

## **EXPRESSIONS OF POWER IN A MARGINAL LANDSCAPE? THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 15TH CENTURY FISHERMEN'S VILLAGE OF WALRAVERSIJDE**

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Through the Late Middle Ages, some places along the coast of the county of Flanders developed into fishermen settlements. The importance and character of these settlements varied from small, temporary fishing bases to ports such as Ostend. There was coastal fishing as well as offshore fishing. In this landscape Walraversijde took a specific place. It was a settlement of (mainly) sea fishermen that developed during its short existence (13c-16c) into one of the larger fishermen communities along the coast. Walraversijde was rather 'mobile' and experienced some geographical shifts throughout its existence as is shown by archaeological and historical data. After the siege of Ostend (1601-1604) the place was reduced to a small agricultural hamlet.

This contribution mainly focuses on the spatial structure and some landscape features of this fishermen settlement. This hopefully can help to gain insight in some aspects of the late mediaeval fishermen community that had shaped the settlement. Dyer claims that a village is 'the embodiment of a community, [that] expressed an idea about how people should live and organize themselves'<sup>2</sup>. Applied to Walraversijde, this raises some questions about what the material and spatial features of the community can tell us about the nature and identity of this late mediaeval fishermen settlement and community. To investigate this, an interdisciplinary spatial – historical study is carried out. This study embodies a retrogressive reconstruction of the dynamics of the spatial structure of the village by means of cadastral, cartographic, historical, archaeological and other data. The result is interpreted on the basis of the study of, among others, the presence of 'power', the institutional organization and the use of monumentality in the village landscape.

Walraversijde was founded at the latest in the second half of the 13th century as a small, possibly semi-permanent fishermen community along a small tidal inlet near an old domain of the counts of Flanders<sup>3</sup>. At that moment the coastline extended quite a bit further into the sea. Originally it may have been only a temporary base for fishermen from the area who chose this inlet as mooring place or yde<sup>4</sup>. These ydes were in general rather small and were often related to other, permanent, settlements in its immediate surroundings<sup>5</sup>. Such settlements were probably the result of the commercialisation of the food supply around Bruges as well as of farmers' need for extra incomes during periods of economic difficulties. In addition, the development of seaports was strongly encouraged in the 13th century by countess Margareta of Constantinople, on whose land Walraversijde had originated. Whatever the case, it seems that this yde from the otherwise unknown *Walraf* developed through the 13th century into a specific and well-known

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<sup>2</sup>Dyer 1997:58.

<sup>3</sup>The oldest testimony dates from 1290 and deals with '*les poissonniers de Wilravenszeide*' who had debts in Ypres.

<sup>4</sup>Compare with situation in Devon; cf. the contribution of H. Fox and Fox 2001.

<sup>5</sup>See also Gelling and Cole (2000: 85) about the related hyth toponyms, among others on the southeastern coast of England, and Loppens (1938).

fishermen settlement of a more permanent nature<sup>6</sup>. Originally Walraversijde seems to only have consisted of some houses along the mooring place<sup>7</sup>. However, the inlet silted up in the course of the 14th century and the community moved eastwards to the dunes NW of the 15th century Walraversijde<sup>8</sup>.

The Saint Vincent storm flood of 22 January 1394, which was accompanied by heavy sand-drifts in the dunes, caused the settlement to be moved once again. As a result of the flood, the village houses on the beach had ended up in front of the dunes<sup>9</sup>. Hence, the settlement had to be rebuilt inland on farmland. After 1394, a new settlement with specific planned spatial features thus was created in the landscape, and this apparently by an existing, well-organized fishermen community with a certain 'sense of community'<sup>10</sup>. Further, the limited historical data shows us a fishermen community with a very typical profile<sup>11</sup>: a large group of people, half of which was away from home for a long time. At the top of the social hierarchy were the captains or *sciplieden*, the owners of the fishing vessels<sup>12</sup>. The knowledge of the maritime environment, fishing techniques and sea routes were very important within the social hierarchy as well. Like in other fishermen communities, the Walraversijde fishermen could be quite violent and sometimes they resorted to piracy. Because of this, the relatively low social importance of fishermen and a certain peculiarity when compared with farmers, such fishermen communities were seen as rather marginal, as testified in some contemporary historical sources.

This 15th century Walraversijde had some specific spatial characteristics. The 15th century Walraversijde probably had over 600 inhabitants, who lived in over a hundred houses on small, almost urban plots. These plots were relatively methodically constructed (in rows) within the older rural plot structure. There were also some more specific community spaces such as the *draeyplaetsen*, where nets were made, the brewery, the inn and the chapel. This Walraversijde was considerably larger than the neighbouring agricultural villages such as Middelkerke, which consisted of some farms around the church only. At the same time, it was quite smaller than the neighbouring seaport Ostend. In spite of the commercial orientation of fishing and other trade activities, legal or otherwise, Walraversijde did not have its own market infrastructure. In spite of the large number of inhabitants, Walraversijde never became an independent parish. Just like in other fishermen communities along the North Sea, the place of worship, in spite of its remarkable size and prestige, always kept its status as a chapel<sup>13</sup>. The settlement seemed almost to be a 'guest' on the territory of Middelkerke.

However, Walraversijde was not just a fishermen community on the edge of the landscape and on the fringes of society. Some written sources throw interesting light on the privateering of

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<sup>6</sup>See footnote 2. Also see Gardiner 2001 about similar evolutions on the English coast.

<sup>7</sup>Choqueel 1950:88. Choqueel's observations were based upon surface finds on the beach between Middelkerke and Mariakerke. Until the construction of breakwaters between 1978 and 1980, remains of the 13th and 14th century village came to the surface from time to time. These finds were very systematically registered by A. Choqueel, A. Mortier and E. Cools.

<sup>8</sup>Tys 1996. The most southern parts of the 14-th century village were just located on an old estate of the St. Peter's abbey from Ghent and the village was connected with this estate through the *muelnewech* or 'millroad' (State Archive Ghent, Fund St. Pietersabdij, Account 806d: 81r°-89v°).

<sup>9</sup>See footnote 6.

<sup>10</sup>It is this settlement that has been excavated and studied by Marnix Pieters (IAP) since 1991; see Pieters (1997) and his contribution.

<sup>11</sup>Compare with, among others, Collet (1991) and Geistdoerfer (1977).

<sup>12</sup>In 1480 there were 16 captains in Walraversijde, 10 in Heist and 50 in Ostend. The records of the aldermen from the *Brugse Vrye* clearly show that the Walraversijde captains were for the government (from aldermen to duke) the obvious persons to negotiate with.

<sup>13</sup>Compare with the medieval fishermen settlement Walberswick, where the 'chapel' had the dimensions of a '*magnificent church*' (Warner 2001).

Walraversijde fishermen. In 1404 the aldermen of the *Brugse Vrye* warned that '*niemand uut zoude varen ter zee omme rove of scade te doene, iof het ne ware bi bevelle van onsen gheduchten heere*'<sup>14</sup>(nobody should set sail to sea to plunder or damage ships, unless if ordered by our formidable lord). In other words, the Walraversijde fishermen acted as privateers when the Duke ordered them to. The fishers also supplied the Duke's fleet with ships and the fishing fleet with guard ships throughout the 15th century.

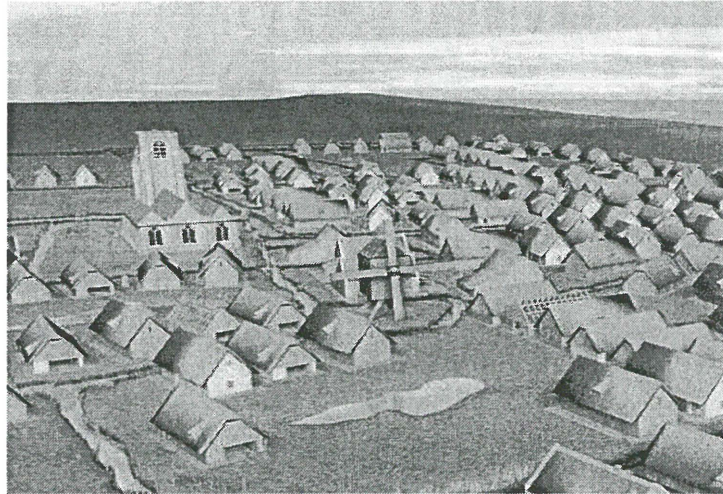


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of Walraversijde in 1463. (copyright Past Forward)

Walraversijde, however, was also confronted with other forms of 'power'. In the course of the 15th century, the development of stronger and larger ships for offshore fishing required some financial efforts from the fishermen which they actually hardly could afford<sup>15</sup>. Financial support was offered by rich fish merchants who could invest in the fleet. Consequently, shipowners or 'wards' such as the family Van Varsenare, who lived in Walraversijde, got a firm grip on offshore fishing. In addition, this evolution ran completely parallel with the capitalist developments in agriculture in the polders behind Walraversijde. The farms over there also fell in the hands of members of a rich, urban elite which did not participate in the production process.

The influence of these three power groups (state, wards and land owners) on the fishermen community also showed in the village of Walraversijde, more specifically in the St. John's Chapel of Walraversijde. This chapel featured three aisles and altars, the tower of a village church and was thus rather prestigious. It was built in the village between 1420 and 1430 on the directions of and with financial help from the family Van Varsenare; from lord Willem van Halewyn, councillor of the Duke and bailiff of Bruges, and from the family Reyphins, large landowners and aldermen of the *Brugse Vrye*. The latter family even had its arms represented in the stained-glass windows of the chapel. The chapel thus was rather a symbol of 'control' which signalled the standing and presence of the three power groups in the village. The chapel also proves that the fishermen, in spite of their rather rough way of life, were pious Christians. In this manner, the chapel was the perfect symbol of the special position of Walraversijde between sea, heaven, city and country.

<sup>14</sup>National Archive, Fund Rekenkamer, records of the *Brugse Vrye*, No. 42527- 43v°-44r°.

<sup>15</sup>Between 1420 and 1430 various fishermen had debts to herring merchants, which resulted in, among others, the confiscation of their *corfscepe* (Tys 2003: 577-578).

At the end of the 15th century, the Walraversijde community encountered major problems resulting from the general political instability and the increased insecurity at sea. The disappearance of the settlement's most eastern quarter after 1500 proves that this instability had seriously damaged the community. Walraversijde hardly recovered in the 16th century. When the Eighty Years War broke out in 1567, Walraversijde was deserted. After the siege of Ostend (1601-1604), the settlement appeared to be reduced to some isolated houses and the remains of the chapel. The fishermen community of Walraversijde had disappeared from the landscape.

At first sight, the disappearance of Walraversijde could be explained easily by the crisis situation at the end of the 16th century. However, why didn't this crisis result in the disappearance of the nearby agricultural villages? The answer may be related to some aspects of the specific nature of fishermen communities. As opposed to agricultural settlements, activities of fishermen communities were not dependent on the land where they were situated. The communities could move along with the activity, in this case offshore fishing. This is already shown by the fact that many fishermen communities were originally set up as temporary 'camps' near the sea<sup>16</sup>. In other words, it is quite possible that fishermen communities were intrinsically 'temporary' and 'finite', however long this temporary aspect lasted. This would partially explain why Walraversijde never became an independent village and always remained institutionally subject to the little farm village Middelkerke. In some cases, fishermen communities could become more permanent because of economic possibilities<sup>17</sup>.

In the case of Walraversijde, the commercial turnover of sea fish on large urban markets seems to have played a role here. Furthermore, Walraversijde received from at least the 15th century onwards an additional, more political-military role in the service of the centralist state policy of the Dukes of Burgundy. From the end of the 15th century it was this additional role which lost its significance first. After the death of Charles the Bold in 1477, the role of the Netherlands in the Habsburg state formation process decreased. Certainly also in view of the nearness of Ostend, the role of the Walraversijde fisher-privateers in the 'empire where the sun never set' became increasingly smaller. In the same period offshore fishing became less and less interesting over here. In the second half of the 16th century, the fishermen probably moved their fleet and activities to safer ports, which definitively put an end to the local fishermen community. In short, it is not impossible that fishermen settlements as the one in Raversyde were intrinsically and structurally temporary and 'abandonable', and that this characteristic eventually led to the downfall of Walraversijde.

Walraversijde, and other fishermen settlements possibly as well, was in other words a very specific settlement, the individuality and characteristics of which cannot be grasped by using modern concepts such as 'city' or 'village', 'nucleated settlement' or 'dispersed settlement', 'marginal' or 'elitist'. The spatial nature and perhaps the identity of such settlements as well was more specific and more complex than these concepts, or do we have to say that our perception and expectations of settlements. The settlement pattern and hierarchy and the spatial organization of such fishermen communities seem to be more complex than people should expect. To obtain some kind of insight in this complexity, I think it is necessary to see the space and landscape of such settlements as interactive forms of material culture in their specific social, political, economical and cultural context. This can probably be done by a transdisciplinary combination of archaeological, historical, anthropological and other research only. Many questions still need to be answered and, of course, further research is required.

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<sup>16</sup>Also see Roberts' definition of temporary settlements (Roberts 1996: 5-10).

<sup>17</sup>cf. Gardiner (2001).

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