

TRANSFARM

Vocational education and training for transhumance practitioners



The Wilms boo, the last remaining summer farm in Schoonebeek (NL) Photograph: Beeldbank National Heritage Agency, Amersfoort. Licensed under Creative commons.

National report - the Low Countries

Hans Renes, June 2022

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Table of contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Current situation of transhumance	3
2.1	<i>Areas used, extent animals</i>	4
2.2	Kind of transhumance	4
2.3	Sociology of transhumance practitioners.....	4
2.4	Awareness of transhumance	4
2.5	Legal and funding situations.....	4
2.6	Vet offers for transhumance practitioners and training gaps.....	4
3	History.....	4
1	The coastal marshes	5
2	The lower Fenlands	6
3	The village of Schoonebeek.....	7
4	The Peel Region	10
5	The Ardennes	10
	Conclusion	11
4	Values and meaning.....	12
5	Challenges to face, needs/opportunities.....	12
	Literature.....	13
	Notes	14

1 Introduction

Transhumance is a system of farming in which animals move on a seasonal basis between permanent farms and temporary, seasonal farms. The general background is the wish (or necessity) to use different biotopes that are too far from each other to make daily travel possible. Therefore, part of the population travels with the herd from the permanent winter farms to temporary houses, usually for the summer.

The practice has existed in many parts of Europe, but in most regions, it has disappeared. The Low Countries is an example of a region in which transhumance must have existed but is now completely something of the past. In this report, we give some examples of former transhumance in the Low Countries. It illustrates the variety and the former wide distribution of the practices.

2 Current situation of transhumance

Nowadays, transhumance is non-existent in the Low Countries. The last shepherd who still moved around with his herd and who spent the night with the herd was a man named Willem Koestapel (1874-1961) (see Fig. 1).¹ However, until very late in his life he did not have a permanent home, so he was a nomad rather than a transhumanist.



Figure 1. Statue of the last Dutch travelling shepherd in the village of Loenen. The statue was stolen and lost in 2017.

Present shepherds move their herds from one grazing area to the other but spend the night at home and leave the herd within flexnets or in stables. Some shepherds save money by leaving the herd for longer periods within flexnets.

In recent years, the return of the wolf causes increasing problems. Fences need to be 1.20 meters high at least and are heavy and difficult to handle.²

2.1 Areas used, extent animals

As transhumance in the Low Countries is something of the past, this information is presented in Chapter 3, on history. There we give a number of regional examples that show a large variety in chronology and practices.

2.2 Kind of transhumance

Again, there is a large variation in historical practices.

2.3 Sociology of transhumance practitioners

The few examples show a large variation, with for example family members of farmers as well as professional herds.

2.4 Awareness of transhumance

Only among archaeologists and landscape historians, there is an awareness of former transhumance.

2.5 Legal and funding situations

Not applicable.

2.6 Vet offers for transhumance practitioners and training gaps

Not applicable.

3 History

In the Low Countries, little has been written about transhumance. In archaeological literature, prehistoric transhumance is sometimes suggested, but mainly on theoretical assumptions. For the medieval and post-medieval periods, however, there is more evidence and when we bring this together a varied picture arises. Below, we describe the evidence for a number of regions: the coastal marshes (1), some of the large fenlands (2-4) and the Ardennes (5) (Figure 2). The animals involved were sheep, cattle and, in some cases, pigs. The general idea that arises is that transhumance was not fundamentally different from other types of organised pasture use and that the main reason for transhumance was distance or other travel obstructions that made it difficult to run the herds from the main farm.



Figure 2. The Low Countries: regions mentioned in the text, map by the author.

1 The coastal marshes

In the coastal marshes of Flanders during the Early and High Middle Ages, many authors have suggested the possibility of transhumance.³ However, written evidence is scarce and archaeological evidence is non-existent. In the present Dutch part of Flanders in 794 AD (the region nowadays known as Zeeuws-Vlaanderen) pastures are mentioned where during winter 130 and in summer 190 sheep could pasture.⁴

In fact, the seasonal character of habitation of the Flanders marshes is mainly supposed on the basis of theoretical insights into the development of the coastal landscape that described these regions as subject to periodical sea transgressions and regressions. This theory has now been abandoned and the archaeological evidence points to a rather densely and permanently settled region during the Early Middle Ages.⁵

The situation changed by a few huge flood disasters in the early 11th century, that turned large parts of the coastal landscape into tidal marshes. Afterwards, a number of monasteries owned large herds of sheep that were grazed in these marshes. Written sources mention specialised sheep farms, so-called *bercariae*, belonging to those abbeys.⁶ It is probable that these sheep pastures were used only during the summer season.

2 The lower Fenlands

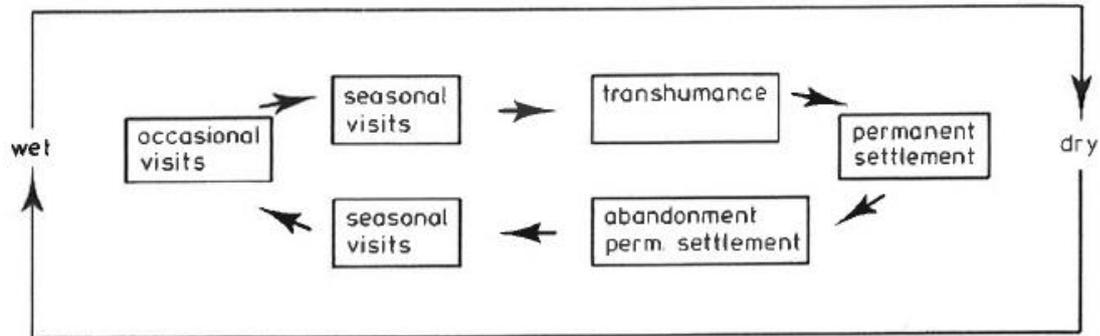


Figure 3. A model of cyclical land use in Dutch coastal wetland, based on research in the former IJ estuary (Brandt et al., 1984, p. 11).

A model for the use of lower fenlands suggests a number of possible developments. In this model, human activities start from the adjoining higher grounds and the main use of the fenlands is for occasional visits in dry periods to extract resources (peat, wood, hay, game). In a further stage, the fenlands can be seasonally used as pasture. In the course of time, the fenlands can be drained and seasonal activities can develop into permanent settlement. Developments in the opposite direction are also possible, and in some fenlands permanent settlements have been abandoned after a certain period.⁷

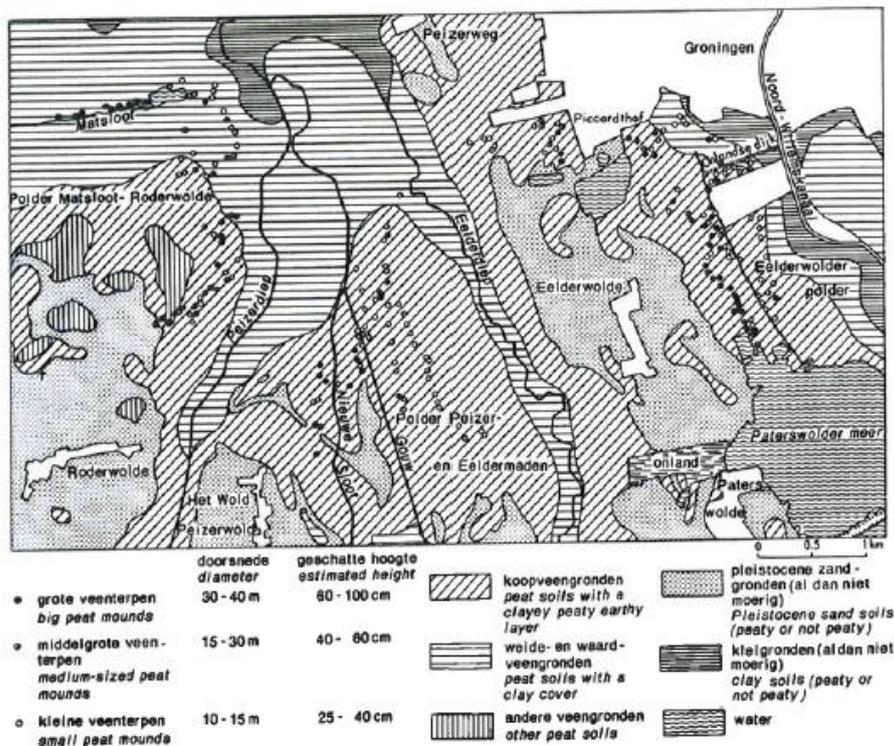


Figure 4. Distribution of medieval 'peat terps' (peat mounds) in the northern Drenthe peatlands south of the city of Groningen. From: Van Doesburg, 2011.

In the northern Netherlands, many small medieval dwelling mounds have been discovered in the fenlands south of the town of Groningen. Archaeological research showed that some of these dwelling mounds have been used for permanent occupation, but in other cases the tiny structures suggest seasonal habitation.⁸

3 The village of Schoonebeek

A typical form of former transhumance is known in the settlement of Schoonebeek in the fenlands of the Eastern Netherlands and in neighbouring parts of Germany. In these villages the distance between the village and some of the pastures, in wetlands that were difficult to pass especially during Autumn and Winter, was such that most of the farms founded a seasonal farm, locally known as a 'boo'.⁹

The landscape is rather complex. The valley of a small, east-west running stream, the Schoonebeeker Diep, nowadays forms the Dutch-German border. Around the stream valley a few small sandy ridges were surrounded by an enormous, raised peat bog, that extended for many miles northward. Schoonebeek is first mentioned 1341, but settlement of this region may have started already in the previous century.¹⁰

In the early 19th century, the settlements of Schoonebeek can be divided into three different areas. In the western part, the farms of Oud-Schoonebeek ('Old-Schoonebeek') were situated on the edge of the stream valley, with their pastures and meadows along the stream and arable on the slope of the peat bog. In the course of time, the drainage of the peat brought land subsidence and extended the amount of pasture. The arable and the farms were moved northward on the slope of the bog. The maps by Hottinger (c. 1790) show the arable around the farms, the cadastral data of forty years later show that the arable had moved further north.

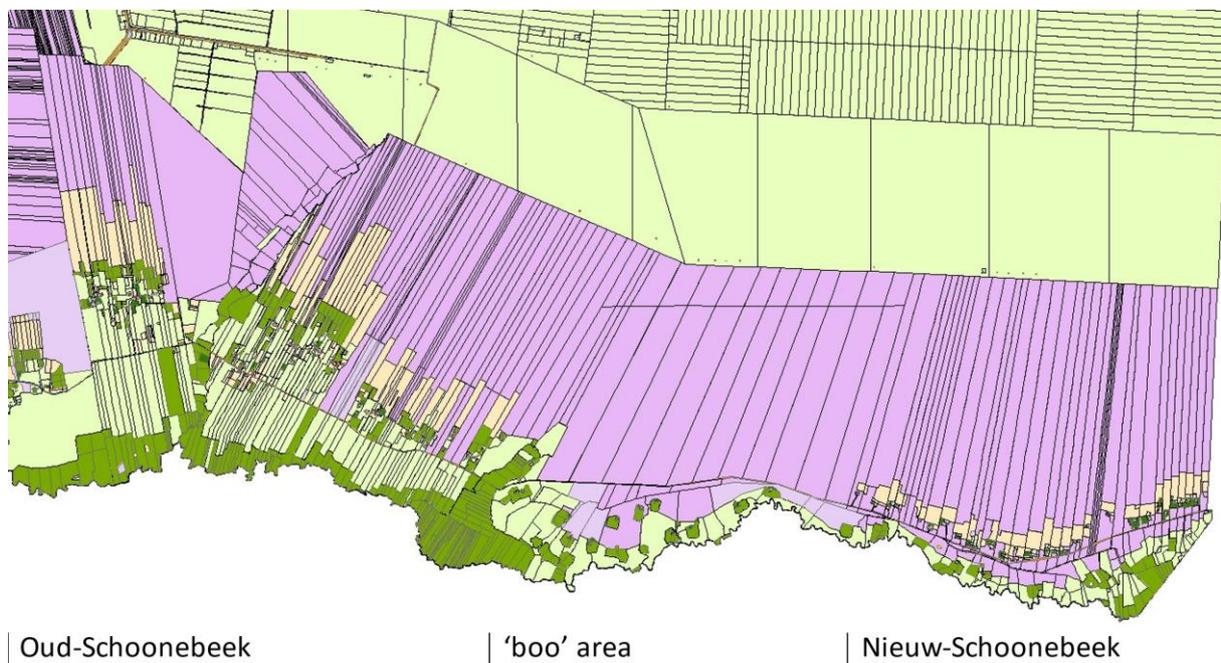


Figure 3. Schoonebeek after the oldest cadastre (c. 1832). Legend: dark green = forest; light green = pasture and meadows; yellow = arable; purple = moor. The large green area in the north is former peat bog that had recently been excavated. Source: hisgis.nl.

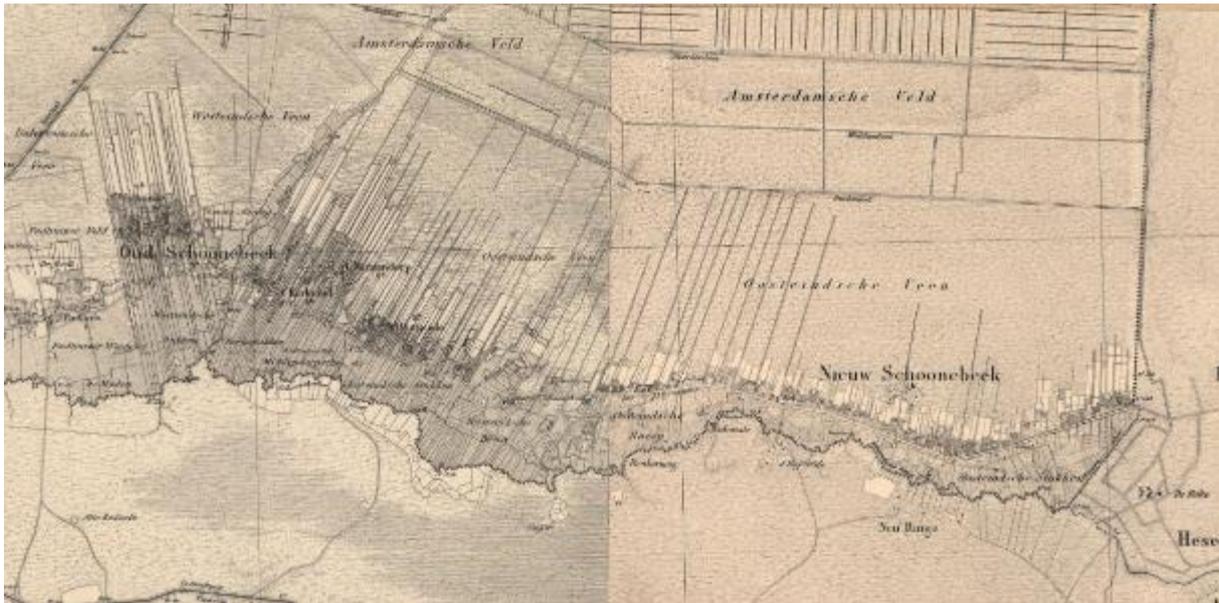


Figure 4. The village of Schoonebeek on the Topographic and Military Map, ca. 1850.

East of Oud-Schoonebeek, the most interesting area is the central area. In this region, no arable was possible, but the small patches of grasslands along the stream offered grazing lands and – more important – meadows. Here, small farms were inhabited seasonally by a single shepherd (the *booheer*, or lord of the boo, in most cases a bachelor or widower), who lived there together with oxen or cattle.¹¹ The shepherd moved to the boo in October and started with harvesting hay for winter fodder. In May, the shepherd went back to the farm to work as farm hand during the summer; young cattle then grazed around the boo. For a long time, the land was used as commons and the use rights were divided according to the farms. In 1654, 35 inhabitants of (Oud) Schoonebeek owned rights in the commons; of these 23 possessed full rights (named as ‘a full boo’), 7 owned half and 5 a quarter of full rights. In the early 18th century 32 farms owned a boo, in 1806 31 farms together owned 28 boos.¹² The boos were named after the farmers of the main farms. This naming shows a strong continuity.

Although some authors suggest that boo-like objects existed elsewhere in the Eastern Netherlands and the adjoining parts of Germany during the late Middle Ages, in Schoonebeek boos were first mentioned in tax registers in 1650. The whole boo-system must have been based on the commercial breeding of oxen, that developed during the 17th century, as part of a commercial agriculture for urban markets. Oxen were fattened and prepared for the final drove to an urban slaughterhouse.¹³

In the course of time, the production of hay must have increased. In the middle of the 17th century only 0,55 ha meadows belonged to a boo. In the first half of the 18th century an individual hayshed was shared by a number of boos. In the early 19th century, every boo had a hayshed and some 2 hectares of private, enclosed meadows were situated next to the boo. This development meant an intensification of the system. During the early 19th century, the *booheer* stayed at the boo for almost the whole year; only for six weeks per year, between Christmas and Candlemas (February 2), he stayed at the main farm. It meant that the land around the boo received more manure than before, at the cost of the arable at the main farm. Main farms compensated the lack of manure by investing in a growing number of sheep.¹⁴

The third area is the most eastern part of the village, called Nieuw-Schoonebeek. Originally, this area must have been settled in the same way as the central area, but here from the period around 1800 colonists from the German side of the border transformed the former boo-landscape into a landscape of mixed farming.¹⁵



Figure 5. Wilms boo, one of the two last surviving boos in 1967. Photograph: Beeldbank National Heritage Agency, Amersfoort. Licensed under Creative commons.

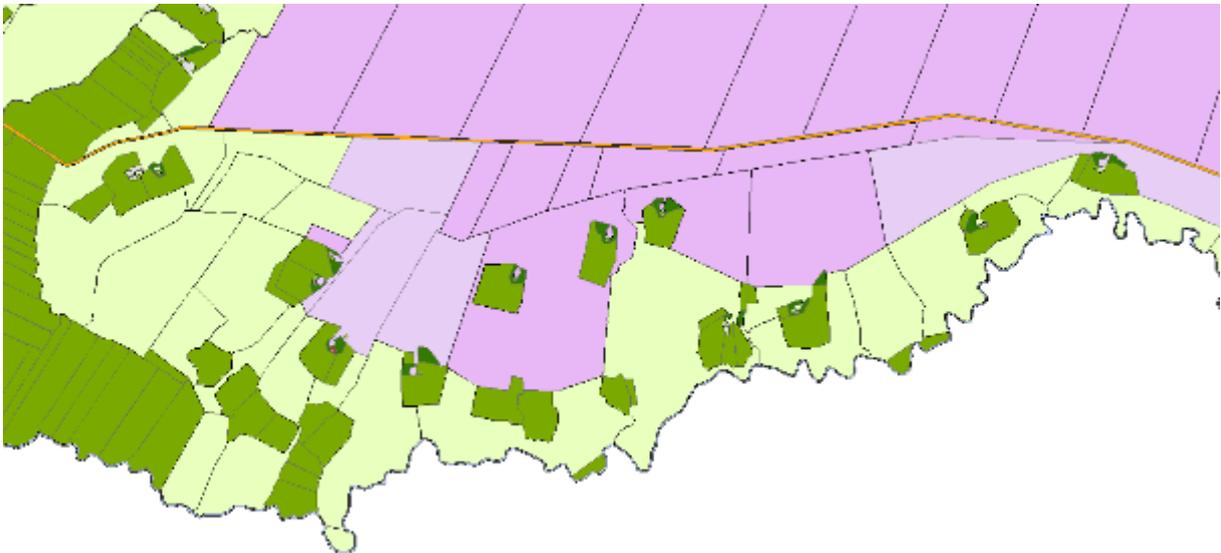


Figure 6. The boo region of Schoonebeek in detail (Source: Hisgis <https://hisgis.nl/>).

4 The Peel Region

The Peel is a region in the southern part of the Netherlands that consisted of a huge peat bog surrounded by a ring of villages. In the course of time, the villagers excavated peat on a small scale, moving the fringe of the peatland slowly backwards. On the poor sandy soils that came to the surface a heathland vegetation developed, that was mainly used for grazing sheep, which were kept for wool and manure. Maps from the 1840s show a large number of sheepfolds that were located on dry land but close to the remaining peatlands (that were probably also grazed in dry periods). Little is known about the history of these sheepfolds, but a map from 1682 shows a number of them.¹⁶ With the moving frontier, distances between the villages and the sheepfolds must have become larger and it is known that in the region shown on Figure 7 many farms had two herds of sheep, of which one stayed close to the farm whereas the other went farther away. The map shows both types of sheepfolds. Some of the distant sheepfolds are known to have had accommodation for the shepherd, meaning that he could stay with the herds for longer periods.¹⁷

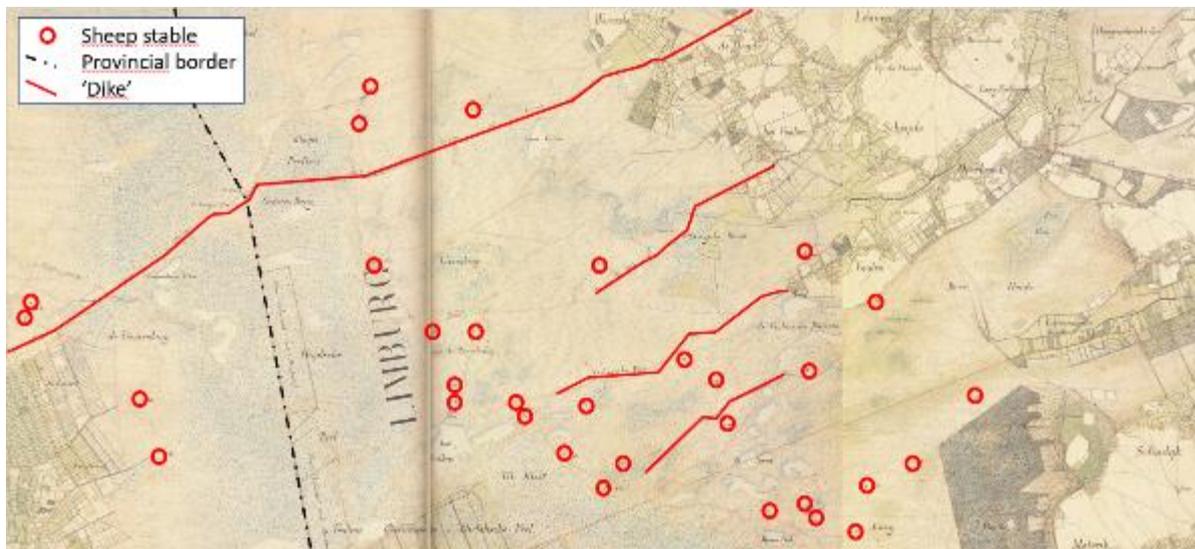


Figure 7. Sheepfolds in the Peel region ca. 1840, marked with 'SK' (for 'schaapskooi' or sheep stable). A few years later the large-scale commercial exploitation of the peat reserves started.

5 The Ardennes

For the Ardennes-Eifel region, that includes parts of Belgium, Luxemburg, France and Germany, an overview has been written by Yante. He finds evidence of transhumance with pigs and sheep to the hills of the Ardennes.¹⁸ The forests of the Ardennes were used for grazing pigs, that thrived on acorns. The sheep must have been attracted by the open pastures that also existed in the mountains.

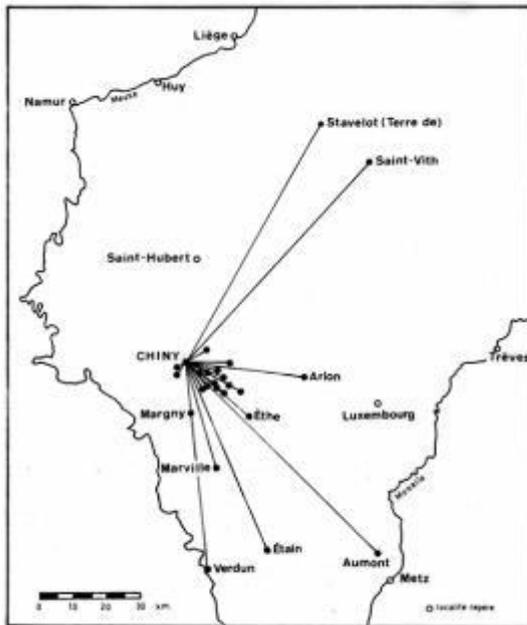


Figure 8. Geographical origin of the farmers of the Chiny forest pasture (16th century). Source: Yante, 2006.

Much is still unclear about the chronology and the region that was involved in the transhumance. Evidence of long-distance movement of animals comes from tolls at Sierck (on the Moselle), on the state forest of Chiny, at Huy (where herds from the Hesbaye crossed the Meuse in their way to the Ardennes) and Bastogne (in the Ardennes).

Transhumance of sheep and pigs to the highlands of the Ardennes certainly existed during the 15th-16th century but the practice is probably much older. The toll of Yvois taxed these animals during the second half of the 14th century, but it is not even clear whether these animals were going to and from summer pastures or towards urban markets. Another toll existed near Sierck during the 15th century and here Yante suggests that the movement of pigs during the autumn was related to the harvest of acorns, whereas the movement during winter consisted of animals for slaughter.

The abandonment of transhumant practices during the 19th century caused regrowth of forests and the loss of chalk grasslands that were botanically very important. Nowadays nature management wants to restore the old grasslands.¹⁹ For this restoration, the main methods are cutting and removing hay, or renewed grazing by animals. In the last case, shepherds seem necessary, and even some renewed transhumance could be envisioned. In the wider Ardennes region, some revival of transhumance takes place in the French Thiérache-region.²⁰

Conclusion

In the Low Countries, transhumance is something of the past. The evidence of former transhumance is scarce and limited to certain regions, but the few traces are interesting as parts of regional heritage. Although transhumance is hardly a possibility in the strongly intersected Dutch landscape, pasture and herding are making a recovery in nature management.

4 Values and meaning

The early disappearance of transhumance in the Low Countries makes it difficult to find traces in the present landscape. However, there are a few traces, such as the sites of former shielings or small dwelling-mounds and the roads that connected those to the main farms. However, especially in Schoonebeek some traces are still existing and the remaining boos is an important regional heritage object. In the Ardennes parts of the old routes, converging in a places where the river Meuse could be crossed. Such traces may be interesting for local historians to investigate, and they may add stories to the landscape.

5 Challenges to face, needs/opportunities

A major question is whether there is a future for transhumant practices in the Low Countries. This future should be related to nature and landscape conservation. One of the major problems for nature conservation is the extreme fragmentation of the landscape. The landscape is intersected by roads, canals, buildings etcetera. As part of the building of a Dutch Ecological Main Structure from 1989 onwards the Dutch government and, later, the provinces, have worked on connections between ecologically important areas, but the program (now named Nature Network Netherlands) has been delayed and downsized in the last decades. In Flanders the Flemish Ecological Network has the same aim.

Transhumance as a way of life is something of the past in the Low Countries. The landscape has become too fragmented for large-scale movement of herds. Still, there may be some opportunities for travelling flocks. The growing threat of wolves and other large predators (dogs in particular) asks for a growing degree of supervision.

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Notes

¹ Kobussen & Fraanje, 2002; Idema, 2002-2006. I am grateful to Martin Woestenburg for this information.

² Information received from Martin Woestenburg, 14-6-2022.

³ Verhulst (1995, p. 40) suggests a transhumance system between the sandy inland regions and the coastal marshes. He is, however not explicit about this. More recent, early medieval transhumance was suggested by Termote (2012), but again without any elaboration or evidence. More explicit is Tys (2001/2002), who sees herds of sheep being pastured in the marshes in spring and summer, but says nothing about seasonal migration of parts of the population. De Clercq (2009, pp. 182 and 471) mentions transhumance, but again is not clear about the term.

⁴ Gottschalk, 1955, p. 16.

⁵ Loveluck & Tys, 2006.

⁶ Verhulst, 1995, pp. 27-30.

⁷ Brandt et al., 1984.

⁸ Van Doesburg, 2011; Groenewoudt & Van Doesburg, 2019, p. 256.

⁹ Elerie, 1989; Elerie & Smit, 1981; Borger, 1984, p. 388.

¹⁰ Van Berkel & Samplonius 2006; Elerie, 1989, p. 55.

¹¹ Elerie, 1989, p. 74.

¹² Elerie, 1989, pp. 66-67. South of the stream, on German territory, another 13 boos were situated in the middle of the 18th century.

¹³ Bieleman, 1987, p. 668.

¹⁴ Elerie, 1989, p. 69-71.

¹⁵ Borger, 1984, p. 415; <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nieuw-Schoonebeek> [8-6-2022]; this development took place between the making of the Hottinger maps (1788-1792) and the Huguenin maps (1819-1829).

¹⁶ Van den Brand, 1982, p. 146.

¹⁷ Van den Brand, 1982, p. 73-75.

¹⁸ Yante, 2006, pp. 249-262.

¹⁹ For example in the Wallonian part of the Ardennes: <https://www.cirkwi.com/nl/point-interet/1207631-tienne-d-aise> [13-10-2022].

²⁰ <https://www.la-thierache.fr/transhumance/> [13-10-2022].