

# The impact of the slave trade on the Dutch economy

July 5 2019, by Lieselotte Van De Ven

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View of the harbor of Middelburg, second half of the eighteenth century, by Mathias de Sallie and based on a drawing by Dirk de Jong. Rijksmuseum Collection Amsterdam, RP-P-1926-37.

To what extent did the Netherlands grow rich from the Transatlantic slave trade? In his dissertation "Walcherse Ketens," Gerhard de Kok looks at Vlissingen and Middelburg, the most important slave trade cities in the Netherlands during the second half of the 18th century. It turns out that, although the slave trade comprised only a small fraction of Dutch national trade, it had a major economic impact at a local level.

## **The height of a trade branch**

In the two decades before 1780, the [slave trade](#) on the island of Walcheren in Zeeland was at its peak. After the dismantling of the Dutch West India Company's slave trade monopoly in the 1730s, 65 to 70 percent of the Dutch slave trade was in the hands of Walcheren merchants. Between 1730 and 1800, about 500 [slave ships](#) departed from Vlissingen or Middelburg, loaded with valuable exports to exchange for people in West Africa. By participating in the slave trade in the 18th century, people from Zeeland joined the "Atlantic system," which was driven by slave labour.

## **"The ordinary citizen' participates**

For two other major North-Western European centres of slave trade, Liverpool and Nantes, it is known that this trade branch considerably stimulated the municipal [economy](#). De Koks research shows that the construction, provisioning and equipping of slave ships was also of great economic importance on Walcheren between 1755 and 1780. The Walcheren economy was closely tied to the slave trade in the second half of the 18th century, according to De Kok. Carpenters, sailmakers, bookkeepers, millers, ironsmiths; countless of 'ordinary citizens' were directly or indirectly involved in the slave trade. This trade in human beings also stimulated other branches of trade, such as the import of textiles and the export of sugar. Because slave traders exchanged

gunpowder for slaves, the local gunpowder industry flourished. The [service sector](#), consisting of, among others, clerks, bookkeepers and bankers, was also partly maintained by the slave trade.



Image out of a nineteenth century children's book; a sailor from Vlissingen

shows the city of Vlissingen to an African. Etching by Reinier Vinkeles, 1804-1805. Rijksmuseum Collection Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-64.839.

## **Strong profits and significant losses**

Between 1760 and 1780, 5 to 6 percent of the income earned in Middelburg was linked to the Transatlantic slave trade, while for Vlissingen this share was as high as 25 percent. "This does not mean that Walcheren has become rich as a result of the slave trade," De Kok says. "There were investors who made substantial profits, but on the other hand there were those who incurred significant losses." He goes on saying that the participation in the transatlantic slave trade on Walcheren did not lead to innovations in the industrial or financial sector, as was the case in Great Britain. "In the industrial field, it were mainly traditional sectors such as shipbuilding and gunpowder production that benefited, but the Walcheren slave trade was too small in scale and the Dutch economy too open to allow, for example, the textile industry to flourish on the island for export to Africa."

## **Trade in sugar and coffee**

What then, was the effect of the (Transatlantic) slave trade on the Dutch economy as a whole? This question is still heatedly debated today because of the reprehensible nature of slavery. "It was precisely the colonial production of sugar and coffee, produced with the use of slave labour, that was important for the Dutch economy during the second half of the 18th century," De Kok says. "The scale of trade in these products was much greater than the slave trade itself. Dutch plantation colonies were, however, partly dependent on the slave trade that took place from Walcheren." Due to the activities of slave traders from Walcheren, these colonies were not dependent on foreigners for the supply of labour.

Opening up these areas to foreign slave ships would have undoubtedly led to more smuggling trade and the transfer of a large part of the colonial production to other countries.

## The role of Humanities

In his dissertation, De Kok mainly looks at the economic effects of the transatlantic slave trade, but there is much more to consider than just cold statistics. We must, for example, also consider what people on Walcheren thought of the slave trade. "It is precisely from the perspective of the Humanities that we are able to gain more insight into this matter," De Kok says. "We know that the slave trade on Walcheren in the 18th century was not undisputed. Yet there was hardly any opposition to it. In fact, the municipal and national governments did their best to stimulate the Transatlantic slave [trade](#) at the end of the 18th century."

Provided by Leiden University

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