



YRJÖ KAUKIAINEN

Shipping and Commodity Flows in the Late Eighteenth-Century Baltic

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Now as these pipe dreams are materializing in the form of this concise book, I would like to thank the publisher, *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura* (SKS), for accepting my study in their series *Studia Fennica Historica*. My special thanks are due to the Editor of the series, professor Sari Katajala-Peltomaa for her editorial input and for taking care of the arduous pre-publication process. I also thank the two anonymous referees for their useful, sometimes even provoking, comments. Last but not least, I thank the staff of SKS for the efficient and professional running of the publication process.

Helsinki, November 2025

Yrjö Kaukiainen

Introduction

1. A maritime road to economic transition

For a long time, the significant role of overseas trade has been taken for granted in the historical study of the 'Industrial Revolution', or the 'modern economic growth' (as the transition is nowadays usually called). In fact, Adam Smith was among the first to emphasize the significance of good maritime connections as a precondition for dynamic economic development.¹ In the 1960s, however, a new school of thought emerged claiming that domestic demand was more important in the British industrial breakthrough. This view also underlined the key role of mechanical inventions and manufacturing industries.²

Over the past three decades, however, a counter-current with a fresh interest in international trade has become apparent. This change in emphasis is connected with new research on the 'prehistory' of modern economic growth. It has been claimed that signs of a transition towards more dynamic economic development, above all an almost continuous (albeit modest) growth of real wages, can be found in the regions bordering the North Sea (i.e. the Dutch Republic and Britain) a century or two before the actual British Industrial Revolution.³

Such view of 'the long road to the industrial revolution' (an expression coined by Jan Luiten van Zanden) naturally implies a revision of the earlier emphasis on domestic demand and manufacturing. Instead, factors like foreign trade and maritime transport are gaining new ground in serious scholarly discussion. Robert C. Allen, in particular, has contributed to the debate with a number of important papers in which he finds that international trade had a significant impact on the early modern development of northwestern Europe.⁴

Such conclusions, however, have been based on indirect or circumstantial evidence: hardly any consistent statistics of European merchant tonnages and maritime trade can be found before the second quarter of the 19th century. For the late 18th century,

1. Cf. Smith 1776, Book I, Ch. III.
2. See e.g. Davis 1979, 9.
3. See e.g. van Zanden 2009.
4. Allen 2003, 432; see also Allen 2009.

there are just a few sporadic datasets which can be used to sketch a rough picture of the contemporary ocean and short-sea shipping. One of them are the results of a survey undertaken by the French government in 1786–1787 (Table 1). While it covers Europe fairly well, several of its figures may be classified as educated guesses; for example, the British tonnage is about ten percent lower than in some other sources and both the Danish and Swedish tonnages seem to have been overestimated.⁵

Table 1. European merchant marines in 1786–1787.

Thousand tons

Britain	889
France	729
The Dutch Republic	398
German North Sea and Baltic ports	155
Denmark-Norway	386
Sweden	169
Spain and Portugal	234
The Two Sicilies, Venice, Genoa	414

Source: Unger 1997, 261–262; Johansen 1992, 482.

Tonnage data naturally does not tell us how the respective merchant marines were utilized. Such pieces of information can only be roughly outlined from a few late eighteenth-century foreign-trade statistics, such as the British and Dutch ones. Unfortunately, they do not inform us about ship passages but rather of trade values. Still, they are able to reveal which were the main directions of the respective maritime trades. The statistics in question recorded the cash values of exports as well as imports but, as far as the focus is in sea transports, the latter are more interesting since the values of imported goods also included the costs of maritime (and other) freight.

Table 2. Dutch and British imports in the late 18th century by origin.

Percent of total value of imports (excl. colonial re-exports)

Importing country and period	Origin of imports					
	Northern Europe	N-western Europe	Southern Europe	Asia	The West Indies	North America
Dutch Republic, 1770s	18.6	21.2*	19.5	16.9	15.3**	
Britain, 1784–1786	16.7	9.9	12.6	21.8	20.1	6.6
Britain, 1794–1796	18.0	9.5	12.2	19.4	22.7	6.6

* Including Mediterranean France. ** The West Indies and North America.

Source: de Vries and van der Woude 1997, 497; Davis 1979, 92–93.

5. In these two cases the numbers of ships, at least, are some 20% higher than those in the respective national data. It is not certain that different national measures of ship sizes have been correctly converted.

Vessel traffic and commodity flows expanded at a remarkable pace from the 1750s to the late 1780s, making maritime trade one of the most dynamic sectors of the international economy in an era otherwise marked by slow growth. This study offers a comprehensive overview of late eighteenth-century shipping and maritime trade in the Baltic Sea region. Drawing on extensive and systematically analysed empirical material, it provides new quantitative and interpretative insights into the structure and development of Baltic maritime trade.

At the heart of this trade was the export of primary products and raw materials from the eastern Baltic regions to the more economically advanced countries of western Europe, notably the Dutch Republic, western Germany, and especially Britain.

The book will be of particular interest to scholars and students of maritime and economic history, early modern trade, and European economic development, as well as to all readers interested in the historical foundations of industrialisation and international trade.



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