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The prize of neutrality

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7 Conclusion

Writing a book about two areas that seem to be so far apart like history and computing is a difficult task. The historian would like to present the results of research in a good narrative, which would urge the reader to read on. The number of quantitative studies that have produced “good reads” is limited, but there are some famous examples. Next to that there are a number of quantitative studies which were influential in spite of the fact that they were hard to read. I do not suppose that I succeeded in writing a book that will capture the attention of the reader from beginning to end: this is just not such a book. A source-analysis like this can always benefit from more detail, and more supporting evidence. It seems like there is always too little background to put the data into perspective. I wanted to tell a tale about both sides of this form of history: about the methods used and about the results produced. Such a hybrid form of history shall never read like a novel. Finding the right balance between methodological discussion and presenting the results of research is never easy and in this case it was even harder because the sources used produced much more detail for other topics than for the final theme of this book, the trade of Amsterdam with North America. The *Paalgeld*-portbooks, which formed the most important source provide more information on the European trade than they do on the trans-Atlantic trade, at least for the period covered by this book. However there were good reasons to concentrate on the North American trans-Atlantic trade anyway. First of all and probably decisive was the sheer volume of data that would have to be processed to cover the same period for the European trade. Even using the methods developed to speed up the input process such an undertaking would require many more years to complete than I was willing to spend on them. It is not the difficulty of such a task which is prohibitive, it is the amount of time needed to put all the results in perspective. Using computer analysis of a source like the *Paalgeld*-portbooks allows you to look at the trade of Amsterdam both in a more global way as well as in very precise detail. Concentrating on a product like wine, wood, or grain, one could write a very detailed study based on this source. The richness of information of this source can only be compared with that of the Danish Sound Toll Registers, which have been the basis of so many studies. But all the detailed results need a historical framework to be fully understood. Writing the definite book about Amsterdam's trade at the end of the eighteenth century once was my objective, but I came to realize that it will probably

take a team of better historians to accomplish such a Herculean task. So I have restricted myself to a global approach of the most detailed part of the *Paalgeld*-portbooks. I have used the data on the European trade only to build the set in which to put the trans-Atlantic trade. All the detail of the electronic appendices will provide other historians the solid information needed for other histories. During the last years I have provided other researchers with data on the trade in wine, silk, and iron pots in Amsterdam. It is all there, and every moderately computer literate will be able to extract that part of the data that is needed to support his or her story.

Heeres indicated that the Portbooks of the Levy of the *Paalgeld* in Amsterdam could offer much more information than he had gathered from the yearly accounts of the *Paalgeld*, which he found in the archives of Enkhuizen, but he did not have the means to undertake the analysis. The pilot-study about the year 1778 that we did together gave an indication of the problems I would have to overcome if I wanted to get a grip on this treasure. Snapper, who manually performed some global counts on a number of years of the portbooks, realized that it would take a team of historians to gather all the information from this source. I have decided to concentrate on methods which would allow a single researcher to undertake such a task. But I also wanted to produce evidence that such an undertaking would be a meaningful project for a historian. In his first publication about the registers of the Levy of the *Paalgeld* Heeres wrote that the most interesting new information would be about the trans-Atlantic trade. The annual revenues of the *Paalgeld*, which were specified for the European trade and for the trans-Atlantic trade, showed the increasing importance of the *West-Indian* trade. Although the parts of the portbooks of the levy of the *Paalgeld* dealing with this trade did not offer the specific information on the cargoes that the parts covering the European trade had, their analysis became the center of the historical part this study.

7.1 Methodology

The methods used for this study have all been used before, but their combination for a historical study is unique, as far as I know. My conclusions concern two aspects of my study: the gathering of the data and the analysis.

Gathering and analyzing such amounts of data without using computers is out of the question. Comparing the results of my findings with the findings of Posthumus, Van Nierop, Oldewelt, Snapper and others, showed time and time again the disturbing lack of precision of these older studies. However it is not fair to undermine the reputation of these fine historians, who did not have at their disposal the modern tools that I relied on. My data were entered in the computer using very strict valuation rules, range checking and other mechanisms to assure the quality of the data set, and afterwards they were checked thoroughly. Even so I still find minor errors every now and then. One can only have the utmost admiration for the industry of the older scholars who had to do without all these devices.

Database management systems offer facilities to reorganize data whenever needed. A manual approach is bound to stick to a form of organization chosen at the beginning of a project, simply because a reorganization of the whole data set would be too cumbersome. Manual systems offer one entrance to the data, while a well structured database offers all possible entrances to the data. But before one can use the data in a database first these data have to be put in.

7.1.1 The input process

The input process has not received the attention of computer scientists that it deserves. Databases offer a number of facilities meant to warrant the quality of the data, but they have few facilities to improve the input speed while at the same time guaranteeing the quality of input. Usually data entry is done by lower echelons of the working force, whose time is not that expensive. However direct input from historical sources requires the ability to read these sources, which implies a high level of training. It is not surprising that many historians have high hopes for the use of scanners and Optical Character Recognition software, which promise to take this annoying task off the historians shoulders. However, the results with handwritten material, especially with the less standardized forms of writing of earlier centuries, are disappointing and are no real alternative to manual keying of the data. This implies that highly trained staff is needed to do input work. For many historical research projects this is a serious bottleneck. Data-input is not regarded as an academic activity and a researcher gets very little academic credit for building a good database. Although inputting the data may actually take

much more time than the analysis of the data, the first activity has a very low status, but is still necessary for the second.

In order to minimize the time needed to input the data for this research a number of forms of default-generation have been used. These methods served two purposes: speeding up the input process and limiting the possibilities for errors. Since the algorithms used the data that had already been entered to generate defaults, these were dynamic and had a number of traits of expert systems³².

The first form of default generation used was *limited carry over*. Those parts of the data that would probably remain the same within a series of records were suggested as default values by the computer. Most of the time these defaults would be correct and the number of keystrokes needed to input these data could be reduced to one.

The second form of default generation used was *semi-static pick-lists*. This technique was used on selected fields. All the different possible values for the field were saved to a table, which then was offered as a “pick-list”, i.e. a list from which the data entry specialist picked a value. By using *point-and-shoot* techniques these data could then be entered. This had two advantages: it helped in recognizing parts of the source that were difficult to read and it limited the range for errors, since only forms that were in the pick-list were acceptable as valid input. This guaranteed that all possible mistakes could be traced systematically.

Since navigation through pick-lists, especially when they become very extensive, can become quite complex I have combined the use of these pick-lists with two other techniques: *input completion by incremental matching* and *coded input*. Input completion by incremental matching is based on searching the closest match in the pick-list with every keystroke and suggesting that match as value. Depending on the length of the strings that had to be put in, input speed could be reduced to an average of three to four keystrokes. Usually the match then found in the pick-list would be the correct form. Only for forms which would have the same characters at the beginning of the string and would only differ at the very end this method brought very little improvement³³. To overcome this problem coded-input was used. All forms in the pick-list were given a unique code with a maximum of three characters at the first time

³²H. de Swaan Arons and P. van Lith (1984)

³³This technique is also used in language aids for the handicapped.

that they were encountered. From that moment on it would be possible to type in the code and have the input program substitute this for the original form. This required that the data typist memorizes the most used codes, but it produced the greatest speed improvement of all methods used. On the other hand it created a new possibility for errors--typing in a code that existed in the thesaurus, but was actually a code for another form. However, since the code was immediately replaced by the original form and displayed, it would be recognized in time.

The final method to speed up the input process was using dependencies between data-items. Having the rules on which the levy of the *Paalgeld* was calculated allowed me to let the input program do the calculating once the cargo and its amount were specified. However, my aim was to make a machine readable version of the portbooks, which would be as close to the original as possible. The clerks that did the accounting in the eighteenth century made a number of mistakes and in such cases I had to stick to their wrong calculations. Other dependencies which were not so strict were also used for default generation. Since ships coming from Norway usually carried wood, wood would be the default value for the first cargo-item. These dependencies were based on a statistical analysis of the input: however since they were frequently wrong, they tended to irritate the data typist and only those that were right most of the time were used in the end.

Default generation can increase the speed of the input process by about 65%, while at the same time offering less possibilities for errors. However, defaults that are wrong too often tend to be quite irritating. Using the techniques described the usual trade-off of speed versus accuracy can be avoided: actually these techniques improve the reliability of the digital transcript.

7.1.2 Data modeling

Recently there has been a great emphasis on the importance of data modeling within the community of computer-using historians, resulting in the Moscow Conference of the Association for History and Computing in 1996 on this topic. The overall acceptance of the Relational Model for databases has led to ever more difficult methods for data modeling, all having their own graphical sub-language which require the training of an engineer to understand them. The result of these methods are complex databases which cannot be used

without serious training. One of the most important reasons for all these methods is the need to exclude data redundancy in the relational model. Given the fact that there is no theoretical difference between guarding a database from data-inconsistency with the required minimal redundancy of the relational model or with multiple redundancy of other models, I decided to use a method which allowed redundancy. This Method -LOGIC- is built around the idea that all tables in a database should contain complete information. All tables should be based on structure sentences, which all have a subject, one verb and a number of nouns connected by qualifiers. This method simplified the use of the database and complied with my requirement that the computer should be a tool which should not get in the way between the historian and his data. This simple model, which may have some theoretical drawbacks, but allows the researcher to experiment with his data without having to undergo complete retraining, deserves more attention from the historical community.

7.2 The portbooks of the levy of the *Paalgeld*

The foundation of this entire research project are the portbooks of the levy of the *Paalgeld*. *Paalgeld* was levied in all ports around the Zuider Zee on the cargoes of incoming ships from overseas. From the revenues of this levy the maintenance of coastal fires, and beacons, which served to guide ships past the shallows, sandbanks, and other obstacles. From 1573 until 1836 the city of Enkhuizen was responsible for this maintenance and had the right to collect this tax. In 1838 the central government took over the task and Enkhuizen lost the right to collect this levy. The actual collection of the money was done by the various admiralties, that were also responsible for the collection of a number of other levies, like the *Convoyen en Licenten*. These admiralties produced yearly accounts in which complete details of incoming shipping were registered, containing the date of registration, the name of the captain of each ship, a complete description of the cargo, the port of departure and the amount of *Paalgeld* paid. These registers have survived for the city of Amsterdam for the years 1742, 1771-1836, with the exception of the year 1810-1813 when the French government took over this task and the collection was stopped. In these portbooks all incoming ships were registered, except ships coming from East India. The basis for this levy was the *observantie van den ontfangh van 't Paal-gelt*, a list first made in 1667 and revised several times

afterwards, describing how much should be paid for each cargo item. For all goods not listed a levy of 5 cents for every 25 guilders worth had to be paid, a 0.2% levy. The changes in the list are new additions of goods. Ships coming from West India, meaning that part of the world that was covered by the monopoly of the Dutch West India Company, i.e. the whole Western Hemisphere and the south-west coast of Africa, were registered in separate parts of these portbooks without specification of the cargoes.

The information in these portbooks has been verified by comparing it with information from other sources for the year 1778. Comparison with the registers of the *Buitenvuurgeld* and the registers of the *Galjootsgeld*, two other levies on incoming shipping, and with the data from the *Monsterrollen* (muster-rolls) confirmed the correctness of the data in the *Paalgeld* registers. For additional checks the verdicts of *Avery Grosse*, ship-contracts, and the ship-tidings in the newspapers of that year were used. An attempted record-linkage between all these sources of information was only partly successful. However, all checks confirmed the correctness of the information in the *Paalgeld* portbooks. But, since the collection of most levies was done by the same agency, the value of this confirmation should not be overestimated. Taxes were evaded on a large scale in this period, and the collection of the *Paalgeld* was probably no exception to this rule. The extent of tax-evasion cannot be assessed.

Using the techniques to speed up the input process described above, the data of the entire *Paalgeld* portbooks have been converted to a machine readable transcript for the years 1742, 1771-1787. For the period 1788-1817 only those parts of the portbooks that concern the West Indian trade have been processed.

The eighteen years for which the data of the complete registers were produced served two purposes: as a check on earlier publications and as a point of reference for the discussion of the trans-Atlantic trade. Except for identifying all port names mentioned in the *Paalgeld* portbooks, processing of the data therein was not problematic. After comparing the results of the analysis of the data of the *Paalgeld* portbooks with those of earlier publications for overlapping years, a formula was devised to correct these time series for the years for which there are no data from the *Paalgeld* portbooks available. On the basis of these corrected data and the results of the analysis of the *Paalgeld* portbooks a reconstruction was attempted of the incoming trade to Amsterdam, covering the whole eighteenth century. Using the information from the portbooks, estimates were made of the value of the trade from various regions. From

this analysis it can be concluded that the greatest number of ships that put into Amsterdam came from the region around Bremen and Hamburg, known as the *Kleine Oost*. The real dimension of this trade has not been described before. The value of this trade was never very high, with the exception of years of war in which ports in this region, especially Emden, served as neutral home ports after flag-flight for a part of the fleet of Amsterdam. The second important area for the trade of Amsterdam was the Baltic, including Russia. In some years the total number of ships from this area, traditionally called the *moeder negotie* of Amsterdam, was even higher than that of ships coming from the *Kleine Oost*. However, the European Atlantic trade with France, Great Britain, Portugal and Spain, which comes third if we consider the number of ships coming from the areas, was always of a greater value than the trade with the Baltic and the *Kleine Oost*. The very valuable trade with the Mediterranean regions was not very extensive, but was more or less stable.

The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War 1780-1784 ended a period of growth that started in the 1770's. After the war there was a short revival of the trade around 1790-1793, but the period of French dominance of the Netherlands saw a steady decline of all trade, with the exception of the year of peace 1802-1803. Napoleon's continental system brought trade to an almost complete standstill, with a lowest point of 216 ships coming into port in 1810. For next three years no data are available, but starting in 1814 there was a quick recovery of the trade, especially of the trans-Atlantic trade.

7.3 The trans-Atlantic trade of Amsterdam

Of the intercontinental trade of Amsterdam, the trade with the Far East has always received most attention. The story of success and decline of the Dutch East India Company has fascinated many researchers. This has resulted in an under-appreciation of the trans-Atlantic trade of Amsterdam. The failure of the Dutch West India Company may have been one of the reasons. However, it is clear from the *Paalgeld*-data that the trans-Atlantic trade was much more sizable than the East Indian trade. It must be admitted that this was the period of decline of the Dutch East India Company. Based on the estimates of the total value of this trade, the trans-Atlantic trade must be regarded as more important than the trade with the Far East, at least at the end of the eighteenth century.

The character of the trans-Atlantic trade changed completely during the period under research. The West Indian trade, which had been very profitable during the years of the American Revolution, never recovered after the fourth Anglo-Dutch war. The trade with the American rebels on St. Eustatius, which had been one of the causes of the war, began to grow after the war. The trade with Surinam, Essequibo and Demerara showed growth until 1794, except for the interruption during the war with Great Britain. After 1795 the West Indian trade and the trade with Surinam collapse, except for a short-lived revival in the peace year 1802-1803. Since 1783, when the French opened their West Indian ports to the Americans, the trade with the United States of America began to grow, and this growth gained even more momentum after 1795. The trade with Central America was almost insignificant during the whole period.

After the Napoleonic era the trade with Surinam recovered quickly, just like the trade with North America. The trade with the West-Indies also made a good recovery, but on a much smaller scale than before.

7.4 The prize of neutrality

Amsterdam's trade with North America only really got going after the American War of Independence, although there had been direct contacts even in the colonial period. The development of the trade with North America shows an opposite development to all other trade of Amsterdam in this period. Though the trade never lived up to the high expectations that the merchants of Amsterdam had cherished before American independence, it became steadily more important.

Before 1783 the value of the cargoes that the American ships carried to Amsterdam was low. In this period the number of ships coming from northern and southern ports of the United States is almost equal. The value of cargoes of ships coming from the south, probably consisting of tobacco, rice and indigo, was a bit higher than those of ships coming from the north. After 1783, when France opened its West Indian colonies to the Americans this picture begins to change. The number of ships coming from North America starts to rise and at the same time the average cargo value starts to go up. After 1794, when the Americans and British had settled their disagreements in Jay's treaty, French American relations deteriorated

until Napoleon decided to give up the dream of a French American empire. From 1800 the number of ships coming from the United States starts to rise quickly. Between 1805-1807 there is a peak in this trade, not only in the number of ships coming from America, but also in the value of the cargoes these ships carried. After 1807 decline sets in, caused by the self restrictive measurements of Jefferson and the effects of Napoleon Continental System. In 1810 trade comes to a virtual standstill. For the next three years no data are available, but there are indications that not all traffic between Amsterdam and the United States halted in this period. After the Napoleonic era the recovery of the trade with North America was quick, but did not reach the high level of the first decade of the nineteenth century.

The balance between ships coming from northern and southern ports shifted completely during the period of growth. Especially New York, and to a lesser degree Baltimore and Philadelphia, became dominant in the trade with Amsterdam. In this trade the great majority of ships were American: the role of Dutch ship masters in this trade was always insignificant.

The explanation of the success of the United States in the trade with Amsterdam can be found in the political developments of this period. During the rebellion against Great Britain the Americans needed neutrals to provide them with the supplies for the war. The Dutch, whose strange semi-democratic federal state form was an inspiration to some of the founding fathers, were more than willing to oblige. The 1770's had been good years for commerce and had boosted the self-confidence of the Amsterdam merchants. Their one-sided interpretation of neutrality eventually led to a clash with Great Britain, which could not tolerate the overt support for the rebels by one of its official allies. The war that followed was devastating for Dutch commerce. After the Americans and Great Britain had signed peace in 1783, the United States immediately adopted a policy of neutrality in international affairs. When France, the former ally of the American rebels, went to war with the rest of Europe in 1793 president Washington issued an official declaration of neutrality. This neutrality, although constantly troubled by British and French ship seizures, allowed the Americans to take over a great part of the West Indian trade and even to gain a position in the European coastal trade, when all the European nations were at war. The fact that the Americans suddenly lost a part of their newly won position in the year of the peace of Amiens underlines the importance of this policy of neutrality for the success of their commerce.

Around 1793 the Americans had the ships to play an important role in international trade. The political situation offered them the opportunity to step in as neutral freighters for all European belligerents for the next twenty years, a period long enough to establish the United States as one of the major maritime powers. Earlier the Dutch merchants had learned the benefits of neutrality for their enterprises during the seven years war. However the Netherlands were not able to maintain this policy of neutrality with strength, when Great Britain challenged it during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war, which reduced the Netherlands to a minor maritime power. The war of 1812 between Great Britain and the United States showed that the Americans were capable of maintaining their position. The declaration of the Monroe doctrine gave a name to what had been official US policy ever since 1783.

In the discussions about the new constitution of the United States of America the example of the Dutch Republic was frequently mentioned. On the one hand it was praised for its democratic character, but on the other hand the weakness of its central government was depicted as a clear example of the implications of federalism gone too far. Another Dutch example of better politics, the policy of neutrality, was copied with great success and formed the solid foundation for the commercial power of the young United States of America.