

Southern-Netherlandish Prize Papers as unexplored sources on maritime warfare, mercantile risks, and colonial commodity flows, c. 1702-1783

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The Prize Papers Collection, preserved at the National Archives in Kew, contains shipboard documents captured from enemy ships by the British Navy during the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1714), the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) and the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). The Southern Netherlandish part of this collection has been left unexplored, and offers us a starting point to investigate 'commodity flows' of American and Caribbean colonial goods such as sugar, tobacco, tea, rice, and indigo towards the Southern-Netherlandish ports of Ostend and Bruges. They contain two complementary source types revealing the circulation of commodities across the Atlantic Ocean: bills of lading, which enable us to quantitatively trace products, merchants, and shipping routes, and personal correspondence from merchants and ship captains allowing us to qualitatively 'look through their eyes' towards the risky circumstances created by maritime warfare and its potential commercial gains.

As formal documents, bills of lading contain a detailed description of a ship's cargo. Although these documents were generally disposed of upon the cargo's delivery, they have been preserved as Prize Papers in ships taken mid-journey. As such, they present valuable 'snapshots' of both 'ordinary' and 'illegitimate' early modern commodity flows.

Due to the restrictions of 18th century mercantilist policies, and as the Southern Netherlands did not hold any territory in the Atlantic basin, tropical commodities could only reach the region's markets by way of intermediate ports belonging to the colonial maritime empires. Research on the bills of lading shows that the Southern Netherlandish ports of Ostend and Bruges were not dependent on a single empire, but traded with both French and British ports in order to get hold of sugar, coffee or rice. In an example from an international network perspective, bills of lading also unravel the connection between a local small-town shopkeeper in Enghien, a merchant in Ostend, and a slave trader in Nantes. Lastly, these documents shed light on the importance of family, national, and religious ties in shaping early modern trade networks, from the plantation economy to the ports of arrival.

Both privateering and government restrictions on enemy trade disrupted commerce during wartime. Merchants and sailors' personal correspondence testifies to the commercial risks faced by privateering. However, interrupted trade routes often resulted in scarcity, which caused prices to rise. Resultingly, smuggling presented lucrative opportunities for ambitious merchants. We turn to the Prize Papers in order to explore these 'illegitimate' commodity flows, which shows us how merchants used double sets of bills of lading, as well as inventive hiding places on board the ship, to mask their real destination upon encountering privateers.

Despite the fragmented nature of the Prize Papers as shipboard primary sources, they give us new and unique insights into commodity flows, and the agency of merchants confronted with the adverse economic circumstances of maritime warfare.

Keywords: Maritime history; Prize papers; Privateering; 18th century; Atlantic; Commodity flows; Ostend