

SARTONIANA

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**Sarton Chair of History of Science
Ghent University**

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Editors: Robert Rubens and Maarten Van Dyck

**Sarton Chair of History of Sciences
Ghent University, Belgium**

Laudatio Erik Thoen

Marc Van Meirvenne

Until last year Prof. Erik Thoen was chairman of the Department of History of the “Faculty of Arts and Philosophy” at the Ghent University, where he currently is still a guest professor since his retirement. He is specialized in the field of rural history, and in particular the long term history from the middle ages until the 19th century. He stimulated research in different fields such as economic history, historical geography, rural techniques, environmental history and historical demography.

He is a member of the research group “Economies, Comparisons, Connections”, which brings together historians and social scientists who study the interaction of historical processes at varying geographical, social, political, environmental and economic scales. As Director of the International Research Community “*Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area*” (CORN) and as a key member of many other international organizations, he stimulated international comparative research all over Europe. He was also director of the editorial team of the four volume book series “*Rural Economy and Society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000*” (published 2010-2013). In the 1990s he was the first to introduce in Belgium the new field of “environmental history”. Nowadays this topic is thought at most universities, often by his doctoral students or their students. He published more than 120 papers and books and received many scientific awards, such as the prestigious *Francois Chair* in 2012 at the (Dutch) Free University of Brussels.

His contributions to the history of sciences are twofold:

1. He contributed to the historical study of agricultural techniques in

Europe, and particularly in Flanders, since the middle ages, with an emphasis on the social-economic evolution within the rural societies.

2. He contributed to the historical analysis and reconstruction, use and transformation of old culture landscapes, particularly in the pre-industrial periods. He focused on the ecological consequences of technical evolutions throughout the pre-industrial times, such as the transformations of the coastal areas in The Netherlands, as a consequence of over-exploitation by man in the Middle Ages.

Personally, I know Prof. Erik Thoen since some 6 years when we, together with colleagues from his department and the Department of Archaeology, succeeded in obtaining an FWO-project on the Zwin area and its impact on the rise and decline of the harbour of Bruges. As a soil scientist I was always triggered by his ability to “read” present-day landscape features and link these to past structures such as field boundaries, ditches or former villages.

Therefore, it is a real pleasure for me that I can announce to you Prof. Erik Thoen as beneficiary of a Sarton medal 2019. His track record fits perfectly in several activity domains of our faculty, such as agriculture, environmental technology and socio-economics related to agriculture. I am convinced that he will bring us a most interesting presentation on “Peasants, farmers and landscapes in pre-industrial Flanders”.