



The WIC, the Dutch West India Company

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The Westindische Compagnie (WIC) held the monopoly on trade and warfare in the Atlantic region between 1624 and 1674 and again between 1674 and 1738, while subsisting as a legal entity until 1791. Its main activity became the trade of enslaved people as the company accounted for a quarter of the total Dutch slave trade.

The first WIC (1624-1674)

During the Eighty Years war with Habsburg Spain, the Dutch Republic continued trade on a global level. This was a private trade, but competition between Dutch merchants and violent encounters with archenemies Spain and Portugal would give way to joining forces into one company.

With the end of the Twelve-Year Truce in 1621, the WIC was created on VOC model with 5 chambers, representing the maritime Dutch provinces, and 19 directors. But it proved difficult to find investors, because the beginning of the VOC had been quite expensive and there were high risks of warfare. Finally, by 1623 some 7,1 million guilders [98 million euros] were invested, and this increased to 17 million guilders [211 million euros] by 1639. The company received the monopoly on maritime trade, the right to govern colonies and to conduct privateering in the Atlantic Ocean Region. However, the basis of the company would be primarily commercial.

Although a trading company, war and conquest were important elements of the WIC. The “Big Plan” was to take over the most important Iberian strongholds as the VOC had done in the Indian Ocean, but situation in Atlantic Ocean proved much more challenging than in Asia as the Iberian powers were much more powerful. But thanks to some privateering successes, especially Piet Hein’s conquest of the silverfleet in 1628, enough money was secured to conquer North Brazil, the largest sugar colony in the World. The WIC then focused on Africa as to secure the slave trade by taking the Portuguese possessions of Elmina in 1637 and Luanda in 1641.

This made the WIC the strongest trading company and the biggest slave trader with 53,600 African captives traded between 1658 and 1674. But the growing colonial empire, which had to be regularly fed, defended and governed, increased the financial and administrative burden of the 19 Directors. This proved too ambitious and risky for a trading company. Another problem was the impossibility to keep the monopoly over the trade in the Atlantic world as compared to the VOC.



And the WIC did not have the force and financial means to assure the slave trade or food influx of Brazil. For this reason, it was quickly decided that private trade to Brazil was allowed against a tax on merchandise.

Especially Brazil proved too difficult to exploit as it was in a quasi-continual rebellious state. After the departure of the energetic governor Johan Maurits van Nassau and the influx of 25,000 enslaved individuals until 1645, the Dutch lost the initiative and despite multiple costly attempts and the WIC lost the colony in 1654. She focused then on the trade of African captives to English, French and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, but debts amounted 36 million guilders and it was decided in 1674 to cease activities and to transfer all actions and colonies to a new company with a new charter.

At this point, the WIC controlled different territories in the America. New Netherlands, important for fur trade and the tobacco culture, had been lost and exchanged against Surinam with the English in 1667. This territory on the Wild Coast or Guianas was not formally occupied by the Iberian powers and the Dutch also founded Essequibo and Berbice there which produced tobacco and cotton. In the Caribbean, the islands Aruba, St. Eustatius & Curaçao were taken in the 1630s. Especially Curaçao would become an important regional hub in the slave trade, formal and informal, with Spanish Americas.

The second WIC (1674-1738-1791)

In 1674, the new company had 1.2 million guilders of old capital [13.7 million euros] and 4.6 million guilders [52.6 million euros] in new actions. There were only 10 directors, but otherwise, it resembled a lot the old company. By 1700, the company already noted 2 million guilders of losses. Africa became the most important possession of the second WIC, initially for ivory and gold trade, but now most importantly through the trade of African captives. The Gold Coast was the heart of this empire, but exploitation was difficult because of important competition from the English and the French, as well as unhealthy living conditions.

Nonetheless, the WIC traded some 140.000 enslaved individuals between 1624 and 1738, most of which to Dutch colonies as well as foreign Antillean islands. 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, called *lorrendraaiers*. These illegal slave traders accounted for nearly one quarter of the total Dutch trade with more than 40.000 African captives traded, mostly to St. Eustatius and to foreign colonies. 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, especially due to



falling sugar prices and the bad payment of enslaved individuals by planters who totaled a debt of 4 million florins.

From then on, the company was active as intermediary in the slave trade through its African fortresses, especially Elmina. But the financial situation worsened due to warfare and competition in West Africa and until its demise it was impossible to invest into trade even the most basic ones. The WIC only made profit when other Europeans were at war and when the English declared war on the Dutch Republic in 1780 was this the beginning of the end. In 1791, it was decided, rather than to keep the company alive, to dissolve it and the possessions of the company came to the state.



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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Illustrations



Dutch West India Company slave ship *Beeckestijn*, Hendrik de Leth, 1735, © Public domain.



West-Indische paskaert: waer in de graden der breedde over weder zyden vande middellyn wassende soo vergrooten, ... Vertonende (behalven Europaes zuydlickste) alle de Zee-kusten van Africa en America - West India map, property of the WIC, 1675, © New York public library.



Merchant with an enslaved person, anonymous, between 1750 and 1800, © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



A gold coin worth 12 guilders, minted by the WIC during the siege of Pernambuco by the Portuguese, Pieter Janssen Bas, 1645-1646, © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

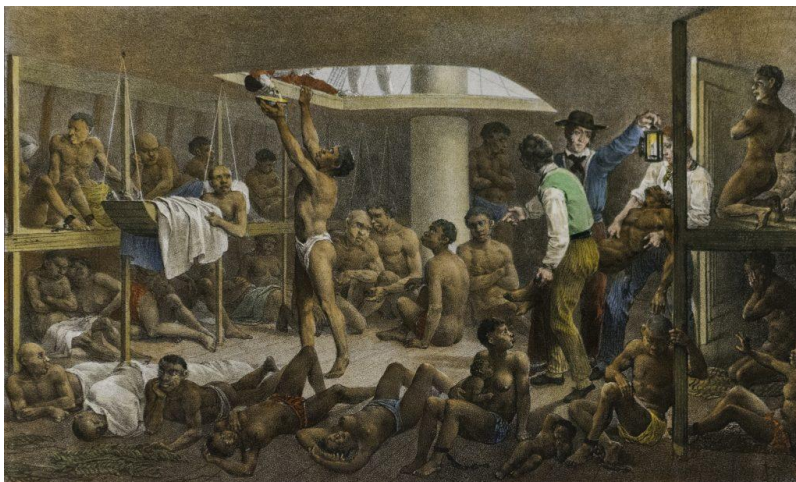


A Brazilian landscape, Frans Jansz Post, 1652, © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

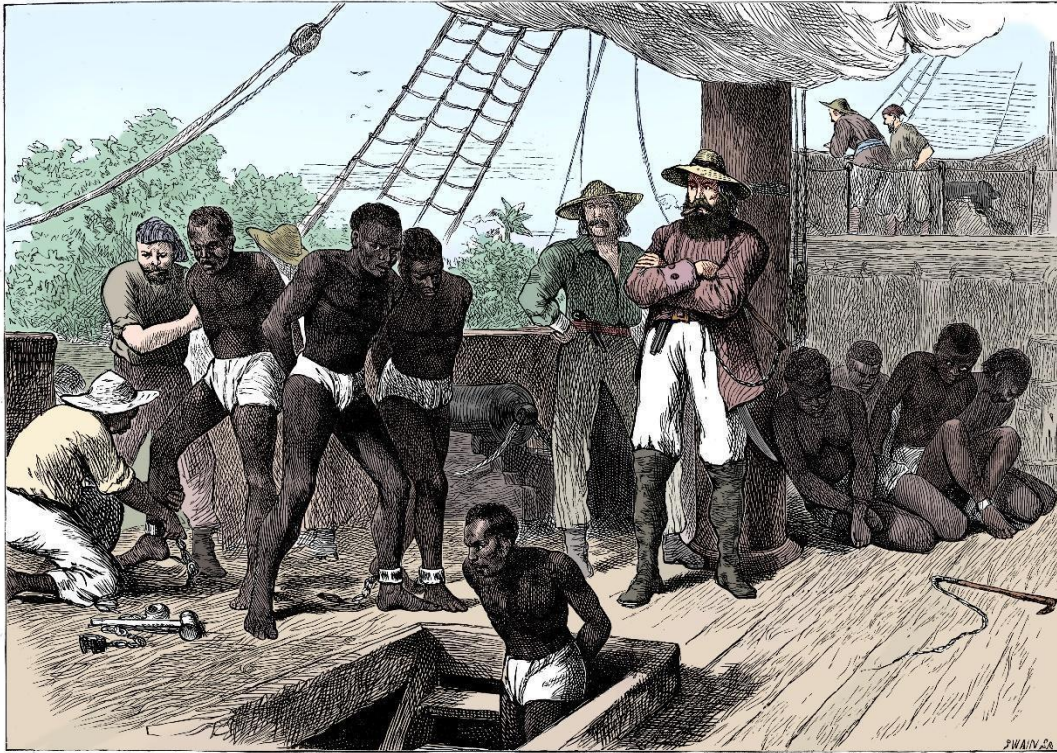
From 1630, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) conquered part of Brazil. The Dutch relaunched the sugar production. Sugar was cultivated in plantations such as the one depicted in the painting. Enslaved Africans worked there in very poor conditions. What was presented in a romantic light by the Dutch was in fact a hellish reality for the enslaved peoples.



Anchored ships on the coast, Willem van de Velde, around 1660, oil on canvas, © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Captives in the hold of a ship, Johann Moritz 1830, © Wikipedia.



ON BOARD A SLAVE-SHIP.

Captives aboard a ship, anonymous, 19th century, © Alamy.