CONCLUSION

NEW INSIGHTS ON DUTCH-PORTUGUESE RIVALRIES IN THE ATLANTIC

During the past fifty years the scholarship on Imperial and Colonial History and more recently on Atlantic History has strongly defended the thesis that the Dutch Atlantic enterprise had a mainly commercial character. The Dutch empire was based on a network of nodal points linking the key spots of their trading circuits. By contrast, the Portuguese created a territorial empire not only based on trade but also on agricultural production, especially of cash crops, to meet the consumption needs of the European markets. Land ownership, land exploitation and slave trade were important components of the Portuguese Atlantic. This historiography has also claimed that the arrival of the Dutch in the Southern Atlantic with superior commercial expertise and naval power was the main cause of the collapse of the Portuguese Atlantic economy in the mid-17th century. The analysis of the institutions, the people, the societies and the economies developed in the Dutch and the Portuguese possessions in Western Africa offer new insights on this subject.

The formation of these two Atlantic empires involved a wide range of actors: the states, the state-sponsored companies, the entrepreneurs and businessmen, the royal servants and Company employees, the commercial agents and the settlers. Each of these groups had their own specific goals and strategies. They were determinant in the shaping and the course of events in the Dutch and the Portuguese Atlantic.

This study has shown that the Portuguese Crown and the States General both aimed to build and maintain territorial and commercial Atlantic empires in the early modern period and both wished to hold a monopoly over such an empire. However, the strategies and the reasons behind the scramble for the Atlantic Empires were different.

The States General sponsored the formation of a monopolistic company for three main reasons: i) to plunder the Habsburg Empire and deprive the Spanish Crown of its major sources of income: the precious metals from the Spanish American colonies; ii) to promote the image of a powerful young Republic, able to rebel against the Spanish
rule and attack the core of the Habsburg Empire; and iii) to improve its reputation in the eyes of other European States also engaged in the political conflicts of the time. However, this design was met with great opposition from many powerful entrepreneurs and businessmen in the Republic.

From the late 16th century, these men had been engaged in the development of commercial activities between the Republic and Brazil, Venezuela, the Wild Coast, and North America without any support or intervention from the States General. On the one hand, from the late 1580s, Dutch merchants as well as Flemish and Sephardic businessmen who had immigrated from Antwerp and other cities of the Southern Netherlands engaged in new trade circuits. These circuits linked the Republic to Brazil via Portugal, Madeira and the Canary Islands. On the other hand, from the 15th century onwards, the Dutch traders acquired a key position in the redistribution of Portuguese commodities and colonial goods from the various Portuguese possessions to the Northern European consumption markets, including the Baltic, Scandinavia, the German States and the Southern Netherlands, among other regions. The growing availability of these colonial goods in the Dutch port cities and the increasing demand for the associated finished products in the markets mentioned earlier, together with the redistribution role of Dutch businessmen, stimulated the creation of several industrial branches highly dependent on the imports of colonial goods. Therefore, a monopolist company with a military character proposing to attack the Iberian overseas possessions, where these entrepreneurs and businessmen had multiple interests, was not welcome in commercial circles.

By contrast, commerce between the Republic and the African continent had to be initially fostered by the States General. Due to the limited knowledge of the merchants from the Republic about Western African trade until the late 16th century, the States General granted temporary fiscal exemptions to merchants and skippers conducting business in these trading circuits and financed the construction of Fort Nassau at Mouri in 1612. However, among the merchants from the Republic involved in the Western African trade, the States General also found strong opponents to the establishment of a chartered company. Many of these traders had commercial activities in the Portuguese settlements in Western Africa, such as Cape Verde, São Tomé and Angola. From their point of view, a monopolistic and military company would disrupt the trade in these areas. By contrast, the traders