

Dutch Activities in the North and the Arctic during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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INTRODUCTION

The Dutch were engaged in important activities in the north and in the Arctic during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in the areas of commerce, exploration, whaling, and cod-fishing. Dutch commerce with northern Europe must have begun around the middle of the sixteenth century; their explorations were started in 1584, and they began whaling in 1612. All of these activities expanded during the seventeenth century, at a time when the United Provinces became the greatest commercial power in Europe. The Dutch continued whaling until the last quarter of the nineteenth century and took it up again for a short while after 1945 (de Jong, 1972, 1978a,b, 1979). Accounts of Dutch activities in the north and in the Arctic were popular in Holland from the very beginning. Manuscripts, printed works, and illustrations concerning our Arctic past are numerous. Also, since the mid-1800s, it has been possible to develop an historical research covering the various aspects of Holland's Arctic past, involving several disciplines — history of explorations and of cartography, economic history, and maritime history (Muller, 1874).

THE UNITED PROVINCES: A GREAT COMMERCIAL POWER

The Republic of the United Provinces owed its existence to the success of the war of independence against the Hapsburgs of Spain (1568-1609 and 1621-1648), and also took advantage of the great prosperity of the Netherlands. This new state established itself over a small territory, on the shores of the North Sea and of an important sound (the Zuyderzee) and at the mouth of the Rhine and the Maas. This country managed to become a great commercial and political power in Europe during the seventeenth century (Braudel, 1979). Over two decades, from the 1590s onwards, the Dutch took over the maritime routes leading to all the geographic areas of Europe and also began participating in the worldwide European expansion (Jansma, 1952:235-241; Boxer, 1973:1-33). Dutch trade had at its disposal the largest merchant fleet of its time. The accumulation of capital, the development of industry and handicraft activities, and the progression of agriculture all served these commercial activities; the Treasury and the Bank of Amsterdam were at the centre of it all (Barbour, 1950).

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE DUTCH IN THE NORTH AND IN THE ARCTIC

Trade with northern Russia

Dutch merchants have maintained trade relations with northern Europe (northern Scandinavia and Russia) since the mid-1500s. One of the great promoters of this trade with northern Russia during the 1570s was an Antwerp merchant, Gillis Hooftman (Jansma, 1946:346-347, 1952:236-237; Fig. 1). In 1577 he, along with Balthasar de Moucheron, a great businessman from Antwerp, and Olivier Brunel, businessman and explorer, formed a company for trade with the northern part of Russia via the White Sea. Many Dutchmen such as Jan van de Walle and Olivier Brunel worked personally on trade with northern Russia. The cities of Antwerp, Vlissingen, Dordrecht, and Enkhuizen, among others, played a role in this commerce from the start. During the 1580s, the sea route leading to northern Russia became very important for Dutch merchants, since access to Russia via the Baltic had been barred to the Netherlands as a commercial route since 1583 (such was the role of the port of Archangelsk, situated on the coast of the White Sea, founded in 1583 by the Czar) (Bruyn,



FIG. 1. Portrait of the Antwerp merchant Gillis Hooftman and his wife, painted in 1570 by Maerten de Vos (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inventory no. A1717). Hooftman initiated Dutch activities in northern Europe.

1980:148-149; Ahvenainen, 1967). During the 1580s, Amsterdam was to concentrate in its hands all trade with northern Russia, thanks to the activities of merchants from the southern part of the Netherlands who had been chased away from this region by the Spanish army (among them can be found such well-known names as Isaac le Maire, Marcus de Vogelaer, and Daniël van Os). This commerce with northern Russia flourished throughout the seventeenth century, monopolized by Amsterdam. The Dutch had ousted their foreign competitors, the British, and were exporting rare products such as wine and precious metals and importing furs and caviar, which they transported even to the port of Livorno, in Italy, and such products as hemp and wheat (Hart, 1973).

During the seventeenth century, Dutch merchants also maintained commercial relations with Iceland, a relatively poor island dominated by the Danes (Thomas, 1935:77-151).

Arctic Exploration

Between 1584 and 1668, the Dutch made many attempts to find a northerly sea route to Asia. Most of them had as an objective the discovery of the Northeast Passage; others, however, tried to locate the Northwest Passage. Whaling was also relevant in this regard, as the waters of Svalbard and Greenland had already been explored.

The year 1584 saw the first Dutch attempt at the discovery of the Northeast Passage. Very few facts are known about this voyage, which was initiated by Antwerp merchants (Gillis Hooftman and Balthasar de Moucheron among others) and organized by the merchant-explorer Olivier Brunel (Ahvenainen, 1967:16; Jansma, 1952:342; Emmanuel, 1959:68). The next three expeditions setting out to discover the Northeast Passage left in 1594, 1595, and 1596-97, all from ports in the territory of the United Provinces (the northern Netherlands). Detailed accounts of all these expeditions are available (Emmanuel, 1959:62, 68-75). The originator of the two first expeditions was Balthasar de Moucheron, who managed to interest the authorities in his project (de Stoppeelaar, 1901:92-128), in which some famous men participated: Petrus Plancius, a geographer (Keuning, 1946; Fig. 2) and Jan Huygen van Linschoten and Willem Barents, two experienced navigators. The Dutch had available to them a great knowledge of the northern regions, and also profited from British experience while looking for the Northeast Passage (Burger, 1929). The results of the 1594-97 expeditions were synthesized in the last map drawn by Willem Barents (Fig. 6). During his last expeditions (1596-97), this great navigator and talented explorer lost his life. In the journal of Gerrit de Veer (1598a,b) — well illustrated and translated into many languages — can be found the narrative of this epic: first were discovered Svalbard and Bear Island, then came the polar cold of a long wintering along the northeast coast of Novaya Zemlya (Figs. 4,5,6), and finally a successful return to the homeland. Many museums have in their collections equipment from this heroic expedition of 1596-97 (de Jonge, 1873, 1877) (Fig. 3).

In the early part of the seventeenth century, the Dutch con-



FIG. 2. Nautical training given by the minister-geographer P. Plancius in Amsterdam. (Engraving from the maritime atlas *Groote lichtende ofte vyerighe colom* by J.A. Colom; Amsterdam, 1652). P. Plancius is presenting an *astrolabium catholicum* to one of his students and explaining the relationship between compass variation and geographical longitude.

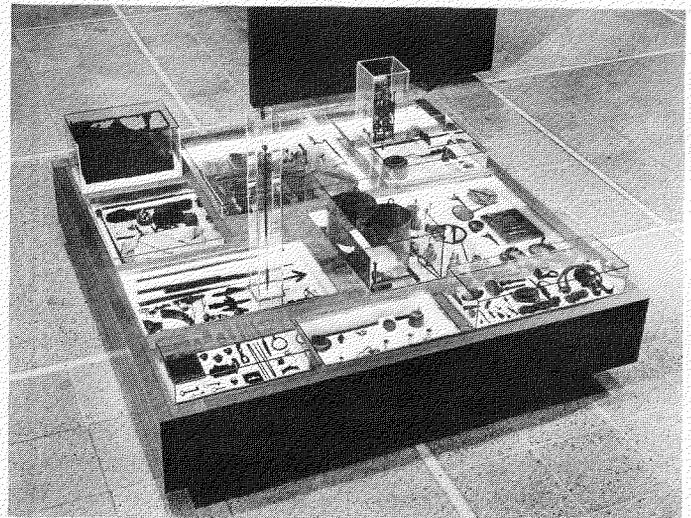


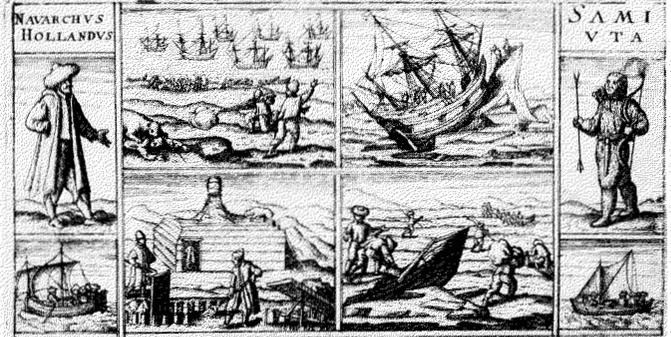
FIG. 3. Display case containing objects from the last expedition of the Dutch navigator Willem Barents, seeking the Northeast Passage in 1596-97; on display at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Nova Zembla collection).

tinued in their attempts to find a northerly sea route to Asia. Expeditions were organized on the initiative of the Dutch East India Company in 1609 (H. Hudson), of the States General in 1610-11 (Jan Cornelisz May) and of a Flemish merchant called Isaac le Maire in 1609 (Melchior van den Kerckhoven). The former, living in Amsterdam, had even tried to interest the French in this enterprise.

Between 1614 and 1625, the Company of the North (1614-1642), specializing in whaling, was the originator of numerous expeditions setting out to discover the Northwest and Northeast passages and also to explore the shores of

VVaerachtighe Beschryvinghe
Van drie seylagien / ter werelt noyt soo bzeemt ghe-

hoot / Drie jaeren achter malanderen deur de Hollandtsche ende Zeelandtsche schepen by
 noorden Noortweghen Sibiria ende Tartaria na de Conuickrijken van Cathay ende China, so merke jaende op-
 waerde vele verbeeterde seegen ende ander zee mannes ende ontydtsche kouten en hoe op de laetste seylt rick op de bereit in omme rick
 op 76. graden op Nova Zembla en luyde ghetruurt ende o. ananden jaere alder ouder hebben ende hier na twee alge / rouwlijck
 open elpue li puyen oude ende laege des zee gyltharen. Sijns sijn teer groeten princijs / magtes ende coningelijcke / landtsche. Gebou-
 den Gerrit de Veer van Amstelredam.



Ghedrukt t'Amstelredam, by Cornelis Claesz, op't wwater, int Schrijf boeck, A^o. 1598.

FIG. 5. The ship of the Willem Barents expedition caught in the ice on the north-east coast of Novaya Zemlya in August 1596 (engraving from the journal of G. de Veer).



FIG. 4. The spot on the northeast coast of Novaya Zemlya where the ship from the Willem Barents expedition ran aground in August 1596. Recently, in 1979, the Soviet navigator-historian D. Kravchenko found the remains of the ship in this same spot (photo taken by a Soviet expedition in 1933).

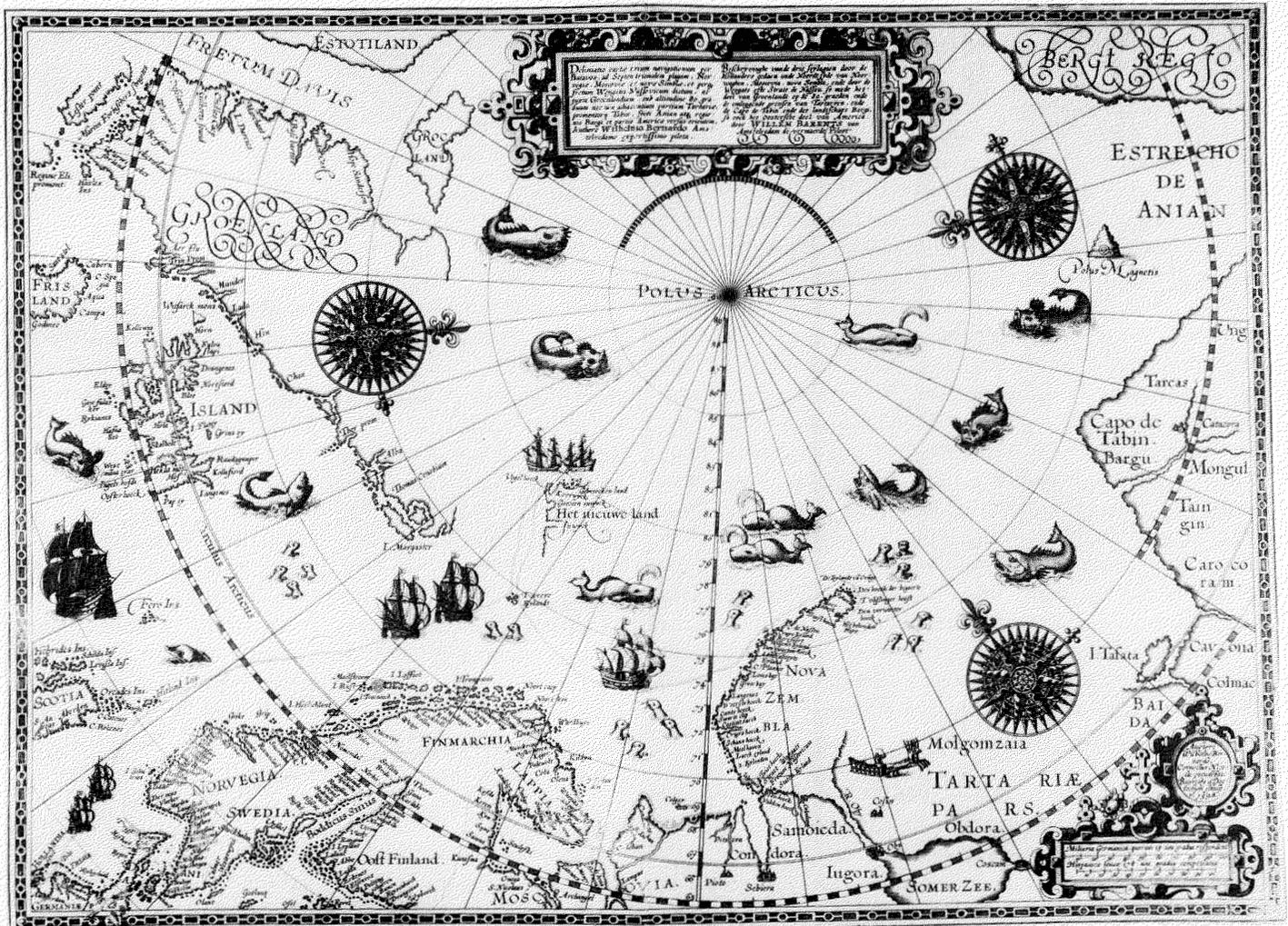


FIG. 6. First circumpolar map of the North Pole drawn by the navigator W. Barents (d. 1597) and edited in 1598. The route followed by the expedition to the spot where the ship was grounded is traced on the map (engraving published in the journal of G. de Veer, Amsterdam 1598).

Greenland and the waters of Svalbard. Joris Carolus of Enkhuizen, cartographer and navigator, played an important role in this exploration (de Jong, 1978:163-176). Then in the 1660s the idea of a search for the Northeast Passage was taken up by a brilliant businessman from the southern Netherlands, Pieter de la Court (Fig. 7); he had conceived of the project in 1664, and it was realized in 1668 by some Amsterdam merchants who sent to the north a navigator, experienced in whaling, called Willem de Vlamingh. This last voyage brought to a definite close the sequence of attempts by the Dutch to find a northerly sea route for their trade with Asia (de Jong, 1978b:177, Overvoorde, 1926; Schilder, 1976:14-15). Exploration and whaling were thus activities which mutually influenced each other throughout the course of this period (de Jong, 1978b:7,163).

Whaling

Following the discovery of Svalbard by Willem Barents in 1596, Dutch merchants began in 1612 to develop an interest in whaling in arctic waters (between Greenland and Novaya Zemlya and in northern Scandinavia) and in the production of whale oil, a product needed by the United Provinces. The Dutch also engaged in cod-fishing in the seas around Iceland (Thomas, 1935:152-182).

For their whaling activities, Dutch merchants soon formed (in 1614) a monopoly company, the Company of the North, which operated as a production and sales cartel until its permit expired in 1642. Until then, the company had been able to limit whaling considerably, but after 1642, free enterprise led to frantic activity (Bruyn and Davids, 1975). While the Company of the North had acquired only a limited work force, after 1642 the situation changed completely: great numbers of immigrants and seasonal workers began working in the industry. Since the beginning of their whaling activities, the Dutch had had to call upon Basque harpooners because they were such competent hunters; it is because of the Basques' specialization that the Dutch were able to launch their whaling industry and to keep it going successfully for so long (Basques were found in the employ of Dutch whalers until 1660 [de Jong, 1972:100]). The Dutch domination of the whaling industry throughout the seventeenth century was due to the Basques, to the quality and experience of the Dutch sailors themselves, to their economic organization, and to the low cost of their ships. Since the activities were so intense, many sailors from northern Germany and northern Friesland (immigrants) found work among the Dutch, and some of them did grow richer thereby (de Jong, 1972:101-113).

Dutch whalers practiced three types of whale hunt: first, in the bays and along the shores, until 1670; then in the high seas (the pelagic hunt) from 1635 to 1670; and later, after 1670, in the ice floes (de Jong, 1972:137-139, 1978a:5-7). In the earliest period, oil was extracted on shore, close to the whaling ground. There they constructed buildings for oil extraction, production of hunting implements, and storage, and also as homes. Settlements were erected along the northwest coast of Svalbard, on Jan Mayen Island, and on Amsterdam Island



FIG. 7. Portrait of Pieter de la Court (1618-1685), businessman and writer of political pamphlets, painted by A.L. van den Tempel in 1667 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inventory no. A2243). De la Court in 1664-65 initiated plans for an expedition to the Northeast Passage.

(nicknamed Smeerenburg, or Blubbertown), where the men worked during the summer. The built-up areas were first used by the various "locals" (or local production units organized by city: Amsterdam, Enkhuizen, Hoorn, Harlingen, and others [Muller, 1874:132-161; de Jong, 1972:146-147, 189-200]). Some of the local organizations remained in these whaling facilities after the Company of the North's monopoly expired in 1642, until about 1670 (de Jong, 1972:41, 1978:1-12). These residences thus existed for quite a length of time, and visitors have been able to view the ruins of Dutch buildings that bear direct witness to the ephemeral presence of European fishermen during the seventeenth century at a latitude of about 80°N (Martens, 1710). This presence served the development of natural resources in the arctic seas, within a commercial capitalist economy primarily interested in direct high-return speculative enterprises.

RESEARCH INTO HOLLAND'S ARCTIC PAST

Numerous accounts relating the voyages and exploits of Dutch explorers and sailors in the Arctic from the end of the sixteenth century to the present have always enjoyed great popularity among the general public. Dutch activities in the Arctic are also reflected in a rich collection of illustrations, from which nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have



FIG. 8. Objects from the ship of the W. Barents expedition (Nova Zembla collection).



FIG. 9. Interior of the wooden cabin serving as shelter and home to the men of the W. Barents expedition (engraving from the German edition of the journal of G. de Veer, Nuremberg, 1598).

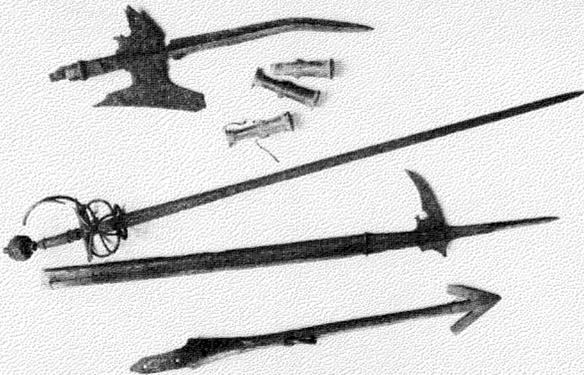


FIG. 10. Arms of the Barents expedition (Nova Zembla collection).



FIG. 11. Pewter beer or wine mug, made in Amsterdam (Nova Zembla collection, inventory number NM 7679).

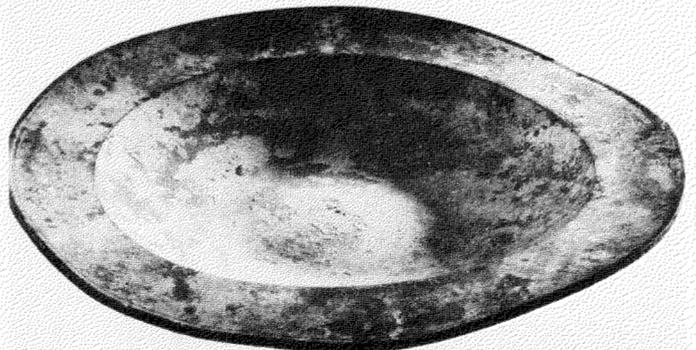


FIG. 12. Pewter meat platter (Nova Zembla collection, inventory number NM 7661).

sought inspiration (Tollens, 1843, 1849; Helman, 1931; Veterman, 1934). The Dutch past in the north has its place in the collections of several museums: the National Museum (Figs. 8-12), the State Museum of Maritime History, and the Museum of City History in Amsterdam, the Museum of History in Rotterdam, and the State Museum of the Zuyderzee in Enkhuizen.

In 1872 and 1876, the government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands acquired a large collection of original artifacts from the winter camp of the 1596-97 expedition of Willem Barents (de Jonge, 1873, 1877). Then, beginning in 1873, a national committee organized a series of expeditions to the arctic seas to conduct scientific investigations and to search for historical traces of the Dutch sailors and explorers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries (*De tochten der Nederlanders*, 1880; Koeman, 1981; Fig. 13). In 1978, the Arctic Committee of the University of Groningen sent, in collaboration with the National Museum in Amsterdam, the first exploratory expedition to Amsterdam Island, situated to the northwest of Svalbard, in order to study the remains of ruins of Dutch whaling facilities from the seventeenth century (de Jong, 1973; Kist, 1978, 1980). Following the success of this



FIG. 13. The men of the W. Barents expedition make one of their rowboats seaworthy before their return trip from the north of Novaya Zemlya to northern Russia (engraving from the journal of G. de Veer).

expedition, the Arctic Centre of Groningen sent many archaeological expeditions to Amsterdam Island and other nearby locations (Haquebord and de Bok, 1981; Anon., 1981). A number of Dutch specialists in various fields collaborated in these excavations, locating not only traces of habitation, of the whalers' food, of the vegetation, and of the fauna, but also many objects from the whalers' equipment and graves. D. Kravchenko, a Soviet historian, has pursued interesting research on the last expedition of Willem Barents (1596-97) and searched for his traces on Novaya Zemlya Island; since 1977, expeditions sent to this island have recovered an important collection of original objects from the Barents expedition, which complement these already preserved in the museum collec-



FIG. 14. Carpenter's tools (Nova Zembla collection).



FIG. 15. Auger (Nova Zembla collection, inventory number NM 7774).

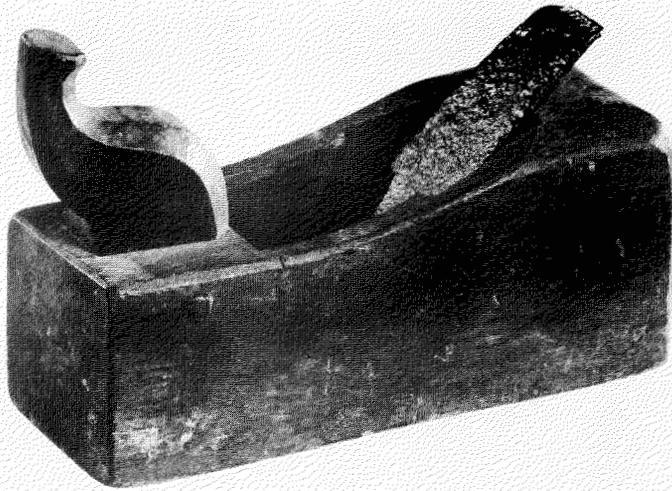


FIG. 16. Plane (Nova Zembla collection, inventory number NM 7771).

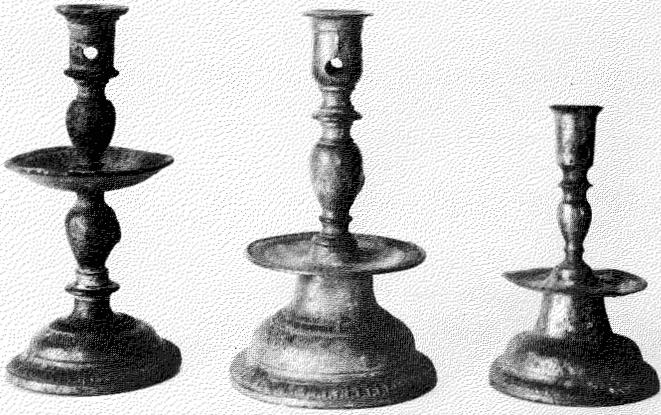


FIG. 17. Candlesticks (Nova Zembla collection).

tions (Figs. 14-17). Finally, during the post-war years, some Dutch historians significantly renewed interest in the economic history of commercial activities in northern Europe (Jansma, 1946; Ahvenainen, 1967; Hart, 1973, 1976) and in Dutch whaling activities in the Arctic from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century (de Jong, 1972, 1978a,b, 1979; van der Woude, 1972; Bruyn and Davids, 1975). All this research is important in that it creates awareness of the difficult conditions in which the Dutch must have lived and worked in the North, and the courage with which they faced the harsh climate.

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