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**Language, law and loanwords in early medieval Gaul:
language contact and studies in Gallo-Romance phonology**
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8 An Old French origin for Dutch polder

Introduction

The Modern Dutch word *polder* refers to diked lands in the alluvial coastal area of present-day Flanders and the Netherlands. In the Late Medieval and Early Modern period, these lands were drained by use of windmills, giving rise to the typical Dutch landscape of the western Netherlands where elongated plots of lands are divided by a myriad of straight ditches that stretch as far as the eye can see. As a Dutch culture word, the word *polder* spread during the Early Modern period to English and Italian where respectively *polder* (1604) and *poldro* (1640) are attested in the seventeenth century (Van der Sijs 2006: 145). Later, other European languages adopted the Dutch word *polder* in reference to the diked lands of the Dutch coasts (Van der Sijs 2010: 524). Although it is clear that the word *polder* is tied to the Dutch landscape, its origin is contested. The aim of the present investigation is to provide a new convincing etymology for the *polder*-word. This etymology will be supported by the historical context of the earliest land reclamation projects in the Low Countries. I will therefore first provide the relevant historical background.

Historical overview

In Roman times, the Dutch and Belgian coast consisted of a coastal barrier of dunes followed by inland peat moors. In the early centuries of the Common Era (CE), the coastal barrier of Zeeland and Flanders was breached by the sea and the peat was flooded (Wintein 2007²¹⁰). As the dune strip was broken, several new tidal inlets allowed the sea to deposit sand and clay sediment on the peat. In the centuries that followed, inland saltmarshes arose (Wintein 2007; Baeteman 2007: 8). In the Zeeland and Flanders coastal area, the practice of diking these saltmarshes goes back to the twelfth century.

Originally, diking began as a defense against seasonal inundation, but in the course of the eleventh and twelfth century the welding together of local dikes and the construction of sea ramparts created new arable land (Hoppenbrouwers 1997: 96). This newly accreted land was consolidated by the construction of defensive dikes which allowed settlers (*hospites*) to colonize the new marine clay polders. These endikement projects were funded by Flemish abbeys who saw land reclamation as a viable means of enlarging their landed wealth (Hoppenbrouwers 1997: 97). Judging from the diplomatic evidence, the saltings of the Flemish coastal plain were probably the first to be diked in (l.c.). It may have started with the mud

²¹⁰ Presentation consulted digitally at URL:

http://www.vliz.be/docs/Zeelessen/Noordzeesymposium/PP_Holocene_ingressie_WillyWintein.pdf

flats around the island Cadzand and those in the estuary of the river Yser. Then the Zwin flood area followed suit. Only in the thirteenth century do we find records of similar land reclamation projects in the territory of the counts of Holland. The oldest ‘Holland’ polders are found on the South-Holland islands (Alblasserwaard, Aartswaard, Hoeckenisse) and consisted of two kinds of land reclamation projects, that is, peat drainage and the offensive diking of saltings. Although the practice of draining the peat marshes started earlier in the tenth and eleventh century, we might consider that the concept of reclaiming land in the tidal area slowly radiated northwards from its inception in Flanders. The endikement projects of the twelfth century also had demographic consequences as they entailed a population spread from the coastal levees to the inland alluvial saltmarshes.

Old Dutch

The oldest attestations of the word *polder* date back to the twelfth century and refer to agricultural lands of, respectively, the abbey of Egmond and the county of Flanders.

(Liber S. Adalberti, Oppermann 1933: 79)

pro animo Gherardi, filii Mauricii, data sunt duo iugera et unum hond in polra, que solvunt annuatim III solidos (1130-1161 CE)

“for the soul of Gherard, the son of Mauricius, two morgen and one *hond* are given in *polra*, which pay yearly III solidi”.

(Gros Brief, Verhulst & Gysseling 1962: 175)

Ratio Lamsini notarii Ypris in domo comitis, eodem die ex eodem anno [...] super mare et polra et wast 17 l. (1187 CE)

“The register of notary Lamsin of Ypres in the castle of the count (...) on the same day, in the same year, on the sea and the *polra* and the *wast*, 17 pounds”.

The oldest recording is a note in the thirteenth century *Liber Sancti Adalberti* which dates back to the time of abbot Walther (1130-1161 CE). The localization of the land to which this *polre* referred is moot. The placement of the phrase *in polra* between other lands in *Hemecekerke* (Heemskerck) and *Alkmere* (Alkmaar) would point to a locality in Kennemerland (province of North-Holland). Scholte (1978: 256) however argued for localization in the Delfland and Schieland area (province of South-Holland) since there are no lands called *polre* to the north of the Delfland before 1300 and the abbey of Egmond did not possess any lands to the south of the Delfland.

The second twelfth-century attestation is found in a diploma from Bruges (1187 CE), which is reproduced in a property list of the count of Flanders known as the ‘*Gros Brief*’ (Verhulst & Gysseling 1962). Here the text reads ‘*super mare et polra et wast XVII librae*’ which translates as “on the sea and the *polre* and the uncultured lands, 17 pounds” (cf. ODu. *wast* ‘untilled land’, ONW *wast*²¹¹). This phrase illustrates the proximity of the arable land called *polre* to the sea. The Old Dutch word is also encountered from the twelfth century onwards as an element in toponyms. The following occurrences are recorded in Gysseling’s *Toponymisch Woordenboek* (1960):

Abbekines polra (ca. 1200 CE), Watervliet (Gysseling 1960: 34)

kerkpolre (1177-1184 CE), Cadzand (Gysseling 1960: 559)

sudhpolra (1138-1153 CE), Ramskapelle (Gysseling 1960: 1105)

sudpolre (1190 CE), Cadzand (Gysseling 1960: 1105)

These places are all located on the Flemish coast and the Zeeland estuary of the river Scheldt and confirm the southern Dutch original locus of the word²¹². The oldest attestations all point to a final vowel /a/ which was weakened to schwa in the late twelfth century.

Middle Dutch

In Middle Dutch, the gender of the noun is masculine, although we have a single phrase in which a feminine gender is implied, i.e. *in de polre* (Pijnenburg e.a. VMNW 2001: 3822). Since the preposition *in* selects for a dative or an accusative case, we would expect a demonstrative *den* if the noun was masculine. Here the noun must therefore be interpreted as a feminine accusative singular, judging from the demonstrative *de* that follows the preposition. Feminine gender would be in consonance with the final /a/ of *polra* in the Old Dutch attestation on the diploma from Bruges. Alternatively, we could argue that the final /a/ is due to the latinization of the word as *polra* and the Old Dutch word was originally masculine. Nevertheless, the Old Dutch attestations all have final /a/ which is hard to reconcile with an Old Dutch masculine noun. Therefore I assume that the gender of the noun was originally feminine, i.e. Old Dutch *polra* (f.), which became masculine when the vowel timbre of the ending weakened to schwa, i.e. Middle Dutch *polre* (m.).²¹³

²¹¹ Consulted digitally at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=ONW&id=ID3810&lemmodern=wast>

²¹² We may also note that to the present day the alluvial lands of the Flemish coast are called *De Polders* in the Brabant dialects of Dutch.

²¹³ We may note that in Middle Dutch, the masculine noun MidDu. *polre* was latinized as *poldrus* (cf. Niermeyer 1976: 811; Pijnenburg e.a. VMNW 2001: 3822).

The Middle Dutch occurrences of the word point to a markedly Flemish origin. Whereas the word is only found twice in the west of Holland, it occurs 62 times in West Flemish sources (Pijnenburg e.a. VMNW 2001: 3822). As noted above, the twelfth century *polre* in the Egmond property list may refer to localities in either Kennemerland or the Delfland. However, there is another factor at play which might explain the use of a Flemish term in an Egmond property list. The twelfth century occurrence of the word *polre* in the Egmond sources goes back to a diploma issued by the Flemish abbot Walther (1130-1161 CE) who, before he accepted the abbacy of Utrecht, was associated with the St. Bavo abbey of Ghent (Declercq 1993: 165-166). We may therefore suspect that he used a Flemish term which at that time may not have been common in Holland. If this explanation is correct, it would reinforce the southern Dutch distribution of the word.

Enigmatic is the occurrence of the word in England where we find *poldre* (1232) and *polres* (1246) in thirteenth century Cheshire. We also have a Middle English *polre* in Lincolnshire (1316) and a *Newpolder* (1448) in Sussex (Beekman 1941: 422). Here the meaning of the word also seems to be ‘low-lying land reclaimed from the sea’. An early loanword from Flemish seems to be the best solution for explaining these English names. We should not forget that in the High Middle Ages a substantial amount of Flemish colonists settled on the English countryside (Toorians 1998: 74).

Etymologies

Now that we have explored the relevant historical background and the oldest attestations of the word, we can turn to the etymologies that have been suggested. Uhlenbeck (1901: 305) argued that Modern Dutch *polder* should be connected to Modern Dutch *poel* < Gm. **pōl*- ‘puddle, quakmire’ (cf. OE *pōl*, OHG *pful*²¹⁴, OFris. *pōl*), a word whose origin is also unclear. According to Kroonen (2013: 398), the cognates in Balto-Slavic, i.e. Lith. *balà* ‘marsh’ OCS *blato*, and possibly Latin *palūs*, *palūdis* point to a substratum word **bal-t-*, but, unfortunately, little more can be said about this hypothetical substratum origin.

This connection between ModDu. *poel* and *polder* was accepted by Gysseling (1975) who attributed Germanic **pōl*- to the non-Germanic substratum he called Belgic. According to Gysseling, this Belgic word **pōl*- may have acquired a Latin collective suffix *-*āria* yielding Latin **pōlāria*. The phonological development needed for **pōlāria* to have become Old Dutch *polra* is problematic to say the least. Gysseling assumes irregular shortening of **pōlāria* to **polria*, a development that according to Gysseling has a parallel in the evolution of the toponyms *Marne* < Gallo-Lat. *mātrōna* and *Menen* < Gallo-Lat. **moininio* (Gysseling 1975: 2). In the toponyms, however, the short vowel is due to the Romance loss of distinctive vowel

²¹⁴ OHG *pful* is attested in the forms *pful*, *pūl*, *pūl* gl. *palus*, *volutabrum*, *lama* (Schützeichel AAG VII: 293-294).

length, e.g. ModFr. *marne* < Rom. **matrona* < Lat. *mātrōna*. If we would be dealing with a Romance etymon, this would not be a problem, cf. Lat. *sōlārium* ‘roof terrace’ > Romance **solariu* (cf. OFr. *solier* ‘balcony, roof terrace, chamber’) → Old Dutch *solre* gl. *solium* = *solarium* (cf. MidDu. *solre* ‘roof terrace, upper floor’, see ONW lemma SOLRA²¹⁵). However, since **pōl*- was in all likelihood a Germanic etymon (Kroonen 2013: 398), it seems overly convoluted to assume a Romance intermediate stage which allowed vowel shortening after which the word must have re-entered Germanic. This scenario is also unlikely because no form *polarium* or *polaria* is attested in Latin or Medieval Latin, as noted by Pijnenburg e.a. (2001: 3822 VMNW s.v. *polder*).

Not only the phonological connection to Gm. **pōl*- is shaky, but, as is rightly noted by Desnerck e.a. (2012: 32), the semantic connection is also far from compelling. Whereas the Germanic **pōl*-words refer to puddles in the low-lying swamps, the Middle Dutch *polder* on the other hand seems to refer to high-lying diked land. For these reasons, Beekman (1941: 419) considered a connection to Middle Dutch *polle* ‘tip, top of something’. Because Modern Dutch *polle* is found in the meaning ‘alluviated land, tip of land sticking out’ in the saltmarshes of Friesland, he projects this meaning back into Middle Dutch. A Middle Dutch *polle* in this meaning would then have been extended with a suffix *-re*. This connection between Dutch *pol* and *polder* is repeated by De Vries (De Vries & De Tollenaere 1971: 536-37) and Philippa e.a. (2003-2009: 568) and is considered the most plausible explanation for the Dutch *polder* etymon (Scholte 1979: 255). This explanation however meets several unpleasant difficulties.

1) It is unclear what the function of the suffix *-re* would have been. Philippa e.a. regard this as the main problem for the connection to ModDu. *pol* (Philippa e.a. 2003-2009: 568). The secondary nominal suffix *-re* is reflected in several Dutch formations that do not in any way explain a presumed derivational relationship between ModDu. *polle* and *polder*.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| • ModDu. <i>modder</i> ‘mud’ | < WGm. * <i>mudra</i> - | (inherited formation) |
| • ModDu. <i>klodder</i> ‘splodge’ | ⇐ ModDu. <i>klad</i> | (expressive) |
| • ModDu. <i>spetter</i> ‘spat’ | ⇐ ModDu. <i>spetteren</i> | (deverbal) |
| • ModDu. <i>splinter</i> ‘splinter’ | ⇐ ModDu. <i>splint</i> | (agent noun) |

2) The meaning ‘land outside the dike that sticks out of the sea’ is unattested for Middle Dutch and Early Modern Dutch. The Dutch word *polle* first occurs in the glossary of Kiliaen (Etymologicum Teutonicæ Linguae, 1599) where it is regarded as an eastern Dutch word, i.e. *polle*, *pol*, *Sax. i. cacumen, fastigium* ‘tip, elevation’ (MNW *pol*²¹⁶). In Kiliaen we also find *polle*, *polleken*, *Sax. Fris. vertex capitis, caput, capitellum* ‘top of the head, head’. Kiliaen does not

²¹⁵ consulted online at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=VMNW&id=ID13311&lemma=solre> and <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=ONW&id=ID1788&lemma=solre>

²¹⁶ consulted digitally at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&id=43364&lemmodern=pol>

record the meaning assumed by Beekman (1941: 419), nor does he record a Flemish Dutch or Holland Dutch use of the word.

3) The aforementioned meaning ‘land outside the dike that sticks out of the sea’ is only found in Friesland of the modern period (Beekman 1941: 419-420). Beekmann gives multiple occurrences of the word *polle* meaning ‘salting’ in Frisian coastal municipalities (l.c.). In the Frisian dictionaries, we find ModFris. *pôle* with the meanings ‘tip of something, small island, elevated land, salting’ (FW *PÔLE*²¹⁷). It needs no further argument that this leaves a substantial geographical gap to the original Flemish locus of the Old Dutch *polre*-place-names. A toponymical element (-)pol(-) is also found in the east of the Netherlands, for which Beekman gives examples in Limburg, Overijssel and Gelderland (Beekman 1941: 419). Beekman concedes that for these place-names a meaning ‘hill, elevation’ should be assumed.

For the above listed reasons, I deem the connection of Old Dutch *polra*, *polre* to Early Modern Dutch *polle* ‘tip, top of something’ to be tenuous at best.

Flemish sandbanks

It is noted by Desnerck e.a. (2012: 33), that the word *polder* is also represented as a name for several Flemish sandbanks that lie in front of the mouth of the river Scheldt, i.e. ‘Franse Polder’ and ‘Engelse polder’. These sandbanks are recorded in maps from the seventeenth century onwards as *Fransche Polder* and *Engelsche Polder*. According to Desnerck e.a. (l.c.), the fact that the names *Fransche Polder* and *Engelsche polder* are alternated with *Fransche pol* and *Engelsche pol* reinforces the connection with Middle Dutch *polle* ‘alluviated land, tip of land sticking out’. However, their assertion (Desnerck e.a. 2012: 33) that the attestations of *Fransche pol* and *Engelsche pol* are older than *Fransche polder* and *Engelsche polder* is only true by a decade. Already Henricus Hondius in a map from 1633 has *Fransche polder* and *Engelsche poldr* (Bossu 1983: 80-81). This is only fifteen years after the latest possible date for Visscher’s recording (ca. 1621 CE) of *Fransche Pol* and *Engelsche Pol*.

Furthermore, a sandbank which lies in front of the coast of Dunkirk is also named *Polder*. This *polder*-name is missed by Desneck e.a. (2012) and already occurs in the map of Flanders made by Gerard Mercator (ca. 1550). Also, whereas the sandbank names *Engelsche polder* and *Fransche polder* sometimes occur with the word *pol* instead of *polder*, this is not the case for the *polder* in front of Dunkirk which is consistently spelled *polder* from the 16th century until its disappearance in the eighteenth century.

²¹⁷ consulted digitally at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=WFT&id=77750&lemmodern=pol>

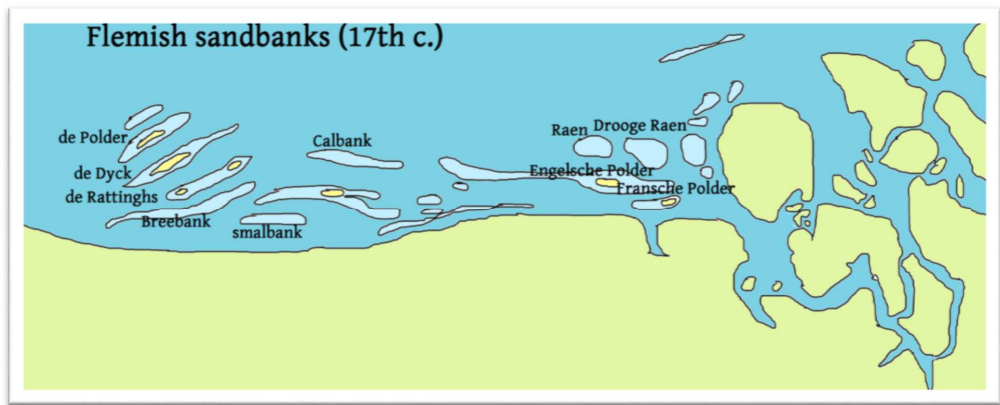


figure 9 map based on Hondius 1636 (Bossu 1983: 80-81)

To sum up: we are dealing with three sandbanks. Two are situated to the south of the tidal inlet between the island of Walcheren and Zeeland Flanders and are to the present-day known as ‘Engelse polder’ and ‘Franse polder’. The third is the last in a row of sandbanks in front of the coast of Dunkirk and was historically known as *Polder*. In the late eighteenth century it disappears from the maps.

Below I will provide a list of attestations of the aforementioned sand banks. This list is based on a study of the sixteenth and seventeenth century maps outlining the Flemish coast which are reproduced in Bossu’s *Vlaanderen in oude kaarten* (1983). First the name of the cartographer is given, followed by the date of composition of the relevant map and finally the different *polder*-names that are recorded on that map.

- Gherardus Mercator (ca. 1537²¹⁸) *Polder*
- Lucas Waghenaeer (ca. 1584²¹⁹) *Polder*
- Pieter van den Keere (dated 1622²²⁰) *Polder*
- Nicolaes Visscher (dated 1611-1621²²¹) *Dyck Polder, Fransche Pol, Engelsche Pol*
- Henricus Hondius (dated 1636²²²) *de Polder, Fransche polder, Engelsche poldr (sic!)*
- Willem & Joan Blaeu (dated 1635²²³) *Dyckpolder, France pol, Engelse pol*
- Pieter Goos (dated 1666²²⁴) *Polder*
- Frederick de Wit (ca. 1688²²⁵) *Fransche Polder, Engelsche Polder*

²¹⁸ Bossu (1983: 50-51)

²¹⁹ Bossu (1983: 68-69)

²²⁰ Bossu (1983: 72-73)

²²¹ Bossu (1983: 118-119)

²²² Bossu (1983: 80-81)

²²³ Bossu (1983: 96-97)

²²⁴ Bossu (1983: 116-117)

²²⁵ Bossu (1983: 126-127)

- Carel Allard (dated 1696²²⁶) *Fransche pol, Engelsche pol,*

As is clear from the list above, the oldest attestation of the *polder* sandbank in front of Dunkirk (1537 CE) predates the names of the Zeeland Flanders sandbanks (ca. 1620 CE) by almost a century. Furthermore, the variation *pol* ~ *polder* in ‘Franse polder’ and ‘Engelse polder’ co-occur in seventeenth century maps without a clear lead as to which of the two is the older. It is my contention that the *polder*-name of the Dunkirk sandbank tips the balance in favour of the *polder* variant. The variant *pol* would then have been a shortening of *polder*. Another argument that pleads against the assumption that the Zeeland Flanders sandbanks were originally named after MidDu. *polle* is the fact that the word *polle* in the meaning ‘tip of land sticking out of the sea’ is limited to Friesland. There is therefore a clear geographical gap between the Frisian *polle*-names and the two Zeeland *pol*-sandbanks. For these reasons I believe that the Zeeland Flanders sandbanks were originally named *polder*, thereby not denying the possibility that association with ModDu. *pol* might have provoked the shortening to *pol*. Desnerck e.a. (2012: 33) admit that it is hard to imagine what would have prompted the naming of sandbanks after polders since they have virtually nothing in common.

Tidal marshes and saltings

It is my contention that the Flemish *polder*-sandbanks hold the key to the etymology and original meaning of the Old Dutch word *polra*. Since the concept of offensive diking was new in the twelfth century, the word must first have had a different older meaning. The fact that the Flemish sandbanks called *polder* are contiguous to the first diked saltings that are called *polre* in the Old Dutch and Early Middle Dutch period is in my opinion striking.

In the Late Antique and Early Medieval period, settlements were situated on the dune islands of the Zeeland coastal barrier, the two km wide sandy strip which separated the open sea from the inland tidal marshes (Beekman 1932: 261; Baeteman 2007: 5). It is plausible that the Early Medieval population of this coastal strip used the same word for the uninhabited tidal marshes to the west and east of the dune strip. In my opinion, the Old Dutch word *polra/polre* was the word for tidal marsh. Whereas the supratidal marshes (saltings) to the east of the island settlements were diked and colonized, the supratidal (saltings) and intratidal marshes (mudflats) to the west were left uninhabited. Several of these mudflats later drowned and became sandbanks, thereby explaining the *polder*-names for the sandbanks in front of the Flemish coast. The Old Dutch word *polra* would also have covered the meaning of the Modern Dutch word *schor* ‘tidal marsh/salting outside the dike’ < EMidDu. *schor* ‘shore,

²²⁶ Bossu (1983: 134-135)

salting outside the dike'. In short, the meaning 'tidal marsh' offers a new perspective on the etymology of Old Dutch *polra*.

We may note that several old saltings on the Flemish and Zeeland coast are named *zand* 'sand' < MidDu. *sandt* < ODu. *sant* (ONW lemma ZAND²²⁷), cf. ODu. *Cadesand* (1111 CE) 'Cadzand' (Zeeland Flanders, see Toorians 2002: 19). These saltings were also known in Old Dutch as *werpelant* 'banked up land' (l.c.) on account of the fact that the high-lying saltings arose when fine-grained sediments composed of clay and sea sand were deposited on the tidal flats (Baeteman 2007: 4). Also drift sand from the dune strip banked up on these saltings, giving the supratidal marsh land area a sandy impression. Just as other Zeeland and Flemish saltings are named *zand* after the fine-grained soil which caused their existence, I believe the nature and consistency of the soil might also have been the naming motive for the saltings called *polre*.²²⁸

Old French *polre*

In this regard, I want to point to Old French *puldre*, *pouldre* (first attested ca. 1200 CE) which is found with the main meaning 'dust, dust-like substance, dirt' but may also refer to 'grains of sand' (Tobler-Lommatzch 1969: 1660-1663). The Old French word derives from Latin *pulvis*, *pulveris* 'dust, powder, sand' which in the oblique form *pulverem* [acc.sg.] provoked the coining of an analogical Romance feminine **pulvera*. This form developed into Gallo-Romance **polra* which yielded Old French *poldre*. The Romance intervocalic /lr/ cluster was broken up by an epenthetic dental, i.e. /l^dr/, in the Francien dialect of Old French (Pope 1934: 148), but in the north this epenthesis did not occur (Pope 1934: 489), e.g. Old French *polre* 'sand' (Lorraine dialect, ca. 1200 CE). A northern Proto-French **polra* (f.) 'fine-grained sand', as opposed to Proto-French **sable* 'coarse-grained sand' (cf. OFr. *sable* 'id.', see Wartburg FEW XI: 18), may have been borrowed in Flanders as Old Dutch *polra* (f.) 'tidal marsh'. It is a distinct possibility that we are dealing with an Old French calque of Old Dutch *sant* which was in use among the bilingual elites of Early Medieval Flanders.

The Old Dutch word *polra* eventually underwent Dutch epenthesis to Middle Dutch *polder* (Schönfeld & Van Loey 1959: 56). The Middle Dutch spellings *polre* may also have had an epenthetic /d/ which was not reflected in orthography (l.c.). Noteworthy is the occurrence of *polre* in an Old French diploma by countess Margherita of Flanders in 1269 CE (Tailliar 1849: 302; FEW XVI: 644). The diploma records the sale of land near the present-day town of Damme (West Flanders). In this case it is plausible that we are not dealing with a Flemish loanword in Old French, but rather with the insertion of a Flemish word in a French

²²⁷ consulted digitally at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=ONW&id=ID4821&lemmodern=zand>

²²⁸ We may note that the polder complex near present-day Ostenisse and Hontenisse (Zeeland-Flanders), which is now known as 'Zandpolder', is named *Sanda sive uerpelant* in 1170 CE (ONW lemma ZAND).

text (*contra* Van der Sijs 2006: 145). After all, it is not surprising that we can find a Flemish word in a Flemish diploma, in reference to a Flemish locality.

Sand

Although Old French *poldre* means ‘dust’ and the meaning ‘sand’ is secondary, a metonymical development from the meaning ‘dust’ to ‘sand’ is natural and can be established from Old French contexts where *poldre* unambiguously refers to sand. The following contexts come from *Le Roman de la Rose*, a late thirteenth century Old French poem:

- (...) *e par terre eslever les poudres* (*Le Roman de la Rose*, v. 17896)
“and from the ground, lift up the grains of sand”
- *e poudres de sablon menues* (*Le Roman de la Rose*, v. 18049)
“and little grains of sand”

We may also point to the meaning of Middle English *poudre*, a loanword from Francien Old French, which did not only mean dust, dust-like substance, but also meant soil, dirt, sand (Kuhn 1952: 1153-56, MED lemma *poudre*²²⁹):

- *For þat erth...uprisand fra þe grund bers þe pudre up o-loft* (*Cursor Mundi*, 21076, ca. 1300 CE)
“for the earth, rising from the ground, bears the sand up in the sky”
- *He mote be wel yware of þre þinges, þat þe sonne, þe wynde and þe dust þat is reysed of þe poudre of erþe be behind his backe (...)* (*Vegetius*, 75b, 1408 CE)
“he should be well aware of three things, that the sun, the wind and the dust that is raised from the sand of the earth, would be behind his back”

In this regard, we may also point to the Middle Dutch fish-name *poeder* (MNW lemma *POEDER*²³⁰) which is found in a 15th century diploma on fishing rights in the Zwin basin (Gailliard 1882: 279).

- *Up varsschen zalm, poederen, meerzwijn, stuer (...)* (ca. 1477 CE)
“on fresh salmon, poederen, porpoise, sturgeon (...)”

We may note that the etymology of the fish name on traditional terms is obscure. To me it seems plausible that it is connected to the Old French word *poudre* [pudrə] in its meanings ‘dirt, soil’. It is even possible that we are dealing with a dialectal calque of MidDu. *grondele* ‘gudgeon’, a small fish well-known for its occurrence in brackish estuaries.

²²⁹ consulted online at URL: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED34203&egs=all&egdisplay=compact>

²³⁰ consulted online at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&id=43255&lemmodern=poeder>

Zavel

Old Dutch *polra* would not have been the only Romance loanword for a condition of the soil.²³¹ Another Romance word for ‘sand’ crossed the language border with Dutch in the Early Middle Ages. From the Old Dutch period (1198 CE), we have the toponym *Sauelberga* (Mechelen, province of Antwerp, ONW lemma SAVEL²³²) in which we recognize the Latin words *sabulo*²³³ ‘coarse-grained sand’ and *sabulum* ‘sand’. In the Middle Dutch period, the word *savel* refers to fine-grained sand used for making roads, streets and mortar (MNW lemma SAVEL²³⁴). The same word is also reflected as *sawel* in the German border dialects of the Rhineland, Luxemburg and Lotharingia (Wartburg FEW XI: 18). Past scholarship has directly connected Middle Dutch *savel* to Latin *sabulum* (cf. De Vries & De Tollenaere 1971: 856). However, in Latin *sabulum* we are dealing with a plosive /b/ which cannot account for the Dutch /v/. A loanword of the Latin etymon in the West Romance stage (300–600 CE, see chapter 4) is more attractive since Latin plosive /b/ later developed into West Romance /b/ which can account for the Dutch /v/. Two West Romance formations might have been the donor word for Old Dutch *savel*. To these, we might add one possible Old French (800–1300 CE) word.

1. Latin *sabulum* > WRom. **sāblu* → WGM. *sābal* > ODu. *savel*

This scenario has a direct parallel in the development of Latin *tabulum* to Middle Dutch *tavel/tafel*. The West Germanic *-al-suffix weakened in the late Old Dutch period to -el, which would explain the Old Dutch attestation *sauelberga*. It is therefore an attractive solution which is advocated by Wartburg (FEW XI: 18).

2. Latin *sabellum* > WRom. **sābello* → WGM. *sābel* > ODu. *savel*

This scenario connects Old Dutch *savel* with the Romance etymon **sābello*, which is reflected in the central Old French dialects as *savel* (Old Dauphinois, see FEW XI: 5). The Romance suffix *-ello would then be responsible for the Old Dutch -el-suffix.

3. OFr. *savel* > ODu. *savel*

We might also assume that Old French *savel*, the continuation of WRom. **sābello*, was the donor word for Old Dutch *savel*. Then Old French *savel* must also have occurred in the northern Old French dialects. Wartburg (1959, FEW XI: 5) argues that this might have been the case, since the northern dialect form *savelon*²³⁵ ‘sand’ in Picardian, Walloon and Lotharingian seems to presuppose an Old French base **savel*.

²³¹ For this connection, I am indebted to Michiel de Vaan (p.c.) who pointed out the case of ModDu. *zavel*.

²³² consulted digitally at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=ONW&id=ID4822&lemmodern=zavel>

²³³ Wartburg (REX XI: 17) convincingly argues that ModFr. *sable* ‘sand’ does not reflect Latin *sabulum* since ModFr. *sable* ‘sand’ only occurs regularly from the 16th century onwards. In the Middle Ages, the French word for sand was OFr. *sablun* < Lat. *sabulō*. Therefore ModFr. *sable* should be explained as a *Rückbildung* from OFr. *sablon/sablun* ‘sand’ just like ModFr. *glace* ‘ice’ is a *Rückbildung* from OFr. *glaçon* ‘ice’.

²³⁴ consulted digitally at URL: <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&id=48469&lemmodern=zavel>

²³⁵ Northern Old French *savelon* cannot directly have been the donor word for Old Dutch *savel* since OFr. **savelon* would have been borrowed as Middle Dutch *saveloen*.

All three options are possible scenarios for explaining the origin of Old Dutch *savel*. However, the formal match between Old French *savel*, provided it existed in northern Old French, and Old Dutch *savel* is striking. The proximity of the French word to the Dutch language border make a borrowing from an Early Old French dialect on the northern border of the Gallo-Romance dialect continuum an especially attractive scenario. We may remind the reader that the word is limited to southern Dutch, that is, the Germanic dialect that immediately borders northern French (cf. Wartburg XI: 18; MNW SAVEL). If the etymon was borrowed in the Romance stage, we might expect a larger distribution of the word in the Germanic dialect continuum.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for an Old French origin of Old Dutch *polra*, *polre*, the ancestral form for Modern Dutch *polder*. It has long been recognized that the traditional connection of ModDu. *polder* to Modern Dutch *polle* ‘tip, top of something’ leaves the suffix *-re* unexplained. We have also noted that the alleged meaning ‘tip of land outside the dike’ is only found in modern Friesland which leaves a chronological and geographical gap to twelfth century Flanders and Zeeland. Since the word *polder* referred to the innovative concept of reclaiming land by offensive diking, it must have had a different meaning before this practice developed in the twelfth century. I have pointed to the fact that the first *polders* were diked tidal marshes and in this regard we have found that several mud flats in front of the Flemish and Zeeland North Sea coast are also named *polder* in coastal maps of the seventeenth century.

I have argued that the original meaning of Modern Dutch *polder* might therefore have been ‘tidal marsh’ which was in the twelfth century semantically narrowed to ‘diked salting’. The Dutch toponyms in Old and Middle Dutch *sant*, *sandt* ‘sand’ show that these saltings of the Flemish coast could be named after their sandy soil. The same naming motive might be present in Old Dutch *polre/polra*, which, as I have argued, goes back to Early Old French **polra* ‘dust, dirt, sand’ (cf. OFr. *poldre*, *poudre*). This lexical transfer from Early Old French to Old Dutch may have occurred in the Flanders coastal region where it was used in reference to the sandy saltings in the alluvial coastal area. An Old French etymology for Dutch *polder* therefore sheds new light on the Early Medieval origin of what eventually became the hallmark of the Dutch landscape.