THE TOBACCO NATION:
ENGLISH TOBACCO DEALERS AND PIPE-MAKERS IN
ROTTERDAM, 1620–1650

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Jan de Vries and fellow author Ad van der Woude note in The First Modern Economy that little is known about the production of clay pipes, “perhaps because it involved a cheap, simple article of mass consumption. The clay pipe was the quintessential throwaway product—the Bic lighter of the seventeenth and eighteenth century.”¹ This paper intends to shed some new light on pipe-making and tobacco dealing in the Dutch Republic in the first half of the seventeenth century, especially in Rotterdam. Archival sources will be used to show the extent to which English natives dominated both sectors. At the same time, as we will see, tobacco produced in the English colonies, in particular the Chesapeake, was often carried to Europe not by English merchants but Dutchmen.

Anglo-Dutch Trade

Englishmen first entered Dutch territory in large numbers primarily for military reasons. The bilateral Treaty of Nonesuch, signed in 1585, stipulated that the English Crown would help the Dutch war effort against Habsburg Spain with money and troops, in compensation for which Queen Elizabeth I received as pawns the towns of Vlissingen (Flushing) and Den Briel (Brill) as well as the fortress of Rammekens, all in the province of Zeeland. At these places, groups of English soldiers, each under the command of a governor, were garrisoned for the next three decades, until the Dutch finally paid off their debt in 1616.² These soldiers were joined by countrymen in the first decades of the

seventeenth century, when scores of men and women moved from the British Isles to the Low Countries for religious and economic reasons. By 1631, there were seventeen English and Scottish congregations in the Dutch Republic.\(^3\)

The commercial ties between the two countries were strengthened shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Nonesuch, when a Habsburg army captured Antwerp, the commercial hub where the Merchant Adventurers had established a foothold on the European mainland. The Spanish occupation of Antwerp meant that England lost an important outlet for its main export item: semi-finished cloth. The bulk of the cloth exports was conducted by the Merchant Adventurers, who moved their seat first from Antwerp to Hamburg, and by 1598 relocated their “Court” to Middelburg in Zeeland. Recognizing the importance of this move, the Dutch Estates General exempted the Adventurers from paying import duties on English cloth, kerseys, and bays. The arrival of the Adventurers greatly stimulated Anglo-Zeeland trade, as wool and white unfinished cloth were increasingly carried via Middelburg to Leiden and other textile towns in the province of Holland, where these products was dyed and finished.

In 1635, the Court relocated again, now to Rotterdam, a city with rapidly expanding commercial connections to English colonies in the West Indies and North America. Contacts between Rotterdam and the English islands date back to the early years of English settlement. In the 1630s and 1640s, regular shipments of tobacco arrived in Dutch home ports from the English colony on St. Christopher (established in 1624),\(^4\) while tobacco from Barbados (settled in 1627) was traded in Rotterdam as early as January 1630, less than two years after Barbadians had started selling their crop.\(^5\) After 1635, commercial contacts with these foreign colonies were facilitated by the decision of the


\(^4\) Gemeentearchief Rotterdam (GAR), Oud Notarieel Archief (ONA) 167: 65/101 (September 27, 1634), 94: 40/75 (December 19, 1634). The English colony on tiny St. Christopher (sixty-five square miles) was sandwiched between two French settlements. Although the French and English jointly defended their colonies against Carib and Spanish attacks, they could not prevent the destruction of their colonies by a Spanish fleet in 1629.