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Walcherse ketens : de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel en de economie van Walcheren, 1755-1780

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Summary in English

A glance at eighteenth-century trade statistics of the Dutch Republic reveals an interesting fact: while most of the slave-based export of the Dutch West-Indian colonies was transported to cities in the province of Holland, the slave trade was dominated by merchants from the southern province of Zeeland. This disparity was especially pronounced after the monopoly of the Dutch West India Company was dismantled in the 1730s. For the remainder of the eighteenth century, merchants from the Zeeland cities of Flushing and Middelburg were responsible for 65 to 70 percent of all Dutch Transatlantic slave voyages. Both cities were located on the island of Walcheren, making this island the center of the Dutch slave trade. This study investigates the local economic effects of the many slaving voyages departing from Walcheren. For at least two other contemporary slaving centers in Northwestern Europe – Liverpool and Nantes – the slave trade had a profound effect on the local economy. The English slave trade from Liverpool has famously been associated with the origins of the Industrial Revolution, although the extent to which this was the case is still debated. Nantes too received an economic impulse from the slave trade, which led to the establishment of textile factories in its vicinity. In light of these English and French cases, it is interesting to study to local impact of the Dutch slave trade.

The character of the Dutch slave trade changed in the early eighteenth century. The focus of slave traders shifted from being an important supplier of slaves to non-Dutch West Indian colonies, to almost exclusively supplying the Dutch plantation colonies on the Wild Coast of South America with slaves. In the same period, merchants from Zeeland started to dominate the Dutch slave trade. Capital-rich Amsterdam turned instead to the trade in the exports of the West Indian colonies, predominantly sugar and coffee from Suriname. By providing extensive loan and credit facilities to planters, Amsterdam merchant houses were able to draw most of the plantation produce to their city. While the Zeeland Chamber of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) managed to secure preferential rights for Zeeland merchants in the colony of Essequibo/Demerara, the most important market for West Indian produce was Amsterdam. Supplying slaves to the Dutch West Indian colonies was a way for Walcheren merchants to tap into the engine of economic growth that was the Atlantic economy of the eighteenth century.

In the period between 1730 and 1800, about 50 merchant houses from Flushing and Middelburg organized around 500 Transatlantic slaving voyages. Although these

merchants were successful in dominating the Dutch slave trade, most of their slave voyages were not remarkably profitable. The modest financial returns are clearly revealed in the extant records of slavers, especially in the well-preserved financial administration of the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie (MCC). While individual voyages had the potential to be immensely profitable, on average the trade yielded modest to disappointing results. Only during the disruption of the French slave trade in the Seven Years' War (1756 – 1763) were the financial results temporarily above average. A lack of viable commercial alternatives was one reason why local merchants did not abandon the slave trade. Another explanation is the fact that this trade was strongly embedded in local economic structures. Many slave traders were also active in economic activities that were closely related to the trade in enslaved Africans, such as gunpowder production and textile trade. The same can be said for many investors, who were as interested in supplying slave ships with goods and services as they were in the financial results of the individual voyages.

The 1730 Dutch regulations on the trade to Africa stipulated that slave traders operating in the Dutch Republic had to use Dutch-built ships, fitted out in Dutch harbors. The Walcheren economy clearly benefited from this stipulation, as most slave ships were built on local shipyards. More than half of all oceangoing vessels built on private shipyards in Middelburg between 1750 and 1794 made at least one slave voyage. Although relevant data is missing, the shipbuilding industry in neighboring Flushing is likely to have benefited from slaving even more as the international trade of this city was especially geared towards the slave trade. Slave ships were generally fitted out for long voyages (on average 18 months) and a relatively large crew compared to ships on European routes. In both cities, the provisioning of slave ships was an important activity for local bakers, butchers, coopers and other suppliers. In addition, around 40 percent of seamen on private Middelburg ships served on a slaver, while the corresponding figure for Flushing was about 70 percent.

While slave traders were obligated to employ the services provided in and around Dutch ports to ready their vessels for slaving voyages, they were free to import the necessary trade cargo for Africa from abroad. The slave trade to West-Africa required large amounts of textiles, guns, gunpowder and other products to be traded for enslaved Africans on the coast of West-Africa. Slave traders throughout Europe made use of international networks to acquire these goods and Walcheren merchants were no different. It is likely that Dutch slave traders imported more of their trade goods from abroad than their counterparts from Liverpool and Nantes. The most important part of every Africa cargo (especially to Loango-Angola) consisted of textiles. Most of the textile was imported from Asia by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), although local slave

traders also ordered textile from French and English manufacturers. The majority of the guns destined for Africa was imported from Liège, while slave traders imported many smaller trade items (such as glassware, beads and knives) from the German hinterland. The only item of importance for the slave trade that local manufacturers produced in sufficient quantities was gunpowder. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Walcheren counted four (after 1765 five) gunpowder mills. All these mills delivered a large part of their output to slave traders.

The Walcheren slave trade had a positive effect on traditional industries on the island, such as shipbuilding and gunpowder production. However, it did not lead to innovative new production techniques or large-scale industrialization on Walcheren. An important reason was the relatively small scale of the trade (500 voyages between 1730 and 1800) in comparison to Liverpool (3,500 voyages in the same period) and Nantes (1,200 voyages). The high cost of labor in the Dutch Republic and the open character of the economy also played a part. Walcheren slave traders imported up to 70 percent of their trade cargo from abroad. While the economic effects of the slave trade were therefore limited, on a local scale the trade was still an important economic factor. In the years between 1755 and 1780, when the local slave trade was at its absolute peak, about 5 to 6 percent of the Middelburg economy (17,000 inhabitants) was directly or indirectly connected to the slave trade, while the same was true for about 25 percent of the Flushing economy (6,000 inhabitants). From a theoretical perspective, the capital invested in the slave trade could have been employed in other sectors of the local economy. However, the lack of viable commercial activities makes it plausible that the economies of Flushing and Middelburg would have been significantly smaller without the slave trade.

One area in which the Dutch slave trade would have benefited from innovation was finance. Planters usually paid for their slaves in the West Indies using bills of exchange drawn on Amsterdam merchant houses. This system worked well as long as the merchant houses accepted the bills drawn on them, but a series of financial crises in the 1770s led to serious liquidity problems for Walcheren slave traders. As more and more bills of exchange were protested in the Dutch Republic, merchants were unable to realize their profits and to fit out new slaving voyages. While a commercial innovation in Great-Britain (the so-called “bills-in-the-bottom-system”) shielded slave traders from financial risks by adding an extra layer of security between traders and planters in the form of specialized agents, Dutch slave traders were exposed to the full risk of planter default. Walcheren merchants were unable to shoulder that risk, which led to a serious weakening of the local slave trade after 1770. When many Dutch slave ships were captured by English privateers in 1781, the sector all but collapsed. It was revived on a

smaller scale in the late 1780s and early 1790s, but the French invasion of the Dutch Republic in 1794-1795 delivered a fatal blow to the Walcheren slave trade.

In contrast to Liverpool and Nantes, the Walcheren slave trade did not lead to industrialization. On a local scale, it was still an important sector for the economy. On a national scale, the direct economic effects of the Walcheren slave trade were rather limited. It did function as an important part of the 'Atlantic system', since the slave labor imported on Walcheren slave ships played a crucial role in the exports of colonial produce. While Dutch West Indian planters could have procured slaves from non-Dutch slavers (and regularly did so illegally), there was strategic value in employing the services of Dutch slavers. Not only did it reduce the dependency on foreign powers, it was also conducive to maintaining the economic balance between the Dutch provinces of Holland and Zeeland.