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978-0-521-65548-4 - The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas

David Eltis

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## The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas

Why were the countries with the most developed institutions of individual freedom also the leaders in establishing the most exploitative system of slavery that the world has ever seen? In seeking to provide new answers to this question, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* examines the development of the English Atlantic slave system in the context of European exchange with Africa and the Americas between 1650 and 1800. The book outlines a major African role in the evolution of the Atlantic societies before the nineteenth century and argues that the transatlantic slave trade was a result of African strength rather than African weakness. It also addresses changing patterns of group identity to account for the racial basis of slavery in the early modern Atlantic world. Exploring the paradox of the concurrent development of slavery (for peoples of African descent) and freedom (for peoples of European descent) in the European domains, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* provides a fresh interpretation of this difficult historical problem.

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DAVID ELTIS

*Queen's University*



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## Preface

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Slavery was an accepted element in human society for so long and reached its high point as an economic system so recently that the strong and continuing interest in the subject seems only proper. While the wrongs of slavery are among the few certainties in a postmodern world, in this, as in other areas of social activity, human behaviour and contradiction are inseparable. The aim of this work is to highlight the tensions that emerge as people pursue goals, moral or material, that cannot all be achieved at once or are at odds with some aspect of their individual and shared systems of belief. Chapter 1 begins with the puzzle of slavery and freedom emerging from the same roots in western society, and the volume ends with the morally ambiguous consequences of the abolition of coerced labor and the transportation system that supplied it. Historians should attempt to put some distance between scholarship and the values of the society in which he or she functions. We have more than enough evidence to condemn what happened in the past. No one who is aware of the below-deck conditions on a slave ship, how little these changed over three centuries, and how Europeans never subjected other Europeans to such an experience can fail to appreciate this point. Yet if condemn on the basis of modern values is all we do, then we are never likely to understand the past. At the very least, condemnation of wrong thinking in earlier societies should emerge from circumspect reflection on how present attitudes will appear to posterity. Nor will this dilemma disappear in the future. It is only human to identify with those who suffered. However, the people who inflicted the suffering, in this case owners of slaves, were perhaps less different from ourselves than late-twentieth-century sensibilities would have us believe. Not only have almost all peoples been both slaves *and* slaveholders at some point in their histories, but there are also many historical examples of individuals having been both slave and slaveholder at different points in their lives.

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*Preface*

The attempt here to write Atlantic history rather than the history of a particular nation or group has greatly increased the author's debt to others. The community of scholars interested in the slave trade undoubtedly share information and expertise to a greater degree than those who labor in other parts of the discipline – which helps explain why collective knowledge of the subject has increased so rapidly in recent years. Scholars have made available their archival data to each other and provided tips on new sources in a way which should be a model for all historians. I am neither an Africanist nor a Caribbean specialist and have drawn heavily on the knowledge of those who are entitled to these labels.

Robin Blackburn, John Coatsworth, Peter Coclanis, Seymour Drescher, Farley Grubb, David Howard, Wim Klooster, Robin Law, Joseph C. Miller, Ugo Nwokeji, Kwabena Opare-Akurang, Stuart Schwartz, John Thornton, and Michael Turner have provided aid at critical points in the preparation of this work. Herbert S. Klein and Pieter Emmer capped many exchanges of ideas over the past decade with several pages of commentary on an earlier version of the manuscript. Within my department Don Akenson read Chapter 9 with great care and provided extensive commentary. Robert Malcolmson, James Pritchard, and Robert Shenton have read draft chapters or shared ideas and sources over the years. Discussions with Mary Turner have provided a base for many of the arguments presented here. With two colleagues I have worked closely indeed over the past five years, to the point where I am no longer sure which idea or source is mine and which is theirs. David Richardson and Stephen D. Behrendt have toiled with me on the slave trade in Hull, England, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and indeed several other locations on both sides of the Atlantic. Their knowledge of the primary sources of the slave trade, their good sense, and their friendship are deeply appreciated.

As with countless other manuscripts in this and related fields, Stanley L. Engerman provided a never-ending stream of questions to be asked, references to be pursued, obscurities in the text to be eliminated, and constant support. Counterfactual exercises usually conclude that no single innovation or individual has much impact. Yet the historiography of slavery, and, more generally labor and migration in the pre-twentieth-century Atlantic world, would not have been the same without the combination of Stan's own work and his tireless help to other scholars. This book would have been very different.

Earlier versions of some chapters were presented at seminars held at the Institute of Historical Studies and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, both of the University of London; at the University of Pennsylvania; W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University; the Department of Economic and Social History, University of Hull, England; the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar; the Center for the Study of Freedom, University of Washington; Tulane University, New Orleans; and at Queen's

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## Abbreviations

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Add ms	Additional manuscripts, British Library.
CSPCS	Sainsbury, W. Noel, ed. <i>Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series</i> . Vols. 1–10. London, 1860–78.
CSPDS	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series</i> . Vols. 1–10. London, 1860–78.
Custom Books	“A Coppie Journal of Entries made In the Custome House of Barbados,” Beginning August 11, 1664 to August 10, 1665; and “A Coppie Journal of Entries made In the Custome House of Barbados,” Beginning August 11, 1665 to April 22, 1667.
TSTD	David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, <i>The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM</i> (Cambridge, 1999)
Voyage id	Unique number of voyage to be found in David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, <i>The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM</i> (Cambridge, 1999).