

## Sound Toll Registers Online. Concise source criticism of the database<sup>1</sup>

### The Sound Toll Registers

Sound Toll Registers Online (STRO) is an online database containing the information included in the Sound Toll Registers (STR).<sup>2</sup> The Sound Toll Registers are widely known as crucial for the study of the history of European shipping and trade, but their sheer volume and detail make them virtually impossible to handle. In consequence, quite paradoxically, they themselves have not been used a lot for historical research. Instead, historians have preferred to use the Sound Toll Tables (STT), or, in the original Danish, *Tabeller over skibsfart og varetransport gennem Øresund*.<sup>3</sup> STRO offers new, improved and instant access to the STR.

### The Sound Toll Tables

This monumental seven-volume publication, produced by the Danish historians Nina Ellinger Bang and Knud Korst in the first half of the twentieth century, provides an ample summary of the STR and makes them more digestible for the researcher. Ever since the publication of the first volume of the STT in 1906, these tables, rather than the STR themselves, have been used for almost every major study of early modern European transport and trade.<sup>4</sup>

The enormous significance the STT have had for historical research should not conceal their shortcomings. These are extensively discussed in the historiography.<sup>5</sup> First of all, they only cover the years 1497–1783. Second, they only present data on a high level of aggregation, so that individual passages have disappeared from sight. Third, the way they combine commodities in categories is sometimes quite haphazard and blurs details. As a result, the STT offer only limited possibilities of analysis of the original data.<sup>6</sup>

### Sound Toll Registers Online

The unwieldiness of the STR and the flaws in the STT were among the reasons to build Sound Toll Registers Online.<sup>7</sup> Sound Toll Registers Online is a relational database set up to make the STR data instantaneously available to all. It includes for each passage<sup>8</sup> the following information:

- the passage date
- the shipmaster's name
- the shipmaster's place of residence
- the port of departure

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<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> [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl).

<sup>3</sup> Ellinger Bang and Korst, *Tabeller over skibsfart og vaeretransport gennem Oeresund*.

<sup>4</sup> See also Van Tielhof, *The 'Mother of all Trades'*. There are, of course, exemptions. Christensen has used both the STT as the STR in Christensen, *Dutch trade to the Baltic*. The same is true for Boon in Boon, 'West Friesland and the Sound'. Scheltjens uses the STR in, for instance, Scheltjens, 'The changing geography' (2012).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Gøbel, 'The Sound Toll Registers Online Project'; Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund'; Christensen, 'Der handelsgeschichtliche Wert der Sundzollregister'; Heckscher, 'Öresundsråkenskaperna'.

<sup>6</sup> Gøbel, 'The Sound Toll Registers Online Project', 321-322; Jeannin, 'Les comptes du Sund'.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Willem Veluwenkamp (University of Groningen) and Siem van der Woude (Tresoar) managed the project. George Welling (University of Groningen) designed the database in the application phase. Douwe de Vries (then Director of Tresoar) and the late Rienk Wegener Sleeswijk encouraged and supported us.

<sup>8</sup> More precisely: for each STR entry. As discussed in the main text, passages were often recorded in more than one entry in the STR before 1634.

the port of destination (from the mid-1660s; before that, they were not recorded in the STR)

the nature and quantity of the cargo

the toll paid

The data was entered into the database in the Danish language as used in the original source, including all early modern spelling variants to avoid contamination by premature interpretation. The spelling variations of personal names, geographical names, commodity names, measures and weights are almost without limit. Obviously, standardized spelling facilitates the data analysis, but so far, we have only standardized the spelling of the geographical names, while preserving the original input in the database and keeping it accessible there.<sup>9</sup>

The database has four basic tables: passage, cargo, taxes and images. The *passage table* basically contains one record for each passage, including fields for the date and the shipmaster's name and place of residence. It does not contain fields for the cargo and the ports of departure and destination, as many ships carried several commodities and the ports of departure and destination could differ per commodity. Accordingly, the *cargo table* contains per passage records for each commodity mentioned there, including fields for the commodity's ports of departure and destination and the tax paid per commodity. The separate *taxes table* contains records with fields for the tax or, in many cases, the several taxes levied per passage. The *images table* contains records with a field that connects the passage record with the scans of the relevant folio of the original source. The four tables are connectable by a common identity field.

STRO is essentially an instrument for historical research. It allows one to make all conceivable cross tabs and to carry out any statistical analysis.<sup>10</sup> It includes a user interface, facilitating the selection of passage records by applying search terms for time periods, shipmaster names and places of residence, ports of departure and destination, and cargoes.<sup>11</sup> Researchers may download the results and process them with applications like Microsoft Excel and Access.

## Limitations of STRO

STRO should not be used thoughtlessly. 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. Also, STRO is an interpretation of the STR and not a direct copy or a source edition. It is an organic historical source fitted into a much more sterile database. It is also both a sharp and heavy tool. It should be handled with care and with understanding of its power and limitations. The individual researcher must be aware of this when they use it. A few remarks explaining some of STRO's complications may clarify this.

First and foremost, we have only entered the STR toll collection entries proper into the database. We have omitted the large quantity of additional information the STR contain. This mainly involves the recurrent introductory, accounting and justifying texts the toll officials noted. In addition, as the database has a strict format, we could not include the extra information the officials sometimes added in the passage entries. This information is diverse. It may involve the owner or addressee of part of the cargo, a ship having been stranded, or a rotted part of the cargo. In order not to completely lose sight of that information, we, as a rule, have put a reference in the field '*opmerking bron*' – 'remark on the source'. This

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<sup>9</sup> George Welling (University of Groningen) and Frank Bosmans standardized the geographical names.

<sup>10</sup> George Welling (University of Groningen) and Frank Bosmans (Tresoar) designed the database.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Bosmans (Tresoar) produced the user interface in the execution phase.

reference is often worded only as '*stuk Deense tekst*' – 'piece of Danish text' – with no further details.

Not all entry problems were solved after extra information had been dealt with – or shed – in this way. The STR developed organically during more than three and a half centuries so that their form and precise content change and vary from one period to the next. This means that we had to handle all kinds of peculiarities to fit the content of the STR entries proper into the database. The three most conspicuous examples of this concern the recording of the value of a commodity, the formulas 'giør' and 'er', and references in one STR entry to another.

Usually, the STR record commodities – the components of the cargo – by stating the quantity, the unit of measure and the commodity, e.g. *60 læster rug* (60 lasts of rye).<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the unit of measure and the quantity involve an amount of money, e.g. *for 800 rd. kramerie* (for 800 rixdollars pedlar's wares).<sup>13</sup> Aside from these, the value per unit of the commodity is also sometimes recorded, for example: *156 fad stads viin à 52 rd.* (156 casks of town wine at 52 rixdollars per cask).<sup>14</sup> In this case, we enter the value per cask into the database as part of the commodity: '*stads viin à 52 rd.*'

Sometimes, the STR record commodities with a second measure, e.g. *42 læster rug etc. giør 50 2/5 læst* (42 lasts of rye etc. i.e. 50 2/5 lasts) or *36 læster hveede er 45 læst* (36 lasts of wheat i.e. 45 lasts).<sup>15</sup> We have interpreted the formulas 'giør' and 'er' as 'that is to say' or 'i.e.'. In these cases, we have entered the second measure in a separate field as an alternative measure.

In approximately less than 0.6% of the STR entries there is a reference to another entry, characterized by the term 'Vide Fol.' and followed by the relevant folio number and passage number.<sup>16</sup> These references usually involve corrections of or additions to earlier entries. We have indicated these references concisely in the field '*opmerking bron*' – 'remark on the source' – as well as mentioning the folio and passage numbers and the relevant shipmaster name and place of residence. It is up to the researcher to further process these references.

Finally, despite all efforts to maximize correct reproduction of the content of the STR entries, it is inevitable that the database contains many small errors and perhaps a few omissions. However, errors in the original spelling hardly affect the substance of the information. In other cases, the user will have to rely on his critical mind and wit to avoid mistakes and errant interpretations. We are confident that the quality of the information in the database allows all queries to produce accurate results. Moreover, as the image of the original is available in the database, researchers can always check the results.

JWV, SvdW, May 2020

## Websites

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

## Literature

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<sup>12</sup> [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl), record 152363, 25 August 1783.

<sup>13</sup> [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl), record 81863, 11 November 1783.

<sup>14</sup> [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl), record 96205, 16 May 1783.

<sup>15</sup> [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl), record 75437, 23 March 1783 ; record 82520, 5 May 1783.

<sup>16</sup> For example [www.soundtoll.nl](http://www.soundtoll.nl), record 119865, 21 August 1783.

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