

LIQUID SILVER: THE WINE AND BRANDY TRADE BETWEEN NANTES AND ROTTERDAM IN THE FIRST
HALF OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Henriette S. de Bruyn Kops, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: James B. Collins, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

In the economic history of the Dutch Republic, the coastal trade along the North Sea and the Atlantic shores has been given relatively little attention in comparison with the trans-Atlantic, Pacific, and Baltic trades. This coastal trade was responsible for over one-third of the maritime imports into the Republic, yet Dutch historiography has tended to focus on more remote, exotic, or better documented destinations. In the emerging global economy of the seventeenth century the interdependency of markets precludes giving primacy to a single sector or single region, but the coastal or cabotage trade deserves greater prominence. Wine was one of the key commodities shipped from south-western to northern Europe, so the study of the alcohol trade in particular enables us to discover more about the coastal trade in general and to properly recognize the importance of that sector to the Dutch maritime economy. The wine and brandy trade with France has been identified as one of the pillars of Dutch economic activity in its 'Golden Century', but this study is the first attempt to verify and quantify that assertion.

The rise of Rotterdam as Holland's second strongest economic center after Amsterdam coincided with the blossoming of its wine and brandy trade with France, and with a boom in the brandy production around Nantes, the peak of which occurred between 1620 and 1650. The sizeable Dutch merchant community in Nantes maintained strong ties to their relatives and associates back home. Dutch interest in trade with Nantes peaked at the time of the most concerted Spanish efforts to enforce the trade embargo against the Republic. In the Dutch scheme to evade the Spanish embargo and to ensure the continuing flow of silver to the north, Nantes was one of several French ports that acted as a transfer station between the Iberian peninsula and the Republic. Despite the secrecy surrounding the bullion and money trade, evidence suggests that the network of Sephardic communities along the European coast contributed significantly to the ease with which the Dutch obtained the silver and coins so vital to the functioning of the other commercial sectors.