

Dutch Deltas: Emergence, Functions and Structure of the Low Countries' Maritime Transport System, ca. 1300–1850. Werner Scheltjens.

Brill's Studies in Maritime History 1. Leiden: Brill, 2015. xiv + 326 pp. \$149.

Werner Scheltjens has written a monograph in which he addresses an important lacuna in Dutch history. While the development of Dutch international trade on the republic's economy has been well researched, its main facilitator, maritime transport, received much less scholarly attention. Using an impressive array of source material, Dr. Scheltjens looks at the development of the Dutch maritime transport system through a geographical division of three deltas: the SMR (the south of Holland, including Rotterdam, but also Zeeland and Antwerp), the ZDZ (around the Zuiderzee, including the Wadden Islands, but also Amsterdam, Utrecht, and West Frisia), and the LDE (the far northeastern corner of the United Provinces, including Groningen). It's a pity the author explains this division rather simply by stating that "the delta is deemed to be an appropriate geographical unit" (8). It is indicative of a more general lack of explanation with regard to a number of methodological choices. While this does not make the book less relevant, it makes reading it at times frustrating, a feeling enhanced by the recurrence of various inconsistencies. At one point, the author claims that "a few villages in SMR provided maritime transport services before 1400" (30). Two pages later, this becomes

“in the period before 1400 an exceptionally large number of villages . . . in SMR also offered maritime transport services” (32).

The book is divided into five thematic chapters, four of these being reworked or expanded versions of earlier publications—a justifiable choice, although there is a sense of discontinuity throughout the book. The first chapter is about the location of Dutch maritime transport services within the three deltas and their development over time toward more integration and less autonomy. This chapter relies on an impressive amount of data on 328 places, but it suffers from a tendency to summarize too much of it and several of the included tables are hard to understand for a nonspecialist. A table containing the location coefficient, a measurement for “the share of a certain good in total freight transport” (15), of the deltas and outside places with regard to different shipping routes has values ranging from 0.08 to 61.64, making the exact meaning of these numbers hard to grasp. A second chapter deals with a classification of ports within the Dutch maritime transport system. There is a lack of elaboration on method and analysis that makes it harder to assess the value of this chapter in relation to the larger conclusions on the Dutch maritime transport system, particularly when introducing a classification tool for ports on page 71, based on a varying degree of self-sufficiency (between zero and over two) and home-market share (with a distinction at 0.5). The significance of the values is unclear, as well as the concrete historical meaning of these categories. The third chapter makes the necessary bridge between maritime transport and trade. Ultimately, the transport’s *raison d’être* remains commerce and this chapter is the most rewarding one. Here, the author successfully applies statistics on primary sources to show temporal evolution of certain trade routes, discussing the relation between these routes and the changing role of places within the deltas in the United Provinces.

Chapter 4 deals with the problem of the ambiguity of shipmasters’ registered domiciles and with the role of migration and registering in a neutral port in times of warfare. It is insightful as it adds a much-welcomed warning of caution when analyzing the source material. The last chapter is about the “flexible specialization” (146) cities adopted to stay competitive. As it tries to make sense of statistical sources in the framework of an inner economic logic of maritime places, it is a fitting end to this monograph; but again, the feeling remains that this chapter could (or should) have been longer. It’s a chapter that makes a successful case for studying maritime transport through institutions, however these should be defined, although much remains unsaid.

In the end, the author has offered an original approach to the important question of the development of the Dutch maritime transport system. The ambition of the work, however, could not be entirely fulfilled. In that sense, this book should serve as a motivation for other scholars to analyze the myriad questions connected to maritime transport. The author is aware of this, and concludes that much more research is needed, and that historians should also look at the technological development of shipbuilding and navigation or the maritime labor market. Werner Scheltjens has written an important book that is not without its flaws, but that does offer important insight into the structures of Dutch maritime transport in the United Provinces. It is a valuable

and original complement to the well-known discourse on Dutch involvement in early modern seaborne trade.

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