

Sovereignty at Anchor: Internal Frontiers and the Dutch Eel Ships of the Thames

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Pushing the Boundaries Outwards to Make More England...

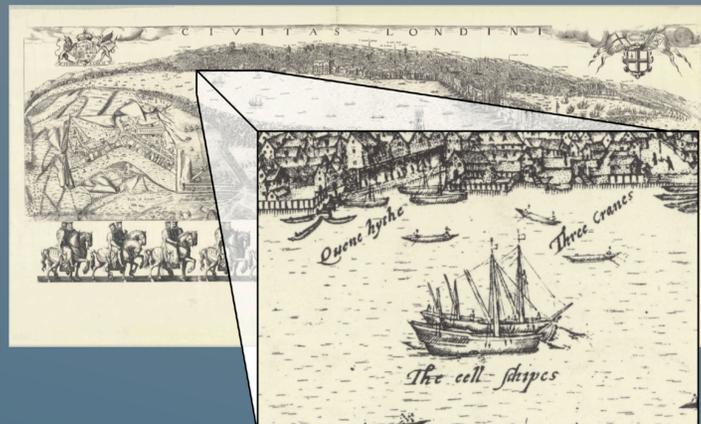
- The 16th and 17th centuries saw increasing efforts in England to drain the Fens — a large region of swampy territory in East Anglia
- English elite in London conceived of this as literally creating new land, pulling more England up from the sea



“A General Plot and Description of the Fens”
by Henricus Hondicus, 1632

...Killed the Eels...

- Efforts to drain the Fens caused serious ecological disruptions, badly degrading what had been the county's single largest natural habitat for eels
- Eels were dietary staple that cut across class lines and the Fens provided London with many of the eels that its citizens demanded



“Civitas Londini” by John Norden, 1600

...And Created New, Contested Internal Frontier Spaces...

- At the start of the 17th century, visual and literary descriptions of London began to include Dutch ships on the Thames, selling live eels
- Over the next 100 years, the ships' position in the city became a point of ongoing negotiation
- Mapmakers, artists and authors tried to make the eel ships a part of the cityscape
- Parliament expelled the Dutch eelmen in 1667
- The ships were allowed back in 1680 after an anonymous petition to Parliament argued that the English could not meet market demands through native production, and that they needed the Dutch
- At that point the eel ships returned to the Thames,. However, they did not reappear in representations of the cityscape, and a mythology of spatial belonging began to emerge around them

...That Hardened into a Lasting Spatial Myth.

- The myth developed that, because of some long-gone service to England, the Dutch had been granted a tax-free anchorage, so long as the spot was never empty for more than two minutes
- In this way, the Dutch kept the sovereignty of their space, the English had a cultural excuse for granting the privilege
- The myth became reified over time into spatial fact, accepted by both the English and the Dutch



“Holland in London” in The Yachting Monthly, 1908.

- No longer a contested space, the ships reappeared in cityscape descriptions only in the late 19th century as an antiquarian curiosity



Dutch Eel Ships on the Thames
at Billingsgate, 1937

- The eel ships stayed at anchor through WWI, fearing to lose their spot even though they had no eels to sell
- The last ship left in 1938