

University of Groningen

## 'Offer gheen water op en hadde gheweest'(1) - Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century

Esser, Raingard

*Published in:*  
Dutch crossing-Journal of low countries studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/03096564.2016.1159866](https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2016.1159866)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Esser, R. (2016). 'Offer gheen water op en hadde gheweest'(1) - Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century. *Dutch crossing-Journal of low countries studies*, 40(2), 97-107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2016.1159866>

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



# 'Ofter gheen water op en hadde gheweest' – Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century

Raingard Esser

To cite this article: Raingard Esser (2016) 'Ofter gheen water op en hadde gheweest' – Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century, Dutch Crossing, 40:2, 97-107, DOI: [10.1080/03096564.2016.1159866](https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2016.1159866)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2016.1159866>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 324



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# ‘Ofter gheen water op en hadde gheweest’<sup>1</sup> – Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century\*

RAINGARD ESSER

*University of Groningen, NL*

Inundations and floods were part of the everyday experiences of early modern coastal societies. While much scholarly research has focused on the immediate reactions to the seemingly extraordinary inundations, this article argues, that an investigation of the long-term perspective of flood accounts, beyond the much studied discourses of ministers, magistrates and engineers might reveal a different, but perhaps more typical response to these disasters. The discourse of resilience and stoical attention to business as usual adds an additional dimension to modern society’s scripts of disaster management.

KEYWORDS resilience, floods, regional chorographies

## Introduction: a long-term perspective of water and floods

In Vlissingen a part of a tower was flooded and the city wall broke in the middle, so that the water could inundate the land, but shortly afterwards it was diked again.

The Westcapelle dike broke at several places, but it was shortly afterwards repaired.

Around Veere in the North of Walcheren, the dike broke in two places, but thanks to the diligence of the Sir Adolf of Burgundy, Lord of Beveren the land was reclaimed within three or four days. [...]

Wolffaertsdijk was inundated at several places, and the dikes were broken in many places, but it was worst in Sluys, nevertheless, the land was diked again during the same winter.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Boxhorn, *Chroniick van Zeelandt, eertijds beschreven door d’Heer Johan Reygersbergen, nu verbeetert, ende vermeerdert door Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn, Deel 2*, (Middelburg, 1644) p. 431.

\*I would like to express my gratitude to the Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel for granting me a fellowship to research and write this article.

This survey of some of the damages incurred in the province of Zeeland after the Saint Felix Flood of 1530 was recorded in Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn's *Choniick van Zeeland* in 1644. More than ninety years after the disaster, Boxhorn deemed it important to remind his readers of the destructions of this devastating flood. Recording the destructions, however, was only one part of Boxhorn's account: equally, if not more important were the references to the ensuing repair works in Zeeland. His record of land lost and regained extended the four examples above. They were typical for Boxhorn's approach to the Zeelanders' reaction to severe weather conditions. And they give evidence of the long-term coping strategies of coastal societies when confronted with the power of the wind and the sea.

The study of these long-term reactions to nature induced disasters is in the focus of much recent scholarship on the topic. Many researchers are now less interested in the seemingly seismic effect of one particular calamity, but are thinking more about the long-term developments of 'cultures of coping' and 'disaster induced learning'.<sup>2</sup> Resilience, the capacity to recover (relatively) quickly from destructions and chaos, and to 'bounce back' into a new or an already established routine, can certainly be an important part of such a coping culture.<sup>3</sup> Resilience, I would argue, is also the key message in Boxhorn's above-mentioned text.

Studying early modern responses in the wake of disasters scholars predominantly focus on the reactions to nature induced disasters within three distinct frameworks: the dominant theological response which often used a peccatogenic model, the discourse of authority which focused on the maintenance of order and stability in society and the technical or professional response trying to apply solutions to technical problems, which added a secondary factor to the key argument of God's intervention on earth. In his research on the Christmas Flood of 1717 Adam Sundberg, for instance, distinguishes between 'Providential Readings', 'Institutional Responses' and 'Technocratic Solutions'.<sup>4</sup>

While these three discursive frames are certainly most relevant for an understanding of the coping strategies of early modern society when confronted with catastrophes, they require some further nuances.

Firstly, the assumption that for early modern men and women nature induced disasters were predominantly God's responses to human sin is, perhaps, a bit too one-dimensional. Historians have diagnosed a preponderance of an eschatological-apocalyptic rhetoric (which included references to the 'Fifth Horseman'<sup>5</sup>, water) in early modern texts. But many of the references to the apocalyptic prophecy of Saint John were also used, as Thomas Fuchs has convincingly argued, as rhetorical tools in the debates of the first generation of Reformers (chronologically the high tide of eschatological fears). Invoking the apocalyptic scenario provided an acceptable tool to challenge the time-honoured argument of tradition, with which Catholics responded to the new religious movement. Invoking an eschatological scenario, in which tradition was no longer relevant allowed for a presentation of new ideas and visions. In this respect, so Fuchs proposed, the references to the apocalyptic scourges often served as prologues for debates on the faults of the old and the nature of the new church, rather than expressing an imminent fear of the end of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the dominance of texts written by the clerical elites might have distorted our picture of contemporary interpretations of nature induced disasters. The proportionately overweening representation of theological texts and their adaptations might have led to an overestimation of religious domination in the discourses on disaster. Philip Soergel even suggested that it is precisely the dogged persistence and intensity of the equation of sin and God's punishment (or of God's test of man's faith), which we find in early modern pamphlets, sermons and other theological tracts, that is evidence of the failure of this message to effectively reach their audiences. The repetitive admonitions to repent diagnosed indifference among early modern men and women, but it might also have bred such indifference. Soergel sees glimpses of these reactions, for instance, in Christoph Irenäus' *Wasserspiegel* (Water-Mirror), a rather rampant appeal to the sinful world to repent and mend its way published in 1566. In the book the Lutheran theologian referred to 'Hans Nonsense' and 'Claus Carefree', who remained doggedly convinced of natural causes for disaster and failed to see the wrath of God at work.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, sermons and sermon literature need to be interpreted in the framework of their homiletic style and programme. Homiletic texts had to include a prescribed set of elements: example, mirror, exhortation and warning, repentance and conversion. This is what preachers were expected to preach and what audiences expected to hear. However, questioning the dominance of a peccatogenic discourse does not mean that the ever-present link between sin and disaster or test and disaster was less relevant in early modern society or became just a hollow phrase. It remained a hardy perennial and a familiar script to early modern people and their coping strategies when confronted with crises.

Secondly, an investigation of long-term coping strategies of crisis management requires the study of long-term perspectives of contemporaries and their interpretation of past calamities. These perspectives should lead us to the study of sources, which have not been produced in the immediate aftermath of such a disaster, but which reflect upon them in retrospection, after the initial shock of the onslaught. Adam Sundberg has alerted us to the possibility of the 'un-learning' of past coping strategies in the middle of such a calamity.<sup>8</sup> Whether these reactions, therefore, were expressions of 'lessons learned' or lapses into a familiar pattern of the past might be tested in the retrospective reflection on the crisis and crisis management of particular challenges. In other words, we might want to see how these events were recorded and remembered. Did they provide guidelines for future actions and strategies for resilience in adverse circumstances? In this sense specific disasters might have served as either milestones or turning points, or they might simply be pieces in a jigsaw without a prominent role in a narrative of long-term coping strategies of coastal societies with frequent experiences with floods. The following study, therefore, looks beyond the specialist discourses, theological, managerial or technical, to assess the impact of these 'lessons learned' on societies notoriously at risk from natural disasters – in this case floods in the coastal provinces of the early modern Netherlands.

### **Readings of floods: taxonomies and political arguments**

The inhabitants of the North Sea coast were certainly aware of the potentially devastating powers of wind and waves and they also reckoned with recurring inundations. The

Burchardi Flood of 1634, which drowned large parts of the German North Sea coast was also known as the ‘Second Mandränke’ thus referring to the devastating Marcellus-Flood of 15 January 1362, the ‘First’ or ‘Great Mandränke’, which had inundated large parts of the North Sea coast.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch engineer Jan Adriaansz. Leeghwater witnessed the Burchardi Flood disaster on the North Frisian island of Fahretoft. In his account of the event, which he published fifteen years later, at the end of his career and his life, in 1649, he consciously or unconsciously misdated the flood. The storm had reached its climax in the night from 10 to 11 October 1634, but Leeghwater dated it (twice in one sentence) to the day before All Saints, thus linking it to the All Saints Flood of 1570, which had left a lasting mark in Dutch memory.<sup>10</sup>

Storm floods were not only recorded in particularly themed texts, but also appeared in publications with different topics. Emmanuel van Meteren in his *Commentarien ofte memorien van den Nederlandtschen staet*, reminded his readers when chronicling the All Saints Flood of 1570, that the Netherlands had traditionally been prone to floods which usually happened in winter by New Moon.<sup>11</sup> He then presented a long list of previous floodings beginning in the year 850 when the Rhine flooded the Katwijk and Dordrecht area. His detailed account of these earlier instructions aimed to confirm that other than in Spanish interpretations, the All Saints Flood was one of many inundations rather than a sign of the Saints’ revenge for the desecration of their images. According to Protestant Dutch interpretations, the Saints were not vengeful. Van Meteren’s list and descriptions of floods, which he had partly taken from an early eyewitness account of the 1570 inundation by Johan Fruytiers, was indirectly repeated by P. C. Hooft in his *Nederlantsche Historien* from 1642, who mentioned that the North Sea had frequently and for a long time flooded the land, although he labelled the All Saints Flood as the most devastating of these inundations.<sup>12</sup> In the Catholic camp, authors such as Joan Jacquinet in his *Princelijcke Historie etc.* from 1653 blamed the flood on the Iconoclastic Fury, which had caused God’s wrath.<sup>13</sup> The interpretation of the flood thus became on the one hand an ideological battleground of the Eighty Years’ War; on the other, the reference to the frequency of these inundations also demonstrated that they were regarded as part of the recurrent challenges for coastal societies.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporaries thus developed hierarchies of floods, they compared and related them to each other. They (not always accurately) copied accounts from each other in which particular stories or morality tales frequently reappeared.<sup>15</sup> These taxonomies were presented in texts, but also in their physical environment, for instance through watermarks and commemorative tablets which were recorded for the All Saints Flood of 1570 and for later inundations, but which have not yet been systematically investigated.<sup>16</sup> Categorization and comparison offered a coping strategy, which could transform the exceptional to a routine, but which also allowed for exceptions to these routines. They could provide a script for the disaster management which could serve as a reminder of previous preventative measures or could cover up failures and inadequacies by exaggerating the scale of the respective disaster. They could also, as will be argued here, become simply a characteristic feature of the landscape and a society, which was used to the challenges of winds and waves.

## Land lost and reclaimed: the script of routines in Dutch maritime provinces

Besides national histories such as those mentioned above, regional chorographical descriptions provide us with an interesting inroad into long-term perceptions of floods beyond the immediate shock of the calamity. At the same time, they allow for a contextualization of these floods within a wider framework of regional or provincial identity formation intended by these works, whose production proliferated in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup>

One of these texts is Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn's above-mentioned *Chroniick van Zeeland*, a revised edition of an earlier chronicle by Johan van Reygersberghen, and published in Middelburg in 1644. Boxhorn and also his source van Reygersberghen knew what they were talking about. The latter had been a citizen of Veere in Zeeland. Boxhorn, although a native from Bergen-op-Zoom in Brabant and professor in Leiden, had many friends in the province and had married Susanna Duevelaar, the daughter of a later mayor of Middelburg. With his *Chroniick* he wished to chronologically update van Reygersberghen's text, but also deemed it important to keep the earlier text's main theme, Zeeland's struggle with the water, intact.<sup>18</sup> In his topographical-chronological description Boxhorn portrayed the sea itself as being active in the destruction of the coastline: 'The wrath of the sea can never be underestimated. The history of the previous centuries gives evidence of her unseemly lust to swallow up the land.'<sup>19</sup> In his survey of the reasons for these disasters Boxhorn expressly left aside 'Godts ghetarde wraeke' – God's provoked anger-, but focused on, firstly, natural causes: the rising sea-level and the increase of wide rivers in the area. This particular passage provides a good example of the above-mentioned synchronic existence of a theological and a managerial model of the interpretation of flood disasters. While explicitly sidelining theological reasoning for these floods, Boxhorn, nevertheless listed the familiar range of God's instruments to punish the sinners with earthquakes and inundations.<sup>20</sup> This brief and cursory coverage seems to function as a reference to an accepted, but in this context not relevant explanatory framework. It was presented in an almost formulaic manner which is comparable to the 'prologues' of eschatological fears mentioned earlier. The following paragraphs then gave a long and detailed account of both the failures of past dike maintenance and suggestions for improvement.<sup>21</sup> What turned the onslaught of the sea into a calamity, so Boxhorn argued, was a mixture of personal and communal failures. Boxhorn recorded mismanagement of those in charge, who were putting personal interests before those of the community. Particularly in the first half of the sixteenth century, the dike reeves but also some magistrates, so he complained, had spent more money on copying the vanities of the Burgundian and Habsburg courtiers than investing in dike maintenance. They had been endlessly bickering about the maintenance costs and had thus neglected essential repair works.<sup>22</sup> Boxhorn explicitly refused the theory that a lack of know-how and expertise in dike building might have caused earlier inundations, but suggested that previous generations simply did not invest in better dikes, because the land lost was not worth the effort and money, and it had been easier and cheaper for the few inhabitants of Zeeland to abandon their homes and move further inland.<sup>23</sup> This risk-assessment,

which does not fit into the engineers' discourse of ever-improving knowledge and specialists' expertise, provides an interesting avenue into a study of the interaction between 'uncertain environments' and societies affected by them.<sup>24</sup> On the early modern coast, people were certainly not caught unawares by the water, but adapted their living environment to the challenges in very practical ways. Dike building was one precaution and much has been written about the improvements of dikes and their engineers. It is also a discourse that has been driven by dike engineers eager to promote their profession and their personal expertise.<sup>25</sup> It might also be worth, however, to study the alternative, non-invasive measures that coastal societies explored to cope with inundations. Here, more nuanced research, for instance by Marie Luisa Allemeyer has demonstrated that the traditional, dominant perception of a conservative rural society in opposition to the 'modernizing' forces of technological solutions in water protection is perhaps a bit too one-dimensional.<sup>26</sup> On a day to day basis, people also used the lie of the land to improve their chances of survival, and the engineers as well as the provincial chorographers were certainly aware of these measures and their effectiveness. In his dramatic account of the Burchardi Flood Jan Leeghwater left the house of his friend Pieter Janszoon at the onset of the storm, because he knew that his own lodgings were higher above the ground level than Janszoon's house. He could precisely measure these differences. His friend's house was just five or six feet above the 'Meyvelt' compared to his own house which was built on the 'Hooghe Dijk' and was thus 11 feet above the sea level. As the storm became worse in the middle of the night, he and his son got up to find refuge in the nearby manor house, which, again, was further inland and, presumably also higher above the ground than his house. Leeghwater knew how to save their lives: both his and his friend's house were destroyed when he returned to inspect the aftermath of the storm on the following day.<sup>27</sup> He met survivors, who had found refuge in a church tower, and we know that churches were deliberately built at high places and large enough to host man and beast in case of an emergency.<sup>28</sup> This description, albeit of a North German coastal society and their safety measures would certainly also match the strategies applied by the inhabitants of the Dutch coastline. They fit well into what Michael Kempe and Petra van Dam have aptly labelled an 'amphibious' or 'amphibian' culture and society of the early modern North Sea coast.<sup>29</sup> Van Dam has alerted us to these societies' use of preventative measures working with, rather than against the sea. They included: the compartmentalization of the land through canals and dikes, building on more secure, higher grounds and water-based (rescue-) mobility in the aftermath of a disaster. In one of Boxhorn's earlier publications, his *Toneel ofte Beschrijvinge der Steden van Hollandt* of 1634, the land reclamation and compartmentalization of the newly-claimed polders was indeed very effectively visualized in a number of carefully engraved maps with the geometrical grid-pattern of dikes, canals and waterways (Figure 1).<sup>30</sup> He also recorded the works of the water mills used in Holland to drain the seasonally inundated meadows and to prepare them after the winter storms for rich pasture in spring thus giving examples of the everyday resilience of coastal society.<sup>31</sup> In the *Chroniick*, Boxhorn praised the achievements of dike building, but also made references to 'Natuere's' protection of Zeeland through the 'Duynen' of Walcheren and called for a systematic planting of beach grass on the dunes to keep them intact.<sup>32</sup>





FIGURE 1 Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn, *Toneel ofte Beschrijvinge der Steden van Hollandt* (Amsterdam, 1634), p. 21, *Totius Hollandiae Septentrionalis vulgo Westfrisiae novissima tabula* Auct. Bath. Flor. a Berckenrode, University of Groningen, Library (photographer Dirk Fennema, Haren, The Netherlands)

Moreover, resilience in difficult circumstances, which is expressed in Leeghwater's and Boxhorn's observations is supplemented in Boxhorn's *Chroniick* with an assessment of the advantages of life in such a hazardous, water-logged environment. Loss and gain of land were frequently juxtaposed in his account and are best captured in the two-line riddle verses dedicated to the province, which Boxhorn placed at the beginning of his book: 'Waer woent het volck, stae by verstandt/Daer landt werdt Zee/en Zee werdt landt?'.<sup>33</sup> The numerous surveys of the different parishes and their surroundings, particularly in the first part of the book, listed them as either drowned and abandoned or reclaimed in the various major and minor inundations over the centuries.<sup>34</sup> In a 'Byvoegsel', an addition, Boxhorn provided further details with a survey of land losses, carefully measured in 'Gemeten' and 'Roeden', which he had collected from the various administrative records in the province. His account, which focused on the period prior to 1550, was not restricted to the spectacular inundations, of, for instance, 1530 and 1532, but covered a range of different floods.<sup>35</sup> In the second, chronological part of the book, the land losses of the Saint Felix Flood of 1530 were recorded, but, again, as has been shown above, the loss of the land was complemented with a stoical record of land-reclamations over shorter or longer periods leaving an impression of an almost organic, natural fight against the sea with losses and gains on either side.<sup>36</sup> For 1531, the year following the Saint Felix Flood, Boxhorn could account for a very good harvest in spite of the previous inundations, thus again providing testimony to the resilience of the landscape.<sup>37</sup> On the 'plus'

side Boxhorn weighed up the role of the sea as an effective defence against external enemies. In his *Chroniick*, the sea was thus both a ‘moeder ende voestersse’ (a mother and nurturer) and the ‘allergrimmichste ende ombarmhartichste stiefmoeder’ (the most grim and merciless stepmother).<sup>38</sup> The water had been ‘somwijlen gunstich, behulpsaem, mildt, ende vriendelijck, somwijlen in teghendeele, grimmich, schadelich, onversadich, ende schrickelijck’ (sometimes supportive and helpful, mild and friendly, sometimes the opposite: grim, disastrous, greedy and terrible).<sup>39</sup> The janus-faced theme was continued throughout the book and was also related to the then current war with Spain, where the rough sea protected the Zeelanders against invasions. These defence advantages were, so Boxhorn claimed, hailed by Prince Maurice and also by Zeeland’s regents, who had minted coins with messages similar to the one from 1593 with the motto ‘Idem Protector Et Hostis’ – The sea is my protector and my enemy.<sup>40</sup> Boxhorn’s account of Zeeland’s and the Zeelanders’ relations to the sea remained the standard interpretation of the nature of this coastal society. It was repeated verbatim, and with specific reference, in Mattheus Smallegange’s *Nieuwe Cronyk van Zeeland* published in Middelburg in 1700.<sup>41</sup>

In Friesland, another Dutch province with a distinctly amphibious profile, the estates’ official historian, Pier Winsemius, produced a *Chronique ofte Historische Geschiedenisse van Vrieland*, which was published in Franeker in 1622. Written in a chronological style with a survey of Friesland’s towns and cities at the end, the text also included frequent accounts of floods in the province. The register of the book listed no less than 16 entries on ‘Watervloeden’.<sup>42</sup> While the All Saints Flood received three separate entries, others were simply listed with brief comments. Significantly, the first reference to floods, dating to Roman times, confirmed the normality of these inundations which were, so Winsemius reminded his readers, regular occurrences during the times around the autumnal equinox.<sup>43</sup> More in the chorographical style was a later text published in 1655 by the Frisian minister and professor of the University of Franeker, Christianus Schotanus. He dedicated Chapter XX of his *Beschryvinge end Chronijck vanden Heerlickheydt van Friesland* to the ‘Blessings and Plagues out of the air and out of the sea’.<sup>44</sup> Not surprisingly, the minister Schotanus applied his theological agenda to this chorographical text. The introduction to Chapter XX, the last chapter of his book, opened with a general comment on God’s occasional need to re-balance the Frisians’ economy of sin by sending natural disasters, but it was again the sea itself which was presented as Frisia’s worst enemy: ‘In this land, we have no worse enemy than the Sea, which is kept at bay by the forces of dikes and dams, and is more expensive than was the war with Spain.’<sup>45</sup> What followed was a long list of disasters, both through inundations, fires, and other calamities, which were in most cases not directly linked to particular sins or misdeeds.<sup>46</sup> There were notable exceptions: Schotanus compared some of these floodings to the biblical flood and recorded clearly identified causes for God’s punishment. The great flood of 1173, for instance, was preceded by and, according to Schotanus, a consequence of the theft of a host in Utrecht.<sup>47</sup> The long and grim chronology of the various disasters that befell the Frisian coast, however, was also interspersed with success stories of the inhabitants’ attempts to stem the tides and to profit from their water-logged environment. Schotanus reminded his readers, for instance, of the economic successes of peat digging which started after the

floodings in the 1220s and created much prosperity in the Flie-Lauwers region.<sup>48</sup> Similar successes were also recorded for the aftermath of the 1230 flood, when, after a couple of years, the inundated land became particularly rich and fertile and generated much wealth.<sup>49</sup> In his address to the Frisian estates, whose members had commissioned a new and reworked edition of the book published in 1664, Schotanus provided an optimistic account of Frisia's environment: the land was protected by dikes, the sea was bridled and provided nourishment for the coastal society.<sup>50</sup>

Individuals were mostly absent in these stoical accounts of losing and (re-) claiming land, but it would certainly be interesting to learn more about those 'Hans Nonsenses' and 'Claus Carefrees' and their response to Irenäus' accusations. Capturing their voices, however, is difficult. Although relatively rich compared to other early modern societies, diaries and ego-documents of coastal inhabitants of the Dutch North Sea coast are rare. And while Gerrit Caspar Schenk has suggested that the baroque topos of the unspeakable experiences which result in silences is much less prevalent in narratives of naturally induced disasters than in accounts of experiences of interpersonal violence and war for modern readers, however, many of the existing texts remain impersonal and distant.<sup>51</sup>

Resilience is, therefore, the message of these texts written to profile coastal provinces and their inhabitants in the seventeenth century. Instead of a society shocked by extraordinary storms and inundations, the picture that was painted here was that of endurance and managed response. A narrative of extreme nature induced disasters was not symptomatic of these texts. Severe floods were logged with other inundations and not overblown in mythical proportions. Working with the lie of the land in a balanced risk assessment became a characteristic feature of seventeenth-century Dutch coastal society's coping with crisis.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 2, pp. 427–28.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance; Christian Pfister, 'Learning from Nature Induced Disasters', in *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies toward a Global Environmental History*, ed. by Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 17–40. A long-term study of early modern coastal societies and their coping strategies in Northern Germany is provided by Marie Luisa Allemeyer, "*Kein Land ohne Deich ...!*". *Lebenswelten einer Küstengesellschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Resilience is an open term currently much in circulation among researchers and organizations interested in issues of social-environmental sustainability. One of those consortia, the Resilience Alliance, defines resilience as: 'The capacity of a system to absorb disturbance, undergo change and still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks.' (<http://www.resalliance.org/key-concepts>, last accessed 23 November 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Marie Luisa Allemeyer, "*Kein Land ohne Deich ...!*"; Adam Sundberg, 'Claiming the

Past: History, Memory, and Innovation Following the Christmas Flood of 1717', *Environmental History*, 20 (2015), 238–261.

<sup>5</sup> Mara Wade, 'The Fifth Horseman: Discourses of Disaster and the "Burchardi Flut" 1634', *Daphnis*, 24.2/3 (1995), 301–328.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Fuchs, 'Reformation, Tradition und Geschichte. Erinnerungsstrategien der reformatorischen Bewegung', in *Protestantische Identität und Erinnerung, Von der Reformation bis zur Bürgerrechtsbewegung in der DDR*, ed. by Joachim Eibach and Marcus Sandl (Göttingen, 2003), pp. 71–85.

<sup>7</sup> Christoph Irenäus, *Wasserspiegel* (Eisleben, 1566), B4v–5r. cited in Philipp Soergel, 'Portent, Disaster and Adaptation in Sixteenth-Century Germany', *The Medieval History Journal*, 10.1&2 (2007), 303–326.

<sup>8</sup> Sundberg, 'Claiming the past', p. 241.

<sup>9</sup> *Flutkatastrophen 1634. Natur, Geschichte, Dichtung*, ed. by Boy Hinrichs, Albert Panten, Guntram Rieken (Neumünster, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Jan Adriaansz Leeghwater, 'Nog een groot notabel droevig stuk van het hoog water in Oost landt, daar

- ik mede present geweest ben, ende in groot perykel was om myn Leven te verliezen', p. 32, in *ibid.*, *Een Kleyne Chronycke ende Voorbereydinghe van de Afkomste ende 't Vergrooten van de Dorpen van Graft ende Ryp ende Van meer Verscheyden Notable Oude Stucken ende Geschiedenissen* (Amsterdam, 1649).
- <sup>11</sup> Emmanuel van Meteren, *Commentarien ofte memorien van den Nederlandschen staet*, (pseud.: Ghedruckt op Schotland, 1609), fol. 64.
- <sup>12</sup> Johan Fruyters, *Corte beschrijvinghe van de ellendighen ende seer beclaghelycken watervloet, di op den 1 Novembris 1570 in allen landen aen de Noerdzee gelegen, is gesciet met afspoelinge van vele huysen, beesten en menschen met duysenten, op rye gestelt door Johan Fruytier, di ook geen lange jaeren hierna en leefde etc. 1571*, (Leiden, 1614); Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, *Nederlandsche Historien*, (Amsterdam, 1642), pp. 205–206.
- <sup>13</sup> Joan Jacquinet, *Princkelijke Historie etc.*, 1653, BL Add. Ms. 17.89.
- <sup>14</sup> For further details on the political use of these flood narratives see Raingard Esser, 'Fear of Water and Floods in the Low Countries', in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, ed. by William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (Manchester, 1997), pp. 62–77.
- <sup>15</sup> Emmanuel van Meteren, for instance, attributed the drowning of 72 villages in Holland, which had initially been part of the record of the Saint Elizabeth Flood of 1422 to the inundation of 1530. (*Commentarien*, fol. 64). On the recurrence of particular stories in flood narratives see Judith Pollmann, 'Of Living Legends and Authentic Tales: How to get remembered in Early Modern Europe', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 23, (2013), pp. 103–125.
- <sup>16</sup> The role of these commemorative tablets as markstones for flood memories had already been recognized by early modern contemporaries. In his *Chronique ofte Historische Geschiedenisse van Vrieslant* (Franeker, 1622) Pier Winsemius specifically mentioned a marble tablet fixed above the door of the Frisian church of Metslawier to remind the churchgoers of the All Saints Flood of 1570, which had flooded the church and had allegedly killed 1800 people in the municipality. (p. 550). For other commemorative tablets see also Marcus Petersen and Hans Rhode, *Sturmflut. Die großen Fluten an den Küsten Schleswig-Holsteins und in der Elbe*, (second edition Neumünster, 1979), p. 42.
- <sup>17</sup> For chorographies in the seventeenth-century Low Countries see Raingard Esser, *The Politics of Memory. The writing of partition in the seventeenth-century Low Countries*, (Leiden, 2012). The role of exceptionally severe floods for the creation of a regional identity has also been addressed by Martin Rheinheimer, who has alerted us to the tendency of over-exaggeration of the drama of these floodings compared to the more mundane everyday challenges of water in coastal societies. See: Martin Rheinheimer, 'Mythos Sturmflut. Der Kampf gegen das Meer und die Suche nach Identität', *Demokratische Geschichte*, 15, (2003), 9–58.
- <sup>18</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Voorreden aan den Leser, n. p. More generally, he aimed with his book to provide the province with a history outlining its glorious past.
- <sup>19</sup> arcus Zuerius Boxhorn, *Chroniick van Zeelandt*, Deel 1, p. 100. 'Nemaer, de verbolghentheyte van de Zee heeft dus niet kunnen ter neder gheset werden. De gheschiedenissen van de verlaten eeuwen gheven ons een gheduerighe vertooninghe van eenen ontemmelijcken ende onversadelijcken lust, om de landen op te suypen'. This reference to the agency of the sea was not new. In his *Tractaet van Dijkkagie*, written between 1576 and 1579, the dike engineer Andreas Vierlingh compared the sea with a roaring lion. Andreas Vierlingh, *Tractaet van Dijkkagie*, ed. by J. van Hulle, H. G. Verhoven (The Hague, 1920), p. 342.
- <sup>20</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, p. 100. 'Ick en hebbe nu niet voorghenomen te spreeken van die t'samengaende vermenichvuldighe van sonden ende plaghen, van Godts ghetarde wraecke meer by de naecomelighen, als hare voorouderen; de welke onderscheyden middelen heeft om uyt te storten de grimmicheyt van haren toren ...'.
- <sup>21</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, pp. 100–110.
- <sup>22</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, pp. 100–102.
- <sup>23</sup> This comment on earlier generations' strategy to leave the inundated land rather than fight for its reclamation is a current theme in the history of coastal societies. See also Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge van de Heerlijckbeydt van Frieslandt Tusschen 't Flie en den Lauwers*, Cap. XX, 'Van de Voornaemste Zegeningen en Plagen uit de Locht end Zee, daer mede Godt dit Landt heeft besocht van Chrystus tyden af tot op de Sassensche Regeeringe', (Franeker, 1655), p. 345.
- <sup>24</sup> The term, 'uncertain environment' has recently gained some currency in the study of historical disasters. See, for instance, *Uncertain Environments: Natural Hazards, Risk, and Insurance in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Uwe Lübken, Christof Mauch, Special Issue *Environment and History*, 17.1, (2011). There are good reasons, however, not to overstretch the use of the concept in this current context. The frequent references to the regularity of inundations and their seasonal predictability in the texts under review would qualify the amount of 'uncertainty' that coastal societies experienced in their environment.
- <sup>25</sup> Andreas Vierlingh, Jan Adriaensz. Leeghwater, Thomas van Seeratt and others wrote optimistic accounts of their abilities and technical skills thus preceding a more general rise of these texts written by engineers in the second part of the eighteenth century. See: Andreas Vierlingh, *Tractaet van Dijkkagie*, ed. by J. van Hulle, H. G. Verhoven, (The Hague 1920), Jan Adriaensz. Leeghwater, *Haarlemmermeer Boek*, (Amsterdam, 1641), Thomas van Seeratt, *Journal Van De Commies Provinciaal Thomas Van Seeratt Betref De Dijken over De Jaren 1716–1721*, 1730. Staten van Stad en Land. 1. 818. Groninger Archieven.

- <sup>26</sup> Marie Luisa Allemeyer, “*Kein Land ohne Deich ...*”.
- <sup>27</sup> Leeghwater, *Toneel ofte Beschrijvinge der Steden van Hollandt*, (Amsterdam, 1634), pp. 32–36.
- <sup>28</sup> Petra van Dam, ‘Denken over natuurrampen, overstromingen en de amfibische cultuur’, *Tijdschrift voor Waterstaatsgeschiedenis*, 21 (2012); webversie 2014, pp. 6–7.
- <sup>29</sup> Michael Kempe, “‘Mind the Next Flood!’: ‘Memories of Natural Disasters in Northern Germany from the Sixteenth Century to the Present’, *The Medieval History Journal*, 10.1&2 (2007): 327–354; Petra J. E. M. van Dam, *Denken over natuurrampen, overstromingen en de amfibische cultuur*, *Tijdschrift voor Waterstaatsgeschiedenis* 21 (2012); webversie 2014.
- <sup>30</sup> For the *Toneel* and its Latin original see Raingard Esser, *The Politics of Memory*, Chapter 7: ‘Holland: Towns and Cities in a Man-Made Land’.
- <sup>31</sup> Boxhorn, *Toneel*, pp. 28–29.
- <sup>32</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, pp. 98, 105, 107, 108. In his appraisal of the dikes, he also referred to the above-mentioned text by van Meteren, who, in Book 16 of his *Commentarien* provided a detailed survey of the Zeeland dikes, their nature and their maintenance costs. See *Commentarien*, 1609, Book 16, fol. 72v.
- <sup>33</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, n. p.
- <sup>34</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, pp. 41–55.
- <sup>35</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, pp. 49–54.
- <sup>36</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 2, pp. 426–428.
- <sup>37</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 2, p. 431.
- <sup>38</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, p. 96.
- <sup>39</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, p. 96.
- <sup>40</sup> Boxhorn, *Chroniick*, Deel 1, pp. 109–110. The same Johan Fruytiers, who gave a detailed account of the losses of the 1570s flood also mentioned the flood and north-westerly winds, which allowed for the rescue of the besieged city of Leiden in 1574. Jan Fruytiers, *Corte Beschrijvinghe van de strenghe beleggeringhe ende wonderbaerlijcke verlossinghe der Stadt Leyden in Hollandt*, (Delft, 1578), fol. 27.
- <sup>41</sup> Mattheus Smallegange *Nieuwe Cronyk van Zeeland*, (Middelburg, 1696, but published in 1700), pp. 199f. A later and abridged version of Boxhorn’s reworked study of Reygersberghen’s book published in Amsterdam in 1646 under the title *Beschryvinge van Zee-Landt* also focused on the gains and losses of the land.
- <sup>42</sup> Pierium Winsemius, *Chronique ofte Historische Geschiedenisse van Vrieslant*, (Franeker, 1622), Index, n. p.
- <sup>43</sup> Winsemium, *Chronique*, p. 20. Even one of the entries in his register emphasized this routine: “Watervloeden in Vrieslandt ghewoonlijk als de Son in Libra”.
- <sup>44</sup> Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge end Chroniick vanden Heerlickheydt van Frieslant Tusschen ’t Flie end de Lauwers*, (Franeker, 1655), Chapter XX, ‘Vande Voornaemste Zegeningen end Plagen uyt de Locht end Zee, daer mede Godt dit Landt heeft besocht van Christus tyden af tot op de Sassensche Regeeringe’.
- <sup>45</sup> Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge*, p. 344.
- <sup>46</sup> Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge*, Chapter XX, ‘Vande Voornaemste Zegeningen end Plagen uyt de Locht end Zee, daer mede Godt dit Landt heeft besocht van Christus tyden af tot op de Sassensche Regeeringe’.
- <sup>47</sup> Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge*, p. 349.
- <sup>48</sup> Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge*, p. 353.
- <sup>49</sup> Schotanus, *Beschryvinge*, p. 355.
- <sup>50</sup> Christianus Schotanus, *Beschryvinge vanden Heerlickheydt van Frieslant Tusschen ’t Flie end de Lauwers met nieuwe caerten etc.*, (n. p., 1664), ‘Toeeyginghe’, n. p. However, Schotanus went out of his way to remind his readers, that God could, at any time, turn the fertile earth back into barren land.
- <sup>51</sup> See Gerrit Jasper Schenk, ‘Lektüre im Buch der Natur. Wahrnehmung, Beschreibung und Deutung von Naturkatastrophen’, in *Geschichte Schreiben*, ed. by Susanne Rau, Birgit Studt et al. (Berlin, 2010), p. 508.

## Note on contributor

Raingard Esser is Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Groningen. She is a specialist in early modern migration and politics of memory with a particular expertise in the Low Countries and England. Her current research interests focus on early modern border identities. Among her recent publications are: *The Politics of Memory. The Writing of Partition in the Seventeenth-Century Low Countries* (2012) and, with Steven Ellis, *Frontier and Border Regions in Early Modern Europe* (2013).

Correspondence to: Prof. Dr Raingard Esser, Faculty of Arts, Early Modern History – Research Centre for Historical Studies, University of Groningen, Oude Kijk in ’t Jatstraat 26, NL-9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands. Email: r.m.esser@rug.nl