

## INTRODUCTION

by

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In a survey on economic historiography in the Netherlands published in 1989, Jan Luiten van Zanden remarks that the period 1500-1650 received far less attention from Dutch economic historians during the past few decades than it did before 1960. The issue of the expansion of the Dutch economy up to the middle of the seventeenth century no longer ranks as prominently among topics considered worthy of theoretical reflection and empirical research as it did when the discipline of economic history was still in its infancy<sup>1</sup>.

This volume does not represent a new synthesis of scholarship on this period. It is not a new textbook. Its aim is more modest: to stimulate interest in the problem of the expansion of the Dutch economy in the early modern era by offering a variety of studies on key aspects of economic life at the time<sup>2</sup>. The nine essays included in this volume all centre on the period of relatively rapid growth, which is generally taken to have ended somewhere between 1650 and 1680. The starting-point chosen by the authors is not always the same. In a number of essays – notably those by Van Zanden, De Vries, Noordegraaf en Lesger – the long-term view is extended to comprise the entire sixteenth century or even a large part of the fifteenth century. Other authors have taken their starting-point in the last quarter of the sixteenth century with the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt and the establishment of the Dutch Republic, which also had far-reaching consequences for the development of the economy. What most of the nine essays have in common, though, is their interest in the issue of continuity, or discontinuity, between economic development during the Republic and in the period that went before it.

The geographical area covered in these studies is the whole territory of what after the 1580s came to constitute the Dutch Republic, otherwise known as the United Provinces or the Northern Netherlands. Only Van Zanden and Lesger for reasons of principle or because of the nature of the source material have chosen to focus on developments in one particular part of this area, namely the province of Holland.

The contribution by Van Zanden, which opens this volume, provides an overview of the evidence at hand on the growth of output in Holland between 1500 and 1650 and the extent to which it benefited capital and labour. The next four articles look into various sources of growth in the Republic at large, viz. the role of the entrepreneur, the development of the labour market, the advance of technology and the impact of government policies. The last four contributions deal with four different sectors of the Dutch economy: industry, agriculture, intraregional trade and foreign trade.

This survey of sources and sectors can of course not be regarded as exhaustive. The volume does for instance not include separate pieces on capital accumulation, natural resources or population growth, nor special contributions on such important sectors of the economy as herring fishing, whaling, the shipping industry or domestic services. Most of these topics, on the other hand, receive at least some attention, from various points of view, in one or more of the essays on other sources or sectors of growth. Capital accumulation, for example, is treated by Van Zanden, Klein and Veluwenkamp and Noordegraaf, natural resources by Davids and Bieleman and population growth by Bieleman<sup>3</sup>, while herring fishing, whaling and the shipping industry come up for discussion in the articles by Davids, 't Hart, Lesger, Lindblad and Van Zanden and the role of domestic services is briefly considered by De Vries.

Readers will notice that the authors use a wide array of conceptual tools, ranging from Von Thünen's fields of force and geographers' models of port systems down to Schumpeterian ideas on entrepreneurship and key notions borrowed from theories of political economy. These tools, moreover, are employed in different ways, depending on whether the author primarily aims at synthesis, analysis or recasting the statement of problems. Variations in emphasis notwithstanding, all the authors have striven to give an up-to-date summary of the state of inquiry on their subject, to signal important problems for further research and to assess – as far as the evidence permits – the contribution of the particular source or sector of growth they are dealing with to the overall economic expansion of the Dutch Republic.

The picture emerging from these studies is that of broad-based economic growth which, though accelerating after the 1580s, in many respects rested on foundations laid well before the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt. The expansion manifested itself in agriculture, herring fishing, foreign commerce and the shipping industry, as well as in industry, domestic trade and energy production. While the importance of the influx of capital and skills from the Southern

Netherlands in the late sixteenth century is rightly underscored by a number of authors<sup>4</sup>, it is also evident that the economy of the North had seen striking changes even before the effects of the Revolt came into the equation. There had already been a significant increase in agricultural productivity, growth of a large and flexible labour market, growth of a port system, a vast expansion of bulk trades with the Baltic region, an increase in energy production, a rise of new forms of industrial organization and a development of novel arrangements in public finance ? to name but the most essential transformations highlighted in this volume.

What the period after 1580 added to this, apart from an increased accumulation of capital and an impressive clustering of entrepreneurial talent, was particularly an accelerated advance of technology in many sectors of the economy, an increased interweaving of the rural economy of the inland provinces with the more urban economy of the coastal region, a huge expansion in demand and supply of labour and growth of a segmented labour market, development of an intraregional transport system, the rise of a variety of 'rich' trades, a renewed surge of industry and an extension of public facilities and policies in support of economic growth. The authors agree that the Revolt and the coming of the Republic was, in a sense, indeed a watershed in Dutch economic history. Economic expansion after the 1580s was to no small extent favoured by intervening political and institutional changes<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the essays in this volume on the economy of the Netherlands in the Golden Age ultimately point to the need to 'bring politics back in'.

## NOTES

1.. J.L. van Zanden, 'The Dutch economic history of the period 1500-1940; A review of the present state of affairs', *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands* 1 (1989) 9-30; 11, 13-15. It should be pointed out, however, that Van Zanden also rightly draws attention to the epoch-making studies published by, among others, members of the 'Wageningen School', P.W. Klein and Jan de Vries.

2.. We wish to thank Mrs. R. de Coursey for correcting the English of all contributions included in this volume (except the article by De Vries).

3.. The classic study is: J.A. Faber *et al.*, 'Population changes and economic developments in the Netherlands; A historical survey', *AAG Bijdragen* 12 (1965) 47-113.

4.. Notably in the contributions by Klein and Veluwenkamp, Davids and Noordegraaf.

5.. As argued in this volume especially by 't Hart, Klein and Veluwenkamp, Davids and Noordegraaf.