

Urk: A Thousand-Year-Old Dutch Fishing Community

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The survival capacity of urban and even village settlements in certain parts of the so-called Old World is a matter of some interest to a geographer from a very new part of the so-called New World. In Oklahoma, within less than a century, a number of villages and small towns have been established only to thrive briefly, and then to almost or actually disappear because of changing land use patterns, improved transportation, and a mobile citizenry. Within the same brief period, the once attractive inner core of some of our larger cities has become blighted to the point that only the dragline with the steel ball, followed promptly by the bulldozer, can begin the process of urban renewal. A sabbatical leave in 1967-68, spent largely in the Netherlands on a Fulbright teaching appointment at the University of Utrecht, afforded the writer the opportunity to observe the process of communities struggling for survival and renewal in a different geographical setting. An interesting example of this struggle for survival is that of the little fishing town of Urk, which, on the occasion of our visit in late May, 1968, was celebrating its one thousandth anniversary.¹

While the Dutch effort to survive as a people and as a nation has been essentially a success story, with at present more than 12 million people on an area not one-sixth as large as Oklahoma, enjoying a standard of living that is the envy of 90% of the world's population, it should not be presumed that the Dutch have had no failures. They have had many of them. In the westernmost province of Zeeland, where the Lek, the Waal, the Maas, and the Schelde pour their waters into the North Sea and a tidal range of 1 to 5 m thrusts the sea water back at the land, the contest has been especially ferocious. Up to a half century ago, when the shoreline and river banks of the delta area were considered to be fairly well stabilized, Zeeland had gained some 9,000 hectares on the sea during the historical period, but it had lost 28,000 hectares (Demangeon, 1927). A large cultivated tract on the north side of the lower Maas, upstream from Dordrecht, known as the Waard, already protected by dikes in the later Middle Ages, was severely devastated by a flood on 18 November 1421. This flood, which had been preceded by several lesser floods in the last quarter of the 14th century, ripped a new channel, the Hollandsch Diep, through the low plain, destroyed 28 villages and cruelly damaged two cities, Dordrecht and Gertruidenberg, the latter of which was never able to be restored. Dutch school children now visit the wilderness area of reeds and swamp grass on the tidal flats of the Biesbos to study the vegetation and the wild birds, and to hear the story of the villages which once were, but are no more. As recently as February, 1953, the same province of Zeeland was devastated by another flood when a high tide, forced inland by a severe storm over the North Sea, broke the dikes in several places, and water rushed into the polders, drowning almost 1,800 people and causing frightful damage to livestock and other property. The Delta Plan, currently in mid-construction and anticipated for completion in 1980, is modern Holland's answer to these Zeeland floods. There is some reason to hope that it will be a success story (Lingsma, 1966).

The story of Urk is that of a small fishing settlement on what until recently was a tiny island in the Zuiderzee, a shallow embayment along the North Sea coast of the Netherlands. The town has not moved, but the Zuiderzee is no longer there, having been replaced by the smaller, fresh-

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water IJsselmeer, and Urk is no longer on an island, for its island is firmly attached to the Northeast Polder. Its fishing industry survives in greatly modified form, its economic interests are slowly merging with those of the agriculturally oriented polder, and its once stern and rigidly closed society is gradually taking on the more tolerant, liberal, and open pattern which characterizes the Dutch national norm.

Prior to the enclosure of the Zuiderzee with the 30-km-long *Afsluitdijk* in 1932 and the subsequent diking and draining of the Northeast Polder, Urk was one of several small islands rising slightly above the brackish water of the sea. It was formed essentially of glacial till left behind by the Riss advance of the Pleistocene ice, a till that is widespread in Overijssel and Drente provinces in the eastern part of the country. The island had an area of some 80 hectares, or about one-third of a square mile. The gentle hill which formed the western end of Urk, with boulders embedded in a sticky matrix of sandy clay, stood as much as 8 m above mean Amsterdam sea level, but the eastern end of the island was a sandy outwash plain only 10 to 30 cm above the water. While the glaciated eastern part of the Netherlands has been inhabited by man for several thousand years, as witnessed by numerous excavations and by the curious *Hunebedden* monuments east of Assen, in Drente, it appears that the permanent settlement of Urk took place in the latter part of the 10th century, probably in 968. Little is known of the early residents of Urk except that they were a sturdy blonde people who spoke a Frisian, or low German, dialect, and who gained their subsistence from fishing and from a few cows and garden vegetables which they managed to raise on the lower slopes of the island.

When the Zuiderzee area first came to the attention of literate Europeans—that is, the invaders from Rome—the configuration of land and water in the area was quite different from what it has been in later periods. The southern part of what became the Zuiderzee was then a fresh-water lake, *Lacus Flevo*, which received the waters of the Kromme Rhine, the Vecht, and the IJssel rivers from the south, and which overflowed to the brackish mud flats of the Waddenzee through two narrow channels, the east and west Vlie, which were deep enough to permit some movement of shallow-draft fishing and trading vessels. The brackish sea extended itself inland, mainly in the 12th and 13th centuries, when a series of violent wind storms drove the tidal waters of the North Sea into the fresh-water lake, modifying the bottom in such fashion as to widen the connecting channels. After about 1300 the daily tides regularly reached the southern margins of old *Lacus Flevo*, and the enlarged brackish sea became a suitable environment for herring. The herring catch of the Zuiderzee, eaten fresh or preserved by drying or by salting with salt recovered from the burning of brackish turf, brought a measure of prosperity to Urk, as well as to the inhabitants of the neighboring island of Schokland and to the more distant islands of Marken and Wieringen on the west side of the sea. From the western shore of the Zuiderzee, sea captains from the mainland towns of Amsterdam, Edam, Hoorn, Enkhuzen, and Medemblik sailed over the North Sea to trade with England and across the oceans to barter with the natives and eventually plant colonies in North and South America and on the islands of the East and West Indies.

Beginning in the later Middle Ages, and with increased vigor after about 1600 when the windmill-driven pump came into extensive use, the Dutch began creating polders, new farmland below the level of mean high tide. The success of the Beemster, Purmer, and Schermer polder projects to the north of Amsterdam in the first half of the 17th century led many Dutch to look to other parts of the country for new sea floor to conquer. It was not until the middle of the 19th century, however, that steam-powered pumps made it possible to dike and drain the great Haarlemmermeer polder to the southwest of the capital city.

Various engineering schemes were suggested for diking and draining the Zuiderzee itself during the 19th century, and sizable sums of private money were raised to conduct studies, make plans, and lobby for public support. While storm waves gradually eroded the margins of Schokland to the point that public authorities had to remove the population from that island in 1859-60, Urk was safeguarded from a similar fate by stonework above and below the water line on its periphery. Under one engineering proposal, Urk would have been developed into a major port on the outside of a sea dike reaching across the central Zuiderzee southeastward from Enkhuizen. It was an even more ambitious proposal which finally prevailed. At the turn of the century, however, Urk was a quiet little fishing town of 2,700 people, accessible by a 2-hr steamer ride from Enkhuizen, with a markedly conservative Reformed church and a healthy but much intermarried population, living largely from its local herring catch.

The depth of water in the Zuiderzee prior to the development of the modern reclamation project varied from about 1 to 9 m, with an average depth of less than 4 m. Careful physical and chemical analyses of the sea bottom revealed that the boulder clay, marine clay, or sandy loam surface could in most areas be quite readily converted to farmland once it was drained and the salt leached out (Beekman, 1915). Increasing population pressure in the rural areas of the country made the enlargement of the agricultural area a desirable goal. While Amsterdam at the turn of the century was a thriving commercial entrepot, thanks to the North Sea Canal which gave it a deep water outlet to the ocean, the smaller ports of Edam, Hoorn, and Enkhuizen were of less commercial importance than they once had been and were living largely from their oyster beds and a limited agricultural hinterland. Island towns like Urk, Marken, and Wieringen had no hinterland.

Perhaps the most important single function of the two major multi-purpose reclamation projects of the 20th century in the Netherlands, the Zuiderzee project and the Delta Plan, has been to shorten the length of the salt water shoreline. This shoreline in 1840 was 1,187 miles long. By 1940 it had been reduced to 860 miles, and with the completion of the Delta Plan it will be reduced much further (van Veen, 1962).

The Zuiderzee project, with which the town of Urk is associated, was approved by the Dutch parliament, after many years of consideration, in 1918. The first major phase involved the construction of the great *Afsluitdijk* extending in a southwest-northeast direction so as to separate the Zuiderzee from the tidal flats of the Waddenzee. The dramatic story of the successful effort to shut out the tide in a zone where millions of tons of water had rushed back and forth daily for centuries, sweeping channels of up to 13 m in depth, has been told many times and will not be repeated here. A set of sluices at either end of the dike permits excess water from the IJsselmeer to be discharged into the North Sea during periods of low tide. Each set of sluices is accompanied by a navigation lock which allows fishing vessels and barges to come in and go out at will. The big dike was finally closed on 28 May 1932, and within five years the water behind it was essentially fresh. The level of the IJsselmeer is maintained about 25 cm higher in summer than in winter because of beneficial effects on the ground water situation in adjacent agricultural areas.

Conversion of the water in the IJsselmeer from salt to fresh had three deleterious effects on the life of residents of the islands and the immediate shore: (1) the permanent destruction of the oyster beds which had furnished a valuable means of livelihood to people in communities along the west shore; (2) the death or departure of the herring, which throughout the history of the region had been the main source of income for Urk and other fishing communities; and (3) a frightful invasion by mosquitoes. Compensation was paid by the state for the loss of the oyster beds, and assistance was given in finding other means of employment for the dis-

placed workers. The mosquito menace was finally conquered by the eel, *Anguilla anguilla*, which spawns far off to the southwest in the Sargasso Sea, drifts slowly in the northeastward current, all the while in the larval stage, for three years, and then, just as it begins its transformation into what is called the elver stage, moves into the fresh water of the streams and through the locks into the IJsselmeer, where it feeds on the mosquito larvae.

The fishermen of Urk have been able to make a reasonably satisfactory adjustment to the changed fishing conditions necessitated by the Zuiderzee project. Some of the 120 fishing boats which are currently in the Urk fleet go after the eel in the IJsselmeer, while others—most of them, it appears—go on weekly ventures into the North Sea where they join fishing vessels from IJmuiden, Scheveningen, Harlingen, and ports of other North Sea countries. They go out early Monday morning, equipped with winches, nets, ice, and the latest radio and radar gear and, hopefully, return on Friday evening with holds filled with herring, plaice, sole, cod, and mackerel, for which there is usually a ready market in the Netherlands and adjacent countries.

One particularly successful fisherman whom we visited and who gave us a 2-hr ride on his boat as it participated in a kind of fishermen's regatta to celebrate the thousand-year anniversary of the town, is Jan van den Berg, age 26, whose father was lost at sea in 1954 at the age of 37, but whose 77-year-old grandfather still helps repair the nets. Mr. van den Berg, who operates his new boat with a crew of five, will have that boat paid for in two years, and is said to be earning from \$2,000 to \$2,500 per month. He is building a fine, new two-story brick home, but is so busy with his boat, his crew, and his fish that he insists he does not even know how many rooms it is going to have. The house, he says, is his wife's project.

When the Northeast Polder, to which Urk is now firmly attached, was pumped dry in 1942, and 2,000 Dutch farm families came in to settle on the new rectangular farms, mostly of 12 to 24 hectares, raising wheat, oats, potatoes, and various horticultural crops, the fishermen cordially detested them and the polder technicians who made their arrival possible (Pinchemel, 1953). Still, Urk has prospered with the change. Although the principal market center of the polder is the totally new town of Emmeloorde, which in 1968 had about 20,000 inhabitants, Urk has grown from about 2,700 at the beginning of the century to approximately 8,000. A good motor road now leads to Urk from the east, new brick houses of two stories are replacing or supplementing the old one-story wooden ones, and the young people of the community are gradually, to the regret of some of their elders, enjoying a measure of release from the social isolation of centuries. Many of the men of Urk, however, still go down to the sea in ships and feel that this is the only proper life for a well born citizen of their once lonely island.

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