Het slavenschip Leusden: over de slaventochten en de ondergang van de Leusden, de leefomstandigheden aan boord van slavenschepen en het einde van het slavenhandelsmonopolie van de WIC, 1720-1738
Balai, L.W.

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Summary

The slave ship Leusden was one of the last slave ships of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) to embark on a slave-trading voyage. On 1 January 1738 the ship foundered in front of the Maroni River estuary in Suriname and 680 African captives were sent to their deaths by the crew, which made it the largest shipping disaster in the history of the Dutch slave trade. Even so, this event is not part of the Dutch history canon. The most important reason for that is the low interest in this period in Dutch history, even though the Netherlands was involved in the transatlantic slave trade for over 240 years.

From her maiden voyage in 1719 until her sinking in 1738, the Leusden made 10 slave-trading voyages. During these 10 voyages, 6,564 captives were embarked, 1,639 of whom did not survive the passage. Before sale, another 102 captives died in the slave warehouses, bringing the total number of deaths to 1,741, which represents 26.5% of the number of captives embarked in Africa, an inconceivable waste of human life.

The history of the Leusden is part of the slave trade history of the WIC. On 3 June 1621, the Dutch Republic’s States General granted a charter to the WIC for a trade monopoly within the Republic for the Atlantic region. Even though the company was not founded for the purpose of trading slaves, this became an important activity within a few years, due to the conquest of parts of Brazil from the Portuguese and the short-lived control of these in the period 1624-1654. From the middle of the sixteenth century, Brazil had been importing African captives, who were forced to work as slaves on the sugar plantations. The partial conquest of Brazil forced the Dutch to supply African slaves to the plantations. It is not known whether the WIC ever considered engaging white labourers from the Netherlands to work on the sugar plantations.

In 1637 the Dutch captured one of the most important Portuguese forts in West Africa from which the slave trade to Brazil was carried on, São Jorge da Mina (Elmina). As a result of this conquest, the WIC became the most powerful participant in the slave trade in West Africa for some decades. After the loss of Brazil in 1654, the WIC continued to be involved in the slave trade. Via the island of Curaçao, which served as a slave depot, the company supplied African captives to the Spanish colonies in the Americas. The Spaniards did not have any trading posts in Africa because this was prohibited under the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). To supply African slaves to their colonies, Spain entered into supply contracts (asientos) with countries that did have access to the slave trade in West Africa. Under the asiento system, the WIC also supplied African captives to the Spanish territories in the Americas. Usually it acted as subcontractor of those who owned the contract, the asentistas. For the WIC,
supplying African captives to the *asentistas* and, by circuitous routes, also direct to the Spanish colonies, was a profitable trade. This came to a halt when after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713), the British acquired the *asiento* from the Spaniards, which meant that Curaçao was no longer needed as a slave depot.

Not much research has been done on slave ships, which were indispensable for the transport of African captives to the territories in the Americas. This is remarkable because the treatment of captives on the slave ships may give us a clearer picture of how this forced transport of people was organized. There are some eyewitness accounts from people who worked on English slave ships. This concerns mainly accounts by abolitionists, who tried to mobilize public opinion against slavery and the slave trade by means of their stories. The impression conveyed by these accounts is that the captives on these slave ships were permanently oppressed and treated with exceptional cruelty. Similar accounts describing the Dutch slave trade do not exist. We have no way of knowing whether the Dutch treated their captives in the same ruthless manner, as described by the English abolitionists. On board of slave ships there were two groups of people, who were in totally different circumstances, even though they had to make the passage from Africa to the Americas together. For the crew of the ships, usually white Europeans, the passage from Africa to the Americas was part of a much longer triangular voyage, which had started in Europe and which brought them, via Africa and the Americas, back to Europe. For the captives, it was a single voyage, made involuntarily. The white crew had to supervise the African captives, in a heavy-handed manner if necessary. There was always the fear and the risk that the captives would try to regain their liberty.

We cannot be sure how the Dutch fitted out the slave ships for the purpose of transporting African captives. The English abolitionists used the picture of the slave ship *Brooks* to show how the transport of captives was organized. The captives had very little room to move and were packed together as closely as possible in the hold of the ship used for this purpose. The *Brooks* is known to have been specially designed and built as a slave ship. The Danish slave ship *Fredensborg*, too, was specially built for transporting African captives. There is no unequivocal answer to the question whether European slave traders built any other special slave ships. As far as the Dutch slave trade is concerned, the prevailing view is that special slave ships were not built. An important argument in this context is that with a few adjustments, ordinary merchant ships could be made suitable for the transport of slaves. Nevertheless, research into the *Leusden* has revealed that from the second decade of the eighteenth century (1718) in any case, the WIC signed special contracts for the building of slave ships. As for shipbuilding contracts, a distinction was made between various types of ships, depending on the intended use of the ship. Special contracts were made for slave ships, cruisers or *retourschepen* (homeward-bounders). Cruisers were heavily armed ships that permanently sailed off the coast of West Africa for the purpose of fighting illegal trade and protecting the ships of the WIC against enemy attacks. *Retourschepen* were used for carrying goods from the Republic to West Africa and back again. The *Leusden* was specially built as a slave ship and was used only for that
purpose. Slave ships were also used as cruisers, however, or as ships for the return voyage to Africa. Even so, all the necessary facilities were fitted out at the time of the construction of a slave ship, which meant that the ship could be easily adjusted in Africa for the transport of captives. The notion that ordinary merchant ships could be made suitable for the transport of African captives, with only minor modifications, is less self-evident than we have assumed until now.

The presence of African overseers during the passage was an important aspect in the transport of African captives on Dutch slave ships. Earlier studies on the Dutch slave trade did not pay attention to this subject. The Dutch slave ships carried special overseers (bombas) who were engaged to instruct the captives during the passage. These overseers were free Africans, who were sometimes employed by the WIC (who were on the payroll, at least), but also offered their services to the company as self-employed persons. These bombas were aboard the slave ships that went to the Americas and from there to the Netherlands, where they sometimes stayed for a long period before returning to Africa. Based on the documents studied, it can be established with certainty that bombas were aboard of the Leusden during the seventh, ninth and tenth voyages in any case.

During the passage to the Americas, the two main worries of the captains of slave ships were the outbreak of infections and acts of resistance (revolts) among the captives. Both situations occurred aboard the Leusden. During the seventh passage a revolt broke out among the captives, as a result of which five whites were killed. It was never clarified how this revolt took place and who was in charge of it. The WIC just sent a message to the Director General in Africa suggesting that the revolt on the Leusden had been led by the bombas aboard that ship. After the revolt during the seventh voyage, the slave ship captains were advised not to put too much trust in the bombas. Nevertheless, the WIC continued to use these African overseers on their slave ships. The ninth voyage of the Leusden could well be called disastrous. Due to an infection aboard, before and during the passage, only 226 of the 689 captives reached Paramaribo alive.

After the British had acquired the asiento in 1713, the slave trade still offered opportunities for the WIC. Particularly in Suriname and Berbice, there was great demand for workers at sugar plantations. Surinam planters were not wealthy, however, for which reason the WIC was not prepared to supply large numbers of captives to this colony. The WIC preferred to find other opportunities to continue the slave trade in a profitable manner again. In 1719, the Board of Directors of the WIC, the Heren Tien, decided to organize the island of Saint Eustatius into an open slave market for the surrounding islands to compensate for the loss of the supply of African captives through the Spanish asiento system. The Heren Tien had been informed by the administrators at Saint Eustatius that there were opportunities to organize the slave trade for the surrounding islands in a profitable manner. The first voyage of the Leusden was for Saint Eustatius, where, pursuant to the decision made by the Heren Tien in 1719, the first load of captives was delivered.
The first four voyages of the *Leusden* were to the island of Saint Eustatius. The data of these voyages show that trade to this island was indeed profitable for the WIC. They also show how the sale of the captives was organized and which surrounding islands they were sold to. These supplies to Saint Eustatius stopped just as abruptly as they had started. The *Leusden* delivered her last load of captives for this island in 1726. In 1727 the WIC discontinued the slave trade to Saint Eustatius. This sudden cessation of the trade for Saint Eustatius was due to the presence of the British, who delivered captives to this island as well. The WIC could not compete with the British and decided to intensify their supplies to Suriname.

Consequently, the destination of the other six voyages made by the *Leusden* was Suriname, but the decline of the WIC as a slave trade organization was inevitable. The WIC could not compete with other slave traders, especially the English and the French. There were two reasons for that: first, the inferior quality of the trade goods the WIC shipped to Africa. Second, the WIC was not able and willing to pay the prices African slave traders asked for the captives. The British and the French who actually paid higher prices for the captives and brought along trade goods of higher quality received preferential treatment from the Africans. This meant that ships owned by the WIC, such as the *Leusden*, stayed near the African coast for many months before they had their desired load of captives aboard. Due to the termination of the WIC’s trade monopoly for Africa in 1730, the company’s weak position deteriorated even further. Free – Dutch – traders were now allowed to trade on Africa’s west coast as well, with the exception of a strip of sixty miles. In 1734, the States General lifted this restriction as well, which ended the WIC’s trade monopoly for West Africa. Only the slave trade in Suriname and Berbice were reserved to the company. In 1738, however, the WIC reached the conclusion that it was no longer able to supply to Suriname the numbers of captives prescribed in the charter. Accordingly, in this year, it decided to give up its monopoly on the slave trade.

In the year in which the WIC decided that it would no longer play an active role in the trade of African captives, the *Leusden* perished at the Maroni River estuary. The WIC paid hardly any attention to this disaster and the many lives it claimed. The sinking of this ship and the fact that no attempts were made to save the captives’ lives make it clear that the captives transported were considered goods that could be lost due to calamities. The WIC’s directors took the decision in April 1738. It is unknown whether the disastrous sinking of the *Leusden* in January 1738 affected this decision.