

# THE BINATIONAL CITY OF EURODE

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The subject of our paper is the formation of an urban community that consists of two municipalities at both sides of the Dutch-German frontier in the area of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen). In 1997 the Dutch municipality of Kerkrade and the German municipality of Herzogenrath decided to enter into a narrow cooperation with each other, with the prospect of even a merger, and to present themselves under the name of Eurode as one bordercrossing community. We call this the binational city of Eurode.

Such a construction is rather unique, although we know of some comparable projects elsewhere in Europe. This project of the binational city of Eurode is more ambitious than the well-known projects of regional cooperation along many borders in the European Union that are called euregions. Realizing Eurode means spadework, for both local authorities experience a lot of problems that result from the different national administrative frameworks. Kerkrade and Herzogenrath are, respectively, a Dutch city and a German city, not only because they are situated in different countries, but above all because they are the products of two different institutional frameworks. Therefore, both local authorities consider to ask for becoming an exceptional case, in order to be able to carry on their intentions.

Our research project has been started earlier this year (1999), so we are only in the initial phase. Our main topic is not, as would perhaps be expected, the institutional and politico-administrative complications and constraints with which the policymakers are confronted, but the attitudes and feelings of both local populations that are involved. This was our decision, because of our theoretical interests in questions of local identities and sense of place. But the local authorities of the Eurode project too expressed their strong interest in this topic, for they want to know what ordinary people think and want with regard to this specific project of cooperation. Because history plays a prominent role in the project, we too pay full attention to this dimension in the research design.

After this introduction the paper consists of 3 sections:

- 1 The conceptual framework
- 2 Description of the local situation
- 3 The reseach design.

## **1 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The notion of the binational city is as new as the phenomenon itself is. Therefore, first some remarks with regard to this concept. Besides the international border situation,

there is the element of two neighbour cities that can be considered as double cities (twin cities).

A double city is a pair of two cities of almost the same size that are situated very close to each other, as such an almost contiguous urban area. Nevertheless, the two urban nodes are clearly recognizable with their particular city centre. Moreover, the inhabitants of both cities are fully aware of their own local identity. The Twin Cities Minneapolis and Saint Paul are possibly the most famous and best known examples of that situation. But all over the world pairs of neighbour cities are to be found that can be considered as double or twin cities.

Spatial closeness is, however, not enough to be called a double or twin city. In our opinion a necessary condition is a sense of having common interests and belonging together. At the same time a tradition of rivalry and competition is not uncommon. One may suppose that this tradition of rivalry is enhanced by their closeness and sameness of size. Like kids of the same family twin cities share feelings of communality and competition.

The realization of common interests is first of all felt by local politicians and administrators, who sooner or later are confronted with common problems and interests, that ask for cooperation. Rivalry and competition are undesired and even wrong at that level. In starting concrete projects of cooperation they soon will earn the sympathy of leaders of trade and industry, chambers of commerce, and so on. It is, however, more difficult to get involved the ordinary inhabitant, who cherishes his feelings of dislike to his neighbours.

Normally, this needs not be a real problem. Only when very far-reaching plans are proposed, such as a merger of the two cities that up to then were independent administrative entities. This situation occurred in the case of the Dutch double city of Enschede and Hengelo some years ago. Their mayors and city councils planned a merger of both cities, but could not win the support of their inhabitants. In particular, the people of the smaller city Hengelo (75,000 inh.) opposed the merger. The project has been postponed, but has been picked up again by the regional and national authorities in 1998.

The unanswered question remains: why should such rather large cities merge, instead of cooperate narrowly and heartily where necessary? A merger of two or three small municipalities is to be defended, because of economies of scale that are to be expected in the administrative apparatus. But this argument does not hold for cities as the above mentioned. The only argument that has been put forward repeatedly was that after the merger the new city would be the 5th city of the country and that it would better to be positioned on the European map! Such arguments are not very convincing to citizens.

From the many questions and themes for research we selected the attitudes and reactions of the local population, in response to the plans and intentions of their city councils, as our first subject. Because in the above-mentioned case of Enschede-Hengelo the expectation of many citizens was that after the merger local taxes would be much higher in Hengelo, we thought it would be preferable to find a case where this issue did not influence the attitude of the inhabitants.

The announcement of the aspired cooperation and integration - not to speak of a merger - of the border cities of Kerkrade (NL) and Herzogenrath (G) offered new opportunities for research. Our department had already a long tradition of research on border issues, not in the last place because the city of Nijmegen is situated at the Dutch-German border. Border studies will be the trade mark of its research programme. So, a case study of a double city that crosses the border fits very well in the programme.

Before entering this case by describing its geographical characteristics that are of importance to our analysis, we first have to point at the existence of a rather large

number of double cities at state borders. We will not have the opportunity to elaborate on this special category of border double cities, such as along the U.S.-Mexico border and along the German-Polish border river Oder-Neisse. Both lines of border twin cities have their own history, which is narrowly tied up with the dividing function of the state border. This is also true for Eurode, as the new border-crossing twin city in Kerkrade and Herzogenrath is called.

## **2 EURODE: A SHORT PORTRAIT**

The Eurode project is, as a matter of fact, a correction of history, for about two centuries ago, the places of Kerkrade and Herzogenrath, belonged already together, as a small semi-independent territory between Prussia and the Netherlands. People spoke (and speak) a common dialect that differs significantly from the official languages as well as from other regional dialects. The area was called Land of Hertogenrade, or Land of Rode. During the Congress of Vienna (1814), however, they were separated, against the will of the then local authorities. A road, called Newstreet, became the dividing line. This road plays a very prominent role in the relations between the two parts and in the history of the region. During the fixation of the border there were some quarrels and disputes between both countries (Prussia and The Netherlands), because of the importance of the Newstreet as a trade route and the presence of coal mines in the area (Venner 1981). Figure 1 shows the situation around 1860. The road from Herzogenrade to Holz und further southwards is the road from Aachen to Geilenkirchen that later has been called 'Neustraß' and which has been the border between both countries since 1816.

So, the villages of Kerkrade and Herzogenrath gradually developed into centres of a mining district, although this did not happen before the end of the 19th century. Around these historical centres a number of new mining villages developed, with the consequence that the area today is characterized by a rather dispersed settlement pattern. Coal mining, however, disappeared from the area. The mines were closed in the 1970s and today only the remembrance of the mining period is kept alive by the presence of some relics. Kerkrade and Herzogenrath remained however the main centres, also after a recent administrative reform at both sides of the border. It is not without importance to know that the city of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) is very close, as is the larger mining town of Heerlen in the Netherlands, nor is the attractive city of Maastricht far away. So, the urban function of both Kerkrade and Herzogenrath is rather restricted. Both cities meet each other physically in the Newstreet, one side of the road being Dutch territory and the other German.

The drawing of the border line in 1815 did not mean that the people of Kerkrade and Herzogenrath estranged from each other (Scholtes 1981). During the whole 19th century intensive social contacts existed between the people at both sides of the border and many men worked in the mine at the other side of the frontier. The German language was very common in Kerkrade, in the church as well as in the school and most people of Kerkrade read a German newspaper. We have to remark that in the 19th century in the whole region the feeling of belonging to the Netherlands was not very strongly developed (Knippenberg 1998).

This changed, however, drastically with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, during which the Netherlands remained neutral. Both the Dutch and the Germans set up the guarding of the frontier. The Germans built a 2 metres high barbed wire entanglement in the Newstreet, to prevent deserters and smugglers. The Newstreet no

longer was a neutral street. The Dutch inhabitants were no longer allowed to leave their houses by the front door. Windows and doors were sealed up with barbed wire. For the first time the inhabitants of the Newstreet experienced the existence of a physical frontier (Braad 1994).

After the First World War a German-Dutch commission of arbitration determined the exact course of the border. As a consequence, the road (Newstreet) itself became German. In 1936 the Germans built a by-road (Grenzumgehungsstrasse), so that the traffic between Herzogenrath and Aix-la-Chapelle did not have to use the Newstreet anymore. Soon afterwards the barbed wire (2,5 m.) wall appeared again. The Second World War caused anti-German feelings in the Dutch area, which was a new phenomenon in this region with intensive social relations crossing the border.

After the war, contacts were restored (Frensch 1999). It is not surprising that the beginning of the cross border cooperation started at the Newstreet. As early as in 1965 the idea of one common street was raised. But the barbed wire still was there, although it had been lowered in 1957 (from 2 m. to 1,20 m.). In 1968 the Newstreet was reconstructed, the barbed wire was replaced by concrete blocks. The line of these blocks divided both communities and expressed the existence of the frontier. From 1970 onward the inhabitants were allowed to cross the line everywhere. In 1988 for the first time a considerable number of people came together to protest against the presence of the blocks, that ultimately were removed in 1993.

Cooperation at the municipal level started in about the same period, with the signing of the Friendshipmanifest (13 July 1991). With the aid of the Interreg Fund an action programme was formulated, in order to improve the economic and socio-cultural situation of the area by common plans (*Aktieprogramma* 1991). On the basis of the Friendship charter of 1991 a further important step was done in 1997, when both municipalities decided to become a 'federation' that occupies itself with all municipal tasks for the whole territory of both municipalities, as far as Dutch and German legislation does allow this.

The border crossing federation is named 'Eurode', a name that already was in circulation for some time. This name is composed of two elements and, by that, of two philosophies. The meaning of the first syllable is clear, it refers to Europe. The second syllable, 'rode', is a toponym that is to be found in many place names in the area (ending with -rode, rade, rath, roth), meaning 'reclamation of land' (Schrijnemakers 1984). So, the new name contains a very familiar element that should contribute to its acceptance. However, in this way Eurode is not only a successful reference to the past, but also a symbolic reference to the future of Europe, where - so to say - new ideal reclamations within the existing wood of national identities have to be made.

In the meantime, it is thought to be of importance to strengthen the feeling of belonging together among the local populations by stressing the common history. The reference to the common history is the leading thread running through the social construction of the binational city. The most famous building of the area that expresses its past is the abbey of Rolduc, built in 1104 and which was also the starting point of the economic development (mining) of the area (see Haas 1986).

### **3 THE PEOPLE'S INTEREST**

The social construction of Eurode as a binational city is our main theoretical concept and research question: how can new place-bound identities be created in the minds of ordinary citizens? That is, in what manner does the social construction of cities find its

way in general, how can it be influenced and manipulated and, third, how is this process present in the project of Eurode?

As we started our project just half a year ago, there are as yet only questions and no answers. Do we bring forward the right questions and do we, at least, have some indications? To start with the last, from previous cases (Enschede/Hengelo) we learnt that the response of the local populations at far-reaching plans for cooperation and merger are not without importance. Cities are not objects of experimentation for their authorities and administrators, cities are first of all places where people want to feel themselves at home. Therefore, they cherish their local identity.

With regard to the opinion citizens have about Eurode we only have a very limited indication of the acceptance of Eurode as an idea by people of Kerkrade thanks to an investigation carried out in 1998 (Crutz 1998). It appeared that a not negligible minority of them had rather negative opinions on the idea of one common city. It also appears that many people oppose, or feel it difficult to accept, the new name that is given to the binational city. Moreover, the municipality of Kerkrade participates in another - completely Dutch - project of regional cooperation, called Parkstad (Park City) Limburg. This is perhaps not only embarrassing for some people, but it also is offending, because this new name is intended to replace - and do forget - the remembrance of the mining period. Formerly the area was called the Eastern Mining Area, and although this was a very prosaic name, many families whose life has been narrowly connected with coal mining, are a little bit touchy in this respect. Moreover, Parkstad misses any reference to whatever local toponym. Parkstad can be everywhere. And to make it still more complex, it is to be expected that inhabitants of other quarters of the polynucleated municipality Kerkrade are much less involved in the Eurode project than the inhabitants of the proper place of Kerkrade. But this question of local sentiments is part of our research plan.

At this very moment we are trying to adapt the theory and notions of Anssi Paasi to our case. Therefore, my concluding remarks will touch upon these notions and their applicability in the context of the Eurode project.

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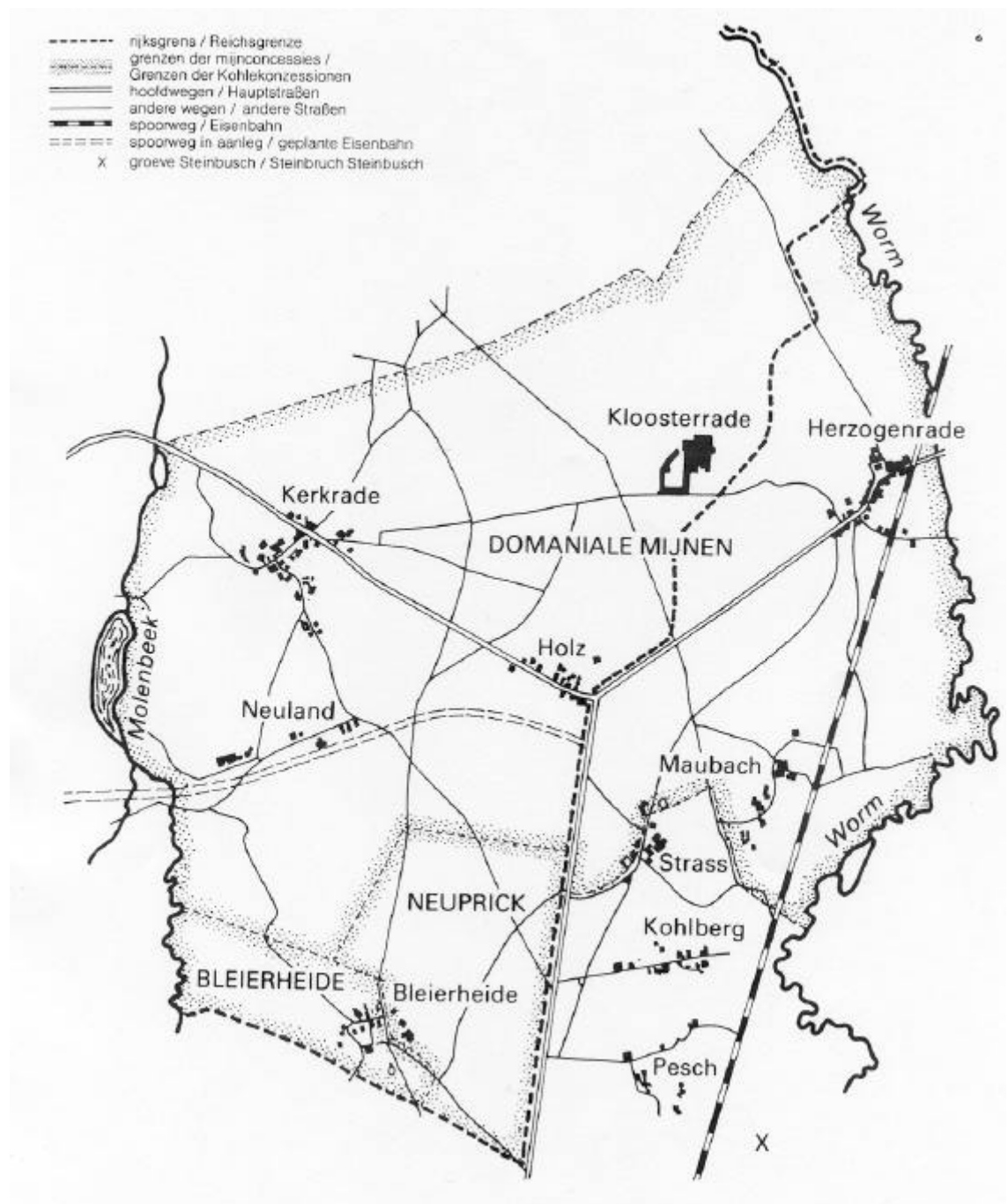


Figure 1: The bordersituation in 1860 (Augustus, 1986: 78)