

New insights into Dutch shipping and trade in the Atlantic in early modern history

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For a long time, Dutch historians dealing with overseas history focused their eyes eastward. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) had a large and certainly profitable trade network. That network was the basis for the later colony called the Dutch East Indies. The economic importance of the West, however, was not rated very high. The Dutch West India Company (WIC) was a financial failure, its trade supposedly did not amount to much, and from the 19th century onward, more money went into the colonies in the West than came out of them. But, was that really the case?

The views of the economic development of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth and eighteenth century are fairly clear, but not always correct. One such view is that the Dutch Republic in early modern times mainly started to thrive owing to the VOC's

trade in spices. Another one is that the Dutch mainly traded slaves in the Atlantic region and kept plantation colonies with slaves. The Dutch shipping and trade are said to have collapsed in the course of the eighteenth century, a development that pro-

ceeded more quickly in the Atlantic region than in the East. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians started placing question marks behind those opinions. Extensive quantitative research in historic sources was undertaken to verify whether the views on the past were actually correct. The University of Leiden, for example, carried out a large study into trade and shipping between Europe and Asia. The results were published in *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th centuries*. This three-part publication of sources contained data for 4800 journeys from the Netherlands to Asia and 3500 journeys from Asia to the Netherlands. The resulting data file made it possible to formulate new questions and find answers regarding matters such as trade volume and fluctuations in Dutch shipping traffic to Asia. To the surprise of many, the

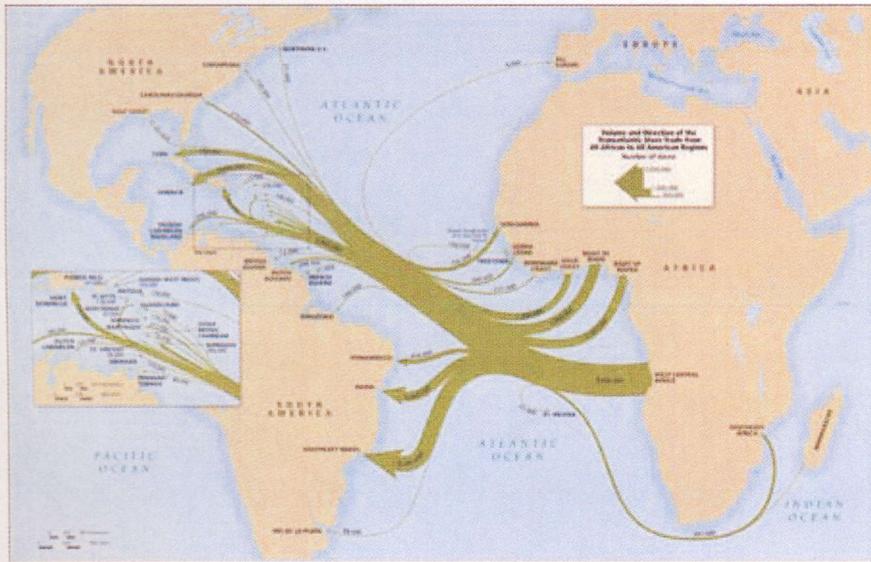


Figure 1. The volume and direction of the transatlantic slave trade.

decline of the VOC turned out to have started much later than had long been assumed.

Unlocking all the data

At the end of the 1960s, studies of the Dutch transatlantic slave trade started as well. American historian Philip Curtin's publication *The Atlantic Slave Trade; A Census* served as catalyst for the Dutch investigations. Curtin estimated that approximately eleven million Africans were made slaves and taken to the New World from the sixteenth until the twentieth

century. Prior to the publication of his study, the estimates ran from about 3.5 to 100 million. Was Curtin right, however? Historians in various countries started an extensive quantitative study in order to prove or negate his findings. Historian Johannes Postma, who is based in the States, took on the task of looking into the Dutch contribution to the transatlantic slave trade. Very little was known about it at the end of the 1960s. His research and that of others revealed that Dutch merchants removed approximately 550,000 slaves from Africa, on a

total of about 12.5 million, as was shown later. That means that the Dutch share took up almost five per cent of the total. In 1991, an international group of researchers decided to gather all available information about the transatlantic slave trade in a large data file, and track down any lacking data by additional research. Their efforts resulted in the launch of the web site www.slavevoyages.com in 2006. It unlocks the data of some 35,000 transatlantic slave journeys, which represent 80 to 85 per cent of all slave journeys, so the editors estimate. Since the launch of the web site, many publications have appeared that offer new insights into the various aspects of the transatlantic slave trade. Now for the first time, we can determine with some certainty from which West-African areas the slaves originated, which percentage passed away during the voyage, and where exactly in the New World the survivors ended up.

Tedious puzzle-solving

At the beginning of the 1990s, research into the Dutch activities in the Atlantic region broadened. The historians' attention diverged to include goods being traded with West Africa, parts of North and South America, and the Caribbean. Investigating this was not easy. The VOC, which held

the monopoly in trade and shipping traffic to Asia, had left behind an excellent and well arranged archive, with nearly all the data a researcher could possibly want. No wonder that many historians and institutes focused on it in the past. The WIC, by contrast, was an economic failure, and to make matters worse, most of its archive was demolished. But the trade with the West was of a very different nature than the trade with the East. The trade in the Atlantic region was mainly the realm of small private entrepreneurs. Hence, the researchers had to accomplish magic and acquire data from a large number of different sources. Next, they had to connect those data to gain insight into the Atlantic trade network of the Dutch Republic. This tedious puzzle-solving resulted in a number of interesting data files over the past twenty years. We now know much more about the extent of the trade and shipping traffic between the Netherlands and West Africa, Surinam, Curacao and parts of North America. The available data reveal that the economic activities of the Dutch in the Atlantic region were much more sizeable than had been assumed until recently. The Dutch colonies in the West were small and few, but the merchants operating there succeeded in rerouting part of the production of

the surrounding French and British colonies. Part of the sugar, cocoa, coffee and tobacco produced in them were shipped to Dutch ports via Curaçao and St. Eustatius, which were both Dutch. Furthermore, the investigation revealed that the Dutch trade with the West did not decline in the eighteenth century but by contrast, grew strongly.

Relational database available

It is not yet clear how the Dutch managed to secure a disproportionately large part of the transatlantic trade. Also not quite known is how large that Dutch part was. In 2008, a group of researchers of the University of Leiden and the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam started a large study aimed at clarifying those issues. The NWO-financed research project is titled 'Dutch Atlantic Connections' and will run until 2013. Existing data files of earlier research projects have been joined in a so-called relational database within the framework of this project. This also included the nearly 1600 transatlantic slave journeys that the Dutch carried out. Collecting them and making them uniform, made it possible to unlock these 'old' files digitally, and create a database of thousands of Dutch shipping movements in the Atlantic region. This relational database has been depos-

ited at DANS and is available to other researchers now. More new data that the 'Dutch Atlantic Connections' project dug up from archives will soon be added. The database makes it possible to address new questions. That way, hard data can put a stop to existing assumptions and the view on the economic importance of the Dutch shipping and trade in the Atlantic in early modern times can be adjusted. It will engender new insights and a stream of new publications.

