

## **The Sound Toll Registers. Concise source criticism of the original source<sup>1</sup>**

### **The Sound Toll Registers**

The Sound Toll Registers (STR) are the records of the toll levied by the kings of Denmark on the ships passing through the Sound, the main strait connecting the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. The toll was introduced by the Danish king Erik VII in 1429. For centuries, the kings' bureaucrats administered the Sound Toll – *Øresundstolden* in Danish – in the small town of Helsingør, north of Copenhagen, where the strait is at its narrowest. The Sound Toll contributed considerably to the income of the Danish state. By the late seventeenth century it amounted about 4.5 % of that income and this percentage subsequently increased to about 10 % during many years in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Sound Toll was abolished in 1857 as a result of diplomatic pressure of the main maritime powers, including the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The accounts of the toll have been preserved for intermittent years between 1497 and 1573, and practically entirely for the period from 1574 to 1857. They cover about 300 of the 360 years between 1497 and 1857. The Sound Toll Registers – or *Øresundstoldbøgerne* – hold information on about 1.8 million passages. They are stored by the Danish National Archives in Copenhagen, where their more than 700 volumes occupy about sixty metres of shelf space.<sup>2</sup>

### **The STR data**

The information the kings' bureaucrats entered in the registers for each ship's passage was initially limited to the passage year, the name of the shipmaster, his place of residence, the toll amount paid and, when relevant, the toll amount paid for any cargo of wine. The amount of the information increased with the gradual introduction of additional tolls in the course of the centuries. It reached its more or less definitive form by the eighteenth century, when for each individual passage, both westward and eastward, the STR contain the declaration date, the name of the shipmaster, his place of residence,<sup>3</sup> his ports of departure and destination, the composition of the cargo and the toll paid.

The contents of a typical STR entry looks like this:

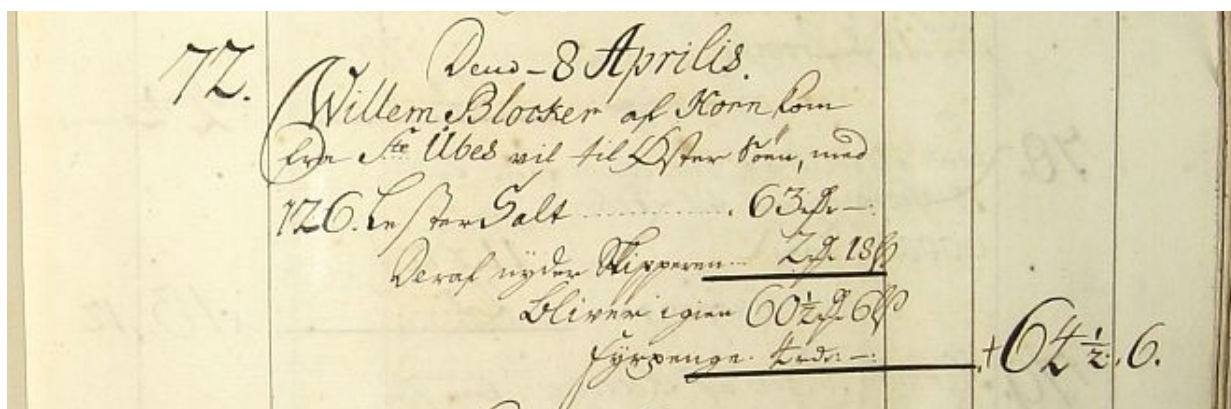
### **Entry from the Sound Toll Registers, 1734**

---

<sup>1</sup> This tekst is largely based on: Veluwenkamp, 'Sonttolregisters Online'; Scheltjens, Veluwenkamp and Van der Woude, 'A Closer Look'. Veluwenkamp, "Die Sound Toll Registers Online"; Scheltjens and Veluwenkamp, 'Sound Toll Registers Online'.

<sup>2</sup> Gøbel, 'The Sound Toll Registers Online Project', 305-308.

<sup>3</sup> There is a protracted historiographical discussion concerning the question if the STR actually list the shipmasters' places of residence. The – Danish – wording in the source is, for example: *Willem Blocker af Horn*. It is our interpretation that – generally – the shipmaster lived in the place mentioned – in this case Hoorn. Some, however, have argued that the toponym refers to the homeport of the ship.



Source: Danish National Archives, Copenhagen

*Transcription:*

Dend 8 Aprilis

72 Willem Blocker af Horn kom  
 fra S<sup>te</sup> Ubes vil til Østersøen, med  
 126 lester salt 63 rdr.  
 Deraf nijder skipperen 2 rdr. 18 s.  
 Bliver igjen 60 ½ rdr. 6 s.  
 Fijrpenge 4 rdr 64 ½ 6

*Translation:*

Willem Blocker of Hoorn, comes  
 from Setubal wants to sail to the Baltic Sea, with  
 126 lasts of salt 63 rigsdaler  
 Thereof enjoys the shipmaster 2 rigsdaler, 18 skilling  
 Remains 60.5 rigsdaler, 6 skilling  
 Beacon money 4 rigsdaler 64.5, 6

*Explanation:*

Shipmaster Willem Blocker, living in Hoorn<sup>4</sup>, departed from Setubal, destined to the Baltic Sea with as cargo aboard his ship  
 126 lasts of salt, for which a toll of 63 rigsdaler is due  
 Subtracted as a contribution in favour of the shipmaster: 2 rigsdaler, 18 skilling  
 Remains: 60.5 rigsdaler, 6 skilling  
 Added: beacon money for the maintenance of the beacons in the Sound: 4 rigsdaler  
 Grand total to be paid: 64.5 rigsdaler, 6 skilling

**An important source**

It is clear that 1.8 million entries like this provide a lot of information about the shipmasters passing the Sound, the routes they sailed, the cargo of their ships and the toll they paid. For that reason, the STR are well known as one of the great serial sources of early modern history and the only one with rich and detailed information on European shipping and trade that spans a period of four centuries. They are the main measuring point of commodity transport in Europe and contain vital information on trade, transport, production and consumption. The

<sup>4</sup> See note 4. The Danish word 'af' used in the STR, of course, means 'from'.

STR are also cherished as a vital source of information on the origins, lives and economic activities of a host of shipmasters from many countries. They are, in short, a central source to social, economic and maritime history on all levels: global, European, national, regional and local.<sup>5</sup>

### Limitations of the STR

This all does not mean that the STR should be used without criticism. One has to keep in mind that the STR are a fiscal source. The Danish bureaucracy kept them not to produce statistics for future researchers, but to give account for the toll they levied to the king. The STR have been the subject of extensive source critical discussions in the historiography. These amount to three main concerns about their reliability.

**First**, there were other routes from Western Europe to the Baltic Sea area, including the ones through the Little Belt and the Great Belt, the overland route, the route to Russia via North Cape and, from 1784 on, the Schleswig-Holstein Canal. Although each of these routes individually may not have offered a serious alternative to the Sound, taken together they should not be omitted from the analysis of trade flows. Hardly anything is known about the traffic through the Little Belt except that this strait was hard to navigate because of its winding channels and strong currents, and using it implied a long detour for ships sailing to and from the Baltic Sea.<sup>6</sup> It was, probably, only significant for local transport.<sup>7</sup> Only a minority of the shipmasters sailed the Great Belt, as this channel was much harder to navigate than the Sound, while the same toll tariffs were applied in both straits.<sup>8</sup> The traffic here was mainly regional, predominantly connecting Lübeck and Rostock with Danish and Norwegian ports. The overland route to present-day East Germany, Poland and Russia was only relevant for the transport of low-weight, low-volume and expensive commodities.<sup>9</sup> The Schleswig-Holstein Canal between Tönning on the North Sea and Kiel on the Baltic Sea, was opened in 1784, but only small ships could pass through it and it never attracted a lot of traffic.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the sea route to Russia via the White Sea port of Archangel was the main gateway to Russia during the long seventeenth century, when Russia did not have its own Baltic port. It was the main and preferred alternative for the routing of Russia's foreign trade via the Baltic Sea and the Swedish and other possessions lying between the sea and Russia. Vital as it was to Russia, this route arguably involved usually much less than 10 per cent of the Sound traffic.<sup>11</sup>

**The second concern** about the STR's reliability involves fraud. This did not mean stealing through the Sound without paying the toll. The chance of success in this respect was very low as officials observed and guarded the strait from Kronborg castle and the royal guard ship cruising it. It is widely accepted that all ships that sailed through the Sound in the years covered by the STR were recorded in them. Shipmasters, nevertheless, certainly evaded payment of part of the toll due, by making false declarations of the commodities their ships carried. Clearance was based on the documents they carried, but the customs officers were entitled to search the ships. Obviously, this did not stop all shipmasters from trying their luck. Comparison with other sources, especially customs accounts of individual ports, the dependability of which is incidentally problematic too, has shown that the information on

---

<sup>5</sup> Scheltjens, Veluwenkamp and Van der Woude, 'A Closer Look', 2.

<sup>6</sup> Gøbel, 'The Sound Toll Registers Online project', 319-320 – Gøbel mentions that toll registers of the Little Belt have been preserved for the years 1816-1857; Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund', 12.

<sup>7</sup> Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund', 12.

<sup>8</sup> Gøbel, 'The Sound Toll Registers Online project', 319; Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund', 12.

<sup>9</sup> Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund', 4, 6, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Gøbel, 'The Sound Toll Registers Online project', 319-320.

<sup>11</sup> Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund', 4-5.

cargoes in the STR is generally correct but not complete.<sup>12</sup> The size of the fraud differed per period and per commodities category. Expensive commodities of small volume were always subject to fraud.<sup>13</sup> For bulky commodities like grain, flax and hemp, the picture is slightly different. Here, before 1618, especially in the period 1580–1618, fraud was enormous, oscillating perhaps between 25 and 50%. This may be explained by the fact that the customs officers seem to hardly have checked the declarations. In 1618, this changed. From then on, the customs officers carried out more systematic checks, so that in the case of the conspicuous bulk goods, fraud was no longer a serious problem.<sup>14</sup>

**A third reason** why the STR must be handled with care, is the fact that sometimes parties were exempted from the toll. This applies throughout to Danish ships and goods and to Swedish vessels and commodities between 1650 and 1710.<sup>15</sup> Exempted passages were recorded, but often without mention of the relevant cargoes, and, in any case, usually without mention of their quantities.

Alternative routes, fraud and exemptions cannot alter the fact that the STR are a great source and starting point for the study of trade and transport in the period they cover, even to the very critical historian. As always, the researcher must be aware of the limitations of the source, in this case especially with regard to cargoes.<sup>16</sup>

JWV, SvdW, May 2020

## Websites

Sound Toll Registers Online at: [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl).

## Literature

- Gøbel, E., ‘The Sound Toll Registers Online Project, 1497-1857’, *International Journal of Maritime History* XXII, 2 (2010) 305-324.
- Jeannin, P., ‘Les comptes du Sund comme source pour la construction d’indices généraux de l’activité économique en Europe (XVIe-XVIIe siècle)’ in: idem, *Marchands du Nord. Espaces et trafics à l’époque moderne* (Paris 1996) 1-62.
- Scheltjens, W., and J.W. Veluwenkamp, ‘Sound Toll Registers Online. Introduction and first research examples’, *International Journal of Maritime History* XXIV, 1 (2012) 301-330.
- Scheltjens, W., J. W. Veluwenkamp and S. van der Woude, ‘A Closer Look: STRO as an instrument for the Study of Early Modern Maritime History’ in: J.W. Veluwenkamp and W. Scheltjens ed., *Early modern shipping and trade. Novel approaches using Sound Toll Registers Online* (Leiden, Boston 2018) 1-18.
- Tielhof, M. van, *The ‘Mother of all Trades’. The Baltic Grain Trade in Amsterdam from the Late 16th to the Early 19th Century* (Leiden, Boston, Cologne 2002).
- Veluwenkamp, J.W., ‘Die Sound Toll Registers Online’ als Instrument für die Erforschung des frühneuzeitlichen Ostseehandels’ in: Peter Rauscher and Andrea Serles, eds., *Wiegen – Zählen – Registrieren. Handelsgeschichtliche Massenquellen und die Erforschung mitteleuropäischer Märkte (13.-18. Jahrhundert)* (Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen 2015) 365-384.

<sup>12</sup> Gøbel, ‘The Sound Toll Registers Online project’, 319-321.

<sup>13</sup> Jeannin, ‘Les comptes du Sund’, 33, 38; Van Tielhof, *The ‘Mother of all Trades’*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Jeannin, ‘Les comptes du Sund’, 21, 37-39.

<sup>15</sup> Jeannin, ‘Les comptes du Sund’, 39-40.

<sup>16</sup> Gøbel, ‘The Sound Toll Registers Online project’, 319.

Veluwenkamp, J.W., 'Sonttolregisters Online', *Tijdschrift voor Zeegeschiedenis* 38, 2 (2019) 75-78.