Patterns of slave trading and slavery in the Dutch colonial world
1596-1863

Introduction

From the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, slavery played a fundamental role in the Dutch colonial world. All overseas possessions of the Dutch depended to varying degrees on the labour of slaves who were imported from diverse and often remote areas. The slaves were almost exclusively of African and Asian descent, as it was no longer deemed morally acceptable to enslave fellow Europeans and early experiments with Native American slaves had quickly been abandoned due to a lack of success. Meanwhile, in the Dutch Republic and selected other parts of early modern Europe, slavery and serfdom had almost entirely disappeared, even though an official moment of abolition eludes us. Historians have often been struck

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2 There is sparse evidence suggesting the presence of African and Asian slaves in the Low Countries from the sixteenth until the eighteenth centuries, but this is almost entirely drawn from the commercial juggernauts of Antwerp and Amsterdam, global ports with strong connections to overseas colonies. Our understanding of this ‘metropolitan slavery’ is still scanty, partly due to the scarcity of the source material – the numbers cannot have been very high – and partly due to the line dividing slave from servant appearing rather blurred here, if not de jure then certainly de facto. Slaves brought back on return voyages from the colonies – generally considered an illegal practice – were often manumitted on arrival in the Netherlands and became personal servants, with their daily tasks arguably differing very little from those serving as domestic slaves in the colonies. For a general overview of this reverse migration, see Poeze 1986 and Oostindie and Maduro 1986. As a cultural theme, African ‘slaves’ – especially young children – figured prominently in contemporary paintings of wealthy burghers. See Blakely (1993) for the African presence in the Dutch Republic. The unique but numerically insignificant presence of slaves in metropolitan society falls outside the scope of this chapter.
by this curious paradox: that the seventeenth-century Dutch took great pride in their hard-fought freedom and climate of tolerance at home, while simultaneously exploiting hundreds of thousands of slaves in their overseas dominions (Drescher 1994; Eltis 1993, 1999).

But perhaps this paradox holds the explanation as to why public awareness of slavery in Dutch history has until recently been so limited. In sharp contrast with most other lucrative commodities bought and sold by the merchants of the East Indies Company (VOC) and the West Indies Company (WIC), slaves seldom passed through the Dutch Republic. The trade in slaves, even then considered a rather ‘uncommon market’ (Gemery and Hogendorn 1979), was always held at a relatively comfortable distance. And whenever this physical distance was occasionally bridged, as in the frequently-cited Middelburg case of 1596, the Dutch commitment to freedom was instantly tested.3 Colonists returning to their homeland were generally prohibited from taking their slaves along and, when doing so anyway, risked the loss of their property by implicit manumission. The eminent historian of Western slavery, David Brion Davis (2000:458), spoke of these moral and legal boundaries as ‘primitive “Mason-Dixon” lines, now drawn somewhere in the Atlantic, separating free soil master-states from tainted slave soil dependencies’.4 Because of this physical and psychological separation, there was hardly any need to come to terms with colonial slavery in the metropolis.

How much more direct is the awareness of slavery in the United States – or most other former colonies in the Americas – where the institution had been planted in its very midst and functioned as a foundational theme in the national history? With the descendants of slaves visibly and ever more vocally present, citizens could not afford the luxury of ignoring an ignoble past. It may perhaps not come as a surprise that until this very day many Europeans, when confronted with the topic, still conjure up a Hollywood-type image of black slaves picking cotton in the antebellum South, as if slavery was an exclusively American invention.5

3 In 1596 a ship carrying 130 Angolan slaves, most likely captured at sea from the Portuguese enemy, entered the province of Zeeland with the intention of selling this human cargo for profit on the local market. However, these plans were, as far as we can tell now from the available documentation, prevented by the protests from several concerned citizens.

4 Sue Peabody (1997) has given a masterful historical analysis of this paradox in early modern France and its colonies. Recently, Susan Amussen (2007) explored how English metropolitan society came to terms with colonial slavery during the seventeenth century. The ‘Mason-Dixon line’ separated the free northern territories of the United States from the slave states of the South.

5 This traditional overemphasis on slavery in the antebellum US South is, undoubtedly, a result of the powerful influence of the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the popular portrayal of history by Hollywood. But in a sense, the European fascination with US slavery dates back to the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic Uncle Tom’s cabin (1852).