

Book review

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The Oer-IJ and Amsterdam



There is something of a vogue at the moment for presenting the history of a region in the form of an atlas. The success of this formula is indicative of a growing interest in the origins of landscape features specific to different parts of the country. The aim of the Atlas van het Oer-IJ-gebied is to explain the history of the IJ area to the people who live or work there or have a special interest in the prehistoric IJ tidal system.

The landscapes of the coastal areas along the southern shores of the North Sea evolved as a result of the interaction of natural processes and human activities. These are young landscapes where nature had free rein for a very long time, and which acquired their current form as a result of measures taken by human beings to control nature. The lowlands bordering the sea consequently display considerable diversity, with each area having its own distinctive form and particular history. All areas are unique, but the Oer-IJ area is very special indeed.

Although much is already known about the natural processes and human activities that played a crucial role in the development of the landscape diversity in the coastal area, the accessibility of that information is extremely limited. Not only is it scattered across a bewildering number of academic theses, scientific reports, professional journals and regional history publications, but it is also highly fragmented owing to the narrow disciplinary focus of the available data.

The Atlas van het Oer-IJ-gebied surveys the current state of knowledge relating to the landscape development and settlement history of the IJ area. It contains contributions from experts from a wide variety of disciplines, which a firm editorial hand has turned into very readable accounts. The editors can justly claim that this Atlas is an important key to reading the current landscape and unlocking its history.

The Oer-IJ area not only boasts a rich past but is also facing a fraught future. The pressure on land on the north side of the Randstad is immense. Living, working, nature and recreation are all vying for space there and the intensity of that battle is not expected to diminish in the coming decades. In publishing the Atlas the editors are taking a stand in this tense battlefield of competing interests in the hope of influencing the further course of that battle. Taking a stand has been rendered necessary by society's recognition of the importance of cultural heritage, which has led to cultural-historical arguments being included in deliberations on the future development of the remaining open space and in the redevelopment of already urbanised areas.

This is a tricky task for spatial planning. Thanks to the accumulation of demands for space in a steadily shrinking arena, the tensions surrounding new development plans will only increase. Ultimately, whether plans can go ahead intact or in an altered form will depend on the strength of community support. The contest for space can no longer be left to backroom specialists bartering one interest against another. This is a contest that calls for a public debate about the priorities that need to be set and the posteriorities that have to be accepted. But such a debate is only possible based on a clear and accessible summary of the current state of knowledge regarding the landscape development and settlement history. And this is what the Atlas van het Oer-IJ-gebied provides. The

editors invite the province and municipalities to use this Atlas when setting out their policy, but what is really crucial to the final result is the active involvement of a vigilant citizenry.

The Atlas begins by describing the geological prehistory of the area by way of explaining the huge diversity in soil conditions and landscape forms to be found there. Human impact is discussed next, revealing the first area of tension. The Malta Convention (1992) stipulates that research must be undertaken whenever cultural heritage is threatened by new spatial interventions and in principle that does indeed occur in the Netherlands. But archaeological soil research requires excavation and whatever has been excavated ceases to exist. In most cases further research is no longer possible and all that then remains is the documentation of the findings and the memory.

In many cases the current spatial configuration contains not a single clue as to the original position of an excavated object. This applies, for example, to the Castellum Flevum, the Roman fortifications built in two stages. The first castellum was constructed in around AD 15 and destroyed during the uprising of the Frisians in AD 28. A second castellum was built close to the site of the original one in around AD 39 only to be abandoned after the emperor Claudius decided to make the river Rhine the border of the Roman Empire in AD 47. Nevertheless, the Atlas devotes attention to the castella, and rightly so. The excavations of both sites are of international importance in connection with the formation of the border of the Imperium Romanum in the Low Countries. In this instance the national frame of reference falls short when it comes to the evaluation of cultural heritage on Dutch soil.

There is another respect in which the invisibility of archaeological heritage constitutes a planning problem. Because architectural heritage is well documented it is possible to take account of the presence of valuable cultural-historical objects during the spatial planning process, even though surprises can never be ruled out. It is quite a different story when it comes to the archaeological soil archive. There exists detailed documentation of known archaeological objects, but time and again important cultural-historical sites come unexpectedly to light. Since no one had any idea they were there, it is by definition impossible to take any account of them in the planning process. Unfortunately, this situation results in more and more emergency excavations that have to be carried out under tight time constraints and consequently without the desired meticulousness.

The historical landscape is different again. Very few people realize that the current landscape configuration is the product of a centuries-long, local settlement history. It is the familiar living environment we walk or ride through every day. It is so familiar, in fact, that we scarcely notice the changes that are occurring under our very noses. Yet the historical landscape is an essential element of the distinctive local quality of any future development of the space. Urbanization will undoubtedly go ahead in the Oer-IJ area, but what aspect of the historical landscape would we like to preserve to enrich the urbanised environment of the future? That question is usually too vaguely formulated during the preparation of spatial plans, which is why such plans have a habit of turning out badly. The blame is usually laid at the door of the planners or the administrators, but that is unfair. The real problem is the lack of public awareness of the qualities of the historical cultural landscape. That obstacle could be removed by involving local historical societies in the plan preparation and ensuring that the general tenor of their advice is taken into account as much as possible during the elaboration of the plans.

The long period covered by the Atlas (prehistory to the present day) is divided into seven sections. In each section chapters sketching the main points of the history of the landscape and its settlement are interspersed with chapters in which relevant excavations are discussed in order to shed light on the local dynamics of the occupational pattern and the development of the settlements. These chapters also focus on excavated cultural heritage objects. These tell us the regions with which the

inhabitants in the different periods maintained a trading relationship. In many instances, however, while the origin of the imported objects is known, it is unclear what local products the inhabitants might have offered in exchange. This is especially true of the earliest periods

The rich diversity of flora and fauna in the Oer-IJ area is also discussed, as is the significance of several recurring elements in the names of places, fields and areas of water. The dozen or so strongholds that stood along the inner edge of the dunes in the Middle Ages represent an atypical form of dwelling. Some still adorn the landscape, but many are ruined, dilapidated or demolished. Any remains are preserved solely in the soil archive. Because of the complex relationship with the early history of the County of Holland, Egmond abbey and castle receive special attention.

A general discussion of the medieval water management history of Noord-Holland is followed by an account of the results of excavations carried out in the context of the North/South metro line in Amsterdam. These revealed that the river Amstel was originally a minor tributary of the Oer-IJ, but that from circa 1050 BC the Rhine-Vecht system cut into that channel, turning the tidal creek into a freshwater river. Sparse finds indicate a continuous human presence in the area, but it appears to involve transients and perhaps brief, ad hoc habitation. That all changed around the year AD1000 when the first reclamation works began. Numerous farms and agricultural settlements sprang up along the Amstel, although not along the mouth of the river where it was still too wet due to poor drainage in the IJ. However, after Almeer acquired an open connection to the North Sea, a development ascribed to the exceptionally severe storm flood of 1170, it was not long before a settlement of specialist craftsmen and traders emerged at the mouth of the Amstel, the first step in the formation of the medieval city.

A distinctive feature of the current landscape of the Oer-IJ area are the remains of the large number of leafy country estates that were once to be found there, especially along the inner edge of the dunes. Equally characteristic were the many industrial and drainage windmills that started to be built in the fifteenth century. In the peatlands the drainage mills were needed to lower the water level and increase dairy production, but they were also used to reclaim the various lakes along the fringes of the Oer-IJ area. Most of those mills have since been replaced by pumping stations, but the low-lying polder land and the deep reclaimed lakes still bear witness to the strong influence of human beings on the formation of the contemporary landscape.

The great wealth of the Golden Age rested on technological innovations, an extensive trading network and close links between town and country. The development of windmill technology was initially concentrated around Alkmaar and it was only later that its focus shifted to the Zaanstreek. However, villages like Uitgeest, Akersloot, De Rijp and Graft were also very actively involved in the trading network established in the sixteenth century. Just how extensive that network was can be deduced from finds recovered from wells. But in that respect, too, the Rampjaar (Disaster Year) of 1672 seems to have been a breaking point for the Alkmaar area. Thereafter industry, trade and shipping became increasingly concentrated in the Zaanstreek while Midden-Kennemerland gradually turned into a quiet, green expanse of peatland. The explanation for this is sought in the silting up of the northern part of the Wijkermeer, which put a stop to navigation via the Krommenie, whereas the shipping lane via the Nauernasche Vaart remained in use.

The vast green landscape of Midden-Kennemerland had not always been quiet and peaceful. Much of the battle between the Counts of Holland and the West Frisians was fought there. Apart from the remains of fortresses, the memory of that time is confined to placenames identified as battlefields in the sources. The inundations that forced the Spaniards to abandon the Siege of Alkmaar in 1573 have left behind no trace, but the ruins of Egmond abbey and castle are a permanent reminder of that siege. There are more concrete reminders of the 'forgotten war' of 1799, but the threat of war is

most visible in the Stelling, Amsterdam's defence line. As the ancient adage has it, he who desires peace must prepare for war: large tracts of flooded land were supposed to keep the enemy at bay. Those areas now provide scope for nature restoration and development, but the key to the preservation of this military heritage lies in the repurposing of the imposing ring of forts built by our forebears.

The Atlas mounts a persuasive case for the Oer-IJ as an area endowed with considerable landscape diversity, numerous architectural monuments and a rich soil archive. The spatial dynamics on the north side of the Randstad mean that this cultural heritage is under constant pressure. Which government official is sufficiently knowledgeable to rise to the challenge to protect and preserve this fragile heritage, to develop and utilise it in an appropriate manner? In publishing this Atlas, Stichting Oer-IJ offers itself as a guardian of this process.

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