

Intra-European Trade in Atlantic Africa and the African Atlantic

By Anne Ruderman

As the transatlantic slave trade escalated in the eighteenth century, a secondary market of trade between European slavers emerged on the African coast. Intra-European trade enabled European-African trade as European slave ships rebalanced their cargoes in order to meet the tastes and preferences of African consumers and the demands of assortment bargaining—the repeated exchange of small bundles of diverse goods for small numbers of captives—that characterized the slave trade. But intra-European trade operated according to African trading norms, with the rules of assortment bargaining that governed European-African trade structuring trade between Europeans. This secondary marketplace also arose out of the combination of political economy in Europe and territorial reality in Atlantic Africa. For the British, intra-European trade became a way to leverage their position in forts on the African coast, while for the French it became a means of circumventing the restrictions of a mercantilist state. For all slavers, geopolitics in Africa and the political economy of African states shaped the way that the secondary market unfolded. Over time, intra-European trade evolved to include a service sector, anchored on the Portuguese islands in the Gulf of Guinea. These islands linked slave purchasing in the African Atlantic to the transatlantic crossing, connecting African economic history with global economic history.