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The historical interpretation of a strategic cargo
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The historical interpretation of a strategic cargo

Thijs Maarleveld

Introduction

In the development of maritime archaeology in the Netherlands, the Aanloop Molengat site, west of Texel (fig. 1) has a special place. Discovered in 1984, its rich cargo of metals and ingots was the occasion to extend heritage protection to include underwater shipwreck sites and to let research prevail over quick and dirty salvage (Maarleveld, 1993). Building on a small group of professionals and large numbers of volunteers, methods for fieldwork under exposed North Sea conditions were developed and tested. Around thirty articles, specialist and interim reports were published while fieldwork continued, but it was only in 2011, that the balance could be drawn up, thanks to an Odyssee-grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. The grant permitted a team that was coordinated by Alice Overmeer and Wilma Gijsbers in Lelystad with assistance of the project’s original director, Thijs Maarleveld in Denmark, to make the collected data digitally accessible and to evaluate the collected information as a whole. Another 18 specialist reports and catalogues were prepared and integrated in a ‘final’ publication, not in the form of a traditional monograph, but in the format of a multi-layered, digitally enhanced article in the open-access Journal of Archaeology in the Low Countries, an interesting new avenue in archaeological publishing (Maarleveld & Overmeer, 2012). The present paper illustrates that ‘final’ is a very relative concept, as it always leads to new research and considerations. Now that the
archaeological data is consolidated, it becomes a challenge to see whether it can be interpreted in the context of the historical narratives relating to the period, but even more to see whether the independently consolidated archaeological data can contribute to the interpretation of the historical processes, not only by providing an anchoring point in the longue durée but also in the context of more cyclical and contingent processes. This is what this contribution intends to do.

The Aanloop Molengat ship and its cargo

Analysis of cargo and site plan (fig. 2) lead to the inevitable conclusion that the Aanloop Molengat ship is Dutch. Its carrying capacity was at least 550-600 ton. This is derived from its measurements and internal organisation, but also from the measured and calculated weight of its cargo (Table 1). Moreover, the ship was well-armed. Eleven cast-iron gun barrels were found across and around the wreck-site. The guns are 9-pounder semiculverines, large guns for large ships, in view of the overall dimensions of the ship and the fact that its upper works broke away. It is assumed that the ship originally carried more 9-pounders, or even heavier armament.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Measured weight Aanloop Molengat cargo.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pins</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cloth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wrought iron products</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cast iron products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather</td>
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<td>Ivory</td>
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<td>Tin</td>
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<td>Lead</td>
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<td>Iron / Steel</td>
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<td>Mercury</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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</tbody>
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The total weight of the Aanloop Molengat cargo is no less than 550 to 600 tons. This translates into more than 280 - 303 last, to use the measure of the day, if we accept the proposition that a last is 1,973 tons.

The Aanloop Molengat ship was a large ship: 300 last in the terms of the day. It was departing from the Texel Roads in the Wadden Sea when it sank in the approaches (Aanloop) of the Molengat gully that connects the Texel tidal inlet with the North Sea. This must have taken place between 1635 and 1640 (or 1648 at the latest), with a major loss in the beginning of November 1638 as a likely - yet unconfirmed - candidate. The cargo that the ship carried derived from the Dutch Republic, the Amsterdam staple, although most of it was sourced from elsewhere. It had been brought to the Republic across borders of war and despite any limitations on the transport of strategic goods.

The only product in the cargo that was probably produced in Amsterdam itself is pins, a regular produce of domestic industry in the city. The pins come in four sizes, just like they should according to a deed relating to their production (Van Dillen, 1939: nr. 789). Woolen fabrics, represented by leaden cloth-seals from the cities of Leiden and Delft, are the only other product in the cargo that was actually fabricated in the Dutch Republic. But more woolen fabrics were sourced from Hondschoote in the western tip of Flanders, then in the Spanish Netherlands, now in France, and from Mons in Spanish Hainaut. The Leiden seals are consistently stamped with the date 1639. It is the earliest possible date for the ship's last departure. Leiden and Hondschoote were competing centres of factory-based production of woolen cloth of varying quality and colour. Both were booming in the 1630ies (Posthumus, 1939; Coornaert, 1930). On contemporary production in Hainaut we know very little. At least part of the present consignment was top quality purple herenmant and sove de seigneurs, a non-felted fabric, woven in a twill pattern. The production of these expensive fabrics would later decrease in favour of cheaper cloth (laken). The fact that production could hardly keep up with the market combined with the consistent reference to a single production year, is the core of the argument that shipment occurred relatively shortly after production in 1635.

It is likely that barrels with wrought iron products such as nails come from Brabant (or Liège). It is therefore that the map (fig. 3) shows a third arrow from the Spanish Netherlands, east of those from Hondschoote and Mons. A consignment of leather was most probably brought into the Amsterdam staple from the West-Indies (Latin America and the Caribbean), before having been loaded onto this ship. Ivory comes from Africa.

A more substantial part of the cargo consists of non-ferrous metals. It was their discovery that made Aanloop Molengat into a maritime archaeological milestone, as - at least formally - it settled the prevalence of heritage legislation over salvage practice in the Netherlands (Maarleveld, 2006). Tin of high quality comes from Bohemia, mined under royal - Habsburg - statutes. A smaller portion comes from Saxony, not under Habsburg rule, not catholic, but protestant. Interestingly, however, Bohemian and Saxon tin is jointly packed in spruce barrels. It has been traded through several hands along the Elbe to Hamburg and onwards to the Republic, as overland routes were certainly blocked as a result of the Thirty-Years' War (Terhorst, 2012). A shipment of lead was mined in little Poland, in the area of the mining town Olkusz, close to Kraków. Polish sources refer to embargos on its transport at times of war (Molenla, 2002: 36). Apparently such embargos were easily overcome down the Vistula and through Gdańsk. Equally strategic as lead is iron or early industrial steel, as the detailed metallurgical studies by Joosten and Mienhuys (2012) show the material in the cargo to be. It is produced from low phosphorous...
and low manganese ores, but it is presently impossible to say where it comes from. Certainly not from the Netherlands, but Sweden and Bavaria are equally likely candidates. Bavaria suggests itself on the basis of the modern process and the contemporary appreciation of Bavarian steel (Witsen, 1671: 119). That would mean that it would have been sourced from Habsburg – and thus enemy – territory through Hamburg; if from Sweden, it is sourced through the Kattegat route, just like the Polish lead. The close relationship between the Amsterdam merchant coterie and Swedish iron and steel production is well-established (Helmfeld 1963; Klein, 1965). The origin of precious mercury carried in lead-capped square storage bottles can likewise not be determined on the basis of its intrinsic qualities.

Fig. 2 (above and left). Overall plan of the Aanloop Molengat site, indicating the different categories of cargo (drawing A. Overmeer / A. Vos RCE).

**Historical background**

In the history of the Dutch Republic the year 1635 lies almost exactly halfway between the end of the twelve-year truce in 1629 and the conclusion of peace with Habsburg Spain in 1648, which settled the Dutch Revolt and the Eighty Years' War. Around 1635 the war faction in the States-General and stadthouder Frederik Hendrik tried to intensify campaigns against the Spanish in the Southern Netherlands, whereas others, with strong backing from the merchant class in the Province of Holland and the City of Amsterdam would rather liaise with Spain in order to reduce negative impact on maritime trade. In that respect, the Spanish outsourcing of war in the form of intense privateering from Dunkirk was a particular menace. Competition for control between the military faction and merchant interests that favour a diplomatic solution date from before the conclusion of the Twelve Years’ Truce in 1609, but continued unabatedly (Poelhekke, 1953; Israel, 1995).

On the wider European scene, 1635 lies in between the Bohemian rebellion against Habsburg rule that started off the so-called Thirty Years’ War in 1618 and its conclusion in 1648, at the same general peace conference in Münster, Westphalia that settled the peace between the Dutch Republic and Habsburg Spain. As religious fervour was both fed and overruled by power politics, the Thirty Years’ War is a highly complicated conflict including all sorts of troubles and military campaigns. In historical analysis it is commonly broken down in four phases (Pajés, 1972). In 1635 the second or ‘Swedish’ phase had just come to an end. At the battle of Nördlingen (6 September 1634) the alliance of Swedish and protestant-German forces trying to defeat the imperial – Habsburg – troops had not been successful, but had suffered a severe beating themselves. As
Fig. 3. Verifiable links of the Aanloop Molengat ship projected on the more or less contemporary map of Europe by Willem Jansz. Blaeu. Amsterdam is given pride of place, as the ship was probably fitted out from there. The green star indicates the origin of the timber of its keel. The other red stars and arrows indicate origin and route of the cargo prior to being loaded on board (with Africa and the Caribbean outside the map). The blue arrows indicate the ship’s probable itinerary towards the Mediterranean, with France as destination for its cargo. A star is placed on Brittany as it is there that Louis XIII and Richelieu as well as their successors laid out extensive arsenals.

A consequence Saxony, one of the leading protestant states in Germany, prepared a separate peace with the emperor. This so-called Peace of Prague was concluded in May 1635. It isolated the Swedish troops on the middle European scene and shifted the balance of power in favour of imperial and catholic forces, but also in favour of the Habsburg dynasty. For France such a shift favouring Habsburg was unacceptable. So far, France had only marginally taken part in the war, although it had been intensively involved through diplomacy and by financially supporting parties that would weaken Habsburg power. It had, for instance subsidized the military campaigns of the Seven Provinces in the Spanish Netherlands as late as in April 1634. From now on, however, Louis XIII and his minister Richelieu were more inclined to active interference, and the ‘French’ phase of the war began. French troops were sent to central Europe. In February 1635 the relationship with the Seven United Provinces was sealed with an assertive military treaty, and in May of the same year France declared war on Spain (Houtman-Desmedt, 1979; Deyon, 2011).

Historical interpretation

With the data on ship-size, armament and cargo consolidated, it becomes possible to give this information a role in our understanding of the past. At a very basic level the Aanloop Molengat assemblage and interim reports have long started to inform us on specific production processes. But, all things considered, it is also possible to take our interpretation a step further and to develop a historical narrative relating to the cargo as a whole. Where does it fit in the 1630s as we interpret them in economic, political and social history; or in the history of specific nations? All nations linked by the red arrows in fig. 3 are implied, as they all have ‘verifiable links’ with the assemblage. But the Dutch Republic
stands out; it was there that the ship was built, outfitted and laden. And so does the destination, even though the cargo never arrived. Having been sourced through which we denote as the 'Amsterdam staple', the cargo could go anywhere. But actually, the specific context leaves only a limited number of possibilities that make sense in terms of reviewing and rewriting historical narrative.

Size and armament suggest a ship that was engaged in the Mediterranean trade, which with reference to the Straits of Gibraltar was called Straa vaart (E.M. Jacobs in Maarleveld & Overmeern, 2012). Ships in this trade were generally tramping, meaning that they would take profitable cargo to and from whatever port en route. Leaving the Dutch Republic they might load cargo destined all the way for the Levant, but that would be more exception than rule. Moreover, nothing would prevent Dutch merchants to trade with enemy powers or their subjects (Brujin, 1980: 141). This implies that a destination for the first haul in France, Northern Spain, or Portugal would be as likely as any Mediterranean port. Nevertheless, the composition of the Aanloop Molengat cargo makes many a destination unlikely. Of course it is possible to conceive of the cargo as separate shipments, But both the consignment of iron or steel (510 to 570 tons) and the consignment of lead (90 to 50 tons) are so substantial that it is more natural to consider the cargo as a unity, destined for one client. Considering the strategic nature of the goods, this client is most likely to be a public party, a sovereign and a belligerent one (at the time there were hardly any exceptions in Europe). The central European Habsburgs would not, however, source these materials so indirectly through the Atlantic; neither would the Sublime Porte or any subordinate unit in the Ottoman Empire (Casale, 2010). Habsburg Spain is different; it certainly traded with merchants from the Dutch Republic (Ebben, 2011). But the Iberian Peninsula itself is rich in ores. Portugal and Spain would certainly import copper (Glamann, 1971) and occasionally lead (Chirikure et al., 2010), but lead and iron, and also tin and mercury are available from local sources, with production dominated by the crown (Fernández de Pinedo Fernández, 2007). It would be like bringing coal to Newcastle, to bring iron bars to the Spanish king. On the way to the Mediterranean, however, lies the coast of France. France also had resources of its own, but industrial production lagged behind the demands of the centralizing state (Deyon, 2011). In view of its military ambitions, however, France did have money to spend to compensate for lacking supplies (Pagès, 1972).

The story that the Aanloop Molengat assemblage seems to push onto us, is that the ship may have been destined for the Mediterranean, but that the cargo was destined for France. The direct corollary of this interpretation is that the supply of these strategic goods was part of - or a consequence of - the military treaty that the negotiators for the States General had struck with Louis XIII and Richelieu on 8 February 1635. As the treaty between France and the Dutch Republic included the possibility of dividing the Spanish Netherlands between the two, it is commonly referred to as the Traité de Partage. In Dutch national history the treaty has been very contentious from the beginning. It was under the pressure of the imminent arrival of Cardinal-Infant Don Ferdinand as new governor and military leader in the Spanish Netherlands that the military faction could convince the province of Holland's representative Adriaen Pauw to agree with the deal in the first place (Geyl, 1948: 420 seq.). Don Ferdinand was the Spanish king's brother and had been critically successful at Nördlingen, which gave extra weight to his appointment. After having dealt with the Swedish and German opponents of the Austrian Habsburgs, he was to find a military solution to the Spanish king's problems in the Netherlands. In the Republic the appointment favoured the military faction and the alliance with France alike. Resistance was not only fed by merchant interests; internal politics were also at stake. Any military success would risk favouring the regal and centralizing ambitions of Frederik Hendrik who as stadhouder was the Republic's military leader, but hardly more than that. Holland and the Amsterdam merchant class including Adriaen Pauw were his powerful opponents, but could be brought round in early 1635.

The military bond with France of 1635 was already contentious when it was forged, but as it provided a basis for French expansion northwards later in the century under Louis XIV, it definitely got an infamous reputation (Geyl, 1959: 190 et seq.). Moreover, as the agreed demarcation did not conform to the linguistic boundary, it was considered a major breach of community spirit, treason rather, to the Dutch speaking population of the southern Low Countries in national history as written in the 19th and early 20th century (Presser, 1975: 217). What the Aanloop Molengat cargo seems to confirm, however, is that the merchant party wholeheartedly profited from the opportunity that the Traité de Partage created, whether the supply was an integral part of the deal or just its consequence. This kind of opportunism characterizes entrepreneurial behaviour of the group to which Adriaen Pauw and for instance arms dealer Louys Trip belonged (Klein, 1965). A younger peer was Cornelis Witzen (1605-1669) who like many others was deeply involved in shipping (Elías, 1963). He seems to have been even less supportive of the ambitious stadhouder than Pauw. The fact, however, that he was equally opportunistic in matters of political and economic profit, certainly supports the arguments to interpret the Aanloop Molengat cargo in the context of that military cooperation. He was the father of Nicolaes Witzen, the writer on shipbuilding (Witzen, 1671) and may well have been involved in one or several aspects that led to the shipping of the Aanloop Molengat cargo. This inference is further explored elsewhere, where it is suggested that a range of charters that he collected includes a charter
for a series of stocky 130 ft. vessels, according to which the Aanloop Molengat ship may actually have been built in the late 1630ies or early 1630ies (Maarleveld, 2013).

The Traité de Partage of 1635 and its aftermath is an episode of military, political and commercial history that has been shunned away from, as it was not particularly honourable to either the military factions or the development of Holland’s trade. In the context of French national history it more or less disappeared as well. After all, the expansion northwards - then and later - remained confined to a very limited zone, including Dunkirk and Hondeschote as places relevant to the present story. The truth of course is that the Aanloop Molengat cargo - consigned by Cornelis Witsen's relations or not - did not come any further than the place where it was discovered three and a half centuries later. The supplies did not in any way profit the French or the Republic’s military operations. Richellen had to find other supplies of metal, ivory and purple suye de signeurs. It is only after the archaeological information has been weighed and analysed that the story is stirred up and added to with new inferences.

Conclusion

Research into the context of the Aanloop Molengat wreck-site leads to a few daring suggestions on how its archaeological data inform us on European political history between 1635 and 1640. It is suggested that the ship was destined for France that had ordered its cargo as part or consequence of a contentious deal which did not find pride of place in the respective national histories of France and the Dutch Republic. It also leads to reflection on the source quality and the nature of Nicoles Witsen’s work on shipbuilding. And finally, comparison of the number of timbers over four meter of ship length leads to an indicative index that helps in recognizing Dutch-flush shipbuilding in field-archaeology. But these latter two points are subject of a separate article.

Acknowledgements

The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research and all contributors to the project’s fieldwork and ‘final’ publication are most heartily thanked, the responsibility however, for any interpretation beyond the documented data rests with the author.

Notes

1 On-going research by Hell (cf. Hell & Gijsbers, 2012), see also Maarleveld & Overmeir, 2012.
2 The expression ‘verifiabe link’ figures in the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. It is an important marker for integration of heritage approaches (Maarleveld, 2012).

References


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