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# Misreading the marshes: past and present perceptions of the East Anglian Fens, UK

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the structural opposition between wet and dryland landscapes and people. This opposition, and an accompanying negative attitude to wetlands, is often held by ‘outsiders’, those who do not regularly interact with wetland environments. The outsider view of wetlands can be traced throughout history and is problematic as it often unwittingly influences our own understanding of past wetland(er)s. To address this issue, an alternative, ‘insiders’ perception of wetlands should be considered. This paper will do so by re-evaluating historical accounts written by outsiders and integrating these with information from the rich archaeological record of the East Anglian Fens. Doing so reveals several modes of human-wetland interaction in the (pre)historic Fens which reflect the different ways in which this wetland was perceived by various people through time. Considering multiple voices and integrating various categories of evidence from both within and outside wetlands provides us with a more accurate understanding of the dynamics of past life in and around these landscapes and thus helps us break down modern dichotomies which create artificial boundaries between wet and dryland(er)s.

**Keywords:** Landscape Perceptions; Wetlands; East Anglian Fens; Human-Environment Interaction

## The outsiders’ view

In our modern world wetland environments are commonly perceived in negative terms. Wetlands, mostly identified as bogs or marshes, are seen as mysterious, forbidding, wild and dangerous places. In many people’s mind, such areas contrast with the known, cultivated and domesticated ‘drylands’ that we normally inhabit. This attitude, in which wetland people too are often viewed negatively, can be traced back to the medieval period, and even earlier, to Roman authors like Pliny the Elder. Writing in the first century AD, Pliny describes the *Chauci*, a people who lived on raised platforms (or ‘*terpen*’) in the salt marshes in the northern Netherlands and Germany. He talks of a ‘miserable race’ eking out a meagre existence in a large empty plain which is flooded twice a day.<sup>1</sup>

A similar negative attitude can be found in early medieval sources written by Christian monks in England. Between

the fifth and seventh centuries AD, these monks sought reclusion and sanctity in unfamiliar, dangerous environments like the East Anglian Fens (figure 1)<sup>2</sup>. As newcomers to this landscape, the monks regarded it with suspicion and aversion.<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in the writings of Felix (c. AD 730), who narrates the life of St. Guthlac, the founder of Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire. He writes how Guthlac seeks solitude in the wilderness of the Lincolnshire Fens, which are described as: ‘...now consisting of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog...traversed by...tortuous streams’ with ‘terrors of various shapes’.<sup>4</sup> The people who lived in these wildlands were seen as equally wild and dangerous.<sup>5</sup> They are identified as a distinctly different people, the Britons.<sup>6</sup> Felix portrays these ‘implacable enemies of the Saxon race’ as demons who attack St. Guthlac.<sup>7</sup> Although Felix may be exaggerating the Fenland’s foulness and the wildness of its inhabitants in order to emphasise Guthlac’s virtues, sources like this reveal how outsiders viewed these wetlands and their inhabitants with great suspicion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, XVI, 2-4, translated by Rackham, H., *Pliny Natural History Books 12-16*, Loeb Classical Library, 2nd edition, volume IV (London: Harvard University Press, 1953), 386-389.

<sup>2</sup> Ballantyne, R., “Islands in Wilderness: the Changing Medieval Use of the East Anglian Peat Fens, England,” *Environmental Archaeology* 9 (2004): 195.

<sup>3</sup> Ballantyne, “Islands in Wilderness,” 196.

<sup>4</sup> Felix, *The Life of St. Guthlac*, XXIV, translated by Colgrave, B., *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac. Introduction, Text Translation and Notes*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 87; Ballantyne, “Islands in Wilderness,” 196.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Brady, L., “Echoes of Britons on a Fenland Frontier in the Old English “*Andreas*,”” *The Review of English Studies* 61, no. 252 (2010): 669-689.

<sup>6</sup> Brady, “Echoes of Britons Fenland Frontier,” 675-681.

<sup>7</sup> Felix, *The Life of St. Guthlac*, XXXIV, Colgrave, *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, 108-11; Brady, “Echoes of Britons Fenland Frontier,” 678.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ballantyne, “Islands of Wilderness,” 196.

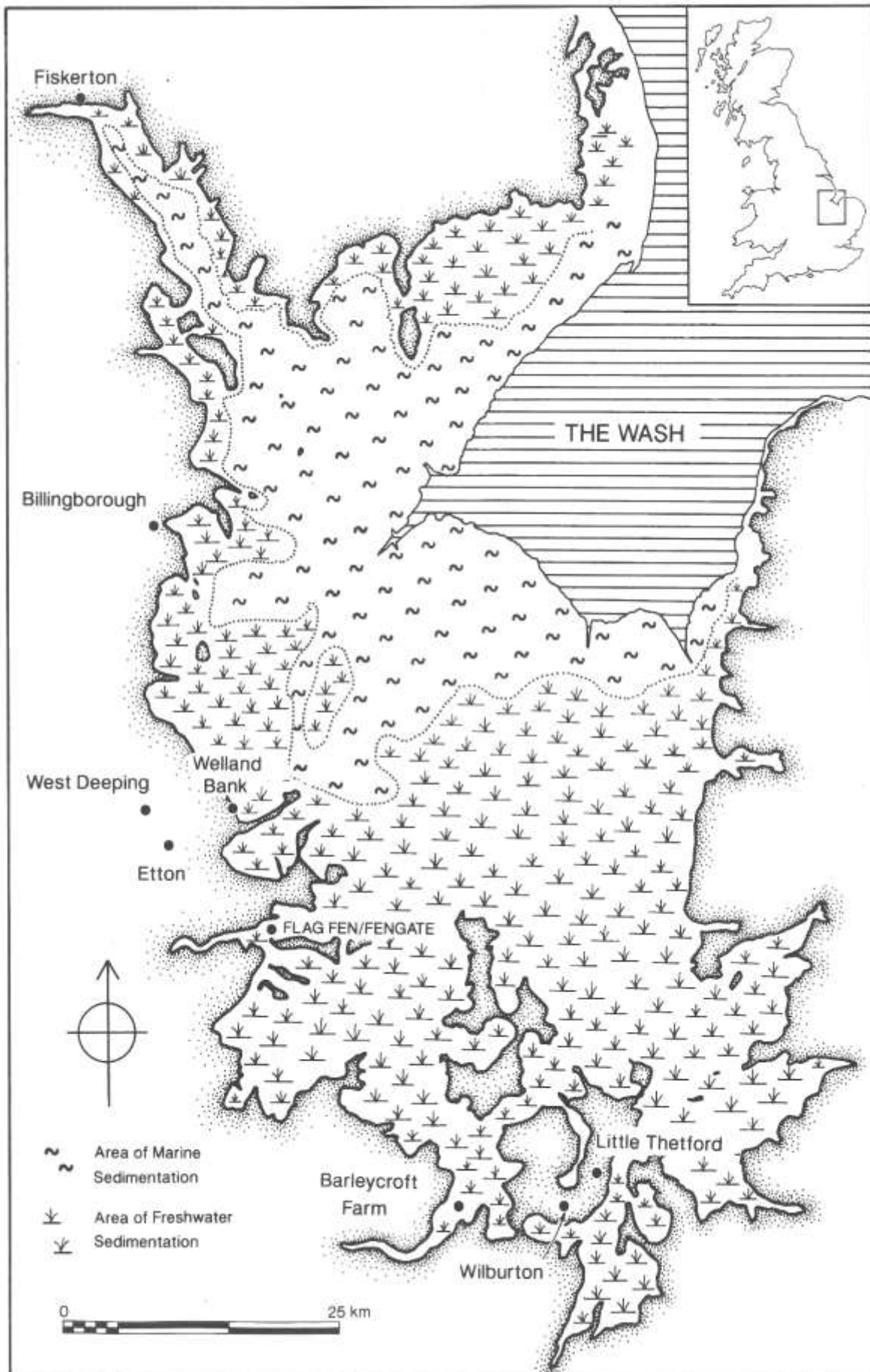


Figure 1: The East Anglian Fens, c. 700-600 BC (from Pryor 2001, 2). Reproduced with kind permission of Ordnance Survey and Cambridgeshire County Council.

With such a negative view of the ‘wild places’ in this ‘most dismal fen’<sup>9</sup> it comes as no surprise that monastic houses founded by Anglo-Saxon monks moving into the Fens, such as Medeshamstede, Thorney, Ely, Ramsey and Crowland, played an important role in early reclamation efforts in this wetland.<sup>10</sup> From the eighth century AD onwards they introduced elements of landscape organization and settlement planning,<sup>11</sup> and in the ninth century AD they initiated more systematic drainage efforts with the aim of improving the Fens’ agricultural productivity.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the wild Fenland was rich in natural resources which were certainly exploited. There is little specific mention of such exploitation in early medieval sources, but later medieval texts are more explicit.<sup>13</sup> Hugo Candidus (c. AD 1150) for instance, considers the Peterborough marshes as ‘very useful for men; for in it are found wood and twigs for fires, hay for the fodder of cattle, thatch for covering houses, and many other useful things. It is, moreover, productive of birds and fish.’<sup>14</sup> With the greater appreciation and exploitation of Fenland resources came new laws and regulations.<sup>15</sup> From the twelfth century AD onwards, rights over land, often already extant, became legitimised, a practice reflected in documents relating to land allocated for grazing and those regulating the use of and access to typical Fenland resources such as sedge and reed, peat, wildfowl and eggs.<sup>16</sup>

Despite a seemingly more positive attitude to wetlands, parts of the Fens continued to be viewed negatively, as useless expanses of wild water. Hugo Candidus describes land that is uninhabitable ‘from the flooding of rivers’, with ‘water, standing on unlevel ground’ making ‘deep marsh’.<sup>17</sup> Matthew Paris, writing in the thirteenth century AD, describes the pre-drainage Fens as a ‘place of horror’, inhabited only by birds and devils.<sup>18</sup>

From the tenth century AD onwards, partly in response to wider social and economic changes and demands for more

agricultural land, such ‘useless wetlands’ increasingly became the focus of large-scale drainage schemes.<sup>19</sup> These drainage efforts, which intensified in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD, were accompanied by an interesting Christian ideology that saw wetlands and their inhabitants as wild, undomesticated and therefore ‘ungodly’.<sup>20</sup> By reclaiming the wild wetlands both the land and its inhabitants could be tamed; as wetlands went from wild wastes to useful fertile agricultural land, wetland people became civilised, hard-working Christians.<sup>21</sup>

We find a similar attitude in the post-medieval period, when sources describe wetlands as wild and ‘utterly wasted’<sup>22</sup> and wetland people as a ‘half-savage population’.<sup>23</sup> Drainage continued relentlessly, especially after an Act was passed in AD 1600 ‘for the recovery and inning of drowned and surrounded grounds and the draining dry of watery marshes, fens, bogs, moors and other grounds of like nature.’<sup>24</sup> Economic motives (drained wetlands like the Fens were amongst Britain’s richest agricultural land) played an important role in these developments.<sup>25</sup> Yet the large scale drainage schemes, which forcefully changed the locally adapted pastoral economy based on extensive wetland usage into arable production, continued to be legitimised through an ideology of improvement.<sup>26</sup> An anonymous source in AD 1685 describes the ‘change of Men and manners’, when ‘Souls of Sedge shall understand Discourse, New hands shall learn to Work’ and ‘New legs shall go to church, new knees shall kneel.’<sup>27</sup>

As more and more former wetlands disappeared over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, perceptions of wetland landscapes and their inhabitants changed.<sup>28</sup> By the nineteenth century, feelings of nostalgia had replaced earlier aversion to the Fens and their people.<sup>29</sup> Wheeler’s description of ‘Fen Slodgers’ who still lived in what remained of the ‘wild’ Fens, encapsulates this change from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ primitivism: ‘Although their condition was very miserable, they enjoyed a sort of wild liberty amid

<sup>9</sup> Felix, *The Life of St. Guthlac*. XXIV, Colgrave, *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Rippon, S., *The Transformation of Coastal Wetlands. Exploitation and Management of Marshland Landscapes in North West Europe during the Roman and Medieval Periods* (Oxford: The British Academy, 2000), 250.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Wright, D., “Restructuring the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Landscape: Planned Settlements, Estates and Minsters in pre-Viking England,” *Church Archaeology* 14 (2010): 24.

<sup>12</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 177; 250-51.

<sup>13</sup> Ballantyne, “Islands of Wilderness,” 196-70.

<sup>14</sup> Hugo Candidus, ‘Historiae Coenobii Burgensis’ in *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptorum Varii*, in Darby, H.C., *The Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ballantyne, “Islands of Wilderness,” 196.

<sup>16</sup> Ballantyne, “Islands of Wilderness,” 196; Hall, D. and Coles, J., *Fenland Survey. An Essay in Landscape Persistence*. English Heritage Archaeological Report 1 (Swindon: English Heritage, 1994), 148.

<sup>17</sup> Hugo Candidus, ‘Historiae Coenobii Burgensis’ in *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptorum Varii*, in Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora*, in Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 219; 245; Ballantyne, “Islands in Wilderness,” 196.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Zwart, H., “Aquaphobia, Tulipmania, Biophilia: a Moral Geography of the Dutch Landscape,” *Environmental Values* 12, no. 1 (2003): 111-12; Rippon 2000, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 219.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Van de Noort, R. and O’Sullivan, A., *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology* (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2006), 77.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, C., “*Sentimental Prehistories*: the Construction of the Fenland Past,” *Journal of European Prehistory* 5, no. 2 (1997): 129.

<sup>24</sup> 1600 Act, in Van de Noort and O’Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, “*Sentimental Prehistories*”, 117; 120.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, “*Sentimental Prehistories*”, 117; 120.

<sup>27</sup> Anon.1685, in Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Evans, “*Sentimental Prehistories*”, 125.

<sup>29</sup> Evans, “*Sentimental Prehistories*”, 125.

the watery wastes'.<sup>30</sup> Although more positive, the structural opposition between wet and dryland and between poor 'wild' wetlanders and civilised educated drylanders remained firmly in place.

Today, as a result of the various drainage activities described above, most wetlands in north-western Europe have completely disappeared. The wetlands that remain are valued not for their cultural heritage, but more as rich natural ecosystems.<sup>31</sup> People are often banned from such landscapes in an effort to preserve these areas for future generations. Thus, structural oppositions between wild, natural wetlands and dry, cultivated and inhabitable 'human' landscapes continue to this day.

For modern attitudes to wetland communities, we have to look beyond Europe. The Iraqi Marshlands, or 'Ahwar', now listed as a World Heritage site, are a good example.<sup>32</sup> Until very recently, this large inland marshland was 'one of the world's most spectacular wetland cultural landscapes'<sup>33</sup>, where the local Marsh Arabs or 'Ma'dan' lived a true wetland life with a self-sufficient economy structured around the wetland environment.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, like many other wetland communities throughout history, the Ma'dan were regarded with suspicion.<sup>35</sup> The Iraqi government saw the marshes 'as a refuge for bandits, smugglers and rebels disdainful of external control'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, after an unsuccessful Shi'ite uprising immediately following the First Gulf War, the marshes were drained, villages bombed and the inhabitants driven out.<sup>37</sup> This extreme example demonstrates the culmination of centuries of negative attitudes towards wetlands and their inhabitants.

From the above discussion, it is clear that throughout history, 'outsiders', or people who do not work, live or enter wetlands on a regular basis often had a negative attitude towards wetlands and their inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> This attitude is found not only in respect of the East Anglian Fens, but also for many other wetland areas, such as Romney Marsh in Kent, or the Somerset Levels.<sup>39</sup> Historic sources describe these wetlands as wild, dangerous

expanses of unhealthy marsh inhabited by a distinct community of 'Marshlanders'.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere in Europe, we find similar attitudes. A thirteenth century AD chronicle for instance, describes how William of Holland attacked the Frisians, who were living in the low-lying coastal areas of West Frisia. These 'uncouth, uncivilised and unconquered men' cunningly lured William into a frozen marsh where he became stuck and was killed.<sup>41</sup>

Of course many of the written sources mentioned above are biased and exaggerate the negative features of wetland landscapes and their inhabitants for their own purposes. They reflect the view of a small yet vocal and powerful minority within society which, as we shall see below, is unlikely to reflect broader societal views on wetlands. Yet unfortunately, the generally negative perception of wetland(er)s presented in these historical accounts is still very influential, not only in popular culture, but also in academia. In mainstream archaeology for instance, wetlands are often seen as physically and socially marginal areas.<sup>42</sup> The sub-discipline of wetland archaeology seeks to rectify this misconception by demonstrating how many past people exploited the great wealth of natural resources in wetland areas, and by arguing for the high potential of well-preserved wetland sites to increase our understanding of life in the past.<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, wetland archaeologists, studying past wetland landscapes and the people interacting with them, tend to have a more positive view of these landscapes. Yet, as outsiders themselves, not even they escape the influence of the structural opposition between wet and dryland(er)s that developed over time. This is reflected in one of the most important research questions that underlies much wetland research: why did people choose to live in wetlands, 'an environment so inhospitable, muddy, unstable and prone to flooding...?'<sup>44</sup> The assumptions underlying this question are rooted in our own modern understanding of wetland environments and landscapes, which we, like other outsiders, perceive as fundamentally unsuitable for habitation. Thus, in attempts to explain past wetland sites they are often considered to be 'special' in some way. Moreover, by referring to 'wetland people' we distinguish between them and other 'normal'

<sup>30</sup> Wheeler, W.H., *A History of the Fens of South Lincolnshire*, 2nd edition (Boston: J.M. Newcomb, 1896), 35; Evans, "Sentimental Prehistories," 125.

<sup>31</sup> Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 137.

<sup>32</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2016, United Nations, viewed 1st August 2016, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1481>.

<sup>33</sup> Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 120-21.

<sup>34</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2003, United Nations, viewed 1st August 2016, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1838/>.

<sup>35</sup> Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 121.

<sup>37</sup> Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rippon, S., "'Uncommonly Rich and Fertile' or 'not very Salubrious'? The Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes," in *Landscapes* 10, no. 1 (2009): 39.

<sup>39</sup> Rippon, "Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes," 47-51.

<sup>40</sup> Rippon, "Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes," 47-51.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora*, in Bartlett, R., *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 77.

<sup>42</sup> Van de Noort and O'Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 33; Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Coles, J., *The Archaeology of Wetlands* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984); Coles, B. and Coles J., *People of the Wetlands. Bogs, Bodies and Lake-Dwellers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989); Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*; Menotti, F., *Wetland Archaeology and Beyond: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Menotti, F. and O'Sullivan, A. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Wetland Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Pétrequin, P. and Bailley, M., "Lake-dwelling Research in France: from Climate Change to Demography," in *Living on the lake in prehistoric Europe: 150 years of lake-dwelling research*, ed. F. Menotti (London: Routledge, 2004), 39-40.

people inhabiting drier parts of the landscape in a way that is very similar to the historical sources described above.<sup>45</sup>

Although such distinctions between dry and wetland(er)s may well have existed in some periods and places, we should not assume such a division from the onset. Rather than approaching past wetlands with preconceived ideas about these landscapes and the people interacting with them, we need to consider past ‘insider’ perceptions; what did these landscapes mean to *them*?<sup>46</sup> We can do so by reconsidering written documents and examining other lines of evidence, such as the archaeological record in wetlands. In contrast to many of the written sources described above, this record was created mostly by less vocal and illiterate ‘insiders’, who are less likely to have had a particular agenda. Unlike outsider viewpoints on wetland(er)s, direct evidence of past insider perceptions is rare, but by ‘reading between the lines’ and examining human-environment interaction through the well-preserved archaeological record in wetlands, we do gain insights into these insiders’ perspectives. Together, written sources and the archaeological record can provide us with a more balanced view of past people’s attitude to and perception of wetland landscapes.

### The insiders’ view

Before large scale drainage, wetlands of various kinds made up large parts of the north-western European landscape.<sup>47</sup> The rich archaeological records in these wetlands demonstrate that they played an important role in many people’s lives. Nowhere is this clearer than in later prehistory, when rising sea levels created the vast wetland area later known as the East Anglian Fens.<sup>48</sup> During the Bronze Age, the Fens were used for grazing, as reflected by fen edge fieldsystems which appear in this period.<sup>49</sup> Bronze Age briquetage found at Northey and Fengate are the earliest indications of saltmaking in the Fens.<sup>50</sup> We also see the appearance of wooden trackways crossing wet stretches of the landscape, sometimes accompanied by numerous

metal items, pottery and animal bone deposits, like at Flag Fen.<sup>51</sup> Here, people probably came together to place votive offerings in the marsh, suggesting the Fens had an important ritual meaning.<sup>52</sup>

Yet the most striking example of human-wetland interaction in the Bronze Age Fens is the newly discovered site of Must Farm. Here, numerous fish traps, weirs and no fewer than nine logboats were found in a palaeochannel of the River Nene.<sup>53</sup> Even more spectacular is the Late Bronze Age settlement built on piles in the middle of the same stream. At least three roundhouses and a wealth of organic and inorganic objects, including a large assemblage of metal items, whole pots with contents, fine textiles and glass beads were discovered.<sup>54</sup> Yet although levels of preservation are exceptional at Must Farm and its wetland location seems strange to us now, this settlement may be typical of Fenland habitation in the Bronze Age (Mark Knight, pers. comm.). It seems communities living in the area decided to move into the marshes when the river became inaccessible due to peat growth around it.<sup>55</sup> This wetland colonisation demonstrates that, in contrast to our current perception, the wet environment was not considered a problem.<sup>56</sup> Equally, it shows the connectedness of people living in this settlement with communities along the river further inland. That they were no marginalised or poor people is also attested by finds of beads and metal items from Continental Europe.<sup>57</sup>

The Iron Age Fens continued to be used for pasture, and saltmaking became increasingly important.<sup>58</sup> Ritual depositions continued at sites like Fiskerton and Over, where both objects and human remains were found in the rivers Witham and Great Ouse respectively.<sup>59</sup> At Haddenham V the numerous bones of wild animals like beaver, swan and other wild fowl suggest specialised Fenland resource extraction, possibly for trade with inland

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Evans, “*Sentimental Prehistories*”.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Van de Noort and O’Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 7-11; 17-21.

<sup>48</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Evans, C., *Fengate Revisited, Further Fen-edge Excavations, Bronze Age Fieldsystems and Settlement and the Wyman Abbott/Leeds Archives*, CAU Landscape Archives, Histiography and Fieldwork (1) (Cambridge: Cambridge Archaeological Unit, 2009), 243-256.

<sup>50</sup> Lane, T. and Morris, E.L. (eds.), *A Millennium of Saltmaking: Prehistoric and Romano-British Salt Production in the Fenland*. Lincolnshire Archaeology and Heritage Reports Series 4 (Lincolnshire: Heritage Trust for Lincolnshire, 2002), 8.

<sup>51</sup> Pryor, F., *The Flag Fen Basin. Archaeology and Environment of a Fenland Landscape*, English Heritage Archaeological Reports (Swindon: English Heritage, 2001), xviii-xix.

<sup>52</sup> Pryor, *Flag Fen Basin*, xviii-xix.

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, I., Knight, M. and Murrell, K., *Must Farm Palaeochannel Investigations 2009-2012. Post-excavation Assessment*, Cambridge Archaeological Unit Report No. 1266, (2015).

<sup>54</sup> Must Farm Progress Archive 2016, Cambridge Archaeological Unit, viewed 3rd November 2016, viewed 2nd November 2016, www.mustfarm.com.

<sup>55</sup> Knight, M. and Brudenell, M., *Pattern and Process. Landscape Prehistories from the Whittlesey Brick Pits. The King’s Dyke and Bradley Fen Excavations 1998-2004*, CAU Flag Fen Basin Depth and Time Series Volume 1 (in prep.).

<sup>56</sup> Knight and Brudenell, *Pattern and Process*.

<sup>57</sup> Must Farm Progress Archive, www.mustfarm.com.

<sup>58</sup> Lane, T.W., *The Fenland Project Number 8: Lincolnshire Survey, the Northern Fen-edge*, East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 66, (Sleaford: Heritage Trust of Lincolnshire, 1993), 385-86.

<sup>59</sup> Field, N. and Parker-Pearson, M., *Fiskerton. An Iron Age Timber Causeway With Iron Age and Roman Votive Offerings: the 1981 Excavations*, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003); Evans, C., *Twice Crossed River. Prehistoric and Paleoenvironmental Investigations at Barleycroft Farm/Over, Cambridgeshire*, Cambridge Archaeological Unit Landscape Archives Series, The Archaeology of the Lower Ouse Valley, Volume III, (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2016).

communities.<sup>60</sup> Like the Bronze Age communities in the Flag Fen Basin, the people exploiting the wetland landscape at Haddenham were interacting with and possibly even part of a larger community that inhabited the drier areas around the Fens.<sup>61</sup> Although it is often assumed that the wetland groups would have had a constant ‘wet identity’, they may in fact have identified more closely with contemporary upland or up-river settlement and communities.<sup>62</sup> Unlike in later periods, there may not yet have been a separate class of ‘wetlanders’.

Pliny’s description of poor wetlanders living in a vast wilderness fits in with how the Roman State viewed wetlands; as marginal wastelands which they were keen to reclaim and bring into cultivation.<sup>63</sup> Several emperors actively invested efforts in large scale drainage projects in Italy.<sup>64</sup> It has been argued that the Fens also saw large-scale systematic drainage after the Roman State seized this virgin ‘wilderness’ and turned it into an imperial estate supplying grain to the army on the northern frontier.<sup>65</sup> Yet although there are indicators that would support the view of the Fens as an imperial estate, such as the sophisticated stone building at Stonea<sup>66</sup> or the construction of several Fenland canals, there is no evidence for any large-scale drainage operations in this wetland area; the Fens remained an intertidal marsh in the Roman period.<sup>67</sup>

Yet this does not mean that the Fens were not exploited in the Roman period. On the contrary, there is a marked increase in activity from the second century AD onwards.<sup>68</sup> The fen edge and islands continued to be settled and both settlements and salterns were located in the marine silts.<sup>69</sup> Although no large-scale reclamation took place, local enclosure is evidenced in double-ditched features which presumably resulted from the construction of banks.<sup>70</sup> Fieldsystems indicate continued grazing and Roman turbaries demonstrate that peat was cut on a large scale,

possibly to fuel the expanding salt production.<sup>71</sup> Ritual activities also continued, as reflected at the Romano-British shrine at Snow Farm, Haddenham.<sup>72</sup> Nearby, on the fen edge at Colne Fen, an inland port was found where terpen-like house platforms were discovered and the economy reflects extensive use of wild wetland species.<sup>73</sup> Rather than an impoverished backwater community eking out a marginal living from sad hovels perched upon small mounds (cf. Pliny’s description of the terpen-people above), this mounded settlement and the reliance on wetland species may have been an innovative adaptation to local environmental conditions,<sup>74</sup> where the importance of trade and ease of transport outweighed the ‘inconvenience’ of a wet environment.

Despite disparaging accounts of Christian monks who moved to the Fens in search of solitude, these wetlands continued to be used and settled in the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>75</sup> Although marine flooding caused some settlement abandonment in the third century AD, Romano-British sites remained occupied and there seems to have been continuity between the Roman and early medieval period, both in terms of settlement and communities.<sup>76</sup> In the freshwater peat bogs, people continued to exploit the same wild resources as had their prehistoric and Roman predecessors.<sup>77</sup> Further towards the coast, in the Lincolnshire siltlands, new settlements were established in the same locations as in the Roman period.<sup>78</sup> Here too the rich natural resources of the landscape were exploited, but for the first time, there also is evidence for small-scale local drainage efforts which allowed some arable cultivation in this area.<sup>79</sup> At sites like Chopdike Drove, Mornington House, Hay Green, Rose Hall Farm and Ingleborough for instance, substantial ditches and evidence for cereal cultivation (often of salt tolerating barley) suggests people managed to improve drainage in this still intertidal environment.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Evans, C. and Hodder, I., *Marshland Communities and Cultural Landscapes from the Bronze Age to Present Day*, The Haddenham Project Volume 2, (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2006), 213; 243-46; 277.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Evans and Hodder, *Marshland Communities*, 1; 276-77.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Evans and Hodder, *Marshland Communities*, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 127; 129.

<sup>64</sup> Jackson, R.P.J. and Potter, T.W., *Excavations at Stonea, Cambridgeshire 1980-85*, (British Museum Press, London, 1996), 678.

<sup>65</sup> Richmond, I.A., *Roman Britain* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1963), 102; Salway, P., “The Roman Fenland,” in *The Fenland in Roman Times*, *Royal Geographical Society*, ed. C.W. Philips (London: Royal Geographical Society, 1970); Potter, T.W., “The Roman Fenland: a Review of recent work,” in *Research in Roman Britain 1960-1989*, ed. M. Todd (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1989), 159-60; Rippon, *Transformations of Coastal Wetlands*, 127.

<sup>66</sup> Jackson and Potter, *Excavations at Stonea*, 678; Potter 1989, “The Roman Fenland; a Review”, 186.

<sup>67</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 127-33.

<sup>68</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 129-31.

<sup>69</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 115; Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 73.

<sup>70</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 75.

<sup>71</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 117; 119; Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 102.

<sup>72</sup> Evans and Hodder, *Marshland Communities*, 409; 417.

<sup>73</sup> Evans, C., *Process and History; Romano-British Communities at Colne Fen, Earith. An Inland Port and Supply Farm*, Cambridge Archaeological Unit Landscape Archives Series, The Archaeology of the Lower Ouse Valley, Volume II (Cambridge: Cambridge Archaeological Unit, 2013), 272; 385.

<sup>74</sup> Evans, *Process and History*, 426.

<sup>75</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 122; Oosthuizen, S., “Culture and Identity in the Early Medieval Fenland Landscape,” *Landscape History* 37, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>76</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 140; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 122; 130; Oosthuizen, “Culture and Identity”, 8-9.

<sup>77</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 140; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 122; 131.

<sup>79</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 172.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

These early reclamation efforts were a form of unsystematic landscape modification, reflecting a piecemeal approach to drainage, with small tracts of land being enclosed as required by local communities.<sup>81</sup> Yet although there was no systematic landscape transformation at this stage, these early drainage efforts do reflect a change in people's attitude to the wetland landscape. Rather than just exploiting the natural resources, people started to place more value on dry and fertile agricultural land than on wild resources. This could partly be explained through the growing influence of the ecclesiastical houses founded in the Fens by Anglo-Saxon monks. These monastic houses demanded a year-round farmed surplus from rural communities, which required extensive settlement and landscape changes.<sup>82</sup> Under their influence villages became more nucleated from the eighth century onwards and from the tenth century, monasteries were actively promoting the drainage of wetlands.<sup>83</sup> Thus, landscape exploitation and modification strategies started to give way to more systematic landscape transformation.<sup>84</sup> The construction of a 'Sea Bank' around the whole of the Wash between the seventh and eleventh centuries AD is a clear outcome of this development. Part of a much larger system of carefully maintained flood defences, this earthwork was aimed at protecting settlements and fields from flooding.<sup>85</sup>

Yet the drainage of former wetland areas resulted in the loss of many wild resources highly valued by communities who had lived in the Fens for generations. Although many people seem to have accepted drainage as a new way of wetland usage, others may not have approved. Their feelings may, indirectly, be reflected in Felix' account of the Fenlanders' attack on St. Guthlac (see above). Interestingly, this only happened after Guthlac encroached on their land.<sup>86</sup> A passage in the later twelfth century AD *Chronicle of Ramsay Abbey* also describes violent clashes between Anglo-Saxon settlers and the 'savage and untamable race of the Britons', who raided the area around St. Ives.<sup>87</sup> As outlined above, Anglo-Saxon sources systematically portray the Britons in the wild and marginal Fens as a dangerous 'other' in order to forge an identity for their own people.<sup>88</sup> Yet although these narratives are biased and exaggerated, they may reflect true tensions between the

monks coming into and altering the untamed Fenland landscape and some of the people already established here. If so, this is the first hint that several 'insiders' felt different from people they considered outsiders. These different identities became more pronounced in the following period as more of the Fenland was drained.

There was a steady increase in the use of coastal wetlands in the medieval period, particularly from the twelfth century onwards.<sup>89</sup> With increasing pressure on land as a result of more general economic and social expansion across north-western Europe, drainage became the dominant strategy in most wetlands, including the Fens.<sup>90</sup> Both in the coastal siltlands and the freshwater peat bogs in the back fens, large tracts of land were reclaimed, not only by the Church, but also by lay landholders and tenant communities.<sup>91</sup> These drained wetlands were very fertile and amongst the most highly valued land in England.<sup>92</sup> This is reflected in wealth assessments in the Domesday Book,<sup>93</sup> but also in contemporary descriptions of the changing Fenland landscape, which turned from 'a place of horror' into 'delightful meadows and also arable ground.'<sup>94</sup>

However, despite disparaging accounts of the wild fens and the clear agricultural gain in drained areas, wild Fenland resources continued to be valued and exploited as well. Medieval historian William of Malmsbury writes about the Fens that: 'Here is such a quantity of fish as to cause astonishment to strangers, while the natives laugh at their surprise.'<sup>95</sup> Thomas of Ely mentions that in the Fens 'there are countless geese, fig-birds, coots, divers, cormorants, herons and...ducks.'<sup>96</sup> Many other medieval sources document Fenland resources in detail and the medieval Fens were fully exploited. All earlier uses and activities continued, from grazing, with animals being driven to the Fens from far and wide, to the extraction of reed and sedges, wood, wildfowl, eggs and peat.<sup>97</sup> Access to the Fens was in great demand as reflected in the lay-out of elongated parishes on the fen edge which gave access to fen, fen margin and upland areas.<sup>98</sup> There also was a clear increase in fish consumption as reflected in numerous fisheries identified through concentrations of fish-net weights, bone and shell finds.<sup>99</sup> Specialised salt-making communities

<sup>81</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 133; 177.

<sup>82</sup> Wright, "Restructuring the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Landscape," 24.

<sup>83</sup> Wright, "Restructuring the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Landscape," 24; Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 250.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 52.

<sup>85</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 175-76; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 127.

<sup>86</sup> Brady, "Echoes of Britons Fenland Frontier," 679.

<sup>87</sup> *Chronicon Abbatiae Ramesiensis*, in Brady, "Echoes of Britons Fenland Frontier," 681.

<sup>88</sup> Brady, "Echoes of Britons Fenland Frontier," 677

<sup>89</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 219.

<sup>90</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 245.

<sup>91</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 252-57.

<sup>92</sup> Darby, H.C., Glasscock, R.E., Sheail, J. and Versey, G.R., "The Changing Geographical Distribution of Wealth in England: 1086-1334-1525," *Journal of Historical Geography* 5, no. 3 (1979).

<sup>93</sup> Darby et al., "Geographical Distribution of Wealth".

<sup>94</sup> Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora*, in Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 52.

<sup>95</sup> William of Malmsbury, *De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum*, in Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 28.

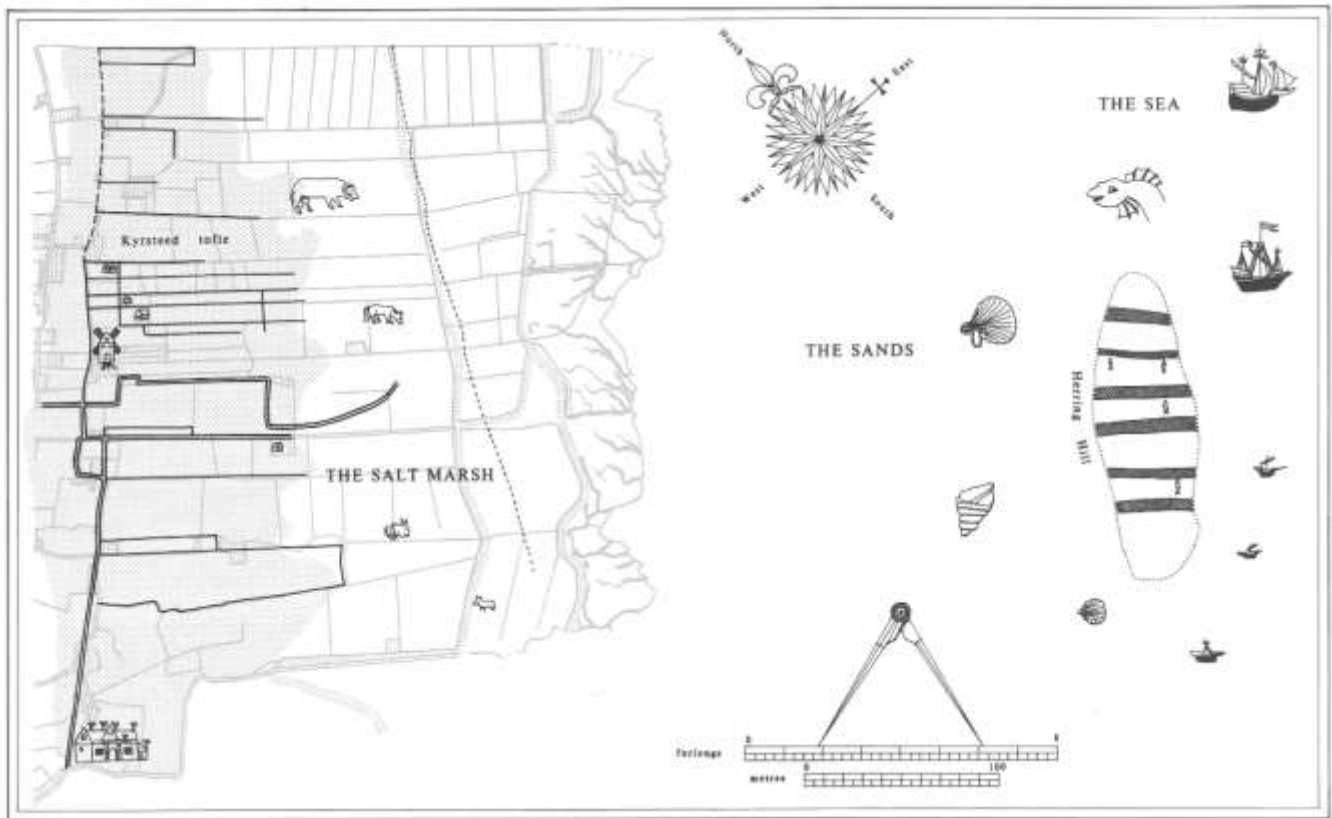
<sup>96</sup> Thomas of Ely, *Liber Eliensis* II.105, translated by Fairweather, J., *Liber Eliensis. A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth, Compiled by a monk of Ely in the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), 213-14; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 42.

<sup>97</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 132-48; Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 21-42.

<sup>98</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 138.

<sup>99</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 220; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 135-36.





**Figure 2: Redrawn map of Wrangle Tofts from AD 1606, which demonstrates the many economic opportunities that the (post-)medieval Fens had to offer, from rich pasture in the salt marshes (left), to (shell-)fishing grounds in the ‘Sands’ and access to trade routes via the sea (from Lane 1993, 110). Reproduced with kind permission of the Heritage Trust of Lincolnshire and Tom Lane.**

emerged along the coast in Norfolk and Lincolnshire.<sup>100</sup> Around Bicker Haven for instance, mounds of the coastal mud from which brine was extracted, still rise up to three metres high.<sup>101</sup> A slightly later map of Wrangle Tofts neatly summarises the medieval situation, showing many different economic activities taking place in and around the Fens (figure 2).

Unsurprisingly, many acts and laws were passed which sought to control and regulate access to these rich wetland resources.<sup>102</sup> For instance, the Littleport Rolls, dating to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, specify that no one may ‘have or take anything in the fen save by the favour of the lord.’<sup>103</sup> Despite these restrictions, many people continued to hunt, fish and gather illegally in the Fens, as reflected in written sources complaining about this problem.<sup>104</sup> These ‘Fen Slodgers’ (figure 3), who had lived and worked in the Fens for generations, clearly felt they had rights to the

wetlands that could not be impinged upon by ‘outsiders’, such as the Church or other landowners.

The differences between people who lived off the numerous wild Fenland resources and those in favour of turning these lands into dry agricultural land increased in the post-medieval period and eventually led to conflict.<sup>105</sup> The large scale drainage projects in this period had a great impact, not only on the landscape, but also on the lives of people who had lived and worked there for generations.<sup>106</sup> Several people who could actually be considered outsiders as they were not based in the Fens themselves, recognised these threats and started to oppose reclamation. An *Anti-Projector* pamphlet, written around 1645 AD, outlines how drainage of the Fens would result in the loss of innumerable important resources whilst the ‘many thousand Cottagers which live on our fens...must go a begging.’<sup>107</sup> Thomas Fuller also mentions the presence of a ‘great plenty and

<sup>100</sup> Rippon, *Transformation of Coastal Wetlands*, 228.

<sup>101</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 143.

<sup>102</sup> Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 33; Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 138; Ballantyne, “Islands of Wilderness,” 196.

<sup>103</sup> Littleport Rolls, in Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 33.

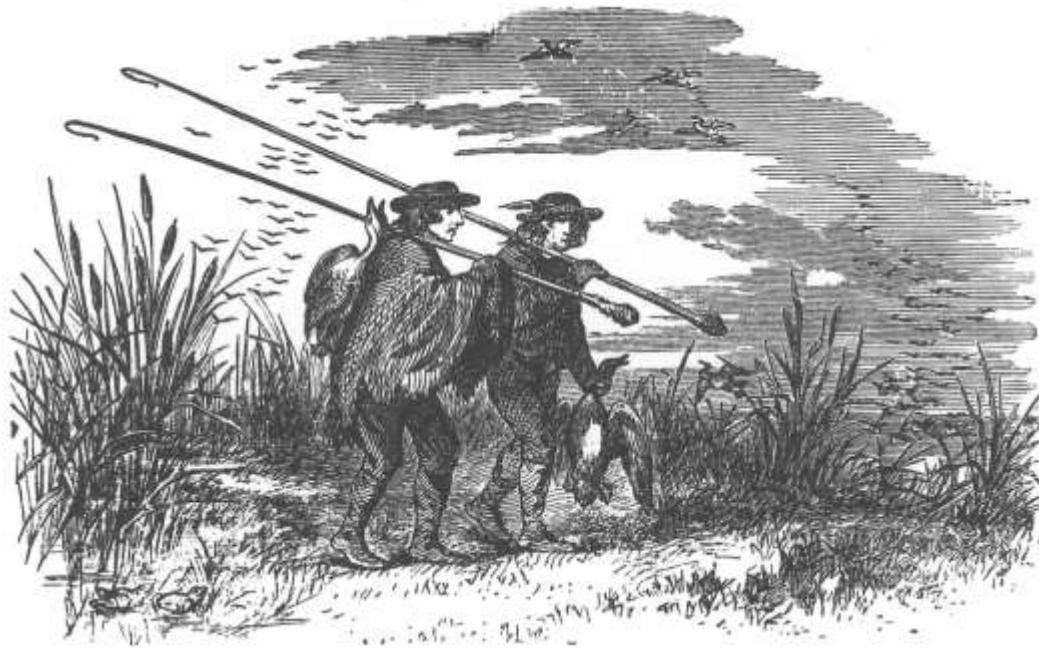
<sup>104</sup> Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 33.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Rippon, “Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes,” 53.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Rippon, “Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes,” 53.

<sup>107</sup> *The Anti-Projector, or The History of the Fen Project* (1646?), Early English Books Online, ProQuest LLC 2003-2016, viewed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016,

[8](http://eebo.chadwyck.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=9692084&FILE=&SEARCHSCREEN=param(SEARCHSCREEN)&VID=44008&PAGENO=1&ZOOM=FIT&VIEWPORT=&SEARCHCONFIG=param(SEARCHCONFIG)&DISPLAY=param(DISPLAY)&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD=param(HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD); Wheeler, <i>History Fens South Lincolnshire</i>, 35.</a></p>
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**Figure 3: ‘Fen Slodgers’ (from Wheeler 1868, xix).**

variety of fish and fowl [in the Fens]...‘which will be destroyed on draining thereof.’<sup>108</sup>

The Fenland cottagers mentioned in the Pamphlet saw their livelihood endangered, and it is no wonder that they too opposed the drainage schemes.<sup>109</sup> On several occasions, they even attacked drainers and sabotaged drainage work.<sup>110</sup> Young explains the existence of a large tract of undrained fen in Lincolnshire by describing how, after its initial drainage in the seventeenth century, ‘a large mob, under the pretence of playing at foot-ball, levelled the whole of the enclosures, burnt the corn and the houses, destroyed the cattle and killed many of those who occupied the [newly drained] land...[They] proceeded to destroy the works of drainage...[and] the country was again inundated as it formerly had been.’<sup>111</sup>

The rift between wet and drylanders is also reflected in later folk tales from the Fens, in which rebellious, fiercely independent, wily and clever Fenlanders are repeatedly contrasted with naively civilised, weak and immoral drylanders.<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, Fenlanders use the same terms as outsiders often use to describe them, portraying themselves as a wild and independent people living off natural resources instead of agriculture. Yet in their own narratives, these characteristics are virtues rather than vices. These tales and the opposition against drainage demonstrate that several people continued to feel a very strong connection to the wet Fenlands and were willing to

risk everything to protect their traditional wetland way of life.<sup>113</sup> Their perception of these wetlands was clearly far more positive than that of landowners attempting to drain these lands.

Eventually, and despite Fenlanders’ opposition, the Fens were drained and the wetland way of life slowly disappeared. Yet it seems that remnants of Fen Slodgers’ ‘wetland identity’ persist until today. Hall and Coles<sup>114</sup> suggest that modern Fenlanders are still independent and perhaps somewhat suspicious of outsiders, as reflected in Harry Godwin’s frequent remarks on the reticence of modern Fenlanders.

### **Wet vs. dryland(er)s?**

The above review of human-wetland interaction throughout (pre)history provides glimpses into insiders’ perspectives of wetlands. The wide range of different activities taking place in the Fens, ranging from resource extraction and grazing, to ritual, trade and settlement, suggests that this area was far from marginalised. On the contrary, it was an important and highly valued part of the landscape. The people living and working in the Fenland landscape were not isolated and rather than being the poor, half-savage creatures described by outsiders in contemporary sources, they were connected with communities nearby and far off. This is true not only for the East Anglian Fens, but also in many other wetland areas

<sup>108</sup> Fuller, T., *The History of the University of Cambridge from the Conquest to the Year 1634* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1655), 147; Darby, H.C., *The Draining of the Fens*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 52.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Darby, *Draining of the Fens*, 52; Rippon, “Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes,” 53.

<sup>110</sup> Wheeler, *History Fens South Lincolnshire*, 36.

<sup>111</sup> Young, A., *General View of the Agriculture of Lincolnshire*, 2nd edition (London: McMillan, 1808), 256.

<sup>112</sup> Evans, “*Sentimental Prehistories*”.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Lane, *The Fenland Project Number 8*, 87.

<sup>114</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 156.

across north-western Europe.<sup>115</sup> Throughout this region there is extensive evidence of human-wetland interaction, demonstrating the value past people placed on these landscapes.

It seems the wet vs. dryland(er) dichotomy is a relatively modern construct. Although present in the Roman period in several areas, it was not really articulated in the East Anglian Fens until the medieval period, when drainage efforts by outsiders created a clear distinction between wet and dryland and threatened a long established wetland way of life, which went back centuries if not millennia. Yet even then, the wet vs dryland(er) distinction was always more apparent than real. Both written sources and the archaeological record demonstrate that many people living within the Fens embraced a new way of life and helped drain parts of this landscape, whilst the ‘outsiders’ who came in and instigated the drainage of the wild wetlands, simultaneously seem to have valued and exploited natural resources as much as, or even more than, ‘insiders’. In the post-medieval period it was not just the Fen Slodgers working and living in the Fens who opposed drainage, but also ‘men of learning and social standing’ from outside the Fens.<sup>116</sup> Thus, the line between insiders and outsiders or wetland(er)s and dryland(er)s becomes blurred.

Of course, this is not to say that the commonly held negative view of wetlands should be replaced by an overly positive one. Living in or near the Fens was challenging at times. Many Bronze Age communities on the edge of the Fens for instance, abandoned their settlement and decided to try their luck elsewhere when faced by expanding peat.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, increasing wetness in the Roman and early medieval period or sudden floods that destroyed whole medieval villages despite complex flood defences had a devastating effect on established communities.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, an indigenous form of malaria became endemic in brackish coastal areas like the Fens between AD 1500-1750, increasing death rates by 25-50 per cent.<sup>119</sup> It is clear that such ‘extrem unhealthiness’ not only drove many people away, but also contributed to the negative perceptions described above.<sup>120</sup>

Yet despite these disadvantages people continued to live and work in the Fens and other wetlands, finding ways to deal with the challenges of these dynamic environments. This demonstrates people’s deep attachment to wetland landscapes and their way of life, and a far more positive perception than we are used to from outsider sources. Summing up the above discussion, it seems that wetlands had different meanings to various groups of people throughout (pre)history.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Rippon, *Transformations of Coastal Wetlands*; Rippon 2009, “Perception and Value of Wetland Landscapes”; Van de Noort and O’Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*.

<sup>116</sup> Wheeler, *History Fens South Lincolnshire*, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Pryor, *Flag Fen Basin*, 405.

<sup>118</sup> Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 146.

<sup>119</sup> Knottnerus, O.S., “Malaria Around the North Sea: A Survey,” in *Climatic Development and History of the North Atlantic Realm*, ed. G.

## Conclusion: from dichotomies to dynamics

This paper has traced the origins of a common, often negative perception of wetlands, which contrasts these ‘wild’ areas and their ‘uncivilised’ inhabitants with domesticated and civil dryland(er)s. Yet such structural oppositions, mostly found in written sources, are problematic. They provide an ‘outsider’ view which, often unwittingly, influences both our approach to and understanding of past wetland landscapes and the communities living and working here.

Although we can never avoid modern biases completely, this paper has argued that we can address such preconceptions by considering how insiders perceived of the wetland landscapes they lived and worked in. To do so, we need to examine the archaeological record alongside more biased written sources, as it is through this record that largely non-literate wetland communities can be given a voice. A very brief review of the archaeological and historical record of the East Anglian Fens has demonstrated that past people interacted with this landscape in multiple ways and that past perceptions of wetlands may have differed substantially from ours.

Rather than opposing insiders and outsiders or replacing an overly negative by an overly positive view, this paper has demonstrated that a (re)consideration of both insider and outsider perspectives throughout (pre)history provides a very dynamic and far more complex picture of past perceptions and identities. By integrating historical and archaeological data, and by recognising a multiplicity of voices we may break down unhelpful modern dichotomies and negative stereotypes. This provides a more accurate understanding of past life in and around wetlands.

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<sup>120</sup> Bishop’s Visitations Essex 1723, in Dobson, M. ““Marsh Fever”-The Geography of Malaria in England,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 6, no. 4 (1980), 368.

<sup>121</sup> Van de Noort and O’Sullivan, *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology*, 43.

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