Sound Toll Registers online
Concise source criticism

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Although the Sound Toll registers (STR) are widely known as crucial their sheer volume and
detail make them virtually impossible to handle. As a partial solution to this problem, in the
first half of the twentieth century, Bang and Korst published an ample summary of the STR in
the shape of tables - the monumental Sound Toll Tables (STT) as they are usually called.¹
Ever since, these tables have been used in every major study of early modern European trade.
Their enormous significance, however, should not conceal their shortcomings. The STT only
cover the years 1497-1783. They only present data on a high level of aggregation; individual
passages have disappeared from sight. In addition, the way data have been combined in
categories, may not always suit the researcher and sometimes give reason for doubt about its
correctness. As a result, the STT offer only limited possibilities of analysis of the original
data.²

In the 1970s, Johansen, looking for ways to improve the accessibility of the STR, created an
electronic database with the detailed data of all Sound passages for the period 1784-1795. He
presented his analysis of these data in a monograph in 1983.³ The Danish Data Archive at
Odense (Denmark) administers Johansen’s database and puts it at the disposal of researchers.
In 2009 and 2010, George Welling reconstructed and edited Johansen’s database and made it
accessible via the internet.⁴

Not to be confused with the STR are the “Dutch Sound Registers”, the lists of Sound passages
which the Dutch representatives in Denmark made and sent to the Estates-General in the 18th
century and are kept by the National Archives of the Netherlands in The Hague. These
‘Registers’ only cover the 18th century and contain much less detailed information per passage
than the STR. The website of The National Archives contains a database with the relevant
data of thirteen sample years.⁵

The Sound Toll Registers online is in many ways the delayed continuation of Johansen’s
pioneering effort. It is a relational database set up to make the STR data instantaneously
available to all, including for each passage – in principle and basically - the following
information:

- the passage date
- the shipmaster’s name
- the shipmaster’s domicile
- the port of departure
- the port of destination (from the mid-1660’s)
- the nature and quantity of the cargo
- the toll paid

The database is designed to enable all conceivable search actions, to allow the making of all
conceivable cross tabs and to facilitate statistical analysis. For this purpose, the data are
entered in four basic tables: passage, cargo, taxes and images. The passage table basically
contains one record per passage including fields for the date and the shipmaster’s name and
domicile. 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 a record for each commodity of
each passage including fields for the commodity’s ports of departure and destination and the tax paid per commodity. The separate taxes table contains fields for the tax, or, in many cases, the several taxes levied per passage. The images table contains fields for the scans of the relevant folio of the original source. The four tables are connectable by a common identity field.

RUG and Tresoar have outsourced the entry of the data to Breed, the social workplace at Nijmegen. Breed enters the data in the original spelling of the STR and delivers the data files to Tresoar. RUG and Tresoar accept or reject the data after a quality check by random sample. After acceptance Tresoar and RUG follow a procedure of correcting, standardizing and categorizing the data. Correction to the degree of a flawless reproduction of the original data is impossible, but the quality is such that all queries will produce accurate results. Moreover, as the image of the original is available in the database, researchers may always check results. As there was no standard spelling in the centuries in which the STR were produced, the spelling variations of personal names, geographical names, commodity names, measures and weights are almost without limit. To facilitate the analysis of the data geographical names and commodity names, measures and weights will be standardized. In addition, we examine the possibilities of conversion of measures and weights to the metric system. All standard terms are entered in additional tables so that the original input is preserved. The categorization of geographical names (in regions) and commodity names (in groups of similar products) follows the same procedure. For the time being the personal names - of the shipmasters - are not standardized as the results would be unreliable. It is hard enough to standardize personal names occurring in one region, e.g. Friesland. In the case of the STR, which contain names of shipmasters from many places, regions and countries names must be differently standardized depending on the place where the men lived. Perhaps this nut will be cracked at a later stage. The data are entered into the database in the Danish language as used in the original source. As this might render the database hard to use for many the standard terms are translated into English which allows searching the database and finding results in English. In the same way, the database may be converted in other languages.

To facilitate the use of the database by a broad audience RUG and Tresoar are adding a user interface allowing many queries without knowledge of database applications.

STRO is essentially an instrument of historical analysis. Its builders have tried to fit an organic historical source into a much more sterile database. To that extent STRO is an interpretation of the STR and not a direct copy or a source edition. STRO is certainly a powerful instrument, but it has its limitations. The individual researcher must be aware of this when he or she makes use of it.

First and foremost, only the STR toll collection entries proper have been entered into the database. The large quantity of additional information the STR contain has been omitted. This information mainly involves the recurrent introductory, accounting and justifying texts of the toll officials. In addition, as the database has a strict format the extra information the officials sometimes added in the passage entries could not be included. This information is diverse. It may involve an addressee of part of the cargo, a ship having been stranded or a rotted part of the cargo. To not completely lose sight of that information, we have put a reference with no further details in the field ‘opmerking bron’ – ‘remark to the source.’ This reference usually is worded as ‘stuk Deense tekst’ – ‘piece of Danish text.’

Not all entry problems have been solved even after, in this way, extra information has been dealt with - or shed. The STR have organically developed 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 all kinds of peculiarities must be dealt with 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, commodities – the components of the cargo – are recorded inclusive the unit of measure and the quantity: ‘60 læster rug.’ Sometimes the unit of measure and the quantity involve an amount of money: ‘for 800 rd. kramerie.’ But is also occurs that both the measure and the value of the commodity are recorded: ‘156 fad stads viin à 52 rd.’ In this case we enter the value of the commodity into the database as part of the commodity name and treat ‘stads viin à 52 rd.’ as a separate commodity.

Sometimes commodities are recorded with a second measure: ‘42 læster rug etc. giør 50 2/5 læst.’ or ‘36 læster hveede er 45 læst.’ We interpret the formulas ‘giør’ and ‘er’ as ‘that is to say’ or ‘i.e.’ We enter 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 with the formula ‘Vide Fol.’ followed by the relevant folio number and passage number. These references usually involve corrections of earlier entries by other shipmasters. These references are concisely indicated in the field ‘opmerking bron’ – ‘remark to the source’ - with mentioning of the folio and passage numbers and the shipmasters name and domicile. At the present stage of the project, it is up to the researcher to further process these references.

Finally, despite all scrutiny that has been employed to maximize correct reproduction of the content of the STR entries, it has been unavoidable that the database contains many small errors and perhaps a few omissions. Errors in the original spelling of geographical and product names and measures and weights will be largely overcome by their standardization.

In other cases the user will have to rely on his critical mind and wit to avoid mistakes and errant interpretations.

Literature


Johansen, H.C., Shipping and trade between the Baltic and Western Europe, 1784-95 (Odense 1983).

Internet sites

http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00338
http://www.let.rug.nl/welling/sont/johansen.htm
http://www.soundtoll.nl

Notes

1 Bang and Korst, Tabeller (1906-1953).
3 Johansen, Shipping and trade (1983).
4 http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/index/nt00338.
5 http://www.let.rug.nl/welling/sont/johansen.htm.
6 www.soundtoll.nl, record 152363, 25-8-1783.
7 www.soundtoll.nl, record 81863, 11-11-1783.
8 www.soundtoll.nl, record 96205, 16-5-1783.
9 www.soundtoll.nl, record 75437, 23-3-1783; record 82520, 5-5-1783.
10 For example www.soundtoll.nl, record119865, 21-8-1783.