



Free Seas, World Markets

From the Dutch Republic to the Strait of Hormuz

Overview

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A Small Nation, An Outsized Problem

How the Dutch Republic built a commercial empire through logistics and finance

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What the Wealth Produced, and What It Cost

The Golden Age, its art, and the colonial violence that funded it

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The Chokepoint Problem

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The Long Shadow

From UNCLOS to the Strait of Hormuz — the same questions, four centuries later

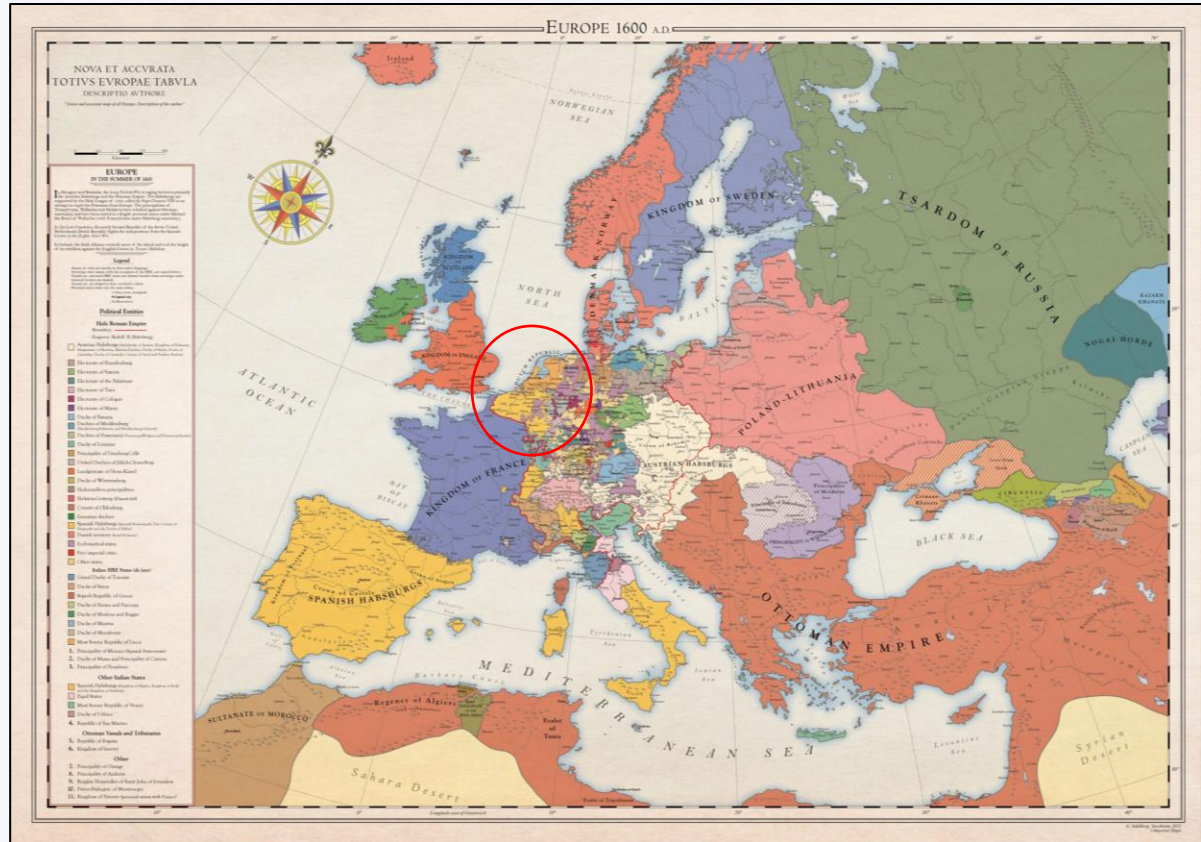


A Small Nation, An Outsized Problem

Section 01

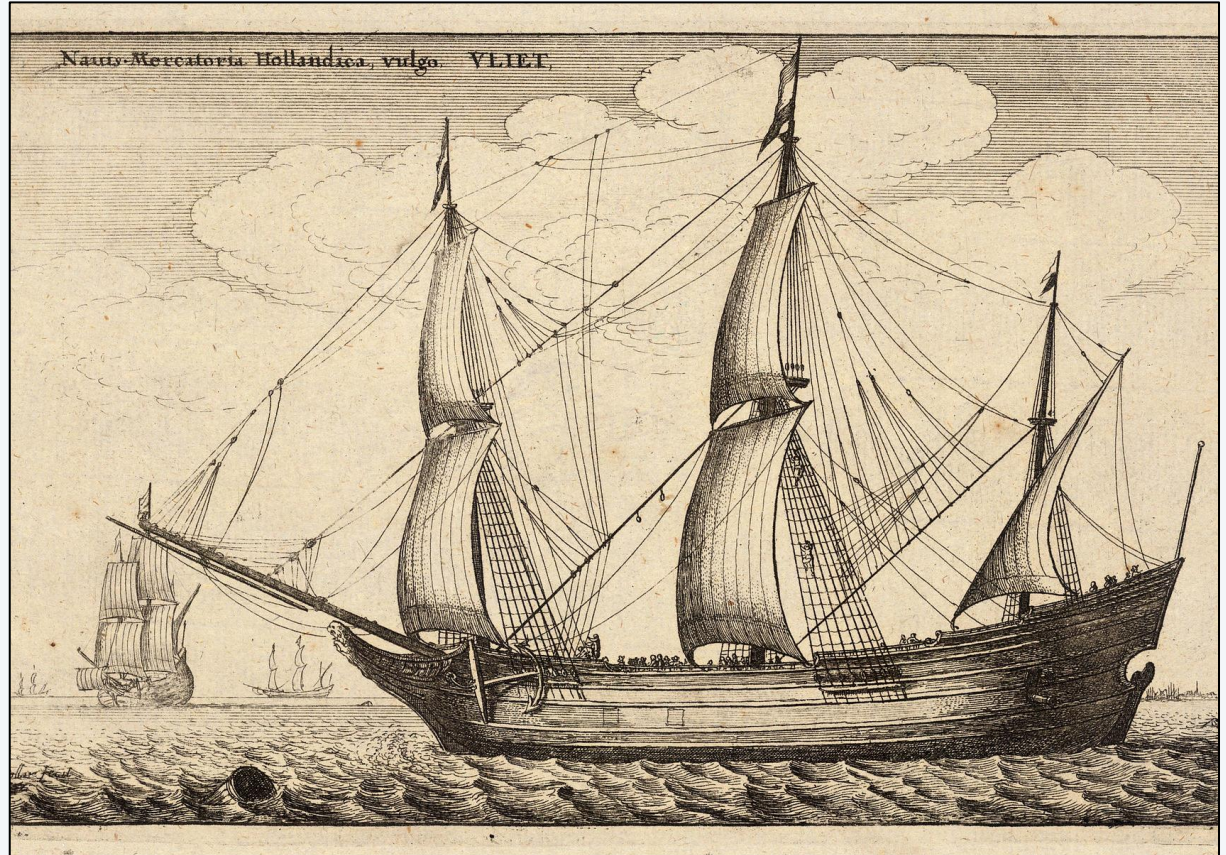
The Dutch Republic, c. 1600

- **Size:** Roughly the size of West Virginia: small, resource-poor, no great forests or fertile hinterland.
- **Neighbours:** Spain to the south, France to the west, the Holy Roman Empire to the east.
- **Context:** In the middle of an 80-year war of independence against Spain (from 1568).
- **The puzzle:** Within 50 years it becomes the dominant commercial power on earth, how?



Innovation I – The Fluyt

- **The problem:** Most merchant ships were dual-purpose, cargo carriers that could double as warships.
- **The solution:** The *fluyt* was optimized for one thing only: maximum cargo, minimum crew.
- **Design:** Flatter hull, greater internal volume, simplified rigging operable by a smaller team.
- **Impact:** Roughly half the crew of a comparable vessel, the Dutch could undercut everyone on freight rates, and they did.





What the Wealth Produced, and What It Cost

Section 02

A Commercial Culture

- **The difference:** Elsewhere in Europe, art was commissioned by royal courts or the Church, grand religious narratives, portraits of monarchs.
- **In the Republic:** Protestant, no monarchy, buyers were merchants, civic administrators, guild regents, prosperous households.
- **The result:** Domestic interiors, maps, ships, market scenes; the visual culture of a commercial republic.
- **This afternoon:** The Mauritshuis in The Hague holds some of the finest examples, including Vermeer and Rembrandt.



The Shadow of the Golden Age

- **VOC:** Monopolistic control of the spice trade enforced by violence in what is now Indonesia.
- **WIC:** The Dutch West India Company (WIC); a major actor in the Atlantic slave trade, transporting an estimated half a million enslaved Africans.
- **Johan Maurits:** Governor of Dutch Brazil (1637–44), patron of the arts, and personally involved in the Atlantic slave trade. The Mauritshuis bears his name.
- **The point:** The Golden Age and its colonial violence are not separable, the museum grapples with this.





The Chokepoint Problem, and the Dutch Response

Section 03

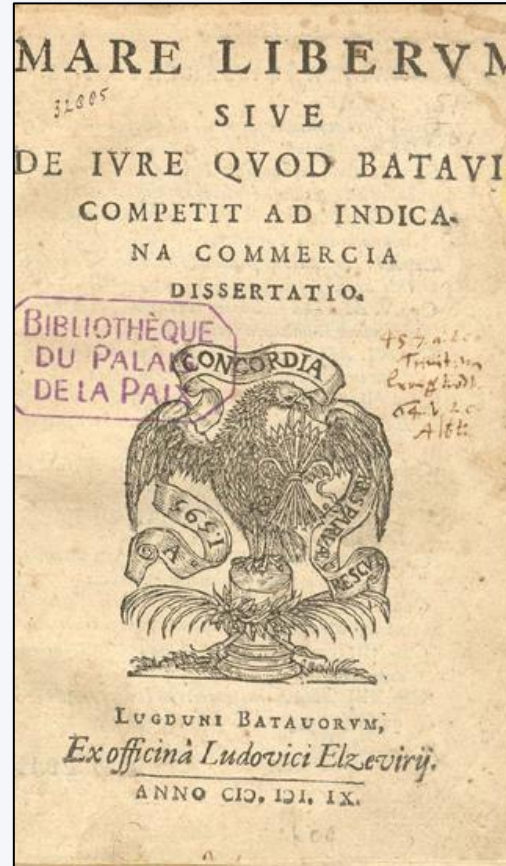
The Battle of the Sound, 1658

- **The threat:** Sweden moved to control the Øresund, the only maritime route between the North Sea and the Baltic.
- **The stakes:** Baltic trade (grain, timber, naval stores) was the backbone of Amsterdam's economy.
- **The response:** Admiral de Ruyter led a fleet into the Baltic, allied with Denmark, and engaged the Swedish navy.
- **The key point:** Not about territory; purely about keeping the strait open for trade.
- **The pattern:** This repeats throughout Dutch history: military action in defence of free navigation, not conquest.



Hugo Grotius and Mare Liberum (1609)

- **The argument:** The ocean cannot be owned; it is a common resource, and all nations have the right to navigate it freely.
- **The context:** Written partly to defend VOC actions in the East Indies, but the argument outgrew its immediate purpose.
- **The legacy:** Foundational text of international maritime law; a tradition running through centuries to UNCLOS (1982).
- **Today:** The principle of freedom of navigation is Grotius's principle, codified after centuries of legal development.



Grotius' Legacy in The Hague Today

- **Royal Library:** Located right next to the train station where we arrive, holds original manuscripts and works of Grotius.
- **The Peace Palace:** Houses the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA); both apply principles tracing back to Grotius.
- **South China Sea:** The Philippines v. China arbitration (2016); disputes over maritime boundaries and navigation rights, handled by the PCA.
- **Continuity:** The questions Grotius was wrestling with in 1609 are the same ones these institutions are answering today.





The Long Shadow

Section 04

The Strait of Hormuz: The Same Questions

- **The facts:** Approx. 33 km wide at its narrowest; the only maritime exit from the Persian Gulf.
- **The stakes:** Approx. 20% of global oil supply and a significant share of LNG passes through it.
- **The framework:** UNCLOS and the IMO are the legal and regulatory infrastructure, built on Grotius's principles.
- **The tension:** The system works because states agree to let it work, and that agreement is most fragile at the chokepoints.
- **The questions:** Who has the right of passage? Who bears the cost of disruption? Are the institutions adequate?



What History Offers

Perspective

The daily news cycle moves fast.
History slows it down; it tells you
which questions have been with us
for centuries.

Pattern Recognition

The chokepoint problem predates
the VOC and will outlast UNCLOS.
The institutions change; the
underlying question does not.

The Stakes

80% of world trade moves by sea.
How we manage maritime order,
through law, institutions, or hard
power, is one of the defining
questions of our time.

Group Discussion

The Dutch Republic went to war in 1658 to keep a strait open, because the institutions of their time couldn't resolve the dispute any other way.

Today we have international law, the IMO, UNCLOS, and the courts in The Hague — mechanisms that are supposed to make that unnecessary.

As a supply chain manager, a policymaker, or simply someone whose economy depends on maritime trade: do you think those institutions are adequate? And if they fail, what should happen next?

5 minutes in groups · Then we hear from each group in turn · No single correct answer!

After the discussion → campus tour → lunch → The Hague (Mauritshuis)