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Conquest and Incorporation: Merging French-Style Central Government Practices with Local Water Management in Seventeenth-Century Maritime Flanders

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Abstract

How does a new power impose new practices in water management and how does it deal with inherited customs and institutions? How, in practice, does the change of legal order, underpinned by territorial conquest, manifest itself? This article questions how the change of sovereignty affected water management in the border region of modern France and Belgium in the seventeenth century. In 1662 King Louis XIV of France bought the city and the territory of Dunkirk from the King of England. Maritime Flanders, as it was called from then on, became the northern border of the Kingdom of France. Water management was a major issue from the outset. The French administration restored the local water management institutions and integrated it into its own institutional framework. Doing so, the French deployed very harsh control under the authority of the intendant of Lille, the representative of the King in the whole of Flanders. By thus providing water to the port of Dunkirk and by planning large scale temporary defensive inundations, the French monarchy succeeded in militarising the regional water management.

key words

water governance, early modern history, France, Low-Countries

Introduction

Water governance can be considered a tool of government.[1] When a state conquers new territory, it first takes control of the network it has inherited and then develops new infrastructure that is more in keeping with its traditions of governance. Recent history offers several examples of such developments.[2] After the conquest of Vietnam, the French launched a large project to exploit the Mekong Delta and promote new forms of water governance dedicated to rice cultivation. The project was facilitated by the use of industrial technologies and was linked to the construction of the railway. The re-shaping of the whole delta greatly modified the environment and facilitated the establishment of colonial power. As such, the policy affected people's lives and played a role in the nation-building process. In his book, David Biggs shows that the networks that were superimposed were bound to a specific form of authority and method of governing.

To some extent, we could conduct a similar analysis in the context of Maritime Flanders. Located on the border between the Southern Low Countries and France, Maritime Flanders was hotly disputed territory throughout the Early Modern era. The term 'Maritime Flanders' is a French neologism that was coined in the eighteenth century to designate the territories of the one-time castellanies[3] of Bourbourg and Bergues, which included the ports of Dunkirk and Gravelines. The region formed part of the Flemish coastal plain that was annexed by France in 1662, when Louis XIV bought Dunkirk from Charles II of England. Both castellanies had belonged to the County of Flanders and had formed part of the Duchy of Burgundy in 1384. As such, they had been integrated into the empire of Charles V in 1521, and then transferred to the Habsburgs of Spain until the French conquest. The area had thus formed part of highly centralised and bureaucratised power structures since the fifteenth century. Moreover, the history of Maritime Flanders is closely linked to the development of a water grid that made soil drainage possible, and thus, by extension, agriculture and inland navigation. Indeed, the existence of navigation canals and local water unites (*wateringues*) in the area has been documented since the twelfth century.

Maritime Flanders thus offers fertile ground for analysing the relationship between government and sovereignty on one hand, and water governance and the shaping of the environment on the other. Focusing on the French conquest and its aftermath allows us to

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1 Several examples could be mentioned here. For an original view: 'Politique et contrôle de l'eau dans le Moyen-Orient ancient,' special issue of *Annales ESC*, 2002/3, 358 pp. Thomas P. Hughes, *Network of Powers: Electrification in Western Society (1880-1930)* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983).

2 David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2012).

3 Castellany: a translation of *châtellenie.* In this context, the term refers to the area ruled by a city.

examine some key issues of water governance. Once annexed, Maritime Flanders was subject to various considerations pertaining to its land, both economically and geo-strategically. It no longer formed the southern tip of the Low Countries, but had become the northern extremity of a large and compact kingdom. France had annexed Maritime Flanders against the backdrop of radical change in its own institutions. Whilst centralisation was nonetheless reinforced, the State was organised in a modern way. During the 1660s and 1670s, the French monarchy had two goals: asserting military power in Europe and developing the French economy. For almost fifty years, France made a continuous effort to institutionalise its power and strengthen its domination in Flanders, as well as in Alsace.[4] Everywhere they went, French armies modified the water infrastructure so that it could be used for defensive purposes.[5] Along the coast, they also developed port infrastructure to promote French naval power.[6] Maritime Flanders formed a focal point for all of these challenges: a border was to be created and Dunkirk was to be secured and enlarged. However, the French also had to deal with the fact that this was a densely populated area with its own traditions of government. The French therefore had to reconcile opposing goals: militarisation on the one hand versus integration and agricultural development on the other.

How could a change of sovereignty and the establishment of a new institutional framework influence water governance? How was a balance negotiated and achieved between landowners and farmers on the one hand, and the State on the other? Furthermore, was water governance used as a means of conquest and as a tool of control and domination? This article is based on the hypothesis that the French adapted the water network of Maritime Flanders to meet their needs by superimposing two complementary layers of water governance. As France's first priority was to protect Dunkirk and enlarge its capacity, the water grid was modified in order to meet this military requirement. However, the success of the work was conditioned by the efficiency of the primary drainage facilities, over which the civilian authorities exercised increasing control. When we consider the Burgundian and Habsburg heritage, French water governance was not so much a *tabula rasa* policy as a constant effort to reconcile local needs and central demands.

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4 Daniel Nordman, *Frontières de France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

5 Raphaël Morera, 'Vauban et l'hydraulique militaire', in *Vauban, bâtisseur du Roi-Soleil, Catalogue de l'exposition tenu à la Cité du Patrimoine et de l'Architecture*, pp. 198-206 (Paris, SOMOGY-Cité du Patrimoine et de l'architecture, Musée des Plans Reliefs, 2007)

6 André Lespagnol, 'État mercantiliste et littoral dans la France des XVII^{e}-XVIII^{e} siècles: Une première forme d'aménagement de l'espace littoral', in G. Le Bouedec and F. Chappe, *Pouvoirs et littoraux du xv^{e} au xx^{e} siècle*, pp. 349-358 (Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2000),

Between urban authorities and centralised power: Habsburg rule and the Burgundian legacy

The region of Maritime Flanders[7] was bounded by the River Aa to the south and the city of Veurne to the north. During the sixteenth century, it included the castellanies of Bourbourg and Bergues, with their ports of Gravelines and Dunkirk, respectively. Until 1547, the region formed a border between the Low Countries and the English enclave of Calais, which had been annexed by France after its purchase by François I.[8] The ground was made up of tidal sediment covered in places by a thick layer of peat, below sea level in many areas.[9] A long dune protected the region from the North Sea. Without a hydraulic infrastructure, Maritime Flanders would have been continuously flooded and barren. Since at least the twelfth century, however, local inhabitants and landowners had developed *wateringues*, local water management units, to drain the country and reclaim arable pastureland. In his recent work, Tim Soens has shown that administrative units such as these were very active until the fifteenth century, whereupon they declined, undermined by land concentration.[10] *Wateringues* were usually managed by representatives of landowners, who had to pay a subscription to a treasurer. This money was used to finance the maintenance of dikes and locks, including salaries. The *wateringues* therefore pooled the various costs associated with maintenance and constituted the first level of water management.

During the sixteenth century, Maritime Flanders was ruled by the Habsburgs. As early as 1531, Charles V delegated the government of the Low Countries to his sister, Mary of Hungary. Both the immense size of his empire and the rise of Spain forced Charles V to delegate his power to local, but reliable, actors. The integration of the Low Countries into the empire thus did not prevent political authority from being exercised both regionally and in a centralised manner. This original form of governance was a feature of the Spanish empire,

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7 'Maritime Flanders' is the translation from the French 'Flandres maritime'. This expression was coined at the end of the seventeenth century as a comparison to 'Flandre wallonne'.

8 S. Rose, *Calais, an English Town in France, 1347-1558* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008).

9 C. Baeteman, 'The Origin of the Moeren', in M. van Molle (ed.), *Recent Trends in Physical Geography in Belgium, Liber Amicorum Prof. Dr. L. Peeters* pp. 31-44 (Brussel : Study Series of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1985); Raoul Blanchard, *La Flandre, étude géographique de la plaine flamande en France, Belgique et Hollande* (Lille, 1906).

10 Tim Soens, *De Spade in de Dijke: Waterbeheer en rural samenleving in de vlamse kustvlakte* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2009); idem, 'Explaining Deficiencies of Water Management in the Late Medieval Flemish Coastal Plain, 13th-16th centuries', *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis. Water Management, Communities, and Environment. The Low Countries in Comparative Perspective, c. 1000 - c. 1800*, (2005-2006),35-62

whose territories were in fact very independent.[11] When it came to water management, this institutional pattern meant that the regional governor had to arbitrate between various actors; a form of governance that had a deep influence on water management in Maritime Flanders. For the sixteenth century, however, Dunkirk is unfortunately the only documented case that we have.[12] It was divided into four *wateringues*: Oostover, Westover, Zuidover and Noordover. Within each *wateringue*, infrastructure management and supervision were entrusted to a *watergrave*, who was appointed by a collective of landowners. For the *wateringue* of Noordover, just five different *watergraves* were chosen between 1549 and 1565, suggesting that only a few people were able to cope with this responsibility. At the lowest level, water management was the responsibility of landowners and their agents, but they nevertheless also took part in the government of the castellany as members of its *keur,* or council.

All of the water that collected in the ditches of the various *wateringues* of Bourbourg, Bergues and Dunkerque emptied into the Colme, a large canal that joined the Aa to Veurne in order to allow inland navigation in Flanders. It had been dug out during the Middle Ages, and thus formed part of the mediaeval transport revolution.[13] Its maintenance was delegated to urban authorities who governed large rural areas. In the sixteenth century, its finances were administered by the Privy Council in Brussels.[14] In 1574, for instance, the cleaning of the Colme and the Aa between Bergues and Dunkerque was managed by local landowners and the *wateringues* on one hand, and various users such as merchants and watermen on the other. All of the towns in the area were involved, and even the magistrates of Saint-Omer were forced to pay for the work.[15]

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11 For a perspective on colonial Mexico: Vera Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

12 Archives Municipales/City Archives (hereafter AM), Dunkirk, ANC DK, 270.

13 Alain Derville, 'La première révolution des transports continentaux (c. 1000 – c. 1300)', *Annales de Bretagne* 85-2, (1978), 181-205; idem, 'Le marais de Saint-Omer', *Actes des congrès de la SHMESP, dixième congrès,* p. 73-93, (Lille, 1979).

14 Archives municipals (hereafter AM) Bergues, DD 53; DD 54 / 1; DD 56/3.

15 AM Bergues, DD 57.

Contributors	**Amount in *gulden***
Wateringues	9000
City of Saint-Omer	1400
Landowners (including monasteries)	860
Sr de Rasingheim for its *overdracht* (sluice)	100
Watermen	8000

1 Cost allocation for the cleaning of the Colme, 1574 (AM Bergues, DD 57)

At first glance, it would appear that the cities were in charge of the operation: they collected the taxes and organised the work. The magistrates (the mayors or *bourgmestres*) therefore seem to have played a decisive role. During the Habsburg and Burgundian periods, however, centralised power had been substantially reinforced, and the mayors were in fact chosen annually by commissioners from the Royal Council. Although a mayor had wide powers in public administration, his actions were tightly controlled by the monarchy and water management was used by the government to serve economic goals.[16] Following the initiatives taken by the Duke of Burgundy, Charles V and Philip II of Spain promoted the construction and upkeep of inland navigation canals. Their support played a decisive role in the completion of the canal of Willebroek, which joined Brussels to the Rupel and then to the Scheldt and Antwerp. The canal, which was of strategic importance to the economy of Brussels, belonged to the city, but it would never have been realised without the involvement of the central authorities. A second feature of Habsburg water policy was the reinforcement of the control and upkeep of all waterways in order to avoid breaches and permanent floods, which badly damaged crops and cattle breeding. In 1574, for example, a disagreement between Bergues and Saint-Omer over the cleaning of the Colme and the Aa was allayed and resolved thanks to a commissioner from the Privy Council.[17] The latter conducted a thorough inquiry, going from place to place and listening to all the arguments, so that he could set the tax rate and compel Bergues and Saint-Omer to contribute to the work. As such, the commissioner was an arbitrator who embodied the public good. His actions demonstrated that

[16] Chloé Deligne, *Bruxelles et sa rivière. Genèse d'un territoire urbain (12e-18e siècle)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003).
[17] AM Bergues, DD 54/1.

the different castellanies had no fiscal autonomy: they were bound to apply and implement the council's decisions. Moreover, taxpayers' contributions were their only financial resource.

A lack of local sources prevents us from pursuing the history of water management in Maritime Flanders further into the sixteenth century. We can only make a few, admittedly very likely, assumptions. During the last third of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the war between Spain and the United Provinces was intensifying: all resources were mobilised for the war effort, meaning that water management no longer appeared in the documentation.[18] As the military inundations that were provoked in the Low Countries suggest, water uses dramatically changed.[19] Furthermore, the Eighty Years' War led to a major geostrategic change.[20] Until the 1570s, Antwerp had been the most important port in the Low Countries, but after the town was sacked in 1576, the Brabant harbour began to lose status as well as power.[21] The fatal blow was struck in 1585, when the Dutch decided to close the Scheldt. The richest Flemish merchants had to flee to Amsterdam and henceforth contributed to the Dutch Golden Age.[22] By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Southern Low Countries had thus lost their only continental port. In this context, the meridian inland navigation supplying Antwerp ceased to be so important, whereas the ports along the Flemish coast, such as Dunkirk and Gravelines, which had been neglected until this point, became crucial. Furthermore, as France had bought Calais in 1547, the Aa River now formed a fragile border.[23] Thus the French Wars of Religion on the one hand, and the independence of the United Provinces on the other, disrupted the traditional goals of water management in Maritime Flanders.

In the first part of the seventeenth century, the main goal of the Spanish authorities was to mobilise local forces to resist both French and Dutch pressure.[24] This dynamic had an impact on water management. The first priority was to fortify the towns and ports. The central

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18 For context: Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, pp. 115 ff (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

19 Marjolein 't Hart, *The Dutch Wars of Independence: Warfare and Commerce in the Netherlands*, 1570-1680, pp. 72-73 (London: Routledge, 2014).

20 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); idem, *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy 1600-1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

21 Helmut Georg Koenigsberger, *Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments*, p. 271 ff (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

22 Johannes Briels, *Zuid-Nederlanders in de Republiek, 1572-1630: een demografische en cultuurhistorische studie* (St Niklas: Danthe, 1985); Oscar Gelderblom, *Zuid-Nederlandse kooplieden en de opkomst van de Amsterdamse stapelmarkt (1578-1630)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000).

23 Nordman, *Frontières de France*..

24 René Vermeir, *En estado de guerra. Felipe IV y Flandes, 1629-1648* (Cordoba: Universidad de Cordoba, 2007).

government bore the construction costs of this scheme, but delegated funding of the waterworks to local communities. Although the Council of Flanders gave the orders and strictly enforced them, the *wateringues* had a well-established water management role. The regional work, which began with the independence of the United Provinces and the continuation of the war on the continent, was based on a clear distribution of roles between the public and private spheres. The council controlled the finances and ordered the various works, whereas the *wateringues* had to manage them and ensure that taxes were collected. In this sense, the newest element was the development of the fortifications; the management model was merely a continuation of methods that had been used during the sixteenth century.

During the Twelve Years' Truce, both traffic in the port of Dunkirk and the port's military significance increased notably.[25] Fort Mardyck, which protected the harbour, was completed in 1622, and in 1640 the Spanish greatly fortified the bulwark.[26] This growth had an impact on inland water management: more traffic meant a larger port and more water to supply the moored boats. The port's needs consequently influenced the inland water grid. To meet this challenge, the aldermen[27] of Bergues sent a request to the archduke in 1615, asking for 60,000 *gulden* to build a new lock in Dunkirk that would cost 112,000 *gulden* in total. They had already paid 33,000 *gulden* for the lock.[28] They finally obtained an answer in 1617, when Albert and Isabelle Claire Eugenia gave them a grant to finance the widening and deepening of the canal from Bergues to Dunkirk.[29] This decision was confirmed in 1619 with a grant of 64,000 *gulden*. The initial financial plan for the work relied on the granting of two-thirds of the milling rights in Bergues for a period of six years and a direct grant of 2,500 florins.[30] On this basis, Bergues invested 51,000 florins between 1615 and 1618. However, the difficulty of the work meant an increase in the budget of 40,000 florins. To cover this amount, Bergues proposed and obtained an annual loan of 4,000 florins for four years. The archduke decreed that this annuity be redeemed within four years and extended the two-thirds of milling rights dedicated to financing the work.

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25 Alain Cabantous (ed.), *Histoire de Dunkerque*, p. 79 (Toulouse: Privat, 1983).
26 Ibid., p. 72-73.
27 'Aldermen' is the translation of the Flemish *keurheers*.
28 AM Bergues, DD 56, 4-9 March 1615.
29 AM Bergues, DD 56/5.
30 AM Bergues, DD 56/6; 'des deux tiers du molage de ladite ville et châtellenie [de Bergues] pour le temps de six ans'.

During this period, all of the canals were regularly cleaned and maintained. For instance, in 1638 Philip IV ordered the Veurne canal be cleaned.[31] This was another way in which the new strategic position of Maritime Flanders caused deep disruption to the water links between Bourbourg and Gravelines. In order to protect the port, Spanish engineers modified the existing drainage network. The magistrates of Bourbourg thereupon complained to Philip IV, because the engineers had stopped up a canal known as St Joris.[32] The loss of lands involved in the military initiatives in the area represented an enormous cost for Bourbourg's landowners. This work formed part of the fortification plan: by blocking ditches, engineers re-directed the water flow in order to manage defensive inundations and supply the port and the ditches of the fortress town with water. The defence of Gravelines, designed as a lock to protect Dunkirk, brought about permanent inundations in many districts of Gravelines, such as Loon, Craywick and Saint-George. To solve this conflict between the demands of defence and agriculture, magistrates and engineers proposed that the water be diverted to Dunkirk.[33] These works required massive investment to dig new canals and build bigger locks, however, at a time when both the *wateringues* and the towns were penniless. In other words, completing such an ambitious project would have necessitated the implementation of a new tax system.

To tackle these financial difficulties, a patent letter was issued that ordered a rise in the *tailles*, the subscriptions paid to *wateringues* by the landowners.[34] In other words, the *wateringues* were still supporting the hydraulic works and the profound changes being made to the landscape. This taxation followed a clear principle, however: the more the *wateringues* benefited from the operations, the more they had to pay. The patent also specified how taxation should be shared between landowners and farmers. The weakness of the second group was taken into account, since it was admitted that 'it was not reasonable that a farmer should pay so much money in so short a time.'[35] For this reason, the archduke eventually authorised the *wateringues* to borrow money at the lowest possible rate.

Besides fiscal and financial issues, the central authority also had a hand in all water management. Its authorisation was required for all work that would affect the flow of water. As a rule, the monarchy did not finance any enterprise aside from the building of bridges to

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31 Louis Trénard, 'La navigation en Flandre: projets et réalisations de Vauban', in Catherine Brisac and Nicolas Faucherre (ed.), *Actes du colloque Vauban Réformateur*, p. 77 (Paris, Association Vauban, 1993).

32 AM Bourbourg, DD 4.

33 AM Bourbourg, DD 29, 17 September 1632.

34 AM Bourbourg, DD 4, 17 September 1632.

35 AM Bourbourg, DD 4, 17 September 1632.

cross the new ditches. New canals were built along Gravelines, but the draining of the Moëres is the best example.[36] The great wave of improvement also affected Maritime Flanders.[37] At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Moëres was a lake that extended to the borders of the castellanies of Bergues and Veurne. The lake was the result of the intensive land exploitation that had occurred during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era. Since the sixteenth century, the draining of lakes had given a significant boost to northern agriculture,[38] and in 1619 Philip IV gave an octroy to Wenceslas Cobergher to drain the lake.[39] At that time, Cobergher was also in charge of the pawnshops in Bergues, from where he led the work.[40]

The draining of the Moëres was facilitated by a combination of mechanical and gravitational hydraulics. The drainage scheme was very similar to the techniques that were commonly used in the United Provinces.[41] Wind-driven mills pumped the drained water into an emissary canal, which carried it to Dunkirk on the southern side and to Veurne on the northern side. To that extent, the draining of the Moëres proved useful for the reclamation of arable lands as well as for providing more water to the port of Dunkirk. The supervision of the project was accompanied by an agreement between Bergues and Veurne.[42] Bergues committed to letting the drained water from the lake and that from another lock pass through its land, and to providing Veurne with fresh water from the Colme in case of need. Likewise, Veurne agreed to build a dam at Bulskamp to keep high waters from flooding the drained Moëres. To enforce this agreement, the magistrates of both cities designed a monitoring system to punish any lockkeeper who failed to respect it. This allowed Bergues to appoint officers to control offences and punish offenders.[43]

Before the French conquest, Maritime Flanders therefore had a highly sophisticated system of water management that relied on a combination of legal and conventional frameworks. The council of Flanders could grant some fiscal resources and arbitrated between

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36 Marcel Dolez, *Les moëres: étude d'une association syndicale de desséchement dans la région du Nord de la France* (Caen: 1907).

37 Han van Zwet, *Lofwaerdighe dijkckagies and miserabele polders* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009); Salvatore Ciriacono, *Building on Water: Venice, Holland And the Construction of the European Landscape in Early Modern Times* (New York: Bergan Books, 2006).

38 Jan de Vries, Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, failure and perseverance of the Dutch Economy*, pp. 27-33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

39 Traité et octroy des Archiducs concernant le desseichement des Moëres, 22 April 1619, Archives Départementales/Departmental Archives (hereafter AD), Lille, B 913.

40 AD Lille, B 4 G 72; 16 G 328; 16 G 329.

41 Gerardus Petrus van de Ven, *Man-made lowlands: History of water management and land reclamation in the Netherlands* (Utrecht: Matrijs 1994).

42 AM Bergues, DD 62/1.

43 AM Bergues DD 62/1: 'commettre des personnes pour veiller à la contravention, et seront les personnes qui y auront contrevenu puny par ceux de Furnes selon et suivant l'exigence du cas.'

the two cities, but local monitoring fell to the local authorities and landowners: the cities and *wateringues*. The central government was the real source of laws and rules, but it did not enforce them directly. For the military programme to succeed and private projects to be completed, coordination on water management between the authorities and landowners was essential. From this perspective, when the French arrived, they had to deal with a longstanding tradition of organisational and territorial governance.

Consolidating and controlling a heritage

Prior to purchasing Dunkirk and its surroundings, the French had occupied the area between 1646 and 1652. To improve the defences, the Spanish had adapted the water grid and its existing uses, but as their power weakened, they were no longer able to control water management. The drainage system in Maritime Flanders therefore became ineffective and the hydraulic infrastructure fell into ruin. As a consequence, the newcomers had to renovate and reorganise water management across the entire area. Just after the annexation in 1662, however, French civilian institutions were still too weak to enforce any policy. Indeed, the country was still in state of war, as Lille was conquered in 1666. It was in this context that the governor of Dunkirk and Gravelines, the Marquis of Montpezat, ordered the first work to be done in the area. In 1663, Montpezat used local contractors to drain the *wateringues* of Vieux Mardicq, Grande and Petite Scynthe, and to dig a new canal.[44] As the governor, Montpezat was the local representative of the king and commanded the army in Maritime Flanders. This first contract suggests that the French authorities considered the restoration of the water grid and the *wateringues* a priority, as the primary network was targeted first.

A monarch's ability to adapt local water management to his requirements was limited by a specific legal framework. In the Kingdom of France, there were two categories of waterway: first, waterways that could not be used for navigation and mooring, and second, those that could. Since the Edict of Moulins in 1566, navigable rivers where mooring was possible had been integrated into the domain of the king, meaning that they were considered his property.[45] This rule was confirmed in 1669 by the Royal Ordinance on Waters and

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44 AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 297.

45 *Edict du Roy, donné a Moulins au moys de fevrier, 1566. Contenant les reigles, & maximes anciennes, de l'union & conservation de son domaine* (Rouen: 1610).

Forests.[46] Conversely, the legal regime for unnavigable waterways, where mooring was impossible, differed from the statute for the main canals used for inland navigation. These waterways were never covered by a general act; custom was the only legal foundation and this clearly held that the water belonged to the owner of the land across which it flowed, and the owner was free to use it as long as he did not harm his neighbours. This was in fact a common principle in much of Europe.[47] This framework gave the king a legal tool for controlling the primary water network and ensuring that it was well maintained. Indeed, if the ditches were not correctly maintained or sluices were in a state of disrepair, this could stop the water flowing in the royal canals.

The king could thus use various methods to influence water management in Maritime Flanders. The first text mentioning a comprehensive decision was published on 7 May 1665, but it was not archived. We only find references to it in later texts, in order to justify taxes. Thus in 1665, a royal decree ordered the intendant to repair all the *wateringues* around Dunkirk: Vieux Mardicq, Grande and Petite Synthe, Arenboutcappelle, Coudekerque, Teteghem, Leffrinckoucke, Uxem, Ghyvelde, Zhyvelde and Zuydcotte.[48] The intendant ordered and allowed local authorities and the *wateringues* to collect taxes in order to finance the renovation of the waterways. In the following year, this text was used as a legal basis to levy the *wateringues'* subscriptions and taxes. Intendants had appeared for the first time in the middle of the sixteenth century. At that time, they were sent to specific areas for limited missions. When he decided to go to the war with Spain in 1635, Richelieu used intendants as tax collectors and 'peacemakers' to face the anger of the peasants.[49] Under the reign of Louis XIV, intendants became the permanent agents of the king in different regions. [50] They did not hold any office; they were directly appointed by the Crown and could be replaced very easily. Intendants were therefore unable to implement their own policies and were dependent upon the king. As early as the 1660s, intendants became more powerful and started to become the real local representatives of the king. The intendant of Lille, for example, was mobilised to supervise water management in Maritime Flanders, developing a form of indirect rule that integrated *wateringues*.

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46 *Ordonnance sur le fait des Eaux et forêts* (Paris: 1669).

47 Josuha Getzler, *A History of Water Rights at Common Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

48 AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 219.

49 Richard Bonney, *Political Change in France under Richelieu and Mazarin, 1624-1661* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Michel Antoine, 'Genèse de l'institution des intendants', *Journal des savants* 3 (1982), 283-317.

50 Annette Smedley-Weill, *Les intendants de Louis XIV* (Paris: Fayard, 1995); idem, *La France entre deux guerres: l'administration des provinces de 1678 à 1689* (Paris: EHESS, 1991).

The same evolution occurred in Bourbourg, where the intendant was also a key actor in the new system of governance.[51] Due to the bulwarks built by the monarchy, the *wateringues* of Bourbourg no longer ran to the sea through Gravelines, but went to Dunkirk. This change forced the inhabitants of Bourbourg to adapt and modify the grid. To this end, the magistrates of Bourbourg adopted a new rule, justified by a royal grant compelling inhabitants to divert their water to Dunkirk.[52] The principle of this regulation was simple: the installations, which included dikes, levies and locks joining ditches and main canals, should be supervised by the *wateringues* themselves. The rule specified how and where the earth used for the dikes should be withdrawn and what should be done with the sludge that was cleaned out of the ditches. The text also allocated charges to different regional associations. The most important responsibilities, which involved all *wateringues*, were entrusted to a regional *wateringue*. At the parish level, each local *wateringue* had to maintain the infrastructure involving its own water. For Bourbourg, the document clearly distinguished six different *wateringues* that had to pool part of their resources: Loon, Craywick, Saint-Georges, Saint-Nicolas, Saint-Willbort and Saint-Pierrebrouck.

The *wateringues* of Dunkirk allocated subscriptions and taxes according to the amount of land owned in a particular area, suggesting that the harshness of the Colbert administration had influenced *wateringue* management. To ensure they had good information about the landowners, *wateringues* kept rolls that were controlled and updated regularly, although not annually. After the French conquest, it seems that rolls were written initially in 1687-1688 and then again in 1698-1699,[53] with the third update taking place only in 1732.[54] This interruption was due to the seemingly endless War of Spanish Succession and, after 1714, to the intervention by the English, who wanted to avoid the consolidation of the French State in Flanders. These documents show that *wateringue* taxes were collected following a clear logic. As in Bourbourg, there were two levels of organisation. Account books were maintained by the person responsible for the primary level of drainage equipment; these recorded the names and qualifications of the contributors and were organised by parish. After the French conquest, the first accounts were written in 1666. Pierre Jacobsen was the only officer in charge of the taxes for all the Dunkirk parishes.[55] The accounts were presented in two parts: taxation due to the King preceded those of the *wateringues* themselves. Landowners were in

51 AM Bourbourg, DD 26 and DD 27.
52 AM Bourbourg, DD 25.
53 AM Bourbourg, DD 42; AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 220.
54 AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 220.
55 AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 230.

fact subject to a double levy. The first was dedicated to the *wateringues* in the strictest sense of the term, whereas the other was imposed by the king to cover the larger infrastructure. Eventually, the accounts of the regional *wateringues* showed the funds due from the smaller *wateringues* in order to finance the most important facilities; by this time, the same agent was employed by the monarchy and the *wateringues*. In effect, the king reinforced the *wateringues* in order to maintain the primary water network and to ease the tax burden. Local communities were therefore put into action to serve the central authorities. As Hilton Root has shown in the case of Burgundy, this was a means for the king to bypass local authorities.[56] In that sense, water management was a political tool in the hands of the monarchy.

Years	Taxes for the king for one measure of land (sous)	Taxes for the *wateringues* for one measure of land (sous, deniers)	Total
1666	12	11 s 3 d	23 s 3 d
1675	12	5	17
1681	12	8	20

2: Evolution of taxes imposed on the *wateringues* after the French conquest (AM Dunkerque ANC DK 230)

Following the act of 7 May 1665, both taxes were collected with the agreement of the intendant, who determined the amount due.[57] The amounts were calculated based on land area, suggesting that the aim was to tax property. The differences between the taxes deserve to be highlighted. The tax for the king remained steady for years after the conquest, whereas the levies for the *wateringues* could change significantly from one year to the next. This means that the levies were directly linked to the *wateringues*' spending, as they only financed maintenance work. Moreover, this implies that local authorities maintained real flexibility; they could focus on actual needs by changing the tax level. The tax rate was the same for all the *wateringues* of Dunkirk, which suggests that they were coordinated. On the other hand, the fact that the king's tax remained constant suggests that the State regarded the *wateringues* as a fiscal cell: the intendant gave them the authority to levy different kinds of taxes. They were thus seen as a local authority, representing the landowners who were involved in a kind

[56] Hilton Root, *Peasants and King in Burgundy. Agrarian Foundations of French Absolutism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
[57] AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 219.

of *indirect rule*. Keeping the tax rolls thereby eased the work of the State, by giving the latter a clear document by which to set tax rates.

Besides finance, another key issue was the supervision of the *wateringues*; the maintenance of water networks required regular visits and detailed reports. After 1680, the churchwarden of each parish had to write such reports, in which he listed any malfunctions and damages he had observed, as well as suggested solutions.[58] These reports formed a necessary basis for writing specifications and preparing contracts to launch the expected work. Although the same agent managed financial issues for all the *wateringues*, it appears that daily supervision was entrusted to the churchwarden of each parish, which was the de facto primary level for water management. Although the churchwarden did not directly collect levies and taxes, his representatives had to watch over the infrastructure on an almost daily basis. Their motivation was based on the direct interest in the efficiency of local water management. However, it does not mean that the parish had a say in regional water management.

The French administrators entrusted the supervision of infrastructure to local institutions, but the newcomers took responsibility for the maintenance itself.[59] Payment policies therefore became more and more rigorous.[60] As early as the 1660s, upkeep procedures that had been developed by the monarchy were applied in Maritime Flanders.[61] Work contracts pertaining to the cleaning of ditches and canals, as well as repairs to and the construction of locks, were granted by the churchwarden. In the new context, the different contracts had to be recorded by Dunkirk magistrates after being authorised by the intendant's *subdélégué*. Under French law, the procedure had to begin with a bid and an auction; as a general rule, the cheapest contractors seen to have been chosen.

The implementation of these rules necessitated the affirmation of a new hierarchy, which had to take its rightful place in the daily life of the local community. Its origins lay more in the political process than in the institutional one. It was not merely a question of procedures and rules: the French had to obtain the consent of the people, and even more importantly, of the elite. Correspondence between the intendant and the magistrates of Bourbourg dating from the early 1680s demonstrates the continuity of role distribution in the

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58 Churchwarden is the translation of the local word 'hoofman'.

59 Cédric Glineur, *Genèse d'un droit administratif sous le règne de Louis XIV: Les pratiques de l'intendant dans les provinces du Nord (1726-1754)* (Orléans : Presses de l'Université d'Orléans, 2005).

60 AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 219.

61 AM Dunkerque, ANC DK 297.

context of the new hierarchy.[62] At the end of August 1680, the intendant wrote to the urban authority of Bourbourg to express his dissatisfaction. He considered the work on the Colme to be progressing too slowly, and he thought that the magistrates of Bourbourg were responsible for this delay. He therefore asked them to increase their contribution.[63] A few days later, the intendant wrote again to order the locks of Bourbourg be opened, because Hautpont, a district of Gravelines, was entirely flooded.[64] Following these injunctions, the intendant abruptly informed the magistrates that he was henceforth in control of their finances.[65]

To some extent, our knowledge of the first two thirds of the seventeenth century is too scarce to be able to determine precisely what changed between the Spanish and the French periods. It is highly probable, for instance, that rolls were also kept before the conquest, but they were not preserved. Nevertheless, the first layer of French water governance mobilised and renewed the former organisation of the *wateringues*, and the latter were rapidly enshrined in the French legal order. The magistrates of Bourbourg and Dunkirk lost their authority over the *wateringues*, to be replaced by the intendant, directly appointed by the king. Whereas under the Habsburgs, central authorities had arbitrated between the various urban elites and granted resources to finance any work, the French State developed its power by controlling the *wateringues* and bypassing traditional elites. Rather than obtaining revenue from mills or some other tax, the newcomers instead chose to fund large-scale work directly by levying land based tax and thus to ensure the good usage of large facilities such as the Colme and the large locks. The cities were no longer allowed to fall into debt, and taxation of landowners was greatly encouraged. These first changes were necessary in order to impose new practices in the area.

Imposing new practices

The annexation of Southern Flanders formed part of a larger plan to extend the French border and affirm Louis XIV's military ambitions in Europe. Louis XIV wanted to curb Dutch influence and increase the French presence in the North Sea. Dunkirk played a key role in this strategy: it was the French gateway to North Sea trade and the port was needed to contain the

62 AC Bourbourg, DD 36 and DD 37.
63 AC Bourbourg, DD 37, letter from 23 August 1680.
64 AC Bourbourg, DD 37, letter from 28 August 1680.
65 AC Bourbourg DD 37, letter from 12 September 1680.

Republic in the English Channel.[66] Both objectives implied that the French had to control and defend Maritime Flanders. Soon after the annexation, as part of the larger plan for the new northern border of France, Maritime Flanders was transformed into a gigantic works site. Sébastien Le Prestre, marquis de Vauban, the great engineer, was sent to the area soon after the conquest.[67] The French certainly benefited from the Spanish legacy, but their work militarised the region, consuming massive amounts of Parisian money. The French were aided in this policy by the legal arrangements that made the king the owner of all navigable waterways.[68] Consequently, all of the main canals in the recently conquered areas became the king's property, meaning that he was free to carry out any work he wanted; an arrangement that played a fundamentally important role in financing. Indeed, the king could (and had to) intervene single-handedly, without the influence of local authorities such as the cities. To implement his building projects, the king could draw upon what seemed to be an infinite French budget.[69] Moreover, in the 1690s, at a time when records were being kept, the French army amounted to 435,000 men. They could also be used for various types of work, including digging new canals.[70]

To maintain control of the region, the French had to integrate Maritime Flanders into the complex administrative structures of the monarchy. In 1661, Louis XIV decided to dismiss his prime minister and begin his personal reign. This decision could be interpreted in various ways, but it eventually provoked deep changes in the structure of the State.[71] Following the advice of Colbert, his *Contrôleur Général des Finances*, or finance supervisor, Louis XIV decided to 'divide and rule' by creating six different departments, each with a strictly defined jurisdiction. The most powerful were the War Department, the Marine Department and the Finance Department. Behind its apparent rationality, this system used finance to integrate the French aristocracy's traditional loyalties and supporters, even if they were henceforth constrained by harsher procedures.[72] Colbert headed both the Finance and

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66 Cabantous, *Histoire de Dunkerque*; Renaud Morieux, *Une mer pour deux royaumes. La Manche, frontière franco-anglaise, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles*, p. 121 ff (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008).

67 Anne Blanchard, *Vauban*, p. 153 ff (Paris: Fayard, 1996); Nordman, *Frontières de France.*

68 *Edict du Roy, donné a Moulins au moys de fevrier, 1566. Contenant les reigles, & maximes anciennes, de l'union & conservation de son domaine* (Rouen: 1610); *Ordonnance sur le fait des Eaux et forêts* (Paris: 1669).

69 Alain Guéry, 'Les finances de la monarchie française sous l'Ancien Régime', *Annales E.S.C* 33-2 (1978): 216-239.

70 André Corvisier, *Histoire militaire de la France*, Tome 1, p. 435 ff (Paris: PUF, 1992).

71 J. H. Elliott and Lawrence W. B. Brockliss, *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

72 Katia Béguin, *Les princes de Condé: rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du Grand Siècle* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1999).

Marine Departments, whereas Louvois was given those of War and Fortifications.[73] Consequently, conflict and competition between the different departments began to affect the functioning of the State. As a port, Dunkirk fell under the jurisdiction of the Marine Department, led by Colbert. As a town and fortress, Dunkirk and its inland region depended on the War Department, headed by Louvois. The institutional division between the two departments both dictated and delayed the evolution of water management.

In the 1660s and early 1670s, the War Department was predominant. When the French seized Dunkirk, engineers deplored the general disrepair of the hydraulic infrastructure and the silting-up of the docks. In 1666, a French engineer of the Marine Department named Gobert wrote that whilst the harbour was beautiful, the port was filled with sand and mud.[74] That same year, Jean-Baptiste Brodard, another French engineer, estimated the cost of renovation at 100,000 *livres tournois*.[75] The engineer Simon Stevin, originating from Flanders, but living in the Republic, had shown that ports should regularly be supplied with fresh water.[76] In his book, Stevin had presented a port-building model. He maintained that ports had to be connected to inland waterways in order to ease trade with the hinterland, to protect areas surrounding ports, and to provide regular shelter for boats. This model was well known to French engineers and had been studied by Vauban, who applied it in his work.[77]

Control over inland waterways increased progressively, following the pace of the work at Dunkirk. For instance, a State Council decision promised the magistrates of Dunkirk and Bourbourg that the canal between Dunkirk and the Aa would be made navigable. The text also stated that the magistrates should receive part of the canal income in compensation for their commitment to providing daily navigation between Dunkirk, Bourbourg, Calais, Saint-Omer and Gravelines.[78] As early as 1671, however, the growing need to supply more water to the port led to a plan to renovate and enlarge the Bourbourg lock and to dig the 'blue sluice' in Mardyck. With this work, Vauban wanted to control the water flow throughout Maritime

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[73] John Albert Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[74] 'La rade est très belle; le port et comblé de vase et de sable', quoted by Jean Peter, *Vauban et Dunkerque*, p. 75 (Paris: OEconomica, 2000).

[75] Peter, *Vauban*, p. 76.

[76] Simon Stevin, *Nieuw Maniere van Sterctebou door Spilsuysen [New Manneer of Fortification by means of Pivotted Sluice Locks]*, in R. J. Forbes (ed.), *The Principal Works of Simon Stevin*, Vol. 5 pp. 83-201 (Amsterdam, 1966 [1617]).

[77] Michèle Virol, *Vauban*, p. 33 (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2003).

[78] '...promet aux magistrats et habitants des dites villes de Dunkerque et de Bourbourg de faire et rendre navigable le dit canal depuis Dunkerque jusqu'à la rivière d'Aa. Ceux-ci vont pouvoir également jouir de tous les profits et émoluments qui proviendront dudit canal à la charge par eux de faire partir une barque par chacun jour de la ville de Dunkerque pour aller à Bourbourg, Calais, Saint-Omer et Gravelines,' quoted by Jean Peter, *Vauban.,* p. 113.

Flanders in order to keep a huge mass of water available to supply the port. Vauban thus subjugated the whole country to the port's needs. Following the military model, all of the drained and canalised water had to converge at Mardyck's 'blue sluice'.

A further challenge was how to defend Dunkirk in case of an attack from the north. To ease the burden on the royal budget, a strategy of defensive inundation was decided upon, which would spare the army from building larger fortifications. The recent draining of the Moëres was also abandoned in order to strengthen the defensive system.[79] Vauban thought that dry land could be dangerous, making it easier for enemies to advance. For this reason, the French decided to abandon the reclaimed land in order to form a natural barrier protecting Dunkirk and Veurne. Regarding the latter, Vauban suggested filling the Moëres with the Colme in order to increase the water mass and dissuade potential attackers. For that purpose, Vauban ordered the dikes of the Hondschoote canal to be raised and consolidated. To avoid the risk of collapse, the canal had to be built up in many places. The plan was discussed by the military hierarchy. Louvois, for whom Vauban worked, considered blocking all the canals between Dunkirk and Veurne, because he was afraid that floods or canals could be used for navigation and to launch troops against Dunkirk. For Louvois, the necessity of defending Dunkirk was so absolute that he considered stopping all commerce with Veurne. In his correspondence with Vauban, he requested that this possibility be considered, asserting: 'I know that it would trouble the whole region, and many individuals who have interests in trade with Veurne; but there should not be opposition to such a service, which would ensure that the inundation could always be mastered.'[80] In this way, the military and controlled inundating was facilitated by a large reorganisation of regional management.

The large-scale change in water management in Maritime Flanders was confirmed by Vauban's involvement in 1678. In that year, he was sent to serve the Marine Department and authorised to leave the War Department. His political influence and skills guaranteed success, and his intervention was a sign of State involvement. Vauban rapidly obtained a massive investment of 278,000 *livres* so that the canal between Dunkirk and the Aa could be completed as early as the following year.[81] Vauban's goal was to remove sand by using the ebb tide. The project also involved deepening the docks so they could shelter 500 vessels, including warships. Moreover, Vauban foresaw the threat from the shipworms that ate boat

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79 *Don des Moeres, en faveur des sieurs Colbert et de Louvois* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1669).

80 Letter from Louvois to Vauban, 27 July 1677, Service Historique de la Défense, Bibliothèque d'inspection du Génie, MR 33.

81 Peter, *Vauban,* p. 86 ff.

hulls and damaged fleets. This mollusc thrived in seawater, but could not survive in fresh water. [82] For that reason, it was necessary to provide fresh water in order to protect the fleet. In view of this strategy, the French conquest of Maritime Flanders and the northward transfer of French borders entailed a great change in water management by enforcing a military model in order to reconcile continental and maritime priorities. The growth of port infrastructure thus led to a change in the entire seafront environment.

Beyond the political authority and governance structures developed by the French monarchy, it is clear that from the conquest onward, royal engineers played a key role in water and land management. Their influence had already been great under the Spanish during the reigns of Philip III and Philip IV, but Louis XIV increased their power and ultimately gave them control over the region.[83] The engineer functioned as mediator between different actors engaged in public works, from contractors to ministers. The engineer needed to be able to understand the needs of the public authorities, as well as the specific skills of each mason or carpenter. In short, engineers were the local representatives of the State. Using tools such as quotations, maps and plans, they were able to construct an abstract representation of the area in order to implement the decisions made by those above them in the hierarchy.[84] In the particular case of Maritime Flanders, pictures and maps reveal much of the evolution in water management. Between the conquest and the end of the eighteenth century, army cartographers had to draw many parts of Maritime Flanders to show the Parisian military hierarchy how the various planned inundations could work, as well as how the border and Dunkirk were defended.[85] Soldiers had to supervise canals in the area in order to find the right place to break the dams and flood the countryside. Moreover, large parts of land were not cultivated, even if it had been possible to do so.

The development of engineers' contributions thus went hand in hand with changing water use north of the Aa. The conquest of Maritime Flanders was followed by its complete integration into the French administration, which was also developing. As Philippe Destable has shown, all of French Flanders at that time was like a great dockyard where every resource,

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82 For a broader view on the issue: Adam D. Sundberg, 'Floods, Worms and Cattle Plague: Nature Induces Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age' (Ph.D. diss, University of Kansas, 2015), 113 ff.

83 Josy Muller, 'Les ingénieurs militaires dans les Pays-Bas espagnols (1500-1715)', *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire* 20 (1959), 467-478.

84 Christian Jacob, *L'Empire des cartes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996).

85 Hélène Vérin, *La Gloire des ingénieurs. L'intelligence technique du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993).

human as well as technical, was being mobilised to defend the kingdom.[86] In this regard, a military layer was superimposed on water governance in Maritime Flanders. After the French conquest, water management in the region was dominated by the army. Colbert's primary goal was to develop French maritime power in order to compete with the United Provinces and obtain a new position in international trade. In many respects, military engineers and the new army administration were the tools of this policy. The central archives demonstrate the success of Colbert's ambitions, which needed strong support from Louvois. Ironically, the success of this policy was bolstered by the confirmation and control of existing governance structures.

Conclusion

From the 1660s onward, the conquest of Maritime Flanders and its integration into the Kingdom of France became a concrete reality through the incorporation and maintenance of water networks. In practice, the maintenance and organisation of drainage networks, which were useful to both agriculture and navigation, and the fortification of the zone were also fundamental issues for the newcomers. The proper functioning of these networks demanded the mobilisation of a large workforce. This justified and required the exercise of stricter control over the people of Maritime Flanders themselves, particularly due to their local knowledge. In this sense, control over the water network was both an *object* and a *tool* of government, and assumed a dual dimension.

The implementation of this dual policy was based on a merger between two methods of governance: inherited governance and imported governance. Inherited governance styles were absorbed into the French administrative machinery, which was being perfected and systematised. Former uses, including internal procedures, were first confirmed and then strengthened. Water management was strengthened primarily for technical and water-related reasons, but it subsequently gave the French authorities the means to control the *wateringues* and give them instructions. The *wateringue* thus eventually became an element in the operation of the monarchical administration. This evolution corresponded in every sense to the overall evolution of the monarchy, which was systematically looking to strengthen the role of landowners and customs in the management of community assets, water in particular.

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86 Philippe Destable, "Les chantiers du roi: la fortification du pré carré sous le règne de Louis XIV",(Ph.D thesis, University of Lille III, 2006).

In Maritime Flanders, the State, whether in its civil or military guise, created a confrontation with landowning institutions by eliminating all intermediary powers likely to intervene.

The merger between imported and inherited governance was not an obvious one, and pays testament to a convergence of interests between the people involved with the actual workings of the system and the pragmatism of the monarchy. It also shows an understanding of local issues and the need for deliberation and collective decisions. However, the merger was facilitated by the notion of the public good. Agricultural and military methods were brought together in the name of the public good, or, in other words, the interests of the community at large, personified and publicised by the monarchy's wishes. To achieve its goals, the French monarchy drew upon and perfected all the tools at its disposition. The circulation of high-quality information in the hierarchical civil and military administrations allowed a distant authority to become established. Likewise, the regular use of cartography considerably facilitated the decision-making process.

Lastly, the terms of Maritime Flanders' integration shed new light on changes in water governance, suggesting that change is not simply something that occurs with the imposition of a model. As Biggs observed of the Mekong Delta of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it seems that change is the result of upholding or even strengthening existing structures on the one hand, and integrating them into much larger networks on the other. From this point of view, a change in governance does not begin with a *tabula rasa*, but can only be understood when viewed through the prism of a change in scale. In the case of Maritime Flanders, basic structures of governance did not definitively change, but were inserted into an administrative whole that transformed their relative position. Although they were able to negotiate and carry out autonomous projects, the *wateringues* quickly understood that they were answerable to supervisors who were as distant as they were coercive. They thus lost autonomy over their actions and were set to work on larger projects. In return, they became more efficient. The environment was thus shaped by the interplay of these different levels of organisation and decision-making.