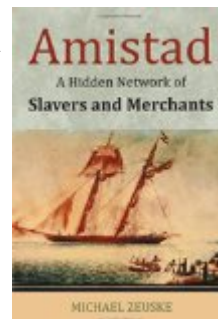


Michael Zeuske. *Amistad: A Hidden Network of Slavers and Merchants.* Translated by Steven Rendell. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2014. 284 pp. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55876-593-1.



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On July 2, 1838, approximately fifty African abductees aboard the Cuban-flagged schooner *Amistad* seized the ship, killed the captain and the cook, and demanded the surviving sailors return them home to today's southern Sierra Leone. Ramón Ferrer, *Amistad*'s owner and captain, had been sailing the Cuban coast, intending to sell them as slaves, when this happened. The surviving sailors agreed to return to Africa, but zig-zagged north instead. A United States revenue cutter found *Amistad* and detained all aboard her off the coast of Long Island, New York, the following month. American courts ruled in the Africans' favor, acknowledging them as free men and women who had been kidnapped in Africa and illegally transported across the Atlantic to Cuba (Congress had joined Britain in prohibiting the transatlantic slave trade, effective January 1808), and finding that they had justifiably used force to defend themselves against their kidnappers. The courts ordered the US government to return them home. [1]

Historian Michael Zeuske recontextualizes this uprising, removing it from its usual place in literature and film—he cites director Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997)—as a narrowly conceived American story, an abolitionist victory against slavery. He retells it "as part of the history of the Atlantic and Cuba" instead (p. x). Zeuske promises that his research into Cuban, Portuguese, and Spanish archives will reveal "the hidden Atlantic," the network of agents and slave dealers, smugglers, both captains and crews, and their numerous accomplices on both sides of the ocean, including the raiding parties who abducted Africans, the interpreters and physicians who evaluated them, and the ships' cooks, guards, and oarsmen who performed much of the everyday labor that put these Africans on *Amistad*. He only partially illuminates this network, however, as might be expected, given its nature as a criminal operation whose participants willfully conducted their business off the books and in the dark.

Zeuske does not introduce anything new concerning these abductees' entrance into slavery in

Sierra Leone. But he does clarify that an American-flagged ship, *Hugh Boyle*, and not a Portuguese-flagged ship called *Teçora*, as previously reported in the literature, departed with them in April 1839, and transported them to a clandestine night landing near Havana approximately eight weeks later. Based on port records, he believes *Hugh Boyle's* captain, J. R. Brown, used false registration papers, reflagged the ship, and painted "Teçora" on the hull to evade British patrols and Spanish authorities sometime before officially arriving in Havana. *Amistad* took them from there.

Zeuske also reconstructs Ferrer's career, from his emigrating from Catalonia to Cuba to his becoming a prosperous ship owner, investing in and captaining several ships, among them, *Amistad*, by the 1830s. This prosperity derived from his and his brother's buying and selling ships, his coastal runs as a legitimate merchant, and his participation in the illegal slave trade in the larger Atlantic. He operated normally when working his day job, so to speak; he used an alias, "Ramón Roselló," when working nights. Ferrer/Roselló's *Amistad* encountered a wrecked British warship off Cayo Verde one night in November 1834. This warship had freed African abductees from another Cuban slave ship and was still carrying them when Ferrer rescued them, accepting a handsome reward for assisting in the suppression of the slave trade afterwards. Zeuske believes Ferrer was patrolling the Cuban coast that night, searching for incoming slave ships that needed his local knowledge as a pilot, as he likely did many nights.

Zeuske loses Ferrer outside of Cuban waters, and cannot document any transatlantic connections or voyages, or place him anywhere in Africa, either, speculating "[this] may be because he carefully erased all traces of his presence there" (p. 123). Perhaps. But as Ferrer goes, so goes his hidden Atlantic network. This understandably seems to have frustrated Zeuske, who calls the captain "not only shameless but also a racist" (p. 64) and "not only an evil slave dealer but also a pirate" (p.

71). Although Zeuske loses his man, his research and speculations thereafter, through "imagination and comparison" (p. 73), do explore and illuminate related slave networks and practices from Africa to Cuba over the several centuries that transatlantic slavery functioned.

Zeuske perceives his research methods as "historical criminology" (p. 70). But he lacks Sherlock Holmes's cool, calm, and collected disposition. He becomes emotional, partisan, and prosecutorial when explaining Ferrer's significance as "a technological pioneer of a form of Atlantic modernity whose dark side includes the capitalism of human bodies" (p. 69). He uses Ferrer to introduce "a report on investigations into crimes against humanity," insisting, "Everything in this book is documented. Hence it has footnotes. The documents cited can be checked. They are real and what they describe and represent was a historical reality whose consequences are still making themselves felt" (p. 16). He is attacking the legitimacy of Western modernity and capitalism--and not prosecuting Ferrer's network--when he writes this. According to Zeuske, transatlantic slavery enabled "the world-historical rise of Western Europe and the United States" (p. 29) and impoverished the global South at the same time, and this remains "fundamental to the whole story" (p. 34). Abolitionist narratives, including those that present the *Amistad* uprising as a victory against slavery, have obscured this. Zeuske's primary purpose seems to be to bring this to light.

Zeuske's locating the *Amistad* uprising in the Atlantic world is most welcome, but his diligent attempt to illuminate Ferrer's network seems to have gone as far as the documentary record permits. His case against Atlantic modernity, capitalism, and the world-historical rise of western Europe and the United States--in short, slavery, Europeans and Americans' original sin, renders all that has followed shameful--is far less pathbreaking than he seems to believe. Historian Eric Williams argued this over seventy years ago.[2] As

far as Zeuske's reducing the rise of western Europe and the United States and the impoverishment of the global South to slavery, some may rejoice and cheer him for this. Those who approach historical research and writing as world historian Philip Curtin did, seeking more intellectually complex and comprehensive, and less politicized, interpretations, however, will remain unimpressed. As Curtin explained, "No one today defends the slave trade as a humane institution, and few indeed defend it on any grounds. It may be well to concede that the era of the slave trade is beyond the effective range of moral condemnation. The more important task is to find out what happened and why, rather than placing blame, however well deserved." [3]

Notes

[1]. *United States v. The Amistad* 40 U.S. 518 (1841).

[2]. See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[3]. Philip Curtin, "The Tropical Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade," in *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 171.

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