



ain  
versus Godliness

### *The Dutch Slave Trade*

On 1 July 2002, in the presence of Queen Beatrix, the National Slavery Monument was unveiled in Amsterdam's Oosterpark. Not only to honour the slaves and their descendants, but also to symbolise the close ties that exist both between the countries that were once involved in the slave trade and between the different racial groups now living in the Netherlands.

#### **The origins, rise and fall of the Dutch slave trade**

The Netherlands did not start transporting slaves from Africa to the New World on impulse. They followed the example of the Spanish and the Portuguese who, on their voyages to the New World, had first taken African slaves back home and then shipped them to their new colonies in South Ameri-



The National Slavery Monument (by Erwin de Vries) in Amsterdam. Photo by Klaas Koppe.



ca. Around the year 1500, about three per cent of the population of the Iberian Peninsula were slaves. To outsiders this Iberian trade in human beings initially seemed rather secretive and repellent. However, Dutch objections to the slave trade did not last for very long. After capturing part of Brazil from the Portuguese in 1630, it quickly became apparent that the demand for sugar by Dutch dealers could only be met by a regular supply of slaves. These dealers were members of the West India Company (WIC), which enjoyed a monopoly of trade and colonisation in the Atlantic area. When a number of traders first expressed a desire to engage in the slave trade, the WIC's board of directors, in good Dutch tradition, set up a committee to consider the moral implications of such activity. Unfortunately the minutes of this committee have been lost; but although its recommendations will remain unknown, the outcome speaks volumes. The WIC became involved in the slave trade. Even an enlightened thinker like Hugo Grotius was not averse to the concept of slavery or to the slave trade so long as the slaves were prisoners of war.

Originally the Dutch slave trade was almost entirely focused on Brazil, and between 1635 and 1645 about 25,000 slaves were transported there. But when the Portuguese retook the territory, the WIC had to find new customers. It found them in the Caribbean, where Spanish, French and English planters were desperate for cheap labour once they realised that sugar plantations could turn the region into a 'second Brazil'. Precisely how and when the knowledge and the materials required for growing and processing sugar

A drawing by Frans Post of a sugar mill in Dutch Brazil (1624-1654). *Stichting Atlas van Stolk*, Rotterdam.

cane passed from Brazil to the Caribbean remains unclear, but there is ample evidence to suggest that Dutch slave traders played an enthusiastic part in the process. Between 1645 and 1670 they sold about 10,000 slaves. Furthermore, Dutch slave traders also did occasional business in North America. Even before the foundation of the WIC, in 1619, a Dutch 'Man of Warre' had arrived in Jamestown, Virginia with 20 slaves on board, the first to be introduced into North America.

Eventually, however, the Dutch were also denied access to the English and French islands since these could be supplied by slavers from their respective mother countries. The ban gave rise to a new crisis in the Dutch slave trade. Again it looked as if this untypical branch of Dutch commerce was destined to wither away, just as it had seemed after the loss of Brazil. But now it was Curaçao that offered relief. At first sight this might seem strange, since little could be cultivated on a rocky little island where the rainfall was both inadequate and irregular. It was difficult enough to grow enough food, let alone sugar. The Dutch colonists, however, made a virtue out of necessity by turning the island into one of the most important transit ports in the region. From 1658, the transport of slaves to Curaçao got under way. Later on the Dutch island of St Eustatius also attempted to pick up a few crumbs from this transit trade in slaves, but without success. It lay too far from the South American coast to attract buyers from Venezuela, and although it was well placed for planters in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guadeloupe and Martinique, that area of the Caribbean was dominated by English and French slave traders. But eventually the transit trade in slaves via Curaçao also came to an end. From Jamaica the English were able virtually to monopolise the supply of slaves to mainland South America. In total, Dutch slave ships transported about 200,000 slaves to the Caribbean islands, and most of them ended up in the Spanish colonies.

Nevertheless, the Dutch slave trade continued to expand because, apart from Curaçao, a second market had opened up in the Dutch colonies on the 'Wild Coast'. These became the principal destination for the majority of slaves: 200,000 to Surinam, 16,000 to Essequibo, 15,000 to Berbice and 11,000 to Demerara. Indeed, the demand for slaves in these plantation colonies was so great that the WIC was unable to meet it and from 1734 the Company lost its monopoly and the slave trade was decontrolled. On payment of a fee, any Dutch shipping company could obtain a licence to engage in the slave trade. The result was a rapid proliferation: more than 30 companies, including a number of quite small firms – particularly in Middleburg and Flushing – began trading in slaves. That growth came to an abrupt end after 1775 when it became clear that the planters in Surinam were heavily over-mortgaged and no longer able to meet their financial obligations. Most of them went bankrupt and the shipping firms, who usually supplied the slaves on credit, lost a great deal of money. That was why at the end of the eighteenth century the government in The Hague seriously considered subsidising the slave trade. In the end the government did not go that far, but it did abolish all taxes on the transportation of slaves. The definitive death-blow was the French invasion of 1795. Only during the peace year of 1802-1803 were there one or two more slaving voyages.

## The slave trade in practice

Preparing a slave ship for sea differed somewhat from the preparations required by an ordinary trading ship. The difference lay not so much in signing on the crew or the stocking of provisions, but in the purchase of wares for barter. If their goods were not of a high quality, the ships' captains found it almost impossible to obtain slaves. African slave dealers were extremely fussy since at any one time there were usually so many European slave ships lying off the coast that they could choose from an overwhelming range of European goods. More than half the value of most of the cargos consisted of various kinds of textiles. Guns and gunpowder followed in second place. Wines and spirits accounted for about 10% of the value. Besides that there were also 'mixed goods', which included such things as glass beads, mirrors, wine glasses, cream jugs, cutlery, Delft sugar bowls and other crockery, aniseed, bells for horse-drawn sleighs (!), lead, and iron bars.

Over the years, the manner in which African slaves were bought underwent a number of changes. Initially, Dutch slave ships bought their human wares at the forts that the WIC had built along the coast. The garrisons first bought the slaves from African dealers. The slaves were then locked up in the fort's cellars until such time as they were resold to the captain of a Dutch slave ship in exchange for goods that he had on board. This was undoubted-

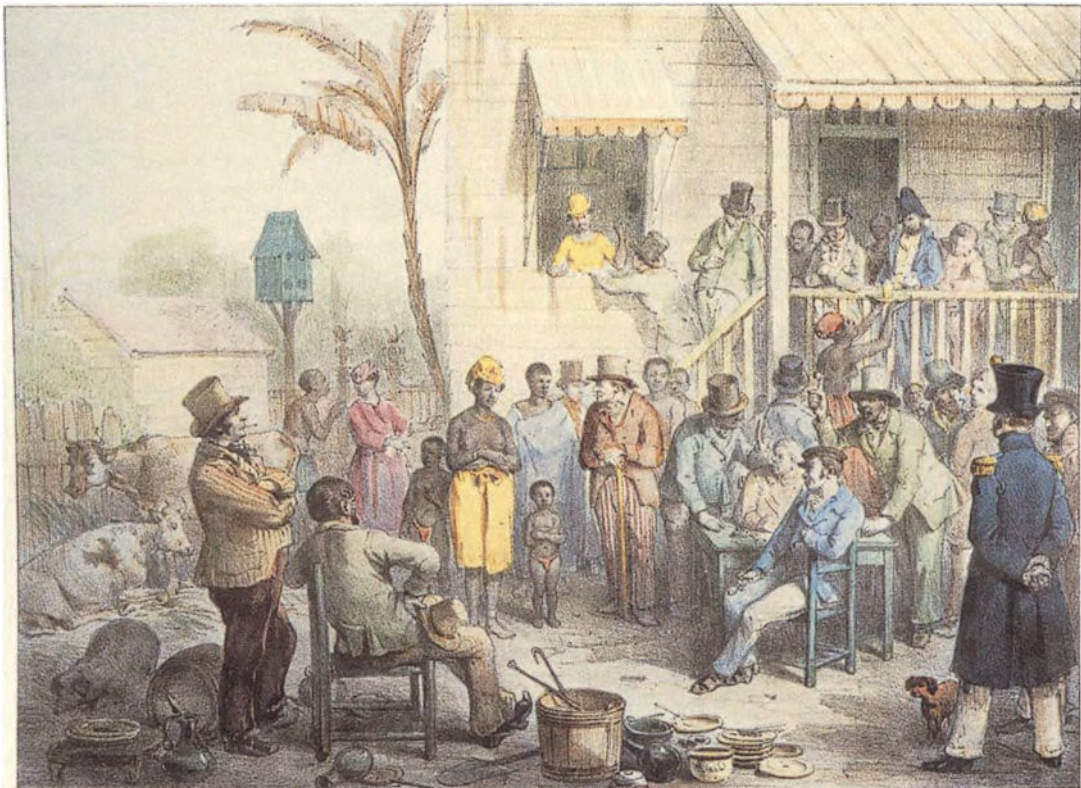
St George Castle in Elmina as seen from the sea, in *Vingboons Atlas* (1660). KIT, Amsterdam.



ly the most efficient method of purchase. The central fort for the Dutch slave trade was Fort Elmina on the Gold Coast (now Ghana), which the Dutch had taken from the Portuguese in 1637. When the Dutch Prince Willem-Alexander and Princess Máxima visited this former slave fort in April 2002, they expressed regret for this black page in the history of the Netherlands.

Eventually, as the slave trade expanded in the course of the seventeenth century, stretches of the coast without European forts started to get involved and the purchase of slaves took place increasingly on board the slave ship itself. Most slavers would spend several months sailing up and down the West African coast in order to give as many African slave dealers as possible the opportunity to offer their wares. When a canoe came alongside, a rope ladder was let down and the dealer climbed on board with his slaves. The captain or his first mate and the ship's doctor would stand ready to inspect the slaves. If it came to a sale, a selection of wares was displayed on deck. The African dealer then made a choice from a number of rolls of fabric, a gun, a bar of iron, and some bottles of liquor. Naturally there was some haggling, but usually the two sides reached an agreement. The dealer put the goods in his canoe, pushed off, and paddled back to the coast. The ship's doctor took the slaves down to the hold where they were given something to eat and drink and then chained up. This method meant that it generally took more than six months before a slave ship had a reasonable number of slaves in its hold. The third method of buying slaves consisted of building a wooden shed on the beach where the goods for barter were stored. The dealers brought along their slaves who, if a deal was struck, would have to spend

Female slave being sold at a Surinam slave market, from P.J. Benoit's *Voyage à Surinam* (1839). KIT, Amsterdam.





one or more nights on the beach before being transported by boat to the slave ship.

### **Profit or loss?**

Why did Dutch ship owners become involved in the transport of slaves? Why did officers and sailors take part in the slave trade with all its attendant risks, even though they may have regarded the transport and sale of slaves as morally repugnant? Was it because so much money could be made from

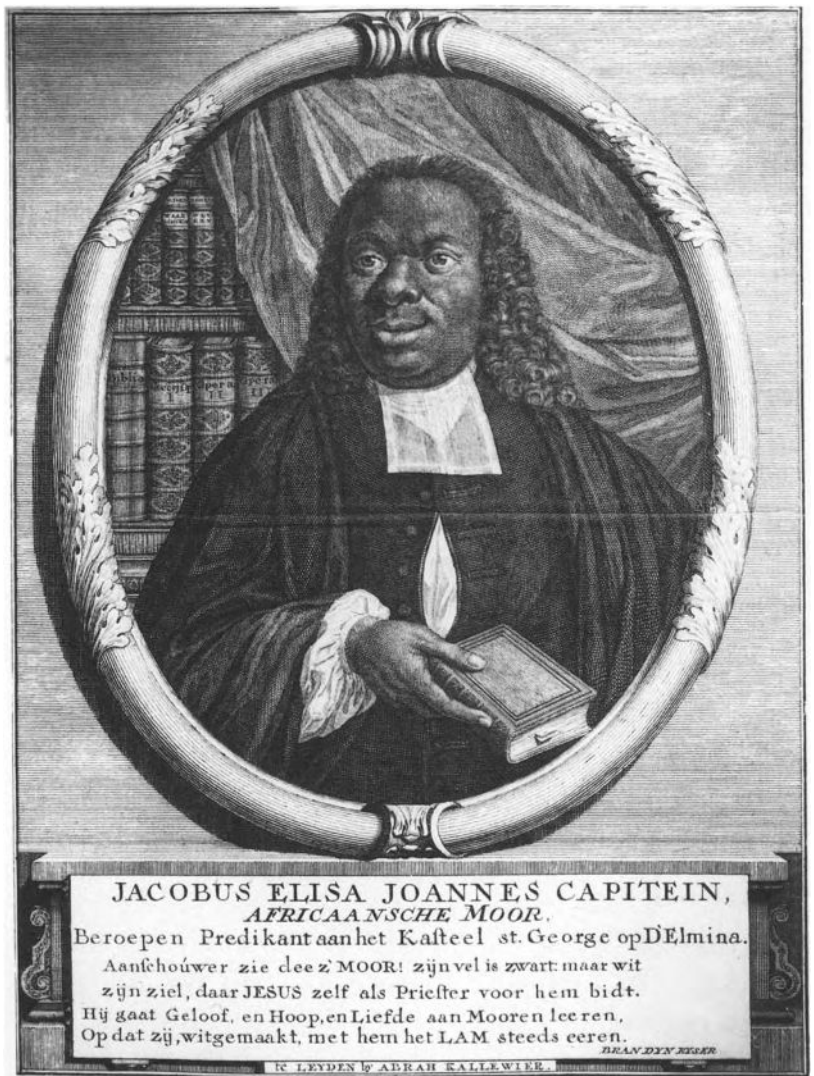
An allegory of gain: an African maiden with the horn of plenty, in Johannes Blaeu's *Atlas Maior* (Amsterdam, 1662).

the slave trade? In fact, the Dutch slave trade was not particularly profitable and there were even periods when many owners of slave ships made a loss. The WIC alone lost 4.5 million guilders in the slave trade to Dutch Brazil because the Portuguese planters in the colony did not pay their debts, in the expectation that their compatriots would soon free them from the Dutch yoke. And the Company did not do much better in the eighteenth century. In spite of all kinds of government subsidies, when the WIC was finally liquidated its debt amounted to as much as four million guilders. Individual shipping firms did somewhat better because they did not have the same level of overheads as the WIC. Unfortunately, the records of only one such shipping firm have survived: those of the Middleburg Commercial Company. Its profits were between two and three per cent. Nowadays we would consider that much too low, but in the eighteenth century such returns were quite normal. In any case, interest rates were no higher.

### **Abolition: the British clergyman and the Dutch merchant**

By the end of the eighteenth century the slave trade was facing increasing opposition. Criticism was also being expressed in a number of publications on slavery in Surinam such as Voltaire's *Candide* and John Gabriel Stedman's book on the cruelty of the planters. In the Netherlands, however, little concern was shown. Perhaps this was to be expected since, in contrast to England, France and Portugal, this particular branch of commerce was in decline from 1780. The question is whether it would still have been the case if the Dutch slave trade had been flourishing. Around 1800, the leading lights of Dutch society were far from being in the vanguard of the enlightened thinkers who dominated European political debate at the time. The new ideas about liberty, equality and fraternity met with a lukewarm response in the Netherlands. The Dutch had to concede that the slave trade and slavery were not exactly philanthropic institutions. Nevertheless, one had somehow to earn a crust – or preferably sugar and coffee – and that would be impossible without slavery and the slave trade. One of the more remarkable defences of the trade in human beings came from the hand of Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, a Ghanaian who came to the Netherlands as a slave and returned to Africa a free man with a doctorate in theology. In 1742 '*the Moor from Africa*' graduated from Leiden University with a dissertation that was to become a best seller. In it, the black preacher with a white heart defended the proposition that slavery was compatible with the Christian faith. It has recently been translated from the Latin into English by the American historian Grant Parker (*The Agony of Asar: A Thesis on Slavery by the Former Slave Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, 1717-47*. Princeton (NJ), 2000).

In the Netherlands, ideals are tried out only after their financial implications have been carefully calculated. It is true that towards the end of the eighteenth century the Dutch slave trade was no longer particularly profitable, but was that a good enough reason to forbid it? On the other hand, the English slave trade yielded far greater profits and it is a remarkable paradox that England was the first to abolish the slave trade. There were two main reasons for this difference between the Netherlands and Great Britain. In the first place, the eighteenth century saw several important religious changes



in England. Numerous new radical groups such as the Methodists, Quakers and Baptists were urging their members to strive for reform in their religious and social life, and to do so immediately. The Netherlands had no such groups.

Furthermore, at the end of the eighteenth century England had a fast-growing economy and a new middle class that sought to distinguish itself in all kinds of ways from the ruling elite. The abolition of slavery and of the slave trade was one way of doing this, and the House of Commons had never been bombarded with so many petitions as it was on these subjects. Moreover, the new science of economics, with Adam Smith as its leading light, regarded slavery as old-fashioned. Forced labour could never be profitable, whatever the planters might say. In December 1806 the House of Commons passed a law forbidding all British subjects to engage in the slave trade with effect from 1 March 1808. Radical Protestantism and the new ideology of liberalism had won the day in England.

Portrait of Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein. The first line of the poem by Brandyn Ryser reads: 'See this Moor! His skin is black, but white is his soul'. Engraving by François van Bleiswijk.



Holland's neighbour across the North Sea paid dearly for this ideological U-turn. Innumerable successful British slaving companies were compelled, from one day to the next, to develop totally new markets. And the abolition of the slave trade was followed in 1833 by the abolition of slavery, which cost the British taxpayer a further £20 million. Again England was out in front but on its own, for the abolition of slavery in the British colonies meant that a mere 4% of the world's slaves gained their freedom.

In the Netherlands it was the other way around. In contrast to Great Britain, when it came to abolishing the slave trade and slavery the interests of the trader came first. There was no political lobby campaigning for abolition, and the pressure group that did exist remained insignificant. In 1814 King William I, under pressure from England, issued a ban on the Dutch slave trade, ten years after it had already ended. In this way the Netherlands could make a philanthropic gesture without it costing anything. It was not until 1 July 1863 that the Dutch parliament abolished slavery, long after England (1833), France (1848) and Denmark (1848). The long delay in abolition was due not just to lack of pressure from the public but also to the refusal of Dutch politicians to use taxpayers' money to buy freedom for the slaves. However, the situation changed after the introduction of the forced farming system in Java. The sugar and coffee that the Javanese village communities were compelled to cultivate eventually generated so much profit that a single year's production could have bought freedom for the entire slave population of the Dutch West Indies. Forced labour in the East enabled The Hague to abolish forced labour in the West. It opened the way to providing compensation for the slave owners, though not for the slaves themselves. In ending the slave trade and in buying freedom for the slaves, the Dutch merchant had proved more than a match for the Dutch clergy. In the contest between Gain and Godliness, Gain won comfortably.

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*Translated by Chris Emery.*

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