

Podcast “Amsterdamse Handelsgeest” (Amsterdam’s Trading Culture) – From the Golden Age to Now

➤ Episode 4: The Meaning of Contracts in Commerce

In this episode of *Amsterdam Trading Culture: From the Golden Age to Now*, we discuss the role of contracts in international trade, both in the Golden Age and today. My name is Hidde Bruinsma, I am a lawyer and legal podcast maker. Joining me at the table are Oscar Gelderblom, professor of financial history at the University of Antwerp and author of the book *Cities of Commerce*, and Helene Kleinjan, a lawyer at Lexence specialising in international commercial contract law. Together, we will discuss how contracts build trust and support trade.

Hidde Bruinsma: Oscar, we just heard an excerpt about the Trippenhuis and the Trip family. Can you explain who this family was and how they built their trading empire?

Oscar Gelderblom: Certainly, the Trip family was originally from Dordrecht. They came to Amsterdam in the early 17th century and were involved in the iron and weapons trade. One of their relatives even became administrator of the VOC, which was a prestigious position. Through clever alliances and trade in raw materials such as tar and pitch with Sweden, they managed to build their empire.

Hidde Bruinsma: How did they deal with the challenges of international trade at the time?

Oscar Gelderblom: It certainly wasn't easy. Whereas we can now send information around the world in milliseconds, they had to rely on letters sent by horse or boat. To minimise risk, they often sent multiple letters and used clever techniques such as double-entry bookkeeping. This provided control mechanisms that allowed them to organise their affairs well, even over long distances.

Hidde Bruinsma: Helene, can you explain how contracts play a role in international trade these days?

Helene Kleinjan: Contracts are truly indispensable in international trade. They provide legal certainty, offer structure and help manage risks. In a world where you have to deal with different languages, cultures and legal systems, it is essential to make clear agreements. This prevents misunderstandings and makes conflict resolution a lot more efficient.

Hidde Bruinsma: Oscar, how were contracts drawn up in the Golden Age?

Oscar Gelderblom: In those days, a lot depended on trust. For smaller transactions, agreements were often made verbally or recorded in merchant books. For larger and long-term collaborations, they engaged notaries, who drew up formal contracts on parchment. They also used innovative techniques such as bills of exchange to facilitate payments.

Hidde Bruinsma: Helene, how do you see the role of technology in modern contracts? Think, for example, of blockchain and smart contracts.

Helene Kleinjan: Blockchain and smart contracts certainly have potential, but the disruption expected has not materialised. Traditional contracts still offer more flexibility and are better suited to the complex needs of businesses. What is interesting, however, are AI tools that can help identify risks and inconsistencies in contracts. But ultimately, human judgement remains essential because contracts are not just about rules, but also about context and nuance.

Hidde Bruinsma: Oscar, what lessons from the Golden Age can we apply today?

Oscar Gelderblom: One of the key lessons is the importance of trustworthiness, both from governments and trading partners. We can also learn from how cities in the 17th century aligned their legal systems to facilitate trade. Such cooperation is still crucial in today's international economy.

Hidde Bruinsma: Finally, Helene, how do you see the future of contracts and the role of innovation?

Helene Kleinjan: I think we are seeing a movement towards shorter, simpler contracts that are more readable for all parties. At the same time, I see AI and technology playing an increasing role in drafting and managing contracts. Nevertheless, it remains important that legal professionals remain engaged to ensure a balance between technical efficiency and human nuance.

With these insights on the role of contracts in trade, we come to the end of this episode of *Amsterdam Trading Culture: From the Golden Age to Now*. Many thanks to my guests Oscar Gelderblom and Helene Kleinjan for their insights.

Quote:

Oscar Gelderblom: "One of the key lessons from the Golden Age is the importance of trustworthiness. Both governments and trading partners need to stick to agreements to make trust and trade possible."

Helene Kleinjan: "Contracts not only provide legal certainty, but also help manage risks and resolve conflicts more efficiently. Without clear agreements, international trade would be much more unpredictable and risky."

Oscar Gelderblom: "Reliability is the basis of successful trading."

Helene Kleinjan: "Contracts are indispensable in international trade."

Introductory text:

Contracts have been the basis of trust and cooperation in international trade for centuries. In this episode of Amsterdam Trading Culture: From the Golden Age to Now, we take you into the fascinating world of legal agreements, from the 17th century to the present. We discover how trading families like the Trips in the Golden Age used contracts to build international empires and explore how modern technologies like AI and blockchain affect the role of contracts in an ever-changing global economy.

With Oscar Gelderblom, professor of financial history at the University of Antwerp, and Helene Kleinjan, a lawyer at Lexence specialising in international commercial contract law, we delve into the history and future of these crucial documents. What lessons can we learn from the past, and how do contracts continue to play an essential role in modern trade? You will hear in this episode.