

PRE-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES AND STRATEGIES FOR THE EXPLOITATION OF RESOURCES

**A theoretical framework for understanding why some
settlements are resilient and some settlements are
vulnerable to crisis**



Daniel R. Curtis

Cover photo taken by Einar Ragnar Sigurðsson, 2005.

**Pre-industrial societies and strategies for the exploitation of resources.
A theoretical framework for understanding why some settlements are
resilient and some settlements are vulnerable to crisis**

Pre-industriële samenlevingen en exploitatie strategieën van middelen.
Een theoretisch kader ter verklaring voor de duurzaamheid of kwetsbaarheid van
nederzettingen ten overstaan voor crisis
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Società pre-industriali e strategie per lo sfruttamento delle risorse.
Un quadro teorico per comprendere perché alcuni insediamenti sono resistenti e
alcuni insediamenti sono vulnerabili di fronte alle crisi
(con un riassunto italiano)

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Promotor: Prof.dr. B.J.P. van Bavel

Preface

“We never think entirely alone: we think in company, in a vast collaboration; we work with the workers of the past and of the present. [Across] the whole intellectual world, each one finds in those about him the initiation, help, verification, [and] encouragement that he needs”

Antoine Sertillanges, *La vie intellectuelle*, 1920

The seeds of this project were sown during some time spent as a postgraduate student in medieval history at the University of Cambridge, although the theoretical scope and direction of the work has been shaped through a fruitful period spent at the Research Institute for History and Culture at Utrecht University. I am grateful to numerous individuals and institutions for their help and kindness during the research and writing process.

I am most indebted to my supervisor at Utrecht, Prof. Bas van Bavel, for sharing his considerable academic expertise and support. Above all, I have benefited from his active encouragement in pursuing an ambitious PhD project. As a result, this has left the thesis much more open to criticism, but I have also learnt that criticism is a good thing, and far better than writing something conservatively or with a narrow focus and then left to gather dust on bookshelves. The emphasis on comparative history and approaching social and economic developments across the *longue durée* is certainly down to the influence of Bas, as well as the explicit focus on how property structures and market institutions are very much socially-embedded. Bas always addresses you as an equal, which has given me encouragement and confidence.

While the theoretical stimulus has been provided through my time at Utrecht, the empirical skills needed to conduct research and work with archival manuscripts were cultivated at Cambridge. I thank my former supervisor Dr. Susan Oosthuizen for her time and expertise in this respect, as well as important guidance from Prof. Christine Carpenter and Prof. Rosamond McKitterick. My palaeographical skills were developed through an excellent course led by Dr. Tessa Webber.

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I am also grateful to the European University Institute in Fiesole, Tuscany, for granting me access as a visiting scholar for three months, which allowed me to conduct archival research in Florence. On that note, I thank all members of staff employed in the archives of Groningen, Arnhem, Bari, Florence, and the various colleges of Cambridge (including as well the Record Office at Shire Hall) for their help.

Finally, I am especially indebted to my parents, for without their support over the years, this thesis never would have come to fruition.

Utrecht, 2012

D.R.C.

In memory of Ken, a great man

'It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes. Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live, and let's change the way we treat each other. You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do what we gotta do, to survive'.

Tupac Shakur

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Abbreviations

All journal titles are spelled out in full. Archives and some recurrent printed sources are abbreviated, however.

Archives

ASA – *Archivio di Stato di Arezzo*

ASB – *Archivio di Stato di Bari*

ASC – *Archivio di Stato di Cosenza*

ASF – *Archivio di Stato di Firenze (Florence)*

ASN – *Archivio di Stato di Napoli (Naples)*

ASP – *Archivio di Stato di Pisa*

ASFO – *Archivio di Stato di Foggia*

ASEM – *Archivio Storico dell'Eremo e Monastero di Camaldoli*

BCP – *Biblioteca Comunale di Poppi*

BNF – *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (Florence)*

BL – British Library (London)

CCRO – Cambridgeshire County Record Office (Shire Hall, Cambridge)

CUL – Cambridge University Library

GELA – *Gelders Archief (Arnhem)*

GA – *Groninger Archieven (Groningen)*

KCA – King's College Archives (Cambridge)

MCA – Merton College Archives (Cambridge)

NADH – *Nationaal Archief Den Haag (The Hague)*

PCA – Pembroke College Archives (Cambridge)

RAR – *Regionaal Archief Rivierenland (Tiel)*

SCC – St. Catherine's College Archives (Cambridge)

SWB – *Streekarchivariaat West-Betuwe (Geldermalsen)*

TNA – The National Archives (Kew)

Recurring printed sources

RC – *Regesto di Camaldoli*

RH – *Rotuli Hundredorum*

VCH – Victoria County History

Chapter 1
**The resilience and vulnerability of settlements: introducing the
historiography**

“Civilizations are fragile, impermanent things. This fact inevitably captures our attention, and however we might wish otherwise, prompts disturbing questions”.

Joseph Tainter

This thesis tries to provide an answer to one main question. Why in the pre-industrial period were some settlements resilient and stable over the long term while other settlements were vulnerable to crisis?¹ Indeed, what made certain human habitations more prone to decline or even total collapse, than others? All pre-industrial societies had to face economic, environmental, and agricultural challenges at some point, which could come in the form of famine, war, expropriation, flooding, failed harvests, pestilence, harsh taxation, or the disappearance of valuable resources in the pursuit of commercial gain. How then can we explain why some societies were able to overcome or negate these problems, while other societies proved susceptible to failure, as settlements contracted, stagnated, were abandoned, or even disappeared entirely?² In this first chapter, some of the main literature on the resilience or vulnerability of settlement to decline or collapse is described. Following the historiographical tradition, the approach taken in this thesis is introduced.

1.1 Malthusian-ideologies and the population-resources framework

The population-resources framework has often been employed to explain why societies and settlements failed in the pre-industrial period, often founded upon an underlying theory of 'Malthusian Crisis'. In these explanations, societies failed to combat the destabilising effects of demographic pressure on an (often) finite pool of resources, which put the future sustainability of settlements in danger.³ It is the story of people outstripping resources, straining the natural environment, and leading to an inevitable breaking point. Even modern-day societal collapses have been explained with recourse to this framework.⁴

Famous advocates of the population-resources framework were the social and economic historians of the pre-industrial period; Michael Postan, Georges Duby,

¹ The importance of further research into this question and the coming together of social history and environmental studies has recently been asserted in P. Boomgaard & M. 't Hart, 'Globalization, environmental change, and social history: an introduction', *International Review of Social History*, 18 (2010), 7.

² For example, certain societies have been shown to have withstood famine better than others in M. Ravaillon, 'Famines and economics', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 35.3 (1997), 1208; C. O'Grada, 'Markets and famines in pre-industrial Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 36 (2005), 143-66.

³ A Malthusian paradigm recently resurrected in G. Clark, *A farewell to alms: a brief economic history of the world* (Princeton, 2007), 1-18.

⁴ For example, Rwandan genocide in 1994 in C. André & J-P. Platteau, 'Land relations under unbearable stress: Rwanda caught in the Malthusian trap', *Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization*, 34.1 (1998), 1-47.