

CLIO'S ABACUS

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On the Arrival of the Annales School in the Netherlands
and the Development of Historical Arithmetic

{ Historiographical Thriller }

Peter van Druenen



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PROLOGUE *

In 2011, the *Bosatlas van de geschiedenis van Nederland* was published by Noordhof in Groningen.¹ This monumental work, bound and delivered in a beautiful cassette, contains more than 1500 maps and images that depict the history of the Netherlands from prehistoric times up to and including the twentieth century, with a small section on the 2000s. A ‘must have’ for a historian with a great interest in cartography, but also in clearly organized numbers and facts. Since at that time I was involved in researching demographic data regarding the history of the Northern and Southern Netherlands in the Early Modern period, I immediately flipped in the store to the demography pages on pages 155 and 312: neat maps showing the population numbers of several Dutch cities in different periods from the end of the Middle Ages.

I have the professional habit of always first checking where the compilers obtained their information for such factual data. In large reference works, these are almost always previous

* This essay is the outcome of preliminary research in historical-demographic literature post-1945, conducted for my study *Met en Tellen. Stedelijke inwonertallen in de Lage Landen: een alternatieve benadering* (Measuring and counting: urban population numbers in the Low Countries: an alternative Approach). Amsterdam, 2022 (also my PhD dissertation, defended on September 2, 2022, at Utrecht University and published by Amsterdam University Press under the same title). The results of the preliminary research prompted the development of an alternative multidisciplinary method for calculating urban population numbers, as elaborated in *Measuring and Counting*, but are not included in it.

¹ Noordhoff Atlasproducties, 2011.

publications and rarely studies based on original sources. The author had – as I expected – provided proper references: among others, the fourth volume of the *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (General History of the Netherlands) from 1980 for data prior to 1500, and the publication by Piet Lourens and Jan Lucassen from 1997, *Inwoneraantallen van Nederlandse Steden ca. 1300-1800* (Population Numbers of Dutch Cities ca. 1300-1800), for the figures after.² I knew that the two authors of the latter book had relied entirely on existing literature. This is inevitable, of course, when you want to retrieve the population numbers of 158 cities over a period of 500 years.

I also knew that the demography chapter in volume 5 of the aforementioned General History of the Netherlands, written by the Wageningen professor Ad van der Woude, had played a significant role in the methodology of Lourens and Lucassen.³ Van der Woude, in turn, had derived his information from an article he had written himself in the early 1960s with four colleagues: a project for which extensive research had been conducted in five Dutch regions using original sources such as baptism, marriage, death, and tax registers..⁴

My makeshift investigation into the origins of the numbers in the *Bosatlas* initially seemed satisfactory: although the author had obtained the information from a ‘source of a source of a source of a source’. For the base source, five solid investigations in the archives were used. Yet I remained doubtful: is it wise to fully adopt old information from half a century ago in a standard

² Blok et al., 1980, 48-50; Lourens and Lucassen, 1997.

³ Van der Woude, 1980, p. 102-168.

⁴ Faber et al., 1965, p. 47-114.

work? The question answers itself: of course not. You must always investigate whether new insights have been developed in the meantime. In this case, there were indeed many new insights: precisely during this period, historical demography evolved from a refined auxiliary subject into an independent and multifaceted discipline with its own sub-disciplines and interactions with numerous other sciences. This has resulted in many hundreds of studies and publications, a significant portion of which could have contributed to a more realistic representation of the facts in 2011, in this case, the urban population numbers of the Netherlands from 1500 onwards.⁵

A second question that arose was less easily answered: to what extent were the available data from the 1960s complete? In other words, for which cities was the presented information not covered by adequate source material? And, extending from this: is the 'Bosatlas case' an isolated instance, or are there more similar cases, perhaps even indicating an ingrained process in the practice of historical demography in the Netherlands? Finding answers to these questions is important for current societal debates in which such historical key data are used as evidence. For example, those about migration issues, where there are often references to the success or failure of previous waves of immigration. The historical data series used to support various positions vary considerably, which in turn feeds the prejudice that 'you can prove anything with statistics'.⁶

⁵ For an overview, see: Van Druenen, 2022, p. 23-78.

⁶ See: Van Druenen, 2022, p. 25-30, 222-226.

Quantitative research into the numbers of inhabitants, births, deaths, and marriages, and based on that, into migration and urbanization movements, plays an important role in the field. Demographers who deal with population developments in the current era must be able to calculate in any case. This certainly applies to historical demographers, who by definition also have to deal with incomplete source material and thus with incomplete data series. The French historian and innovator Ernest Labrousse advised his students in the 1950s for good reason: “Pour être historien, il faut savoir compter” (To be a historian, one must know how to count).⁷

The driving force behind Dutch historical demographic research after World War II, where Labrousse’s advice would certainly have been endorsed, was the Department of Agrarian History at Wageningen University. The researchers structured their studies and publications according to the ideas of the Annales School. A key figure was Ad van der Woude, who was a professor of Agrarian History and head of the department from 1975 to 2000. His work and academic career play important roles in this essay. It will become clear that at the end of his classical university education as a historian, he was captivated by the ideas of the French Annales School and its first followers in the Netherlands, including his predecessor, Bernhard Slicher van Bath. Van der Woude decided in the late 1950s to pursue his doctorate under Slicher van Bath, and became an ardent advocate of the new approach. He began this work when the so-called second generation of Annales historians was dominant, and achieved the status of one of the most important Dutch

⁷ Darnton, 2004, p. 725.

historians of his time during the third and early fourth generation. The historical demographic research and the methods and techniques he employed, date back to the early period of his career.

The chapter ‘The Demographic Development of the Northern Netherlands 1500-1800’ in volume 5 of the 15-volume *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (hereafter: *AGN*) from 1980 was the summarizing culmination of his work in this discipline up to that point.⁸ This new *AGN* (hereafter: *NAGN*) was based on the ideas of the French Annales School and replaced the old *AGN*, which had been written between 1947 and 1958.⁹ The authors of this latter 12-volume edition used the classical narrative approach, in which political and military history dominated.¹⁰ The group of historians to which Van der Woude belonged wanted to focus primarily on the social, cultural, and economic aspects of the past. For the new *AGN*, Van der Woude wrote two contributions, both in Volume 5: the introduction and the article on demography.¹¹ The introduction served mainly as a justification for volumes 5 through 9, in which the ‘Modern Age’ was treated according to the insights of the Annales School.

The second article, particularly in terms of the numerical data on population numbers – and thus on migration and urbanization movements – as well as the methodologies used, was in many ways a denial of the first. Nonetheless, it has dominated historical demographic research in the Netherlands for decades.

⁸ Blok et al., 1977-1983.

⁹ Van Houtte et al., 1949-1958.

¹⁰ Van der Dussen, 1983, p. 2-18.

¹¹ Van der Woude, 1980, p. 9-36 en 102-168.

As of 2024, it remains, like many other contributions in the NAGN, an important, frequently used, and cited secondary source.

In the following chapters an answer will be sought to the question of how this could have happened, extending from the 'Bosatlas case', focusing on the methods used for calculating historical population numbers. The structure is as follows: The first chapter is about the controversy between Van der Woude, who fell under the spell of the ideas of the Annales School during his graduation, and his mentor Pieter Geijl, who rejected them. The history of this school and the criticism of its approach are the subjects of the second chapter. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters address the adaptation of the Annales School ideas by the Wageningen School in the Netherlands during the period 1945-1980. The emphasis is on the development of the historical demographic research in the Netherlands, culminating in Van der Woude's contributions to the *AGN* of 1980. The significant and almost paradigmatic influence of this work on historical demographic research, especially on the arithmetic components after 1980, is discussed in chapter six.

1. STUDENT, MASTER

On the first page of his dissertation *Het Noorderkwartier* from 1972, Ad van der Woude first thanked the Utrecht professor Pieter Geijl, under whom he graduated as a historian in 1958.¹² He called him his mentor but emphasized in the same paragraph that he had taken his historical work in a different direction. Van der Woude did not elaborate further – three more pages of acknowledgments to others followed – but with this fragment, he made it immediately clear what he meant, at least to his fellow historians and anyone who had followed developments in the field over the previous 25 years.

A new generation of historians had emerged who, in terms of themes, methods, and source usage, advocated a different approach to historical science than the previous generation, of which Geijl was one of the representatives for him. It was characteristic of Van der Woude to mention this, and even in the first lines of his dissertation. Throughout his academic career, starting from 1958, he had opposed his old teacher and his generation's views on the discipline. In the year after his graduation, Van der Woude, together with Eastern Europe historian Zdeněk Dittrich, published a manifesto against what they saw as the traditionalism of existing historiography that focused on political and military events and great men, where the literary qualities of the historian were more important than their expertise.¹³ The two advocated for a transition where the discipline should become an empirical social science that reconstructs “the

¹² Van der Woude, 1972, Preface (no page numbers).

¹³ Dittrich and Van der Woude, 1959, p. 361-380.

material and immaterial realities of the human past in their temporal sequence and their interrelation, in order to explain the actual course of societal development”.¹⁴

Although no names of Dutch colleagues were mentioned, Geijl immediately felt targeted by the article from his younger colleagues Dittrich, whom he had recently helped secure a scholarship, and Van der Woude, his last graduate student. He responded with a letter, stung by their critique, calling Dittrich a “self-willed, brilliant, passionate Czech” and noting that he would rather stay in a crypt than in the novelty of his young colleagues.¹⁵ This could have been the start of a scientific polemic. Van der Woude continued to oppose the established order in general and Geijl in particular. However, a written debate with his old mentor never materialized for the simple reason that Geijl, who won the most important Dutch prize for literature – the P.C. Hooft Prize – in 1957 for his essayistic work, continued to publish extensively but completely ignored the new developments in his field.

In the years between his retirement in 1958 and his death in 1966, Geijl mainly focused on writing about the future and the self-awareness of Europe, on which he had an optimistic outlook. In his farewell lecture in 1958, titled *De vitaliteit van de westerse beschaving* (The vitality of western civilization), he made it clear where his interests would lie in the years following his retirement. Additionally, he wrote about eminent scientists from the past and World War II. In debates with writers like Henri

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 368.

¹⁵ Tollebeek, 1996, p. 388; Perton, 1977, p. 4.

Gomperts and Henk van Galen Last, he defended his nationalism, by which he meant the Dutch-speaking region, not just the kingdom. He also emphasized that the shared culture of the Netherlands and Flanders was not necessarily superior to that of other countries, but rather that it had its own variety that needed to be preserved.¹⁶

Van der Woude would continue to express his objections to Geijl for many years, even after Geijl's death in 1966. In a 1977 interview with the historical journal *Groniek*, he remarked that the ideas of the French Annales School only penetrated the Netherlands in the 1960s. According to him, historians like Jan Romein and Pieter Geijl were unaware of these new developments. When the French historian and co-founder of the Annales School, Lucien Febvre, came to give a lecture for the Alliance Française, an organization founded in 1888 to promote and spread French language and culture, at the end of the 1940s, there were hardly any Dutch historians present.¹⁷

In the subsequent edition of *Groniek*, Van der Woude's remarks were refuted by his Groningen colleague Ernst Kossmann: "Oh dear! How difficult contemporary history is! Let me provide Van der Woude with some data before he further studies the very strange phenomenon he observed".¹⁸ Kossmann demonstrated that Dutch historians were already aware of the work of their French colleagues during the interwar period.

¹⁶ Geijl, 1959-1960, p. 10-14.

¹⁷ Perton, 1977, p. 4.

¹⁸ Jansen, 1977, p. 26.

The lectures given by Febvre and Bloch in the Netherlands were well attended, including by Kossmann himself. He also recalled a 1954 publication by Pieter Geijl, in which Geijl criticized a work by Febvre but acknowledged his French colleague as a leading figure of an important new historiographical school.¹⁹ Although Kossmann was correct, he also knew in 1977 that the 1954 publication was one of the last times Geijl publicly commented on the Annales School.

During that year, Geijl was deeply involved in completing his ten-volume magnum opus, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam* (History of the Dutch Nation), of which the first eight volumes, covering the period from 500 to 1751, had been published in the 1930s.²⁰ During World War II, the project had been halted because Geijl was interned for most of the war due to his criticism of the German occupiers. In the early years after 1945, he wrote a comprehensive work on Napoleon.²¹ It wasn't until 1947 that Geijl resumed his main project. The initial books were partially rewritten and supplemented. For the period from 1751 to 1798, an additional two books were needed before the project came to a halt for him.

1798 was not chosen arbitrarily. It was the year in which the first Constitution of the Netherlands came into effect: *the Staatsregeling voor het Bataafsche Volk* (Constitution for the Batavian People).²² Geijl saw this event as the provisional culmination of Dutch state formation, at least for the Northern Netherlands.

¹⁹ Ibid..

²⁰ Geijl, 1956.

²¹ Geijl, 1946.

²² Dutch Constitution (<https://www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl>).