Grain markets and dearth policy: Market regulation in three regions in northwestern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

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1. **Introduction**

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the population of northwestern Europe gradually recovered from the demographic crises of the fourteenth century. Urbanization increased and in several regions rural proto-industries developed. Wage labour and social polarization grew.¹ As a result, an increasing number of people came to depend on the market for their food provisioning. When in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries living standards declined in much of Europe, a growing group was living so close to the edge that any episode of dearth, caused by harvest failure or war, posed a serious threat. Deprivation, in turn, gave rise to discontent and increasingly also to riots, endangering public order and political stability. As a consequence, dearth policies aimed at regulating the trade in basic foodstuffs, especially grains, became a priority. Urban governments had long been involved in the regulation of urban markets and the protection of the interests of urban consumers, but now intensified their interventions. In addition, in a process intertwined with the formation of national states, an increasing involvement of central governments can be discerned.²

Dearth policies encompassed a wide array of arrangements aimed at ensuring a steady supply of grain and bread at affordable prices to consumers. Common measures were, for instance, prohibitions of forestalling (buying before the products arrived at the open market) and regrating (buying with the purpose of reselling at the same market), the surveying of private grain stocks, and various forms of price setting, especially of bread prices.³ Scholarly opinions on the effects of these policies vary, with one side emphasizing the risk of frustrating the normal functioning of markets and thus exacerbating the situation, and the other claiming that exactly because of these price peaks and because of the imperfections of pre-modern markets, intervention was the only way to provide at least some protection to the entitlements of the poor.⁴ The same controversy was also at the heart of the vivid discussions on the vices and virtues of free trade in Enlightenment France.⁵

This paper does not focus on the effects of dearth policies. Instead, it looks into the origins of these policies and the factors that determined the shape they took. This is another

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¹ Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, 71–82.
² Tilly, ‘Food supply and public order’, esp. 428–455.
issue that has given rise to differing opinions. On the one hand, the existence of a general, pan-European pattern has been emphasized, with policies displaying remarkable similarities over time and over place. On the other, many studies tend to focus on institutions that are regarded as particular to certain countries and periods, such as dearth legislation, in Tudor England, culminating in the Elizabethan Book of Orders, or the hard-won absence of taxation on the international grain trade in Habsburg Holland. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how both similarities and differences in dearth policies came into being, and in particular how they were affected by both the nature and severity of the situation they were addressing and by social and political relations.

Comparative studies on dearth are scarce and those that do exist focus mainly on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This paper examines, from a comparative perspective, the preceding era and investigates policy responses in three regions: East Anglia in England, Picardy and Upper Normandy in France, and Holland in the northern Low Countries. These three regions are in the same climate zone and all have good access to sea; these elements can thus be ruled out as explanatory factors for any differences in dearth policies. In other respects, however, there were significant differences. For a start, East Anglia and Picardy and Upper Normandy were both grain growing regions, producing, at least in good years, a grain surplus that could be exported. Exports from East Anglia moreover increased considerably in the period under examination. Holland, on the other hand, could not feed its own population but had to import a substantial and increasing part of its bread grains: at the end of the sixteenth century at least 75%. Secondly, the political development of the countries which the regions were part of also differed. In England a traditionally strong Crown was checked by Parliament from the late fourteenth century onward, while France saw a gradual—although uneven and as yet incomplete—rise of the power of the monarchy. In Holland, finally, the growth of central authority under the Burgundian and Habsburg regimes was restrained, and ultimately reversed, by the growing influence of the Estates, which in turn relied on the collaboration of urban elites.

From the broad range of dearth policies, this paper focuses on two elements: restrictions on exports and interregional trade, and public grain stocks. These two aspects

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7 Slack, ‘Dearth and social policy’, Tracy, ‘Habsburg grain policy’.
8 Appleby, ‘Grain prices and subsistence crises’.
10 Van Tielhof, ‘Grain provision in Holland’, 204-205.
have been selected because they represent, in more than one respect, opposing ends of the range of instruments available to the authorities. Restrictions on exports and interregional trade were regulatory measures, usually required the involvement of central government and could, when combined with a system of licenses, be fiscally attractive. Public grain stocks were organizational interventions, belonged to the domain of urban authorities, and involved substantial investments. This paper will show how both economic and political aspects affected the shape these particular interventions took in the regions under examination. The next section discusses restrictions on exports and interregional trade—and their enforcement. Public grain stocks are discussed in the third section. Conclusions follow.

2. Restrictions on exports and interregional trade

In times of dearth, authorities on all levels—local, regional and national—were tempted to make sure that grain was not moved out of their jurisdiction. This section traces the development of restrictions on the movement of grain for each of the three regions under examination, distinguishing between limitations on exports beyond national boundaries and restraints on trade between regions within the country. It will be demonstrated that although in theory there were important differences in the restraints imposed on the grain trade, especially between East Anglia and Picardy and Upper Normandy on the one hand and Holland on the other, in practice variations were modest.

In view of the early rise of central power in England, it is not surprising that the efforts of the English Crown to control foreign exports of grain go back a long way: at least to the late twelfth century. A series of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century ordinances prohibited grain exports except under royal license. The motivation was a fiscal one: the license fees formed an attractive source of revenues for the Crown. From the end of the fourteenth century onward, the growing power of Parliament brought other interests to the fore: those of the urban consumers, who usually opposed exports for fear of dearth, and those of the producers in the grain-growing regions, in particular East Anglia, who desired the freedom to export their surpluses. In the fifteenth century this resulted in a compromise: a series of statutes that allowed exports if prices in the port of shipment did not exceed a specified rate. Above that

13 For the categorization into regulatory, fiscal and organizational interventions: Tilly, ‘Food supply and public order’, 434.
rate a license was required. In times of serious distress, however, the Crown could override the statutes and suspend permission to export by proclaiming a ban.

The sixteenth century, especially the second half of it, was marked by a growing concern over the food provisioning of the towns, and in particular of London, with its rapidly growing population and large numbers of poor. According to N.S.B. Gras, the city even became ‘the dictator of Tudor corn policy’. Making use of the existing framework of export regulation by the Crown, the London authorities forcefully pressed for restrictions on exports, and with considerable success: after 1565 there were more years with an export ban than years without such a proclamation. What is more—and what is sometimes overlooked in the literature—the London authorities also played an active part in enforcing these bans, sending out agents to other parts of the kingdom for this purpose: in 1565, for instance, the mayor’s officials were sent to Norfolk to seize any grains waiting for shipment in the port towns.

Nevertheless, East Anglian grain producers and grain merchants found ways to continue their export activities. Some of them were downright illegal: although exact figures are difficult to give, there is substantial evidence that in the second half of the sixteenth century very large amounts of grain—20,000 quarters annually, or more—were exported without a license from the ports of East Anglia, even in dearth years. Other methods stayed within the bounds of the law. The port towns of Norfolk sent delegates to London to bargain for large export grants which were subsequently divided in smaller portions and sold as licenses to individuals. Yarmouth, for instance, managed to secure several of these grants to cover expenses for maintaining its harbour facilities. The fact that the Crown had to rely on the port towns for naval services probably furthered their case. Likewise, farmers in East Anglia repeatedly petitioned for greater liberty, claiming that restrictions were harmful because they would lower grain prices and discourage grain cultivation. These complaints fed into emerging mercantilist notions on the benefits of exports. The temporary abandonment of fixed price ceilings between 1571 and 1593, when local authorities were to decide whether price levels justified exportation, can perhaps be seen as an attempt to meet the protests.

Thus, although at the end of the sixteenth century export policies were dominated by the

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interests of the towns and especially of London, producers and merchants were not completely powerless.

The literature emphasizes that even though exports were strictly regulated, the internal trade in England was, in comparison to the continent, relatively free. However, while tolls and duties levied on internal trade were indeed few, other kinds of restrictions were undeniably present, at least in the second half of the sixteenth century. For one, London’s increasing demand for grain and its gradually extending provisioning zone gave rise to protests. In 1565 the University of Cambridge tried, without success, to convince the central authorities that grain transports from the town to King’s Lynn (and from there probably to London) should be restricted because they endangered the food supply of the colleges. In other places local authorities did not ask for permission but actually seized corn shipments leaving the area, or even simply passing through. Admittedly, such actions were not tolerated. However, government policies also included restraints on internal trade in times of dearth. From the middle of the century, for instance, corn badgers officially required a license from the local justice of the peace. While this prescription may not always have been enforced, the fact that it found its way into the 1586 Book of Orders—together with some other measures restricting the movement of grain within the country—suggests that in times of distress it did have meaning; and at the end of the sixteenth century those times were frequent. At that stage, then, the internal grain trade, just as the export trade, was in practice subjected to restraints.

Although France did not have the same tradition of central regulation of foreign grain exports as England, from at least the late fifteenth century onward the French Crown on occasion also prohibited grain exports. Export bans were often imposed for diplomatic or military reasons, but not always: in 1481/82, for instance, the motivation was dearth. Notably, in many cases the initiative for these measures appears to have lain with regional and local bodies or functionaries. This was the case, for instance, in 1500 in Normandy, where the provincial Estates urged the king to impose an export prohibition. Paris also had an active role, petitioning for export restrictions in much the same way as London: in 1501 the city’s

23 Chartres, Internal trade, 13.
28 Usher, History of the grain trade, 264.
aldermen requested that orders should be sent out to the royal functionaries in several towns in Picardy to prevent grain exports via the Somme.  

In the early sixteenth century, prohibitions in times of dearth alternated with permission to export in times of abundance, regulated through a system of licenses. As in England, export licenses formed an attractive source of revenues for the Crown and as such they were probably the driving force behind at least some of the prohibitions. Only in 1559 an attempt was made to introduce a more systematic approach. By royal edict a bureau was installed that was to determine each year, for the whole of France, how much grain was available for export and to subsequently grant export licenses to merchants. A later version of this plan stated that no grain could be exported without explicit permission from the king himself, who was to base his decisions on reports from lower officials regarding the expectations of the crops. Combatting dearth was clearly an important goal, but the financial sections of the edict suggest that fiscal considerations played a significant role as well: licenses were to be sold at auction and exports were restricted to specified ports in order to facilitate control.  

Directive as this may sound, in practice the regulation of imports and exports of grain was not a completely top-down affair. In Rouen the execution was left to the Chambre de la Police, a committee established in 1572 in which local, regional and royal functionaries collaborated. It was this committee that gave permission for exports, which meant that local and regional interests had a voice in the decision. In coastal regions or port towns these were not always in favour of restricting exports. Moreover, as in East Anglia, individual merchants clearly did not always adhere to the rules: in the 1560s and 1570s shipments of grain repeatedly left from ports in Normandy (and Brittany) without any kind of license.  

In contrast to its stance towards foreign exports, with regard to internal trade the French Crown propagated freedom (although this did not include the absence of levies). The dearth of 1481/82 may have been a trigger event, for a royal ordinance of January of this year announced, as an exceptional measure, free circulation of cereals in the entire kingdom. In later years this became, in theory at least, the norm. An ordinance of 1539 specified that everybody was permitted to freely trade grain, wine and other products within the kingdom as long as the usual duties were paid, and that provincial governors and their functionaries had

29 Usher, *History of the grain trade*, 81, 225.  
33 Lapeyre, *Famille de marchands*, 539.  
no business interfering. The wording of the text suggests that this rule was often violated. In fact, the freedom of internal trade was a carefully cultivated illusion. In reality local and regional authorities imposed rules and restrictions on the grain trade all the time, usually without being called to order.\(^{35}\)

While a tradition of regional autonomy and the weakness of central enforcement institutions provided the towns of Picardy and Upper Normandy with more options to restrain grain movements than the East Anglian towns had a their disposal, in another respect they found themselves in very similar circumstances. Like London, Paris grew rapidly in the sixteenth century, with similar results: the provisioning zone of the city expanded at the expense of other towns. Merchants from Rouen, for instance, were still able to buy grain along the Oise river in 1462, but in 1529 they had to petition the Provost of Merchants of Paris for permission to do so.\(^{36}\) The example shows that the demarcation of a provisioning zone sometimes included the use of coercion, but as we saw earlier, this was not a French peculiarity: it happened in England as well.

In Holland, export prohibitions were occasionally issued by the central authorities from at least the early fifteenth century onward, for instance in the dearth years 1407/1408 and 1416/17. This course of action was continued when around 1430 Holland was incorporated in the Burgundian empire.\(^{37}\) At this point in time there is no trace of a licensing system or even of attempts to establish one. The Habsburg rulers who came to power in the late fifteenth century, however, repeatedly tried to introduce a system of licensing which closely resembled the English and French systems: in periods when exports were officially prohibited, merchants might be exempted from the prohibition in return for a payment, the *congie*.\(^{38}\) This policy was not uncontested: protests rose. The arguments of the Amsterdam authorities, recorded in a Habsburg ordinance from 1501, are worth repeating. Amsterdam had apparently claimed that since Holland could not feed itself (“not even for a tenth”) and was dependent on imports, it was unwise to take measures that might scare merchants away: if they were not allowed to freely export grain, they would not import it in the first place.\(^{39}\) The fact that the urban elite was heavily involved in the grain trade itself is not mentioned, but it can safely be depended upon to have played an important role.


\(^{39}\) Graswinckel, *Placcaetboeck op ’t stuck van de lijftocht*, 1–4.
Until the middle of the sixteenth century the Habsburg government made several renewed attempts to introduce a licensing system. Each time it met with fierce opposition from the Estates of Holland, in which the towns had a prominent position, and each time the plans had to be withdrawn. That the Habsburg government was forced to give in to urban demands goes to show the increasingly influential position of the urban elites of Holland. Amsterdam was at the forefront, but it bears emphasizing that the claims were supported by the other towns as well.\(^\text{40}\)

The fact that the matter of licensing had been moved out of the way does not mean that export prohibitions themselves disappeared. Rather, as in England, their frequency appears to have increased after the middle of the sixteenth century.\(^\text{41}\) However, these export bans were usually restricted to home-grown grains and did not apply to imported grains. This was not a minor issue since, as mentioned earlier, by this time at least three quarters of all bread grains consumed in Holland were imported. This made export prohibitions that excluded imported grains into virtually powerless instruments. Only in situations of extreme distress exports of all cereals, including imports, were prohibited. This happened, for instance, in 1556/57.\(^\text{42}\) In fact, on this occasion it turned out that the earlier opponents of such measures had had a point, for the merchants of Danzig, who complained that they had been forced to sell their grain in Amsterdam for prices below what they might have made elsewhere, threatened to move their activities from Amsterdam to Emden.\(^\text{43}\) Even after the establishment of the Dutch Republic there were times when commercial interests gave way to the demands of dearth: in 1595/96, for instance, a similar general export ban was in operation for half a year.\(^\text{44}\) Still, in Holland freedom of international trade found its way into formal regulation to a greater degree than in France or England.

Internal trade, on the other hand, met with restrictions imposed by town governments in times of dearth. Urban particularism remained strong, even under Burgundian and Habsburg rule; in fact, there is no sign that central government objected to urban trade restrictions. That Brielle, situated in one of Holland’s very few grain-growing districts, in the second half of the sixteenth century repeatedly prohibited the movement of grain out of its jurisdiction is perhaps understandable.\(^\text{45}\) However, towns like Gouda and Haarlem, greatly


\(^{41}\) Unger, ‘Hollandsche graanhandel’, 499–504.

\(^{42}\) Graswinckel, *Placcaetboeck op ’t stuck van de lijftocht*, 71–79; Tracy, ‘Habsburg grain policy’, 311-312.


\(^{44}\) Noordegraaf, ‘Dearth, famine and social policy’, 79.

\(^{45}\) Unger, *Levensmiddelenvoorziening*, 189.
dependent on foreign grain imports, occasionally also issued prohibitions to convey grain out of the town. From a report by one of the members of the Council of Holland we know that even Amsterdam followed this course of action in 1556/57. Whether the prohibition was effective is another matter: the Amsterdam authorities stated that some merchants had transferred their stocks to one of the villages in the surrounding countryside just before the ban became operational. Moreover, some months later it turned out that more than half of the grain stocks stored in Amsterdam had been sold and transferred to elsewhere after all. In this respect Amsterdam merchants were no different from their colleagues in Rouen or King’s Lynn, nor was the fact that rules were already tuned to their interests sufficient to make them forgo on the profits that could be made by evasion.

Reviewing the evidence regarding formal regulations, differences mainly appear between Holland on the one hand and the other two regions on the other. In Holland export restrictions were loosened in the course of the sixteenth century while in East Anglia and in Picardy and Upper Normandy they were tightened; in Holland urban governments were at liberty to restrict the movement of grain out of their jurisdiction in times of dearth, an option that the towns in the other two regions, at least in theory, did not have. Looking for an explanation for these differences three interrelated elements come to the fore. The first is the fact that Holland, in contrast to East Anglia and Picardy and Upper Normandy, was not a grain-producing region but even in normal years imported most of its bread grains. Under these conditions, both commercial interests and provisioning needs dictated that exports should be free. A second factor is the structure of the urban network: Holland did not have a large and rapidly growing capital on the scale of London or Paris with an expanding provisioning zone and was thus spared any conflicts of interests between towns on this issue. Finally, urban elites successfully joined forces in their efforts to withstand attempts of the central authorities to use the grain trade as a source of revenues, even before the establishment of the Dutch Republic.

However, when instead of at formal regulations we look at daily practice, differences between the regions are much smaller. In years of severe dearth even in Holland grain exports were completely halted, while internal trade in Picardy and Upper Normandy was far from unfettered and even in East Anglia it was restricted by Tudor dearth regulation. In all three

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46 Unger, Levensmiddelenvoorziening, 201, 204.
47 Graswinckel, Placcaetboeck op ’t stuck van de lijftocht, 46–53.
regions local authorities were able, in some way or another, to influence decisions on trade restrictions, and individuals resorted to smuggling and evasion of prohibitions everywhere. In short, the very real exigencies of dearth, but also the interests of commerce, narrowed the theoretical gap considerably.

3. Public grain stocks

Creating grain reserves with the purpose of selling the grain, often in the form of bread, at subsidized prices during dearth was not something to enter into lightly. For one, the expenditure involved was substantial, especially when purchases were made as an emergency reaction to dearth. The alternative was to maintain a permanent stock, refreshing it regularly when prices were low. This, however, was risky. If no dearth occurred the stocks could lose much of their value: prices might fall even lower. Moreover, grain was a perishable product: it might spoil or be eaten by mice.49 In practice, public granaries were always urban undertakings, probably because managing them on a larger scale was too daunting a task.50 Especially in the older literature—but as we will see also in some recent studies—emergency purchases and permanent stocks have been presented as contrasting phenomena, the underlying assumption being that permanent stocks were only required in regions where grain supplies frequently faltered.51 This section charts the emergence and development of urban grain stocks for each of the three regions under scrutiny. It shows that instead of opposites, the two options were poles of a continuum that left room for greater variety, and for change over time.

In England, the urban authorities in London occasionally made emergency grain purchases when prices were high from at least the late fourteenth century onward: this happened in 1391, for example, and again in 1429.52 For several provincial capitals, Norwich among them, similar purchases are documented for 1521 and 1522, again in response to dearth.53 During the food crisis of the late 1590s municipal activity in organizing grain stocks intensified and expanded: smaller towns now also procured substantial amounts of corn in order to sell it to

49 Persson, *Grain Markets in Europe*, 82.
50 Cf. Kaplan, ‘Lean years, fat years’, 210, 228.
52 Keene, ‘Crisis Management ’, 69.
the poor at subsidized prices—as grain, flour or bread. The authorities in Ipswich, for instance, bought 2,000 bushels, enough to feed 3,000 people for a month; Norwich, four to five times the size of Ipswich, purchased almost twenty times as much. Some cities, in East Anglia and elsewhere, directly ordered grain abroad: in the Baltic region, in Amsterdam, or in France.\(^{54}\)

The costs and the efforts involved in these large grain procurements were considerable, but clearly the financial means, organizational capacity and political will required to make them could be mustered. As John Bohstedt has pointed out, it is probably no coincidence that the towns making these emergency purchases in the 1590s were almost all parliamentary boroughs and that most of them had broad freeman franchises. Bohstedt also claims that municipal provisioning was episodic: grain purchases were made when the need was there, but did not bear a structural character. In the early seventeenth century central government made several attempts to persuade counties and towns to install permanent granaries: institutions that were to stock up every year when prices were low. The plans met with opposition from local and regional authorities, who apparently felt this would be too much of a burden.\(^{55}\)

There were, however, exceptions. The best known is London. The construction of the first public granary, at Leadenhall, began in 1440, directly after the serious dearth of the years 1437 to 1439. This was an impressive building which also housed a market, a chapel, a college of priests and a school. Because of its grand scale doubts have been raised about the reasons why it was built: it is claimed that as a reaction to the crisis of the previous years it was out of proportion.\(^{56}\) However, for initiator Simon Eyre, a wealthy draper and mayor of London in the year 1445/46, and for several other private contributors, the provision of storage was the avowed incentive.\(^{57}\)

It is true that it is uncertain how long the building was actually used for the storage of municipal grain stocks; in the early sixteenth century this no longer appears to be the case.\(^{58}\) However, around that same time another granary was installed at the Bridgehouse, where from 1520 onward municipal grain was stored. Urban grain purchases, by then still irregular, became progressively more frequent over the next few decades until they had acquired, by the

\(^{56}\) Keene, ‘Crisis Management’, 61–62.
early 1540s a structural character. This transition from incidental to structural grain purchases ran parallel to another development: an increasing involvement of the city’s guilds, who at first were requested to contribute financially to the grain purchases of the city, but from 1578 onward were ordered to establish their own stocks. Both the granary system and the contribution of the guilds to its provisioning disintegrated in the early seventeenth century, when the need to maintain a permanent stock was apparently no longer felt.

Although guild involvement was a feature typical for London, permanent grain stocks were not unique. Gras mentions an attempt to establish a permanent stock in Bristol, which he believes did not materialize. However, at least one other English town undeniably did have such a stock: Norwich. In the middle of the sixteenth century the Norwich textile industry had fallen into decline; poverty was rife. The Norwich granary was founded in 1554, as a result of a testamentary provision made by William Castleton, Dean of Norwich Cathedral, for the sale of grain at sub-market prices to the poor at times of dearth. The urban authorities of Norwich made up for any deficits. The Norwich granary functioned until the middle of the seventeenth century, when the corn stock was allowed to be depleted and, finally, the building itself was sold.

As in East Anglia, in Picardy and Upper Normandy the food crises of the fifteenth century probably stimulated local authorities to adopt an active stance in the field of food provisioning. Emergency purchases of cereals were among the strategies they employed. In 1443/44, for instance, the bailiff of Evreux, sent two men to the nearby town of Dreux in order to buy grain and other victuals. The bailiff was a functionary of the Crown, but evidence from Amiens shows that urban governments engaged in similar practices. In 1456 the aldermen of Amiens delegated one from their midst to acquire a considerable quantity of wheat, in an attempt to ‘put an end to the dearth that had become manifest’. Their successors took recourse to this line of action repeatedly during the frequent episodes of dearth of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: delegates were sent out, at first to the surrounding regions but at the end of the period occasionally even to the Baltic countries, to search for grain and

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59 Gras, Evolution, 80–82.
61 Gras, Evolution, 80.
63 Slack, Poverty and policy, 116–117.
64 Plaisse and Plaisse, Vie municipale à Evreux, 159.
purchase it for the town. The same happened in Rouen, and also in towns in other parts of northwestern France. The quantities purchased were substantial, and, at least in late fifteenth-century Amiens, the urban authorities showed foresight, building up stocks when prices were on the rise but not yet at their peak.

The second half of the sixteenth century was a tumultuous period. Urban autonomy, and urban financial resources in particular, were eroded by the extension of royal authority. The Wars of Religion and especially the civil war that erupted in the 1580s wrought havoc in northwestern France. However, recent research for Nantes (Brittany) suggests that in this town urban government did not break down. In fact, in collaboration with functionaries of the Crown the urban authorities increased their efforts to maintain order and provide relief from distress. This seems to contradict the earlier findings of Marie-Louise Pelus for Amiens. She concludes that during the serious dearth of 1586/87 the aldermen of that town—in contrast to their fifteenth-century predecessors—acted slowly: they did not try to purchase grain until it was too late and not enough of it could be found. Pelus believes that the delay was on purpose: scarcity, after all, raised profits. However, at the time the situation in northwestern France was so much troubled by conflict and warring that that alone may well explain any delays.

In the literature, the grain purchases by the towns in northwestern France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are described as emergency, make-shift actions. It is stated that although there were greniers de ville (urban granaries), these were used only during times of dearth; afterwards they were dismantled until the next crisis occurred. This is contrasted—negatively—to the permanent granaries that existed in some towns in Germany, Lorraine, Franche-Comté, and Switzerland. However, the situation appears to be no different from what was customary in eastern England in the majority of towns.

Admittedly, the Norwich granary, which did have a permanent character from the middle of the sixteenth century onward, did not have a pendant in Amiens or Rouen, or, to my

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70 Tingle, ‘Stability in the urban community’.
72 Benedict, ‘Civil war and natural disaster’, 88–94.
knowledge, in any other town in Picardy or Upper Normandy. Nor, for that matter, did Paris have a facility resembling the Bridgehouse granary in London.\(^{74}\) Perhaps these English exceptions are in greater need of an explanation than what appears to have been the normal situation in both eastern England and northwestern France, but if we want to focus on Picardy and Upper Normandy: since warring and the loss of financial autonomy of the towns conditions had made even emergency purchases problematic, it is not surprising that setting up a permanent stock was out of reach.

In Holland, as in eastern England and northwestern France, the food crises of the fifteenth century appear to have triggered an active involvement of the towns with grain provisioning.\(^{75}\) Among the actions were emergency grain purchases. The first references to towns buying grain date from 1437, when Gouda and Rotterdam both procured supplies in Amsterdam.\(^{76}\) Purchases of this type are also recorded for Gouda and Brielle during two serious episodes of dearth in the last two decades of the fifteenth century.\(^{77}\) In the sixteenth century they became increasingly common: several towns bought grain repeatedly in years when prices were high. Sometimes they were actually urged to so by central government.\(^{78}\) Just as in East Anglia some towns placed their orders directly in the Baltic region. In 1597 the authorities in Alkmaar, for instance, decided to buy grain when the corn ships came in unless the price was above 100 guilders per last, in which case they would order directly from the Baltic instead. Apparently the price was indeed too high, for ultimately this was what happened.\(^{79}\)

In some towns, the second half of the sixteenth century saw a gradual shift towards a permanent grain stock. This shift was not always sustained for long, nor was it always based on a conscious and well-considered decision. The case of Leiden is illustrative: it shows how the authorities of this town, which just as Norwich was confronted with a decline of its cloth industry, were drawn into stockpiling step by step, through their involvement with the local poor relief organizations. In 1545, a year of high prices, the Leiden relief institutions—there were several of them—had purchased a substantial quantity of grain to be baked into bread for the poor. They were, however, unable to pay for the purchases within the prescribed time and asked the town government for help. The urban authorities ordered a collection in the churches, but also guaranteed to make up for any remaining deficits. Seven years later, in

\(^{74}\) Kaplan, ‘Lean years, fat years’, 197-200.
\(^{76}\) Dijkman, *Shaping medieval markets*, 298.
\(^{77}\) Unger, *Levensmiddelenoorziening*, 77, 189.
\(^{78}\) Unger, *Levensmiddelenoorziening*, 77–78.
\(^{79}\) Noordegraaf, ‘Levensstandaard’, 77.
1552, prices were at high levels again. This time the urban authorities took the initiative and asked the poor relief institutions to distribute bread against sub-market prices. When this resulted in a financial loss, the town took it upon itself to compensate the institutions. The next step was not far away: in 1556/57, the urban authorities bought grain themselves. In fact, the mayors acknowledged to the council that since prices were rising rapidly they had not waited for permission but had gone ahead and made the purchase. Additional purchases were made later in the year, some of them involving contributions from the poor relief organizations. Finally, during the crisis of 1565/66 the town not only bought grain again, but also acquired a building, a hospital that was no longer used, to serve as granary for the town’s grain stocks.  

The facility was used for this purpose only briefly, for in the early 1590s the building became the inspection hall for serges, the products of a new and successful branch of the Leiden textile industries.

The Leiden granary was not unique. In 1565/66 the authorities of the small town of Schoonhoven sold part of the town’s silverware in order to have a designated granary built to store the town’s grain, ‘for the common good’, as the inscription on the façade reads. It is not clear if this building really housed a permanent grain stock, and if so, for how long. However, we do know that throughout the seventeenth century the Amsterdam authorities regularly purchased grain when prices were low and stored it in one of the four granaries owned by the city. In times of dearth the grain was baked into bread distributed at subsidized prices to burgurers of limited means—a larger group than the poor that normally received relief. Notably, notwithstanding Amsterdam’s pivotal role in the European grain trade, a permanent grain stock was deemed necessary.

The general pattern is clear. As a reaction to dearth, towns in Holland and in Picardy and Upper Normandy started making substantial emergency grain purchases from about the 1430s or 1440s. East Anglian towns were probably later, but followed the same course of action from at least the early sixteenth century onward. In the second half of that century towns in all three regions intensified their efforts: purchases became more frequent. In most towns this was as far as it went. However, in a few cases in East Anglia (Norwich) and in Holland (Leiden and Schoonhoven) something resembling a permanent grain stock emerged in the

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1550s or 1560s. It is probably not a coincidence that both Norwich and Leiden had substantial textile industries that at the time experienced problems (although Schoonhoven does not fit into this profile). Equally notable is the fact that in both Norwich and Leiden the urban authorities were set on the path towards permanency by the actions of others: in Norwich by a substantial testamentary bequest of a cleric, in Leiden by the local poor relief organizations which could no longer cope. There is, at present, no indication that a similar development took place in Amiens—also a textile town—or in other towns of Picardy and Upper Normandy. For as far as this requires an explanation, the most likely one is the combination of civil war and the erosion of urban autonomy and urban finances taking place in France around this same time.

The permanent grain stocks of Norwich and Leiden were relatively short-lived; in Leiden the system did not outlive the sixteenth century, in Norwich it disappeared in the early seventeenth. By that time, however, Amsterdam, did have a permanent grain stock, which continued to function until at least the end of the seventeenth century. This, in combination with the economic and social characteristics of Norwich and Leiden in the middle of the sixteenth century, suggests that permanent grain stocks were not primarily intended to compensate for problems with the all-over availability of grain, but instead aimed at protecting the entitlements of the poor.

4. Conclusion

This paper has brought to light both differences and similarities in the dearth policies that developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in East Anglia, Picardy and Upper Normandy, and Holland. With regard to trade restrictions, at first sight the differences stand out. In Holland export restrictions were gradually loosened, while in the other two regions they were tightened; in Holland urban governments were free to restrict the movement of grain out of their jurisdiction in times of dearth, in the other two regions they were not. Holland’s deviating position can be attributed to three interrelated factors: the fact that the region was highly dependent on grain imports, the absence of a city on the scale of London or Paris expanding its provisioning zone, and the balance of powers between central government and urban mercantile elites. In practice, however, differences were smaller than they looked: dearth and commercial interests gave rise to multiple exceptions and adjustments.

Policies regarding urban grain stocks do not display the same degree of regional variation: towns in all three regions made emergency grain purchases. These purchases,
however, do show a marked development over time: from a modest beginning in the fifteenth century to a significant expansion in the second half of the sixteenth, both geographically and in frequency. In a few towns in East Anglia and Holland a shift towards permanent grain stocks can be discerned, triggered by poverty among the urban population. This shift was gradual and in most cases not very long-lived; Amsterdam appears to have been the only exception to this rule.

A final issue deserves attention here: the degree to which policies that came into being in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries formed the foundations for later institutional development. In many respects this seems to have been the case. In northern France, for instance, permanent public grain stocks, with a very few exceptions, did not emerge until after the Revolution, and in Holland grain exports remained, again with a very few exceptions, free. In England, however, export restrictions disappeared in the course of the seventeenth century, making way for the diametrically opposed policy of stimulating grain exports. The reasons for this turnaround are to be found in improvements in agricultural productivity. It is, however, important to note that even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries East Anglian grain producers and grain merchants had opposed export limitations, with some success; in that sense this policy reversal did not come out of the blue.

84 Kaplan, ‘Lean years, fat years’; Miller, Mastering the market, 53-56.
85 Van Dillen, ‘Dreigende hongersnood’, & & .
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In the sixteenth century, the Northwest European region of England and the Low Countries underwent transformational change. In this region, a bourgeois culture emerged and cities like Antwerp, Amsterdam, and London became centers of institutional and business innovation, whose accomplishments have influenced the modern world. What explains the observed pattern of emergence of impersonal markets in sixteenth century Europe? I focus on the interaction between the commercial and communication revolutions of the late fifteenth century Europe. The fifteenth century per capita printing penetration of the cities would stack as: Lisbon < Bordeaux < Hamburg < Seville < Rouen < London < Amsterdam < Antwerp. Long distance western market demand for grain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was always small relative to both total subsistence needs and regional market demand on the part of eastern consumers. Still, this marginal opportunity for profit refracted through institutional contexts in lands of the Polish crown, where magnates and gentry could control the sale of the exportable surplus 90 per cent of which was grain by the 1550s and the peasant labour needed to produce and carry it to points of sale. Probably well before the quantifiable evidence of the 1560s, cereal prices over mos