

Medieval castles in the Dutch central river Area: Towers of power?

by

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Introduction

Castles were amongst the most dominating features of the European medieval landscape, especially in those parts which are relatively flat such as the Netherlands, where they were visible from many miles away.

In the Middle Ages the Dutch landscape was dotted with castles of different shapes and sizes. A rough estimate indicates that there must have been least 2500 medieval castles, of which about a quarter still exist today. Castles were however not evenly distributed. There were regional differences in the number of castles. The provinces of Noord Brabant, Friesland and Guelders had in the Middle Ages for example hundreds of castles.¹ On the other hand the number of castles in the provinces of Drenthe and Noord Holland were fairly limited. The same goes for the distribution of certain types of castles, such as mottes. In some areas, such as the provinces Friesland, Zeeland, Limburg and parts of South Holland, they are abundant while in others like Utrecht, Noord Brabant and Drenthe they are relatively scarce (figure 1).

In some areas large-scale reclamations coincide with the construction of numerous castles. This is especially the case in areas in the province of Utrecht.

This leads one to consider if there is a possible connection between the two. It is also unclear why so many castles were built in reclamation areas in Utrecht whereas this was not the case in other similar areas in the rest of the Netherlands?

¹ H. L. JANSSEN, Tussen woning en versterking. Het kasteel in de Middeleeuwen, in: H. L. JANSSEN et al. (red.), 1000 jaar kastelen in Nederland, 1996, S. 5–111; P. NOOMEN, De stinzen in middeleeuws Friesland en hun bewoners, 2009.

JAN VAN DOESBURG: Medieval castles in the Dutch central river Area



Figure 1: The distribution of mottes in the Netherlands (after BESTEMAN, *Mottes in the Netherlands* [as Note 2]).

Castle research

Surprisingly little has been written about the factors that led to the placement of castles in the landscape. On the one hand this can be explained by a lack of documentary evidence concerning the decision-making process behind the choice of location of the site for a castle. The other reason may be that most researchers often implicitly assume that military considerations were always dominant in the choice of location. This is due to the fact that castle research in the Netherlands – as well as in other European countries – was, for a long time based on a military-architectural approach, focusing on the classification of castles on the basis of morphological criteria.² This focus on the classification of castles into categories and sub-categories has cast a long shadow over castle research throughout Europe. From the late 1970s this way of thinking has however gradually changed. Several studies rejected the earlier used military-architectural approach and emphasized the social and economical functions of castles as expressions of status and social position.³

² See for for instance J. G. N. RENAULD, *Het Middeleeuwse kasteel en de archeologie, Een kwart eeuw oudheidkundig bodemonderzoek in Nederland*, 1947, S. 427–444; E. H. TER KUILE, *Kastelen en adellijke landhuizen (De schoonheid van ons land. Bouwkunst 13)* 1954; J. G. N. RENAULD, *Archeologisch onderzoek in middeleeuwse kastelen*, in: *Antiquity and survival 2/5–6* (1959) S. 246–264; J. C. BESTEMAN, *Mottes in the Netherlands: a provisional survey and inventory*, in: T. J. HOEKSTRA, H. L. JANSSEN, I. W. L. MOERMAN (eds.), *Liber castellorum: 40 variaties op het thema kasteel*, 1981, S. 40–59; H. L. JANSSEN, *The Archaeology of the medieval castle in the Nertherlands. Results and prospects for future research*, in: J. C. BESTEMAN, J. M. BOS, H. A. HEIDINGA (eds.), *Medieval Archaeology in the Netherlands. Studies presented to H. H. van Regteren Altena*, 1990, S. 219–264; JANSSEN, *Tussen woning en versterking* (as note 1).

³ See for instance H. L. JANSSEN, *The castles of the bishop of Utrecht and their function in the political and administrative development of the bishopric*, in: *Chateau Gaillard. Etudes de castellogie médiévale VIII. Actes du Colloque International tenu à Bad Münstereifel, 30 août–4 septembre 1976*, 1977, S. 135–157; E. J. BULT, *Rapport betreffende de opgraving Altena bij Delft. Verslag 1978–1979* (typescript), 1980; J. TAUBER, *Alltag und Fest auf der Burg im Spiegel der archäologischen Sachquellen*, in: J. FLECKENSTEIN (Hg.), *Das ritterliche Turnier im Mittelalter (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck Institutes für Geschichte 80)* 1985, S. 588–623; E. J. BULT, *Moated sites in their economical and social context in Delfland*, in: *Chateau Gaillard. Etudes de castellogie médiévale XIII. Actes du Colloque International tenu à Wageningen, Pays Bas, 31 août–6 septembre 1986*, 1987, S. 20–39; W. MEYER, *Die mittelalterliche Burg als Wirtschaftszentrum*, in: *Chateau Gaillard. Etudes de castellogie médiévale XIII. Actes du Colloque International tenu à Wageningen, Pays Bas, 31 août–6 septembre 1986*, 1987, S. 127–142; M. W. THOMSON, *The Decline of the Castle*, 1987; JANSSEN, *The Archaeology of the medieval castle in the Nertherlands* (as note 2); N. J. G. POUNDS, *The Medieval Castle in England and Wales: A Social and Political History*, 1990; M. W. THOMSON, *The Rise of the Castle*, 1991; T. E. MCNEILL, *English Heritage Book of Castles*, 1992; J. TAUBER, *Symbole im Alltag aus archäologischer Sicht. Ein Annäherungsversuch*, in: G. BLASCHITZ u. a. (Hg.), *Symbole des Alltags – Alltag der Symbole. Festschrift für Harry Kühnel zur 65. Geburtstag*, 1992, S. 701–731; J. ZEUNE, *Burgen – Symbole der Macht*, 1996; M.

The last decades of European castle research has seen the development of studies focusing on the interrelationship between castles and their surroundings. This approach is based on the development of theories and methods within Landscape studies, such as landscape archaeology. This new direction, especially in the British Isles has lead to several important publications.⁴ These studies show that the relationship between any given castle and its surroundings can essentially be understood from two perspectives: the impact of the landscape on castles and the impact of castles on the landscape. On the one hand the natural and manmade landscape provided a setting that influenced decisions about the location, development and function of the castle. On the other hand the construction of castles and the policies of their builders could have many long- and short-term consequences for the development of their surrounding physical and cultural landscapes.

This article will focus on the interrelationship between medieval castles and reclamations by looking at an area with extensive medieval reclamations as well as a relative high number of medieval castles: The Kromme Rijn area. The possible connection between large-scale reclamations and the appearance of castles has been addressed in several European countries but until now no systematic research has been taken in this direction in the Netherlands.⁵ This is surprising as the Netherlands are well known for the large scale systematic reclamations that were carried out here during the

HERDICK, *Eliten und Wirtschaft; Handwerk und Gewerbe im Bereich mittelalterlichen Herrschaftssitze*, in: *Burgen und Schlösser* 42 (2001) S. 143–153; J. ZEUNE (Hg.), *Alltag auf Burgen in Mittelalter. Wissenschaftliches Kolloquium des Wissenschaftlichen Beirats der Deutschen Burgenvereinigung (Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Burgenverein B 10)* 2006.

⁴ See for instance D. AUSTIN, *The castle and the landscape*, in: *Landscape History* 6 (1984) S. 70–81; R. LIDDIARD, “*Landscapes of Lordship*”. *Norman Castles and the Countryside in Medieval Norfolk, 1066–1200 (BAR British Series 209)* 2000; O. H. CREIGHTON, *Castles and Landscapes. Power, Community and Fortification in Medieval England*, 2002.

⁵ See for instance W. JANSSEN, *Zur Differenzierung des früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Siedlungsbildes im Rheinland. Die Stadt in der europäischen Geschichte. Festschrift Edith Ennen*, 1972, S. 277–325; G. FOURNIER, *Le château dans la France médiévale. Essai de sociologie monumentale*, 1978; W. MEYER, *Rodung, Burg und Wirtschaft. Ein burgenkundlicher Beitrag zur mittelalterlichen Siedlungsgeschichte*, in: M. T. HEYER-BOSCARDIN (Hg.), *Burgen aus Holz und Stein. Burgenkundliches Kolloquium in Basel 1977 (Schweizer Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Archäologie des Mittelalters 5)* 1979, S. 43–80; R. FRIEDRICH, *Siedlungskundliche Studien zur einer Gruppe vor Burghügeln im Hunsrück*, in: *Interdisziplinäre Studien zur europäischen Burgenforschung. Festschrift für Horst Wolfgang Böhme zum 65. Geburtstag* 2 (Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Burgenverein A 9) 2005, S. 55–74.

High Middle Ages. 'Frisian' reclaimers not only carried out reclamations projects in the Low Countries but were also involved in reclamations in other areas in Northwestern Europe.

The Kromme Rijn area

The Kromme Rijn area is part of the Dutch central river area. It covers about 4000 ha and in medieval times it boasted more than one hundred castles and *moated sites* (figure 2).⁶ The area is bordered in the north by the city of Utrecht, in the east by a high northwest-southeast orientated ice pushed ridge, the Utrechtse Heuvelrug, in the west the Amsterdam-Rhine channel and in the south the rivers Rhine and Lek. The river Kromme Rijn divides the area lengthwise in two.

The activities of the Kromme Rijn and its predecessors have led to a varied landscape. In the centre there is a zone of sandy stream ridges combined with lower lying clay filled depressions. To the northeast and southwest of these we find large, low lying clay areas. During the Middle Ages the area belonged to the territory of the bishops of Utrecht.

The year 1122 marks important changes in the development of the Kromme Rijn area. In that year the river Kromme Rijn was dammed up at the town of Wijk bij Duurstede. This damming enabled the reclamation of the lower lying wet areas, especially those at Langbroek. The oldest reclamation at Langbroek date only four years after the dam was constructed in the Kromme Rijn and was carried out at Langbroek. This was a low lying area between the ice pushed ridge of the Utrechtse Heuvelrug and the stream ridges of the Kromme Rijn. The suffix *-broek* indicates a wet, marshy and partly wooded bog area. The reclamation was initiated by the bishop of Utrecht who claimed ownership over these wildernesses. The reclamations were carried out in the form of a so called '*cope*'. Due to the fact that the reclamations in Langbroek were of a relatively late date, the settlers were free men and for the main were not native to the Kromme Rijn area. Written sources call them 'Frisians' indicating that they came from the western or northern parts of the

⁶ B. OLDE MEIERINK, *Kastelen en ridderhofsteden in Utrecht*, 1995; J. VAN DOESBURG, *Kastelen en moated sites in het Kromme Rijngebied* (working title), in prep.

Netherlands. Also plot names such as (Frisian land) ‘*Vriesen lant*’ (1394) in Nederlangbroek and ‘*Vresenhoeve*’ (Frisian plot) (c. 1365) refer to the place of origin of the settlers.⁷

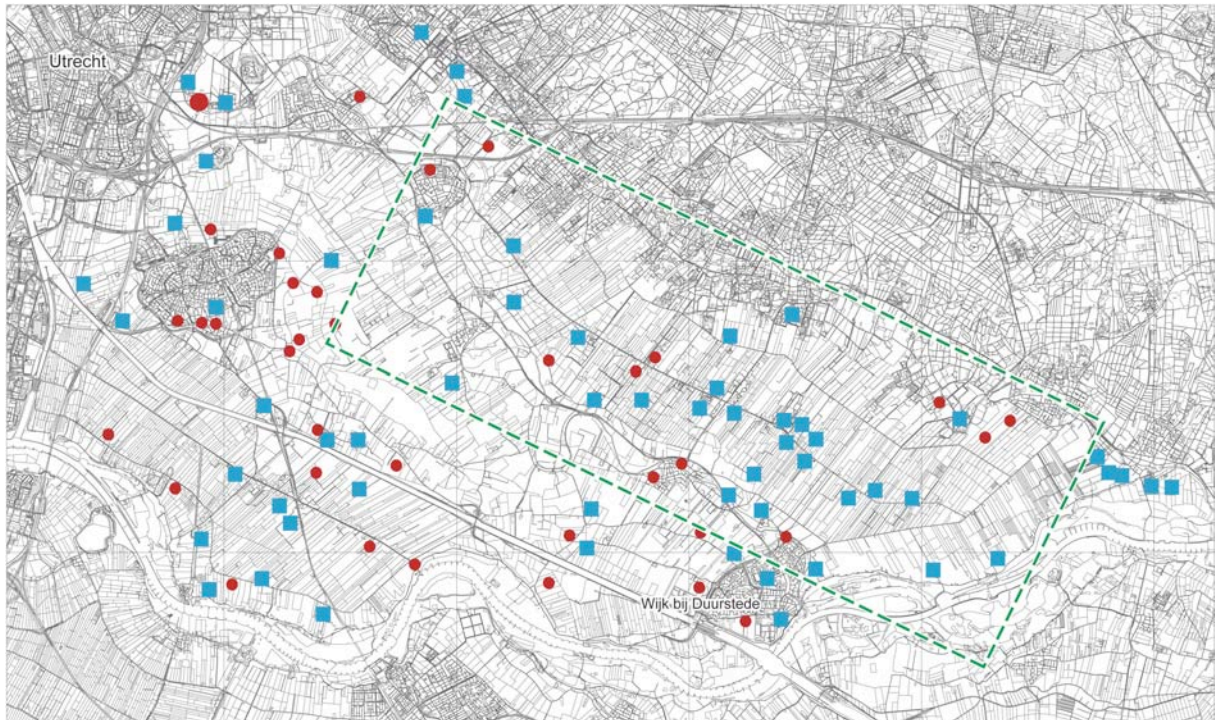


Figure 2: The distribution of castles (blue squares) and moated sites (red dots) in the Kromme Rijn area. The large green square indicated the location of the Langbroekerwetering area.

At the start of the reclamation the area was divided into large more or less rectangular parcels of land or ‘blocks’ of different sizes.⁸ Each block was bordered by low dikes. A number of these also functioned as roads. A canal – the so called Langbroekerwetering (*wetering* = canal) – was dug lengthwise through the low lying centre of the blocks. The canal served to drain away water outside the reclamation area. The Kromme Rijn channel was used as a drainage canal leading the excess water away. On both sides of the canal, at right angles plots of c. 550 m wide and 2500 m long were marked off. Each plot was bordered by ditches. By making very long plots the different soils were more or less evenly divided among the farmers. The farmsteads were

⁷ A. VAN BEMMEL, *De ontginning van Langbroek: van wildernis naar cultuurlandschap*, in: *Het Kromme-Rijngebied* 33/1 (1999) S. 2–22, here S. 8-9.

⁸ See C. DEKKER, *Het Kromme Rijngebied in de middeleeuwen* (Stichtse historische reeks 9) 1983; C. DEKKER, *De ontginningen van het Kromme Rijngebied in de middeleeuwen*, in: *Maandblad Oud-Utrecht* 4 (1985) S. 228–238; VAN BEMMEL, *De ontginning van Langbroek* (as note 7).

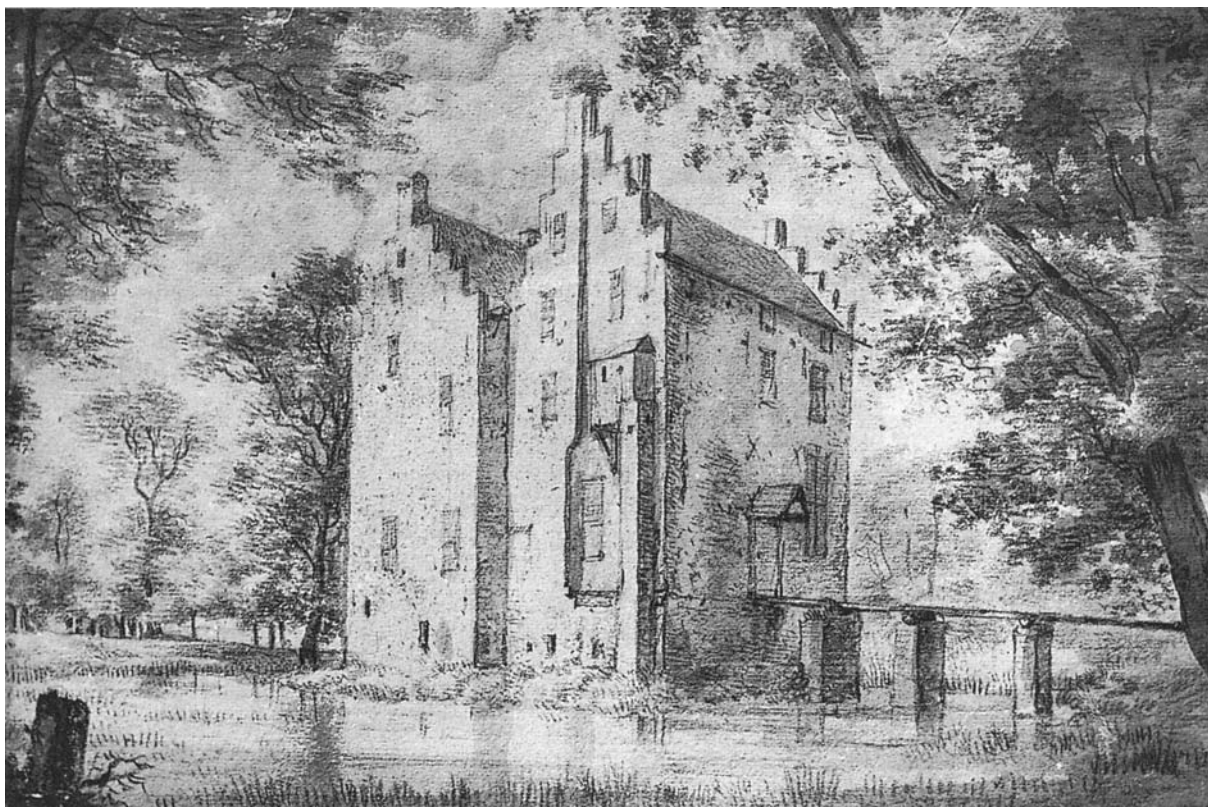
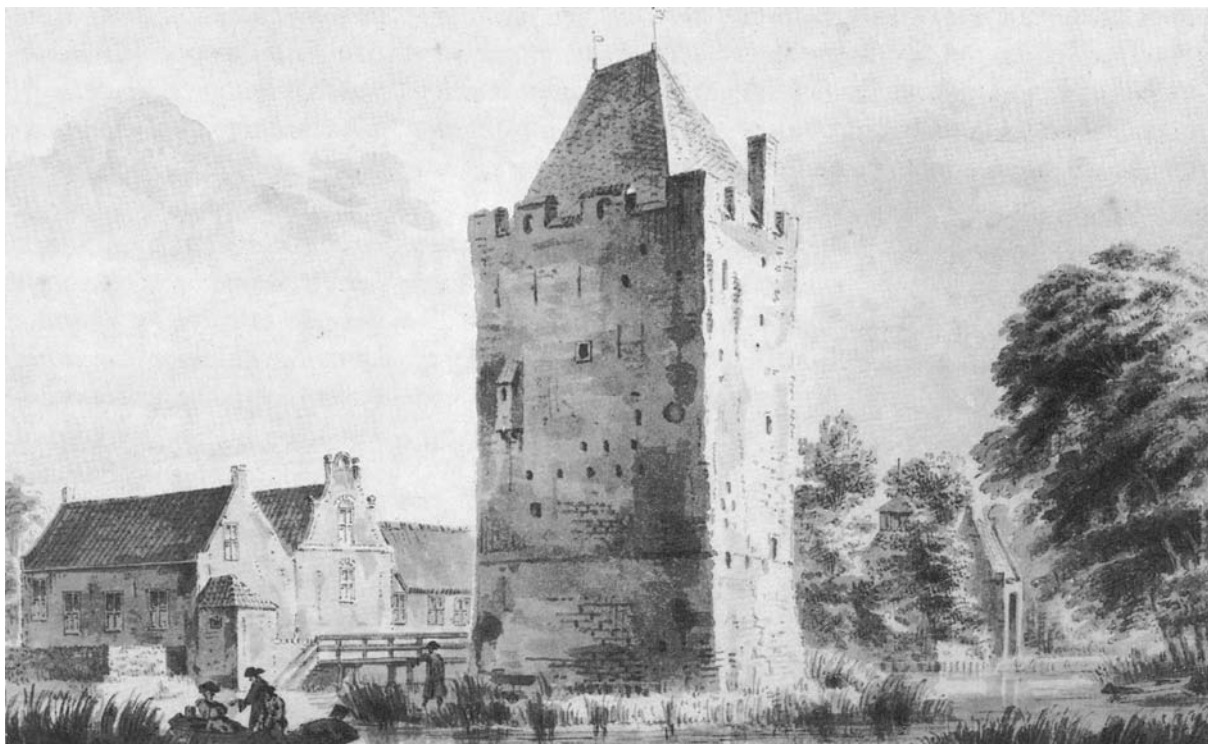


Figure 4: The distribution of the castles in the Langbroekerwetering area.

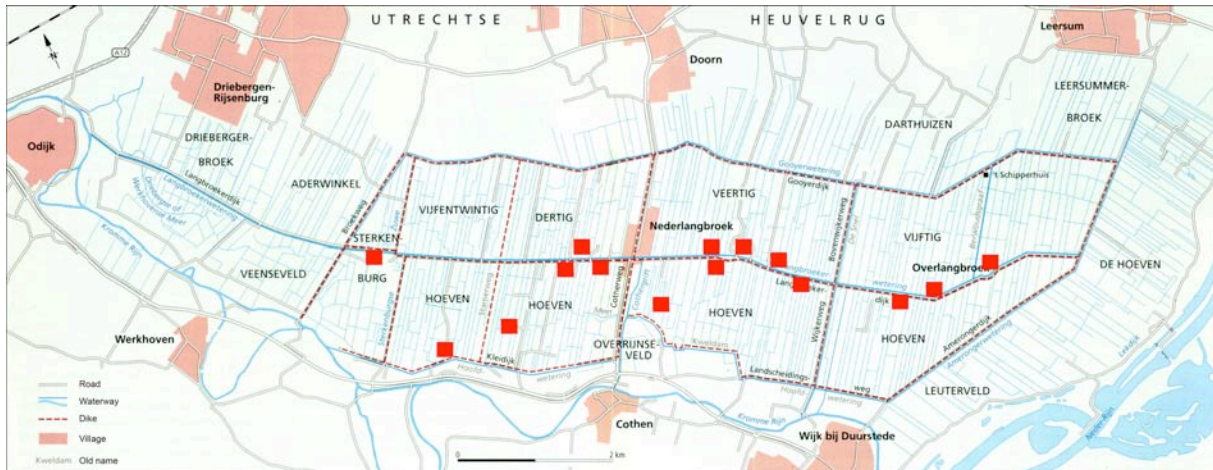


Figure 5: The tower-house Lunenburg and the hall-keep Zuilenburg depicted on drawings from the late 17th –early 18th century.

clay layer that is less than 70 cm thick. In one case (Noordwijk) the castle was located on a stream ridge. Two castles were built on heavy, low lying clay soils (Roeterd and Hardenbroek). In most cases the towers are located close to the Langbroeker-wetering. The distance between the castles is in some cases only a few hundred meters. In most cases a ditch connected the canal with the moats. A few castles do not fit in this general pattern. The castles Hardenbroek, Weerdensteijn (c. 750 m) and Noordwijk were located at some distance from the Langbroeker-wetering. They seem with the exception of Weerdensteijn, to be orientated on the Kromme Rijn instead of the Langbroekerwetering. Noordwijk is located on a stream ridge of the Kromme Rijn. The name Hardenbroek gives a clue about the location of this castle. The part *Harden-* shows the presence of a tough clay layer in the subsoil and the suffix *-broek* indicates that this was located in a boggy area. The fact that Hardenbroek, Weerdensteijn and Noordwijk are located in the direct vicinity of the higher grounds that were already in use in the Carolin-gian period, suggests that these castles were founded in that area.

Most of the castles were simple brick tower-houses and hall-keeps surrounded by one or more moats. The tower-houses were quite similar in size and construction, varying between 8 and 10 m and consisting of three storeys, including a cellar, under a saddle roof (figure 5). The thickness of the walls is c. 1,2 m. The relatively younger hall-keeps had a rectangular form and more or less the same construction as the tower-houses. These castles were build, in most cases near to moated farmbuildings. Of all the tower-

houses and hall-keeps only Sterkenburg developed into a larger castle complex. In its heyday it consisted of an angular brick shell-keep with a 15 m high round tower on one corner and several buildings inside the curtain wall.

The Langbroekerweting area is in this respect not unique in the province of Utrecht. In other reclamation areas, such as the areas of the Schalwijker wetering south and the Juthpase wetering southwest of the city of Utrecht, we find concentrations of castles. All these areas can be classified as 'castle landscapes' as castles dominated the medieval landscape. What makes Langbroek special is the fact that most of the castles here have survived, whereas in the other areas most have disappeared. Outside the province of Utrecht the number of castles in reclamation areas is fairly limited.

The owners

Written sources indicate that three families were responsible for the construction of the majority of the castles in Langbroek: the families Van Wulven, Van Zuilen and Van Zijl. The family Van Wulven owned five castles: Sterkenburg, Hardenbroek, Hindersteijn, Weerdenburg and a castle in Overlangbroek of which the exact location and name are not known. Zuylenburg, Roeterd and an unknown house of Gerard van Zuilen belonged to the castles of the Van Zuylens as well as Zuilenburg, Natewisch, Bergesteijn and Duurstede in the direct vicinity of Langbroek. The family Van Zyl owned Lunenburg, Sandenburg and Noordwijk and at least three other castles of which the names and locations are unknown. The rest of castles were owned by other families, who mostly had only one and occasionally two castles in their possession.

The Van Wulvens and Van Zuilens were initially unfree servants of the bishop of Utrecht (*ministerialen*) who through time had managed to climb the social ladder and integrated within the ranks of the high nobility of Utrecht.¹¹ Both families are encountered around 1200 for the first time in the written sources. The Van Wulven originated from the area around Houten where they owned the castles Oudwulven and Wulven. How they obtained their

¹¹ See DEKKER, Het Kromme Rijngebied (as note 8) S. 147–148.

possessions in Langbroek is not completely clear. It is possible that they held loans in nearby Werkhoven but this is unclear.¹²

The Van Zuylens probably acted as Stuarts (*villicarus*) to the domain of the abbey of Deutz in nearby Wijk bij Duurstede. In the second quarter of the 13th century they constructed a brick tower-keep that formed the core of the later square castle, Duurstede. In 1300 they granted the settlement Wijk bij Duurstede city rights. This illustrates their autonomous position in this period within this area of the Kromme Rijn. The social background of the family Van Zyl is less clear.¹³ They seem to originate from Cothen where they held Ten Zyl as a loan from the deanery of Saint Martin. Members of this family are first mentioned in the 14th century in the written sources.¹⁴ Members of the Van Zyl family are referred to as 'squires' (*famulus*) and in one case 'knight' (*miles*). They held several positions in Langbroek such as bailiff and magistrate. The Van Zyl family could not compete in social status and prestige with families like the Van Wulvens or Van Zuilens, but in the 14th century they can be seen as belonging to the lower nobility of Utrecht. In the 15th century the fortunes of the family took a turn for the worse and they lost their social status and became farmers and townspeople.

The castles in the possession of these three families are more or less clustered in to three groups (figure 6). The location of the castles reflect the directions these families entered the Langbroeker area : The Van Wulven's from Werkhoven, the Van Zyl's from Cothen and the Van Zuylen's from Wijk bij Duurstede.

¹² DEKKER, Het Kromme Rijngebied (as note 8) S. 87-93.

¹³ See C. DEKKER, De geboeders Willem, Gerrit en Gijsbrecht van Zijl, domkanunikken te Utrecht in de tweede helft van de 14e eeuw, in: Jaarboek Oud-Utrecht (1981) S. 61-100.

¹⁴ DEKKER, De geboeders Willem, Gerrit en Gijsbrecht van Zijl (as note 13).

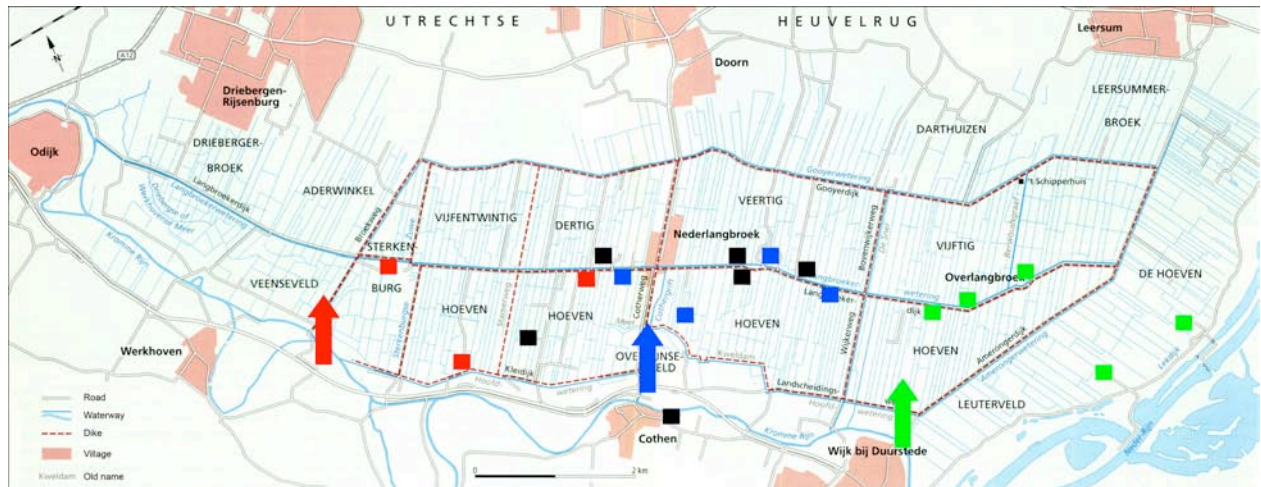


Figure 6: The distribution of the castles owned by the families Van Zyl (blue squares), Van Zuylen (green squares) and Van Wulven (red squares) in the Langbroekerwetering area. The arrows indicate the directions from which these families entered the area. The black squares represent castles owned by other families.

Towers of power?

Several authors have tried to answer the question of why there were so many castles in the Langbroekerwetering area?

The most accepted explanation is that this is connected to the fact that the reclamations here were carried out by people with the legal status of free men. Some of these families prospered and were able to reach the status of the lower nobility or were rising towards this status. In the 13th and early 14th century they, as well as several families that already belonged to the regional nobility build brick tower-houses and hall-keeps.¹⁵ According to this theory the castles in the Langbroeker area must purely be seen as symbols of social prosperity and status and had no real military function.

This last point has recently been disputed. It has been argued that the large number of castle sites along the Langbroekerwetering was the result of the

¹⁵ DEKKER, *Het Kromme Rijngebied* (as note 8) S. 275–278; JANSSEN, *Tussen woning en versterking* (as note 1) S. 95; HERMANS, *Woontorens in Zuidoost-Utrecht* (as note 9).

fact that medieval society here was organized according to the feudal right.¹⁶ A comparison is made with the situation in Friesland in the Middle Ages, where due to the lack of a central authority feuds between relatives were fairly common.¹⁷ From this perspective the brick tower-houses and hall-keeps can be seen as attempts of the local lower nobility to protect themselves and their families in a hostile and violent surrounding where central power was, to a large extent absent.

There are however several problems with this interpretation. The first is that the political situation in the Kromme Rijn area in the 13th and 14th century is incomparable to that in Friesland in the same period. Although we have to admit that not all bishops of Utrecht were powerful rulers, the administrative and legal system in Utrecht was stable enough to prevent the outbreak of long-standing feuds.

Also the construction and internal division of the buildings seem not to support this interpretation. The tower-houses seem to be inspired by older castles such as the tower-keep of Duurstede in Wijk bij Duurstede, but with one important difference. Almost all lack architectural elements needed to be able to withstand a siege, such as a well, bread oven and lavatory as well as thick outer walls. That tower-houses and hall-keeps functioned as refuge is also not supported by written sources. There is in fact only one report of an incident in which a tower-house in Langbroek was attacked, and the attackers had no trouble entering the building.

The fact that the tower-houses and hall-keeps had no real military function is probably the main reason why the bishops of Utrecht did not object the construction of these buildings and also in later periods did not act against them. With the larger castles this was different. These posed a real threat to the bishop's authority and that of the city of Utrecht. From the 14th century onwards a number of steps were undertaken several to remove this perceived threat. Some were besieged and destroyed and in other cases owners were forced to hand their castle over to the bishop.

¹⁶ J. VAN SCHAIK, K. VAN SCHAIK, De functie van versterkte torens in een vetemaatschappij, in: *Het Kromme Rijngebied* 43/4 (2009) S. 86–89.

¹⁷ NOOMEN, De stinzen in middeleeuws Friesland (as note 1).

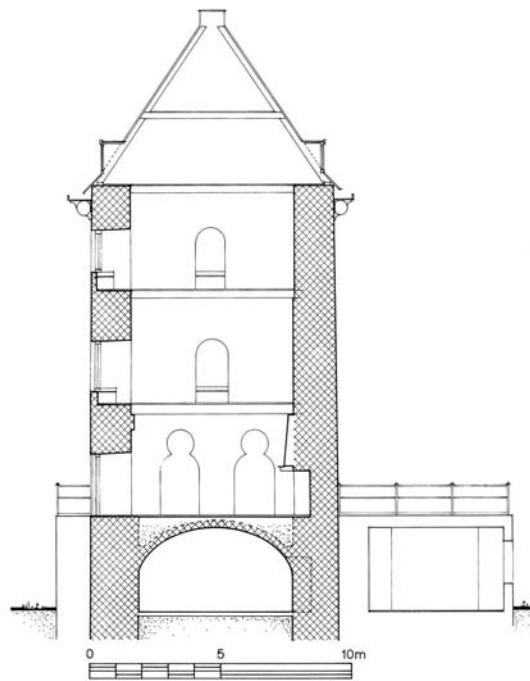


Figure 7: Cross sector through the tower-house Weerdesteyn (after OLDE MEIERINK, *Kastelen* (as note 6))

But what was the function of the tower-houses and hall-keeps? The presence of a large cellar indicates that large quantities of agrarian products could be stored (figure 7), well protected against fire, rodents and theft. The other floors in the building were used as permanent or temporary living accommodations as well as for the storage of valuable goods such as clothing, money and documents. Also guests could be entertained here. Food was probably prepared in the nearby farm and water from the well in the farmyard was brought to the tower or hall.

By using brick as a building material and surrounding the complexes with one or more moats, the owners displayed their wealth and social position. By copying the architecture of earlier tower-keeps they tried to associate themselves with the owners of such castles.

Final remarks

Although this article only lightly touches on many complex issues, a few concluding comments are appropriate. The study of the relationships between castles and their surrounding gives new insights into the mechanisms involved in the both the location choice as well as the development and function of castles. Reclamations opened here possibilities for enterprising people such as members of the regional nobility and farmers. In contrast to the higher sandy soils, where society was still under strict feudal rule and where agrarian production was arranged according to a classic domain system, society in the reclamation areas was less rigid and allowed social flexibility. People here had more personal freedom and were able to keep a larger amount of agrarian surplus for their own private use. It illustrates how new resources from newly reclaimed land were used by different groups to gain wealth and prestige which through time led to important changes in society. The ownership of castles became an important medium in which both members of the nobility and rich farmers were able to express their newly gained social standing.

The question however remains why in the province of Utrecht large scale reclamations led to the development of 'castle landscapes', such as the Langbroekerwetering area whereas in other reclamation areas this development did not take place. Possibly this is due to with the specific social-geographical and geo-political situation of Utrecht during the Middle Ages. The fact that in contrast to other territories, where power was hereditary, each new bishop had to be elected; this led to a contest between different political factions. In most cases the counts of the neighbouring territories Holland and Guelders were involved in this struggle for power, and always tried to get their candidate elected. Members of the regional nobility played a key role in this struggle. They obtained grants and favours in return for their support for a specific candidate. Furthermore, during his reign the bishop stayed dependent on support and even financial assistance from the regional nobility to maintain his political position. This led to complex interrelations between, on the one hand the regional nobility and the bishop and on the other the regional nobility mentioned before and the counts of Holland and Guelders. The regional nobility therefore were able to exploit their crucial position and become semi-independent.

Future research is necessary to unravel the complex system of interrelationships between reclamations, nobility and territorial rulers and the effect this had on castle building.

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