



# European Society for Environmental History

## Biennial Conference 2017



**Zagreb, Croatia, 28 June to 2 July 2017**

Hosting institutions: University of Zagreb, Faculty of Science, Department of Geography together with University of Zagreb, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, History Department and University of Zadar, Department of Geography



'At the Mercy of Global Trade Dynamics: the Frisian Village Molkwerum, Extremely Vulnerable Yet Resilient', European Society for Environmental History (ESEH), TM van den Brink (Wageningen University) Zagreb, 29 juni 2017.

Triggered by economic crisis and decline, this research focusses on the nearly disappearance of the Frisian settlement 'Molkwerum'. The goal was to find an explanation for its rapid collapse and its eventual recovery. It is clear that the historiography about the disappearance of societies is quite fragmented. In fact, a full understanding of this phenomenon requires an investigation of both the social-economic as well as its (physical) geographical dimension. In order to do justice to this complexity a detailed and in-depth analysis of one case instead of a global comparison of many cases was made.

The advantage of Molkwerum is that there were several detailed maps available, including one from the first phase of collapse and one when the collapse had ended. Likewise, there was data available about the trade-networks the inhabitants were involved in and about the social as well as the geographical processes. Despite these valuable sources, the tricky thing with a community on the verge of collapse is that it does not produce an abundance of data. The solution was found in a main research question that tested the suitability of six theories about crisis, decline, collapse and resilience to explain what happened in Molkwerum.

At first glance the story seems to be clear: the shifts in the trade networks are to be identified as the ultimate cause that led to collapse. However, this does not provide a satisfying answer to the question why the community was so vulnerable for this phenomenon. The vulnerability of Molkwerum can be traced back to several aspects: the orientation of the local economy was one-sided as it was highly depended on the international trade, the social and physical features of the landscape: the poor drainage - with the resulting swampy pastures - the highly fragmented land property and the collective land management.

