The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867

The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867 traces the inland origins of slaves leaving West Central Africa at the peak period of the transatlantic slave trade. Drawing on archival sources from Angola, Brazil, England, and Portugal, Daniel B. Domingues da Silva explores not only the origins of the slaves forced into the trade, but also the commodities for which they were exchanged and their methods of enslavement. Further, the book examines the evolution of the trade over time, its organization, the demographic profile of the population transported, the enslavers’ motivations to participate in this activity, and the Africans’ experience of enslavement and transportation across the Atlantic. Domingues da Silva also offers a detailed “geography of enslavement,” including information on the homelands of the enslaved Africans and their destination in the Americas.

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Preface

The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867 traces for the first time the origins of slaves leaving West Central Africa at the peak period of the transatlantic slave trade. West Central Africa was one of the principal sources of slaves for the Americas. During the nineteenth century, the importance of the region as a supplier of slaves increased as a result of the suppression of the trade north of the Equator. Although some nations retreated from the business early in that century, others remained active, expanding their activities along the coast of West Central Africa. Some scholars of the slave trade claim that a quest for political power motivated Africans to sell one another into the transatlantic commerce as prisoners of war. They argue that the expansion of the slave trade from West Central Africa in the nineteenth century increased the incidence of warfare in the region, which in turn spread the enslaving frontiers further into the region’s interior. However, as this book demonstrates, the rate of slaves leaving from West Central Africa remained relatively constant from the late eighteenth until the mid-nineteenth century, with slaves originating from places much closer to the coast than previously thought. Moreover, the book shows that cultural and economic motivations were also important factors shaping the participation of Africans in the slave trade. More Africans engaged in this activity than a handful of rulers and warlords, but their participation depended significantly on the ability of merchants in Europe and the Americas to deliver the goods required for exchanging for slaves.

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Preface

Columbia. His research focuses on the slave trade between West Central Africa and the Americas, especially Brazil and Cuba. It received funding from several institutions, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and the Luso-American Foundation for the Development of Portugal. Domingues is co-manager of “Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database” and his research is available to the public in peer-reviewed journals in English and Portuguese, such as Journal of African History, Slavery and Abolition, and Revista Afro-Ásia.
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I have been living abroad for a little over a decade now and, since my research is largely based outside my country of origin, I have had few opportunities to return and see my family. Although my life as a migrant is of course incomparable to that of thousands of Africans forced into the transatlantic slave trade, it allowed me to reflect on their experiences and on the lives of the people that they left behind. I am now acutely aware of not only the challenges of moving into a different culture, but also of the impact that the absence of a loved one has on those who stayed home. I am thus grateful for my family’s understanding and support throughout these years. More difficult is to seek the understanding and thank the support of the person who followed me during this period with no guarantee of success. Livia, you left your family behind and abandoned an otherwise successful career to accompany me in this adventure. I am afraid I will never be able to repay you, but I will remain forever grateful for your sacrifice. This, my first book, is dedicated to you.
Abbreviations

AHI     Arquivo Histórico do Itamaraty, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
AHNA    Arquivo Histórico Nacional de Angola, Luanda, Angola
AHU     Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon, Portugal
ANRJ    Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
BNA     British National Archives, Kew, England
BNRJ    Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Cod.    Codice
CU      Conselho Ultramarino, Lisbon, Portugal
Doc.    Document
FO      Foreign Office Series, London, England
SEMU    Secretaria de Estado da Marinha e Ultramar, Lisbon, Portugal