

Presentation MARTIN BERENDSE THE ATLANTIC DAY NOVEMBER 3th/AMSTERDAM

Excellencies, representative of UNESCO, representatives from the embassies and countries in the Atlantic World, ladies and gentlemen,

Coincidence and luck have shown to play an important role in handing over and sometimes even saving old archives. If history would have chosen just an other road, the archives of the first Dutch West India Company had been lost for ever. In 1821 for instance, a large part of them would have been sold as old paper. The famous fire in the ministry of the Navy in 1844 almost did the rest.

The most important part of the remained archives belonged to the chamber Zeeland. As you might know, the WIC-company had five offices, called chambers (*kamers*), in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hoorn, Middelburg and Groningen. The chambers in Amsterdam and Middelburg contributed most to the company. The board of directors consisted of 19 members, known as the Heeren XIX (the Gentlemen Nineteen).

The archives of the first WIC (1621- 1674) in the Nationaal Archief comprise of records on the Coast of Guinea, minutes of the meeting of the chambers collectively, minutes and records of the chambers of Amsterdam and Delft. A large part of these archives are records from the chamber of Zeeland, among which an important collection of records from Brazil from the period 1630-1654.

Now we take advantage of the Dutch characteristic feature to reach a compromise and take decisions by mutual agreement. All the letters and other documents from the Atlantic countries were copied five times, for every chamber a copy. This procedure enlarged the chance that old papers would survive.

Coincidence is also the main reason why the Brazilian letters from the seventeenth century are still available. They just forgot to clear up the shelves where they were stored.

But all these attempts on the archives of the WIC bring one important advantage: the digitization was not a tough job.

Digitization and presentation on the internet is a spearhead of policy of the Dutch Nationaal Archief. It gives us a wonderful opportunity to enlarge the access to and the use of archives. No trips to The Hague anymore, and when you come from abroad, that is a very pleasant circumstance.

Another advantage is that the vulnerable documents and registers can be withdrawn from regular use, and destruction can be avoided. For some users it will be a pity: they cannot enjoy the sensation of reading and feeling and smelling original documents from the past. That is a fact. But the advantages are equal to the disadvantages.

The Dutch Nationaal Archief has an ambition on digitization and presentation on the internet. But we do have to choose, for we can't present a hundred kilometers of documents, over 300.000 maps and millions of photographs.

The Dutch Program Mutual Cultural Heritage has its main goal in giving access, digitization and presentation of the heritage that the Netherlands share with former colonial countries. These countries are Brazil, Suriname, Ghana, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, South-Africa and Russia. Of course, there are more countries that share a history (like Guyana, the United States, Malaysia, Japan and Curaçao), but they don't play an official role in the program.

Our colonial history is not always a reason to be proud of. The colonial powers have brought much pain among the people in Asia, Africa and America. The other side of the coin is that our involvement is pretty well documented. In the Dutch Nationaal Archief we have hundreds of metres, but the countries we ruled in the past also have 'Dutch' archives: Jakarta (10 kilometres), Cape Town (over 300 metres), Colombo (over 300 metres), Chennai (60 metres), Paramaribo (hundreds of metres), Albany and New York (dozens of metres), Georgetown (dozens of meters).

These archives are sometimes the only written sources for the colonial history of a country and therefore of a great value. The interest of the presentation of these archives world wide is the wish of all participating countries. We have to respect that wish. Therefore, we emphasize the archivist access and conservation of the archives. When these conditions are fulfilled, we start the digitization and presentation on the internet. At the end of November we organize a training in The Hague for taking care of the access and the use of international standards. All participants of the Mutual Cultural Heritage program will be present.

The Dutch Nationaal Archief is so lucky to have the access to the archives in good order. So we can pay all our attention to digitization. Thanks to the Mutual Cultural Heritage program we already finished the digitization of the archives of the Old or First West Indian Company. Now we start with the second West Indian Company, the successor of the old company.

I have the privilege to open two presentations, so researchers and the general public can see and use the digitized cultural heritage of the West India Company:

- First the launch of the digital archives of the First or Old West Indian Company. More than 46.000 scans are now available for you!
<http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/ead/gahetnascans/zoekterm/WIC/aantal/20/eaid/1.05.01.01>
- Then push the button of the web presentation on the WIC (youtube of NA-site)

You can see and admire three wonderful documents:

1 View on Elmina castle in nowadays Ghana, 17th century

Elmina was built in 1482 as a trade centre by the Portuguese. In 1637 the Dutch became the possession of the castle and use it as a slavery depot for the West Indian Company.

2 The manuscript of the official license for the Dutch West Indian Company, 1621

This license permits the company to trade in the Atlantic area, but also to hijack ships of the Spanish merchants. Trade and war go hand in hand.

3 The historical atlas of the coasts of Brazil, Chili and Angola from 1640.

During the reign of Johan Maurits, governor-general of Dutch Brazil, the Dutch West-Indian Company succeeds to make settlements in Angola, which is an important slave market. The WIC also wants to settle on the American coasts for the cultivation of Agricultural products like sugar.

I end by showing you the clip on Roue'choice Roue Verveer is one of the host of the Series on Slavery the NTR is broadcasting momentarily.