaneous with a second harvest failure. The weather in May 1740 remained abhorrent as pastures flooded after heavy rainfall. A comparatively warm and (too) dry summer again damaged grain yields and problems lasted well into late 1741. The central government's embargo on grain exports (for the Estates' role herein, see further) was enacted in November 1739, but large amounts of grain had already been moved out of the Southern Netherlands. A crisis was now unavoidable.<sup>21</sup>

Collectively, the petitions allow us to assess the severity of the crisis, as many provided an estimate of the extent of the harvest loss, sometimes backed up with a quantitative estimation: either

21 RAB, To10, no. 142: 1741; Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation*, 153-154.





Illustration 2 The harsh winter of 1740 struck all over Western Europe

(source: Anonymous, *Harde winter van het jaar 1740*. Engraving on paper, 1740 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, FMH 3772).

counting damaged acreage or representing it in the form of guilders. Though these numbers were most likely exaggerated – given that the requested tax moderation was expected to be proportionate to their harvest damages<sup>22</sup> – most petitioners reported that about a third of the harvest had survived.<sup>23</sup> Outliers mentioned losses as high as 80 or even 90 percent, which is still not implausible considering other winter grain harvest failures of the era.<sup>24</sup> Food supply was thus thoroughly disrupted.

Even outside of crises, the food situation in eighteenth-century Brabant was precarious. Between 1709 and 1755, the Brabantine countryside experienced a general growth in population from 265,000 to 340,000 people, while the urban population declined. The result was increased demographic pressure and stress on food supply,

22 RAB, To10, no. 143/BIS: 1741: '... une moderation proportionnées à leur perte...'

23 RAB, To10, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1739-1741; RAB, T44, no. 60-61: 1740-41.

24 Andrew B. Appleby, 'Grain prices and subsistence crises in England and France, 1590-1740', *The Journal of Economic History* 39:4 (1979) 871; Curtis et al., 'Low Countries', 139.

coupled with a growing labor surplus in the countryside.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, the number of (middle to) large farmers in Brabant declined as the population of manual laborers, dependent on their wages and credit relations to survive, increased.<sup>26</sup> Especially these laborers and other members of the lower class struggled with acquiring the necessary food to survive. Vandenbroeke speaks of a “chronic situation of malnourishment”, which in turn triggered epidemic diseases of all kinds.<sup>27</sup> Hunger was thus likely a genuine threat in 1740-1741. Mortality increased by an average of 22.3 percent in 1740-1742 compared to 1735-1739.<sup>28</sup> Post assessed that this rise was indeed primarily caused by typhoid fevers connected to a critical deficiency in foodstuffs. These “famine fevers” were related to a societal vulnerability to epidemics in times of hunger and principally struck the lower classes.<sup>29</sup>

This article looks at that specific part of the lower class, in other words: the group of people whose subsistence was threatened during years of crisis like 1740-1741. The size of that group is difficult to estimate. One way is through the minimum acreage required to subsist on their own land. Poukens has studied this for western Brabant, distinguishing two categories: those able to subsist in normal times, but not in bad harvest years (2-5 ha), and those below the line of subsistence production (0-2 ha). Both were threatened in 1740-1741. Together, they made up the majority of individual farms (with considerable regional variation between sandy and sand-loamy regions, respectively 60 and 80 percent).<sup>30</sup> Of course, this selection leaves out those who owned no agricultural land. This group included but was not limited to the so-called fiscal poor, defined by Van Onacker and Masure as “those poor enough to be exempt from taxation”.<sup>31</sup>

Such exemptions were commonplace in the eighteenth century, but how this group was delineated was not decided top-down and

25 Paul M.M. Klep, *Bevolking en arbeid in transformatie. Een onderzoek naar de ontwikkelingen in Brabant, 1700-1900*. (Nijmegen 1981) 57, 103.

26 Johan Poukens, ‘*Cultivateurs et commerçans*’. *Huishoudelijke productie, consumptie en de ‘industrious revolution’ in het westen van het hertogdom Brabant (1680-1800)* (Leuven 2020) 84-85.

27 Christiaan Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation* (Louvain 1975) 606-607.

28 Post, ‘Climatic variability’, 13.

29 Post, ‘Climatic variability’, 13; Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Famines in Europe. An overview’, in: Idem (eds), *Famine in European history*, 6.

30 Poukens, ‘*Cultivateurs et commerçans*’, 87-89.

31 Eline Van Onacker and Hadewijch Masure, ‘Unity in diversity. Rural poor relief in the sixteenth-century Southern Low Countries’, *TSEG* 12:4 (2015) 73.

could differ between one locality and another. The twentieth tax, as mentioned based on immovable assets, naturally excluded those who owned little to no land at all. Houses were taxed, too, but in some places all who were dependent on village poor tables were fiscally exempt: in the Brabantine towns of Lier and Nijvel, this group amounted to 21 and a staggering 39 percent, respectively. Rural exemptions on specifically the twentieth tax unfortunately remain a gap in current research. Comparing the tax lists of the 1747 income tax and the twentieths for the Brabantine villages of Kuntich and Humbeek demonstrates the complexity of the matter. Many – but not all – fiscal poor exempt from the 1747 tax are present on the twentieth lists, but either without any fiscal information, or a very low taxation, as they only owned a house.<sup>32</sup> Daelemans assessed for Gooik, a village not far from Brussels, that 17 percent of households did not own any land.<sup>33</sup> In any case, the division of tax pressure within the village was left up to local village management and poor tables, both regarding who counted as ‘poor’ and how their fiscal situation was arranged. How then was this vulnerable social group represented in the petitions of 1739-1742? *Who* was petitioning the Estates, and *why*?

## Whose petitions?

Above all, the petitioners presented themselves as representatives of their community, like elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> All petitions in this corpus were written by a combination of five types of actors. By far the most frequent was the first category: aldermen and lawmakers. Following them, in no particular order, are the mayor, bailiff/*drossaard*, clerk, and pastor. They all fit the label ‘village management’, as conceptualized by Coppens.<sup>35</sup>

32 Rijksarchief Leuven (hereafter: RAL), 51 *Schepengriffies van Vlaams-Brabant arr. Leuven*, no. 4015; Kuntich. Zettingen (“cedule”) van de 20ste penning, 1746; RAL, 51/2 *Schepengriffies van Vlaams-Brabant arr. Brussel*, no. 7933; Humbeek. Zettingboek van de 20ste penning, 1755; Daniel Schepens, *De volkstelling van 1747 in oostelijk Vlaams-Brabant* (Rotselaar). The decrease in the amount of fiscally exempt is not strange, considering the wartime context of the 1747 income tax. Comparison is further hampered by the fact that while the twentieths’ tax list worked on an individual basis (per taxpayer), the 1747 tax worked with two parallel systems: taxpaying households vs. individuals who were fiscally exempt.

33 F. Daelemans, ‘Veebezit en sociale welvaart. Het voorbeeld Gooik, 1794’, in: H. Coppejans et al. (eds), *Album Carlos Wyffels* (Brussels 1987) 106.

34 For example: Brendan Scott, ‘Select document: “Petition of the inhabitants of Cavan to the Lord Deputy and Council”, 8 July 1629,’ *Irish Historical Studies* 43:163 (2019) 113.

35 Coppens, ‘Schepenbanken en dorpsbesturen’, 722.

In Walloon Brabant, these village officials were mostly wealthy farmers. In three out of four villages, half or more of the village management was among the most heavily taxed. In one out of five, all of them came from the highest tax brackets. Contemporary agronomists spoke of a “small-scale oligarchy” in the Walloon countryside.<sup>36</sup> An example from the petition corpus is the *meier* of Nil-Saint-Martin, a man named Jean Baptist Mahy. In 1740, he sent in a petition by himself, asking for a personal tax remittal. He reasoned that he alone already paid about a quarter of the total twentieths levied upon Nil-Saint-Martin.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the officials in these petitions were practically segregated from the lower social classes. Especially the stipulation to own land and being able to read formed significant hurdles for the lower class. Moreover, the limited monetary compensation for filling administrative roles meant that only the wealthier members of the community could afford to exercise them.<sup>38</sup> Everything points to this dynamic being largely the same for most rural communities in Brabant. In Walloon Brabant, the lower class was indeed vastly underrepresented, and likely in Flemish Brabant and the sandy region between Brussels and Antwerp as well. In the case of the latter, most aldermen were either farmers or craftsmen.<sup>39</sup> Even in the less commercialized Campine society, sixteenth-century aldermen benches consisted of the most severely taxed thirty percent of the community.<sup>40</sup> As Scheelings put it, “the aldermen could represent, only by chance or if the lord wanted it, the different social groups of the village community.”<sup>41</sup> I conclude that while the village management petitioners represented their village community, they were likely not representative of it. In years of grain shortage like 1740-1741, they were not under threat of starvation, but feared economic loss instead, as is clear from the petitioners’ discourse.

Even though the village councils were supposed to represent the village’s common interests, the petitions reflected the concerns of the governing class above all. The problems mentioned that plagued the

36 Claude Bruneel, ‘Les échevinages en Brabant Wallon au XVIIIe siècle’, in: *Les structures du pouvoir dans les communautés rurales en Belgique et dans les pays limitrophes (XIIe-XIXe Siècle)* 77, *Historische Uitgaven* 8 (1988) 135, 150.

37 RAB, To10, nr. 143 /BIS: 1740.

38 Coppens, ‘Schepenbanken en dorpsbesturen’, 732.

39 Bruneel, ‘Les échevinages en Brabant Wallon au XVIIIe siècle’, 152-154.

40 Eline Van Onacker, *Village elites and social structures in the late medieval Campine region* (Turnhout 2017) 214.

41 Frank Scheelings, *De heren en het heerlijk regime in Brabant in de achttiende eeuw* (Dissertation Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1990), 475

**Table 1 Mentions of issues in petition dossiers surrounding the 1740-1741 crisis**

Mentioned problem	Frequency relative to all petitioning communities
Floods	19%
Frost	54%
Precipitation	27%
Livestock mortality	35%
Cash deficit	21%
Varia	20%

Source: RAB, T010, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1739-1741.

Brabantine countryside seem to be expected: floods, heavy rains, and ice-cold winters damaging the fields.<sup>42</sup> For example, mostly village communities in riverine and flood-prone regions complained about flooding or excessive precipitation. The petitions thus reflected the historical reality to a certain degree. While petitioners stood to gain by presenting the situation in their community as disastrous, they most likely did not fabricate the issues they complained about. However, one characteristic problem of a subsistence crisis remains nearly absent from the petitioners' discourse. But a few of the 250 petitions speak of hunger at all. On the contrary, most of the mentioned issues concern economic damage.

The clearest example of this concern is the issue of livestock mortality: keeping draft animals was typically reserved for the wealthier social strata.<sup>43</sup> In late-eighteenth century Gooik, the ruling class of large farmers owned three quarters of village lands and half of the livestock, while the majority of the inhabitants struggled around or under the subsistence line.<sup>44</sup> Even the common denominator of these petitions, their demand for tax remission on the twentieths, only directly affected taxpayers. The (fiscal) poor, more likely to experience hunger, were not helped by a tax reduction as they paid little to none anyway (see above). It is also questionable whether these poor, often owning only a house, would share in tax remissions. The petitions often included a list of

42 Vanhaute and Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community', 164; Post, 'Climatic variability', 6.

43 Van Onacker, *Village elites and social structures*, 215; Lambrecht, 'Reciprocal exchange, credit and cash', 244, 248; De Keyzer and Van Onacker, 'Beyond the flock', 179; Bruneel, 'Les échevinages en Brabant Wallon au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', 154.

44 Daelemans, *Veebezit en sociale welvaart*, 115.

people whose lands had suffered harvest damages – naturally excluding those who did not. Any mention of the informal relief networks as studied by Vanhaute and Lambrecht was absent. Even local pastors focused on taxation rather than the village's poor relief institutions (*de armentafels*/poor tables). While individuals and poor tables did ask for charity donations during this crisis, the village councils – forming the overwhelming majority of petitioners in this corpus – did not.<sup>45</sup> Their motivation was economic above all else.

## The Estates' crisis management

When Brabant was struck by the events that led to the crisis and mass petitioning of 1740-1741, the Estates were still the principal executive power within Brabant. Even decrees of the central authorities had to pass through the hands of Brabantine officials in the Council of Brabant, which stood in close contact with the Estates' Permanent Deputation.<sup>46</sup> This was a small group of mandated representatives (generally two prelates, two noblemen, and two representatives of each of the three capital cities) that convened daily. General Assemblies were only held biannually, to discuss complex topics.<sup>47</sup> The Estates of Brabant – in practice thus often the ten-or-so men seated in the Permanent Deputation – had the means to install import or export embargoes on grain, regulate different agricultural and industrial sectors, and compensate financial damages, as the petitioners were asking. This section will investigate which groups were affected by the Estates' relief measures, both socially and comparing city and countryside.

Embargoes on grain exports or other economic sectors consuming grain (for example, distillation) were one of the first measures discussed or enacted during crises like 1740-1741. The Estates held a staunch belief in the free export of grains; it had long opposed the central export embargo of 1739.<sup>48</sup> Their view was motivated primarily by fiscality: some of the Estates' largest tax revenue streams were for a significant part linked to the production and consumption of grain.

45 RAB, T44, no. 60: 24 February 1740.

46 Van Uytven et al. (eds), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795*, 1, 141, 148.

47 Augustyn, 'Staten van Brabant', 111-113.

48 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van het Ancien Régime', 172, 175; Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation*, 153-15



These were taxes on land and on consumption, which was also mostly accounted for by grain-related sectors. The Estates employed these sources of income to pay off debts to the central government, but also deposited net revenues into the provincial treasury.<sup>49</sup> However, the Estates' enthusiastic defense of free grain trade (and grain-related sectors) was curbed by a deep-rooted fear of social unrest, principally in the capital cities.<sup>50</sup> They often faced a dilemma: to protect urban economic interests, such as the fiscally lucrative distillation sector, or to secure the cities' food supply? This divergence characterized much of the interaction between the central government and the Permanent Deputation during this period. Even in the rare cases where the institution agreed to a prohibition of distillation, it stressed the sector's importance in its letters to the central government.<sup>51</sup> Instead of export or industry embargoes, the Estates often supported buying the necessary grains in other countries. Such was the case on 20 July 1740, when the Estates spent over twenty thousand guilders on purchasing Dutch (read: Baltic) rye, following a request by the city government of Brussels a few months earlier.<sup>52</sup>

It is clear that discussions in 1739 and 1740 on crisis relief were related to the urban context. Measures such as the purchasing of grain were intended for the cities, not to solve the scarcity and high grain prices that troubled the hungry rural population. The Estates tried to maintain free grain exports to keep the grain price from falling too much. In practice, however, high prices only benefited the wealthier farmers and large landowners who could export surplus grain.<sup>53</sup> Village poor tables that bought grain for their dependents were victims of this practice, having to buy their grain at skyrocketing prices and spending several times their normal yearly expenditures. The fact that they showed remarkable resilience during the 1740-1741 crisis was in no way thanks to the Estates' policies, but rather tied to local networks of relief and exchange.<sup>54</sup> In general, the Estates' attention to urban industrial sectors and food supply stood in stark contrast to the near-silence that shrouded the institution regarding the Brabantine countryside.

49 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', 31, 49-50, 57.

50 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van het Ancien Régime', 177-178.

51 RAB, T44, no. 60: 28 May 1740.

52 RAB, T44, no. 60: 21 May, 20 July 1740.

53 Vandenbroeke, 'De graanpolitiek in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', 385.

54 Vanhaute and Lambrecht, *Famine, exchange networks and the village community*, 171-174.



While only playing a minor role in their discourse, the Estates of Brabant did engage in rural crisis management. One of the recurring measures pertained to the *beemden*. These river-adjacent meadows flooded every winter and produced hay that fed the cattle, providing manure for the fields.<sup>55</sup> Communal pasturing after a specific date was a tradition present all over Europe, which secured the first hay harvest(s) for the land owners, but also allowed village community members on these crucial pastures.<sup>56</sup> Prohibiting the pasturing of livestock on all common meadows for a few weeks was a typical reaction by the Estates of Brabant to bad weather. In the decade leading up to 1740-1741, the Estates saw it necessary to enact this measure no less than three times (see table 2). The Estates themselves motivated this decision by arguing that it protected these meadows. They believed letting livestock graze on them would only exacerbate the damages.<sup>57</sup> Whether this action was also economically beneficial to local societies is hard to assess. It was also not relevant in the Estates' decision-making, because they did not suffer any real financial consequences from limiting pasturing rights. Provincial taxes were not based on livestock health or quality.<sup>58</sup> In any case, prohibiting communal pasturing favored the owners of the pastures (usually larger landowners) above others in the rural communities. Smaller farmers and peasants lost their grazing rights, on which they were often dependent to subsist.<sup>59</sup>

Other rurally oriented measures of the Estates included limiting the access to village poor tables for so-called foreigners and taking action against vagrants.<sup>60</sup> However, the request for money by the poor table of Court-Saint-Etienne in order to keep supporting its dependents was

55 M. Hejman et al., 'Origin and history of grasslands in Central Europe – a review', *Grass and Forage Science* 68:3 (2013) 345–363; Esther Beeckaert, *Rural transformation in the Ardennes. The commons as landscapes of change, 1750-1850* (PhD thesis, Ghent University, Free University of Brussels 2022) 91.

56 Maïka De Keyzer, 'The impact of different distributions of power on access rights to the common wastelands. The Campine, Brecklands and Geest compared', *Journal of Institutional Economics* 9:4 (2013) 535.

57 RAB, T25 *Staten van Brabant. Kartons*, no. 104/1: Rekwesten gericht aan de Bestendige Deputatie, 9 June 1740.

58 Herman Coppens, *Fiscale bronnen voor de sociale en economische geschiedenis van het platteland. Een methodologische benadering van de belastingkohieren in het kwartier Antwerpen, 1686-1795* (Brussels 1972) 149-150.

59 Tine De Moor, 'Avoiding tragedies. A Flemish common and its commoners under the pressure of social and economic change during the eighteenth century', *The Economic History Review* 62:1 (2009) 8-9.

60 RAB, T44, no. 60: 1 August and 27 October 1740.

**Table 2 Years in which the Estates of Brabant enacted a prohibition on pasturing, coupled with anecdotal meteorological data for the Southern Netherlands, 1731-1742**

Year	Date of enactment	Cold weather in spring	Heavy precipitation	Floods
1731	9 <sup>th</sup> of June	X		X
1736	20 <sup>th</sup> of June	X	X	X
1737	27 <sup>th</sup> of June	X	X	
1740	9 <sup>th</sup> of June	X	X	X
1741	22 <sup>nd</sup> of June	X		
1742	16 <sup>th</sup> of June	X	X	

Source: RAB, T25, nr. 104/1: 9 June 1740; Buisman, 'Duizend jaar weer en wind in de Lage Landen', 583-585, 627-628, 640-641, 690-692; Vanderlinden, *Chronique des événements météorologiques en Belgique jusqu'en 1834*, 184-189.

soundly rejected.<sup>61</sup> This matter was left to local authorities. The Estates of Brabant only large-scale and regionally-diversified management of the crisis in the countryside was their response to the petitions, starting in 1741. After the dire spring of 1740, the Estates' discourse noticeably changed. In early 1741, the large-scale tax remissions looming over the provincial finances were communicated to the central government in discussions surrounding the grain export embargo. At that point, their position was still nuanced: the continued embargo on grain was unfortunate but necessary, but embargoing vegetables and beer would further damage the economy. The word *famine* was mentioned for the first time, and the Estates assessed that about a third of the grain harvest had survived, mirroring the story of the petitioners.<sup>62</sup> Around the same time in 1742, the Estates opposed loosening export restrictions, tempering Governor Von Harrach's hopes of a good harvest by emphasizing the uncertainty of abundant grain yields so early in the year. The experiences of 1740 had shown that good hopes could easily be thwarted by foul weather in spring.<sup>63</sup> The Estates now stood wholly opposed to lifting the embargo on grain export, especially as the threat of war grew ever nearer.<sup>64</sup> It maintained that position until the end of the crisis in 1743.<sup>65</sup>

61 RAB, T25, no. 104/1: 24 February 1740.

62 RAB, T44, no. 61: 28 January 1741, in reaction to the proposed ordonnance of 1 February 1741.

63 RAB, T44, no. 62: 10 February and 1 March 1742.

64 RAB, T44, no. 62: 1 March 1742.

65 Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation*, 156.



Illustration 3 Another crisis hit the Southern Netherlands as they were still reeling from 1740-1741, when the War of Austrian Succession reached the region

(source: Felix Philippoteaux, *The Battle of Fontenoy, 1745: The French and the Allies Confronting Each Other*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 71,8 x 116,2 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 85-1880).

While in 1740 the Estates had directed its attention primarily to the cities, in 1741 and especially 1742 it increasingly considered the situation in the countryside. In September 1742, the Estates received word from Governor Von Harrach that an army of twenty-two thousand troops would traverse Brabant. Disastrously, he expected Brabant to provision the horses and pack animals with the necessary fodder, in the form of straw and oats. The Estates of Brabant stated that providing such quantities had become impossible for many rural communities. It seems that the Estates now feared social unrest outside of the cities, too. Additionally, violent foraging by armies often hit large farmers, without chance for financial restitution.<sup>66</sup> The Estates wanted to avoid such plundering of the countryside by foraging troops at all costs. Policies after late 1742 reflect that: grain was to be threshed as soon as possible to provision the necessary straw, and the Estates searched for grain elsewhere in the Southern Netherlands.<sup>67</sup> By 22 October, the Estates communicated that the army's requirements were pressuring the weakened countryside too much: it mentioned the "total ruination

<sup>66</sup> Scheelings, *De heren en het heerlijk regime in Brabant in de achttiende eeuw*, 327

<sup>67</sup> RAB, T44, no. 62: 19 October 1742.

of the Low Countries”.<sup>68</sup> By December 1742, an “embarrassed” Estates of Brabant signaled that it could no longer provide either the armies of their sustenance, or the central government of their annual subsidies.<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, in both the Estates frenzied letters of late 1742 and early assessments of the peril that plagued the countryside, the crisis was approached from either an economic angle or to prevent social unrest. This method is best exemplified in the Estates’ grain purchases in 1742. At first glance, buying oats was similar to the grain purchases they had done in earlier years of the crisis. Nevertheless, though oats played a significant role in averting eighteenth-century famines, the Estates bought them for the cavalry regiments, not the rural population.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the Estates’ policies only became more rurally oriented after the massive influx of rural petitions and the subsequent tax remission in mid-1741. Only by early 1741 did the institution consider the rural impact of the crisis beyond grain prices, mainly copying the discourse presented in the petitions they received. The petitions of 1740-1741 thus seem to have played a crucial role in the Estates’ perception and handling of the situation in the Brabantine countryside.

## Remitting taxes for an entire province

From May 1740 onward, most petitions for tax remission remained unanswered by the Estates of Brabant. It took until 12 August 1741, before the Estates remitted taxes for more than 80 villages, about a third of all studied petitions. This action followed the decision made in the General Assembly of March 1741, when a commission had been put together consisting of the abbot of Dielegem and the count of Sart to moderate the twentieths of 1740 “in consideration of the considerable loss suffered in the harvest of that same year”.<sup>71</sup> The Estates had feared that the cumulative sum of tax remissions would also reach such a “considerable” amount. Indeed, by the end of 1741, over 200 village communities had petitioned for tax reduction because of the harvest failure in 1740, for which the Estates of Brabant remitted

68 RAB, T44, no. 62: 22-24 October 1742.

69 RAB, T44, no. 62: 4 December 1742.

70 Appleby, ‘Grain prices and subsistence crises’, 855.

71 ‘[...] ten eijnde van moderate ende afslaghe der XXe penninghen geconsenteert voor het subsidie des jaers 1740 in consideratie van het merckelijck verlies geleden in den oost van den selven jaere door den grooten ende lanckdurighen vorst [...]’: RAB, T44, no. 61: 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1741.

some 13,076 guilders.<sup>72</sup> Such an amount was exceptional compared to most years, when the Estates remitted but a couple hundred guilders at best.<sup>73</sup> These 13,000-odd guilders were still a comparatively small sum, considering the twenty-thousand the Estates had spent the year before on Baltic grain. On the other hand, the Estates's internal and external communication expressed considerable financial stress from these petitions.

I will argue that this strain was related to the role of the twentieth tax in both the Estates' global balance sheet and the fiscal tug-of-war between the Estates and the central government of the Southern Netherlands. Brabant, unlike other provinces, did not send a predetermined sum of tax revenue to the central government; rather, it redirected revenue streams from individual taxes, such as twentieths, toward the central treasury. Together, this sum amounted to more than 940,000 guilders per year.<sup>74</sup> However, any sort of budgetary overview or overarching balance of the Estates' finances was practically non-existent, even for the Estates' contemporaries. Zelck's present-day assessment showed that in 1779-1780, the Estates accumulated hundreds of thousands of guilders in their own treasury through tax revenue surpluses ('net revenue'), even from taxes whose revenues were intended for the central government. The Estates used these funds to pay off (royal) debts, finance their own administration, and invest in infrastructure projects.<sup>75</sup> Which role, then, did the twentieths play in this system, and how did it affect remissions?

We can approximate the Estates' fiscal situation around the time of the 1740-1741 crisis by modifying Zelck's assessment of the Estates' finances, leaving out all taxes levied after 1745 from his overview of fiscal year 1780 (see table 3). This new estimate of the Estates' yearly surplus amounted to some 134,000 guilders, of which over 70 percent came from land taxes and more than half directly from the twentieths' accounts (see table 3). Provincial finances were probably in more dire straits than that general net revenue shows, considering the troubles of the early 1740s. First, Brabant had paid a *don gratuit* of 900,000 guilders in 1739 to finance the Austrian war against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>76</sup>

72 RAB, To10, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1739-1741

73 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', 71.

74 Coppens, *De financiën van de centrale regering*, 127.

75 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', 55-57, 103.

76 M. Gachard, *Recueil des anciennes ordonnances de la Belgique, contenant les ordonnances du 6 novembre 1734 au 14 mars 1744*, vol. 5, troisième série – 1700-1794 (Brussels 1882) XVIII-IX.

**Table 3 Estimate of the Estates' yearly net revenue based on active taxes and Zelck's assessment for 1780, 1725-1745**

Tax type and accounts	Yearly net revenue, in guilders	Percentage of total yearly net revenue
<b>Land taxes</b>	<b>95,118</b>	<b>70.87%</b>
3 and 2 twentieths	46,919	34.96%
3/4 and 1/2 twentieths	26,601	19.82%
Grote bede	19,692	14.67%
Kleine bede	1,906	1.42%
<b>Consumption taxes</b>	<b>24,528</b>	<b>18.28%</b>
24 stuivers per aeme of wine	2,373	1.77%
Brandy and tobacco	11,618	8.66%
Imposten op de vier speciën	10,537	7.85%
<b>Other taxes: stamp duties</b>	<b>14,564</b>	<b>10.85%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>134,210</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Zelck, *'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw'*, 30-36, 53, 292-293.

Moreover, the 1739 twentieths had not exited that year unscathed: the Estates of Brabant had remitted some 5,000 guilders' worth of tax on that fiscal year, and the 20,000 guilders used to purchase grain in mid-1740 were paid using these tax revenues as well. Over the course of 1740, both the income and land taxes had again suffered, considering respectively the distillation bans and the petitions for remission slowing down twentieth payments.<sup>77</sup> In that regard, the remission demands on the twentieths were the latest and possibly most dangerous threat to that specific, crucial tax account.

With this in mind, the Estates' fear of a "considerable" remission is far more understandable. While the amount of remitted taxes represented not even two percent compared to the Estates' twentieth revenues, it formed nearly 18 percent of what the institution pocketed from that account (see table 4). When they had formed the remission committee in early 1740, the Estates had limited the total tax remitted to a maximum of 25 percent (in their own words: equivalent to about one twentieth).<sup>78</sup> This decision now seems entirely pragmatic: a total remission, asked by more than a few communities, was impossible.

77 RAB, T44, no. 59: 28 January 1741: the Estates stated that they were still waiting on payments from 1739 due to remission procedures.

78 The Brabantine countryside paid in fact 3,75 twentieths, together a tax of more than 15 percent.

**Table 4 Different ways to remit taxes and their impact on the Estates' finances, fiscal year 1740**

	Reality	Equal remission	Two thirds /village	One twentieth /village	Total remission
Average remission per village, in percent of their twentieths	8.41%	8.41%	66.67%	25%	100%
Total cost, in guilders	13,076	17,507	138,699	52,012	208,048
% of total twentieths revenue	1.68%	2.25%	17.80%	6.67%	26.69%
% of yearly surplus twentieths (estimate 1725-1745)	17.79%	23.81%	188.65%	70.75%	282.98%
% of total yearly net revenue (estimate 1725-1745)	9.74%	13.04%	103.34%	38.75%	155.02%
% of total yearly net revenue (1780)	4.37%	5.86%	46.39%	17.40%	69.58%

Source: RAB, T010, 163, 142-143/BIS: 1739-1741; RAB, T44, nr. 60-61: 1740-41; Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', 55-57, 103, 292-293.

Remitting such an amount might mean a loss of revenue of over 280 percent relative to the surplus twentieths, or about one and a half times what the Estates usually 'made' yearly (see table 4). Even remitting the decided maximum of 25 percent for all petitioning communities around the 1740 harvest would have landed the total remitted sum just over 50,000 guilders, or about a third of the Estates' estimated yearly net revenue (see table 4). The Estates most likely were not very sympathetic to this option, let alone able to finance it at all. Such an amount might have even consumed the entire positive balance of the Estates of that year, considering the challenges of the crisis. In October 1741, the Estates deposited thousands of guilders from selling grain stocks at a loss back into the twentieths account of 1740, which was already under pressure of remissions as well.<sup>79</sup>

In any case, few petitioning village communities saw their wishes fulfilled: Brabantine communities were only remitted on average 8.41 percent of their twentieths (see table 4). None of them received a tax reduction proportionate to the harvest damage they claimed, nor was it realistic that the Estates could or wanted to concede to such a blow to its financial health in crisis. The tens of thousands of guilders

<sup>79</sup> RAB, T44, no. 61: 5 October 1741.



the Estates spent on buying grain for provisioning the cities had already put enough pressure on the treasury. This issue brought the Estates into a situation where they had to find a compromise between whether a community deserved a certain amount of remission and whether that was financially possible or desirable. Remitting a large percentage of taxes (a relative remission) for a smaller village could amount to a mere ten guilders of tax income lost. Conversely, an at-first-sight low percentual reduction might hide a real (or absolute) remission of hundreds of guilders for villages paying upward in the thousands of guilders each year. As the total cost of remissions went up during the high point of the crisis, both average relative and absolute remission per village went down (see figures 1 and 2). This shows that the Estates were likely under considerable financial pressure as the crisis progressed.

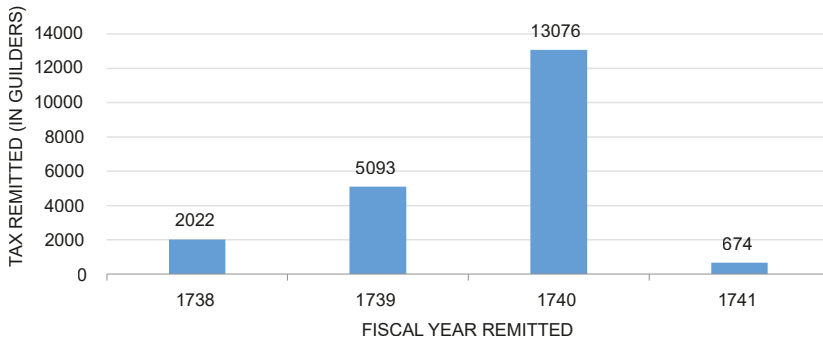


Figure 1 Total tax remitted on the twentieths per fiscal year, 1738-1741

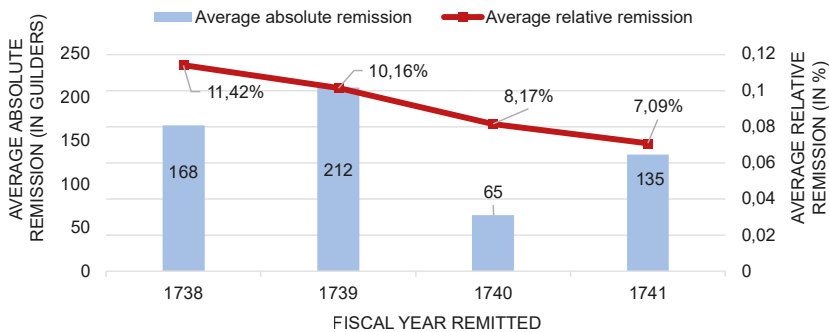
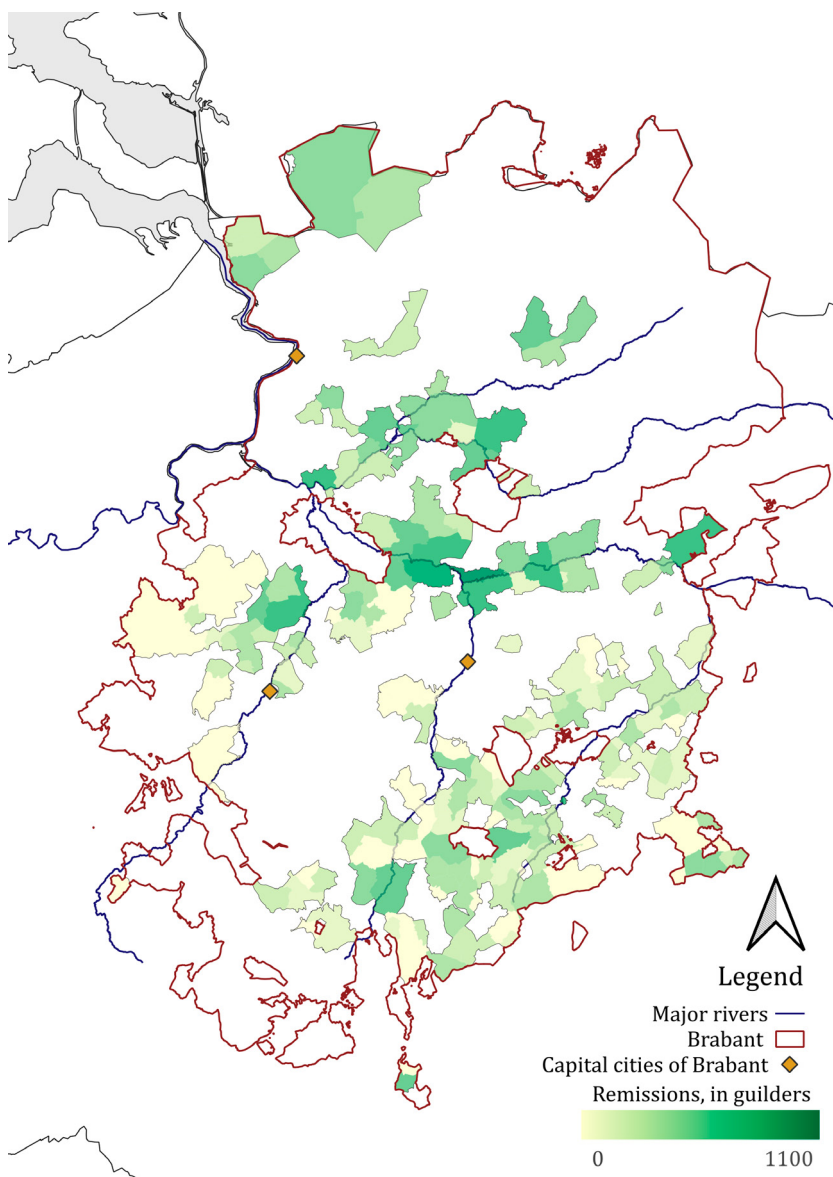
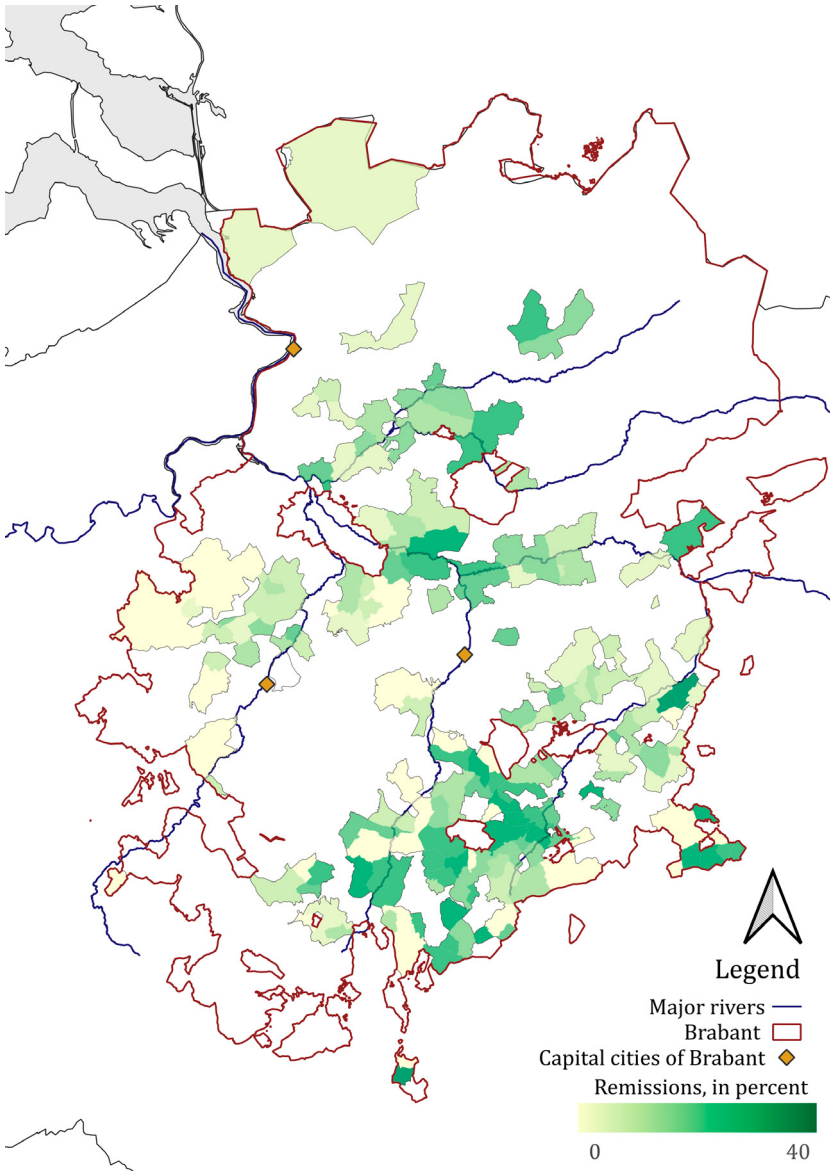


Figure 2 Average tax remitted per village per fiscal year, 1738-1741



Map 2 Absolute remission on the twentieths per village, fiscal year 1740

Sources: RAB, T010, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1740-1741; RAB, T44, no. 59-62: 1739-1742; Stapel, *Historical atlas of the Low Countries* (2023). Map made by author.



Map 3 Relative remission on the twentieths per village, fiscal year 1740

Sources: RAB, T010, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1740-1741; RAB, T44, no. 59-62: 1739-1742; Stapel, *Historical atlas of the Low Countries* (2023). Map made by author.



*Illustration 4 Open fields near Brussels (source: Joseph de Ferraris, Carte de cabinet des Pays-Bas autrichiens, 1771-1778. Brussels, KBR, © NGI).*

Maps 2 and 3 demonstrate that using average remission numbers hides the considerable variation between localities, which is studied here through five focus regions, based on administrative unity, geographic cohesion, and landscape characteristics: three predominantly open field zones versus regions situated around relatively large rivers (see map 4 and table 5). Looking at fiscal year 1740 alone (eliminating the distortion of the crisis progressing and villages receiving more than one tax remission), it is clear that tax remissions were reliant on two main factors. The first was tax pressure, which is shown in table 5 through average twentieths per village and average tax coefficient per village (twentieths per hectare, since it was a land tax). The Estates might have granted higher remissions to more heavily taxed communities in order to support them equally. Contrasting percentual remissions between the Dijle-Gete area and the region surrounding Brussels show the opposite is true: their absolute remissions were about the same (see table 5). It was much cheaper for the Estates to reduce taxes for smaller villages (like in the Dijle-Gete region), which paid on average low taxes. In comparison, many village communities around Brussels did not receive any remission at all around this period, reducing their average remission by about thirty guilders. Thus, from a supralocal perspective, the three studied open field regions received very similar

average remissions in absolute terms, despite being under wildly different tax pressure (see table 5). However much the Estates might have wanted to support fiscally more profitable regions, it quickly became too costly.

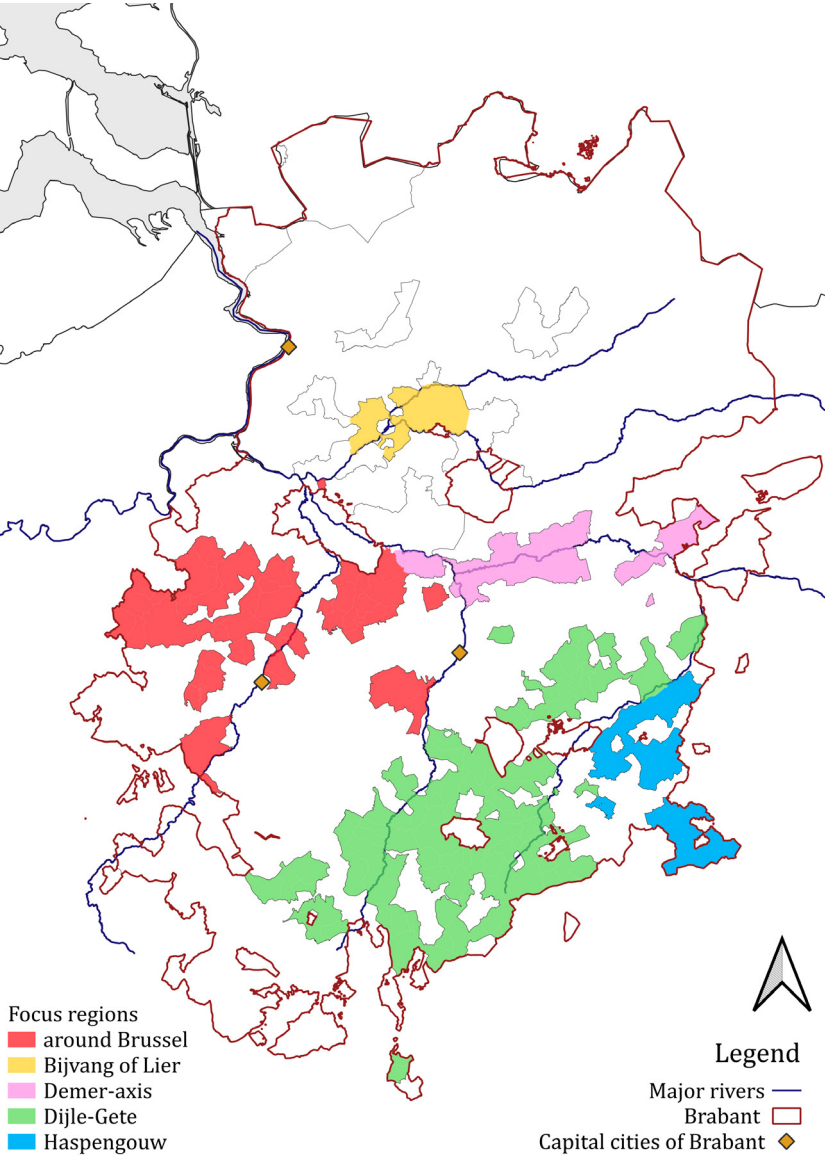
These findings do not correspond with the more pronounced differences between the surroundings of Lier and Demer-axis, on one hand, and the previously discussed open field regions, on the other. While only seven communities around the Demer petitioned the Estates of Brabant concerning reductions on the 1740 twentieths, they received more than 16 percent of the total 1740 tax remissions – averaging a staggering 305 guilders per village – while only accounting for less than 5 percent of the total amount of petitions (see table 5). A similar, though less pronounced pattern is seen for the so-called Bijvang of Lier. Both in relative and especially absolute terms, these regions score the highest in all of Brabant.

**Table 5 Regional differences in taxes and remissions on the twentieths of 1740, represented by five focus regions and averages for all Brabant**

	around Brussels	Haspen- gouw	Dijle-Gete	Demer- axis	Bijvang of Lier	avg. for Brabant
<b>General characteristics</b>						
Geography	open field	open field	open field	fluvial	fluvial	
Avg. twentieths	1740	533	528	2662	1897	1035
Avg. tax coefficient (g./ha) <sup>80</sup>	2.07	1.13	0.79	2.97	1.92	1.29
<b>Remissions</b>						
Avg. absolute remission	51	40	48	305	170	65
Avg. relative remission	4.22%	9.08%	9.76%	10.52%	9.21%	8.17%
<b>Costs for the Estates</b>						<b>Total</b>
Total cost in guilders	2258	1370	4602	2137	1018	13076
% of remissions 1740	17.27%	10.47%	35.19%	16.34%	7.79%	100%
% of twentieths	0.29%	0.18%	0.59%	0.27%	0.13%	1.68%
% of surplus twentieths	3.07%	1.86%	6.26%	2.91%	1.38%	17.79%
<b>Context petition corpus</b>						
Amount of petitions	44	34	96	7	6	202
Percentage of petitions	21.78%	16.83%	47.52%	3.47%	2.97%	100%

Source: RAB, T010, 163, 142-143/BIS: 1739-1741; RAB, T44, nr. 60-61: 1740-41.

80 Without the so-called *cleyn steden* (non-capital cities), whose sometimes small surface area combined with high taxes distorts the dataset.



Map 4 Focus regions

Sources: RAB, T010, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1740-1741; RAB, T44, no. 59-62: 1739-1742; Stapel, 'Historical atlas of the Low Countries' (2023); Ferraris, Carte de Cabinet (1771-1778). Map made by author.



**Table 6 Relative remission for village communities in the Bijvang of Lier and along the Demer-axis that sent in multiple petitions for tax reduction between 1739 and 1742**

Village	Twentieths, in guilders	1739	1740
Region: Demer-axis			
Diest	4,026	3%	3%
Haacht	2,906	23%	18%
Haterbeek	459	5%	5%
Rillaar	1,167	7%	7%
Rotselaar	3,026	23%	18%
Werchter	4,044	28%	17%
Region: Bijvang of Lier			
Emblem	1,606	9%	9%
Hagenbroek	3,214	4%	8%
Kessel	1,818	9%	8%
Lachenen	1,590	5%	10%
Mijl	1,800	8%	9%
Nijlen	1,354	11%	11%

Source: RAB, T010, no. 163, 142-143/BIS: 1739-1741; RAB, T44, no. 60-61: 1740-41.

The difference between these regions and the area around Brussels was not their tax pressure: all were quite heavily taxed. It was rather caused by a second factor: geography. The Bijvang of Lier and the Demer-axis were very prone to river floods. Lier is positioned at the confluence area of the Nete rivers, and therefore vulnerable to inundations, just like the historically flood-prone Demer.<sup>81</sup> It proved crucial for their high tax remissions in two ways. Pasture grounds, especially meadows around rivers, were valued more than arable fields in the land register of 1686, upon which the twentieth tax was based.<sup>82</sup> Flooded pastures were thus, by the Estates' logic, also worth more than damaged fields. Secondly, these communities petitioned the Estates regularly because of the recurring inundations. Not only was Brabant's government more aware

81 Eline Lathouwers, Yves Segers and Gert Verstraeten, 'Reconstructing valley landscapes. GIS-analyses of past land use changes in three Flemish river valleys since the late 18th century', *Land Use Policy* 135 (2023) 23.

82 Arable fields were valued at 4 to 12 *stuivers*, pastures at 4 to 16 *stuivers*, depending on their average yield/revenue; Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', 32.





*Illustration 5 Demer floodplain running from east to west, east of Aarschot (source: Joseph de Ferraris, Carte de cabinet des Pays-Bas autrichiens, 1771-1778. Brussels, KBR, © NGI).*

of this region's issues, but these particular villages had also historically received certain tax remissions, which the Estates could now hardly back down from. This is evident when looking at the tax remissions of villages petitioning for remission on the 1739 and 1740 twentieths. Tax remission per village went down for the crisis year 1740 – as it did throughout Brabant – but only in villages that had received more than 20 percent remission in 1739 (see table 6). On average, remissions remained far above the other studied regions (see table 5).

Ultimately, the significant tax remissions received by the pasture-rich regions underline the fiscal nature of Brabantine rural policy. While pastures played a critical role in the agro-food systems (cattle grazing on them provided manure for the fields), that was not the reason the Estates were remitting higher sums on them; the fact that they were worth more fiscally was. Petitions considering pasture floods were even treated separately from ones that concerned damages to the grain harvest, though both asked for remission on the same tax. Despite the high cost, the Estates were willing to grant very high tax remissions, thus again prioritizing pasture quality over grain harvest losses. Given their high economic value, pastures were often in the possession of wealthier strata of the village community. Moreover, the remission of the twentieths, the Estates' only large-scale and regionally

diversified rural crisis management during this crisis, was fully geared toward this wealthier class. The fiscal burden of the twentieths was largely carried by the larger farmers of the community, who owned most of the land. With this policy, the large-scale tax remissions of the 1740s show their true identity as a measure against an economic crisis – not a subsistence-threatening event.

## The Estates of Brabant in the mid-eighteenth century

The Estates' policy was not only dependent on what was possible but also on their members. Beeckaert showed that the composition of Luxembourg's Estates did affect its policy decisions.<sup>83</sup> In Brabant, the Permanent Deputation held *de facto* power between General Assemblies, but its members were representative of the general socio-economic profile of the Estates of Brabant.<sup>84</sup> Those sitting in Brabant's Estates were political and economic elites. This character was true for all three estates.<sup>85</sup> The central government considered the Estates the voice of the large landowning class. Zelck aptly demonstrated this situation by outlining the ambiguous attitude of the Estates towards discussions about land rights in the second half of the eighteenth century. The enclosure movement, aimed at usurping common land, enjoyed major support from the Estates. At the same time, the Estates vigorously protested attempts by the central authorities to limit land consolidation under large farms.<sup>86</sup> Not only was the Estates sympathetic to (their own) large landowning class, but nearly everyone in the Estates of Brabant had a stake in the grain trade as well. In the first place, this connection was by virtue of their economic position as large landowners.

Between 1739 and 1742, the first estate was mostly represented by the abbeyes<sup>87</sup> of Park and Sint-Geertrui, both in Leuven (see table 7). Their proximity to Brussels must have played a greater role than their relative wealth regarding their appointment to the Permanent Deputation, but they were far from poor institutions.<sup>88</sup> Zelck deemed the abbeyes in

83 Beeckaert, *Rural transformation in the Ardennes*, 237.

84 Augustyn, 'Staten van Brabant', 111–113.

85 Paul Janssens, *De evolutie van de Belgische adel sinds de late middeleeuwen* (Brussels 1998) 238.

86 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van het Ancien Régime', 172, 194.

87 So-called "Statenabdijen", abbeyes with the right to a seat in the Estates.

88 Raymond Van Uytven and Jan De Puydt, *De toestand der abdijen in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden, inzonderheid der statenabdijen, in de tweede helft der 18de eeuw. Het verslag de Külbeg en de procesverbalen der abtskeuzen* (Antwerp 1965) 51.

Brabant’s Estates “super surplus extractors of the countryside”.<sup>89</sup> They sourced nearly 80 percent of their immense income from their rural holdings, often oriented toward grain cultivation.<sup>90</sup> The rural aristocracy in the second Estate also had strong ties to the grain sector. Their landholdings often had a profound agrarian character, consisting of mostly grain-producing fields. Furthermore, it was not exceptional for noblemen to have a direct stake by owning a mill or brewery (for example, the marquis of Wemmel).<sup>91</sup> It is also worth noting that many nobles in Brabant’s Permanent Deputation during the 1740-1741 crisis had years or even decades of experience in the Estates. By 1739, the baron of Herent and the count of Lalaing had sat 40 and 33 years in the Estates, respectively, and had endured another grain crisis in the mid-1720s.<sup>92</sup>

**Table 7 Members of the Permanent Deputation of Brabant, January 1739 until December 1742. Frequency of actors in resolutions or discussions concerning grain or food policy (total = 96)**

a. First estate		
Title	Name	Frequency
Abbot of Sint-Geertrui	De Herzelles, G. P., later De Leefdael, L. E.	92
Abbot of Park	Slootmans, A.	89
Abbot of Dielegem	Crockaert, H.	9
b. Second estate		
Title	Name	Frequency
Marquis of Wemmel	Taye, F. F.	60
Count of Corroy	Van Nassau, G. A. J.	47
Count of Sart and Brussel <sup>93</sup>	De Varick, P. R. J.	39
Baron of Herent	Van Spangen, P. L. F. J.	32
Marquis of Aiseau	Van Gavere, R. F.	19
Count of Lalaing	Lalaing, M. J.	2

89 Zelck, ‘De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw’, 17.  
90 Van Uytven and De Puydt, *De toestand der abdijen*, 61.  
91 Scheelings, *De heren en het heerlijk regime in Brabant in de achttiende eeuw*, 242-248; R. Dessaer, *Geschiedenis van Wemmel* (Anderlecht 1945) 77.  
92 M. Felix-Victor Goethals, *Dictionnaire généalogique et héraldique des familles nobles du Royaume de Belgique*, vols. 2-4 (Brussels 1852); Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture et alimentation*, 151.  
93 Present Sart-Dame-Avelines. Brussel was a viscounty. Alex Olzheim, *Uit de geschiedenis Van Varik* (2013) 8; Eugène De Seyn, *Geschied- en aardrijkskundig woordenboek der Belgische gemeenten* (Brussels 1938) 1194.

c. Third estate		
City (function)	Name	Frequency
Leuven (mayor)	Van Bommel, P. J.	82
Brussel (pensionary)	Dewilde	69
Leuven (pensionary)	Van Den Broeck	65
Brussels (mayor)	Cano	36
Leuven and Brussels (mayor) <sup>94</sup>	De Limminghe, C. J.	29
Leuven (pensionary)	De Vroey, J. L.	11
Antwerp (mayor)	Wellens, P. A. J.	11
Antwerp (pensionary)	Van Kessel, A. M.	11
Antwerp (pensionary)	Van Hove	6
Brussels (mayor)	Van Der Dift	6
Antwerp (mayor)	Dellafaille, K. J.	3

Source: RAB, T44, nr. 59-62: 1739-1742; supplemented with literature.<sup>95</sup>

94 It happened that members of families from Brussels attempted to obtain a political mandate in Leuven (and vice versa), when they were unsuccessful in their own city. Count De Limminghe was an example of that: in 1740, he acquired a mandate in Leuven, but later that year and in 1741, he acted as mayor in Brussel. The resolution books of the Estates of Brabant do not specify the city of origin of the representatives of the third estate. Alfons Meulemans, *De Leuvense geslachten* (Leuven 1976) 137; Floris Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen. Met Oostenrijk en onder de Franschen* (1715-1814) 9 (Antwerp 1947) 222-223.

95 For the first estate:

Abbey of Park: Albert d'Haenens, 'Abdij van Park', in: Despy-Meyer et al. (eds), *Monasticon Belge. Province de Brabant 4* (Liege 1964).

Abbey of Sint-Geertrui: Alphonse Joseph Louis Jacobs, *L'Abbaye noble de Sainte-Gertrude à Louvain depuis son origine jusqu'à sa suppression*, anastatische herdruk (Brussels 1999) 86.

Abbey of Dielegem: Maurits De Meulemeester, *Notes d'Histoire Jettoise* (Brussels 1996) 138.

For the second estate:

Barony of Herent: Marcel Piot, *Geschiedenis van Herent. Van prehistorie tot 21ste eeuw* (Herent 2003) 102.

Marquisate of Wemmel: R. Dessaer, *Geschiedenis van Wemmel* (Anderlecht 1945) 77.

County of Sart and Viscounty of Brussel: Olzheim, *Uit de geschiedenis Van Varik*, 8; De Seyn, *Geschied- en aardrijkskundig woordenboek der Belgische gemeenten*, 1194.

Counties of Corroy, Aiseau and Lalaing: M. Félix-Victor Goethals, *Dictionnaire généalogique et héraldique des Familles Nobles du Royaume de Belgique 2-4* (Brussels 1852).

For the third estate:

Antwerpen: René Boumans, *Het Antwerps stadsbestuur voor en tijdens de Franse overheersing. Bijdrage tot de ontwikkelingsgeschiedenis van de stedelijke bestuursinstellingen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden* (Bruges 1965) 221-227, 262; Floris Prims, *Geschiedenis van Antwerpen. Met Oostenrijk en onder de Franschen* (1715-1814) 222-223.

Brussel: Alexandre Henne and Alphonse Wauters, *Histoire de la ville de Bruxelles*, 2 (Brussels 1845) 557.

Leuven: Meulemans, *De Leuvense geslachten*, 49, 137; Peter Crombecq, *Het alfabetisch register van de twaalfde-tot achttiende-eeuwse stadsbestuurders van Leuven* (Edegem 2010). F. De Greef, *De Leuvense vaart. Historische nota over het aanleggen en over de feestelijkheden die plaats hadden bij het begin der werken en het openstellen der vaart tot in het jaar 1763* (Leuven 1950) 8.

The representatives of the third estate were often recruited from lower nobility (and thus also likely large landowners), and the cities they spoke for were actors in the grain trade. Being part of the political and economic elite in their town of origin, the third estate representatives had entirely different economic interests from the countryside: in Leuven, for example, the grain-consuming brewing sector was highly dominant.<sup>96</sup> Often, ruling urban families engaged directly in the import and export of grain.<sup>97</sup> City authorities' diligence in supplying their inhabitants with food contrasted greatly with their lack of interest in provisioning the countryside during harvest failures.<sup>98</sup> Legislation concerning urban markets even actively discouraged a grain flow to the countryside.<sup>99</sup>

This representation puts the Estates' policy during the crisis of 1740-1741 and surrounding years into another perspective. Undoubtedly, the fiscal nature of the Estates of Brabant as an administrative institution thoroughly influenced the measures that were taken. Granting every village community the remission it asked was indeed fiscally or financially impossible. However, limiting an interpretation of what the Estates *could* do ignores what the Estates of Brabant *wanted* to do. Many of the Estates' policies benefited, directly or indirectly, themselves, too. This is especially apparent in their favorable treatment of the wealthier farmer and landholder class – of which they were also a member. An export policy aimed at keeping prices high benefited them over the poorer classes, who were certainly not exporting grain and most likely suffering from hunger.<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, they were vested in the financial well-being of wealthier farmers, who might be their direct tenants. Low prices could mean these tenant farmers could not pay their rents anymore, forcing large landowners to remit rents.<sup>101</sup> It is also no coincidence that the Estates' grain purchases were often requested by the cities themselves,

96 J.A. Torfs, *Geschiedenis van Leuven van den vroegsten tijd tot op heden* (Tienen 1984) 308.

97 Zelck, 'De Staten van Brabant op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', 121; Meulemans, *De Leuvense geslachten*, 111.

98 David R. Weir, 'Markets and mortality in France, 1600-1789', in: John Walter and Roger Schofield (eds), *Famine, disease and the social order in early modern society* (Cambridge 1989) 223; Cormac Ó Gráda and Jean-Michel Chevet, 'Famine and market in Ancien Régime France', *The Journal of Economic History* 62:3 (2002) 717; Dijkman, 'Coping with scarcity', 20; Vandenbroeke, 'De graanpolitiek in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', 385.

99 Vanhaute and Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community', 170-171, 175.

100 Sheila Pelizzon, 'Grain flour, 1590-1790', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 23:1 (2000) 96; Vandenbroeke, 'De graanpolitiek in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', 385.

101 Pelizzon, 'Grain flour, 1590-1790', 105.

represented via the third estate. For the first and second estate, such an action meant a possible loss of revenue. This conflict of interests within the Estates of Brabant revealed itself in July 1740, during one of the price surges of the crisis. The Estates had just spent thousands of guilders in tax money to buy Baltic grain, but the abbot of Sint-Geertrui – present in the Permanent Deputation at the time – was selling his grain stocks at enormous profits.<sup>102</sup> Other rural measures fall in the same category. Limiting grazing rights was, as argued above, mainly beneficial for the owners of common meadows. The Estates' members, landowners themselves, were probably sympathetic to sapping common rights, in the context of the enclosure movement.<sup>103</sup> Even the large-scale tax remissions of the 1740s indirectly promoted the Estates' members own interests. They were primarily geared towards wealthy tenant farmers, who often not only paid disproportionately more of the twentieths of their village, but also formed the economic backbone of some Estates' members' personal wealth.<sup>104</sup> As landowners themselves, lowering taxes allowed their personal revenues to stay in their own purses, as well as allowing increased rents.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusion

The hundreds of petitions the Estates received over the course of the 1740-1741 crisis played a crucial role in the Estates' crisis response. On the one hand, they show that the Estates did engage in crisis management in the countryside. On the other, they highlight that to the Estates, two parallel calamities were plaguing Brabant in the 1740s: an economic crisis and a subsistence one. These fundamentally hit different parts of the population and demanded different relief measures from the (provincial) government. Yet, throughout the crisis, the Estates maintained an economically oriented approach, focused above all on keeping critical fiscal sectors going. The small net revenue that the Estates could work with demanded creative bookkeeping to be able to buy grains, remit taxes, and support the central government's monetary demands. To keep their

<sup>102</sup> Van Houtte, *Leuven in 1740*, 12.

<sup>103</sup> Beeckaert, *Rural transformation in the Ardennes*, 125-126.

<sup>104</sup> For example, the Abbey of Park. Stefan Van Lani, 'De Abdij van Park en haar abdijdomein', 43; R. Van Uytven, et al., (eds), *Geschiedenis van Brabant: van het hertogdom tot heden* (Zwolle 2011) 460-461.

<sup>105</sup> Paul Janssens, 'Taxation in the Habsburg Low Countries and Belgium, 1579-1914', in: Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla and Patrick K. O'Brien (eds), *The rise of fiscal states. A global history, 1500-1914* (Cambridge 2012) 80.



accounts in the black, the Permanent Deputation thus invariably opted for policy decisions that harmed them the least financially. Measures such as grazing prohibitions were much cheaper than remissions or buying grain. Such expensive actions, taking considerable chunks out of the provincial budget, were undertaken reluctantly and when nothing else seemed to work to preserve social order.

This situation led to a considerable discrepancy in the Estates' relief measures when comparing urban and rural contexts. In the cities, the Estates had to balance between supporting grain-processing sectors and the hungry lower classes, whose food supply had to be secured to prevent so-called food-riots. In the countryside, too, the subsistence crisis hit the poor and/or landless class above all, through disease and hunger. Those able to comfortably subsist were more worried about economic damage amidst volatile prices. Yet here the Estates undertook no policies to alleviate hunger, as the rural poor were left to support from their own, over-burdened, relief networks. The principal cause of this situation was the nature of the relation between the Estates and its rural subjects. All actors involved in the provincial decision-making process regarding the rural crisis experienced 1740-1741 as an economic crisis first and foremost. That is apparent from their discourse and socio-economic background. Somewhat similar to those sitting in the Estates, the rural petitioners of the early 1740s were all part of a class of wealthy farmers and landlords, who spoke of an economic crisis, barely mentioning hunger – or omitting any mention of it at all.

This group largely overlapped with the tax-paying strata of rural society, those represented in village management and those less concerned with hunger. The very nature of the Estates' power, fiscality, already benefited these taxpaying social groups over the poorest classes, who paid little to no taxes. The Estates' rural crisis management, remitting taxes on a large scale and closing off common floodplains, reinforced this intrinsic bias. Only very late into the crisis, when the threat of plundering troops loomed over the countryside, did they become aware of an impending famine or much-feared social unrest. Still, little changed in their relief measures, which continued to be oriented toward helping that same class of petitioning wealthy landowners and farmers. While in Brabant's cities, hunger alleviation formed a critical aspect of Estates' policy and spending, in the countryside the considerable regional variation in tax remission corresponded more with fiscal differences and had nothing to do with harvest damage or the effectiveness of local relief systems. While the hundreds of Brabantine



petitions profoundly impacted the Estates' policy, the disaster the Estates were trying to prevent in the countryside was not a subsistence crisis or famine, but rather an economic catastrophe.

## About the author

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