Kapitale ossen. De internationale handel in slachtvee in Noordwest-Europa 1300-1750

Gijsbers, W.M.

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Summary

Capital Oxen. The international trade in slaughter oxen in Northwest-Europe (1300-1750)

The historiography of the international ox trade has a long history, but Dutch contributions were as yet few (appendix 1). This study deals with the history of the international trade in slaughter oxen (castrated bulls, see § 2.2) in Northwest-Europe during the period 1300-1750. The oxen were transported over land and sea from the production area Denmark/Schleswig-Holstein to Germany and the Netherlands (for an overview of the involved European production- and grazing regions and the main transport routes, see map 1.1; for locations in the research area, see map 2.1). The province of Holland was taken as a starting point. The central focus, as explained in chapter 1, was on the determinants of the long-term development of the ox production and trade (in the period 1300-1750) and the interaction between that long-term development and the collective and individual behaviour of the participants in the overseas trade (between 1575-1750).

In this book, the trade relation between Denmark/Schleswig-Holstein and Holland was described as a symbiosis, as a situation in which two unlike organisms coexisted to their mutual benefit. For the discussion of the long-term development (chapter 2) the timespan 1300-1750 was divided into three periods: 1300-1500 (rise), 1500-1660 (expansion) and 1660-1750 (contraction). Maarbjerg defined three phases to analyse the integration of Scandinavia into the world economy in the period 1570-1625. In that integration process he distinguished a phase of price integration (in which the prices of local products were determined by the larger system outside the local economy), a phase of product integration (in which the production system was modified in response to international demand) and a phase of commercial integration (in which foreign merchants or their native agents and capital penetrated into local markets). It is a concise characteristic of trends in the research period.

In the Late Middle Ages, under the influence of a rising demand for beef cattle from West-European towns, there was a concentration of the breeding of slaughter oxen in Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein. From the 14th century onward, the province of Holland became a grazing area for this cattle, destined for the growing urban population of the southern provinces of the Netherlands. Foreign cattle traders were privileged by the count of Holland to visit markets in Holland with their oxen. From 1389 onward the Westfrisian Zuider Zee town of Hoorn developed into the most important cattle market in this area. The development of the toll of the count of Holland (the 'grafelijke beestentol') over the period 1467-1722 was studied to get an impression of the overseas import in the north of Holland (§ 2.3, figure 2.5, appendix 6).
In the 16th century in Denmark (and to a smaller extent in Schleswig-Holstein) the production of oxen was adapted both quantitatively and qualitatively to the growing demand from abroad. A number of compulsory production regulations were promulgated in order to establish a division of labour in the production of oxen along social dividing lines. The gist of it was that farmers raised oxen until these were five to six years old, the age that they were sold as grassoxen to the Crown and the nobility. On the estates of the latter, the oxen were house-fed during the winter season, after which they were sold to well-to-do merchants, who exported them as stall-oxen (figure 2.1). The international cattle trade was linked to an extensive slaughter in autumn, after which the beef was preserved to supply the growing urban population with beef during the winter season and for provisioning of the fleet. (§ 2.4).

In the 16th century Wedel (near Hamburg) became the most important international market where Danish and Schleswig-Holsteinian exporters sold their oxen to German and Dutch merchants (§ 2.4.3). The peak of the export of oxen over land from Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein past Gottorf and Rendsburg was registered in 1612 (52,350 oxen) (for the size of the export, see appendix 3; for two of the landroutes that were taken in 1731, see map 2.3). The 17th century decline soon showed the weakness of the hierarchical production system. That it lasted for quite some time was not only due to the political power the nobles had to extend it to their own advantage, but also to the capital generated by Dutch landowning merchants, who took part in the export more and more. (§ 2.4)

From the last quarter of the 17th century onward both the Danish and the Dutch authorities took their resort to protectionistic measures. The most important one on the Dutch side was the gradual introduction of a tax on the import of lean cattle from the years 1724-1729 onward (for the offices of the Admirality where this tax was collected, see map 2.2; for the registered import past de Abt, see appendix 13). With this tax the Dutch government aimed at switching from the fattening of lean foreign oxen to the fattening of homebred cows. In the course of the 18th century this high tax (ƒ 20,- per ox) (see table 2.5), in combination with the repeated outbursts of the cattle plague, put an end to the regular trade in oxen between Denmark/Schleswig-Holstein and Holland. (§ 2.5) In appendix 7 the total of the overland and overseas trade between the production area of Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein and the grazing area of Holland was roughly estimated (for a description see § 2.6). Considering the number and the duration of the disruptive circumstances which affected the international oxtrade during the research period, we have to conclude that periods with a disturbed export were a rule, rather than an exception.

Against the background of this long-term development and by means of notarial acts, the structure and the dynamics of the organisation of the overseas trade were described in chapter 3 (the value of this source was described in § 3.2; see also figure 3.1). Although inadequate for an estimate of the total overseas export (for an overview of the lacunary figures of this overseas export, see appendices 4 and 5), the 'standardized' freight contracts give an impression of the logistics of the overseas transport of oxen (or other cargo), while attestations throw light on the social aspects of it. Central themes in this chapter were the origin of merchants and
skippers (see § 3.3, tables 3.1-3.2, appendices 9-10 and maps 3.1-3.2), the moment of departure and the duration of the voyages (§ 3.4), the type and the gear of the ships (§ 3.5), the places of loading and the destinations of the ships in Holland (§ 3.6, table 3.3, maps 3.3-3.4), the way of travelling (individually or in groups) (§ 3.7), the conditions on board of the ships (§ 3.9) and the transportation costs (§ 3.10 and table 3.4). The most important levies mentioned in the notarial acts were described in § 3.11. In combination with municipal regulations, maritime law (Zeerecht) formed the juridical guideline in disputes concerning transport over sea. Examples taken from the notarial acts give an impression of these matters and of the procedure that was followed (§ 3.12-3.13).

It appeared that until the second quarter of the 17th century the trade in and the export of oxen was almost exclusively in the hands of merchants and skippers from the production area. The abolishment, in 1623, of the export restrictions by the Danish king because of the Thirty Years War marked a new period in the overseas export. To ship oxen to Dutch markets, Dutch skippers were employed more often. For that purpose freight contracts (sometimes by means of mandate: for examples, see appendix 11) were drawn up in Holland: initially almost exclusively by West-Jutish merchants (§ 4.4), but soon afterwards also by Dutch merchants, notably from Amsterdam (§ 4.6). The obstructed overland trade in oxen at the end of the 1620s led to a peak in the overseas supply of oxen in Enkhuizen, where the annual market had been organised since the turn of the century. In 1653 Enkhuizen lost this market to Amsterdam (§ 4.5; for locations of the market in Amsterdam, see map 4.1).

The freight contracts drawn up by Danish (mainly West-Jutish) merchants and Dutch skippers differed from those of the Amsterdam merchants and their skippers. The West-Juts directed the ships to locations on the West-Jutish coast, while the Amsterdam merchants often sent the Dutch skippers to Eastern Denmark (including Skåne, Halland and Blekinge), South Sweden and Norway (§ 3.6). In the contracts made by foreigners, cargo or ballast were rarely mentioned on the outward journey. Amsterdam merchants loaded the hired ships with (usually) unspecified goods. (§ 3.8) Besides skippers from Holland, many skippers from the provinces of Overijssel and Friesland were contracted by the Danish and Dutch merchants (§ 3.3; for an example, see the contract of four Dutch merchants with 132 skippers in appendix 12). Their flat- or roundbottomed ships could load up to 50-60 oxen. For destinations east of cape Skagen bigger ships (presumably flutes) that could transport about 80-90 oxen were put into service (§ 3.5 and § 3.8).

In chapter 4 the shift in participation of exporters of oxen was studied. In the first half of the 17th century the Danish and Schleswig-Holsteinian merchants personally accompanied their oxen to the Dutch oxmarkets. There were several burgomasters and councillors amongst them, often related by marriage (see § 4.4, appendices 9, 19A-B and 19D for the interrelations between several Danish and Schleswig-Holsteinian families, especially those from Ribe, Ringkøbing, Varde and Tønder). Prosperity was a precondition for admission to important offices. At the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, the international oxtrade offered the best opportunities for the accumulation of capital.
As a result of the series of wars that Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein got involved in, the production and export of oxen suffered; and as a consequence of that, so did many ox producers and -exporters who financially got into trouble (see § 4.2). From about the 1640s onward, the share of Dutch and Schleswig-Holsteinian merchants in the export grew at the expense of Danish and German exporters (see figure 2.3 and appendix 2). The Dutch merchants themselves - operating individually or in flexible, occasional companies - started buying oxen in the production area. The period which started at about 1660 is known as the 'Holländertijd' (the era of the Dutch) (§ 4.6). This had an effect on the organisation of the trade (export period and the size of the herds), the character of the trade contact (the social position of persons trading with one another) and on the international capitalflow (the decreasing number of foreign ox merchants spending their money in Holland) (§ 4.6.1).

In Holland the fattening of oxen had been a profitable investment until the 1670s - a period of economic growth - but landowning townspeople didn't dispose of their land during the period of economic contraction that followed. They exercised their political influence to protect their agricultural interests. Besides, the fattening of oxen in the countryside had also become a favourite pastime for landowning town-dwellers who fled their businesses and the crowded towns. Two late-17th century unions of graziers were discussed: 'the Honourable Guild of Graziers of Oxen' ('het Loffelijke Ossenweidersgilde') in Haarlem and 'the Good Men' ('de Goede Mannen') in Amsterdam (§ 4.6.3 and appendices 14-15).

In chapter 5 three casestudies (Tatinghof, Jensen and Deutz) were presented to highlight the so-called 'final phase of ox production and export'. The leading characters (and their next of kin) were active in different towns in Holland in other periods of the 17th century, moreover their economical position and social status were quite dissimilar. Tatinghof, market superintendent and innkeeper in Enkhuizen, can be considered as a representative of the period in which foreign merchants were the initiators of the ox trade and -export (§ 5.2-5.9). Jensen, merchant from Ringkøbing who chose Holland as the operating base for his commercial affairs, marked the transitional phase in the trade and export, in which the role of the Dutch merchants grew rapidly (§ 5.10-5.17). Deutz, a rich merchant from Amsterdam with land and a farmstead in the Beemster, was a grazier who through the years joined in occasional companies, buying their oxen directly in the production area (§ 5.18-5.28). The specifically named entrepreneurs stood in the centre of a larger circle of persons concerned in the ox trade or graziery and it became clear how sometimes their circles intertwined. Events and circumstances that influenced their entrepreneurship were discussed (for an overview of their activities, see appendices 16, 17 and 18; for their family trees, see appendices 19C-E).

In the concluding chapter 6 the interaction between the determinants of the long-term development in the ox production and -trade, and the behaviour of the people involved - or in other words, between factors and actors - is summarized. It was demonstrated that demographic, economic, political, social, cultural and physical determinants all affected the long-term development of the international ox trade and the graziery of oxen in the province of Holland. The concentration and growth of the population in the Dutch towns involved were discussed, and so
were the tension between demand and supply of oxen on the international market and the regulating role or reserved attitude of both the foreign and the Dutch government towards the ox production and trade under the changing circumstances. Other determinants that were mentioned were the changing character of the interaction between the social groups involved, the pleasure Dutch landowners took in the grazing of oxen and the unpredictabilities of nature. (§ 6.2) It was shown that deteriorating economical conditions in the production area that gradually caused the desintegration of the Danish production- and export system led to a growing participation of Dutch skippers after 1623 and of Dutch merchants from about the '40s onward, culminating in the 'Hollandertid'. Even though Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein were economically and politically weaker at that time, it didn’t mean there was commercial integration in the sense of capitalist expansion from a core (the Netherlands) into a periphery (Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein). The Dutch merchants didn’t strive for a monopoly to dominate the market. Apart from the fact that they were not in the position to do so - the production monopoly being in the hands of the Danish Crown and the nobility - the risks attached to the breeding and export of living slaughter cattle were probably too high. After all, oxen were of no use for breeding, for the production of milk or milk-products, and in Holland they were hardly exploited as draught oxen. The production outlay ran sky-high if the oxen had to be fed during the winter; there was no alternative but to slaughter them in autumn. So it all came down to common sense for business. The people entrusted with the purchase of the oxen in Denmark or with the payment for the oxen through Hamburg, had to be shrewd and pick their moment, in free competition with other merchants or their agents. (§ 6.3)

But if there was no economic dominance of the foreign economy by the Dutch, does it also mean then, that their influence on the national and international economy was limited? Certainly not. The coming of the Dutch influenced the financial climate in the production area. It was in fact the reason of the moving of the most important 'ting' - assemblies where the main financial-juridical matters were settled - that had been organised for ages at the same time of the year. Payments for the oxen now mainly went through Hamburg and less money was spent directly in the Dutch marketplaces for the purchase of return goods. Given the influence of such a shift within a capital intensive trade like the international ox trade, the question becomes relevant as to what its effect was on the cyclical fluctuations of the international economy that roughly coincided with the periods of its rise (circa 1300-1550), the expansion (circa 1500-1660) and the contraction (circa 1660-1750). (§ 6.3) In § 6.4 some recommendations for further research are given.