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Antunes, C.A.P.; Negrón, R.

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The Dutch Republic and the Spanish Slave Trade, 1580-1690

Cátia Antunes and Ramona Negrón

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Abstract

This article investigates the reason why groups of merchants operating from the Dutch Republic, particularly from Amsterdam, decided to take part in the exploitation of the Spanish Empire, through a very particular type of activity, that of the slave trade. We argue that Amsterdam-based merchants were heavily engaged, through various organizational forms, in supplying Spanish American markets with enslaved Africans. This participation was rewarded with a path for access to Spanish American silver, at the time the essential exchange mechanism for entry and expansion in the Mediterranean and Asian trades.

Introduction

The Dutch Republic's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade has been analyzed in various historiographical strands. The first strand, best represented by Piet Emmer, argues that Dutch traders were relatively insignificant in the Atlantic slave trade, particularly when compared to the data available for the Portuguese (Portugal, Brazil, and Angola) and the British.¹ His claims at that time of relatively modest gains from the slave trade² were later contested by Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum.³

1 P.C. Emmer, *De Nederlandse slavenhandel, 1500-1850* (Amsterdam 2000).

2 P.C. Emmer, 'Winst in de marge? Een reactie van Piet Emmer op Matthias van Rossum en Karwan Fatah-Black "Wat is winst? De economisch impact van de Nederlandse trans-Atlantisch slavenhandel"', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* (hereafter TSEG) 9:4 (2012) 64-70.

3 K. Fatah-Black and M. van Rossum, 'Beyond profitability. The Dutch Transatlantic slave trade and its economic impact', *Slavery & Abolition* 36:1 (2015) 63-83.

Emmer's claims were justified by the data then available, which was corrected, supplemented, and re-interpreted in subsequent decades. The pioneer in this respect was Johannes Postma, who reconstructed some of the Dutch slave trade data for before 1674. Postma's moderately successful attempt encouraged others to follow in his footsteps and reconstruct the overall data pertaining to this trade.⁴ Postma also shifted the focus away from direct connections between Dutch slave trading and Dutch colonial settings in the Atlantic, given their relatively small and generally peripheral role in the overall Atlantic economy. Suriname's cash crop production, for example, always compared poorly to that in the British or French Caribbean, or to Brazil, and eighteenth-century Curaçao's overall development was never a match for Barbados or Saint Domingue. Postma was nevertheless adamant about the role played by Dutch skippers in connecting different spaces in the Atlantic, mostly thanks to their shipping capacities.

Postma's idea of the Dutch as connectors in a broader Atlantic context was further researched and placed within Atlantic historiography by the work of Gert Oostindie, Jessica Roitman, and Wim Klooster.⁵ Taking the premises and perspectives of Atlantic history posited by David Armitage as their point of departure,⁶ these authors emphasized the role Dutch skippers and ships played as linchpins in Atlantic exchanges, as well as how their position in circulating people, products, and ideas significantly facilitated the trade in enslaved Africans, including the distribution and transformation of colonial raw cash crops into consumer goods.

The importance attached to the Dutch role in Atlantic traffic was further emphasized when Ulbe Bosma and Pepijn Brandon reconstructed the link between agricultural productivity in the Dutch Atlantic world and other Atlantic empires' input into the Dutch transformative manufactures in the Dutch domestic market. Their calculations, based on theoretical premises of commodity chains, demonstrate a correlation between slave labor output in the colonial world and transformative and commercial gains in the Dutch domestic market amounting to

4 J.M. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge 1990).

5 W. Klooster, *The Dutch moment. War, trade and settlement in the seventeenth-century Atlantic world* (Leiden 2016), esp. chapters 3 and 4; G. Oostindie and J.V. Roitman, 'Repositioning the Dutch in the Atlantic, 1600-1800', *Itinerario* 36:2 (2012) 129-160.

6 D. Armitage, 'Three concepts of Atlantic history', in: D. Armitage and M.J. Braddick (eds), *The British Atlantic world, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke 2002) 11-27.

5 percent of GDP for the Dutch Republic as a whole, and about 10 percent of GDP for the province of Holland.⁷

What current historiography still underestimates, however, is the importance of Dutch activities outside the colonial antechambers of the Dutch Republic. This historiographical gap will soon be filled by the results of the ongoing *Exploiting the Empire of Others* project,⁸ which examines the gains attained by Dutch partnerships and firms worldwide while exploiting other countries' empires. As Cátia Antunes posits, these yields were far more significant than what they could attain in the geographically reduced and partially chartered Dutch empire. That is, the British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish empires all offered greater opportunities and rewards than the States General or cooperation with the Dutch chartered world (Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and WIC), Society of Suriname, etc.) ever could.

One of those opportunities with the promise of great rewards pertained to the transport and introduction (as stated in the primary sources) of enslaved Africans into the largest slave markets in the New World by the end of the sixteenth century, namely, those of the Spanish West Indies. The Spanish-American world presents historians with a peculiarity. Well into the seventeenth century, Spanish American slave markets were the largest in the New World.⁹ In a context where plantations did not dominate the economic landscape, enslaved Africans were mostly used for domestic urban labor, rural work, and labor in the silver mining districts.¹⁰ Although a major importer of African slaves, the Spanish monarchy did not have direct permanent access to slave markets on the coast of West Africa. For that reason, and from its inception, the Spanish American colonies were heavily dependent on slave traders who were overwhelmingly not subjects of the Habsburg kings (or only temporarily so).¹¹ In order to determine access to this protect-

7 P. Brandon and U. Bosma, 'Slavery and the Dutch economy, 1750-1800', *Slavery & Abolition* 42:1 (2021) 43-76.

8 C. Antunes, 'Exploiting the empire of others', VICI project sponsored by the Dutch Research Council NWO, *Exploiting the Empires of Others: Vici grant for Cátia Antunes – Leiden University* (universiteit-leiden.nl)

9 A. Borucki, D. Eltis and D. Wheat, 'Atlantic history and the slave trade to Spanish America', *American Historical Review* 120:2 (2015) 433-461.

10 J.M. Delgado Ribas, 'The slave trade in the Spanish imperial system, 1500-1800', in: J.M. Fradera and C. Schmidt-Nowara (eds), *Slavery and antislavery in Spain's Atlantic empire* (New York 2013) 13-42. E. Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamerica y el comercio de esclavos* (Seville 1977).

11 A. de A. Mendes, 'The foundations of the system. A reassessment of the slave trade to the Spanish Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth century', in: D. Eltis and D. Richardson (eds), *Extending the frontiers. Essays on the new Transatlantic slave trade database* (New Haven 2008) 63-94.

ed market and offer that access in the form of a royal privilege bestowed upon the few, the Spanish monarchy devised different mechanisms of access that ranged from free access (earlier period), to a system of licensing (or the so-called Portuguese *asientos*) until 1640 (end of the Union of the Crowns),¹² moving afterwards to direct contracting with firms of subjects of non-Castilian extraction (Genoese firms) during the 1650s and 1660s, moving then to naturalized foreigners in the 1680s (case of the so-called Coijmans *asiento*) and later in the century to commercial companies from Portugal, France, and England.¹³ Even if this is the overall take on the evolution of accessibility to the Spanish slaving markets in the Americas, nuances, anomalies, and investment undercurrents took hold of this well-devised system from its outset.

In this context, it is thus pertinent to explain when, how, and why Dutch private firms entered into the trading of enslaved Africans to the Spanish empire as part of a larger phenomenon of exploiting other powers' empires, on the one hand, and as part of the transnational solution that the Spanish monarchy found to service the constant demand for enslaved Africans in its American colonies, on the other. While providing these explanations, we will reflect on and reassess the function and role Curaçao played in this process. The relevance of this approach is fourfold. Firstly, it offers a contribution to the understanding of Dutch colonial exploitative behavior outside the purview of the Dutch state, taking as a case study the trade in enslaved Africans. In the second place, it uncovers the mechanisms through which private Amsterdam entrepreneurs made their way into the legal spaces provided by the Spanish monarchy, whilst facing the challenges imposed by the specificities of the slave trade. Thirdly, it re-evaluates the role played by Curaçao as a linchpin in the global connections that resulted from the demand for silver in the world market (particularly in the Mediterranean and China). Last, but not least, it showcases the way the Spanish monarchy related to subjects and non-subjects and their entry into its colonial domains by focusing on the private contractual nature of the *asiento* as a contract between the monarchy and a private merchant/financier.¹⁴

12 Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamérica y el comercio de esclavos*.

13 M.G. Rodrigues, *Between West Africa and America. The Angola slave trade in the Portuguese and Spanish Atlantic empires (1560-1641)*, unpublished PhD dissertation (European University Institute Florence 2019). A. García Montón, *Genoese entrepreneurship and the asiento slave trade, 1650-1700* (London 2021).

14 G. Scelle, *La traite négrière aux Indes de Castille. Contrats et traités d'assiento* (Paris 1906) 6. A point made less accurately by A.E. Wright, 'The Coymans asiento (1685-1689)', *Bijdragen voor de Vaderland-sche Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde* 6th series:1 (1924) 23-62.

Drawing on a diverse set of primary sources, this article rests firstly on the long-term data project led by David Eltis and David Richardson's team, which has resulted in the slave voyages database (TSTD). For the period 1560-1690, we have searched for all voyages where slaves were disembarked in the Spanish Americas (e.g., Buenos Aires, Caracas, Cartagena, Cumana, Hispaniola, Portobelo, Santo Domingo, Spanish West Indies), Curaçao, Barbados, and Jamaica, amounting to a total of 1,043 slave voyages (see figure 1).¹⁵ In the second place, we extracted the TSTD data concerning the same Spanish American and Caribbean ports for the period between 1630 and 1690, focusing on voyages classified as Dutch only (with a total of 215 voyages). To these results, we added the voyages for the aforementioned period in Johannes Postma's dataset stored in open access with DANS, though absent from the TSTD database (a total of 12 voyages). In the third step, we have added a total of 36 voyages collected in Cátia Antunes's database (containing a sample of 29,764 notarial contracts of the city of Amsterdam), which are absent in TSTD and in Postma. Her database was constructed from a sample of commercial contracts only, registered yearly in the months of April-May and August-September for the period between 1580 and 1776 (of this, only contracts related to slaving or slave trading voyages were considered). The joint data in these sets have resulted in a dataset of 1,043 slave voyages for the period 1549-1691, which will be further designated in this article as Antunes-Negrón, 'Combined dataset on slave trading voyages to the Spanish Americas, 1560-1690'.¹⁶ We will further complement this quantitative dataset with a first-hand report by a prominent seventeenth-century Dutch slave trader in Cadiz, Pedro van Belle, published in Rotterdam in 1689.¹⁷

15 This approach was inspired by previous data-mining attempts that resulted in C. Antunes and F. Ribeiro da Silva, 'Windows of global exchange. Dutch ports and the slave trade, 1600-1800', *International Journal of Maritime History* 30:3 (2018) 422-441; J. Vos, D. Eltis and D. Richardson, 'The Dutch in the Atlantic world. New perspectives from the slave trade, with particular reference to the African origins of the trade', in: Eltis and Richardson (eds), *Extending the frontiers*, 228-249.

16 Trans-Atlantic slave trade database (TSTD) <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>; DANS, *Dutch Atlantic connections. The circulation of people, goods and ideas in the Atlantic world, 1600-1795* (2009) <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-zc8-sz7n>. Supported by J. Postma, 'A reassessment of the Dutch Atlantic slave trade', in: J. Postma and V. Enthoven (eds), *Riches from Atlantic commerce. Dutch Transatlantic trade and shipping, 1585-1817* (Leiden 2003) 115-138. C. Antunes, *Notarial database 1580-1776* (sampling commercial contracts only). Stadsarchief Amsterdam (SAA), Inventaris van het Archief van de Notarissen ter Standplaats Amsterdam, 5075.

17 P. van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal van alle handeligen en directie van Pedro van Belle omtrent den slavenhandel, ofte, het Assiento de negros, eerst door D. Juan Barosso y Posso, bij zijn overlij-*

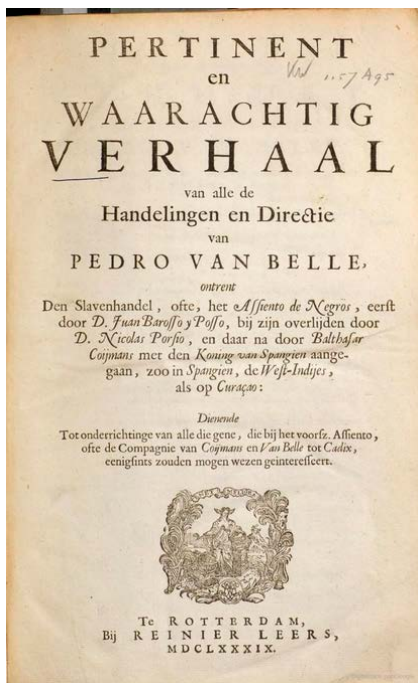


Illustration 1 Pedro van Belle, *Pertinent en Waarachtig Verhaal* (Rotterdam 1689)
(source: Google Books.)

Dutch entry into Iberian trades: Focus on Spanish America

Partnerships and firms operating from the Dutch Republic were active in Iberian trading from the 1570s onwards, particularly after the Union of the Crowns (1580-1640) brought together Portugal and Spain, and their empires, under Philip II. The connections between the Republic and major Iberian cities were maintained by three specific trading groups: firstly, merchants born and raised in the Republic, often with commercial contacts to major Northern European hubs such as Ant-

den door D. Nicolas Porcio, en daar na door Balthasar Coijmans met den koning van Spangien aangegaan, zoo in Spangien, de West-Indijes, als op Curaçao: Dienende tot onderrichtinge van alle die gene, die bij het voorsz. Assiento, ofte de Compagnie van Coijmans en Van Belle tot Cadix, eenigsints zouden mogen wezen geïnteresseert (Rotterdam 1689). Cátia Antunes is thankful to Wim Klooster for pointing out this document in a private conversation. We are also thankful for being able to rely on his previous work on Van Belle's manuscript.

werp;¹⁸ secondly, merchants who had left Antwerp after the siege in 1584-85, including Flemish (mostly Protestant) and Portuguese Sephardic merchants;¹⁹ and, thirdly, Spanish and Portuguese (Catholic and Sephardic) merchants arriving in Amsterdam directly from Antwerp, Iberia (escaping Inquisitorial persecution), or Hamburg (where many had taken refuge after the fall of Antwerp).²⁰

Thus, Dutch, Flemish, Portuguese, and Spanish merchants – Catholics, Protestants, and Sephardic Jews, whether subjects of the States General or the Habsburg kings in Madrid – formed the backbone of trade between the newly emerged Dutch Republic and Portugal and Spain. Using labor deployment in the maritime sector as a proxy to measure specific trading areas' relative importance for the Dutch Republic, Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude demonstrated that Dutch employment relating to Iberian trading grew from approximately 23 percent in the 1610s to over 25 percent by the 1680s, excluding employment generated by the VOC, though including data for the WIC.²¹

The Dutch domestic market imported agricultural products (Portuguese salt, fruit, olive oil, sugar, and dyewoods; Spanish wool, wine, and fruits) and mineral resources (Portuguese precious stones and gold; Spanish iron and silver) from Iberia or its empires. These imports were wholesaled to the transformative industries or directly retailed to Dutch consumption markets. As an entrepôt and, at times, staple market, Amsterdam also used Iberian imports in its own trading with the Baltic, the German hinterlands, England, the Mediterranean, and the supply chains supporting the logistics of the trading companies, particularly the VOC and WIC.

Even if Iberian products were essential cogs in various European and overseas commodity chains organized from Amsterdam, however, the most crucial import product was silver. Silver was essential for bal-

18 C. Antunes, 'Failing institutions. The Dutch in Portugal and the tale of a sixteenth-Century Firm', *Storia Economica* 32:2 (2015) 331-347.

19 M. Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese nation. Conversos and community in early modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington 1997); O. Gelderblom, *Zuid-Nederlandse kooplieden en de opkomst van de Amsterdamse stapelmarkt (1578-1630)* (Hilversum 2000).

20 C. Antunes and F. Ribeiro da Silva, 'Amsterdam merchants in the slave trade and African commerce, 1580s-1670s', *TSEG* 9:4 (2012) 3-30; D. Swechinski, *Reluctant cosmopolitans. The Portuguese Jews of seventeenth-century Amsterdam* (London 2000); C. Lesger, *Handel in Amsterdam ten tijde van de Opstand. Kooplieden, commerciële expansie en verandering in de ruimtelijke economie van de Nederlanden ca. 1550-ca. 1630* (Hilversum 2001), especially chapter 6.

21 J. de Vries and A. van der Woude, *Nederland 1500-1815. De eerst ronde van moderne economische groei* (Amsterdam 1995) 472 (see table 9.4).

ancing the Dutch Republic's payments in European and Asiatic trading; for providing financial services (including public debt investments, payments of armies and warfare, and long-distance loans/payments in Europe and overseas); and for maintaining a stable system of payments for a specialized, wage-driven economy. At the same time, the world's two largest silver-producing areas were largely closed to Dutch traders. Their access to Spanish America and Japan was severely hampered by Habsburg and Shogunate laws and by the generally poor understanding of traders from the Republic of informal (and formal) rules governing access to these resources, including the underlying commodity chains that opened up access to these resources.²² In the case of Spanish America, continued warfare between the Dutch Republic and the Habsburgs until 1648 (with a short truce during the 1610s); traders from the rebellious provinces of the North (read: the Dutch Republic) being excluded from the gains of the Spanish empire as economic retaliation for the Dutch Revolt; and the efficiency of Portuguese traders in the Spanish empire left traders from the Dutch Republic longing for Spanish American silver.

Since Spanish domestic and American markets remained closed to the Dutch, partnerships in Amsterdam approached the city's Portuguese Nation for access to maritime insurance and later capital to strengthen the group's participation in Iberian trade and services in the hope of securing access, albeit indirectly, to Spanish silver. A preferred activity was the provisioning of logistics and financial services to the family networks of the Portuguese Nation's major traders in Amsterdam, some of whom provisioned the Spanish armies in Europe and overseas, in addition to the Spanish fleets, forts, and fortresses in the Atlantic and Asia. This included supplying men and provisions, as well as paying dues to royal and religious institutions (including tax farming) in the king's name.²³

The second and possibly least indirect activity was the Amsterdam traders' participation in the transatlantic slave trade catering to the Spanish American market. Although this trading did not often result in enslaved Africans being directly bartered for silver, it gave ships an ex-

22 C. Antunes, *Cutting corners. When borders, culture and empire do not matter*, inaugural address (Leiden 2017).

23 E. Pereira, *A contractor empire. Public-private partnerships and overseas expansion in Habsburg Portugal (1580-1640)*, unpublished PhD diss. (Leiden University 2020); E. Pereira and K. Wirta, 'A forgotten emporium. Commercial aspirations and transnational mercantile networks in seventeenth-century Glückstadt', in: H. Weiss (ed.), *Locating the global. Spaces, networks and interactions from the seventeenth to the twentieth century* (Berlin/Boston 2020) 17-40.

cuse for calling at Spanish American ports and for offering diverse manufactures, foodstuffs, and enslaved Africans, paid for in silver or colonial products like cash crops (mostly sugar and later tobacco) or dyewoods. The major challenge concerned how this trade was to be conducted, given that trade to and from the Spanish Americas was allowed only in the cargo holds of the *Carrera de Indias*, as administered by the *consulados* in Seville, Mexico City, and Lima, or by royal privilege. Since Dutch traders, like all other non-subjects of the king, were commonly excluded from both, entry into the Spanish Americas remained a significant obstacle for most traders.

Traders in Seville overcame the challenge of the *consulados* by forming partnerships with members of the Seville *consulado*, thus accessing the *Carrera* through their partners' privilege. A different but complementary strategy included appointing *prestanombres*, frontmen, commission agents, and brokers to legitimize foreign trade.²⁴ Here, however, access to Spanish American markets remained indirect, with the only direct connection being in the illegal trade overland via the Rio de la Plata or by using Curaçao and Jamaica for transshipment.²⁵

Amsterdam traders transformed the obstacles in the Spanish American trading system into opportunities, adapting their choices and behaviours to the political context and exploring new forms of business organization to access the much-coveted Spanish American silver. In the early-seventeenth century, Dutch and Flemish merchants in Amsterdam insured ships and cargoes owned by the Portuguese Nation and operating in the Atlantic and sometimes provided personal loans to traders to increase partnerships' liquidity, thus enabling some ma-

24 R. Grafe, *Distant tyranny. Markets, power, and backwardness in Spain, 1650-1800* (Princeton 2012); J.L. Gasch-Tomás and S.M. Miranda, 'Imperial economies', in: F. Bouza, P. Cardim, and A. Feros (eds), *The Iberian world, 1450-1820* (London/New York 2020) 431-448; F. Ribeiro da Silva, *Dutch and Portuguese in Western Africa. Empires, merchants and the Atlantic system, 1580-1674* (Leiden 2011) in particular chapter 7; J.M. Oliva Melgar, *El monopolio de Indias en el siglo XVII y la economía Andaluza. La oportunidad que nunca existió* (Huelva 2004); S.J. Stein and B.H. Stein, *Silver, trade, and war. Spain and America in the making of early modern Europe* (Baltimore/London 2000) 15; J. Cromwell, *The smugglers' world. Illicit trade and Atlantic communities in eighteenth-century Venezuela* (Williamsburg/Chapel Hill 2018) 40.

25 Stein and Stein, *Silver, trade*, 25-26; D. Wheat and I. Altman (eds), *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic world in the long sixteenth century* (Lincoln 2019); D. Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570-1640* (Chapel Hill 2016); Miguel Ángel Rosal, 'El comercio de esclavos en la ciudad de Buenos Aires a principios del siglo XVII', *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Históricos 'Prof Carlos S. A. Segreti'* 10 (2010) 93-113; Zacaria Moutoukias, 'Power, corruption and commerce. The making of the local administrative structure in seventeenth-century Buenos Aires', *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 68:4 (1988) 771-801.

for Portuguese Nation players to become significant slave traders.²⁶ The Portuguese Nation was able to secure permanent access to Spanish American markets because of family members' success in bidding for the Portuguese *contrato* for exporting enslaved Africans from Portuguese-held territories and forts on the coast West Coast of Africa and, simultaneously, the Spanish licences and/or *asiento de negros* to introduce enslaved Africans into Spanish America. By controlling the *contrato* and the licences/*asiento*, Portuguese New Christians in Iberia and their families or networks in Amsterdam gained unprecedented access to the Spanish American markets, an advantage they shared with their partners in Amsterdam.²⁷

These traders' advantage came to an end in the 1630s and 1640s, when Inquisitorial persecution of New Christians in Iberia and the Spanish Americas, as well as the ending of these family and business networks' exploiting of the *contrato* and *asiento*, called for new ways of provisioning the Spanish Americas with enslaved Africans. This is when Northern European carriers, starting with the WIC, started intruding in the Portuguese circuits in West Africa, facilitated by the Dutch conquest of northeast Brazil after 1628, the temporary occupation of São Tomé and Luanda, and the final conquest of Castelo da Mina (Elmina).

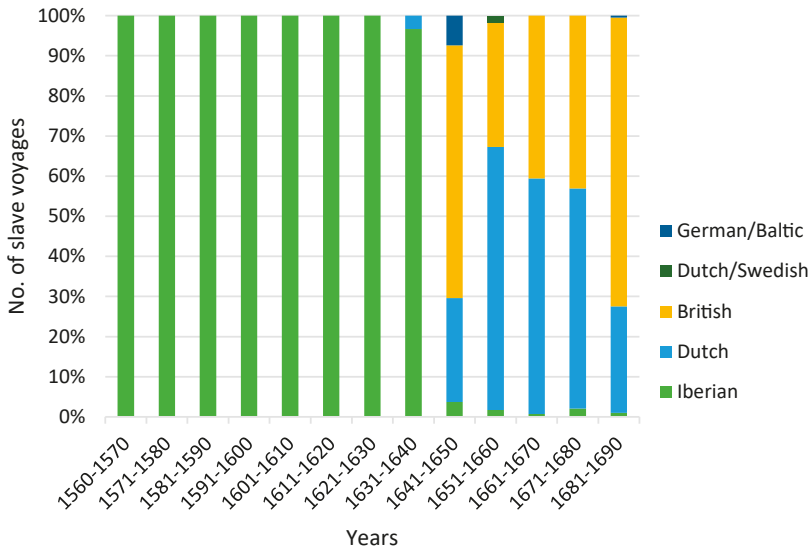
However, Dutch advancement on the West African coast during the late 1630s and 1640s did not preclude English traders from expanding into West Africa, not only for importing silver from Spanish America but also for providing English colonies in the Caribbean with an enslaved workforce. English planters were aided both by WIC fleets and by private interlopers, with Caribbean island ports in Barbados, Jamaica, and Curaçao becoming mainstays connecting Dutch and English slave traders with their colonists or the Spanish American slaving markets on the Spanish Caribbean mainland, particularly Portobelo and Cartagena de las Indias (see figure 1).

Portugal's independence in 1640 and the reconquests of Luanda in 1648/1649 and northeastern Brazil in 1654 left the WIC and Dutch traders outside the South Atlantic trade circuits, forcing most of them to focus on the Caribbean and the Wild Coast. Even so, the consensus that the WIC was behind most slave voyages during the second

26 C. Antunes and F. Ribeiro da Silva, 'Cross-cultural entrepreneurship in the Atlantic. Africans, Dutch and Sephardi Jews in Western Africa, 1580-1674', *Itinerario* 35:1 (2011) 49-76.

27 Rodrigues, *Between West Africa and America*.

Figure 1 Slave voyages to the main Caribbean ports (Barbados, Cartagena, Curaçao, Jamaica and Portobelo), 1560-1690



N=1043

Source: Antunes/Negrón, 'Combined dataset' (see introduction).

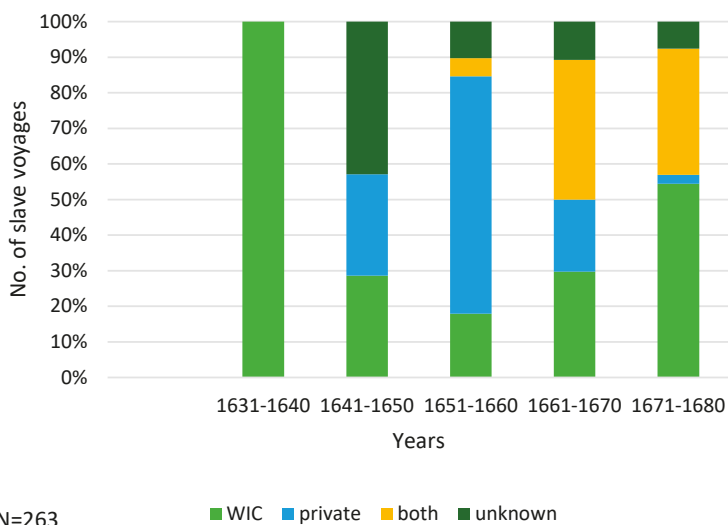
half of the seventeenth century finds little support in current data.²⁸ Henk den Heijer underestimates the importance of players other than the WIC by arguing that the latter was able to exert strict, efficient control over trade in Curaçao, the main port for Dutch slave arrivals in the Caribbean. This successful intervention by the WIC arguably prevented private traders from continuing their trade outside the company's purview.²⁹ However, figure 2 shows the relative decrease in the WIC's share of slave voyages, compared to that of private firms and partnerships or where the company was forced to work with private traders, often on a subcontracting basis. Unable to maintain fleets and provide a much-needed maritime labor force, the WIC often relied on freighting private fleets to attain its goals until the end of the first WIC (1674).³⁰

²⁸ Antunes and Ribeiro da Silva, 'Windows of global exchange', 432.

²⁹ H. den Heijer, *Goud, ivoor en slaven. Scheepvaart en handel van de Tweede Westindische Compagnie op Afrika, 1674-1740* (Zutphen 1997) 29, *vide* footnote 44.

³⁰ Erik Odegard, 'Recapitalization or reform? The bankruptcy of the First Dutch West India Company and the Formation of the Second Dutch West India Company 1674', *Itinerario* 43:1 (2019) 88-106; Idem, 'Convoys and companies. Privatising economic warfare at sea in the Dutch Republic, 1580-1800', in: D. Morgan-Owen and L. Halewood (eds), *Economic warfare and the sea. Grand strategies for maritime po-*

Figure 2 Dutch slave voyages to the Caribbean, based on type of business organization, 1630-1690



Source: Antunes/Negrón, 'Combined dataset' (see introduction).

Only after the company restarted in the late 1670s was it able to muster sufficient resources to operate as the main carrier for enslaved Africans sold in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast.

Despite growing competition from the English, the second half of the seventeenth century saw the Dutch becoming increasingly prominent in the transatlantic slave trade to the Caribbean, mainly owing to the plantation economy that developed in Suriname under Dutch rule. It created an internal Dutch colonial market for enslaved Africans, demand for which had fallen after the loss of northeastern Brazil. More important in changing Dutch slave traders' insignificant position in the Atlantic into a prominent role in the transatlantic slave trade, however, was the intrusion of Spanish licences in the 1650s, the subcontracting of the Spanish *asiento* in the 1660s and 1670s, and its direct contracting in the 1680s. It was Dutch slave traders' increasingly direct participation in the Spanish empire that allowed the Republic to play a prominent role in transatlantic slave trading during this period.

Dutch participation in the Spanish slave trade

Though Portugal had regained its independence in 1640, Portuguese slave traders were still excluded from trading with the Spanish empire despite their privileged access to West African slave markets. However, direct licensing by the Spanish crown during the 1640s and 1650s resulted in fewer imports of enslaved Africans into Spanish America and, consequently, in higher prices having to be paid for slaves, as well as in the royal exchequer missing out on significant income from taxing slave imports. Madrid therefore opted to return to the *asiento* system, whereby the king offered the privilege of introducing enslaved Africans into Spanish American slave markets by initiating a private contract with a merchant house/family able to guarantee the contractual clauses including, but not limited to: annual imports of specific numbers of slaves; farming of the taxation on trade and imports; and payment of the officials responsible for supervising the system.³¹ In exchange, the king guaranteed a fixed price for every slave, to be paid partially in Europe, partially in the Caribbean, more often than not in silver. Interested parties could bid for the contract, with the best bid winning the king's favour. Successful bids were often those guaranteeing the greatest stability: Madrid was more interested in steady and timely income than in promises of high but uncertain or delayed payments, given the Habsburg monarchy's involvement in multiple wars on three continents and its military capacity's consequent reliance on steady influxes of income.

The first direct, legal participation of traders from the Dutch Republic (WIC, partnerships, and firms) in the Spanish slave trade came in the 1650s, when some traders engaged with Spanish licence holders. However, the Dutch became increasingly prominent in the 1660s, when the new *asentistas*, the Genoese Domenico Grillo and Ambrosio Lomellino, took on the *asiento*.³² These Genoese were driven by their ambition to attain royal favour and become provisioners for the royal navy, rather than because of profits promised by the *asiento*. Slave trade to the Americas was known for being cumbersome and complex, and often resulted in low profits, particularly for firms lacking access to the West African and Caribbean markets. Grillo and Lomellino's solution was to externalize the burden of the slave trade onto a subcontract for the transport of enslaved Africans to carriers with access to the West Af-

31 Scelle, *La traite négrière*, 6.

32 García Montón, *Genoese entrepreneurship*, particularly chapter 5; Odegard, 'Recapitalization or reform?', 88-106.

rican coast. These charged low freight costs and were able to circulate in the Caribbean without breaking the accessibility laws imposed by Madrid. The Portuguese were automatically excluded as their independence in 1640 left their trading community at odds with the Habsburgs in Madrid until well into 1668. The other two options were the English and the Dutch, with the latter being the better choice, particularly after the Peace of Westphalia (1648), when Madrid finally acknowledged the Dutch Republic's independence.

Grillo and Lomellino therefore sent word to their Amsterdam representative, Francesco Ferroni, to contract the WIC to transport slaves from West Africa to the Caribbean.³³ The WIC accepted Ferroni's proposal, yet the company proved to have insufficient transporting capacity to fulfil the subcontract's annual requirement for deliveries of slaves to Spanish America. In addition, the king did not allow subcontractors to trade directly with the Spanish American ports of Portobelo or Cartagena unless they fell under the purview and supervision of the *asentistas*, while the responsibility of the *asentistas* to monitor the subcontracting party's actions increased the risks and costs in the Americas. Furthermore, subcontractors could be transporters, though they were not allowed to be tax farmers, meaning Grillo and Lomellino themselves still had to comply with the tax-collecting clauses in the *asiento*.

The WIC's capacity problem was partially resolved by contracting various private fleets, often owned by directors of the company or slave traders operating in the Atlantic outside the charter. Although this sub-subcontracting resolved the immediate problem, it also brought rogue and illegal traders, as well as interlopers, within the chartered trade's fold. And even though all parties welcomed the solution, the WIC and its subcontractors were never able to transport as many enslaved Africans as Grillo and Lomellino had contracted, with the result that the WIC defaulted and was forced out of the contract.³⁴

The solution found for the problem of foreigners participating legally and directly in the Spanish American market was Curaçao. Trade between the Dutch forts in West Africa and Curaçao was legal under the WIC charter with its monopoly on trading enslaved Africans for the Spanish crown.³⁵ Once in Curaçao, enslaved Africans would be shipped

33 For general information on Ferroni see H. Cools, 'Francesco Ferroni (1614/16-1696). Broker in cereals, slaves and works of art', in: H. Cools *et al* (eds), *Your humble servant. Agents in early modern Europe* (Hilversum 2006) 39-50.

34 García-Montón, *Genoese entrepreneurship*, chapter 5.

35 W. Klooster, 'Curaçao and the Caribbean transit trade', in: Postma and Enthoven (eds), *Riches from*

in Spanish cargo holds to the ports of Cartagena and, later, Portobelo. This transshipment legalized the trade from the Spanish crown's perspective, as it curbed direct access to Spanish America for Dutch interlopers and illegal traders operating from Curaçao, where many tried to illegally exchange manufactured products for silver, dyewoods, or cash crops. The same mechanism was used when the *asentistas* subcontracted to the English, with Jamaica becoming a similar transshipment island. The *asentistas* kept their agents in Cartagena for tax farming and supervising the number of disembarked slaves, while royal officials inspected the activities of the agents of the *asentistas* in what Iberian scholarship often refers to as the double-check system.³⁶

Despite the WIC's defaulting on the subcontract in the 1660s, the *asentistas* called on it again in 1667 to commission annual imports of 4,000 slaves. This new, three-year subcontract not only clustered Atlantic slave traders in the Republic around the WIC, but also secured Curaçao's position as the largest slave-trading entrepôt in the Caribbean.³⁷ Transshipment of human beings, more than the trade itself, became a specialized and highly profitable activity for the WIC and its partners in the Dutch Republic. This advantage for traders from the Dutch Republic lasted until 1675, when Curaçao became a free port welcoming trade from all trading nations; offering outstanding conditions for transshipment and redistribution throughout the Caribbean; and representing a trustworthy system of long-distance payments, anchored in the liquidity and reputation of the Amsterdam business elite.³⁸ According to Jesse Cromwell, 90 percent of the 122,000 enslaved Africans entering Curaçao between 1662 and 1714 were transshipped to Spanish America.³⁹

If Curaçao was the legal solution for exchanges between the *asentistas* chosen by the Habsburg king in Madrid and the WIC and its

Atlantic commerce, 203-218.

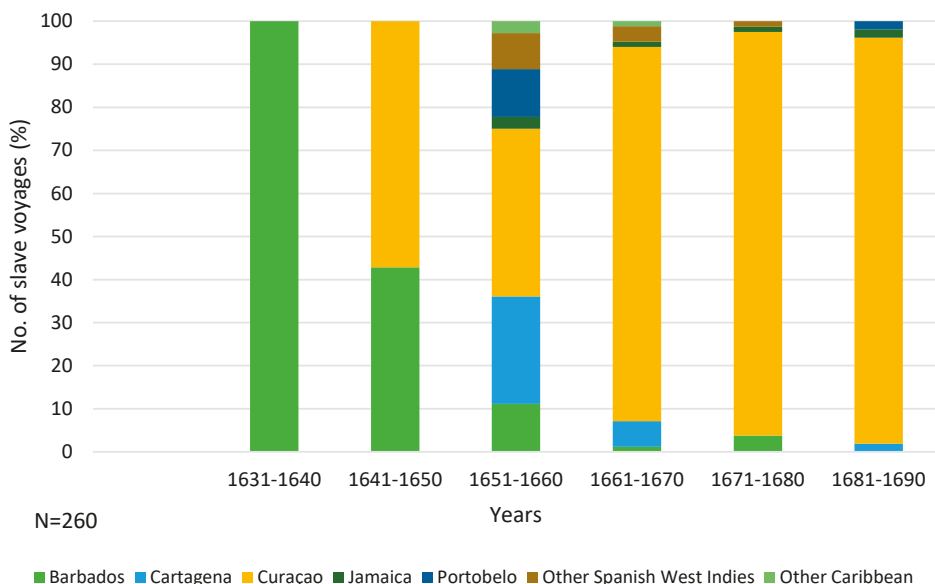
36 A. García Montón, 'The cost of the *asiento*. Private merchants, royal monopolies, and the making of trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Spanish empire', in: A. Polónia and C. Antunes (eds), *Mechanisms of global empire building* (Porto 2017) 11-34; A different example applied to provisioning through *asiento*: Pereira, *A contractor empire*, particularly the introduction and chapter 3; R. Donoso Anes, 'Algunos aspectos relacionados con el control administrativo y contable de la renta de los esclavos enviados a Hispanoamérica (hasta el final del período de las licencias en 1595)', *Revista Española de Financiación Y Contabilidad* 110 (2001) 1093-1136.

37 Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade*, 33; D. Eltis and D. Richardson (eds), *Atlas of the transatlantic slave trade* (New Haven/ London 2010) 204; Klooster, 'Curaçao and the Caribbean', 203-218.

38 H. Jordaen, *Slavernij en vrijheid op Curaçao. De dynamiek van een achttiende-eeuws Atlantisch handelsknooppunt* (Zutphen 2013) 24.

39 Cromwell, *The smugglers' world*, 263; Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the transatlantic slave trade*, 204.

Figure 3 Principal places of slave disembarkation of Dutch slave vessels (Barbados, Cartagena, Curaçao, Jamaica, Portobelo), 1631-1690



Source: Antunes/Negrón, 'Combined dataset' (see introduction).

non-chartered partners, historiography remains silent on the role Curaçao played in receiving and distributing legal silver payments made by Spanish captains in Curaçao as part-payment for enslaved Africans. It also has said little on illegal silver entering Curaçao through interlopers and illegal traders between the island and the Spanish Main. How much silver was transshipped from Curaçao to the Dutch Republic and beyond, along with how that silver entered the wholesale market supplying the VOC, remains a mystery. Estimates vary, but the VOC certainly transported between 563 and 574 million guilders of precious metals to Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁰ Although the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw silver entering the Sinocentric system from Japan, where the VOC had a factory in Deshima, and from Acapulco (Pacific route for American silver) via Chinese traders from Spanish Manila, the reliance for most of the seventeenth century was on Spanish American Atlantic silver imports. The missing link in this Atlantic silver trade is how silver entering Curaçao was distributed to European ports, and particularly Amsterdam, where

40 J. Lucassen and M. van Rossum, 'Smokkeloos en zilverstromen. Illegale export van edelmetaal via de VOC', *TSEG* 13:1 (2016) 104.

it was in high demand for use in the Mediterranean and Asian trade. Investigating Curaçao's role as a transshipment port for Spanish Atlantic silver may improve our understanding of how WIC silver and privately (probably illegally) earned bullion was capitalized in Curaçao and made available in the Dutch Republic.⁴¹ The VOC archives have still to reveal how Spanish American Atlantic silver entered the company's fleets and heavily contributed to the company's successes in Asia, as little is yet known about how it purchased its bullion for Asia before 1700.

From subcontracting to *asentista*

Even if subcontracting with the *asentistas* positioned Dutch traders at the forefront of the Caribbean slave trade in the 1650s, 1660s, and 1670s, it was the direct contracting of the *asiento* by Balthasar Coymans (1652-1686) and his partners in the 1680s that finally achieved direct access to Spanish American ports for these traders. As with the licence holders and subcontractors of the 1650s and 1660s, the opportunity to acquire silver for the Asian markets was most likely the driving force behind Coymans's decision to bid for the *asiento*, even though his potential partners, particularly Pedro van Belle (1642-?), warned him against it because of the risks involved and the sparse gains attainable.⁴² Van Belle regretted later that he had not returned to the Dutch Republic when he had the chance, as he had wished 'to have never been persuaded to participate in the slave trade'.⁴³ After years in the Caribbean, Van Belle went bankrupt and, in attempting to clear his name, published his memoir in 1689, in which he detailed how his involvement in the Spanish slave trade with Coymans had ruined them.⁴⁴

Van Belle, a Rotterdam-born merchant, had arrived in Seville in 1664, to assist his brother Josua van Belle (1637-1710) in his merchant house. The two engaged in shipments to the Spanish Americas through commission agents and represented *asentista* Grillo. In 1671, they were

41 Den Heijer, *Goud*, 128; P. Dehing, *Geld in Amsterdam. Wisselbank en wisselkoersen, 1650-1725* (Hilversum 2012) 160.

42 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 2, 171-172.

43 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 6: 'Invoegen dat Pedro van Belle, op de instantien van zijn broeder in den jare 1678 geresolveert heeft, om na 't retour van de doenmaals uit zijnde gallioenen, te repatrieeren, welk voornemen hij Pedro van Belle wenschte dat doenmaals had volbragt, en zich noit laten induceeren om zich in den slavenhandel te engageeren'.

44 W. Klooster, 'Slavenvaart op Spaanse kusten. De Nederlandse slavenhandel met Spaans Amerika, 1648-1701', *Tijdschrift voor Zeegeschiedenis* 16:2 (1997) 121-140.



Illustration 2 *Gezicht op de beurs te Sevilla*, Pieter van den Berge, 1694-1737 (source: Rijksmuseum, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.601535>.)

joined by the young Coymans, who trained as an apprentice merchant at Josua's *comptoir*, thanks to the long-standing relationship between the Coymans and Van Belle families, with the latter assisting Balthasar's mother, Sophia Trip, in managing the Coymans' Amsterdam firm after her husband died in 1657.⁴⁵ When Josua left Seville to return to Amsterdam in 1673, Balthasar Coymans and Pedro van Belle took over the merchant house. They then relocated to Cadiz, which had supplanted Seville in the 1670s as the entrepôt to Spain's transatlantic commercial system. By then, it was nearly impossible for larger vessels to cross the Guadalquivir River to Seville, and a growing numbers of foreign merchants preferred Cadiz to Seville as its bays facilitated contraband.⁴⁶

Although Coymans was increasingly interested in the Spanish slave trade, and his family in Amsterdam shared his enthusiasm, the Van Belles and their Spanish partners advised him against it 'for with the

45 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 2; Kees Zandvliet, *De 500 rijksten van de Republiek. Rijkdom, geloof, macht en cultuur* (Zutphen 2018) 221; Sophia Trip (1615-1679), widow of Joannes Coymans (1601-1657). Additionally, Josua was friends with Balthasar's brother-in-law Joan Huydecoper van Maarsveen (1625-1704), a prominent merchant and burgomaster in the city.

46 Stein and Stein, *Silver*, 15.

slave trade one seldom makes a profit'.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Coymans was granted a royal privilege to introduce enslaved Africans into the Spanish Americas in the early 1670s. As these voyages proved successful, he invested more resources, with a golden opportunity arising when Nicolás Porcio, who planned to bid for the *asiento* with his father-in-law, Juan Barroso y Pozo, needed capital. Although Coymans was keen to invest in Porcio's bid, Van Belle warned him against it, as he believed Porcio would ultimately deceive them. However, Coymans ignored these concerns and even managed to persuade Van Belle to invest.⁴⁸

In 1679, Barroso became the new *asentista* and authorized the firm of Coymans's brother and brother-in-law in Amsterdam, Jean Coymans (1645-1703) and Carel Voet (c.1632-1679), to negotiate with the WIC for delivering enslaved Africans to Curaçao for the *asiento* on a contract similar to those of the 1650s and 1660s. Under this contract, the WIC had to deliver 9,800 enslaved Africans to Curaçao by the end of 1681, an annual average of 4,900 slaves, whereas just a decade before it had been unable to provide 4,000.⁴⁹

Coymans dispatched three ships containing Spanish products and 300 enslaved Africans to the Spanish Americas, with the captains intended to use the expected gains to purchase slaves from the WIC in Curaçao and transport them to Cartagena. However, the voyages were much longer and more difficult than expected, which resulted in high mortality among the enslaved. The lack of money in the Spanish American ports also meant that the ships arrived in Curaçao without sufficient means to pay the WIC for the first 800 enslaved Africans. A liquidity problem ensued when Governor Van Liebergen allowed the factors to pay in bills of exchange, but Coymans and Voet in Amsterdam refused to pay until Barroso gave permission. The WIC ordered Van Liebergen never to accept bills of exchange again and to demand that slave purchases be paid in silver. Although Coymans and Voet eventually paid the bills, Balthasar's reputation was seriously damaged, and the gov-

47 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 6.

48 For excellent detailed information on Barroso and Porcio see: J. Orozco Cruz, 'Barroso, Porcio y Coijmans: redes e entramados mercantiles en la articulación de los asientos de negros de finales del siglo XVII (1675-1692)', in: M.F. Fernández Chaves and R.M. Pérez García (eds), *Tratas atlánticas y esclavitudes en América. Siglos XVI-XIX* (Seville 2021) 125-140; J. Orozco Cruz, 'Redes transnacionales de comercio en el asiento de negros. La compañía de Juan Barroso del Pozo y Nicolás Porcio (1675-1682)', in: J.J. Iglesias Rodríguez and I.M.M. Muñoz (eds), *Hacer historia moderna. Líneas actuales y futuras de investigación* (Seville 2020) 319-331.

49 *Ibid.*, 7; SAA, Inventaris van het Archief van de Notarissen ter Standplaats Amsterdam, 5075, inv. 4768, fo. 154, 10 May 1679; SAA, 5075, inv. 4768, fo. 164, 10 May 1679.

ernor consequently refused to sell enslaved Africans to the *asiento* on credit. Continued liquidity shortages meant Coymans was repeatedly reliant on credit from Curaçao residents and the Spanish Main, with the WIC and the Spanish authorities regularly forced to confiscate *asiento* ships to force him to pay his debts.

Barroso and Coymans requested Van Belle relocate to Curaçao to get a grip on liquidity and improve control of the exchanges between Curaçao and the Spanish Americas. Meanwhile, Porcio requested a new *asiento* to buy time to pay his creditors and avoid foreclosure. The new contract (1682-1689) required Barroso to introduce 10,000 *toneladas*⁵⁰ into the Spanish Americas, with payment of 1,125,000 pesos to the Spanish crown even if he failed to introduce the stipulated numbers. He also had to pay 200,000 *kronen* for the contract within two years. Again Barroso authorized Jean Coymans to negotiate with the WIC on delivering 4,000 to 6,000 slaves to Curaçao for the *asiento*. After one successful slave voyage, the new governor Van Erpecum agreed to deliver 900 enslaved Africans on credit to Van Belle and Balthasar Beck, the island's factor, for the *asiento*.

Although Van Belle and Beck successfully established the infrastructure for the new *asiento*, Porcio, who arrived in Curaçao in 1683, profoundly disagreed with how they were managing it. Porcio accused them of conspiring with the WIC to betray him.⁵¹ Porcio's creditors, fearing they would never receive their money, complained to the Spanish governor in Cartagena, while Porcio, trying to avoid bankruptcy, claimed he was unable to continue managing the *asiento* for health reasons and so authorized Van Belle and Beck to administer the *asiento* for him. He later fled Cartagena and sailed to Portobelo, where he was assisted by the president of Panama. Meanwhile Porcio's assistant, Santiago del Castillo, persuaded the Spanish crown to reinstate Porcio and make him the principal *asentista* instead of Barroso, who had since died.⁵²

Only days after Del Castillo left for the Spanish Americas to bring Porcio the good news, Diego Maguet arrived in Madrid, having been sent there by Van Belle with new allegations against Porcio. The issues

50 The Spanish used the measurements of *tonelada*, or ton, and *piezas de indas* in the slave trade for taxation. Depending on the stipulations in the contracts, a *pieza* was an adult slave in a certain age group, slaves outside that age group were calculated as one half, one third or one quarter of a *pieza*. One *tonelada* consisted of a number of *piezas* to be specified.

51 In his memoir, Van Belle even claimed that Porcio had instructed their captain to murder Van Belle, Beck, and Alexander de Schot by leaving them on a small boat on open sea 'to float on God's grace'. Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 22.

52 *Ibid.*, 19-26.

surrounding Porcio's administration presented Van Belle and Coymans, his main creditors, with an opportunity to take over administration of the *asiento*. Maguet and Coymans then persuaded the Crown to appoint Coymans as the new *asentista* after he promised to accept liability for Porcio's debts, including the instalments still owed to the royal exchequer.⁵³

Coymans' *asiento* essentially continued the Barroso and Porcio *asiento* on new conditions. Coymans had to pay 200,000 *kronen* for the *asiento* and accept personal liability. Jean Coymans and Josua van Belle provided half of the required capital, while Coymans and Van Belle, through their partners, provided the rest. *Toneladas* not introduced by September 1689 became debt. Coymans was due to pay the Crown 1,125,000 pesos before the expiry date of the contract, which would be renewed for two more years if he introduced another 3,000 *toneladas*.⁵⁴ This mechanism of awarding a second contract to a party that had previously defaulted is common in Iberian historiography: Iberian kings often allowed defaulting merchants the chance to restore their reputation, recover losses and, above all, continue securing regular and steady payments of installments to the Crown, albeit on different conditions.⁵⁵

Coymans authorized his brother Jean Coymans, Josua van Belle, Hendrick Staats, and Manuel de Belmonte to negotiate with the WIC to deliver slaves to Curaçao. Van Belle's calculations show that, of the contracted 10,000 *toneladas*, Barroso and Porcio introduced only 917, leaving Coymans to supply 9,083. Coymans consequently needed the WIC to deliver more than 22,700 slaves to Curaçao within four years and five months, which Jean Coymans and Van Belle considered an 'absolute impossibility'.⁵⁶ As figure 4 illustrates, the combined total of enslaved Africans disembarking from WIC vessels in Cartagena, Curaçao, Jamaica, and Portobelo over a five-year period probably never exceeded 14,000. Jean Coymans suggested purchasing enslaved Africans from other nations, mentioning the Brandenburg Company, and using Jamaica as a similar transshipment entrepôt to Curaçao to tap into enslaved Africans purchased by the English in West Africa. To this end, Porcio had established a factory in Jamaica, with deliveries of enslaved

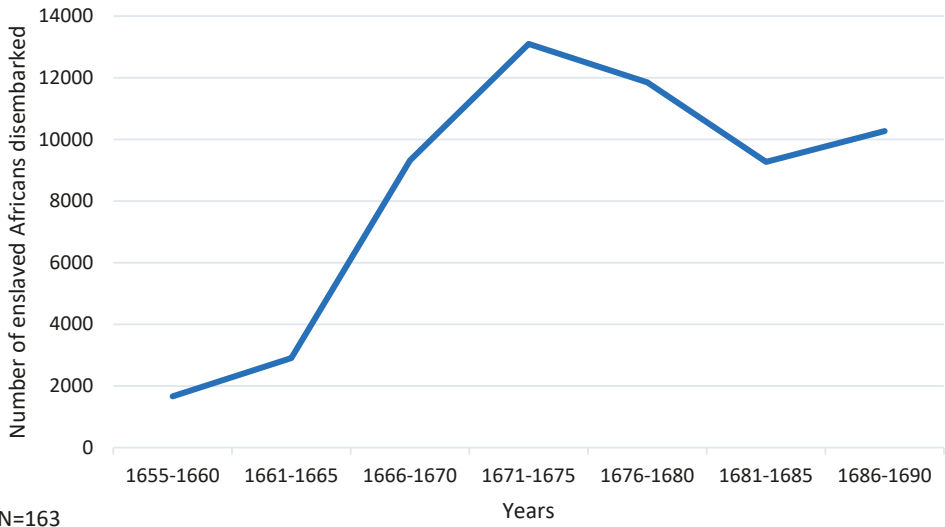
53 *Ibid.*, 27; W. Klooster, *Illicit riches. Dutch trade in the Caribbean, 1648-1795* (Leiden 1998) 113.

54 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 24-32.

55 Pereira, *A contractor empire*, particularly chapters 7 and 8. S.M. Miranda, 'Risk and failure in tax farming. De Bruijn and Cloots of Lisbon and the Portuguese tobacco monopoly, 1722-1727', *Itinerario* 43:1 (2019) 122-145.

56 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 29.

Figure 4 Number of enslaved Africans disembarked on Barbados, Cartagena, Curaçao, Jamaica and Portobelo from WIC ships, 1655-1690



Source: Antunes/Negrón, 'Combined dataset' (see introduction). There were no data available for 26 out of the 189 voyages by the WIC to the ports of Barbados, Cartagena, Curaçao, Jamaica, and Portobelo.

Africans from the island proving successful. However, Manuel de Belmonte and Hendrik Staats, the two main partners of Coymans and Voet in Amsterdam, vehemently disagreed, as they were entitled to commission for every enslaved African purchased by the *asiento* administration in Curaçao, and purchasing slaves in Jamaica would considerably reduce their profits.⁵⁷

The contracts between the WIC and Coymans' agents in 1685 show how the company increased its control over the administration of the *asiento*. The WIC was permitted to place a second captain on each *asiento* ship, and the crew had to consist exclusively of Dutchmen who had sworn an oath to the company. The WIC agreed to deliver 12,000 slaves between 1685 and 1688; based on Van Belle's calculations, this would be 10,000 too few. The contract also prohibited Coymans from purchasing slaves from other nations, on forfeiture of twenty pesos per slave purchased elsewhere.⁵⁸ The Coymans *asiento* was consequently doomed to fail from the outset.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁵⁸ SAA, 5075, inv. 4771, fo. 435, 10 April 1685.

The WIC's 1685 contract was also more disadvantageous than those with Grillo (1660s) and Barroso (1670s). Van Belle explains that the price for each *pieza* rose from 12.5 pesos in 1680 (Barroso) to 20.5 pesos in 1685 (Coymans). In the 1670 contract with Grillo, the WIC required three quarters of the slaves to be male, with children under four considered as infants, and allowed Grillo to buy disabled or elderly slaves on Curaçao. Now, however, only two thirds of the slaves had to be male, children were infants only until the age of two, and Coymans could not buy slaves from others on the island.⁵⁹ Despite complaints by Josua van Belle, the disadvantageous contracts were signed by the representatives of all parties.⁶⁰

Van Belle and Beck quickly ran into trouble, with Porcio and Del Castillo refusing to hand over ships, slaves, and other effects belonging to the administration of the *asiento*. The governor of Jamaica refused to assist until it was proved that the Spanish crown had removed Porcio from the administration and ordered all effects to be transferred to Beck.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the president of Panama helped Porcio embezzle large sums of money and, by the time his estate was seized, no assets were left to liquidate.⁶²

Although Van Belle could still raise funds to transport 1,650 slaves to Portobelo, he struggled to sell them. There was insufficient silver to purchase the commodities brought by the Spanish galleons to the *feria* (fair/market), resulting in devaluation and consequently exceedingly low prices. Merchants were now more interested in buying cheap commodities than slaves. To make matters worse, a smallpox outbreak resulted in many slaves dying, with the surviving 459 being sold below purchasing cost.⁶³

While Van Belle and Beck continued trying to raise money for the slave voyages, Porcio had bribed members of the merchant elite in the Spanish Americas, and creditors refused to lend the administration more money until they were paid. After news of the WIC contract reached the West Indies, rumours spread that Coymans and his associ-

59 SAA, 5075, inv. 4768, fo.154, 9 May 1679; SAA, 5075, inv. 3204, fo.422, 20 September 1670. Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 31-32.

60 Van Belle, *Pertinent en waarachtig verhaal*, 32-33: 'dat het een vilipendie en schande zal wezen voor onze natie bij de Spangiaarden, en onverantwoordelijk voor Balthasar Coymans bij den Koning, en de crediteuren van Barosso en Porcio, dat zijne gevolmachtigde bij hare landgenoten nadeeliger conditien hadden geobtaineert, als wel Grillo en Barosso voor dezen gedaan hadden.'

61 *Ibid.*, 37.

62 *Ibid.*, 38.

63 *Ibid.*, 47-48.



Illustration 3 Paskaart van West-Indien, Johannes van Keulen, 1681 (source: Amsterdam Museum, <https://hart.amsterdam/collectie/object/amcollect/60251>.)

ates had insufficient funds, with the president of Panama even claiming that Coymans had deceived the Spanish crown.⁶⁴ Although Porcio's creditors sought redress from Van Belle, Coymans ordered him not to pay them.

In 1686, Van Belle received letters from Coymans' representatives, complaining about Van Belle's and Beck's operations in the West Indies. They argued that the Jamaican factory should be closed because it violated the contract with the WIC. They also accused Van Belle of engaging in contraband trade.⁶⁵ In one of his last letters to Coymans in July 1686, Van Belle wrote that unless things changed drastically, his administration of the *asiento* was bound to fail, as employees of the *asiento* had embezzled funds and neglected their duties, while captains were accused of massive smuggling.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-139.

In 1687, Van Belle heard that Balthasar Coymans had died in Cadiz on 8 November 1686. Coymans's will appointed Van Belle as his successor. Van Belle was requested to return to Cadiz and replace Coymans as manager of the *asiento*. He arrived there on 27 July 1687, where he met Juan Carcau, Coymans's former cashier, who was provisionally administrating the *asiento*. Carcau handed Van Belle several letters from Jean Coymans and Manuel de Belmonte, both complaining about his operations in the West Indies and ordering him to visit the Dutch ambassador in Madrid, Francisco Schonenberg.⁶⁷ In Madrid, Van Belle heard that Jean Coymans wanted Van Belle to form a new partnership with one Cornelis Hogerwoerd to continue the *asiento*, but Van Belle refused. In an attempt to resolve all misunderstandings, Van Belle traveled to Amsterdam to meet with Coymans and Belmonte, but the meeting was fruitless. Coymans double-crossed Van Belle by promising to consider his explanation, meanwhile appointing Governor Willem Kerckering as factor in Curaçao.⁶⁸

Van Belle returned to Spain and requested the Spanish crown to either extend or renew the *asiento*, but his request was denied as the king had been advised not to contract the Dutch for introducing slaves into the Spanish Americas anymore.⁶⁹ Instead, the *asiento* was given to Porcio again, who had sided with Schonenberg and Belmonte, both of Sephardic Iberian extraction and residents in Amsterdam.⁷⁰ Schonenberg had aided Porcio's escape from Tierra Firme to Jamaica and then to La Coruña, enabling him to travel to Madrid without hindrance and petition the return of the *asiento* to his administration.⁷¹ Meanwhile, Belmonte again negotiated with the WIC, agreeing to more advantageous conditions; the factory in Jamaica was reopened, while Del Castillo was sent to London to negotiate with the English on delivering slaves to Jamaica.⁷²

Not unsurprisingly, in his memoir, Van Belle blamed Belmonte and Schonenberg for ruining the administration of the *asiento*, claiming they were only interested in their own profits.⁷³ Van Belle's report shows how Belmonte and Schonenberg employed their international network to manipulate the administration of the *asiento*, as Van Belle spoke of several Portuguese Jewish merchants trying to pervade administra-

67 *Ibid.*, 62, 65, 67.

68 *Ibid.*, 70-71, 90, 91.

69 *Ibid.*, 100.

70 *Ibid.*, 100, 127.

71 *Ibid.*, 54.

72 *Ibid.*, 127-128.

73 *Ibid.*, 76. Alongside Belmonte's commission, Schonenberg received an annual salary of 4,000 pesos, while 6,000 pesos meant to pay Spanish authorities also disappeared into his pockets.

tion of the *asiento* in one way or the other. The actions by Belmonte and Schonenberg can possibly be seen as an attempt by Iberian New Christian families (Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam) to regain control over the *asiento* that members of the Portuguese Nation in Amsterdam had lost at the beginning of the 1640s.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Van Belle left Spain in great haste. The sanctity of his home and *comptoir* in Cadiz had been violated when Spanish royal officials entered the premises and confiscated his accounting, correspondence, and administration records. Arriving in the Dutch Republic, he found himself destitute of reputation, alone, and bankrupt.⁷⁵ He later returned to the Caribbean, this time as a plantation owner. Van Belle and Coymans, performative Catholics in the Spanish domains, were part of a diverse group of merchants living in Amsterdam – Portuguese Jews from Antwerp and Hamburg, New Christians of the Portuguese Nation of Amsterdam, and Protestant refugees from Antwerp – who dedicated a great deal of their resources and networks at various moments in the seventeenth century to the exploitation of the Spanish empire and, particularly, to the privilege of importing enslaved Africans into Spanish American markets. Amsterdam merchants and companies legally engaged with Spanish America by looking for partners within the *consulado* system in Seville to export manufactured goods in the cargo holds of the *Carrera* for bartering for silver in Cartagena or Portobelo; by becoming preferential transporters for the enslaved via multiple forms of subcontracting; or by successfully bidding for the *asiento*.

The main consequence of subcontracting and bidding for the *asiento* was that Amsterdam mercantile interests became legally engaged in Spanish America and thus able to acquire silver in exchange for European manufactured goods and enslaved Africans. Demand for this Spanish American silver in Amsterdam was particularly high because it could be exported to Asia in the cargo holds of the VOC. Curaçao, like Jamaica, consequently became a major transshipment island for legally redistributing enslaved Africans in the Spanish Americas and stock-

74 *Ibid.*, 43–44. M. Herrero Sánchez, 'Conectores sefarditas en una monarquía policéntrica: el caso Belmonte/Schonenberg en la articulación de las relaciones hispano-neerlandesas durante la segunda mitad del siglo XVII', *Hispania: Revista española de historia* 76 (2016) 445–472.

75 *Ibid.*, 106.

piling silver for re-export to Europe. How Curaçao organized the transport of bullion and how that influenced the island's development, on the one hand, and contributed to the VOC's fluctuating successes in the East, on the other hand, remain matters for future research.

Yet even if the Spanish empire was still successfully being supplied of an enslaved African workforce through the *asiento* system at the dawn of the eighteenth century, the same could not be said of the Amsterdam participants in the trade. The predominantly Dutch merchant elite – born in Amsterdam, that had been at the core of the transition from indirect participation (through partnerships and insurances) in the trade in enslaved Africans in the South Atlantic to prominent engagement in the transatlantic slave trade to the Caribbean during the 1660s – had lost most of its privileged relationship with the Spanish empire. As access to Spanish American markets had been the foremost reason for the key role Dutch slave traders played in the second half of the seventeenth century, severing the connections with Madrid brought to an end a cycle of apparent prosperity and engagement in the Atlantic. All parties, then – whether chartered, joint stock, or partnerships – failed in 'their' *asientos*, leaving behind a trail of liquidity problems and bankruptcies. The claimed Dutch dominance of the transatlantic slave trade in the second half of the seventeenth century consequently masked the dire economic and financial reality of the men involved in trading other humans. The lure of silver and implicit expectations of extraordinary gains could not hide the failure and doom that the *asiento* brought to the Amsterdam-based elite trying to legally engage with the Spanish crown. Dutch slave traders in general and those of Amsterdam in particular were forced to look for other means of Atlantic participation by the dawn of the eighteenth century.

About the authors

Cátia Antunes is professor of Global Economic Networks: Merchants, Entrepreneurs and Empires at the Institute for History, at Leiden University. She is currently the principal investigator of the project *Exploiting the Empire of Others* supported by the Dutch Research Council.
E-mail: c.a.p.antunes@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Ramona Negrón (1997) studied colonial history at Leiden University. She works as a PhD Candidate at Leiden University in the project *Ex-*

exploiting the Empires of Others: Dutch Investment in Foreign Colonial Resources, 1570-1800 led by prof.dr. Cátia Antunes and as Data Curator at the Amsterdam City Archives. She publishes in the field of maritime and colonial history, mostly on topics related to slavery studies.

E-mail: r.negron@hum.leidenuniv.nl