

1. Introduction

The privilege of the lord to demand servile works from his subjects is often considered one of the hallmarks of lordship in the past.¹ The right to such *corvées* is often portrayed as a form of pure surplus extraction from which no other party except the lord benefited. In theory, the rights of the lord to command such works lasted until the end of the Ancien Régime. In the southern Low Countries, servile works were officially abolished in 1795 when French revolutionary legislation was implemented. However, many historians have shown that during the late middle ages the power of the lord to command such works had already weakened substantially. In the early modern period, only a minority of lords could still command free labour from their subjects. By the late medieval period, the labour market was freed from any feudal or seigniorial constraints (de Vries 1992, 56). A survey executed in the Duchy of Brabant in 1753, for example, shows that only seven percent of the seigneuries could claim servile works. At that time, servile works had become the exception and only a small minority of the population was subject to labour services (Scheelings 1990, 197-99). Therefore, the economic importance of servile labour during the late medieval and early modern period was probably negligible. There are many reasons why the right to servile works of the lords weakened during the late middle ages. When lords progressively abandoned direct exploitation of their demesnes, such servile works became useless. Also, there are many indications that the quality and speed of the work executed by seigneurial subjects was inferior to waged labour. The right of the lord to command such works was also increasingly curtailed by territorial rulers and states. In the second half of the fourteenth century, the count of Flanders actively halted aggressive lords who tried to impose or extend seigneurial rights (De Waele 2022). With particular reference to labour services the duke of Brabant enacted restrictions at the start of the fifteenth century (Willems 1843, 720-21). Next to these general measures, territorial rulers also intervened in local conflicts to protect peasantries from aggressive lords trying to extort free labour from their subjects. In 1431, for example, Philip the Good forbade the lord of Valkenburg to exact labour services from the inhabitants of Oud-Valkenburg (Janssen de Limpens 1977, 635-36). As in early modern France, the central government in the Southern Low Countries also shielded rural communities from

¹ Throughout this chapter, the terms ‘labour services’ and ‘(servile) works’ are used interchangeably.

heavy labour services imposed by local lords (for France see Gransagne 2015). In the second half of the seventeenth century in particular, the central government of the Spanish Netherlands intervened to limit the exactions of lords. The possession of a seignery as such did not entitle lords to labour services. Servile works could only be demanded if they were included in the description of the seignery (Reglement 1672, art. 54). An instruction from 1700 even stated that only lords that possessed specific legal titles relating to labour services could command such works.² Such state interventions limited the options of the lord to demand labour services.

This paper does not dispute the claim that labour services were gradually eroded and even disappeared in most seigneuries during the late medieval and early modern period in the Southern Low Countries. However, in some seigneuries servile works persisted until the end of the eighteenth century. Lords aiming to safeguard their claim to servile works were obliged to maintain an impeccable administration of those customary services. This diligent record-keeping has resulted in the preservation of exceptional archival material. In this paper we turn our attention to a number of well-documented lordships where peasantries continued to execute servile works for the lord. As we will show, labour services in such communities survived because they were compensated by the lord. Peasantries agreed to work for the lord because they were remunerated for their work. By way of close reading of manorial customs and descriptions of lordly rights we are able to reconstruct these compensation mechanisms in some detail. Documentary sources such as manorial customs frequently record the rights of the lord in some detail. Such descriptions indicate that many lordly rights had been subject to negotiation and even compensation. For example, on certain days of the year, the inhabitants of Rahier had to hand over the morning milk produced by their cows. In exchange for the produce of their cows, the subjects of the lord of Rahier obtained the right to fish (with their hands or equipped with rods) in the water streams of the seignery (Poncelet et. al. 1958, 281). This type of contractual exchange was typical of late medieval seigneuries. The lord received part of the produce of the peasantries and in exchange offered them use rights on his private properties. As we will show, the performance of servile works was often embedded in similar exchanges.

The Belgian historian Léo Verriest concluded that labour services in late medieval and early modern Hainaut constituted an unpleasant burden imposed by the lordly class on the rural population (Verriest 1917, 228). He based this conclusion on a number of well-documented conflicts between lords and peasantries. To a large extent, such a view is shaped by the available documentation. The archival paper trail of peasants refusing to perform labour services is more elaborate than those faithfully meeting the labour demands of their lords. Resistance and refusal by peasantries are often much better documented than compliance and obedience. An analysis of the customs offers a more nuanced and representative picture of peasant-lord relations in the past. Customs were the result and outcome of a bargaining process between lords and their subjects. Customs listed and described the rights and obligations of both lords and peasantries and therefore constitute the best source to reconstruct the realities of their relationship in the past. In this paper, we use the rich and detailed

² State Archives Ghent (SAG), *Collection Varia II*, nr. 263: fol. 419r-v.

information embedded in the customs to reconstruct the relation between lords and peasantries through the lens of labour services. In the first section of the paper, we discuss the options of the rural populations to escape servile works by way of commutation. The second section of the paper focuses on the limitations imposed by custom on the mobilization and execution of servile works. The third part of the paper analyses the various ways through which seigneurial subjects were compensated and remunerated by their lords for the labour they supplied³.

2. Commutation of servile works

During the late middle ages, the type of services as well as the work volume a lord could claim from his subjects was restricted. In most lordships, households owed the lord less than five days of work per annum or a specified work volume (such as mowing a meadow). The type of work subjects of the lord were required to execute could vary. In most cases, the works related to mowing grass or spreading manure on demesne land, sometimes supplemented with transport services to haul peat or firewood. The works were often divided between those inhabitants that possessed horses and carts and those who could only perform manual labour (Lambrecht 2019; Verriest 1917). The former were primarily mobilized to perform transport and carting services, whereas the latter engaged in a variety of tasks. In the south of Belgium in particular, transporting stones from the lord's quarry can be encountered in a number of customs. Exceptionally, lords used their labour services to fish their ponds (Poncelet et. at. 1958, 81) or to assist him during the hunting season (Génicot and Allard 1981, 593). The customs of Wanne from 1464 include the infamous peasant obligation to stir the ponds when the local lord (in this case the abbot of Stavelot) resided in the village. Stirring the pond disturbed and silenced the croaking frogs that would otherwise disturb the night's rest of the abbot of Stavelot (Poncelet, Yans and Hansotte 1958, 370).⁴

By the late middle ages, labour services in the majority of seigneuries could be converted to payment in cash. In many descriptions of labour services, the specific rates charged by the lord were also recorded. The reference to specific rates charged by lords to redeem labour services is not without significance because it meant that peasantries were offered the choice between either the execution of works or the payment of a redemption fee. In most cases, the commutation fee paid by each household was determined by their social and economic background and the type of work they had to perform for the lord. Those who owed work with their horses were constantly charged higher redemption fees compared to labourers, although the differences could be small. The customs of Ogy and Isières from 1234 record a redemption fee of 5 *denari* for a common labourer whereas a four-horse team had to be acquitted for the sum of 18 *denari* (Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 384). On one of

³ In this paper, we use the terms «compensation» and «remuneration» in the specific context of labour services: goods, services and/or rights provided by the lord in direct exchange for corvée labour, but in a non-wage labour market context.

⁴ This particular labour service did not extend to all inhabitants of the seignery, but was restricted to the owners of specific plots of land listed in the customs.

the estates of the abbey of Lobbes horse-owners and labourers paid nine and six *denari* respectively to redeem one of their works (Génicot and Allard 1968, 443). In the seignury of Kalken, labourers and horse owners could redeem their works owed to the lord for 2 and 3 *groten* respectively (De Potter and Broeckaert 1889, 19). The social and economic background of the inhabitants, and the possession of horses in particular, usually determined the fee. An exception to this rule is found in Lorcé where the customs of 1506 made a distinction between men and women. Here, women were charged half the redemption fee of a man (Poncelet at. Al. 1958, 179). The decision to pay the fee or execute the work resided usually with the peasantry. In Ragnies, the inhabitants could decide on the day if they preferred to perform the labour service or redeem their works by way of a monetary compensation (Génicot and Allard 1981, 684).

In addition to the yearly and individual payment of fees, there were other ways how labour rents were commuted into cash. Commutations could be temporary or permanent, apply to a collectivity or individual and financed by recurrent or one-off payments. The charter granted by a lord from Hainaut to the inhabitants of his seignury in 1338 constitutes an interesting example of the permanent and collective commutation of labour services obtained with a one-off payment. After obtaining permission from the count of Hainaut, Wautier of Enghien freed all the inhabitants of his seignury (extending to the villages of Herne, Tollembeek and Sint-Pieters-Kapelle) from existing labour services. The nature and frequency of these works are not detailed in the document, but they applied to labourers and those who owned carts and horses. According to the lord, he liberated the inhabitants of this burden to stimulate the growth and development (*«l'accroissement et multipliances»*) of these settlements. However, the noble intentions of the lord for his seignury came at a price. In return for the permanent and collective abolishment of labour services, the inhabitants of the seignury had paid Wautier the hefty amount of 300 lb. *tournois* (Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 244-46). In this particular case, the local population agreed to buy off the right of the lord to claim labour services in perpetuity. From the perspective of the lord, such a permanent commutation financed by a one-off sum could be an interesting proposal. If the labour services had little economic value to the lord or, perhaps more relevant in this case - if a lord urgently needed cash - the commutation was an attractive proposal. The outcome of this transaction was a weakened seignury, but on the other hand this lord had successfully transformed his annual labour rent into capital that could be deployed elsewhere.

However, in most cases lords did not transform labour rent into capital, but to money rent. Such commutations could have a permanent character and apply to individual holdings (and subsequently to the households who leased or exploited these holdings). For example, an estate owned by the leprosy of Geraardsbergen located within the seignury of Boelare was exempted from labour services in 1404. The lord of Boelare commuted this labour rent owed by the estate of the leprosy into an annual money rent of 3 lb. *parisis* payable at Christmas (De Portemont 1870: 281). The conversion of labour rent into money rent could also have a temporary and collective character. As late as 1666, the inhabitants of a seignury located in the parishes of Michelbeke and Sint-Maria-Oudenhove agreed to pay the lord an annual fee of 80 guilders for the duration of three years. In exchange for this fee, the lord

renounced all his rights to labour services for a period of three years.⁵ Finally, there are also examples of temporary and individual commutations of labour services. In 1774, the lord of Boelare offered his subjects the opportunity to commute their works into cash for a period of eighteen years. Those who owned horses could redeem their works with an annual fee of 21 stuiver per horse. Common labourers were charged 4 stuiver annually to liberate themselves from the execution of servile works.⁶ The latter case is particularly interesting because the documentation produced by the steward of the lord not only signals the commutation of labour services well into the eighteenth century, but also sheds light on some unknown complexities concerning labour services in the past. First, the notebooks of the steward make it clear that the organisation of labour services required documentary supervision and organisation. In this particular case, the steward had to keep track of individual redemption payments by one part of the population and the execution of works by another part. Such operations could result in elaborate accounts. As inhabitants of the seignury passed away or emigrated, this required adjustments in the lord's administration. Immigrants had to be registered. The works and fees owed by each individual household could also change over time as household units were merged or separated. Also, the works owed to the lord could change as a result of upward or downward social mobility. The account books of Boelare showcases the many complexities the administration of the lord could experience in keeping the labour services or redemption fees up to date. Importantly, the accounts of Boelare also indicate that the preferences among rural households to execute were far from uniform. Although we do not know the exact numbers, it is clear that not all inhabitants preferred to commute their works. Moreover, the documentation from Boelare also shows that the preferences of individual households to pay the fee or execute the works, could change over time. For example, Joseph Schollaert, owner of two horses, entered the agreement with the lord in 1774 and annually paid the redemption fee of two *guilders* and two *stuiver* until 1780. From 1781 to 1785, Schollaert preferred to execute his works. From 1786, he paid the redemption fee again. There are many other examples of individual households that switched between the performance of works and the payment of a fee. For example, after the death of her husband, a widow decided to perform the works and no longer pay the redemption fee. Pieter van der Beken was registered as a labourer and paid the redemption fee but when he came into the possession of a horse, he changed from paying the fee to executing the works, albeit briefly. All these individual cases are highly instructive because they indicate that the preferences of households to pay redemption fees or execute works could vary and were not uniform. The decision to pay or work was probably influenced by many factors such as the size and composition of the household, access to cash or income to pay the fee, the animal/land ratio on individual holdings and so on. In other words, the documentation for Boelare indicates that multiple reasons probably governed the decisions of individual households to redeem their works by way of labour or cash.

⁵ SAG, *Land van Zottegem*, nr. 4623.

⁶ SAG, *Archives de Cassina*, nr. 145-146.

3. Executing servile works

In the event that lords and their subjects preferred to execute the works rather than commute them into cash, labour services were subject to very detailed instructions and regulations regarding their mobilization and execution. Much more than the central state legislation, the local customs sought to protect the subjects of the lord from exploitation. The many restrictions imposed by local customs on the execution of labour services reflect the relative strong position of the peasant population during the late middle ages. The customs protected the population from labour extortions by the lord in a number of ways. Documents recording local customs restricted the periods in which the lord could claim works. By the thirteenth century, the lord could not claim works during the busy harvest period. The exclusion of the harvest months indicates that pressing agricultural activities had preference over the lord's demand for helping hands on his estate (Verriest 1917). Also, the lord had to respect specific procedures and time frames when he wanted to mobilize the works owed by the inhabitants of the seigneurie. The lord had to announce the days on which he expected the works to be executed in advance. This could be done by the lord himself or his representative. In the latter case, this could be a seigneurial officer but also a tenant farmer (Janssen de Limpens 1977, 197; Gennevoise 1929: 161-2). In some cases, the local aldermen had to agree to the timing proposed by the lord for the execution of the works (Génicot and Allard 1968, 215). The fourteenth-century customs of Sébourg are exceptionally detailed in this regard as they even recorded the specific words the lord's officer had to use when claiming works owed by the local horse-owners: *«il vous convient demain venir à le coruées»* (Verriest 1946, 295). The period between the notification by the lord and the execution of works varied between seigneuries. In Lompret (1514) the time frame was rather short as the lord had to notify the inhabitants only three days in advance (Verriest 1946, 261). The lord of Donstiennes (1503) enjoyed exceptional flexibility as he could mobilize the works with only one day's notice (Génicot and Allard 1968, 215). In Heusden, on the contrary, the lord had to notify the inhabitants three weeks in advance (Havenith 1900: 343)! The customs of Trith and Maing went as far as to enumerate the specific weeks and weekdays on which the lord had to announce his works (Verriest 1946: 53-4). Failure to respect these customary procedures and time frames gave the subjects of the lord a valid reason not to execute the works. In most cases, the location where the lord announced his works was the parish church. In case of extensive seigneuries, the works were announced in multiple churches (Génicot and Allard 1981, 684). Servile works needed to be claimed each year and could not be accumulated. As is clear from the customs of Ecaillon (1451), if the lord did not claim his works, the population was exempt from labour services for that year (Gennevoise 1939, 30). The customs of Herchies and Sébourg specifically state that works unclaimed by the lord could not be accumulated or transferred to the next year (Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 225; Verriest 1946, 295). Individuals summoned by the lord could send a replacement to execute the work. Also, failure to show up for work on the designated day did not immediately result in sanctioning. Many customs, such as those from late thirteenth-century Elesmes, offered the peasantries the option to

postpone the execution of work for the lord with one day before they were sanctioned (Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 127-28).

Customs also determined the length of the working day which in most cases started with sunrise and ended at sunset (see for example Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 65). The agreement between the lord and inhabitants of the seigneurie of Herchies from 1275 stated that they should be able to return home before dark on days when they worked for the lord (Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 225). Some customs also made arrangements for adverse weather conditions and their impact on the completion of labour services. If the hay harvest was interrupted by rain in Soiron, the workers could return home. However, they were expected to resume work the next day on the exact hour they left the previous day in order to complete their day's work (Janssen de Limpens 1977, 197).

Details about the location of works were particularly important when labour services were expressed in tasks rather than days. For example, in the case of hay works, the customs and other documents frequently identify the specific meadows on which these works had to be executed. The hay works owed by the inhabitants of Herzele had to be executed on two meadows identified by their toponyms (Jansen-Sieben 1975: 8). The meadows that had to be mowed by the inhabitants of Donstiennes were simply named after the works themselves (*«les preits que l'on dit les preits de corouvées»*; see Génicot and Allard 1968, 215). Also, in the absence of toponyms, the specific meadows where the work was to be executed were recorded and described in detail (Diericx 1821, 120). In Fontaine-Valmont the customs limit the hay works to a meadow called *«le Gravière»* and explicitly mention that only on this named plot of land hay works had to be executed (*«et nient ailheurs»*, see Génicot and Allard 1968, 277; other example in Génicot and Allard 1981, 684). Such details about the locations where works had to be executed were important additions because they effectively restricted the works to specific plots of land and thereby limited the volume of work a lord could claim from his subjects.

In most cases, there was an implicit assumption that the works had to be carried out within the territory of the seigneurie. In other words, there were limitations on how far peasantries were expected to travel to execute these works. In Sébourg, the population was able to negotiate that they should be able to return to their homes before sunset from their work locations (Verriest 1946, 295). Such clauses effectively limited the distance lords could make their subjects travel to engage in servile works. The lord of Zaventem and Sterrebeek declared in 1386 that his subjects did not mind to transport his grains within a distance of 3,5 miles from the seigneurie.⁷ Older customs, such as those for Vicq and Escautpont (1238) offered the lord more options and flexibility with respect to the deployment of servile works. In these two seigneuries, the lord was able to send his subjects outside the village to execute work and even keep them there overnight (Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 539). In most cases, however, the lord could not force his subjects to travel large distances to execute servile works.

Depending on the specific type of work that needed to be executed, the customs also contain details about the tools and equipment peasantries were expected to bring

⁷ State Archives Belgium (SAB), *Archives de Boisschot*, nr. 23.

along with them. Already in 1258, the customs of Covin stated that inhabitants summoned to do work at the lord's mill were expected to bring the necessary tools to execute their work («porter hostil pour besogner», see Géricot and Allard 1968, 144). In the customs of Boussu-en-Fagne (1454 and 1579), the inhabitants were required to bring the necessary tools to assist with work on the lord's mill or clean the local waterways (Géricot and Allard 1968, 50 and 52). In Fosse (1561), the widows tasked with looking after the horses and oxen that performed carting services had to be equipped with a sickle and small wooden rod to, respectively, cut green fodder and chase away the flies bothering the animals (Poncelet et. at. 1958, 80). The same set of customs also lists the equipment each worker had to bring to fish the pond of the lord (Poncelet et. at. 1958, 81).

The many details in the customs about the execution of servile works reflect the successful attempts by peasantries to limit and restrict the lord's power to extract labour rent from his subjects. By the late middle ages, seigneurial subjects agreed to work for the lord but they did so mainly on their own terms. The details enumerated in the customs, therefore, are testament to the strong bargaining position of late medieval rural populations in the Low Countries. However, the strong position of the peasantries is not only exemplified by the many restrictions imposed on the lord. The late medieval customs also indicate that in most cases, seigneurial subjects were compensated and remunerated for these servile works.

4. Remuneration of labour services

One of the main characteristics of labour services in the Southern Low Countries is that those who worked for the lord were, more often than not, in some way compensated for their work. Similar forms of compensation schemes also existed in other European countries. In many French regions, for example, the lord had to provide food for his labourers and fodder for their horses or oxen (Gransagne 2015, 51-53). This compensation or remuneration could take different forms and shapes. Some forms of remuneration, such as food rations, could be claimed individually by each worker. Others, such as pasture rights, were shared by the community. In this section of the paper, we explore the variety and meaning of the various remuneration packages peasants were able to obtain from lords in exchange for their labour. Although there are many references to compensations for labour services, remuneration in cash for labour services was quite rare in the Southern Low Countries. In Donstiennes (1503) each plough team received a monetary compensation of 3 *deniers* on servile work days. The monetary compensation only extended to households with a plough team as labourers who were mowing the meadows of the lord did not receive monetary compensation (Géricot and Allard 1968, 215). In the seigneurie of Bergen op Zoom, those who transported the fuel of the lord were also given a small monetary compensation (Moll 1915, 127-28). Overall, however, customs that include monetary payment for servile work constitute a small minority. Other forms of remuneration appear more frequently in late medieval customs. This is why we make a clear distinction between seigneurial compensation

or remuneration for servile labour on the one hand, and more market oriented wage labour on the other hand.

4.1 Food

The most common form of compensation for labour services consisted of food. The oldest references to food rations as remuneration for servile works date from the early thirteenth century. The customs of Salesches from 1202 state that during the three servile works executed for the abbey of Maroilles, the inhabitants would receive one meal per day (*«victum semel in die quo laboraverit ab ecclesias accepturustræ»*; Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 468). Another early example of customs with references to food rations comes from Montignies-sur-Sambre (1253). Here, the customs state that when the meadows of the lord surrounding his manor were mowed using servile works, the lord had to feed the workers (*«li sires doit doner a maingier»*; Cauchies and Thomas 2005, 372). The uniquely detailed customs of the seigneurie of Saint-Amand compiled between 1265 and 1271 state that each haymaker received a bread cake (*«mattielle»*) worth one *«maille»*. These customs explicitly mention that this food allowance was given to compensate the workers for the use of their tools (Meijers and Salverda de Grave 1934: 47). By the third quarter of the thirteenth century the description of food rations becomes quite detailed and elaborate in some customs. In the customs of Scheldewindeke (c. 1280) a distinction was made between the food rations for those who assisted during the hay harvest and those engaged in loading and spreading manure. Also, this is the oldest set of customs that contains details about the timing of the distribution of food to workers (Berten 1906, 272; for the dating see Heirbaut 1997). A distinction in food rations depending on the type of work is also recorded in the customs of Couvin from 1301 (Génicot and Allard 1968, 148). After 1200, a growing number of customs contain explicit references to food rations. Quite possibly, the provision of food by the lords during servile works was becoming more frequent in the course of the thirteenth century (Lambrecht 2019, 145). Also, the explicit refusal recorded in the customs of Vicq and Escaupont (1238) to supply food to those who performed servile works (*«en ces corowées, quant il les font, li sires ne leur doit nul despens»*; see Cauchies and Antoine 2005: 540), could suggest that the distribution of food rations had become a standard practice and common expectation by that time. In any case, after the thirteenth century, the provision of food by the lord was widespread within the Southern Low Countries. In most descriptions of labour services from the late medieval and early modern period there is an explicit reference to the provision of food by the lord or his representative. Some customs (Presles, 1405) even explicitly state that the provision of food was considered a form of payment or reward (*«redevanche»*) for the labour services (Génicot and Allard 1981, 651).

Some customs only state that the lord owed the inhabitants who executed work some compensation in food without specifying the type of food (Poncelet et. al. 1958, 104). However, as the description of labour services in Veulen stated, the food rations had to be fair (*«redelike costs»*), meaning that they should be in accordance with the

work executed or on par with what workers commonly expected when they worked (Domsta 1970, 145). Whereas most lords offered their subjects food during servile works, some restrictions also applied. For example, the estate of Bijgaarden only supplied food to the workers when the fields were manured. No compensation was provided when workers were mobilized to cut hay or dig ditches. On these days, the description from 1439 states, the workers had to work at their own cost.⁸ In many cases, there was a distinct logic that accounted for differences in the provision of food. In general, work and activities that required more physical effort or caloric consumption were compensated with higher food rations. In Couvin, construction and repair work at the lord's mill and forestry work were compensated by a bread ration valued at four *tournois*. The men that carted the grain of the lord received only two *tournois* of bread. Next to the food ration, the number of meals could also reflect differences in physical effort. Those who were loading and spreading manure in Scheldewindeke probably burned more calories per day than those engaged in hay works. Therefore, the former were given two meals per day (noon and evening) whereas the latter only received one piece of bread at noon (Berten 1906, 272). The food rations also mirrored existing social and economic inequalities. In Fontaine-Valmont the owners of horse teams could expect the same meals as those served in the manor when they were executing their works. If they sent their servants, however, these were only entitled to 2,5 pieces of bread and a pittance of cheese (Génicot and Allard 1968, 277). Some customs adopted more rustic assessments of the quantities of bread that had to be supplied. The customs Francorchamps (1543) specified that the bread given to each labourer should have the same size as the wheel of a plough (*«ung pain de la grandeur de la rolette de l'arren»*; see Poncelet et. al. 1958, 98).

In Neufchateau, the late medieval customs not only recorded the frequency (two times per day) and type (bread and cheese) of meals, but also the exact hours when those working for the lord could expect these meals (Janssen de Limpens 1977: 305). In Boussu the customs even stipulated that the inhabitants could lawfully walk away from their work (*«raller sans plus avant faire corvées»*) if the lord failed to offer them food at the designated hours (Verriest 1917, 222). In Mont-sur-Marchienne, the mid fourteenth-century customs state that failure to supply a loaf of bread of a certain value resulted in the temporary immunity of the inhabitants to specific fines imposed by the lord (Génicot and Allard 1981: 539). The customs of Presles and Boussu-en-Fagne even contain a description of to the specific locations where the inhabitants would receive their food. In Presles (1405) this was the meadow where the works had been performed whereas in Boussu-en-Fagne (1454) a plot of grassland was designated as the customary location (Génicot and Allard 1968, 50 and 1981, 651). The attention to detail in these customs strongly suggests that the food rations were important to the subjects of the lord and had been the subject of intense negotiation.

The most detailed description of the provisioning of food by a lord during servile works was recorded by the lord of Dadizele circa 1480 (see Buylaert and Haemers 2016 for this exceptional document). The description applied in particular to the days when the inhabitants of his seigneurie assisted him in loading, carting and spreading manure on demesne land. The breakfast consisted of bread, sweet milk, butter and

⁸ SAB, *Archives de Boïsschot*, nr. 23.

baked tripe. At lunch, the workmen were offered bread, bacon, peas, meat, cheese and beer. When work ceased in the evening, everybody received a small piece of bread and cheese. Throughout the day, cheap beer was provided to the workmen (Kervyn de Lettenhove 1850, 143-44). Compared to other lordships, the quantity and quality of food provided by the lord of Dadizele was very copious. Also, unlike many of his contemporaries, this lord treated all categories of workers - labourers and horse owners – on an equal footing as there was no differentiation in the food rations. No wonder this lord lamented about the high costs attached to providing meals for his workmen. In the seigneurie of Herzele the annual cost of feeding the servile workers was estimated to be circa 8 lb. *parisis* in the 1470's (Lambrecht 2019, 145). This was the equivalent of circa 50 daily wages of a common labourer. The high costs attached to providing meals might have caused some lord to scale back on the food rations. This happened in Lalaing, where the daily food ration dropped from three loaves to one loaf of bread between 1300 and 1506 (Verriest 1946, 16).

In most descriptions of food rations, there are no explicit references to drink. Probably, drinks, and beer in particular, would have been included in the meals offered by the lord. The provision of wine for workers was truly exceptional and only encountered in one set of customs from the region of Stavelot. In Clotten (1521) some inhabitants owed the abbey of Stavelot the transport of eight cartloads of firewood annually. Possibly, these relatively heavy labour services were compensated by more expensive food rations. In this case, the owners of the carts were each entitled to a fixed wine ration (2,5 quarters) accompanied by cheese worth 6 *denari*. The lord, apparently, could not guarantee these rations as the customs state that if due to unforeseen circumstances only soup could be offered (in lieu of wine and cheese), they could not protest (Poncelet et. al. 1958, 41). In the region of Stavelot, there are also references to the provision of milk to young mothers. In Lorcé, women who carried their infants to the fields could interrupt servile work three times a day to suckle their children. If the mother lived close to the work site, she could even travel home three times a day to feed her child. The lord, however, also had the option to task a young girl (*'mesquine'*) with the care of the infant so the mother could work uninterrupted. In this case, the lord also had to provide the milk to feed the child (Poncelet, Yans and Hansotte 1958, 180). In the neighbouring seigniorie of Stoumont, the lord equally had to provide milk for the infant children (*'du leccavey pour repaisse, ressaissier ou réfectionner son enfant'*) of female workers who took their offspring to work (Poncelet, Yans and Hansotte 1958, 346).

Although most customs record the delivery of food to peasantries, some rural communities were able to extend the provision of food to their working animals. The lord of Lompriet had to supply a sack of oats to each horse that turned up for work ((Verriest 1946, 261). The customs of Fontaine-Valmont from the fourteenth century state that the lord had to provide forage to the horses in the same manner as he fed «his own horses (*'oteilz frais comme a siens'*»; Génicot and Allard 1968, 277). The lord of Dadizele ensured a constant supply of hay for the horses of his subjects during servile works.

As these many examples indicate, the provision of food by the lord seems to have been a standard practices in many lordships from the late middle ages. Workers did not receive a traditional wage, but were compensated for the calories they

expended when working for the lord. The many details about the quality and quantity of the food and the timing and location of food distributions indicate that peasantries expected some compensation for the work executed for the lord. In the case no food was provided by the lord, other compensation schemes can be encountered.

4.2 Common resources and use rights

In June 1440 the abbey of Saint-Peter (Ghent) reached an agreement with the inhabitants of Dikkele over the execution of certain labour services, in particular the five plough works owed to the leaseholder of the abbey.⁹ Possibly, there had been a longstanding conflict about these labour services as the leaseholder had already complained to the abbey two decades earlier about the late and substandard execution of the plough works (Thoen 1988: 473). The agreement from 1440 records how two individuals, Jan de Witte and Jan Van Haelst, had taken the lead in in the refusal to execute the plough works. Although they did not challenge the legality of these works, their arguments to withhold these works focused on the non-execution of existing customary (and non-written) arrangements. Amongst them, the abbey had failed to keep a bull and boar for communal use at their estate in Dikkele. As part of the agreement that would end the discord, the abbey agreed to supply their estate with a bull and boar that was entitled to roam throughout the community (*«gaende int ghemeene»*). This passage in the agreement from 1440 refers to a much older and widespread practice that was typically encountered in the county of Flanders. Whereas in many other regions the provision of communal male animals fell upon the owners of the tithes, in Flanders the local lord was expected to supply communal animals.

However, not all descriptions of communal animals can be explicitly linked to the execution of labour services. In the customs of Scheldewindeke, for example, the servile works and communal animals are described separately and therefore the provision of communal animals cannot be connected directly to compensation for labour services. In Zwijnaarde, the section about the communal animals is directly preceded by a description of the works owed to the lord and therefore suggests a clear link.¹⁰ In the description of the seigneurie of Herzele, the provision of a bull and boar by the lord is explicitly related to the performance of servile works by all the inhabitants of the seigneurie (Jansen-Sieben 1975, 8). The description of a fief located in Merelbeke and Lemberg (1461) records that the fief holder was entitled to hay works and in exchange supplied both these communities with a bull and boar. Also, in the description of a lordship in Lede from 1430 the provision of a bull and boar by the lord is explicitly linked to servile works (De Raadt 1901, 512-13). Most of the arrangements between lords and peasants concerning the provision of male animals concerned bulls and boar. Only occasionally did these agreements also include stallions. This was the case in Zwijnaarde where the lord had to supply the unusual

⁹ SAG, *Abbey of Saint-Pieter (1st series)*, nr. 1701.

¹⁰ SAG, *Abbey of Saint-Peter (1st series)*, nr. 1173bis.

combination of a bull, boar and stallion.¹¹ A description of a fief located in the village of Desselgem, consisting of the local office of *meier* and a farm of circa 21 hectares, records that the fief holder had to supply – upon request of the inhabitants - a stallion to inseminate the local mares (*«omme de merien te springhenes»*). In exchange for this service, the inhabitants of this fief were required to mow a number of designated meadows situated along the river Leie (Diericx 1821, 120). So, at least in some seigneuries, male reproduction animals were explicitly and directly viewed as a compensation for labour services.

The communal animals supplied by the lord (or others exerting seigneurial rights) enjoyed a specific and privileged legal status as they were not subject to the customary rules about stray animals and damage to property and crops. The communal animals, unlike most other domesticated animals, could roam the entire territory of the seignury without consideration for private boundaries (*«al theerscap dueren»*, see de Limburg-Stürum s.d., 198). In Zwijnaarde, the communal bull, boar and stallion were equally not restricted to the demesne of the lord but could roam the entire parish (*«al de prochie dor gaendes»*)¹². The customs of Scheldewindeke state that the owner of the communal bull and boar could not be held accountable for any damage inflicted on property and crops. The inhabitants could gently chase away the bull and boar from their land if they caused damage, but were not able to constrain them physically (as was customary with other animals) or cause them any physical harm. These late thirteenth-century customs seem to suggest that the inhabitants had to bring the female animals to the location where bull and boar were present and could not lead them to their farmyards to inseminate their cows and sows (Berten 1906, 185). In the village of Wambeek, on the other hand, inhabitants could lead the communal bull and boar to their farmsteads, but had to return them to the original location once the animals finished their job. Also, whilst under their individual care, the inhabitants remained responsible for all damage caused by the bull or boar (Strubbe 1963, 272). The services provided by the communal animals were free of charge for the local population. In the description of the seignury of Zwijnaarde from the early fourteenth century, the lord explicitly acknowledged that he would not charge anything to his subject for making use of his bull, boar and stallion.¹³

Although seigneurial documents represented such communal animals sometimes as a service to the community, their presence in rural communities was often the result of negotiations about compensation for labour services. For peasantries, such form of compensation made sound economic sense. In particular for small farmers, the maintenance of male animals could be expensive as their use was mostly restricted to inseminate female animals. Male animals required fodder and space to pasture. Also, uncastrated male animals were more difficult and dangerous to manage and supervise. The provision of male animals by the lord as communal animals effectively enabled small farmers to cut costs. The male animals of the lord enabled peasantries to reproduce their livestock, but they did not have to bear the full cost of

¹¹ SAG, *Abbey of Saint-Peter (1st series)*, nr. 1173bis.

¹² SAG, *Abbey of Saint-Peter (1st series)*, 1173bis.

¹³ SAG, *Abbey of Saint-Peter (1st series)*, 1173bis.

reproduction. For the peasantries, offering limited volumes of work in exchange for continuous and free access to the lord's animals was a small price to pay.

In addition to communal animals communities bargained with their lords for access to pasture, especially in the southern parts of the Low Countries. In Lalaing the customs from 1300 state that, in exchange for the works performed by the inhabitants, the lord granted use rights in perpetuity on two plots of land. Here, the inhabitants could not only pasture their horses, but also cut and collect the vegetation for domestic use (Verriest 1946, 16). In Seraing (1421) and Embourg (1428) the inhabitants had to assist the lord with hay works, but as compensation they could pasture their animals on the meadows of the lord after the hay had been carted (Daris 1885, 68 and 100). In Harvaing, the three works owed by the inhabitants to the count of Hainaut were compensated with pasture rights in the village (extending one league in all directions; see Verriest 1917, 224-25). In some cases, restrictions applied to the duration of such rights. According to the fifteenth-century customs of Neufchâteau, the inhabitants were expected to perform hay works on a meadow called *Gros Pré* and, in addition to food, were also entitled to pasture their cattle on the said meadow for two to three days after the hay harvest (Janssen de Limpens 1977, 305). In Presles, the inhabitants could send their cattle to pasture on the meadow they had worked, but only after Christmas (Génicot and Allard 1981, 651). Compensation under the form of pasture rights typically concerned meadows and grassland and only rarely extended to arable land. The only example comes from Dikkele where in 1440 the abbey of Saint-Peter granted pasturing rights on their arable land as part of compensation for plough works. Here too, restrictions applied with respect to the timing of such rights.¹⁴ The high value rural communities placed on pasture rights and pasture spaces is also evidenced by the negotiations concerning seigneurial taxes. In the county of Hainaut, for example, multiple rural communities agreed to fixed annual seigneurial taxes in exchange for pasture rights and access to the land owned by the lord (Verriest 1917, 198-99). As with communal animals, peasantries exchanged labour for communal resources. In this case, they were compensated for their works by use rights on land exclusively owned by the lord.

4.3 Exemptions and monopolies

One final category of compensation for labour services consists of specific exemptions or monopolies granted by lords. In the thirteenth century, the inhabitants of Mairieux had been able to obtain freedom from tolls in the nearby city of Maubeuge in exchange for transport works for the count of Hainaut (Verriest 1917, 225). In 1413, the inhabitants of Ponth agreed to perform works for the lord but as compensation the lord liberated them from the obligation to use the demesne mill (Janssen de Limpens 1965, 94-95). In both cases, the peasantries were able to obtain fiscal exemptions in exchange for labour. In addition to exemptions, rural communities were also bargaining for specific monopolies as the case of Bergen op Zoom illustrates. The seignery of Bergen op Zoom was one of the largest

¹⁴ SAG, *Abbey of Saint-Pieter (1st series)*, nr. 1701.

individual lordships in the Low Countries. In the fifteenth century, the seigneurial rule of the lord of Bergen op Zoom not only included the city, but also some twenty nearby villages. The labour services owed by some inhabitants of these villages were subject to separate ordinances and regulations. The first of these regulations was drafted in 1479, probably as a result of conflicts and tensions. The ordinance of 1479 stated that all those who owned a horse and wagon under the jurisdiction of the lord of Bergen op Zoom were expected to cart fuel for the lord. The number of wagon loads that needed to be carted depended on the number of horses owned by each household. Apparently, households without horses were not expected to perform any servile works. The transport works had to be executed from the start of June to the end of August and applied to the transport of peat and firewood in particular. The agreement stated that each wagon load of fuel transported for the lord would be compensated by a small denomination coin (*«blancke»*). However, this was not the most important form of remuneration. The regulations concerning transport services also granted the farmers in the region a monopoly. Farmers who performed servile works with their horses were also granted the monopoly to transport goods during the two fairs organized annually by the city. In particular, the agreement stated that all those who wished to sell their goods and wares during the fairs had to make exclusively use of the services offered by the local farmers and horse owners. The monopoly extended to transporting goods to and from the city and within the city walls. This was a genuine transport monopoly as only those resident within the seigneurie could execute such work. The lord protected this monopoly by fining outsiders who performed transport services for the merchants visiting the fairs (Moll 1924, 14-15; Sloomans 1985, 163-64). The economic and financial significance of this monopoly should not be underestimated as the two fairs of Bergen op Zoom had an international character at that time. The two fairs, held around Easter and All Saints Day, originally had a regional character but attracted a growing international audience in the course of the fifteenth century. At Bergen op Zoom, cloth, spices and furs were traded in high volumes. As part of the renowned Brabant fairs, the fair at Bergen op Zoom flourished in the late middle ages (Kortlever 2001, 625-43). Through the transport monopoly during these fairs, the horse owning farmers in this region also profited from the increased volumes traded at this fair. For a period of circa six weeks twice a year, they were able to supplement their income from farming with carting activities. From their perspective, the servile works executed for the lord in exchange for this transport monopoly were an interesting proposition as it most probably resulted in additional net income.

5. Conclusions

An early modern legal manual described labour services in the Southern Low Countries as work performed by subjects of the lord for which no compensation was required. The servile works were executed at the cost and expense of the seigneurial subjects.¹⁵ Such a description of servile works was in many respects a legal fiction. In

¹⁵ State Archives Courtray, *Manuscript Collection*, nr. 64: pp. 94-95: '*à leurs fraix et dépens*'

this paper, we argued that peasantries were often remunerated for the servile works they performed. From the thirteenth century, mounting evidence appears in customs and other documents that clearly indicates that the performance and execution of servile works came at a cost for the lord. In other words, in the late medieval and early modern Southern Low Countries, servile works were no longer a free source of labour for the lord. In many cases, lords had to compensate their subjects directly and indirectly for the ‘gratis’ labour they mobilized. Peasantries were only willing to assist the lord if they were compensated or remunerated. This compensation or remuneration could take different forms. Most frequently, peasantries received food when they worked for the lord. These food rations ensured that servile works did not come at an additional cost for the subjects of the lord. The attention to the quality and quantity of the food rations reflects the importance attached by the peasantries to this form of compensation. The food rations – in some cases very generous – are indicative of the strong position of peasantries vis-à-vis their lords during the late middle ages. Also, the other forms of remuneration obtained by the rural population in exchange for servile works clearly points at a strong bargaining position of the rural population. Lords were willing to grant their subjects fiscal exemptions and monopolies in exchange for small volumes of work. In the case of communal animals and pasture rights, lords were even willing to incur costs or share the produce of their demesne land to secure this servile labour. All this evidence indicates that by the thirteenth century, peasantries had secured a strong bargaining position. After the Black Death this bargaining position probably improved even further when population levels dropped and labour grew scarce and became more expensive. Most of the remuneration packages we discussed in this paper emerged for the first time during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The particular compensation mechanisms that were constructed between lords and their subjects indicate that peasantries were not necessarily hostile to the labour demands of their lords. On the contrary, these agreements clearly signal that peasantries viewed the various remuneration packages they received as a fair ‘wage’ for their labour. Also, these compensation mechanisms illustrate, albeit for a specific labour context, that remuneration for work could take different forms and shapes during the pre-industrial period. Labour was not necessarily compensated by a traditional wage, but could be remunerated in other ways beneficiary to the working population.

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