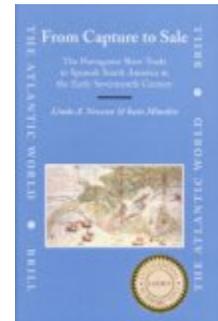


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda A. Newson, Susie Minchin. *From Capture to Sale: The Portuguese Slave Trade to Spanish South America in the Early Seventeenth Century*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007. xiv + 378 pp. \$148.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15679-1.

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Risky Business

According to geographer Linda Newson and historian Susie Minchin, “the Portuguese slave trade in the early seventeenth century was a hazardous business.” In this early period, “neither sources of supply, market demand nor the supporting infrastructure” of the trade in Africa or Spanish America were well developed (p. 297). This underdevelopment extends to the body of scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade which has tended to focus on the more amply documented eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Therefore, we know little about the Portuguese slave trade to Spanish America before 1700 and even less about the organization of the slave trade after slaves landed in American ports.[1] Newson and Minchin do not situate their book explicitly within the growing literature on Atlantic history, but their story of Portuguese traders in Spain, Africa, and Spanish America confirms the development of Iberian (rather than only Spanish or Portuguese) commercial networks around the Atlantic basin in this early period. The authors do engage with some of the foundational scholarship in Atlantic history, though they do not address it in those terms, specifically work on the Columbian Exchange and the transatlantic slave trade. Given this focus, *From Capture to Sale* makes its most valuable contributions to our knowledge of slave-trading and the experiences of slaves on the long journey from Africa to Peru in the early seventeenth century.

The authors note that documentary evidence for the Atlantic leg of the slave trade “is found largely in archives in Lisbon and Africa, and that for the American sec-

tor in Spain and in countries receiving slaves in Spanish America” (pp. 8-9). Thus, the Portuguese slave trade is studied largely by Africanists and Brazilianists. The few scholars who have studied the importations of slaves into seventeenth-century Spanish America tend to focus on the history of slavery in specific colonies and less on the slave trade itself.[2] Though Newson and Minchin did not consult archives in the Lusophone world, they bridge the bifurcation in studies of the slave trade to Spanish America through a collection of private business journals, papers, and letters from Portuguese slave-trader Manuel Bautista Pérez, who ultimately settled in Lima, Peru. Pérez and his many relatives and agents organized two slaving expeditions from Africa to South America between the 1610s and the 1630s and numerous expeditions from Cartagena (in present-day Colombia) to Peru. The Spanish crown tried to control foreigners’ commercial access to the empire into the eighteenth century, but the Union of the Portuguese, Castilian, and Aragonese crowns opened Spanish America to Portuguese merchants from 1580-1640. Many of these merchants, like Pérez, were New Christians who ultimately ran afoul of the Inquisition on charges of Judaizing. During the judicial proceedings their papers were seized and most are now housed in the Inquisition section of the Archivo General de la Nación in Lima.

One strength of these private documents is the fascinating details they provide on all aspects of the slave trade which the authors mine carefully to address a range of issues pertinent to scholarship on the transatlantic

slave trade—the commercial organization and practices of both European and African slave traders and conditions experienced by slaves throughout their long passage from capture in Africa to sale in the Americas. Another strength, according to Newson and Minchin, is that these private sources were less likely to contain falsifications of data than official documentation like ships' registers, tax rolls, and inspection reports, though the authors make ample use of both types of sources. One problem with the sources used here is the relatively small size of the sample provided by the slave-traders' private papers. The authors are keenly aware of the limits to the conclusions they can draw from such a sample but on occasion they analyze evidence in more detail than the possible interpretation warrants, overwhelming the narrative. These occasions are rare and scholars particularly interested in the specific topics analyzed in detail may find more benefit than nonspecialists.

From Capture to Sale is organized into eight chapters that are bracketed by a brief introduction and conclusion. The text has more than a dozen photographs, maps, and illustrations and is supplemented with thirty-one tables, seven appendices, a glossary of Spanish and Portuguese terms, a bibliography, and an extensive index. This wealth of supporting material is increasingly rare in academic publishing, as is the use of footnotes rather than endnotes. Brill may be one of the few publishers to allow such relative extravagances, but they will be much appreciated by the book's scholarly readers.

The first six chapters follow the geographic trajectory of Pérez's slaving expeditions from Africa to Peru. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the contract and licensing system of *asientos* used by the Spanish crown to supply its empire with African slaves. Then the authors delve into the bureaucratic and commercial tangle Pérez faced organizing two expeditions to Africa in 1612 and 1615—paying fees and bribes for licenses, registrations, and inspections, hiring a crew, and purchasing provisions and barter goods for the voyage to Africa. The analysis of these complicated transactions supports the authors' contention that kin played a crucial role in early Portuguese slave trading, providing investment capital, expertise, and personal contacts. Chapters 2 and 3 document the many complexities of assembling a full cargo of slaves in the 1610s in two regions on the western coast of Africa—Upper Guinea and Angola. Pérez purchased slaves mostly one or two at a time in over one hundred small transactions with African leaders or resident intermediaries. Again the value to Portuguese slave-traders of kin and compatriots in negotiating the uncertain and

volatile markets of West Africa is clear. The piecemeal acquisition of slave cargoes could take close to a year, forcing some of the enslaved to endure many months in captivity in African ports. Newson and Minchin use evidence of health problems of slaves on arrival in Cartagena to discuss inadequacies of diet, diseases, and levels of mortality in African societies and among slaves gathered on the coast before they boarded ships for the Atlantic crossing.

Chapter 4 is a very detailed examination of conditions endured by slaves during the Middle Passage based on the admittedly fragmentary archival record for the seventeenth century and a careful reading of the secondary literature on all carriers in the transatlantic trade. The authors again discuss the relative importance of factors like diet and diseases in addition to tight packing, shipwreck, and rebellion as causes of mortality on the Atlantic crossing. They conclude that "normal" levels of mortality on the passage from Upper Guinea to Cartagena in the early 1600s may have been between 10 and 15 percent, slightly more for the passage from Angola. These figures are somewhat lower than earlier studies have suggested. However, outbreaks of serious diseases like smallpox and dysentery or natural disasters could push mortality to 25 percent or more.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide fresh information on the little-understood South American portion of the slaves' journey after their arrival in Cartagena. Traders again used kin and compatriots to negotiate a new thicket of imperial bureaucracy and complex transactions to transport hundreds of slaves to Lima for final sale by mule, foot, and sometimes boat. Here Newson and Minchin have extensive evidence on the importance slave-traders attached to adequate food to maintain slaves' health and thereby the value of their investment. They argue that the American leg of the slave trade was probably the most profitable for traders; mortality tended to be lower and slave prices and demand were consistently high in Lima in this period. The authors' minutely detailed discussion of costs, size of rations, and nutritional content may be too dense for undergraduates and nonspecialists but their information on the variation in diets over the many ecosystems through which slaves passed on their journey from Colombia to Peru offers a new, environmental perspective on the slave trade in South America.

The end of chapter 6 deals with the final sales of slaves in Lima calculating prices and profits for traders. Chapters 7 and 8 return to the topic of slaves' health problems and their treatment. While these two final chap-

ters contain much useful information on seventeenth-century medical practices, they fit rather uncomfortably with the larger story of the expeditions of traders and slaves from Africa to Peru. Scholars interested colonial pharmacology and the interplay of European, indigenous, and African healing practices will find a wealth of material here. For those with less interest in such details, chapter 8 ends with a useful summary of slave mortality in the various regions from Cartagena to Lima that reviews the main points of the analysis. *From Capture to Sale* shows clearly that Portuguese slave-trading in the early seventeenth century was indeed a risky business. Before the era of trading companies merchants like Manuel Bautista Pérez relied on far-flung networks of kin and compatriots for local knowledge and capital to carry out the many transactions necessary to move slaves safely and profitably from Africa to Peru. Though the authors' conclusion refers to the risks incurred by the Por-

tuguese slave-traders at the heart of the book, the meticulously analyzed evidence on slaves' diets, health, and mortality richly documents the many hazards they too faced on the very long journey from capture to sale.

Notes

[1]. The study by Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamérica y el comercio de esclavos* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, 1977) remains fundamental for the period of the Portuguese *asientos*.

[2]. Vila Vilar is an exception but she worked exclusively from Spanish archival sources. For the early slave trade to the imperial centers of Peru and Mexico, most notable are Frederick Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); and Colin Palmer, *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

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