"In dienste vant suyckerenbacken." De Amsterdamse suikernijverheid en haar ondernemers, 1580-1630
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Summary

Most research on the economic history of the Dutch Republic focuses on international trade and its development. Only in a limited number of cases is the focus on Dutch industry as a whole or on specific branches of Dutch industry. We encounter the same phenomenon in early modern entrepreneurial history: research has been almost entirely focused on international merchants. This study is a first step towards correcting this imbalance. It deals with the sugar industry in Amsterdam at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, and particularly with the entrepreneurs who invested in the Amsterdam sugar-refining industry.

This book is divided into two parts. The first discusses the uses of sugar in the early modern period, the process of producing sugar, the origins of the European sugar industry and the organization of sugar refining in Amsterdam. The second part focuses on the sugar boilers. To study them properly, I collected information on several aspects of the life of each Amsterdam sugar refiner from many different sources (e.g. notarial archives, tax registers, registers of marriage banns) in order to establish some of the common characteristics of the group. This is called prosopography or collective biography.

The history of sugar as a consumer good starts a long time before the period studied in this book. Sugar as an extract from cane had been known in the Far East and the Middle East since around 6000 BC. However, it appeared in Europe only in the late Middle Ages. In the early modern period sugar was used in five ways: as a medicine, as a food flavouring (spice), as a means of conserving food-stuffs, as the ingredient of all kinds of figures used to decorate festive diners and feasts, and – as from the second half of the seventeenth century – as a sweetener, especially for the new hot drinks (coffee, tea and chocolate). In absolute figures the group of sugar consumers in Europe grew in the seventeenth century. Relatively speaking, however, sugar remained a luxury product until well into the eighteenth century, and only the elite could afford it.

All sugar in the early modern period was produced from sugar cane, which is why the sugar-refining industry was first established in areas where sugar cane was grown. In the late Middle Ages the European sugar industry was concentrated around the Mediterranean. When the demand for sugar grew in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and it became necessary to expand the cultivation of sugar cane, the cane and the refined sugar parted company: from the six-
teenth century, sugar cane was grown mainly in Brazil (but also on some of the islands in the Atlantic Ocean), while Antwerp and, later, Amsterdam became the centres of the Western European sugar industry. As a consequence, raw sugar had to be imported for the European sugar refiners. Sugar entrepreneurs could either import it themselves or obtain it from specialized merchants. Therefore, a reliable international trade and an active merchant community were two important conditions for the establishment of a sugar industry.

The process of refining sugar from the raw material comprises a series of repeated purifications. This was done by boiling the raw sugar substance, then cooling it and removing the impurities. After a succession of these actions it was possible to end production and make the liquid substance into sugar loaves. Each time the raw sugar ran through this cycle of refining, it became whiter, more expensive and more exclusive, thus creating different kinds of sugar. It is likely that the Amsterdam sugar boilers let the market situation dictate which kind of sugar to produce, because there is no evidence that they limited themselves to one type.

In contrast with many other branches of industry in the Netherlands at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the sugar-refining industry can be characterized as an open one: there was no guild or similar organization and therefore no barriers to new sugar boilers entering the industry. Even when the sugar industry became very sizeable and important in Amsterdam, no regulations were imposed and no guild was created.

Although theoretically anyone who wanted to start producing sugar could do so, some characteristics of the process of refining sugar formed obstacles to entering the industry. The investment in the buildings and equipment needed to make raw sugar into a consumer good was one such obstacle, although it could be overcome by renting a ready-to-use sugar refinery for a certain period. Another obstacle was the time it took to refine sugar. Many weeks passed between making the investment (buying the raw sugar) and enjoying the returns (selling the refined sugar). This is why it was of the utmost importance for a sugar entrepreneur to have access to long-term credit.

The relative openness of the Amsterdam sugar-refining industry at the end of the sixteenth century was probably promoted by the fact that it was a new branch of industry in Holland. Until the 1580s Antwerp was the only centre of sugar refining not only in the Netherlands but also in Western Europe. In the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Antwerp became the most suitable place for the Western European sugar industry for two reasons: Antwerp’s harbour had good connections with the Iberian peninsula – where most of the sugar cane came from – and the city had direct access to a huge hinterland as an outlet for refined sugar. The Antwerp sugar industry blossomed during the sixteenth century, supplying the whole of Western Europe with the sweet product.

The conquests by the Duke of Parma in the Southern Netherlands, which culminated in the fall of Antwerp in 1585, were a heavy blow to the sugar refiners.
The city on the Scheldt could no longer fulfil the demand for sugar on the Dutch market and an alternative had to be found. This turned out to be Amsterdam, which at the time was experiencing a powerful economic upturn. Information on the trade in sugar in Amsterdam suggests that the city had a sugar industry already in the 1580s. The industry developed enormously in the first half of the seventeenth century and Amsterdam became the most important sugar producing centre in Western Europe.

Usually the establishment of the Amsterdam sugar industry is linked to the exodus of people from the Southern Netherlands during the last decades of the sixteenth century. However, the geographical origins of the sugar entrepreneurs do not support this. The immigrants from the Southern Netherlands and mainly from Antwerp who settled throughout Holland played a role in the downturn of the Antwerp sugar industry and the growth of the Amsterdam sugar refining industry different from the one usually portrayed in the historical literature. Although a large number of the Amsterdam sugar refiners before 1630 stemmed from a family that came from the city of Antwerp, there was almost no occupational continuity on a personal level: sugar boilers who were active in Antwerp at the end of the sixteenth century did not migrate to Amsterdam, and the sugar producers in Amsterdam between 1580 and 1630 who originated from Antwerp had not been sugar boilers in their city of origin. The conclusion must be that of the group of immigrants from the Southern Netherlands that came to Holland and Amsterdam after 1580, only a few were sugar entrepreneurs. Thus a distinction has to be made: although the sugar industry did move from Antwerp to Amsterdam, the entrepreneurs did not necessarily go with it. Industrial know-how and labour did not always travel at the same time and in the same direction. Nevertheless, because the sugar-refining process was so complicated, the Antwerpers in the Amsterdam sugar industry must have had some elementary knowledge of the process. They would have acquired the necessary skills by (partially) learning them in Antwerp or by the oral transfer of knowledge.

As for the Amsterdam sugar boilers, the information from the prosopography indicates that the group of sugar entrepreneurs active in Amsterdam between 1580 and 1630 was a very heterogeneous one. By using information both on the position/function of entrepreneurs within the sugar business and on their activities in the trade, the group can be divided into three types of sugar boilers. Just over a third produced sugar themselves and worked in their own small-scale enterprise: these are what I call the sugar refiners (suikerraffinadeurs). The, economically speaking, widely orientated international merchant – the traditional figure of the refiner in the literature – did not dominate the group of Amsterdam sugar boilers at all: less than 30 percent of the sugar entrepreneurs had these characteristics. These were the merchants-industrialists (kooplieden-industriëlen). They were active in different kinds of trade and their relationship with sugar production was almost exclusively financial. The remainder of the Amsterdam sugar boilers (again roughly a
third) were involved in both the day-to-day business of sugar refining as well as in trade, mainly that in raw and refined sugar for their own sugar production. These were the sugar refiners-merchants (suikerraaffinadeurs-kooplieden).

The typology of Amsterdam sugar boilers indicates that its stereotypical image needs to be revised. The literature usually refers to rich, international merchants when talking about sugar entrepreneurs. These capitalists saw the sugar industry as just one of many possible investments, without giving it any special attention. Based on, among other things, the long-term investment required for sugar refining, this study shows that this description fits only a limited number of the Amsterdam sugar producers. At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, a third of the Amsterdam sugar boilers were small sugar producers working on their own. Sugar refining was their only economic activity. From this we can conclude that the sugar industry in Amsterdam up until 1630 was less capital-intensive than is usually supposed in historiography, and that it is likely that the industry still had many of the characteristics of the late medieval crafts in the first years after its establishment in Amsterdam. It should be questioned whether the breach between the medieval and the newly introduced early modern branches of industry was as clear-cut as has been supposed.

Another idea about industrial entrepreneurs in general and those in export-oriented industries in particular can be nuanced. The strong link between international trade and export industries (e.g. sugar refining) did exist on the level of individual entrepreneurs, but only for some of them. A limited group was active in both the sugar trade and sugar production. On top of that, these entrepreneurs did not all stem from the world of international trade; almost the same number of persons started their economic career as a producer rather than a merchant.

The division of the Amsterdam sugar entrepreneurs into three types fits the rest of their economic behaviour and their investments, even those outside the world of sugar refining. All three entrepreneurial types exhibited common economic behaviour and activities. The sugar refiners concentrated solely on the production of sugar, and did not have enough free capital to make other investments. The sugar refiners-merchants were active in trade on a limited scale only, mostly for their own sugar refinery. The amount of capital they had was not very large compared to that of other Amsterdam merchants. This may be one of the explanations for the lack of interest among the sugar refiners-merchants in investing in one of the two Dutch trading companies, the United East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC). The merchants-industrialists can be considered wealthy not only when their capital fortunes are compared with the two other types of sugar entrepreneurs, but also in comparison with all Amsterdam merchants. Therefore the merchants-industrialists were capable of developing a lot of economic activities, mainly in international trade but also, for instance, investments in real estate. Nevertheless, their good financial situation did not lead to a great interest in the VOC or the WIC.

The three types of entrepreneurs also differed in their social behaviour. It thus
seems likely that the economic sphere played a decisive role in shaping the behaviour of early modern entrepreneurs. The sugar refiners did not have family ties with other sugar boilers, did not fulfil an official function in Amsterdam and did not differ much from the population of Amsterdam regarding their addresses or the location of their graves inside church buildings. The merchants-industrialists show a completely opposite picture: they were related to other sugar entrepreneurs and other merchant families by several blood relationships and marriage ties, and they succeeded in displaying their status by living in a house in a prestigious street or on one of the canals, and by having their own grave at the heart of the church. These merchants-industrialists were held in high esteem by Amsterdam society. They were therefore more anxious than the other sugar entrepreneurs to maintain or even improve their reputation and that of their family. None of the merchants-industrialists was active in politics. The fact that most of them came from Antwerp may be a reason for this. City politics was a field the old Amsterdam elite reserved entirely for itself. Some of the merchants-industrialists, however, did fulfil functions in societal or church organizations, as did the sugar refiners-merchants. When we look at all the other aspects of social behaviour that were considered – viz. family ties with other sugar entrepreneurs, addresses in Amsterdam, the ownership of graves and their location within the church, and the importance of maintaining one’s reputation – we can say that the sugar refiners-merchants held a middle position between the sugar refiners and the merchants-industrialists.

For most of the Amsterdam sugar entrepreneurs the investment in the sugar industry was of major importance. The fact that all three types of sugar boilers were engaged in sugar refining for a long period is an important indicator of this. When the activities in sugar production are set against the economic and social behaviour of the sugar entrepreneurs, it can be seen that the group of entrepreneurs that was attracted to sugar refining was not as broad as is usually supposed. The decision to invest in a sugar business influenced that person’s economic and social activities. Sugar refining was not a branch of industry where an amount of capital was put aside temporarily. The entrepreneurs who engaged in exploiting a sugar refinery in Amsterdam at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century made an intentional, conscious choice specifically for this branch of industry – hence the common patterns of investment of each of the three different types of sugar entrepreneurs.

Again this deviates from the consensus in the economic-historical literature. The rich entrepreneurs who did not put all their eggs in one basket and risked investing in the sugar industry did exist (among the merchants-industrialists), but they constituted only a minority of the sugar boilers. At least as big was the group of entrepreneurs who considered sugar production as their main activity: the sugar refiners. For them the investment in sugar business was crucial, because it represented the core of not only their economic but also their social behaviour.
Thus far the conclusions relate only to the specific situation of the sugar entrepreneurs in Amsterdam. The question is whether the results of my research could also shed new light on early modern industrial entrepreneurs in general. Four points are of importance in this respect. The first three are mainly concerned with methodology, whereas the fourth is more theoretical.

First, the results of the analysis of the information on sugar boilers make it clear that intensive research at an individual level is the only way to arrive at meaningful conclusions on the functioning of entrepreneurs in the early modern period. Studies at a more general level tend to give too much weight to a couple of cases for which there are a lot of sources, but that are usually far from representative.

Second, the results show that we should abandon the idea that the primacy of early modern entrepreneurship lies exclusively within the sphere of international trade. This can only be revealed by an analysis of the course of the individual careers of early modern entrepreneurs. In addition, a profound examination of especially industrial entrepreneurship can shed new and illuminating light on early modern entrepreneurial behaviour.

Third, a close consideration of the origins of the Amsterdam sugar industry and the migration from the Southern Netherlands demonstrates that historical research on migration can only be done properly by using in the analysis evidence from the place of origin as well as that from the new residence. By combining the sources from these two places, severe doubts about the idea of continuity in occupation before and after the act of migration can be raised. Unfortunately, this idea still constitutes the starting point of many migration studies. I want to plead for an approach in migration history in which the possibility of a change of occupation is part and parcel of the analysis.

Fourth, the analysis of the economic and social behaviour of the Amsterdam sugar entrepreneurs brings to light one of the general characteristics of the early modern entrepreneur: the social and economic investments of an early modern entrepreneur were directed by a specific personal strategy that offered him at that point of his career the best possibilities to acquire wealth, power and prestige for himself and his family. In shaping this strategy, free capital and wealth or possessions were of the utmost importance. They steered not only the economic but also the social behaviour of the entrepreneur. We can thus say that economic characteristics acted as a condition for the social and political development of the early modern entrepreneur.

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