

Do we have everything with us?
*A study into the goods taken by MCC slave and
Caribbean return ships, 1760-1785*

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The Slave Ship
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
1. Historical overview of the MCC slave and return trade	6
2. Goods brought on board MCC slave ships	8
3. Comparison between an MCC Caribbean return ship and slaving ship	15
Conclusion	20
Bibliography	22

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Assorted Woodwares on MCC-ships, taken from their inventories.....	10
Figure 2: Totals slave ships Cook’s, Cooper’s, and Helmsman’s goods.....	11
Figure 3: Total embarked enslaved persons compared to the number of slave shackle items.	12
Figure 4: Totals slave ships Sailmaker’s, Bottle Master’s, and Carpenter’s goods.....	13
Figure 5: Total items in the slave ship inventories	14
Figure 6: Comparison Slave Ships and Caribbean Retour Ships (Helmsman’s, Corporal’s, Cooper’s and Cook’s goods).....	15
Figure 7: Comparison of Slave Ships and Caribbean Retour Ships (Cabin’s, Constable’s and Boatswain's goods)	16
Figure 8: Comparison of Slave Ships and Caribbean Retour Ships (Carpenter's, Sailmaker's, and Bottle Master's goods).....	18

INTRODUCTION

Slave traders in the eighteenth century took many different goods with them to trade on the African shores. In his award-winning book, *The Diligent*, Robert Harms, professor of History & African studies at Yale, elaborates on what goods were taken to Africa for the French ship ‘The Diligent’. The ship carried 37.782 French livres worth of trading goods, with more than a third being cloth. Another third was cowry shells, which served as a form of currency along the African coast in the early eighteenth century, and another quarter was brandy. The remaining cargo was an assortment of goods, including guns and ammunition from Holland and iron from Sweden.¹ Harms’ book offers a single viewpoint of what a slave ship could carry to Africa in order to buy enslaved people and trade goods.

A broader overview of Dutch slave traders of the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie (MCC) is given by Gerhard de Kok in his dissertation on the MCC and its relationship with Walcheren.² Slave ships sailing out from the Zeeland isles were mostly fully packed with a great variety of goods. However, once they got to the African coast, the biggest bulk of the items was not necessarily used for trading. Instead, only around half of the goods aboard were specifically for trading, such as textiles, gunpowder and weapons, and alcoholic drinks. The other half was mostly necessary goods to complete the journey.³

These studies bring interesting information to the table, although either too specific or very broad. Research has focused on the financial aspects of slave trading for a few decades now. The outfitting of the ship has always been included in the calculations for these financial aspects.⁴ More recently, the interests of slavery historians have moved away from this financial aspect and have become more focused on the social or moral aspects of the slave trade. In other words, research has gone from being more quantitative to more qualitative. Another trend in the Dutch history of the slave trade especially is also a more local perspective, with recent studies focusing on Amsterdam’s involvement in the slave trade and smaller towns’

¹ Robert W. Harms, *The Diligent: a voyage through the worlds of the slave trade* (1. paperback edition; New York: Basic Books 2002) 81-82.

² Gerhard de Kok, *Walcherse ketens: de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel en de economie van Walcheren, 1755-1780* (2019) 117-126; De Kok’s dissertation was later published by WalburgPers: Gerhard de Kok, *Walcherse ketens: de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel en de economie van Walcheren, 1755-1780* (Zutphen 2020).

³ H. J. den Heijer, *Nederlands slavernijverleden: historische inzichten en het debat nu* (Zutphen: WalburgPers 2021) 82-83; Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 142.

⁴ See for example: Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990); Corrie Reinders Folmer - Van Prooijen, *Van goederenhandel naar slavenhandel: de Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie 1720-1755* (Leiden 2000); And more recently: Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma, ‘De betekenis van de Atlantische slavernij voor de Nederlandse economie in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 16 (2019) 5-46 <doi:10.18352/tseg.1082>.

involvement as well.⁵ Slave traders made huge profits with their slave trading ships. Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma estimate that 5.2 percent of the Dutch Republic's GDP in 1770 was based on slavery.⁶ Middelburg played a large role in the Dutch slave trade. During the 1760s and 1770s, the city received a huge boost in revenue from the slave trade. Gerhard de Kok estimated that around 5% of the city's income came from slave trading-related activities during those years.⁷

Besides slave ships, the MCC also traded within Europe and made trips between Europe and the New World.⁸ This trade differed from the slave or triangle trade in the sense that the ships did not go to Africa but only from Europe to the New World and back. Because of this, we choose to call these ships return ships, not to be mistaken with return ships to the East. These ships carried other supplies than the slave ships that were used in the triangle trade. Some items were the same, while others were totally unnecessary for ships that did not travel toward the African coast, like shackles for enslaved persons.

This research aims to focus on the slave ship and in particular on the goods necessary for a slave ship to complete its journey. European slave traders took enormous amounts of goods to West Africa to trade for enslaved persons. Especially Asian kinds of cotton, tobacco from the colonies, and spirits from European countries were in high demand.⁹ Iron also played a vital role in the trade, as illustrated by an article by Chris Evans and Göran Rydén.¹⁰ During the second half of the eighteenth century, Swedish iron was part of the outgoing cargos of slave ships, albeit in smaller quantities than in the early eighteenth century.¹¹

With this paper the author would like to contribute to the historiography of the Dutch slave trade by comparing what differences can be established between what the MCC's slave ships and Caribbean return ships took aboard on their journey. A comparison between these two categories of ships has not yet been made. Although Gerhard de Kok has done a thorough job with his dissertation to show the impact of the MCC's slave trade on the economy of Walcheren he has not thoroughly compared the inventories of slave trading and Caribbean return

⁵ See: Ramona Negrón and Jessica den Oudsten, *De grootste slavenhandelaren van Amsterdam: Over Jochem Matthijs en Coenraad Smitt* (Zutphen 2022); J.P. van de Voort, 'Vlaardingen en de slavernij: Vlaardingers en hun nazaten als koloniale functionarissen en plantage-eigenaren in Suriname 1720-1863', *Historisch Jaarboek Vlaardingen 2021* (2021); Gert Oostindie ed., *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam* (Amsterdam 2020).

⁶ Brandon and Bosma, 'De betekenis van de Atlantische slavernij voor de Nederlandse economie in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw'.

⁷ Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 209.

⁸ Reinders Folmer - Van Prooijen, *Van goederenhandel naar slavenhandel*, 80-81.

⁹ Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 103-105.

¹⁰ Chris Evans and Göran Rydén, '“Voyage Iron”: An Atlantic Slave Trade Currency, its European Origins, and West African Impact', *Past & present* 239 (2018) 41-70 <doi:10.1093/pastj/gtx055>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

ships. The differences between these inventories could tell us more about how the maritime business of the MCC was conducted and why certain decisions were made by the MCC's directors.

The central question to be answered in this paper is whether there are any differences or similarities in the necessary goods that the MCC brought aboard slave trading ships and Caribbean return trade ships, roughly between 1760 and 1785. What exactly these necessary goods are, will be discussed in the second chapter. The main focus of this paper will be the comparison between the slave ships and the return trade ships. Changes over time can be measured and the data used in this paper could also be used by other researchers to, for example, extend the database on which this paper is based to include more ships.¹²

Archival material forms the basis of this paper. The archive that is central to the research is the MCC archive, located in Middelburg, The Netherlands. The MCC archives are well-organized and completely digitized, with easily readable scans. There is a multitude of information available for all its ships, including the inventories of many ships that left from Middelburg for Africa. To answer the main research question, a selection had to be made because the MCC archive is large, including many ships from the late eighteenth century. From the MCC archives the *Welmeenende* (1769-1774), *Aurora* (1771-1781), *Geertruyda en Christina* (1767-1786), *Haast U Langzaam* (1764-1781), and *Watergeus* (1773-1791) have been selected as slave trading ships.¹³ A total of eleven voyages from these ships will be looked at. These voyages were the ships' first and last journey, except for the *Welmeenende*, which only made three trips in total; so all trips have been included. The accompanying data available via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database for these ships will also be used.¹⁴

The five slave ships from the MCC archives have been selected because of their similarity to the return-trade ships. Four 'fregatten' (frigates) and one 'snauw' (snow), the *Welmeenende*, from the MCC archives have been selected.¹⁵ The snow was selected to check for any major dissimilarities between smaller and bigger slave trading ships within the MCC fleet. The return voyages that will be looked at to compare with the slave ship voyages are the second journey of the *Zorg* (1779), the fourth journey of the above-mentioned *Aurora* (1777), the sixth

¹² The database is based upon the primary source material from the MCC and can be found via <https://spstuur.nl/mcc-db-inventories/>.

¹³ Zeeuws Archief (ZA), 20 Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie (MCC), inv.nrs. 213-231 'Aurora', 404-435 'Geertruyda en Christina', 508-550 'Haast U Langzaam', 1284-1298 'Watergeus', 1299-1317 'Welmeenende'.

¹⁴ Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD), voyage ids of above-mentioned ships.

¹⁵ Björn Landström, *Het schip: de geschiedenis van het schip: van primitief vlot tot atoom-onderzeeboot met reconstructies in woord en beeld* (Den Haag 1961) 176-177; Phillip Reid, *The Merchant Ship in the British Atlantic, 1600-1800: Continuity and Innovation in a Key Technology* (Boston: BRILL 2020).

journey of the *Geertruyda en Christina* (1779), and the second journey of the *Vis* (1777). These ships were all frigates and were also used for slave trading journeys. The specific journeys looked at are however Caribbean return trade trips.

To compare the ships with one another a database was made that includes information from the inventories of the ships. What was looked at are inventories that were drawn up before the ship set sail for its (first) destination. As such, this data does not include what was bought while the ship was already on its way, say for example on the African coast to restock. The items listed in these inventories and logs include for example types and amounts of sails, goods carried for the ship's carpenter, guns, compasses, and the cooper's supplies. The MCC used standardized forms to describe the equipment that they took on board with their ships, although some earlier ships also use handwritten lists to describe the same items. The second chapter will elaborate further on this database.

The first part of this paper will offer a brief historical overview of the history of the MCC slave trade business. After this historical overview, the paper will continue with an analysis of the inventories of the various slave trading ships of the MCC. The third chapter will compare these slave ships' inventories with ships that only made voyages between Europe and the Caribbean, the so-called Caribbean return ships. The paper ends with a conclusion that answers the research question.

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE MCC SLAVE AND RETURN TRADE

The Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie was founded in 1720 when the Middelburgs *vroedschap* decided that there should be a Chamber of Commerce in the city.¹⁶ The MCC worked via a system of shares, similar to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Dutch West India Company (WIC). In this sense, it was unique on the island of Walcheren. Most other slave traders worked via a system where investments were made for one slave ship in particular. With the MCC however, shareholders could buy shares at the start of the company. The directors held the largest shares in the company and loaned money to the MCC for its journeys when it did not have enough capital available.¹⁷ Shares were traded, especially during the first years, as speculating investors could not provide the money they enlisted for. They assumed that the company would return a profit, while it sadly did not in the first thirty years of its existence. This meant that their shares were traded, and new participants would join the MCC.

The ships were mostly owned by the MCC, and most were even built at their own shipyard. This allowed the MCC to construct ships according to the specifications that they wanted. All slave ships that are looked at within this research were built on the MCC-wharf. The wharf was a highly specialized workplace where the carpenters would build MCC-ships only. The ships took many months to build and especially during the early 1770s ships would take well over two and sometimes even close to four years to build.¹⁸ Although the slave ships did not differ much from the normal frigates that were built during the late eighteenth century, there were some unique aspects to them. De Kok mentions that the tweendeck, the section of the ship where the slaves would live during the middle passage, on MCC ships was altered to allow for a bit more room for the slaves.¹⁹

In the first 35 years, the MCC struggled and hardly made any profit. Only the trade to the then-Spanish colonies in the Caribbean Sea returned a slight profit. In the 1730s, they tried going out on a slave trading journey but stopped after just one trip. It was not until the 1740s that the slave trade started to pick up.²⁰ In comparison to the later years, not much profit was made in the 40s. It took until 1755 for the triangle slave trading journeys to start outweighing

¹⁶ Reinders Folmer - Van Prooijen, *Van goederenhandel naar slavenhandel*, 17-18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153-157.

¹⁸ Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

²⁰ Reinders Folmer - Van Prooijen, *Van goederenhandel naar slavenhandel*, 163-164.

the other activities of the MCC, and the company could really be called a slave trading company.²¹

Of these other activities transatlantic trade (to and from the Caribbean and/or South America) was quite extensive. Between 1720 and 1755, 59 ships set sail for Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, while in the same period, only 23 ships set sail to Africa for the slave trade.²² Other activities also included trade within Europe. In comparison to trade outside of Europe, these activities however did not return much of a profit.²³ From the 1760s onwards, the company mostly returned a profit. Looking at the period 1760 until 1785, the main focus of this paper, the company netted a profit of *f* 275.734,- on a total investment of almost 5.5 million guilders.²⁴ This profit is only the profit that the company made with its direct slave trading routes. The profit of other sectors in which the company was active is not included here. Only in the period after 1785 and before the 1760s losses were made.

The MCC was a well-oiled machine during the years between 1760 and 1785. For every part of the company separate books were kept. The wharf, the line track, and the sail attic in Middelburg were all part of the company, but their ships did not receive any discounts when using these facilities.²⁵ Besides this, the MCC kept many books and asked its captains to be precise when trading, and of course write all trades down. The standardized inventories that will be used throughout this paper are a great example of the administration that the MCC kept. The inventories were drawn up at the start of the journey and the captain promised to provide the company with a decent account after the journey of the ship was completed.

While from 1755 onward the MCC chose to focus on the slave trade for the most part, it still sent out some ships for a return voyage to the Caribbean. The return trade netted an overall lower profit than the slave trade, which was why the directors chose to not pursue it that often. But because some ships did sail out for a return trip, it is possible to compare some of the slave trading vessels from the period 1760-1785 with Caribbean return trade vessels from the same period.

²¹ Ibid., 265.

²² Ibid., 150.

²³ Ibid., 135.

²⁴ Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 85-86.

²⁵ Ibid., 49.

2. GOODS BROUGHT ON BOARD MCC SLAVE SHIPS

The MCC used a thorough and clear system to ensure that everything needed aboard a ship was taken aboard. These items were listed in inventories that were written up before each journey of the ship. Gerhard de Kok has already done a great amount of work into these inventories, but a quantitative analysis of the goods brought on board was not included in his dissertation. Instead, De Kok tells a more qualitative story about the goods that were brought on board.²⁶ For this research, a more quantitative approach is taken to look at the inventories of the ships as mentioned in the introduction.

The goods brought on board by the crew for the MCC slave ships were categorized into ten categories based on the area on the ship that needed them: boatswains (*Bootmans*), constable's (*Constabels*), bottle master's (*botteliers*), sailmaker's (*Zeylmakers*), cook's (*Koks*), cooper's (*Kuyppers*), corporal's (*Corporaals*), carpenter's (*Timmermans*), helmsman's (*Stuurman*), and cabin's (*Cajuits*) goods were defined. As de Kok has also noticed in *Walcherse Ketens*, the inventories of a slave ship were not so different from other merchant ships.²⁷ Sails, food, and such all had to be taken with the ship wherever it would go. There were obviously some unique aspects to slave-trading ships and these are not only to be found in the chains that were carried along for the African enslaved people.

MCC slave ships seem to have always carried certain items with them. These items include sails, anchors, lines, ropes, hooks, and nails. This was different for different kinds of ships, but in general a sort of list of 'necessary goods' can be established from the inventories. These necessary goods can be described as all goods necessary for a journey that were not trade goods. An extensive list was made by Stanley B. Alpern and gives some indication of what to look for.²⁸ Snobs and frigates had a different number of sails with them, but ships of the same type almost always had the same number of *Bootmans*-items with them. Aboard every vessel was also the Bible, the *Christelijke Zeevaart*, Psalm books, and of course pots, pans, and different kinds of plates. Differences are mostly found in gunpowder, cannons, different types of extra wood, and the number of alcoholic beverages taken on board. When looking at the gunpowder, weapons, and cannons aboard each ship it is hard to differentiate between necessary goods and trading goods. The same is true for alcoholic beverages, which were also used as

²⁶ Ibid., 117-125.

²⁷ Ibid., 117.

²⁸ Stanley B. Alpern, 'What Africans Got for Their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods', *History in Africa* 22 (1995) 5-43 <doi:10.2307/3171906>.

trading goods along the African coast.²⁹ As such, a comparison with ships destined for the Caribbean return trade is useful, as will be done in chapter three.

These differences can be seen in the database constructed specifically for this paper. The database has information about the five slave trading Dutch MCC and three trips undertaken by ships as Caribbean return ships. The names of materials proved difficult to accurately translate for most items in the MCC-archives, which is why most of the time the Dutch names will be used to describe the items or materials. Besides that, a lot of the standard inventories of the MCC included extra items written in by hand. Sometimes, these were not readable and thus have not been included.³⁰ Furthermore, only the inventories of the first and last voyages of each ship are included in the database. Due to the large number of different items that went along on a voyage, this choice has been made to show what different things might be taken on a first and last journey. The database can be used together with the Slave Voyages database, the ship names have been shortened and the year of departure has been used to identify which ship is which.³¹ The *Aurora* (AUR), *Geertruyda en Christina* (GEC), *Haast U Langzaam* (HUL), *Watergeus* (WAG), and *Welmeenende* (WLM) can all be found there for additional information.

In the database, units of items are measured, but we have to take into account that not every unit is of equal size. For example, a cannon takes up more space than a pair of scissors or fifty sail needles. Especially when looking at alcoholic beverages that were taken aboard the slave ships it is good to take note of the different kinds of measurements. In Middelburg, several units of measurement were used. A *bottel* is most likely equal to 0,85 litres. On the other hand, there was also a *stoop* (2,25 litres) which was equal to 2 *kan*. A bigger size was the *aam*, which was equal to between 80 and 112 *kan* depending on the area of trade within the Netherlands. It is unclear how many *kan* made up an *aam* in Middelburg, but it could be around 100 to 120 litres. Then there is also the half-*aam*, which as the name suggests is half an *aam*. This means that one half-*aam* of brandy might take up the space of over 100 bottles of white wine.³²

As said above, all MCC ships looked at for this research have almost identical inventories. The boatswain's items are the same for most ships, although the larger frigates took extra

²⁹ Ibid., 24-26.

³⁰ See for example, ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 218.4, f. 88. This inventory of the cabin has some extra wares written down, but the last ones are unreadable.

³¹ The Slave Voyages IDs are as follows: 10444 (1771 AUR), 10448 (1779 AUR), 10587 (1767 GEC), 10592 (1783 GEC), 10659 (1764 HUL), 10666 (1779 HUL), 11125 (1773 WAG), 11128 (1780 WAG), 11132 (1769 WLM) & 11134 (1773 WLM).

³² For more information about measurements in Middelburg pre-1820, see: 'Maten en gewichten' <<https://mgw.meertens.knaw.nl/plaats/688>> [consulted 5 june 2023].

Kruyszeilen with them. Due to this, the frigates took around a hundred more boatswain's items with them than their snow counterpart.³³ Interesting to see is that the sailmaker's goods are mostly the same for all ships. The only differences to be found there are that some boats took more flags with them than others. The same is true for the cook's and helmsman's goods, where



Figure 1: Assorted Woodwares on MCC-ships, taken from their inventories.

there are only minor differences of one or two things being taken as extras.

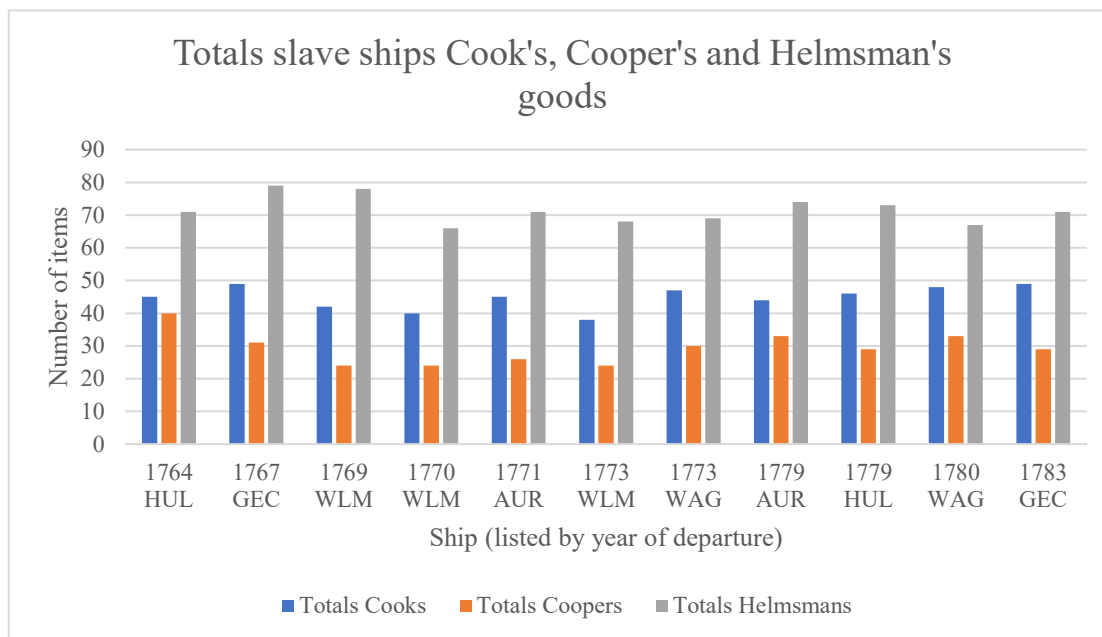
One of the places where differences can be found among the Dutch ships is the woodwares taken on board by the ship's carpenter(s). As Postma and De Kok both noticed, the ship's carpenter was an important man for the slave trading business.³⁴ It was his task to make the lower decks suitable for the stowing of enslaved people. To be able to do this, all MCC ships took extra woodwares with them. Figure 1 shows the total amount of assorted woodwares taken by the ships used in this paper.³⁵ One trip stands out from the trend: the 1767 trip of the *Geertruyda en Christina*. In comparison to the other trips, this voyage took a lot more woodwares with it. When we look at what could explain this difference, a few things stand out from the other ships. The *Geertruyda en Christina* took a lot smaller planks, with a length of 24 and 20 feet, with them than other frigates of the same size. The *Geertruyda en Christina* was 90 feet

³³ Average taken from 1769 WLM & 1773 WLM for the snow *Welmeenende* and averages from all the other MCC-ships for the frigates.

³⁴ Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 232-233; Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 117.

³⁵ Unless stated otherwise, all information in the next graphs comes from: ZA, MCC, inv.nrs. 218.4 (1771 AUR), 230.4 (1779 AUR), 405.1 (1767 GEC), 405.5 (1783 GEC), 509.1 (1764 HUL), 509.5 (1779 HUL), 1284.1 (1773 WAG), 1284.5 (1780 WAG), 1300.1 (1769 WLM), 1300.2 (1770 WLM), 1300.3 (1773 WLM). All items used here are inventories from the ship.

long and took a total of 149 planks of those sizes with it.³⁶ The *Aurora* was 86,8 feet long and took only a total of 100 planks of those sizes.³⁷ The size difference between the ships is only minimal, but the *Aurora* took almost 100 fewer planks with it in total. Why the *Geertruyda en Christina* took way more planks with them than the *Aurora* is unclear, but it might have to do with more caution, as they had a long journey ahead of them. The trip between Angola and the Berbice colony was longer than the trip between Guinee and Suriname and as such more repairs



might have been necessary.

When we take a look at the other goods that were brought on board by the MCC on their Slave ships, we can identify a few similarities. Figure 2 shows these similarities. For the helmsman, the MCC carried around 70 items per ship. These include compasses, lines to figure out bearing, but also hourglasses with a four-hour duration. The differences per ship are very few, with the only real differences occurring in these hourglasses. The same is true for the cook's goods, varying between around 40 and 50 items, not counting the stones that were brought along. The last items shown in Figure 2 are the cooper's goods. These vary between 25 and 40 items per ship, excluding nails, iron hoops, and bands necessary for the cooper to make his goods. Each ship carried between 300 to 500 hoops and a *party duygen*, in other words, wood, and iron necessary to make barrels aboard the ship.

The constable's, corporal's, and cabin's goods are similar most of the time. Especially when only looking at the necessary goods for a journey, we could say that it is likely that there

Figure 2: Totals slave ships Cook's, Cooper's, and Helmsman's goods

³⁶ Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 110; ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 405.1, f. 100.

³⁷ Ibid; ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 218.4, f. 84.

was a standardized list of equipment that MCC slave traders took with them. MCC ships generally took six to ten cannons with them.³⁸ Only the *Watergeus* and the last journey of the *Aurora* took more cannons with them. The *Watergeus* had around 30 on both its first and last journey, while the *Aurora* carried 24.³⁹ Of these cannons, almost half were smaller cannons. These smaller cannons of half a pound were likely destined to be traded once in Africa.

Within the constable's goods, we can also find the ship's guns, bullets, and shackles for the enslaved people. Between 60 and 100 guns were taken aboard each slave trading vessel. The number of bullets varied between 250 and 450, depending on the number of guns aboard. Interesting to see is that the number of embarked enslaved persons and the number of shackle items (feet and hand constraints, plus the required pins) is generally speaking about the same as the amount of enslaved persons aboard the slave ship. This is interesting because one might think to take more restraints than would be necessary, in case a restraint breaks or in case more enslaved persons were brought aboard. This distribution is visualized in Figure 3. Only the *Haast U Langzaam* and the first journey of the *Watergeus* had more shackles with them than required. Some ships, such as the *Geertruyda en Christina* on its first journey, and the *Aurora* even had fewer shackle items with them than they had enslaved persons on board.

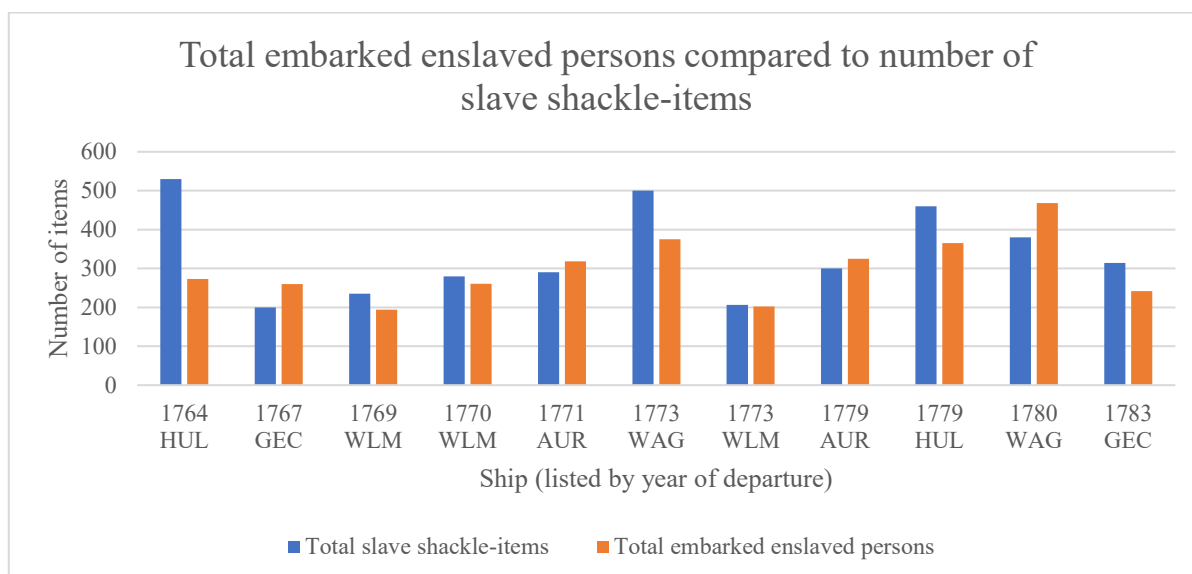


Figure 3: Total embarked enslaved persons compared to the number of slave shackle items.⁴⁰

Other goods to look at would be the sailmaker's, bottle master's, and carpenter's goods (excluding the assorted wood, *spykers & nagels*). Figure 4 shows these goods. Here again, we

³⁸ See: Rimmelt Daalder, Andrea Kieskamp and Dirk J. Tang, *Slaven en schepen: enkele reis, bestemming onbekend* (Leiden Amsterdam: Primavera pers Stichting Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum 2001) 54-55. The claim in Daalder et al. is confirmed by the database used in this paper.

³⁹ ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 230.4, f. 33-34; inv.nr. 1284.1, f. 61-62; inv.nr. 1284.5, f. 23-24.

⁴⁰ Data about the number of embarked enslaved persons from: 'Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade - Database' <<https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#results>> [consulted 5 June 2023].

can see similarities. Ships took around 150 sailmaker's goods with them, the only exception being the *Welmeenende* on its 1769 journey.⁴¹ They did not carry Flemish linen to make sails and brought fewer needles to sew sails according to their inventory. It is most likely that they did carry Flemish linen, however, because this was likely to be a trading good. If we discard this Flemish linen, ships took around 100 sailmaker's goods with them. Most of these are spare sails. For carpenters between 175 and 250 items were taken on board. Included are many kinds of bolts, nuts, and plugs, and the tools necessary to repair all kinds of things aboard.

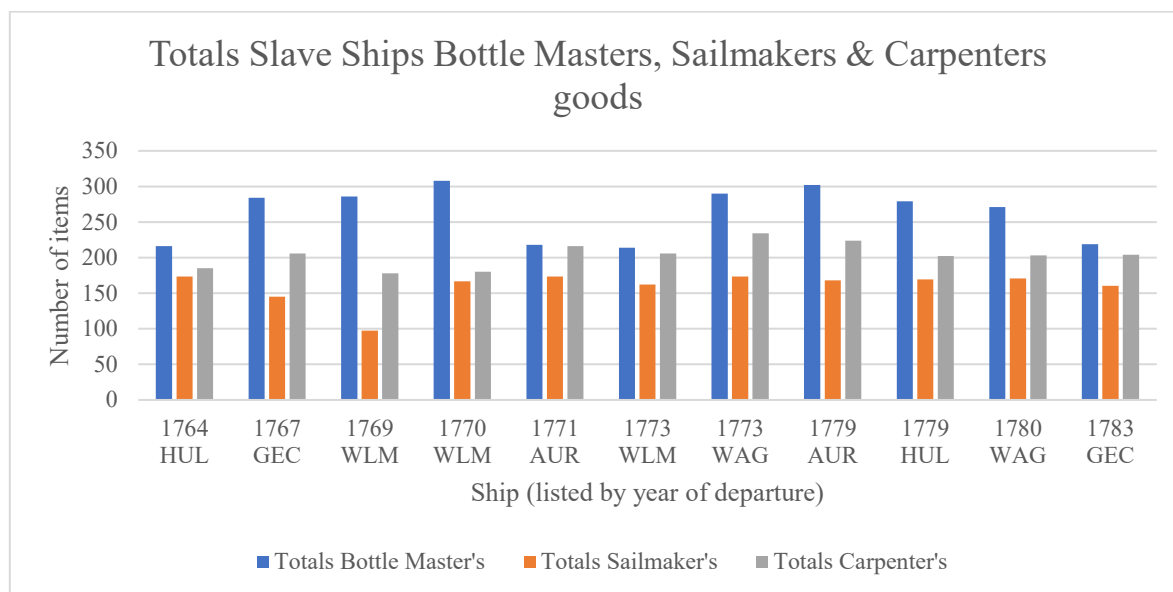


Figure 4: Totals slave ships Sailmaker's, Bottle Master's, and Carpenter's goods

Looking at what the MCC slave ships brought with them, we can conclude a few things. First of all, some items were essential to have on board, as they were on board every slave trading vessel. Although there was a difference in the number of items aboard each ship depending on the size of the slave ship, assorted woodwares were always brought aboard. The tradition to bring aboard a bible, psalm books, and an edition of the *Christelijke Zeevaart* is also confirmed just like other literature suggests.⁴² Secondly, it is hard to specify which parts of the cabin's goods were necessary goods. A large part of the alcohol has to be identified as a trade good and the same would probably be true for a large part of the constable's items. Thirdly, we can establish that, while there is some fluctuation, the total amount of items aboard each ship was mostly around 5000 items, although a few ships (*Welmeenende* in 1769 and 1770) had just 4400 items and some ships had as many as 5700 items (*Aurora* in 1779). For an indication, see Figure 5 below. Many items could then be described as necessary goods aboard

⁴¹ ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 1300.1, f. 96-97.

⁴² Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 117.

each vessel. However, more data is needed to remove the trading goods from the inventories. As such, a comparison with the Caribbean return ships would be useful to determine which goods can be removed as necessary goods within the inventories of the MCC ships.



Figure 5: Total items in the slave ship inventories

3. COMPARISON BETWEEN AN MCC CARIBBEAN RETURN SHIP AND SLAVING SHIP

The differences between the slave ships and Caribbean return ships are numerous. Let us start with the fact that slave ships sailed for longer than the Caribbean return trade ships. On average, return ships only sailed for 281 days round trip, while slave ships sailed for 354 days.⁴³ This difference in voyage length can be used to calculate how many of the trading goods might be seen as necessary goods later in this paper. This is based upon the assumption that every ship would probably take things like alcoholic beverages aboard for its crew, as well as for trading.

Figure 6 shows the differences between four of the goods categories.⁴⁴ On average, we can say that the slave ships and the return ships took around the same number of helmsman's, cooper's, and cook's items with them. The figures have not been adjusted for the longer journey of the slave ship in comparison to the return ship. Most of the goods taken in these categories were not one-time use like food or alcohol would be. The differences are mostly in specific slave items such as slave pots for the cook. The slave ships did take a lot more cooper's nails with them than the return ships, on average about 600 more. Figure 8 shows that the number of sailmaker's goods was also around the same, with slave ships taking around 150 items and return ships around 125 items. The differences there are to be found in the number of sail

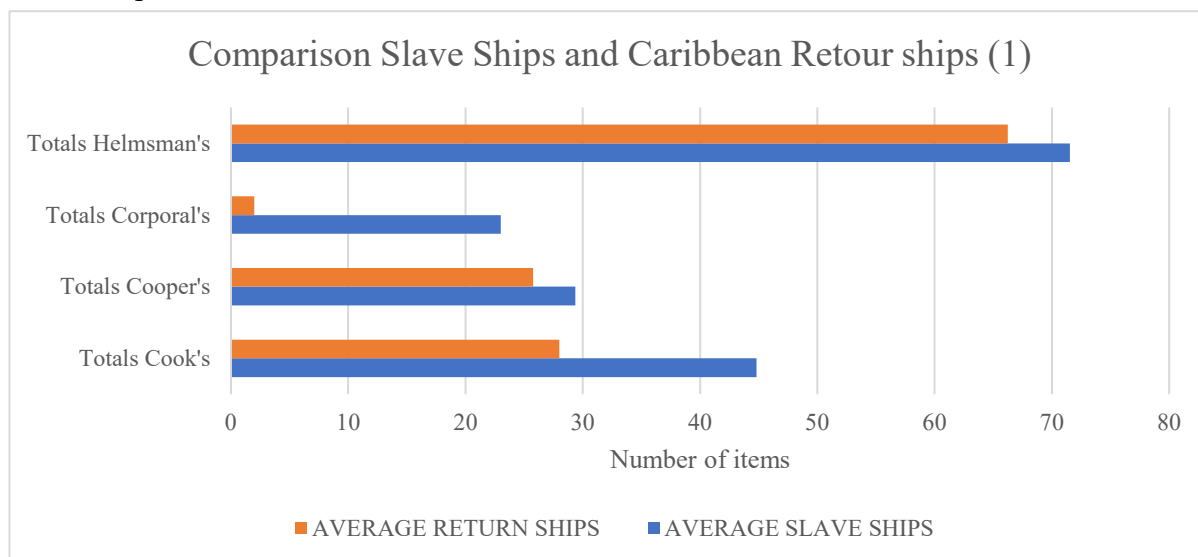


Figure 6: Comparison Slave Ships and Caribbean Retour Ships (Helmsman's, Corporal's, Cooper's and Cook's goods)

⁴³ Information about the length of the slave trading voyages is taken from the Transatlantic Slave Database. For the return ships this was calculated according to how long the voyage took according to the MCC archive.

⁴⁴ Unless stated otherwise, all information in the next graphs comes from: ZA, MCC, inv.nrs. 218.4 (1771 AUR), 230.4 (1779 AUR), 405.1 (1767 GEC), 405.5 (1783 GEC), 509.1 (1764 HUL), 509.5 (1779 HUL), 1284.1 (1773 WAG), 1284.5 (1780 WAG), 1300.1 (1769 WLM), 1300.2 (1770 WLM), 1300.3 (1773 WLM). All items used here are inventories from the ship.

needles (*zeylnaalden*) the slave ships took extra with them. The biggest differences can be seen in six types of goods: corporal's, carpenter's, bottle master's, cabin's, boatswain's, and constable's goods. A few general remarks can be made for each of these categories.

To start off with the corporal's goods. These goods included some specific kinds of pincers, solder, copper wire, iron wire, sheets, and a vise to work the iron. On average, the slave ships took around 20 items with them. One exception is the *Haast U Langzaam* on its first journey because they took 36 extra big screws with them.⁴⁵ For the remainder of the slave ships, the amount of corporal's goods is largely the same. The return trade ships however only took four kinds of corporal's goods with them: glue, copper wire, iron wire, and a vise. This could be because some items, such as extra sheets of metal and solder were only needed to fix the shackles of enslaved people.



Figure 7: Comparison of Slave Ships and Caribbean Retour Ships (Cabin's, Constable's and Boatswain's goods)

The difference in cabin goods is great, as can be seen in Figure 7. This difference can be mostly attributed to the lower number of alcoholic beverages that were in the cargo hold of a Caribbean return ship in comparison to the triangle trade ships. The triangle trade slave ships took on average more than 900 units of alcoholic beverage with them, while the *Zorg*, for example, only took around 130 units.⁴⁶ The biggest difference can be found in the number of bottles of white and red wine. Whereas the slave ships took hundreds of these wine bottles with them, the return ships only took around 100 to 120 with them. Probably enough to serve the crew. They would probably also drink from the bottles of brandy and the jenever that were aboard them, which the slave ships also carried. From this, we can determine that many of the

⁴⁵ ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 509.1, f. 93.

⁴⁶ ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 1425.2, f. 42.

alcoholic beverages aboard slave ships were, as the historiography shows, used as trade goods along the African coast.⁴⁷ We can also say that on average, return ships took around 143 units of alcoholic beverages with them, in comparison to the 922 units that the slave ships took with them. Taking this into account, it might be possible to establish an average number of alcoholic beverages taken on every journey of an MCC ship, in the sense of necessary goods. As the journey of a slave ship took approximately 25% longer than that of a return ship, we could then say that, on average, around 179 units of alcohol were needed as necessary goods aboard slave ships. The remaining 743 units, be it bottles of wine, brandy, jenever, or other spirits, can most likely be categorized as trade goods. Considering that the MCC slave ships had around 30 to 40 crew members, 179 units of alcohol would seem a reasonable amount of alcohol for the trip.

Further differences in the cabin's goods are found in fishhooks and surgical drapes. Of the latter, only 6 were taken by the Caribbean return ships on average, while the slave ships took 40. This is obviously because the need for surgical drapes was much higher aboard the slave ships. The difference in fishhooks, Caribbean ships took fewer fishhooks with them, is probably also due to the fact that there were enslaved persons on board, as the difference is not that high to suggest that the fishhooks might have been traded in Africa. The fishhooks would probably be used to fish and would occasionally break, as such more were needed for a longer journey with more people aboard. The last difference worth noting is the difference in oils taken aboard. Especially *soete olij*, roughly translated as sweet oil, was taken aboard slave ships in huge amounts. On the return ships, only around 45 bottles were taken aboard, while on slave ships, more than 200 bottles were taken aboard on average. This oil was probably traded in Africa and as such, not all oil can be named a necessary good, just like alcohol.

The main difference in the constable's goods is to be found in constraining items taken aboard slave trading ships that were not taken aboard return trade ships. The remaining difference can be found in the number of flints taken aboard the return ships, they took around 200 units fewer firestones with them. Stanley Alpern suggests that these flints would be taken by European traders to trade alongside the flintlock guns that were taken to Africa.⁴⁸ This would make sense if the slave trading ships took more guns with them than their return trade counterparts. However, the return ships on average only took 5 fewer guns with them than the slave trading ships (75 versus 80). That does not explain why slave trading ships would take upwards of 200 extra flintstones with them. This might be an indication that the crew aboard slave

⁴⁷ See: Alpern, 'What Africans Got for Their Slaves'; Sean M. Kelley, 'American Rum, African Consumers, and The Transatlantic Slave Trade', *African Economic History* 46 (2018) 1-29 <doi:10.3368/aeH.46.2.1>.

⁴⁸ Alpern, 'What Africans Got for Their Slaves', 19-22.

trading vessels had to use their guns more often than their return trade counterparts. It is however not possible to verify such a hypothesis using the quantitative data available in the database for this paper.

Another noteworthy aspect to mention is concerning the cannons that the MCC would take aboard its return trade ships. Many ships took more cannons than might have been required for their intended voyage. Whereas the slave ships, on average, carried a total of 15 cannons, the return trade vessels traveling to the Caribbean region typically accommodated an average of 20 cannons. This disparity can be attributed to the cannons serving as extra ballast for the ships.⁴⁹ Because the return ships took way fewer total goods with them in comparison to the slave ships, they had to adjust for this weight reduction to allow for a good draft of the ship on its Atlantic journey.

The last item category in Figure 7 is the boatswain's items. The MCC standardized list consisted of 245 different items that a boatswain could take with him. The difference between the slave ships and return ships can be found in the number of *harpuys* taken aboard the ships. *Harpuys*, or *harpuis*, is a mixture of boiled linseed oil, rosin, and stearin that is used to protect the ship's masts and above-water parts of the hull against woodworm and weathering.⁵⁰ Besides this, there are some minor differences that due to the number of items within this category add up to quite a large number in total.



Figure 8: Comparison of Slave Ships and Caribbean Retour Ships (Carpenter's, Sailmaker's, and Bottle Master's goods)

⁴⁹ See for example: ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 1425.2, f. 30; ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 228.3, f.62.

⁵⁰ Instituut voor de Nederlandse Geschiedenis, *VOC Glossarium* (Dem Haag 2000) 52 <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vocglossarium/index_html_en>.

Figure 8 shows the remaining three categories of items aboard the slave and return ships. The sailmaker's goods have the least amount of difference between them, as was already covered above. The carpenter's and bottle master's goods do have quite a large difference between the return and slave ships. For the carpenter's this can be found in the fact that the Caribbean return ships did not take as much assorted woodwares with them. The carpenter of the *Zorg* took very few supplies with him on their return trip to the Caribbean. The ship only took a spare boat and sloop, some clamps, parts of different masts, and a sharpening stone with it. In total, he only took 54 different carpenter items with him.⁵¹ The same can be said for the *Vis*. Its carpenter only took 13 different items with him, the bare minimum: a spare boat, a sharpening stone, a sloop, and 6 boatman's sticks. The other two return trade voyages took a bit more with them, and also some assorted woodwares. The *Aurora* took 102 assorted woodwares with it, while the *Geertruyda en Christina* took 106.⁵² This is in stark contrast to the slave ships looked at in this research, which on average and without the assorted woodwares and nails, took 203 items with them.

In conclusion, then, there are many differences but also similarities between the MCC's slave trading ships and their return trade vessels. The examination of the specific categories of goods reveals intriguing disparities between the two types of ships. Especially the information regarding corporal's goods, alcohol, cannons, *soete olij*, flint, assorted woodwares, and other carpenter's items is very useful to distinguish between necessary and trade goods on the slave ships. Some of these items can be described as necessary for the slave trading ships, such as the *soete olij*. For other items, such as the flint, this is less clear-cut. Using the information gathered in this chapter, we can get a better image of what number of items in certain categories can be described as trade goods and what number can be described as necessary goods.

⁵¹ ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 1425.2, f.37-38.

⁵² ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 228.3, f. 70; ZA, MCC, inv.nr. 405.4, f.47.

CONCLUSION

Illustrated above are the differences and similarities between the MCC's slave and return ships. From these variations, it is possible to say something about the necessary goods required for a slave trading journey and return ships. Chapter 1 provided historical context for the MCC and its trading activities and in chapters 2 and 3 insights have been gained about what goods were taken aboard a slave ship and Caribbean return ship. The research question that was set out to be answered was whether there are any differences or similarities in the necessary goods that the MCC brought aboard slave trading ships and Caribbean return trade ships, roughly between 1760 and 1785. From the research we can conclude three things: firstly, the amount of goods taken by MCC ships varied depending on the ship's type and duration of the voyage. Secondly, it is hard to establish which goods can be classified as trading goods and which as necessary goods. It was only by comparing the slave ships with the return ships that a clearer understanding of this could be gained. Finally, while there are many differences between the number of necessary goods aboard MCC ships, there are items that were taken aboard every vessel, regardless of its destination being the Caribbean or Africa. Let's elaborate on each of these conclusions.

As established earlier, a ship's type was important to what necessary goods it carried. Larger frigates required more and sometimes different kinds of sails, which in turn resulted in more demand for sailmaker's goods to repair the extra sails. Overall, there are several items of which the number taken aboard depends on the size of the ship. In general, it can be said that this is true for the majority of the boatswain's items. For other items, such as the number of assorted woodwares but also the amount of other carpenter's and cooper's supplies, this is more due to the type of journey and the length of the journey. Corporal's goods and shackles for enslaved persons were the epitome of goods that were taken due to the type of journey a ship went on. A lot of the corporal's items were only taken because the need arose from having so many iron wares on board to restrain the enslaved persons that were brought on board in Africa.

The second conclusion, that it is hard to establish which goods are for trading and which are necessary, does not come as a surprise looking at how this research was set up. As we have only looked at the inventories of a small series of ships and not at the invoices within the *scheepsboek* or their *negotieboek*, it is hard to find out what exactly was sold from each ship. There are three small points to be noted here: most of the alcohol brought aboard for a slave trading voyage was probably aboard as a trading good, most of the *soete olij* brought on board by the slavers was likely also traded with, and finally, the excess flint that was brought on board

either was used by the crew or was also traded in Africa. To get a better insight into exactly what was necessary to outfit a slaver, one could use the database built for this research and combine it with information from both the *scheepsboek* and *negotieboek* to find out which goods were sold on the African coast. Using this information, one could deduct those goods from the inventories and perhaps come to different conclusions than we did here.

The third conclusion requires a bit more elaboration. From the research conducted for this paper, it is possible to say something about the items that were taken aboard vessels regardless of whether their voyage was for the return or triangular trade. Some of these items, like the Bible, *Christelijke Zeevaart*, and psalm books were crew-related and sometimes even down to the preference of a captain, a cook, or a helmsman. Some helmsmen took half hour-glasses with cabinets around them aboard their vessels, while others did not. Items that were taken regardless of the journey were for example the Cook's goods (with the exception of slave-related items), the Helmsman's goods, the Bottle Master's goods (with the exception of some containers and planks that were only brought on slave ships), and the Cabin's goods (with the exception of the alcoholic beverages, oils and some food items).

In conclusion, there were quite some differences between what MCC slave ships and return ships brought on board. The main differences obviously lay in the fact that slave trading journeys required (more) trading goods and that they required items that were specific to the slave trade such as restraints, slave pots, and food and specialty apothecary items for the enslaved persons. There were also many similarities, as each ship required food, sails, navigational materials, and general items such as plates, candles, etc. Further research is needed to determine exactly what MCC slave traders brought with them, as it would be necessary to also compare the *negotieboek* with the inventories of the ships. In combination with an enlarged database regarding return and slave ship voyages, this could lead to new insights into how the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie traded.

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