

Conference on the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Ostend Company

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On 23 and 24 November 2023, a conference remembering the 300th Anniversary of the founding of the General Imperial India Company, commonly known as the Ostend Company, was held in Ostend, Belgium. Although this company existed only for a short time (1723–1731), it played a crucial role not only in the history of trade and navigation of the Austrian Netherlands, but also in the history of Asia and especially in European politics and diplomacy of the 1720s and 1730s. The aim of this international conference was not only to shed light on a number of hitherto unknown aspects related to the Ostend Company, but also try to interpret current knowledge from new and novel perspectives. The conference was organized by the Flemish Maritime Institute, the Royal Belgian Maritime Society and the City of Ostend. It took place in the building of the Flemish Maritime Institute and was accompanied by an exhibition related to the history of the Ostend Company in the Ostend Museum of Historical and Cultural Heritage, by Ostend city tours and by lectures for the general public. The authors of the report were invited to the conference because they wrote the book *The Imperial Eagle and Attraction to the Orient: The Habsburg Monarchy Trade Expansion to Overseas (1715–1789)* in 2021.

The conference opened on 23 November with introductory speeches by representatives of the Flemish Maritime Institute, the Province of West Flanders and the Royal Belgian Maritime Society. Sessions on both days were introduced by keynote speeches. The first, written by Cátia Antunes (Leiden), tried to evaluate the role of smaller companies, among which the Ostend Company is included, in a global perspective. The second keynote speech was given by Wim de Winter (Leuven), who analysed the commercial-military interests of the Ostend Company in India and China and described its relations with Asian trading partners and rulers in an innovative way.

The conference itself was divided into six sections. The first of these was dedicated to European investors and merchants of the Ostend Company. Pierrick Pourchasse (Brest) was the first to appear in the section with a contribution devoted to the relations between the French East India Company and the Ostend Company. He rightly pointed out that France was one of the few countries that was not openly hostile to the Ostend Company and gave it considerable support, especially in the first phase when the Ostenders were

building their bases in India. In addition, French investors from Dunkerque, Le Mans, Saint-Malo and Paris played a significant role in the history of the Ostend Company. The presentation by Gijs Dreijer (Leiden), Susana Münch Miranda (Lisbon) and João Paulo Salvado (Évora) was dedicated to the Portuguese partners of the Ostend merchants and their joint trade voyages between 1715 and 1730, which were carried out under the Portuguese flag and using Ostend capital. The section was completed by the presentation of the Danish historian Benjamin Asmussen (Copenhagen) dealing with the dizzying career of Pieter van Hurk, who used the experience and capital acquired in Ostend Company within the framework of the Danish Asiatic Company, one of the successor companies of the Ostend Company, and became fabulously rich.

The second section was devoted to the import, distribution and smuggling of Asian goods, transported by the Ostend Company, on European markets. Jan Parmentier (Antwerp) summarized the importation of the most profitable community—tea—from Canton and its sale and smuggling from Ostend to the English, Dutch, and French markets. In his contribution, Jelle Jan Koopmans (Groningen) addressed the activities of Dutch and Frisian captains and merchants in the service of the Ostend Company and their role in the export of Oriental goods to the Baltic region, based on the analysis of the Sound tolls. Veronika Hyden-Hanscho (Klagenfurt) demonstrated on Georg Bernard Savage's sales book from 1734–1736 the extent of the import of Indian cotton fabrics and the structure of demand among women of all social classes in the Austrian Netherlands.

The third section was devoted to the importance of the Ostend Company for the Austrian Netherlands and the City of Ostend. In his speech, Michael W. Serruys, the main organizer of the conference, now working at the University of Bamberg, summarized the importance of the Ostend Company for the development of the city of Ostend itself. The contribution of Erik Muls (Leuven) was devoted to the commercial rivalry between Bruges and Ostend in 1715–1730, the numerous Bruges attempts to create a competing trading company for long-distance trade, and the attempt to attract part of the Ostend commerce to Bruges, among other things by the extension of the Bruges-Ostend canal.

The fourth section was dedicated to Ostend sailing and the development of Ostend factories in Asia. Dennis de Vriese (Brussels) introduced the session with a microhistorical study of the strict regulation of eating practices on board of Ostend ships. The rules of who could eat, with whom, and where reflected the command structure, but were temporarily broken when necessary. The contribution of the authors of the report was based on the study of

sources stored in the State Archives in Vienna. They analysed partial aspects of the creation of the Ostend factory in Coblön (also Sadatpatnam) on the Coromandel coast of India. They tried to assess the significance that the establishment of this settlement had on the change of attitude of the imperial court towards long-distance trade in Asia and the establishment of the Ostend Company. To do this, they critically evaluated some of the reports delivered to Vienna and the intrigues and attacks that the Ostenders faced from European and Asian enemies. The presentation by John Everaert (Gent) which followed was dedicated to the development of the Ostend factory in Bankibazar in Bengal with an emphasis on the period from the demise of this factory (1744) until today. The block was rounded off by a talk of Taiwanese historian Yi-Chieh Shih (Leiden) dedicated to the creation of clay portrait figurines of Ostend and Danish merchants, produced in China as souvenirs for European merchants.

The fifth section was devoted to the role of the Ostend Company in European diplomacy. In the introduction, Jonathan Singerton (Amsterdam) relativized the concept of the conflict between the Dutch Republic and the Central European Habsburg Monarchy as primarily a commercial clash. He emphasized the power struggle and the fear of Habsburg imperialism, whose exponent the Ostend Company was considered to be. Contributions of Frederik Dhont and Stefano Cattelan (Brussels) were devoted to various legal aspects of the maritime powers' struggle against the Ostend Company (1725–1730) and the role it played in the development of maritime law. The section closed with a presentation by Charlotte Backerra (Göttingen), documenting the emperor's efforts from 1727–1735 to save the Asian trade of the monarchy after the dissolution of the Ostend Company through the free imperial city of Hamburg and other ports.

The sixth section dealt with the Ostend Company in the context of new social ideas. It was dominated by the contribution of Alexei Kraikovski (Genoa) discussing the interest of the Russian press from Saint Petersburg in the Ostend Company and Russian attempts to imitate Western European trading companies. The objectively given failure of these half-baked projects was justified by the conspiracy of Western European employees, which was an acceptable explanation for the Russian government authorities.

The conference brought a number of new perspectives, especially on the broader context of the phenomenon of the Ostend Company in the history of the eighteenth century. We can only believe that the organizers' promise regarding the publication of contributions will be fulfilled, the knowledge gained will not be forgotten and will stimulate further research.