

The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas. By David Eltis. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xviii, 353. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM. Edited by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. \$195.00.)

The simultaneous development of slavery and freedom has long been recognized as an important problem in the history of the early modern Western world. In *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, David Eltis develops a complex set of arguments that offers a thoughtful new perspective on this central paradox. Examining the revival of slavery in the age of European overseas expansion and the specifically racial character the institution acquired in its early modern form, Eltis finds the activities of the northwest Europeans, and the English in particular, to be of central importance. According to Eltis, “it was not the Iberian contact with Amerindians but the Dutch-English interaction with Africans that ultimately reshaped conceptions of freedom and race into forms recognisable in the early twenty-first century” (pp. 27-28).

For Eltis, an important reason to direct attention to the English derives from evidence of their unmatched economic productivity in the seventeenth century. “The English system,” Eltis insists, “was strikingly flexible” (p. 54), exhibiting a special capacity to respond successfully to economic pressures, both at home and abroad. On the domestic front, for example, “English exports retained and expanded traditional markets on the European mainland in the face of increasing domestic wages and rising protective measures on the continent” (p. 54). Exceptional English efficiency can be seen in the Atlantic arena as well. Comparative analysis of transatlantic population movements before 1760 indicates that, despite their minor role in the sixteenth century and Portuguese domination of the slave trade before 1650, the English transported “more transatlantic migrants, both free and coerced, than any other nation” (p. 37) from the second half of the seventeenth century on. The dramatic expansion of English slaving after 1650 took place at a time when slave prices were actually falling in American markets, suggesting superior economic efficiency not only in shipping but more notably in slave trading.

As with the English advantage in slave trading, so with sugar production in the Americas. Barbados took the lead during the second half of the seventeenth century. Relative to its size and population, the value of exports from the island probably exceeded those of “any other polity of its time or indeed any other time up to that point,” making Barbados “the Hong Kong of the preindustrial era” (p. 198). The tiny island’s success was achieved in the face of economic pressures emanating from three sources: outside competition (Jamaica, the Leeward Islands, and the non-English Caribbean), declining soil quality, and falling sugar prices. Eltis finds that English sugar producers, in general, and Barbadian planters, in particular, benefited from productivity gains not enjoyed by their competitors in the colonies.

Here again, flexibility was the key. For sugar planters in Barbados, this meant diversification. Barbadian planters switched from muscovado to more refined clayed sugar, resulting in “a higher-valued product that was cheaper to transport” (p. 200). They also developed a market for rum and molasses, the by-products of sugar production. Finally, the Barbados sugar growers were pioneers in agricultural innovation, apparently being the first to make use of manure to preserve soil fertility. None of these creative responses has been perceived by those focusing only on production of muscovado sugar. Viewed through such a narrow lens, Barbados sugar production appears to languish in inefficiency “and entrepreneurial inability to adjust” in the second half of the seventeenth century, “when the reality was quite the opposite” (p. 202).

Eltis finds evidence that, compared to their competitors, the island’s colonists (slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike) enjoyed unsurpassed wealth, benefiting from an “obscene explosion of English economic power in the post-1650 Americas” (p. 212). Beyond English superiority in shipping and slave trading and the flexibility of Barbadian planters, the most important single factor behind the island’s

unmatched economic growth probably can be found in the plantations themselves. Here, however, Eltis and other researchers have thus far come upon a dead end. Whereas there is ample evidence about sugar mills in the early period, little is known about the organization of work in the cane fields themselves. Documentary accounts make clear the importance of “a whip-driven lockstep gang labor regime” (p. 220) by the later eighteenth century, but details about the day-to-day work of Africans laboring in this crucial early period remain difficult to discern. “The central question,” says Eltis, “is the extent to which slavery and sugar production in the early European-dominated Americas was coterminous with gang labor as described by later observers or did the latter evolve over time. At the moment, the answer is not known” (p. 220).

Quantitative analysis demonstrates English superiority in shipping, slave trading, and sugar production. But Eltis turns to the cultural sphere to explain the economic behavior responsible for superior English productivity in the early modern Atlantic world. Indeed, he devotes much of this volume to analysis of cultural factors that motivated economic behavior. Resuscitating Frank Tannenbaum’s controversial thesis that differences among Anglo-Saxon, Iberian, and French cultures were key to the development of slavery in the several colonial regimes of the Americas (*Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* [New York, 1946]), Eltis finds significance in the exceptionally well-developed notions of individual freedom among Europeans in general, and the English and Dutch in particular. “Perhaps modern historians would reconsider Tannenbaum’s emphasis on the legal and religious heritage of European migrants determining different attitudes to race in the Americas,” Eltis suggests, “if it were recast in terms of national differences in the latitude allowed for individual action” (p. 26).

The unique relationship between the individual and property rights was especially significant. Put simply, the early modern European notion that labor is owned by the individual, not the corporate kin group, was a “peculiar institution” (p. 22). Status and rights were associated with autonomy and independence, especially in northwest Europe. By contrast, freedom was characterized by “social bonds” and “belonging” in non-European societies. The European conception of freedom was thus “exceptional in global terms” (p. 22). The distinction had important implications for the development of slavery in the Americas: “If, in the Western world, possessive individualism meant a recognition that one owns full rights in oneself and that one has the right in a market society to bargain away such rights, it might also mean the accumulation of rights in others in the hands of a few, as did happen in the slave societies of the European Atlantic” (p. 22).

Culture is critical because, in Eltis’s view, the economic arguments usually offered to explain the development of African slavery in the Americas are insufficient. Building on a central theme of his important 1993 essay, “Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation” (*American Historical Review* 98 [1993], 1399-1423; reproduced here in revised form as chapter 3), Eltis insists that economic explanations “cannot deal easily” with questions first introduced by Winthrop Jordan twenty-five years ago: “why no European slaves “ and “why no African indentured servants”? (p. 63; Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* [Chapel Hill, 1968, 66]). They are important questions, as the former would have been the most cost-effective solution to the labor crisis in the American colonies - “no sound economic reasons spoke against it” (p. 64). Only analysis of cultural values explains the economic choices that shaped the contours of the early modern Atlantic world.

The key lies in differences between European and African definitions of insider/outsider status. American, African, and European societies were equally capable of “depriving people of liberty” (p. 71). But whereas enslavement was permissible in the Americas and Africa, in Europe such thorough dispossession of an individual’s liberty “was reserved for non-Europeans” (p. 71). In essence, “conceptions of insider had expanded to include the European subcontinent whereas for Africans and American Indians a less than continent-wide definition of insider still pertained” (pp. 71-72). Thus, Europeans (specifically, the English) were disposed to look outside Europe for candidates to solve the labor crisis that developed in the colonies in the second half of the seventeenth century; and Africans,

with their narrow conception of insider status, were poised to respond positively to the demands of the Atlantic market for coerced laborers.

Similarly, culturally specific notions of gender in Europe and Africa go a long way toward explaining demographic contours of transatlantic migration that, according to Eltis, also went against purely economic reasoning. In brief, English cultural norms devalued women's labor, and as a result, colonial planters showed limited interest in recruiting female workers. "It is striking," Eltis notes, "how little impact the strong demand for labor and high wages relative to Europe had on dominant attitudes toward women as either employers or workers in the Americas" (p. 100).

That substantial numbers of female migrants reached the Americas at all in the early stages of colonial settlement is owing to African involvement in the Atlantic system. African societies did place high value on the economic roles of women, who were no less likely than men to fall into the hands of African slave traders. The outcome, a system of coerced migration whose demographic contours were "shaped in part by the relative economic freedom of women in Africa," is "one of the great ironies of the slave trade" (p. 110).

African actors influenced economic outcomes in the Atlantic world in other ways. It was their successful resistance in the face of persistent European efforts to establish plantations in Africa that compelled the would-be colonizers to turn their attention to the Americas. Once a system of slave trading developed, the resistance of those Africans forced to board the European slave ships raised the cost of transatlantic slaving, with the result that fewer Africans entered the Atlantic than would have been the case otherwise. Eltis has calculated that half a million potential victims of the slave trade remained in Africa because of the cost imposed by the actions (real or threatened) of their less fortunate counterparts. "In effect," he writes, "Africans who died resisting the slave traders, as well as those who resisted unsuccessfully but survived to work on the plantations of the Americas, saved others from the Middle Passage" (p. 160).

Eltis's interpretation of economies and cultures in the early modern Atlantic world builds toward an intriguing end. "Slave regimes existed," he finds, "not just because of European economic growth but also on account of the related phenomenon of European freedom" (p. 55). Western Europeans had come to value their freedom so highly that it was culturally taboo to coerce fellow Europeans into laboring on New World plantations. Where other interpretations of the slavery-freedom paradox have understood Western freedom as an achievement that was "dependent to some degree on the slave systems that western Europe also developed" (p. 279), Eltis suggests the reverse. In his estimation, "the rise of slavery in the Americas was dependent on the nature of freedom in western Europe" (p. 279). It is a provocative conclusion that challenges us to rethink the way we narrate and explain the trajectory of early modern Atlantic history, particularly the seventeenth-century expansion of Atlantic colonization and slave trading.

Eltis has more to say about the development of slavery and freedom than about ideas regarding race, leaving important questions about the relationship between the slave-free paradox and perceptions of racial difference unexplored. If the slave-free paradox was a product of Anglo-Dutch involvement in the Atlantic world of the seventeenth century, as Eltis argues, then one wonders what role was played by ideas about racial difference generated in the course of the Atlantic exchange from the time of Columbian contact? In other words, can (and should) questions about the origins of racial slavery and the origins of racial thinking be separated so neatly as they are in Eltis's text?

Also unexplored are the implications of Eltis's argument for our understanding of the development of African slavery in non-English sectors of the Americas. Eltis explains early on that "much of this volume argues for important differences between the Iberians and the north-western Europeans" (p. 26). But the author does more to demonstrate the exceptionalism of the latter than to explain differences between the two groups. If English possessive individualism was central to the development of a system of slavery characterized by ethnic exclusivity and unprecedented levels of exploitation, what explains the development of Iberian systems of slavery with similar features in Brazil and Cuba or the French system in St. Domingue?

Eltis has produced a volume of remarkable empirical depth and insightful interpretation that deserves a wide audience. His enormously important book will no doubt quickly come to be regarded as one of the best examples of what the growing field of Atlantic history has to offer. It will be required reading in graduate seminars having anything to do with the slave trade, the African diaspora, or the development of the English colonies in the Americas, as well as those concerned with the social and economic development of early modern Europe. The author's probing, often provocative conclusions will surely stimulate debate among specialists in a range of subfields concerned with the early modern histories of Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

Much of the quantitative evidence presented in this volume derives from the slave trade database project that has been in the works for nearly a decade under the sponsorship of Harvard University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research. *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* makes data long the exclusive preserve of specialists widely available to the public. In doing so, the editors have provided a great resource for the growing community of scholars engaged in research related to the slave trade and have produced a tool that will be of great use for teachers in both college and K-12 classrooms. A pioneering achievement of monumental proportions, the database is a first-rate model of how information technology can be put to successful use in historical research, scholarship, and teaching.

Taking the widely accepted estimate that twelve million Africans departed the continent aboard European slave ships as a base point, the editors have calculated that the database includes two-thirds of all transatlantic slaving voyages undertaken. It comprises 27,233 slaving voyages made between 1527 and 1866. Information on these voyages is organized in spreadsheet format with a CD-ROM interface that allows users to manipulate and query the data. (Users preferring the full flexibility of a spreadsheet application may download the data files in SPSS format).

Unfortunately, learning to use the CD-ROM is not particularly easy. This reviewer (as well as several colleagues and the undergraduate students in my slave trade seminar) found the minimal instructions included in the accompanying manual to be wholly inadequate. Happily, an additional Teacher's Manual has been added to the CD-ROM package since its initial release, which provides more detailed directions for navigating through the CD-ROM and sample queries that surely will be helpful for all users. (According to the Cambridge University Press website, the Teacher's Manual now ships with the CD-ROM; however, it was not included in the materials received for review. It can also be downloaded free of charge from the website.)

Once one figures out how to use the CD-ROM, the possibilities for research and teaching are endless. Selecting parameters in a "query" screen, users essentially create smaller voyage samples from within the whole according to the criteria they choose. For example, one might search for all voyages departing from a specific port or region, those sailing in a designated time period, those experiencing a shipboard uprising, or those under the command of a particular captain. An "analysis" function calculates the number of slaves embarked and disembarked, tonnage of vessels, shipboard slave mortality, duration of the Middle Passage, and proportion of males and adults. A "summary" function goes one step further and calculates the number of slaves embarked and disembarked from specific regions on both sides of the Atlantic. Finally, map and graph functions provide additional tools for presenting and analyzing the data.

However, the flexibility that is one of the database's greatest strengths will no doubt cause users a great deal of frustration. Though ostensibly intended to provide ease of use, the query menus bombard the user with a confusing and sometimes overwhelming array of choices. A user wishing to query for voyages that disembarked in the United States between 1700 and 1808, for example, has several options from which to choose in defining the African side of the query: selecting "year departed Africa" = ">1699" and "year reached port of disembarkation" = "<1809" yields a sample of 1,386 records. Alternately, substituting "year left last slaving port" for the first parameter produces a much smaller sample--only 142 voyages. The two versions of the query ask essentially the same question, but they isolate different geographic entities: the former selects the large number of voyages for which the exact year of departure from Africa is known, while the latter selects the significantly smaller number of

voyages for which the year of departure from the “last slaving port” is known. The second, smaller sample thus enables close study of specific sites for slave trading on the African coast. In order to accommodate the complexity of the slave trade and the records it left behind, the editors have had to account for an enormous range of possibilities on both sides of the Atlantic. As a result, the user is confronted with a cascade of choices when trying to frame a query, and it is not always readily apparent which one is most appropriate for the question one is trying to answer. Working with the CD-ROM is thus not as straightforward as one might like. Then again, neither is the intricate history it records.

The value of any such compilation of data depends in large part on its depth and breadth. As the authors estimate in the introductory guide, the database encompasses more than 90 percent of all British voyages. But much of the Portuguese trade is not represented here, and several other branches of the trade are under-represented, most notably the nineteenth-century Spanish traffic, as well as that of the Danes and North American slave traders. Thus, while those whose specific interest is the English traffic will find that the proverbial glass is better than “half full,” others will find the glass appears to be worse than “half empty.”

There is much the editors have had to infer even for the 27,233 voyages that are represented here. The data are categorized in 226 fields of information: 162 “data variables” record what is positively known about the voyages, including information about the vessel, the crew, the African captives, the places of trade in Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and the sources from which the data have been derived. An additional 64 “imputed variables” provide information that has been “calculated or imputed from the data in the interest of making the latter more accessible or of compensating for missing information” (*Database Manual*, p. 13).

In defining the temporal parameters of a query, for instance, researchers can choose from three different stages of a slaving voyage: “the year in which the voyage originated,” “the year of embarkation of slaves,” or “the year of arrival at point of disembarkation.” Often information is not available for each of these categories. In such cases, “an imputed value is derived from the next (or previous) stage of the voyage for which dates are available.” Among the most significant imputed values are those calculated to fill in gaps regarding “the numbers of slaves carried and the numbers who perished during the voyage, as well as the age and gender categories” (*Database Manual*, p. 14). It is these imputed variables that supply much of the data reported in the “analysis” and “summary” functions.

Fully aware that their own assumptions may differ from those of other researchers, the editors have made every possible effort to make the database fully manipulable. To that end, they have included the formulas used to calculate imputed variables in the SPSS files on the CD-ROM. Users who find fault with the editors’ reasoning may alter the SPSS data files as they see fit, but all should remember that “one researcher’s estimates (and inferences) may be different from, but as good as, another’s, despite the fact that all are working with the same data base. Anyone using the data, including ourselves,” the editors warn, “therefore needs to specify clearly the assumptions he or she is using” (*Database Manual*, p. 14).

The role of the imputed variables becomes clear when one considers the irregularities of the historical record. Although 23,040 voyages in the database are known to have carried slaves from the African coast, the actual number of Africans on board is known only for 6,884. The data are more favorable on the other side of the Atlantic. Of 20,729 voyages known to have landed slaves in the Americas, the number of Africans aboard on arrival in the Americas is known for 15,789. The number of deaths during the Middle Passage is known for only 5,300 of the voyages in the database (*Database Manual*, p. 19). Simply put, the database is both an impressive compilation of what is known about the slave trade and a sober reminder of how much remains unknown.

Though the editors have gone to great lengths in their introductory remarks to make explicit the methods and assumptions used to calculate imputed values in the database, close examination of randomly selected voyages does produce some surprises. For example, among the things known about the *Elizabeth* (voyage ID # 9611) are the following: the ship departed from England in November 1663; the “first port of embarkation intended” was in the Gold Coast region; the “first place of slave purchase” was Kormantine, a major Gold Coast port, where the vessel was intended to obtain 200 slaves; the “second

place of slave purchase” was Ardra, a major port in the Bight of Benin, where 132 slaves were in fact obtained. All of these values are recorded in the data variables for the voyage. In determining the imputed variables, however, the editors have chosen to designate the Bight of Benin as the “intended region of first embarkation,” perhaps because there is no positive evidence that any slaves were put on board the *Elizabeth* at Kormantine. But the editors’ reasoning in this case seems contradictory. Why has the Gold Coast disappeared entirely from the imputed variables for this voyage?

Such judgments are an inherent part of any effort to organize historical data, and users should not be surprised that such acts of interpretation have played a large role in creating this database. Here the interpretive act is at once transparent and opaque: transparent in that the editors have made an admirable effort to identify the need to make judgments and inferences; opaque in that the medium—a sleek query screen whose one-click commands perform calculations and draw maps in an instant—easily masks the very significant limitations one must bear in mind if the database is to illuminate, rather than obfuscate, understanding of the slave trade. The database does indeed provide “an extraordinary source for historical reconstruction of the history of the African peoples in America” (*Database Manual*, p. 2). Nonetheless, it is a source researchers should use with the same care and caution they would apply to more conventional sources of historical data. To that end, it is unfortunate that the design of the CD-ROM interface does little to encourage such discretion, making it difficult to distinguish easily between what is known and what is imputed.

Users wishing to employ the database to assess the scale of various branches of the slave trade will be disappointed. As the editors suggest, the database will indeed be “vital to future assessments of the volume of the slave trade” (*Database Manual*, p. 30), because it will provide a much firmer basis from which to calculate estimates of that volume than has been available to date. But in some cases, the data contained herein cannot provide anything close to a reliable picture of the size of the migrant streams linking Africa and the Americas. For example, a query for all voyages that landed in the United States produces records for 1,422 voyages calculated to have delivered 270,976 slaves—far short of the accepted estimate that a half million Africans were sent to North America. Likewise, while Eltis estimates that 2,976 slaves departed Upper Guinea (Senegambia) aboard Dutch vessels between 1658 and 1713 (*Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, table 7-1), researchers using the CD-ROM will find that the *Aletta Maria* (voyage ID # 10023), sailing in 1674, is the only Dutch voyage in the entire database that took on slaves in that region.

These kinds of shortcomings should not surprise: though quite large, the database is a sample, not a complete record of transatlantic slaving. As the editors suggest, the database “provides samples large enough to present the major trends over time in the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade” (*Database Manual*, p. 5). So long as one sticks to analysis of “major” trends, the database can be used quite reliably. But as users venture into individual branches of the traffic, they will find that the results are necessarily uneven. Nonetheless, even where the data are severely limited in terms of quantity, in many cases the available samples are substantial enough to present a reasonably reliable picture of major patterns. Indeed, revealing patterns is what the database does best, particularly with regard to the internal geography of the slave trade. It offers a far clearer picture of where slaves came from in Africa, where they went in the Americas, and how these patterns changed over time than was ever thought possible just three decades ago. From Philip D. Curtin’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969) to this *Database on CD-ROM*, research and scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade surely has come a long way and promises to reach impressive new heights in the future. The vision and painstaking work that has gone into this remarkable new tool represents a superb achievement and a great service to teachers and researchers of early modern Atlantic history.

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