CHAPTER SIX

THE COASTAL TRADE AND THE DUTCH-ATLANTIC ECONOMY

*My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,*

*Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate*

*Upon the fortune of this present year*  

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

In the economic history of the Dutch Republic, the coastal trade along the North Sea and Atlantic coasts has been given relatively little attention in comparison to the Asian, transatlantic and Baltic trades. The historiography of the Asian and New World trades has benefited from the centralized administration and accounting systems of the large joint stock companies, while the Sound toll registers have enabled a detailed study of the Baltic trade. By contrast, the commodity trade along the Atlantic coast of Europe was in the hands of individual trading houses and small commercial partnerships. Apart from the all too rare surviving port registers, the coastal traders left few traces of their activities beyond those transactions that needed notarization. These merchants worked at an international level but left documentation at a local level, further complicating attempts to assess the overall economic impact of the European coastal trade. To get closer to a quantitative picture of the Dutch portion of this trade will require the joint efforts of several historians to compile detailed studies of commercial life in each of the port cities and of every significant economic sector. French economic history of the first half of the seventeenth century not only suffers from similar restrictions but is complicated by the meager participation of French merchants in the coastal trade, a situation much lamented by observers such as Jean Eon and Jean-Baptiste Colbert.

In studies of integrated economic systems, the tendency has been to come up with a ‘champion’ sector or commodity which is then presented as the motor of the economy. In Dutch economic history, the

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‘moeder negotie’—the grain trade with the Baltics—held that position, until challenged by the growth of the ‘rich trades’. Instead of assigning primacy to one particular sector, however, early modern economic history requires us to consider the horizontal integration of local, regional, and international networks. Economic globalization came into its own in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, forcing people and markets in every corner of the navigable world to make decisions about participation, cooperation and/or competition for a slice of the pie. One nascent country along the European coast of the Atlantic, a tiny rebel nation comprised of seven bickering ‘united provinces’, used its location, technological know-how and population density to push itself to the top of the seventeenth century’s economic food chain.

In this process, an efficient distribution system for commodities—both those covering essential needs and those satisfying unnecessary luxuries—was of paramount importance. The trade in French wines and brandies was just one of the many sectors that fueled the Dutch economy. The myriad activities and investments of the wine trading merchants of Rotterdam exemplify the need to see even local trading practices as part of the much greater whole. We can position the French alcohol trade in ever wider circles, from its place within the Dutch economy to its place in Europe’s coastal trade, which in turn links it to the emerging colonial economies of the Americas—their own intertwined with the trade in slave labor from Africa—and which finally connects it with the trade in Asia’s exotic and luxury commodities.

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As noted by Van Tielhof, it is also possible that the Baltic grain trade earned this contemporary title because it was a mother’s job to feed her children, i.e. the Dutch population. M. Van Tielhof, *The ‘Mother of All Trades’: The Baltic Grain Trade in Amsterdam from the Late 16th to the Early 19th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 4.

3 The rulers of Japan and China kept foreign trade and Europeans at bay and under tight control.

4 The primary struggle continued to be between the maritime—and the landlocked provinces. Domestic competition further pitted Holland against Zeeland, and within Holland the city of Amsterdam against the other commercial centers of the province. These oppositions found expression in the non-payment of proportional contributions levied by the States General. “... most of the provinces, except Holland, in the payment of their proportion of 1,108,870 guilders designed [to establish another Admiralty board] were always slow and remiss, as to the whole, or else deficient in part.” See Pieter de la Court and Johan de Witt, *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland* (1662), The Evolution of Capitalism (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 187.