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The lifecycle of casks: the production, use, and repurposing of casks in the Netherlands (1300-1800)

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The Lifecycle of Casks

The production, use, and repurposing of casks
in the Netherlands, 1300–1800

Jeroen Oosterbaan

Colofon

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The Lifecycle of Casks

The production, use, and repurposing of casks
in the Netherlands, 1300–1800

De levenscyclus van vaten
De productie, het gebruik en herbruik van vaten
in Nederland (1300-1800)

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*Den Grooten Kuijper kuypt,
Can vaste banden buyghen,
Indien Hij niet kuypt,
De wereld valt in duygen.¹*

The great cooper coops,
Can bind firm hoops,
If he does not hoop,
The world falls apart.

¹ Inscription on the guild cup of the Coopers' Guild of Vlissingen (1704). De Ridder, 2004, 67.

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Preface

In the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, casks were a familiar feature in the urban landscape. They were so common and useful that they even found their way into language, with sayings featuring casks to express ideas about value, danger, and change. In Dutch, several proverbs and expressions reflect this cultural importance: *wat in het vat zit verzuurt niet, het vat valt in duigen, kijken wat er in het vat zit, uit een ander vaatje tappen, hij is zo vol als een ton, oude wijn in nieuwe vaten, een vat vol tegenstrijdigheden, and communicerende vaten*. The same applies to the English language, in which ‘casks’ and ‘barrels’ appear in proverbs and sayings: a rotten apple spoils the barrel, to scrape the bottom of the barrel, like shooting fish in a barrel, an empty barrel makes the most noise, like putting new wine into old barrels, and a barrel of laughs.

Over the last six years, I have had the opportunity to study these casks, made possible by a grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO, Promotiebeurs voor Leraren 2019-I). It was a journey I may have underestimated at the start, but one that ultimately demanded a great deal from me. None of this would have been possible without the support of my supervisors, Roos van Oosten, Frans Theuws, and Jos Bazelmans. Frans made this project possible in the first place, and Jos ensured it could be brought to a successful conclusion. Above all, it was Roos whose enthusiasm, sharp insight, and thoughtful guidance carried me through the most demanding stretches of this journey.

I am also fortunate to have been able to conduct this research in collaboration with others, because writing a dissertation, an essentially solitary undertaking, did not always feel that way. Many researchers contributed their expertise in ways that proved indispensable. I would like to specifically acknowledge my co-authors Sjoerd van Daalen, Petra Doeve, Liam Tran, Arent Vos, and Victor Enthoven, whose contributions were particularly valuable when incorporating data from written sources, dendrochronological research, and maritime archaeology. In addition, there are many others who supported me with advice, data, or in other ways, too many to mention individually, but I would like to specifically acknowledge the paleography working group based in Middelburg, Dr. Ferry Zwaan, Nicole Schoute, and Joran Smale.

One of the most extensive collaborative efforts I was involved in was the WOODAN Cask Marks Database project, in which I had the privilege of participating in the Cask Marks Working Group. Special thanks go to Liam Tran and Wouter Donders for their work in data collection, and to Jelte van der Laan and Stephan Nicolaij of Qursi Software and the WOODAN Foundation for developing the database.

Behind every object and every archive reference in this dissertation lies a field of expertise, and I have gratefully drawn on the knowledge of many specialists, too many to name individually. I would also like to thank the students from both Saxion University of Applied Sciences and Leiden University who carried out various sub-studies and contributed valuable input to this project.

My colleagues at Saxion University of Applied Sciences deserve special mention here. Completing a PhD project alongside a teaching position and a separate research project was a genuine challenge, and it would not have been possible without the understanding and facilitation of those around me. I would like to specifically thank Geert Roovers, Pim Alders, Ronald Frederiks, Arlette van Wijhe, Olaf Leppink, Suzan Veldhuis, Roeland Emaus, and above all Wouter Vos – for the substantive discussions, the space you gave me, and the easy way we worked together (No worries!).

I also want to mention the excavation team of ARC BV at the Vlissingen Groote Markt excavation, where the idea to study casks was born. I would especially like to acknowledge Steven Brussé for the close and enjoyable collaboration we shared during that project.

Work is, in the end, only work. Outside of it, I am fortunate to be surrounded by friends and family who kept me grounded. Tonz, Tinus, Rinke, Olivier, Klaas, Rob, Thomas, Joppe, Hugo, Hubba, Eelke, Joep, and Mattie – knowing you were there made all the difference. To my family, thank you for your unconditional support.

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