Shipmasters from the West Frisian Islands in the Sound Toll Registers

1737-1800


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Introduction

In the eighteenth century the Dutch Republic lost its dominant position in international trade. Whether this century should be regarded as time of decline or as a time of stabilization in which other countries ‘overtook’ the Dutch Republic is a contested issue. Some scholars argue that Dutch trade was marginalized by the mercantilist policies of European countries.¹ Others claim that the phenomenon ‘voorbijlandvaart’ negatively affected Dutch trade. In increasing numbers ships sailed directly to their destination, instead of bringing their goods to the staple market of Amsterdam.² More recently, C. Lesger stated that the staple market of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century was in the first place a centre of information exchange.³ In this line of thought, Jan Willem Veluwenkamp argues that the function of Amsterdam as ‘information hub’ eroded as a result of the ‘postal revolution’ of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, mercantilist politics supported shipmasters further to sail directly to their port of destination.⁴

However, these changes did not result in a sharp decline of Dutch shipping to the Baltic area, the backbone of Dutch trade. In general, the number of Dutch ships that passed the Sound remained stable during the eighteenth century, while the number of ships from other countries increased. This supports the theory that the Dutch economy in the eighteenth century stabilized rather than fell into decay. It also suggests that the Dutch maritime transport sector underwent structural changes since the phenomenon of ‘voorbijlandvaart’ did not result in a lower number of Dutch passages through the Sound. A conclusive explanation of how this supposed structural change took place has not yet been given. Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude suggest that Dutch maritime trade during the eighteenth century changed its focus from a north-south axis to a west-east axis, whereby the German hinterland became more important.⁵ According to Jonathan Israel, the decline of Dutch maritime trade was camouflaged by an increase number of small ships from the northern province Friesland and the West

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² Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, Nederland 1500-1815. De eerste ronde van moderne economische groei (Amsterdam 1995) 558, 578-581.
⁵ De Vries and van der Woude, Nederland 1500-1815, 580.
Frisian Islands which were used in the Baltic trade. The Sound Toll Registers Online (STRO) offer a promising tool for research which can result in a more precise insight into the structural changes in Dutch eighteenth-century maritime transport. This study aims fulfill this promise, both in terms of results as in methodology. The year 1737 is chosen as starting point because that is the first year for which data in STRO was available to the authors at the start of their research. For the same reason the year 1799 is the endpoint of the study.

Between 1737 and 1799 the total number of annual passages through the Sound increased from about 3000 to about 9500 passages. In the same period Amsterdam was responsible for a more or less stable contribution of between 1000 and 2000 passages per year. The five inhabited Dutch islands in the Wadden Sea during the whole period only played a very marginal role. The names of these West Frisian Islands, also known as Dutch Wadden Islands, are: Texel, Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland and Schiermonnikoog. A closer look at the development of the number of passages by shipmasters from these islands leads to the observation that the statement of Israel concerning the camouflaging effect that a rise of small ships from these islands had, may be in need of reconsideration. 250 shipmasters from the West Frisian Islands passed through the sound in 1750, by the 1750s this number fell below 50 ships per year. Other places in the Dutch province of Friesland, such as Lemmer and Dokkum, meanwhile became more involved in Baltic trade.

Graph 1: Total numbers of passages through the Sound per year.

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This observation raises questions about the causes of the decline of the West Frisian Islands’ involvement in Baltic shipping during the eighteenth century. The answers to this question can contribute to a better understanding of structural changes in the maritime transport sector in that century. In this article, it will be argued that shipmasters from the West Frisian Islands specialized in routes that were successful in the beginning of the eighteenth century, but fell into desuetude during the second half of the century.

Because these shipmasters were highly specialized, they became ‘locked in’ a certain route. In the case of the shipmasters in this study, this was often the route between Amsterdam and Gdansk. Therefore they were not able to switch on time to an upcoming route. To show this, the shipmasters that appear in the STRO have been categorized into four groups ranging from ‘once-only’ to ‘specialist’. On the basis of this, specialization patterns can be identified.
Routes & Specialization

In order to establish on which specific routes the shipmasters were active the westbound, or ‘returning’, passages were used. Eastbound passages were not used because in almost 40% of the passages ‘Baltic Sea’ is reported as the destination. The shipmasters from the West Frisian Islands to a large extent sailed in service of Amsterdam. During the eighteenth century the spatial structure of Amsterdam’s the Baltic trade changed. Although most of the important trade routes which connected Amsterdam to the Baltic area remained stable, some routes gained or lost importance. The route Gdansk-Amsterdam can be considered as a route in the latter category. Until 1775 it was the most frequently used route. After 1775 the level of activity on that route decreased rapidly (graph 3). During the same period some routes emerged, such as the route Pillau(today: Baltiejsk)-Amsterdam.

Graph 3: the total number of westbound passages on the five routes most important to the shipmasters from the West Frisian Islands, 1686-1804

Before it was possible to connect the changes in the spatial structure of a part of Baltic trade and the demise of West-Frisian Islands Baltic shipping it was necessary to find out who made most of the voyages. Because the names of the shipmasters feature in multiple spelling variations in the Sound Toll registers the names were standardized. This was largely done on the basis of the name thesaurus compiled by the Frisian Historical and Literary Centre Tresoar. The thesaurus was supplemented when name variations were missing. A database of shipmasters from the West-Frisian Islands was the result.
The next step was to divide the total population into four categories: specialist, regular, sporadic and once only (graph 4). The number of passages and the timeframe during which these passages took place are the conditions on which the categorization took place. Shipmasters with the highest passages/time ratio were labeled as specialist, those with the lowest as sporadic. ‘Regulars’ form an intermediary category. The specialists and regulars of the islands which were more involved in Baltic shipping, Ameland and Terschelling, account for a larger share of the passages than their equals from the other islands. The most active quarter of the shipmasters from Ameland were responsible for 85% of the passages by shipmasters from Ameland. On the other hand, the most active 30% of the shipmasters from Texel made only 60% of the total passages. The specialist’s share of the total number of passages is probably higher because the shipmasters who feature in the dataset only once often actually belonged to a different port. Some shipmasters were inconsistent in the domicile they reported, a phenomenon known as the ‘hjemsted problem’. Therefore some of the once-only and irregular shipmasters in fact resided somewhere. For the same reason some of the passages made by shipmasters who did live on the West Frisian Islands are missing.

Graph 4: percentage of specialist/regular and sporadic/once-only shipmasters and passages per island.
Zooming in on Ameland

Now the names of all the shipmasters from the Westfrisian Islands have been standardized and subsequently labeled as ‘once-only’, ‘sporadic’, ‘regular’ or ‘specialist’, it is possible to find out specialization strategies of the regular and specialist shipmasters. This enterprise is based on a number of assumptions. In the first place, it is assumed that specialization is a process that for the greater part takes place on an individual level. Therefore it is necessary to distill general specialization patterns from individual shipmasters’ specialization characteristics. However, to check and compare the characteristics of all West Frisian Islands’ shipmasters, would not be a feasible enterprise. Therefore a second assumption was made, that is, the general downward trend of West Frisian Islands’ Baltic trade can be explained by the shipmasters that have been identified as ‘regulars’ or ‘specialists’. They are after all responsible for sixty to ninety percent of the West Frisian Islands’ passages. In the third place the similar downward trend in number of passages of the islands, suggests that focusing on the island that is responsible for most of the passages will also give probable explanations for the other islands. In this study the specialization of shipmasters from the island of Ameland was studied because the shipmasters from this island were the most active in Baltic shipping.

According to the STRO, 3662 passages by shipmasters from Ameland were made in the period 1737-1799. After standardizing the names, 622 shipmasters were linked to these passages. A quarter of them have either been labeled either as regular or specialist. They are responsible for more than eighty percent of the passages. When passing the Sound at Helsingør on a voyage to a Baltic town, shipmasters sometimes gave up ‘Baltic Sea’ as their port of destination. For that reason only the data from the westbound passages, when the shipmasters gave up a more precise Baltic port, is used here. When only the regular and specialist shipmasters are taken into account that have made at least three westbound passages, 79 regulars and 45 specialists remain.

The shipmasters that regularly went to the Baltic Sea, seem to have specialized in two or three routes. For the most of them, Gdansk was the most important destination. For some however, Riga or Königsberg was more important. This contrasts with the clear domination of the route between Amsterdam and Gdansk in the case of the specialists. Most of them focused on this route only, while a few almost always went to Riga. These results suggest that the more shipmasters went to the Baltic Sea, the more they specialized on one route.
Most shipmasters from Ameland specialized in maritime transport to Gdansk, some on shipping to Riga. As stated above, the level of activity on the route Gdansk-Amsterdam fluctuated in the eighteenth century: in the first half of the century it was the busiest route and in the second half the route was marginalized. There seems to be a relation between this development and the decline of West Frisian Islands shipping in the period examined in this study.

**Concluding remarks**

In this study it was established that within the total shipmaster population certain individuals were more active in the Baltic shipping than others. A small group of shipmasters specialized and made the larger part of the voyages to the Baltic. The micro study on Ameland resulted in some interesting findings on the specialized shipmasters from that island. Although specialization seems to have brought them success, it also made them vulnerable. The specialists depended on the trade between Amsterdam and Gdansk. When this trade decreased, they lost their business. They did not switch to a different route which was on the rise such as Pillau-Amsterdam.

In economic literature this phenomenon is called ‘lock-in’. Entrepreneurs adopt a certain commercial strategy and tend to stick to this strategy even when the circumstances call for a different one. Somehow, entrepreneurs do not perceive the necessity for change until it is too late. We think this concept can explain the sad fate of West Frisian Islands Baltic shipping in the eighteenth century.

The decline of Baltic shipping by shipmasters from the West Frisian Islands during the eighteenth century was to a large extent caused by a change in the spatial structure of the Baltic trade. The shipmasters were specialized in a trade which was in decline during the eighteenth century, that is, trade between Amsterdam and Gdansk. This suggests that the decline was not caused by competition from shipmasters from other countries or ‘voorbijlandvaart’. Instead a plausible explanation should go into the trade between Amsterdam and Gdansk.

In this study only a small fragment of Baltic shipping and Dutch Baltic shipping during a short period of time was investigated. Whether the abovementioned conclusions have more general relevance can only be established by further research.