



THE UNITED PROVINCES AND THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

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With more than 550,000 African captives embarked between 1596 and 1829, the Dutch trade of enslaved people represents 5% of the total Transatlantic slave trade. As such, the Dutch were less prominent traders than other European nations like the British, the French and the Iberian powers. Still, they played an important role in putting the trade in place during key moments, dominating the trade during short periods in the 17th century, and diminishing sharply in the last quarter of the 18th century. Their activities are strongly linked to the Ghanaian fortress Elmina, Dutch Brazil and the former colonies of Suriname and the Dutch Antilles.

The origins of the slave trade

The protestant Dutch Republic was formed in 1568 during the reformation as it cut itself loose from the catholic Habsburg empire over an Eighty Year long war until 1648. Thanks to the influx of capital and merchant contacts from the Southern Netherlands, the United Provinces became the most important European trading nation. They came into conflict with the Iberian colonial powers, controlling most of the New and Old Worlds. In their search for spices, the newly created Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) managed to conquer many Portuguese strongholds in the Indian Ocean. In the Atlantic, the Dutch mainly occupied themselves with privateering on rich Spanish vessels. At the same time, they were occupied in trade of salt, gold, ivory, brazil wood and tobacco. To protect their trade, they created small strongholds all over the Atlantic.

Those were all private initiatives, but violent encounters with archenemies Spain and Portugal would give way to the idea of joining forces in one company like the VOC. This was concretized with the continuing of war with the Iberian powers after the end of the Twelve-Year Truce (1609-1621). The Dutch West India Company, the WIC, was born in 1624. It held the monopoly over trade in the Atlantic world. The first twenty years were successful. In 1630, the Dutch managed to take the northern part of Brazil, the prosperous sugar plantations of Bahia and Recife, which used extensive enslaved labor.



This conquest brought the discussion on slavery and slave trade to the foreground. Should the Dutch follow the Iberian example? Religious arguments were important, and though the bible stated that all men were equal, some members of the clergy qualified Africans as heathens, children of Cham, condemned to work in slavery forever, and could thus be traded and employed by Christian owners. This was confirmed by famous jurist Hugo de Groot who justified the trade of enslaved people by stating that the captives offered to the Dutch were victims of “just wars” and legally could be bought.

Expansion of the slave trade

In reality, the lucrative sugar culture in Brazil could only be developed through the trade of enslaved people. For this, the WIC needed access to the African market. After some minor success and failures, they managed to capture all Portuguese possessions in Africa including the impenetrable fortress of Elmina in 1637 and Luanda in Angola in 1641. This allowed for an important trade: until 1645, some 25,000 African captives were traded in Brazil. Enormous profits were made in the sugar trade, so instead of securing the rebellious Brazilian countryside, the WIC preferred to focus on trade. This led to the loss of Brazil in 1654, while Elmina remained Dutch. But where could these enslaved individuals be taken then?

During their expansion in the 1630s, the Dutch also took several Caribbean islands from the Spanish like Curaçao, Bonaire, Aruba, St. Eustatius, but none was suitable for sugar culture. So, after the 1648 Peace of Munster, the Dutch traders became intermediaries to French and English planters who turned to labor-intensive sugar plantations on their Caribbean islands. European labor proved insufficient, so the Dutch gladly transported enslaved African to these islands after the fall of Brazil. The Dutch also delivered their African captives to the Spanish Americas which needed thousands of enslaved individuals.

For this, the WIC indirectly obtained the *asiento de negros*, the right to import thousands of enslaved persons into the Spanish American possessions for specific periods, like 1662-75. Curaçao, strategically located near the Venezuelan coast became an important regional slave hub delivering some 100,000 individuals to the Spanish, mostly during the *asiento*, but also illegally after 1675. During this period, the WIC was the most powerful trading company and the biggest trader with more than 50,000 persons traded.

Also, the Dutch settled in more promising plantation colonies along the Guyana coast, installing themselves in Essequibo and Berbice in the first half of the 17th century and taking Suriname from the English in 1667. Suriname became in 1685 a private society between WIC, Amsterdam and the



private investor Sommelsdijck. But the number of enslaved remained always too low and too expensive. Half of African captives were taken to Dutch Antilles before 1675, but only 13% afterwards.

In the meantime, the WIC had suffered financially from the very expensive war in Brazil and lost most of its revenues with the loss of this colony. The company was no longer viable and was dissolved in 1674 before being immediately reinstated in a lighter, but identical form. The monopoly on the slave trade was its most important focus, which was concentrated along the remaining trading forts on the Gold Coast as the Dutch possessions in Angola had been lost to the Portuguese.

The Dutch again held the asiento in 1686-89, but due to the following wars and the losses due to French privateering, the Dutch more and more lost the initiative in the trade of enslaved people to the English who obtained the asiento in 1715. The new WIC did not have enough financial means to compete with other European nations in the slave trade and had difficulties fighting the Dutch contrabanders. The financial situation of the WIC became critical and in 1738 it was decided to relinquish its monopoly on the slave trade on West Africa.

Between 1624 and 1738, the WIC traded some 140,000 captives, most of which to Dutch colonies, while contrabanders accounted for 40,000 individuals traded. Enslaved people were taken to the Antilles mostly between 1650 and 1725. Before 1675 about 1,500 individuals yearly up to 1730 1,000 and afterwards 500 yearly. 1734-1774 represented the high point of Dutch slave trade with 140,000 persons traded to Dutch Guianas, 10,000 to Dutch Antilles and 10,000 to foreign colonies. This gave way to big private companies like the Middelburgse Commerciale Compagnie who transported some 20% of total Dutch slave trade. This was possible due to the increased demand and offer, while Dutch traders visited new slaving regions in Africa like Ivory coast and Sierra Leone.

Suriname was the most important colony with 200,000 African captives imported, while the three other Guianan regions received a total of 42,000. An important global boom in the slave trade took place after 1750, in which the Dutch private traders followed. However, in the 1770s, the Surinam planters were incapable of reimbursing the credits that they had engaged to buy enslaved individuals. It was then decided that they could no longer be sold on credit. This created a crisis in the Dutch slave trade, which lost its vitality and decreased from 3,600 yearly to 1,400 on 3 to 4 vessels. The Fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780-1784) hit the trade even more, plummeting the Dutch slave trade to a mere 100 yearly.

By 1800, Suriname was a plantation economy which produced cash crops like sugar, and it counted 40,000 enslaved individuals, mostly employed on plantations, as well as 4,000 Europeans and



freemen. Curaçao and St. Eustatius were important in transit trade. Most enslaved there earned money through arts and crafts, only one quarter was “field slave”. Curaçao counted 8,000 freemen and Europeans and 13,000 enslaved persons. Nonetheless an important slave revolt took place in the island in 1795. The other Dutch Caribbean islands only counted several thousand enslaved individuals.

Organization of the slave trade

The Dutch traded with more than 1200 vessels accounting for some 350 African captives per vessel. The tonnage of vessels decreased also from 500 captives with the WIC to less than 300 afterwards. The middle passage was organized as any other maritime adventure, with the same sailors, but higher risks because of revolts and African diseases. The cargo consisted mainly of Indian textiles, militaria and alcohol. The ship would go to a Dutch stronghold on the Gold Coast, but especially in the 18th century could they not deliver enough captives for all ships, and about three quarters of Dutch vessels were obliged to go to trade directly with other Africans along the coast.

Most of the captives traded, some three-fifth, was male and one-fifth child, as was usual in the Transatlantic slave trade. Over time, the percentage of women increased, and the numbers of children even doubled. The Dutch lost about 2 out of 1,000 captives daily, higher than on French and English vessels, which could be explained by the physical conditions of the African captives in the regions where the Dutch bought them. The average mortality was 12.6% for 2 ½ months of middle passage, but mortality decreased during the 18th century with 3 percent points to 11.4%. The number of revolts was high, as one-fifth of the vessels experienced rebellious African captives.

The profits of the slave trade are subject to discussion. The second WIC never made profit, only losses, some 4 million florins [some 42 million euros] at end of 18th century. Individual expeditions only registered some 2 to 3% profit, but this fluctuated, some voyages had up to 80% profits, others were a net loss. One of the big problems was the selling of enslaved individuals on credit to planters. This was reinforced with the 1774 Suriname crisis. Some historians argued that based on these facts, the slave trade only represented 1% or less of the entire Dutch maritime trade. But one should take into account the entire industry that used enslaved people and if we include cash-crop plantations, insurance, refineries etc. it represented some 5.2% of the Dutch Gross Domestic Product in 1770.



End of the slave trade

Discussions on the abolition of the slave trade existed from the beginning of the seventeenth century, but only became dominant in the Dutch Republic during the French Revolution. However, the abolition of the slave trade would only be concretized in 1814 with the installment of the Dutch Kingdom and this under strong English pressure. It seems that the Dutch, contrary to many other nations, did not participate in the illegal slave trade of the 19th century. Nonetheless, slavery in Dutch colonies would subsist for another 50 years, longer than in English and French colonies. This can be explained as the discussions happened in the margins and focus was on the increase of the living conditions of enslaved people. Slavery would only be abolished in Suriname on the 1st of July 1863, but with an apprentice period of 10 years. Slavery was supplanted by contract labor, mostly originated from South Asia.



About the author

Rafaël Thiebaut defended its PhD thesis on the Dutch and French slave trade to Madagascar in 2017. This research received three Thesis Prizes, among which the Thesis Prize of the Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage. Then, he was a postdoctoral researcher at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam where he was part of the project "Resilient Diversity: the Governance of Racial and Religious Plurality in the Dutch Empire 1600-1800". He also gave courses in various French universities. More recently, Rafaël was a postdoctoral researcher at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac where he studied the link between the museum objects and slavery.

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Further information

Slavevoyages.org – The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>

Enslaved – Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade: <https://enslaved.org/>

Atlas of mutual heritage: <https://www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl/>

Illustrations



Fort Elmina in Ghana, 1568, © Dutch national archives

Fort Elmina is located off the coast of Ghana. It was built in 1482 and served as a trading post by the Portuguese.



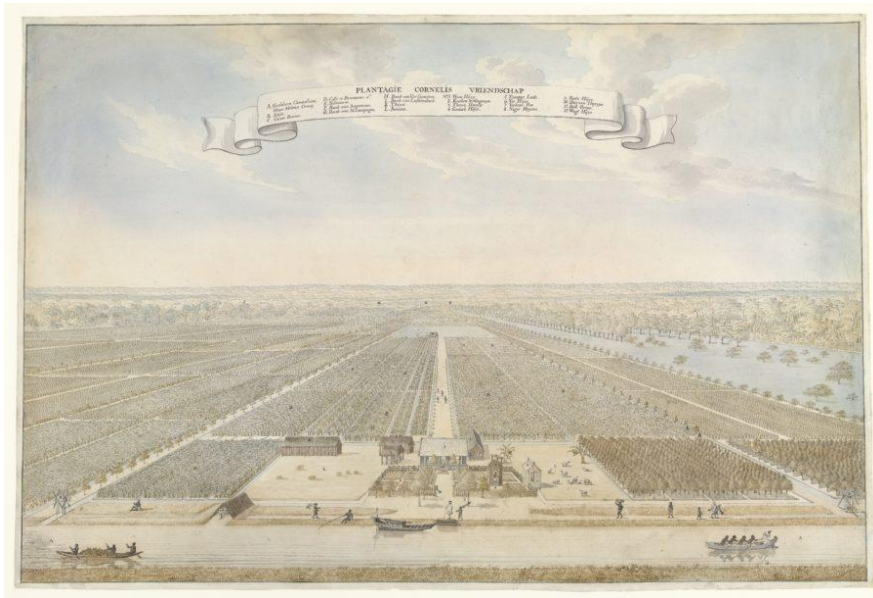
Elmina, seen from Fort Sao Jorge da Mina, 2009, © Wikipedia



A Dutch ship in the port of Recife, in Portuguese Brazil, Abraham Willaerts, 1640, © Het Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam



A market where enslaved people were sold, Jean-Baptiste Debret, from Johann Moritz Rugendas, 19th century, public domain.



A view of the Cornelis Vrienschap plantation in Suriname, anonymous, 18th century © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



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A view of the island and the city of Batavia belonging to the Dutch for the West India Company, Jacques-Gabriel Huquier, 1758-1761, © Bibliothèque nationale de France.



A portrait of a major merchant of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia, Aelbert Cuyp, 1650-c.1655, © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The character standing on the left is a merchant of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), probably Jakob Martensen, pictured with his wife. An enslaved man standing behind them is holding a sunshade, a pajong, above their heads. The Batavia castle is visible in the background. On the right, the Company's fleet is anchored and ready to return to the Netherlands. The merchant is pointing to the ships with his stick, indicating that he is taking part in the expedition.



A Dutch merchant with slaves walking in a valley in West Indies, anonymous, 1700-1725 © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.