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Maarten F. Van Dijck

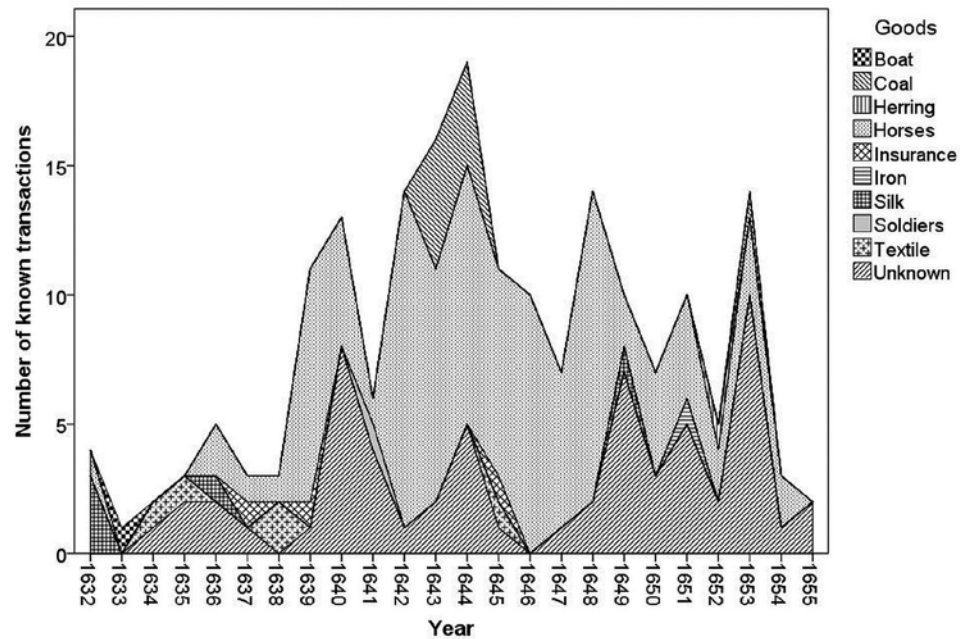
Rotterdam and the Beginnings of Global Trade in the Early Modern Period

Assistant Professor Theory and Methodology of History

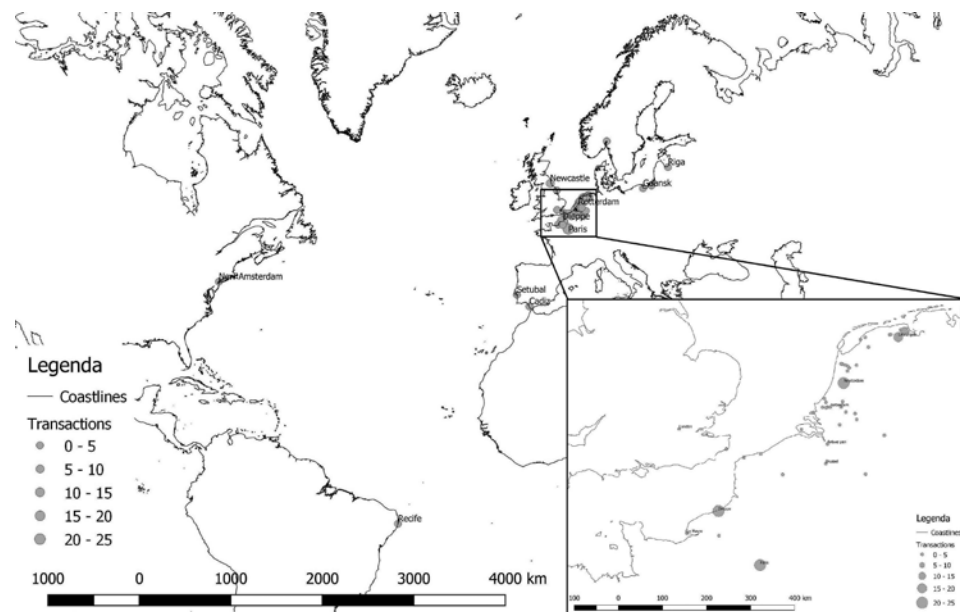
Historians have extensively discussed the rise of Rotterdam during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the heydays of the harbour, but the earliest growth after 1600 received less attention, although a lot can be found about this in the notarial records of those days. They show that Rotterdam was a pivotal node in global networks during the first phase of globalisation. Waterfronts of early modern port cities were responsible for global exchange of people, goods and ideas between different parts of the globe. In the case of this essay, this will be shown by several exchanges between Rotterdam and New Amsterdam.

Hubrecht Schepmoes (1610- 1657), son of a textile merchant from Delft, but himself working from Rotterdam, started in the silk trade. His development as a merchant is a fine example of how Rotterdam merchants built up careers in international trade. Switching from silk to coal trade to horses, and from neighbouring European countries to long-distance trade with the Baltic states, the Mediterranean and eventually North America, the scope and impact of his trade expanded during Schepmoes' career. At the end of his career, no other merchant had sent more ships from Rotterdam to New Amsterdam as Schepmoes did. The sources do not mention what kind of goods Schepmoes shipped to New Amsterdam, but the cargo he sent in 1650 had a value of 11,000 guilders which corresponds today to more than 100,000 euros.

Merchants were not only responsible for the exchange of material goods. One of them, the English quaker Benjamin Furly, participated enthusiastically in debates on monarchy or popular representation he organised in his house with such eminent thinkers as John Locke, Pierre Bayle, William Penn and the Earl of Shaftesbury.



Graph 1. Trade transactions of Hubert Schepmoes based on the Rotterdam notarial records (1632-1655)



Map 1. International trade network of Hubert Schepmoes based on the Rotterdam notarial records (1632-1655)

Because of his commercial networks, these debates travelled the world and influenced among others the so-called Leisler rebellion in New York, former New Amsterdam, against new taxations in 1689. This uprising was named after Jacob Leisler, a German migrant whose involvement in the fur and tobacco trade made him one of the richest men in New York. He himself never visited Rotterdam but many of his New York friends and supporters resided for some time in Rotterdam.

Of course these travelling ideas were just the side cargo to the people and products crossing the seas. For example Jacob Jansz Huys, who came from Oudkarspel – some 100 kilometres north of Rotterdam – joined the ship of Adriaen Blommaert to New Amsterdam in 1649. Huys was a carpenter and left the Dutch Republic for the New Netherlands to establish a new life as a carpenter overseas. He had to pay Blommaert 42 guilders for every month he spent aboard the ship. This sum equaled the monthly wage of a beginning carpenter in Amsterdam. However, Blommaert had to bring Huys back to Rotterdam free of any charge if he decided to return to the Dutch Republic. Apparently, Jacob did not become homesick and stayed at least eleven years in the New Netherlands. He pops up in a document dated 8 May 1660 as the skipper of the *Nieuwer Amstel* who brought lumber and other provisions from New Amsterdam to Curaçao, an interesting career move.

Wood and carpenters were very essential for the establishments and the extension of the colonies. Obviously, therefore, Jacob Jansz Huys was not the only carpenter who left the Dutch Republic for the New Netherlands. Another interesting example is found in a notarial agreement between three young carpenters from the southern part of the Dutch Republic dating from 1656. They decided to sail from Rotterdam to New Amsterdam with the ship *De Geldersche Blom* and formally promised each other to work together at their destination as carpenters. The document stated that they would split their revenues in three and support each other in case of sickness or any other accident.

Port cities were gateways to move goods, people and ideas between different parts of the globe. Historians have already shown how important Amsterdam was for the development of global trade in the early modern period, but other cities in the Dutch Republic hardly received any attention. This is partially due to the fact that many archives of the Dutch West India Company were destroyed in the nineteenth century. The notarial archives, however, provide an interesting alternative to find out how trade, migration and communication were organized in the early days of one of the most important ports in world history. It is certainly the task of the Rotterdam history department to look closer at the past of its own city to understand this essential early phase of globalisation.

Further reading

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