

The storm surge of 1134. Disaster of none?

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In early October 1134 a storm surge wreaked havoc in the coastal area of the Low Countries. Contemporary sources speak of breached dikes, flooded settlements and lost farmland. Especially the Sinfal-bay got hit severely with floodwaters nearly reaching Bruges, thus creating a tidal inlet called *the Zwin*. However this flood must have been a disaster for the inhabitants of this coastal area, the city of Bruges and the Count of Flanders turned this calamity into an opportunity. After all, a better navigable connection with the sea could only extend the economic growth of the emerging city of Bruges. Soon a new network of dikes, canals, sluices and ports thrived at the borders of the Zwin, shaping the area into linear suburban extension of the city center and leading Bruges into its medieval heyday. However, the transformation and adaptation of this disaster landscape did not turn out to be durable. The process of natural sedimentation was reinforced by the progressive embankment of the adjoining tidal wetlands and resulted in an increasingly narrowed waterway. The 16th century economic recession eventually made the port network collapse while outports like Monnikerede and Hoeke were deserted.

This is the state-of-the-art of the Zwin-debate, which was until now predominantly based on written sources and pedological data. However, a profound study of this debate has put some aspects and assumption of this state-of-the-art into question. Was it only one storm surge that formed this large tidal inlet? And if so, what is the actual evidence pointing at 1134? Was some part of the coastal area already protected with large dikes? Or were these dikes adaptations made afterwards? Furthermore, we can ask ourselves to what extent we can label this flood as a disaster, since it equally shaped the conditions for an economic boom. Without drawing final conclusions, this poster will list the argumentation for these questions and aims to be a starting point for further discussion.

References

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