

The Rise of the Amsterdam Market and Information Exchange: Merchants, Commercial Expansion and Change in the Spatial Economy of the Low Countries, c.1550–1630. By Clé Lesger, translated by J. C. Grayson. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006. x + 326 pp. Figures, tables, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$114.95. ISBN: 0-745-65220-3.

Reviewed by Hugo van Driel

The Rise of the Amsterdam Market and Information Exchange, originally published in Dutch in 2001, is a well written study that combines theory and empirical descriptions in an elegant, straightforward manner. The Dutch rise to economic prominence in the decades around 1600 has received considerable scholarly attention, but Clé Lesger manages to add vitality to the subject through the use of heretofore neglected primary sources, such as the archives of the Amsterdam Exchange Bank and the assessment registers of the convoy and license duties collected at Amsterdam. Following a concise review of the literature, he proposes that a spatial economic approach will shed new light on the reasons for Dutch success. The result is a partial restoration of an old view: that Amsterdam's ability to overtake Antwerp and replace it as the center of European trade was due more to an "external shock" than to the internal dynamics of the northern Netherlands economy. This external shock took the form of a revolt by the Low Countries against the Spanish Habsburg king, Philip II, resulting in a split between the northern and southern parts of the region. This split became permanent after the Dutch blockaded the river Scheldt, Antwerp's connection to the sea, in 1585. The imposed separation, lasting for more than two centuries, dismantled Antwerp's dominance of the integrated trade and transport system within the Low Countries, undermining its important and diversified roles in international trade. Until that point, Amsterdam had dealt mainly with the Baltic and Nordic regions, but in a very short period, from 1585 to 1600, the northern Netherlands, above all Amsterdam, not only took over Antwerp's functions in the trade with southern Europe but also extended them by establishing links to other parts of the world, such as the Americas and Asia.

Lesger's description of the shift as a sudden one accords more with contemporaries' view of events than with recent interpretations in the literature. An

example of the latter is a 1997 study by Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude that has gained the status of a handbook. *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815*, views the modernity and efficiency of Holland's society and economy, and the entrepreneurial vigor of the Amsterdam merchants, as the factors behind the shift of trade dominance from Antwerp to Amsterdam. While Lesger does not deny that the unusual openness that characterized Amsterdam's economic climate was critical to its transformation, his explicit aim is to produce a less deterministic account of Amsterdam's rise.

In his revisionist version, Lesger assigns both less and more importance to the role of Amsterdam's entrepreneurs than recent historians have done. On the one hand, with the help of export registers, he shows that in the mid-sixteenth century, while Antwerp's commercial activities were dominated by foreign merchants who did not live there permanently, Amsterdam's merchants were not particularly "active" either. Around 90 percent of the persons who exported through Amsterdam resided outside the city, mainly elsewhere in the northern Netherlands. In other words, he concludes, the Amsterdam merchants showed no unusual entrepreneurial vigor. On the other hand, in describing Amsterdam's spectacular ascent after 1585, Lesger attaches considerable importance to the contributions of the many immigrants from the southern Netherlands. Profiting from their invaluable commercial relations and experience and their focus on economic activities, which they—out of necessity—pursued more exclusively and persistently than the incumbent elite, the entrepreneurial immigrants initiated Amsterdam's rapidly developing trade with Italy, Russia, and the Levant. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Lesger provides short expositions of the activities of individual entrepreneurs in order to illustrate his argument, which is largely based on the aggregated data he has drawn from the archives of the Amsterdam Exchange Bank.

Lesger adopts as his central theme the concept of gateways, "places that acted as intermediaries between the hinterland and the rest of the world" (p. 14). This is a deliberate departure from the habit of previous economic historians, who applied the more pretentious term "staple market" to characterize Amsterdam's central position as a center where goods were stored in large quantities awaiting re-export. The theoretical, but long-held and influential view that Amsterdam occupied the top rung in a hierarchy of

staple markets is by now out of fashion among economic historians. Lesger makes a convincing argument that the currently popular model in the economic-geography literature, which adheres to the view that there was a strict hierarchy of gateways, does not do justice to the dynamism and diversity of the trade networks that existed in the early modern Low Countries either. Lesger goes very far in his demolition of the staple-market thesis. He denies that the basic hazards of the premodern economy—such as slow, irregular, and unreliable transport and communication—underlay Amsterdam’s position as a central European market, where large stocks created transparency and stability. Its function as a gateway in transit trade was not haphazard, but “grew out of the strong demand and supply in the Republic itself” (p. 211). Amsterdam’s success rested on the concentration of information that was supplied by traders arriving from various countries at the bourse and elsewhere in the city, on its status as a central node in mail networks, and on the availability of brokers, price currents, newsletters, and cartographic and naval information. The “base prices” that were thus established on the central market, and not the stocks held there, acted to stabilize prices in the surrounding regions. Lesger is too eager, however, to conclude that Amsterdam primarily functioned as an “information staple,” when he downplays the advantages of offering the opportunity to physically inspect the wares at a central market. Instead, he simply states, “We are poorly informed about the details of bourse dealings around 1600, but just as in later years, international trade would have been based on standard samples, and not on samples of consignments” (p. 253). Subsequently, he writes briefly about textiles in order to substantiate his claim that “goods were homogeneous and came in fixed types and qualities” (p. 254), ignoring the fact that the achievement of standardization and consistency in the quality of the raw tropical goods that were so critical to the Amsterdam trade remained problematic into the twentieth century (see, for instance, Robert G. Greenhill, “British Export Houses, the Brazilian Coffee Trade and the Question of Control, 1850–1914,” Working Paper no. 6, Centre of Latin American Studies, University of Cambridge, 1972). However, this is but one weak spot in an otherwise excellent work.

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