Chapter

24. A Forgotten Page in History? The Southern Netherlands' Early Participation in Slavery

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Historians have not written much about the Southern Netherlands' early participation in slavery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1993, American historian Allison Blakely pointed out that historians from the Netherlands and Belgium had hardly researched the presence of Black people in sixteenth-century Antwerp. According to Blakely, this might be due to a sense of shame about the subject, or to the fact that slavery was so ubiquitous in Antwerp back then that the topic hardly seemed worth researching. It is remarkable indeed that despite the recent spike in interest in Antwerp's Golden Age, it is mostly art historians who have studied enslavement in sixteenth-century Antwerp.

In Belgium, historiography and the public debate on slavery mainly focus on nineteenth-century Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. The 2021 report by the special commission on Belgium's colonial past, written at the behest of the Chamber of Representatives, contains only sporadic references to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By contrast, Dutch historiography is tracing the roots of the Low Countries' involvement in slavery further back in time, to the 1590s and even earlier, before the establishment of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC), the trading companies most closely associated with Dutch involvement in slavery.

Currently, this is a gap in Belgian historical research. Recent studies by art historians into the presence of enslaved people in sixteenth-century Antwerp rely heavily on older literature. Historians who want to investigate the role of the Southern Netherlands (present-day Belgium) in the slave trade and the use of slave labor can turn to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century articles and books that are mostly based on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century accounts by merchants, plantation owners, and explorers.

These works bemoan the fate of enslaved people and condemn the slavery system, but do not include the perspective of the enslaved. Another avenue to explore are references to the enslaved in the literature from the 1970s through the 1990s, but even in these more recent works, slavery and the enslaved are mentioned only in passing; they are not a research topic per se.

The transcontinental slave trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas was a "multinational" affair from the outset. Therefore, it is not a good idea to view that complex and fluid trade through the lens of the twenty-first century nation-state. What does the label Southern Netherlands mean in the context of that multinational trafficking in humans? What are we to make of the "Flemish" who left the Southern Netherlands for the Iberian peninsula and the "New World" and remained there to take part in the slave trade? We must also take into account that in the Iberian world, the label of Flemish or Flamenco was given to people from both the Southern and the Northern Netherlands. So, viewing this subject in the framework of the later division between the Republic and the Habsburg-led Southern Netherlands only muddies the water. Besides, the complicity of Southern Netherlanders in the sixteenth-century slave trade is arguably part of Dutch history. In any case, pinpointing the start of Dutch complicity in slavery in the 1590s does not do justice to the continuities from the preceding period when the Netherlands was still a greater entity. The Southern Netherlands was already active in the trade in enslaved Africans in the fifteenth century, and the New World offered new opportunities for traders and entrepreneurs, particularly those from Antwerp. Another result of the Southern Netherlands' participation in the globalizing trade of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the colonial plantation economy was that a considerable number of free and enslaved Africans ended up in Antwerp.

The Iberian Connection

Flemish entrepreneurs, many of them based in Bruges, were involved in the fifteenth-century Portuguese and Castilian expansions on the coast of West Africa which led to a growing trade in enslaved people. It began with sugar cultivation and trade in Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Azores. There, plantation owners experimented on a large scale with the use of enslaved people from the original population (such as the Guanches in the Canaries) and imported North African and sub-Saharan enslaved people. It was also from these islands that the export of enslaved people to Latin America

began. Southern Netherlanders were very active in these proto-colonies as plantation owners and sugar exporters.

One example is Jacob Groenenberch, an Antwerp merchant born in Cologne in 1472. In 1513, he bought a sugar cane plantation in Tazacorte on the Canary Island of La Palma. By 1524, Groenenberch owned one sixth of all the land in La Palma.[1] An inventory of his estate, drawn up when his widow died in 1544, shows that there were enslaved people working on his Los Llanos sugar cane plantation. They were listed between the "animals" and the "pots" needed to cook the sugar cane.[2]

Another example is one Lorenzo de Gorrevod, who received permission from King Charles V in 1518 to transport "four thousand negro slaves, both men and women, to the [West] Indies, the [Caribbean] Islands and the [South American] mainland on the [Atlantic] sea, and to do this from the [West African] islands of Guinea and other regions from which one wishes to procure these negroes."[3] The licensee was also exempt from paying the usual royal taxes on slave trading. Born in Bresse (in present-day France), Lorenzo de Gorrevod, also known as Laurent de Gouvenot, was the king's second chamberlain and had accompanied the young Charles V on a trip to the Spanish city of Valladolid. The 1518 slave trading license was doubtlessly a gift to De Gouvenot for services rendered. This license also marks the beginning of the direct transatlantic slave trade between Africa and Central and South America. Up to that point, the slave trade with South America had always been conducted via Seville or Lisbon. De Gouvenot's license ended up changing hands several times, between traders in Seville, Genoa, and Castilia before it was actually used. This shows how the enslaved were commodified and became part of a financial web in which nobility and merchants from Castilia and Genoa did business. In the Flemish reports of that time, De Gouvenot is referred to as Flemish. But was this man with his complex and "international" life story Flemish just because he lived in the Southern Netherlands for a while? Rather, this episode makes clear how pan-European and complex the slave trade already was and how many stakeholders in northwestern Europe could be involved in it.

De Gouvenot was not the only one in Charles V's "Burgundian" and "Flemish" entourage who was attracted to the tempting riches of the New World. Many of these high-ranking gentlemen, including regent Adriaan van Utrecht (the later Pope Adrian VI, the only Dutchman ever to become pope), maintained close contact with none other than Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first Spanish priest in Central America who was famous for his

criticism of the atrocities committed there by the Spanish. De Las Casas complained about the Spanish colonists to these Southern Netherlanders because he regarded the Flemish as potentially better colonists who might put right the injustices that the Spanish had done to the original inhabitants of the Caribbean. As odd a solution as it may seem, De Las Casas proposed to replace the "Indian" forced laborers, who had been decimated by disease, with enslaved Africans.[4] Hence, De Gouvenot obtained his licenses. However, a "Flemish" takeover of the Spanish colonies like De Las Casas envisioned never got off the ground and he later expressed regret for having appealed for shipping in enslaved Africans because he had come to consider "black slavery" as unjust as the enslavement of "Indians."

Another example of Southern Netherlanders' early involvement in slavery is Roldán de Argote, from Bruges. He was a gunner who in 1519 signed on to sail aboard the *Concepción*, a carrack in Ferdinand Magellan's fleet that departed on a voyage of discovery that same year. In July 1522, the decimated fleet reached the Cape Verde islands, where De Argote traded cloves from the Moluccan Islands for enslaved humans and food for the journey home.

To the "New World"

Usually, there is little information available about slavery on Flemish plantations in the Atlantic. That does not hold true for the sugar cane plantation on São Vicente, an island near the coast of present-day Brazil owned by Erasmus Schetz, an Antwerp-based merchant financier. Schetz bought this plantation around 1540. A long, but unfortunately anonymous, letter from 1548 and a series of other documents give us some insight into the conditions on the plantation.[5] According to the letter, there were 130 enslaved men and women on the plantation. Clearly, this Antwerp trader dealt not only in sugar, but was also personally involved in colonization and slavery. The majority of the laborers on the plantation were enslaved locals, while the minority were Black people. In Brazil, enslaved Black laborers would not replace enslaved original inhabitants until the latter half of the sixteenth century.

Erasmus Schetz's business exploits involved more than sugar production and trade. As early as the 1530s–1540s, he had built up an industrial complex for the production of brass in the Netherlands and in the Holy Roman Empire. This copper alloy was used to manufacture *manillas*—cuff

bracelets made from either copper or brass which were used as a medium of exchange and were in demand in West Africa. The Portuguese used these cuff bracelets to buy grains of paradise (melegueta pepper), ivory, and enslaved people. It was even customary to express the purchase price of enslaved people in manillas. Erasmus Schetz supplied the Portuguese crown with manillas via Antwerp. Thus, Schetz's industrial and commercial empire, which was based on the slave trade and slave labor, took on the typical shape of the three-way trade between Europe, Africa, and America. So, even though the slave ships did not actually call at the port of sixteenth-century Antwerp, the city on the Scheldt was one of the key locations from which the Atlantic slave trade was coordinated and financed.[6]

Portrait of Katherina in silverpoint by Albrecht Dürer, 1521.

There were also traders from the Southern Netherlands who tried to export enslaved people without an official license from the Spanish government. Most of the cases discussed here are of slave trade and forced labor in the Atlantic world. However, there are indications that people from the Low Countries were also involved in the slave trade in the Indian Ocean. Jan Hendrik is one such case. Hendrik was a soldier who fought

under Spanish Governor-General Miguel López de Legazpi in the siege and conquest of Manila in 1570. He was rewarded with an *encomienda* in the Philippines: a grant from the Spanish Crown that gave him the right to demand tribute and forced labor from the local inhabitants. The encomienda system led to slavery, first in Latin America and later in the Philippines.

Enslaved People in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp

The involvement of the Low Countries in early slavery could also be seen in the center of trade: Antwerp. Historians have searched for traces of Africans and enslaved people in sixteenth-century Antwerp (and the Low Countries) since the 1800s. It is often claimed that Antwerp had the second-most inhabitants of African origin in Europe, after Lisbon. That is an exaggeration. There are far more traces to be found of this group in the Portuguese archives and visual culture of that period than in Southern Netherlandic sources. Yet it is true that there were Black people in Antwerp back then, and that some of them were enslaved.

The contrast between the ban on slavery in the Netherlands and the actual presence of Africans, both enslaved and free, is a classic topic in historiography. In 1582, Antwerp common law stipulated in Article XXXVI that all people in Antwerp were free and that everyone who was held in slavery could invoke this right. Nonetheless, the Antwerp archives contain references to Black enslaved people in the city in the sixteenth century. For example, Portuguese merchant George de Sulco Lobo publicly proclaimed in 1516 that the two absconded "moors who are not Christians and are dressed in skipper's clothes" must be found and brought back to their owner.[7] This proclamation explicitly mentions the fact that the two were not Christians because it was illegal to enslave Christians in the Low Countries.

In 1552, Bertelmeeus, an enslaved Black man who belonged to the Spanish subject Pedro de Melgosa, invoked the Brabant freedom privilege—the precursor to Article XXXVI of Antwerp common law—to claim freedom.[8] He had accompanied Paulo de Melgosa, a relative of his owner, and his goods on a trip to Antwerp. The Antwerp aldermen decided that Bertelmeeus had to be returned to his master in Spain, but that he should be treated well. Paulo de Melgosa was required to pay a large bond for this. If Bertelmeeus were to later return to the Low Countries, he would be freed immediately.[9] It looks like the city magistrate was trying to get rid of this problem as fast as possible.

Jan van der Elburcht's painting *The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch* (1556-1563) refers to the Bible story from Acts of the Apostles 8:26-40.

We can conclude from these examples that the enslaved traveled with their masters to the Low Countries. German artist Albrecht Dürer even drew a portrait of one of them in 1521: Katherina, a maid to—or possibly enslaved servant of—João Brandão, factor to the king of Portugal. In his diary, Dürer simply called her Brandão's *Mohrin* (Mooress).[10] Dutch historiography often cites the laws of Antwerp as proof that slavery did not exist in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, but these examples clearly challenge that claim.

The Antwerp archives also contain many records of enslaved people being granted freedom. In 1599, Antwerp merchant Adrien Wannemaquer reconfirms the freedom of Jehan Maria, an approximately 20-year-old "noir" from Ubohala in the Angolan kingdom. An English merchant had given Jehan Maria to Wannemaquer in Zeeland in 1590. The then 11-year-old had been captured, along with other "Blacks" by the British in an unknown location, and baptized on board by a priest. This baptism was reconfirmed in Antwerp, and Jehan Maria was freed. After several years of loyal service, Wannemaquer drew up a document reconfirming his status as a free man, to aid Jehan Maria's return to his birthplace. The document was probably written in French intentionally, so Jehan Maria could prove his free status on the trip back home.[11]

The presence of Black people in Antwerp also brought about a change in the visual culture. In successive versions of the Adoration of the Magi scene, which was highly popular in the sixteenth century, the face of the Black king, Balthasar, becomes more and more individualized, as we can see for instance in the work of Gerard David, Barend van Orley, and Jan Gossaert. This shift in the visual culture started in the early sixteenth century, at a time when Antwerp drew more and more Spanish and Portuguese traders and craftsmen. Another theme that grew in popularity was the baptism of Moors, as we can see in the painting by Jan van der Elburcht painted on commission for the altar of the Antwerp cathedral. This baptism scene illustrates the prohibition on the enslavement of Christians in Antwerp.

Continuities during the Republic Era

Following the political and religious struggles in the latter half of the sixteenth century and a European diaspora, more and more merchants from the Southern Netherlands, most of whom had strong ties to Antwerp,

found a new home in Amsterdam. The transition from Antwerp to Amsterdam as a metropole for world trade has been extensively studied from the merchants' perspective. However, these merchants' connections to slavery and the slave trade have yet to be thoroughly researched. How important were these networks to the development of the Northern Netherlandic slave trade?

Willem Usselincx, born in Antwerp in 1567, was one of the founders of the WIC. As early as 1600, he devised plans for the Dutch colonization of parts of Central and South America which were controlled by Spain and Portugal. Usselincx envisioned agricultural colonies in which baptized members of the original population and European immigrants would work. He saw slavery as a typically Iberian and Roman Catholic practice, but this is not to say that he condemned it. Far from it, but he rejected its use because he thought that it would not be profitable. Usselincx wrote that slaves would only work hard if threatened with physical violence. In his view, a man from the Republic would be more productive than three Black people. The WIC ignored his advice, however, and the Company would soon become a major player in the transatlantic slave trade and slave labor.

Balthazar de Moucheron and his nephew, Cornelis, who were associated with the *voorcompagnieën* (pre-companies) and the VOC itself, were active in the trade in enslaved people in West Africa. Slave trader Ximenez was represented by the famous Amsterdammer Cornelis Pietersz Hooft in the early 1590s. Another Antwerper, Gaspar de Mere, left for Pernambuco in 1598 and acquired a sugar cane plantation near Cape Santo Agostinho. De Mere is believed to have provided crucial strategic information which led to the establishment of the WIC. Unfortunately for him, the Hollanders confiscated his plantation after they conquered Pernambuco in 1630.

Input for Further Research and Debate

The Southern Netherlanders who took part in the trade in enslaved people did so via the Portuguese and Spanish colonial systems which they already had commercial dealings with and, since Philip I of Castile's short reign, had geopolitical access to. They had hardly any influence over these systems and could also opt to work around them. However, much research is still needed to gain a clearer picture of the Southern Netherlands' role in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century slavery. Their role is not always easy to

trace because traders often circumvented the official colonial systems of the Spanish and Portuguese Crown, which is the origin of our sources.

It is also not always easy to identify the Dutch names that were phonetically transcribed in Portuguese or Spanish. This would require collaboration between Belgian, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese historians. Such cooperation might even reveal narratives from the enslaved themselves; these are unknown to us at present. Additional research would tell us how representative or anomalous such cases are.

Bruges, and later Antwerp, were hubs in a complex and globalizing commodity chain and financial network. This early history of slavery shows that even without big companies like the VOC or WIC, there was a trade in enslaved people run by small-scale expeditions and smaller plantations, both within and outside of the official colonial system. Studying this aspect of history is much more difficult than researching company archives, but studying the archives of Iberian courts of law, governments, and even the Inquisition, might provide us with information about the people enslaved by Southern Netherlanders.

Another arena that needs to be explored in more detail is the massive increase in book printing in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century. Countless travel stories and ethnographies avant la lettre came off the presses. These books can contain a wealth of information about the representation of other population groups and can serve as a source on racialization and ideas of white superiority, which must have contributed to the general willingness to tolerate the trade in enslaved people.

In Conclusion

This chapter teaches us that even before the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648), high-ranking nobility, merchants, and entrepreneurs from the Low Countries were clearly involved in slavery and the slave trade. The Southern Netherlands were part of a highly extractive and commercialized system that exploited forced laborers. As a result of the Reformation, the Catholic persecution thereof, and the Dutch Revolt and resulting Eighty Years' War, many trading families relocated to the Republic. The Dutch involvement in slavery therefore goes back much further than widely thought, via the Southern Netherlands.

Much research still needs to be carried out on how the knowledge about the slave trade and the trading networks that existed were passed on from the Southern to the Northern Netherlands. It seems that the ownership of, and trade in, enslaved people was a normal part of everyday life in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century merchant circles. Is this evidence of a clear pattern of unscrupulous pursuit of profit? What is much more difficult to ascertain is how people in the Low Countries who were not involved in human trafficking viewed slavery. How did they react when they ran into Katherina, the girl immortalized by Dürer?

In retrospect, this history seems inevitable. And yet... What if Bartolomé de las Casas had not appealed to Charles V and his "Flemish" entourage to spare the "Indians" and replace them with enslaved Black Africans, but had instead questioned the universal morality of slavery?

Notes

1 Hugo Soly, *Capital at Work in Antwerp's Golden Age* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

2 Fernand Donnet, *Les Anversois aux Canaries, un voyage mouvementé au XVIe siècle*, Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Anvers 1819 (1895–1896) (Antwerp: Veuve De Backer, 1895), 276–311, 202–365.

3 Quoted in Georges Scelle, *La Traité négrière aux Indes de Castille* (Paris: Larose et Tenin, 1906), 755. Original document can be found in Archivo General de Indias, Indiferente General, 419, libro 7, folio 735rv.

4 Lawrence Clayton, "Bartolomé de las Casas and the African Slave Trade," *History Compass* 7, no. 6 (2009): 1526–41.

5 Eddy Stols, "Um dos primeiros documentos sobre o Engenho dos Schetz em São Vicente," *Revista de História* 37, no. 76 (1968): 407.

6 Manuel F. Fernández Chaves, "Manuel Caldeira y la trata de esclavos en el Caribe, 15561562," in *Sometidos a esclavitud: Los africanos y sus descendientes en el Caribe hispano,* ed. C. Naranjo Orovio (Santa Marta: Universidad del Magdalena, 2021), 47–88.

7 FelixArchief Antwerp, Ancien Régime archives of the city of Antwerp, Gebodboeken, Inv. no. 14891539 A, folio no. 72v

8 FelixArchief Antwerp, Ancien Regime archives of the city of Antwerp, Gebodboeken, Inv. no. 15391564 B folio no. 272r–273v.

9 FelixArchief Antwerp, Ancien Regime archives of the city of Antwerp, Gebodboeken, Inv. no. 15391564 B folio no. 272r.

10 Moriz Thausing, *Dürers Briefe, Tagebücher und Reime*. 114, between March 17 and April 6, 1521 (Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1872).

11 FelixArchief Antwerp, Certificatieboeken BE SA 112, 1599, 28v; Donnet, "Les Anversois aux Canaries," 516–18.

Abstract

This chapter discusses how private interests helped shape the Dutch Republic's policies on slave trade and colonial expansion. An important channel of influence was the petition, a direct request to the authorities signed by a wide diversity of private individuals. Both in Asia and the Atlantic, local and foreign actors tried to sway decision making, often through petitions. Colonial authorities could shape policy through their relatively far-reaching autonomy in implementing legislation. This chapter recommends further research into lobbying by the processing and manufacturing industries, the role of private interests in diplomatic exchanges, and the origins of social and racial policies that shaped colonial hierarchies.

Keywords: petitions; lobbying; private interests; colonial policies