In 1429 the Danish king Erik VII introduced the Sound Toll as a duty which had to be paid by all ships passing through the Sound, the strait between Denmark and Sweden connecting the North and Baltic Seas. The king’s bureaucrats levied the toll at the small town of Elsinore, north of Copenhagen where the Sound is at its narrowest. There, too, they kept the toll’s records, today known as the STR. 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.

Today, the STR are stored by the Danish National Archives. More than 700 volumes of the STR have been preserved – about sixty metres of shelf space - covering about 300 of the 360 years between 1497 and 1857, including a practically uninterrupted series from 1574 to 1857. They hold information on about 1.8 million passages. For each individual passage, both westward and eastward, the STR contain the passage date, the name of the shipmaster, his place of residence, his port of departure and – from the mid-1660s – his port of destination, the composition of the cargo and the toll paid.
The STR are a fiscal source. They were kept by the Danish bureaucracy to give account of the toll levied. They are detailed to the extent that they contain data on all ships paying the toll. The contents of a typical STR entry looks like this:

**Figure 2. Entry from the Sound Toll Registers**

![Image of a typical STR entry](source: www.soundtoll.nl, record 117784, 14-7-1782.)

**Transcription:**
Michel Volkring af Stettin fra
Memel til St. Malo med
6915 ¼ steen hamp 115:13 [rigsdaler: skilling]
240  dº hør 4
   119:13
føring 4½:13
   114½
fijrp. 4 118 ½

**Translation:**
Michel Volkring of Stettin, from
Memel to St.Malo with
6915 ¼ stone hemp 115:13
240  dº flax 4
   119:13
compensation 4½:13
   114½
fire money 4 118 ½

**Explanation:**
Shipmaster Michel Volkring, living in Stettin\(^1\), departed from Memel destined to St.Malo with as cargo aboard his ship
6915 ¼ stone [weight measure] hemp 115:13 [toll in currency units rigsdaler and skilling]
240  dº [dito, i.e. stone] flax 4
   119:13

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\(^1\) There is a protracted historiographical discussion concerning the implication of the Danish word ‘af’in the STR. Of course, it means ‘from’. Most likely this implies that the shipmaster lives in the place that follows, in this case Stettin. Some, however, have argued that rather the homeport of the ship is mentioned.
compensation 4½:13
[deduction in favour of the shipmaster]

114½

fire money 4 118½ [grand total to be paid]

[for the maintainance of the beacons in the Sound]

It is clear that 1.8 million entries like this provide a lot of information about the shipmasters passing the Sound, 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 considered to be the main measuring point of commodity transport in Europe and contain vital information on trade, transport, production and consumption. Also, the STR are 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.

All this does not mean that the STR may be used without criticism. Several qualifications need to be made. First, there were other routes to the Baltic. Nevertheless, they did not offer a serious alternative for the Sound. The Little Belt was hardly navigable. The Great Belt was navigable but much harder to navigate than the Sound and the shipmasters had to pay the same toll here as in the Sound anyway while it was well-guarded by the royal navy. Therefore, only a small minority of the shipmasters chose to sail this strait. In 1784 the Schleswig-Holstein Canal between Tönning on the North Sea and Kiel on the Baltic was opened, but only small ships could pass through it and it never attracted a lot of traffic.5 Finally, of course, one could choose the over-land route to the Baltic area. But it is clear that this was only feasible for the transport of low-weight, low-volume and expensive commodities.

Second, shipmasters could try to steal through the Sound without paying the toll so that the STR perhaps do not include all passages. The chance of success of slipping through, however, was very low as the strait was observed and guarded from Kronborg castle and the royal guard ship cruising the Sound. It is widely accepted that all ships that passed the Sound in the years that are covered by the STR, are recorded in the STR.6

Third, it may be contested that the information in the STR entries are correct and complete. Clearance was based on the ship’s and cargo’s documents the shipmaster carried. As a rule, the customs officers did not search the vessels. Consequently, fraud was possible and tempting. It is true that the officers were entitled to search ships and that they did in case of suspicion, but this did not stop the shipmasters. Comparison with other sources, especially customs accounts of individual ports, the dependability of which is incidentally problematic, too, has shown that the information on cargoes in the STR is correct but not complete. As far as cargoes are concerned, consequently, the STR must be used with caution.7 This does not alter the fact that the STR are a great source for trade and transport and that even to the very critical they are a very rich starting point for the analysis of European trade and transport in the period they cover.

**Literature**

Website

www.soundtoll.nl

Notes