

STAN PANNIER • ENTERPRISING MERCHANTS in the GLOBAL ATLANTIC



# ENTERPRISING MERCHANTS *in the* GLOBAL ATLANTIC

*Frederic Romberg and  
the Austrian Netherlands Trade with  
West and Central Africa, 1775-1795*



*Stan Pannier*

# Enterprising Merchants in the Global Atlantic

*Frederic Romberg and the Austrian Netherlands Trade  
with West and Central Africa, 1775-1795*



KU Leuven – Faculty of Arts  
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Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Maïka De Keyzer & Dr. Torsten Feys

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## Acknowledgements

On my first day of doing maritime history, a seagull stole my waffle.

It was a beautiful early spring day, the kind that still calls for a sweater, but only just. Peacefully I walked down the platforms of Ostend station, eagerly eyeing the treat I had been looking forward to all day. Then came the bird. I did not see it coming, it flew right over my shoulder, and it struck with a force I barely thought possible from a seagull. There I stood, in front of the train, watching my waffle fly off in the distance. At that precise moment, I realized this PhD project would not be easy.

In fact, it became routinely more difficult than dealing with hungry sea animals. The only reason why this page is followed by hundreds more, therefore, is because I was helped by countless people along the way.

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Historical research can be a lonely endeavour, especially when the world filled with the smell of sanitizer during the early stages of this project. Fortunately, an escape was provided by the amazing colleagues who surrounded me everywhere my scholarly undertakings took me. I am grateful to everyone with whom I had the pleasure of sharing conferences and excursions, to everyone who accompanied me at lunch, coffee, or bar tables, and to everyone who joined me on after-work runs, trails, and North Sea swims.

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## Abbreviations

ARA	Algemeen Rijksarchief
RAtB	Rijksarchief te Brussel
RAB	Rijksarchief Brugge
RAG	Rijksarchief Gent
RAL	Rijksarchief Leuven
SAB	Stadsarchief Brugge
SAD	Stadsarchief Doornik
SAG	Stadsarchief Gent
SAV	Stadsarchief Veurne
KBR	Koninklijke Bibliotheek
PMA	Plantin-Moretus Archief
UAG	Universiteitsarchief Gent
ANF	Archives Nationales de France
ANOM	Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mers
ADC	Archives Départementales du Calvados
ADG	Archives Départementales de la Gironde
ADM	Archives Départementales du Morbihan
ADSM	Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime
AdP	Archives de Paris
AMSO	Archives Municipales de Saint-Omer
BNF	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
SHDR	Service Historique de la Défense Rochefort
TNA	The National Archives
AGI	Archivo General de Indias
ANRC	Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba
STRO	Sound Toll Registers Online
TSTD	Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database
fl.w.g.	Gulden Vlaams, wisselgeld
fl.c.g.	Gulden Vlaams, courantgeld
£t.	Livres tournois
P.	Pesos





## Currencies

In the Austrian Netherlands, prices were typically expressed in either Flemish guilders *wisselgeld* (*argent de change*, fl.w.g.) or Flemish guilders *courantgeld* (*argent courant*, fl.c.g.). The ratio between the two currencies was 6 fl.w.g. to 7 fl.c.g. Throughout this book, tables that include currency will always specify which type of guilder is being used. For the sake of readability, I have generally referred to sums in the text simply as ‘guilders’, unless otherwise noted. In such cases, the amounts are expressed in Flemish guilders *wisselgeld* (fl.w.g.). When referring to amounts in Flemish guilders *courantgeld* (fl.c.g.), I have explicitly used the term ‘current guilders’.

The exchange rates between the currencies of the Austrian Netherlands and foreign denominations were as follows:

1 *livre tournois* (£t.) = 0.467 Flemish guilder *wisselgeld* (fl.w.g.)

1 Holland guilder = 0.96 Flemish guilder *wisselgeld* (fl.w.g.)

1 pound sterling = 10.675 Flemish guilders *wisselgeld* (fl.w.g.)



## Overview Publication Overlap

Several parts of the following study have been published or are currently in the process of being published.

Portions of Chapter 1 and 2 are included in Magnus Ressel, Michaël Serruys, and Stan Pannier, 'Ostend and the Austrian Netherlands: Developing a Window upon the World', in: Singerton, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Habsburg History*, forthcoming. Sections dealing with Ostend's port life during the 1780s have been published in Stan Pannier, 'From crisis management towards a Mediterranean model? Maritime quarantine in the Austrian Netherlands, c. 1720-1795', in: *Low Countries Historical Review (BMGN)* 138:2 (2023) 32-74, or will be published in Stan Pannier, 'Reaping the Returns of a Runaway Economy: Seamen's Wages in the Ostend Merchant Marine, 1775-1785', *TSEG* 21:3 (2024), forthcoming. The latter article contains analysis which is reiterated in Chapter 5 in the section on maritime workers involved in Romberg's business ("Very difficult to find...for a voyage that long and unhealthy": Contracting Maritime Labour'). Chapters 4 and 7 are being published (in a shortened form) as Stan Pannier, 'Habsburg in Havana. Outsider Participation in the Spanish Empire: the Slaving Licence of Romberg & Consors of Ghent, 1780-90', forthcoming.









## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

“THE SHORES OF AFRICA ARE *also visited by the ships of [the Austrian Netherlands]; and the Flemings pursue on that coast the same unhallowed traffic, which other European nations have so long practised without scruple.*”<sup>1</sup> For the British traveler James Shaw, a short journey to the Austrian Netherlands during the early 1780s sufficed to note the region’s involvement in the trade with Africa. Today however, this episode of ‘Belgian’ commercial history has fallen into oblivion, in sharp contrast with the rich historiography on the *Generale Keijzerlijke Indische Compagnie* (GIC), an East India company which briefly operated under an Imperial charter during the 1720s.<sup>2</sup> Following recent scholarship advocating to look beyond formal ways of empire-building to understand the history of European expansion, this book presents the first exhaustive study of the Southern Netherlands trade with West and Central Africa—primarily organized by the merchant Frederic Romberg—and the ‘Belgian’ intervention in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

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<sup>1</sup> James Shaw, *Sketches of the History of the Austrian Netherlands: With Remarks on the Constitution, Commerce, Arts, and General State of These Provinces* (London 1786) 76.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Jan Parmentier, *Oostende & Co: het verhaal van de Zuid-Nederlandse Oost-Indiëvaart 1715-1735* (Amsterdam 2002); Frederik Dhondt, ‘Delenda est haec Carthago. The Ostend Company as a Problem of European Great Power Politics (1722-1727)’, *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 93:2 (2015) 397-437; Gijs Dreijer, ‘The Afterlife of the Ostend Company, 1727-1745’, *The Mariner’s Mirror* 105:3 (2019) 275-87; Wim De Winter, *Worlds of the Ostend Company in Qing China and Mughal India (1717-1744)* (Ghent 2021).

The lacking state of research on the colonial involvement of the Southern Netherlands is emblematic of past trends in the historiography of the Atlantic system. This Atlantic system, the term generally used for the multi-directional complex of economic and demographic exchange that emerged during the Early Modern period and linked Europe, Africa, North America and South America, has long been portrayed as the exclusive domain of the major maritime powers. Using mercantilist barriers and institutions, these nations sought to ensure a steady flux of wealth to centres of power in Europe (the 'metropolis'), to secure overseas markets for European manufactures, and to prevent outsiders from exploiting the colonial domains.<sup>3</sup> These traditional studies have tended to separate the commercial activities of different empires, in the process slicing the Atlantic complex into numerous 'Atlantics'. Although the intrusion of interlopers was acknowledged, connection between these spheres was mostly viewed in terms of rivalry and conflict.<sup>4</sup>

During recent decades, the emergence of Atlantic history, global history, transregional history, and a maritime history moving away from its former narrow 'naval' boundaries, has led scholars to question the rigidity of Early Modern borders implied by traditional national or imperial frameworks.<sup>5</sup> Taking a bird's eye view of Atlantic border regions or, through its methodological opposite, conducting in-depth studies of 'microregions', historians have shown the permeability of demarcation zones with regards to people, commodities, and information.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have challenged the

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<sup>3</sup> Christoph Strobel, *The Global Atlantic: 1400 to 1900* (New York 2015); Anna Suranyi, *The Atlantic connection: a history of the Atlantic world, 1450-1990* (New York 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Carla Rahn Phillips, 'Empire as a framework for research', in: Cátia Antunes and Karwan Fatah-Black, *Explorations in History and Globalization* (New York 2016) 177-92.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Games, 'Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities', *American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006) 741-57; Patrick O'Brien, 'Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history', *Journal of Global History* 1:1 (2006) 3-39; Philip Morgan and Jack Greene, *Atlantic History: a Critical Appraisal* (Oxford 2009); Amélia Polónia, 'Maritime History: A Gateway to Global History?', in: Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia, *Maritime History as Global History* (Liverpool 2010) 1-20; Violet Soen, Bram De Ridder, Alexander Soetaert, et al., 'How to do Transregional History: A Concept, Method and Tool for Early Modern Border Research', *Journal of Early Modern History* 21:1 (2017) 343-64; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik Seeman, *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500-2000* (London 2018).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Karwan Fatah-Black, 'A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics. The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World', *Low Countries Historical Review* 128:1 (2013) 31-52; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra ed., *Entangled Empires. The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500-1830* (Philadelphia 2018); Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean* (Cambridge 2020). See for example Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of*

perspective of the state or the national empire by calling for an actor-centred approach to the history of the Atlantic System. They have revealed a world other than the one dominated by institutions and central power strategies of empire-building such as monopolies: an ‘informal empire’, built on transnational, cross-imperial, and cross-cultural networks and interactions of private actors.<sup>7</sup> The socio-economic interests of these agents operating within the colonial domains did not always coincide with those of the state-organized monopoly, and so they shifted their strategy accordingly, sometimes opposing, sometimes appropriating, and sometimes cooperating with monopolistic structures. Such dynamics existed within empires and their national subjects, but, as Cátia Antunes, Susana Münch Miranda, and João Paulo Salvado recently argue, equally between actors and the empires of other nations. Here too, merchants, mariners, or financiers pursuing prospects in colonial spaces resorted to circumvention (e.g. smuggling or piracy) or acquiring monopolistic rights (e.g. petitioning for patents and privileges), according to need or opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

These novel perspectives have had several important consequences. First, they compounded existing Atlantic histories of nations in a rich way by including new cross-imperial and informal connections. Second, and more crucially, they also had the consequence of drawing attention to the participation in the colonial project of European areas not yet considered. Elizabeth Buettner describes this as the ‘Europeanizing’ of the imperial turn, taking the study of empire out of the exclusive domain of a few European

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*sugar in modern history* (New York 1985); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: a new history of global capitalism* (London 2015); Bin Yang, *Cowrie shells and cowrie money: a global history* (New York 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches. Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648-1795* (Leiden 1998); Jack Owens, ‘Dynamic Complexity of cooperation-Based Self-Organizing Commercial Networks in the First Global Age (DynCoopNet): What’s in a name?’, *Journal of Knowledge Management, Economics and Information Technology*, special issue (2012) 25-51; Cátia Antunes, ‘Free Agents and Formal Institutions in the Portuguese Empire: Towards a Framework of Analysis’, *Portuguese Studies* 28:2 (2012) 173-85; Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia eds., *Beyond empires: global, self-organizing, cross-imperial networks, 1500-1800* (Leiden 2016); Elisabeth Heijmans, *The Agency of Empire. Personal Connections and Individual Strategies in the Shaping of the French Early Modern Expansion (1686-1746)* (Leiden 2018); De Winter, *Worlds of the Ostend Company*.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The many-headed hydra: sailors, slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston 2000); Cátia Antunes, Susana Münch Miranda, and João Paulo Salvado, ‘The Resources of Others. Dutch Exploitation of European Expansion and Empires, 1570-1800’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 131:3 (2018) 501-21.



countries with formal empires and embedding it into a broader European narrative.<sup>9</sup> This shift in thinking about the history of European expansion has generated significant scholarship revolving around the ‘margins of colonialism’ or ‘colonialism without colonies’.<sup>10</sup> Early attention went to the Scandinavian countries, who despite being minor players in the Atlantic complex still possessed formal territories in the Caribbean region and on the coast of West Africa.<sup>11</sup> Later, focus shifted towards states with a less likely connection to the colonial project such as Switzerland and Germany. Being ‘landlocked’ polities, these Central European lands have often been denied a maritime history, let alone an Atlantic history. As with the examples above, however, scholars have demonstrated how production centres in Central and Eastern Europe were significantly oriented toward overseas markets and the supply of the slave trade.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Swiss and German merchants managed in great numbers to partake in the Atlantic economy by establishing transnational, cross-imperial connections.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar fashion, historians have begun to explore the Atlantic history of the territories belonging to the Austrian Habsburgs. Much like Germany and Switzerland, the Habsburg dynasty has long been primarily viewed as a

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Buettner, ‘Europe and its entangled colonial pasts. Europeanizing the ‘imperial turn’’, in: Britta Tim Knudsen et al., *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage: New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and beyond Europe* (New York 2022) 25-43.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘The End of Innocence: Debating Colonialism in Switzerland’, in: Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (London 2015) 1-16, especially 7; Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk, and Patricia Purtschert, ‘Colonialism without colonies: examining blank spaces in colonial studies’, *National Identities* 18:1 (2016) 1-9.

<sup>11</sup> Recent explorations of the topic are Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett, ‘Introduction: Nordic colonialisms and Scandinavian studies’, *Scandinavian Studies* 91:1-2 (2019) 1-12 and Magdalena Naum and Jonas Monié Nordin, ‘Colonial Entanglements: Crossroads, Contact Zones, and Flows in Scandinavian Global History’, *Itinerario* 43:2 (2019) 191-3. See also the other contributions in this special issue.

<sup>12</sup> Klaus Weber, ‘The Atlantic Coast of German Trade. German Rural Industry and Trade in the Atlantic, 1680-1840’, *Itinerario* 26:2 (2002); Anka Steffen, ‘A Fierce Competition! Silesian Linens and Indian Cottons on the West African Coast in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, in: Jutta Wimmeler and Klaus Weber, eds. *Globalized Peripheries. Central Europe and the Atlantic World, 1680-1860* (Woolbridge 2020) 37-56. See also the other contributions in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Klaus Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel, 1680-1830* (München 2004); Niklaus Stettler, Peter Haenger and Robert Labhardt, *Baumwolle, Sklaven und Kredite: Die Basler Welthandelsfirma Christoph Burckhardt & Cie. in revolutionärer Zeit (1789-1815)* (Basel 2004); Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority. German Merchants in London, Naturalization, and Global Trade, 1660-1815* (Oldenburg 2015); Lucas Haasis, *The Power of Persuasion. Becoming a Merchant in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Bielefeld 2022) notably 44-7 and 153-67.

‘continental’ power devoid of a maritime or overseas history.<sup>14</sup> Although Vienna never acquired a formal overseas colony of her own and was a modest maritime power, the Monarchy’s subjects—either in a formal, informal, or hybrid role—participated in a wide array of intentional or unintentional colonial activities which contributed to European overseas expansion. These ranged from gathering intelligence on opportunities for formal empire, pursuing commercial opportunities, appropriating artifacts and knowledge, or engaging in missionary activities.<sup>15</sup> While early historical interest in the colonial past of the Habsburg monarchy primarily focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, over the past decade scholars have uncovered extensive evidence of similar dynamics in earlier periods. Scholars such as Jonathan Singerton, Klemens Kaps, and Heather Morrison have shown how the Early Modern Atlantic world was a place of emphatic commercial, cultural, and scientific interest to the Habsburg Monarchy and her subjects.<sup>16</sup>

Many of these overseas activities, ambitions, and aspirations were formulated, facilitated, and funded from the Austrian Netherlands. These territories astride the North Sea, added to the Habsburg realm in 1714 through the Treaty of Rastatt, provided the Monarchy with a veritable new ‘window upon the world’.<sup>17</sup> While the connection between Habsburg and Belgian imperial designs have been particularly well-documented for the nineteenth

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<sup>14</sup> Alison Frank, ‘Continental and Maritime Empires in an Age of Global Commerce’, *East European Politics and Societies* 25:4 (2011) 781-2.

<sup>15</sup> See the various contributions to the special volume of *Austrian Studies*, ‘Colonial Austria: Austria and the Overseas’, especially Walter Sauer, ‘Habsburg Colonial: Austria-Hungary’s Role in European Overseas Expansion Reconsidered’, *Austrian Studies* 20:1 (2012) 5-23. See also the contributions to Jonathan Singerton, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Habsburg History*, forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> Klemens Kaps, ‘Mercantilism as private-public network: The Greppi Marliani company – a successful Habsburg Central European player in global trade (1769-1808)’, in: Daniele Andreozzi ed., *Mediterranean Doubts. Trading Companies, Conflicts and Strategies in the Global Spaces XV-XIX* (Palermo 2014) 89-114; Klemens Kaps, ‘Small but powerful: networking strategies and the trade business of Habsburg-Italian merchants in Cadiz in the second half of the eighteenth century’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 23:3 (2016) 1-28; Heather Morrison, ‘Open Competition in Botany and Diplomacy: The Habsburg Expedition of 1783’, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 46:1 (2017) 107-19; Jonathan Singerton, *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy* (London 2021), especially 1-14; Jonathan Singerton, ‘An Austrian Atlantic. The Habsburg Monarchy and the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century’, *Atlantic Studies* (2022) 1-25; Dirk Rupnow and Jonathan Singerton, ‘Habsburg Colonial Redux: Reconsidering Colonialism and Postcolonialism in Habsburg/Austrian History’, *Journal of Austrian Studies* 56:2 (2023) 9-20.

<sup>17</sup> Magnus Ressel, Michaël Serruys, and Stan Pannier, ‘Ostend and the Austrian Netherlands: Developing a Window upon the World’, in: Singerton, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Habsburg History*, forthcoming.

century—several Austrian explorers and mercenaries joined the African initiatives of Leopold II, while the King’s sister Charlotte married the Austrian Archduke Maximilian and joined her husband on the throne of Mexico<sup>18</sup>—this is not the case for the preceding century, where most attention has gone to two episodes of Habsburg participation in East India trade. The first such episode involved the *Generale Keijzerlijke Indische Compagnie* (GIC), more commonly known as the Ostend Company, a partnership of merchants who organized expeditions to India and China and established a settlement in Banquibazar during the 1710s and 1720s. In 1722, they received an Imperial charter from Charles VI, which was ultimately suspended in 1727 in an attempt to secure the accession to the throne of Maria Theresa, his daughter.<sup>19</sup> The second episode involved various East India companies established by William Bolts, a merchant, in the Austrian port of Trieste between 1775 and 1785, leading to several expeditions to Asia and the acquisition of factories in East Africa and India.<sup>20</sup> Both Habsburg ventures into East India trade were largely organized by Southern Netherlands subjects or funded by Southern Netherlands capital. However, during the eighteenth century, the ‘Belgian’ provinces served as a far more significant springboard for the Monarchy’s expansionist ambitions and became a major focal point for Habsburg subjects participating in the colonial projects of other nations. These roles are yet to be explored in full.

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<sup>18</sup> Florian Krobb, ‘The starting point for the civilisation of the Dark Continent’. Austrians in the Sudan: Ernst Marno and Rudolf Slatin as Agents of African Conquest’, *Austrian Studies* 20:1 (2012) 142-60; David Pruonto, ‘Did the Second Mexican Empire under Maximilian of Habsburg (1864–1867) have an ‘Austrian Face’?’, *Austrian Studies* 20:1 (2012) 96-111; Sauer, ‘Habsburg Colonial’, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*; De Winter, *Worlds of the Ostend Company*.

<sup>20</sup> Helma Houtman-De Smedt, *Charles Proli, Antwerps zakenman en bankier, 1723-1786: een biografische en bedrijfshistorische studie* (Brussels 1983) 69-95.



FIGURE 1.1 The *Allegory on the commerce of Ghent* by Pieter Van Reijschoot, 1782.  
Source: Historische Huizen Gent, collectie Stadhuis, GS-XXIII-1-1/3 © Stad Gent.

Amore Neptuni Ditesco:  
The Austrian Netherlands and the Atlantic World

In 1782, the painter Pieter van Reijsschoot came first in a competition organized by the city of Ghent. Participants were asked to create a decoration for the newly-built *Pakhuys*, a storage building in the centre of Ghent. Van Reijsschoot's design convinced all jury members. A woman, symbolizing Ghent, forms the focal point of the piece. Behind her lurks Mercure, god of trade; over her towers Neptune, god of the sea, pointing to storage facilities and a large galleon lying in port. Surrounding a seated Ghent: an African man, an Asian woman, shiploads of overseas commodities such as elephant tusks, and a lion holding a sign bearing the Latin phrase *Amore Neptuni Ditesco*—"I am enriched by the love of Neptune".<sup>21</sup>

The images presented in Van Reijsschoot's *Allegory on the commerce of Ghent*, and the unanimous decision of the jury members—only based on the ideas conveyed through the *cartoon*, and not by the rococo-toned splendour of the finished piece—are illustrative of the appeal of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean economies in the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands.<sup>22</sup> Yet today, the image persists of the Southern Netherlands being cut off from interoceanic trade after the dismissal of the Ostend Company. Contrary to the Habsburg Monarchy, which is still often denied even a maritime history, the maritime past of the Southern Netherlands is scarcely questioned, but the existence of an Atlantic or global history is seldomly admitted.<sup>23</sup> This perception seems to come primarily from the fact that the Austrian Netherlands—except for the short-lived GIC fortress in India—never acquired a formal colony of its own. According to early historians, primarily occupied with formal ways of empire-building, this failure to impose sovereignty over an overseas territory and to reestablish a chartered company had far-reaching consequences. Hubert Van Houtte, the author of the last economic history of the Southern Netherlands, for example—writing in an era when Belgian colonialism still reigned supreme—argued that the lack of an empire had effected an indolence among its subjects

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<sup>21</sup> Marie Fredericq-Lilar, *Gand au XVIIIe siècle: les peintres van Reijsschoot* (Ruisselede 1992) 190-6.

<sup>22</sup> Van Reijsschoot's piece today hangs in Ghent's city hall. Unfortunately, Fredericq-Lilar's reproduction is the best presently available.

<sup>23</sup> Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 8.

with regards to commerce, as “the profound transformation that the possession of the Congo has had on our public mind is no longer disputed”.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent research, however, positioning itself—implicitly or explicitly—within the emerging historiographical tradition that focuses on informal forms of empire and the transnational agency of individuals, has demonstrated in numerous ways how enterprising private actors in the Austrian Netherlands leveraged their capital, commodities, and expertise in the service of other nations’ empires. First, rather than displaying a lack of initiative, many of the GIC’s former directors and shareholders devised intricate schemes to continue its operations following the revocation of the company’s charter. Scholars such as Jan Parmentier, Christian Koninckx, and Gijs Dreijer have demonstrated how subjects of the Austrian Netherlands managed to continue the activities of the GIC for decades after its formal suspension. They achieved this by circumventing restrictions through smuggling and the use of free ports, investing in Nordic East Asia companies, or taking up directorship positions in Prussian companies.<sup>25</sup> Soon their capital investments were complemented by broader segments of the population: as Karel Degryse and Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt have shown, an increasing amount of wealthy citizens started funding foreign colonial enterprises as a result of decreasing interest rates on traditional ways of investment such as government bonds.<sup>26</sup> Captains and officers once employed in the Ostend Company, acting as what

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<sup>24</sup> Hubert Van Houtte, *Histoire Economique de la Belgique à la fin de l’Ancien Régime* (Ghent 1920) 352-3, “On ne conteste plus en effet la transformation profonde que la possession du Congo a exercée sur notre esprit public”.

<sup>25</sup> Christian Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters of the Swedish East India Company (1731-1766): A contribution to the maritime, economic and social history of north-western Europe in its relationship with the Far East* (Kortrijk 1980); Jan Parmentier, *De Holle Compagnie: Smokkel en legale handel onder Zuidnederlandse vlag in Bengalen, ca. 1720-1744* (Hilversum 1992); Dreijer, ‘The Afterlife’, 276-86; Felicia Gottmann, ‘Prussia all at Sea? The Emden-based East India Companies and the Challenges of Transnational Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of World History* 31:3 (2020) 552-3.

<sup>26</sup> Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bijdrage tot de studie van de goeode burgerij te Gent in de XVIIIe eeuw: de vorming van een nieuwe sociaal-economische Stand ten Tijde van Maria Theresia* (Ghent 1952) 131-148; Karel Degryse, *De Antwerpse fortuneien: kapitaalaccumulatie, -investering en rendement te Antwerpen in de 18de eeuw* (Antwerp 1985) 531-60; SAG, *Family Papers*, 1136 (Carpentier), Testament of Marie Madeleine Baeteman, widow of Nicolas Carpentier (Brussels, 25 January 1787); Gaëtan Van Goidsenhoven, ‘Le baron Denis-Benoît-Joseph de Cazier: trésorier général des finances (1718-1791)’, *Etudes sur le XVIIIe Siècle* 27:1 (1999) 211-2.

Antunes has called 'labour specialists' operating in a colonial space, successfully offered their expertise to Indian Ocean enterprises abroad.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to its Indian counterpart, the involvement of the Austrian Netherlands in the Atlantic economy is less well known. As Singerton has rightly assessed, historians searching for global connections of the Habsburg Monarchy "have looked more East than West, more towards Asian seas than Atlantic coastlines".<sup>28</sup> What is true for the whole is also true for its parts. In fact, Belgian scholars have often only looked West when they were looking East: the Atlantic return leg of the ships of the Ostend Company, who routinely put into Brazilian ports to restock in order to avoid the hostile harbour of the Dutch Cape Coast colony, has been well described by historians.<sup>29</sup> Going beyond the activities of the chartered company and examining private initiative and commodity flows, however, the same trends established for the Indian Ocean characterize the involvement of Austrian Netherlands elements in the Atlantic economy. Here too, funds found their way to foreign commercial initiatives: Ambroise-Joseph de Herzelles, a high-ranking member of government, held shares in the Spanish *Real Compañía Guipuscoana de Caracas*, while local merchants invested in the Dutch and French slave trade.<sup>30</sup> Julien Depestre, a Brussels nobleman, owned plantations in the French Caribbean—one was called *La Nouvelle Flandre*.<sup>31</sup> Seamen and captains offered their services to Atlantic maritime businesses: Pierre-Ignace-Liévin van Alstein, who sailed several slave ships to West Africa for shipowners in Nantes, or the MCC, a slaving company based in Zealand, whose vessels were for a sizeable portion

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<sup>27</sup> Karel Degryse en Jan Parmentier, 'Kooplieden en kapiteins. Een prosopografische studie van de kooplieden, supercargo's en scheepsofficieren van de Oostendse handel op Oost-Indië en Guinea (1716-1732)', in: Christian Koninckx, ed., *Vlamingen overzee* (Brussels 1995) 119-241; Cátia Antunes, 'Globalisation in history and the history of globalisation: The application of a globalisation model to historical research', in: George Modelski, Tessaleno Devezas, and William Thompson, *Globalization as evolutionary process. Modeling global change* (Newcastle 2007) 258-9.

<sup>28</sup> Singerton, 'An Austrian Atlantic', 2. See also Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 8.  
<sup>29</sup> Jan Parmentier, 'From Macao to Rio: The Flemish-Portuguese relations in the East Indies and Brazil, 1715-1745', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge* 132:3 (1995) 373-400.

<sup>30</sup> Jan Parmentier, 'De Oostendse Guineavaarders, 1718-1720', in: *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis* 127:3-4 (1990) 194-5; Jan Parmentier, 'De rederij Radermacher & Steenhart (1730-1741). Zeeuwse Guinea-vaart en slavenhandel met Zuidnederlandse participatie', *Tijdschrift voor Zee-geschiedenis* 11:2 (1992) 137-51; Denis Tomboy, 'Le Marquis Ambroise-Joseph de Herzelles (1680-1759), surintendant et directeur général des finances', *Etudes sur le XVIIIe Siècle* 27:1 (1999) 35-7.

<sup>31</sup> Xavier Duquenne, *Le Château de Seneffe* (Brussels 1978) 8, 25-31.

crewed by Flemish mariners, are but a few examples.<sup>32</sup> The ways in which manufacturers were able to introduce their products in Atlantic empires has probably been underestimated as well. Knives produced in Flanders, for instance, were used as trading cargoes in the French slave trade.<sup>33</sup> Ann Coenen, additionally, has shown how cotton fabrics produced in the Austrian Netherlands found their way to the Americas.<sup>34</sup> Finally, large volumes of Flemish linen were sold to the Spanish Empire or entered Dutch colonial commerce as trading cargoes or sails of slave ships.<sup>35</sup> Luc Dhondt, examining one such linen exporter, concluded that the Austrian Netherlands “were probably more endowed with entrepreneurs than usually assumed”.<sup>36</sup>

The above participation of Austrian Netherlands and Habsburg subjects in the project of European expansion was leveraged to an exceptional degree during the American War of Independence (1775-83) and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84). Vienna managed to steer clear from both conflicts, a diplomatic position which yielded exceptional opportunities as established European empires lowered their protectionist barriers in favour of neutral parties. This allowed for numerous forays by Habsburg subjects into the Caribbean and North America, which over recent decades have become well documented.<sup>37</sup> The significant African aspect of this episode, however, has not. Indeed, while the eighteenth-century dream of exoticism and overseas riches presented in Van Reijsschoot’s *Allegory on the Commerce of Ghent* was commissioned for a public building, the *Allegory* could well have been ordered

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<sup>32</sup> Dieudonné Rinchon, *Pierre-Ignace-Liévin van Alstein: capitaine négrier, Gand 1733-Nantes 1793* (Dakar 1964); John Everaert, ‘Pierre-Ignace-Lievin van Alstein. Gents slavenkapitein in Nantes dienst (1733-1793)’, *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor geschiedenis en oudheidkunde te Gent* 19:1 (1965) 47-84; Matthias van Overtveldt, *Zeelieden in de 18de eeuw: de Middelburgse commercie compagnie: een casus* (Ghent 2005) 76-9.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Claude Bénard, ‘L’Armement honfleurais et le commerce des esclaves à la fin du XVIIIe siècle’, *Annales de Normandie* 10:3 (1960) 255-6.

<sup>34</sup> Ann Coenen, *Carriers of growth?: International Trade and Economic Development in the Austrian Netherlands* (Antwerp 2015) 122.

<sup>35</sup> John Everaert, *De internationale en koloniale handel der Vlaamse firma’s te Cadiz 1670-1700* (Bruges 1973) 241-5; Etienne Sabbe, *De Belgische vlasnijverheid* (Kortrijk 1975), II, 251-3; Gerhard De Kok, *Walcherse ketens: de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel en de economie van Walcheren, 1755-1780* (Zutphen 2020) 114.

<sup>36</sup> Luc Dhondt, ‘Een Ondernemer, Notabelen en het volk van Oudenaarde tussen Ancien Régime en Nieuwe Maatschappij’, *Handelingen van de Geschied- en oudheidkundige kring van Oudenaarde, van zijn kastelnij en van den lande tusschen Maercke en Ronne* 18:2 (1976) 330-2.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 2.



by—or even modelled on—one specific firm. A firm which did organize transoceanic ventures from Ghent when Van Reijsschoot put his brush to the canvas, which did bring enslaved Africans to the town, and which, had it not been for one mutinous British officer, would have disembarked a cargo of elephant teeth on its docks. That firm was Romberg & Consors.

The Case-Study: Frederic Romberg, Romberg & Consors,  
and the Austrian Netherlands Trade with West and Central Africa

Romberg & Consors was a subsidiary branch of the commercial business of Frederic Romberg (1729–1819). Born in Westphalia, Romberg moved to Brussels during the 1750s to establish himself as a merchant. In the following decades, he would steadily expand his business in the Austrian Netherlands, especially in the so-called ‘transit trade’, the trade routes connecting Ostend with Central and Southern Europe. Historians have not failed to notice Romberg’s importance for the economy of the Austrian Netherlands during the second half of the eighteenth century. Even Van Houtte admitted the merchant’s “great spirit of initiative” but saw his argument of indolence confirmed in the fact that Romberg was “a foreigner, originating from Westphalia”.<sup>38</sup> Yet Romberg’s enterprise was more than its director alone and cannot possibly be captured in narrow national categories. As will become clear in the following chapters, the firm included many Austrian Netherlands partners, clerks, and agents within its ranks or its close network, connected extensively with the local economic fabric of manufacturers, labourers, and shopkeepers, while at the same time drawing capital, commodities, and expertise from all over Europe. In other words, Romberg’s business was thoroughly multinational in character, well embedded both in the Austrian Netherlands as in Europe as a whole.

Romberg and his associates exploited the international turmoil of the 1780s to increasingly shift the firm’s focus from overland trade to maritime

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<sup>38</sup> Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 353, “Faut-il ajouter que Frédéric Romberg, le seul pour ainsi dire qui dans les Pays-Bas fit preuve, dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, d’un grand esprit d’initiative commerciale, était un étranger, originaire de Westphalie?”.

trade. The merchant was particularly eager to participate in the Atlantic plantation complex, including slave trade. For these purposes, he established a subsidiary firm in Bordeaux in 1783, called Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie, which has been studied by Françoise Thésée.<sup>39</sup> Yet before this date, Romberg had significantly participated—and was still participating—in human trafficking by equipping slave ships in the Austrian Netherlands proper. In contrast to his activities in Bordeaux, this trade has elicited remarkably little scholarship. Historiographical exceptions are represented by Paul Verhaegen, Hubert Van Houtte and Fernand Donnet, who all wrote short studies in the early twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Instead of focusing on primary sources, these authors mainly built their narratives on a traveler’s report by the Frenchman Damiens de Gomicourt, *Le voyageur dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens*, which was published between 1782 and 1784.<sup>41</sup> While Gomicourt, writing under the nom de plume *Dérival*, is generally regarded as well-informed on the topics he addresses, his information on Romberg’s trade is limited and occasionally unreliable.<sup>42</sup> Only decades later, Romberg’s African activities were again briefly discussed by John Everaert in a broader article surveying African trade in the Southern Netherlands. By this time, however, the Ostend city and admiralty archives had gone up in smoke during World War II, resulting in a narrative which remains “imperfect and sometimes fractional”.<sup>43</sup> In the following decades, Romberg’s activities were briefly addressed by several historians looking into the colonial legacy of

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<sup>39</sup> Françoise Thésée, *Négociants bordelais et colons de Saint-Domingue. Liaisons d’habitation. La maison de Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie, 1783-1793* (Paris 1972).

<sup>40</sup> Derival [August-Pierre Damiens de Gomicourt], *Le voyageur dans les Pays-bas autrichiens, ou Lettres sur l’état actuel de ces pays* (Amsterdam 1784); Paul Verhaegen, ‘Le commerce des esclaves en Belgique à la fin du XVIIIe siècle’, *Annales de la Société royale d’archéologie de Bruxelles* 15 (1901) 254-62; Hubert Van Houtte, ‘Contribution à l’histoire commerciale des Etats de l’empereur Joseph II (1780-1790)’, *Vierteljahrsschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 2-3 (1910) 374, 383; Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 347-52; Fernand Donnet, ‘Quelques notes sur le commerce des esclaves’, *Bulletin de la société royale de Géographie d’Anvers* 46 (1926) 6-37; Dieudonné Rinchon, ‘Les négriers belges au XVIIIe siècle’, *Revue de l’Aucam* 9 (1934) 15-20.

<sup>41</sup> Henry De Grootte, ‘L’auteur du ‘Voyageur dans les Pays-Bas Autrichiens’’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 26:1-2 (1948) 118-35.

<sup>42</sup> De Grootte, ‘L’auteur’, 132-4; Ressel provides reliable evidence that Gomicourt accepted payments from Romberg, severely questioning the objectivity of his reports, see Magnus Ressel, ‘Accounting Practices and the Transatlantic Slave Trade: The Business Prospectus of an Eighteenth-Century European Slave Trader’, in: Claudia Bernardi et al. eds., *Moving Workers. Historical Perspectives on Labour, Coercion and Im/Mobilities* (Oldenburg 2023) 71, 81-4.

<sup>43</sup> John Everaert, ‘Commerce d’Afrique et traite négrière dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens’, *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 62 (1975) 177-85, quote 13 : “imparfaite et parfois partielle”.

continental Europe, but without providing much novel information.<sup>44</sup> Recently, Magnus Ressel made a concerted effort to revive this line of research by shedding additional light on Romberg's business and the ties of the firm's activities—including slave trade—with central Europe.<sup>45</sup> In many ways, this study works as a complement to Ressel's study of Romberg's continental trade, firmly casting its eyes towards the Atlantic.

In short, this book studies the participation of the Austrian Netherlands and its actors in the project of European expansion, beyond the traditional ways of acquiring territories and claiming markets through state-backed companies. While Antunes, Münch Miranda, and Salvado, in their study of exploitation of empires by non-subjects, focus on a Dutch case-study, they suggest that the phenomenon was more widespread and happened as well in other European regions, "either through specific groups or particular individuals".<sup>46</sup> As Romberg partnered with foreign merchants and petitioned foreign state administrations to gain access to colonial resources, I argue that he was such a particular individual. From a point of view of business history, the study of Romberg's firm offers a rekindling of this scholarly interest in Belgium—a field formerly led by authors such as Helma Houtman-De Smedt but now all but faded.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, his operations contribute to the scholarship on the German diaspora in port cities, Austrian Habsburg ventures into the Atlantic, as well as the global or colonial connections of the Southern Netherlands, especially involving West Africa. In this way, I expand on the scholarly work of

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<sup>44</sup> Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*, 195-8.

<sup>45</sup> Magnus Ressel, 'Das Alte Reich und der transatlantische Sklavenhandel. Drei Schlaglichter auf eine historische Verflechtung', *Wissenschaftsportal Gerda Henkel Stiftung* (2021); Magnus Ressel, 'The Hinterland of the Holy Roman Empire and the Slave Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century. An Economic Case Study Based on the Business Ventures of Friedrich Romberg (1729-1819)', *Journal of Global Slavery* 8:1 (2023) 269-301. A recent article by the same author, published a week before this book was submitted and without my prior insight into the text, focuses more extensively on Romberg's Atlantic activities. However, due to the article's limited archival and analytical scope, it necessarily presents an exploratory study of this part of his portfolio, see Magnus Ressel, 'Spoils of Neutrality: The Austrian Netherlands in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Early 1780s', *The Journal of Modern History* 96:4 (2024) 765-801.

<sup>46</sup> Antunes, Münch Miranda, and Salvado, 'The Resources of Others', 520.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Helma Houtman-De Smedt, *Charles Proli, Antwerps zakenman en bankier, 1723-1786: een biografische en bedrijfshistorische studie* (Brussels 1983). For an overview of the evolution of Belgian business history, see Roger De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants and entrepreneurs and their business papers', in: Jochen Hooek and Wilfried Reininghaus, eds., *Kaufleute in Europa: Handelshäuser und ihre Überlieferung in vor- und frühindustrieller Zeit* (Münster 1996) 101-4.

historians such as John Everaert, Eddy Stols, Christian Koninckx, Werner Thomas, and Johan Verberckmoes, who have demonstrated the global ties of the Southern Netherlands for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>48</sup> In recent years, spurred by twenty-first-century globalization and fruitful examples from the Netherlands, historiography on this global ‘Belgian’ entanglement appears to have gained renewed momentum.<sup>49</sup>

The genre to which this study subscribes is that of micro-history. Its focal point is one Early Modern firm, with its principal and associates in the head office and its representatives overseas. Its chronological focus is on a short period of time instead of the *longue durée*: although the events and processes of the following pages range from 1750 to the opening decades of the nineteenth century, this book will mainly deal with the narrow timeframe of 1775 to 1795; that is, the American War of Independence (1775-83), the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84), and the ten-year long aftermath (at least, for Romberg’s firm) of both conflicts. Microhistory, conceived during the 1970s and 1980s, reacted against the ‘social science history’ of the second French *Annales* school. Instead of focusing on long term evolutions and underlying structures in past societies, microhistory turned to smaller events, communities, or single persons, to bring individual agency to the foreground.<sup>50</sup> While the genre reached its apogee in popularity during the 1990s, it continues to be adopted by new schools of

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Everaert, *De internationale en koloniale handel*; Eddy Stols and Rudi Bleys, *Vlaanderen en Latijns-Amerika* (Antwerp 1993); Werner Thomas, ‘Misioneros flamencos en América Latina’, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 4:7 (1994) 451-78; Christian Koninckx, ed. *Vlamingen overzee* (Brussels 1995); Johan Verberckmoes, ed., *Vreemden vertoond. Opstellen over exotisme en spektakelcultuur in de Spaanse Nederlanden en de Nieuwe Wereld* (Leuven 2002); Werner Thomas and Eddy Stols, eds., *Een wereld op papier. Zuid-Nederlandse boeken, prenten en kaarten in het Spaanse en Portugese Wereldrijk (16<sup>de</sup>-18<sup>de</sup> eeuw)* (Leuven 2009).

<sup>49</sup> See for example Marnix Beyen, Marc Boone and Bruno De Wever, eds., *Wereldgeschiedenis van Vlaanderen* (Kalmthout 2018); Herman Portocarero, *De zwarte handel* (Antwerp 2021); Dirk Jacobs, ‘Geopolitiek en sociaal kapitaal in een Brugse grafkelder. Slavenhandelaar Nicolas Masterson en de trans-Atlantische driehoekshandel tijdens de Vierde Engels-Nederlandse Oorlog (1780-1784)’, *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge* 159:1 (2022) 115-58; Johan Verberckmoes, *Wij, Habsburgers: een geschiedenis van onze globalisering, 1500-1700* (Antwerp 2022); Jeroen Puttevils, ‘Een vergeten bladzijde? De vroege participatie van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden aan slavernij’, in: Allen, Rose Mary, Captain, Esther, van Rossum, Matthia, and Vyent, Urwin eds., *Staat & Slavernij* (Amsterdam 2023) 347-57 and Nadia Bouras et al., *Wereldsteden van de Lage Landen. Stadsgeschiedenis van Nederland en België* (Amsterdam 2025), forthcoming. For Dutch examples, see Marjolein ‘t Hart e.a. eds., *Wereldgeschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam 2018) and Lex Heerma van Voss e.a. eds., *Nog meer wereldgeschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István Sziájtó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and practice* (New York 2013) 1-11.

history. Recently, scholars have argued that microhistory might revitalize ‘global history’ (and related fields like Atlantic history and transnational history) by its method of reducing the scale and offering a bottom-up perspective on global evolutions.<sup>51</sup> Simultaneously, while traditionally linked to cultural and social history, microhistory has continued to prove to be a refreshing approach to economic history.<sup>52</sup> In this regard, the limited scope of time and subject facilitates a focused study of how and why the subjects of a polity without a colonial presence aspired to, pursued, and succeeded in gaining access to the empires of other nations. The methodology of zooming in additionally allows to adopt a more expansive geographical scope: the coming chapters will take us from the commercial heart of Ghent, to Malembo’s marketplace in the Kingdom of Kakongo, to Havana’s Plaza Nueva. By all means, therefore, this book is a ‘global microhistory’ or—in the phrasing of Francesca Trivellato—a “global history on a small scale”.<sup>53</sup>

The focused nature of this book also enables a more exhaustive examination of the source material than would be possible in a macro-oriented study. This course of action fits the micro-historical tradition, which subscribes to no specific methodological practice, but generally advocates a minute examination and close-reading of the available source material. This source material, then, was found and selected in a range of deposits, both domestic and foreign. The loss of Ostend’s archives presents obvious difficulties to research, but mostly in the sense that there is no large, central archival collection available, and the documents of interest are dispersed over many repositories,

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<sup>51</sup> Lara Putnam, ‘To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World’, *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2006) 615-30; Francesca Trivellato, ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?’, *California Italian Studies* 2:1 (2011) 1-25; Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris and Jacques Revel, ‘Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History’, *The International History Review*, 33:4 (2011) 573-84; Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (London 2014) 63-9; Thomas Cohen, ‘The Macrohistory of Microhistory’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 47:1 (2017) 53-68; Jan De Vries, ‘Playing with scales: The global and the micro, the macro and the nano’, *Past & Present*, Supplement 14 (2019) 23-36; Giovanni Levi, ‘Frail Frontiers?’, *Past & Present*, Supplement 14 (2019) 37-49.

<sup>52</sup> David Hancock, *Citizens of the World. London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge 1997); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers. The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven 2009); Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton 2011); Ana Sofia Ribeiro, *Early Modern Trading Networks in Europe. Cooperation and the case of Simon Ruiz* (London 2016); Lucas Haasis, *The Power of Persuasion*.

<sup>53</sup> Trivellato, *The familiarity of strangers*, 7.

boxes, and bundles. Although more complicated, the fragmented nature of the source material simultaneously enriches it by allowing different voices to be heard and enabling parallels and comparisons between various accounts. Additionally, I underwrite the arguments made by scholars who have pointed out that the historian should embrace rather than shun the complexities created by myriad archives and multilingual source material, as these tend to uncover connections not visible when examining one single collection of sources.<sup>54</sup> The narrative that will unfold in the following pages, then, is composed using a wide variety of sources from Belgian, French, British, and Spanish archives. To study Romberg's slave trade from the perspective of the firm at its core in the Austrian Netherlands, I consulted a range of government sources, merchant correspondence, surviving accounting books, and several lawsuits brought against Romberg. The extensive records created by Spain's colonial administration provided valuable insights into the negotiations and strategies employed by Romberg & Consors to gain access to the Spanish Empire, as well as shedding light on the activities of the firm's agent in Cuba. To further examine governance and cross-cultural interactions in the firm's periphery, I drew on Ostend's notary archives, correspondence from captains, and four shipboard logs that partially or wholly document the operations of Romberg's captains while at sea. Finally, newspapers, periodicals, and contemporary publications offered valuable external accounts of Romberg's African trade.

The book is outlined as follows. Chapter 2 sets the stage by exploring the commercial and economic development of the Austrian Netherlands and Ostend during the second half of the eighteenth century, while also introducing the protagonist of this story, Frederic Romberg. I illustrate how government efforts to promote trade, combined with a neutral stance during the American War of Independence, culminated in exceptional commercial growth. By forging ties with North America and the Caribbean, I explain how the Austrian Netherlands during this period became the Habsburg Empire's 'window upon the world'. However, I also argue that contemporary connections of the Austrian Netherlands with West Africa have been crucially overlooked.

Chapter 3, as well as Chapter 4, focuses on the ways in which traditional Atlantic 'outsiders' could participate in the project of European expansion.

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<sup>54</sup> Cañizares-Esguerra, 'Introduction', in: Cañizares-Esguerra ed., *Entangled Empires*, 1-15; Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires*, 21-2; Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 13.

While Chapter 2 highlighted the direct connections between the Austrian Netherlands and the Caribbean region, this chapter assesses another crucial contribution of this polity to a different aspect of the Atlantic plantation economy: the slave trade. By taking a bird's-eye view of this trade under the Flemish or Imperial flag and zooming in on the operations of Frederic Romberg, I argue that subjects of the Austrian Netherlands—including municipal governments, notary publics, and merchants—enabled and facilitated the wartime slave trade of other nations by providing access to neutral ship's papers, committing capital to human trafficking schemes, and supporting the outfitting process of slave ships in Ostend.

Chapter 4 expands on the ideas presented in the previous chapter by focusing on Frederic Romberg's engagement with the Spanish Empire. I examine how his firm petitioned the Spanish imperial framework to secure the privilege of importing captive Africans into Cuba and, consequently, to access Spain's colonial resources—especially silver. I demonstrate how Romberg provided Spain with a welcome alternative to the slave traders of rival colonial powers, who had dominated the business for centuries but from whom Madrid sought to disentangle itself during the second half of the eighteenth century. I analyse how Romberg and his multinational stakeholders dispatched eight vessels to Havana and sold surplus licenses to foreign slave traders. By importing more than a thousand enslaved Africans into Havana and facilitating the transport of hundreds more through foreign traders, I show how this outsider to the Atlantic system exploited the empire of a nation he was no subject to, in the process setting the Cuban slave trade on a path toward free trade and rapid expansion in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5 examines the logistics underpinning Frederic Romberg's African ventures. Drawing on recent historiographical trends that take a broader view of colonial trade—incorporating both backward and forward linkages—I assess the impact of his firm's operations on the local economy of the Austrian Netherlands. Using a micro-historical approach, I analyse several surviving expense lists to highlight the extensive societal reach of outfitting Romberg's slave ships, which engaged a wide range of local labourers, artisans, shopkeepers, and financiers. Additionally, I provide a macro-level assessment of the economic impact of Romberg's African trade on the Austrian Netherlands. With expenditures amounting to approximately half a million

guilders on local supplies and services, I conclude that this impact was significant.

In Chapters 6 and 7, we leave the Austrian Netherlands and shift our focus to the Atlantic basin, examining the governance of Romberg's operations on the firm's periphery. I demonstrate how, as a newcomer to Atlantic trade, Romberg drew extensively on foreign expertise and experience. I analyse the strategies employed by his firm to align the actions of these specialists with its interests, emphasizing contractual incentives and monitoring by the firm's 'insider' agents. After exploring these internal determinants of agent behaviour, I turn to the external context influencing their actions through two case studies. I show that Romberg's operations were primarily challenged by his position as a European operating on the African seaboard, while also emphasizing the difficulties of being an outsider among European nations.

Chapter 7 further develops these dynamics by examining the case study of François Carpentier, who was dispatched to Havana in 1783 to manage the local affairs of Romberg & Consors. I demonstrate how Carpentier sought to facilitate the firm's capture of Spanish resources, particularly by extending its operations and lobbying strategies from its core to the Caribbean periphery and by forging ties with key political figures in Cuba. Despite these connections, Carpentier reported experiencing mistrust in Havana and faced increasing difficulties in recovering the firm's outstanding payments. I argue that these challenges stemmed from his exclusion from the powerful Cuban-British commercial networks, which had dominated slave imports since the early eighteenth century and continued their activities during and after the American War of Independence, again highlighting the difficulties faced by outsiders operating in overseas settings.

In Chapter 8, the enslaved Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic aboard Romberg's ships take central stage. Drawing on recent scholarship that advocates looking beyond the Middle Passage alone, I trace the origins of these individuals, their experiences of enslavement while still on the African coast, and the winding trajectories they endured after arriving at their first Caribbean port of call. Additionally, as scholars have suggested that merchants could significantly influence the experience of enslavement through their selection of trading assortments and provisions, I investigate whether Romberg's slave trade practices differed from those of more experienced



merchants. I conclude that, while several of Romberg's ships suffered health disasters during the Middle Passage, these tragedies stemmed from the structural violence of the trade rather than the actions of a clueless newcomer.

Chapter 9 returns to Europe by examining the benefits Romberg hoped to extract from his participation in the slave trade, both in terms of material profit and increased social capital. First, I contribute to ongoing debates about the profitability of the slave trade. By drawing on the firm's surviving accounts, I conclude that the merchant's slave trade was deeply loss-making, adding evidence to the scholarship that nuances the direct profits of the trade and shedding light on the 1780s, a period often used to draw broader conclusions about the trade's profitability. Second, I argue that Romberg's involvement in the slave trade was also driven by a search for social capital. I demonstrate how the merchant and his associates used the Atlantic trade and its symbols as a tool to enhance their status in the eyes of the general public, their mercantile peers both in the Austrian Netherlands and abroad, and the government.

Chapter 10 concludes that, while Romberg was ultimately fatally drawn to the Atlantic, the case of his firm and the many Austrian Netherlands actors involved in its operations reveals a broader story of 'Belgian' participation in European global expansion that stretches beyond the dynamics of formal empire: a story of individual, enterprising actors engaging on a global scale with the empires of other nations.

CHAPTER TWO  
The Making of an Atlantic Moment:  
A Maritime History of the Austrian Netherlands, 1750-85

**O**STEND, 9 MARCH 1782, FIVE IN THE MORNING. A fierce north-westerly gale has been whipping the town all night long. Squeaking and creaking, the forest of masts in the harbour is swaying to and fro. Suddenly the *Jonge Balthazar*, a brigantine commanded by Gaspar Nieuman, gets caught by the wind, sets adrift and, lacking a crew neither sizeable nor skilled enough to remedy the situation, crashes with a thundering roar into a neighbouring vessel. Cables snap, bowsprits break, a sloop shatters. The departure of the damaged ship, fully loaded and ready to leave as soon as morning breaks, is delayed by two whole weeks. The vessel is called the *États de Brabant*. She is property of Frederic Romberg, she is set to make for the Atlantic Ocean, and in three months' time, she would be on the African seaboard, purchasing enslaved people.<sup>55</sup>

The spectacle of a helplessly undersized and undertrained crew colliding with a slave ship was a highly unusual one for Ostend. During the previous centuries, the town's supply of skilled maritime labour had seldomly fallen

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<sup>55</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 109/623 (Ostend, 9 March 1782).

short of demand, her docks had never been dangerously clogged, and interoceanic trade, let alone slave trade, had rarely passed through the city's harbour. Yet all those things very much characterized the Ostend of the early 1780s. It was a short-lived period of exceptional growth for the Austrian Netherlands' principal port town; a bubble, mostly, but one with important precedents and long-lasting consequences. It was rooted in political-economical decision-making of years and decades prior, policies which did not only develop Ostend as a port town, but also helped create the merchant Frederic Romberg.

During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), Charles VI, the Habsburg Emperor, asserted his claim to Spain and its vast overseas empire as his rightful inheritance. However, a union of the two empires under a single crown was unacceptable to other European powers, leading to Charles' ambitions being thwarted by the Treaty of Rastatt. During the peace negotiations, however, Charles was offered the Southern Netherlands as a compensation for relinquishing his claims, a transfer that heralded eighty years of Austrian rule over the region. The Southern Netherlands—now the Austrian Netherlands—occupied an awkward position within the Habsburg realm, being both geographically distant and detached from the monarchy's core territories in Central Europe, known as the Hereditary Lands. It did, however, contribute about two million people to the Emperor's subjects, most of whom resided in the affluent provinces of Flanders and Brabant. Moreover, the Austrian Netherlands' distance from Central Europe had the advantageous side-effect of granting the region access to the sea. This 67-kilometer stretch of coastline offered the Habsburg Monarchy a potential northwestern 'window upon the world', a gateway that Vienna was eager to develop.<sup>56</sup>

In this chapter, I set the scene of this book by exploring the maritime and commercial development of the Austrian Netherlands and Ostend as a port town under Habsburg aegis during the eighteenth century. I show how the ideas of mercantilism and cameralism effected a far-reaching government intervention in infrastructure, business, and finance from the 1750s onwards, enabling a steady expansion of the country's maritime trade. I demonstrate how these policies came to exceptional fruition during the American War of

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<sup>56</sup> Ressel, Serruys, and Pannier, 'Developing a Window upon the World', forthcoming.

Independence (1775-83), when Ostend and the Austrian Netherlands became the mercantile heart of Europe. The opportunities which emerged from the chaos on the high seas coalesced with the ascension to the throne of an ambitious new ruler in Vienna, Joseph II, who was keen to establish a global presence of the Habsburg dynasty. The result was an ‘Austrian Atlantic bubble’, during which the Habsburg Monarchy made unprecedented ventures into the Atlantic world.<sup>57</sup> By highlighting and compounding existing scholarship, I show how the Austrian Netherlands became the place *par excellence* where such Habsburg commercial, scientific, and imperial designs on the Atlantic converged. Lastly, by introducing the mission of Jan Baptist Vervier—an overlooked Habsburg venture in Africa—and the firm of Frederic Romberg, I initiate the reorientation, argued and developed throughout the rest of this book, of the Austrian Atlantic moment of the 1780s from its traditional focus on the Caribbean and the United States towards West and Central Africa.

### Dancing Sailors: Roads, Rivers, and Maritime Revival

On the evening of 17 February 1754, Charles of Lorraine, governor-general of the Austrian Netherlands, attended a play in *La Monnaie*, a grand Brussels theatre which was experiencing its heyday under Charles’ generous patronage of the arts. In the governor’s company was Charles Joseph de Ligne, a flamboyant diplomat and dear friend of Charles. As the *Gazette de Bruxelles* reported the next day, both men witnessed a “magnificent” port scene where a vessel disembarked male and female actors. For the occasion, they were dressed as sailors, dancing with joy at having safely made landfall.<sup>58</sup>

Benevolent attention by government officials for maritime affairs, however, stretched beyond the glamorous stages of the Brussels high society life. Following the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which concluded the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), minister-plenipotentiary Antoniotto Botta-

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<sup>57</sup> Singerton, ‘An Austrian Atlantic’, 12.

<sup>58</sup> KBR, *Gazette de Bruxelles*, 19 February 1754. In one of his famous memoirs, Ligne recalled a party hosted by Charles of Lorraine, where other guests complained about Ligne always being late. According to Ligne, Charles answered: “*That much is true, gentlemen, but to me this man is always late, even if he were the first to arrive.*”, see Marijke Arijs, *De charmeur van Europa: Memoires* (Antwerp 2006) 67.

Adorno had initiated a string of policy measures aimed at lifting the Austrian Netherlands from depression, a state that had more or less characterized its economy during the first 35 years under Austrian rule. Charles VI's sovereignty in his newly acquired possessions and his ability to govern had been severely restrained by the precarious state of public finances (exacerbated by the large yearly expenses on Dutch garrisons along the French border stipulated by the Barrier Treaty) and by Great Britain and the Dutch Republic, who actively opposed any measure in Vienna that could possibly strengthen their strategically located neighbour. Additionally, the Southern Netherlands' economy had been in a dire state due to a century of frequent warfare on its territory, the loss of Spanish overseas markets, and the customs tariffs included in the Barrier Treaty, which favoured the maritime powers. A ray of hope was provided by the establishment of the aforementioned GIC: after the War of the Spanish Succession, Austrian Netherlands merchants had set up a lucrative trade route with India and China through private ventures. In 1723, in order to better coordinate the trade and to keep revenues high, Vienna provided institutional support by issuing an imperial charter. Nevertheless, international protest and the need for Charles VI to gain recognition of his heir to the throne, Maria Theresa, led to the GIC's suspension and eventual abolition in 1731.<sup>59</sup>

The treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle is often considered an economic turning point for the Austrian Netherlands. The administrations of ministers plenipotentiary Botta-Adorno (in office between 1749 and 1754) and Karl Johann Philipp von Cobenzl (o. 1754–1770) firmly subscribed to the views of mercantilism (or its German equivalent, cameralism). Both saw an important role reserved for the state in the economy, especially with regards to commerce, maritime trade, and industry. While such ideas would later meet opposition from more 'laissez faire'-minded officials (see further), the first decades following Aix-la-Chapelle formed the apogee of Austrian Netherlands' interventionism.

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<sup>59</sup> Klaas van Gelder, *Regime Change at a Distance. Austria and the Southern Netherlands following the War of the Spanish Succession (1716-1725)* (Leuven 2016) 243-86.

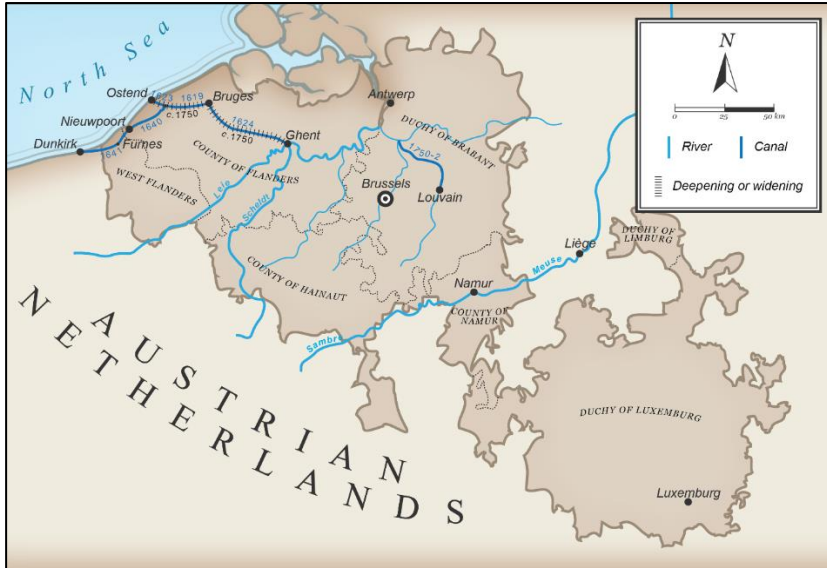


FIGURE 2.1 The Austrian Netherlands and its waterway infrastructure, c. 1780.

Source data: Serruys, “The Port”.

Ostend, the Southern Netherlands’ main access to the North Sea since the Dutch Republic had closed off the Scheldt River during the Eighty Years’ War (1568-1648), had fallen into a pity state, and its commercial fleet had dwindled to a meagre six ships.<sup>60</sup> The Spanish Crown, recovering the city in 1604 after a four-year siege, had sought to reconnect the Southern Netherlands to the North Sea by embarking on an ambitious canal-building program in the coastal area during the 1620s (see Figure 2.1). However, relentless warfare on the country’s territory throughout the remainder of the century forced the abandonment of this program.<sup>61</sup> As Michael Serruys has shown, from the 1750s onward, the plans of seamlessly integrating Brabant and Flanders were rekindled by connecting the provinces’ major harbours to Ostend, and ridding the country of the despised ‘Dutch detour’—the financial and geographical necessity to pass

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Laenen, *Le ministère de Botta-Adorno dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens pendant le règne de Marie-Thérèse (1749–1753)* (Antwerp 1901) 167-8.

<sup>61</sup> Louis Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Cartulaire de l’ancienne estaple de Bruges: recueil de documents concernant le commerce intérieur et maritime, les relations internationales et l’histoire économique de cette ville* (Bruges 1906); Werner Thomas, ed., *De val van het Nieuwe Troje: het beleg van Oostende 1601-1604* (Leuven 2004).

commodities through the Dutch Republic instead of a domestic transport network. All these measures were collected under the same header of *transit policy*.<sup>62</sup> Bruges had been connected to Ostend under Spanish rule, but Botta-Adorno ordered the by now silted-up waterway repaired, deepened the canal between Bruges and Ghent, and constructed additional conduits (*coupures*) in both towns in order to join both canals and link them up with the Scheldt River. By 1755, sea-going vessels could once again reach Ghent. In Brabant, too, the waterway network was enlarged by digging a canal toward Leuven. Likewise, the government expanded the country's road infrastructure, removed arduous local tolls, and abolished the obligation of transshipments.<sup>63</sup> All interventions combined into a steadily increasing shipping traffic, from 275 incoming vessels in 1760 to about 400 in 1770.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the successes of the 1750s, commercial and maritime policy in the Austrian Netherlands was pursued with certain restraints. This was mainly caused by the fact that the Southern Netherlands were part of a bigger constellation, the Habsburg Monarchy, whose primary interests lay not with its territories flanking the North Sea, but with the core of the Habsburg dynasty—the Hereditary Lands—in Central Europe. More specifically, Vienna was chronically concerned about managing its security environment, which was traditionally threatened from the southeast by the Ottoman Empire, and increasingly from the northwest by Prussia under Frederick II. Consequently, Austrian ministers were on a perpetual quest to obtain the funds required to keep sufficient Imperial troops in the field and deter neighbours from realizing designs on Habsburg territories.<sup>65</sup> In hardly any of the Imperial domains were such sizeable funds available as in the Austrian Netherlands—as Maria Theresa wrote to Joseph II, the southern Low Countries were the Monarchy's "*only happy state, paying many taxes to which we owe our preponderant position in Europe*".<sup>66</sup> Retaining the wealth of the Southern Netherlands, then, was the

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Serruys, 'The Port and City of Ostend and the Process of State Consolidation in the Southern Netherlands in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Geopolitical Approach', *International Journal of Maritime History* 19:2 (2007) 327-8, 336-7.

<sup>63</sup> Laenen, *Botta-Adorno*, 170-6; Serruys, 'The Port', 342.

<sup>64</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 1760-1770.

<sup>65</sup> Aaron Wess Mitchell, *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton 2018) 64-71, 119-93.

<sup>66</sup> Cited in Walter Davis, *Joseph II: an imperial reformer for the Austrian Netherlands* (The Hague 1974) 114. Throughout the eighteenth century, Vienna indeed eagerly tapped into the resources of the Austrian Netherlands, either fiscally, by way of floating loans, or

primary objective of Imperial officials, and every measure (however big its long term yield) which significantly hurt the treasury was to be discarded. The infrastructure works of the 1750s, for example, were closely monitored by Chancellor Kaunitz, who mainly saw their expenses instead of their advantages.<sup>67</sup> Pursuing ambitious schemes of formal empire such as establishing a chartered company or staking out a territory overseas were likewise off the table, lest they anger powerful neighbours. Botta-Adorno, for all his efforts, did not want to push the reestablishment of the Ostend Company (as some former shareholders wanted), fearing retribution from neighbouring countries and compromising the steady program of development he had initiated.<sup>68</sup> Given the persistent threat of losing the easily-invaded Low Countries in a future conflict, coupled with the dormant scheme to eventually exchange them for a more strategically positioned polity, a sense of opportunism sometimes pervaded the highest echelons of power: Kaunitz even entertained the idea of encouraging wealthy merchants from the Southern Netherlands to settle in the Hereditary Lands.<sup>69</sup> Following the reduced threat of a French invasion after the *renversement des alliances* of the 1750s, the conclusion of the costly Seven Years' War, and the growing revenues of the *Bureau de Régie*—responsible for collecting customs duties—under the competent leadership of Henri Delplancq, this overtly extractive approach gradually diminished over time. Nevertheless, difference in opinion continued between Brussels, primarily focused on developing the national economy, and a fiscally-minded Vienna, which principally considered the interests of the Habsburg Monarchy.<sup>70</sup>

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through financial sleight of hand with the *gastos secretos*. On average, between 1750 and 1788, Coppens calculated that almost 1.4 million guilders were transferred to the Hereditary Lands every year. Georges Bigwood, 'Les origines de la dette belge', *Annales de la Société royale d'archéologie de Bruxelles: mémoires, rapports et documents* 20:1 (1906) 10-38; Herman Coppens, *De financiën van de centrale regering van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden aan het einde van het Spaanse en onder Oostenrijks bewind (ca. 1680-1788)* (Brussels 1992) 311-9, 341, 357.

<sup>67</sup> Philippe Moureaux, *Les préoccupations statistiques du gouvernement des Pays-Bas autrichiens et le dénombrement des industries dressé en 1764* (Brussels 1971) 293-5; Michèle Galand, 'Charles de Lorraine, gouverneur général des Pays-Bas autrichiens', *Etudes sur le XVIIIe Siècle* 20:1 (1993) 112, 126.

<sup>68</sup> Laenen, *Botta-Adorno*, 179.

<sup>69</sup> Galand, 'Charles de Lorraine', 118-9.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, *The Grand Strategy*, 67; Moureaux, *Les préoccupations statistiques*, 357-8.



## Boats instead of Bonds: Creating Financial Incentives for Commerce

Next to developing the country's infrastructure, other cameralist-inspired interventions in the economy had a sizeable effect on commerce. The most important was finance. From the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards, interest rates were declining all over Europe.<sup>71</sup> In the Austrian Netherlands, however, the price of money decreased even faster than elsewhere.<sup>72</sup> By law, interest rates were capped at 6.25 percent at the verge of the eighteenth century, a rate that was reduced to 5 percent in 1752. In practice, however, interest rates were far lower than these official rates: in 1752, for example, they stood at 3.5 percent or 3 percent. This declining trend was partly caused by the natural confrontation of a large supply of capital, which was steadily growing to abundance in the years of peace and stability under Austrian rule, with a demand that had increased more modestly, if at all.<sup>73</sup> A different factor of importance was the policy of the so-called *Jointe des administrations et des affaires des subsides* (which translates roughly as the 'Commission for administrations and subsidies'), a government institution established in an attempt to alleviate the sizeable debts racked up during the preceding decades and centuries by almost every level of government.<sup>74</sup> One way of reducing the costs of public bodies was to cut interest rates (so-called *reducties*) on outstanding bonds. With such measures, Vienna hoped to release funds that could be used for future loans to the Monarchy. Additionally, officials also sought to turn the Low Country provinces into a single capital market (similar to the attempts of creating a single commodity market), which was still rather fractionalized in the eighteenth century.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Sidney Homer and Richard Sylla, *A History of Interest Rates* (Hoboken 2005) 164-77.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Servais, *La rente constituée dans le ban de Herve au XVIIIe siècle* (Antwerp 1982) 125-35.

<sup>73</sup> Servais, *La rente constituée*, 271; Paul Deprez, 'Hypothekaire grondrenten in Vlaanderen gedurende de 18e eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 79:1 (1966) 142-8.

<sup>74</sup> See Piet Lenders, 'De Junta der Besturen en Beden (1764-1787) en haar werking in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden', *Low Countries Historical Review* 92:1 (1977) 17-36, for a comprehensive overview.

<sup>75</sup> Piet Lenders, 'Controversen over de intrestvoet in de achttiende eeuw bij de conversie van de renten in Vlaanderen (1755-1777)', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 55:1 (1977) 1037-68; Yvan Vanden Berghe, 'De Raad van Besturen en Beden saneerde Stadsfinanciën: het voorbeeld Brugge', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge* 107:1-2 (1970) 88-95.

Another economic consequence of these policies, however, was the strong support they provided to agriculture, industry, and commerce through falling interest rates. Lower rates made it easier for business owners to secure funding from the general public, who were increasingly disinclined to invest in low-yielding government bonds. Officials in the *Jointe* and in other levels of government recognized and applauded this economic side-effect.<sup>76</sup> The declining trend in interest rates indeed constituted a problem for the wealthy yet economically inactive inhabitants of the Austrian Netherlands. This demographic lived of the rents annually received from capital that was allocated to traditional, relatively risk-free investments such as government bonds and real estate. Another nuisance for these moneyed men and women was the steadily increasing cost of living in the Austrian Netherlands, especially during the latter half of the century. With inflation rising, rates on newly issued loans declining, and the rates on existing government paper being reduced, many wealthy citizens were increasingly inclined to look elsewhere for profitable investments and keep up their standard of living.

Profit-seeking capital, then, flowed in two directions: the public debt of foreign states and assets such as stocks of trading companies. Concerning the former, as discussed, interest rates were declining all over Western Europe, but this trend set off later or followed a more bumpy course (rates crept up slightly in some countries during the second half of the century) than in the Austrian Netherlands, frequently making foreign bonds an attractive investment. Emerging powers such as Russia which began floating loans on Western European capital markets offered even higher rates, although interest reductions soon became commonplace there, too.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, despite their high risk compared with government debt, subjects of the Austrian Netherlands were increasingly inclined to buy stocks of trading companies. Boats took the place of bonds: Karel Degryse and Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt have shown for Antwerp and Ghent, respectively, how shares of maritime trade companies start showing up in prodigious amounts of inventories during the latter half of the century, and based on available evidence the same was true for Brussels.<sup>78</sup> Next

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<sup>76</sup> Lenders, 'Controversen', 1054-6; Van Goidsenhoven, 'Cazier', 212.

<sup>77</sup> Homer and Sylla, *A History of Interest Rates*, 164-77; Degryse, *De Antwerpse fortuinen*, 424-573.

<sup>78</sup> Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bijdrage tot de studie van de gegoede burgerij*, 131-48; Degryse, *De Antwerpse fortuinen*, 531-60; Tomboy, 'Herzelles', 35-7; SAG, *Family Papers*, 1136

to their high yields, Piet Lenders sought the appeal of such assets into the emergence of a ‘business society’, which appreciated liquidity (in the form of easily transferable assets such as stocks) and came to replace a society that was more focused on assuring the family fortune through long-running, fixed rents.<sup>79</sup> In the past, most attention has gone to investment in foreign trading companies, for example the Swedish East India Company after the demise of the Ostend Company or the numerous commercial initiatives set up by Vienna in its Adriatic harbours. The extent to which Austrian Netherlands firms were able to raise funds has been largely ignored by previous research—as the case of Romberg will show.

“The most perilous port in the World”:  
The Development of Ostend

While the *Jointe des administrations et des affaires des subsides* persisted in its crusade against debt and high interest rates, infrastructure works continued to be ordered by the government. With the completion of the waterworks in the interior of the country, attention now shifted to Ostend. Georg von Starhemberg, who had succeeded Cobenzl as minister plenipotentiary after the latter’s sudden demise in 1770, was less of a hardline mercantilist than his predecessor was, but his administration—especially privy councillor Thomas De Gryssperre—was very dedicated to developing the Austrian Netherlands main commercial seaport.<sup>80</sup> During the 1770s, Ostend received its first lighthouse, the harbours’ docks and basins were redesigned and enlarged, and the town’s piloting corps, tasked with safely guiding vessels into the harbour, was expanded.<sup>81</sup>

Still, in almost every aspect, Ostend was an unlikely focal point of a national trade policy. Although late eighteenth-century Ostend was a far cry

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(Carpentier), Testament of Marie Madeleine Baeteman, widow of Nicolas Carpentier (Brussels, 25 January 1787).

<sup>79</sup> Piet Lenders, ‘Het juridisch statuut van de rentebrieven’, in: Jozef Veremans et al., *Liber Amicorum Prof. Dr. G. Degroote* (Brussels 1980) 73-92.

<sup>80</sup> Galand, ‘Charles de Lorraine’, 154.

<sup>81</sup> Daniël Farasyn, *1769-1794: de 18de eeuwse bloeiperiode van Oostende* (Ostend 1998) 67-88.

from the fishing town of yore, nothing fundamentally had changed to its topography, which was as unadapted to a bustling port life as it ever had been. The Flemish banks still were a challenging marine environment for vessels; difficult to navigate even in fair weather and downright hazardous during storms. The harbour mouth was so narrow and shallow it could only be safely entered during high tide, and was in constant threat of silting up completely.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, the entrance channel was subject to strong and treacherous currents, which overwhelmed many an unexperienced navigator.<sup>83</sup> As one former captain summarized in 1782, Ostend was “*certainly [t]he most perilous [port] in the Channel and maybe even in the whole world*”.<sup>84</sup> In the harbour, during periods of heightened maritime activity, vessels soon needed to be stacked in rows, causing a significant decrease in the efficiency of cargo handling.<sup>85</sup> Lastly, surrounded by low-lying creeks and polders, Ostend was devoid of much room for expansion, and seemed geographically fated to remain a small, windy town, more marsh than metropolis. Or, as one trader put it delicately, the town was “*un...vilain trou*”.<sup>86</sup>

The ability of Ostend to attract merchants and shipping, then, was heavily dependent on the international political climate and the macro-economic policies implemented in Brussels. Although the opportunities for independent action had increased significantly since Aix-la-Chapelle, policymakers were still assured of extensive protests of neighbouring countries if the Austrian Netherlands would prove too ambitious in extending its trade, as such steps would almost inevitably mean reducing the commerce of neighbouring states. In order to make big strides in establishing a proper Southern Netherlands merchant fleet, a window of opportunity would be needed where a sovereign would dare to realize such ambitions at a time when the maritime powers were too occupied elsewhere to obstruct such plans. As a matter of fact, on 19 April

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<sup>82</sup> Roland Baetens, ‘Het uitzicht en de infrastructuur van een kleine Noordzeehaven tijdens het Ancien Régime: het voorbeeld van Oostende’, *Mededelingen van de Marine Academie van België*, 23 (1973-74) 47-62.

<sup>83</sup> Farasyn, *Oostende*, 28.

<sup>84</sup> Rijksarchief Gent (RAG), *Council of Flanders*, 30 868, Mémoire of Stephano de Bissy, “[le] port d’Ostende, qui est le plus périlleux de toutes ceux de la Manche et presque du monde entier” (Bruges, 23 September 1782). I thank Yannis Skalli-Housseini for referring me to this source.

<sup>85</sup> Farasyn, *Oostende*, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Baetens, ‘Het uitzicht’ 47-62; Farasyn, *Oostende*, 131-4. Merchant cited in Herbert Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la révocation de l’Edit de Nantes à la Révolution* (Paris 1970), II, 610.

1775, when 5,500 kilometres away near the town of Lexington a first shot sounded between American colonists and British troops, such a window opened.

“The Emperor takes advantage of it all”:

The Austrian Netherlands and the American War of Independence

*“L’Amérique a Commencée tout / La France entreprend tout / L’Espagne ne fait rien du tout / L’Angleterre se Bat Contre tout / La Hollande payera tout / L’Empereur tire parti de tout”*. Somewhere during the early 1780s, in a moment of idleness between feverishly writing letters to trading partners, the merchant Laurent Janssens jotted down a summary of the extraordinary political situation he found himself in.<sup>87</sup> *“Angleterre se Bat Contre tout”* comprised both the War of American Independence (1775-83) and the Fourth Anglo Dutch War (1780-1784), which initially pitted Great Britain against its rebellious American colonies, but soon drew in the Bourbon monarchies of France and Spain—eager to support the enemy of their enemy—and the Dutch Republic. The 67-kilometer-long seaboard of the Austrian Netherlands, with its two major harbours Ostend and Nieuwpoort, became the only Western European site of shipping not involved in the hostilities. Joseph II, who had acceded to the throne after the demise of Maria Theresa in 1780, soon proved ready to exploit the political situation in order to economically improve his North Sea possessions—hence Janssens’ line *“L’Empereur tire parti de tout”*: the Emperor takes advantage of it all.

Joseph II had been made fully aware of the maritime possibilities of the Austrian Netherlands as early as 1777, when Joseph Jean François, count de Ferraris, presented him his renowned map of the region. A later edition of the map, designed for the trade market (the so-called *Carte marchande*), featured

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<sup>87</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/10 (Ghent, s.d.). For the sake of brevity, I singled out the belligerent parties. Janssens’ complete summary (either devised or copied) goes as follows: *“L’Amérique a Commencée tout / La France entreprend tout / L’Espagne ne fait rien du tout / L’Angleterre se Bat Contre tout / L’Empereur tire parti de tout / La Russie Balance tout / Le Danemarck le garde tout / La Suède ne veut rien du tout / Le Roy de Prusse guide tout / Le Portugal s’écarte de tout / La Turquie admire tout / La Hollande payera tout / Le Pape Craint tout / Si Dieu n’a pitié de tout / Le Diable emportera Le tout”*.

a richly adorned plate commemorating this moment (Figure 2.2). In this illustration, Ferraris employed the same allegorical trope found in Van Reijsschoot's Ghent painting, prominently depicting the gods Neptune, symbolizing the sea, and Mercure, embodying trade. They were accompanied by several *putti* managing recently unloaded goods in a port, while a large ocean-going vessel loomed in the background. As Karen De Coene persuasively argues, by including this particular image, Ferraris did not aim to reflect the realities of Imperial commerce but rather sought to remind the Emperor of the opportunities that control of the Southern Low Countries could offer his realm—and, conversely, to dissuade him from exchanging the region for another polity.<sup>88</sup> More subtly, it hinted at the historical and symbolic importance of the Atlantic ocean for the Habsburg dynasty; especially for Charles VI, Joseph's grandfather, who after his loss of the Spanish throne in 1713 had continued to wade in fantasies of wielding power over an Atlantic empire for the remainder of his life.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Karen De Coene, *Carte blanche. De diplomatie van Ferraris in een Europa in omwenteling* (Tielt 2024) 144-7.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Maria Theresa. The Habsburg Empress in Her Time* (Princeton 2021) 24; Singerton, 'An Austrian Atlantic', 5-6.



FIGURE 2.2 The Count of Ferraris offers his map of the Austrian Netherlands to Emperor Joseph II on 10 December 1777. *Source:* Charles Emmanuel Patas and Charles Eisen, 1777, KBR.

Ferraris' symbolic plea seemingly yielded result. From his first steps on the political stage as a sole ruler, Joseph showed the proclivity to take bold steps in trying to improve the Imperial domains, and, contrary to his mother, had little time for the concerns and sensibilities of domestic and foreign opposition groups.<sup>90</sup> The domain of economic and maritime policy turned out to be no exception. Joseph's primary obsession was the reopening of the Scheldt River and the revival of Antwerp's commerce, efforts that brought the Emperor on the brink of a full-scale war with the Dutch Republic in 1784.<sup>91</sup> In another attempt to restore Austrian Netherlands use of the Scheldt, the government authorised the establishment of a lazaretto in the Zwin area aiming to attract English and Dutch trade with the Levant to a Flemish harbour, but yet again, the plan came to nothing.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Davis, *Joseph II*, 59-113, 134-62; Stollberg-Rilinger, *Maria Theresa*, Chapter 10.

<sup>91</sup> Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 346-7; Derek Beales, *Joseph II: Against the World, 1780-1790* (Cambridge 2009) 374-6, 390-3.

<sup>92</sup> Stan Pannier, 'From Crisis Management to a Mediterranean Model? Maritime Quarantine in the Austrian Netherlands, 1720-1795', *Low Countries Historical Review* 138:2 (2023) 51-5.

Joseph achieved greater success with his policies targeting the North Sea ports of the Southern Netherlands. In 1781, the Emperor had embarked on a tour of his Low Country possessions. He was particularly interested in the port of Ostend, the locus of the refurbished trade policy that had been pursued during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Famously refusing gifts from the Estates of Flanders and ordering them to use these funds on enhanced canal and port facilities instead, Joseph was eager to develop the Austrian Netherlands major sea port.<sup>93</sup> He even ordered to dismantle Ostend's century-old fortifications, in order to make room for commerce.<sup>94</sup> Room was needed indeed: in 1780, shortly before her passing, Maria Theresa had decided to join the League of Armed Neutrality, an alliance of neutral states established by Russia's Catherine II and which also included the Nordic Crowns, Prussia and Portugal. The principal aim of the League was to safeguard its members' commerce, but of course all states involved recognized that neutrality did not only imply a protection from commercial downturn. As historians of neutrality like Eric Schnakenbourg have stressed, the adoption of neutrality had for centuries proven to be a catalyst for commercial growth and an instrument to access new markets; sometimes in the long run, but at the very least in the short run while the conflict on the high seas raged.<sup>95</sup>

In order to fuel the commercial fervour even more, voices started being raised in the Austrian Netherlands to declare Ostend a free port. A free port or *porto franco* was an instrument of political economy that had been adopted several times in Europe during the preceding centuries. This famously happened in the Tuscan town of Livorno, a relatively small port belonging to a small polity without a commercial empire of its own, but conveniently located astride important trade routes. By removing import and export duties, the Tuscan authorities hoped to attract established merchants who would be able to connect the port to the global economy.<sup>96</sup> Charles VI had been inspired by

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<sup>93</sup> Hervé Hasquin, 'Nijverheid in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1650-1795', in: D.P. Blok ed., *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden 8* (Haarlem 1979) 124-59.

<sup>94</sup> Farasyn, *Oostende*, 137-8.

<sup>95</sup> Eric Schnakenbourg, *Entre la guerre et la paix: neutralité et relations internationales, 17e-18e siècles* (Rennes 2013); Leos Müller, *Neutrality in World History* (New York 2019) 59-65; Victor Wilson, 'Enclaves of Exception: Reaping the Advantages of Colonialism Through Free Trade in the Scandinavian Caribbean, 1672-1815', *Global Intellectual History* 8:6 (2023) 735-6.

<sup>96</sup> Koen Stapelbroek and Corey Tazzara, 'The Global History of the Free Port', *Global Intellectual History* 8:6 (2023) 672.



Livorno's example and proclaimed Trieste a free port in the early eighteenth century.<sup>97</sup> The resemblance of the Italian-Istrian situation with that of Ostend was not lost on policymakers in the Southern Netherlands, and soon after the beginning of hostilities they began lodging proposals in Vienna to argue their case for a free port.<sup>98</sup> In March 1781, Patrice-François de Nény, director of the Privy Council, penned a lengthy treatise in which he truthfully mentioned the losses for the Imperial Treasury, but claimed that the economic advantages would dwarf the costs that arose from a free port in the Austrian Netherlands. Additionally, Nény, a lawyer, acknowledged that neighbouring countries could potentially oppose a free port on their doorstep, especially the Dutch Republic and France (where Dunkirk, merely 50 kilometres down the coast, also enjoyed free port status) but that no existing treaties could serve as a legal base for such complaints.<sup>99</sup> In the unlikely case that Joseph had any reservations arising from the sensitivities of these maritime neighbours, he decided to ignore them. Immersed in festivities, the Emperor declared Ostend a free port on 11 June 1781.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Daniele Andreozzi, 'From the Black Sea to the Americas. The trading companies of Trieste and the global commercial network (18<sup>th</sup> century)', in: Daniele Andreozzi ed., *Mediterranean Doubts. Trading Companies, Conflicts and Strategies in the Global Spaces XV-XIX* (Palermo 2014) 65-87; Klemens Kaps, 'A Gateway to the Spanish Atlantic? The Habsburg Port City of Trieste as Intermediary in Commodity Flows between the Habsburg Monarchy and Spain in the Eighteenth Century', in: Jutta Wimpler and Klaus Weber, *Globalized Peripheries. Central Europe and the Atlantic World, 1680-1860* (Woodbridge 2020) 117-32.

<sup>98</sup> Farasyn, *Oostende*, 99-100.

<sup>99</sup> ARA, *Geheime Raad*, 1154/A, Nény, *Mémoire sur les Ports de Flandre, et sur le question s'il convient de declarer Ostende Port Franc* (Brussels, 22 March 1781); Jan Parmentier, *De maritieme handel en visserij in Oostende tijdens de achttiende eeuw: een prosopografische analyse van de internationale Oostendse handelswereld, 1700-1794* (Ghent 2001), IV, 64-5.

<sup>100</sup> Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 347-52.



FIGURE 2.3 Free port Ostend, c. 1781.

Source: G. Canali, Stadsarchief Oostende PT/Goo45.

The results went beyond every expectation and left many observers baffled. “*The Trade of the Town of Ostend...increases daily with a rapidity which almost exceeds belief*”, wrote Alleyne Fitz-Herbert, the British envoy to Brussels.<sup>101</sup> In the space of a couple of years, shipping traffic rose from about 500 arrivals to about 2,000 in 1782.<sup>102</sup> Partly, the boom far surpassed the level of shipping that Ostend could possibly handle, let alone sustain. Vessels had to queue outside the harbour for days (on one occasion, local fishermen started hurling rocks at a British man-of-war in order to bypass the ship<sup>103</sup>) and crashes between ships became common.<sup>104</sup> One Bremen insurer warned his business partner against sending vessels to Ostend without insurance, as “they are sailing

<sup>101</sup> TNA, *Foreign Office*, 1, Fitz-Herbert to the Foreign Office (Brussels, 31 January 1781).

<sup>102</sup> Veerle Van Gucht, *De trans-Atlantische handel vanuit Oostende, van Amerikaanse tot Franse revolutie (1775-1790): een kwantitatieve benadering* (Ghent 2008) 65-6, 74.

<sup>103</sup> TNA, *Foreign Office*, 1, Fitz-Herbert to the Secretary of State (Brussels, 4 December 1781). In October 1781, HMS *Alert*, seeking shelter in Ostend, had been waiting outside the harbour for more than a day when she was harassed by local fishermen also wishing to enter the harbour; the latter threw rocks, bricks, and hooks to the naval vessel, wounding her captain and, insultingly, taking down her flag.

<sup>104</sup> UAG, *Fonds 3385*, 1080a. See also the *États de Brabant*, supra, and Farasyn, *Oostende*, 105.

each other into the Ground over there”.<sup>105</sup> Turnover times increased dramatically, to the extent that, over time, many merchants moved their business to the more tranquil docks of Bruges. One witness reported that the unloading of cargoes generally suffered a delay of eight to fourteen days.<sup>106</sup> The Ostend city council, concerned about the organisation of maritime quarantine in the town, warned that the port was so full with vessels it took captains up to four days to reach the quarantine station in the Gouweloze Creek, barely a mile further down the harbour.<sup>107</sup> Laurent Janssens, a Ghent merchant, also opened a branch of his firm in Bruges, saying that “*3/4 of the Captains refuse to go to Ostend, because in Bruges their Ships are better protected, the unloading goes more rapidly, The costs are lower and the cargoes are better stored than in Ostend*”.<sup>108</sup> Ostend’s population of maritime workers, despite an extraordinary influx of domestic and foreign mariners, was unable to meet the demand of shipowners, and many mariners offering their labour had never seen the sea before. Soon merchants wishing to outfit a vessel faced doubled or even tripled wages for seasoned sailors, high desertion rates, and long spells of stalking the town’s streets and inns to gather a crew.<sup>109</sup>

Yet despite all these inconveniences, the early 1780s were an exceptionally prosperous period for the maritime trade of Ostend and the Austrian Netherlands. In particular, the Flemish seaboard became a site of extensive Habsburg engagement with the Atlantic world during those years as many hundreds of heavy, ocean-going vessels left for a destination in North America or the Caribbean region, and just as many returned from there.<sup>110</sup> This involvement took the form of material encounters, indirect participation through the masking of foreign vessels, direct participation in overseas

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<sup>105</sup> RAG, *Schenking d’Hoop, supplement*, 30, Bleij to De Loose (Bremen, 12 April 1782) “*het eene zeylt het andere in de Grond*”.

<sup>106</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 26 June 1780. Romberg, the merchant who published these claims, was famously unhappy with the lack of government initiatives to prolong Ostend’s prosperity beyond the war years, so his claim, ostentatiously published in a newspaper, was undoubtedly exaggerated to press Brussels to act.

<sup>107</sup> ARA, *Geheime Raad*, 1230/B, Letter from the Ostend city council (Ostend, 31 January 1782). See also Pannier, ‘Maritime Quarantine’, 53-4.

<sup>108</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/18, s.n., s.d.

<sup>109</sup> Stan Pannier, ‘Reaping the Returns of a Runaway Economy: Seamen’s Wages in the Ostend Merchant Marine, 1775-1785’, forthcoming.

<sup>110</sup> Veerle Van Gucht, *De trans-Atlantische handel vanuit Oostende, van Amerikaanse tot Franse revolutie (1775-1790): een kwantitatieve benadering* (Ghent 2008) 65-6, 74.

ventures, proposing fantastical schemes of formal empire at Court, or partaking in actually realized expeditions organized by Vienna.

*Sugar, Tortoiseshells, and Talking Parrots:  
Material Encounters with the Atlantic*

The years of the American War of Independence brought large-scale material encounters with the Atlantic world to the populace of the Austrian Netherlands. This was especially evident with plantation crops like sugar, coffee, cacao, and cotton. As in much of Europe, people in the Austrian Netherlands increasingly embraced these slavery-based commodities, consuming them in ever larger quantities both at home and in specialized establishments such as coffee houses.<sup>111</sup> Not only had the country's palates become increasingly intertwined with the Atlantic plantation complex during the eighteenth century, its manufactures had as well. During the latter half of the century, the sugar sector in the Austrian Netherlands flourished, spurred by the Cobenzl administration's mercantilist-inspired policies, including tariff exemptions and discounts. As a result, sugar refineries emerged across the region, and annual imports of unrefined sugar increased year on year.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, the fledgling cotton industry in the Austrian Netherlands received favourable attention from Brussels and—although still dwarfed by the production of traditional fabrics such as linen—expanded steadily during the second half of the century.<sup>113</sup>

Just as the Ostend Company had brought about a massive import of tea into the Southern Netherlands half a century earlier, the boom period of the 1780s witnessed high levels of overseas imports.<sup>114</sup> As Ann Coenen calculated from the country's customs accounts, colonial goods typically accounted for about 35 percent of the total value of imported commodities in the Austrian

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<sup>111</sup> Anne McCants, 'Exotic Goods, Popular Consumption, and the Standard of Living: Thinking about Globalization in the Early Modern World', *Journal of World History* 18:4 (2007) 433-62; Bruno Blondé and Wouter Ryckbosch, 'Think Local, act Global? Re-assessing hot drinks in the urban consumer culture of the 18th-century southern Low Countries' (2009).

<sup>112</sup> Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 151-7.

<sup>113</sup> Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 116-22.

<sup>114</sup> Jan Parmentier, *Tea time in Flanders: The maritime trade between the Southern Netherlands and China in the 18th century* (Ghent 1996) 121-32.

Netherlands, but during this period, this share rose to 45 percent.<sup>115</sup> Spices, dyestuffs, coffee, and refined sugar especially seem to have reached a peak during these years.<sup>116</sup> As we will see in Chapter 8, Austrian Netherlands consumers would soon be confronted with the production side of these plantation crops, as enslaved Africans arrived on Ostend's docks.



FIGURE 2.4 An aristocratic family in Bruges enjoys coffee or tea with sugar, perhaps recently arrived in Ostend, c. 1778. *Source:* Jan Anton Garemijn, Gruuthusemuseum (Bruges).

The operations of the Ostend Company had also led to a massive import of Asian commodities, such as porcelain—which served as bulky ballast for tea shipments—and painted fans into the country, catering to the contemporary European fascination with *chinoiseries*.<sup>117</sup> During the 1780s, the Austrian Netherlands elites' attention to exotic commodities increasingly turned west. To be sure, the Americas had been a source of fascination for centuries among

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<sup>115</sup> Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 144. Coenen includes as colonial commodities rice, candy sugar, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, saffron, pepper, indigo, cochineal, gallnuts, madder, chocolate, tea, coffee, white powdered sugar, white cotton, printed cotton, siamoises, and crude silk.

<sup>116</sup> Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 148-9, 150.

<sup>117</sup> Parmentier, *Tea time*, 121-32.

the inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands.<sup>118</sup> But the sudden connections of Ostend with this part of the world gave affluent citizens the opportunity to draw in the Atlantic region into their home—following broader trends in the Habsburg Empire—and showcase their wealth and worldliness to their peers.<sup>119</sup> Soon, curiosity cabinets and urban dwellings filled with Atlantic artifacts such as tortoiseshells or exotic skins.<sup>120</sup> Others specifically sought to procure tropical fauna and flora. “*I have no doubt that your two parrots will by now have arrived [in your city]*”, wrote one Ostend merchant to a partner in Antwerp, “*they can talk really well, but are impossible to understand because they speak Spanish*”.<sup>121</sup> While Ostend’s Atlantic boom was short-lived, it left a lasting and living legacy in homes across the country.

*“[T]he Merchants of this Country [are] treading very fast in the steps of their Neighbours the Dutch”: Traders in Neutrality*

In a more commercial way of partaking in Europe’s colonial project, merchants and other well-connected citizens in the Southern Low Countries extensively engaged in the ‘masking’ of foreign trade ventures. On 14 June 1781, for instance, the Imperial vessel *Minerva* found herself near the Isle of Wight when a British sail appeared on the horizon. The privateer, also called the *Minerva*, bore down on the vessel and forced her to stop. The privateer commander, Fairfax Beddington, deemed the *Minerva* (that is, the Imperial *Minerva*) a legitimate prize: the vessel was bound from Rouen to Bayonne, and, according to Beddington, captain Jean Baptiste Meriel was clearly a Frenchman as he spoke French. Meriel, however, had no time for Beddington’s reasoning, and fiercely retorted that he was “*certainly Born in France, but that he was Actually a Subject of his Emperor and...Ready to suffer Death for his Emperor*”. Beddington then tried to bribe the *Minerva*’s mate into admitting that Meriel

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<sup>118</sup> See for example the essays in Verberckmoes, ed., *Vreemden vertoond*.

<sup>119</sup> Rupnow and Singerton, ‘Habsburg colonial redux’, 11; Singerton, ‘An Austrian Atlantic’, 10-1.

<sup>120</sup> See for example UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 9 September 1782, advertisement of a sale by broker Bernard Pollet.

<sup>121</sup> PMA, 1452, De Gruyter to Moretus (Ostend, 1 October 1782), “*Verders twijffele niet ofte Uld twee papegaeijen syn Uld door den beijlandre Ph[illipus] Asseman seer wel behandight, also Reets van over 10 Daghén vertrocken is, sy klappen seer wel maert t’is Spaens, dus dat hun niet verstaen*”.

was a Frenchman by offering him 20 guineas, but to no avail: “[even] if he...would Give...two hundred Guineas [I] could only Speak the Truth, and that [my] Captain was a Burgher of Ostend and that he lived there”. Frustrated, and in order to express his contempt and disbelief about the *Minerva*’s allegiance, Beddington struck the Imperial flag and ran it up again, this time upside down. Meriel was tied up and his ship taken to Plymouth.<sup>122</sup>

Whatever his methods, Beddington had a point. Meriel had only become an Imperial subject in October of the previous year, suggesting that his recent citizenship was more inspired by opportunism than, as he himself claimed, an act of heartfelt loyalty towards the Habsburg Monarchy.<sup>123</sup> Meriel’s *Minerva* was exemplary of the large-scale use (and abuse) of the Imperial flag by European merchant fleets during the American War of Independence. At the outset of the war, as in previous conflicts, many French, British, and American shipowners began sailing under neutral Dutch colours. However, when Britain declared war on the Dutch Republic in 1780, many of these vessels were at risk of being preyed upon by British privateers, who, as in every conflict, posed a significant threat on the high seas. Increasingly, therefore, the merchant fleets of the belligerent nations adopted the flag of remaining neutral nations—Denmark, Prussia, the Hanseatic towns, but most importantly, the Holy Roman Empire. Although the Habsburg Monarchy had claimed neutrality during the earlier Seven Years’ War, the conflicts of the late 1770s and early 1780s were the first in which the Imperial flag was respected by the belligerent nations.<sup>124</sup> By 1782, large parts of the Dutch mercantile fleet had run up the Imperial ensign, the flag of the Austrian Netherlands, or Ostend’s red-and-yellow.<sup>125</sup> Soon, fleets

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<sup>122</sup> TNA, HCA32/402/6, *Minerva*, Testimony of Jean Baptiste Meriel (Plymouth, 23 June 1781).

<sup>123</sup> TNA, HCA32/402/6, *Minerva*, Examination of Jean Baptiste Meriel (Plymouth, 20 June 1781).

<sup>124</sup> Schnakenbourg, *Entre la guerre et la paix*, Chapter 2. The Austrian Netherlands’ neutrality during the Seven Years’ War (1756-63) was compromised when French troops took up garrison in Nieuwpoort and Ostend in July 1757. Although the Imperial government claimed these were only for defensive purposes, Britain thenceforward considered the ports of Flanders as enemy bases. See Jonathan Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Years’ War* (Lincoln 2005) 1-2, and Franz Szabo, *The Seven Years War in Europe, 1756-1763* (London 2007) 12.

<sup>125</sup> E.S. van Eyck van Heslinga ‘De vlag dekt de lading. De Nederlandse koopvaardij in de Vierde Engelse oorlog’, *Tijdschrift voor Zeegeschiedenis* 1:2 (1982) 102-13. This was especially the case in harbours close to the Southern Netherlands: in the Holland port of Hellevoetsluis, 80 percent of shipping traffic flew Imperial colours, while this number grew to 90 percent in the ports of Zeeland. See also Jan Parmentier, ‘Profit and Neutrality: The Case of Ostend, 1781-1783’, in: David Starkey, E.S. van Eyck van Heslinga and J.A.

from other countries followed suit, and a massive neutral and Imperial carrying trade emerged on the world's oceans.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Austrian Netherlands merchants not only profited from the use of their flag in European seas, but also in the more distant waters of the Caribbean as European empires—unable to maintain ties with the metropolis—lowered mercantilist barriers and allowed neutral ships to enter colonial harbours.<sup>127</sup> In August 1781, the British envoy to Brussels already noted that “*the Merchants of this Country [are] treading very fast in the steps of their Neighbours the Dutch...in supplying the French West-India-Islands with provisions and in bringing home their produce*”.<sup>128</sup>

The right to fly a neutral ensign was awarded through the possession of neutral ship's papers and the naturalisation of the captain as a citizen of the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>129</sup> The procedure to obtain such documents was fairly easy. The ownership of the foreign ship was bestowed on an Imperial subject through a fictitious sale, validated by a local notary public. The new 'owner' of the ship received a commission for his services and for the effort of claiming the ship and cargo in case it would be captured. Then, captains became *burgher* of an Austrian Netherlands town simply by requesting citizenship and paying a fee to the city council to authorise the necessary identity documents and ship's papers. Local governments, sometimes as far removed from the sea as Vilvoorde, were mainly interested in pocketing these sums, and exerted minimal control over whom they distributed passports to; in fact, many towns did not even demand to see the requesting party in person.<sup>130</sup> Although this extensive 'Ostendizing'<sup>131</sup> of vessels led to some 'flag inflation' and harassment from privateers—like Beddington—the number of ships which were actually

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de Moor eds., *Pirates and Privateers. New Perspectives on the War on Trade in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Exeter 1997) 217.

<sup>126</sup> Famously prompting Benjamin Franklin to cry out that, should the practice continue to spread, “[T]hey will find none but Flemish ships upon the Ocean”, see ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2189, Franklin to Mercy-Argenteau (Passy, 18 January 1782).

<sup>127</sup> Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: L'évolution du régime de «l'Exclusif» de 1763 à 1789* (Paris 1972) 452-91. For Spain, see Chapter 4.

<sup>128</sup> TNA, FO, 2, Alleyne Fitz-Herbert to the Foreign Office (Brussels, 3 August 1781).

<sup>129</sup> Schnakenbourg, *Entre la guerre et la paix*, Chapter 2.

<sup>130</sup> Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial', 45-7; Jan Parmentier, 'Profit and Neutrality', 206-26.

<sup>131</sup> Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 123, translation of *Ostendisieren*, a verb which came in vogue during Ostend's boom years.



captured and had to be reclaimed by locals was a minority, estimated by Parmentier at 2 to 4 percent.<sup>132</sup>

Everaert and Parmentier have shown how many Imperial subjects for several years ran a profitable business in neutralizing foreign vessels.<sup>133</sup> This 'masking' service has sometimes been presented as exemplary of the passive nature of Austrian Netherlands commerce during the eighteenth century; Flemish merchants satisfying themselves with their neutrality commission but leaving the brunt of the profits to foreigners.<sup>134</sup> Alternatively, as Leos Müller has argued for the Swedish case, neutral ship's papers and a neutral flag were an essential way to protect shipping during wartime, just like convoying, and did not differ much from ensuring a ship or cargo.<sup>135</sup> Cast in this way, the sale of ship's papers to foreign merchants was just like any other financial service, and presented an easy inroads for traditional outsiders into the Atlantic system without having to meet the notoriously large requirements in expertise and capital. Thanks to Everaert's study, we have a thorough overview of the sizeable extent to which Imperial merchant houses and, through their leniency, local levels of governments facilitated the shipping lanes between Europe and the Americas and enabled the functioning of the plantation complex during the American War of Independence. In Chapter 3, however, I will show how Imperial subjects earned from facilitating another crucial constituent sector of the Atlantic system, and effected a significant 'Belgian' intervention in the slave trade.

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<sup>132</sup> John Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial aux Indes occidentales. Contrebande de guerre et trafic neutre depuis les ports Flamands (1778-1785)', *Bijdragen tot de internationale maritieme geschiedenis* 1:1 (1988) 57. See also UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 4 February 1779, 11 March 1779, 10 June 1779, 4 October 1779 and ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2150/15. For Parmentier's estimate, see 'Profit and neutrality', 220.

<sup>133</sup> Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial', 45-7; Jan Parmentier, 'Profit and Neutrality', 216-20.

<sup>134</sup> Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 352-3.

<sup>135</sup> Leos Müller, *Consuls, corsairs, and commerce: the Swedish Consular Service and long-distance shipping, 1720-1815* (Uppsala 2004) 164-6.

*Atlantic Dividends and American Dreams:  
Direct Participation in Transoceanic Trade*

In another rebuttal of the argument for mercantile passivity, numerous studies have revealed a more extensive participation in the Atlantic economy by Imperial subjects than simply masking foreign ventures. Everaert, again, has shown how many Austrian Netherlands merchants bought a stake in foreign-owned expeditions bound for America or the Caribbean, on top of the commission rate they charged for furnishing the ship with a neutral passport. Other merchants organized their own transoceanic voyages.<sup>136</sup> The decision to invest in such commerce was driven by the prevailing freight rates, which had risen so high that shipowners could recoup the cost of their vessels after just a few voyages.<sup>137</sup> This peak in freight rates dovetailed with the decade-long efforts by the *Jointe* to bring down interest rates in the country. Many opulent citizens, speculating they could earn more in shipping than by cashing the 3 percent yield on government paper, decided to put their money to use in trans-Atlantic commerce. In fact, so much domestic capital flowed into commerce that interest rates effectively rose again to over 4 percent.<sup>138</sup> Opportunities for material gain, moreover, did not only beckon for wealthy citizens: local mariners who enlisted on trans-oceanic commercial ventures, for instance, could earn almost a quarter more than when contracting for European voyages.<sup>139</sup>

Another important focus of commercial interest during the 1780s lay with the United States. As Singerton has shown, Habsburg ministers identified sizeable opportunities for trade with the new republic across the Atlantic and extensively studied its potential as a durable commercial partner. In order to pursue these ends, the Court sought to establish a permanent representative of the Monarchy in the United States, with the six-year tenure of Baron Frederick Eugene de Beelen-Bertholf, a native of the Austrian Netherlands, serving as its most notable example.<sup>140</sup> In the private sector, Imperial merchants, especially those from the Austrian Netherlands, were keen to access American markets. Recently relocated Antwerp merchants such as Ignaz Verpoorten and François

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<sup>136</sup> Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial', 54-9; Parmentier, 'Profit and neutrality', 215.

<sup>137</sup> Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial', 59; Parmentier, 'Profit and neutrality', 223.

<sup>138</sup> Van Goidsenhoven, 'Cazier', 211-2.

<sup>139</sup> Pannier, 'Reaping the Returns', forthcoming. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>140</sup> Singerton, *The American Revolution*, Chapter 8.

Baraux led the way in setting up trade with the United States from Trieste, while Benjamin Franklin received similar petitions from Flemish merchants established in the Austrian Netherlands proper.<sup>141</sup> Singerton noted how firms such as Herries, Keith & Co, Liebaert, Baes, Derdeyn & Co or De Heyder, Veydt & Co—especially in the years following the war—struck a partnership with American traders.<sup>142</sup> My research yielded two additional Austrian Netherlands forays into American markets: Francis Willems and Rochus Vercnocke, both Ostend traders who dispatched their sons overseas in order to set up trading posts in Baltimore (Maryland) and Fredericksburg (Virginia).<sup>143</sup> Vercnocke’s surviving letters attest of how the efforts to establish a foothold in this potentially lucrative new region sparked intense competition among merchants from the Southern Netherlands operating overseas. “*I have seen Fink here, who has run away from Ostend and has gone to live in Philadelphia*”, the young man aired his envy in a letter to his parents, “*With his gilded jacket and cloak he is pretending to be the most important merchant of Ostend.*”<sup>144</sup>

Yet the opportunities abounding in the United States also appealed to many people outside the country’s mercantile classes. In 1779, for instance, J.J. Brown, an Englishman, enlisted Charles De Brabander, Thomas Vilain, and other young men in Ostend to join him in America as a servant by promising them a large plot of land and the ability to quickly earn a fortune—they could even bring their girlfriends. In the end, the men were dissuaded from following up on the contract as more experienced mariners told them Brown was likely trying to press them in the Navy. Yet the eagerness of these young men to migrate to a place they barely knew is exemplary of how the ‘American dream’ of material opportunities, unhindered freedom and a fresh start put a spell on

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<sup>141</sup> Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 60-1, 124-5, 137-8.

<sup>142</sup> Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 148-56.

<sup>143</sup> ARA, *Geheime Raad*, 1230/B, François Jacques Vercnocke to Rochus Vercnocke (Baltimore, 13 October 1783); Joannes Willems to Francis Willems (Baltimore, 14 October 1783). See also RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 121/566, 569, 613, 614, 615.

<sup>144</sup> ARA, *Geheime Raad*, 1230/B, Vercnocke to parents (Baltimore, 15 October 1783), “*K hebbe alhier Fink Gezien die van Oostende was wegghelopen en hy gaet Woonen tot Philadelphia, hij geeft hem alhier uyt met Syn vergulde Kasak & mantel voor den eersten Koopman van Oostende*”.

many people in the Southern Netherlands.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, citizens of Kortrijk, Ghent, and Brussels were keen to migrate to the nascent sovereign state.<sup>146</sup>

The circum-Caribbean region and the United States were undoubtedly the areas of commercial activity that garnered the greatest interest from Austrian Netherlands subjects. However, during the 1780s, Ostend also witnessed the largest direct commercial engagement with West and Central Africa emanating from the Southern Netherlands before the modern era, to which we will turn in the coming chapters.

### *Gathering Knowledge, Claiming Territories:*

#### *The Austrian Netherlands and (Thwarted) Paths to Imperial Expansion*

The 1780s also marked a period when Vienna launched several expeditions to acquire knowledge, artifacts, and territories in the Atlantic region, or was petitioned by private individuals to undertake such efforts on behalf of the Habsburg Monarchy. Again, the Austrian Netherlands played a pivotal role in coordinating, enabling, and executing these schemes. In April 1783, for example, the Emperor dispatched a team of botanists, gardeners, and painters led by Frans Joseph Märter to the Americas. Their widely proclaimed goal was to gather plant and animal specimens for the Imperial gardens and acquire scientific knowledge, although in the background a quest for lucrative economic intelligence and markets for Habsburg produce was certainly present—after all, Märter was a professor in *economic* botany.<sup>147</sup> Two years later, in a similar effort, Joseph II sent Franz Boos and Georg Scholl to the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and Réunion in order to collect plants and animals for the Imperial gardens.<sup>148</sup> As discrete government documents reveal, Brussels ministers facilitated and financed both expeditions in numerous ways. Märter's team received over 20,000 guilders for funding its journey, while Boos received a

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<sup>145</sup> ARA, *Geheime Raad*, 1156/A, Report of Thomas de Reus (Brussels, 10 February 1779).

<sup>146</sup> Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 218. See also Piet Lenders, *Gent, een stad tussen traditie en Verlichting (1750-1787)* (Kortrijk 1990) 415-7.

<sup>147</sup> Morrison, 'Open Competition in Botany', 107-19, especially 110-1; Heather Morrison, "'They hear you tell of such things as if they were from America": Representations of the Newly Independent United States in an Austrian Botanist's Travelogue', *Austrian History Yearbook* 48:1 (2017) 74-90.

<sup>148</sup> L. Cornelis Rookmaker, *The Zoological Exploration of Southern Africa 1650-1790* (Rotterdam 1989) 38-9.

grant of 10,000 guilders to realize his botanic mission to South and East Africa.<sup>149</sup> Brussels also contributed support toward the conclusion of both expeditions. The government allocated 3,000 guilders to Franz Bredemeyer, Märter's gardener, for transporting his group's natural history paintings to Vienna.<sup>150</sup> Additionally, the government spent a lavish 6,000 guilders to get a collection of birds and a live zebra to the Imperial *menagerie* at Schönbrunn.<sup>151</sup> Lastly, in 1787, Austrian Netherlands ministers sent a Brussels merchant called Grosjean to Jamaica in order to fetch the specimens collected by Märter destined for the Emperor.<sup>152</sup>

In addition to establishing an Atlantic presence in Vienna through various artifacts, fauna, and flora extracted from overseas regions, the 1780s also witnessed various plans and designs for establishing a formal Habsburg presence in the Atlantic. Some of these were floated by the Monarchy's subjects or by foreign petitioners, while others were the result of designs coming straight from Vienna. Beginning with the former bottom-up channel, the start of hostilities in Europe had initiated a cascade of petitions of such nature, each exceeding the other in wildness. One group of leading merchants proposed the purchase of Tobago, while Charles de Proli advocated the same for Cat Island, a purportedly inhabited islet in the Bahamas. Others still argued the staking out of a territory in the Essequibo region, or acquiring an island in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>153</sup> Although Vienna's and Brussels' political bodies did not offer an entirely unsympathetic ear to these proposals, they were all eventually discarded due to the expected backlash from established colonial powers and the lack of a navy capable of preserving an overseas territory.

While the above petitions are well-documented in current historiography, the fact that some petitioners looked south instead of west is not. In 1777, a

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<sup>149</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 926. See orders of 28 October 1784, 5 February 1785, and 27 June 1785 for Märter. See orders of 17 December 1785, 19 December 1785, 10 May 1786, 3 October 1786, and 10 March 1787 for Boos.

<sup>150</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 926, order of 31 October 1784.

<sup>151</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 926, 10 October 1786 and 30 October 1786.

<sup>152</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 926, order of 13 March 1787. I thank Heather Morrison for helping me identify Grosjean.

<sup>153</sup> Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial', 61; ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 512, Proli to the Maritime Trade Committee (Antwerp, 7 February 1783).

French naval officer named Saint-Lambert advocated for establishing a venture in West Africa focused on tuna and sardine fishing, with the intent to export the salted catch to Europe. He also proposed harvesting certain shells that purportedly could produce the same colour as cochineal at a fraction of the cost. The massive profits that were bound to ensue from this project would then enable the government to build a navy of “100 men-of-war or more, of 60 to 80 cannons”. As a base of operations the Frenchman proposed two unspecified islands “unknown to all nations, but so abundantly provided with wood and other necessary resources that it seems as though Providence placed them for the execution of this project”.<sup>154</sup> The Finance Council—although its members did take the effort to look up the African regions mentioned by Saint-Lambert in Savary’s *Dictionnaire de commerce*—thought the project too vague and too fanciful to warrant further consideration. However, the French officer remained steadfast in his conviction, declaring that he would take his plan all the way to Vienna if necessary.<sup>155</sup> It is possible he did just that, as echoes of his proposal can be found in the later expedition of Jan Baptist Vervier.

Jan Baptist Vervier (1750–1817) was a young doctor living in Ghent, who had studied in Leuven and had served the Imperial troops during the War of the Bavarian Succession (1778-9). In addition to his medical activities, he was a proficient writer, poet, and pamphleteer, and an ardent subscriber to the ideas of Joseph II. In 1783, he wrote that “[A]rt and virtue revive as JOSEPH reigns / Whose name (as long as the sea shall ebb and flow) / Whose wondrous rule no man shall ever forget.”<sup>156</sup> Vervier’s career in literature and poetry has primarily drawn the attention of literary historians.<sup>157</sup> Yet it was not only in his

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<sup>154</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4289, Saint-Lambert to Starhemberg (Brussels, 28 February 1777), “cent vaisseaux de guerre et plus depuis 60 jusqu’a 80 pieces de canons”, “deux Isles inconnues à toutes les nations, si abondamment pourvues de bois et autres choses nécessaires, qu’il semble que la providence les ait placées pour l’exécution de ce projet”.

<sup>155</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4289, Report of Baudier and Delplancq, members of the *Raad van Financiën* (Brussels, 16 April 1777), “l’auteur, actuellement à Gand, a donné à entendre que si on n’admettoit pas ses idées d’abord, il s’adresseroit à Vienne”.

<sup>156</sup> Jan Baptist Vervier, *Gedicht aan Mr. Johannes Palfyn, berugten ontleeder en wondheeler* (Ghent 1783) 8, “Dus ziet men konst en deugd wyl, JOSEPH heerscht, herleven/Wiër Naam, (zo lang de zee word op en neer gedreven)/Wiër wonderbaar beleit noit mensch vergeeten zal.”

<sup>157</sup> See Félix-Victor Goethals, *Histoire des lettres, des Sciences et des Arts en Belgique* (Brussels 1842) 377-8; Hippolyte Kluyskens, *Des hommes célèbres dans les sciences et les arts, et des médailles qui consacrent leur souvenir* (Ghent 1859) 570-1; Elaut, ‘Het mollewerk van een Gents geneesheer uit de patriottentijd’, *Handelingen - Koninklijke Zuid-Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis* 25 (1970)

poetry that the Ghent doctor connected Joseph II with the sea. Shortly before Vervier had composed the above lines, he had been bestowed a secret mission by the Habsburg government to travel to Africa and seek out an island which could be exploited as an intermediary station in the slave trade. Apart from Saint-Lambert's plan, the mission also contained echoes of the imperial project that Spain had embarked upon several years earlier by acquiring the islands of Annobón and Fernando Po (in the Gulf of Guinea) to participate in the slave trade (see Chapter 4).<sup>158</sup>

To my knowledge, no primary source exists that documents the details of Vervier's mission. Our understanding of its existence relies on the accounts of his earliest biographers, who drew on information from personal connections.<sup>159</sup> There is no reason to doubt this evidence: as we discussed, the 1780s marked a timeframe in which Vienna under its ambitious new ruler attempted to establish a Habsburg presence in the Atlantic world and bring the Atlantic world to the Habsburg lands. As we saw with Märter, in pursuing these objectives, the Habsburg court relied on individuals from a wide range of professions. These non-state actors, providing diplomatic services to an Early Modern prince or government, have in recent years been increasingly recognized and explored by the field of 'new diplomatic history'.<sup>160</sup> The mission of Vervier provides yet another example of a non-career diplomat engaging in diplomatic activities. The information gathered by the doctor never resulted in an actual acquisition for the Habsburg Monarchy and—apart from the general facts mentioned above—it has remained shrouded in mystery. However, as I show in this book, it was Romberg who hosted Vervier within his business and

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117-34. For a contextualization of Vervier's work in the literary history of the Southern Netherlands, see Tom Verschaffel, *De weg naar het binnenland* (Amsterdam 2016) 265-6.

<sup>158</sup> Elena Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana: War, Trade, and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill 2018) 275-7. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>159</sup> The father of Hippolyte Kluyskens, who had also been a doctor in Ghent, was a contemporary and colleague of Vervier. As Vervier was in military service, his salary would have been paid by the state coffers dedicated to military matters. During the Brabantine Revolution, however, all archives involving the *Caisse de guerre* were destroyed in a fire, see Erik Aerts et al. *De centrale overheidsinstellingen van de Habsburgse Nederlanden* (Brussel 1994) 882-6. Another possibility would be payment through the *gastos secretos*, the financial channel used by the government to make discrete payments, but no sums were transferred to Vervier in this way, see ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 926.

<sup>160</sup> See for instance Tracey Sowerby, 'Early Modern Diplomatic History', *History Compass* 14:9 (2016) 441-56 and the mission statement of the *Diplomatica* journal by Giles Scott-Smith and Kenneth Weisbrode, 'Editorial', *Diplomatica* 1:1 (2019) 1-4.

provided a supportive base for the doctor's diplomatic mission. In 1783, Vervier travelled to West Africa on the *Roi du Congo*, one of the expeditions organised by Romberg & Consors in the Austrian Netherlands. In this aspect, too, Vervier's mission resembled the Märter expedition, which travelled on a merchant vessel—a deliberate choice of the Monarchy to bring down the costs.<sup>161</sup> The private commercial project pursued by Romberg & Consors during the 1780s thus dovetailed with the contemporary Atlantic aspirations of the Habsburg monarchy. Additionally, Vervier, with his objective of gaining knowledge for colonial purposes, supported by an Austrian Netherlands firm, presents a novel, pre-modern antecedent to nineteenth-century Belgian imperialism.

### The Rise of Romberg

Frederic Romberg (1729–1819) was born in Iserlohn, Westphalia, to a family of paper makers. Deciding that his calling lay with commerce, Romberg began apprenticing to merchants and cotton producers in several towns in the German interior. Like other aspiring young merchants in Europe, Romberg used this training to acquire the numerous skills necessary for success in the profession, such as understanding price trends, mastering the complex system of Europe's currencies and weight measures, balance profits and costs to maintain a business and, especially, learn the art of double book keeping.<sup>162</sup> After completing his apprenticeship, Romberg began his quest westward, effectively joining the 'wave' of German merchants who moved near the coast of Western Europe to conduct commerce: after a stay in Aix-la-Chapelle, Romberg decided to move to the Austrian Netherlands together with his brother Wienold (1732–1779), three years his junior.<sup>163</sup> The Romberg brothers first settled in Leuven, but soon set up shop in Brussels under the header of Romberg, Frères & Cie. At about the same time, Frederic married Sophie-Louise-Henriette von

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<sup>161</sup> Originally Märter and his team were planned to embark on a private ship belonging to the merchant William Bolts, who was then director of the Asiatic Company of Trieste, see Morrison, 'Open Competition', 109-11.

<sup>162</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce* (Los Angeles 1992 [1979]) 408-9; Haasis, *The Power of Persuasion*, 94-100.

<sup>163</sup> See for example Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*.



Huysen, an aristocratic girl from Essen, also in Westphalia. The couple had five children; Romberg, however, would survive all of them: his two daughters died shortly after birth, Henry (1762–1784) died in Bordeaux at 22, Ferdinand (1764–1787) in Saint-Domingue at 23, and François-Frédéric-Chrétien (1760–1809) at 49 during a voyage to Austria.<sup>164</sup>

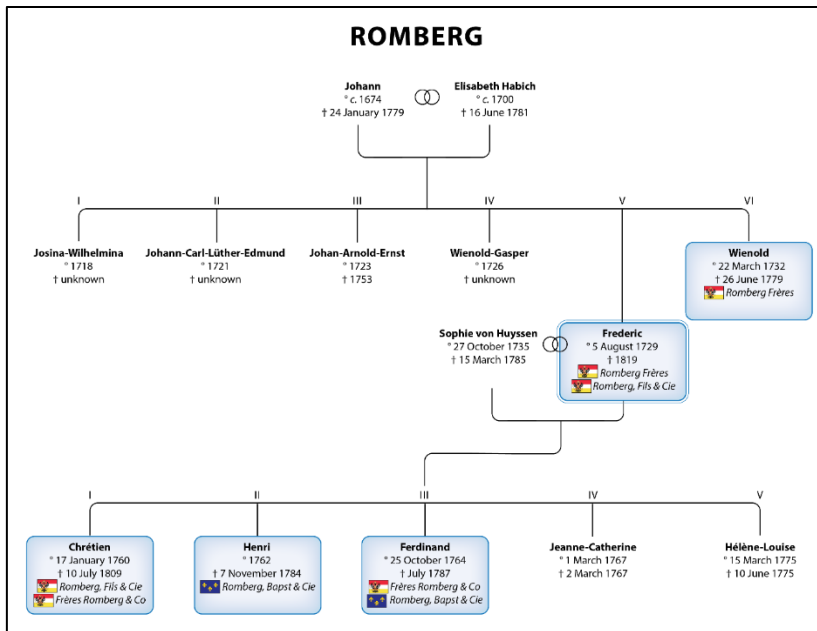


FIGURE 2.5 The Romberg family and its member's functions within the structure of the firm. *Source data:* Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*; Anspach, 'Romberg', 164-7.

At their time of passing, all three sons were leading parts of their father's business empire (see Figures 2.5 and 2.6 for an overview). Romberg managed his business as an 'ambulant ruler', frequently visiting his different branches in person. As the size of his business expanded, he also installed his offspring on key positions to establish a more continuous presence and to enhance control of his affairs. François-Frédéric-Chrétien succeeded his uncle after the latter's demise in 1779, thus establishing Romberg, Fils & Cie. The expanded maritime activities of the 1780s necessitated the opening of subsidiary branches in

<sup>164</sup> Anspach, 'Romberg', 164-7.

Ostend (Frederic Romberg & Cie, which itself had a branch in Bruges) and Ghent (Romberg & Consors). Romberg's cotton business and printing factory, which he had acquired in 1780, found shelter within the newly established firm Frères Romberg & Compagnie (not to be mistaken with the former firm of Frederic and Wienold). In 1786, the partner structure of the firm was reshuffled (Ferdinand and Chrétien joined the management), but confusingly retained the same name. Meanwhile, Romberg's branches began expanding beyond the Austrian Netherlands. In 1780, the firm opened a by-house in the Free Imperial City of Lindau, which sits on the eastern shore of Lake Constance. This subsidiary served as way point for Romberg to oversee the firm's trade routes between Italy and the Austrian Netherlands and, as Ressel suggests, was managed by Chrétien Romberg.<sup>165</sup> In 1783, another supporting branch, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie, was established in Bordeaux in order to pursue colonial trade, with Romberg's son Henry as co-director until his early demise in 1784.<sup>166</sup> Ferdinand Romberg, although no official partner like his brother, was engaged to safeguard his father's investments in the Bordeaux firm's colonial business, hence him dying on Saint-Domingue.<sup>167</sup>

All these branches managed their own affairs and kept accounting books separate from the main firm in Brussels. No contract was concluded with the branch managers, but it is clear that Romberg remained firmly in charge of the affairs happening in his name. An associate of one such subsidiary firm attested that "nothing of importance happens there without [Frederic Romberg] giving his approval and consent".<sup>168</sup> Romberg also had an absolute claim to the profits earned, collecting dividends "as he saw fit when the balance was presented to him".<sup>169</sup> Roger De Peuter also considered the outward compartmentalisation of Romberg's business "largely fictitious" and that the merchant "dominated the

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<sup>165</sup> Ressel, 'The Hinterland', 284-9.

<sup>166</sup> Anspach, 'Romberg', 168-74; De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants', 99-106; Saskia Claessens, *Frederik Romberg (1729-1819). Een biografische en bedrijfshistorische studie, met nadruk op de katoenmanufactuur te Brussel in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw* (Ghent 1996) 108-16.

<sup>167</sup> Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*, 94-5, 138.

<sup>168</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Interrogation of François Carpentier (Brussels, 24 October 1791), "*aucune affaire majeure ne se traitoit sans qu'il donna son approbation et consentement*".

<sup>169</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Interrogation of François Carpentier (Brussels, 24 October 1791), "*Quant au dividend comme il n'y avoit pas de Contrat Monsieur de Romberg avoit l'option de le faire comme il trouvoit convenir lors qu'on lui présentait la ballance*".

whole organization of the different firms". According to De Peuter, the many different branches served to make the management and accounting look more sound to partners and creditors.<sup>170</sup> In addition, Romberg frequently fell back on the division of his business when one of his subsidiaries came into legal trouble. Without failing, the merchant on such occasions claimed that he bore no responsibility for the actions of his associates, as such isolating his person, his reputation, and eventually his creditworthiness from potential damage.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants', 108.

<sup>171</sup> For an example involving Frederic Romberg & Cie of Ostend, see RAG, *Council of Flanders*, 21698. For examples involving Romberg & Consors of Ghent, see RAfB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845 and 8065 and RAfB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4164 and 4764.

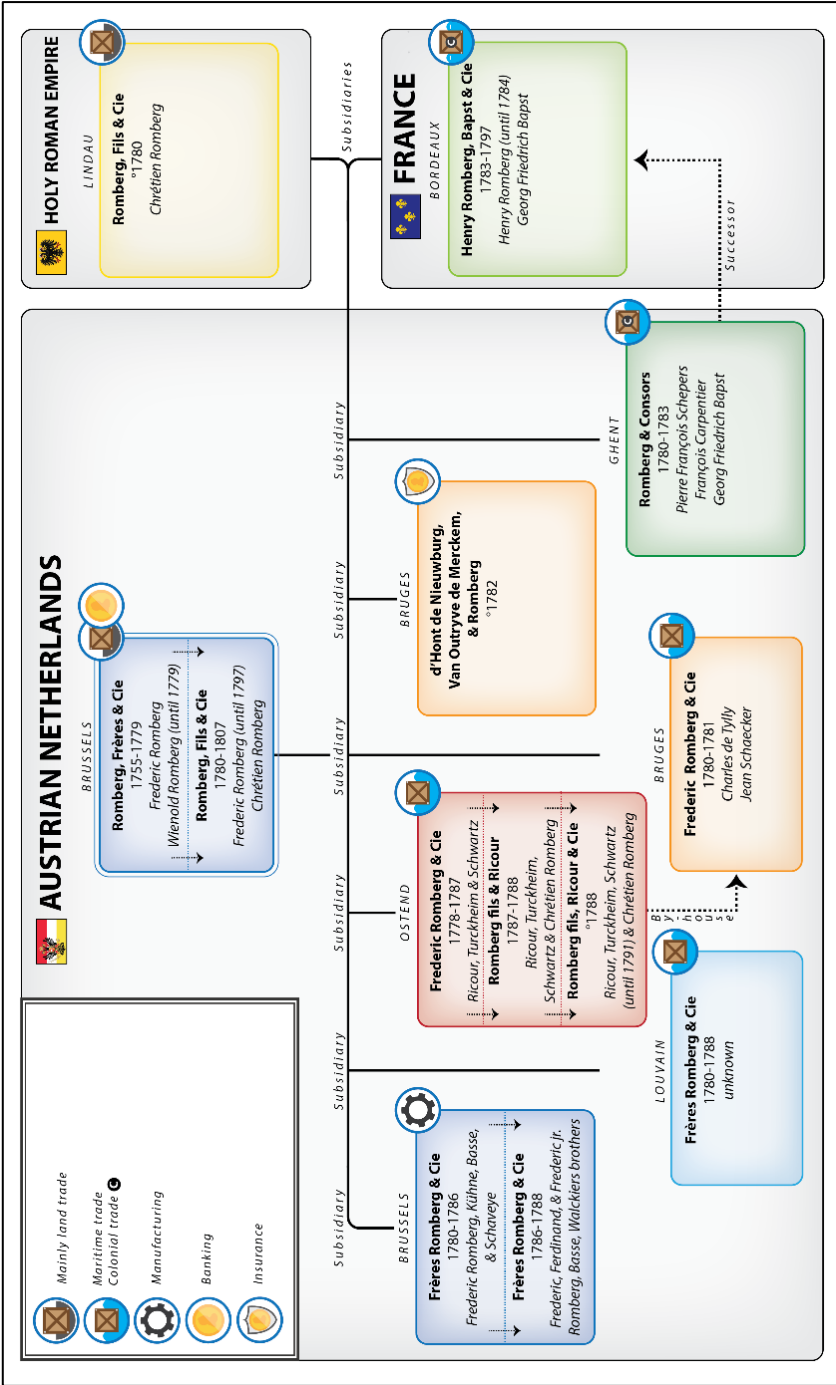


FIGURE 2.6 Romberg's business portfolio, 1755-1807. Source data: Romberg, *Mémoire de faits*; Thésée, 'Négociants bordelais'; Anspach, 'Romberg'; De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants'; Parmentier, *Het gezicht*; Ressel, 'The Hinterland'.

Several factors enabled Romberg's rapid ascent in Austrian Netherlands and European trade. First, the merchant clearly had an innate talent for commerce, which was fostered by numerous apprenticeships during his formative years. Second, being a German migrant and a protestant, Romberg quickly integrated into an international network of fellow countrymen and co-religionists.<sup>172</sup> Thirdly, his knack for networking and his language proficiency (next to his native tongue, he was fluent in French and Flemish) allowed him to quickly establish new contacts, in commerce but also in politics.<sup>173</sup> The Count of Zinzendorf, an Austrian statesman residing in Brussels during the late 1760s and early 1770s, thought him "a man of merit, and a very sensible [person]". Both men met up frequently as Romberg showed Zinzendorf around his warehouses and the country's manufactures.<sup>174</sup> At the peak of his career, in 1781, Romberg was allowed to join Joseph II during the Emperor's visit to Marie-Antoinette, his sister, in Versailles (see Chapter 9).<sup>175</sup> Fourthly, and most importantly, the economic environment of the 1750s and 1760s was entirely beneficial to Romberg's budding enterprise. As we have seen with regards to maritime and financial affairs, high-ranking officials such as Cobenzl and Delplancq held very mercantilist and interventionist views on how to run an economy, and the domain of industry and internal commerce was no different. Both ministers thought it necessary for the government to actively support the domestic economy by handing out monopolies, patents and privileges to entrepreneurs and merchants.<sup>176</sup> The opinions of Cobenzl and Delplancq, however, were not uncontested in Brussels. The Finance Council, for example, was not sure if Cobenzl's approach was the way to police an economy, if indeed it should be policed at all in the first place. This liberal thinking did not reach the councillors' offices through the work of Adam Smith (whose famous

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<sup>172</sup> Lüthy, *La banque protestante*, 592-685; *Thésée, Négociants bordelais*, 86-93; Anspach, 'Romberg', 168; Ressel, 'Spoils of neutrality', 789-90.

<sup>173</sup> Rijksarchief Gent (RAG), *Council of Flanders*, 30868, *Mémoire of Stephano de Bissy, "le sieur Romberg lui en parla en langue flamande, que nous n'entendions pas"*.

<sup>174</sup> Karl von Zinzendorf and Georges Englebert, ed., *Journal. Chronique belgo-bruxelloise 1766-1770* (Brussels 1991) 160, 165, 177, 193, 264, 266, quote 160: "un homme de mérite et très sensé". I thank Lien Verpoest for pointing me to Zinzendorf's diary.

<sup>175</sup> Anspach, 'Romberg', 170.

<sup>176</sup> Jozef Pricken, *Deplancq, l'oublié* (Brussels 1967) 35-44; Moureaux, *Les préoccupations statistiques*, 276-96; Ann Coenen, 'De Oostenrijkse Nederlanden in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw: infant industry protection vóór de Industriële Revolutie?', in: Maarten van Ginderachter et al. ed., *Overheid en economie: geschiedenissen van een spanningsveld* (Brussels 2014) 97-112.

indictment of the ‘sophistry of merchants and manufactures’ would not be published until decades later) but mostly through the writings of the physiocrats.<sup>177</sup> The physiocrats, a school of thought originating in France, argued that (in the margin of their main concern with developing agriculture) the state should not try to become too involved in the economy. It could build infrastructure such as roads and waterways, but handing out monopolies or privileges to individual manufacturers or merchants would only lead to imbalances. Rather, as François Quesnay, the leader of the physiocratic school argued, the economy should be allowed to run its ‘natural course’.<sup>178</sup> Under Neny, who became director in 1754 and who was firmly convinced of the fact that every institution that limited competition was harming the well-being of society, the Finance Council pursued the same liberal course in governing the domestic economy.<sup>179</sup> The High Council for the Low Countries under Emmanuel de Silva-Tarouca, too, supported a more modest government intervention in economic affairs, though especially because it feared that showering the mercantile and industrial classes with tax exemptions would drain the Habsburg state coffers (cf. supra).<sup>180</sup> Yet, due to several political shifts during the 1760s (Neny was promoted to the less economically influential Privy Council, Sylva-Tarouca’s High Council was abolished), Cobenzl and Delplancq’s interventionist views on industry and domestic trade gained the upper hand. Much to the concern of Kaunitz, scores of monopolies and patents were handed out to entrepreneurs painting rosy pictures of flourishing new factories or novel trade routes.<sup>181</sup>

One of these fortunate petitioners, on 19 May 1766, was Romberg. Together with his brother, the merchant secured tax exemptions on the transit route between Ostend and Germany. Much to the displeasure of the Finance Council, the Romberg brothers were the only ones to do so, rendering his services virtually indispensable to anyone wishing to send cargoes back and forth between Ostend and Central and Southern Europe. During subsequent

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<sup>177</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Chapter X, Part II.

<sup>178</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (London 1972 [1954]) 223-49.

<sup>179</sup> Jean-Jacques Heirwegh, ‘Neny et les idées économiques de son temps’, *Standen en landen* 88:1 (1984) 63-79; Bruno Bernard, *Patrice-François de Neny (1716-1784). Portrait d’un homme d’état* (Brussels 1993) 113-22.

<sup>180</sup> Moureaux, *Les préoccupations statistiques*, 292-5.

<sup>181</sup> Moureaux, *Les préoccupations statistiques*, 255-8.

years, Delplancq fended off ceaseless protests by the Finance Council and other merchants trying to elbow themselves in the transit trade, fearing that the compromise of Romberg's exclusive privilege would reduce the merchant's incentives to forge trade links and develop the Austrian Netherlands' commerce. For five years Romberg managed to maintain his monopoly, aided by lobbying figures in high power with persuasion and flattery. In 1770, for instance, he asked Zinzendorf if he could name a vessel after the Austrian statesman.<sup>182</sup> At times, Romberg used bribes disguised as gifts: Gaspar Baudier, Finance Councilor tasked with all customs-related matters, refused the merchant's material approaches, but the wife of Delplancq accepted a new set of porcelain tableware—it was only the director's impressive track record which saved him from scandalous dismissal.<sup>183</sup>

It is impossible to assess the lucrateness of Romberg's transit privilege, but in all appearance, it made the merchant incredibly wealthy. The fact that other merchants were incessantly petitioning the government for opening up the trade, together with the fact that merchants in Nancy were routinely complaining about Romberg's inflated prices, suggest that the merchant operated with significant profit margins.<sup>184</sup> Van Houtte suggested that the institutional framework created in 1766 provided Romberg with a secure environment for capital accumulation, funds which enabled him to expand his maritime enterprise during the early 1780s.<sup>185</sup> Eventually, however, the institutional barriers to entry of the transit trade were alleviated when the Overman brothers in 1771 were granted the same privileges as Romberg.<sup>186</sup> The transit sector remained an appealing business, however. As late as 1781, local merchants attempted to gather intelligence on Romberg's methods and trade routes, deploying agents who used both conventional methods, such as observation, and unconventional tactics, including intoxication, to extract secrets from his firm.<sup>187</sup> As one such 'spy' wrote to his principal in Ghent:

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<sup>182</sup> Zinzendorf and Englebert, ed., *Journal*, 303.

<sup>183</sup> Pricken, *Delplancq*, 84, 91-2; Van Goidsenhoven, 'Cazier', 186-7.

<sup>184</sup> Pricken, *Delplancq*, 38-42.

<sup>185</sup> Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 369.

<sup>186</sup> Pricken, *Deplancq*, 35-44; Anspach, 'Romberg', 162-82.

<sup>187</sup> SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301, Weguelin to Janssens, Letters of 9, 20, and 22 August 1781, 4 and 28 September 1781.

Having found an opportunity to make the acquaintance of two clerks of Monsieur Romberg, who are Swiss and suspected nothing about me, I stayed an extra couple of days to take advantage of it. In the evenings, when they came to drink their pint of beer, I don't have time to recount all the details, but simply put, I learned from them on which route their house brings muslins and lightweight wool fabrics into France.<sup>188</sup>

The fact that merchants were willing to go to such lengths to encroach on Romberg's business in the 1780s, long after his monopoly had been broken, is exemplary of the profits the merchant still derived from the transit trade.

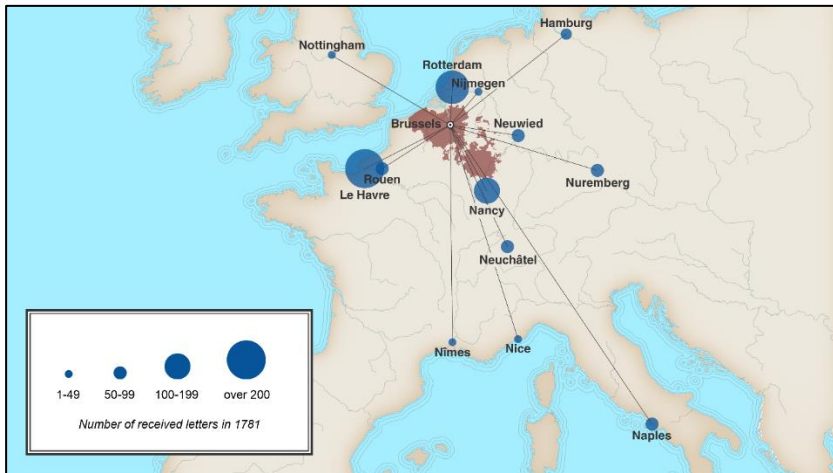


FIGURE 2.7 A glimpse on the reach of Romberg's network provided by the surviving letters the merchant received from towns whose names began with an 'R' or 'N', 1781.

Source: KBR, Ms. 19959, 20172, and 20173.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>188</sup> SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301, Weguelin to Janssens (Namur, August 1781), "*aijant trouvé occasion de faire Connoissance avec deux Comis de Mons[aigneu]r Romberg qui sont suisse, & ne se doutoit de rien de moi je me Suis arreté un Couple de Jours de plus pour en tirer parti, le soir quand ils venoit boire leur Pinte de bierre, je naij pas le Tems de vous dire tout le Detail, simplement que j'aij appris d'eux de quel coté leur Maison fait entrer en France les Mousselines, & Etoffes de laine légères*". Weguelin had extracted similar secrets in Brussels: "*While in Brussels, I learned from a clerk of Mr. Romberg, who did not know me, that they bring the aforementioned goods into France through Lorraine.*" [*"Etant a Bruxelles j'aij appris d'un Comis de Mr. Romberg qui ne me connoissoit pas, qu'ils font entrer les susdittes Marchandises par la lorraine*"], see Weguelin to Janssens (Brussels, 9 August 1781).

<sup>189</sup> Unfortunately, these are the only books from an original collection of 66 volumes that was once stored at the KBR, see De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants', 100.



Since Romberg had ventured into the transit trade business during the 1760s, he had entertained a maritime branch of his firm. His vessels were preoccupied with shipping the goods that had arrived in Ostend from Central and Southern Europe to the ports of England, and vice versa.<sup>190</sup> Zinzendorf, after one of his trips with Romberg, recorded in his diary a detailed description of the goods in the merchant's transit warehouses:

[Romberg] took me to his warehouse of engraved fabrics from England, very pretty printed fabrics from Switzerland in the style of patterned Chinese *taffetas*, and rather ugly printed fabrics from Antwerp. From there, [we went] to his transit warehouse. Large bales of Mocha coffee from England, crates filled with woollen stockings from England, other bundles filled with draperies, and barrels with hardware from Birmingham filled this warehouse.<sup>191</sup>

Under the beneficial political circumstances of the American Revolutionary War (1775-83) and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84), Romberg heightened his maritime ambitions. In July 1779, he extended his shipping services between the Southern Netherlands and England to five packet boats.<sup>192</sup> At the same time Romberg started purchasing vessels to ply European trade routes—by Autumn 1780, he owned 23.<sup>193</sup> “*The Maritime operations that our Commercial Houses have been so fortunate to initiate promise to become big & very Big*”, the merchant wrote on 4 June 1781.<sup>194</sup> Exactly one week later, Ostend was proclaimed free port, and once again Romberg’s maritime enterprise mushroomed: either through effective ownership or through

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<sup>190</sup> Anspach, ‘Romberg’, 168.

<sup>191</sup> Zinzendorf and Englebert, (ed.), *Journal*, 165 (Diary record of 13 September 1769), “*Romberg vint chez moi, il me mena dans son magasin de toiles gravées d’Angleterre, de toiles imprimées de Suisse très jolies dans le goût des taffetas chinés, de toiles imprimées d’Anvers assez vilaines. De là à son magasin de transit. De grosses balles Café de Moca venant d’Angleterre, des caisses remplies de bas de laine d’Angleterre, d’autres ballots remplis de Draperies et des tonneaux avec de la quincaillerie de Birmingham remplissaient ce magasin*”.

<sup>192</sup> Farasyn, *Oostende*, 100. During Joseph’s visit to Ostend, a message circulated through the town that Joseph II would cross to Britain aboard one of these vessels, but it eventually turned out to be a rumour as the diplomatic situation (Austria’s ally France being at war with Britain) made such a voyage unacceptable. See TNA, *Foreign Office*, 26/2, Fitzherbert to Foreign Office (Ostend, s.d.) and Beales, *Joseph II*, 138.

<sup>193</sup> Farasyn, *Oostende*, 100-1.

<sup>194</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4376, Romberg & Consors to Crumpipen (Brussels, 4 June 1781), “*Les opérations Marimites [sic] que nos maisons de Commerce ont si heureusement commencé et quelle se proposent détendre dans le grand & très Grand*”.

fictitious sales in order to provide ‘paper armour’, his fleet grew to 94 sail.<sup>195</sup> “*Since the house of R[omberg] has been established [in Ostend], she is doing more business than all the others combined*”, cried out one employee in joy.<sup>196</sup> Due to his ambitious ‘maritime turn’, Romberg was forced to open up new offices of his firm to deal with its logistics. These by-houses were staffed with salaried clerks and directed by associates, who were required to participate in the equity capital of the branch and thus were part-owners of the branch. A first one was opened in Leuven, along the important water axis that ran through the town. A second by-house, called Frederic Romberg & Compagnie, was opened in Ostend, soon followed by another in Bruges, which stood under the custody of the Ostend branch.

The most important subsidiary branch, however, was opened in Ghent. Like many urban centres in the Austrian Netherlands, the capital of the province of Flanders had experienced a remarkable economic growth during the eighteenth century. Much of this revival was due to Ghent’s convenient location: the canal works of the 1750s (cf. supra) had rendered the town a crucial junction between Ostend and the hinterland of Brabant and the Walloon provinces. Transport to France was possible through the Scheldt and Lys River, while the Sassevaart provided a route towards the Dutch Republic. A growing number of merchants, manufacturers, and travellers took to the Austrian Netherlands’ new network of paved roads, of which many converged in Ghent. The increase of commercial transport and the blossoming of local manufactures (especially textiles) necessitated more storage facilities, and the city authorities catered to these needs by constructing a central *Pakhuis* (where Van Reijsschoot’s *Allegory* eventually was displayed) and in 1780 several *entrepôts* astride the Coupure.<sup>197</sup>

In this environment of commercial upturn, Romberg & Consors saw the limelight on 5 August 1780.<sup>198</sup> It was conveniently established on the Kouter, a

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<sup>195</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301, 8, Establishment act of Romberg & Consors (Ghent, 1 June 1780).

<sup>196</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 6 March 1780), “*depuis que la maison de R. est etabli ici elle seule a fait plus d'affaires que toutes les autres Ensemble*”.

<sup>197</sup> Lenders, *Gent*, 43-56.

<sup>198</sup> Romberg & Consors’ establishment act was sent to all of Romberg’s correspondents and shows up in many European mercantile archives. See for example SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/8, Establishment act of Romberg & Consors (Ghent, 1 June 1780) and AN, *Banque Greffulhe*, 61 AQ, 101, idem.

square in the center of the city which in many ways formed the social heart of the town. Wealthy citizens frequented the square to promenade and showcase their riches and status.<sup>199</sup> Since 1772, a weekly flower market painted the Kouter in bright colours. In summer, the scores of linden trees provided shade to strollers, and their blossoms filled the square with a sweet fragrance—in fact, if Romberg & Consors opened their windows, the scent would have permeated their workspace. The Kouter was also a hub where Ghent’s commercial elite gathered to network and discuss business matters, and merchants easily visited Romberg’s offices while conducting their affairs.<sup>200</sup>



FIGURE 2.8 The Kouter in Ghent, 1763. In 1780, Romberg & Consors established its offices in the second house from the left. *Source:* Engelbert van Siclers, Stadsmuseum Gent (STAM).<sup>201</sup>

Romberg & Consors was helmed by three associates: Pierre François Schepers, François Carpentier, and Georg Christoph Bapst. Born in 1735,

<sup>199</sup> Lenders, *Gent*, 69-72.

<sup>200</sup> SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301/15, Deforceville to Janssens (Amiens, 19 December 1782), “*Je ne crois pas me Tromper, c’est vôtre sieur Janssens que J’aij vû, ainsy que précédament Mr Reynard au comptoir de MM Romberg et consors de v[otre] ville Tenû par MM Charpentier & Baps*”.

<sup>201</sup> My ability to locate Romberg & Consors’ offices was aided by descriptions of the Kouter in Frans De Potter and Jan Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis van de gemeenten der provincie Oost-Vlaanderen* (Ghent 1864), IV, 322-3 and Desiré Destanberg, *Gent onder Jozef II, 1780-1792* (Ghent 1910), Plate VII.

Schepers' career in commerce and politics had taken a swift ascent. By 1760, he had acquired the important function of director of the Province of Flanders, a figure responsible for collecting taxes from subaltern levels of government. Schepers would hold on to this lucrative position for several decades. On top of this public office, he was a tireless entrepreneur. In 1776, in a rather spectacular episode of his career, he managed to smuggle a British spinning device to Ghent which he planned to use to mechanically improve the production of cotton and linseed.<sup>202</sup> Around the same time, Schepers struck an alliance with Romberg. Both men set up a project to furnish the French *fermes générales* with eight million pounds of tobacco, which would be grown in the Austrian Netherlands. The ambitious scheme came to nought, but the commercial relationship between the two merchants came out unscathed, given Schepers' position of associate in Romberg & Consors.<sup>203</sup>

Like Schepers, François Carpentier had served Romberg's company for several years before becoming an associate, but unlike the former, he could not command decades of experience in commerce.<sup>204</sup> Born in Brussels in 1753, Carpentier was only twenty-seven when joining Romberg & Consors, but he had shown his zeal and competence during the first years of Ostend's trade boom, when Romberg had assigned Carpentier to his North Sea offices (cf. Chapter 7). What worked in Carpentier's favour was the fact that his family and Schepers' were quite close-knit: both were acquaintances of the influential Vilain XIII family, and Schepers' daughter Marie would in 1791 marry Thomas Cornelis Carpentier, a cousin of François.<sup>205</sup> Thomas Cornelis was the treasurer of

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<sup>202</sup> Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bijdrage tot de studie van de gegoede burgerij*, 69-70, 247-8; Luc Dhondt, 'Een ondernemer', 331-2. Although the Estates of Flanders supported Schepers, the central government had become less fond of personal monopolies and privileges since the demise of Cobenzl, and Schepers could not enjoy the full fruits of his risky scheme—although it would appear Schepers' Royal cylinder did eventually improve manufactures in the country.

<sup>203</sup> Dhondt, 'Een ondernemer', 333-5.

<sup>204</sup> Carpentier's full name was François Joseph George Carpentier, and should not be confused with the merchant François Carpentier, who was also established in Ghent during Carpentier's spell at Romberg & Consors, but whose full name was François Louis Carpentier. See ARA, *Département voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 651, 'Note de divers négocians des principales villes et provinces belgiques-autrichiennes, qui ont des correspondances dans les pays étrangers', 1771, reproduced for Ghent in Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bijdrage*, 194-9; UAG, *Wegwijzer van Gent, 1770-1795*.

<sup>205</sup> Charles Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique. Recueil historique, chronologique, généalogique et biographique complet de toutes les maisons nobles reconnues de la*

Ghent, and he was not the only notable member within the family's ranks: Nicolas Carpentier (c. 1694–1747), grandfather of François, had sailed several vessels to India and China for the Ostend Company. Later he became one of the most successful merchants of the Southern Netherlands, undertook diplomatic missions for the Imperial government, and became mayor of Ostend. In 1747, these exploits had earned him and his descendants a noble title.<sup>206</sup> Cornelis Carpentier (1716–1799), Nicolas' son and uncle of François, continued the business of his father and became director of the Emden Company for Bengal.<sup>207</sup> Perhaps because of the wealth and ambition that came trickling down the family tree, Carpentier was determined to follow in these footsteps, and set up interoceanic shipping lanes himself.

Like Carpentier, Georg Christoph Bapst was quite young, but contrary to his fellow associates he was not born in the Southern Netherlands, as he hailed from Romberg's German network. Being in his early twenties, Bapst was the junior member of Romberg & Consors. He had previously gained experience by apprenticing to Romberg in his main office in Brussels. Later, after the termination of Romberg & Consors, Bapst would become associate of Romberg's Bordeaux branch.<sup>208</sup>

Romberg & Consors' central task was the easing of commodity flows between France and the Dutch Republic, an axis which could be conveniently managed from Ghent.<sup>209</sup> From the outset, however, the firm had attempted to reap the profits of the turmoil caused on international markets by the American War of Independence. In 1780, Romberg had negotiated a deal with the French government to supply its shipyards with naval materials from the Dutch Republic, and Romberg & Consors was assigned to deal with the logistics of the

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*Belgique* (Brussels 1864), II, 366; Dhondt, 'Een ondernemer', 331. For the ties between François Carpentier and Charles-Joseph Vilain XIII, see Chapter 4.

<sup>206</sup> Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, II, 365-7; Degryse and Parmentier, 'Kooplieden en kapiteins', 156; Jan Parmentier, *Het gezicht van de Oostendse handelaar: studie van de Oostendse kooplieden, reders en ondernemers actief in de internationale maritieme handel en visserij tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Ostend 2004) 65-9; Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*, 137-41. The vessels commanded by Carpentier were the *Arent* (1724) and the *Hope* (1726).

<sup>207</sup> Gottmann, 'Prussia all at Sea?', 552-3.

<sup>208</sup> Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*, 26-7.

<sup>209</sup> SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301, 8, Establishment act of Romberg & Consors (Ghent, 1 June 1780).

contract.<sup>210</sup> Undoubtedly the biggest wartime project of the Ghent firm, however, was organizing trade between the Austrian Netherlands and West and Central Africa.

## Conclusion

During the 1780s, the ‘window upon the world’ that the Austrian Habsburgs had inherited at Rastatt was flung wide open. Its hinges had been oiled in the preceding decades, as a prolonged period of peace and favourable government policies fostered steady, organic growth in commerce, industry, and wealth in the Austrian Netherlands. Despite its continuing inherent flaws, the development of Ostend transformed it in a more hospitable harbour for trade, while the enhancement of road and waterway infrastructure connected more regional and urban economies to the sea. Lastly, financial policies of the government made commerce and manufacturing a more appealing investment for wealthy citizens’ spare funds.

The Habsburg Monarchy lacked the resources and the naval capabilities to establish and maintain a formal colony of its own, but it had the diplomatic expertise to create a political environment that enabled its subjects to venture into the Atlantic world and economically participate in the empires of other nations. This strategy became especially evident during the American War of Independence, when Vienna steered clear from the conflict, joined the League of Armed Neutrality, and declared Ostend a free port. The Habsburg Court fully leveraged its neutrality by, overtly or covertly, exploring new markets overseas.

While the Brussels government facilitated and funded such centrally orchestrated endeavours, its own merchants, manufacturers, moneylenders and maritime workers were especially eager to participate as well. As discussed in the previous chapter, subjects of the Southern Netherlands had continued to seize opportunities offered by the Atlantic complex in foreign countries following the abolishment of the GIC. Now, however, these opportunities had arrived at the country’s doorstep. On an unprecedented scale, private,

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<sup>210</sup> Magnus Ressel, ‘An entrepreneur as central protagonist of foreign relations in the Early Modern period: Frederik von Romberg’s Service to the Habsburg-Bourbon alliance in 1780-81’, *Annales Mercaturae* 8:1 (2022) 83-108.

enterprising actors explored avenues for moving into or profiting from the Atlantic space, whether through their skills, their capital, or through the commodities they manufactured. While previous scholarship has centred on the engagement of the Austrian Netherlands and the Austrian Habsburgs with the United States and the Caribbean, the coming chapters will reveal how Romberg and his Ghent subsidiary pursued similar endeavours in Africa—and, in the process, contributed yet another chapter to the Atlantic history of the Southern Netherlands.

### CHAPTER THREE

## “Slaves [are] very scarce owing...to the Neutral vessels” Austrian Netherlands Protection and Partnership in the African Trades, 1780-1782

“SO LET US DO BUSINESS TOGETHER”, wrote Jacques Chauvel, a merchant from Le Havre, to Frederic Romberg on 21 July 1781.<sup>211</sup> Chauvel went on to neatly lay out a plan for outfitting two vessels to the Gold Coast. One ship would procure ivory, beeswax, and gold dust, the merchant wrote, while the other was set to go to Saint-Domingue after stopping in Africa and purchasing “all the Negroes we can find for a good price”.<sup>212</sup> Chauvel was far from the only trader who sought to establish commercial ties in the Austrian Netherlands during the American War of Independence. The wartime conditions and the neutrality of the Imperial flag effected a large-scale ‘Belgian’ intervention in the slave trade of the early 1780s. However, this fact has been obscured by past trends in the writing of the history of the Atlantic system. This chapter, as well as Chapter 4, remedies this lacuna by exploring how Austrian Netherlands entrepreneurs used various ways to participate in

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<sup>211</sup> KBR, Ms. 19,959, Chauvel to Romberg (Paris, 21 July 1781), “*Commençons donc quelque affaire ensemble*”.

<sup>212</sup> KBR, Ms. 19,959, Chauvel to Romberg (Le Havre, 10 September 1781), “*tous les Nègres que l’on trouvera à bon Marché*”.



the Atlantic slaving system, ranging from selling neutral ship's papers, engaging in a partnership with a foreign merchant, or directly participating in colonial trade.

Like the history of European expansion writ large, its constituent, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, has in the past been largely studied from a national perspective. Or, as Svend Green-Pedersen described it, it was generally approached like an "exotic appendix to the history of individual nation states".<sup>213</sup> More recent scholarship, however, has started to view colonial businesses as the locus where different transnational streams of capital, commodities, labour, and expertise converged.<sup>214</sup> This shift in perspective has revealed connections to the trade of regions previously disconnected to human trafficking, while also shedding light on the possible strategies employed by these polities to organize their own trade. Felicia Gottman, for instance, has shown how colonial companies in Prussia significantly drew on foreign capital, labour, and expertise to organize their ventures. Gottman concluded that Prussia did not command overseas territories or a large merchant fleet but argued that "[w]hat permitted them nevertheless to participate in Europe's overseas expansion...was transnationalism".<sup>215</sup>

Still, the focus on formal empire prevails in the study of the Atlantic slave trade. This lasting legacy is demonstrated by the *Slave Voyages* project, which in recent decades achieved the major accomplishment of collecting 36,000 voyages in an open source, digital database (TSTD).<sup>216</sup> However, the perspective of this database, just like the data it presents, is derived from previous scholarship and thus primarily presents an Atlantic complex dominated by polities with formal empires. Although the authors acknowledge that approximately 15 percent of the trade of 'minor slave carriers' is still unaccounted for, they restrict this category to nations with possessions in the Atlantic world.<sup>217</sup> The Austrian Netherlands and the Habsburg Monarchy,

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<sup>213</sup> Svend Green-Pedersen, 'The History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade, 1733-1807. An Interim Survey Relating in Particular to its Volume, Structure, Profitability and Abolition', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 62:226 (1975) 208-9.

<sup>214</sup> See for example De Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 162-3; Green-Pedersen, 'The History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade', 209.

<sup>215</sup> Gottmann, 'Prussia all at sea?', 564.

<sup>216</sup> Consultable at [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org).

<sup>217</sup> David Eltis and David Richardson, 'A New Assessment of the Transatlantic Slave Trade', in: David Eltis and David Richardson eds., *Extending the Frontiers. Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* (London 2008) 34.

states without such possessions, are not considered in the database. In fact, until this study, Ostend was not even a selectable slaving port, nor were the Imperial or Flemish colours selectable ship flags.

In the coming two chapters, therefore, I argue that previous perspectives on the Atlantic complex have severely disregarded and obscured the role of 'Belgian' intermediaries in the slave trade of the 1780s. I contend that Gottman's conceptualization, developed for Prussia, is fully applicable to the case of the Austrian Netherlands. Habsburg merchants provided key insurance services to foreign slave traders in the form of neutral passports, engaged in partnerships with established slaving merchants, or set up Atlantic ventures on their own account. The transnational ventures that resulted from these collaborations ranged from Imperial subjects acting as a mere cover-up to ventures with a sizeable involvement of Imperial capital and labour. Disregard for these multinational dynamics has had two important effects. First, it has obscured the fact that the Austrian Netherlands facilitated a sizeable part of the slave trade that is currently known to scholarship but entirely ascribed to traditional Atlantic powers. Secondly, the neglect of the southern Low Countries as a polity enabling foreign slave trade and organizing slaving voyages from its own harbours has resulted in a significant number of such voyages remaining unnoticed by previous researchers. This chapter studies the foreign slave trade under Imperial flag during the American War of Independence, organized either in foreign ports or in Ostend proper. While it examines the operations of all Imperial actors, it primarily focuses on Frederic Romberg, the central figure of this study and the leading Southern Netherlands participant in the slave trade. Chapter 4 will develop Romberg's case further by exclusively focusing on the slave voyages organized by his firm in Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent.

## Selling Protection to the Slave Trade

The American War of Independence (1775-83) and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84) had severely disrupted the Atlantic trade in enslaved labour. On its low point in 1779, 37,759 people were embarked on European vessels on the African seaboard (see Figure 3.1). It had been almost seventy years since the trade had been at such a low ebb; even during the Seven Year's War (1756-63)—the last great power conflict on the high seas—on average 58,729 people were forcibly loaded onto European ships each year.<sup>218</sup> From 1775 onwards, privateering and naval activity on both sides of the conflict made it increasingly dangerous to outfit vessels under the flag of a belligerent party. For slaving vessels, it was near impossible to continue their business, as their prolonged spells anchored off the coast of Africa made them extremely vulnerable to capture. Additionally, inflated insurance rates drove up outfitting costs and mortgaged every possible profit.<sup>219</sup> In Africa, meanwhile, the transport of enslaved people from the interior of the continent to the coast continued unabated, resulting in crowded seaboard prisons, an overabundance of enslaved labour, and thus low prices. Reversely, in the Caribbean, demand by colonial planters remained as high as ever and the lack of imports by European slave traders caused prices for enslaved Africans to rise significantly. The difference in value of enslaved labour on opposite sides of the Atlantic made for an unprecedented opportunity to acquire a fortune in the slave trade. It gave a huge incentive to established traders to continue their operations, or for new players to enter this domain of colonial trade.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> TSTD.

<sup>219</sup> Patrick Villiers, *Le commerce colonial atlantique et la guerre d'indépendance des Etats Unis d'Amérique 1778-1783* (New York 1977) 352-4; Patrick Villiers, 'Armateurs et navires négriers en temps de guerre: la correspondance Foache, négociants au Havre 1759-1762 et le navire *La Musette* de Nantes 1781-1796', *Colloque International sur la traite des noirs* (Nantes 1985) III, 1.

<sup>220</sup> Joseph Inikori, 'Market Structure and the Profits of the British African Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century', *The Journal of Economic History* 41:4 (1981) 759-61.

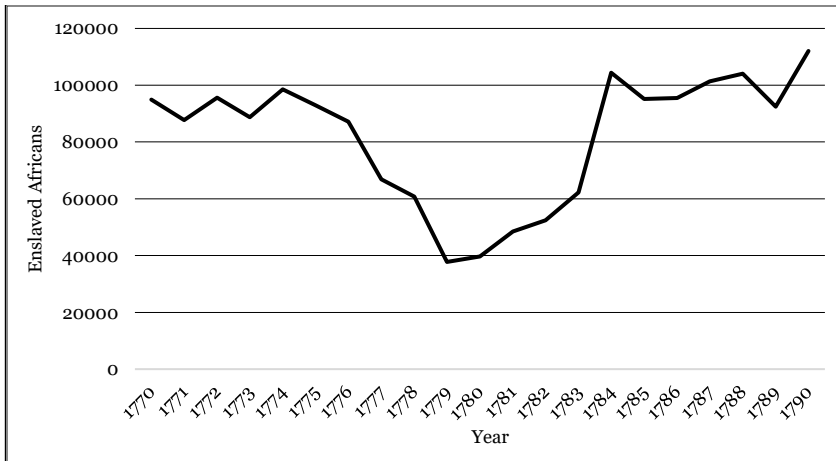


FIGURE 3.1 Number of embarked enslaved Africans per year, 1770-90.

Source: TSTD.

With the outbreak of war, a substantial demand for neutral carriers and neutral shipping papers swiftly emerged. The influx of slave ships operating under neutral flags appears to have rapidly diminished the previously abundant supply of enslaved individuals available for sale at unusually low prices along the African coast. Already in February 1781, a British observer managing a factory on the Îles de Los noted that “Slaves [are] very scarce owing...to the Neutral vessels who [have] almost ruined this Trade”.<sup>221</sup> Partly, these neutrals comprised the traditional intermediaries in Atlantic trade, who leveraged their activities during wartime. Swedish and Danish merchants, for example, increasingly participated in the slave trade during the 1780s.<sup>222</sup> It is equally clear, however, just like in European waters, that many ships travelling to Africa adopted an Imperial or Flemish flag from 1781 onwards. In fact, the trade in Imperial ship’s papers extended beyond the formal end of the war as merchants

<sup>221</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*, Colley to Hartley (Îles de Los, 3 February 1781) and Colley to Barrow (Îles de Los, 3 February 1781).

<sup>222</sup> Knud Klem, ‘Om Fr. De Conincks og andre rederes udnyttelse af den danske neutralitet især i perioden 1781-82’, *Museet for Søfarts årbog* 32:1 (1973) 94-121; Ole Feldbæk, ‘The Danish trading companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 34:3 (1986) 210, 214; Leos Müller, ‘Sweden’s neutral trade under Gustav III’, in: Koen Stapelbroek, ed. *Trade and war: The neutrality of commerce in the inter-state system* (Helsinki 2011) 159; Eric Schnakenbourg, ‘Sweden and the Atlantic: The Dynamism of Sweden’s Colonial Projects in the Eighteenth Century’, in: Magdalena Naum and Jonas Nordin, eds., *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity. Small Time Agents in a Global Arena* (London 2013) 234-5.

involved in the slave trade were still procuring Flemish passports after preliminary peace treaties were concluded between the belligerent parties in January 1783. These documents served to protect vessels on their way to Africa, where news of the ceasing of hostilities had not yet arrived. One such British slave trader pressed his French partner “to have *Imperial Papers on board, to exercise in case of need, lest [the crew] should be visited after passing the Canary Islands by some British ships of force, before Peace is reinstalled in those Seas.*”<sup>223</sup>



FIGURE 3.2 Flags of the Holy Roman Empire, the county of Flanders (ensign and jack), the city of Ostend, and the duchy of Brabant (from left to right), c. 1781. Source: ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2180.

As Patrick Villiers and Jan Parmentier have highlighted, tracing neutralized foreign vessels is a challenging endeavour because, of course, the whole point of the scheme was to render the real owners of the vessels invisible. Mostly researchers have to rely on notary records of ship’s sales or correspondence which have been passed to posterity.<sup>224</sup> In the case of the Austrian Netherlands,

<sup>223</sup> ADM, E 2406, Barber to Delahaye (7 February 1783 and 25 February 1783, quote in second letter).

<sup>224</sup> Villiers, ‘Armateurs et navires négriers’, 1; Parmentier, ‘Profit and neutrality’, 206-27; Jacobs, ‘Geopolitiek en sociaal kapitaal’, 141.

an additional source of information is provided by the lists of Imperial vessels drawn up by the Admiralty in response to the widespread abuse of the Imperial flag. These lists, 75 in total, contain many hundreds of vessels, each with their respective captain, tonnage, type, owner, and purchase location.<sup>225</sup> Most importantly, they contain the place where the ship was located at the time the shipowner reported his craft to the Admiralty. Many vessels suggested a deployment in the slave trade. Table 3.1 first comprises the vessels which allegedly were situated in Africa at the time of the report and have been confirmed as slave ships by other sources. Table 3.2 lists the ships with reported locations in Africa but which are not currently included in the TSTD. Some of these ships were merely accidentally in Africa and had no business in this particular region. According to Houtman-De Smedt, the two ships belonging to William Bolts, for instance, were both whalers from the Asiatic Company of Trieste, operating in the southern Atlantic Ocean.<sup>226</sup> Other ships may have been deployed in the commodity segment of African commerce. However, this seems a rather unlikely scenario given the economic incentives for participating in wartime slave trade. The vessels owned by the Brussels merchant house of Michiel van Schoor, since his death managed by his widow, for instance, very likely conducted human traffic in East Africa. As the widow herself remarked in a proposal to the government to maintain Ostend's prosperity beyond the war years, "*we suppose, when peace will be concluded, we will be forced to renounce the slave trade*".<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184. These lists were compiled following a governmental decree of 12 December 1782.

<sup>226</sup> Houtman-De Smedt, *Charles Proli*, 151, 134n.

<sup>227</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 512, Widow Van Schoor to the Maritime Trade Committee (Brussels, 4 February 1783), "*Nous supposons devoir renoncer également au Commerce de la Traite des Negres*". See ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2162 for a slightly more elaborated version of the same treatise.

TABLE 3.1 Foreign slave ships neutralized by merchant houses established in the Austrian Netherlands, 1780s.

Port	Vessel	Captain	Location	Owner	TSTD	
					Voyage	Captain
Middelburg	<i>Mooye Louisa</i>	Jean François Landolph	'Gold Coast'	De Vinck & Cie	• [33812]	•
London	<i>Columbus</i>	Charles Le Moine	'Guinea'	Buse, Overman & Cie	• [33621]	•
-	<i>Bemimelijcke Theresa</i>	M.S. Millon	'Africa'	Famin & Rigoult	• [33915]	•
Le Havre	<i>Belle Arsène</i>	Ferdinand Stuellemans	-	Jacques-Joseph Chapel	• [32659]	•
Bordeaux	<i>Archiduchesse Marie Christine</i>	Arnaud Castagnet	'West Indies'	Gravier & Willems	• [33562]	•
Vlissingen	<i>Eendragt</i>	Pieter Udemans	'Surinam'	Henri Segers	• [10536]	•
Le Havre	<i>Piano Forte</i>	François Felix Dono	'Africa'	Romberg & Consors	• [32658]	•
Le Havre	<i>Frederic</i>	Pierre Goubard	'Gold Coast'	Romberg & Consors	• [32661]	•
Le Havre	<i>De Neride</i>	Charles de l'Arbre	'Guinea'	Gavanon & Cie	• [32660]	•

Source: ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184; TSTD.

TABLE 3.2 Possible foreign slave ships neutralized by merchant houses established in the Austrian Netherlands, 1780s.

Port	Vessel	Captain	Location	Owner	TSTD	
					Voyage	Captain
-	<i>Adelaide St. Florina</i>	Bodin Desplantes	'Gold Coast'	Romberg & Consors	○	●
-	<i>Expedition</i>	François Hanouet	'Senegal'	Gavanon & Cie	○	○
L'Orient	<i>Antonina</i>	Noël Pouillard	'Guinea'	Gavanon & Cie	○	○
London	<i>Archiduchesse Marie Catherine</i>	L.J. Van Iseghem	'Africa'	William Bolts	○	○
London	<i>Hertog van Saxe-Teschén</i>	M.C. Tutel	'Africa'	William Bolts	○	○
Bordeaux	<i>Ville de Bruxelles</i>	A. Vandenberghen	'East Africa'	Widow Michiel van Schoor & fils	○	○
Nantes	<i>Brabant</i>	Henry De Vries	'East Africa'	Widow Michiel van Schoor & fils	○	○
Dunkirk	<i>Entreprise</i>	Pierre Reynders	'East Africa'	Widow Michiel van Schoor & fils	○	○
Bordeaux	<i>Le Courier Impérial</i>	Etienne Buco	'East Africa'	Widow Michiel van Schoor & fils	○	○
La Rochelle	<i>L'Heureux</i>	Simon Janzekat	'East Africa'	Widow Michiel van Schoor & fils	○	○
-	<i>Eendragt</i>	Joes Langeland	'Senegal'	Schultz, Serruys, Tamm & Co	○	○
Nantes	<i>Drye Graeven</i>	Ledit de Bayenne	'Gold Coast'	Schultz, Serruys, Tamm & Co	○	○
-	<i>Beminnelijcke Rosa</i>	Charles Deshayes	'Africa'	Famin & Rigoult	○	●
-	<i>Vrouw Victoria</i>	M. La Neuville	'Africa'	Famin & Rigoult	○	○

Source: ARA, *Secrétarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184; TSTD.



TABLE 3.3 Ships located in the Americas commanded by slaving captains, 1780s.

Port	Vessel	Captain	Reported location	Owner	TSTD	
					Voyage	Captain
Liverpool	<i>Goede Hoop</i>	William Fell	'Saint Thomas'	Guillaume Wilson	o	● [e.g. 82688]
Brest	<i>Diana Fregat</i>	Jean-Baptiste Jourel	'West Indies'	De Gruyter & Solvijns	o	● [e.g. 32733]
Le Havre	<i>Général Daun</i>	Philippe-François Drouet	'America'	Gavanon & Cie	o	● [e.g. 32676]
Nantes	<i>Aurora</i>	Thomas Butler	Saint-Domingue	De Vinck & Comp	o	● [e.g. 31045]
-	<i>Comte de Cobenzl</i>	Jean Roussel	'America'	Stival	o	● [e.g. 31186]
Bordeaux	<i>Hippopotame</i>	Jean Balguerie	'to the Indies'	Stival	o	● [e.g. 31689]
-	<i>Vriendschap</i>	John Gibson	'to St. Thomas'	John Fittrel	o	● [e.g. 80066]
Honfleur	<i>Heros</i>	Etienne Revet	'West Indies'	Famin & Rigoult	o	● [e.g. 32611]
-	<i>Hertoginne van Toscane</i>	Robert Sanson	'Martinique'	Famin & Rigoult	o	● [e.g. 31951]
Honfleur	<i>Coopman</i>	Charles Lelièvre	'West Indies'	Famin & Rigoult	o	● [e.g. 32687]
Le Havre	<i>Marie Anna</i>	Jean Baptiste Le Loup	'Islands of America'	Famin & Rigoult	o	● [e.g. 32751]
Le Havre	<i>Nærstigen</i>	Pierre Fleury	'West Indies'	P. de Gravier & Co Ant. Willems & fils	o	● [e.g. 32680]

Source: ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184; TSTD.

Additionally, the Admiralty lists contain 367 ships with a location in the Americas. These vessels may have been deployed in the direct Atlantic lanes of shipping, or, at the time of reporting, could have been in the Americas on the second leg of their slaving voyage. Without further evidence, it is impossible to pinpoint which vessels were active in the slave trade and which were not. However, Table 3.3 lists twelve more ships commanded by captains with a known earlier or future career in the slave trade, which may serve as a possible indication of the nature of their wartime shipping. In the case of Thomas Butler, for example, his ship is the same craft with which he completed slaving voyages before the war.

Due to the aforementioned methodological challenges, chronological constraints, and pervasive fraud, these lists inevitably underestimate the true number of slave ships that sailed under Imperial colours during the 1780s. This becomes strikingly evident when we shift our focus to the other side of the Atlantic. As noted in the introduction, the previous inability to select an Imperial or Flemish flag for vessels in the TSTD—stemming from the presumed insignificance of these polities in Atlantic trade—has obscured their critical roles as intermediaries and facilitators in the slave trade. For instance, in Saint-Domingue, one of the Caribbean's principal slave markets, TSTD records indicate that only French ships, with occasional exceptions for British, Danish, and Dutch vessels, arrived at Cap Français or Port-au-Prince. Primary colonial sources documenting these arrivals, however, paint a different picture. In late November 1782, for instance, the *Affiches américaines* reported the arrival of *De Lion*, an Imperial ship “with a very nice cargo of 450 Blacks hailing from the Gold Coast”.<sup>228</sup> In March 1783, the “Ostend ship *Le Columbus*” anchored in the harbour of Cap Français, “coming over from the Gold Coast in a crossing of 36 days...with a cargo of 338 Blacks”.<sup>229</sup> In January 1784, Blanchardon, Defoy & Cousin, local factors, advertised that they “were still selling 55 prime Negroes

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<sup>228</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 27 November 1782, “*Le Navire Imperial de Lion, Capitaine Winkelter, est arrive sur cette rade avec une très-belle cargaison de 450 Noirs de la Côte d’Or*”.

<sup>229</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 19 March 1783, “*Le Navire Ostendois le Colombus, venant de la Côte-d’Or en 36 jours de traversée, a mouillé en la rade du Cap avec une cargaison de 338 Noirs*”.

of the cargo of the *Aigle Impérial*...coming from Ouidah”.<sup>230</sup> These examples of Imperial vessels, none of which show up in the previously discussed admiralty lists, again suggest the important role of the Austrian Netherlands in facilitating colonial trade during these years.

Several groups benefited from this ‘masking’ service that facilitated the slave trade. First, as discussed in the previous chapter, municipal governments profited by charging a fee—typically around 25 guilders—for issuing neutral passports. Second, local notaries earned an additional income by authorizing the required documentation. As Parmentier has demonstrated, many notaries were more than willing, for the right price, to supply blank documents to foreign merchants, enabling them to neutralize their ventures without the need to dock at an Imperial port.<sup>231</sup> Lastly, and most importantly, local intermediaries, who formally claimed ownership of the slave ships, earned commissions from these transactions. This group consisted both of foreign actors, who had temporarily relocated to the Austrian Netherlands, as well as local merchants, shipowners, and otherwise enterprising citizens. Concerning the former group of people who show up among the (proven, see Table 3.1) owners of slave ships, there are for example De Vinck & Co, De Gravier & Co, and Joseph Stival, which were all commercial houses from Dunkirk. Establishing operations in nearby Ostend was a small step for these firms, and from this port they catered to the passport needs of their slaving partners elsewhere in France.<sup>232</sup> Similarly, the firm of Famin & Rigoult, a French enterprise, specialized in neutralizing the fleets of Le Havre and Honfleur. Meanwhile, the Amsterdam-based firm Gavanon & Cie is also documented as having neutralized a French slaver originating from these ports.<sup>233</sup>

Table 3.1 also demonstrates the involvement of Austrian Netherlands commercial houses in the neutralizing of foreign slave ships. This was the case with Jacques-Joseph Chapel, an industrialist and banker from Brussels who owned the *Belle Arsène*, a ship outfitted in Le Havre that forcibly transported 386 enslaved Africans from West Central Africa to Saint-Domingue.<sup>234</sup> Frederic

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<sup>230</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 7 January 1784, “MM. de Blanchardon, Defoy & Couffin donnent avis qu’ils ont encore à vendre 55 têtes de Negres de choix, provenants dela cargaison du Navire l’Aigle Impérial, Capitaine Delaly , arrivé de Juda”.

<sup>231</sup> Parmentier, ‘Profit and neutrality’, 212, 218.

<sup>232</sup> Parmentier, ‘Profit and neutrality’, 208-9.

<sup>233</sup> Parmentier, ‘Profit and neutrality’, 209.

<sup>234</sup> TSTD 32659.

Romberg, the focal point of this study, provides another example. He, too, took ownership of several Le Havre slavers. This was no coincidence, as the merchant regularly sent shipments to the Norman town and was well-connected with the region. Jean Christophe Rohner and Wichman Gustav Eichhoff, two local merchants, served as commission agents and kept a close watch on ships of the Brussels firm calling at Le Havre or the port of Honfleur, on the opposite side of the Seine River. In 1781 alone, Rohner & Eichhoff sent close to a hundred letters to Brussels comprising news of the arrival and departures of ships, buying opportunities to expand Romberg's fleet, weather conditions (and the corresponding delays and damages), and other eventualities. Another much-consulted correspondent was De Longuemars, cashier of the *fermes du tabac*, whose letters (43 in 1781) served as a useful back-up and cross-check to Rohner & Eichhoff's correspondence. Romberg and his son, Chrétien, kept the bonds tight by their occasional physical presence in Normandy. In May 1781, for example, Romberg visited Le Havre, Honfleur, La Hougue and Caen. He returned to France shortly after, as an extension of the voyage he made together with Emperor Joseph II (see Chapter 9).<sup>235</sup>

TABLE 3.4 Foreign slave ships neutralized by Romberg, 1782.

Year	Port	Vessel	Captain	Ton	Enslaved Africans	
					Emb.	Disemb.
1782	Le Havre	<i>Piano Forte</i>	François Felix Dono	85	310	266
1782	Le Havre	<i>Frederic</i>	Pierre Goubard	116	367	313
–	–	<i>Adelaide St. Florina</i>	Bodin Desplantes	220	–	–

Source: ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184; SAG, *Koophandel*, 154bis/1-2; TSTD.

During the American War of Independence, the Imperial firm neutralized several vessels lying in Le Havre harbour which were engaged in the slave trade, probably in league with local merchants. In February 1782, for instance, the firm neutralized the *Piano Forte*, which forcibly transported 310 enslaved Africans to Cap Français. According to Delobette, the expedition was realized in collaboration with the widow Féray, one of the old, protestant slaving houses of Le Havre.<sup>236</sup> A second vessel was the (perhaps not quite accidentally named)

<sup>235</sup> See KBR, Ms. 19,959.

<sup>236</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184; Edouard Delobette, *Ces messieurs du Havre. Négociants, commissionnaires et armateurs de 1680 à 1830* (Caen 2005) 668.

*Frederic*, prepared by Eichhoff and (at least on paper) owned by Romberg. Pierre Goubard, the ship's captain, embarked 367 prisoners in Badagry, a port on the Gold Coast, and forcibly transported them to Martinique.<sup>237</sup> Augustin Simon, a merchant from Nantes, addressed Romberg to neutralize his *Adelaide St. Florina* and used the Imperial papers to enable his captain to safely trade slaves in Africa.<sup>238</sup> Romberg charged his usual 1 percent commission, and purchased an additional share of 2/35 in the venture.<sup>239</sup>

### Partners in Imprisoning: Outfitting Slave Ships in Ostend

All slave ships and possible slave ships discussed in the previous section, like so many of the vessels flying an Imperial flag during the 1780s, never saw Ostend, Bruges, Nieuwpoort, or Ghent as a harbour. Many other Africa-going vessels, however, were outfitted in the Austrian Netherlands. Putting into Ostend before departure was necessary to acquire the necessary documents and ship's papers if the foreign merchant in question did not have the right local contacts. Yet an Imperial intermediate stop could also give more credibility to the claimed Imperial ownership and could obscure the itinerary of the ship when conducting trade between two belligerent parties. It also enabled foreign merchants to access the pool of maritime labour available in Ostend—a town where recruitment was not hindered by competition from the Navy or depleted by the imprisonment of large groups of maritime workers in foreign prisons following capture. Mariners from the Austrian Netherlands provided the

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The captain was François Felix Dono, see TSTD, 32658. For more on the Féray family, see Eric Noël, 'Les Féray, des négriers protestants aux Barons d'Empire (du milieu XVIIème au milieu XIXème)', *Cahiers Havrais de Recherche Historique* 55:1 (1995) 145-68.

<sup>237</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184; TSTD, 32661. The voyage took the life of 54 enslaved Africans, as well as eight crew members and the captain. The return of the ship to Le Havre in September 1784 created quite a diplomatic incident, when neither Eichhoff, by now bankrupted, nor Romberg seemed to be inclined to settle with the widows and children of the deceased crew members, see ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Delahaye to the Maritime Trade Committee (Le Havre, 24 October 1784).

<sup>238</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184. Desplantes' previous four slaving journeys (TSTD 30967, 31000, 31026, and 33296) during the 1770s are part of the TSTD, but the one under an Imperial flag seemingly slipped from the record. It might still be the case that Desplantes was only conducting commodity trade in West Africa, but his track record suggests otherwise.

<sup>239</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 62 r.

additional advantage of contributing to the ship's status as a neutral vessel.<sup>240</sup> The outfitting of slave ships in Ostend, Bruges, or Ghent put a leverage on the number of Austrian Netherlands citizens profiting from this particular trade compared to when these vessels were prepared in foreign ports. While municipal governments, notaries, and local middlemen continued to benefit, now also a vast amount of local craftsmen, labourers, insurers, and shopkeepers earned from the trade simply by the sheer amount of goods and services a slaving vessel needed during the outfitting process (see Chapter 5).

Table 3.5 lists 23 ships that departed from Ostend for destinations in Africa between 1780 and 1784. While some of these ships participated in the commodity trades, seeking ivory, gum Arabic, gold dust, or beeswax, the majority participated in the slave trade. The House of Romberg, involved in at least fourteen of these expeditions, was by far the largest participant in the Austrian Netherlands' Africa trade. The owners of the other ventures are more difficult to identify. The *Magle Gaard* had arrived from Copenhagen before entering Ostend harbour, while the *Joannes* was meant to go to that town after completing its journey to Africa and thence Saint-Thomas. As both itineraries indicate a Danish owner, the pair of ships was probably owned by Frederick De Coninck, a Danish slave trader who also partnered with Romberg (cf. *infra*).<sup>241</sup> The *Brugsche Welvaeren* was owned by the commercial house of Mason, Blundell & Masterson. This was only one ship outfitted for the slave trade in Ostend, but as Dirk Jacobs has demonstrated, André Bogaert, a carpenter from Bruges, provided his British contacts with many more ship's papers which were later employed in the triangular trade.<sup>242</sup> The *Jalousie* shipwrecked off the coast of France, leaving only the captain and two mariners alive, while the *Pax & Libertas* (TSTD: *Vrede en Liberteit*) forcibly transported 130 enslaved Africans

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<sup>240</sup> Villiers, *Le commerce colonial*, 257-60. Ostend, however, would soon become a place in its own right where shipowners and captains vied for each other's sailors, significantly bidding up wages in the process, see Pannier, 'Reaping the returns', forthcoming. See also Chapter 5.

<sup>241</sup> The *Magle Gaard* passed the Sound on 25 February 1781 with tobacco and East India goods, see STRO. The *Johannes* went down with all hands off Dover on 18 April 1782, see UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 22 April 1782. See also Parmentier, 'Profit and neutrality', 215 for the link between Frederick de Coninck and the Austrian Netherlands.

<sup>242</sup> Jacobs, 'Geopolitiek en sociaal kapitaal', 115-58.

to Surinam and was thus presumably owned by Dutch merchants.<sup>243</sup> Of all the other ships, the fate, ownership or commercial goals are unclear.

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<sup>243</sup> For the sinking of the *Jalousie*, see UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 6 May 1782. For the itinerary of the *Pax & Libertas*, see TSTD 11762.

TABLE 3.5 Vessels departing from Ostend and bound for West Africa, 1780-83.

<i>Departure</i>	<i>Vessel</i>	<i>Captain</i>	<i>Slave trade</i>	<i>TSTD</i>	<i>Romberg</i>
4 December 1780	<i>Marie-Antoinette</i>	Kors Neurenberg	●	○*	●
25 December 1780	<i>Prince Charles</i>	Johan Weickaert	●	○	●
30 March 1781	<i>Deugdelijke Sophia</i>	Gerd Gerdson	●	○	●
1 May 1781	<i>Magle Gaard</i>	J.C. From	—	○	○
2 December 1781	<i>Comte de Flandre</i>	Jean Hagueron	○	○	●
23 March 1782	<i>États de Brabant</i>	Jean Le Sens	●	○*	●
25 March 1782	<i>Aimable Cathérine</i>	Nicholas Parowell	○	○	●
25 March 1782	<i>Olijboom</i>	Pieter Gregnet	—	○	○
26 March 1782	<i>Joannes</i>	J.B. Borreman	—	○	○
18 April 1782	<i>Jalousie</i>	Antoine Tempié	—	○	○
30 May 1782	<i>Brugsche Welvaeren</i>	Thomas Wallace	●	○	○
18 June 1782	<i>Vos</i>	K. Barrera	—	○	○
27 July 1782	<i>Bellotjes</i>	Jan Hendrik Vooght	—	○	○
4 December 1782	<i>Empereur &amp; Roi</i>	Jean Lambert	○	○	●
4 December 1782	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	Nicholas Louvet	●	○*	●
15 February 1783	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i>	Jean-Pierre Barrabé	●	○*	●
20 March 1783	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	Simon Le Coq	●	●	●
12 April 1783	<i>Prince de Starhemberg</i>	Francies Butte	●	○*	●
19 April 1783	<i>Vlaensch Zeepaerd</i>	Guillaume Constantin	●	○*	●
19 April 1783	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	Armand Lacoudrais	●	●	●
1 July 1783	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	Pierre Destrais	●	○*	●
12 September 1783	<i>Prosperine</i>	G. Garner	—	○	○
16 September 1783	<i>Pax &amp; Libertas</i>	Henry Delmar/Ditman	●	●	○

Source: UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 1780-83. \*Has since been added.



The operations of fourteen vessels listed in Table 3.5 were facilitated, realized, or funded by Frederic Romberg or the subsidiary branches of his firm. Most ships aimed to conduct slave trade: between them, according to my research, they resulted in the abduction of 2,651–3,218 prisoners from Africa, of whom 1,938–2,628 survived the crossing to Havana, different ports of Saint-Domingue, and several places on the Leeward Islands.<sup>244</sup> I categorize Romberg’s fourteen expeditions into two groups, based on chronology and their primary site of operations in the Caribbean. The first group consists of six vessels outfitted between the winter of 1780 and the spring of 1782 in partnership with foreign merchants. Most expeditions were destined for Upper West Africa and were relatively limited in size, using small ships and employing small crews (Table 3.6). As I show in this section, during this particular period of involvement in the Africa trades, Romberg assumed a commissioners’ role by charging a neutrality fee, though often complemented by a small or large stake in the ship’s profits. The eight remaining ships, which departed from Ostend from December 1782 onwards, belonged to what I call the ‘Spanish phase’ of Romberg’s Africa ventures. This much more ambitious phase will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

TABLE 3.6 Romberg’s ships of the commission phase, 1780-82.

<i>Departure</i>	<i>Vessel</i>	<i>Ton</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Destination</i>	<i>Trade</i>
4 December 1780	<i>Marie-Antoinette</i>	80-90	13-16	Îles de Los/Guadeloupe	slaving
25 December 1780	<i>Prince Charles</i>	120	10-11	Îles de Los/‘Caribbean’	slaving
30 March 1781	<i>Deugdelijke Sophia</i>	–	–	‘Guinée’/Guadeloupe	slaving
2 December 1781	<i>Comte de Flandre</i>	70	7	West Africa	ivory
23 March 1782	<i>États de Brabant</i>	170	–	West Africa	slaving
25 March 1782	<i>Lieve Catharina</i>	220	–	West Africa	gum

*Source:* See Appendix A.3-A.8.

<sup>244</sup> See Appendix A.1 for a discussion of these numbers.

Early Africa expeditions of Romberg had a strong connection with Great Britain and served as a way for British merchants to continue their African operations during wartime. In 1780, Romberg's Ostend division planned to send four vessels to West Africa and thence to the Caribbean, likely to participate in slave trade.<sup>245</sup> The scheme, developed with an unknown British trader, seems to have been quite advanced as Romberg had already taken out insurance at the London firm of Dimsdale & Clay, but eventually the project was abandoned for unknown reasons.<sup>246</sup> Some months later, however, Romberg's firm struck a new deal with a merchant called Miles Barber. This time, the plan did result in the launch of two expeditions, the *Marie-Antoinette* and the *Prince Charles* (see Table 3.6).

Miles Barber was a merchant originally from Liverpool. In 1754, Barber had established a slaving factory near the Îles de Los and had permanently anchored an 800-ton vessel there to store trading goods and enslaved Africans, waiting to be shipped overseas. Over the ensuing decades, Barber would extend his small 'slaving empire' in the region to thirteen additional prison ships and coastal settlements. In this way, the merchant could tap into the supply routes of enslaved people and commodities which ran deep into the riverine interior of Upper West Africa. Barber's outpost became an important entrepot for slave trade, as well as a way station where European slave ships put in for stores and repairs on their way to slaving markets further south.<sup>247</sup>

The settlements established by Barber and the local British agents who maintained them, were entirely reliant on the metropolis for building materials, trading commodities, and certain kinds of provisions. Therefore, the merchant could not afford to patiently wait out the disruption of shipping lanes due to the American War of Independence. Moreover, the high demand and soaring prices for enslaved labour in the Caribbean presented an opportunity that Barber found impossible to ignore. From the beginning of the war, therefore, the merchant—who by 1780 had established a partnership with the London

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<sup>245</sup> To wit, the *Oostende*, the *Prince de Ligne*, the *Theresa*, and the *Maximilien François*.

<sup>246</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 109/556.

<sup>247</sup> Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford 1970) 249; Yvan Debbašch, 'L'espace du Sierra-Léone et la politique française de traite à la fin de l'Ancien Régime', *Colloque International sur la traite des noirs* (Nantes 1985), III, 1-7; Melinda Elder, *Slave Trade and the Economic Development of 18th-Century Lancaster* (Edinburgh 1992) 147-50; Melinda Elder, 'The Liverpool Slave Trade, Lancaster and its Environs', in: David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles, eds. *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* (Liverpool 2007) 121, 131. See also Chapter 8.

businessmen Samuel Hartley—began setting up slaving schemes with French merchants, regardless of the ongoing hostilities between Britain and France.<sup>248</sup> Additionally, he sought partnerships with Imperial traders, and spent considerable time in Ostend for that purpose.

In cooperation with Romberg's Ostend branch, Barber outfitted the *Marie-Antoinette* in the fall of 1780. The ship left Ostend in December, making its way to Barber's factory on the Îles de Los where Kors Neurenberg, the ship's captain, embarked about 200 enslaved Africans in exchange for his complete cargo of European commodities.<sup>249</sup> Barber's local agent, James Edward Colley—either as a sign of the secrecy of the affair or the disrupted communication channels during wartime—seems to have been unaware about the ownership of the *Marie-Antoinette*. In several letters addressed to British merchants (among whom Barber and Hartley) and handed over to Neurenberg for postage in the Caribbean, Colley wrote that he had been forced to trade with Romberg's captain because he had been in dire need of building materials, but that he was "very Griev'd" to see "those Foreigners take the Load".<sup>250</sup>

Yet, clearly, the commercial goals of the *Marie-Antoinette* went further than simply supplying Barber's African offices: the merchant also sought to profit from trade with markets he was prohibited from visiting. Although the *Marie-Antoinette* was officially bound either to Curaçao or Sint-Eustatius, at the time two neutral ports, her real destination was the French island of Guadeloupe. Typically, such schemes were kept a secret by the captain and the shipowner.<sup>251</sup> On the *Marie-Antoinette* as well, the crew was only informed of going to Guadeloupe when sailing into the Caribbean, as Laurens Holm, the ship's mate, later related in his examination:

That when the s[ai]d captain told [me] the said Cargo was to be delivered at Guadeloupe it surprized [me] very much [and I] told the Captain it appeared very Commical...had [I] have known the said Brig ...was going to any Port belonging to the King of France [I] would not have come with him.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> See for instance the correspondence between Barber and Delahaye in ADM, E 2406.

<sup>249</sup> See Appendix A.3.

<sup>250</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*, Colley to Hartley (Îles de Los, 3 February 1781) and Colley to Barrow (Îles de Los, 3 February 1781).

<sup>251</sup> Schnakenbourg, *Entre la guerre et la paix*, Chapter 2.

<sup>252</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*, Examination of Lorens Holm (Bassetterre, 8 March 1781).

James Hill, a mariner, told his examiners how Neurenberg was paranoid about several letters on board which presumably revealed the real destination of the voyage. The captain had a habit of hiding these documents as soon as another ship appeared on the horizon:

some little time before the s[ai]d Privateer's Boat came on Board...the Captain...came down in the Cabbin where [I] was lying Sick and took the said Letter out of his Pocket Book & said to [me] "here Jan put up this Letter carefully for me". That [I] took the said Letter & put it in one of [my] Pockets, but as the said Letter was very large, a part of it could be seen outside of [my] Pockett, That very shortly after that the Captain Observed that the said Letter was too large for [my] Pocket...the said Captain took it and put it in his Bossom & tyed a handkerchief round his Belly in Order...to Conceal the said Letter.<sup>253</sup>

Not only did Barber use his partnership with Romberg to conduct his slave trade and provision his factories, it appears, he also used it to trade with the enemy.

The *Prince Charles*, departing a month after the *Marie-Antoinette*, was the second expedition stemming from the Romberg-Barber collaboration. The *Prince* was a tiny 25-ton sloop owned by the Ostend bailiff Schottey, which was chartered by the two merchants for a second voyage to the Îles de Los and the Caribbean. Schottey described Barber as someone "*who collaborates a lot with the House of Mr. Romberg*".<sup>254</sup> After leaving Ostend, the *Prince* put into Cowes on the Isle of Wight for what officially was storm damage (the traditional excuse for illicit port calls) but what seemed to be a pre-planned intermediate stop: the *Prince* embarked eight cannons, several British mariners, a British passenger, and scores of letters addressed to British merchants.<sup>255</sup> Rather unsurprisingly, shortly after leaving the English Channel, the *Prince* was captured by a Spanish

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<sup>253</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*, Examination of James Hill (Basseterre, 13 March 1781).

<sup>254</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489/12, Letter from bailiff Schottey (Ostend, 17 May 1781). Romberg was not the only firm which worked with Miles Barber. In August 1782, the merchant planned to fit out another ship to West Africa from Ostend, the *Empereur* commanded by John Grell. This time he teamed up with the Austrian Netherlands firm of Overman & Cie (as we have seen, Romberg's competitors in the transit trade towards Germany and Italy), but there is no material proof the ship actually sailed, see ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401.

<sup>255</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2159-19. See also Appendix A.4.

privateer as she looked too much like a British ship and had thrown all her papers overboard during the chase. Although Romberg angrily signalled the capture to the government, Kaunitz held similar opinions to the privateer's crew and opted to intervene only to a limited extent. According to the Imperial Chancellor "*the case of the Flemish ship Prince Charles, arrested in Spain, looks a lot like one of these trade speculations which make the Ostenders lose their credit in England and which will bring them the same fate in Spain and France...if our Merchants choose to meddle in malicious business of this kind, it is wholly up to them to try and get out of it*".<sup>256</sup>

In March 1781, Romberg's Ostend offices dispatched the *Deugdelijke Sophia* to "the coasts of Guinea".<sup>257</sup> This particular ship, which arrived back in Ostend in May 1782, was the result of a Dutch-Danish partnership. While the *Sophia* was on Romberg's account, she was freighted by De Coninck & Co, a trading firm headed by Frederic De Coninck.<sup>258</sup> De Coninck was a merchant and shipowner whose family originated in the Southern Netherlands but who had been based in Copenhagen since 1763 and whose commercial activities had become one of the most extensive in Denmark.<sup>259</sup> Known for his dexterity in exploiting shifting political circumstances and instrumentalising Danish neutrality on the high seas, De Coninck was primarily active in the India trades, but also showed interest in West Africa—especially during the 1780s.<sup>260</sup>

Denmark's maritime commerce, which through its freeports in the Caribbean contained a significant Atlantic contingent, had since long been relying on a strategy of steering clear of conflicts among the major European powers. During wartime, Danish merchants and shipowners picked up the slack in the trade of the belligerent nations through neutral shipping. During the

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<sup>256</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489/12, Kaunitz to Starhemberg (Vienna, 5 July 1781), "*le cas du Navire Flamand le Prince Charles, arrêté en Espagne, a tout l'air d'une de ces spéculations de commerce qui font perdre aux Ostendois leur Crédit en Angleterre et qui leur attireront le même sort en Espagne et en France...si nos Négocians s'embarquent dans de mauvaises affaires de cette espèce, c'est à eux aussi à chercher de s'en tirer*".

<sup>257</sup> See Appendix A.5.

<sup>258</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Ryckx, sr., 103/191.

<sup>259</sup> van Eyck van Heslinga, 'De vlag dekt de lading', 107.

<sup>260</sup> Ole Feldbæk, *India Trade under the Danish Flag, 1772-1808. European Enterprise and Anglo-Indian Remittance and Trade* (Odense 1969) 68-70; Ole Feldbæk 'Dutch Batavia Trade via Copenhagen, 1795-1807. A Study of Colonial Trade and Neutrality', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 21:1 (1973) 46-7; Knud Klem, 'Om Fr. De Conincks', 94-121.

American War of Independence, Denmark again claimed neutrality and joined the League of Armed Neutrality. Yet like the Austrian Netherlands, it was wary of exploiting its neutrality too much lest it should provoke the anger of Great Britain. The Danish Monarchy, therefore, originally forbade its subjects to venture into too ambitious schemes of neutral shipping—for example fitting out formerly Dutch vessels under Danish flag. De Coninck, seeing his far-reaching colonial ambitions thwarted, threatened the government to move his business to the Austrian Netherlands. Eventually the merchant could exert enough political pressure to shift government policy in his favour, but this was only in the summer of 1781—the fitting out of the *Deugdelijke Sophia* half a year earlier through the Imperial conduit of Romberg’s firm, therefore, served as a provisional solution.<sup>261</sup>

Between December 1781 and March 1782, Romberg outfitted three more vessels for West Africa. In contrast with the previous expeditions, the foreign partners now involved French merchants, particularly traders based in the Norman port towns of Le Havre and Honfleur. The three ships also presented the first outfits of Romberg & Consors, the Ghent subsidiary managed by Bapst, Schepers, and Carpentier. When war began to disrupt trade routes, and the Dutch Republic’s entry into the conflict compromised the neutrality of its flag, Norman merchants started reaching out to Romberg to explore potential partnerships under an Imperial flag. Discussions with Jacques Chauvel, Louis Le Grand, and Jean Béziers, in particular, progressed significantly, with some evolving into concrete ventures.

It is unclear when the ties with Chauvel were established. The first surviving letter stems from May 1781, but it is clear both men were by then familiar with each other. Very likely he and Romberg had met in person, for example in Paris. In any case, they would continue to do so, as shown by the occasional (and to the historian, frustrating) mentions of the likes of “in Accordance of the Conversation we had earlier”, “in two or three hours of good conversation we will be able to thrash out the details of this”, or “we will leave

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<sup>261</sup> Ole Feldbæk, *Dansk neutralitetspolitik under krigen 1778 - 1783: studier i regeringens prioritering af politiske og økonomiske interesser* (Copenhagen 1971), especially 145-55 for the extensive English summary. See 104-10 for De Coninck’s disagreement with the government’s commercial policies.

for Ostend and surely Visit you in Brussels”.<sup>262</sup> As described in the introduction, Chauvel proposed to Romberg to collaborate in sending two vessels down the coast of Guinea, one acquiring commodities and one participating in the slave trade. Messages went back and forth on the topic all throughout 1781, but with the material correspondence ending in the same year, it is unclear if the project ever materialized.<sup>263</sup>

With Louis Le Grand such was certainly the case. No material proof of both men’s commercial ties remains in Romberg’s collection of correspondence, but Le Grand likely corresponded with Romberg & Consors. Two expeditions can be linked with the Norman merchant: the *Comte de Flandre*, which left Ostend for West Africa on 2 December 1781, and the *États de Brabant*, which followed suit on 23 March 1782.<sup>264</sup> Romberg & Consors owned 1/3 of the *États de Brabant*, while at least a part of the remaining equity was owned by Le Grand: the will of Jean-Baptiste-Martin Turgis, a French merchant who owned a share in the vessel, mentioned that the *États de Brabant* was “under the direction of Mrs L[oui]s Legrand and the care of Mrs Romberg and Co of Ostend, of Ghent [sic]”.<sup>265</sup> The *Comte de Flandre*, too, was presumably partly owned by Le Grand. The ship’s captain, Jean Hagueron, stated after his capture by British privateers that

he knows *only a part of the Owners* of the Ship taken to wit Mess[ieur]s Romberg, Father & Son of Brussels, Mr. Carpentier of Alost in Flanders, Mr Baspt [sic] & Mr. Schipper [sic] of Ghent [*my italics, SP*].<sup>266</sup>

The ownership details allegedly unknown to Hagueron—perhaps omitted during the examination to avoid jeopardizing the ship’s acquittal—very likely

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<sup>262</sup> KBR, Ms. 19959, Chauvel to Romberg (Paris, 6 July 1781), “*en Conformité de la Conversation que nous avons eu ensemble*”; KBR, Ms. 19959, Chauvel to Romberg (Le Havre, 13 October 1781), “*deux ou trois bonnes heures de tête à tête mettrons bien au Clair cette affaire*”, “*nous partirons pour Ostende et nous irons surement vous rendre Visite a Bruxelles*”.

<sup>263</sup> KBR, Ms. 19959, Chauvel to Romberg (Le Havre, 10 September and 13 October 1781).

<sup>264</sup> Le Grand would also play an important role in the outfitting of two slave ships in Le Havre bound for the Indian Ocean, see Appendix A.2.

<sup>265</sup> Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime (henceforth ADSM), 201BPJuridiction de Rouen, 550: “*sous la direction de Mrs L[oui]s Legrand et aux soins de Mrs Romberg et Co d’Ostende, de Gand*”. See also Dardel, *Rouen et Le Havre*, 170. Romberg’s 1/3 part in the vessel is mentioned in AdP, *Faillissements*, D5B6, 336, 9 r.

<sup>266</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron.

included Le Grand. He was the same merchant who had provided Hagueron with the vessel to transport it to Ghent and had previously hired the captain for earlier voyages.<sup>267</sup>

The third part of Romberg's Norman connection consisted of the firm of Béziers & Carmichael.<sup>268</sup> A letter from Jean Béziers to a Ghent merchant in August 1781 confirmed his firm's association with Romberg: "*It is known to you that I have befriended the House of Romberg of your town [which has sent voyages] to the Coast of Guinea. If your house wants a stake in these, I can Provide you with a small interest*"<sup>269</sup>. Together with Romberg & Consors, Béziers' firm organised the voyage of the *Lieve Catharina*. The ship would go on to purchase almost 10,000 pounds of gum Arabic on the African seaboard, a cargo in which Romberg & Consors was invested for a 1/16 part.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Le Grand fitted out approximately 64 slaving expeditions towards Africa between 1764 and 1793, and had owned the *Arlequin*, Hagueron's ship that ended up being captured by the British in 1778. After his employment by Romberg was concluded, Hagueron returned to his former employer to command the *Alexandre* towards West Central Africa. Pierre Grémont, the mate of the *Comte de Flandre*, became captain of Le Grand's *Belle* in 1791, which might indicate that the two, like Hagueron, were acquainted before Romberg hired him.

<sup>268</sup> Delobette, *Ces Messieurs du Havre*, 1336, 1626, 1824. According to Delobette, Béziers was born in the Dutch Republic and, during the early 1780s, became an associate of the Ostend firm Van Iseghem & Co, which might explain his acquaintance with Romberg. In 1783, he partnered with Jacques Carmichaël and Corneille Donovan to create a new trading firm, which in 1785 would establish a partnership with the Liverpool merchant Miles Barber—in his turn, as we have seen, a business relation of Romberg.

<sup>269</sup> SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301/7, Béziers & Co to Van Nuffel (Nantes, 11 August 1781), "*Il vous est connu que J'ai fait une amy La maison de Romberg chez vous pour la Côte Guinée. Si votre maison veut y des Interets je vous la Cederai un petit interest*".

<sup>270</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 10 r. The 1 percent commission on the return of the cargo yielded 2,067 *livres* for Romberg, which implies a total return of 206,700 *livres*. As the firm received an additional 12,976 *livres* for her share in the returns, the implied investment is 6.2 percent or 1/16.



## Conclusion

In the previous chapter, we witnessed how Alleyne Fitz-Herbert, the British envoy to Brussels, observed that “*the Merchants of this Country [are] treading very fast in the steps of their Neighbours the Dutch...in supplying the French West-India-Islands with provisions and in bringing home their produce*”.<sup>271</sup> This chapter has abundantly proven how the Austrian Netherlands played yet another crucial role in the upkeep of the Atlantic plantation complex during the American War of Independence: the facilitation of the slave trade and the forced transportation of enslaved labour to the sugar and cotton fields of the Americas. Thousands of enslaved Africans made an Atlantic crossing enabled by the safety of the Imperial ensign, were forced to perform humiliating ‘dances’ under an Austrian Netherlands flag, or emerged in the Caribbean from their dark, cramped, and disease-ridden living quarters to the sight of Ostend’s red-and-yellow.

The beneficiaries in the Southern Netherlands of this service to the Atlantic complex were numerous, ranging from municipal governments over notaries to merchants. Some were ignorant of their participation in the Atlantic system, others actively leveraged their existing international networks or struck new transnational partnerships in attempt to profit from it. Romberg certainly belonged to the second category. His international address book provided him with easy inroads into the colonial empires of other nations, as he served as a conduit for merchants wishing to challenge the commercial policies (De Coninck) and the trade restrictions (Barber) imposed by the states they were subject to. Romberg’s ventures thus breathed the same transnational dynamics Gottman identified as typical for nations on the outskirts of the Atlantic system. They differed in range: in their most passive shape, the firm simply provided neutral documents and ‘paper armour’ to foreign traders, while pocketing a commission fee. At other times, the firm increased its involvement by acquiring a direct material stake in its ventures and facilitating the outfitting of ships.

Particularly when Romberg & Consors entered the business, the firm’s involvement became ever more significant: while early ships like the *Marie-Antoinette* or the *Deugdelyke Sophia* had barely spent a month in Ostend and

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<sup>271</sup> TNA, FO, 2, Alleyne Fitz-Herbert to the Foreign Office (Brussels, 3 August 1781).

had simply put into the Imperial port to get the necessary papers and neutralize part of the crew, both the *Comte de Flandre* and the *États de Brabant* spent four months preparing their voyages in Ghent before departing on the high seas. Moreover, Romberg & Consors seems to have acquired a sizeable stake in both vessels—an increase in risk and engagement which, in hindsight, signalled what lay ahead.

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For nine months after the *Lieve Catharina* departed from Ostend, no Romberg-owned ship sailed for Africa. Meanwhile, however, in their offices on the Kouter in Ghent, the associates of Romberg & Consors were plotting an even grander scheme of plying Atlantic trade lanes. Yet, instead of looking to the colonial empires of France and Britain, this time they were looking to Spain's.



CHAPTER FOUR  
“This most fortunate event for our Trade”  
Contracting with the Spanish Court, 1782-1785

“**W**E HAVE JUST RECEIVED, *by grace of the King of Spain, a privilege to send eight vessels to Havana with a cargo of slaves...I can think of nothing more urgent than to inform you of this most fortunate event for our Trade*”.<sup>272</sup> Thus wrote Pierre François Schepers, associate of Romberg & Consors of Ghent, hurriedly on 13 November 1782 to one of the firm’s investors. The decision of Charles III of Spain to grant a licence to the Austrian Netherlands firm fitted into an increased openness to foreign trade during the American War of Independence, a period often regarded as laying the groundwork for the emergence of free trade by the decade’s end. More broadly, the licence underscored Madrid’s enduring, century-long reliance on foreign traders in the slave trade, despite concerted efforts in the latter half of the eighteenth century to assert Spanish control over this crucial economic sector. At the same time, the generosity of the privilege—eight ships—extended to an Imperial outsider to the Atlantic system was an

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<sup>272</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Schepers to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 13 November 1782): “*Nous venons de recevoir par grace tres destingtive du roy d’Espagne, P[a]r un privilege de pouvoir envoyer 8 navires a L’Havane avec leur Cargueson en Negres...Je n’aye rien de plus empressé que de vous donner part de Cet heureuse evenement pour notre Commerce*”.

expression of the Spanish government's growing unease with its dependence on rival Caribbean powers, particularly Great Britain, for slave imports. Although the slave trade during the American War of Independence has become progressively better understood, the role of Romberg in this business remains little explored in current scholarship, despite its significance for this decisive period in the history of the Spanish Empire.

This chapter explores the participation of outsiders in the Spanish Empire through the case-study of Romberg & Consors. I first place Romberg's operations within the long-term evolution of Spain's slave trade, especially on Cuba. I then show how the associates of Romberg & Consors navigated the Spanish imperial administration and leveraged their position of 'outsiders' in order to acquire privileges from the Crown. I show how these permits resulted in the forced disembarkation of approximately 1,500 people into Havana over the course of barely two years, making Romberg one of the largest importers of bonded labour during this timeframe. By meeting the needs of plantation owners, his firm fueled the long-term pleas of Cuban elites for free trade, pleas which would eventually be answered in 1789 and firmly put the Spanish Empire on its course of becoming an industrial slaving complex during the nineteenth century. Lastly, I investigate the stakeholders of Romberg's Spanish venture. I conclude that the multinational character evident in the early phase of his slaving business remained intact, but that the Austrian Netherlands component became much more significant, both from Romberg and from local private investors.

### Opportunities for Outsiders: the Spanish Empire, Cuba, and Slave Trade

Ever since the Crown of Castile had claimed dominion over large parts of the Americas, it had attempted to retain the spoils of colonial trade for its own subjects. This goal was further reinforced by mercantilist statecraft doctrines, which emphasized the accumulation of precious metals and a trade surplus as the primary basis of state power. To this end, commercial institutions were established from the sixteenth century onwards to monopolize the produce and profits of the colonies, while prohibiting foreign involvement in American

markets. In practice, however, Spain's domestic economy struggled to provide the capital and manufactures necessary to provision the overseas territories and keep the *carrera de Indias* afloat.<sup>273</sup> Therefore, from the very start, Madrid was forced to condone foreign interloping in its Atlantic Empire—"no pero sí" (no but yes), as Antonio García-Baquero González aptly summarized these conflicting policy aims.<sup>274</sup>

In broad terms, scholars have identified three strategies adopted by foreigners seeking to participate in the Spanish Empire: either they appropriated existing monopolistic structures, legally circumvented them, or either they outright—and illegally—defied them. Concerning the first strategy, the political economy of the Spanish Empire (as well as the Portuguese) was characterized by a system in which the Crown extensively outsourced its property rights over markets or fiscal revenues to private parties. In return for a contribution to Madrid's state coffers, these individuals could exploit colonial resources for a prior agreed-upon term. It was not uncommon for foreigners to compete for such *asientos*, especially in the slave trade (cf. infra).<sup>275</sup> The second approach consisted of two methods: using the services of native intermediaries or applying for naturalisation. While the first was generally easier than the second, both approaches allowed foreign merchants to ship their merchandise overseas.<sup>276</sup> Lastly, numerous merchants elected not to abide by either of these strategies and resorted to sailing directly into colonial harbours carrying contraband. Colonists welcomed these cheap supplies, and often colonial

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<sup>273</sup> John Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (London 1966) 239-250, 307-8; Geoffrey Walker, *Spanish Politics and Imperial Trade, 1700-1789* (London 1979) 1-15; Antonio García-Baquero González, 'Los extranjeros en el tráfico con indias: entre el rechazo legal y la tolerancia funcional', in: M.B. Villar García and P. Pezzi Cristóbal eds., *Los extranjeros en la España moderna* (Málaga 2003) 75-99; Xabier Lamikiz, *Trade and trust in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world: Spanish merchants and their overseas networks* (Woodbridge 2013) 1-21.

<sup>274</sup> García-Baquero González, 'Los extranjeros', 4.

<sup>275</sup> George Scelle, *Histoire politique de la traite négrière aux Indes de Castille: contrats et traités d'Assiento* (Paris 1906).

<sup>276</sup> John Everaert, *De internationale en koloniale handel der Vlaamse firma's te Cadix 1670-1700* (Bruges 1973); Hugues Jahier, 'El atractivo gaditano para los suizos de la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII del capitalismo mercantil hasta los pequeños probadores de fortuna', in: Villar García and Pezzi Cristóbal eds., *Los extranjeros*, 401-16; Arnau Bartolomei, *La Bourse et la vie. Destin collectif et trajectoires individuelles des marchands français de Cadix, de l'instauration du comercio libre à la disparition de l'empire espagnol (1778-1824)* (Marseille 2007); Ana Crespo Solana, *Mercaderes atlánticos: redes del comercio flamenco y holandés entre Europa y el Caribe* (Córdoba 2009).

officials, either under pressure from local elites or out of proper interest, turned a blind eye to illicit trade. Moreover, Spain's colonial waters were so vast that only a minimal degree of supervision could be exercised by the naval vessels deployed in the area.<sup>277</sup>



FIGURE 4.1 Charles III, King of Spain and imperial reformer between 1759 and 1788.  
Source: Francisco de Goya, Museo del Prado.

The dawn of the eighteenth century and the accession of the Bourbon dynasty to the throne did not mark a radical departure from these practices, as foreign merchants remained omnipresent within the imperial framework. The traumatizing defeat during the Seven Years War (1756-63) awakened many in Spanish government to the fact that the empire needed drastic change. Identifying both foreign traders and manufacturers as harmful to Spanish interests, policy theorists set out to reimpose central control over the imperial domains and restructure colonial trade. These designs culminated in the *comercio libre* act of October 1765, which broke the former monopoly of Cádiz and allowed eight other port cities access to the Spanish Caribbean. The latter

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<sup>277</sup> Walker, *Spanish Politics*, 1-15.

geographical demarcation extended progressively during the following years, and by 1778 it included most of the Spanish overseas empire. The principal goal of the *comercio libre* act was to establish a protectionist framework within which Spanish industry could flourish and Spanish royal revenues would grow; in no way, 'free trade' entailed participation of foreign merchants: indeed, once again the closure of Spain's overseas territories to *extranjeros* was confirmed. Although Spanish exports to the New World did increase (albeit primarily agricultural produce) in the following decades, it proved next to impossible to decrease the role of foreign merchants.<sup>278</sup>

In no other segment of the colonial economy foreign involvement was so extensive as in the slave trade. Under the Treaties of Alcáçovas (1479) and Tordesillas (1494), Spain's sphere of influence had been confined to the western half of the globe, depriving the nation of the right to establish outposts on the African coast—and thus to conduct slave trade. Thenceforward, the Spanish Crown was dependent on foreign traders to furnish its colonies with enslaved labour. The right to import prisoners (and often, albeit illegally, commodities) soon became a coveted prize among foreign merchants. Free trade, however, was in no way permitted, and from the start, the Crown of Castile asserted a firm grip over the slave trade in order to secure revenues for the Crown and to control the population composition of the Indies.<sup>279</sup>

The contracts used to pursue these policy aims and through which merchants gained access to Spain's slaving markets in America took manyfold shapes, but two systems stand out: the *licencia* and the *asiento de negros*, or short, *asiento*. The former system was the earliest to be adopted in the Iberian Atlantic. By soliciting, purchasing or being gifted a *licencia*, a person acquired the permission to import a certain number of enslaved Africans into the Indies. The holder was, however, in no way legally obliged to use this permission, and slaving licences were freely sold, exchanged or left to expire in Spain's metropolises.<sup>280</sup> According to George Scelle, this non-binding aspect of the

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<sup>278</sup> Gabriel Paquette, *Enlightenment, governance, and Reform in Spain and its Empire, 1759-1808* (New York 2008) 93-126; Allan Kuethe and Kenneth Andrien, *The Spanish Atlantic World in the Eighteenth Century. War and the Bourbon Reforms, 1713-1796* (Cambridge 2014) 231-304.

<sup>279</sup> Lutgardo García Fuentes, 'Licencias para la introduccion de esclavos en Indias y envios desde Sevilla en el siglo XVI', *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 19:1 (1982) 4-5.

<sup>280</sup> Fuentes, 'Licencias', 5-12.



*licencia* marks the crucial difference with the system that came in vogue from the seventeenth century onwards, the *asiento*.<sup>281</sup> The *asiento* was a veritable contract, which obliged the holder to furnish the Spanish colonies with a certain number of captives for a certain period of time. In return for this much stricter stipulation, and contrary to the earlier system of licences, the *asiento* had a monopolistic character, and—at least on paper—the *asentistas* became the sole owners of the supply of captive labour in the Spanish colonies. Nevertheless, the old *licencia* system was never completely abandoned, and resurfaced at times when *asiento* holders were unable to fulfil their contracts (e.g. in wartime) or in periods in between different monopolies.<sup>282</sup>

Of all Spanish overseas possessions during the eighteenth century, Cuba was the one which craved enslaved labour the most. Cuban slavery had its origins in the sixteenth century, when enslaved Africans came to replace the indigenous labour force deployed in the island's silver and gold mines. Additionally, as Cuba served as a way station along important shipping routes, the Spanish Crown purchased 'royal slaves' to construct fortifications along the coast, build war vessels, and serve in militias.<sup>283</sup> Next to this state slavery, a considerable private demand for enslaved labour emerged and increased dramatically during the eighteenth century as Cuba's plantation economy expanded and large areas of *La Isla* came under sugar.<sup>284</sup> In 1759, there were 200 sugar plantations, while in 1778 there were 480.<sup>285</sup> Production followed apace: in the period 1760-64 it stood at 5,300 tons, whereas by 1780 the annual produce had risen to 8,430, and would reach 24,100 tons by the turn of the century.<sup>286</sup>

Cultivating sugar was an arduous and labour-intensive process. As Cuba's sugar revolution took force, planters needed an increasing number of enslaved Africans to work their expanding cane fields, as well as replace the captives who

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<sup>281</sup> Scelle, *Histoire politique*, 146.

<sup>282</sup> Bibiano Torres Ramires, *La compañía gaditana de negros* (Seville 1973) 11.

<sup>283</sup> Alejandro de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the sixteenth century* (Chapel Hill 2008) 147-53; Evelyn Jennings, 'The Sinews of Spain's American Empire: Forced Labor in Cuba from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries', in: John Donoghue and Evelyn Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires. Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500-1914* (Leiden 2016) 34-45.

<sup>284</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 168; Manuel Moreno Friginals, *El ingenio: complejo económico social cubano del azúcar* (Barcelona 2001 [1964]).

<sup>285</sup> Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana*, 284.

<sup>286</sup> Antonio Santamaría García, 'Reformas coloniales, economía y especialización productiva en Puerto Rico y Cuba, 1760-1850', *Revista de Indias* 65:235 (2005) 720-6.

had succumbed to the harsh demands of the plantation work. Spain's tightly controlled imperial framework, however, failed to deliver the bonded labourers necessary to meet the demands of plantation holders. Time and again, colonists pressed Cuban and metropolitan officials for greater imports, and to allow foreigners to trade in Havana. These foreigners were primarily British: the 30-year *asiento* won by the South Sea Company at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-13) had forged strong ties between Spanish and British traders and established a vibrant intra-American commercial system in which captive Africans were transported in large numbers, both legally and illegally, across imperial borders. These networks continued to function unabated during the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-48), which pitted Spain against Britain, and after the formal conclusion of the South Sea Company *asiento* in 1750.<sup>287</sup> The commercial ties between Spain's and Britain's Caribbean empire were strengthened still during the Seven Years' War, when Havana fell to the British in 1762. The conquest of Cuba's capital immediately prompted a wave of immigration from British merchants, who subsequently imported thousands of captives in barely ten months' time.<sup>288</sup>

As Elena Schneider has noted, however, the British occupation of Havana—which returned to the Spanish Crown after the war—proved not only a catalyst for imperial reform but also for a reassessment of slave trade in the Spanish Empire. Whereas Spanish policy makers had previously focused on South America and its mines of precious metals, it increasingly dawned on reformers that—emulating the empires of other Atlantic powers—more wealth could potentially be extracted from the empire by developing a plantation complex. A larger population of enslaved Africans was key to enabling this economic transformation. Coincidentally, two officials with roots in the Austrian Netherlands proved to be among the most vocal supporters of promoting the slave trade: Francisco de Craywinkel, whose father had been an Antwerp merchant, and Agustín Crame, a military engineer born in the Southern Netherlands. Crame in particular viewed an expanded population of slaves an important source of security for the empire, as African militias had

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<sup>287</sup> Emily Berquist Soule, 'The Spanish slave trade during the American Revolutionary War', in: Gabrielle Paquette and Gonzalo Quintero Saravia, eds., *Spain and the American Revolution. New approaches and perspectives* (New York 2020) 100-3.

<sup>288</sup> Paquette, *Enlightenment*, 118-9.

proven to be loyal soldiers—not least during the recent siege of Havana.<sup>289</sup> Lastly, the occupation of the Cuban capital had highlighted that the close commercial ties between local elites and British traders had significantly directed the former's allegiance towards Britain. If the Court could provide enough slaves to the slaveholding or slave-selling elites, so Madrid reasoned, it could disengage these merchants from their British contacts and again gear their loyalties towards King and country.<sup>290</sup>

Although Cuban merchants had petitioned to keep the liberal slave trading policies of Britain intact after Havana returned to the Spanish Crown, the Council of the Indies quickly returned to its policies of exclusive permits and *asientos*. Metropolitan authorities had become wary of the importance of British commercial networks for providing Spain's imperial realm with essential supplies, which it increasingly viewed as a major security concern.<sup>291</sup> Yet as so often, the wishes of the metropolis did not align with the realities of the colonies, and immediately after the war Cuba again quickly became reliant on British traders, both through legal as well as illicit imports.<sup>292</sup> In an effort to bring the slave trade under Spanish control, the Council of the Indies granted the *asiento* in 1765 to a partnership of Cádiz and Basque merchants known as the *Compañía Gaditana de Negros*. The *Compañía*, however, organized a 'Spanish' slave trade in name only; once again, the firm quickly became a slaving enterprise dependent on British merchant houses, which sourced their human cargoes from Caribbean entrepôts such as Jamaica, Dominica, or Barbados.<sup>293</sup> Nevertheless, as was customary, the *asentistas* failed to supply enough enslaved individuals to meet the ever-increasing demand of Cuba's planters. In a bold attempt to boost imports and take control of the slave trade, Spain subsequently acquired Annobón and Fernando Po, two islets in the Gulf of Guinea, in a treaty with Portugal. However, strong resistance from the local

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<sup>289</sup> Elena Schneider, 'African slavery and Spanish empire. Imperial Imaginings and Bourbon Reform in Eighteenth-Century Cuba and Beyond', *Journal of Early American History* 5:1 (2015) 23-5.

<sup>290</sup> Schneider, *The Occupation*, 237-8, 245-8, 256-9.

<sup>291</sup> Adrian Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America, 1763-1808* (Liverpool 2007) 67-8; Schneider, *The Occupation*, 219-65.

<sup>292</sup> Schneider, *The Occupation*, 250.

<sup>293</sup> Bibiano Torres Ramírez, *La compañía gaditana de negros* (Sevilla 1973); Nikolas Böttcher, 'Trade, War and Empire: British Merchants in Cuba, 1762-1796', in: Böttcher and Bernd Hausberger, *Dinero y negocios en la historia de América Latina: veinte ensayos dedicados a Reinhard Liehr/Geld und Geschäft in der Geschichte Lateinamerikas* (Madrid 2000) 171, 186-7; Pearce, *British Trade*, 59, 62.

population to Spain's claims of sovereignty, coupled with British military manoeuvres and a lack of experience in the slave trade, led to the swift failure of this initiative and resulted in lasting supply shortages for Cuba.<sup>294</sup>

The contract of the *Compañía Gaditana* expired in 1779, the same year Spain, aligning with France and the fledgling United States, entered the American War of Independence. This marked a disruption in the longstanding commercial ties between Cuba and its neighboring British islands, leading to a collapse in the export of slaves to Havana.<sup>295</sup> Madrid, aware of the crucial importance of bonded labour for Cuba's nascent plantation complex, tried to shore up imports by taking several steps toward a more open imperial economy. First, in 1780, the Spanish Crown allowed the introduction of enslaved Africans from neighbouring French colonies in Spanish bottoms. Over the following year, however, this source of supply proved incapable of solving the shortages of slaves on Cuba. Madrid therefore decided to impose *comercio neutro*, which relaxed the restrictions of the mercantilist framework for merchants of neutral and allied nations.<sup>296</sup> In addition to these general policies, the Crown continued to issue slaving licences to individual merchants.<sup>297</sup> Once again, the Spanish Empire in general and Cuba in particular became a commercial playground for enterprising, foreign merchants in the circum-Caribbean and in Europe's metropolises. In the space of only a few years, traders disembarked an unprecedented number of captives on the island. The massive imports of bonded labour under *comercio neutro* firmly set Cuba on a course of becoming a slave-based agricultural powerhouse, while also creating a major precedent and inspiration for the free trade act of 1789.<sup>298</sup>

Due to its importance for the long-term economic, social, and cultural history of Cuba and the Spanish imperial project, the slave trade during the American War of Independence has received ample scholarly attention, with

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<sup>294</sup> Pablo Tornero, 'Emigración, Población y Esclavitud en Cuba (1765-1817)', *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 44:1 (1987) 6-8; Schneider, *The Occupation*, 275-7; Berquist Soule, 'The Spanish slave trade', 100-3.

<sup>295</sup> Pearce, *British Trade*, 69-70.

<sup>296</sup> María Encarnación Rodríguez Vicente, 'El comercio cubano y la guerra de emancipación norteamericana', *Anuario de estudios americanos* 11:1 (1954) 72; Gloria García, 'El mercado de fuerza de trabajo en Cuba: El comercio esclavista (1760-1789)', in: *La esclavitud en Cuba* (Havana 1986) 142-4; Stanley Stein, 'Caribbean Counterpoint: Veracruz vs. Havana. War and Neutral Trade, 1797-1799', in: Jeanne Chase, ed., *Géographie du capital marchand aux Amériques 1760-1860* (Paris 1987) 21-44.

<sup>297</sup> García, 'El mercado', 142-4; Tornero, 'Emigración', 10.

<sup>298</sup> Pearce, *British Trade*, 83-94.

researchers continuing to deepen our understanding of this traffic.<sup>299</sup> Recently, Alex Borucki and José Luis Belmonte Postigo made a major contribution by providing the first exact estimate of slave imports by each nation. The authors computed a total number of 14,476 enslaved Africans disembarked in Havana over the course of four years (1781-5), mainly by American traders plying intra-Caribbean and trans-imperial slaving routes.<sup>300</sup> Nevertheless, the mercantile networks underpinning these forced migrations remain obscured, a situation compounded by the limited and, at times, unreliable information found in colonial sources. As I show in the coming pages, previous studies of the slave trade during the American War of Independence have largely disregarded the operations of one particular player organising trans-Atlantic slave trade from the outskirts of the Atlantic system: a player whose petition appeared on the desks of the Council of the Indies in the summer of 1782 and was signed with *Romberg y Consortes del comercio de Gante*.

### Working the Sinews of Power: Romberg & Consors' Business Diplomacy

In the spring of 1782, Romberg & Consors had begun with the fitting out of six slaving vessels destined for Saint-Domingue.<sup>301</sup> Around this time, however, news reached the firm of lucrative opportunities beckoning in the Spanish Caribbean. Perhaps they did so by way of Jacques Chauvel, a French contact of the firm who was also petitioning Madrid for access to Cuban slave markets during this time.<sup>302</sup> Compared with the Spanish Empire, France's colonies presented a less appealing site of operations for the firm. French planters typically paid for their slaves in colonial produce rather than in bare currency,

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<sup>299</sup> José Antonio Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el nuevo mundo y en especial en los países americano-hispanos* (Havana 1938, II) 268-9; Rodríguez Vicente, 'El comercio', 12; Juan Bosco Amores, *Cuba en la época de Ezepeleta* (Pamplona 2000) 135; Tornero, 'Emigración', 10.

<sup>300</sup> Alex Borucki and José Luis Belmonte Postigo, 'The Impact of the American Revolutionary War on the Slave Trade to Cuba', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 80:3 (2023) 493-524.

<sup>301</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to Aranda (Ghent, 17 June 1782). To wit, the *Comte de Belgioioso*, the *Zeepaerd*, the *Conseil de Flandre*, the *Négrier Impérial*, the *Roi du Congo*, and the *Piano Forte*.

<sup>302</sup> AGI, *Indiferente General*, 2820B, Chauvel & fils to the Council of the Indies (Le Havre, 20 June 1782).

and the realized profits often took years to be remitted to Europe.<sup>303</sup> In contrast, the Spanish overseas possessions abounded with cash. This applied especially to Cuba: in order to strengthen the island's position as the Spanish Empire's bulwark in the wake of the Seven Years War, the Council of the Indies ensured that substantial funds were transferred annually from the royal treasury in Veracruz, Mexico, to the state coffers in Havana. From there, these funds were distributed across other parts of the Spanish colonial realm. As authors such as Juan Marchena Fernández and Franklin Knight have shown, considerable parts of this subsidy (known as the *situado*) flowed towards non-military segments of the colonial economy, for example the sugar planting industry.<sup>304</sup> Likewise, Allan Kuethe stated that the *situados* turned Cuba into "a capital-rich island where financial liquidity abounded and where the quick-witted and the enterprising could find personal opportunity".<sup>305</sup> This was especially true during the American War of Independence, when 30 million pesos were injected into the island's economy in the space of a few years.<sup>306</sup>

In a recent paper, Cátia Antunes explored the concept of 'business diplomacy', which she defined as the "channel through which the diplomatic agency of Early Modern firms and entrepreneurs took place". Business diplomacy comprised the various ways in which businesses, both foreign and domestic, attempted to wrest commercial privileges from states by drafting petitions or bidding for contracts. As Antunes highlights, successful commercial negotiations with state administrations were entirely dependent of the firm's knowledge of, and access to, these institutions.<sup>307</sup> The actions of Carpentier, Schepers and Bapst, who began working the sinews of power in the Spanish

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<sup>303</sup> Dieudonné Rinchon, *Les armements négriers au XVIIIe siècle: d'après la correspondance et la comptabilité des armateurs et des capitaines nantais* (Brussels 1956) 99-102; Meyer, *L'armement nantais dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris 1969) 215-9; Pierre Boulle, 'Slave Trade, Commercial Organization and Industrial Growth in Eighteenth-Century Nantes', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 59:214 (1972) 48.

<sup>304</sup> Franklin Knight, 'Origins of Wealth and Sugar Revolution in Cuba, 1750-1850', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 57:1 (1977) 242-3; Juan Marchena Fernández, 'Capital, créditos e intereses comerciales a fines del periodo colonial: los cosos del sistema defensivo americano. Cartagena de Indias y el sur del Caribe', *Tiempos de America* 9:1 (2002) 3-38.

<sup>305</sup> Allan Kuethe, 'Guns, Subsidies, and Commercial Privilege: Some Historical Factors in the Emergence of the Cuban National Character, 1763-1815', *Cuban Studies* 16:1 (1986) 123-38, quote 130.

<sup>306</sup> Schneider, *The Occupation*, 288.

<sup>307</sup> Cátia Antunes, 'Early Modern Business Diplomacy: an Appraisal', *Diplomatica* 2:1 (2020) 20-7, quote 23.

Empire in the spring of 1782, are a great illustration of how business diplomacy worked in practice. Indicative of Antunes' stress on the need for knowledge on how to access power brokers, the Ghent triumvirate did not attempt to make inroads into Spain's institutional framework by petitioning the Council of the Indies directly. Rather, the firm leveraged its growing network of high-ranking ministers in Paris, strengthened in recent years through the negotiation of the aforementioned contracts with the French Navy and the *fermes générales*.

On 17 June 1782, Romberg & Consors began making inroads into the Spanish administration by petitioning Pedro Pablo Abarca de Bolea y Jiménez de Urrea, Count de Aranda, the Spanish ambassador to France. Romberg's associates notified Aranda of their willingness to redirect the six slaving vessels they were preparing in the Austrian Netherlands from France to the Spanish colonial domains. The Ghent associates made sure to cast their plan as a wartime service "*esencial para España*", providing Cuba with highly sought-after enslaved labour and sparing the colonists from the excessive prices of the slaving markets in Cap Français and the privateer-infested waters of Cuba and Saint-Domingue. In return, the firm requested exemption of all import duties on Cuba.<sup>308</sup> Aranda passed on the message to José Moñino y Redondo, the Count de Floridablanca, Spain's first minister. Floridablanca, in turn, presented it to José de Gálvez, governor of the Council of the Indies. With Cuba's supply problems in mind, Gálvez lent a ready ear to Romberg & Consors' petition, and over the summer, the Council and the Ghent firm thrashed out the details of the deal. On 22 October 1782, Madrid officially granted the firm a licence to transport enslaved Africans to Havana.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to Aranda (Ghent, 17 June 1782); AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to the Council of the Indies (Ghent, 4 November 1782). On privateer activity off Saint-Domingue, see Patrick Villiers, *Le commerce colonial*, 353-4. Spanish ambassadors served as negotiators of slaving contracts on later occasions as well: in 1784, Bernardo del Campo, envoy to Great Britain, worked out the contract of Dawson & Baker, see Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136.

<sup>309</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Floridablanca to the Council of the Indies (San Ildefonso, 30 June 1782 and 22 September 1782).



FIGURE 4.2 José Moñino, Count of Floridablanca, Spain's prime minister between 1777 and 1792, as depicted by Francisco de Goya in 1783. Perhaps he is holding letters by Romberg & Consors. *Source:* Museo del Prado.



FIGURE 4.3 José de Gálvez, president of the *Consejo de Indias* between 1775 and 1787, as depicted in 1785. On 22 October 1782, Gálvez granted Romberg permission to conduct slave trade in Havana. *Source:* Unknown artist, Museo Nacional de Historia Castillo de Chapultepec.



There were several reasons which made Romberg & Consors an attractive contracting party for the Spanish Crown. Although he had little experience in the slave trade, the Council of the Indies conceded that Romberg, as the firm's principal, at least disposed of the necessary funds to set up a slaving venture ("*una de las poderosas [casas] de los Payses Baxos Austriacos*").<sup>310</sup> Closely linked to this commercial success was Romberg's wide network, which may have served as an additional motivation for the Council: what the merchant missed in expertise, he might be able to get through his international contacts. Undoubtedly Romberg's most important trait, however, was that he was a subject of the Holy Roman Empire. Since its defeat in the Seven Years' War, Madrid, driven by both economic concerns and national security interests, sought to disentangle itself from the many traders affiliated with rival Caribbean powers operating within its overseas empire—chiefly British and French merchants, but also Portuguese, Danish and Dutch traders.<sup>311</sup> In contrast, Vienna lacked a formal empire and, despite numerous exploratory expeditions organized by the Court and countless 'bottom-up' petitions advocating the acquisition of overseas territories like Tobago, had no serious plans to pursue such ambitions.<sup>312</sup> The absence of a formal empire also meant that the Austrian Habsburgs lacked an Atlantic entrepot for their manufactures, one that could serve as a launching pad for introducing contraband into Cuba under the cover of slave trade. These traits afforded the Habsburg Monarchy, and by extension, Romberg & Consors, an outsider status in the Caribbean, a position they were able to leverage when negotiating with the Spanish Court.

For Romberg & Consors, the main attraction of the slaving licence lay in the lucrative opportunity to tap into the mineral wealth of the Spanish Empire. Additionally, wartime disruptions to shipping lanes had caused a shortage of enslaved labor in Cuba, leading to higher-than-usual profits for slave traders.<sup>313</sup> The firm did not receive a contractually fixed price for their captive Africans, and were simply ordered to sell their human cargoes "*al precio de la Plaza*".<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Aranda to Floridablanca (Paris, 22 June 1782).

<sup>311</sup> Schneider, *The Occupation*, Chapter 6, especially 270 and 274.

<sup>312</sup> Everaert, 'Le pavillon impérial', 61; Morrison, 'Open Competition'.

<sup>313</sup> Gloria García, 'La explotación de moneda y el comercio de esclavos (Cuba, 1760-1800)', *Rabida* 11:1 (1992) 79.

<sup>314</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to the Council of the Indies (Ghent, 4 November 1782). In this letter to the Council, proposing to raise the

What Romberg & Consors could enjoy, like all slaving firms at the time in Havana, were exceptionally beneficial fiscal conditions. The Ghent firm was required to pay only 6 percent in duties on the importation of enslaved Africans whereas normally, slave traders were taxed a so-called *derecho de marca* of 40 pesos per prisoner brought to Havana, implying a tax of 16 percent on an average price of about 250 pesos per enslaved person.<sup>315</sup> Traditionally, one of the main prizes of slaving contracts (be it *asientos* or *licencias*) was gaining access to the broader Spanish colonial market. Either in a legal way (cf. Britain's *navio de permiso* under the South Sea Company *asiento*) or an illegal way (through contraband trade), this entailed that foreign contract-holders could sell European commodities in the Spanish colonies. In a chronically understocked market, these goods fetched high prices which were enough to offset the often-loss-making business of slave trading itself.<sup>316</sup> One commodity that could be legally imported on Cuba by *asentistas* was flour. As the island's agricultural sector was chiefly geared toward the export of plantation crops, Cuba lacked a sufficient supply of basic food products to feed its urban population. Many slaving vessels, therefore, held this particular staple in stowage when they arrived in Havana; indeed, it often proved to be the most profitable part of their business.<sup>317</sup>

In the case of Romberg & Consors, however, importing manufactures or staples in Havana seems not to have been a motive to apply for a licence. The firm readily accepted a contract which explicitly banned any contraband trading under the cover of slave trade.<sup>318</sup> Despite a growing shortage of staples, Madrid also prohibited the import of flour, a market which the court had exclusively

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initial plan to 6,000 enslaved Africans (cf. *infra*), Romberg & Consors asked a price of 350 pesos per person, but like the proposal as a whole, this request remained unanswered.

<sup>315</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, State of the insurance (Brussels, 11 September 1783); Rodríguez Vicente, 'El comercio', 14; James Ferguson King, 'Evolution of the Free Slave Trade Principle in Spanish Colonial Administration', *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 22:1 (1942) 38; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 132.

<sup>316</sup> Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America*, 22-3; Andrea Weindl, 'The Asiento de Negros and International Law', *Journal of the History of International Law* 10:2 (2008) 236.

<sup>317</sup> James Lewis, 'Anglo-American entrepreneurs in Havana: the background and significance of the expulsion of 1784-1785', in: Jacques Barbier and Allan Kuethe, eds. *The North American role in the Spanish imperial economy, 1760-1819* (Manchester 1984) 112-4.

<sup>318</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Council of the Indies to the Intendant of Havana (Madrid, 23 October 1782).

allocated to Anglo-American traders.<sup>319</sup> Although colonial officers frequently turned a blind eye to smuggling, there is no proof Romberg engaged in such activities. The accounting books of the firm do not report sales other than human cargoes, with the occasional leftover drinking water as the only exception.<sup>320</sup> François Carpentier, Romberg & Consors' associate and agent on the island (see Chapter 7), struck a close friendship with the intendant of Cuba, Juan Ignacio de Urriza, a politician who vigorously pursued smugglers on the island; presumably, if Romberg & Consors engaged in such activities, Carpentier's friendship with Urriza would be untenable.<sup>321</sup> Lastly, by the time Romberg's ships showed up in Havana, royal officials had assumed a firmer attitude against contraband trading as many captains had introduced illicit goods in 1781 and 1782, forcing foreign vessels to take on board Spanish guards while in port. Romberg's *Négrier Impérial*, arriving in May 1784, certainly received such a treatment while in Havana.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Lewis, 'Anglo-American entrepreneurs', 115-6.

<sup>320</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336.

<sup>321</sup> Lewis, 'Anglo-American entrepreneurs', 120.

<sup>322</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366, Unzaga to Gálvez (Havana, 19 May 1784).

N.º 73

Exmo señor.

Señor.

El y tl. de la Int. de la Hav. con. En cumplimiento de lo que V.ª se sirbe  
 testar la R.ª or.ª de 22.ª de octub.ª prevenirme por R.ª or.ª de 22.ª de octubre  
 prox.ª pas.ª en q.ª se le previene prox.ª pas.ª permitire al capit.ª del Navio  
 permita al capit.ª del Navio Imperial titulado Le conseil de Flan-  
 seil de Flandres, la descarga des, la descarga, introducion, y venta  
 introducion, y venta de los de los negros que conduca: Lo que  
 negros que conduca. abiso a V.ª para su inteligencia.

Dios m.ª a V.ª m.ª a.ª como de-  
 seo. Havana 29.ª de Enero de 1783.

Exmo. Señor

Alm. de N.º de  
 sumas de. y rev. serv.

Juan Ignacio de  
 Urriza

Exmo S.ª d. Josef de Galvez

FIGURE 4.4 Juan Ignacio de Urriza, Intendant of Cuba, signs off on Romberg's permit for the Conseil de Flandre. Source: AGI, Gobierno: Indiferente General, 2823.

## Paper Ships into Wooden Ships: Realizing the *Real permiso*

From the very start, Romberg & Consors had entertained the option of eventually selling the firm's cargoes elsewhere than Havana if market conditions would prove better elsewhere.<sup>323</sup> Indeed, the firm was very candid about this, and informed the governor of Havana that its captains would be carrying French passports—just in case Saint-Domingue would hold better sale prospects.<sup>324</sup> This suggests that the *Real permiso* created an upper bound to the spoils of the Spanish imperial domain the Austrian Netherlands business group could lay claim to, but in no ways a lower bound. This lack of obligation for Romberg as contracting party, recalling Scelle, implied that the *Real permiso* had the legal character of a *licencia* rather than an *asiento*.<sup>325</sup>

Unlike licences of other trading houses, in which the details of the privilege were expressed in number of enslaved Africans or shipping tonnages, Romberg's *permiso* was stipulated in number of ships. Capped at six in the original proposal, the contract expanded during the discussions with the Council of the Indies and comprised eight vessels by the time it was concluded in October. The ships were specified by name and included the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*, the *Roi du Congo*, the *Comte du Nord*, the *Empereur et Roi*, the *Comte de Belgioioso*, the *Conseil de Flandre*, the *Négrier Impérial*, and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.<sup>326</sup> In November 1782, however, immediately after receiving confirmation from Madrid, Romberg & Consors heightened their ambitions still and proposed to introduce a total number of 6,000 enslaved Africans in Havana, an increase of 2,550 people on top of the 3,450 captive Africans the firm planned to transport with the original *permiso* ships.<sup>327</sup> The latter request, however, likely remained unanswered.

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<sup>323</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783).

<sup>324</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1355, Romberg & Consors to the Governor of Havana (Ghent, 28 December 1782).

<sup>325</sup> Romberg & Consors used the word 'licencia' themselves to describe their permit, see AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1355, Romberg & Consors to the Governor of Havana (Ghent, 28 December 1782): "Nos tomamos la libertad de dirijir à V.E. La Licencia que S.M. Catholica, se ha dignado concedere nos...".

<sup>326</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Santo Domingo*, 1661.

<sup>327</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to the Council of the Indies (Ghent, 4 November 1782).

TABLE 4.1 Ships of the *Real permiso*, 1782-85.

<i>Flotilla</i>	<i>Departure from Ostend</i>	<i>Vessel</i>	<i>Ton</i>	<i>Cargo</i>	<i>Slaves disembarked</i>	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Destination</i>
I	4 December 1782	<i>Empereur &amp; Roi</i>	60	ivory	0	Senegal	Senegal
I	4 December 1782	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	120	slaves	299	Havana	Havana
I	15 February 1783	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen [I]</i>	160	slaves	92	Havana	Port-au-Prince
II	20 March 1783	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	—	slaves	371	Havana	Havana
II	12 April 1783	<i>Prince de Starhemberg*</i>	—	slaves	0	Havana	<i>shipwreck</i>
II	19 April 1783	<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [I]</i>	300	slaves	350	Havana	Cap Français
III	19 April 1783	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	300	slaves	525	Havana	Havana
III	1 July 1783	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	300	slaves	434	Havana	Cap Français
—	London, 1783	<i>Comite du Nord**</i>	—	slaves	571	Havana	Charleston
—	unknown, 1784	<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [II]***</i>	—	slaves	491	Havana	Havana
—	unknown, 1785	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen [II]***</i>	—	slaves	—	Havana	Havana

Sources: See Appendix. \*Not included in the Royal permit. \*\*Outfitted and owned by Miles Barber & Samuel Hartley after purchasing a permit from Romberg & Consors. \*\*\*Outfitted and owned by David Nagle after purchasing a permit from Romberg & Consors.

In the six months following the acquisition of the privilege, eight vessels were fitted out in Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent with the intent of going to Havana (Table 4.1). These ships differed from the ships allowed by the Council of the Indies in three aspects. First, the *Empereur et Roi*, a small vessel of barely 60 tons, diverged from the slaving expedition implied by the *Real permiso*: her captain received the objective to exclusively purchase ivory and then return home without an Atlantic crossing.<sup>328</sup> Second, Romberg & Consors dispatched a small ship, able to carry 150 enslaved Africans, to Havana which was called the *Prince de Starhemberg* and was not included among the licences received from Madrid. It is unclear if such a lack of metropolitan permission thwarted the ship's operations on Cuba, however: the *Starhemberg*, having barely left home waters, hit a bank off Gravelines and sank. Third, and in contrast to the *Starhemberg*, the licenced *Comte du Nord* was not outfitted in the Austrian Netherlands. Remarkably, Romberg & Consors resold this permit to Miles Barber and Samuel Hartley, Romberg's former partners with whom he had earlier organised the expeditions of the *Marie-Antoinette* and the *Prince Charles*.<sup>329</sup> It is unknown which sum the firm got in return, but presumably it was significant, given the benefits which could be derived from selling captive Africans on a protected and liquidity-rich market such as Havana's. The transaction directly contravened the interests of the Spanish government, whose generosity toward Romberg stemmed entirely from his position as an outsider to the Atlantic system. By supporting the Imperial merchant, Spain had sought to create an alternative to the traders of the established Atlantic nations. However, the use of his permits to facilitate trade by a British subject—a citizen of a nation with which Spain was still at war, and from which it sought to distance itself in the slave trade even in times of peace—would have been unacceptable to the Council had they been aware of it. Barber and Hartley eventually used Romberg's licence to dispatch a recommissioned man-of-war able to carry 1,000 enslaved Africans—one of the largest slave ships to ever sail the Atlantic—to Malembo in the Kingdom of Kakongo. Meeting with fierce competition in the latter port, James Penny, the ship's captain, was forced to

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<sup>328</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845.

<sup>329</sup> TNA, E219/377, Barber to Penny (London, 3 November 1784). I would like to thank Nicholas Radburn for sharing his information, sources, and transcriptions related to the *Comte du Nord*.

limit his trade to 674 captive Africans. In the end, Barber and Hartley decided against selling the captives in Havana, sending Penny to the purportedly better markets of Charleston where the captain, after a particularly disease-ridden voyage, disembarked 571 survivors.<sup>330</sup> Romberg's sale is interesting, as it echoed the practice of selling *licencias* during the early slave trade in the Spanish Empire, as analysed by Lutgardo García Fuentes.<sup>331</sup> In this way, it is also revealing of the strategies of outsiders trying to capture the benefits of established European empires, as Romberg used his license not only in its traditional role as a tool to access Spain's wealth but also as a source of wealth in its own right. As we will see, he would reiterate this strategy later on.

As Table 4.2 shows, the eight permission ships were grouped in several flotillas. Investors could only buy shares in a particular flotilla, not in a single ship, in order to spread the risks of the venture (see further). The different flotillas also served as a commercial separation, as the constituent vessels were helmed by a common supercargo (see Chapter 6). Of Flotilla I, the *Empereur et Roi* and the *Comte de Belgioioso* left on the same day for West Africa, the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* followed suit only two and a half months later. In a letter to an investor, Romberg later claimed that all that time, the vessel had been confined to port by contrary winds. Given the fact that the muster roll was only filled in early January, however, the shipowner had probably, like many others (cf. infra), ran into crewing problems in Ostend—but blaming the elements presumably was an easier way to deal with unhappy shareholders.<sup>332</sup> At any rate, the *Saxe-Teschen* was eventually able to catch up with the rest of the flotilla on the African seaboard.<sup>333</sup> Flotilla II left in the spring of 1783. Although under the command of the same supercargo, the three vessels departed Ostend separately: the *Négrier Impérial* on 20 March 1783, the *Prince de Starhemberg* on 12 April and the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* on 19 April. Although the *Roi du Congo* left together with the *Zeepaerd*, the former vessel formed a third group of two ships together with the *Conseil de Flandre* (Flotilla III). The pair of vessels made their passage to Africa separately taking different routes, but met up on

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<sup>330</sup> Radburn, *Traders in Men*, 179–82.

<sup>331</sup> García Fuentes, 'Licencias', 4–5.

<sup>332</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Rycx, sr.*, 115/25, 9 January 1783.

<sup>333</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7065, State of insurance (Brussels, 11 September 1783).



the coast of Angola (cf. Chapter 6). On her return journey from the Caribbean, however, the *Conseil* was shipwrecked off Île d'Yeu.

With the *Starhemberg* lost and the *Empereur et Roi* seeking to procure ivory and gold, six slaving vessels of Romberg remained that carried written permits explaining their royal privileges, in order to avoid difficulties with the Cuban port authorities.<sup>334</sup> Three vessels did eventually show their permit in Havana harbour. The three others finished their journey prematurely in ports of Saint-Domingue due to severe outbreaks of disease and high mortality rates during the Middle Passage (see Chapter 8).

In January 1783, preliminary peace treaties were signed between the warring parties, marking the end of the privileged status enjoyed by foreign merchants in the Spanish Atlantic, and with the decree of 23 January 1783 admittance of foreign ships in Spanish ports was once again prohibited.<sup>335</sup> The conclusion of peace posed a significant challenge for Romberg, as it not only entailed deflated price levels (see Chapter 9) in the Caribbean, it also engendered insecurities regarding the ships whose voyages were ongoing and whose welcome in Havana was suddenly in doubt. Moreover, some of the *permiso* ships had encountered severe hardships during their Atlantic crossing, which had forced them to turn into French ports in Saint-Domingue. Romberg, however, still wished to fully exploit his privilege, and send the remaining ships on a later date.

In October 1784, Romberg, Bapst & Cie of Bordeaux enquired at the Council of the Indies whether the permissions of two years prior were still valid in the current political circumstances.<sup>336</sup> Madrid dispelled all doubt, confirming that the contract had not been limited in time, and that it would continue to be honoured in the colonies.<sup>337</sup> When the *Négrier Impérial* arrived in Havana harbour in May 1784 to some confusion of the local ministers, the ordinance of 23 January was indeed superseded in favour of Romberg's *Real permiso*.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2820B; AGI, *Gobierno: Santo Domingo*, 2188; AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366.

<sup>335</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Santo Domingo*, 2188.

<sup>336</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg, Bapst & Cie to the Council of the Indies (Bordeaux, 25 September 1784).

<sup>337</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Council of the Indies to Romberg, Bapst & Cie (San Lorenzo, 25 October 1784).

<sup>338</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366, Governor of Havana to the Council of the Indies (Havana, 19 May 1784).

Thus, Romberg managed to extend his contract into peacetime, the only foreign firm to do so, another indication of the extent the merchant was able to capitalize on his 'outsider' status in the Atlantic complex. Soon after the *Négrier's* arrival, word spread to the French Caribbean, and a French observer confirmed the exclusive nature of Romberg's licence:

The captives are worth or have been worth a lot in Havana, [but] it is not permitted to import them. Romberg of Brussels is the only house that has the permission of the Court and has made a treaty with the Spanish minister in Madrid...the port [of Havana] is closed to all foreigners, with the exception of the ships of Romberg.<sup>339</sup>

On 25 October 1784, Romberg's permits were officially prolonged for future purposes.<sup>340</sup>

Romberg's permits were effectively put to use in the following years, but not by his own firm. As he had done with Barber, Romberg seems to have sold his *licencias* to the British merchant David Nagle, a resident in Havana, or an unknown firm represented by Nagle.<sup>341</sup> On 22 December 1785, the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [II]* arrived in the Cuban port, disembarking 491 captive Africans.<sup>342</sup> At some date in April 1786, the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen [II]* followed suit, carrying an unknown number of enslaved people. Nagle's involvement in these ventures is proven by a letter the merchant directed to the Governor, in response to the latter's initiatives to compile a list of all foreigners resident in Havana. Nagle set out that he was still collecting planters' debts stemming from his shipments of enslaved Africans through the *Zeepaerd* and the "*Principe de Saxe-Teschen*". He added that these imports had happened "*in conformity with the conditions of the licences of your Majesty*", undoubtedly referring to Romberg's *permisos*.<sup>343</sup> With the *Comte du Nord's* licence sold to Barber and

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<sup>339</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Mesnier Frères to Tresca (Cap Français, 11 May 1784).

<sup>340</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Santo Domingo*, 1665.

<sup>341</sup> Sherry Johnson, "The Rise and Fall of Creole Participation in the Cuban Slave Trade, 1789-1796", *Cuban Studies* 30:1 (2000) 58.

<sup>342</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Troncoso to the Council of the Indies (Havana, 24 December 1785).

<sup>343</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, Nagle to the Governor (Havana, 1788), "*en conformidad a las condiciones de la Licencia de su Majestad*". As the British firm of Dawson & Baker at that time held the monopoly of slave trade in the Spanish Empire, Romberg thus helped a competing British trader to access Havana's slave market.

Hartley, the only remaining permit was that of the *Conseil de Flandre*. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the latter permit was ever used to outfit an actual slave ship.

In total, the ships Romberg & Consors outfitted in the Austrian Netherlands disembarked 1,215 enslaved Africans in Havana over the course of half a year. This constituted 8.4 percent of the 14,476 bonded people introduced in Havana between 1781 and 1785 calculated by Borucki and Postigo.<sup>344</sup> If we add the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd [II]*, outfitted outside of the Austrian Netherlands but part of the same permit, Romberg & Consors organized or facilitated the import of 1,706 people, or 11.4 percent of the total number.<sup>345</sup> This puts the activities of the Imperial firm at a comparable level of British (1,958 captives) and American traders (1,878), although the latter disembarked many additional captives in Danish ships.<sup>346</sup> If the 901 people landed and sold on Saint-Domingue would have made it to Havana as planned, Romberg & Consors would have been the third most important slave trader in Havana. An additional indicator of the importance of the Imperial firm's slave trade is provided by the flows of silver returning to Europe from Havana. Gloria García, using Havana harbour records, noted that during the American War of Independence, 275,600 piasters earned in Cuba's slave trade were exported towards Ostend, 16.3 percent of the total exports in this period. This figure positioned the Austrian Netherlands as the third-largest recipient of Cuban silver during this period, surpassed only by Saint-Domingue and Saint-Thomas, which further underscores the significance of Romberg's operations—presumably the main source of these bullion exports.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, 'The Impact', 504. The *Roi du Congo* and the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd I* were included in the table under the header of France as the ships entered the harbour under a French flag, but belonged to Romberg & Consors. I thank the authors for explaining and sharing their data on Romberg & Consors' vessels with me.

<sup>345</sup> The *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd [II]* was not included in the estimate of Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, so with this ship the total number of prisoners introduced between 1781 and 1785 increases to 14,967.

<sup>346</sup> Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, 'The Impact', 504.

<sup>347</sup> García, 'La explotación', 77.

## Agency, Stakeholders, and Capital in the *Real permiso* phase

### *A Problem of Principals: How Romberg was Romberg & Consors?*

In late 1782, Romberg & Consors entered a new phase of its African operations. As the previous pages abundantly made clear, the scale of this phase was far larger than anything the firm had initiated before. In contrast to the slender material resources with regards to the capital outlay of the ventures treated in the previous chapter, several documents stemming from some suits brought against Romberg during the late 1780s (see Chapter 9) allow to put the Spanish phase of the firm's operations into numbers. They also allow us to answer a question raised by scholars, contemporary observers, as well as shareholders of the venture: who exactly was at the wheel of Romberg's Africa venture, or in other words, who was the real 'principal' of the business?

Table 4.4 shows that the total equity of the Africa venture, spread over three flotillas, amounted to 1.6 million guilders. This was, of course, a colossal sum of money. To put things in perspective, it constituted a quarter of the original outlay of the Ostend Company (6 million guilders), and fell only slightly short of the annual sum the Brussels government had paid to the Dutch Republic up to 1748 to maintain thirteen fortresses with 30,000-35,000 troops astride the French border.<sup>348</sup> Table 4.4 also shows that Frederic Romberg for his own account provided the vast majority of the funds. Of the total investment of 1.6 million guilders, the merchant provided 1.15 million (71 percent), while Romberg & Consors invested 125,000 guilders (8 percent) and Romberg & Cie in Ostend committed 20,000 guilders (1 percent) tot the venture. Though absent in this list of investors, the accounting books of Romberg Frères & Cie (the branch which contained the cotton printing business, see Chapter 2) reveal that the branch acquired a stake of 11,200 guilders in April 1783, presumably on a later date purchased from Frederic Romberg.<sup>349</sup> The contribution of non-

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<sup>348</sup> Van Gelder, *Regime Change at a Distance*, 115-6; Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*, 16.

<sup>349</sup> See ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783, f. 299, "Pour l'interet suivant qu[e] Romberg & Consors nous ont cédé dans leur Navires Negriers conforme a la reconnaissance qu'ils nous ont donné en datte du 14 avril, f. 13,066-13-3". Sources treating the disbursement of dividends show that Romberg Frères held a stake of 4,800 guilders in Flotilla I, 4,200 in Flotilla II, and 2,800 in Flotilla III (11,200 fl.w.g. equalling the figure of 13,066-13-3 fl.c.g. of the aforementioned source). See AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336.

company stakeholders was quite small compared to the funds brought in by the firm itself. The balance between these two parties became more skewed as the operation progressed: while Flotilla I was funded for 65 percent by Romberg and for 35 percent by commercial partners and retail investors, Romberg is responsible for 82 percent and 87 percent of the capital in subsequent flotillas. *Armateurs* in France only very rarely retained a stake of over 40-50 percent in a particular voyage and, as a risk-spreading strategy, sold off the remaining shares to colleagues and the general public. Romberg and his offshoot branches, however, held on to a much larger share even in the most balanced of flotillas.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Robert Stein, *The French slave trade in the eighteenth century: an Old Regime business* (Madison 1979) 155; Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 211-2, 231-4.

TABLE 4.2 Capital outlay of the *Real permiso* phase (in fl.w.g.), 1782-1785.

#	Name	Location	Investment in flotilla			Total
			I	II	III	
1	Frederic Romberg	Brussels	192,000	436,540	513,655	1,142,195
2	Romberg & Consors	Ghent	49,823	45,000	30,000	124,823
3	Romberg & Co	Ostend	20,000	–	–	20,000
4	Gammarage de Vlieringh	Brussels	23,000	23,000	23,000	69,000
5	Neufcour & Annecroix	Brussels	7,000	7,000	7,000	21,000
6	Verlat	Louvain	3,000	3,000	3,000	9,000
7	Simons	Brussels	4,000	4,000	4,000	12,000
8	Comte van der Dilft	Brussels	7,500	7,500	7,500	22,500
9	Judocus Marous	Lille	4,000	4,000	4,000	12,000
10	d'Armencourt	Lille	1,500	1,500	1,500	4,500
11	le Febvre de Terbecke	Ghent	2,000	2,000	2,000	6,000
12	Comte de Limminghen	Brussels	4,500	4,500	4,500	13,500
13	J.F.E. de Wallenbourg*	Vienna	1,500	1,500	1,500	4,500
14	Jean Texiere & Co	Amsterdam	10,000	5,000	5,000	20,000
15	Cornelis Schepers	Alost	333	333	333	999
16	Schellekens	Alost	333	333	333	999
17	Lambert van Peteghem	Alost	1,000	500	500	2000
18	Van Hecke	Alost	1,500	1,500	1,500	4,500
19	Lubbert frères	Bordeaux	2,800	2,800	–	5,600
20	Gerrand de Rolland	Amsterdam	300	–	–	300
21	Schuler & Kreglinger	Worms	12,000	–	–	12,000
22	Lavabre, Doerner & Co	Paris	1,000	–	–	1,000
23	Bachman frères & Bapst	Paris	12,000	–	–	12,000
24	Meinicken & Watter	Bordeaux	2,800	–	–	2,800
25	l'Etienne	Tournai	7,000	–	–	7,000
26	Vilain XIII	Alost	4,000	5,500	–	9,500
27	Baron de Keerle	Ghent	6,000	6,000	–	12,000
28	Moerman de Voorhoute†	Ghent	6,000	–	–	6,000
29	Buyck	Ghent	6,000	–	–	6,000
30	Van Tieghem	Ghent	3,000	–	–	3,000
31	Malfaison	Ghent	3,000	–	–	3,000
32	Marie De Noose	Alost	–	1,500	–	1,500
33	H.J. Williametz	Tournai	–	2,571	–	2,571
34	Beaugarde	[France]	–	2,800	2,800	5,600
35	Jean Senat	Bordeaux	–	9,333	–	9,333
36	de Ghiessens	Ghent	–	9,000	6,000	15,000
37	Saqueleu	Tournai	–	–	1,500	1,500
<i>Total</i>			<i>398,889</i>	<i>586,710</i>	<i>619,621</i>	<i>1,605,220</i>

Source: RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845. \* Returned shares to Frederic Romberg. † Bought share from Baron de Keerle, who ceded half his original share of 12,000 guilders in Flotilla I.

With four Romberg branches invested in the Africa venture, our first question concerns the identification of which constituent part of the merchant's business took on a directing role. The question seems superfluous, as the previous pages clearly indicated the agency of Romberg & Consors and Table 4.2 the overwhelming financial support of Frederic Romberg. Yet it became an important issue during the late 1780s, when Romberg began distancing himself from Romberg & Consors and denied all responsibilities for the activities of the Ghent subsidiary. By this time, it was clear that the whole enterprise would end up as a colossal financial failure, and several shareholders started suing Romberg for what they believed were overdue dividend payments (see Chapter 9). The Council of Brabant, the legal body overseeing the cases, was perplexed by Romberg's commercial structure. On one side, the Council faced the shareholders, who stated that Romberg had always referred to Romberg & Consors as "my Ghent by-house" and that he was the main director of the said branch.<sup>351</sup> They were backed by Carpentier, who attested on Romberg & Consors that "nothing of importance happens there without [Frederic Romberg] giving his approval and consent".<sup>352</sup> Although it suited Carpentier well to redirect the blame to his employer, his and the investors' stance is joined in our time by the analysis of Roger De Peuter, who assessed that despite the fragmentation of his firm in different branches, Romberg always remained in charge of the whole organization.<sup>353</sup>

Romberg and his lawyers, however, retorted that, if the merchant ever had referred to Romberg & Consors as "his" Ghent by-house, "it was done incorrectly". On top, if the associates had ever consulted him for major commercial undertakings, it had been "because of his experience and because his commercial network, and because he had a considerable stake in the firm", but not at all because he had a directing role in Romberg & Consors—this, Romberg stressed, lay solely with the three associates.<sup>354</sup> In an 1810 summary

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<sup>351</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilft and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 30 June 1792), "*ma Maison de Gand*".

<sup>352</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Interrogation of François Carpentier (Brussels, 24 October 1791), "*aucune affaire majeure ne se traitoit sans qu'il donna son approbation et consentement*".

<sup>353</sup> De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants', 108. See also Chapter 2.

<sup>354</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilft and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 27 August 1792), "*qu'impromptement*", "*si l'on a consulté le rescribent sur des operations majeurs, ce fut*

of his career, the merchant again put all responsibility with Carpentier, Schepers and Bapst, claiming that he himself had downright opposed the Africa project but that his associates had convinced him under false pretences, deceptively stating that Romberg & Consors would limit itself to a minority share in the expeditions—as indeed the firm had done in its early ventures into Africa trade. Additionally, the Ghent associates allegedly only had approached Romberg when the project was in a well-advanced state, thus presenting him with a *fait accompli*.<sup>355</sup> Given his frequent visits to the Kouter, his close commercial relationship with Schepers, and the sheer size of the merchant's investments, however, it seems unfathomable that Romberg was unaware of what was happening in Ghent, and in all likelihood acted in league with his managers.<sup>356</sup> His attempts at distancing himself from Romberg & Consors' commercial operations should primarily be viewed as a way to rid himself from any financial responsibility and save his own reputation and credit. The 1810 *mémoire*, in which he reduced his slave trade to a literal footnote, served an additional purpose: to wash himself clean of the involvement in slave trade, a practice on which public opinion had significantly shifted by the early nineteenth century. Romberg's *mémoire* took on an overtly hagiographical tone, and human trafficking—both a commercial failure and a moral stain—had no place whatsoever in this idealized version of his career.

A second 'problem of principals' was raised by Damiens de Gomicourt, the French journalist who extensively recorded daily life in the Austrian Netherlands during the early 1780s. Gomicourt observed in a *Voyageur* letter of July 1782 that a 'quadrumvirate' of wealthy merchant-bankers had been formed in Brussels with the goal of participating in slave trade, consisting of Romberg, Walckiers de Gammarage, Jacques-Joseph Chapel, and Joseph Depestre.<sup>357</sup> As Table 4.4 shows, only the Walckiers brothers (as 'Gammarage de Vliering'), are included in the shareholder structure. Their investment is sizeable—indeed the largest of the non-Romberg stakeholders—but is dwarfed

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*a cause de son expérience et de ses nations dans le commerce, et parce qu'il avoit des fonds tres considerable dans la maison de Gand*".

<sup>355</sup> KBR, *Mémoire des faits de Frédéric Romberg*, 9.

<sup>356</sup> See for example RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 31 August 1781), "Mr. Romberg, who was here the day before yesterday [Mr. Romberg qui étoit avant hier ici]".

<sup>357</sup> Derival [August-Pierre Damiens de Gomicourt], *Le voyageur dans les Pays-Bas Autrichiens*, I, 78-9.



by Romberg's and does not really convey the equal footing an association would imply. Joseph Depestre, then, was a financier from Brussels, whose father, Julien, had grown wealthy with a varied portfolio of government offices, manufacturing, and, especially, furnishing horses and carriages to the French army.<sup>358</sup> During the 1750s, he became director of the Emden Company for Bengal, invested in the triangular trade and acquired several plantations in the French Caribbean.<sup>359</sup> Joseph Depestre inherited his father's fondness towards France and finance, and engaged in several speculative and highly ambitious commercial schemes.<sup>360</sup> Given his wealth and existing investment in the Atlantic plantation system, it is easy to see Depestre as an organizer of slave trade, and during the bellicose 1780s French partners—Depestre had come to live in Paris permanently—indeed petitioned to set up slave trade together.<sup>361</sup> Nevertheless, except from Gomicourt's remark, not a single document puts Romberg and Depestre together for the former's slaving enterprise. Xavier Duquenne, who has thoroughly examined the Depestre family archives, remarked that "several authors have reiterated [Gomicourt's] information without any other proof". Although Duquenne goes on to say that Gomicourt was informed quite well and that "there is no reason to believe that [his] statement was inaccurate", he rightly adds that nothing proves that the association allegedly formed in July 1782 produced any material result.<sup>362</sup> Likewise, in my research, I have found nothing to dispense with Gomicourt's claim, but nothing which supports it either. Jacques-Joseph Chapel, lastly, did irrefutably invest in slave trade during the 1780s, but no source suggests he did so in collaboration with Romberg.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Duquenne, *Le Château*, 3-39.

<sup>359</sup> Gottmann, 'Prussia all at sea?', 553-4.

<sup>360</sup> Duquenne, *Le Château*, 46-50.

<sup>361</sup> Duquenne, *Le Château*, 31, 43-44.

<sup>362</sup> Duquenne, *Le Château*, 31.

<sup>363</sup> Chapel was officially the owner of the *Belle Arsène*, Ferdinand Stiellemans commanding, which sailed from Le Havre under Imperial colours in November 1782. See TSTD 32659 and ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184, Declaration of 13 January 1783. See also Chapter 3.

*“[A]broad & far away”? Assessing the Multinationalism of Romberg’s Trade*

A third suggestion, put forward by John Everaert, is that Romberg’s involvement in the slave trade to Havana may have served as a front for French shipowners.<sup>364</sup> Everaert thus implies that there was a strong continuity between the early phase of expeditions and the Spanish phase. In a letter of March 1784, Guillaume de Bellecombe, the governor of Saint-Domingue, hinted to the same assessment by saying that

a trading house has been set up in Ghent under the name of Romberg & Consors, whose strongest partners are said to be French, which has already outfitted 12 vessels for the slave trade, several of which have passed through here, and have given notice that [the firm] will fit out 75 for this trade.<sup>365</sup>

Although Bellecombe rather overstated Romberg’s diligence in outfitting vessels, he raised an important question: how foreign was Romberg’s slaving venture?

*“I kindly ask you, as a friend”*, wrote Lepage, a merchant from Lille, on 18 May 1782, to Laurent Janssens in Ghent, *“what people in your country think of the project of Romberg & Consors to send two vessels to the coast of Guinea, of which I have received the prospectus, and if they have faith in the profits [le sucre] the prospectus promises.”*<sup>366</sup> Lepage was talking about the *Comte de Belgioioso* and the *Empereur et Roi*, whose prospectus was around that time being circulated by Romberg & Consors. Table 4.3 presents a summarized version of the document. On a capital outlay of 160,000 Flemish guilders for both ships (one buying slaves and one trading commodities) combined, Romberg & Consors expected to make a net profit of 439,308 guilders. In that way, the net profit rate of the venture would amount to 174.6 percent, a ludicrously high estimate (see Chapter 9).

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<sup>364</sup> John Everaert, ‘Commerce d’Afrique’ 177-85.

<sup>365</sup> ANOM, COL C9 A, 155, f. 121 r, “il s’est formé à Gand une maison de Commerce sous le nom de Romberg & Consors et dont on assure que les plus forts associés sont françois, qui a déjà armé 12 Batimens pour la Traitte des Negres dont plusieurs ont déjà passé ici, et ont donné avis que cette maison devoit en armer 75 destinés a ce Commerce”.

<sup>366</sup> SAG, Family papers, 3301/5, Lepage to Janssens (Lille, 18 May 1782) “moy je vous prie en amy, ce quel on pense chez vous du projet d’expédition de deux navire a la cote de Guinées de Mr Romberg & Consors, dont j’ai le prospectus”.

TABLE 4.3 Summarized prospectus of the *Comte de Belgioioso* and the *Empereur et Roi*, as distributed by Romberg & Consors in the spring of 1782.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Expense or income (in fl.w.g.)</i>
Capital outlay <i>Comte de Belgioioso</i> and <i>Empereur et Roi</i>	160,000
Return of sale slaves of <i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	360,000
Expenses <i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	-41,600
Net product <i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	+318,400
Return of sale commodities of <i>Empereur et Roi</i>	112,400
Expenses <i>Empereur et Roi</i>	-13,492
Net product <i>Empereur et Roi</i>	+98,908
Variou income sources both vessels	+40,000
Total	457,308
Expenses in return port	-18,000
Net profit	439,308

*Source:* RAfB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Armement à Gand sous la direction de Romberg & Consors de deux navires Pour la côte D’Affrique and Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784).

The rather dreamlike profit rates presented in the prospectus explains the scepticism Janssens displayed in his response a day later—a scepticism which was allegedly widely shared in the commercial circles of the Austrian Netherlands:

Everyone here & in Ostend thinks that the Guinea Coast expedition of Messrs. Romberg & Consors will only find credulous people abroad & far away; as to the success they promise, it is simply the spirit of all prospectus makers; no one either here or in Ostend invests for lack of confidence in Success.<sup>367</sup>

<sup>367</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, Handbook 542, Janssens to Lepage (Ghent, 19 May 1782). Janssens was not a perfectly neutral source with regard to Romberg. The merchant had no reason whatsoever to promote his competitor’s business, as he—like many other merchants (cf. Chapter 2)—was trying to encroach on Romberg’s transit trade. Moreover, four months earlier, Janssens had been the victim of a widespread slander leaflet, which he was firmly convinced had been authored by Romberg & Consors (see SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/12, Draft letter Laurent Janssens, s.d and SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/18, Weguelin to Janssens (Leuven, 9 August 1781).

Apart from the Walckiers brothers, no Austrian Netherlands merchants subscribed to the capital of the three flotillas, confirming the scepticism which Janssens reported prevailing in the commercial circles of the country. Many foreign commercial investors, however, *were* prepared to lend their funds to Romberg, and give a thoroughly multinational character to the venture's capital outlay.<sup>368</sup> Jean Texier, a merchant from Amsterdam who acted as the firm's representative in matters of ship purchases and contested letters of exchange, invested 20,000 guilders.<sup>369</sup> Lepage seems to have been successfully dissuaded from investing by Janssens, but his Lille competitor Judocus Marous did entrust Romberg & Consors with a sum of 12,000 guilders. Romberg's German and protestant network contributed as well: the Lubbert brothers, a Bordeaux-based firm with roots in Hamburg, bought a stake of 5,600 guilders, while Meinicken, also based in Bordeaux, invested 2,800 guilders.<sup>370</sup> Schuler & Kreglinger, lastly, a commercial firm from the Free Imperial City of Worms, provided 12,000 guilders.<sup>371</sup> This particular investment compounds the material links of Romberg's slave trade with its hinterland in the Holy Roman Empire explored by Ressel with a financial link.<sup>372</sup> Lastly, Romberg (as well as Schepers) was well at home in the French world of finance, and this is shown by the inclusion of several Parisian bankers in the capital.<sup>373</sup> Bachmann & Bapst, the firm of Jacques-Auguste Bapst (brother of Romberg & Consors' Georg Christoph) invested 12,000 guilders in the first Havana-bound flotilla.<sup>374</sup> Lavabre, Doerner & Co, another banking firm and an important business

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<sup>368</sup> This corresponds with Parmentier's findings for the capital structure of the Guinea ships which were dispatched from the Austrian Netherlands in the late 1710s and early 1720s, see Parmentier, 'De Oostendse Guineavaarders', 166-9.

<sup>369</sup> See for example NA, Notary Archives, 5,075, inventory number 15,617, deed nr. 599,736 (12 May 1783).

<sup>370</sup> Stephan Cuenot, *Journal du Palais. Recueil le plus ancien et le plus complet de la jurisprudence française* (Paris 1858) 458; Michel Espagne, *Bordeaux-Baltique: la présence culturelle allemande à Bordeaux aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris 1991).

<sup>371</sup> s.n., *Ueber den Oligarchendruck in Worms ein merkwürdiges Actenstück fürs Archiv der reichsstädtischen Oligarchie überhaupt, zur Beherzigung der Patrioten* (Frankfurt 1788) 2-8.

<sup>372</sup> Ressel, 'The Hinterland', 269-301.

<sup>373</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/8, Devanderheij to Renard (Paris, 6 August 1781), "Mr. Schepers partirait avec moi pour icy, comme il a fait pour prendre quelques arrangements icy avec Mr Romberg de Bruxelles se trouvant actuellement icy".

<sup>374</sup> Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*, 27.

partner of Romberg, also bought a stake, though consisting of only 1,000 guilders.<sup>375</sup>

TABLE 4.4 Investment (in fl.w.g.) in Romberg's *permiso* ships, per region.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Investors</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Share (in %)</i>
Austrian Netherlands	25	1,515,587	94.2
<i>Romberg</i>	3	1,287,018	80.2
<i>Commercial</i>	1	69,000	4.3
<i>Retail</i>	21	159,569	9.8
Holy Roman Empire	2*	16,500*	1.0*
France	8	52,833	3.3
Dutch Republic	2	20,300	1.3
<i>Total</i>	37	1,605,220	100

*Source:* RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845. \*Wallenbourg later sold his share of 4,500 guilders back to Romberg.

Clearly, there was an important foreign element in Romberg's equity. French shareholders were especially numerous, but with a combined share of 3.3 percent (Table 4.4) of the capital they hardly were the "strongest partners" Bellecombe and Everaert thought them to be. Romberg himself possibly hinted at a foreign partner when he wrote in his *Mémoire de faits* that "when the operations commenced, the *armateurs*, whose leader had recently died, fell out with the other shareholders...and ultimately the Ghent firm remained wholly responsible".<sup>376</sup> As none of the three associates of Romberg & Consors died in this timeframe, this may be a reference to Henry Romberg, who had inherited the affairs of Romberg & Consors in 1783 as manager of the Bordeaux branch, but who had passed away in November 1784. However, it might also be a reference to Jacques Chauvel, whom we witnessed proposing a slaving venture in the previous chapter but of whom it was unclear if his scheme was realized: Chauvel died in March 1785.<sup>377</sup> The first two of the eight *permiso* vessels, one conducting slave trade and one conducting ivory trade, certainly looked like Chauvel's project. Still, the Le Havre merchant is absent in the capital structure

<sup>375</sup> De Peuter, 'Eighteenth-century Brussels merchants', 107.

<sup>376</sup> Romberg, *Mémoire de faits*, 9, "Quand les opérations furent commencées, les *armateurs* dont le chef venait de mourir, et les autres actionnaires se brouillèrent...enfin la maison de Gand resta engagée pour tout son avoir".

<sup>377</sup> AN, Série E, *Conseil du Roi*, 2626, Succession Jacques Chauvel, négociant du Havre (5 May 1786); ADSM, 216 BP 416, 81 v.

of the venture, dating back to September 1783, long before his death. No other source at my disposal, be it a notary record, correspondence, or dividend payout, hints at Chauvel's involvement, his heirs, or that of any other, invisible stakeholder.<sup>378</sup> The multinational dynamics behind Romberg's slave trade certainly deserve further study, but in the absence of most of the firm's personal accounting books and correspondence, its intricacies will perhaps forever remain unclear. Additionally, as we have seen previously, lots of discussion and scheming was not committed to paper, and even when material evidence was produced, it was easy to discard by the authors (or their descendants) when public opinion eventually turned against the slave trade.<sup>379</sup> Yet based on the available evidence, I conclude that the slaving venture initiated by Romberg & Consors was effectively largely funded by capital from the Austrian Netherlands. Perhaps the main source of doubt is simply this: the legacy of a decade-long historiography which has presented the Southern Netherlands as a passive commercial entity, entirely separated from the Atlantic complex.

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<sup>378</sup> Delobette, despite using a monumental collection of sources, never found any trace of Le Havre merchants partnering with Romberg for slave trade under neutral cover in this period, see Delobette, *Ces Messieurs du Havre*, 667-8. As Parmentier has shown (Parmentier, 'Profit and neutrality', 206-26), neutralization schemes often become clear through traces of fictitious ship sales, but such is not the case for the *permiso* ships: two ships were indeed purchased in Honfleur, but others in La Rochelle, London, and Amsterdam. Frederic Romberg, through his massive share in the equity, did not in any manner serve as a front for foreign interests. Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie paid dividends only to Romberg, not to a party excluded from the capital structure of Table 4.4. Additionally, the archives of the firm do not include a single letter with an unknown foreign stakeholder, a correspondence which would certainly have arisen given the unexpectedly lengthy process of recovering the proceeds of the venture. As we mentioned before, Romberg himself drew a clear line between the commission voyages and the Spanish phase of Romberg & Consors' slaving business. Schepers, in a private letter to an investor, also confided that "[Romberg & Consors] & Mr. Fred[er]ic for his own account will take a share of 700,000 guilders" (RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Schepers to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 13 November 1782), "*ma maison et Mr. Fred[er]ic en son particulier en prens 700 000 lb. Ch[ange]*"). Third, in 1791, Frederic Romberg authorized Bapst to buy a strip of land for him in the environments of Bordeaux. The projected worth of the "*bien fond ou terre*" was to be in the vicinity of 50,000 *écus*, about 150,000 guilders. The sum, so states the notary deed, was backed by "the Value still to receive from Mr. Pedro Jouane [*sic*] de Erice and Mr. Carpentier in silver piasters" (see RATB, *Notary*, 8727, Deed of 16 February 1791, "*contre la Valeur a recevoir chez Mr. Pedro Jouane de Erice et Mr. Carpentier en piastres*"). By this purchase order, Romberg not only confirmed the ownership of almost all of the remaining funds in Havana (indeed aligning with the share included in Table 4.4), he also claimed them as his own and not for further distribution by his intention to spend them on an asset that was clearly for his own benefit. See also Chapter 9.

<sup>379</sup> John Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel: organisatie, conjunctuur en sociaal milieu van de driehoekshandel 1763-1793* (Brussel 1978) xix-xx.

“Can you please tell me if these eight vessels together form a Single expedition”, inquired Charles-François-Joseph Vilain XIII on 22 Novembre 1782 at Romberg & Consors, “and if One of them should turn out lossmaking or perish, will the seven others be obliged to support this Loss?”.<sup>380</sup> Vilain XIII hailed from an important noble family in the County of Flanders. His brother, Jean-Jacques-Philippe Vilain XIII (1712-1777), had been one of the most prominent political figures in the Austrian Netherlands as president of the Estates of Flanders.<sup>381</sup> Charles-François-Joseph himself was *receveur général* of the Land of Alost and *seigneur* of Welle.<sup>382</sup> Next to his fiscal activities, Vilain XIII had a keen interest in global commerce, judging by his personal library which contained titles such as *La science des négociants & Teneurs de livre*, *L’art des lettres de change*, and *Dictionnaire Universel de Commerce, contenant tout ce qui concerne dans les quatres parties du monde*. Other works (*La noblesse commerçante*) suggest he saw a clear role for himself in the world of commerce.<sup>383</sup> Indeed, in 1765 he linked up with the De Loose brothers, resourceful merchants in Ghent, to develop oyster and lobster farms in Ostend under the company name of Constantijn Clays & Cie.<sup>384</sup> During the 1770s, the nobleman had invested in cargoes of Hungarian tobacco which Romberg shipped on a regular basis from Trieste.<sup>385</sup> When economic opportunities arrived on the Austrian Netherlands’ doorstep in 1775, Vilain was prepared to intensify his efforts and to act on the knowledge he had gained through his years of reading. In 1780, he added shares to his commercial portfolio of the *Comte de Cobenzl*, a Romberg-owned vessel bound to the Caribbean, and also invested

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<sup>380</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, Lepage to Janssens (Lille, 18 May 1782), “je vous prie en amy, ce quel on pense chez vous du projet d’expédition de deux navires a la cote de Guinées de Mr Romberg & Consors, dont j’ai le prospectus et si on y a la meme confirme pour son sucre qui le font esperer”.

<sup>381</sup> Piet Lenders, Geert Verstaen and Gregie de Maeyer, *Vilain XIII* (Leuven 1995).

<sup>382</sup> Piet Lenders, ‘L’héritage archivistique de du président des Etats de Flandre J.J.P. Vilain XIII. Sa destruction par les autorités (1778)’, *Etudes sur le XVIIIe siècle* 10:1 (1983) 133; Guy Schrans, *Vrijmetselaars te Gent in de XVIIIe eeuw* (Gent 2009) 559-60.

<sup>383</sup> UAG, *Catalogue d’une très belle collection de livres delaisés par feu messire Charles Vilain XIII, seigneur de Welle* (Alost 1786), ff. 8, 31, 32.

<sup>384</sup> Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bijdrage tot de studie van de goeode burgerij*, 99-101.

<sup>385</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Schepers to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 21 June 1782). For an example of one of Romberg’s Trieste vessels arriving in Ostend with Hungarian tobacco, see UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 19 October 1778.

5,000 guilders in a transoceanic venture to the island of Saint-Vincent organised by a merchant from Alost, close to Vilain's residence.<sup>386</sup> Much to his regret, Vilain missed out on the first Africa-going expeditions organised by Romberg & Consors, but, satisfied by the answers he received to his aforementioned question, invested a significant sum of 9,500 guilders in the firm's Spanish venture.<sup>387</sup>

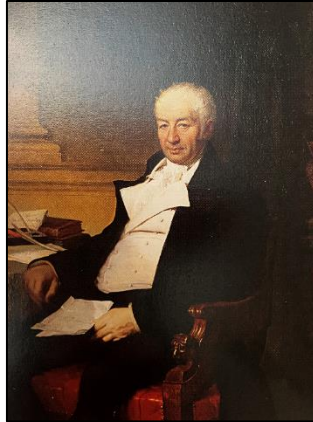


FIGURE 4.5 Matthieu Verlat, canon and former professor of the University of Louvain, one of Romberg & Consors' numerous retail investors. *Source: Duquenne, Het park van Wespelaar, 61.*

A remarkable final trait of the venture's capital structure is its inclusion of numerous investors—like Vilain XIII—who in their day-to-day lives did not engage in a commercial profession. There were twenty-one of them, collectively making a significant investment of 159,569 guilders, or 9.8 percent of the total equity (see Table 4.4). Predictably, many of these so-called 'retail investors' were drawn from the aristocracy or belonged to the educated, high-income middle class. Additionally, most shareholders were friends and business partners of different people within Romberg's commercial organisation—the same 'closed off' nature characterized capital structures in the French long-

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<sup>386</sup> RAIB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Project for a ship bound to 'America'; KBR, Manuscript II 4590, Share n° 10.

<sup>387</sup> RAIB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 31 August 1781).



distance trade.<sup>388</sup> A first group of investors hailed from Brussels and its immediate environment and entered the equity structure by way of Frederic Romberg. Matthieu Verlat, for example, was a canon and former professor of pedagogy at the University of Leuven. In 1781, he had changed career and had become a private teacher; in 1796, he joined the household of Jean-Baptiste Plasschaert, future mayor of Leuven and brother of Jeanne-Marie Plasschaert, who was married to Chrétien Romberg, Frederic's son.<sup>389</sup> Verlat's, however, was a leveraged investment: in August 1782, the canon took out a loan of 7,000 Brabant guilders with Jean Charles Osy, an Antwerp nobleman belonging to a wealthy banking family, in order to subscribe to the capital of the “*seven ships that Messrs. Romberg and Comp[an]y of Brussel and Ghent are planning to fit out for the Coasts of Guinea and to the Islands of France and Bourbon*”. The Artois family, of which Verlat was a close friend, were willing to stand as guarantors with their Leuven breweries.<sup>390</sup>

Jean Simons was a Brussels-based manufacturer of carriages, who had earned a fortune by selling his designs all over Europe—both he and Romberg were visited by Joseph II during the Emperor's stay in Brussels.<sup>391</sup> Jean-Marie van der Dilft de Borghvliet was a count who had been ennobled in 1771, and who inhabited the Coloma estate in Sint-Pieters-Leeuw, not far from the capital.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Guillaume Daudin, ‘Profitability of Slave and Long-Distance Trading in Context: The Case of Eighteenth-Century France’, *The Journal of Economic History* 64:1 (2004) 167-8.

<sup>389</sup> J. Roegiers e.a. *550 jaar Universiteit Leuven* (Leuven 1976) 242-3; Anspach, ‘Romberg’, 166; Xavier Duquenne, *Het park van Wespelaar. De Engelse tuin in België in de 18de eeuw* (Brussels 2001) 11-16, 61. I am grateful to An Smets for sharing data and literature references on Verlat with me.

<sup>390</sup> RAL, *Notary Joannes Baptiste Staes, 16*, Deed of 8 August 1782, “*seven schepen die de heeren Romberg en Comp[agni]e tot Brussel ende Gend voornemens sijn uyt te reeden ses op de Kusten van Guinee ende een naerde eijlanden van Vrankrijk en Bourbon*”. For Osy, see Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, VIII, 186. The Osy banking house established in Rotterdam provided important financial services to the Habsburg Monarchy, frequently floating large loans on the Dutch money market. Osy presents the only link with Antwerp's world of finance of Romberg's Africa enterprise. See Valéry Janssens, *Het geldwezen der Oostenrijkse Nederlanden* (Brussels 1957) 232-3.

<sup>391</sup> Philippe Moureaux, ‘Le grand commerce à Bruxelles en 1771’, *Études sur le XVIIIe Siècle* 4:1 (1977) 41-2. Although the manufacturer is only denoted as “Simons” (a common name in the Southern Netherlands, then and now) in the list of investors, different sources mention “Simons, fabriqueur de voitures en cette ville” as an investor in a transoceanic venture of Romberg; without much doubt, the same Simons invested in the firm's Africa expeditions. See ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783, f. 357. For Joseph's visit, see Eugène Hubert, *Le voyage de l'Empereur Joseph II dans les Pays-Bas (31 mai 1781–27 juillet 1781): étude d'histoire politique et diplomatique* (Brussels 1900) 65-6.

<sup>392</sup> E. B. F. F. Wittert Van Hoogland, J. E. Van Leeuwen, *De Nederlandsche adel: omvattende alle Nederlandsche adellijke geslachten in de Noordelijke en Zuidelijke*

“Neufcour & Annecroix” referred to the brothers Chrétien and Léonard Huysman, the former *seigneur* of Neufcour, the latter of Annecroix. The castle of Neufcour stood at Lennik, slightly to the west of Brussels.<sup>393</sup> “Van den Berghe de Limminghe” referred to an unknown member of the Brussels-based aristocratic family.<sup>394</sup> Likely these nobles in the region of Brussels spent considerable time in the high society life of the capital, where they would have met Romberg. Lastly, presumably also in this category, the investment of J.F.E. de Wallenbourg stands out. Likely this person was Jacques de Wallenbourg, a young nobleman living in Vienna who was very interested in the wider world: at the age of nineteen, he left for Constantinople in order to learn Arab, Hebrew, and Persian; later, he would translate several works in these languages to French.<sup>395</sup> Although primarily interested in the East, Wallenbourg’s desire to become involved in a commercial enterprise spanning Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean perhaps aligned with the growing Habsburg interest in all things Atlantic, as identified by scholars such as Singerton.<sup>396</sup> Nevertheless, Wallenbourg, for whatever reason, later sold his shares back to Romberg.

A second group of investors consisted of personal friends of Schepers and Carpentier, mostly from the Alost region. Nicolas Carpentier, father of François, was born in Brussels, but had moved to Alost to become a councillor in 1766.<sup>397</sup> Growing up in Alost, it was plausible that François Carpentier became acquainted with other nobles in the area such as Charles-François-Joseph Vilain XIII. Yet it was probably Schepers who brought in the latter noble: both had known each other for several years, Vilain XIII having helped the Ghent entrepreneur to conceal compromising documents with regards to Schepers’ smuggling of the English spinning device (cf. *supra*).<sup>398</sup> Jean Van Hecke, who worked as Charles-François-Joseph Vilain XIII’s cashier in his office of *receveur*, was tipped by his employer about Romberg’s Africa scheme and

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*Nederlanden met een historisch overzicht voorafgegaan door de genealogiën van het koninklijk huis* (The Hague 1913).

<sup>393</sup> Félix-Victor Goethals, *Miroir des Notabilités nobiliaires de Belgique, des Pays-Bas et du Nord de la France* (Brussels 1857) 530-2.

<sup>394</sup> Goethals, *Miroir*, 577-604.

<sup>395</sup> Joseph Michaud and Louis Michaud, eds., *Biographie universelle, ancienne et moderne* (Paris 1827), V, 99.

<sup>396</sup> Singerton, ‘An Austrian Atlantic’, 2.

<sup>397</sup> Félix-Victor Goethals, *Dictionnaire généalogique et héraldique des familles nobles du Royaume de Belgique* (Brussels 1843), I, 607.

<sup>398</sup> Lenders, ‘L’héritage archivistique’, 133.

invested a sizeable sum of 4,500 guilders.<sup>399</sup> Lambert van Peteghem and Marie de Noose were also based in Alost, as was Schellekens, a physician. Cornelis Schepers presumably was a relative of Pierre François.<sup>400</sup>

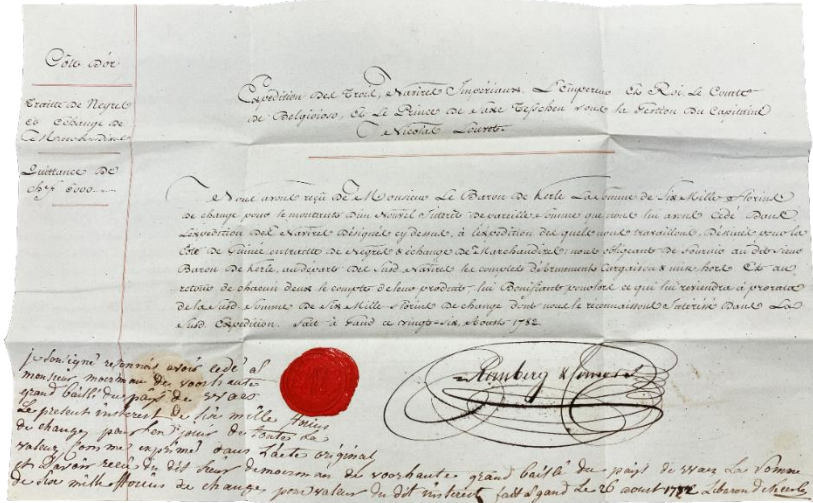


FIGURE 4.6 A share worth 6,000 guilders issued by Romberg & Consors for the first flotilla of Africa-bound ships, comprising the *Empereur et Roi*, the *Comte de Belgique*, and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschén*. Source: RAG, Famille de Moerman d'Harlebeke, 168.

A third group of shareholders was based in Ghent. These people already belonged to Romberg & Consors' network, or they might have seen the firm's vessels being prepared in port and wanted to get involved—presumably, the fitting out of ships for Africa, unprecedented in Ghent, caused quite a stir among the town's inhabitants (see Figure 4.7).<sup>401</sup> In fact, the associates of Romberg & Consors actively guided potential investors around the vessels in port, as an additional promotional effort alongside the distributed prospectuses. In one letter, François Carpentier refers to an occasion on which

<sup>399</sup> RAG, *Estates of Flanders*, 5837, Carpentier to Van Hecke (Ghent, 25 January 1781).  
<sup>400</sup> For Schellekens, see Dhondt, 'Een ondernemer', 368; One Cornelis Schepers of Alost, carillonneur of the city, famously refused to play French Republican songs on his instrument after the Austrian Netherlands fell to French revolutionary armies in 1792. Presumably, this is the same person who invested in Romberg & Consors' scheme. See Luc Rombauts, *Singing Bronze: A History of Carillon Music* (Leuven 2014) 140.  
<sup>401</sup> The fact that Laurent Janssens, a local merchant, drew up a list of commodities being embarked in the *Comte de Flandre* for no obvious reason, suggests this was indeed the case, see Chapter 4.

he and Charles-François-Joseph Vilain XIII together stood on the Ghent quaysides, observing the spectacle of the *Comte de Belgioioso* being prepared for her journey to Africa.<sup>402</sup> The town's investors consisted both of nobility and *bourgeoisie*. Included in the former category was Joseph-Louis de Keerle (with a large investment of 12,000 guilders), whose father had held several offices within the Finance Council and the presidency of the Council of Flanders (the province's judicial body, housed in Ghent). He had been ennobled in 1778, with the permission for his offspring to bear the same title (hence the list's "Baron de Keerle").<sup>403</sup> Jacques-François Ghysens (15,000 guilders, the second largest private shareholder) was employed at the Council of Flanders as an attorney and had been ennobled by Maria Theresa in 1766.<sup>404</sup> Mathieu Joseph Robert Ghislain, the *vicomte* of Moerman and *seigneur* of Voorhaut, exercised the offices of bailiff in the Pays de Waes and was a member of the Estates of Flanders.<sup>405</sup> "Le Febvre de Terbecke" either referred to Jacques Joseph Le Fèvre de Terbecke (1720-1804) or his son, Louis Henri Ghislain (1758-1834); both noblemen held important offices in Oudenaarde and Ghent.<sup>406</sup>

Other Ghent shareholders did not possess a noble title, but equally held important offices or exercised educated professions. Jean Baptiste van Tieghem, for example, was an attorney at the Council of Flanders.<sup>407</sup> "Malfaison" either referred to Ignace Malfeson, director of public works in the province of Flanders, or Jean-Bapiste Malfeson, an architect who during the 1770s designed the *Rasphuys* (the octagonal correction house in the city) and

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<sup>402</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

<sup>403</sup> Philippe Moureaux, 'Un organe peu connu du gouvernement des Pays-Bas autrichiens, le bureau de régie des droits d'entrée et de sortie', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en geschiedenis* 44:2 (1966) 479-99; Joseph Lefèvre, *Documents sur le personnel supérieur des conseils collatéraux du gouvernement des Pays-Bas pendant le 18ème siècle* (Brussels 1941); Joseph Lefèvre, *Documents concernant le recrutement de la haute magistrature dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens au XVIIIème siècle* (Brussels 1939); Charles-Jean Beydaels, *Liste des titres de noblesse, chevalerie et autres marques d'honneur* (Brussels 1783) 21.

<sup>404</sup> Alphonse De Vlaminck, *Filiations de Familles de la Flandre* (Ghent 1875), I, 162-3; Luc Duerlo and Paul Janssens, *Wapenboek van de Belgische Adel* (Brussels 1992), II, 166.

<sup>405</sup> Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, VII, 321; RAG, *Famille de Moerman d'Harlebeke*, 168.

<sup>406</sup> Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, IV, 218-9.

<sup>407</sup> RAG, *Old notary's office*, Notary Remy Vergult, 1561.

the *Pakhuis* (where the *Allegory* was located, see Chapter 1).<sup>408</sup> Some Ghent shareholders also earned directly from Romberg’s slaving business. Georges-François Buyck, for example, was a notary public from Ghent who, like Van Tieghem, worked for the Council of Flanders.<sup>409</sup> He became acquainted with Romberg’s slaving ventures when his services were consulted by Romberg & Consors during the fitting out of the *Comte de Flandre*.<sup>410</sup> During the *Real permiso* phase, Buyck continued to work for Romberg, certifying several copies for the firm.<sup>411</sup>



FIGURE 4.7 Spectators observing the outfitting of ships in the port of Ghent, 1791.

Source: Pieter Benedictus De Maere, Stadsmuseum Gent (STAM).

Multiple reasons can be identified why retail investors would readily lend their funds to the project of Romberg & Consors. First, the significant risks and volatile profits that characterized the slave trade—which indeed seems to have

<sup>408</sup> Louis Stroobant, ‘Le Rasphuys de Gand’, *Annales de la Société d’Histoire et d’Archéologie de Gand* 3:1 (1898) 227-9; Dirk Van de Vijver, *Ingenieurs en architecten op de drempel van een nieuwe tijd (1750-1830)* (Leuven 2003) 21.

<sup>409</sup> UAG, *Wegwyzer van Ghent*, 1780-1.

<sup>410</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Instruction to Jean Hagueron.

<sup>411</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Council of the Indies to the Intendant of Havana (San Lorenzo, 23 October 1782).

bothered most local merchants, cf. Janssens' statement—were likely less known to people unfamiliar with maritime commerce, who, as a consequence, would have approached the rather flowery figures of Romberg & Consors' prospectuses with little criticism. Additionally, Romberg's associates made extra promotional efforts in personal correspondence. In one letter with regards to the slave ships of the *Real permiso* phase, Schepers wrote to a retail investor that “soon you will see your investment double or possibly triple”.<sup>412</sup> As mentioned earlier, returns on slave voyages of 100 percent or 200 percent were not completely unheard of during the 1780s, but they were very rare and only achieved by the largest firms in the business; presenting them as a certainty for a marginal firm such as Romberg's was quite misleading.<sup>413</sup> It is no coincidence, therefore, that during the latter half of the 1780s, Romberg began racking up lawsuits from the slaving expedition's retail investors, and from retail investors only.<sup>414</sup> Other private investors, however, were perhaps perfectly aware that the slaving business was fraught with danger, and simply liked to take a gamble in the ‘lottery’, as the slave trade was routinely called in the eighteenth century.<sup>415</sup>

Second, just like risk, humanitarian reservations did not generally withhold investors in slaving expeditions either. Paulo Jacomo Cloots, owner of the Imperial Guinea ships of the 1710s and 1720s, responded to a proposal to set up slave trade that “the trade in human flesh does not appeal to me”.<sup>416</sup> Such reservations over slave trade, however, were not very common, and they still were not by the time Vilain XIII was subscribing to the capital of Romberg's slaving enterprise. Still, important thinkers of the ‘High Enlightenment’ had by now started formulating protests against the slave trade. In fact, at the very moment that Vilain XIII was sat on his desk demanding a stake in the slave trade of Romberg & Consors, Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*, with its criticism of slavery, was pressing in his back, as was the multi-volume *Encyclopédie* of

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<sup>412</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Schepers to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 13 November 1782), “vous verrez dans peu du tems doubler et il se peut tripler”.

<sup>413</sup> Boulle, ‘Slave Trade’, 82; Inikori, ‘Market Structure’, 771-4.

<sup>414</sup> See Chapter 9.

<sup>415</sup> Radburn, *Traders in Men*, 29.

<sup>416</sup> Cited in Parmentier, ‘De Oostendse Guineavaarders’, 177, “alsoo de negotie van menschenvlees mij tegenstaet”.

Diderot and d’Alembert<sup>417</sup>—Vilain would only have had to look up ‘*Traite négrière*’ to read a thundering indictment of the slave trade:

Slave trade is the purchase of Blacks made by Europeans on the coasts of Africa...The purchase of Blacks, in order to reduce them into slavery, is a trade which violates all religion, morals, natural law, & all human rights.<sup>418</sup>

Such voices, however, were not yet dominant in public debates, as the abolition movement would not gain force until a decade later. It is easy to see, then, how Vilain XIII could shake off such protesting voices as merely exceptional; in fact, he could even find opposing opinions in the very same works: Montesquieu’s *Esprit des lois* contained a caveat in which the author thought slavery necessary in hot climates, and the *Encyclopédie*, too, comprised many articles which were much less damning of slavery than the ‘*Traite négrière*’ entry.<sup>419</sup>

If risk and moral reservation did not withhold them, what motivated retail investors to commit their capital to Romberg’s venture, next to strictly personal reasons such as an interest in commerce, the appeal of a gamble, or the feeling of vicariously being part of a voyage to regions of the globe only known from books, journals, or plays? Ressel suggested that Romberg had simply asked nobles to invest in order to draw them closer to his company and secure political support.<sup>420</sup> However, this explanation downplays the incentives of the shareholders themselves—both financial and socio-cultural—which, I argue, were the primary drivers of their investment decisions.

First, as discussed in Chapter 2, a key explanation lies in the structural decline of interest rates on traditional investment methods over the course of

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<sup>417</sup> UAG, *Catalogue d’une très belle collection de livres delaisés par feu messire Charles Vilain XIII, seigneur de Welle* (Alost 1786) ff. 6, 8, 18.

<sup>418</sup> UAG, *Catalogue d’une très belle collection de livres delaisés par feu messire Charles Vilain XIII, seigneur de Welle* (Alost 1786) ff. 8, 46; Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, Volume XVI (Neuchâtel 1765) 532: “*Traite des negres, (Commerce d’Afrique.) C’est l’achat des negres que font les Européens sur les côtes d’Afrique, pour employer ces malheureux dans leurs colonies en qualité d’esclaves. Cet achat de negres, pour les réduire en esclavage, est un négoce qui viole la religion, la morale, les lois naturelles, & tous les droits de la nature humaine.*”

<sup>419</sup> Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness. Science & Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore 2013) 130-6, 181-5. Others of Romberg’s investors subscribed to the ideas of the Enlightenment: At Wespelaar Castle, Verlat helped decorate the estate with busts of *philosophes* such as Montesquieu and Voltaire. See Duquenne, *Het park van Wespelaar*, 11-6.

<sup>420</sup> Ressel, ‘Spoils of Neutrality’, 792.

the eighteenth century due to an abundance of capital, a comparatively lacking demand for funds, and the policies of the *Jointe des administrations*. In Ghent, where many of Romberg's investors resided, all general aspects of the Austrian Netherlands economy were true for the local level. First, the yield of government bonds had been cut by a quarter: after a decade-long struggle with the Provincial Estates, the *Jointe* in 1778 at last managed to bring interest rates down from 4 percent to 3 percent.<sup>421</sup> Second, the capital of the province of Flanders was awash with dormant funds. This had been shown as recent as 1778, when the Estates of Flanders had been able to raise three million guilders on the Ghent money market to fund the Austrian military effort during the War of the Bavarian Succession (1777-8).<sup>422</sup> Indeed, so few were the opportunities for investment, that when the government did float new loans, Piet Lenders assessed that people were "almost fighting" to buy bonds.<sup>423</sup> Lenders summarized the specific financial situation in Ghent as follows:

So much is clear: at a time when in Ghent and elsewhere an industrial revolution was beginning, there was a lot of money available. Historians have paid too little attention to this. The policy of cheap money, which accompanied it, completed the ideal atmosphere for investments. The often-heard complaint of a lack of investment opportunities confirms the willingness of capital owners to support serious projects.<sup>424</sup>

Additionally, as elsewhere in the Austrian Netherlands, the cost of living was rising in Ghent during the second half of the eighteenth century. According to grain prices gathered by Paul Deprez, inflation rose on average 4 percent annually between 1770 and 1793.<sup>425</sup> This inflation provided yet another incentive to place idle funds in a lucrative manner. Romberg & Consors profited from all these trends. In a letter, Carpentier suggested that the capital for the slaving enterprise was raised in no time, and that the firm even had to heighten

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<sup>421</sup> Lenders, 'Controversen', 1037-68.

<sup>422</sup> Lenders, 'Controversen', 1065. See also Dries Dewulf, *De private kapitaalmarkt in de 18de eeuw: een vergelijking tussen de regio's Gent en Ieper* (Ghent 2004) 35-9.

<sup>423</sup> Piet Lenders, 'De schulden van de openbare besturen in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden. Hun ontwikkeling vanaf 1749', in: Helma Houtman-De Smedt, ed. *Overheid en Economie. Economische Aspecten van de Overheidspolitiek in en met betrekking tot de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden* (Antwerp 1989) 32.

<sup>424</sup> Lenders, 'De schulden', 32, my translation.

<sup>425</sup> Paul Deprez, 'De prijzen van graan in Gent'.



the ambitions of the expedition, “to satisfy all our Friends who have demanded a Share”.<sup>426</sup> We have seen how the venture was presented as extremely profitable. But even if these windfall profits were discarded and a more average profitability of the slave trade was taken into account, Romberg’s slave trade might have presented an attractive investment product. Guillaume Daudin and Kenneth Morgan, respectively for the French long-distance trade and British slave trade, have suggested that investments in Atlantic trade compared favourably to alternative assets such as government bonds both in liquidity, risk, maturity, and yield. The yield on government debt was equal or higher in both of these countries than in the Austrian Netherlands; therefore, if low-yielding government bonds effected the scramble Lenders described, it is easy to imagine an even more frenetic reaction to stocks promising larger returns.<sup>427</sup>

A second major explanation is that investing in Romberg & Consors’ slavers may have been an act of what might be termed ‘conspicuous investment’. This was particularly true for Romberg’s aristocratic investors, who typically managed their wealth conservatively—acquiring landed property, state debt, or simply letting it sit idle in their coffers. Investing in more speculative assets had long been frowned upon and regarded as an activity beneath their class.<sup>428</sup> Joseph II, however, considered industry and commerce as an essential source of wealth for the enlightened state, and looked down favourably on those of his subjects who pursued it. In contrast to this entrepreneurial class and the peasantry, Joseph considered the nobility—who refused to put their capital to work in an economically useful way—as useless members of society.<sup>429</sup> The Emperor had abundantly made clear his disgust of the aristocratic lifestyle during his tour of the Austrian Netherlands in 1781 by sleeping in local inns instead of palaces, declining costly festivities and special ceremony, and spending much time with ordinary people (that is, not members of the aristocracy).<sup>430</sup>

Joseph’s manifestation of his ideas during his visit to the Low Countries—widely reported in local newspapers—seems to have influenced the local

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<sup>426</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 8 October 1782).

<sup>427</sup> Daudin, ‘Profitability’, 166-7; Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic trade and the British economy, 1660-1800* (Cambridge 2000) 42.

<sup>428</sup> Meyer, *L’armement nantais*, 211-2.

<sup>429</sup> Timothy Blanning, *Joseph II* (Harlow 1994) 101-3; Davis, *Joseph II*, 11, 105.

<sup>430</sup> Davis, *Joseph II*, 117-9; Beales, *Joseph II*, 138, 143.

nobility. In 1791, while looking back on the 1780s and the buildup towards the Brabantine Revolution of 1789, the Ghent authors Jan Baptist Vervier, Bernard Coppens, and Karel Lodewijk Diericx devoted attention to the slaving activities of Romberg & Consors in their town. They suggested that Ghent's nobility chose to invest in Romberg's vessels as a means of winning the favour of Joseph II, who, as highlighted in the previous chapter, was committed to develop his realm both economically and commercially:

When Emperor Joseph II was in Ghent, he received the merchants with distinction because they were useful people, and he looked down on the [Nobles] because they were mere consumers, most of them ignorant or foolish. As a result, the [Nobles] also wanted to get involved in commerce and even in manufacturing. It is easy to imagine that they were not capable of making speculations on their own, but they found opportunities favourable to their greed [when the] Baron de Romberg announced his slave trade.<sup>431</sup>

Vervier, Coppens, and Diericx were devoted Josephinists and hardly strove to give a neutral account of the 1780s with their *Livre blanc*. Still, they were clearly first-hand witnesses—Vervier had worked on one of Romberg's slave ships as a doctor—and their observations must have held more than a grain of truth. Several contemporaries of Joseph had already remarked that the Emperor gradually succeeded in evoking an enhanced service to the state from the aristocracy.<sup>432</sup> Romberg's slave trade provides another early example.

## Conclusion

On 10 January 1784, Francisco Xavier de Esteban addressed the Council of the Indies in order to petition for a slaving licence worth six vessels. In his request, the Madrid merchant expressed the hope of receiving the same “powerful

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<sup>431</sup> Jan Baptist Vervier, Bernard Coppens, and Karel Lodewijk Diericx, *Livre blanc ou révolution gordune* (Ghent 1791) 107-8, “Lorsque l'Empereur Joseph II se trouva a Gand, il y accueillit avec distinction les Negocians, parceque c'étoient des Gens utiles, & il régarda avec dedain les Jonckers, parceque c'étoient de simples consommateurs, la plupart ignorans ou imbéciles. Il en résulta que les Jonckers voulurent aussi se mêler de Commerce, & même de Fabriques. On s' imagine bien qu'ils n'étoient point en état de faire des speculations par eux-mêmes, mais ils rencontrèrent des occasions favorables à leur avidité [quand] le Baron de Romberg...annonça la traite des negres.”

<sup>432</sup> Blanning, *Joseph II*, 103.

protection” the King had bestowed on various Spanish and foreign firms during the past few years, “especially the [house] of Romberg of Brussels”.<sup>433</sup> The generous slaving policies of the American War of Independence to which Esteban referred, however, did not become a permanent situation after the war ended. Soon, the Council of the Indies returned to the old ways, granting an exclusive contract to the British merchant house of Edward Barry in 1784 and, consequently, that of Dawson & Baker. Yet the seeds of free trade, sown during the Seven Years’ War and extensively nurtured during the American War of Independence, proved unstoppable in their growth. Pressed by the perennial yearning for easier access to slaves of Cuban commercial elites, Madrid declared a complete liberalisation of the slave trade in February 1789.<sup>434</sup>

Previous scholars of the slave trade with Cuba during the years of the American Revolution have chiefly focused on intra-Caribbean trade and the trade conducted by the traditional Atlantic powers. As my analysis—and the Esteban petition—show, however, the importance of trans-Atlantic slave trade organised by a Habsburg ‘outsider’ such as Romberg & Consors has heretofore been overlooked. When the Imperial firm submitted its petition to the Spanish Crown in 1782, Madrid, keen to reduce the influence of traders from rival Atlantic powers—particularly Britain—within its empire, was quick to embrace the initiative originating from Ghent. Scaling up the efforts in the African trade the firm had initiated during the early 1780s, Romberg & Consors channelled the same transnational dynamics into an even more ambitious commercial venture starting in 1782, while also strengthening its local embedding by attracting numerous Austrian Netherlands retail investors. Although Romberg & Consors ultimately failed to live up to the expectations of the Spanish Crown, its importation of over a thousand captive Africans during the spell of only a few years facilitated Cuba’s shift from a mining economy to an agricultural economy based on plantation crops, contributed to the establishment of free trade, and set the Spanish Empire on its course of becoming an industrial slaving complex during the nineteenth century.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2821, Request of Francisco Xavier de San Esteban (Madrid, 10 January 1784), “*la poderosa protección*”, “*particularmente la de Romberg de Bruselas*”.

<sup>434</sup> Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America*, 83-94; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136-53; José Luis Belmonte Postigo, ‘A Caribbean Affair: The Liberalisation of the Slave Trade in the Spanish Caribbean, 1784-1791’, *Culture & History Digital Journal* 8:1 (2019) 1-14.

<sup>435</sup> Schneider, ‘African slavery’, 26-7.

CHAPTER FIVE  
“In every way advantageous to the Country”  
The Economic Impact of Romberg’s Africa Trade

ON 27 MARCH 1783, A KNOCK sounded on the door of Joseph Fauré. Fauré was a schoolteacher who lived in the Gouwstraat in Ghent. His specialty was Spanish: Fauré took pride in being able to teach children the language in barely three months’ time. In fact, some months back, he had decided to advertise his special talent in the *Gazette van Gendt*, a newspaper widely read in Ghent and its surroundings. Today, however, Fauré did not expect any pupils until six in the evening. Perhaps, on this early spring day, a new student had decided to enroll in his course and was seeking additional information? Such wasn’t the case: standing on the porch was François Carpentier, a merchant whom Fauré knew had been keeping an office on the Kouter for the past three years. If the teacher would please help him with a translation, asked Carpentier—in exchange for a few guilders, of course. Yet the document Carpentier handed over was not an ordinary bill of lading or a routine business letter to a Spanish contact. No, what Fauré suddenly found himself holding was a special permission, personally granted by the King of Spain: a permission to transport enslaved Africans to Havana.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gendt* (15 March 1781), “*Sieur J. Fauré maekt aen het Publicq bekend...Dewyl het zoude kunnen gebeuren, dat’er eenige jonge Luyden genegen zouden zyn, om de gemelde Taelen te leeren, voorkomt hy de selve, dat hy hun, eenige lichte*

For the last eighty years, the relationship between slave trade and the European economy has been a topic of intense debate. While the profitability of the Atlantic and slaving economy was already widely discussed during the Early Modern period, it was Eric Williams who introduced the debate into modern scholarship in his *Slavery and Capitalism*. The profits gained in the slave trade, so argued Williams, were reinvested in European manufactures and had eventually sparked the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain.<sup>437</sup> In response, however, several authors attempted to put the profits of slave trade into numbers, concluding that the returns were too small to be of any material importance for sparking Europe's economic take-off during the late eighteenth century.<sup>438</sup> Yet the 'Williams thesis', as the author's argument came to be known, inspired many scholars to further examine the reach of slavery in European society.

A first group of historians argued that, instead of singling out the slave trade, the relationship with the Atlantic economy as a whole should be taken into account. Such authors have shown that, both through material gain and institutional reform, the Atlantic complex, of which slavery was a quintessential part, played a crucial role in the ascendancy of Europe.<sup>439</sup> A second group of historians judged the narrow profit-industrialisation reasoning of the original Williams thesis too narrow. Instead, they have expanded the scope of research, focusing on the immense economic activity generated by slave trade and colonial commerce.<sup>440</sup> This activity can be conceptually divided in backward

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*kennisse hebbende van het Latyn, binnen de dry maenden in state zal stellen, om de Vertaelinge te doen...hy sal syne Lessen beginnen...van zes toch acht uren 's avonds". UAG, Wegwyzer van Gent, 1782-3, 107; AGI, Gobierno: Indiferente General, 2823, Council of the Indies to the Intendant of Havana (San Lorenzo, 23 October 1782).*

<sup>437</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill 1944).

<sup>438</sup> Stanley Engerman, 'The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century: A Comment on the Williams Thesis', *The Business History Review* 46:4 (1972) 430-44; Patrick O'Brien, 'European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery', *The Economic History Review* 35:1 (1982) 1-18; David Eltis, Pieter Emmer, and Frank Lewis, 'More than Profits? The Contribution of the Slave Trade to the Dutch Economy: Assessing Fatah-Black and Van Rossum', *Slavery & Abolition* 37:4 (2016) 724-35.

<sup>439</sup> Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge 2002); Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson, 'The Rise of Europe: Atlantic Trade, Institutional Change, and Economic Growth', *The American Economic Review* 95:3 (2005) 546-79; Barbara Solow, *The economic consequences of the Atlantic slave trade* (Lanham 2014). See also recently Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge 2023).

<sup>440</sup> See Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum, 'Beyond Profitability: The Dutch Transatlantic Slave Trade and its Economic Impact', *Slavery & Abolition* 36:1 (2015) 63-

and forward linkages. Forward linkages included the industrial complex often established in the vicinity of Atlantic port towns, which was fuelled by the stream of slave-based produce that was carried to Europe for further processing. Backward linkages included the numerous inputs which underpinned the slaving business. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, substantial amounts of capital were required to set in motion the complex logistical process of preparing an Africa-bound ship. First and foremost, it was necessary to find a suitable vessel, which generally had to undergo various rounds of repairs to ensure it was seaworthy. Shipowners then needed to hire a crew capable of steering the craft to Africa, the Caribbean, and back. In order to keep these mariners alive during their long voyage, as well as the enslaved Africans brutally stowed away belowdeck, many barrels of food, freshwater, and medicine were embarked in the vessel's hold. On top, a wide diversity of trade commodities was needed to cater to the preferences of African brokers. Lastly, many learned professions such as notaries, clerks, or translators—such as Fauré—were involved in every phase of the fitting out process. This expansive approach of following value chains and assessing incomes generated by slave trade has been increasingly emulated during recent decades, especially in Great Britain and the Netherlands. Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma, for example, calculated that in 1770 about 5.2 percent of Dutch GDP was based on slave trade, while 10.4 percent of the province of Holland.<sup>441</sup> Gerhard de Kok, too, concluded a substantial impact of slave trade on the province of Zeeland: on estimate 10 percent of the income of Middelburg and a third of that of Vlissingen was connected to the slave trade.<sup>442</sup> David Richardson calculated that, in 1790, about 40 percent of Bristol's income was related to slave-based activities.<sup>443</sup> Both in Britain and the Netherlands, scores of other studies have been

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83; Tamira Combrink, 'Slave-based coffee in the eighteenth century and the role of the Dutch in global commodity chains', *Slavery & Abolition* 42:1 (2021) 15-42; Tamira Combrink and Matthias van Rossum, 'Introduction: the impact of slavery on Europe – reopening a debate', *Slavery & Abolition* 42:1 (2021) 1-14 and the other contributions to this special issue.

<sup>441</sup> Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma, 'De betekenis van de Atlantische slavernij voor de Nederlandse economie in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor Economische Geschiedenis* 16:2 (2019) 5-45.

<sup>442</sup> Gerhard de Kok, 'Cursed Capital: the Economic Impact of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on Walcheren around 1770', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geschiedenis* 13:3 (2016) 1-27; de Kok, *Walcherse ketens*.

<sup>443</sup> David Richardson, 'Slavery and Bristol's 'golden age'', *Slavery & Abolition* 26:1 (2005) 35-54.

conducted—or are currently being conducted—on case-studies of individual towns and cities, which lay bare the many linkages of urban economies with the Atlantic slaving complex.<sup>444</sup>

In this Chapter, I aspire to contribute to these debates by examining the logistical processes that underpinned Romberg's Africa venture and the value chains that were created by his firm. Previous accounts of the merchant's slave trade exclusively focused on his ships and their operations in the Atlantic, failing to identify the wider economic impact of his slaving business. Nevertheless, many contemporaries were already convinced that the merchant's Africa trade offered significant advantages that went beyond Romberg's own material gain. In the *Vlaemsche Indicateur*, a contemporary enlightened periodical, a commentator acknowledged that Ostend would lose much of its commercial traffic once peace eventually returned to Europe, but voiced the firm conviction that, due to Romberg's *Real permiso*, "at least the trade with the Spanish domains will remain in that port and continue to be a beneficial and profitable branch of trade for this country".<sup>445</sup> When Romberg was ennobled in 1784, the establishment of slave trade was hailed as one of his major economic achievements in the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>446</sup> Gomicourt wanted to raise a statue for the merchant, partly because Romberg had "shown his compatriots the way to Guinea".<sup>447</sup> Ministers of the Finance Council, finally, thought that Romberg's slave trade was "in every way advantageous to the Country".<sup>448</sup>

In the following pages, I explore the connections between Romberg's maritime ventures and the economy of the European mainland, particularly the Austrian Netherlands. In doing so, I engage with a growing body of

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<sup>444</sup> For Great Britain, see for example David Richardson, *Liverpool and transatlantic slavery* (Liverpool 2010) and Stephen Mullen, *The Glasgow sugar aristocracy: Scotland and Caribbean slavery, 1775-1838* (London 2022). For the Netherlands, see Gert Oostindie, ed., *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam* (Amsterdam 2020); Nancy Jouwe et al. *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht* (Zutphen 2021); Coretta Bakker et al., *Het koloniaal en slavernijverleden van Gouda* (Gouda 2024) 137-46, 179-93.

<sup>445</sup> UAG, *Den Vlaemsche Indicateur ofte Aenwyzer der Wetenschappen en Vrye Konsten* 9:1 (1783) 13, "maer den Handel der Spaensche Bezitting zal altoos in die Haef blyven en er een voordeeligen en winstrijken Koophandel-tak overlaeten voor deeze Landen".

<sup>446</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 779, f. 164.

<sup>447</sup> Derival, *Le voyageur*, II, 274, "frayant, pour ainsi dire, à leurs concitoyens la route de Guinée".

<sup>448</sup> See for example ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401, Protocol of Baudier (24 July 1782), "Romberg faisant ce Commerce, à tous égards avantageux au Païjs".

international research that seeks to more firmly integrate the Caribbean slaving complex into the history of European expansion, both in terms of supply and processing industries. I demonstrate that, much like the capital investment discussed in Chapter 4, Romberg's enterprise was profoundly multinational at every stage of the fitting-out process. I show how his slaving business intertwined with European commodity chains linked to the slave trade, both within Europe and the Austrian Netherlands, while also incorporating domestic sectors previously unconnected to the trade. Ultimately, I argue that, in line with recent research in Britain and the Netherlands, Romberg's human trafficking made a substantial economic impact on the economy of the Austrian Netherlands.

## Fitting Out: The Ship in Port

### *Acquiring a vessel*

The first major expense of setting up a slaving expedition was the purchase of an ocean-going vessel. During the seventeenth century, Ostend had boasted its own wharves as a result of the town becoming a locus of Spanish naval policy and a base of operations for the Crown's North Sea fleet.<sup>449</sup> With the dismissal of the *Armada de Flandes* and the dwindling of maritime commerce, however, these shipyards had fallen into disuse. There were still some active wharves in the province of Brabant (mainly Brussels, but also in Mechelen and Boom), but its newly-built vessels could not reach the country's seaports due to too shallow canals and the closure of the Scheldt River, upheld by the Dutch Republic. The lack of enough suitable wood and skilled labourers such as carpenters in the maritime province of Flanders rendered it near impossible to establish a shipbuilding industry which would be able to compete with foreign wharves.<sup>450</sup> In the 1720s, when the GIC was operational, only one vessel was built in Ostend. This construction came at a significant cost, and ultimately, the quality of the vessel proved to be less than satisfactory. The rest of the GIC's fleet was either

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<sup>449</sup> Robert Stradling, *The Armada of Flanders: Spanish maritime policy and European war, 1568-1668* (Cambridge 1992) 33-4.

<sup>450</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 8580, *Dictionnaire de Commerce of Henri Delplançq* (1776), 11-2.



bought in neighbouring countries or constructed in Hamburg shipyards.<sup>451</sup> Likewise, the Sawmill Company, which was established in Ostend during the early 1750s, acquired its vessels in northern Europe.<sup>452</sup>

Like the GIC, Romberg bought his ocean-going vessels in cities such as Dunkirk, Amsterdam, and Nantes. Shipowners in these towns whose vessels were left lying idle due to the American War of Independence were happy to offload them to neutral merchants such as Romberg. As time was of the essence—the arrival of peace would likely decrease profits or render the undertaking politically impossible—constructing a new vessel would be far too sluggish a course of action for the firm. But even in normal times, it was quite unusual for vessels to spend their maiden voyage on African shipping lanes: the shipworm-infested waters of the tropics tended to significantly damage hulls or reduce them to scrap, and most shipowners outfitting vessels for Africa preferred used ships over new craft.<sup>453</sup> The ships used by Romberg to ply Atlantic shipping lanes, too, had previous journeys on their counter: as Table 5.1 shows, all vessels generated significant repair costs before departure.

Correspondents in several European harbours notified Romberg when attractive ship prospects were put up for sale. In Le Havre, Rohner and Eichhoff (see Chapter 3) conducted several sales for Romberg's firm.<sup>454</sup> Chauvel, too, kept an eye out for Romberg, on one occasion writing that a vessel had shown up which was "*brand new, double-sheathed and consequently ready to go to America and to make any kind of navigation you want...[the current owners] ask 120 thousand livres, but there is reason to hope that we will get it for 100 to 108 thousand livres*".<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Parmentier, *Oostende & Co*, 20-5.

<sup>452</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 8580, *Dictionnaire de Commerce of Henri Delplancq (1776)*, 11 v.; Jean-Jacques Heirwegh, 'Une société par actions dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens. La Compagnie des moulins à scier bois près d'Ostende', *Contributions à l'Histoire économique et sociale* 7:1 (1976) 97-150.

<sup>453</sup> Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 161-2; Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 9-10. Romberg's vessels, too, returned from their voyages in a severely damaged condition. The *Comte de Belgioioso*, bought for 22,848 Flemish guilders, was sold again for a third of the purchase price (7,523 Flemish guilders), see AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 46 r. Likewise, the *Empereur et Roi*, acquired for a sum of 7,616 Flemish guilders, was reduced to a craft valued at 2,570 guilders due to it being "eaten by worms". See RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784), "*piqué des vers*".

<sup>454</sup> See for example ADSM, Notary, 216BP414, deeds of 7 December 1780, 19 December 1780, and 2 January 1781.

<sup>455</sup> KBR, Ms. 19959, Chauvel to Romberg (Paris, 6 July 1781), "*tout neuf, redoublé et par conséquent en état d'aller à L'Amérique et de faire telle navigation que vous voudrez, ou,*

Among the vessels for which I possess data, an average of 16.0 percent of the total expedition preparation expenses were allocated to acquiring a vessel (cf. *infra*, Table 5.4). All of these funds were spent abroad: due to a lack of shipyards for ocean-going vessels in Ostend, no backward linkages were established in the Austrian Netherlands with regards to the purchase of Romberg's ships.

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*en demande 120 mille francs, mais il y a lieu d'esperer qu'on l'aura pour 100 à 108 mille Livres*<sup>7</sup>.

TABLE 5.1 Type, tonnage, build and purchase locations of Romberg's Africa-going vessels, 1780-1784.

Name	Type	Ton	Location			Cost (in fl.w.g.)		
			Build	Purchase	Vessel	Repairs	Total	
<i>Marie-Antoinette</i>	brig	80-90	Le Havre	'Paris'	-	-	-	
<i>Prince Charles</i>	sloop	25	-	Ostend	-	-	-	
<i>Virtuous Sophia</i>	frigate	-	-	-	-	-	-	
<i>Comte de Flandre</i>	cutter	70	England	Le Havre	9,800	-	-	
<i>États de Brabant</i>	brig	170	Dutch Republic	Le Havre	-	-	-	
<i>Lieve Catharina</i>	brig	220	Le Havre	Le Havre	-	-	-	
<i>Empereur et Roi</i>	-	60	Dunkirk	'Brussels'	7,616	9,869	17,485	
<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	snow	120	England	London	22,848	27,226	50,074	
<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschén</i>	frigate	160	England	London	28,560	23,740	52,300	
<i>Négriter Impérial</i>	brig	[300]	Nantes	Dunkirk	31,231	36,171	67,402	
<i>Prince of Starhemberg</i>	snow	140	Le Havre	Rouen	15,000	18,351	33,351	
<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	frigate	300	Amsterdam	Amsterdam	-	-	90,694	
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	frigate	300	Nantes	Dunkirk	-	-	-	
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	frigate	300	Honfleur	Honfleur	-	-	-	

Source: ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2184. Measuring the tonnage of vessels was not yet an exact science during the Early Modern period, which resulted in sometimes very differing figures for the same vessel (see also Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 8). Yet even the type of ship, the build location, and the purchase location are features which frequently change in different sources. For this Table, we chose to use the most precise description of every feature.

## Preparations and provisions during the early phase

Another major expense of setting up a slaving expedition was rendering the vessel fit for purpose. This included making necessary repairs, while also bringing adequate supplies of food, drink, medicine, and equipment on board. For this aspect of the outfitting process, Romberg & Consors heavily relied on the local economy of the Austrian Netherlands.



FIGURE 5.1. Ghent economic footprint of the fitting out of the *Comte de Flandre*, 1781-2. Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*; UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gendt*, 1782-3; Victor Fris, *De oude straatnamen van Gent* (Ghent 1925). Map based on Goethals, *Plan van Gend gemeeten en gegraveerd in 't jaar 1796* (1796). Location of craftsmen and shops are correct down to street level.

We are best informed about backward linkages by the case of the *Comte de Flandre*, a relatively small craft of 60 tons. Nonetheless, as Figure 5.1 illustrates, preparing the ship for her journey left a considerable economic footprint in Ghent, with links spread across the city's geographic and professional map. First of all, after bringing the *Comte* to Ghent, Romberg & Consors began employing a range of local craftsmen. The principal task of these skilled workers was to protect the ship against shipworms by attaching copper sheathing to the hull, a practice which became increasingly common in Europe during the 1780s. This extra layer of protection had the additional advantage of preventing shells from accumulating below the water line and slowing down the craft.<sup>456</sup> De Coster, a local shipbuilder, was paid 1,505 guilders for this task (ten times the annual earnings of an unskilled labourer during the eighteenth century), while other sizeable sums were allocated to ropework and timber. Pieter Francis Trinconi, a painter and decorator of houses, painted the vessel inside and out. Trinconi was a reputable artisan: in 1779, he had restored the ceiling decoration of the Saint Sebastian guild which neighbored the offices of Romberg & Consors—perhaps word of mouth advertisement of the painter's skills had reached Romberg's associates through this channel—and in 1785 he would be tasked with applying street names to hundreds of Ghent houses.<sup>457</sup> Next on the list was Finck, a gunsmith, who provided five swivel guns, four blunderbusses, several pairs of pistols, and half a dozen swords and muskets.<sup>458</sup> These arms were not embarked as trading commodities, but only as defensive hand weapons for the crew. Romberg & Consors had instructed Jean Hagueron (the appointed captain of the *Comte de Flandre*) to

take special Care not to let more than five or Six Negroes at Most come on board his Ship at one time in order to avoid the plans that may [be] Meditated by the Natives of the Country; with respect to the Smallness of his Ship he is to receive no person on board unless his Crew is under Arms with all their pieces loaded and the Match lighted to be ready to fire upon the least Alarm on the Insurgents that shall Attempt to board him.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 147; Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 10.

<sup>457</sup> Schrans, *Vrijmetselaars te Gent*, 530-2.

<sup>458</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examinations of Pierre Grémont and Jean Hagueron.

<sup>459</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Instruction to Jean Hagueron.

Additionally, Romberg & Consors sourced sails fashioned from local linen. Since the Middle Ages, the Southern Netherlands had boasted a sizeable textile industry. The production of linen, which mainly took place in the province of Flanders, was by far the most important constituent of the sector. Despite the introduction of new fabrics such as cotton, linen kept its prominent position within the industry during the eighteenth century and was the theatre of burgeoning organizational and technical innovation.<sup>460</sup> In fact, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, Romberg & Consors' very own Pierre François Schepers had played a crucial role in the latter process by smuggling a spinning device across the English Channel. As Ann Coenen has shown, the Flemish linen sector was able to maintain a high level of exports: between 1765 and 1791, 15 to 20 million ells of linen cloth each year passed the country's customs offices on their way to a foreign market.<sup>461</sup>

Anka Steffen has recently advocated for greater attention to the circulation of fabrics such as linens in the Atlantic economy, attention which was previously chiefly channelled towards Indian-style cottons (cf. *infra*).<sup>462</sup> While Steffen mentions Silesian linen as a major disregarded Atlantic 'staple', the Flemish linen sector serves as another prime example. An important export market for these textiles was Spain, especially its overseas empire, where linen was often used to clothe enslaved labourers.<sup>463</sup> Although the severance of the Southern Netherlands from the Spanish Empire in the Treaties of Utrecht and Rastatt (1713-4) had hurt exports, the trade—helped by several customs treaties—went through a revival during the eighteenth century.<sup>464</sup> Another important—perhaps even more important—export market lay to the North, in the Dutch

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<sup>460</sup> Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt, 'De Gentse vlasindustrie vanaf het einde van de XVIIIe eeuw tot de oprichting van de grote mechanische bedrijven (1838)', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 22:1 (1968) 179-81; Joseph Vermaut, *De textielnijverheid in Brugge en op het platteland, Westelijk Vlaanderen voor 1800: konjunktuurverloop, organisatie en sociale verhoudingen* (Ghent 1974); Sabbe, *De Belgische vlasnijverheid*, II; Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt, 'The Belgian textile industry on new roads through the adoption of a new mental attitude', *The Low Countries History Yearbook: Acta Historiae Neerlandicae* 14:1 (1982) 106-23; Ann Coenen, 'The International Textile Trade in the Austrian Netherlands, 1750-1791', in: Jon Stobart and Bruno Blondé, eds., *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century. Comparative Perspectives from Western Europe* (New York 2014) 67-9; Annik Adriaenssens, *Van laken tot linnen: de textielhandel Bethune & Fils, tweede helft achttiende eeuw: een analyse op basis van het bedrijfsarchief* (Ghent 2016).

<sup>461</sup> Coenen, 'The International Textile Trade', 70-1.

<sup>462</sup> Steffen, 'A Fierce Competition', 37-56, especially 38.

<sup>463</sup> Everaert, *De internationale en koloniale handel*, 241-5.

<sup>464</sup> Sabbe, *De Belgische vlasnijverheid*, II, 217-23.

Republic. Flemish linen was consumed locally, but for a significant amount reexported abroad, for example to the Dutch territories in the East and West Indies.<sup>465</sup> In the province of Zeeland, particularly, a large part of the produce was used by sailmakers working for the Middelburgsche Commerce Compagnie (MCC), a slaving firm, or by the MCC as cargo.<sup>466</sup> Both the export to the Spanish and Dutch Empire presented a structural embedding of the Austrian Netherlands in the Atlantic economy—Schepers claimed that the linen produced in Flanders constituted “*the fortune of our Flemish factories..for the export to Spain and Africa*”.<sup>467</sup> Many of the fabrics destined for the Dutch Republic were produced in Ghent or by peasants in the surrounding countryside, and from there they were shipped northward.<sup>468</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that Romberg & Consors tapped into these existing commodity chains for their own colonial endeavours.

With also a seamstress, a brazier, a locksmith, a cooper, a block maker, a glazier, and a compass maker added to the payroll, the *Comte de Flandre* gave employ to nineteen craftsmen, the total fitting-out bill amounting to a substantial 6,353 guilders.

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<sup>465</sup> Sabbe, *De Belgische vlasnijverheid*, II, 251-3.

<sup>466</sup> Paul Brusse, *Gevallen stad: stedelijke netwerken en het platteland, Zeeland, 1740-1850* (Zwolle 2011) 59-60, 71; de Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 114.

<sup>467</sup> Dhondt, ‘Een ondernemer’, 332, “*le bonheur de nos fabriques de flandre dans ce genre pour l’exportation vers l’espagne et l’affrique*”.

<sup>468</sup> Lenders, *Gent*, 54.

TABLE 5.2. Outfitting costs of the *Comte de Flandre* in Ghent, 1781.

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Profession</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sum (fl.w.g.)</i>
Outfitting, equipment, and utensils	De Coster	Carpenter	Sheathing, careening, and repairing	1,505
	Du Vivier	Sailmaker	–	478
	Begijn	Joiner	–	192
	Servaes	Timber merchant	Planks	473
	Vercruysen	Compass maker	–	30
	Hardy	Glazier	–	21
	Trinconi	Painter	Painting the vessel inside and outside	215
	Vermeire	Ropemaker	–	616
	Blockel	Plumber	–	28
	De Smedt	Blacksmith	–	311
	Verdonc	Blockmaker	–	101
	Goemaes	Cooper	Water casks	117
	Guersouille	Locksmith	–	57
	Bervenick	Brazier	–	28
	Marlé	Ironmonger	–	47
	–	Seamstress	–	11
	Finck	Gunsmith	Firelocks, muskets, pistols	235
	–	–	5 guns	150
Medicine	Coppens	[Apothecary]	Medicine	58
Provisions and board	Le Duc	–	Grease	81
	Vandeweeghe	–	Biscuits	228
	C. Holm	–	5 barrels of beer	150
	Verspeyen	[Brewer/Inn owner]	3 butts of beer	90
	–	–	Barrel of flour	11
	–	–	Barrel of bacon	17
	Romberg & Cie Bruges	Merchant	2 hogsheads of wine	167
	Verspeyen	[Brewer/Inn owner]	Board for captain and mate	306
	Van Loo	[Brewer/Inn owner]	Board for the crew	630
		<i>Total</i>	<i>6,353</i>	

*Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, Comte de Flandre.*

A second group of people who earned a living off the *Comte de Flandre* were dealers in provisions. Africa-going ships usually sought a balance between domestically furnished provisions, which were cheaper but had a dangerous tendency to rot during the outward voyage, and foodstuffs bought on the



African seaboard.<sup>469</sup> The *Comte*, too, would call at a port in Sierra Leone to acquire 2,840 pounds of rice.<sup>470</sup> The main part of the provisions, however, was embarked in Ghent. From Coppens, an apothecary, Romberg & Consors bought crucial medicine for the voyage, which was almost certain to be long and disease-ridden. Vandeweeghe furnished the ship with biscuit, Le Duc sold grease, while some anonymous shopkeepers provided a barrel of beef and a barrel of flour. Where possible, Romberg sought to establish a vertical integration of his firm's different subbranches: two casks of wine were purchased at Romberg & Cie in Bruges. Lastly, beer was bought at the stores of brewers such as Verspeyen. Major brewers in Ghent commonly owned one or several inns as a way of ensuring a steady demand for their products, and so it happened that the two officers of the *Comte de Flandre* found lodging in the *Brouwers-Huys*, Verspeyen's inn on the Predikherenlei.<sup>471</sup> Regular crew members received bed and board in the guesthouse of Van Loo, a brandy merchant, also located on the Predikherenlei.<sup>472</sup> Although they remain anonymous in the sources, countless dockworkers, haulers, and porters were paid to load these victuals in the ship's hold.<sup>473</sup>

A third group of those who profited from Romberg & Consors Africa enterprise were educated professions. A pilot, for example, was hired for 62 guilders in order to guide the vessel from Ostend to Ghent, as Jean Hagueron, the *Comte*'s captain, was unacquainted with the waterways in the interior of the Austrian Netherlands. Jean-François Buyck, notary public in Ghent (and shareholder, see Chapter 4), certified several copies for the firm.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Villiers, *Le commerce colonial*, 188.

<sup>470</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite, 2, 3 and 14 February 1782.

<sup>471</sup> Guy Elewaut, *Herbergen in Gent, 1656-1797* (Ghent 1985) 139-41; UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gent*, 1782-3, 67, 83.

<sup>472</sup> UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gent*, 1782-3, 67.

<sup>473</sup> Lenders, *Gent*, 47-8.

<sup>474</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Council of the Indies to the Intendant of Havana (San Lorenzo, 23 October 1782).

TABLE 5.3 Outfitting costs of the *Marie-Antoinette* in Ostend, 1780.

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Profession</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sum (fl.w.g.)</i>
Outfitting, equipment and utensils	City of Ostend	Government	Consul documents	25
	City of Ostend	Government	Bill of health	3
	J. Leept	Carpenter	–	818
	Coysin	Sail maker	–	539
	P. De Roo	Blacksmith	–	64
	J. Clempoels	Ropemaker	–	639
	J. Crepin	Block maker	–	75
	F. Prouvier	Brazier	–	64
	Wegenaeers	Cooper	–	29
	Moneque	Tin man and painter	–	64
	Widow Bedet	Tanner	–	35
	Mestdagh	Plumber	–	23
	Doessaert	Mason	–	6
	Pots	–	Renting of a plank to load goods	1
	C. Holm	–	Pitch	18
	Gibon	–	White soap for the surgeon	4
	P. Robé	Nail maker	–	124
Medecine	Cosyn	Apothecary	Medicine	8
Provisions and board	Romberg & Co	Merchant	4,000 pounds of biscuit	560
	Francis Demey	Baker	–	37
	J. Kindt	Butcher	–	229
	J. Lofsen	Brewer	–	125
	J. Hilleyer	Chandler	–	1,196
	C. Holm	–	Brandy, gin, and wine	206
	Kerkoven	–	Water	55
	Kerkoven	–	Wood	53
	–	–	13 barrels of butter	247
	–	–	8 barrels of salted beef	335
		<i>Total</i>	<i>5,582</i>	

*Source:* TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*. The sums of the original source were noted in fl.c.g. and were converted to fl.w.g.

The expense list of the *Marie-Antoinette*, which at 80-90 tons was only slightly larger than the *Comte de Flandre*, presents a similar image as the latter ship, though this time for the city of Ostend. Again, the number of local artisans involved in the outfitting of a slave ship is abundantly demonstrated: Romberg generated an income for at least fifteen craftsmen and almost ten wholesalers of provisions. And again, the merchant established ties within his own firm by buying 4,000 pounds of biscuit from Romberg & Cie (presumably the local Ostend branch). Despite their significant mark on Ghent and Ostend's urban economy, the *Comte de Flandre* and the *Marie-Antoinette* were still relatively small craft. The *États de Brabant*, a different 'early' vessel outfitted in Ghent, was twice the size of the latter ships (170 tons), and her necessities scaled accordingly.

#### *Preparations and provisions during the Spanish phase*

With the arrival of the *Real permiso* in the offices of Romberg & Consors during the fall of 1782, an even larger economic footprint than the one created by the earlier vessels began to take form. First, the participation in the Spanish Empire sparked the need for involving more specialists. Fauré, for instance, the teacher whom we met in the introduction to this chapter, lent his linguistic prowess to Romberg & Consors for translating documents when communicating with the Council of the Indies.<sup>475</sup> Yet it was mostly the scale of the second phase that prompted more links with the local economy: both the number—eight—as well as the average tonnage of vessels involved in the second phase was larger than in the first phase. Moreover, most of these expeditions were meant to participate in the slave trade, which multiplied and extended almost every aspect of the fitting out process—more provisions, more specific components such as chains and shackles, and more weapons to quell possible insurrections on board.

For the *Real permiso* phase, we dispose of a fairly detailed list of expenses on various aspects of the fitting out process of six vessels (comprising Flotilla I and II), with the exception of the *Empereur et Roi* all slave ships. Like the

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<sup>475</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gendt* (15 March 1781); UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gent*, 1782-3, 107; AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Council of the Indies to the Intendant of Havana (San Lorenzo, 23 October 1782).

*Comte de Flandre* and the *États de Brabant*, the *Comte de Belgioioso*, the *Négrier Impérial*, and the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* travelled as far inland as Ghent, other vessels likely limited their journeys to Bruges and Ostend—but all established significant links with the local economies of these places.

A first major expense lay with repairing and fitting out the vessels selected for Africa. As Table 5.4 demonstrates, on average 15.5 percent of the funds were spent on naval works. Combined with the purchase price of the vessel this gives us a total share of 31.5 percent for costs related to the craft itself, which aligns with the 20–30 percent share found by Jean Meyer for the French slave trade.<sup>476</sup> In contrast to the origins of the vessels (which were all acquired abroad), the sources are not always conclusive as to where the fitting-out expenses were made, but in all appearance Romberg & Consors continued to rely on craftsmen in the Austrian Netherlands. The accounts of the *Négrier Impérial*, for instance, contain expenses of more than 20,000 guilders incurred in Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent for equipping the ship. In 1785, Schepers was still submitting bills from Ghent craftsmen to Romberg, Bapst & Cie in Bordeaux.<sup>477</sup> It is equally clear, however, that some vessels were prepared on the location where they were bought. The *Empereur et Roi*, for example, was repaired in Dunkirk (although additional expenses were later made in Bruges and Ostend). Perhaps it was more convenient and cheaper to have these vessels repaired in a better-equipped foreign port—such ‘shopping’ practices, after all, were also common in the French slave trade.<sup>478</sup>

Another major expense was the provisioning of supplies for both the crew and the enslaved Africans. Meyer assessed that in the Nantes slave trade about 5–10 percent of the total funds were spent on food and drink.<sup>479</sup> Romberg’s vessels again follow this estimate: 6.0 percent was dedicated to provisions for officers and crew, and, despite outnumbering the crew tenfold, 2.5 percent for enslaved Africans—a difference caused by the fact that part of the provisions allocated to the ship’s prisoners were purchased in Africa, but primarily due to the vastly inferior quality of food provided for the human captives (the consequences of this structural violence will be treated in Chapter 8). No

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<sup>476</sup> Meyer, *L’armement nantais*, 162.

<sup>477</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 101 r. The bill in question was from Beghyn, the same joiner who had worked on the *Comte de Flandre*.

<sup>478</sup> Meyer, *L’armement nantais*, 145.

<sup>479</sup> Meyer, *L’armement nantais*, 161.

elaborate list of purchased victuals is available for these second phase-ships, but we may safely assume—as with the *Comte de Flandre*—that these were bought locally: it was of the utmost importance that provisions were as fresh as possible when embarked, given the fact that they would be stored in the ship for months and spoiled victuals could spell ruin for a slaving voyage. Indeed, the *Négrier Impérial* bought 55 barrels of water and large quantities of bread (912 Flemish guilders) at a baker called Fontaine while preparing her journey in Bruges.<sup>480</sup> Lastly, medicine took up a share of 0.5 percent of the total capital—a relatively small expense, but the very fact that drugs were included separately in the accounts reveals their crucial character.

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<sup>480</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 5 v.

TABLE 5.4 Outfitting costs (fl.w.g.) of the ships of the *Real permiso* flotillas.

	Comite de Belgiosos		Empereur & Roi		Prince de Saxe-Teschén		Négrier Impérial		Vlaemsch Zeepaerd		Prince de Starhemberg		Roi du Congo**		Conseil de Flandre**		All Total Sum
	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	Sum	%T	
Purchase vessel	22,848	14.2	7,616	9.4	28,560	18.0	31,232	13.0	69,849*	26.5	15,000	18.2	48,885	16.0	50,255	16.0	274,245
Repairs and fitting out	27,226	16.9	12,945	15.9	23,741	14.9	36,171	15.0	20,846	7.9	18,352	22.3	47,357	15.5	48,684	15.5	235,322
Medicine	1,148	0.7	—	—	797	0.5	1,057	0.4	1,228	0.5	636	0.8	1,528	0.5	1,570	0.5	7,964
Provisions crew	7,843	4.9	—	—	7,322	4.6	13,701	5.7	13,952	5.3	7,416	9.0	18,332	6.0	18,845	6.0	87,411
Provisions and chains and prisoners	4,510	2.8	—	—	4,014	2.5	5,789	2.4	10,005	3.8	2,031	2.5	7,638	2.5	7,852	2.5	41,840
Bed, board, and salaries crew	11,341	7.0	5,348	6.6	12,155	7.6	16,105	6.7	24,236	9.2	6,855	8.3	22,915	7.5	23,557	7.5	122,512
Trading cargo	58,094	36.0	40,740	50.1	54,473	34.2	99,221	41.2	86,468	32.8	24,265	29.5	113,046	37.0	116,214	37.0	592,521
Various expenses	7,159	4.4	589	0.7	7,184	4.5	7,174	3.0	7,261	2.8	753	0.9	7,638	2.5	7,852	2.5	45,611
Insurance	16,364	10.1	11,579	14.3	16,115	10.1	23,235	9.6	22,009	8.3	4,532	5.5	29,025	9.5	29,839	9.5	152,698
3% commission	4,812	3.0	2,429	3.0	4,674	2.9	7,189	3.0	7,865	3.0	2,395	2.9	9,166	3.0	9,423	3.0	47,953
<i>Totals</i>	<i>161,345</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>81,245</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>159,000</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>240,878</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>263,716</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>82,236</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>305,531</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>314,091</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>1,608,076</i>

Source: RAIB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065. \* Also contains some fitting-out expenses and insurance on the voyage from Amsterdam to Bruges. \*\* Detailed outfit costs not available in the sources, but calculated based on the average shares of the six other ships and the total outfit expense.

“One should have done it before to be successful”:

### Assembling a Trade Cargo

While provisions for the crew and enslaved Africans took up a sizeable part of the available space on board, most of the room in the slaving ship’s hull was allocated to the trading cargo. The African economic system was mostly a commodity-based economy, which implied that Europeans paid for their goods or prisoners in kind. Proportional to the physical space the trading cargo claimed of the slaving vessel, the commodities used to purchase captive Africans consumed most of the raised capital. Meyer, again, examining the French slave trade, stated that

each shipowner tried different solutions, groping for the best results. It cannot be said that this has resulted in a precise and immutable doctrine. One fact, however, is certain. There are very few trading expeditions where the cargo does not represent at least half of the raised capital. Its percentage normally fluctuates between 55 and 65 percent of the initial fitting out.<sup>481</sup>

The share of the funding allocated to the trading cargo is the only figure where Romberg significantly diverges from the numbers provided by Meyer. In fact, contrary to the latter’s findings, there is only one vessel where the trading cargo *does* comprise half of the value of the expedition—the *Empereur et Roi* with 50.1 percent—, the six vessels together average only 37.0 percent (see Table 5.4). This low share, however, was not the result of Romberg attempting to cut costs on his trade assortments: A comparison with similarly sized vessels in France reveals comparable sums, in absolute terms, spent on trade commodities. Rather, the low share is caused by the firm vastly overspending on other aspects of the outfitting process, particularly crewing. We will return to this issue in more detail in Chapter 9, when estimating the profitability of Romberg’s African venture.

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<sup>481</sup> Meyer, *L’armement nantais*, 162-3, “Chaque armateur a tenté d’utiliser des solutions différentes, tâtonnant pour obtenir les meilleurs résultats. On ne peut dire qu’il en ait découlé une doctrine précise et immuable. Un fait est certain. Très rares sont les expéditions de traite où la cargaison ne représente pas au moins la moitié du capital de départ. Son pourcentage oscille normalement entre 55 et 65% de la ‘mise-hors’”. Everaert arrived at similar numbers for the pair of ships commanded by Van Alstein, see Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 49-50.

As I outlined in the introduction, extended industries had emerged in the environments of the major European Atlantic ports partly or wholly oriented towards supplying the slave trade.<sup>482</sup> In the Southern Netherlands, too, merchants and economic thinkers had repeatedly extolled the industrial benefits of attracting the slave trade to the Flemish seaboard during the eighteenth century. In 1715, for instance, merchants from Bruges petitioned the Brussels government to establish a Guinea Company in the Austrian Netherlands. These traders, seeking new markets after the loss of the Spanish overseas dominions, believed that Africa could offer an outlet for local commodities, thereby boosting domestic manufactures. The plan, however, came to nought.<sup>483</sup> Decades later, Damiens de Gomicourt (in his *Voyageur*) repeatedly sang the virtues of establishing a slave trading business in the Austrian Netherlands, or—in case the government harboured any moral qualms—at the very least a trade in African ivory or gold. According to Gomicourt, the advantages for the local economy would be twofold. On the consumption side, direct imports of colonial staples from the Caribbean would cut out the French, British, and Dutch middlemen who now reexported tropical produce from their respective colonial domains to the Austrian Netherlands at a considerable margin.<sup>484</sup> On the production side, Gomicourt argued, advantages would be even bigger, as the Southern Low Countries produced several commodities (or were endowed with the resources to do so) that were used in the African trades. Painted cottons, tin and copperware, woollen textiles, jewellery, spirits, sabres, and gun powder could all be provided for by manufactures in the Austrian Netherlands. Weapon producers in the Prince-Bishopric of Liège could be lured to settle in the Southern Netherlands if the demand for firearms would grow in the wake of the establishment of a slave trading company. The only commodities that needed sourcing from abroad, according to Gomicourt, were cowrie shells, coral, and spices.<sup>485</sup>

Romberg's business, started a few years after Gomicourt published his call for an Austrian Netherlands slave trade, presents an apt case-study to test whether and to what extent the region was embedded in the Atlantic slaving

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<sup>482</sup> Bénard, 'L'Armement honfleurais', 256.

<sup>483</sup> Everaert, 'Commerce d'Afrique', 178.

<sup>484</sup> Derival, *Le Voyageur*, Volume 1, 59-60 (June 1782).

<sup>485</sup> Derival, *Le Voyageur*, Volume 1, Letter VII, 75-86 (July 1782).



economy. The first evidence comes from the crew members who belonged to the vessels of Romberg & Consors captured during their voyage. When asked by his British examiners about the origins of his cargo, Pierre Grémont of the *Comte de Flandre* stated that his trade goods were “the Growth, Produce and Manufacture of Several different places vi[delicet] of India, Flanders, France and Holland.”<sup>486</sup> More detailed evidence stems from the cargo inventories of Romberg’s vessels, of which (to my knowledge) four have survived.<sup>487</sup> Their analytical value, however, is limited: although the inventories contain detailed information about the particularities of every piece of cargo, they only rarely provide clues on where the goods originated. Fortunately, I was able to unearth several files which complement Romberg’s cargo lists and shed light on the supply chain and economic impact of the assembling of trading cargoes.

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<sup>486</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Pierré Grémont (London, 4 December 1782).

<sup>487</sup> The cargo list of the *Marie-Antoinette* is preserved in the Prize Papers and contains 122 copper kettles, 290 copper bowls, 9 hogsheads of tobacco, 18 chests of muskets, 20 casks of flour, 126 iron bars, 2 chests of turnery ware, 1 cask of beads, 10 hogsheads Geneva, and 1 small parcel of tinware, see TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*. The cargo list of the *Comte de Flandre* is likewise preserved in the Prize Papers and is reproduced in Table 5.5. The *Prince Charles* carried 14 barrels of cotton fabrics, 11 barrels of brandy, one case of coral, 300 pounds of iron bars, 8 tons of tobacco, 4 barrels of wine, 59 copper bowls, 8 cases of firearms, 200 yards of scarlet, 10 barrels of butter, see ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2189/12, Weickaert to Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Ferrol, 4 February 1781). The cargo list of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschén*, lastly, was kept in the captain’s personal files, presumably as a blueprint for future use. It is published in Paul Maneuvrier-Hervieu, ‘Entre Honfleur et les Antilles: les journaux de bord de la traite des esclaves’, *Annales de Normandie* 68:1 (2018) 134-5 and Ressel, ‘The Hinterland’, 289-91. It is originally and digitally available in ADC, F6120.

TABLE 5.5 Trading cargo and expenses of the *Comte de Flandre*, embarked in October 1781.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Cost (in fl.c.g.)</i>	<i>Origin</i>
Textiles	“dominé blanc”	88 “masses”	252	London
Textiles	“razades”	145 “masses”	214	London
Textiles	“blanc de neige”	500 “masses”	290	London
Textiles	“olivettes differentes couleurs”	400 “masses”	164	London
Textiles	“faux corails”	211 “masses”	240	London
Currency	Cowry shells	224 lb.	88	London
Textiles	“bayettes, avec fraix”	3 pieces	25	London
Textiles	“corros”	250 pieces	706	London
Textiles	“guinées”	24 half pieces	340	London
Various	Costs & commissions	various	95	London
Metalware	Iron bars	400	785	Amsterdam
Utilities	“canevettes de diferentes grandeur	100	195	Amsterdam
Weaponry	Knives	3000	279	Amsterdam
Utilities	Mirrors	200	117	Amsterdam
Utilities	Razors	150	21	Amsterdam
Utilities	“limes”	150	15	Amsterdam
Utilities	Scissors	100	8	Amsterdam
Utilities	“cadenats”	50	14	Amsterdam
Utilities	Snuffboxes	50	15	Amsterdam
Utilities	2 Barrels & 1 Coffe	—	8	Amsterdam
—	Costs & commissions	various	291	Amsterdam
Weaponry	Sabres	72	76	Dutch Republic
Weaponry	Knives	1200	187	Dutch Republic
Utilities	Big pipes	20	25	Dutch Republic
Consumables	Coffee	25 lb.	22	Dutch Republic
—	Costs & commissions	various	15	Dutch Republic
Metalware	Copper basins	104	825	Stolberg
Metalware	Copper cauldron	100	483	Stolberg
Metalware	Small copper basins	434	551	Stolberg
Metalware	Small bars	1000	665	Stolberg
Consumables	Red wine	196 pots	190	Ostend
Consumables	Tobacco	3078 lb.	600	Ostend
Consumables	Spirits	6030 pots	3,603	Ostend
Weaponry	Poudre	300 lb.	165	Austrian Netherlands
Utilities	Petits barils	125	47	Austrian Netherlands
—	Various purchases	—	540	Austrian Netherlands
Textiles	Red bonnets	100	52	Le Havre
Textiles	Hats	100	123	Le Havre
Textiles	Hats trimmed in <i>faux</i> gold	6	3	Le Havre
Textiles	Shirts	8	15	Le Havre
Textiles	“colotes”	6	9	Le Havre
Textiles	“trebuchet & petit pezon”	1	3	Le Havre
Textiles	Shoes	30 pair	29	Le Havre
Textiles	“romaine”	1	7	Le Havre
Textiles	“ancres”	20	27	Le Havre
Textiles	“demies ancres”	50	41	Le Havre
Textiles	“pantouffles”	12 pair	14	Le Havre
Weaponry	Small powder kegs	150	49	Le Havre
Textiles	“cazaques à negres”	12	18	Le Havre
Textiles	English bonnets	96	32	Le Havre
Weaponry	Flintlocks	1200	5	Le Havre
Textiles	Sewing thread	1	2	Le Havre
Utilities	Coffers	2	8	Le Havre
Weaponry	Sabre	1	1	Le Havre
Textiles	Loincloths	225	368	Le Havre
Consumables	“ancres”	50	57	Le Havre
Consumables	“demies ancres”	70	48	Le Havre
Textiles	“perugues”	12	39	Le Havre
Textiles	“pièces toiles à robes”	20	523	Le Havre
Textiles	Handkerchiefs	1200	681	Le Havre
—	Costs & commissions	various	126	Le Havre
Textiles	“Indiennes”	100 pieces	1742	Le Havre
Textiles	“Limeneas”	50 pieces	926	Le Havre
Weaponry	Rifles	150	525	Liège
Weaponry	Pistols	30 pair	105	Liège
—	Costs & commissions	—	40	Liège

Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*; SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301/18.

Table 5.5 lists the commodities loaded onto the *Comte de Flandre* as the ship prepared for its journey in the fall of 1781. I have supplemented this list from the Prize Papers with information provided by a contemporary merchant who witnessed the loading of the ship and confided his observations to paper. These notes offer valuable insights into the origins of the commodities, complementing the details found in the Prize Papers.<sup>488</sup>

A first set of goods included in the assortment were various types of copper containers, which were used for manifold purposes and therefore were in great demand among African traders.<sup>489</sup> The metalware embarked on Romberg's ship was imported from Stolberg, an Imperial city close to Aachen. In recent decades, historians such as Klaus Weber have revealed the structural orientation of this particular German region towards the Atlantic economy.<sup>490</sup> There might have been a personal element at play as well, as Romberg had completed several apprenticeships in the region; perhaps he knew some of the producers personally.<sup>491</sup>

Another prime constituent of the trading cargo of slavers were various types of weapons. Many European slaving cargoes have been found to contain 'Flemish knives', a name which according to Stanley Alpern referred both to a certain kind of knife as well as the region where they were produced. In this way, Flemish knife makers were structurally embedded in Europe's slave trade.<sup>492</sup> On Romberg's slave vessels, however, they are markedly absent: the merchant sourced his sabres and knives from the Dutch Republic and Great Britain. A more significant category of weaponry consisted of firearms. In the case of the *Comte de Flandre*, and likely most if not all vessels, Romberg purchased these in the Prince-Bishopric of Liège. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Liège gun industry had begun to cater to an ever more

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<sup>488</sup> SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301/18. This stray document in the private archives of Laurent Janssens, a Ghent merchant, lists the cargo of the *Comte de Flandre*, as well as the origins of the items. The match between this inventory and the Prize Paper inventory is almost perfect, which gives overwhelming credibility to the source. As Janssens was probably not invested in Romberg's ship (see his comments to Lepage in Chapter 4), I have no other explanation for the presence of this document in his private archives other than curiosity on Janssens' behalf, or him spying on a competitor.

<sup>489</sup> Stanley Alpern, 'What Africans Got for Their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods', *History in Africa* 22:1 (1995) 15-6.

<sup>490</sup> Weber, 'The Atlantic Coast of German Trade', 103.

<sup>491</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>492</sup> Bénard, 'L'Armement honfleurais', 255-6; Alpern, 'What Africans Got', 16-7.

international market, which came to include many European armies.<sup>493</sup> Next to these military orders, significant purchases were made by merchants plying African trade routes: the vessels of the Dutch MCC and WIC, for example, always included Liège arms in their trading assortments.<sup>494</sup> French slave traders, too, purchased large quantities of weaponry at Liège foundries, as African brokers preferred them over the French makes of rifles.<sup>495</sup> While the province and city of Liège are today part of Belgium, they constituted a separate polity during the Early Modern period, and so its blossoming gun industry did not benefit the Austrian Netherlands economy directly. Yet due to the Prince-Bishopric's geography, weaponry on its way to the coast was often forced to pass through Southern Netherlands territories, making it subject to profitable taxation.<sup>496</sup>

Although we lack cargo inventories for most of Romberg's other vessels, we are fairly well informed about the firearms and munitions they carried. Such commodities had to be reported to the Finance Council, as excessively large cargoes exported from the Austrian Netherlands risked raising British suspicions of their destination being the rebellious American colonies, thereby jeopardizing the country's prosperous neutrality. Such suspicion, after all, was well-founded: authors such as Dorlodot and Huibrechts have shown how vast quantities of Liège weaponry found their way to the United States after transit through the Austrian Netherlands and its harbours.<sup>497</sup> In July 1782, Frederic Romberg petitioned the Finance Council for a general permission to export firearms to Africa, but to no avail: the Council decided it wished to be petitioned separately for every cargo in order to keep a firm grip of arms exports.<sup>498</sup> As such, like the *Comte de Flandre*, 23 crates of firearms were transported from Liège to Ostend to be embarked on the *Marie-Antoinette*, taking the traditional

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<sup>493</sup> Claude Gaier, *Quatre siècles d'armurerie liégeoise* (Liège 1985) 56-60.

<sup>494</sup> Huibrechts, *Swampin' Guns*, 313; de Kok, *Walcherse Ketens*, 164.

<sup>495</sup> Boulle, 'Slave trade', 96; Huibrechts, *Swampin' Guns*, 312-3.

<sup>496</sup> Huibrechts, *Swampin' Guns*, 511.

<sup>497</sup> Albert de Dorlodot, 'Les Ports d'Ostende et de Nieuport et les Fournitures d'Armes aux Insurgents Américains, 1774-1782', *Communications de l'Académie de Marine de Belgique* 7:1 (1953) 141-56; Marion Huibrechts, *Swampin' Guns*. See also Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 121-2.

<sup>498</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401, Romberg to the Finance Council (Brussels, 13 July 1782); ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401, Decision of the Finance Council (Brussels, 24 July 1782).

route over Leuven.<sup>499</sup> The *Lieve Catharina*, too, included weaponry, with 100 gilded hunting rifles and 60 pistols likely hailing from Liège; 400 guns and 50 double-barrelled hunting rifles were withheld by the Finance Council.<sup>500</sup> The *Prince of Starhemberg* carried 500 firearms when she went down off Gravelines. For the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*, Romberg & Consors had asked permission to export a cargo of 1,000 rifles and 13,500 pounds of gun powder on each vessel. At first, the Finance Council had slashed the trading cargo to a meagre 250 weapons and 2,500 pounds of gun powder, but after fierce protests of the Ghent house—arguing that the arms had little military value and could only serve “*pour amuser les Nègres*”—the Council conceded to Romberg’s original request.<sup>501</sup> This is exemplary of the diplomatic risks the government was willing to take to support a trade it deemed beneficial for the country. No place of origin is mentioned for the weaponry on board of the *Congo* and the *Conseil*, but in all likelihood, they were purchased in Liège just like the arms making up the cargoes of the *Comte de Flandre* and the *Marie-Antoinette*.

Even more than firearms, textiles formed the bedrock of Afro-European trade relations.<sup>502</sup> In a rare instance of revealing the origins of its cargoes, the *Marie-Antoinette* comprised large quantities of ‘silesias’, meaning the Silesian linen which was in high demand among African traders.<sup>503</sup> In case of the *Comte de Flandre*, hats, handkerchiefs and printed cottons were imported from Le Havre (which perhaps were already on board of the *Comte* when it departed from the same town). The Indian cottons—the most important commodity in Africa trade—were almost certainly produced in Rouen, a town upstream the Seine River whose cotton industry had grown immensely during the latter half

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<sup>499</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4400, Romberg to the Finance Council (Brussels, 18 October 1780); ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4400, Protocol of Baudier (Brussels, 18 October 1780); Huibrechts, *Swampin’ Guns*, 494-6.

<sup>500</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401, Romberg & Consors to T’Kint (Ghent, 5 March 1782); ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401, Decision of the Finance Council (Brussels, 13 March 1782).

<sup>501</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 5200, Romberg & Consors to the Finance Council (Ghent, 17 and 20 February 1783).

<sup>502</sup> See for instance George Metcalf, ‘A Microcosm of Why Africans sold Slaves: Akan Consumption Patterns in the 1770s’, *The Journal of African History* 28:3 (1987) 380-7; Marion Johnson, *Anglo-African trade in the eighteenth century: English statistics on African trade 1699–1808* (Leiden 1991) 52-60; Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial*, 125.

<sup>503</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*; Steffen, ‘A Fierce Competition’, 37-56.

of the century largely due to Le Havre's colonial trade.<sup>504</sup> The *Comte* also included many Indian-style fabrics such as 'corros' and 'guinées' which were sourced from London, a port town with which Romberg had maintained close ties since the 1760s.<sup>505</sup>

In the Austrian Netherlands, too, a cotton industry had been established in the early eighteenth century. Although cotton production was dwarfed by that of linen (cf. *supra*), it proved to be a dynamic and rapidly expanding sector which capitalized on shifting consumer preferences, protectionist measures against foreign imports, and a benevolent attitude by Brussels policy makers. As Ann Coenen argues, some of these manufacturers aspired to produce for an international market and managed to sell their produce abroad.<sup>506</sup> More particularly, Flemish producers, as they did with regards to linen, served the market of Zealand: Gerhard de Kok has shown how small amounts of printed cottons from the Austrian Netherlands made it onto the ships of the MCC to serve as trading commodities in the firm's slave trade.<sup>507</sup> On the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, too, Romberg & Consors' associates included a quantity of "150 pieces of Flemish cottons" worth 1,897 Flemish guilders.<sup>508</sup> Clearly, here, the firm tapped into pre-existing slavery-based commodity flows in the Austrian Netherlands.

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<sup>504</sup> Dardel, *Rouen et Le Havre*, 123-4.

<sup>505</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>506</sup> Coenen, 'The International Textile Trade', 74-80; Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 122.

<sup>507</sup> de Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 156-9.

<sup>508</sup> ADC, F6120, f. 29 v., "[150 pièces Cottonade...de Flandres]"; Ressel, 'The Hinterland', 292.

TABLE 5.6 Purchases of cotton fabrics at Romberg Frères & Co  
by Romberg & Consors, 1782-3.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Purchase</i>	<i>Cost (in fl.w.g.)</i>
August 1782	“840 pièces Cotton bleux & Indes (15 balles)”	10,822
August 1782	“323 Guinees mouchoirs & Draps (5 balles)”	4,610
September 1782	“460 pièces cotton Imprimé & Guinées bleu (6 balles)”	5,271
November 1782	“200 pièces Cotton Bleux (3 balles)”	3,127
4 DECEMBER 1782	DEPARTURE <i>EMPEREUR ET ROI AND COMTE DE BELGIOIOSO</i>	–
December 1782	“400 pièces mouchoirs (en 4 balles)”	2,427
January 1783	“39 pieces mouchoirs; 600 pieces Guinees bleues & mouchoirs (en 6 balles); 400 pieces cotton & mouchoirs (en 4 balles)”	10,835
February 1783	“100 pieces Limeneas”	1,563
15 FEBRUARY 1783	DEPARTURE <i>PRINCE DE SAXE TESCHEN</i>	–
March 1783	“100 pieces mouchoirs; 53 pieces cotton bleu; 200 pieces Limeneas & Indiennes (2 balles)”	4,425
20 MARCH 1783	DEPARTURE <i>NÉGRIER IMPÉRIAL</i>	–
April 1783	“200 pieces Limeneas larges & Indienes larges (3 balles); 202 pieces Limeneas Indiennes & ratines; 100 pieces Limeneas & Indiennes larges toilles des Indes”	8,171
12 APRIL 1783	DEPARTURE <i>PRINCE DE STARHEMBERG</i>	–
19 APRIL 1783	DEPARTURE <i>VLAEMSCH ZEEPAERD AND ROI DU CONGO</i>	–
May 1783	“100 pieces Limeneas (une balle)”	4,078
June 1783	“165 pieces cotton guinées & Callencas”	3,452
1 JULY 1783	DEPARTURE <i>CONSEIL DE FLANDRE</i>	–
<i>1782-3</i>	<i>Total deliveries</i>	<i>58,781</i>

*Source:* ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783. As the accounts of Romberg Frères & Co were kept in fl.c.g., the sums were converted to fl.w.g.

Another source of printed cottons for Romberg & Consors lay within the own firm. Ressel suggested that there was a connection between Romberg’s slave trade and the operations of Romberg Frères & Co, the merchant’s cotton manufacture in Brussels (see Chapter 2).<sup>509</sup> Examining the latter firm’s accounts, as well as cross-checking with the available ship manifests yields

<sup>509</sup> Ressel, ‘The Hinterland’, 292.

abundant proof of this connection. As Table 5.6 shows, large quantities of printed cottons were transported in carriages to Ghent between the summers of 1782 and 1783. These fabrics were destined to be embarked on Romberg & Consors's slave ships: the characteristics of the ordered prints—*limineas*, *guinées*, *callencas*—suggest use in the Africa trades, and so does the timing of the purchases: they occur during the fitting-out of the vessels, and indeed halt immediately as soon as the *Conseil de Flandre*, the last slaver, sailed from Ostend. Several of the unique labels recorded in the manufacture's accounting books show up in the cargo list of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.<sup>510</sup> For one order—a purchase of 165 pieces of cotton worth 4,000 guilders—the link is made explicit in response to the shipwreck of the *Prince of Starhemberg*:

to [Romberg & Consors] for what we already sent them in March to be embarked on the Vessel the *Prince de Starhemberg* Capt. Charles Butet destined for the Gold Coast, but which has perished during its voyage.<sup>511</sup>

In total, the textiles transported to Romberg & Consors amounted to a value of 58,781 guilders. Claessens calculated that the total revenue achieved by Romberg Frères & Co in 1782-3 constituted a sum of 397,791 guilders.<sup>512</sup> This implies that the slave trade pursued by the Ghent sub-branch generated as much as 14.8 percent of the total turnover of the cotton printing firm in that year, a significant share. This case of vertical integration strongly resembles that of Julien Depestre, the Brussels banker and entrepreneur, who launched several ships from Dunkirk to the Caribbean with the explicit purpose of creating a market for his textiles.<sup>513</sup> Based on the accounting books of Romberg Frères & Co, however, it is not possible to check if the cottons furnished to Romberg & Consors were printed in Brussels or acquired abroad, but undoubtedly the firm profited from the slaving expeditions set up by its co-subsiary. It seems, additionally, that the purchases made by Romberg & Consors initiated a more structural involvement of Romberg Frères & Co in the slave trade: during the

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<sup>510</sup> ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783, f. 4 and 161 and ADC, F6120, f. 29 r. and v. Specifically, the bales identified with RC13 to RC18 and RC31 to RC33.

<sup>511</sup> ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783, f. 294, “pour les suivans que nous leur avons envoyé déjà en Mars dernier pour etre chargé a bord du Navire le Prince de Starenberg Capt Charles Butet destiné pour la Cotte d'or mais qui a péri dans son voijage”.

<sup>512</sup> Claessens, *Frederik Romberg*, 222. The figure has been converted from 464,090 fl.c.g.

<sup>513</sup> Duquenne, *Le Château*, 8; Reiner Willemsen, *Julien Depestre: een ondernemer en zijn netwerken* (Brussels 1999) 49-50.



period for which we have access to the firm's accounting books, Louis Le Grand, the Le Havre merchant with whom Romberg partnered for several voyages to West Africa (see Chapter 3), placed several large orders of Indian-styled cottons, no doubt to be embarked on Le Grand's slavers.<sup>514</sup>

The trading goods on board the ship that had 'Ostend' as a stated origin and therefore likely originated in the Austrian Netherlands mainly comprised spirits and tobacco. Alcoholic beverages and smoke wares were crucial constituents of ships wishing to trade in West Africa, not only because of their economic value but especially because of their cultural value. When opening trade relations on the African seaboard, European captains were forced to pay tribute to local brokers and power figures by offering spirits and tobacco. Spirits were readily and cheaply available in the Austrian Netherlands, and Romberg confirmed as much in a conversation with Chauvel when he wrote that "*We are...in need of firearms, sabers, knives & other objects...[but] we do not lack victuals and spirits here*".<sup>515</sup> Tobacco, too, could easily be found in the Austrian Netherlands: especially during the second half of the eighteenth century, the industry had experienced a remarkable growth due to extensive governmental support.<sup>516</sup> Yet many of Romberg's ships also called in Lisbon on their way south to obtain Brazilian tobacco, which was preferred over the European kinds in many places in Africa. Several vessels made a stop in Portugal to obtain such cargoes: at least the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, the *Négrier Impérial*, and the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* called at Lisbon harbour to load up on rolls of tobacco in order to strengthen their trading assortments.<sup>517</sup> Other smoking utensils were bought in the Dutch Republic: the *Saxe-Teschen* not only purchased Brazilian tobacco, but also sourced tobacco from Amersfoort.<sup>518</sup> Romberg likewise bought pipes from Dutch traders, perhaps in Gouda, as the city's pipes were highly sought after in many parts of Africa.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783, ff. 385, 487, 689.

<sup>515</sup> KBR, Ms. 19959, Draft letter from Romberg to Chauvel, s.d. (answer to Chauvel's letter of 10 September 1781), "*Viures et eau de vie ne nous manquent pas pour ces armements il faudroit seulement presser les autres articles propre pour cette expedition Comme armes sabres couteaux & autres objets*".

<sup>516</sup> See for example Els Brodeoux, *De opmars van een zachte drug, tabak in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden* (Ghent 1989).

<sup>517</sup> The *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* embarked 1,200 rolls, the *Négrier Impérial* 800, and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* 300. See ADC, F6120, f. 30 r.

<sup>518</sup> ADC, F6120, f. 29 v.

<sup>519</sup> Ruud Stam, 'De Goudse pijp en de slaafgemaakten', in: Bakker et al. *Het koloniaal en slavernijverleden*, 179-87.

In conclusion, Romberg & Consors clearly drew on the local economy of the Austrian Netherlands when gathering its trading commodities. Nevertheless, the cargoes shipped to the African seaboard hardly resembled the all-Austrian Netherlands assortments Gomicourt had imagined. The main explanation of this assessment is that supply was but one part of the trade equation: demand was the other. As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, consumption preferences in Africa were highly specific, shifted rapidly over time and could differ widely even between nearby regions. Slave trading merchants and captains were therefore continuously seeking information on consumption preferences in order to cater to local tastes and achieve the planned slave cargoes as cheaply and rapidly as possible.<sup>520</sup> Romberg, as an outsider, had no elaborate knowledge of which commodities should be used in the African trades. In the Autumn of 1781, for example, he appears to have sent Chauvel a garnet (a gemstone) presumably to enquire if such an item could be of value in the African trades. This was not the case, and Chauvel overtly communicated this to his correspondent: *“The Garnet you have sent us can serve our Expeditions in no way whatsoever, one needs a completely different kind of merchandise”*. Rather unsubtly, the Frenchman added that *“many Merchants try to get involved in this commerce but do not understand it at all, one should have done it before to be successful”*.<sup>521</sup> Without specific knowledge of African preferences, it was impossible for Romberg to instruct local manufactures in producing goods for his enterprise, and he was forced to rely mostly on commodities from regions and manufactures which were structurally oriented towards the slave trade.

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<sup>520</sup> Phyllis Martin, *The external trade of the Loango coast, 1576-1870* (1972) 109-12; David Richardson, ‘West African Consumption Patterns and Their Influence on the Eighteenth-Century English Slave Trade’, in: Henry Gemery and Jan Hogendorn, eds., *The Uncommon Market. Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York 1979) 303-9; Metcalf, ‘A Microcosm’, 386-9; David Northrup, *Africa’s discovery of Europe 1450-1850* (New York 2002); Robert Harms, *The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York 2002) 80-1.

<sup>521</sup> KBR, Ms. 19959, Chauvel to Romberg (Le Havre, 13 October 1781), *“Le Grenat que vous nous avez envoyé ne peut nullement convenir pour nos Expéditions c’est tout autre sorte de marchandises qu’il faut...beaucoup de Négociants se mêlent de ce commerce et n’y entendent rien il faut l’avoir fait pour pouvoir y opérer de bonne besongne [sic]”*.

“Very difficult to find...for a voyage that long and unhealthy”:  
Contracting Maritime Labour

In the early hours of Sunday 23 February 1783, George Robeson was lifted from his bed and thrown into jail. The 22-year-old from Chester was living in the *Waepens der Franc-Maçons* [*Signs of the Freemasons*], an Ostend inn. Having recently secured a job on Romberg’s *Négrier Impérial*, Robeson was savouring every last moment of his time ashore to the fullest, and on Saturday night, he had once again disappeared into the bottle. But now, Robeson was in trouble: a local shop owner accused the young man of stealing stockings from his store, and his innkeeper suspected Robeson of having opened—and perhaps looting—some private chests in his home. That morning, Robeson mounted a hesitant defence, not helped by his drink-fuelled escapade of the night before. With regards to the unauthorised opening of his host’s personal chests, he told his interviewers, he quite frankly had “been so drunk he no longer knew what he was doing”. But to the accusation of theft, Robeson’s retort was forceful: the mariner denied all charges, claiming that he had purchased his clothes in a “Flemish store unknown to him” and as an honest, law-abiding citizen had paid 14 shillings each.<sup>522</sup>

The wages paid to Romberg’s maritime personnel present another channel through which investments in the slave trade flowed back into the local economy. The extent to which this happened depended on two major factors: the size of the monthly wage, and the nationality of the maritime worker, which largely determined where received salaries would eventually be spent. In this section, I will explore both aspects of Romberg’s hiring process.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the commerce-inducing initiatives of the Imperial government had created extraordinary mercantile activity in Ostend during the American War of Independence. The high demand for maritime workers did not meet with a proportional supply, and wages on the port’s labour market rose to exceptional levels. Throughout the eighteenth century, mariners

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<sup>522</sup> RAB, *Brugse Vrije*, Registers, 17174, 109 v., Examination of George Robeson (Ostend, 27 February 1783), “*verclaerd dat hij soo droncke was dat hij niet en wist wat hij dede*”, “*eenen Vlaemschen winckel hem onbekent*”; RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, *Antoine Ryx, sr.*, 116/283, Muster roll of the *Négrier Impérial* (Ostend, 4 March 1783).

in the Austrian Netherlands had usually earned 12-14 guilders per month. By 1781-2, however, salaries had reached a peak of 40 guilders for ships plying European shipping lanes and over 50 guilders per month for transoceanic ventures. Only when preliminary peace treaties were signed between the warring parties in January 1783, pressure on the Ostend labour market started to abate and salaries came down again.<sup>523</sup> As Table 5.7 shows, the wages paid by Romberg adhered to this macro trend, with the merchant paying 40 guilders per month in 1780 and 50 guilders by 1783. When peace returned to Europe in February 1783, Romberg's wages also decreased, but were still 75 percent higher than normal. Additionally, while it was tradition in Ostend to hand out one month's wages to mariners contracting for European destinations and two months' wages for those embarking on transoceanic journeys, Romberg & Consors—uniquely among Ostend shipowners—often granted its personnel three months' worth of wages as an advance payment.

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<sup>523</sup> Pannier, 'Reaping the Returns', forthcoming.

TABLE 5.7 Wages (in fl. w.g.) of able seamen mustered by Romberg's slaving vessels, 1780-3.

<i>Date of hiring</i>	<i>Ship</i>	<i>Able seamen</i>				<i>Advances (in months)</i>
		<i>Total crew</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Wage range</i>	<i>Mode</i>	
28 October 1780	<i>Marie-Antoinette</i>	14	5	20-40	40	2
19 December 1780	<i>Prince Charles</i>	8	4	20-40	40	2
9 January 1783	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i>	37	20	25.7-42.9	42.9	[2]
4 March 1783	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	37	7	23.4*	23.4*	2
7 April 1783	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	50	16	18.7*-23.4*	23.4*	3
11 April 1783	<i>Prince de Starhemberg</i>	21	7	23.4*-24.3*	24.3*	3
16 April 1783	<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	53	24	21.5*-23.4*	23.4*	3
23 June 1783	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	48	19	23.4*	23.4*	3

Source: RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, *Antoine Ryex, sr.* See Appendix A.17.-A.22 for a complete overview of salaries. Wages with \* mark have been converted from 'argent courant' and foreign denominations.

TABLE 5.8 Registration date as a burgher of Fumes and departure date of four captains, 1781-3.

<i>Captain</i>	<i>Ship</i>	<i>Register date</i>	<i>Departure date</i>	<i>Elapsed time</i>
Jean Paul Lambert	<i>Empereur &amp; Roi</i>	10 July 1782	4 December 1782	4 months 24 days
Nicolas Louvet	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	19 December 1781	4 December 1782	11 months 15 days
Jean Pierre Barrabé	<i>Prince de Saxe Teschen</i>	17 April 1782	15 February 1783	9 months 28 days
Armand Lacoudrais	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	20 March 1782	19 April 1783	12 months 29 days

Source: Jef Caillau, *Poortersboek van Veurne* (s.n. 1989); SAV, *Oud Archief*, 269-270.

These generous employment conditions highlighted Romberg's efforts to overcome the difficulties of recruiting seamen during Ostend's boom years. The scarcity of maritime labour, especially experienced labour, plagued all captains and shipowners, but none more than organizers of slave trade. As in other countries, seamen in the Austrian Netherlands were not readily inclined to embark on such lengthy voyages fraught with danger and disease.<sup>524</sup> Mariners who went to West Africa for the first time died at especially high rates due to their lack of immunity to diseases such as malaria and yellow fever; mortality among those who returned to West Africa on later voyages was less severe, but still higher than for any other destination.<sup>525</sup> Contemporaries were well aware of the bleak statistics of employment in the slave trade. Captain Jan Boerhorst, for instance, who was busy hiring a crew in Ostend in August 1782, wrote to his shipowner that "*there are still some sailors here but they do not feel like going to the West Indies*".<sup>526</sup> Romberg's own Jan Weickaert (captain of the *Prince Charles*) attested on his hiring process that "*it is very difficult to find the people of one's choice... especially for a voyage that long and unhealthy*".<sup>527</sup> When Chauvel in 1781 proposed to Romberg to organize a slaving expedition, the latter responded that "*we would have a hard time finding sailors for this kind of navigation*".<sup>528</sup> Resembling the practices of other European nations, Romberg even ordered Hagueron to hire "*four young Negroes to act as mariners*" in West Africa, "*due to the difficulties of finding Sailors in our own Country*".<sup>529</sup>

In their typology of the European market for maritime labour, Leo Lucassen and Jelle Van Lottum described the Southern Netherlands market as rather homogeneous in nature, mainly employing nationals (with the odd

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<sup>524</sup> Stephen Behrendt, 'Crew Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century', *Slavery & Abolition* 18:1 (1997) 49-71.

<sup>525</sup> Philip Curtin, "'The White Man's Grave': Image and Reality, 1780-1850", *Journal of British Studies* 1:1 (1961) 95; Behrendt, 'Crew Mortality' 49-71; Herbert Klein, Stanley Engerman, Robin Haines, and Ralph Shlomowitz, 'Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58:1 (2001) 105-6.

<sup>526</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/6, Boerhorst to Janssens (Ostend, 13 August 1782).

<sup>527</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489/12, Weickaert to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Ferrol, 24 March 1781). Weickaert was writing from captivity in Ferrol, as he had been captured by Spanish privateers, see Chapter 3.

<sup>528</sup> KBR, Ms 19959, Romberg to Chauvel (Brussels, s.d.), "*on aura de la peine de trouver de matelots pour cette navigation*".

<sup>529</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, Instruction for Jean Hagueron (Ghent, 5 October 1781), "*quatre jeunes Nègres pour lui servir des Matelots, vu la difficulté qu'il ij a de trouver des Matelots dans notre Pajjs*". See also Chapter 8.

Dunkirker or Zealander as exception). Although this framework works as an explanation model for most periods in Ostend's history, it falls short for the 1780s as the high wage level in Ostend had lured many foreign seamen to the harbour.<sup>530</sup> At the same time, many people from the interior of the Austrian Netherlands seem to have joined the Ostend frenzy of the 1780s by becoming a sailor and taking their chances on a merchant vessel.<sup>531</sup> Head of the Maritime Trade Committee Henri Delplancq suggested as much in a report of 1783: "*The people of this country who have taken up this profession have now spread themselves over the multitude of vessels [in Ostend]. We cannot foresee how many will return in order to continue this trade in the future*".<sup>532</sup> Occasionally, we find additional anecdotal evidence in business correspondence. In July 1782, for example, Ghent merchant Laurent Janssens received a worried message from the father of Philippe Joseph Maillart, a young man from Brussels:

[M]y son has come to see you last week offering to work as a mariner on one of your vessels, which you have refused, but he has followed the crowd to Ghent nonetheless and has left Brussels without a word...could you please inform me if you have yet employed him or tell me what has become of him, because his mother is extremely distraught.<sup>533</sup>

Who, then, were the people who enlisted on Romberg's ships, and where did they come from? To start with the quarterdeck, most of the enlisted captains and supercargoes were foreigners. Almost all came from Le Havre and Honfleur, and to a lesser amount from Bordeaux. Le Havre and Honfleur were the French slaving ports closest to the Austrian Netherlands, and Romberg had established close ties with local merchants. These relations gave him access to an experienced pool of maritime labour: as we will see in the following chapter, most of Romberg's captains had helmed slave vessels before, or had likely embarked on such voyages as an officer. This experience was crucial for the financial success of the voyage due to the operational complexities of slave trade. Triangular voyages were long, risky, and often rampant with disease, and

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<sup>530</sup> Pannier, 'Reaping the Returns', forthcoming.

<sup>531</sup> Pannier, 'Reaping the Returns', forthcoming.

<sup>532</sup> Cited in Hubert Van Houtte, 'Contribution à l'histoire commerciale des Etats de l'empereur Joseph II (1780-1790)', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 8:2 (1910) 356-7, my translation.

<sup>533</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/5, Maillart to Janssens (Brussels, 29 July 1782).

captains needed all their nautical and managerial skills to steer their craft and crew clear from danger. More than in any other segment of shipping, moreover, captains needed to adopt a mercantile role when trading on the African seaboard and when selling their human cargoes in the Americas.<sup>534</sup> In the specific case of their service to Romberg and his associates, the captain also had a major role during the outfitting process of the vessels, as Romberg and his associates had little experience in the African segment of shipping. This is illustrated by Table 5.8, which lists four of his captains for whom I was able to identify a registration date as a *burgher* in the Austrian Netherlands. Although Flemish towns during this period certainly granted citizenship without requiring the requesting party's physical presence, the phrase "appeared personally" in Furnes' registers suggests actual attendance.<sup>535</sup> As the table shows, a significant time elapsed between the date of registering and the eventual date of departure from Ostend, suggesting an extensive involvement in the preparation of the ship.

Given this varied range of tasks, all of which required extensive expertise and experience, it is logical that Romberg did not seek to enlist local captains. The Austrian Netherlands lacked a sufficient number of experienced commanders, and in the transoceanic segment of shipping, seasoned captains were missing altogether. By relying on foreign experts, Romberg positioned himself within a longstanding tradition of Austrian Netherlands and Habsburg ventures into the Atlantic, which had traditionally relied partially or entirely on expertise from abroad. The GIC, for example, had attracted many English specialists in the East Indies trade to command its vessels to India and China.<sup>536</sup> A whaling company established in 1727 by Adam-Joseph de Sotelet, a baron, relied heavily on Basque expertise.<sup>537</sup> The three Guinea ships that were fitted out by Ostend merchants between 1718 and 1720 had also remedied their experience problem by enlisting skilled captains and supercargoes in Zealand

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<sup>534</sup> Willem Sybrand Unger, *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de Nederlandse slavenhandel. 2: De slavenhandel der Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie, 1732-1808* (s.l. 1962) 22.

<sup>535</sup> SAV, *Oud Archief*, 269-270, "compareerde".

<sup>536</sup> Parmentier, 'De Oostendse Guineavaarders', 171.

<sup>537</sup> Jan Parmentier, 'Ostend Whalers in Spitsbergen and the Davis Strait: The History of the Ostend Whaling Company, 1727-1734', *The American Neptune* 57:1 (1997) 19-36.



(in the Dutch Republic) where, contrary to the Southern Netherlands, a slaving tradition *did* exist.<sup>538</sup>

Although evidence is scarce, Romberg's high-ranking officers, too, hailed mostly from France. Just like the captain, the mate of the *Comte de Flandre*, Pierre Grémont, lived in Le Havre.<sup>539</sup> On board of the *Conseil de Flandre*, the mate, the first lieutenant and the second lieutenant (together the *état-major*) all came from Honfleur.<sup>540</sup> Yet there were also officers that were demonstrably from the Austrian Netherlands. On the *Conseil de Flandre*, for instance, the second caulker (Jean Baptiste Doize) and the second carpenter (Pierre Verron) were both Flemish.<sup>541</sup> On the *Roi du Congo*, the position of surgeon was filled by Jan Baptist Vervier. Vervier, whom we introduced in Chapter 2, was a doctor who for several years had been established in Ghent (in the Burgstraat, close to Romberg & Consors' offices) before joining Romberg's ship; he would return to practicing in Ghent after the expedition.<sup>542</sup> Not coincidentally, these were all specialists of woodworking and health care who could have gained their expertise outside a maritime environment. On the other hand, the slave trade required specific skills from each of these professions: carpenters, for example, needed to be capable of constructing 'barricades' behind which the crew could stand guard when enslaved Africans were brought on deck for taking meals or physical exercise. Surgeons and doctors had the important task of inspecting slaves for physical deficiencies before purchase on the African seaboard. Likely, these Flemish officers were expected to learn these skills through on-the-job training.

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<sup>538</sup> Parmentier, 'De Oostendse Guineavaarders', 171.

<sup>539</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron.

<sup>540</sup> SHD, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu (MR 5 P), nr. 4 150, Bordereau du payement fait a la Banque, 27 October 1784.

<sup>541</sup> SHD, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu (MR 5 P), nr. 4 150, Bordereau du payement fait a la Banque, 27 October 1784.

<sup>542</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/401, Muster roll of the *Roi du Congo* (Ostend, 7 April 1784). Vervier appears in the *Wegwyzer* of 1778-9, disappears in the 1784-5 edition, and reappears in the subsequent *Wegwyzers*. He died in 1817. For a more elaborate discussion of Vervier, see Chapters 2 and 8.

Luis frontzel	D.	f. 100	ter maende
jean begingui	D.	f. 38	ter maende
* jean joeseph flan	D.	f. 38	ter maende
thomas d'ac dies	D.	f. 30	ter maende
allen charde	D.	f. 38	ter maende
Michel Caprey	D.	f. 15	ter maende
* jacques d'ost jenzon	D.	f. 25	ter maende
jacques Monckhaen	D.	f. 20	ter maende
lydie elies thierckx Carant goldt ter maende			
lucius geeren lude gopstact Binnen Oostende			
d'esen Nozenflou f. 1000 v. d. rya d'ac d'ac d'ac d'ac			
phillip joeses clai			
Anaelto Jone			
jean rober			
jean jagnoux			
guyse a Martine			
Lucy x Fabian j. j. j. j. B te. Simon			
Joseph d'adin momenet.			
Nicolas make			
marq x jacques l'ave			
marq x pierre Mary			
Machour De loof			
marq x Michel Caprey			
Louis froumezelle			
marq x Jean d'ac d'ac d'ac d'ac			
marq x Jean d'ac d'ac d'ac d'ac			
francois joeseph flan			
marq x antoine frouan.			
jacques joeseph			
hoof			
moort d'ac d'ac			
jean d'ac d'ac			
Jean frouan			
vijonillaume urband			
Antoine de saint			

Van Hage  
 1783  
 1783  
 1783

FIGURE 5.2 Muster roll of Romberg's Prince de Saxe-Teschen, signed by all hands in Ostend on 9 January 1783. Source: RAB, Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), 115/25.

In contrast to the officer posts in Romberg's Africa-bound fleet, lower-ranking maritime professions with little or no need for experience (able seamen, ordinary seaman, boy, cook or cook's mate) were in theory accessible to local seamen. The muster rolls, which provide extensive data for studying wages, offer little insight into the origins of the crew members and often present ambiguous information. For instance, French names could indicate origins in either France or the Austrian Netherlands, while Dutch-sounding names might suggest the sailor came from Flanders or the Dutch Republic. Alternative sources first and foremost show that Romberg's ships reflected the international melting pot Ostend had become since the war years. A large component of the mariners of the *Conseil de Flandre*, for example, were Italians. The *Comte de Flandre*, too, had enlisted Italians, as well as Germans.<sup>543</sup> The *Prince Charles* included many English seamen, presumably due to the connection with Miles Barber (see Chapter 3).<sup>544</sup> Secondly, it is equally clear that many local seamen contracted on Romberg's slave ships. Of the 59 crewmembers partly or wholly involved in the journey of the *Conseil de Flandre*, between 7 and 14 hailed from the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>545</sup> The *Comte de Flandre* included two Flemish mariners in her crew of seven; the *Prince Charles* employed a sailor and a cook hailing from the Southern Netherlands.<sup>546</sup> In June 1784, in another demonstration of hinterland participation in the Ostend labour market, Romberg disbursed a sum among the "mariners of Brussels" who had enlisted on the *Comte de Belgioioso*.<sup>547</sup> Indicating a similar origin, the merchant later settled with the heirs of Alexander Everaert, the second cooper of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*, who had perished on Saint-Domingue.<sup>548</sup> Likewise, Pierre François Schepers is seen distributing wages to sailor's wives in Ghent, again suggesting involvement of local mariners.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron.

<sup>544</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron; ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489/12, Weickaert to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Ferrol, 24 March 1781).

<sup>545</sup> Depending on the source, see Appendix A.23.

<sup>546</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron; ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489/12, Weickaert to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Ferrol, 24 March 1781).

<sup>547</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 73 v., "payem[en]ts faits par Mr. Romberg aux Matelots de Bruxelles".

<sup>548</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 103 r.

<sup>549</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 188 r.

TABLE 5.9 Insurance on the outward voyage of Romberg's eight *Real permiso* ships and the *Comte de Flandre* (hull and cargo).

	<i>Holy Roman Empire</i>		<i>France</i>			<i>Austrian Netherlands</i>			
	<i>Hamburg</i>	<i>Bremen</i>	<i>Rouen</i>	<i>Dunkirk</i>	<i>Marseille</i>	<i>Brussels</i>	<i>Ghent</i>	<i>Ostend</i>	<i>Bruges</i>
Insurance	292,842	299,775	409,909	236,329	25,200	128,000	62,000	50,000	35,000
Share (%)	20.9	19.1	26.2	15.1	1.6	7.7	4.0	3.2	2.2

Source: RAIB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel, 7845; TNA, HCA32/296/1, Comte de Flandre, Fitting out costs (Ghent, 1 July 1783)*.

## Commissions and Insurance

The capital outlay of the ships of Romberg & Consors also included a commission of 3 percent. This fee was destined for the firm itself and served as a remuneration for the firm's efforts in fitting-out the vessels for the whole group of shareholders, a common practice among French *armateurs* as well.<sup>550</sup> In total, this commission fetched Romberg & Consors a sum of 47,953 guilders. This figure implied—before the vessels had even departed the Austrian Netherlands—a recuperation of about 40 percent of the total investment of 124,823 guilders made by the firm's three associates (see Chapter 4).

A final expense was insuring the ship and cargo. During the Early Modern period, Europe's financial sector derived substantial revenues from the slave trade. After all, the sums spent on premiums represented a significant cost for shipowners: as shown in Table 5.4, in Romberg's business they on average claimed 9.7 percent of the raised capital. On top, they were an inevitable expense: during the eighteenth century, no vessel sailed from a European port without having proper insurance, and this was especially the case for ships deployed in the slave trade, arguably the riskiest segment of shipping. In French shipping, two methods for insuring were in vogue: either shipowners included the premium in the total fitting-out costs (and the funds that had to be raised among shareholders), or either they excluded the premium and paid it themselves, thus lowering the necessary amount of capital that had to be raised. Romberg & Consors opted for the former approach and included insurance in the total fitting out costs.

Shipowners generally bought insurance for both the vessel and the trading cargo on board. Additionally, in order to spread risk, they took out insurance at multiple companies in different cities. Romberg, too, insured his ships and cargoes at various (anonymous) firms—the larger the ship, the more partitioned the insurance. With the exception of the *Empereur et Roi* (which did not embark on a Middle Passage due to its cargo of exclusively ivory, see Chapter 4), all vessels were insured for a voyage to Africa and the Caribbean ("*Amérique*"). As was common in the slave trade, captains took out a new

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<sup>550</sup> Guillaume Daudin, 'Comment calculer les profits de la traite?', *Outre-mers* 89:1 (2002) 57-8; Daudin, 'Profitability', 145-6.

insurance in a European colony for the return voyage, as cargoes were of much smaller value.<sup>551</sup> Over the course of 1783 and 1784, for example, Romberg, Bapst & Cie took out multiple insurances for the *Comte de Belgioioso* and the *Roi du Congo* at Midy, Roffhack & Cie of Rouen for the ship's passage to Bordeaux—likely, this was the same company which had insured much of the outward bound journeys.<sup>552</sup>

The *Belgioioso* was hardly unique in looking abroad for the purchase of insurance. Like many Ostend merchants, the bulk of these policies were taken out in the Free Imperial cities of Bremen and Hamburg, which each accounted for almost 20 percent of the total insured value (see Table 5.9).<sup>553</sup> Mainly based in Rouen and Dunkirk, with a tiny contingent in Marseille, several French insurers provided another 40 percent of insurance. Many European shipowners and merchants, whatever their nationality, tended to turn to large insurance companies in traditional financial hubs such as London and Amsterdam, but these towns are remarkably absent from Romberg's expeditions.

Instead, 20 percent of the value of the vessel and trading cargo was insured in the Austrian Netherlands proper. This large share was made possible solely by the significant expansion of the country's insurance sector in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In 1754, the *Chambre Impériale et Royale d'assurance aux Pays-Bas* had received the exclusive privilege to issue insurance in the Duchy of Brabant. After ten years, a subsidiary branch was opened in Ghent to serve the province of Flanders. During the 1780s, when the Antwerp company could no longer meet the growing demand of shipowners settling in Flemish harbours, a new *Compagnie d'assurance de la Flandre autrichienne* was established in Ostend, with a monopoly for the whole province—subsidiary agencies of the company were soon opened in Bruges and Ghent. In addition to these public companies, many bankers, merchants, or in

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<sup>551</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 57.

<sup>552</sup> See AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, ff. 9 r. and 10 v. for the *Belgioioso*, f. 46 v. for the *Congo*.

<sup>553</sup> Couvreur, 'De zeeverzekeringsmarkt der Oostenrijksche Nederlanden op het einde van de achttiende eeuw', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis* 80:1 (1937) 65. One of the Imperial firms insuring vessels like the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* and the *Prince de Starhemberg* was Schröder & Co, see AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, ff. 6 v., 7 r.

other ways wealthy citizens began to operate small private insurance businesses.<sup>554</sup>

It is unlikely, however, that Romberg's associates turned to any of these public companies for their insurance needs. The Ostend company was directed by William Herries, a fierce commercial rival of Frederic Romberg.<sup>555</sup> In fact, to compete with Herries' company, Romberg had partnered with several other businessmen to establish his own maritime insurance company in Bruges several months after the Ostend firm began its operations. Together with Walckiers de Gamarage, Romberg was by far the largest shareholder. The clear infringement on Herries' monopoly sparked a protracted court case, but despite this legal challenge, Romberg's company continued its operations uninterrupted.<sup>556</sup> Undoubtedly, Romberg & Consors was instructed to take out insurance at the Bruges company for their Africa expeditions, perhaps complemented with several other private insurers. In any case, the domestic insurance sector profited handsomely from the premiums paid by Romberg & Consors, and presents yet another backward linkage to Romberg's Africa expeditions.

### Backward Linkages: A Quantitative Assessment

After analysing the various backward linkages established by Romberg's firm, I will now attempt to estimate the local economic footprint of the merchant's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Due to data limitations, this analysis will focus exclusively on the Spanish phase of Romberg's operations. However, as this subset of eight vessels represents the core of his slaving enterprise, it serves as a meaningful basis to infer the overall economic impact of his enterprise.

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<sup>554</sup> Couvreur, 'De zeeverzekeringsmarkt', 58-74; Lucien Van Acker, 'De Westvlaamse zeeverzekerings-maatschappijen', *Biekorf* 9-10:67 (1966) 257-65; Jan Parmentier and Karel Degryse, 'Agiotage en verkoop 'op tijd': De eerste spekulatiegolven op aandelen in de achttiende eeuw', in: Geert De Clercq ed., *Ter Beurze: Geschiedenis van de aandelenhandel in België, 1300-1990* (Brugge 1992) 130-1.

<sup>555</sup> Anspach, 'Romberg', 169-70.

<sup>556</sup> Couvreur, 'De zeeverzekeringsmarkt', 74-6; Yvan Vanden Berghe, *Jacobijnen en Traditionalisten. De reacties van de Bruggelingen in de Revolutietijd (1780-1794)* (Bruges 1970) 28-9.

TABLE 5.10 Estimated share and sum of outfit costs (in fl.w.g.)  
spent in the Austrian Netherlands.

<i>Cost</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Share</i>	<i>Sum</i>
Purchase vessel	274,245	0%	0
Repairs and fitting out	235,322	50%	117,661
Medicine	7,964	100%	7,964
Provisions crew	87,411	100%	87,411
Provisions and chains prisoners	41,840	30%	12,552
Bed, board, and salaries	122,512	60%	73,507
Trading cargo	592,521	20%	118,504
Various expenses	45,611	80%	36,488
Insurance	152,698	17%	25,959
3% commission	47,953	100%	47,953
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,608,076</i>	<i>33%</i>	<i>527,999</i>
<i>Income Ghent, Ostend, Bruges</i>			<i>414,376</i>

Source: RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065.

The purchase of ships for Romberg's operations involved funds that flowed entirely abroad, as no vessels were acquired in the Austrian Netherlands or from local owners. The location of subsequent repairs to these ships is more challenging to determine. Detailed accounts for two of Romberg's early ships reveal that the *Marie-Antoinette* underwent preparations both in Ostend and abroad, whereas the *Comte de Flandre* was outfitted exclusively in Ghent. Later voyages organized by Romberg & Consors certainly incurred significant expenses in Flemish port towns but also abroad. For this category, I adopt a conservative estimate of a 50 percent Austrian Netherlands share. Medicine and provisions, on the other hand, were likely procured entirely locally, given the need for freshness and the fact that all necessities were available in Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent. This assumption is supported by the detailed grocery bills of the *Comte de Flandre* and the *Marie-Antoinette*. Provisions for the enslaved Africans likely followed a similar pattern, as the necessary staples—such as groats and beans—were readily available in local markets.<sup>557</sup> The picture for the latter category is somewhat obscured by the inclusion of chains and handcuffs within these expenses. While such items could have been produced by local blacksmiths, the sheer volume of chains required for a slaving venture suggests a reliance on foreign suppliers. Considering the higher costs of ironware relative

<sup>557</sup> Chris Vandebroek, 'De voedingsgewassen in Vlaanderen in de XVIIIe en XIXe eeuw', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 2:2 (1970) 47-82.



to foodstuffs, I estimate a conservative local share of 30 percent for this category.

The next category in the accounts, ‘Bed, board, and salaries to the crew’, is another composite one. As previously discussed, the components of this category—lodging on one side, and wages on the other—represent distinct destinations for spending. Lodging expenses were undoubtedly localized in the Austrian Netherlands, while wages could have flowed abroad if crew members were non-local workers, either through their direct spending or that of their families. Ideally, these spending destinations would be analyzed separately. Fortunately, muster rolls for several of Romberg’s ships have been preserved, enabling a calculation of the total cost of advance payments (typically covering two or three months, see Table 5.7) for the crew. However, as evidence suggests that Romberg’s officers spent an extended period in the Austrian Netherlands prior to departure, overseeing the outfitting process, I adjusted the wage costs upwards by allocating a full year’s salary to both the captain and his mate to account for their prolonged preparatory work.

TABLE 5.11 Costs on wages and costs on board and lodging (in fl.w.g.).

<i>Ship</i>	<i>Calculated wage costs (advances)</i>	<i>Total ‘Bed, board, salaries’</i>	<i>Share wages (in %)</i>
<i>Prince de Starhemberg</i>	3,399	6,855	49.6
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	4,834	16,105	30.0
<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i>	8,714	12,155	71.7
<i>Vlaensch Zeepaerd</i>	6,013	24,236	24.9
		<i>Average share</i>	44.0

*Source:* see Table 5.4 and Appendix A.17-A.20. Where wages for certain functions were missing, I computed an estimate by drawing on wages from comparable ships.

As shown in Table 5.11, wages accounted for only 44 percent of the costs listed under the category ‘Bed, board, and salaries to the crew,’ suggesting a 56 percent share for lodging and sustenance. This imbalance, again, can be attributed to the extended stays of the ships’ senior officers in the Austrian Netherlands, during which they required housing and meals. Scarce evidence suggests that Romberg & Consors sometimes also covered the board of regular sailors. In the winter of 1783, for instance, Pierre Kierkeser of Ostend was paid a sum for providing food for “a sailor of the Ouidah expedition”—meaning

either the *Négrier Impérial* or the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*.<sup>558</sup> Captains and officers, however, undoubtedly accounted for the bulk of these expenses, as they would have chosen more luxurious accommodations, such as hotels. I conservatively assume that 50 percent of this category's investment was directed towards local hotels and inns, a slightly lower share which takes into account the inevitable occurrence of desertions (mariners who cashed their advances and ran off) and the possible early arrival of even more officers. The other funds comprising this category were allocated towards the actual crew wages. These salaries partially flowed back in the local economy when they were either spent by local seamen or by their families. The wages paid to foreign seamen had a smaller impact as these workers remitted parts of their salary to their families back home. However, these mariners, too, spent locally as they paid off debts racked up in inns or with crimps or when they bought clothes and other necessities in town (as did Robeson with stockings in a "Flemish store unknown to him"). As a comparison between the contract signing date and the actual departure date shows, crews sometimes spent weeks or even a month in Ostend after receiving their advances, allowing ample time for these funds to be disbursed into the local economy.<sup>559</sup> Single mariners, without a family to support—again, as illustrated by the Robeson case—would likely have felt little restraint in their spending, especially given the dangers of the voyage they were about to embark on. De Kok, in his study of the MCC, assumed that 30 percent of local spending came from a Zeeland maritime population of 35 percent.<sup>560</sup> While mariners from the Austrian Netherlands undoubtedly enlisted on Romberg's ships, they primarily served as relatively low-earning able or ordinary seamen, making the 30 percent figure too high for this context. Instead, I conservatively estimate that around 20 percent of the wages paid by Romberg were spent locally, either by local seamen or by foreign sailors, resulting in a 60 percent share for the entire category.

As previously discussed, the category that accounted for the largest share of investments was the trading cargo. We have access to only one commodity list which allows us to identify both the costs of the goods and their places of

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<sup>558</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 13 r., "un matelot pour l'Expedition de Juda".

<sup>559</sup> See Appendix A.17-A.23.

<sup>560</sup> de Kok, 'Cursed Capital', 12-3.

origin (stemming from the *Comte de Flandre*, cf. supra). As Table 5.12 shows, 27.9 percent of the value of the trade goods on board the ship consists of locally produced commodities. However, given the exceptionally large quantities of locally purchased spirits on board (3,600 guilders, compared to around 2,000 guilders for the larger *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*), a more conservative estimate for the entire fleet of eight ships is likely closer to 20 percent.<sup>561</sup>

TABLE 5.12 Constituents of the trading cargo of the *Comte de Flandre*,  
value per location of origin.

<i>Origin</i>	<i>Cost (in fl.c.g.)</i>	<i>Share (in %)</i>
France	5,352	29.0
Austrian Netherlands	5,145	27.9
London	2,641	14.3
Stolberg	2,568	13.9
Dutch Republic	2,066	11.2
Liège	670	3.7
<i>Total</i>	<i>18,442</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*; SAG, *Family Papers*, 3301/18.

The category ‘Various expenses’ includes purchases that do not fit into any other category. These expenses covered items not part of the trading cargo or provisions (e.g. maps), as well as fees for government, notary, or translation services. Given the nature of these items, I assumed that most (80 percent) of these expenses were incurred locally. As for insurance, we know precisely how much Romberg paid to institutions in the Austrian Netherlands—specifically, 17 percent of the total fees paid. Lastly, Romberg & Consors charged a 3 percent commission from its investors, which, naturally, remained in the Austrian Netherlands.

In conclusion, I estimate that Romberg’s African business generated revenue in the Austrian Netherlands in excess of half a million guilders. This figure is likely an underestimation rather than an overestimation, owing to our conservative assumptions and the fact that the revenues from six other Africa-bound ships—although admittedly smaller in size—were not included in the

<sup>561</sup> Of course, from a modern perspective, it would be equally defensible to adjust the estimate upwards by including the commodities sourced from Liège in order to assess the pre-modern connections of the whole territory which now constitutes Belgium.

calculations due to limited source data. Scholars in the Netherlands have sought to estimate the economic significance of the slave trade by comparing the revenues—either directly or indirectly generated by the trade—with the total income of a specific city or region. Although the latter figure is not readily available for pre-modern societies, it is possible to compute a fair estimate by multiplying the population of a certain region with the average income per capita. Drawing on this method, Gerhard de Kok arrived at an estimated value of the slaving sector in Flushing of 35 percent, and 11 percent in Middelburg for the year 1770.<sup>562</sup>

We can apply the same method to Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent, where Romberg & Consors' slaving business primarily generated revenues for local artisans, suppliers, and labourers. To account for the incomes that flowed outside the economy of these three cities (linen, for instance, could have been procured in the countryside, cf. supra) De Kok (following Richardson's study for Bristol) applied a 25 percent reduction to the services and supplies indirectly connected to the slave trade, excluding direct earnings through the slave trade such as crew's wages.<sup>563</sup> For our data, this gives a total income of 414,376 guilders. In 1782-3, the combined population of these three cities was approximately 92,000 people.<sup>564</sup> Determining income per capita is a more challenging endeavour. Ideally, we should work with estimates from the same prosperous timeframe, but such figures are not available for the Southern Netherlands. The best estimate at hand is provided by Chris Vandenbroeke, who calculated average income per capita in Flanders to be around 122 guilders between 1760 and 1780.<sup>565</sup> Multiplying both input factors results in a total

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<sup>562</sup> de Kok, 'Cursed Capital', 17-9.

<sup>563</sup> de Kok, 'Cursed Capital', 18-9; Richardson, 'Slavery and Bristol's 'Golden Age'', 48.

<sup>564</sup> Ghent counted 51,258 people in 1784, Bruges had a population of 30,854 people in the same year, and Ostend about 10,000 in 1780. See Paul Deprez, 'Het Gentse bevolkingscijfer in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 11:1 (1957) 178; A. Wyffels, 'De omvang en de evolutie van het Brugse bevolkingscijfer in de XVIIde en de XVIIIde eeuw', *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 36:4 (1958) 80; J. Walgrave, 'De bevolking van Oostende en haar betrekkingen met de zee in de Franse tijd, 1797-1814', *Mededelingen van de Marine Academie van België* 14:1 (1962) 17-19. The latter publication gives an exact population size of 7,077 for 1784, but I chose the estimate of 10,000 people for 1780. Given the quick decrease in population after the conclusion of peace in Europe in 1783, the latter number probably gives a better estimate of the population size in 1782-3.

<sup>565</sup> Chris Vandenbroeke, *Hoe rijk was arm Vlaanderen?* (Bruges 1995) 51-2. Vandenbroeke estimated this number by calculating the 'physical product', taking into the account the product of the primary (agriculture) and secondary sector (industry).

income for Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent of 11,224,000 guilders. This entails that in an average year, Romberg's slave trade would account for about 4 percent of the combined total income of these three cities. This figure is smaller than the income shares calculated for Middelburg and especially Flushing, as these towns had been involved in the slave trade for decades and their municipal economies were significantly geared toward this particular business.<sup>566</sup> While several of its economic sectors certainly produced for foreign slaving ventures, the Austrian Netherlands obviously had no such specialisation. Although in no way an exact measure of the economic weight of Romberg's Africa trade in 1782-3, the figure of 4 percent serves as yet another indicator, this time a quantitative one, of the sizeable impact of the slave trade on the economy of the Southern Low Countries.

### Forward Linkages

In various European coastal metropolises, the Atlantic trade had spawned a whole industry aimed at the refining of plantation crops. Similar to the commodity chains supporting the slave trade, the value generated by forward linkages has increasingly come under scholarly scrutiny when assessing the economic impact of the Atlantic slavery complex on European domestic economies. Despite a lack of formal colonies or direct trade with the Caribbean region during much of the eighteenth century, the Austrian Netherlands boasted a steadily increasing sector whose main economic activity was the processing of plantation crops, especially sugar and cotton. Coenen assessed that, although these industries never grew to the size of forming a veritable 'engine of growth', they were still of importance for the national economy.<sup>567</sup>

With regards to some expeditions, Romberg & Consors clearly had certain forward linkages in mind. Jean Hagueron, captain of the ivory-trading *Comte de Flandre*, was minutely instructed to buy "green ivory", which was "infinitely superior to the white kind". Additionally, Romberg's Ghent associates ordered

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<sup>566</sup> de Kok, 'Cursed Capital', 20.

<sup>567</sup> Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 140-61.

their captain to buy tusks “Big Enough for Billiard Balls”.<sup>568</sup> The economic incentive for bringing ivory back to the Austrian Netherlands was not particularly large, as most finished ivory products were imported from abroad. The region did have its own ivory manufacturing industry, but it imported only about 1000 pounds of raw material annually. The eventual yield of the tiny *Comte de Flandre*—4,489 pounds—would have glutted the home market or, if sold in measured quantities, would have been able to supply it for several years.<sup>569</sup> Already in 1776, Delplancq deemed ivory products “unfashionable”, and only still used for knife handles and small marquetry.<sup>570</sup> Remarkably, billiard balls were not mentioned by the councillor, despite a contemporary craze for the game among the elites of the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>571</sup> In Ghent alone, seven public houses boasted one or more billiard tables around 1780, two of these on the Kouter close to Romberg & Consors’ offices.<sup>572</sup> It is unclear if the domestic market warranted the imports of such a large quantity of ivory or if part of it was to be reexported abroad, as the *Comte de Flandre* never made it back to Europe (cf. Chapter 6). The *Empereur et Roi*, the second ivory ship of Romberg & Consors, disembarked its cargo of tusks in Bordeaux.<sup>573</sup>

The rest of Romberg’s return cargoes were of similarly little importance for the Austrian Netherlands. Some vessels did yield raw plantation crops such as sugar or Campeche wood, yet all these products were disembarked and marketed in French, Spanish, or Dutch ports. The only instance where the result of an expedition flowed back into the domestic economy may have been the *Lieve Catharina*, which returned 9,800 pounds of gum Arabic to Le Havre.<sup>574</sup> Some of this produce might have been reexported to the Southern Netherlands, as Romberg & Consors not long after sold 2,869 pounds of the material to the

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<sup>568</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Instruction of Jean Hagueron (Ghent, 5 October 1781), “*Le Cap[itain]e Hagueron donnera preference quant à l’Ivoire au morphil Verd qui est infiniment superieur au blanc et aux dents de grosneur à faire des Billes de Billard*”.

<sup>569</sup> See the customs statistics recorded by the *Bureau de Régie* between 1759 and 1791 in ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 5748-5805.

<sup>570</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 8580, ff. 53-4.

<sup>571</sup> Elewaut, *Herbergen in Gent*, 180-1.

<sup>572</sup> UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gendt*, 1778-9, p. 84.

<sup>573</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784).

<sup>574</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336.

cotton manufacture of Romberg Frères & Co, where gum Arabic was used in the manufacturing process.<sup>575</sup>

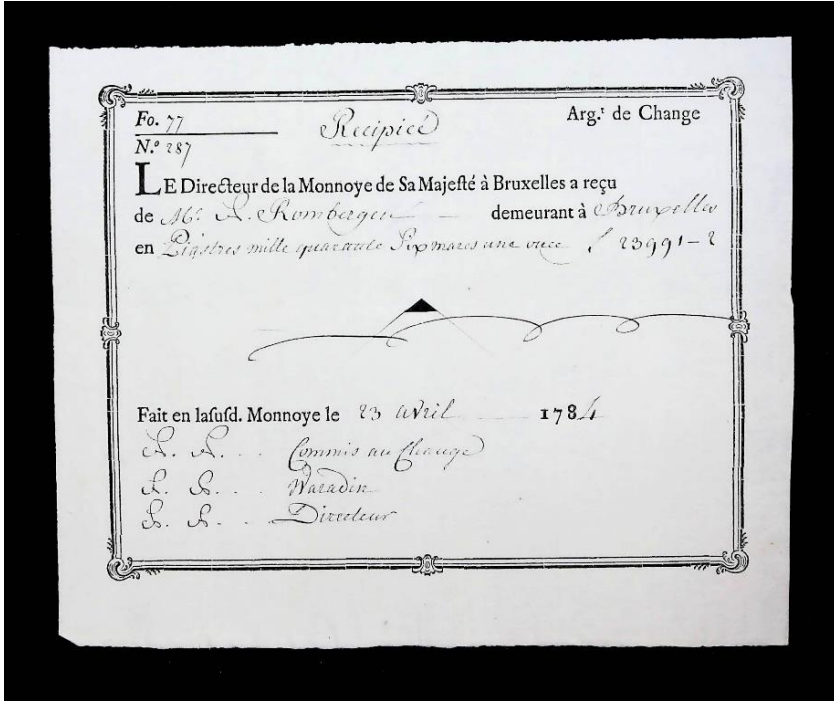


FIGURE 5.3 Proof of delivery by Romberg of piasters to the Mint, 23 April 1784.

Source: ARA, Raad van Financiën, 7493.

A last potential forward linkage involved the cargoes of Spanish piasters brought back to Europe. These coins were frequently utilized by European monetary policymakers as a resource for minting national currencies. Since the Spanish ‘piece of eight’ was the standard currency in international trade, monetary institutions often drew on bankers and wholesale merchants to purchase piasters from them.<sup>576</sup> This was also the case in the Austrian Netherlands. The Brussels Mint aspired to keep up a high level of coinage in

<sup>575</sup> ARA, *Various manuscripts*, 2783, f. 187; Claessens, *Frederik Romberg*, 86, 160.

<sup>576</sup> Louis Dermigny, ‘Circuits de l’argent et milieux d’affaires au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Revue historique* 212:2 (1954) 239-78; Paul Butel, ‘Contribution à l’étude de la circulation de l’argent en aquitaine au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Le commerce des rescriptions sur les recettes des finances’, *Revue d’histoire économique et sociale* 52:1 (1974) 83-109; Marichal, ‘Le piastre’, 107-121.

order to expand the money supply, ease the settlement of payments, foster economic activity, and increase the financial credibility of the government.<sup>577</sup> During the 1780s, the Mint was forced to scale back its activities as it was unable to get hold of enough silver piasters. In order to incentivize the country's bankers and merchants to sell their stocks of silver to the Mint, the institution promised to pay a premium of 0.3 percent above the general price level. As Valéry Janssens highlights, Romberg abundantly made use of these premiums by furnishing the Mint with silver piasters in 1784.<sup>578</sup> The merchant, in his aforementioned *Mémoire de faits*, prided himself that he had done the same in 1782, 1783, and 1785, "in as large quantities as [the institution] could mint, and at such a low price that no other individual was willing to offer the same rate".<sup>579</sup> No doubt Romberg's apparently substantial stockpile of piasters arose from his vigorous engagement in international trade during the American War of Independence. The key question, however, is whether the piasters he supplied to the Brussels Mint were directly linked to his firm's activities in the slave trade.

Gloria García, based on Havana harbour records, noted that during the American War of Independence, 275,600 piasters earned in Cuba's slave trade were exported towards Ostend, 16.3 percent of the total exported value in this period. This figure positioned the Austrian Netherlands as the third-largest recipient of Cuban silver during this period, surpassed only by Saint-Domingue and Saint-Thomas. This further underscores the significance of Romberg's operations—presumably the main source of these bullion exports—as outlined in Chapter 4.<sup>580</sup> The number of piasters which actually reached Ostend, however, is almost certainly overdrawn. Romberg's captains unequivocally reported they were shipping their silver to Flemish ports, but eventually ended their voyages in Bordeaux, where Romberg, Bapst & Cie was by then continuing the slaving enterprise set up by Romberg & Consors of Ghent.<sup>581</sup> Still, the premiums offered by the Brussels Mint might have warranted the costs of an

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<sup>577</sup> Janssens, *Het geldwezen*, 138, 146.

<sup>578</sup> Janssens, *Het geldwezen*, 149-152.

<sup>579</sup> Romberg, *Mémoire de faits*, 10.

<sup>580</sup> García, 'La explotación de moneda', 77.

<sup>581</sup> See for example AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366, Relacion de las Embarcasnes que han salido de este P[uer]to p[ar]a diferentes destinos en todo el mes de la f[ec]ha, "En 2 para Ostende el Paq[ue]lt Imperial nom[bra]do el Conde Belgiuioso, su Cap[ita]n D[o]n Juan Lambert".



additional transport to the Austrian Netherlands. In April 1784, the firm's accounting books do indeed record a sale to "the director of the Mint" involving 60,000 piasters from the *Comte de Belgioioso*, "weighing 6,600 marks".<sup>582</sup> Of course, this might perfectly be a reference to the Bordeaux branch of the French Royal Mint, which sat on the western quays of the Garonne River.<sup>583</sup> Yet, later that same year, the Brussels Mint recorded a delivery from Romberg of piasters "to our Measurement weighing 6,571 marks"—a figure strikingly similar to that in the accounts of Romberg, Bapst & Cie, seemingly too exact to dismiss as mere coincidence.<sup>584</sup> This amount of silver allowed the Mint to coin about 55,000 Imperial crowns, worth 173,250 current guilders. This figure equalled 5.8 percent of the total value of silver pieces created in the—exceptionally prodigious—coinage year of 1784.<sup>585</sup> Unfortunately, the information in the accounting books of Romberg, Bapst & Cie is too scant to conclusively chart the trajectories of other shipments of Cuban silver after arrival in Bordeaux. Sales of piasters either do not mention a counterparty, or either go unrecorded (the account book ending in 1785, long before the final shipment of silver).<sup>586</sup> Yet it appears that at least some of Romberg's silver, acquired through the slave trade, was indeed used to mint Imperial crowns, thereby expanding the money supply and stimulating economic activity in the Austrian Netherlands.

## Conclusion

During its short existence, Romberg's slaving business demanded a massive amount of goods and services. For a large part, these were sourced abroad. Labour expertise in the slave trade was not available in the Southern Low Countries, and so the merchant drew skilled captains, supercargoes, and officers from abroad. The firm also sourced a large part of the ships' trading

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<sup>582</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 33 r., "*pez[an]t 6,600 marcs*". One mark equaled 246 grams, so Romberg sold about 1,625 tons of silver. See Janssens, *Het geldwezen der Oostenrijkse Nederlanden*, 321.

<sup>583</sup> Renée Leulier, 'Le nouvel hôtel des Monnaies d'André Portier, la rue et la nouvelle porte de la Monnaie', *Revue Archéologique de Bordeaux* 96:1 (2005) 225-44.

<sup>584</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 7510, Report by Müllendorf (Brussels, 28 December 1784), "*une livraison faite le 27 par la Maison de Romberg qui de notre Connoissance etoit de 6571 Marcs*".

<sup>585</sup> Janssens, *Het geldwezen*, 302-3, 305, 319-21.

<sup>586</sup> See Chapter 9.

cargoes from neighbouring countries, as domestic industries largely lacked the expertise and information needed for producing the items that would cater to the tastes and preferences of African consumers. These characteristics—reliance on foreign labour as well as trade goods—gave Romberg’s slaving business a distinctly multinational character, a trait it shared with all European slaving ventures, but particularly those from regions on the outskirts of the Atlantic System, such as Scandinavia and Prussia.

Simultaneously, this micro-study has shown—consistent with comparable research conducted in Britain and the Netherlands—that Romberg’s involvement in the slave trade left a significant economic footprint in the Austrian Netherlands, generating an estimated local revenue exceeding half a million guilders. First, the merchant drew on ‘Belgian’ sectors with established ties to the slave and Atlantic trade, such as the Flemish linen industry and, from a modern perspective, the firearms manufactures of Liège. Second, the local outfitting of Romberg’s ships, taking many months to complete, created substantial backward linkages within national sectors that had not before been touched by the slave trade. From wealthy insurers in Bruges over Ostend dockworkers to shopkeepers in Ghent’s back alleys, a wide range of economic actors felt the impact of a slaving vessel preparing for its voyage in their purses. Never mind the possible profits of the journey: even before the anchor was raised, the slaving vessel, through its endless list of necessities, had already left a beneficial mark on the national economy. Third, and finally, although neighbouring countries claimed the lion’s share of forward linkages from Romberg’s trade, reliable evidence indicates that the silver obtained from the forced transport of enslaved Africans to Cuba ultimately made its way back to the Mint of the Austrian Netherlands. This inflow and subsequent coinage facilitated payment settlements and bolstered government credit. While foreign manufacturers and financiers certainly reaped greater benefits, the claim of the Finance Council undoubtedly held true: that Romberg’s slave trade was “in every way advantageous to the Country”.



CHAPTER SIX  
Directing from a Distance:  
Outsiders in the Atlantic

**O**N 26 FEBRUARY 1782, AFRICAN MERCHANTS in Bassa witnessed a mast emerging above the rocks that lined the sandy beach of their town. European vessels had passed Bassa for centuries, but never before had its inhabitants seen a ship flying this particular flag: it was bright yellow, bearing in its centre a black, bird-like figure whose features closely resembled the fish eagles native to their shores. Yet like any other European ship that had come before, it was clear that this vessel came from far. And, like all the others, it dropped anchor slightly off the beach, indicating it was willing to trade. The people in Bassa quickly dispersed across their fleet of boats and used their expert navigational skills to plow through the dangerous surf towards the Imperial vessel. They spoke Bakwé among themselves, a dialect of the Kru language which acted as a binding factor among the different towns between Cape Mount and the Bandama River. Yet the generation-spanning experience of dealing with ships running down the Grain Coast—as it was known to Europeans—had taught the Kru knowledge of several European tongues, and so when Jean Hagueron of Romberg & Consors indicated in French that he wanted to buy slaves and ivory from them, they understood him. For the next ten days, tobacco, spirits, and firearms returned to shore, while elephant tusks and

enslaved Africans were brought to the *Comte de Flandre*—commodities and people slowly passing between different craft, continents, and cultures.<sup>587</sup>

At the shores of Bassa, captain Hagueron found his responsibilities on board of the *Comte de Flandre* significantly expanded. While steering the ship towards West Africa, Hagueron had acted exclusively as a maritime specialist—the role usually associated with the function of ship captain. Now, however, Hagueron also became a manager, and he was expected to assume control of the working capital below deck—trading commodities and tributary goods—in order to turn a profit for the firm which employed him. In fact, Hagueron was expected to behave as if he were the firm and its principal itself—he had, in other words, become an agent. The agent emerged as the solution devised by Early Modern companies—both private and chartered—to address the challenges of operating across vast geographic distances. This was particularly critical in Atlantic trade, where the immense separation between the European business core and overseas operations created prolonged communication delays, inefficient decision-making, and, consequently, diminished profits or outright losses. Agents offered European firms an on-the-ground presence and were granted significant discretionary authority. Their responsibilities included gathering critical information, expanding and maintaining the firm's network, negotiating agreements, executing transactions, and recovering debts.

Agents could either fulfil their role satisfactorily or act contrary to their principal's wishes, a dynamic known as the 'principal-agent problem'. Several factors, both endogenous and exogenous, could lead to such a misalignment of interests between agent and principal. Endogenous factors, first, included the agent's ability and honesty, both of which posed distinct challenges for principals. Regarding ability, the issue of adverse selection was prominent: principals often lacked perfect information about the skills and competence of

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<sup>587</sup> For the description of Bassa's physical feats, see Willem Bosman, *A new and accurate description of the coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory coasts* (London 1704) 484 and John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (Paris 1732) 136. For a study of the Kru's language, maritime skills, commerce, and linguistic prowess, see Jeffrey Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor: Kru Migratory Workers in Global Ports, Estates and Battlefields until the End of the 19th Century* (Berlin 2021) 2-3, 34, 49-50, 63. That the Kru transported themselves towards the ship in order to conduct trade is confirmed by the *Comte's* mate saying that the "Return Cargo as [was] taken in on the Coast [was] shipped by manner of Canoes", see TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Grémont (London, 4 December 1782). For an overview of Hagueron's trading activities in Bassa, see TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, *Livre de traite*.

potential agents, or agents might deliberately conceal their true capabilities. Regarding honesty, the moral hazard problem came into play. This referred to the risk that agents might either passively fail to put in sufficient effort on behalf of their employer or actively prioritize their own interests or even cheat their principal.<sup>588</sup> Both issues—adverse selection and moral hazard—were addressed by principals using various strategies, ranging from recruitment within the own firm, family, kin group, or broader network to ensure trustworthiness, drafting a contract which materially tied the interests of the agent to that of the principal, or adopting different monitoring strategies.<sup>589</sup>

Scholarship on the principal-agent relationship (or problem) has tended to prioritize the study of endogenous factors shaping the actions of overseas agents and the extent to which principals could monitor and influence these actions from afar. However, the ability of agents to achieve the firm's commercial goals was also heavily influenced by the environment in which they operated. Exogenous factors included natural hazards that could threaten the agent's well-being (such as tropical diseases) or damage the company's ships and cargo (storms or prolonged calms).<sup>590</sup> Shifting market conditions—such as adverse price fluctuations and changes in consumer preferences—could decrease or even ruin the venture's profits.<sup>591</sup> Lastly, agents often operated in legal, political, or institutional contexts—whether in European, African, or Asian societies—where they had no access to local power structures, where enforcing property rights was difficult, or where they were placed in an inferior bargaining position. This was especially true for traditional outsiders to the

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<sup>588</sup> Ann Carlos, 'Principal-Agent Problems in Early Trading Companies: A Tale of Two Firms', *The American Economic Review* 82:2 (1992) 140; Oscar Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce. The Institutional Foundations of International Trade in the Low Countries, 1250-1650* (Princeton 2013) 77.

<sup>589</sup> See for example Carlos, 'Agent Opportunism and the Role of Company Culture: The Hudson's Bay and Royal African Companies Compared', *Business and Economic History* 20:1 (1991) 142-151; Carlos, 'Principal-Agent Problems', 140-5; Ann Carlos and Stephen Nicholas, 'Theory and history: seventeenth-century joint-stock chartered trading companies', *The Journal of Economic History* 56:4 (1996) 916-24; Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce*, 76-103.

<sup>590</sup> Curtin, "'The White Man's Grave'", 94-110; David Starkey, *British Privateering Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter 1990); Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority*, 117.

<sup>591</sup> Karl Polanyi, 'Sortings and 'Ounce Trade' in the West African Slave Trade', *The Journal of African History* 5:3 (1964) 381-93; Richardson, 'West African Consumption Patterns'; Northrup, *Africa's discovery*.

Atlantic complex who tried to make room in a system dominated by the actors of other states—such as Romberg.<sup>592</sup>

In the coming two chapters I will explore the challenges of Romberg's firm in operating as a newcomer in the Atlantic system. By examining the 'periphery' of the firm and its seaborne and overseas governance, these chapters constitute a natural complement to Chapters 3, 4, and 5, which dealt with the actions, strategies, and management of the firm at the core. While Chapter 6 will focus on the operations in West and West-Central Africa, Chapter 7 will examine the actions of agents in the Caribbean, particularly in Cuba. Both places were important sites of commercial decision-making, where major transactions—European commodities for enslaved people and ivory in Africa, enslaved people for silver and plantation crops in the Caribbean—were conducted on behalf of the firm. Chapter 6 begins by introducing the captains and supercargoes who commanded Romberg's venture. I explain how Romberg tackled the problem of adverse selection by gathering information on skills within his network, while addressing moral hazard through contracts and monitoring by representatives from his firm. While the first section primarily focuses on the endogenous factors shaping the actions of Romberg's maritime agents, the following section explores the external factors that influenced their operations on the African seaboard. I use two case studies: that of the *Comte de Flandre*, an ivory-trading ship commanded by Jean Hagueron, and the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*, whose captains—Armand Lacoudrais and Pierre Destrais—traded captive Africans in West Central Africa. I demonstrate how these exogenous determinants were primarily composed of the specific dynamics of Euro-African trade, while also highlighting how belonging to a polity not typically involved in Atlantic trade such as the Austrian Netherlands influenced and challenged the activities of overseas agents. This latter aspect will be explored further in Chapter 7, which examines the case study of François Carpentier, who was dispatched to Cuba to represent the interests of Romberg & Consors in the Spanish colony.

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<sup>592</sup> Peter Mathias, 'Risk, credit and kinship in early modern enterprise', in: John McCusker, Kenneth Morgan, Peter Mathias, eds. *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge 2001) 17.

## More than Maritime Experts: Captains and Supercargoes

As we discussed in the previous chapter, Romberg mainly employed foreign maritime workers as captains and supercargoes. This recruitment choice partly reflected the multinational partnership that underpinned the expeditions (especially in the first phase), but also the lack in the Austrian Netherlands of maritime personnel trained and experienced in transoceanic trade. The captains hired for Romberg's African enterprise had not previously worked for the firm in its maritime activities, leaving their capabilities largely unknown. Following a pattern identified by previous scholarship, Romberg solved this problem of adverse selection by drawing on his network.<sup>593</sup> Through this channel, the merchant obtained recommendations and information on the past performance of captains. This is made clear by the intelligence that was subsequently conveyed to the firm's investors: Nicolas Louvet, for example, who commanded the *Comte de Belgioioso* on its voyage to West Africa, was presented as "one of the most Intelligent Captains for this part [of Africa]".<sup>594</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Mathias, 'Risk, credit and kinship', 31-2.

<sup>594</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 8 October 1782), "un des Capitaines des plus Intelligens pour cette partie [d'Afrique]".



TABLE 6.1 Experience in the slave trade of Romberg's captains.

Name	Function	Native town	Slaving commands	
			Before Romberg	After Romberg
Kors Neurenberg	captain	Rotterdam	–	–
Johan Weickaert	captain	–	–	–
Gerd Gerdson	captain	Copenhagen	–	–
Jean Hagueron	captain	Honfleur/ Le Havre	1	3
Pierre Le Sens	captain	–	–	1
Nicolas Paroselle	captain	–	–	–
Jean Paul Lambert	captain	Criquetot	–	–
Nicolas Louvet	captain/supercargo	Honfleur	3	1
Jean Pierre Barabé	captain	Honfleur	–	1
Simon le Coq	captain	–	–	–
Francis Butte	captain	–	–	–
Guillaume Constantin	captain	Le Havre	2	2
Armand Lacoudrais	captain	Honfleur	–	1
Pierre Destrais	captain	Le Havre	3	–
Jean Senat	supercargo	Bordeaux	–	1
Daniel Wicard	supercargo	Ghent	–	–
Jean Baptiste Carpentier	supercargo	Brussels	–	–
Philippe Carpentier	supercargo	Brussels	–	–

Source: TSTD; Jef Caillaux, *Poortersboek van Veurne* (s.l. 1989).

The information Romberg gathered through extensive letter-writing, is today readily available through the TSTD. As Table 6.1 demonstrates, the imperial firm managed to get hold of significant expertise in the African lanes of shipping, as several of Romberg's captains had held commands of slave ships before, especially in the Spanish phase. Those who had no previous experience at the helm of a vessel had certainly undertaken multiple journeys to Africa as officers, as it took time, training, and an extensive personal network to rise to the rank of captain. Seamen without such skills or connections would never be trusted the command of an extremely capital-intensive venture such as a slaving expedition.<sup>595</sup> Armand Lacoudrais (1751-1789, see Figure 6.1), for instance, had not been a captain before Romberg appointed him commander of the *Roi du Congo*, but still possessed plenty of expertise. Born to a family of Norman slave

<sup>595</sup> Jelle van Lottum and Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'Labour productivity and human capital in the European maritime sector of the eighteenth century', *Explorations in Economic History* 53:1 (2014) 96-7.

captains, he had first gone to sea as a boy of ten years old and continuously built up his maritime experience after. During the 1770s, he served as an officer on two slave vessels going to West Central Africa. In the early stages of the American War of Independence, when most of the French slave fleet was confined to port, he enlisted on several men-of-war, receiving honours from Louis XVI for his service.<sup>596</sup>



FIGURE 6.1 Joseph-Armand Coudre-Lacoudrais, captain of Romberg's *Roi du Congo*.

Source: Musée de la Marine, Honfleur.

On top of being employed in the slaving sector of the shipping industry, many of Romberg's captains had specialized knowledge of particular regions in West Africa. Lacoudrais had made several journeys to ports on both banks of the Congo River and would return to the same place under Romberg. Pierre Destrais, who would take Romberg's *Conseil de Flandre* to Malembo, had conducted trade in the exact same port four years previously.<sup>597</sup> Jean Hagueron had undertaken a voyage to the Gold Coast in 1778, and visited the same region

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<sup>596</sup> ANF, MAR, 4JJ/71 nr. 52; Charles Bréard, *Le vieux Honfleur et ses marins* (Honfleur 1897) 186, 189-93. Bréard believed that Lacoudrais returned to Honfleur in 1783 and returned to his career as a slaving captain in 1785, but Lacoudrais' command of the *Roi du Congo* shows that this happened earlier.

<sup>597</sup> TSTD 32644, *Scipion l'Africain* (1778).

with Romberg's *Comte de Flandre*.<sup>598</sup> Guillaume Constantin had led several expeditions to Ouidah (in the Bight of Benin) and that is where he took the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*.<sup>599</sup> The voyage of the *Comte de Belgioioso*, finally, entailed Nicolas Louvet's fourth time trading in upper West Africa.<sup>600</sup>

The reasons for this specialisation were both nautical and cultural-economical in nature. Nautically, first, the vastness of the African continent rendered existing maps inadequate for accurate navigation. When the crew of Romberg's *Conseil de Flandre* measured their location on 4 September 1783, for example, they noted a difference of 120 leagues ("*différence Considerable*") with the map they carried.<sup>601</sup> Moreover, sea charts only gave general directions in how to navigate along the coast of Africa. On a micro-scale, the African seaboard proved a challenging nautical environment as currents and winds were difficult to navigate, while sandbanks were an ever-present danger lurking beneath the coastal waters.<sup>602</sup> Therefore, captains and officers took note of geographical intricacies that would help them on future voyages. In order to make use of this cumulated knowledge, officers often chose to return to the same regions. Lacoudrais, again, serves as a prime example. The Norman seaman began his career in the African trade as an officer in 1773, undertaking several voyages to the slave markets on both sides of the Congo River before entering Romberg's service. In 1773, the *Aimable Henriette* took him to the Loango Coast, where the ship stayed for nine months in order to complete its cargo. In 1777, he travelled to Malembo with the *Duguay Trouin* under the command of Jean-Baptiste Beurier, anchoring for four months. Presumably while his captain conducted trade in Malembo, Lacoudrais made two short trips with a small corvette, the *Babillarde*. First, he took the vessel up the Congo River, where for two months he moved from slaving market to slaving market to complement the main trade in Malembo. Second, Lacoudrais made a two-week expedition to Ambriz, further south along the coast across the Congo River. On both expeditions, Lacoudrais duly noted geographical points of

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<sup>598</sup> TSTD 32654, *Arlequin* (1778).

<sup>599</sup> TSTD 32638, *Comte de Vergennes* (1778); very likely also 32613, *Américaine* (1776).

<sup>600</sup> TSTD 31913, 31923, and 31928.

<sup>601</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 4 September 1784. The map in question was the 1754 chart of West Africa commissioned by Charles Rouillé (then head of the French *Département de la Marine*), see BNF, *Carte reduite des Costes Occidentales d'Afrique*, 1754.

<sup>602</sup> Stein, *The French slave trade*, 89.

interest such as lines of palm trees, mountains and houses. Rivers were of particular interest as landmarks and were described in meticulous detail (“*La Rivierre Enconque or Loze...is easy to Recognize, by three large trees at the entry of it, and a Large group of tall Trees further up north*”<sup>603</sup>). Additionally, the captain made a concerted effort to map the region he visited, with special attention to currents, sand banks and places where mooring was possible (Figure 6.2). Clearly, Lacoudrais considered the possibility that he would use this information again during future voyages. Which indeed he did: under Romberg, he would take the *Roi du Congo* to the mouth of the Congo River in order to trade in Ambriz and Malembo, both places of which he had elaborate knowledge.<sup>604</sup>

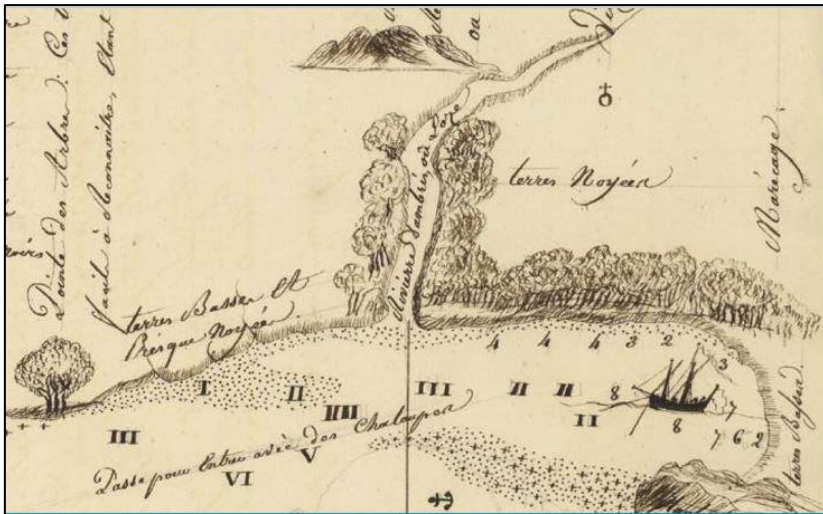


FIGURE 6.2 Drawing of Ambriz by Armand Lacoudrais, officer on the *Duguay Trouin* and future captain of Romberg’s *Roi du Congo*, c. 1777.

Source: ANF, MAR, 4JJ/71 nr. 52.

Probably more important than having the skills to drive a vessel across thousands of kilometres of ocean to one specific port, however, was the ability

<sup>603</sup> ANF, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, Record of 25 August 1783, “*La Rivierre Enconque ou Loze...est facile a Reconnaître, par trois gros arbres seuls qui en font L’entrée, vis a vis d’une Grosse touffe de haut Arbres Plus au Nord.*”

<sup>604</sup> ANF, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Aimable Henriette*, *Duguay Trouin*, the *Babillarde*, and the *Roi du Congo*; TSTD 33028, *Duguay Trouin* (1777).

of the captain to conduct trade with African brokers. As directors of the Dutch MCC put it, captains had to be “*zeeman en negotiant*” [“seaman and merchant”].<sup>605</sup> In order to successfully engage in cross-cultural trade, captains had to possess a thorough insight into the politics or inclinations towards trading with Europeans of different African polities. In his log, for example, Lacoudrais conducted an elaborate study on Sonyo, an autonomous and powerful state on the left bank of the Congo River which had emerged from the declining Kingdom of Kongo during the seventeenth century (“*no-one dares to set foot [there] to trade with them...they have always refused this*”). He also mentioned the nearby territories of King Mtongoa, “*who is a tributary of the Portuguese, but very Much likes the French, which favours us in the Slave trade*”.<sup>606</sup> Crucially, captains needed to be informed on cultural ways of doing trade and of the consumption patterns of different regions if they wanted to get any trade done. Moreover, business was highly dependent on African traders and middlemen, who eventually decided if—and how quickly—Europeans got access to their coveted commodities. Gaining the confidence of these merchants and getting acquainted with the specific consumption patterns of a particular region often took multiple journeys, and so specialization had clear payoffs.<sup>607</sup> Finally, returning to the same port over and over again resulted in beneficial network effects among Europeans as well. Captains spent months waiting to fill their cargoes, giving them ample opportunities to talk to one other in between trade deals or when trade had closed. In Malembo, for instance, where Lacoudrais and Destrais operated, trade was forbidden after sundown, and captains spent their evenings promenading the town and conversing with one another. They shared prices and information and, as we will see, sometimes supported each other.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Unger, *Bijdragen*, 22.

<sup>606</sup> ANF, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, [Notes on the Congo River polities], “*on ne doit point se risquer à descendre à terre pour traiter avec eux...à quoi il se sont toujours refusée*”, “*Roy Mtongoa qui est tributaire des Portugais, mais aimant Beaucoup La nation Francaise, ce qui nous favorise dans les Traittes d’esclaves*”; Joseph Miller, ‘The paradoxes of impoverishment in the Atlantic zone’, in: David Birmingham and Phyllis Martin eds., *History of Central Africa* (London 1983) 143-4.

<sup>607</sup> de Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 81-2.









<sup>608</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 95.

TABLE 6.2 Command structure of Romberg's Africa-going fleet (early phase).

<i>Managing supercargo</i>	–	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Monitoring supercargo</i>	–	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Captain</i>	Kors Neurenberg	Johan Weickaert	Gerd Gerdson	Jean Hagueron	Pierre Le Sens	Nicolas Paroselle
<i>Vessel</i>	<i>Morie-Antoinette</i>	<i>Prince Charles</i>	<i>Deugdelijke Sophia</i>	<i>Comte de Flandres</i>	<i>Etats de Brabant</i>	<i>Lieve Catharina</i>
<i>Tonnage</i>	300 200 100 50 1					
						

Source: Appendix A.3-A.8

TABLE 6.3 Command structure of Romberg's Africa-going fleet (Spanish phase).

<i>Flotilla</i>	I			II			III	
<i>Managing supercargo</i>	Nicolas Louvet			Jean Senat			–	
<i>Monitoring supercargo</i>	Daniel Wicard			Jean Baptiste & Philippe Carpentier			–	
<i>Captain</i>	Nicolas Louvet	Jean-Pierre Barabé	Jean Lambert	Guillaume Constantin	Simon le Coq	Francis Butte	Armand Lacoudrais	Pierre Destrais
<i>Vessel</i>	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i>	<i>Empereur et Roi</i>	<i>Vlaensch Zeepaerd</i>	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	<i>Prince de Starhenberg</i>	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>
<i>Tonnage</i>	300 200 100 50 1							
								

Source: Appendix A.9-A.16.

During the Spanish phase of the firm's expeditions, Romberg & Consors also employed supercargoes, a change in strategy which reflected the more ambitious nature of this group of outfits (compare Tables 6.2 and 6.3). Supercargoes were high-ranking officials who specialized in conducting trade on the African seaboard, often one specific port or marketplace. As was necessary for their function, they were very experienced, well-travelled, and well-connected men. Some captains took up the task of trading themselves: Destrais and Lacoudrais, for instance, were so experienced that they were supercargoes in all but name. Other flotillas had been appointed an official supercargo to take up the commercial command once the vessels had reached their markets of operation. The seasoned Nicolas Louvet, for example, cumulated his command of the *Comte de Belgioioso* with the role of supercargo over two additional vessels which stayed together with the *Comte*, the

*Empereur et Roi* and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.<sup>609</sup> Unsurprisingly, both ships were helmed by inexperienced captains: Jean Paul Lambert of the *Empereur*, for instance, had no demonstrable record of Africa voyages, while the *Saxe-Teschen*, as Paul Maneuvrier-Hervieu found, was the first captain post of the 24-year-old Jean Pierre Barabé.<sup>610</sup>

The Frenchman Jean Senat was installed as supercargo of the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd*, the *Négrier Impérial*, and the *Prince de Starhemberg*. His background is unclear, but Senat was presented to investors as “an *Intelligent man, who knows the local practices of the country*”.<sup>611</sup> What is also clear is that Senat was a married man, and that his father-in-law, as Elisabeth Heijmans has discovered, was Joseph Ollivier Montaguère.<sup>612</sup> Montaguère directed the French fort at Ouidah between 1776 and 1788. This Dahomeyan port was the exact destination of Senat’s flotilla, so it is certain that in Ouidah he was helped by Montaguère in concluding his trade. In fact, Senat might merely have followed Montaguère’s commands, as the French director was later dismissed by the Ministry of the Navy because he had covertly conducted trade for his own account under the name of his son-in-law.<sup>613</sup> The accounting books of Romberg, Bapst & Cie prove that the *Négrier Impérial* comprised sixteen enslaved Africans shipped by Montaguère.<sup>614</sup>

Clearly, Romberg managed to overcome the problem of adverse selection and enlisted many maritime workers who could be regarded as ‘specialists’ in African commerce. Moral hazard, however, was another issue the merchant had to try to solve. Scholars examining this particular component of the principal-agent problem have identified several strategies of how merchants tried to ensure the continued trustworthy behaviour of their representatives. One key approach was offering an attractive salary, high enough to make dismissal costly compared to other job opportunities—a concept known as the ‘efficiency

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<sup>609</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent 8 October 1782).

<sup>610</sup> Maneuvrier-Hervieu, ‘Entre Honfleur et les Antilles’, 127. Jean Pierre’s father, Pierre, had also been a slaving captain based in Honfleur.

<sup>611</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 20 February 1783).

<sup>612</sup> Heijmans, *The Agency of Empire*, 260.

<sup>613</sup> Elisabeth Heijmans, ‘Intersecting Interests: French trade and (enslaved) private traders in Ouidah (1770-1790)’, *Journal of Early American History* 14:2-3 (2024) 103-22.

<sup>614</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 74 r.

wage'.<sup>615</sup> Additionally, a high wage dissuaded agents from pursuing the short-term benefit of cheating instead of the long-term profits of a stable employment.<sup>616</sup> The regular salary could be supplemented with bonuses or gratuities if the principal deemed them warranted. A more structural way to tie merit to effort, lastly, was to grant agents a stake in the enterprise's ultimate profits.<sup>617</sup>

Romberg used all of these strategies. As we discussed in the previous chapter, his captains and supercargoes received a fixed monthly salary and a rather generous three months' worth of advance wages. Additionally, the officers had plenty of opportunity to extend their material earnings from the journey. The most important was private trade: while regular crew members had the right to store commodities in their small private chests, high-ranking officers could use their whole cabins to stow away goods. In case of slave trade, the *état-major* generally bought a number of enslaved Africans for their own account. Private adventures on the *Marie-Antoinette*, for example, consisted of "Six Priviledged Slaves...the Master had four...and the said Doctor and first Mate the other two".<sup>618</sup> Next, if the voyage turned out to be successful, captains were entitled to a share of the produce: Hagueron, for instance, would be granted six percent of the yield of the cargo once returned to Ghent.<sup>619</sup> Lastly, leading crew members sometimes bought shares of their own expedition. Jean Senat, for example, invested 9,333 guilders in the flotilla of three ships he was commanding as a supercargo.

Romberg had communicated the commercial goals of the venture to his captains by word of mouth, but he also furnished them with a lengthy instruction.<sup>620</sup> To ensure that his agents followed orders during their voyage, or at the very least made every effort to maximize profits for the firm, Romberg employed several monitoring strategies. First, he required his maritime agents

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<sup>615</sup> Carlos, 'Agent Opportunism', 144.

<sup>616</sup> Avner Greif, 'Contract Enforceability and Economic Institutions in Early Trade: The Maghribi Traders' Coalition', *The American Economic Review* 83:3 (1993) 530.

<sup>617</sup> Mathias, 'Risk, credit and kinship', 20.

<sup>618</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*, Examination of Kors Neurenberg (12 March 1781).

<sup>619</sup> It is unclear if Hagueron could keep the whole 6 percent. The instructions of the captain of another ship fitted out by Romberg that year, the *Groote Estafette*, mentions that he had a right to 5 percent of the yield of the cargo, but 1 percent was to go to the mate and another 1 percent to the rest of the crew. See TNA, HCA32/345/16, *Groote Estafette*.

<sup>620</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Instruction of Jean Hagueron (Ghent, 5 October 1781).



to provide written documentation of their activities, including frequent letters for short-term updates and detailed ledgers, diaries, and account books for long-term reporting. As Gelderblom outlines, this self-provided proof became increasingly important in Early Modern commerce as European judicial courts accepted them as legal evidence.<sup>621</sup> Writing letters from the African seaboard to Europe was a time-consuming process, as these letters were typically passed on to ships heading for the Caribbean, from where they were then forwarded to Europe. Still, it is clear that Romberg's captains sent such letters to their employer while conducting business in Africa.<sup>622</sup> Secondly, as was traditional in shipping, his officers kept track of their operations in logs and trading books, several of which have partly or wholly been preserved (see further and Chapter 8).

Although these monitoring methods provided Romberg with some insight into his agents' actions, a significant information asymmetry still remained: it was easy to omit or distort information in letters, and accounts and ledgers were only presented to the firm after the conclusion of the journey, long after the principal could possibly order strategy adjustments or force a change in command.<sup>623</sup> In order to tackle this asymmetry, Romberg thought it necessary to apply external supervision to his slaving venture by enlisting several people specifically tasked for this purpose. These agents were listed as 'supercargoes' in the ships' muster rolls but did not possess any demonstrable knowledge of African trade. Therefore, I set them apart from the 'managing supercargoes', who performed their role in the traditional sense, by labelling them as 'monitoring supercargoes' (see Tables 6.2 and 6.3). These monitoring supercargoes were responsible for safeguarding the commercial goals set by the firm and preventing fraudulent behaviour during the voyage. It was quite common practice for slaving captains, for instance, to give their private slaves preferential treatment on board, and if they were to perish, to replace them with

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<sup>621</sup> Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce*, 78-83.

<sup>622</sup> RAiB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 17 April 1784), "*Les dernieres Lettres, que nous avons eu du Capitaine Louvet, sont de Bassa en Affrique du mois d'Octobre dern[ie]r*".

<sup>623</sup> Carlos, 'Agent Opportunism', 144.

company slaves (as Jean Barbot, a French slave trader, put it, “the captain’s slaves never die”).<sup>624</sup>

Monitoring supercargoes were only present in the Spanish phase of Romberg’s Africa venture, reflecting the much larger stake of the company proper in these expeditions, as we established in Chapter 4. They were all seemingly enlisted in the close social environment of the firm’s members. Therefore, their recruitment mirrored the preference of many European enterprises of choosing agents from their own kin group, whether defined by family, religion, culture, ethnicity, or nationality. These shared affiliations were seen as fostering a ‘natural’ bond of trust and moral obligation between the principal and the agent.<sup>625</sup> The first of these monitoring supercargoes was Daniel Wicard, who accompanied Louvet on the first flotilla.<sup>626</sup> Incredibly, Wicard was an innkeeper from Ghent, whose main commercial expertise comprised selling beverages to customers and dealing with brewers. During the 1770s, he had managed a wine and coffee house on the Korenmarkt, one of the principal squares of the town, where visitors could “read several Newspapers for free”.<sup>627</sup> Wicard seems to have had German roots: his wife, Magdalena Jäger, was born in Altenstadt (Hessen), while their son was born in Wissemburg, a town which sits on the Franco-German border. In 1779, Wicard had acted as a witness in Ghent for the marriage of Joseph Gautsch, “a musician from Neuolisch in Bohemia”.<sup>628</sup> Wicard’s inn might have been a gathering place for

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<sup>624</sup> Ann Carlos and Jamie Brown Kruse, ‘The Decline of the Royal African Company: Fringe Firms and the Role of the Charter’, *The Economic History Review* 49:2 (1996) 298-300. Barbot quoted in Harms, *The Diligent*, 260.

<sup>625</sup> Mathias, ‘Risk, credit and kinship’, 15-35; David Hancock, ‘The Trouble with Networks: Managing the Scots’ Early-Modern Madeira Trade’, *Business History Review* 79:3 (2005) 475-80; Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*; Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority*, 115-7.

<sup>626</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 115/25.

<sup>627</sup> After the suspension of Romberg & Consors, Wicard’s wages were paid by Romberg, Bapst, & Cie through the mediation of Schepers in Ghent, implying that Wicard resided in that area (AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 83 v.). On 13 May 1779, a man called Daniel Wicard acted as a witness at a wedding. His signature is identical to the one included on the *Saxe-Teschen’s* muster roll. In the marriage act, Wicard is described as being an innkeeper (see SAG, *Sint-Niklaasparochie, Huwelijksbeloften- en akten*, reg. 129, 16). According to the *Wegwyzer van Gendt*, a man called ‘Wiccaert’ effectively ran an inn on the Korenmarkt from 1771 onwards, only to disappear from the annual guide around 1780 (see UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gend*, 1770-1780). Wicard’s wife, Magdalena Jäger, had died in 1775, which might help to explain his adventurous turn of career (see SAG, *Betoogboeken Alexianen*, LXVIII, 22, f. 47 v.).

<sup>628</sup> SAG, *Betoogboeken Alexianen*, LXVIII, 22, f. 47 v.; SAD, *Overlijdensakte Jean Baptiste Wicard*, 17 January 1822.

Germans in Ghent, providing an opportunity for him to become acquainted with Bapst, who was also of German descent.

On Flotilla II, Senat was joined by two other monitoring supercargoes, Jean-Baptiste Carpentier and Philippe Carpentier, who were both brothers of François Carpentier of Romberg & Consors.<sup>629</sup> Like Wicard, there is no proof either Jean-Baptiste or Philippe had any knowledge of trade in West Africa in particular or, for that matter, of trade or Africa in general. Both were in the early stages of their career and very young—Jean Baptiste had just turned twenty-five when the *Négrier Impérial* left Ostend, Philippe was scarcely twenty-one when the *Zeepaerd* sailed.<sup>630</sup> In Flotilla III, no monitoring supercargo was included, but likely the Ghent doctor Jan Baptist Vervier functioned as a confidant of Romberg & Consors on this expedition. The lack of habituation to the disease environment of the tropics cost most monitoring supercargoes dearly. Wicard passed away at an unknown point during the voyage<sup>631</sup>, both the Carpentiers died shortly after dropping anchor off the coast of West Africa—presumably, they succumbed to the malaria endemic to that coastal region.<sup>632</sup> In a way, their death was a distant prelude to the many Belgians who, a century later, would perish while seeking to get rich quickly in the Congo Free State.

This section addressed the endogenous factors determining the operations of Romberg's maritime agents, and how the Imperial firm attempted to gear them towards their own interests through contracts and monitoring strategies. We will now turn to the external factors influencing these operations, both in the sense of Europeans conducting business in African societies as well as Imperial subjects trying to make inroads in a trade traditionally pursued by other nations.

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<sup>629</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/283 and 116/426.

<sup>630</sup> Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, 367.

<sup>631</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 121 v. “*Dépot des morts à Bachman & Bapst...Notre traite à 8 j[ou]rs de vue ordre Wicard fils à qui nous la remettons pour solde de l'Inventaire de son Pere*”.

<sup>632</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 2000, Romberg & Bapst to Charles Carpentier (Bordeaux, 29 September 1789). Charles was yet another Carpentier brother, see Figure 7.1. In April 1784, a sum of 411 guilders was paid to “Mad[am]e Carpentier” by the firm. As neither Jean-Baptiste and Philippe are known to be married, and their mother had died two years previously, this might have been a payment to Marie Baeteman, their grandmother, in order to compensate her for her loss, see Figure 7.1 and AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 48 v.

## Navigating Preferences: The *Comte de Flandre*, 1780-82

On 2 December 1781, the *Comte de Flandre* set out from Ostend to West Africa. In his cabin, captain Jean Hageron re-read the elaborate instruction that the associates of Romberg & Consors had bestowed on him two months previously while preparing his journey in Ghent. Over fourteen points, it was outlined that Hageron was to proceed to Bassa (in present-day Liberia) and thence run down the Windward Coast (as the stretch of coast between Cape Mount, in present-day Liberia, and Assinie, in Côte d'Ivoire, was then called) and the Gold Coast of West Africa. Carpentier, Schepers, and Bapst had ordered him to purchase only commodities such as redwood, used copper and, principally, ivory. Through these objectives, the *Comte de Flandre* presented something of a relic in the West African trade of the 1780s. For centuries, European ships had frequented the region's shoreline in search of tusks, but by the eighteenth century, the shift in consumer preferences away from ivory and towards plantation crops had turned West Africa in a place which was increasingly visited by Europeans to procure slaves.<sup>633</sup> Hageron was effectively trained in Gold Coast slaving, but his Austrian Netherlands employers believed the ivory trade represented the most promising pursuit for his ship.<sup>634</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> Jelmer Vos, 'The Slave Trade from the Windward Coast: The Case of the Dutch, 1740–1805', *African Economic History* 38:1 (2010) 29–51.

<sup>634</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, Instruction of Jean Hageron (Ghent, 5 October 1781), "*Pour récompenser le Sieur Hageron de ses peines et Soins, nous lui allouons indépendamment de ses Gages, énoncés sur le rôle d'Equipage, Six pourcent sur la vente des Marchandises qu'il rapportera*".



FIGURE 6.3 Trajectory of the *Comte de Flandre*, 1781-2.  
 Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite.

After two months on the Atlantic Ocean, the *Comte de Flandre* dropped anchor at Île Gorée, in today’s Senegal (see Figure 6.3). Due to a lack of local enthusiasm for his trade, however, Hageron continued his journey southward.<sup>635</sup> On 1 February, he arrived at the Îles de Los, where he was finally able to make some trade deals: the captain procured two tusks, a quantity of gold, and 2,440 pounds of rice. Over the next two months, the ship would interrupt its journey about fifteen times. This fragmented nature of the *Comte*’s trade was typical for the Windward Coast: due to heavy surf and a lack of large river mouths, no major port was available in this part of West Africa, and trade took place at small nodes of commerce.<sup>636</sup>

On 31 March 1782, the voyage of the ship came to an abrupt ending when the *Comte* was taken prize near Cape Coast Castle (see Figure 6.3 and further). Although unfortunate for Hageron and his crew, the capture secured the *Comte*’s ship’s papers for posterity. These papers included the aforementioned instruction of Romberg & Consors and a trade book documenting the day-to-day transactions of the ship during its two-month spell on the African seaboard. These two records were later complemented with the examinations of

<sup>635</sup> These and all forthcoming data considering the *Comte de Flandre* are based on TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*.

<sup>636</sup> Vos, ‘The Slave Trade’, 29-38.

Hagueron and Pierre Grémont, the ship's mate, taken at the High Court of Admiralty. Together, this exceptional source material allows to reconstruct the operations of the *Comte de Flandre* to a significant degree. First, the comparison between the orders issued by Romberg & Consors and the captain's actual dealings, as revealed through interrogations and the accounting book, sheds light on the extent to which his actions were shaped by instructions versus his own initiative. Secondly, the case study offers valuable insights into the cross-cultural interactions, consumption preferences, and African bargaining power that shaped Euro-African exchanges in Upper West Africa. Lastly, it offers a glimpse into the practice of the ivory trade, a segment of shipping that has often been overshadowed in scholarly research by the predominant focus on the slave trade—a dynamic described by Marion Johnson and Harvey Feinberg as the “...and ivory’ complex” in African studies.<sup>637</sup> Today, however, the ivory trade, along with its ecological implications of human exploitation and animal population depletion, aligns with the growing body of research exploring the historical origins of the Anthropocene.<sup>638</sup>

During its two-month operations at the coast of West Africa, the *Comte de Flandre* completed 144 transactions with both African and European traders. Of these transactions, 125 were economic in character (goods for goods), sixteen constituted tribute, and three included services (e.g. pilots in the Sierra Leone River). As Table 6.4 shows, ivory claimed the lion's share of the expenses made in these transactions, as had been the intention by Romberg & Consors. The purchase of copper also fell within the directions received in Ghent, and so did the acquisition of enslaved Africans: as discussed in Chapter 5, Romberg had permitted Hagueron to purchase enslaved individuals to supplement his undersized crew and serve as mariners on his ship. Table 6.4 also displays deviations from the centrally issued instruction: beeswax, for example, is completely absent from Hagueron's transactions. Gold on the other hand *was*

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<sup>637</sup> Harvey Feinberg and Marion Johnson, ‘The West African ivory trade during the eighteenth century: the “... and ivory” complex’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15:3 (1982) 435-53.

<sup>638</sup> See for example Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, ‘Defining the Anthropocene’, *Nature* 519:7542 (2015) 171-80; Amélia Polonia and Jorge Pachéco, ‘Environmental Impacts of Colonial Dynamics, 1400–1800: The First Global Age and the Anthropocene’, in: Gareth Austin, ed. *Economic Development and Environmental History in the Anthropocene. Perspectives on Asia and Africa* (London 2017) 23-50.

purchased on multiple occasions, despite the captain never being ordered to do so by his employers.

TABLE 6.4 Expenses made by the *Comte de Flandre*, February–March 1782.

<i>Expenses</i>	<i>Expenditure (in fl.c.g.)</i>	<i>Share of total (in %)</i>
Ivory	3,984	61.9
Gold	773	12.0
Enslaved Africans	603	9.4
Textile	567	8.8
Copper	5	0.1
Provisions	161	2.5
Tribute	86	1.3
Services	26	0.4
Combined costs	142	2.2
Others	88	1.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>6,434</i>	<i>100</i>

*Source:* TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite.

In total, Hagueron loaded 249 tusks onto his small vessel, amounting to 4,489 pounds of ivory—a volume that implies the hunting of at least 125 elephants from the country’s interior. Beyond simply directing him to acquire these goods, Romberg & Consors provided detailed instructions regarding both the price and the quality of the material. As we saw in Chapter 5, Hagueron was ordered to buy “green ivory”, which was “infinitely superior to the white kind”, and to only buy tusks “Big Enough for Billiard Balls”.<sup>639</sup> The Ghent associates also imposed a price cap on the purchased goods, stipulating that the ivory should not exceed two current guilders per pound (equivalent to 480 *denieren*). To assess whether Hagueron adhered to this directive, we compiled all data on ivory purchases from the vessel’s accounting book, presented in Figure 6.4. The data reveals that there was no consistent unit price for ivory: smaller tusks were evidently cheaper than larger ones, though the price difference was disproportionate to their size. Up to a weight of 30 pounds, the unit price increased sharply, eventually stabilizing at around 200–300 *denieren* per pound. While there are

<sup>639</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Instruction of Jean Hagueron (Ghent, 5 October 1781), “*Le Cap[itain]e Hagueron donnera preference quant à l’Ivoire au morphil Verd qui est infiniment superieur au blanc et aux dents de grosneur à faire des Billes de Billard*”.

a few outliers in the 300–350 *denieren* range, it is clear that Hagueron remained well below the two-guilder-per-pound limit set by Romberg.

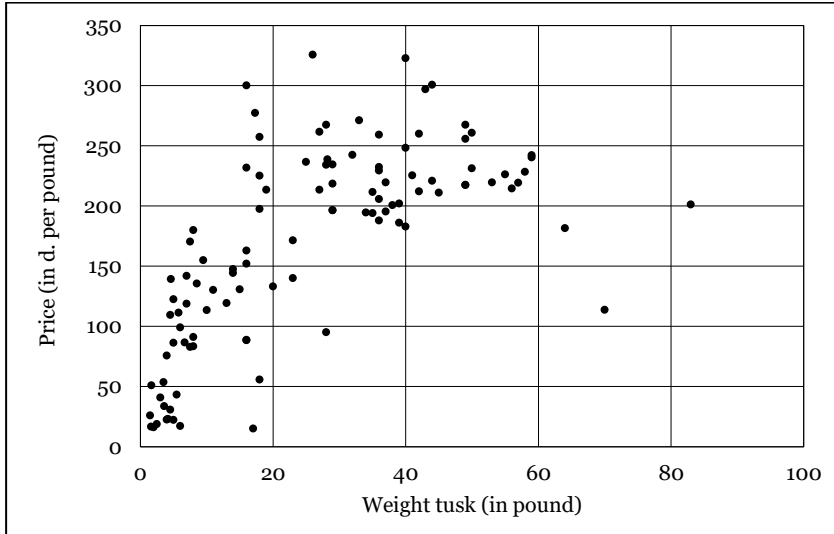


FIGURE 6.4 The price of ivory per tusk weight, n=248.

Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite.<sup>640</sup>

What can we tell about the nature of the tusks bought by Hagueron? Dutch captains and merchants active in the ivory trade generally made a distinction between full tusks (called *tanden*) and small tusks (called *crevel* or *scrivillos*), sometimes supplemented with an extra category of ‘heavy’ tusks. Johnson and Feinberg determined their respective average weights at 33.6 pounds (ranging from 29.6 pounds to 41.4 pounds) and 5.8 pounds (ranging from 4.6 pounds to 7.9 pounds). Tusks above 60 pounds were considered ‘heavy’ by the Dutch merchants.<sup>641</sup> In his own trading log, Hagueron did not distinguish between different kinds of tusks, but because the captain noted down their weight, it is possible to retrospectively place the purchases of the *Comte de Flandre* in the same categories as the Dutch traders. Table 6.5 shows two sets of numbers: one

<sup>640</sup> 76 of the tusks were recorded as separate purchases in Hagueron’s trade book, and provide a very reliable idea of their price. The other 172 tusks were noted in groups of 2, 3 or 5 (outliers 10, 12 and 66), which forced me to use averages.

<sup>641</sup> Rodney, *A History*, 155.



set containing the purchases of single tusks, giving a very reliable idea of their weight, and one set containing the data of all purchases, using averages when tusks were grouped in one purchase.

TABLE 6.5 Weight of tusks purchased by the *Comte de Flandre*, 1782.

Category	Single purchases		Total purchases	
	Amount	Share (in %)	Amount	Share (in %)
<4.6 lb.	1	1.3	48	19.4
4.6 to 7.9 lb. ('Small tusks')	4	5.3	39	15.7
7.9 to 25.9 lb.	21	27.6	103	41.5
26 lb. to 29.5 lb. ('Ordinary tusks')	10	13.2	15	6.0
29.6 to 41.4 lb. ('Full tusks')	19	25.0	19	7.7
41.4 to 59.9 lb.	19	25.0	19	7.7
>60 lb. ('Heavy tusks')	2	2.6	5	2.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>248</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite.

While the data for single purchases presents a fairly equal distribution between the weight categories, the data for total purchases reveal a preponderance of tusks that were generally considered 'small' to 'ordinary' by contemporaries. Yet despite this—on first sight—limited size of tusks, data on tusk weight and size collected for the forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) and the bush or savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), the two species of elephant present in eighteenth-century West Africa, suggest that even the smallest pieces of ivory bought by Hagueron may have been suitable for the purposes—the production of billiard balls—outlined by Romberg & Consors.<sup>642</sup>

<sup>642</sup> Ivory on the coast of West Africa generally had three sources: the hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), the forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), and the bush or savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). Although their numbers have decreased drastically during the past two centuries due to loss of habitat, hunting and poaching, both the forest elephant and the bush elephant were common in eighteenth-century West Africa. Depending on the elephant's diet, tusks could be white, yellowish, pinkish, greenish, brownish, or something in between; similarly, diet influenced the softness or hardness of the ivory. Hippo tusks were smaller in size (weighing between 4 and 15 pounds), of a brownish colour, and harder to carve than elephant's teeth. See Rodney, *A History*, 154-7; Harald Roth and Ian Douglas-Hamilton, 'Distribution and status of elephants in West Africa' (1991) 489-522; Martha Chaiklin, 'Ivory in World History—Early Modern Trade in Context', *History Compass* 8:6 (2010) 531. Because the trading log does not reveal further information of the purchased goods, it is possible that the smallest tusks recorded were hippo tusks, yet because of their limited size, difficulties in refining, and to Romberg unappealing colour, it seems much more likely that the entire cargo of the *Comte de Flandre* consisted of elephant teeth. In his orders for the journey Romberg had explicitly stated that the tusks acquired should be big enough to fashion into billiard balls.

The instruction of Romberg & Consors remained silent on the subject of how to conduct trade on the African seaboard—for this, Hagueron needed to rely on his extensive experience. After leaving the Senegambia and Sierra Leone region, the *Comte de Flandre* travelled southward until she reached Cape Mount. Cape Mount marked the beginning of what Europeans called the Windward Coast, but what was also known as the Kru Coast after the people who inhabited the region. For a month, between the middle of February and the middle of March, Hagueron would trade at several Kru places, the most important being Bottawa, Tabo, Drewin, and the Sassandra River (see Table 6.6). When passing these places, European traders would generally show their willingness to trade by anchoring of the beach, making smoke signals, firing guns, or running up a flag.<sup>643</sup> Kru surfboats would then venture in large fleets towards the European crew with the commodities available for trade.<sup>644</sup> Usually, only one lead trader would board the European vessel, representing the fleet and the *krogba*, the democratically elected leader of the town who generally stayed ashore.<sup>645</sup> Dealing with one representative instead of the whole group was for all practical purposes the easiest for both sides (the Kru not

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Considering the fact that billiard balls are around 57 mm wide, a tusk would have to be around 18 cm circumference measured at the elephant's lip to get at least one billiard ball out of it. As calculated by John Hanks, a male African bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) reaches this circumference at around 10 years of age, a female at around 20 years. See John Hanks, 'Growth of the African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*)', *African Journal of Ecology* 10:4 (1972) 265. To add to the equation, Richard Laws and Elizabeth Park observed that the individual tusks of male bush elephants weighed about 7 to 8.5 pounds when they struck puberty at 12-14 years old, females of around 20 years had individual tusks weighing about 5 pounds. See Richard Laws and Elizabeth Park, 'Age criteria for the African elephant, *Loxodonta A. africana*', *African Journal of Ecology* 4:1 (1966) 1-37. The aforementioned scientists stress the heterogeneity among individual elephants, but the data presented in their studies suggests that even the smallest tusks acquired by Hagueron might have met the size criteria set out by Romberg & Consors.

<sup>643</sup> Adam Jones and Marion Johnson, 'Slaves from the Windward Coast', *The Journal of African History*, 21:1 (1980) 32.

<sup>644</sup> Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 34-8. The maritime abilities of the Kru invariably astonished Europeans. Pierre-Ignace-Liévin Van Alstein, the Flemish captain who worked in the Nantes slave trade, spent time on the Kru coast one year after the *Comte de Flandre*, and observed the expert maritime skills of the local people of Tabo: "One of them went up the ladder...to examine the Ship and the crew, and drank a glass of brandy. Another went up, always staying outside the ship, ready to jump into the sea, which is how they board the canoe—just one man on the edge would capsize it. By placing his arm in the bottom of this small canoe, with his right hand in the middle, the whole body is lifted so skilfully that the canoe makes no movement because his comrades lean to the opposite side as he launches himself, and this is done in the blink of an eye. It is incredible how well these people swim...the weather was terrible, the sea very rough, but these men simply cannot drown". See RAG, *Schenking d'Hoop*, 978, Log of the Pactolle, f. 26 r.-v. (Record of 18-9 June).

<sup>645</sup> Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 38-44.

having to abandon their boats), but European shipowners were generally also wary of allowing too many African traders on board, fearing they would try to overpower the crew. Romberg himself had also furnished the crew with plenty of weapons (see Chapter 5) and had forbidden Hagueron to let more than five or six traders on deck “due to the smallness of his Vessel”.<sup>646</sup>

When the African traders were on board, Hagueron first had to pay tribute to them and the *krogba* on shore, offering brandy or tobacco. This tribute was a crucial element of the cross-cultural trade between Europeans and Africans. Participation in this tradition, common throughout West Africa, was essential for commercial success and exemplified the bargaining power local African traders held. Europeans had no control over the supply chains in the interior and generally did not dare to venture far inland to claim such control. In addition, European crews were on a timer when arriving on the African seaboard: the longer the trade negotiations dragged on, the bigger the chance their provisions would run out or disease would wreak havoc among their human cargoes or themselves. All these conditions compelled Europeans to pay extensive tribute to African brokers, in order to quickly gain access to local markets.<sup>647</sup> Pierre Labarth, a Frenchman who visited the Gold Coast (present day’s Ghana) in 1788, noted that brandy was “the most popular commodity on the whole coast of Africa,” and that “nothing could be accomplished without a gift of it”.<sup>648</sup> Although Table 6.4 shows that the economic value contained in tributes (1.3 percent) was negligible, the symbolical weight carried in these transactions was of utmost importance: their share in the total amount of transactions was 11.1 percent, or 16 out of 144. At almost every location where Hagueron conducted trade, tobacco and brandy were offered to local merchants as “customs”, “gifts”, or “refreshments”. Tribute mostly took place at the start or conclusion of the trading day, but in the Bassa region also a few times during the process of brokering a deal.

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<sup>646</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Instruction of captain Jean Hagueron (Ghent, 5 October 1781), “*par rapport a la petitesse de son Navire*”.

<sup>647</sup> See for example Ty Reese, “Eating” Luxury: Fante Middlemen, British Goods, and Changing Dependencies on the Gold Coast, 1750-1821’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66:4 (2009) 853-6; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge 1992) 66-71.

<sup>648</sup> Alpern, ‘What Africans Got’, 24.

The trade deals proper were conducted through payment in-kind. As we have seen in Chapter 5, the *Comte de Flandre* was furnished with a wide variety of alcoholic drinks, textiles, weapons, metalware, and sundry goods such as razors and mirrors. Cowrie shells did function as a form of currency eastward of Cape Coast Castle, but the *Comte de Flandre* never reached this stretch of coastline, explaining their absence in the trading log.<sup>649</sup> Scholars of African trade in other nations have generally argued that Indian textiles—whether genuinely sourced from India or imitations produced in Europe—formed the foundation of African commerce. George Metcalf, for instance, studying the account books of a British officer trading on the Gold Coast in the 1770s, conclude that “textiles were the cornerstone of trade on the Gold Coast...[they] were what the trade was all about”.<sup>650</sup> On an aggregate level, Marion Johnson computed that 60 to 70 percent of British exports towards Africa comprised of textiles.<sup>651</sup> Likewise, French exports to Africa at the end of the eighteenth century consisted for 40 percent of only textiles from India, as was calculated by Jean Tarrade.<sup>652</sup> Finally, Johannes Postma, writing for the Dutch West India Company, noted that “textiles were clearly dominant among the trade goods that the company brought to Africa”. The author acknowledges that alcoholic beverages were almost present every time as merchandise on ships going to Africa, but that alcohol “accounted for only a small percentage of purchasing power”.<sup>653</sup>

Do the numbers of Romberg & Consors confirm this image of dominance of textiles? Table 6.6 presents the purchasing power contained in the commodities exchanged for ivory, gold, and enslaved Africans by Hagueron. On an overall level, alcoholic beverages (principally spirits) seem to have been by far the most important commodities: 54 percent of the purchasing power is provided by this category. Next are textiles (19 percent), weapons (14 percent) and metalware (6 percent). Only 4 percent of the trade volume was procured by smoking articles; foodstuffs and the ‘Other’ category each account for 2 percent. These numbers initially seem to create a different image than the one presented by the studies on British, French and Dutch trade with Africa. However, our

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<sup>649</sup> Yang, *Cowrie shells*, 169.

<sup>650</sup> Metcalf, ‘A Microcosm’, 380-7.

<sup>651</sup> Johnson, *Anglo-African trade*, 52-60.

<sup>652</sup> Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial*, 125.

<sup>653</sup> Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge 2008) 103-4.

results are heavily distorted by the prodigious quantities of spirits that were traded in the European factories along the Gold Coast: a striking 84 percent of the total volume at these places is procured with alcohol. When looking solely at the trade conducted with African brokers on the Kru Coast, the results are quite similar to those mentioned earlier: here, textiles *do* account for the largest share of purchasing power (37.3 percent). Nevertheless, their share is not as dominant as seems to have been the case for other nations, as a large portion of the trade volume contains alcohol (19.8 percent) and weapons (27.8 percent) as well. The lesser importance of textiles in the commercial activities of the *Comte de Flandre* is probably due to the fact that the Austrian Netherlands, contrary to the nations mentioned earlier, had no direct connection with the East, nor did it have a large cotton industry geared at producing Indian-styled cloths (cf. Chapter 5).

TABLE 6.6 Value (in fl.c.g.) and share of the commodities exchanged by the *Comte de Flandre*, February–March 1782.

Site of trade	Value	Share in value (%)						
		Alcohol	Textiles	Arms	Smoking	Metal	Food	Other
Cape Mount	80	14	34	—	8	4	41	—
Bassa	134	20	48	17	9	—	—	6
Bottawa	436	15	47	20	4	11	—	3
Tabo	863	18	38	30	1	10	—	2
Drouin	295	15	36	35	2	9	—	—
Sassandra	723	14	42	28	1	12	—	3
<i>Subtotal</i>	2,530	16	41	22	4	8	6	3
Îles de Los	146	91	7	3	—	—	—	—
Sierra Leone	772	49	5	23	22	—	—	—
Axim	1,999	83	4	2	—	6	3	2
'at sea'	54	83	17	—	—	—	—	—
Fort Hollandia	158	89	11	—	—	—	—	—
Acoda	519	84	7	—	—	7	2	—
Botro	134	91	9	—	—	—	—	—
Takoradi	121	100	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Subtotal</i>	3,903	84	8	3	3	2	0.5	0.5
<i>Total</i>	6,434	54	19	14	4	6	2	2

Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite. Hageron separated both Bassa and Drouin in a 'Petit' and 'Grand' part. Likewise, Bottawa was divided in 'Large de Bottawa' and Bottawa proper. For practical purposes, I merged these subdivisions into one entity.

The use of the broad category 'Indian textiles' in the previous quotes, however, oversimplifies the complex realities of trade along the African seaboard. Indian textiles encompassed a wide range of cotton fabrics, each varying in colour, pattern, and quality.<sup>654</sup> The *Comte* had stocked up on five different types of textiles before departure: *limineas* (a striped cloth), *indiennes* (a printed cotton which came in various appearances), *chasselasses* (striped or checked cloth), *guinéés* (blue and white, specifically produced for the African market), and finally *corail*.<sup>655</sup> Early descriptions of Euro-African economic relations, which primarily focused on the European side of the trade, often portrayed Africa and its traders as a vast, homogeneous entity. This perspective overlooked the large regional differences in consumption preferences and ignored how these preferences evolved over time. Tastes were often highly specific: factors such as the product's quality, colour, or even the European factory of origin could make or break a particular deal.<sup>656</sup> As Table 6.7 illustrates for the *Comte de Flandre*, this assessment is already evident on the Kru Coast, an operating area of relatively limited size. *Corail* textiles, for instance, only found buyers starting from Tabo onwards, as they do not appear in any of the 34 transactions prior to that. The demand for *limineas* was concentrated in Bottawa and Tabo; beyond these two locations, African brokers seemingly showed no interest in these fabrics.

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<sup>654</sup> Alpern, 'What Africans Got', 6-8.

<sup>655</sup> Alpern, 'What Africans Got', 6-8.

<sup>656</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 109-12; Richardson, 'West African Consumption Patterns', 303-9; Metcalf, 'A Microcosm', 386-9; Northrup, *Africa's discovery*; Harms, *The Diligent*, 80-1.

TABLE 6.7 Pieces of Indian textiles traded by the *Comte de Flandre* on the Kru Coast, 22 February–18 March 1782.

Place	Trans- actions	Limineas		Indiennes		Chassetasses		Guinées		Corail	
		Small	Large	Small	Large	Small	Large	Small	Large	Small	Large
Cape Mount	5	—	—	—	—	5	—	5	—	—	—
Bassa	7	—	—	1	1	1	2	—	3	—	—
Bottawa	22	7	7	9	1	1	—	5	1	—	—
Tabo	30	5	2	5	—	2	—	6	3	3	—
Drouin	15	—	—	2	1	—	—	—	1	3	—
Sassandra	26	—	—	7	—	2	—	2	—	2	—

Source: TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite. Only commodity-for-commodity exchanges are included in the 'Transactions' column.



As with tributes, scholars have asserted that bargaining power of local brokers was so high that captains who were unable to cater to local preferences experienced many difficulties to get any trade done.<sup>657</sup> Was this market power of local merchants also noticeable in the transactions effected by the *Comte de Flandre*? The ship's trading log obviously only notes the transactions that succeeded, not the ones which broke down. Hagueron, in his examinations before the British Admiralty, stated that his trade went "agreeably".<sup>658</sup> His trading log, however, suggests otherwise. On 30 March 1782, the captain bought a quantity of Indian textiles in Botro, presumably at the Dutch fortress of this place. One day later, he repeated his purchase, this time at one of the forts of Sekondi-Takoradi.<sup>659</sup> Because trading commodities in Africa were often available only at exorbitant prices—sometimes as much as 40 percent higher than in Europe—shipowners made every effort to avoid such purchases, as they could significantly reduce the profits of the expedition. Either they gathered extensive information on African consumption preferences, or they acquired a large trading cargo, with surplus goods that could be sold in Africa to captains who had not taken similar precautions.<sup>660</sup> The fact that Hagueron resorted to purchasing trading goods in Africa strongly suggests that his commerce was not progressing as smoothly as he had anticipated. In addition to acquiring types of fabric he already had on board (*limineas*, *chassetasse*, and *guinées*), he specifically bought textiles he had failed to embark in the Austrian Netherlands such as *nicanaises* (blue and white, striped cloth) and *bajutateaux* (various patterns in colours).<sup>661</sup> This suggests that he had encountered demand for these fabrics on the Kru Coast—a demand he had previously been unable to meet. Hagueron's inability to fulfil local demands may also explain his decision to conduct trade at European factories, where his large cargo of alcoholic beverages found a better outlet. Two years later, Jean Pierre Barabé, commanding Romberg's *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, also faced severe trading difficulties in the region due to his inability to meet local consumption preferences. At Cap Lahou, Barabé reported that "every day a lot of captives

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<sup>657</sup> Metcalf, 'A Microcosm', 387; Richardson, 'West African Consumption Patterns', 303-330.

<sup>658</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron.

<sup>659</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite, Log of 30-1 March 1782.

<sup>660</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 35; Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 33, 41.

<sup>661</sup> Alpern, 'What Africans Got', 6-7.

arrive”, but he was unable to purchase them “as we have no more guns.”<sup>662</sup> Later, the captain reiterated that “We need to be better equipped for this country than we were before, especially with cauldrons of 30 to 36 inches, basins of 15 to 18 inches, and 1 tin basin per captive, as well as small jugs”.<sup>663</sup> The latter specification, presumably recorded for future use, again highlights the very specific preferences of African traders and contrasts with early Eurocentric documentations of the trade. The same is shown by Barabé’s note on trading amber gemstones in the Senegal region, “which should be a whitish yellow, but neither transparent nor milky”.<sup>664</sup>

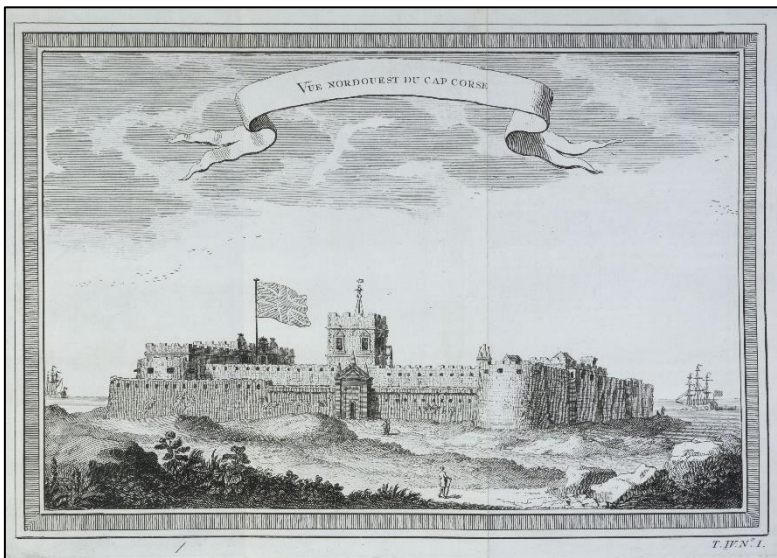


FIGURE 6.5 Cape Coast Castle, c. 1747, where the *Comte de Flandre* was seized by mutinous British forces. Source: Jacques-Nicolas Bellin.

So far, we have emphasized the challenges encountered by Hagueron which stemmed from his involvement in Euro-African commerce, a trade relationship in which Europeans were decidedly the weaker party. Yet to what

<sup>662</sup> ADC, F6120, “tous les jours il en venoit beaucoup, nous n’en avons party que parceque nous n’avions plus de fusils”.

<sup>663</sup> ADC, F6120, “Il faut être assorty pour ce pays mieux que nous ne l’etions surtout en chaudrons de 30 a 36 pouces des bassins de 15 a 18 et 1 bassin De tain par captif et cannettes”.

<sup>664</sup> ADC, F6120, “un jeaune blanc, sans être ny transparent, ny taitté”.

extent did his allegiance to an Imperial firm, a neutral newcomer in the African trades, pose a problem for the captain? Romberg & Consors were fully aware of its outsider status in African shipping, and were especially concerned about the lack of institutions in the region which could safeguard its property rights. Practically, this meant that the firm's maritime agents could not rely on the protection of Imperial naval patrols or seek cover under the guns of an Austrian Habsburg fortress. Romberg & Consors' associates had provided Hagueron with a list of commercial sites the captain should visit and granted him the discretion to explore other markets if the captain deemed it necessary. Yet, the shipowners added, "in no way" could Hagueron "trade with the Factories belonging to one of the Belligerent Nations", except if "an urgent case" forced him to. As Figure 6.3 and Table 6.6 abundantly demonstrate, however, this is exactly what Hagueron did, without any proof of emergency forcing him to. Early on, Hagueron visited the British factories on Île de Gorée, Îles de Los, and Bunce Island. After spending a month trading exclusively with African traders on the Kru Coast, he also began trading at several locations on the Gold Coast where Europeans were settled in fortresses. Hagueron stopped at Axim where there was potentially contact with the Dutch Fort Saint Anthony. The trading log's "Hollandia" presumably means Fort Hollandia, in "Acoda" (now Akwida) he may have traded with the Dutch Fort Dorothea, in "Botro" (now Butre) with the Dutch Fort Batenstein and in "Tarcarari" (now Sekondi-Takoradi) with Fort Orange—equally Dutch—or the British Fort Sekondi. Although it is true that African towns were established near most of these fortresses, the nature of the transactions—overwhelmingly involving alcohol sales—reveals that Hagueron was effectively dealing with Dutch and British garrisons, both of which, of course, were at war with each other.<sup>665</sup>

Although Hagueron's improvisation on his instructions proved successful at first, yielding large quantities of ivory, his decision backfired when, by the end of March, he reached Dutch Elmina and British Cape Coast Castle. The two forts, each with their Fante and Asante allies, had been involved in a coastal strife since the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84) the previous year. In February 1782, 400 British troops under the command of Captain Kenneth McKenzie had made landfall on the beach in order to try and wrest

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<sup>665</sup> Arnold Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* (London 1963) 66-69, 229-41, 262-73, 283-91, 337-40, 349-55.

Elmina from the Dutch. Although the troops razed smaller forts such as Fort Nassau (near Mouree) and Fort Cormantin, the main assault on Elmina failed, and over the following months McKenzie's contingent rapidly dwindled due to death, disease, and desertion; those who remained within the ranks increasingly turned to mutinous behaviour.<sup>666</sup> On 31 March, Hagueron, sailing past Cape Coast Castle, received a letter from McKenzie, in which he invited the captain to drop anchor and sell him some gunpowder. Hagueron hesitantly consented, yet through "a kind of Treachery and Surprize", McKenzie boarded the vessel and took it as a prize, putting a dozen of his men in command. When Hagueron asked why the Englishman believed he had the right to capture the vessel, McKenzie curtly replied that he could do so simply "because he wore a Red Coat", referring to his military attire.<sup>667</sup> The following day, McKenzie took Hagueron and Grémont in a longboat to Cape Coast Castle, along with all documents on board.<sup>668</sup> The transfer of Hagueron and Grémont very possibly saved the men's lives. After capturing the vessel, McKenzie had ordered his troops to steer the craft to Mouree in order to take on board two large cannon and take them to Komenda, another British fortress. In the passage from Mouree to Komenda, however, the *Comte*—along with its crew of eleven, including two Ostend seamen and four enslaved Africans—vanished, being last observed from Cape Coast Castle on 21 April.<sup>669</sup> By June, no new information had surfaced regarding the ship's fate, which prompted Richard Miles, the governor of Cape Coast Castle, to speculate that "*either the Crew overpowered the Troops, or the Troops the crew; one I think must be the case, I know not which*".<sup>670</sup> Nothing, it seems, was heard from the vessel ever again.

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<sup>666</sup> Ty Reese, 'Liberty, Insolence and Rum. Cape Coast and the American Revolution', *Itinerario*, 28:3 (2004) 23–6.

<sup>667</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron (London, 4 December 1781). Together with the *Comte de Flandre*, McKenzie also made prize a Portuguese vessel carrying a valuable cargo of 3,500 rolls of tobacco, see Reese, 'Liberty', 25. The captain was later arrested at Cape Coast Castle for his misconduct; indeed, when Romberg files a complaint to address the seizure of the vessel, McKenzie is reported to be in prison, see ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2189.

<sup>668</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Examination of Jean Hagueron (London, 4 December 1781); *Treasury*, T70/33, Miles to Treasury (Cape Coast Castle, 6 August 1782). Hagueron and Grémont returned to Europe as passengers on HMS *Active* in order to begin their proceedings with the High Court of Admiralty.

<sup>669</sup> TNA, *Treasury*, T70/33, Weuves to Treasury (Cape Coast Castle, 29 April 1782).

<sup>670</sup> TNA, *Treasury*, T70/33, Miles to Treasury (Cape Coast Castle, 6, 12 and 22 June 1782).

We can only speculate on whether McKenzie would have acted the way he did if the *Comte de Flandre* had been trading under a French or Dutch flag, but the likelihood seems small. One week before the capture of the *Comte*, the *États de Brabant*, while stopping at British Île de Gorée for repairs, had also been forced by the local governor, Joseph Wall, to offload part of its trading cargo.<sup>671</sup> The capture and harassment of both vessels echoed the seizing of three Ostend ships in West Africa around 1720, this time by Dutch WIC ships and pirates.<sup>672</sup> Clearly, agents of established colonial powers saw Imperial ships as easy targets to prey upon, knowing full well there would be no immediate response in military terms. Eventually, in the case of the *Comte de Flandre*, Romberg's interests and property rights were upheld by the law, as the British High Court of Admiralty ruled the Imperial ship an illegal prize. The Bank of England provided the merchant with several gold nuggets to compensate for the loss of the ivory cargo, as well as for legal fees and the costs associated with Hagueron's stay, who—with the exception of a few visits to Ghent to settle with his employers—remained confined in London until the end of 1785.<sup>673</sup> Despite this settlement, the case of the *Comte de Flandre*—as well as the *États de Brabant*—serves as an exemplary case-study of the fragility of outsiders operating in an Atlantic setting.

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<sup>671</sup> See Appendix A.7.

<sup>672</sup> Parmentier, 'De Oostendse Guineavaarders'.

<sup>673</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Ruling of the *Comte de Flandre* (London, 26 November 1785).

Coping with Competition:  
The *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*, 1783-84

While the *Comte de Flandre* had been one of the first vessels sent to the African shore by Romberg & Consors, the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre* were the last to be dispatched. The international political context was entirely different: when the *Comte* sailed from Ghent, new parties were still entering the American War of Independence; two years later, nations were seeking a way out of it. Indeed, when the expeditions of the *Congo* and the *Conseil* were being mounted in the Austrian Netherlands, peace negotiations between the courts of London and Versailles were proceeding positively. With reports of impending peace, Europe's slaving ports sprang back to life. During the war, the low prices of enslaved Africans on the African coast due to oversupply and high prices paid by colonists in the Americas caused by undersupply had created a price gap which had enabled large profits for slave traders. Although neutral carriers had picked up some of the slack in the trade, European slave merchants remained convinced that sizeable opportunities still existed in the wake of the war, and many scrambled to prepare their ships.<sup>674</sup> At the same time, every trader understood that if everyone acted on these same incentives, African markets would quickly become overwhelmed with demand, and colonial markets would be glutted with supply, erasing any potential profits. The key, therefore, was to be first.

TABLE 6.8 Enslaved Africans embarked per year, 1775-85.

1781	1782	1783	1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789	1790
48,480	52,401	62,261	104,363	95,152	95,529	101,306	104,040	92,413	112,048

*Source:* TSTD.

From Autumn 1782 onwards, a genuine 'race to the coast' was developing in the ports of France, with ships poised to set sail as soon as peace returned to the high seas.<sup>675</sup> As Table 6.8 shows, a massive 'catch-up' wave of expeditions

<sup>674</sup> Inikori, 'Market Structure', 745-76; I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its neighbours, 1708-1818* (Cambridge 1967) 162-3.

<sup>675</sup> See Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 84 and Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 235-6 for Nantes. See Delobette, *Ces Messieurs du Havre*, 667-8 and Edouard Delobette,

reached Africa in 1784 and kept its momentum throughout the 1780s, making it—with a total of 870,000 people forced onto European boats—the most active and brutal decade in the history of the trade. Romberg & Consors had been preparing its Africa scheme since spring 1782, but the need for coordination with the Spanish crown, an allegedly sluggish customs administration, difficulties in enlisting a crew, and contrary winds delayed the operation considerably, to the extent that Romberg’s enterprise had now been caught up by the course of events in international politics. Yet instead of abandoning the whole affair, the firm—having already made the massive investments analysed in Chapter 5—were gripped with a kind of ‘path dependency’ and decided to take their chances. “400 to 500 ships will now be fitted out, but only the first ones will win the Laurel wreath”, stated François Carpentier confidently on 24 January 1783, four days after the belligerent nations signed preliminary peace treaties.<sup>676</sup>

Their employers in the Austrian Netherlands had taken the gamble: now it was on the agents to deal with the consequences.

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‘Négociants et traite des Noirs au Havre au XVIIIe siècle’, *Annales de Normandie* 48:3 (1998) 268 for Le Havre.

<sup>676</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 24 January 1783), “*Il si armera de Suinte 4 a 5 cent navires, mais les premiers emporteront le Laurier*”. Carpentier’s statement echoed those of his French competitors. Rinchon quotes a French merchant who says that “*the first to arrive on the coast will do an excellent business [les premiers qui arriveront à la côte feront de brillantes affaires]*”, see Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 84.

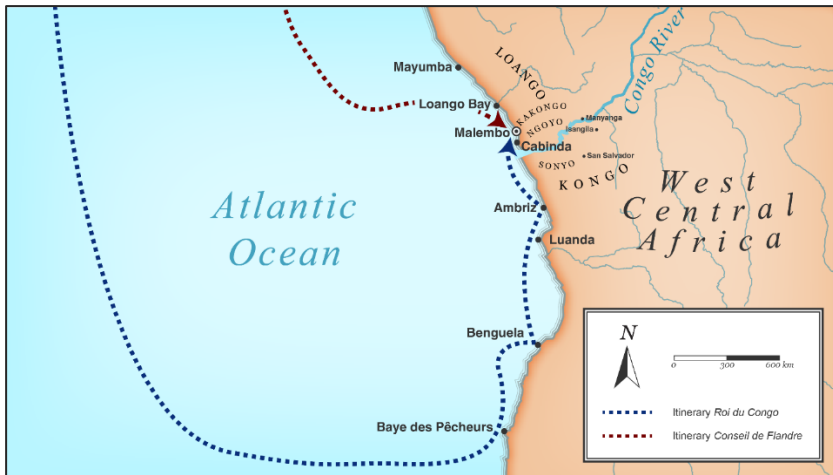


FIGURE 6.6 The Atlantic coast of West Central Africa, with the trajectories of the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*, 1783. Source data: AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*; SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Île d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*.

The *Roi du Congo*, with Armand Lacoudrais at her helm, cleared from the port of Ostend on 19 April 1783 in order to go to West Central Africa. On the very same day, the *Conseil de Flandre*, commanded by Pierre Destrais, went in the opposite direction, drifting past the locks at Slyckens towards Bruges in order to make the final preparations for her journey. One month later, Destrais would leave for Ostend, and another month later, on 1 July 1783, he, too, made for Central Africa.<sup>677</sup> We are informed on the subsequent operations of both captains by partial log books which have been preserved of both ships.<sup>678</sup> Additionally, their actions are described by François Vanstabel, a French captain who put into Malembo—the eventual port of call of the two Romberg ships—on 20 November 1783 and finished his trade on 3 May 1784, which entails that his trade overlapped with that of Lacoudrais for four weeks, and with that of Destrais for eleven weeks. In letters to his employer, Bonadventure Tresca of Dunkirk, Vanstabel commented extensively on the mercantile

<sup>677</sup> See Appendix A.16.

<sup>678</sup> AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*; SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Île d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*.



behaviour of his competitors anchored in Malembo harbour—fortunately, including the two Imperial captains.<sup>679</sup>

For 110 days Lacoudrais sailed on the high seas until he caught sight of the Grande Baye des Pêcheurs in modern Angola (see Figure 6.6). The site presented the most southern point of Lacoudrais' voyage: there, like many European captains conducting trade in West Central Africa, he turned north and hugged the shoreline until he stopped at the Portuguese settlement of Benguela for fresh supplies.<sup>680</sup> For Jan Baptist Vervier, acting surgeon on the ship, this route choice came in handy, as it allowed him to survey a larger stretch of African coast for his Imperial mission.<sup>681</sup> Leaving Benguela and continuing his voyage, Lacoudrais sent a sloop towards Ambriz on 24 August 1783 in order to talk with the captains already moored at that place and enquire about the state of affairs.<sup>682</sup> The small craft apparently returned with news of trade opportunities, because in three weeks' time, Lacoudrais would forcibly load 80 enslaved Africans onto his ship.<sup>683</sup> On 18 September, however, the *Roi du Congo* left Ambriz and resumed its northerly course, passing to the other side of the mouth of the Congo River and dropping anchor at Malembo—it would only be raised again three months later.<sup>684</sup> In the meantime, Destrais' *Conseil de Flandre* had also reached West Central Africa, in a slightly quicker time than his colleague by taking the direct though dangerous route (due to the risk of calms) across the Bights of Benin and Biafra.<sup>685</sup> On 2 October, the captain ordered Alexander Bunel, his second-in-command, to gather information in Loango Bay. Contrary to Ambriz, captive Africans were not readily available in the town, and so Destrais continued without delay towards Malembo. Despite the three months' time that had elapsed between their vessels' departures,

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<sup>679</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037. For the analysis of the Vanstabel letters, I owe gratitude to Christophe Sergeant, who included very helpful transcriptions of the Ms 1037 sources in his *Mortalité et Morbidité au cours d'une campagne de traite d'un navire négrier dunkerquois au XVIIIe siècle* (Lille 1989) 126 and subsequent pages.

<sup>680</sup> AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, Record of 11 August 1783. See Joseph Miller, 'Some Aspects of the Commercial Organization of Slaving at Luanda, Angola—1760-1830', in: Henry Gemery and Jan Hogendorn, *The Uncommon Market. Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York 1979) 83.

<sup>681</sup> See Chapter 2. Likely, the route choice was discussed with Lacoudrais prior to boarding (especially since the *Conseil* took a different, shorter route, cf. infra), or may even have been instructed to the captain.

<sup>682</sup> AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, Record of 24 August 1783.

<sup>683</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 29 November 1783).

<sup>684</sup> AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, Record of 17 September 1783.

<sup>685</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 101.

Destrais met up with Lacoudrais on 9 October, three weeks after the latter had arrived in the port.<sup>686</sup>

Malembo was a trading town close to the mouth of the Chiloango River which belonged to the kingdom of Kakongo. Kakongo was a relatively small state on the north bank of the Congo River. It boasted an Atlantic coastline of about 40 kilometres, of which Malembo was the most important anchorage. The state was bordered in the south by the kingdom of Ngoyo, which held sovereignty over the slaving port of Cabinda. To the north lay the large and powerful Loango Kingdom of the Vili peoples, where Loango Bay was located, another major outlet for slaves (see Figure 6.6). Both Kakongo and Ngoyo recognized Loango's superiority and paid honour and tribute to its rulers. All three polities had once been subject to the kingdom of Kongo, but by the eighteenth century they had broken away; the king of Kongo still claimed sovereignty over Kakongo and Ngoyo, but both stood by their independence.<sup>687</sup> During the final decades of the seventeenth century, slave trade had become established in Malembo, and the port became a major slaving hub during the second half of the eighteenth century when a growing number of Dutch, English, and French captains began calling there. For France especially, Malembo—after Ouidah—became the second most important embarkation point of slaves, and in West Central Africa as a whole the most important locus of trade.<sup>688</sup> The decision of Destrais and Lacoudrais to conduct trade at the Kakongo port in that manner not only aligned with their personal careers—both had visited the harbour before, cf. *supra*—but also conformed to a broader pattern of trade during the eighteenth century.<sup>689</sup>

In 1783, an increasing number of French vessels unable to visit Malembo during the war descended on the mouth of the Congo River. British vessels also visited the town in great numbers—in fact, Miles Barber's and Samuel Hartley's

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<sup>686</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Records of 2 and 9 October 1783.

<sup>687</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 1-32, especially 29-32.

<sup>688</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 75-6, 86, 95-6; Geggus, 'The French Slave Trade: An Overview', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58:1 (2001) 122.

<sup>689</sup> It is expected, however, that Lacoudrais aimed to conduct most of his trade in Ambriz, as he had christened his vessel the *Roi du Congo*, in order to flatter the local traders in the region he was planning to visit—a practice widespread in the French slave trade. It is doubtful, given the polity's opposition to the claims of the Kongo Kingdom, whether people in Kakongo would be flattered by such a vessel's name. See Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 43.

*Comte du Nord*, sailing with a permit of Romberg & Consors, also called at Malembo while Lacoudrais and Destrais were anchored there.<sup>690</sup> Other evolutions further complicated mercantile matters in Malembo. For a considerable time, the Portuguese Crown had been aspiring to reimpose control over the Loango Coast—where they, of all Europeans, had set foot first in the fifteenth century—and reduce competition for the Portuguese stronghold in Luanda. While Lisbon did not command the resources to extend its claims beyond paper during most of the eighteenth century, the American War of Independence proved a window opportunity for the neutral Portuguese—not unlike the Austrian Habsburgs—to better their position economically and pursue their goals on the coast of West Central Africa. In 1782, a mandate was given to the governor of Angola to start negotiations with Ngoyo for the building of a fortress in Cabinda in return for bringing Portuguese trade to the harbour. The permission granted, construction works began in late 1783. Additionally, a naval presence was established which closed the port to all traffic and forced non-Portuguese traders to take recourse to northern ports, the most proximate—at barely 25 kilometres distance—being Malembo.

After the American War of Independence, a combined force of France and Ngoyo (angry at the Portuguese for not honouring their side of the deal) chased the garrison from Cabinda and reimposed free trade.<sup>691</sup> Yet for six months, the capture of Cabinda dovetailed with the forceful resumption of trade following the Peace of Paris into the funnelling of a large amount of ships into Malembo harbour. On 25 December 1783, fourteen slave traders lay at anchor in Malembo; by 20 January 1784, five new vessels had arrived.<sup>692</sup> Even in quieter times, trade in Malembo and other ports along the Loango Coast was characterized by intense competition, with many Europeans vying for a limited supply of enslaved people, as well as the water and food needed for the Atlantic

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<sup>690</sup> Nicholas Radburn, *Traders in Men. Merchants and the Transformation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven 2023) 179-82.

<sup>691</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 82-90; Stein, *The French slave trade*, 79; Joseph Miller, *Way of Death* (Madison 1988) 609-10; AMSO, Ms 1037, Extract from a Cap Français letter (Cap Français, 16 October 1783), “le commandant y a fait descendre 18 canons pour y rétablir un fort...Capitaine Caudeau, qui s'étaient fixés à Gabingue pour y faire leurs traits, ont été obligés d'en sortir et de se rendre à Malimbe...y ayant été forcé par une frégate et deux corvettes portugaises qui leur ont dit que ce port leur appartenait”; AMSO, Ms 1037, Delahaye to Tresca (Le Havre, 27 February 1784); AMSO, Ms 1037, Mesnier frères to Tresca (Cap Français, 11 May 1784).

<sup>692</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 20 January 1784).

crossing.<sup>693</sup> Yet the events of the 1780s caused a situation of an exceptionally large number of buyers facing a stable number of suppliers, which naturally led to the latter's soaring market power. As one trader testified in April 1784,

You cannot imagine how much the captains are overcharged by the local people here, constantly asking or even demanding whatever they please, the fierce competition emboldens them.<sup>694</sup>

Thus, Destrais and Lacoudrais found themselves in a place of steadily growing competition, a place where, to get any business done, it would be necessary to employ material persuasion, lobbying, and sleight-of-hand—and preferably all three at the same time.

The royalty of Kakongo resided in the capital city, Kinguele, which was situated about 60 kilometres inland from the coast.<sup>695</sup> This significant geographic separation implied that in Malembo, the king was represented by two appointed ministers: the *mafouk* and the *mambouk*. The *mafouk* was installed at Malembo with the general objective of supervising the trade between his fellow Kakongo traders and Europeans; he collected taxes, fixed prices, and spoke justice in commercial conflicts. His office was a purchased one, and a very expensive one at that: after paying a large initial lump sum, *mafouks* maintained their position by paying annual taxes to the Manikakongo (the King) in Kinguele. Yet skilful *mafouks* usually managed to recover these investments manyfold by engaging in trade themselves. Close to European sources of wealth and far from central supervision, they were able to gain incredible riches and surround themselves with a growing group of courtiers, thus also securing political influence. The *mambouk*, tasked similarly as the *mafouk*, was of royal descent and therefore of superior status; he, too, was able to acquire significant wealth and power through his office.<sup>696</sup>

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<sup>693</sup> Miller, *Way of Death*, 177; Phyllis Martin, 'Loango trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', in: Joseph Inikori ed., *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York 1982) 211.

<sup>694</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 7 April 1784), "*Mais vous ne sauriez vous peindre combien les capitaines sont surcharges par les gens du pays, toujours demandant ou même exigeant...tout leur convient, la grande concurrence les enhardit*".

<sup>695</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 29.

<sup>696</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 97-9; Miller, *Way of Death*, 184-5.

The power of the *mambouk* and *mafouk* in Malembo was absolute. Europeans needed to keep good terms with them at all costs if they wanted to strike beneficial trade deals. Not only were the ministers themselves important suppliers of slaves, they also appointed—and thus commanded—all the other brokers in town.<sup>697</sup> In December 1783, for example, the *mafouk* demanded from captain Vanstabel an increase of the daily tribute of spirits, which his officers refused. What ensued next is illustrative of the power of the Kakongo minister and deserves to be quoted in full:

The Mafouque [made us] fill [his flask] twice and sent it a third time towards the evening. Mr. Le Breton [the lieutenant]...did not want to give the third; the Negro left his flask and went to make his report...upon which the said Mafouque, without further information, instruction, or inquiry, broke off my trade the next morning, the 25th of this month, with the sound of his tocsin, which his herald struck in front of and at the bottom of my stairs, which astonished me greatly, not having had the slightest difficulty; the Mafouque and his clique came to my place almost immediately to demand a tribute, saying it was the rule, and that if I opposed it in the slightest, he would have it announced again. He kept his word because at the moment when we were in negotiations, it was announced in various trading posts and crossroads that the Mafouque forbade any broker from bringing me captives.<sup>698</sup>

Captains making landfall in Malembo needed to climb up a steep plateau, where the African traders lived and Europeans built their factories. These factories were sturdy buildings, and not always dismantled when the captains left.<sup>699</sup> When Lacoudrais had reached full capacity, for instance, he ceded his trading post to Vanstabel, which according to the latter saved him more than a month's

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<sup>697</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 100.

<sup>698</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malimbo, 24 December 1783), "*Le Mafouque s'est donné le ton de me le faire remplir deux fois et envoya une troisième vers le soir. Mr. Le Breton...ne voulu pas donner le troisième; le Nègre laissa son flacon et fut faire son rapport, comme il lui a plu, sur quoi le dit Mafouque, sans autre information, instruction ou demande, cassa ma traite le lendemain matin, 25 de ce mois, au son de son tocsin, que son héraut vint frapper devant et au bas de mon escalier, ce qui m'étonna beaucoup, n'ayant eu la moindre difficulté; le Mafouque et sa clique vint chez moi, presque immédiatement me demander paquet, que c'était la règle, et que pour le peu que je m'y oppose, il ferait annoncer de nouveau. Il tint parole car au moment où nous étions en pourparlers, il fut publié dans divers comptoirs et carrefours que le Mafouque défendait à tout courtier de m'amener des captifs*".

<sup>699</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 95, 102.

time and happened at the right moment “because the next day an Englishman would have beaten me by the price he wanted to give for it”.<sup>700</sup> Additionally, Lacoudrais did Vanstabel a favour by assisting him in establishing his trade and recommend him to “the best courtiers, which is always helpful.”<sup>701</sup> By this time, Destrais had also arrived in Malembo and was especially in need of a trading post, but Lacoudrais clearly prioritized his personal network over captains working for the same trading company. This put him at loggerheads with Destrais: Vanstabel concluded his letter by saying that “*Captain Lacoudrais of Bruges...did me this favour, without the knowledge of Mr D'Estrais, about whom I have the honour to warn you, because he is extremely jealous*”.<sup>702</sup>

After taking up residence in a factory, Destrais and Lacoudrais went to present themselves to the *mafouk* and pay tribute to him. Vervier had brought a valuable vase specifically for this purpose—another indication that the role of the Ghent doctor extended beyond that of merely a medical expert.<sup>703</sup> Once these formalities were completed, a gong was sounded to signal to the other brokers that the captains had been granted permission to begin their trade.<sup>704</sup> This commerce was conducted on a barter basis, without any monetary component. As in many places on the African shore, however, a standard unit had developed which allowed for a speedier negotiation process. In Malembo the unit equalling the worth of one slave was the ‘bundle’. Each bundle consisted of a differing amount of various commodities, ranging from mirrors over guns to spirits. One way of establishing the worth of each bundle was by assessing the value of every included commodity in ‘pieces’ and add them up. The most important way of valuing, however, was by counting the amount of ‘large goods’ it contained, typically pieces of Indian cloth.<sup>705</sup> As one Saint-Dominican colonist stated, “It is not...the quantity of goods that determines the trade [in

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<sup>700</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 29 November 1783), “*Lacoudrais m'avait cédé bien honnetement et à propos car le lendemain un anglais l'aurait emporté sur moi par le prix qu'il voulait y mettre*”.

<sup>701</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 29 November 1783).

<sup>702</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 14 December 1783).

<sup>703</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 57 r., “*une vase platiné qu'il a fourni pour la Côte: £168*”.

<sup>704</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 102.

<sup>705</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 107-8. In this way, a bundle was for example described as being of “12 large goods and 40 pieces”, see AMSO, Ms 1037, Mesnier frères to Tresca (Cap Français, 25 November 1783), “*12 marchandises et 40 pièces*”.

Malembo], but the quantity of large goods”.<sup>706</sup> The bundle, however, was only the payment for the enslaved person; every transaction with an African broker also involved numerous additional costs in the form of administrative dues, taxes, and tributes. All these elements functioned as ‘levers’ that European captains could manipulate to position themselves as desirable counterparts.

Romberg’s captains attracted trade through several strategies. First, they not only enhanced the number of large goods in their bundles, they also added more and more diverse small goods such as “bells, little pearls, corals, mirrors and razors with silk loincloth, which attracts courtiers”.<sup>707</sup> Additionally, they bestowed significant tribute on brokers and Kakongo officials, especially spirits. As elsewhere on the African coast, alcoholic beverages played a crucial role in facilitating trade deals (as Vanstabel phrased it, “no liquor, no trade”).<sup>708</sup> In order to enhance his lobbying power, for instance, Destrais had a habit of buying up the leftover supplies of spirits from captains who were at the verge of leaving.<sup>709</sup> In November 1783, the captain purchased an impressive 279 pots of spirits from a departing colleague.<sup>710</sup>

The courting strategies of both Imperial captains brought them significant benefit. Lacoudrais was described by Vanstabel as being friends with “the best courtiers”.<sup>711</sup> Undoubtedly, the Dunkirk captain referred to the Norman captain’s acquaintance with the *mambouk*, arguably the most important broker in Malembo due to his well-connectedness with inland traders—to gain this minister’s attention, Vanstabel writes, captains were “sacrificing the value of twenty captives” by augmenting their tribute.<sup>712</sup> By gaining the favour of the *mambouk*, Lacoudrais bought at least 122 enslaved Africans (almost a quarter

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<sup>706</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Mesnier frères to Tresca (Cap Français, 11 May 1784), “*Ce n’est pas, Monsieur, la quantité de marchandises qui règle la traite, c’est la quantité de grandes marchandises de trois pagnes qu’on donne au paquet qui fait avoir la preference*”.

<sup>707</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 2 January 1784), “*petites choses que [Mr] Destrais [ajoute] sur le paquet comme grelots, petites rassades, coraux, miroirs et rasoirs et avec le pagne de soie, ce qui attire les courtiers*”.

<sup>708</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 14 December 1783), “*sans eau de vie, point de traite*”.

<sup>709</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 2 January 1784).

<sup>710</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 32 v. Destrais would sell his own spare trading commodities before leaving the coast in February to four colleagues, see f. 41 r.

<sup>711</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 29 November 1783), “[Lacoudrais] *a d’ailleurs l’honnêteté de me prôner aux meilleurs courtiers*”.

<sup>712</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 6 February 1784), “*sacrié la valeur de vingt captifs*”.

of his cargo) from the top official “in a short amount of time”.<sup>713</sup> Destrais, for his part, gained the approval of the *mafouk*, from whom he (on at least one occasion) purchased 56 captive Africans in the space of twenty-four hours—a large number of people to be able to acquire in one day.<sup>714</sup> The captain was reported to have “a significant number of beautiful presents” at his disposal, and no doubt Lacoudrais, too, had persuaded the *mambouk* with extensive and first-rate tributary gifts.<sup>715</sup>

Despite the many possibilities for creativity in developing individual market power, European traders frequently attempted to act in unison in order to curb the monopolistic power of the *mafouk* and agree on a price cap paid to African brokers.<sup>716</sup> The benefit for all of this cartel-like behaviour would be to reduce the purchasing cost of captives on the market. Individual captains, however, were continuously tempted to break ranks and offer more to African brokers, in order to speed up their departure from the coast. As soon as one captain offered higher prices, local merchants naturally began demanding the same from all traders. European captains had little choice but to comply if they wished to avoid being ignored or left with only the sickly and most weakened captives. Shifting to higher prices was generally accepted by captains nearing full capacity, as further delays in departure would increase the costs of provisioning the hundreds of people already on board and increase the toll of a potential epidemic outbreak.<sup>717</sup> Raising prices too forcefully or at a time considered too early, however, was strongly disapproved of and Vanstabel routinely vented about such “*brûleurs*” [“burners” of the trade].<sup>718</sup>

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<sup>713</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 6 February 1784), “*en peu de temps*”.

<sup>714</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 6 February 1784).

<sup>715</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 6 February 1784), “*la quantité de beaux presents don’t il était muni*”.

<sup>716</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 22 February 1784), “*Mr. Hardy...est capable de pousser les choses plus loin, étant connu pour un vrai “brûleur” de traite. Il a cependant assuré quelqu’autres capitaines qu’il en resterait là si les confrères ne surpassaient*”; AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 3 May 1784), “*Il y a eu un changement de Mafouque, au sujet duquel tous les capitaines français et anglais ont fait assemblée et ont fait un acte, que j’ai signé comme les autres, de nous soutenir mutuellement et de reformer les abus, ce qui m’a fait épargner plus de 190 pièces et crois que si les capitaines s’entendent, chacun d’eux y profitera et le pays prendra un nouvel essor*”.

<sup>717</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 102; Miller, *Way of Death*, 188–9.

<sup>718</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 3 May 1784), “*J’aurais sans doute été jusqu’à 650 sans la quantité de navires et les brûleurs de traite que nous avons eus successivement*”.



A slightly duplicitous strategy among Europeans was to publicly adhere to the reigning price level—retaining their reputation—but privately offering Africans more valuable bundles and achieving a better market position. Romberg’s captains used such tactics: On 2 January 1784, Vanstabel reported that “Mr D’Estrais...pays 13 [bundles] although [he] says only 12”.<sup>719</sup> On 6 February 1784, in a message to his shipowner, he bemoaned the high prices he was paying for his captives, a situation “all captains are in at the moment, thanks to the Imperial vessels here and some careless Frenchmen”.<sup>720</sup> Two months later, he again blamed the “generosity of the Imperials” for his own struggling business in Malembo.<sup>721</sup> The fact that Vanstabel emphasized the ‘Imperialness’ of Lacoudrais’ and Destrais’ expeditions—despite these captains being fellow countrymen of the Dunkirk master—may suggest that Romberg’s officers felt no obligation to adhere to the ‘code’ of the French captains in Malembo, as they were in Imperial service, thus leveraging their outsider status to their advantage.

## Conclusion

Through his extensive international network, Romberg managed to recruit experienced maritime personnel to helm his African venture. To exert oversight over these agents, who were external and unfamiliar to the firm, the merchant also included ‘insider’ officers in his various flotillas, although this monitoring device was largely compromised due to the agents’ premature death. Although Romberg’s captains occasionally made significant deviations from their central orders (as exemplified by Hagueron), these were mostly to address unexpected factors and exigencies. By contractually allowing his officers to partake in the venture’s profits, Romberg ensured their commitment and honesty, effectively mitigating—though the sources on this are limited—endogenous aspects of the principal-agent problem such as moral hazard.

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<sup>719</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 2 January 1784), “[Mr] Destrais... [paye] 13 quoique [il] dise 12’.

<sup>720</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 6 February 1784), “tous les capitaines sont dans mon cas, grâce aux navires impériaux et quelques français étourdis”.

<sup>721</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 25 April 1784), “la générosité des impériaux”.

Rather, the most important challenges faced by Romberg's firm were external in nature, particularly tied to the dynamics of Euro-African negotiations. Since Europeans lacked direct access to the supply lines for ivory, gold, or enslaved Africans in the interior, they were largely at the mercy of local merchants. As the case study of the *Comte de Flandre* illustrated, this dependence forced captains to meticulously cater to the consumption preferences of local polities. Additionally, the operations of the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre* were characterized by heightened competition among European captains, which local brokers exploited fully by driving up the prices of the enslaved Africans they were offering.

Yet clearly, the operations of Romberg's maritime agents were also influenced by them operating within a Habsburg enterprise. In the cases of the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*, this affiliation may have occasionally worked in the captains' favour, granting them greater liberty in their negotiations with local brokers. Mostly, however, their outsider status proved to be a liability. This was already evident in the fate of Romberg's 'monitoring supercargoes'. As a newcomer to the trade, the firm's personnel lacked habituation to the disease environment of West Africa and succumbed rapidly, as did so many other European newcomers in the region. Furthermore, the absence of a Habsburg navy or fortress capable of safeguarding the property rights of its subjects left Romberg's ships exposed to illegal plunder by opportunistic or mutinous agents of established colonial powers. In the next chapter, we will further explore the dynamics of being an outsider in the Atlantic world by examining the case of François Carpentier, who was dispatched to Havana in the spring of 1783 as an overseas agent of Romberg & Consors.



CHAPTER SEVEN  
Habsburg in Havana:  
Outsiders in the Caribbean

“I MEANT TO WRITE YOU SOONER”, wrote François Carpentier on 16 November 1783 from Havana to one of his firm’s investors, “*but the toll I paid to the climate, through a fever I had on two separate occasions, has prevented me from having this satisfaction.*”<sup>722</sup> Carpentier was the fourth ‘insider’ of Romberg’s enterprise which was dispatched overseas, following Jean Baptiste Carpentier, Philippe Carpentier, and Daniel Wicard, in order to manage the risk the firm had undertaken by making a major investment in the Spanish slave trade. In contrast to his brothers and Wicard on the other side of the Atlantic, Carpentier quickly recovered from the illness he contracted upon arriving in his operational setting and was able to assume his role as representative of the firm. Yet, soon, he would have to deal with external factors beyond the tropical disease environment that interfered with

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<sup>722</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783), “Voilà déjà quelque tems que je me tois proposé d’avoir L’honneur de vous écrire, mais la Besogne que j’ai trouvé a mon arrivé ici, joint au tribut que j’ai payé au climat, par une fièvre que j’ai eut par deux différentes reprises m’ont privé de cette Satisfaction.” Presumably, Carpentier was struck with the *Plasmodium vivax* variant of malaria which, contrary to the *Plasmodium falciparum* of West Africa, was “debilitating but seldom fatal”, see Curtin, “The White Man’s Grave”, 95.

his operations—issues which would effectively detain him on the island for more than a decade.

Scholars of the Spanish Empire have often portrayed the hierarchy between the European core and its overseas periphery as ‘flat’, meaning that central orders were not always directly translated to a colonial setting.<sup>723</sup> This also applied to Cuba in the second half of the eighteenth century. As we discussed in Chapter 4, during this timeframe, the Spanish government had sought to secure a larger share of the slave trade for its own subjects and to reduce its dependence on rival Atlantic powers for the import of enslaved labour. The commercial interests of Cuban elites involved in human trafficking had been closely tied to the British Caribbean since the early eighteenth century. These ties had only deepened during the brief British occupation of Havana in 1762, and remained intact during the *asiento* years of the *Compañía Gaditana*. Even though the American War of Independence had disrupted the traditional British-Cuban slaving circuits maintained by the *Compañía Gaditana*, scholars have asserted how merchants involved in the latter company—especially its director, Jerónimo Enrile y Guerci—rapidly forged new ties with primarily Danish and American traders.<sup>724</sup> Many other Cuban elites followed suit in order to profit from the wartime peak in prices.<sup>725</sup> While authorities in Madrid considered Romberg & Consors a useful newcomer, to Cuba’s mercantile classes the Imperial firm was an unwelcome intruder encroaching on a trade they claimed as their own—which, given their local power and the particular hierarchical relations within the Spanish imperial framework, might pose problems for the Imperial firm.

This chapter further explores the dynamics of outsiders operating within an Atlantic system dominated by established colonial powers. I examine how Carpentier tried to negotiate a position for his firm in Cuba’s commercial world by forging alliances with key political figures in Cuban society. Despite these efforts, I argue that while Romberg & Consors’ detachment from the established Cuban commercial and social fabric was advantageous in dealing with

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<sup>723</sup> John Phelan, ‘Authority and Flexibility in the Spanish Imperial Bureaucracy’, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 5:1 (1960) 47-65; Renate Grafe, ‘On the spatial nature of institutions and the institutional nature of personal networks in the Spanish Atlantic’, *Culture & History Digital Journal* 3:1 (2014) 3-4.

<sup>724</sup> Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, ‘The Impact’, 510, 518.

<sup>725</sup> Rodríguez Vicente, ‘El comercio’, 94-104; Schneider, *The Occupation*, 288.

metropolitan authorities, it ultimately complicated and nearly compromised the firm's on-the-ground operations.

### Becoming an Atlantic Agent: François Carpentier's Road to Representative

François Carpentier had joined Romberg's firm somewhere during the late 1770s as a regular employee. Being in his early twenties, Carpentier clearly viewed his position as temporary and merely as a form of training. In private correspondence, he made no secret of his ambition to rise to the rank of associate. The latter position would enable him to participate in the firm's equity capital and share in its profits, rather than receiving a fixed wage like he did as a regular employee. Carpentier was particularly eyeing the position of Rodolphus Weber, one of Romberg's current associates, who was gravely ill and "could barely get any work done" for the firm.<sup>726</sup> For this reason, Carpentier was summoned to Ostend in early 1780 to support the ailing associate in his day-to-day business and shore up the firm's maritime activities, who by now were expanding on a weekly basis (see Chapter 2). As his letters from Ostend attest, Carpentier was firmly captivated by the gold rush atmosphere permeating the town, bustling with people eager to profit from its trade boom. "*Yesterday 60 vessels set sail from this port...it was the most Beautiful sight to behold*", he wrote elatedly to an investor in the countryside.<sup>727</sup> Convinced that he was late to the party ("*I should have come here way earlier...When the war ends, say goodbye to Ostend for business, all that will be left will be pain quotidien [daily bread] and nothing more*"<sup>728</sup>), Carpentier worked feverishly in Ostend, staying up late to write letters and to keep up on accounts:

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<sup>726</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 6 March 1780), "*un des Chef qui ne peut rien faire*".

<sup>727</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 12 March 1780), "*hier Sont Sortie 60 navires de ce port pour differentes destination cetoit le plus Beau coup Doeuil que l'on pouvoit avoir*".

<sup>728</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 6 March 1780), "*après la guerre adieu Ostende pour les affaires ce quil y restera a faire, ce Sera du pain quotidien et pas plus*".

Since my arrival here I have not been able to stop work before one at night, and it was half past two in the morning when I left work yesterday.<sup>729</sup>

Due to his fixed salary, however, such night shifts did not yield any material benefits for Carpentier, a situation he continued to bemoan. On 14 April 1780, Rodolphus Weber, who had started to “cough blood”, eventually passed away in Ostend.<sup>730</sup> Carpentier, however, saw his plan to succeed Weber thwarted by Romberg, who ultimately decided to appoint a more senior associate. “*After him it will be my turn, though sadly I will have to wait one or two more years*”, wrote Carpentier, “*that is a long time at my age*”.<sup>731</sup> As it turned out, however, the young man would not have to wait that long. When Romberg’s Ghent subsidiary firm was established two months later, Carpentier was finally able to secure his coveted promotion. At barely twenty-seven years of age, he became associate of Romberg & Consors.<sup>732</sup>

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<sup>729</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 6 March 1780), “*depuis que je Suis ici moins dune heure la nuit je nai pas encore quitté le travail, il etoit pres de deux heures et demi du matin lorsque hier jai quitté mon travail*”.

<sup>730</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 6 March 1780); RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Vilain XIII to Carpentier (draft), (Alost, 6 March 1780); RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Ryx, sr., 41/101b, 217 (Ostend, 14 April 1780).

<sup>731</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ostend, 12 March 1780), “*après cela ce Sera mon tour tout le Mal quil y a cest que cest encore un an ou deux de plus a attendre Cest beaucoup a mon age*”.

<sup>732</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/8, Establishment act of Romberg & Consors (Ghent, 1 June 1780).

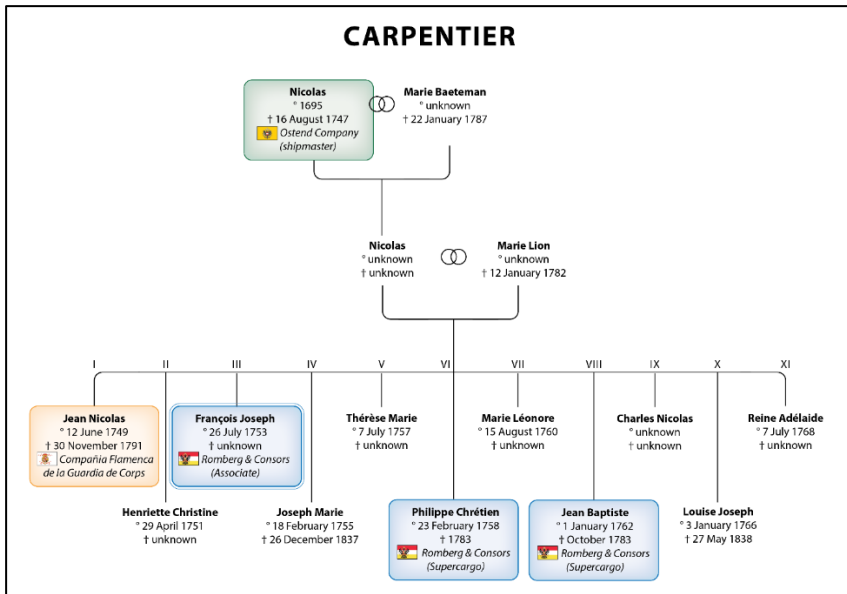


FIGURE 7.1 The Carpentier family tree. *Source data:* Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, II, 366-7; Karel Degryse and Jan Parmentier, ‘Kooplieden en kapiteins’, 156; AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823.

Carpentier’s eagerness to exploit the commercial opportunities of the 1780s dovetailed with the ambition of his co-associates Georg Christoph Bapst, also a young, aspiring merchant, and that of Pierre François Schepers, who had shown himself eager to lend a willing ear to a new commercial scheme. The result, as we have seen in Chapter 4, was the acquisition of Madrid’s *Real permiso* in October 1782. When subsequently the need arose for an overseas agent, Carpentier emerged as a logical choice: he burned with ambition, knew the ins and outs of the project, and his youthful constitution would stand a chance against the diseases of the tropics—a better one than Schepers, at least, who was nearing fifty. Contrary to Bapst, Carpentier was a Catholic, and witness his family’s fondness for the Spanish Monarchy (cf. *infra*) and his future actions he must have had at least a decent grasp of Spanish. Both traits would help him integrate more easily into Spanish society. For Romberg, the choice for Carpentier would largely solve the traditional problem of adverse selection, the uncertainty experienced by principals whether the manager they had hired



would be capable of fulfilling his task. Carpentier had served the company for several years and by all available evidence (admittedly, mostly provided by Carpentier) he was willing to put the effort in for the firm.

In early 1783, Carpentier successfully applied for a Spanish passport and was allowed to make the Atlantic crossing. As he had done with the supercargoes of Romberg & Consors' slaving fleet, Carpentier again attempted to get his family members involved: this time he prompted yet another brother, Jean-Nicolas Carpentier, to join him in Cuba. Born in 1749, Jean-Nicolas was as young and inexperienced as his brothers, but at least he possessed some skills that qualified him for the job. The oldest of eleven siblings (see Figure 7.1), Jean-Nicolas had put the Carpentier family motto— "*Dios y el Rey*"—in practice and, after concluding his philosophy studies at the University of Leuven, had joined the *Compañía Flamenca de la Guardia de Corps*, Spain's royal guard.<sup>733</sup> The *Compañía Flamenca*, based in Madrid, was a vestige of the era when the Southern Netherlands were part of the Spanish Empire.<sup>734</sup> As Werner Thomas and Eddy Stols have shown, the service of elite Flemish regiments at the royal court in Madrid was a significant factor in the integration of Spain and the Southern Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>735</sup> After the Peace of Rastatt (1714), which transferred the latter region to the Austrian Habsburgs, many Flemish nobles and military men continued to seek employment in Spain, with some joining the *Compañía Flamenca*. Due to his profession, Jean-Nicolas presumably had a strong command of the Spanish language, and it is easy to see why Carpentier wanted to take him to Havana. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and Jean-Nicolas had been the instigator of redirecting Romberg & Consors' scheme from the French towards the

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<sup>733</sup> For the motto, see Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, II, 366-7. Poplimont claims Jean-Nicolas joined the *gardes wallonnes*, but Jean-Nicolas himself stated that he was member (in 1783, at least) of the *Compañía Flamenca*. See AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Jean Nicolas Carpentier to the Council of the Indies (Madrid, 31 March 1783). For Jean-Nicolas' inscription at the University of Leuven, see RAL, *Oude Universiteit Leuven: Inschrijvingsregisters*, 28, Act of 28 January 1768 (f. 145 r.).

<sup>734</sup> Thomas Glesener, *L'empire des exilés. Les flamands et le gouvernement de l'Espagne au XVIIIe siècle* (Madrid 2017) 3; Thomas Glesener, 'La renovación de la tradición: los flamencos y el servicio militar a la Monarquía hispánica a inicios del siglo XVIII', in: Enrique Martínez Ruiz, ed., *Presencia de flamencos y valones en la milicia española* (Madrid 2018) 97-122.

<sup>735</sup> Werner Thomas and Eddy Stols, 'La integración de Flandes en la Monarquía Hispánica', in: Werner Thomas and Robert Verdonck, eds. *Encuentros en Flandes Relaciones e intercambios hispanoflamencos a inicios de la Edad Moderna* (Leuven 2000) 1-73, especially 40-2.

Spanish Empire. As Thomas Glesener has demonstrated, many members of the *Compañía* used the institution as a steppingstone to acquire positions in government or get access to lucrative economic opportunities.<sup>736</sup> Maybe Jean-Nicolas had overheard information within the commercial network he had built up during his spell in Madrid with regards to the wartime opportunities for slave trade, and had conveyed it to his brothers back home. Whatever the oldest Carpentier's past role, no future one was reserved for him as his petition for a colonial passport was denied. Presumably, Spain's ministers deemed one foreign resident trader (François) in Havana sufficient.<sup>737</sup> Jean-Nicolas Carpentier would stay put in Madrid and die in the Spanish capital in 1791.<sup>738</sup> Although unsuccessful, his is another example of the intertwinement between Flemish exiles on the Iberian Peninsula and Spain's commercial world.<sup>739</sup>

A few months after the decision to send him to Cuba, Carpentier travelled by coach to Bayonne, where he met up with the Laxagne brothers, correspondents of Romberg. He continued to Madrid, and after a short stay in the Spanish capital left for Cádiz.<sup>740</sup> Soon after arriving in the Andalucian harbour, in late July or early August 1783, he managed to secure passage for Cuba.<sup>741</sup> Half a century after his grandfather Nicolas Carpentier had last sailed to Bengal, a member of the Carpentier family again found himself on board of a vessel crossing an ocean. This time, however, it was the Atlantic.

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<sup>736</sup> Glesener, *L'empire des exilés*, 199-203.

<sup>737</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Jean Nicolas Carpentier to the Council of the Indies (Madrid, 31 March 1783).

<sup>738</sup> Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, II, 367.

<sup>739</sup> Glesener, *L'empire des exilés*, 199.

<sup>740</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 105 r.

<sup>741</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 11 r. In Cádiz, Carpentier probably visited a certain Don Medrano. Once in Cuba, he sent a box of Cuban cigars to the man, see AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 105 r.

## “I have many enemies here”: An Outsider in the Empire of Others

Carpentier's crossing was a tumultuous one. The vessel routinely had to plow through violent seas and bad weather (Carpentier, like most eighteenth-century people, erroneously believed this was caused by the autumnal equinox), and almost perished in a hurricane off the Virgin Islands. Near Baracoa, a town on the eastern outskirts of Cuba, he was witness to the grim realities of the Atlantic slave trade, when a Spanish vessel transporting 200 enslaved Africans from the Danish West Indies disappeared beneath the waves. The crew was saved, the young man observed, but “nothing more”.<sup>742</sup> Undoubtedly, this ship hailed from Saint Thomas, neutral Denmark's commercial bulwark in the Caribbean which Borucki and Belmonte Postigo identified as the principal source of captive Africans for Havana during the years of the American Revolution.<sup>743</sup>

Finally, after 48 days on the high seas, Carpentier sailed into Havana harbour. Noticing that the *Comte de Belgioioso* had already arrived several weeks earlier, the young man hastened into town to secure a residence for the coming months.<sup>744</sup> At that time, Havana was a town of just over 80,000 people, accounting for half of Cuba's total population.<sup>745</sup> The wealthy inhabitants of the Cuban capital tended to live in the historical centre of the city close to the harbour. This *parroquia mayor* contained several important nodes of the urban fabric such as the Plaza de Armas and the Plaza Nueva (see Figure 7.2 and Figure 7.4). The Plaza de Armas, first, was the administrative centre of Havana, where the town's highest political figures held office. It was also adjacent to the harbour mouth, which made it an ideal place for people awaiting the arrival of a particular ship. On the Plaza Nueva Havana's biggest markets were held, and the square generally teemed with merchants discussing mercantile matters and striking trade deals. A third site of interest for

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<sup>742</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

<sup>743</sup> Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, ‘The Impact’, 493-524, especially 505.

<sup>744</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783); AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1365, Relacion de las Embarcaciones que han entrado en este Puerto de diferentes destinos en Septiembre ultimo, “En [4] de la Costa de Guina el Berg[anti]n Imperial nom[bra]do Belgioioso, su Cap[ita]n Lambertt, con Negros”. Presumably, Carpentier arrived with the *Santa Maria Magdalena* (12 October) or the *Nuestra Señora de Loret* (15 October), see AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1365, Embarcaciones que han entrado y salido de aquel Puerto en Octubre.

<sup>745</sup> Allan Kuethe, *Cuba, 1753-1815: crown, military, and society* (Knoxville 1986) 40.

Carpentier, just outside the boundaries of the *parroquia mayor*, was the Alameda de Paula, a promenade flanking the port which provided a lookout over the anchored ships. Additionally, it was an important site of social life, where the Havana elites strolled and congregated in the afternoons and evenings.<sup>746</sup>



FIGURE 7.2 Havana with its important political and commercial sites. *Source data:* Map based on James Phelps, *A new and correct chart of the harbour of Havana on the island of Cuba* (1758) and Niell, *Urban space as heritage*, 27-34.

Carpentier took up residence close to these important urban nodes in the Calle San Ignacio, the central artery of the *parroquia mayor* (cf. Figure 7.2). There, the merchant rented “one of the Nice houses in Havana”, a dwelling of considerable size.<sup>747</sup> As was common in the town’s colonial architecture, the living room, sleeping chambers and dining room were on the second floor while the bottom floor was used for offices, shops, or stables. This division was also a racialized one: enslaved servants were forced to live downstairs, while Havana’s elite families resided on the second story—the so-called *piano nobile*.<sup>748</sup> The

<sup>746</sup> Paul Niell, *Urban space as heritage in late colonial Cuba: classicism and dissonance on the Plaza de Armas of Havana, 1754-1828* (Austin 2015) 27-35.

<sup>747</sup> RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783), “*j’ai une des Bonnes maisons de la Havanne que joccupe*”; AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, *Noticia de los Extranjeros que existen en esta Ciudad* (Havana, March 1788).

<sup>748</sup> Niell, *Urban space as heritage*, 33-4.

same layout characterized Carpentier's residence: the bottom floor of his house comprised "three Beautiful warehouses to accommodate the Negroes, the women and children separate [from the men]". Meanwhile, the Habsburg merchant lived on the top floor, from where he "could keep a close eye on [the slave quarters]".<sup>749</sup>

Carpentier had no familial links to Romberg, and so the merchant needed to apply other strategies to ensure himself of his agent's faithful service. First, the act of promotion through the ranks presumably—as business economists have suggested—engendered a bond of trust between the two men.<sup>750</sup> Additionally, as a partner in Romberg & Consors, Carpentier had a material stake in the slaving ventures launched from the Austrian Netherlands—as such, Carpentier's role was somewhat hybrid in nature, serving simultaneously as an associate of Romberg & Consors and as an agent representing both the Ghent firm and Frederic Romberg. To tie Carpentier's interest to the enterprise even more, the merchant was allowed a 2 percent commission on the total value of shipments he successfully sold in Havana. His share of the yield of the *Comte de Belgioioso*, for instance, amounted to a fee of 8,943 French *livres* or 4,176 Flemish guilders—a substantial sum, which equalled sixteen times the annual earnings of a skilled labourer.<sup>751</sup> The sale of the cargo of the *Négrier Impérial* landed him a sum of 9,058 French *livres*.<sup>752</sup> Carpentier also had a personal stake in these cargoes: a private shipment of six enslaved persons belonging to the *Négrier Impérial* was sold for 8,790 *livres*.<sup>753</sup> Naturally, Romberg would also cover Carpentier's personal and operational costs. A settlement of 28 October 1784, one year into his stay in the town, lists expenses on rent (1,500 pesos), furniture (110 pesos), and sundry household costs (588 pesos).<sup>754</sup>

Before departure, Romberg & Consors provided Carpentier with a detailed set of instructions, which had been reviewed and approved by Frederic Romberg in Brussels, outlining the various tasks the agent was to carry out

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<sup>749</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783), "trois Beaux magasins pour loger les negres, quartier pour femmes et enfants Separem[en]t", "Joccupe le haut de la maison de facon que jai le tout Sous les yeux".

<sup>750</sup> Ann Carlos, 'Bonding and the Agency Problem', *Explorations in Economic History* 31:1 (1994) 331-2.

<sup>751</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 157 r.

<sup>752</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 67 r.

<sup>753</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 67 r.

<sup>754</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 105 r.

while in Havana.<sup>755</sup> The extent to which Carpentier adhered to these orders can be inferred from a handful of surviving letters and the expenses he forwarded to the office in Bordeaux. A first instruction was for Carpentier to take up his place in Romberg's commercial network. Presumably, the associate did not know anyone in Havana. A fellow Ghent *émigré*, Jean Charles Havrey—one of several Flemish printers active in the Spanish Empire during the Early Modern period and the founder of Havana's first printing company in the 1720s—had likely passed away by this time.<sup>756</sup> As a result, the people referred to him by Romberg served as a crucial anchoring point in the town's social fabric. Carpentier's principal contact was Pedro Juan de Erice, a businessman originally from Navarra who furnished local planters with credit and who according to Moreno Fragnals became the "single most important sugar refiner" on the island during the 1790s.<sup>757</sup> Erice also commanded a large network of foreign, chiefly American merchants. He maintained especially good contacts in New Orleans, where he sourced wood to furnish sugar boxes.<sup>758</sup> Additionally, Erice represented Diego Echagüe on Cuba, an important merchant from San Sebastián with whom Romberg had arranged prior to his agent's departure that Carpentier would be able to rely on Erice for all his mercantile needs on the island.<sup>759</sup> Outside Cuba, Carpentier ought to establish contact with French correspondents of Romberg on Saint-Domingue (the Mesnier Brothers) and write to other houses in order to acquire information on market conditions.<sup>760</sup> All of Romberg's captains *en route* to Havana came into

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<sup>755</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783).

<sup>756</sup> Huib Billiet Adriaansen, 'Novena de 1722 destrona a la Tarifa como primer impreso de Cuba', *Opus Habana* (2010) 40-3. For broader context on publishers from the Southern Netherlands active in Spain's overseas territories, see Werner Thomas, 'Zuid-Nederlandse drukkers in Spanje en Spaans-Amerika', in: Werner Thomas and Eddy Stols, eds., *Een wereld op papier. Zuid-Nederlandse boeken, prenten en kaarten in het Spaanse en Portugese wereldrijk (16<sup>de</sup>-18<sup>de</sup> eeuw)* (Leuven 2009) 155-75.

<sup>757</sup> Fragnals, *El Ingenio*, 65-71, quote 71, "el más grande refaccionista de azúcares de Cuba".

<sup>758</sup> Linda Salvucci, 'Anglo-American Merchants and Stratagems for Success in Spanish Imperial Markets, 1783-1807', in: Jacques Barbier and Allan Kuethé, *The North American Role in the Spanish Imperial Economy* (Manchester 1984) 130; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 75-6; Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, 'The Impact', 515.

<sup>759</sup> Xabier Alberdi Lonbide, *Conflictos de intereses en la economía marítima Guizpzoana, siglos XVI-XVIII* (Bilbao 2012) 831-7, 1228; RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783).

<sup>760</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783).

Cap Français for stores, repairs, and to drop off sick sailors. Additionally, they gathered information on prices, but most left again when they found them unsatisfactory.<sup>761</sup> The governor of Saint-Domingue—whose economy, like Cuba’s, was craving unfree labour—was frustrated by such strategies, and complained extensively to Versailles about Romberg’s practices.<sup>762</sup> Of all Saint-Dominican ports, Cap Français was the one where slave ship captains were most likely to receive silver for their prisoners, but in February 1784, French colonists were reporting the dwindling amount of *specie* in port, which might explain the decision of the Imperial captains.<sup>763</sup> Still, the communication with Saint-Domingue—especially with factors such as Lory & Plombard and Cottineau, Choffard & Cie—became unexpectedly intensive during Carpentier’s spell on Cuba as, in the end, three vessels did market their cargoes in the French colony. This was entirely due to them meeting with adverse health conditions during the Middle Passage (see Chapter 8), prompting a premature end to the voyage. Embedding Carpentier within his Caribbean network served an important commercial purpose while also enabling Romberg to establish a mechanism for monitoring his agent. Indeed, Romberg, Bapst & Cie maintained separate lines of communication with Erice on Carpentier, and likely Romberg did the same.<sup>764</sup> This method of external monitoring allowed the head office to cross-check Carpentier’s self-monitoring, conducted through reports he was required to send home regularly in triplicate, distributed across three different packet boats.<sup>765</sup>

In addition of integrating in the head office’s existing mercantile network, Carpentier was also instructed to expand it. Romberg’s main concern was to acquire precise information on the solidity of Havana’s principal slave owners. This enabled the firm to make quick sales of the enslaved cargoes when they arrived—crucial given the sickly and worn-out conditions of the prisoners at

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<sup>761</sup> See AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 32 v. for the *Roi du Congo* and f. 41 r. for the *Négrier Impérial*. See also Chapter 8.

<sup>762</sup> ANOM, COL C 9A C, 155, ff. 121 r.–125 v.

<sup>763</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Lory, Plombard & Cie to Tresca (Cap Français, 22 February 1783).

<sup>764</sup> See for example ADG, *Fonds des négociants*, 7B 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 6 October 1791), “We received your very kind favor dated August 1 of this year, informing us of the departure of Mr. Francisco Carpentier [Nos hallamos con su mui favorecida de usted de 1 de Agosto de este ano, por la que nos avisa de la salida de don Francisco Carpentier de esa]”.

<sup>765</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783).

arrival—and recover profits in cash or through short-term credit. Romberg provided clear instructions on how to interact and connect with what he perceived as the stereotypical Spaniard:

The cold and reserved Spaniard does not open up easily, it is advisable to imitate him, only opening up to him by degrees: a hasty confidence shocks him, he will take it as lightness, it is through prudence that you have to gain his esteem.<sup>766</sup>

In addition to integrating into Cuba's commercial circles, Romberg had also thought it crucial to gain the goodwill of the key political figures of the Spanish colony, the Intendant and the Governor, "*Since all the difficulties that might arise will be submitted to their decision*".<sup>767</sup> Not that Romberg necessarily expected trouble; to the contrary, he believed that the warrants of the Spanish Crown and the shortage of bonded labour would result in a warm welcome of his Imperial slave ships. Yet he still advised Carpentier to keep his guard with regards to the former *asiento* holders—the Basque *asentistas* of the *Compañia Gaditana*—"*which...will not Be of any competition to us at this present time, but may attempt chicanery*".<sup>768</sup>

Romberg, however, had clearly misjudged the extent to which the company, as well as other Cuban elites, would continue their slave trade during the war. Carpentier very soon attested of the difficulties he experienced in making swift inroads with local networks. Barely a month after his arrival, the agent bemoaned the lacking opportunities for engaging with his peers in Havana. According to Carpentier, the town was a "backwater" [*un trou*], with "little society life" going on.<sup>769</sup> On the rare occasions he managed to engage with Havana traders, the Habsburg merchant felt excluded from the local

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<sup>766</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783), "*L'Espagnol froid et réservé ne se livre point Facilement, il convient de L'imiter, ne S'ouvrir à Luy que par degrés: une confiance précipitée le choque, il la taxe de legerité, c'est par la prudence, qu'il faut meriter son estime*".

<sup>767</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783), "*puisque toutes les difficultés, qui pourroient se présenter seront soumises à leur décision.*"

<sup>768</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783), "*une Compagnie, nommée de L'Assiento, qui...dans le moment present ne Sauroit etre redoutable quand a la concurrence mais elle peut etre a craindre par L'esprit de Chicane*".

<sup>769</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).



commercial community. “*I have many enemies and jealous people here*”, wrote Carpentier, “*there is so little good faith in this country that one cannot exactly trust anyone*”.<sup>770</sup> Undoubtedly, these reported “enemies and jealous people” comprised members of the Cuban-British slaving circuits revolving around the *Compañía Gadicana* directed by Enrile. In confirmation of aforementioned scholarship, and contrary to Romberg’s assessment, these merchants did indeed pose competition to his firm in the slave trade, just as Romberg, in turn, posed a competitive threat to them. This explains why Carpentier, acting as the firm’s representative, was viewed with hostility as an unwelcome interloper—an opportunistic outsider intent on exploiting wartime prices to the detriment of local merchants. Moreover, local elites, fully attuned to the anti-British sentiment within the government, perhaps recognized that this newcomer could become a more permanent fixture in Havana if Romberg & Consors demonstrated themselves to be a reliable partner.



FIGURE 7.3 View on Havana, with on the right the Castillo del Morro, c. 1785. Source: Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.

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<sup>770</sup> *Ibid.*

Perhaps motivated by his experiences, Carpentier took his principal's instruction to heart and actively sought to earn the goodwill of Cuba's Intendant, the highest political figure on Cuba after the Governor. During most of Carpentier's residence, the *Intendencia* was held by Juan Ignacio de Urriza (in office between 1776 and 1787).<sup>771</sup> Among the Intendant's principal responsibilities were increasing royal revenue and preventing fraud, particularly in relation to smuggling through the import of enslaved people. He was also tasked with procuring enslaved Africans for the Crown, making him a key figure with whom slave traders needed to maintain favourable relations.<sup>772</sup> In what can be considered an exceptional showcase of business diplomacy, Carpentier quickly managed to befriend Urriza, agreeing to have dinner together every Sunday. His nascent friendship helped him shape the commercial environment in Romberg's favour and remedy the envy he experienced in Havana: "*If I did not have him as a friend, I would have experienced many difficulties which were now sought to facilitate*", Carpentier wrote on Urriza.<sup>773</sup> Additionally, Romberg's agent developed close ties with the Governor, as well as key institutions in Havana including the local custom house, which he won over with several "gifts".<sup>774</sup> Miles Barber hinted to Carpentier's successful lobbying efforts when he ordered the captain of the *Comte du Nord* (the ship sailing with a licence bought from Romberg & Consors) on what to do when going to Havana:

I hope you'll be able to procure a proper Linguister, on whom you can confide to speak both Spanish, & French, but in case you are unable to meet with a Person capable of both Languages, then get one that can speak Spanish, failing therein, French, which Mr Carpentier understands, who doubtless will accompany you to the Governor, & acquaint him both Ship, & Cargo belong to his House, & from thence to the Deputy Governor, Superintendent, Custom House, Don Juan Pedro de Erice &c &c &c.<sup>775</sup>

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<sup>771</sup> Juan Bosco Amores, 'Juan Ignacio de Urriza y la Intendencia de La Habana (1776-1787)', in: Ronald Escobedo Mansilla et al., *Euskal Herria y el Nuevo Mundo. La Contribución de los vascos a la Formación de las Américas* (Vitoria 1996) 227-47.

<sup>772</sup> Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 299-300; Paquette, *Enlightenment*, 121.

<sup>773</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

<sup>774</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 105 r., "*Etrennes aux employés de la Douane*".

<sup>775</sup> TNA, E/219/377, Barber to Penny (London, 3 November 1784).

The arrival of Romberg's vessels in Havana brought many logistical challenges for Carpentier to deal with. Immediately after his arrival in town, Nicolas Louvet, captain and supercargo of the *Comte de Belgioioso*, handed over to Carpentier several unruly mariners whom he had confined in the ship's prison while at sea. Carpentier, in turn, had them ferried across Havana Harbour and imprisoned in the Castillo del Morro (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3). Louvet also reported having 25 rotten sacks of groats on board—remnants of the food served to the enslaved Africans during the voyage—which the agent ordered to be thrown into the sea.<sup>776</sup> Carpentier's main challenge, however, was selling the hundreds of enslaved Africans disembarked by the *Real permiso* ships. As mentioned in Chapter 4, three of the eight granted permits resulted in a vessel effectively calling at Havana—to wit, the *Comte de Belgioioso*, the *Roi du Congo*, and the *Négrier Impérial*. Carpentier was forced to hit the ground running, as the *Belgioioso* had already begun the sale of its cargo of 299 enslaved Africans by the time the agent arrived in mid-October. In March 1784, the *Congo* disembarked 545 people; the *Négrier* followed in May, carrying 371 captive Africans as well as the news of his brothers' demise on the African seaboard.<sup>777</sup> It is unclear if Carpentier interfered in the operations of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd [II]* and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen [II]*, which conducted their operations under a Romberg & Consors licence but were fitted out by a different company, but Barber's letter to the captain of the *Comte du Nord* suggests he did.

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<sup>776</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 105 r. Castillo del Morro was Havana's principal fortress. In 1762, British forces had breached its impressive walls with a mine and defeated the garrison, immediately prompting the surrender of the town.

<sup>777</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366, Embarcaciones que han entrado y salido de aquel Puerto en Marzo Último: "En [13] de Angola la Frag[ame]ta Imperial Nombrada el Rey Congo, su Cap[ita]n Mr. Arman La Cur con Negros" and AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366, Governor of Havana to the Council of the Indies (Havana, 19 May 1784), "presentado a la boca de este Puerto el 14 de este mes el Paquebot Le Negrier Imperial de la Casa de Romberg del Comercio de Gante".



FIGURE 7.4 The Plaza de Armas in Havana during the British Occupation, c. 1762.

Source: Dominic Serres, Greenwich Maritime Museum.

The destination of these slaves after they were sold will be dealt with more elaborately in Chapter 8. Carpentier's acquaintance with Urriza prompted him to sell the majority of his enslaved Africans to the Spanish Crown. The downside of the deal was that the Crown generally paid less than the prices offered by colonists on private slave markets.<sup>778</sup> The advantage for Romberg's firm was that Urriza, as Intendant, had privileged access to the silver flows arriving in Cuba, offering a greater opportunity to swiftly sell Romberg & Consors' human cargo for hard currency. While the arrangement initially worked well, allowing Carpentier to remit large quantities of silver pesos back home, the situation changed dramatically after the war ended. With Romberg's licence being officially extended in peacetime, Carpentier was spared the fate of other foreign traders who were expelled from Havana.<sup>779</sup> Still, in the years after 1783, the Crown proved to be a far less reliable business partner than Carpentier had anticipated, directing only a meagre stream of silver to the merchant. Despite the substantial funds arriving in Cuba annually, the Havana treasury consistently ran a deficit, and by the end of the war, it was burdened with a debt

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<sup>778</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 34.

<sup>779</sup> Lewis, 'Anglo-American entrepreneurs', 121-3; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 45.

of three million pesos, half of which Urriza had accumulated through his dealings with landowners and merchants like Carpentier. Additional silver was sent from Veracruz in the post-war years to address the arrears, but these shipments were chronically insufficient, forcing Urriza to decide which creditors to prioritize.<sup>780</sup> Cuba's established elites likely exerted pressure on the Intendant to ensure their own payouts were given precedence, effectively sidelining Romberg & Consors in the process. Another major factor is that, following the American War of Independence, Spain's slave trade reverted to its exclusive and predominantly British-dominated nature. In 1784, the Crown conferred the *asiento* on John Dawson and Peter Baker, experienced slave traders from Liverpool who were well connected in Havana and had been indirectly involved in supplying slaves to Cuba for the past decade.<sup>781</sup> For the Spanish Crown, therefore, the prospects of the British firm becoming a reliable, long-term partner in the slave trade seemed more promising than those of Romberg & Consors, which had failed to fulfil its commitment to send eight ships to Havana.<sup>782</sup> The arrival in 1784 of the *Comte du Nord*, owned by Barber and Hartley but operating under a Romberg permit, might have altered the situation (provided the venture's true British nature had remained undisclosed), but the ship ultimately opted to sell its human cargo in the United States.<sup>783</sup> Consequentially, Carpentier and Romberg had little leverage for a swift debt repayment and Spanish officials preferred settling with the agents of Dawson & Baker first—who, indeed, appear to have encountered few difficulties in collecting their dues.<sup>784</sup>

The financial problems burdening Cuba's government ultimately led to Urriza's dismissal in 1787.<sup>785</sup> Whatever goodwill the Intendant had still felt toward Carpenter—rooted in their early friendship and the significant contributions of Romberg & Consors to the local economy—was now irreparably lost. Following Urriza's departure, a rapid turnover of Intendants

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<sup>780</sup> Bosco Amores, 'Urriza', 239-40.

<sup>781</sup> Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136-7; Belmonte Postigo, 'A Caribbean Affair', 1-14; Radburn, *Traders in Men*, 212.

<sup>782</sup> Romberg & Consors' successor firm in Bordeaux, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie, maintained its involvement in the slave trade but shifted its focus to Saint-Domingue, where it acquired numerous plantations, see Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*.

<sup>783</sup> Radburn, *Traders in men*, 179-82. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>784</sup> Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136-53

<sup>785</sup> Bosco Amores, 'Urriza', 241-5.

ensued, preventing the establishment of any lasting new relationships.<sup>786</sup> Additionally, in 1787-8, a new drain on the treasury emerged when the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba was confronted with severe liquidity problems (forcing local officials to issue cardboard coins), which necessitated large shipments of silver from Havana.<sup>787</sup> One year later, the outbreak of the French Revolution introduced another, highly disruptive factor into Spanish politics. As Richard Herr has shown, the events in its neighbour over the Pyrenees kept the nerves of Madrid on edge. Ministers fiercely combatted the import of revolutionary treatises and *gazettes*—indeed, censored even the *mention* of the Revolution—and quelled any form of unrest that could lead to a larger uprising. Although Spain did not go to war with France until 1793, setting off a costly mobilization, the government potentially started hoarding funds way earlier, redirecting more colonial silver toward the metropolis.<sup>788</sup>

## Conclusion

On 28 January 1788, police officer Juan García de Cazenea strolled through the streets of Havana, quill and paper in hand, to make the survey the Governor had asked him to make: a list of all foreigners residing in the city, including the length and the reason of their stay in Cuba. In the Calle San Ignacio he knocked on one of the street's grand houses, made short conversation, and continued his rounds. "*D[on] Francisco Campantier [sic], flamenco, 4 años*", he noted briefly, "*Residing in this town by Royal Order for the introduction of Slaves and still remains here for the collection of payments*".<sup>789</sup> Yet "*4 años*" marked only the beginning of Carpentier's woes: the inability of recovering the Crown's debts eventually forced the merchant—who had hoped to conclude his business in Cuba in less than two years—to live out the decade on the island.

Fernand Braudel determined three crucial necessities for merchants aspiring to enter long-distance trade: they needed to have ample capital,

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<sup>786</sup> Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 299.

<sup>787</sup> Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 227-8.

<sup>788</sup> Richard Herr, *The Eighteenth-Century Revolution in Spain* (Princeton 2015) 239-68.

<sup>789</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, Cazenea to the Governor (Havana, 28 January 1788), "*residente en esta vino Con Orden R[ea]l para la Introducion de Negros, y subsiste al cobro de ellos*".

trustworthy sources of information, and last but not least, they needed “to have associates at strategic points along the trade route”.<sup>790</sup> As we have seen in this chapter and the previous one, Romberg & Consors indeed attempted to position confidants of the firm at various key points in the triangular structure of their venture. While the insider agents who joined the slave ships on their way to Africa were quickly taken out by disease, Carpentier managed to establish himself in the Caribbean segment of the Imperial firm’s slaving operations. From what can be derived from the sources, the merchant acted as a capable representative of Romberg, motivated by the stake he had in the enterprise and the bond of trust between him and the firm, engendered by his long-term service and promotion to associate. He took care of logistical issues, participated in the sale of human cargoes disembarked by the firm’s slave ships, facilitated the transfer of resources gained in the trade to Bordeaux (and ultimately, the Austrian Netherlands), and made a concerted effort to establish himself in Romberg’s commercial network. Most importantly, he extended the ‘business diplomacy’ practiced by Romberg & Consors in Europe to the firm’s peripheral areas of operation, building connections and even forming friendships with key political figures in Cuba.<sup>791</sup>

During the early stages of his residence, Carpentier’s efforts succeeded in shaping the legal, commercial, and institutional framework in his favour, while also mitigating the risk for his firm. As the years progressed, however, the agent experienced increasing difficulties in conducting his operations, especially regarding the recovery of the Crown’s debts. While Carpentier was far from the only one affected by Havana’s empty post-war treasury, it is equally clear that he lacked the influence and leverage to secure a primary position in the queue of creditors. With the conclusion of peace, the urgency for the Spanish Empire of hosting Romberg & Consors had passed, and the imperial framework had returned to a slave trade dominated by British traders. As a consequence, Carpentier was made thoroughly aware of him being a “*flamenco*”, a foreigner in the Spanish Empire and an Imperial merchant operating independently from the influential Cuban-British networks in Havana. He was, in other words, still an outsider. But what had once been an asset, had now become a liability.

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<sup>790</sup> Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, 416.

<sup>791</sup> Antunes, ‘Early Modern Business Diplomacy’, 20-7.

CHAPTER EIGHT  
“The Flemings pursue on that coast  
the same unhallowed traffic”  
The Lived Experience of Romberg’s Africa Trade

ON 25 MARCH 1784, Pierre Destrais was told that his ship was dying. Facing the captain stood his mate, Jean Giffard, first lieutenant Alexander Bunel, and second lieutenants Felix Louvet and Jacques Robert. Together they formed the *état-major*, the leading officers of the *Conseil de Flandre*. For more than half a year now, the men had been sharing dinner, using silver, CDF-engraved cutlery to enjoy the finer foodstuffs aboard the ship—it was not that long ago that he, Destrais, embarrassingly, had eaten so much fish he had become sick. During such evening meals, the officers could temporarily ignore the stench, the trauma, and the suffering happening several meters below them. But now, after forty days on the Atlantic Ocean, such was no longer possible. Not only had their cook, Jean Hallé, succumbed to scurvy two weeks previously, since the *Conseil* had cleared from the mouth of the Congo River six other crew members and more than fifty captive Africans had lost their lives. The ship’s victuals were in an advanced state of rot, an epidemic was raging below deck, and the death of the surgeon had eliminated even the



faintest hope of recovery. Either the captain halted prematurely to replenish supplies, so spoke his officers, or either he avoided such expense but risked the lives of everyone on board. In any case, a decision needed to be made, and it needed to be made quickly.<sup>792</sup>

Throughout the Early Modern period, the experiences of the enslaved people aboard of the *Conseil de Flandre* were shared by millions of other people abducted from their homelands and forced into a global system geared towards the production of plantation crops for consumption in Europe. However, rather than focusing on the processes of enslavement and coerced migration, along with the suffering and trauma they entailed, attention to the people caught in the trans-Atlantic slave trade has primarily centred on numerical analysis. This emphasis on quantification is epitomized by the *Slave Voyages* project. While the TSTD serves as an exceptional tool for research, a lasting memorial to the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and a milestone in the adoption of digital methods in the humanities in general and in the field of history in particular, its strongly quantitative approach, along with the studies that underpinned it, has faced growing criticism from historians in recent years. Paul Lovejoy argued that projects such as the *Slave Voyages* database focused too much on the size of imports and exports of commodified people, and failed to highlight that the enslaved were first and foremost people in motion, whose origins and destinations were of utmost importance.<sup>793</sup> Likewise, Boubacar Barry, in his study on slave trade in the Senegambia region, stated that the “quibbling about statistics” diverted attention from what truly mattered: the impact of forced migration on African society.<sup>794</sup> Scholars of the Middle Passage, too, have formulated the need to introduce humanity in their studies.<sup>795</sup> Marcus Rediker, for instance, warned against the “violence of

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<sup>792</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Île d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Entry of 25 March 1784 and Entry of 24 September 1783, “[notre C[apitai]ne a este malade dune indigestion pour avoir mange trop de poisson] (in mirror writing, which the writer (presumably, naively) believed would make it impossible for the captain to read, see also Amand Henry, ‘Le périple tragique d’un négrier’, *Revue du Bas-Poitou* 76:1 (1965) 202-13); *Idem*, List of items salvaged from the wreck of the *Conseil de Flandre* (Île d'Yeu, 3 December 1784), “12 cuillères et fourchettes d'argent marqués Le Conseil de Flandre”.

<sup>793</sup> Paul Lovejoy, ‘Extending the Frontiers of Transatlantic Slavery, Partially’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40:1 (2009) 57-70, especially 65.

<sup>794</sup> Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge 1998) 68-9.

<sup>795</sup> Stephany Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery. A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard 2008); Nicholas Radburn, *Traders in Men*.

abstraction” that could result from an overdrawn focus on numbers. Rediker argued that—like the slaving merchant’s accounting books several centuries previously—a purely quantitative account of the slave trade failed to capture the day-to-day realities of the trade.<sup>796</sup> While Rediker aimed to write an ‘ethnography’ of the slave ship, others have successfully applied the method of ‘biography’ to humanize the trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>797</sup>

So far, this book has primarily examined Romberg’s slave trade in relation to its place within the broader history of European expansion and specific empires, its economic impact on the Austrian Netherlands, and its overseas governance. In addressing these questions, the enslaved individuals caught in Romberg’s business, though central to the narrative, have remained in the background, mentioned at best—indeed—in quantitative terms. In this chapter, however, they take centre stage, not as commodified people, but as individuals in motion. The sources to sketch this lived experience of Romberg’s slave trade, as so often, are scant. While almost every seaman employed by the Austrian Netherlands firm is known (see Appendix), not a single name of the thousands of Africans on board has been kept for posterity—if indeed they were ever recorded at all. This chapter thus will more resemble Rediker’s ‘ethnography’ than Lindsay and Sweet’s ‘biography’. It will be a microhistory with abundant ‘playing with scales’; sometimes zooming in on the highly individual cases of the enslaved people on Romberg’s ships, sometimes resorting to macro trends where Eurocentric sources fail us.<sup>798</sup> It is an endeavour destined to end in disappointment—always reaching but never quite grasping the lives forcibly entwined with the Imperial enterprise, but it is a necessary endeavour nonetheless.

As noted at the beginning of this book, the British traveller James Shaw observed while passing through Ostend that Romberg, like other slave merchants in Europe’s Atlantic metropolises, was pursuing “*the same unhallowed traffic*”. But was it? The African slave trade has often been described as a specialist maritime sector, where a significant amount of capital and, most of all, experience was necessary to realize a successful voyage.

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<sup>796</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship. A Human History* (London 2007) 12-3.

<sup>797</sup> See the mission statement and the essays in Lisa Lindsay and John Sweet, *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia 2014).

<sup>798</sup> De Vries, ‘Playing with scales’, 37-49.

Therefore, its participants almost always boasted a long family or professional background in this particular maritime business.<sup>799</sup> Merchants had a significant impact on the preparation of the journey through the choice of crew, the selection of trade commodities, and the victualling of the ship. It might be hypothesized that seasoned merchants would know how much food was necessary for a particular voyage and could shorten the voyage by a speedier trade based on a well-balanced trading assortment—both aspects severely influenced the experience of enslavement. Indeed: Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz suggested that by the middle of the eighteenth century “the slave trade was dominated by major merchants positioned to accumulate enough knowledge about the African market and the transatlantic voyage to enable them to reduce mortality”.<sup>800</sup> By this token, minor and unexperienced slave traders like Romberg would reversely be expected to organise expeditions fraught with death and disease—not the “*same* unhallowed traffic”, but a “*more* unhallowed traffic”. This hypothesis will elaborately be tested in this chapter.

The horrors of the Middle Passage have attracted significant amounts of scholarship, and in the following pages, too, it will receive its due attention. Yet with this chapter, I also aim to follow in the footsteps of historians arguing to perceive the Middle Passage not simply as the journey between two opposite Atlantic shores, but in a broader perspective which includes the whole process from the moment of enslavement and commodification in Africa until the moment of sale in the Americas. Based on literature and clues in the sources, therefore, I will try to chart the migration trajectories imposed upon the prisoners in the bowels of the vessels dispatched from Ostend. I follow the captives from their homeland in the interior of Africa, during their prolonged stay on the African seaboard, and finally, towards their forced place of resettlement overseas—some on Saint-Domingue, some in Havana, and some, as we will see, in the Austrian Netherlands.

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<sup>799</sup> Stein, *The French Slave Trade*, 156-161.

<sup>800</sup> Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Explaining the Mortality Decline in the Eighteenth-Century British Slave Trade’, *The Economic History Review* 53:2 (2000) 264.

## Marching towards the Coast

People were reduced to the status of enslaved for a number of reasons. Some had been kidnapped during village raids, some were the victim of debt bondages, while others still were captured in war. There is only slender evidence available to where enslaved people arriving on the coast originated, but from limited personal accounts and nineteenth-century ethnographic studies it is clear that, more than immediately on the Atlantic coastline, people were enslaved in the interior of the continent and shipped or walked to the sea over significant distances. This was especially true during the eighteenth century: together with the expanding plantation economy, the slave trade permeated ever so deeply in the African interior.<sup>801</sup> The trajectories of enslavement, and especially, the homelands where people were abducted from, have come under increased scrutiny of scholars during the previous decades. Several historians have looked into the origins of enslaved people in order to link their culture, religion, or particular knowledge and skills with those of African diaspora in the Americas.<sup>802</sup> Others have looked at areas where people were enslaved in order to understand their subsequent history, especially the period of nineteenth-century colonization. Economists such as Nathan Nunn have even demonstrated how areas which were heavily influenced by the trans-Atlantic slave trade still experience a higher level of mistrust today, leading to economic underdevelopment.<sup>803</sup> Lastly, scholars have increasingly considered the gruelling inland trajectories of enslaved Africans in order to understand mortality during later phases of the forced migration to the Americas. Not only the distance covered in itself took a devastating toll on the captives, also the many intermediaries involved in the long journeys entailed that “none of the

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<sup>801</sup> Rodney, *A History*, 254-5.

<sup>802</sup> Philip Morgan, ‘The cultural implications of the Atlantic slave trade: African regional origins, American destinations, and New World developments’, *Slavery and Abolition* 18:1 (1997) 122-45; Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge 2001); Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power. Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia 2018).

<sup>803</sup> Nathan Nunn, ‘The Long-Term Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades’, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123:1 (2008) 139-76; Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon, ‘The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa’, *American Economic Review* 101:7 (2011) 3221-52.

slaves' successive owners incurred responsibility for their long-term welfare", as Joseph Miller contended.<sup>804</sup>

Romberg's vessels sourced their enslaved Africans from a variety of towns, entrepôts, and fortresses along the western coast of the continent. One group of vessels operated in the Upper Guinea Coast, a densely populated, riverine region ranging from Senegal in the north to Liberia to the south. The first market visited by Romberg's ships was Île de Gorée, a small island off modern-day Dakar (Figure 8.1). Since its settlement by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, various powers had claimed sovereignty over the island, but shortly after the start of the American War of Independence, Gorée was seized by Great Britain. Consequently, when Pierre Le Sens' *États de Brabant* halted at the island in 1782 in order to repair storm damages, he was received by Joseph Wall, the recently appointed British lieutenant-governor of the fort. Instead of offering Le Sens a safe harbour to refit his ship, however, Wall, "acting like an absolute and despotic ruler", forced Le Sens to sell a large part of the *Brabant's* trading cargo with the promise of providing him with 50 enslaved Africans of his own choice. In the end, however, Le Sens only received 48 people, which on top were all "of very bad quality". Le Sens then repaired to Gilfrei in the Gambia River, presumably to continue his slaving purchases.<sup>805</sup> Some months previously, Jean Hagueron had also called at Île de Gorée in an attempt to trade, "but meeting with no Encouragement...he departed from thence in a few Hours".<sup>806</sup>

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<sup>804</sup> Miller, 'Some Aspects', 104.

<sup>805</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Report of the Maritime Trade Committee (Brussels, 7 June 1783); ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Le Sens to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Gilfrei, 27 July 1782), "*comme maître absolu et despotique*", "*de très mauvaise qualité*". Scarcely a year after the *Brabant* case, several of Wall's men came to see the lieutenant-governor in order to ask for a raise. Wall ordered seven of the petitioners flogged, of whom three died. Several charges for cruelty were pressed against Wall on his return to England the following year, for which—after a long and winding court case—he was eventually executed in 1802.

<sup>806</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Interrogation of Jean Hagueron.

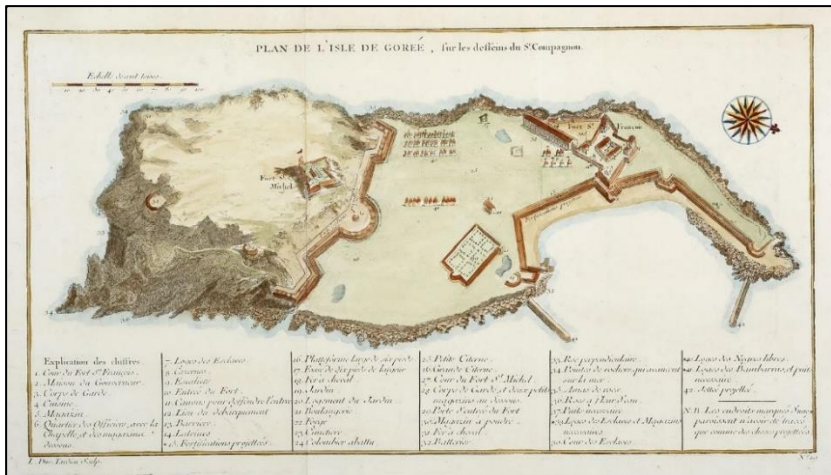


FIGURE 8.1 Map of Île de Gorée, c. 1748. Source: Jacques-Nicolas Bellin.

Further down the coast, Romberg’s captains conducted slave trade near and in the Sierra Leone River, the largest natural harbour of the African continent. Again, the counterparty were Englishmen established in factories. The first such outpost was located at the Îles de Los: as we saw in Chapter 3, the Liverpool merchant Miles Barber had erected a factory on the islands in 1755 which would serve as an entrepôt for enslaved Africans. Ships calling at the Îles de Los were therefore served in swift fashion: the *Marie-Antoinette* took in her first captive on 16 January 1781, and was ready to sail for the Caribbean with 204 prisoners scarcely two weeks later.<sup>807</sup> Another British factory, located slightly further downstream in the Sierra Leone estuary, was Bance Island (variously called Bunce or Bence Island, see Figure 8.2). Bance Island was established during the 1670s by the Royal African Company but passed into private hands during the first half of the eighteenth century. From 1748 onwards, it was managed by the London firm of Grant, Oswald, & Company, who greatly fortified the island and turned it into a commercial centre. Soon, Bance Island became an important port of call for ships wishing to use the estuary’s protected bays for repairs or wanting to stock up on freshwater, fruits, and rice, which was extensively cultivated in the Sierra Leone region. Most importantly, however, the British trading lodge became an entrepôt for slaves,

<sup>807</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, *Marie-Antoinette*.

which due to increasing demand expanded towards neighbouring islets as the fortress itself could no longer provide enough space.<sup>808</sup> While originally trading only with British vessels, Grand, Oswald & Company also began dealing with foreign ships, and soon Bance Island turned into a globalized place where French, Danish, Dutch and Portuguese captains met. As Romberg's vessels prove, however, Imperial ships also contributed to this node of "general rendezvous", as David Hancock put it.<sup>809</sup> In fact, during the American War of Independence, a period where Bance Island's fortress was destroyed by French men-of-war and its trade purportedly completely fell flat, Romberg's vessels prove that commerce in the Sierra Leone estuary did not dry up completely.<sup>810</sup> The first of Romberg's ships to apply to Bance's slave market was the *Comte de Flandre*, who after arriving in the Sierra Leone region hired a pilot to go "to Bans-island" and then purchased four enslaved men from "Mr. Neigt", who presumably worked for Grant, Oswald, & Company.<sup>811</sup> One year later, the *Comte de Belgioioso* spent considerable time in the Sierra Leone estuary taking on board at least half of its eventual cargo of 350 prisoners—presumably, this business also took place at Bance Island or its satellite factories.<sup>812</sup>

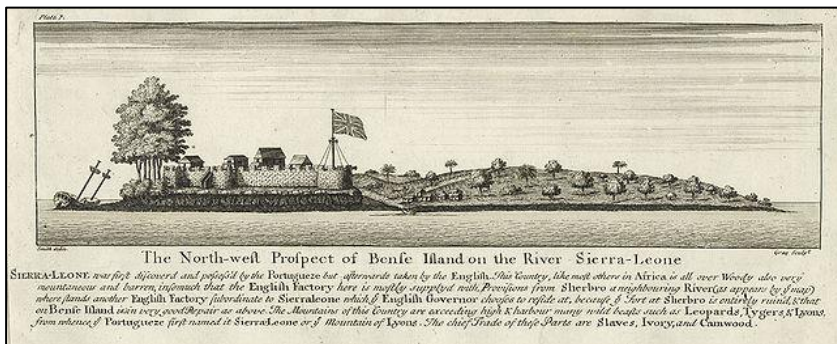


FIGURE 8.2 Bance Island in the Sierra Leone estuary, eighteenth century.

Source: Unknown author.

<sup>808</sup> Rodney, *A History*, 20–5; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 173–239; Carney, *Black Rice*, 9–30; Christopher DeCorse, 'Sierra Leone in the Atlantic World: concepts, contours, and exchange', *Atlantic Studies* 12:3 (2015) 299–304.

<sup>809</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 204–7.

<sup>810</sup> Rodney, *A History*, 251; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 218.

<sup>811</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite, 18 v., Log of 8 and 13 February 1782.

<sup>812</sup> RAatB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 9 July 1783).

The *Comte de Belgioioso*, after embarking most of her enslaved cargo in the Sierra Leone estuary, continued along the Windward Coast of West Africa. The exact trajectory of the vessel is unclear, but she with certainty traded at Bassa [‘Grand Bassam’], as did Romberg’s *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*. Bassa was a place close to the Cestos River (in modern Liberia) which was often visited by French slave traders, especially those from Honfleur.<sup>813</sup> Indeed, Jean Hagueron, captain of the *Comte de Flandre*, who also called at Bassa for his slave trade (albeit in order to conduct only one purchase). It is highly unlikely that the vessels embarked a complete cargo of captives at this trading station: a French source of the 1760s estimated that the village was able to provide 100-200 captives annually, and even this small number Adam Jones and Marion Johnson deemed “inflated”.<sup>814</sup> Bassa was hardly exceptional in this regard: in fact, due to its particular geography, the Windward Coast of Africa consisted entirely of little nodes of commerce where enslaved people and commodities were embarked in small numbers.<sup>815</sup> Ships conducting slave trade in this area tended to run down the whole coast, unable to focus their commercial efforts on one port or fortress (as was more common in the Sierra Leone estuary or on the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin).<sup>816</sup> This indeed seems to have been the strategy of the Imperial ships: the *Saxe-Teschen* continued trading at the Sassandra River, Cap Lahou, and finally Elmina.<sup>817</sup>

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<sup>813</sup> Jean Mettas, ‘Honfleur et la traite des Noirs au XVIIIe siècle’, *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 60:218 (1973) 6, 10-11; Vos, ‘The Slave Trade’, 38.

<sup>814</sup> Jones and Johnson, ‘Slaves from the Windward Coast’, 28. Contemporary travel ports mostly mention the village of Bassa for its supply of ivory and pepper, see John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (1746) 136.

<sup>815</sup> See also the case-study of the *Comte de Flandre* in Chapter 6.

<sup>816</sup> Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison 1969) 128; Jones and Johnson, ‘Slaves from the Windward Coast’, 32; Vos, ‘The Slave Trade’, 38-9.

<sup>817</sup> ADC, F6120, Log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.



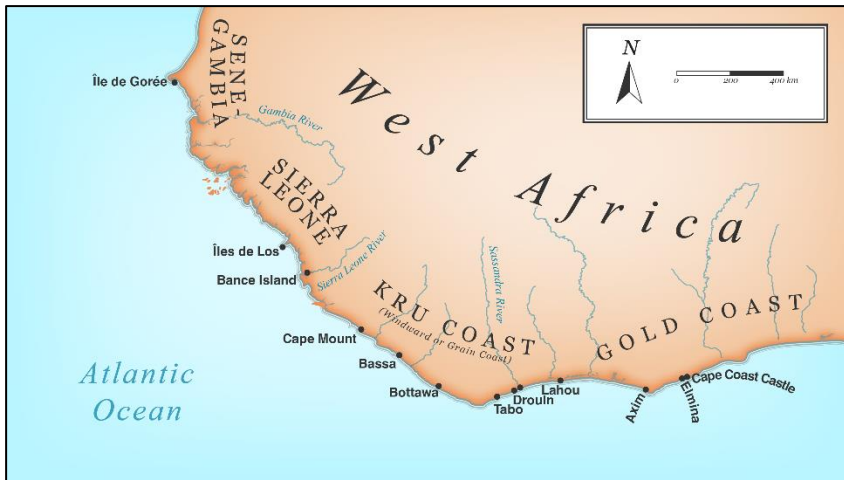


FIGURE 8.3 Map of Upper West Africa.

Little evidence survives to where the enslaved Africans embarked on the Upper Guinea Coast originated, and none at all for Romberg’s purchases. With regards to the European settlements on the coast of Sierra Leone and Senegal, captives were usually brought to the factories by African traders by river transport.<sup>818</sup> Many prisoners were captured, therefore, in the area that could be reached by the abundant waterways: Judith Carney has convincingly shown how the forced migration of people from the riverine areas of the Upper Guinea Coast, where rice was abundantly cultivated, has effected a transfer of agricultural knowledge towards North America.<sup>819</sup> During the eighteenth century, however, when the demand for slave labour in the colonies expanded dramatically, the supply chain in the African hinterland went through some significant changes. First, Europeans began establishing small factories further inland in order to tap into new sources of enslaved labour. With regards to Bance Island, Hancock has described how from the 1760s onwards the company’s agents made a concerted effort to move the sales upstream in order to expand supply.<sup>820</sup> Secondly, the hinterland of European slaving entrepôts along the coast increasingly exceeded the areas that could be reached by river. Walter Rodney argued that the hinterland of the Upper Guinea Coast stretched

<sup>818</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 201-3.

<sup>819</sup> Carney, *Black Rice*, 69-106.

<sup>820</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 201-3.

as far inland as the West Sudanian savannah, and that the polities of both regions entertained close interactions.<sup>821</sup> For Bance Island, some scholars have suggested that places in present-day Guinea, hundreds of kilometres away, were part of Bance Island's hinterland.<sup>822</sup> Kors Neurenberg, captain of the *Marie-Antoinette*, believed that the slaves he embarked at the Îles de Los were "the Growth of the Coast".<sup>823</sup> This contrasts starkly with the French commander who in 1779—one year before the *Marie-Antoinette* conducted trade there—wrote that the islands' factory was well furnished with enslaved Africans and ivory coming from the adjacent rivers, but observed that "since [the streams] start far inland, the Negroes, coming from afar and brought in groups, are exhausted".<sup>824</sup> If we look beyond the commercial, dehumanizing language of the slave trader, the description of the Gorée captives as being "of very bad quality" may reflect the long and arduous journey they, too, had endured before arriving on the island. Scholars investigating mortality during the loading phase of the trans-Atlantic slave trade have suggested that individuals who were marched to the coast from far inland were more vulnerable to the coastal disease environment, lacking the immunity of people captured closer to the coast. If the "very bad quality" remark reflects poor health due to disease, this might be another indicator that the enslaved Africans originated far in the interior of the country.<sup>825</sup>

With regards to the *Comte de Flandre*, the implied function of the captives might lift a veil on their origins. Romberg had indicated that Haguéron could use enslaved people as additional hands for his vessel, as it was impossible to find enough seamen willing to go on an African voyage in Ostend. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Kru-speaking people in the region boasted sizeable maritime skills, for which they were often hired by European (especially British) captains to work on board of their ships.<sup>826</sup> One enslaved

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<sup>821</sup> Rodney, *A History*, 4-6.

<sup>822</sup> DeCorse, 'Sierra Leone', 304-6.

<sup>823</sup> TNA, HCA42/136, Examination of Kors Neurenberg (Basseterre, 12 March 1781).

<sup>824</sup> Jean Machat, *Documents sur les établissements français de l'Afrique occidentale au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris 1905) 127-8, "Les rivières voisines fournissent beaucoup d'ivoire et d'escalves; mais comme elles commencent très avant dans l'intérieur des terres, les nègres qu'on y trouve, venant de loin et conduits en troupes, sont fatigués".

<sup>825</sup> Curtin, "The White Man's Grave", 94-7; Richard Steckel and Richard Jensen, 'New Evidence on the Causes of Slave and Crew Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade', *The Journal of Economic History* 46:1 (1986) 57-77.

<sup>826</sup> Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 65.

person came on board of the *Comte de Flandre* at Bassa, a Kru town, and four others at Bance Island—a British settlement, but the Sierra Leone region was known to be visited by the Kru from the 1770s onwards in order to offer their services.<sup>827</sup> Yet the Africans on board of the *Comte de Flandre* were clearly bought, not hired—contrary to normal practices, as the Kru prided themselves of being ‘unenslaveable’ and set themselves apart from other African polities through face marks. Still, despite this self-acclaimed status, Jelmer Vos has shown that there was frequent infighting among the different Kru villages lining the coast, which resulted in prisoners who were sold into slavery.<sup>828</sup> It might be that Hagueron actively picked such prisoners with maritime tasks in mind.



FIGURE 8.4 Map of the Gulf of Guinea, c. 1780.

Both the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* and the *Négrier Impérial* traded in the Bight of Benin, to Europeans known as the ‘Slave Coast’. The *Négrier Impérial* was spotted in June 1783 by a Flemish captain in French service, Pierre van Alstein, near Shama on the Gold Coast (today’s Ghana).<sup>829</sup> Presumably the ship then proceeded further along the coast towards the slaving port of Ouidah, which Romberg & Consors had indicated as her principal destination. The *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* with certainty called at Ouidah to purchase a cargo of enslaved

<sup>827</sup> Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 61.

<sup>828</sup> Vos, ‘The Slave Trade’, 46.

<sup>829</sup> Everaert, ‘Commerce d’Afrique’, 183.

Africans. Ouidah was part of the Kingdom of Dahomey, whose rulers had seized the town from the Hueda Kingdom in 1727 (Figure 8.5). Under Dahomian rule, Ouidah retained its position as an important site for Afro-European trade and, despite growing competition from neighbouring harbours, continued to be the principal outlet for enslaved Africans in the Bight of Benin.<sup>830</sup> The supply of Ouidah's slaving markets came from a variety of sources. Some prisoners had been kidnapped in their native towns and then slowly made it to the coast through a succession of intermediate sales in the interior of the country—during the eighteenth century, Africans arriving in Ouidah sometimes had been passed from one trader to the next seven or eight times. Others were enslaved after being taken prisoner by the Dahomian army, which was frequently waging war against competing states.<sup>831</sup>



FIGURE 8.5 The town of Ouidah in the Kingdom of Dahomey, c. 1745.  
 Source: Thomas Astley, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*  
 (London 1745), III, 64.

<sup>830</sup> Robin Law, 'A Lagoonside Port on the Eighteenth-Century Slave Coast: The Early History of Badagri', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 28:1 (1994) 44-5; Robin Law, *Ouidah: the social history of a West African slaving 'port', 1727-1892* (Athens (OH) 2004) 1-16.

<sup>831</sup> Law, *Ouidah*, 138-9.

What do the sources tell us about the origins—and journeys—of the enslaved Africans taken on board by the *Négrier Impérial* and the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* in 1783? Cuban documents, dating from after the sale of the former ship's cargo in Havana, state that the prisoners of the *Négrier* consisted of Africans belonging to the “*casta Arara, y Lucumi*”.<sup>832</sup> The Arará, first, were a group of people from the Dahomey area, who have often been closely linked to the Lucumí, some ethnographers going as far as deeming the Arará a subgroup of the Lucumí.<sup>833</sup> The most recent study by Rafael Valdez on slave ethnicities in Cuba, however, separates both groups—the juxtaposition through “y” in our source seems to confirm this strict division.<sup>834</sup> The term ‘Lucumí’ was used in Cuba to indicate enslaved Africans who spoke Yoruba and hailed from Yorubaland, a large ethno-linguistic region in the interior of the Bight of Benin which comprised powerful kingdoms such as Benin and Oyo. The term was used for Yoruba-speaking people in other empires as well, but was gradually replaced by ‘Nago’; in Cuba, however, the term stuck, and is still used today as the name for Afro-Cuban culture and religion.<sup>835</sup> Although mostly a generic label in the Spanish colony, scholars have shown how in West Africa, Lucumí referred to a very specific language and country, which presented an important source of cloth, corn, and especially, enslaved labour from the sixteenth century onwards.<sup>836</sup> Its precise location is still debated by historians, but presumably Lucumí lay somewhere in the interior of the Bight of Benin.<sup>837</sup> If the enslaved Africans purchased by Romberg’s captain effectively hailed from this exact country, they likely had been marched to the coast by merchants from Oyo, who served as middlemen between the northern and western interior of Africa, and the Atlantic.<sup>838</sup> During the 1770s and 1780s, however, the Dahomian king

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<sup>832</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2821.

<sup>833</sup> Robin Law, ‘Ethnicity and the Slave Trade: “Lucumi” and “Nago” as Ethnonyms in West Africa’, *History in Africa* 24:1 (1997) 207.

<sup>834</sup> Rafael Lopez Valdés, ‘Notas para el estudio etnohistorico de los esclavos Lucumi de Cuba’, in: Lázara Menéndez, ed., *Estudios Afro-Cubanos: Selección de Lecturas* (Havana 1990), II, 312-47.

<sup>835</sup> Henry Lovejoy and Olatunji Ojo, ‘Lucumí’, ‘Terranova’, and the Origins of the Yoruba Nation’, *The Journal of African History* 56:3 (2015) 370.

<sup>836</sup> Law, ‘Ethnicity’, 210; Robin Law, ‘Trade and Politics behind the Slave Coast: The Lagoon Traffic and the Rise of Lagos, 1500-1800’, *The Journal of African History* 24:3 (1983) 336-7.

<sup>837</sup> Law, ‘Ethnicity’, 209-11; Lovejoy and Ojo, ‘Lucumí’, 353-72.

<sup>838</sup> Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire, c. 1600-1836. A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford 1977) 221-2.

Kpengla (r. 1774-89) attempted to monopolize the trade and assert price control over imported slaves. As a result, Oyo traders increasingly diverted their prisoners to more eastern ports, where they could negotiate freely with Europeans.<sup>839</sup> If, perhaps more likely, the Cuban sources use ‘Lucumí’ as a general label for Yoruba-speaking slaves, they might also have been taken prisoner by the Dahomian army, which was then in the process of eliminating competition from slaving ports to the east of Ouidah: in 1782, it had razed the town of Ekpè; in August 1783 (when the *Négrier Impérial* was anchored at Ouidah) Dahomian forces raided the rival port of Badagri—presumably both expeditions resulted in prisoners of war who were shipped into slavery.<sup>840</sup>

The last market where Romberg—through the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*—furnished his slaves was Malembo in the Kingdom of Kakongo. The brokers whom we met in Chapter 6 acquired their slaves from inland traders, who mostly used overland caravans or sometimes major rivers where they were navigable—the stretch of Congo River between Isangila and Manyanga, for instance, was known to Malembo traders.<sup>841</sup> Identifying where captives came from is as hard a task as elsewhere in West Africa because ports of embarkation—quoting Miller—“gave only the roughest indication of their origin”.<sup>842</sup> What can be said is that slaves on the Malembo market rarely hailed from the immediate coastal kingdoms, but from the latter’s hinterland.<sup>843</sup> What is also indisputably true is that enslaved people arriving on the coast of West Central Africa during the eighteenth century came from much greater distances than in the preceding centuries. As in other areas of the continent, the soaring demand for unfree labour in the colonies had resulted in the ‘slaving frontier’ steadily shifting eastward.<sup>844</sup>

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<sup>839</sup> Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 141-2; Law, ‘Ethnicity’, 210-11; Law, ‘A Lagoonside Port’, 45; Law, ‘Trade and Politics’, 336-7.

<sup>840</sup> Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*; 165-6; Law, ‘A Lagoonside Port’, 48. Van Alstein, the Ghent captain in Nantes service, was witness to the coastal conflicts, and actively participated on the side of Badagri, see Everaert, ‘Pierre-Ignace-Lievin van Alstein’, 14 and 48n.

<sup>841</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 133.

<sup>842</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 129; Miller, *Way of Death*, 225.

<sup>843</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 117.

<sup>844</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 122; Miller, *Way of Death*, 234; Miller, ‘The paradoxes’, 146; Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge 2011) 53-4, 75-6.



FIGURE 8.6 Map of West Central Africa, c. 1780.

By several accounts, captive Africans on the Malembo market belonged to the Kongo or the Yombe people. If the cargo of François Vanstabel, the Dunkirk captain who traded in Malembo and meticulously documented his activities, serves as an indication of the human cargoes carried by the *Roi du Congo* and the *Conseil de Flandre*, the same can be said for Romberg’s ships: Vanstabel was reported in local newspapers to have arrived in Cap Français with “a very nice cargo of Congos”.<sup>845</sup> These categories, of course, were broad and very general designations used by Europeans, and were in no way exact. Nor were they correct: as Martin has argued, slaves sometimes received the label of ‘Kongo’ merely because they had been brought to market by Kongo middlemen but had first been marched to the kingdom from further in the interior.<sup>846</sup> Yet the general direction of where Malembo’s imports originated seems effectively been to the south instead of to the north or northeast.<sup>847</sup> During the seventeenth century, the Kingdom of Kongo had decentralised into numerous political units, which waged war against each other in a prolonged period of civil war (1665-1709) but continued their strife during most of the eighteenth century. While the Manikongo, at the height of his power during the sixteenth century, had been able to enforce a ban on enslaving freeborn Kongos, such restrictions were

<sup>845</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 30 June 1784, “une très-belle cargaison de Congo”.

<sup>846</sup> Martin, *The External Trade*, 122-4.

<sup>847</sup> Martin, ‘Loango trade’, 213.

no longer adhered to. Consequently, the continuous infighting, raiding, and kidnapping among the different factions led to great numbers of captives.<sup>848</sup> Some of these enslaved people were exploited domestically, but many ended up in the trans-Atlantic circuits of enslavement. They were either bought up *in situ* by merchants from the Loango region, acquired at interior *entrepots* such as Malebo Pool, or led by Kongo traders across the Congo River all the way towards Malembo. Solongo traders from Sonyo also fulfilled the role of middlemen in the slave trade between both sides of the Congo River, although their caravans mostly fed into the more proximate slaving market of Cabinda.<sup>849</sup>

Among Romberg's expeditions, the operations of the *Conseil de Flandre* and the *Roi du Congo* hold particular significance for Belgian colonial historiography, as they link 'Belgian' capital and facilitative activities to the slave trade in the Kingdom of Kongo. This trade, in turn, has frequently been associated with political fragmentation and the erosion of central power, which left the region vulnerable to exploitation and colonization in the nineteenth century.<sup>850</sup> As during the Early Modern period 3.6 million people were forcibly loaded onto European ships in various ports of West Central Africa, of whom 2.4 million during the eighteenth century alone, the small share in this massive number of the *Conseil* and the *Congo* makes the connection rather symbolic, but it is a material connection nonetheless.<sup>851</sup>

### Waiting on the Shore

While gathering their cargoes of commodities or enslaved people, European vessels spent long spells on the coast of Africa. In fact, the coastal part of the Atlantic voyage was often the most prolonged of the whole undertaking. Yet the attention this part of the journey has received in historiography is not in balance with its chronological weight in the overall voyage: squeezed between the moment of purchase at a European or African outpost and the actual Atlantic

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<sup>848</sup> Linda Heywood, 'Slavery and its Transformation in the Kingdom of Kongo: 1491–1800', *The Journal of African History* 50:1 (2009) 1–22; Lovejoy, *Transformations*, 73–4, 84.

<sup>849</sup> Miller, *Way of Death*, 35–6; Martin, *The External Trade*, 130, 134.

<sup>850</sup> Heywood, 'Slavery', 21–2; Nunn, 'The Long-Term Effects', 143.

<sup>851</sup> TSTD.



crossing, the period spent on the coast has often been glossed over in favour of the phases that came before or after. Recently, however, historians have begun to make a concerted effort to assess this particular phase of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, paying attention to the experience of African people on the Atlantic seaboard, either as workers or prisoners.

During the past decade, scholars such as Kevin Dawson, Jeffrey Gunn, and Filipa Ribeiro da Silva have worked to give African aquatic agency its rightful place in maritime and Atlantic history.<sup>852</sup> An important aspect of this agency was the work Africans, free or enslaved, performed on board of European vessels plying the coast of Africa. Dutch and French captains, for example, sometimes employed African seamen to compensate for extreme losses during the journey towards Africa.<sup>853</sup> Other European nations enlisted Africans not out of necessity due to dwindling crew numbers, but because of their unique skills. As Gunn has shown for the Kru Coast, for example, British captains often hired local Kru people for their ability to negotiate the dangerous surf in small canoes or for their linguistic prowess.<sup>854</sup>

As we alluded to in Chapter 5, Romberg ordered some of the Africans embarked on his ships to be employed as additional maritime labour to compensate for the lack of domestic and European mariners in Ostend. Although I have material evidence of such orders for only one ship (Hagueron's *Comte de Flandre*), it is not unlikely that others of Romberg Imperial fleet were given similar instructions given the fact that a scarcity of labour in the Austrian Netherlands plagued every vessel during the 1780s. In any case, Hagueron effectively purchased five people at the beginning of his voyage, four men and one girl; likely, as Hagueron was directing an ivory ship and had not been ordered to meddle in slave trade, he was obliging his instruction to contract maritime labour in Africa. The men, then, presumably toiled on deck alongside their Flemish, German, French, and Italian colleagues or acted as interpreters when negotiating with local traders. Enslaved women were generally ordered to do cooking tasks on board, but they were also commonly forced into sexual

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<sup>852</sup> See for example Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power*; Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, 'Dutch, English and African shipbuilding craftsmanship in precolonial West Africa: An entangled history of construction, maintenance and repair', *International Journal of Maritime History* 31:3 (2019) 508-20; Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labour*.

<sup>853</sup> Van Overtveldt, *Zeelieden in de 18de eeuw*, 68, 80; AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (19 March 1784), "*Je vais prendre 4 nègres pour aider mes gens*".

<sup>854</sup> Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*.

services to the captain.<sup>855</sup> European ships employing enslaved labour generally sold the captives shortly before leaving the coast of Africa, and such was likely the intention of Hageron (as we saw in Chapter 6, however, the conclusion of his voyage was thwarted). In fact, one of the enslaved Africans was sold again after scarcely one week for 230 current guilders; the mark-up of 75 percent with regards to the purchase price presumably reflected a unique selling opportunity.<sup>856</sup>

The overwhelming majority of the people embarked on Romberg's ships were done so as commodified people to be forcibly transported across the Atlantic. Some had entered the vessel soon after reaching the coast, others—for example in Ouidah—had spent lengthy periods in *barracoons* on the beach. Simon Hogerzeil and David Richardson therefore advocated for the inclusion of the time spent on the coast to be included in the definition of the Middle Passage. Both scholars stressed the need “to shift attention from the merchant's point of view to the slave experience” and rightfully argued that for the enslaved Africans, “[the Middle Passage] began as soon as he or she boarded ship”.<sup>857</sup>

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<sup>855</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, *Comte de Flandre*, Livre de traite, Log of 13, 22 and 26 February 1782. See Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 21, Postma, ‘Mortality in the Dutch Slave Trade’, 256, and Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 268-9 for examples of cooking assignments for female captives. See Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 203, 241-3 and Radburn, *Traders in Men*, 118-9 for sexual abuse inflicted upon enslaved women. See also the essays in Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, eds. *Sex, Power, and Slavery* (Athens (OH), 2014).

<sup>856</sup> Although the selling price is fixed in the source at 230 fl.c.g., calculating the purchase price required my own input. The four captives embarked at Bunce Island were bought in a single transaction worth 527 fl.c.g., so their individual prices were not specified. I necessarily assumed that all four captives were of equal value, but had any particular characteristic set one apart and influenced its value, it likely would have been mentioned in the source.

<sup>857</sup> Simon Hogerzeil and David Richardson, ‘Slave Purchasing Strategies and Shipboard Mortality: Day-to-Day Evidence from the Dutch African Trade, 1751-1797’, *The Journal of Economic History* 67:1 (2007) 160-1, 184, quotes 161.

TABLE 8.1 Time spent on the African coast by Romberg's slaving vessels, 1783-84.

Ship	Location	Date		Elapsed time since first trade (in days)	
		First trade	Departure	Romberg	Aug, 1750-1800 <sup>1</sup>
<i>Belgioioso</i>	Windward/Gold Coast	<29 March 1783	>30 May 1783	±60-90	—
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	Windward/Gold Coast	[April 1783]	4 March 1784	±270	—
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	Ouidah	[July 1783]	[March 1783]	±270	150
<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	Ouidah	[July 1783]	[March 1783]	±270	150
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	Malembo	24 August 1783	17 December 1783	115	167
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	Malembo	9 October 1783	8 February 1784	122	167

Source: see Appendix A.10-A.16.

TABLE 8.2 Enslaved Africans embarked on Romberg's ships, 1780-84.

Vessel	Name	Ton	Planned	Captives			Loss (in %)
				Actual (Africa)	Actual (Caribbean)	Crowding (Captives/Ton)	
	<i>Marie Antoinette</i>	80	290	204	187	2.55	8.4
	<i>États de Brabant</i>	170	—	>48	—	—	—
	<i>Belgioioso</i>	120	325	330	299	2.75	9.1
	<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	160	300-350	>244	92	1.88-2.19	62.3-73.8
	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	[300]	450	—	371	1.5	—
	<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	300	450	—	350	1.5	—
	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	300	600	560	527	1.86	5.9
	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	300	600	539	434 (366)	1.79	19.5 (32.0)

Sources: see Appendix A.3, A.7, and A.10-A.16.

What can we tell about the coastal experience of enslaved Africans caught in the holds of Romberg's Imperial vessels? As Table 8.1 shows, the vessels dispatched from Ostend spent considerable time on the African seaboard collecting their cargoes of enslaved Africans. Comparison with the average time spent by European vessels between 1750 and 1800 at the precise trading locations of Romberg's ships reveals that the latter often took a much longer time than normal: the *Négrier Impérial* and the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*, both trading at Ouidah, took about nine months to complete their cargoes, while vessels calling at the Dahomian port on average did so in 150 days, or five months. During the early 1780s, agents residing in the European factories at Ouidah often reported a dearth of supply of enslaved Africans (caused by the diversion of Oyo trade routes to eastern ports, cf. supra); likely, this caused the prolonged spells on the coast of Romberg's vessels.<sup>858</sup> Likewise, on the Gold Coast, Romberg's captains were plagued by the competition that had ensued from the recovery of trade since the Peace of Paris. Mesnier frères, a French colonial firm, wrote in March 1783 from Cap Français to a business partner that he “[should] never organise expeditions for the Gold Coast, those who have done so will ruin themselves because of the expensiveness and the bad quality of the enslaved Africans”.<sup>859</sup> The *Comte de Belgioioso*, which also traded part of its cargo in the Sierra Leone estuary, went through a relative swift loading phase, but the trade of *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* progressed significantly less smoothly. The vessel was supposed to have left Ostend in January 1783, but contrary winds confined the vessel to port until half February. This entailed that the *Saxe-Teschen* would arrive on the Gold Coast in April in the midst of wet season, a period generally avoided by European slavers due to the unhealthy conditions for slave purchases and the occurrence of storms.<sup>860</sup> Yet in the catch-up wave following the end of hostilities, many slaving merchants decided to forego on these restrictions, and so the *Saxe-Teschen* did not only have to contend with an adverse climate, but also with massive competition. At Cap Lahou, captain Barabé reported the presence of fourteen Dutch ships, presumably belonging to the Dutch MCC

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<sup>858</sup> Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 142.

<sup>859</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Mesnier Frères to Tresca (Cap Français, 5 March 1783), “ne faites jamais aucun armement pour la Côte d’Or, ceux qui les ont fait se ruineront par la chèreté des captifs et leur mauvaise qualité”.

<sup>860</sup> Postma, *The Dutch*, 158-9; Erik Gøbel, ‘Danish Shipping along the Triangular Route, 1671-1802: voyages and conditions on board’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 36:2 (2011) 141.

whose main trade was conducted at that place.<sup>861</sup> Additionally, as we noted in the previous chapter, Barabé faced demand from African brokers he could not meet due to sub-optimal assortments of trading goods. Romberg & Consors later claimed that the captain spent “14 months” on the coast, but this is impossible as the ship was in Lisbon in March 1783 and started her Middle Passage early March 1784.<sup>862</sup> Still, a more likely spell of nine months was a considerable length of time given the conditions. The only captains who completed a lower-than-average loading phase were Lacoudrais and Destrais (115 and 122 days versus 167 days): as we have seen in Chapter 6, both men had arrived at Malembo in the early stages of the massive fleet of ships descending on the coast of West Africa after the Peace of Paris. Moreover, through their negotiation strategies, Lacoudrais and Destrais had largely managed to outsmart their competitors.

The extended period most of Romberg’s ships spent off the coast of Africa had dire consequences for the enslaved Africans they carried. This was especially the case for those people who had been the first to be purchased and, as a consequence, remained in the hold of the ship for many months before the actual Atlantic crossing took place. Contrary to the Middle Passage, however, data on coastal deaths among the enslaved Africans is relatively sparse, but where they are available, all evidence shows that the number of fatalities—although lower than during transit—was significant.<sup>863</sup> Steckel and Jensen found that the relationship between time on the coast and mortality resembled an inverted U, with high death rates at the beginning of the loading phase and immediately before departure. The vast majority of enslaved people dying during the early stages of the embarkation process has been explained by the authors by the fact that, as we mentioned earlier, many people had been marched to the coast over significant distances and arrived in a disease environment to which they had no immunity. Indeed, the vast majority of

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<sup>861</sup> Vos, ‘The Slave Trade’, 39.

<sup>862</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784); Appendix A.11.

<sup>863</sup> Stein, *The French Slave Trade*, 94; Steckel and Jensen, ‘New Evidence’, 57-77; Hogerzeil and Richardson, ‘Slave Purchasing Strategies’, 175-6; Johannes Postma, ‘Mortality in the Dutch Slave Trade’, in: Gemery and Hogendorn, *The Uncommon Market*, 241-6; Klein, Engerman, Haines, and Shlomowitz, ‘Transoceanic Mortality’, 96-7, 111. As a single case-study, Vanstabel suffered 40 deaths at the coast while conducting trade in Malembo, see AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Cap Français, 27 June 1784).

enslaved Africans died to ‘fevers’ and gastro-intestinal diseases.<sup>864</sup> Although the effects of crowding on mortality during passage have been downplayed, Steckel and Jensen found that people per ship tonnage ratios did have an impact during the loading phase of the trans-Atlantic slave trade: the authors found that the occurrence of gastro-intestinal disease surged as the trading ships were reaching full capacity; according to the authors, the increased crowdedness of the vessel allowed pathogens to spread more easily.<sup>865</sup> Hogerzeil and Richardson, in their research on the eighteenth-century MCC, equally concluded that mortality rates increased the longer the loading phase of a particular vessel lasted.<sup>866</sup>

Unfortunately, hardly any data on mortality during the coasting phase of Romberg’s ships is available: the sole surviving logbook, of the *Conseil de Flandre*, falls silent as soon as the ship dropped anchor off Malembo—although Vanstabel later reported on Destrais that the captain “suffered not a single casualty” while at the coast.<sup>867</sup> Still, there is no reason to believe that the patterns established by previous scholars differed significantly in this Imperial case-study, especially with regards to the *Négrier Impérial*, the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd*, and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, which all spent above-average time coasting. As we will see, the latter vessel experienced a very high loss percentage during the Atlantic crossing; likely, this loss during transit originated in the loading phase of the voyage.

While disease accounted for the majority of deaths during the loading phase, many people also died while resisting the process of enslavement by rising up against their captors or by taking their own lives.<sup>868</sup> Accidents, too, caused victims. The small boats used to ferry enslaved people from the shore to the vessel were prone to capsize in the dangerous surf that characterized most of the West African seaboard. While many local people living on the seaboard were excellent swimmers, most prisoners came from far in the interior of the country and were less likely to possess these skills. Moreover, sharks were known to roam in the vicinity of slave ships, as crews disposed of deceased

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<sup>864</sup> Steckel and Jensen, ‘New Evidence’, 60.

<sup>865</sup> Steckel and Jensen, ‘New Evidence’, 66.

<sup>866</sup> Hogerzeil and Richardson, ‘Slave Purchasing Strategies’, 176-7.

<sup>867</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Cap Français, 27 June 1784), “*Le capitaine D’Estrais, qui est parti de la côte sans un seul mort de captifs*”.

<sup>868</sup> Steckel and Jensen, ‘New Evidence’, 60.

slaves by throwing them overboard, or as captive Africans jumped overboard themselves in attempts at suicide or escape.<sup>869</sup> Large-scale accidents also occurred. In 1705, for instance, the Danish *Kronprinsen* caught fire and exploded off Sao Tomé and Príncipe, killing all but five of the 826 captives on board.<sup>870</sup> In 1783, Romberg's *Roi du Congo* narrowly avoided a similar tragedy. By December, Lacoudrais had been trading at Malembo for three months and had gathered a cargo of 550 enslaved Africans. On 14 December, at eight o'clock in the morning, Hendrik-Jan ter Horst, the second surgeon, went into the kitchen to fetch a drink. Despite it being already light outside, ter Horst brought a candle with him, and while filling a wooden bowl of spirits with his one hand, the candle in his other accidentally set fire to the alcoholic beverage—leaving him dead, “being burnt from head to toe...the skin of his two hands along with his finger nails remaining in the bowl where...he had plunged them to extinguish the flame.” The fire spread quickly, and all ships in Malembo bay dispatched boats and crew to help extinguish the flames. This they managed in time; if not, according to one eyewitness, of the cargo of 550 enslaved people “not even ten would have escaped”. Lacoudrais, “very affected by what happened to him”, decided to leave the coast of Africa and sailed for Havana two days later.<sup>871</sup>

### Crossing the Atlantic

Arguably the most infamous part of the multi-legged journey enslaved Africans were forcibly subjected to was the actual oceanic crossing. Indeed, the Middle Passage, as the journey across the Atlantic is commonly known, has become a *pars pro toto* for the trans-Atlantic slave trade—hence its frequent appearance in capital letters. During the eighteenth century, slavers lost on average 15

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<sup>869</sup> Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 288-9.

<sup>870</sup> Göbel, ‘Danish Shipping’, 146-7.

<sup>871</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Rycx, sr.*, 116/401, Deed of 7 April 1783; AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 14 December 1783), “*brulé de la tête aux pieds. La peau de ses deux mains avec les ongles restèrent dans la gamelle où sans doute il les avait précipité pour éteindre la flamme*”, “*de fait il n'en échapperait pas dix*”, “*Mr Lacoudrais est actuellement à mon comptoir, très affecté de ce qui lui est arrivé*”.

percent of their human cargoes while crossing the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>872</sup> Romberg & Consors itself considered an expected loss of 9-10 percent in prospectuses drawn up for possible investors.<sup>873</sup> As Table 8.2 shows, some of Romberg's vessels stayed below this rate. The *Marie-Antoinette* lost 17 enslaved people on a cargo of 204, a loss percentage of 8.4 percent. The *Comte de Belgioioso* experienced a similar death toll with a surviving cargo of 299 out of 330 people. The *Roi du Congo*, the ship that nearly went up in flames on the coast of Africa, lost 33 prisoners on a cargo of 560 during the Middle Passage, a transit loss of 5.9 percent. The *Négrier Impérial* and the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* both had a capacity of 450 prisoners. Their imports in the Caribbean of 355 and 350 people would imply high death tolls of about 20 percent, but given the fact that others of Romberg's largest vessels never surpassed 90 percent of their theoretical capacity, average loss percentages of 12-15 percent are more likely.

Other vessels fared much worse. During the Atlantic crossing of the *Conseil de Flandre*, 105 people died out of a cargo of 539, a transit loss of 19.5 percent. If we include the people that died shortly after arriving on Saint-Domingue (68), the loss percentage rises to 32.0 percent. The *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* arrived in the Caribbean with only 117 prisoners alive and lost another 25 people while seeking out a port to sell the survivors.<sup>874</sup> It is unclear how many people came on board in Africa: the last undated mention by the captain is a number of 244 people in Cap Lahou, while the planned number of prisoners was 300 to 350.<sup>875</sup> If we take 244 to be the number with which the *Saxe-Teschen* started its Middle Passage, the loss percentage of the voyage was 62.3 percent. If we assume the ship was at full capacity, this figure increases to an even more staggering 73.8 percent.

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<sup>872</sup> TSTD.

<sup>873</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Armement à Gand sous la direction de Romberg & Consors de deux navires Pour la côte d'Affrique.

<sup>874</sup> Although Bapst mentions a number of 91 survivors, the log of the *Saxe-Teschen* reveals that 25 captives died between Cap Français and Port-au-Prince/Léogâne. Fruchard, a local factor, later indeed sells 92 people, see RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784); ADC, F6120, Log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*; AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 90 r.

<sup>875</sup> ADC, F6120, Log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.



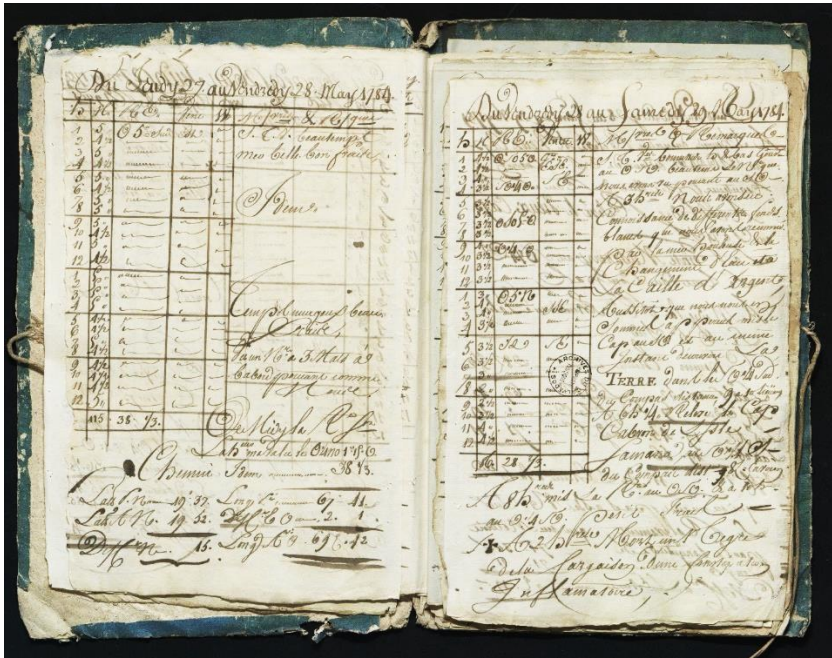


FIGURE 8.7 Extract from the log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* of 29 June, when the crew spotted Saint-Domingue after an especially lethal Middle Passage. “LAND [TERRE]”, recorded captain Barabé, in capital letters that seem to scream relief.

Source: ADC, F6120, Log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.

What caused the mortality on board of Romberg’s slaving ships? The effect of crowding on mortality, first, has been heavily debated by historians. Although the stowing of hundreds of people in cramped living quarters was conceived by contemporaries to be an important (if not *the* most important) vector causing mortality during the Middle Passage, it is now no longer viewed as a principal cause of death: ships with high captive-per-ton ratios do not tend to have higher mortality rates than ships with lower ratios.<sup>876</sup> Comparison with earlier results shows that Romberg’s vessels had crowding rates similar to contemporary European carriers, and that the merchant did not engage in

<sup>876</sup> Herbert Klein, *The Middle Passage. Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton 1978) 229-34; Herbert Klein and Stanley Engerman, ‘A Note on Mortality in the French Slave Trade’, in: Henry Gemery and Jan Hogendorn, *The Uncommon Market. Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York 1979) 265-7; Postma, ‘Mortality’, 249-50.

excessive ‘tight-packing’.<sup>877</sup> In the same token, the fate of Romberg’s fleet confirms the scholarly consensus: the ships with the highest crowding rates do not have exceptionally high loss percentages, while those who have were not at exceptionally high capacity.

While crowding itself did not cause mortality, the confinement of many people in a small space clearly facilitated death by other causes, mostly epidemics: unable to isolate the sick from the well, contagious diseases, once surfaced, tended to spread quickly among the shipboard population of enslaved Africans.<sup>878</sup> With regards to the health conditions on board of Romberg’s ships, we are best informed by the *Conseil de Flandre*, commanded by Pierre Destrais. Due to the ship hitting a bank and sinking off Île d’Yeu after its passage to Europe, a logbook has been preserved which records the ship’s journey from the Austrian Netherlands to the Caribbean (though leaving out the time the ship spent in Africa, and also strangely leaving out the stretch from Martinique to Saint-Domingue).<sup>879</sup>

TABLE 8.3 Causes of death on board of the *Conseil de Flandre*,  
8 February—31 March 1784.

Affliction	<i>Scurvy</i>	<i>Dysentery</i>	<i>Worms</i>	<i>Cardiac arrest</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
Deaths	24	15	2	3	3	12

*Source:* SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Île d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*.

Three days after the *Conseil* left Malembo on 8 February 1784, the first enslaved African died, followed by a second on 20 February. Thenceforward, the deaths follow in quick succession, resulting in a heavy toll of 59 people in a little more than a month’s time. As Table 8.3 shows, most prisoners died to scurvy or dysentery (or ‘the flux’, as the ailment was known in the eighteenth century),

<sup>877</sup> Klein and Engerman, ‘A Note’, 267.

<sup>878</sup> Sowande Mustakeem, ‘“I Never Have Such a Sickly Ship Before”: Diet, Disease, and Mortality in 18th-Century Atlantic Slaving Voyages’, *The Journal of African American History* 93:4 (2008) 488.

<sup>879</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Île d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150. See also Henry, ‘Le périple tragique’, 202-13.

traditionally the primary killers of the Middle Passage. One woman, suffering from dysentery, died after giving birth to a stillborn child; three people died to cardiac arrest, undoubtedly caused by the extreme shipboard conditions. Intestinal worms also afflicted at least two enslaved Africans, and presumably many more due to the difficulty of diagnosis. On 21 February 1784, the ship's writer recorded in his log that

Yesterday...has died a Captive woman, in the evening the Surgeon has cut her open and established that she died from worms, of which he was surprised to find 43 in her stomach.<sup>880</sup>

Lastly, the log reports an outbreak of smallpox shortly after leaving Malembo, but no deaths were afterwards attributed to the latter sickness.

Diet was an important determinant of health during the Middle Passage. Provisions for the enslaved were purchased both in Africa and in the Austrian Netherlands. Source material is scant, but it is clear that Romberg's captains embarked rice, groats, and horse beans while preparing their journeys.<sup>881</sup> Regular seamen mostly ate salted meat, stockfish, biscuits, and the occasional freshly-caught fish; officers enjoyed more premium foodstuffs such as cheese and wine.<sup>882</sup> Table 5.4 in Chapter 5 already revealed how the differing quality and quantity of foodstuffs between crew members and enslaved people translated financially. For the six vessels comprising the first and second flotilla, expenses on food and drink for the crew averaged 5.9 percent of the total costs of fitting out the vessel. The share of provisions dedicated for the cargo of enslaved people amounted to 2.8 percent, despite the prisoners outnumbering the crew members by a factor of ten. Combining the number of captives and crew with the total costs of furnishing the vessel with food and drink reveals the vast difference in expenses between the two demographics on board.

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<sup>880</sup> SHDR, Inscriptio Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the Council of Flanders, Record of 21 February 1784: "*Hier vendredy 20 nous est mort une femme Captif Le soir Le chirugien La ouverte et a trouvé que setoient Les vers quil la voient etonnée Luy En ayant trouvée dans L'esthmac quarante trois*".

<sup>881</sup> RAAtB, Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel, 8065.

<sup>882</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 32; Rinchon, *Pierre-Ignace-Liévin van Alstein*, 105-6, 231-2, 301-2.

TABLE 8.4 Expense on provisions for crew and enslaved Africans (in fl.w.g.).

Vessel	Crew			Enslaved Africans		
	Expense	Persons	Expense pp.	Expense	Persons	Expense pp.
<i>Belgioioso</i>	7,843	–	–	4,510	330 <sup>a</sup>	13.7
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	7,322	38	192.7	4,014	325 <sup>p</sup>	12.4
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	13,701	37	370.3	5,789	450 <sup>p</sup>	12.9
<i>Zeepaerd</i>	13,952	53	263.2	10,005	450 <sup>p</sup>	22.2
<i>Starhemberg</i>	7,416	22	337.1	2,031	–	–
		<i>Average</i>	290.8		<i>Average</i>	15.3

Source: RAfB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065. *a* = actual number of enslaved people embarked on the vessel, *p* = planned number in the prospectus, actual number unknown.

As illustrated in Table 8.4, on average 290.8 guilders was spent per seaman to procure food and drink. Regular crew members and higher-ranking personnel are lumped together in the sources, but a comparatively larger sum would have been dedicated to officers, as they had access to a more qualitative diet. In sharp contrast to the European crew, about twenty times less (15.3 guilders) was spent per head on food for the enslaved Africans. Van Alstein, the Ghent captain working in the Nantes slave trade, spent about 8 Flemish guilders (16 French *livres* and 5 *sous*) per head when preparing the *Pompée* (1768) and 11.5 guilders (24 *livres*, 7 *sous*, and 3 *deniers*) on the *Duc de Laval* (1773).<sup>883</sup> The slightly higher costs per head in Romberg's fleet likely reflect the inclusion of expenses such as chains and shackles in this particular cost. Although the daily meals of the enslaved people were complemented in Africa with produce such as yams, palm oil, and possibly fruits, Table 8.4 gives a good indication of the structural violence of the diet of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Not only were provisions of low quality (or at least of an inferior quality compared to what was fed to the crew), their condition was prone to deteriorate during the long time which elapsed between departure from Europe and the moment the ship could commence its Atlantic crossing. Sacks of oats and beans like those carried by Romberg's ships were a breeding ground for vermin such as weevils and maggots. Additionally, the damp conditions in the ship's bowels, where the provisions were stored, caused victuals to rot. Captains employed in

<sup>883</sup> Rinchon, *Pierre-Ignace-Liévin van Alstein*, 231-2, 301-2.

the slave trade of other nations often reported casualties as a result of spoiled horse beans.<sup>884</sup> Indeed, the spoiled condition of such provisions did not stop captains from feeding them to the enslaved Africans, due to the simple fact that after leaving Africa, no places of reprovisioning were available for at least a month, and most of the time much longer. Inadequate diets deprived enslaved Africans from valuable nutrients and vitamins and sometimes outrightly poisoned them; in any case, they caused malnutrition, low immunity, and eventually a higher susceptibility to disease.<sup>885</sup> The practice of feeding spoiled food to the captives also occurred on the *Conseil de Flandre*, where the horse beans had started to rot even before embarking on the Atlantic:

Since our departure from Malembo the occurrence of smallpox is increasing considerably, as well as dysentery. I attribute the latter sickness to the low-quality victuals which are becoming worse every single day. The captives can scarcely eat a third of their bowl due to the amount of rotten food it contains.<sup>886</sup>

Ultimately, the scarcity of supplies led to the scene with which we began this chapter, and after a day of “careful Reflection”—weighing the cost of restocking against the cost of losing more enslaved people—Destrais decided to put into the port of Saint-Pierre on Martinique in order to stock up on fresh victuals and highly-needed vitamin C.<sup>887</sup> Similar provisioning problems must have plagued the journey of the *Comte de Belgioioso*, as the vessel arrived in Havana with 25 sacks of rotten groats.<sup>888</sup>

The quality of the freshwater on board was another crucial constituent of the health of the enslaved people on board. Keeping liquids from spoiling, then,

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<sup>884</sup> Bénard, ‘L’armement honfleurais’, 259; Mustakeem, ‘Diet, Disease, and Mortality’, 482; de Kok, *Walcherse Ketens*, 120-2.

<sup>885</sup> Mustakeem, ‘Diet, Disease, and Mortality’, 480-3.

<sup>886</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Council of Flanders*, Record of 21 February 1784: “*Depuis nostre depart de Malembe La petite verolle augmente Considerablement mesme La disenterie je n’attribue cestte dernier maladis qua la Mouvese qualité des fesevé qui deviene de jour En jour plus mauvese Les negre ne pouvant manger Le tier de leur gamelle par La quantite de celle qui son pourié*”.

<sup>887</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 27 March 1784, “*a midy aprais La hauteur Le Sieur Destrais nou a decclaree qu aprais avoir précisément Reflechy sur L’etat de La Cargaison il etoit decide de Relacher a la Martinique don’t proces verbal a ete fait et Signer de suite par les officer Composant L’etat majore*”; AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 40 r.

<sup>888</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 105 r.

was a consistent headache of captains trading on the African shore.<sup>889</sup> In order to maintain its quality, drinking water was frequently refreshed while on the African seaboard.<sup>890</sup> Additionally, the crew periodically cleansed the containers and barrels and rid them from algae in order to provide clean storage for as long as possible. Failing to perform this task could have dire consequences for the water it contained. On the *Conseil de Flandre*, again, the writing officer confided such negligence to the log in a rather ominous ‘Note for the curious people [*Note pour les curieux*]’ of 20 March 1784:

[H]aving the details of the water, I see that the first pieces in the ship are in a much better state than those embarked at the time of departure because they were neglected and not emptied, and the water has entirely ruined them...we should have emptied them every eight days. But let’s stop there, there is no need to say everything because you will be there, I know it, and I don’t care, let’s be honest, I don’t care.<sup>891</sup>

Although it is unclear to what extent foul fresh water contributed to the catastrophic Middle Passage of the *Conseil*, it expectedly did not improve the health of the ship’s enslaved cargo.

Several scholars have determined that the length of the Middle Passage was an important indicator of mortality on board, as the risk of disease, spoilage of supplies, or rebellion increased the longer a voyage lasted. When analysing the relationship between mortality and voyage length, Raymond Cohn and Richard Jensen also found that mortality surged after ships passed the voyage length which was average for a particular slaving route. In their study, the authors applied the assumption that slaving captains were rational, profit-maximizing economic actors, and would embark rations for a voyage average in length (with some allowance for slightly longer voyages), not for an excessively long crossing. Therefore, they explained the upward ‘kink’ in mortality when vessels passed the average length of a voyage by the running down of provisions,

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<sup>889</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 35; Stein, *The French slave trade*, 88.

<sup>890</sup> Postma, *The Dutch*, 158-9.

<sup>891</sup> SHDR Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 20 March 1784: “*ayant Le detaille de L’eau je vois que Les piece premier dans Le navire son Beacoup meilleur que cette Embarquier au moment du depart parce que L’on a Negligee de Les faire videe et que L’eau Les a Entierement gastée Soint que L’ont devoit avoir de Les vide tous Les huit jour areste il ne faut pas tous dire car tu sera La je le Sais et je m’en f... soiyons honnestte je m’en mocque*”.

reduced rations, and as a result, occurrence of starvation and more disease.<sup>892</sup> Joseph Miller, in a different article, suggested a similar U-shape in the mortality rates experienced by slavers caused by the running out of supplies during delayed voyages.<sup>893</sup>

TABLE 8.5 Length of Middle Passage of three *Real permiso* ships, 1783-4.

Vessel	Place of departure	Departure	Arrival	Passage length (days)	
				Romberg	Avg., 1750-1800 <sup>894</sup>
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	Gold Coast	04.03.1784	01.06.1784	88	75
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	Malembo	17.12.1783	20.02.1784	65	60
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	Malembo	08.02.1784	17.04.1784	69	60

Source: See Appendix A.11, A.15, and A.16.

For three of the slaving voyages dispatched by Romberg & Consors we were able to calculate the exact length of their Middle Passage (Table 8.5). The *Roi du Congo*, first, took 65 days to go from Malembo to Havana, only five days longer than the European average of 60 between 1750 and 1800. Presumably, this short overextension of the journey was covered by precautions taken by the captain—in any case, the *Congo* suffered a relatively minor percentage of loss (cf. supra). A completely different image emerges from the *Conseil de Flandre*. The vessel had also left from Malembo and had crossed to Martinique in 69 days, more than a week longer than average. During her passage, the log keeper of the *Council* recorded 59 deaths among the enslaved Africans; from 47 of these people, he also noted down the cause of death. As Figure 8.8 shows, the effects of malnutrition increased the longer the voyage lasted: while dysentery is the main cause of death in the early stages of the crossing, scurvy begins to wreak havoc among the ship’s human cargo after one month, eventually killing 24 people before reaching Martinique. Almost certainly, this was the result of the captive Africans *de facto* receiving reduced rations due to the fact the served

<sup>892</sup> Raymond Cohn and Richard Jensen, ‘The determinants of slave mortality rates on the Middle Passage’, *Explorations in Economic History* 19:3 (1982) 269-82.

<sup>893</sup> Joseph Miller, ‘Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Statistical Evidence on Causality’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11:3 (1981) 418.

<sup>894</sup> Between 1750 and 1800, the TSTD lists 1461 vessels who sailed from the Gold Coast for the Americas. Of 424 expeditions, the date of departure in Africa and the date of arrival in the Caribbean is known. Likewise, 264 ships undertook an Atlantic crossing from Malembo; 150 left enough data to compute the length of their respective Middle Passages.

meals were barely edible (see quote above). Although captain Destrais eventually replenished supplies, the damage was already done: during the two-week voyage from Martinique to Saint-Domingue, the *Conseil* lost another 46 enslaved people.<sup>895</sup>

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<sup>895</sup> Destrais bought his provisions at the merchant house of Terrier-Delaistre in Saint-Pierre, for a total sum of 11,403 French *livres*, or 5,329 fl.w.g.. There are no figures available for the purchases made by the *Conseil de Flandre* in the Austrian Netherlands, but the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd*, a vessel of equal size, had spent about 10,000 guilders on food for its captive Africans, suggesting the restocking by Destrais was a major one. Unfortunately, the source does not reveal which foodstuffs were purchased. See AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 40 r.





FIGURE 8.8 Deaths of enslaved Africans to scurvy during the Atlantic crossing of the *Conseil de Flandre*, 8 February 1784–5 May 1784. *Source data:* SHDR, *Inscription Maritime* (Quartier de l’Île d’Yeu MR 5 P. 4, 150, *Journal of the*

*Conseil de Flandre*. I would like to thank Britt Lonneville for plotting the ship’s coordinates on the map.

The *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* also spent an extended period of time on the high seas. Ships in Upper West Africa, having finished their trade, were unable to cross directly to the Americas; they first continued south before picking up the easterly winds south of the equator. Therefore, the average elapsed time between the final purchase and the actual arrival in the Caribbean between 1750 and 1800 was 75 days (see Table 8.5). The *Saxe-Teschen*, however, was stuck on the Atlantic for 88 days due to “contrary winds”. With this phrasing, the captain presumably referred to the calms often encountered in the middle of the ocean after shifting to a northern route and crossing the equator again (the so-called ‘doldrums’).<sup>896</sup> 88 days, however, was not extremely exceptional either—about a quarter of the ships who made the crossing between 1750 and 1800 took longer<sup>897</sup>—but given the fact that the vessel had spent a long time on the coast to reach capacity, her human cargo presumably was exhausted and her provisions stretched even before departure. After arriving in Cap Français, captain Barabé immediately put out for Port-au-Prince. This relatively short stretch of lining the coast rapidly turned into an arduous two-week venture as contrary winds caught the ship for ten days in the Saint Marc Channel, killing over two dozen additional captives. Georg Bapst, in the parlance of the slave trader, related that the ship’s prisoners were “*all dying of Scurvy & most of them [were] as big as barrels*”.<sup>898</sup> The ship’s log—which covers the final part of the journey, see Figure 8.9—confirms that scurvy was the main affliction during the final weeks of the voyage, similar to the *Conseil de Flandre* (see Figure 8.8). As the *Saxe-Teschen* sold off surplus food and water from her journey on Saint-Domingue, it seems that mainly the quality (i.e. victuals with too few vitamin C) of the food had been severely compromised by the long voyage, not the quantity.<sup>899</sup>

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<sup>896</sup> Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 278–9.

<sup>897</sup> TSTD, see 102n for dataset description.

<sup>898</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Co. to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784), “*tous mourans du Scorbut & la majeure partie gros comme des Barriques*”. Presumably Bapst was quoting first-hand information from captain Barabé.

<sup>899</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 90 r.

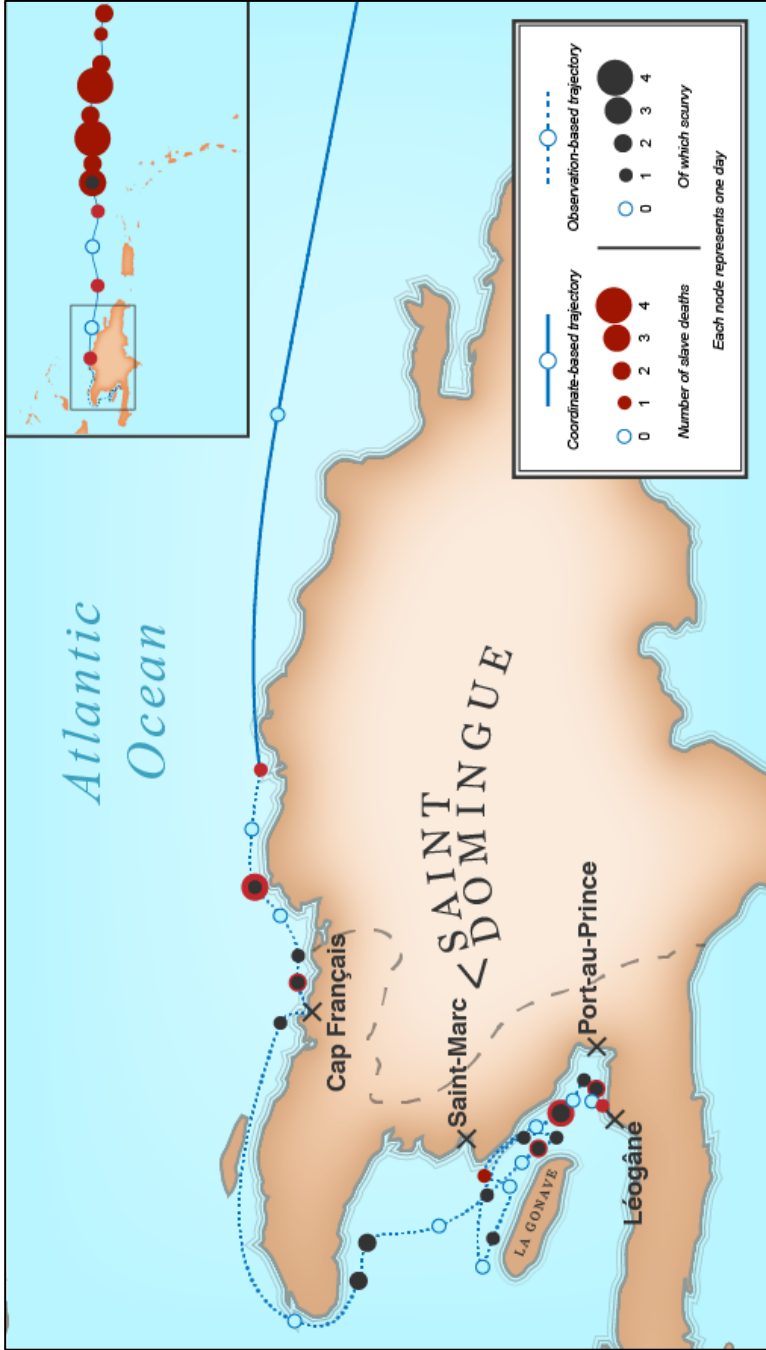


FIGURE 8.9 Deaths of enslaved Africans to scurvy during the final part of the voyage of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, May–June 1784. *Source data:* ADC, F6120, Log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*. I would like to thank Britt Lonneville for plotting the ship’s coordinates on the map.

Like others working in maritime sectors, surgeons were responsible for maintaining the health of the crew aboard the ship. Specific to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they also had an important responsibility in selecting enslaved Africans on the African coast, whom they minutely examined in order to make sure that the person in question held the right physical attributes to fetch a good price overseas and was healthy enough to survive the Atlantic crossing and not present a source of infection for the rest of the cargo.<sup>900</sup> Lastly, once the vessel had cleared the coast of Africa, surgeons were ought to maintain health among the enslaved passengers. However high their competence or medical training might be, the main contribution of surgeons in reducing mortality on slave ships was them insisting on basic measures such as keeping the ship clean, allowing the prisoners regular exercise on deck (often including humiliating forced “dancing”), and providing them with pure water and proper food.<sup>901</sup> When these procedures failed and the structural violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was felt in all its force, most scholars agree that surgeons could do very little to alleviate the ensuing inflictions and diseases, and were especially powerless in the face of epidemics.<sup>902</sup>

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<sup>900</sup> Richard Sheridan, ‘The Guinea Surgeons on the Middle Passage: The Provision of Medical Services in the British Slave Trade’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14:4 (1981) 615-6.

<sup>901</sup> Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Explaining the Mortality Decline in the Eighteenth-Century British Slave Trade’, *The Economic History Review* 53:2 (2000) 262-83.

<sup>902</sup> Klein, *The Middle Passage*, 229; Sheridan, ‘The Guinea Surgeons’, 605; Mustakeem, ‘Diet, Disease, and Mortality’, 478-80, 486; Bernhard Bierlich, ‘The Danish Slave Trade, its surgeons and slave mortality’, *Outre-mers* 96:2 (2009) 229-30.

TABLE 8.6 Surgeons enlisted by Romberg's vessels, 1783-4.

Vessel	Name	Rank	Salary (in fl.w.g.)*		
			Head surgeon	Second surgeon	Mate
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	Pierre Querquy	head	—	—	—
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	Joseph de Marlet	second	—	—	—
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	Charles Delalande	head	84	—	84
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	François Bisscop	second	—	23	84
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	Jean Baptiste Vervier	head	47	—	93
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	Hendrik Jan ter Horst	second	—	56 [sic]	93
<i>Starhemberg</i>	Jean Baptiste Lamisse	head	56	—	70
<i>Starhemberg</i>	François Gonne	second	—	23	70
<i>Vlaemisch Zeepaerd</i>	Nicolas Drouet	head	—	—	—
<i>Vlaemisch Zeepaerd</i>	Gregorius Flamand	second	—	—	—
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	Louis Dupont	head	84	—	93
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	Jean Caudron	second	—	42	93

Source: RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr.

\*Converted from French *livres*.

What was the effect of surgeons on the mortality on board of Romberg's ships? All of the Imperial slavers dispatched by the merchant had enlisted a head surgeon and a second surgeon before departure (Table 8.6).<sup>903</sup> Including two health practitioners was common by the eighteenth century, and Romberg's French captains did not deviate from this procedure when in Imperial service, nor did the merchant force them to forego on the practice for financial reasons.<sup>904</sup> While second surgeons were often still in an apprenticeship, head surgeons had finished their medical training and often possessed experience at sea or specifically in the slave trade.<sup>905</sup> The specific skills (as well as the general scarcity on the Ostend labour market) of these labour specialists is reflected in their salary: most surgeons employed by Romberg claimed among the highest wages aboard the ship; Charles Louis Delalande, the first surgeon of the *Négrier Impérial*, even managed to negotiate a monthly sum of 84 guilders (180 French *livres*), equalling the pay of the mate.<sup>906</sup> In addition, surgeons were entitled to a commission of 1.25 percent on the number of people sold in the Americas, as

<sup>903</sup> See Appendix A.17-A.23.

<sup>904</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 19; de Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 133.

<sup>905</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 19.

<sup>906</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/283, Muster roll of the *Négrier Impérial* (Ostend, 4 March 1783).

such tying merit to effort.<sup>907</sup> Likely the higher pay of some surgeons compared to others reflected experience or higher medical training. This was probably the case for Jan Baptist Vervier, who drew a relatively modest salary of 47 guilders per month. As we discussed in Chapter 2, Vervier had finished his studies in Leuven in 1777, had established a practice in Ghent the following year, and had then been appointed official physician of the Imperial troops in the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>908</sup> This career path likely explained his lower salary, as Vervier would only have treated civilians and soldiers and would have had no experience whatever with the afflictions common to the maritime industries, with the disease environment of the tropics, or with the particular tasks bestowed on surgeons in the slave trade. Another explanation might be that Vervier, as he cumulated his role as surgeon with his Imperial orders, drew an additional salary from Vienna.<sup>909</sup> In any case, Vervier's decision to join Romberg's fleet turned out to be a prudent career decision. No doubt helped by his experience gained in Africa, the doctor quickly ascended in Ghent's medical world and, as shown by the many old master paintings adorning his home, he died a wealthy man.<sup>910</sup>

As for the rest of Romberg's health personnel, we can only speculate on their actual learnedness. The best information available comes from the ill-fated *Conseil de Flandre*, which sank off Île d'Yeu in the return leg of the voyage. On the ship, health was administered by Louis Dupont and his aid, Jean Caudron. When the *Conseil* disappeared beneath the waves, so did Dupont's

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<sup>907</sup> AdP *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 66 v.

<sup>908</sup> Early biographers of Vervier claimed the doctor undertook "more than one sea voyage" for his Imperial mission (see Goethals, *Histoire des lettres*, 377-8, "plus d'un voyage de long cours". See also the biographical introduction to Adolphe De Ceuleneer, *Een onuitgegeven gedicht van J.-B. Vervier* (Ghent 1910) 3-12). It is doubtful, however, that Vervier effectively embarked on an Africa voyage prior to the *Roi du Congo*: he is listed as a doctor in the *Wegwyzer van Gendt* from 1778 to 1783, disappears during his spell on the *Congo*, and reappears afterwards (see UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gendt*, 1778-85). Additionally, in Autumn 1783, he published a poem on Jan Palfyn, a fellow Ghent doctor (Vervier, *Gedigt aan Mr. Johannes Palfyn*).

<sup>909</sup> No salary, however, is paid to Vervier by the *gastos secretos*, the channel used by Vienna during the eighteenth century to make discrete payments. See ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 926. As he was a military surgeon, Vervier perhaps received a salary from the *caisse de guerre*, but the archives of this institution were lost.

<sup>910</sup> Vervier's collection of 76 paintings comprised works of David Teniers the Elder, Francisco Zurbaran, Anthony Van Dyck, and Pieter Paul Rubens. UAG, *Catalogue d'une partie des tableaux et des objets d'art, formant le cabinet de feu Mr. J.B. Vervier* (Ghent, 1829).

personal chest, but French workmen later managed to salvage the box from the shipwreck. The inventory which was drafted up afterwards reveals that he was equipped with over thirty different types of utensils, ranging from razors over scalpels to tools for pulling teeth.<sup>911</sup> Additionally, Dupont had “23 volumes of books on Surgery” at his disposal, which were later sold on auction.<sup>912</sup>

The log of the *Conseil de Flandre* provides little information about the day-to-day activities of both surgeons, apart from general mentions of administering medicine and one post-mortem autopsy on an enslaved woman (cf. supra). On one occasion, the records mention the bringing on deck of the enslaved Africans in order to get some fresh air and physical exercise, which presumably also happened on the instigation of the surgeon.<sup>913</sup> Once dysentery and scurvy start to wreak havoc among the crew and the enslaved people, however, the anonymous recordkeeper features Dupont and Caudron much more often. Almost exclusively, he uses the log to express his aversion of the alleged incompetence of Dupont (whom he had nicknamed *picocoinna*), which seemingly was widely shared among the crew. “*A man has died after taking medicine which did not cure him from an ordinary illness,*” the log says on 3 March 1784, “*the surgeon and the picocoinna are two great destroyers*”.<sup>914</sup> The author continues his abject disapproval the following day, saying that “*Our surgeon, taking as little care of himself as he does of his patients, ate porpoise eggs and had an indigestion, although it failed to rid us of him.*”<sup>915</sup> Yet the writer’s disappointment lasted only until 8 March: “*Finally, for the general good has died Seigneur Louis Dupont, farewell picocoinna*”.<sup>916</sup> The death of the

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<sup>911</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Sale of surgeon’s equipment (Île d’Yeu, 26 October 1784).

<sup>912</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Auction report (Île d’Yeu, damaged date), “*vingt trois volumes...de livres de chirurgie*”.

<sup>913</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 14 March 1784, “*Detendu et monte Les negre differens fois pendant Laprais middy*”.

<sup>914</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 3 March 1784, “*Le 3 mars nous est mort un homme aprais avoir pris medecine sans L’avoir rendue maladie ordinaire...Le chirurgien et le Picocoinna sons deux Grand destruteur*”.

<sup>915</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 3 March 1784, “*Nostre chirurgien ce menagens au sy peut qu’il menage cest malade a mange des oeufs de marsoins a eu une indigestions qui a manquer de nous L’enlevé*”.

<sup>916</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 8 March 1784, “*Enfin pour Le Bonheur Generalle est mort Le Sieur Louis Dupont adieu picocoinna*”.

despised Dupont (and the second surgeon, at an unknown date<sup>917</sup>), however, did little to cure ailing crewmembers or prisoners. Two weeks after the head surgeon's demise, the log's author reports that the task of administering medicine had since been necessarily bestowed on a common sailor, "*who was not at all lacking in Goodwill but had no Knowledge whatsoever*".<sup>918</sup> Although the source material is scant, it suggests that Dupont was sufficiently equipped and learned to fulfil his function on board, but—confirming the insights of previous scholarship—that he could do very little to stop epidemics. This *force majeure*, however, seems little understood by the rest of the crew: as is clear from this case-study, surgeons quickly became the target of hatred when they were perceived as failing to fulfil their primary duty for which they were hired and generously paid—ensuring the health of everyone on board.

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<sup>917</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Cap Français, 27 June 1784), "*La capitaine D'Estrais...ses deux chirurgiens étaient morts*".

<sup>918</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Île d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Log of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 25 March 1784, "*il a falu donner sa confiance a un matelot pour Ladministrations des remesde qui ce pendans na marquer que de la Bonne volonté mais point de Connoissance*".



## Making Landfall in the Caribbean

The trajectories of the enslaved Africans did not conclude upon reaching the other side of the Atlantic. Just as scholars have advocated for including the period preceding the Middle Passage, similar calls have been made to examine the period following arrival in the Americas and the sale of the cargo—often referred to as the ‘seasoning period’—during which enslaved individuals were often confined to the very ships that had transported them across the Atlantic. Similarly, authors such as Nicholas Radburn and Gregory O’Malley have recently highlighted the extensive inter-island and intracolonial trade in the Caribbean, which subjected enslaved Africans to further lengthy sea voyages even after completing the Atlantic leg of their journey.<sup>919</sup> This section explores both perspectives on looking beyond the Middle Passage in relation to Romberg’s slaving venture.

Slave ships calling at a colonial harbour often had to wait considerable periods of time before being allowed to disembark their cargoes, let alone begin the sale of their captives. Therefore, there was a strong continuity between the shipboard conditions of the Atlantic crossing and the time spent anchored off the colonial town or the initial stages of disembarkation. Illnesses, for example, tended to persist unabated, while the effects of malnutrition led to debilitating or fatal consequences long after the captives had arrived in the Americas.<sup>920</sup> In the beginning of May, for instance, Pierre Destrais sailed into Cap Français. The *Affiches américaines*, the local colonial newspaper, reported on its pages that the captain had arrived with a cargo of “434 healthy slaves”, which implied that another 46 prisoners had died during the two-week crossing from Martinique to Saint-Domingue.<sup>921</sup> As this fact and the analysis in the previous sections prove, the status of “healthy” ascribed by the journalist could not have been further from the truth. After its arrival, the *Conseil* was forced to hire a

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<sup>919</sup> Gregory O’Malley, ‘Beyond the Middle Passage: slave migrations from the Caribbean to North America, 1619-1807’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66:1 (2009) 125-72; Gregory O’Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill 2014); Nicholas Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée: The Transatlantic Slave Trade within Prerevolutionary Saint Domingue’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 81:2 (2024) 319-358.

<sup>920</sup> Miller, ‘Mortality’, 411; Postma, ‘Mortality’, 256-9; Gøbel, ‘Danish Shipping’, 148.

<sup>921</sup> BNF, *Affiches Américaines*, 5 May 1784.

warehouse to treat its human cargo.<sup>922</sup> To no avail: Vanstabel, a French captain residing in Cap Français, wrote to his employers that Destrais lost another 68 captives shortly after arrival, and that 72 Africans were in such poor health “nobody wanted them”.<sup>923</sup> The loss percentage of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* is unknown, but, like the *Conseil de Flandre*, its captives were so ill Saint-Dominican health inspectors ordered them ashore when the vessel arrived. Like the *Conseil*, they were treated for two months in a warehouse-turned-hospital specifically hired for that purpose.<sup>924</sup> The firm of Cottineau, Choffard & Cie, Romberg’s commissioners in Port-au-Prince, purchased fruits rich in vitamin C such as lemons, oranges, and bananas for the prisoners, in order to combat scurvy.<sup>925</sup> But the afflictions of the enslaved people on the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* ranged further still: in Autumn 1784, Cottineau, Choffard & Cie were forced to take back a prisoner (whom the factors had sold to a colonist called Louis Le Bled) as the African man had since the sale begun experiencing epileptic fits. He might have developed this condition during transit: as we mentioned before, prospective enslaved Africans were minutely examined by the surgeon and spent extended amounts of time in the ship’s hold before clearing from the African coast—if epilepsy had presented itself during this period, it is likely that Romberg’s captain would have tried to rid himself of the ‘unmarketable’ prisoner.<sup>926</sup>

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<sup>922</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 175 r.

<sup>923</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Cap Français, 6 July 1784), “*que personne ne demande*”.

<sup>924</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 175 r.

<sup>925</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 90 r.

<sup>926</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 112 r. The source mentions “Sr. Leblé”; no plantation owner with that name was active during this time frame, Louis Le Bled bearing the name with the closest resemblance. See BNF, *État détaillé des liquidations opérées...par la commission chargée de répartir l’indemnité attribuée aux anciens colons de Saint-Domingue* (Paris 1828) 4636. The man was later sold again, though for a very low price of 360 *livres tournois*.



FIGURE 8.10 The Caribbean trajectories of Romberg’s *permiso* ships, 1783-4. Source: See Appendix A.9-A.16.

Yet even after this initial ‘coasting’ period was over, the process of forced migration did not end for enslaved Africans. Radburn has recently shown how a “large, sophisticated, and well-organized intracolony slave trade” existed on Saint-Domingue in which merchants and captains moved recently arrived captives from port to port and town to town according to the physical characteristics—health, ethnicity, gender, or age—of the enslaved.<sup>927</sup> The presence of this intracolony system is epitomized by the pathways of the prisoners which were carried on Romberg’s vessels. While attending the sick and replenishing supplies in Cap Français, the ship’s officers generally ventured into town in order to gather information on prices. Although prices for captive labour in the town were lower than elsewhere in Saint-Domingue, Cap Français was the preferred port of sale for most slave traders as it was the largest and most liquidity-rich market on the island, allowing merchants to sell their human cargoes for cash rather than extending hard-to-recover credit to planters.<sup>928</sup> When some of the captives remained unsold, captains typically turned to other markets in the western or southern parts of the island, primarily Saint-Marc, Port-au-Prince, and Léogâne. Romberg’s captains adopted a similar strategy. Destrais, for instance, sold 289 people in Cap Français, but

<sup>927</sup> Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée’, 319-358, quote 323.

<sup>928</sup> Geggus, ‘The French Slave Trade’, 128.

subsequently also 64 others in Port-au-Prince—presumably the sickly slaves Vanstabel had commented on that “nobody wanted them”.<sup>929</sup> The sale of the cargo of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* followed a similar course of events: after marketing 200 of the 350 captive Africans in Cap Français, the remaining prisoners were shipped to Port-au-Prince—seemingly with little success, as two months later almost half of these people remained unsold.<sup>930</sup>

Because Saint-Domingue’s various ports and slave markets were separated by large distances and mountain ranges, land transport was generally avoided. The decision to sell in a different market than Cap Français therefore entailed subjecting the enslaved Africans to another sea voyage while they were still recovering from the gruelling Middle Passage. While the distance from Cap Français to Port-au-Prince usually took about a week to cover, the length of the voyage—and the human toll—could rise significantly when winds turned unfavourably.<sup>931</sup> As we have seen in the previous section, this was the experience of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*. Although ships which suffered epidemics during the Middle Passage usually halted their voyage in Cap Français, rushing the sale of their survivors, captain Barabé decided against this strategy after discussing with his factors, Lory & Plombard.<sup>932</sup> The captain did forego on the initial plan to go to Havana, but still decided to proceed to Port-au-Prince to sell the survivors of his rapidly dwindling cargo. Yet contrary winds confined the ship in the Saint-Marc Channel for more than a week, killing an additional 25 people and ultimately forcing the captain to disembark his prisoners in Léogâne.<sup>933</sup>

As Radburn recently argued for Saint-Domingue, the trajectories of enslaved Africans after being sold were not as straightforward as previously thought and did not constitute an endless stream of people disembarked from ships marching to plantations. Some, for instance, were bought and apprenticed

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<sup>929</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, ff. 71 v., 90 r., 107 r.

<sup>930</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 112 r.; BNF, *État détaillé des liquidations opérées ... par la commission chargée de répartir l'indemnité attribuée aux anciens colons de Saint-Domingue* (Paris 1828) 4636; Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* (Paris 1958 [1789]), II, 1075.

<sup>931</sup> Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée’, 324-7.

<sup>932</sup> Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée’, 330; RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784).

<sup>933</sup> ADC, F6120, Log of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*.

to craftsmen and shopkeepers in the major Saint-Dominican towns.<sup>934</sup> Some were sold to local ‘speculators’, who bought up sickly and weakened enslaved people in order to nurse them back to health and later sell them for a higher price.<sup>935</sup> This seems to have been the fate of the enslaved people of the *Saxe-Teschen*, who were bought by a merchant called Fruchard. Fruchard was established as a merchant in Les Cayes, a port in the southwest of Saint-Domingue where slave traders generally only offered the people who had found no buyers in the first and second rate ports of the island.<sup>936</sup> Presumably Fruchard speculated that, while there were no buyers for the worn-out prisoners of the *Saxe-Teschen* in Cap Français or Port-au-Prince, he would be able to retail them in the understocked slaving markets of southern Saint-Domingue.<sup>937</sup> Most of the enslaved people brought to the French colony by Romberg’s slave ships would have ended up toiling in the island’s plantation economy, but their African place of origin determined in which sector they ended up. Scholars have established that slaves from the Bight of Benin (i.e. those of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*), were especially in demand by sugar planters because of their purported above-average strength and agricultural experience. Captives hailing from West Central Africa (as those on the *Conseil de Flandre*) were viewed as less capable to endure the gruelling work of cultivating sugar, and were more often put to work on less-demanding coffee plantations.<sup>938</sup> But this was hardly a rule that plantation holders strictly adhered to.<sup>939</sup> One of the buyers of the prisoners from the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*, embarked in Ouidah in the Bight of Benin, for instance, was the aforementioned Le Bled, who owned a coffee plantation in Léogâne.

The three other *permiso* ships—the *Roi du Congo*, the *Comte de Belgioioso*, and the *Négrier Impérial*—also put into Cap Français for stores and in order to gather information on prices. After laying at anchor for about two weeks, during which the enslaved Africans remained trapped on the vessel in sight of land, the ships embarked again on another 1,000-kilometre-long

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<sup>934</sup> Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée’, 353-4.

<sup>935</sup> Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée’, 352.

<sup>936</sup> Gournay, *Tableau général du commerce, des marchands, négocians, armateurs, &c. de la France, de l’Europe, & des autres Parties du Monde* (Paris 1790) 288.

<sup>937</sup> Geggus, ‘The French Slave Trade’, 126.

<sup>938</sup> Geggus, ‘The French Slave Trade’, 128.

<sup>939</sup> Radburn, ‘Au-delà de la traversée’, 328.

voyage to Havana.<sup>940</sup> In the latter port they were disembarked and presented to François Carpentier, Romberg’s agent on the island, who inhabited a house which comprised “three Beautiful warehouses to accommodate the Negroes, the women and children separate [from the men]”.<sup>941</sup> Several sources allow for the charting of the trajectories of the enslaved Africans after they were sold and removed from Carpentier’s warehouses. A significant number, first, was sold to sugar plantation holders—particularly the enslaved Africans brought by the *Comte de Belgioioso*, who arrived in the midst of harvesting season; the other two vessels arrived somewhat too late. Carpentier also sold “a large part” of the firm’s enslaved Africans to the Spanish Crown, represented by Intendant Juan Ignacio de Urriza. A number of these ‘royal slaves’ were destined for Cuba’s *Real Factoría de Tabaco*. This institution, exploited within a royal monopoly, was controlled by the *Intendencia* and processed the tobacco grown on the island’s plantations before they were shipped off to the factory of Seville for further refinement. Although tobacco production was about five times smaller than sugar during the 1780s (and would soon be dwarfed by the latter industry), it was still considered an important sector during the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>942</sup> From the Seven Years’ War onwards, the Spanish government made a concerted effort to increase the size and quality of the *Factoría*’s produce, in order to drive Brazilian and Virginian tobacco of the Spanish peninsular market.<sup>943</sup> While slave labour was employed on tobacco plantations as well, Romberg’s captives were forcibly employed in the warehouses and mills of the *Real Factoría*: together with Erice, Carpentier sold 44 enslaved Africans (hailing from the *Négrier Impérial*) to the institution.<sup>944</sup> Cuban authorities may have found alternative use for Romberg’s ‘royal slaves’

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<sup>940</sup> See for example the case of the *Roi du Congo* in Appendix A.15.

<sup>941</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783), “trois Beaux magasins pour loger les negres, quartier pour femmes et enfants Separem[en]t”, “Jocuppe le haut de la maison de facon que jai le tout Sous les yeux”.

<sup>942</sup> Rodríguez Vicente, ‘El comercio cubana’, 6; Santamaría García, ‘Reformas coloniales’, 720.

<sup>943</sup> Santiago de Luxán Meléndez, ‘La segunda factoría de la Habana antes de la Guerra de la Independencia de las trece colonias 1760-1779. Una lectura desde el estanco español’, *Studia Historica: Historia Moderna* 37:1 (2015) 297-8.

<sup>944</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2821, Noticia de los negros vendidos a la Real Factoría de Tavacos por d[on] Pedro Juan de Erice (Havana, 27 June 1787); Santiago de Luxán Meléndez and Lía de Luxán Hernández, ‘Cuba: comercio de esclavos y tabaco 1696-1739’, *Coloquio de Historia Canario-Americana* 21:1 (2016) 1-15.

in the country's shipyards or on fortification construction sites. Additionally, the Crown still enlisted Africans in separate militias. These reputable forces were deployed in many foreign theatres during the American War of Independence, but as Romberg's slavers arrived after the ceasing of hostilities, the merchant's slaves, if enlisted, did not see action.<sup>945</sup>

### Bringing Slavery Home: Enslaved People in the Austrian Netherlands

Following the rekindled scholarly output with regards to the presence of the Atlantic slavery complex in the domestic economy of European countries in the shape of various forward and backward linkages (see Chapter 5), the *actual* presence of enslaved people on the European continent has come under increased scrutiny from historians. It was common practice for slaving merchants and captains to bring one or several of the people they had shipped into slavery home to work as a personal aid or cook.<sup>946</sup> Additionally, they served as a symbol to convey commercial success and status—often, when merchants sat for a portrait, they included their enslaved servants (see Figure 8.11). The aforementioned François Vanstabel, for example, wrote from Cap Français to his employer in Dunkirk that he had “*a beautiful small African...of about 9 years old, well-formed, whom my officers have named Malbroucq for his liveliness...I will take him with me and hope you will be satisfied with him*”.<sup>947</sup> Romberg's Le Havre partners held the same practices. During the 1770s, for example, his soon to be captain Pierre Destrais made three voyages with the *Scipio Africanus* from Le Havre to Cabinda, and then to Cap Français. On one of these trips, Destrais took two enslaved African boys back to France to serve in the home of David Chauvel, his employer. When Chauvel died in 1785, both the 19-year-old Henry Constant and the 22-year-old Pierre (cynically nicknamed ‘L’Africain’ and ‘Scipion’ after the vessel that had abducted them

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<sup>945</sup> Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana*, 296-7.

<sup>946</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 31-2, 45-6, 59, 63; Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 31.

<sup>947</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Cap Français, 8 July 1784), “*J'ai un joli petit nègre...d'environ 9 ans, bien formé, à qui mes officiers ont donné le nom de Malbroucq, à cause de sa vivacité...je vous l'apporterai et espère que vous en serez satisfait*”.

from their homeland) were set free, as was Chauvel's wish according to his testament.<sup>948</sup> Van Alstein, the Ghent slaving captain in the service of Nantes shipowners, also brought an enslaved servant home from his expedition to Malembo; the African boy remained with him for several years, until he escaped the service of Van Alstein when the captain resided in Paris in 1781.<sup>949</sup> Simon le Cocq of the *Négrier Impérial* bought an African girl from Romberg after arriving in Havana, presumably to take her back to Europe.<sup>950</sup> Although slaves officially gained their liberty as soon as they set foot on French soil, historians such as Sue Peabody and Samuel Chatman have shown that captive Africans often remained enslaved and under the control of their masters, despite legislative efforts to the contrary.<sup>951</sup> Moreover, their number was increasing as the century progressed: by 1777, an estimate of 700 enslaved Africans worked in the homes of elites of western France, with 4 to 5,000 for the whole kingdom.<sup>952</sup>

France was far from exceptional in this regard. In Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, and Denmark, research has shown a substantial African presence in port cities with links to the Atlantic from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>953</sup> German scholars, who during recent decades have found extensive links of the Holy Roman Empire with the Caribbean slavery complex, have shown how enslaved persons were subsequently passed from towns such as London, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen to cities in continental Europe.<sup>954</sup> As historians such as Eddy Stols, Johan Verberckmoes, and Jeroen Puttevils have stressed,

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<sup>948</sup> ADSM, *Amirauté du Havre (216BP)*, 416, ff. 82 r.—83. r. For Destrais' three voyages, see TSTD 32581, 32619, and 32644.

<sup>949</sup> Rinchon, *Pierre-Ignace-Liévin van Alstein*, 378-81; Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 365-7.

<sup>950</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 66 v., "Le Cocq cap[itaine] du Négrier à Désarmement, £1590 pour une Negresse qu'il a achetée à la Havanne au prix de 300 p[ia]sters]".

<sup>951</sup> Sue Peabody, "There are no slaves in France": the political culture of race and slavery in the Ancien Régime (New York 1996).

<sup>952</sup> Peabody, "There are no slaves in France", 4; Erick Noël, 'Noirs et gens de couleur dans les villes de l'ouest de la France au XVIIIe siècle', in: Guy Saupin, ed., *Villes atlantiques dans l'Europe occidentale du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle* (Rennes 2015) 217-26.

<sup>953</sup> Mark Ponte, 'Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen' Een Afro-Atlantische gemeenschap in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 15:4 (2019) 33-62.

<sup>954</sup> Mischa Honeck, Martin Klimke, and Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov, *Germany and the Black Diaspora points of contact, 1250-1914* (New York 2013), especially chapters 2 and 3; Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, "There are no slaves in Prussia?", in: Brahm and Rosenhaft, eds., *Slavery Hinterland*, 109-32.



the practice of keeping enslaved personnel was not unknown to the Southern Netherlands either: in sixteenth-century Antwerp, during the city’s commercial heyday, wealthy merchants often ‘employed’ enslaved African servants—a practice that, despite the official prohibition of slavery, was tacitly condoned by the city council.<sup>955</sup>



FIGURE 8.11 Dominique Deurbroucq and his spouse, Marguerite-Urbane Sengstack, c. 1753. Source: Pierre-Bernard Morlot, Musée d’Histoire de Nantes.

Not yet accounted for in current scholarship, Ostend’s years of prosperity add an extra chapter to the history of enslaved presence in the Southern Netherlands. On 14 May 1782, a Portuguese captain then lying with his ship in Ostend, reported that an African man—who had received the European name “Antonio” by his captor and was “old about 25 or 30 years and six foot and several inches of height”—had ran away from him, “[his] owner”, and consequently fled the port on a different vessel.<sup>956</sup> Like “Antonio”, several sources suggest that some of the enslaved Africans forcibly transported by Romberg’s vessels made a second crossing of the Atlantic. On 20 May 1784, for example, a Le Havre trading house paid Romberg & Consors a fee of 124 livres

<sup>955</sup> Eddy Stols, ‘Mercurius met een exotische maraboet. De Antwerpse koloniale handelsmetropool in de zestiende en zeventiende eeuw’, in: Verberckmoes, ed., *Vreemden vertoond*, 13-9; Verberckmoes, *Wij, Habsburgers*, 42-51; Puttevils, ‘Een vergeten bladzijde?’, 352-3.

<sup>956</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Ryxc, sr., 110/1128 (Ostend, 14 May 1782), “agé de vingt cinq a trente ans de six pieds et quelques pouces de hauteur”.

for a “*Certificate of arrival of 2 Blacks in Ostend*”. These captive Africans hailed from the cargo of the *Piano Forte*, one of the Le Havre slave ships the firm had invested in.<sup>957</sup> Several months earlier, on 19 December 1783, Pierre François Schepers of Romberg & Consors had paid 800 French *livres* to Louis Le Grand for a captive African that Pierre Le Sens, captain of the *États de Brabant*, had sent from Le Havre to Ghent.<sup>958</sup> Rupnow and Singerton wrote that Habsburg citizens, despite being subject to an empire-less nation, engaged in the ‘othering’ of foreigners just the same and “crafted a colonial gaze similar to other European empires”.<sup>959</sup> Schepers’ purchase of an enslaved servant may serve as a prime example of this argument. Perhaps the practices of his Norman contacts had inspired the merchant, or perhaps he mirrored himself to Van Alstein, who paid a visit to Ghent with his own enslaved servant in 1781.<sup>960</sup> But even without these personal connections, Ghent elites eagerly subscribed to French fashion, culture, and customs. This ‘francomania’ translated to various ways of outward display of wealth by the aristocracy and aspiring *bourgeoisie*: promenading the central squares—such as the Kouter, where Romberg & Consors had its offices—wearing exquisite clothing, moving through town in luxurious carriages, or organizing house parties in lavishly decorated interiors. It is easy to see how in this competitive environment of conspicuous consumption and status-seeking, Schepers considered an enslaved African a fitting way to convey his success as an entrepreneur to his peers among the Ghent elite.<sup>961</sup> While Chapter 5 stressed the vast array of links with the domestic economy of the Austrian Netherlands created by Romberg’s slaving business, these examples suggest that Romberg and his associates extended the linkages further and brought the Atlantic slaving complex directly home to the Austrian Netherlands.

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<sup>957</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 36 v., “*Certificat d’arrivée de 2 noirs à Ostende*”. See also Chapter 3 for the *Piano Forte*.

<sup>958</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 11 v., “*pour le Valeur d’un Negre que Le Sens a fait passer du Havre à Gand, suivant lettre de Le Grand du 11 courant, £800*”. I have attempted to trace the fate of this enslaved man but was unable to find any record. Enslaved people in Europe were sometimes baptized, although, as Peabody has shown, this was likely the exception rather than the rule (see Peabody, “*There are no slaves in France*”, 82); indeed, sifting through the baptism registers of all Ghent parishes for the years 1783 and 1784 yielded no result.

<sup>959</sup> Singerton and Rupnow, ‘Habsburg colonial redux’, 11.

<sup>960</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 367.

<sup>961</sup> Lenders, *Gent*, 69-72.

## Conclusion

Drawing on extensive secondary literature and closely examining tiny source fragments, this chapter has sought to reconstruct the migration stories of the individuals caught in Romberg's slaving business. First and foremost, this chapter has emphasized the importance of viewing the trajectories of enslavement as a whole. Although the Middle Passage was an especially gruelling and symbolically important leg of the journey, the process of forced migration was far longer and more complex than simply crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Cases such as the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* and the *Conseil de Flandre* demonstrate that the Middle Passage cannot be fully understood without accounting for the time spent on the African coast, as well as considering the overland marches that preceded the coasting phase. Nor did the end of the Middle Passage mark the conclusion of the process of forced migration: the pathways of the enslaved Africans forcibly transported by Romberg's ships confirm the existence of an extensive intracolonial slave trade system, which subjected captives to prolonged and winding journeys long after the actual Atlantic crossing had ended—some of which culminated only after a second Atlantic crossing, all the way to the Austrian Netherlands.

What this chapter also has revealed is that Romberg's slaving business, except from the unusual colours flying in the mast, differed very little from those of contemporary merchants. As we already concluded in the previous chapters, Romberg & Consors enlisted experienced personnel abroad, and there is no proof the firm attempted to cut corners with regards to the number of crew or the amount of provisions embarked on its vessels. Most vessels experienced average losses during passage, and those who were swept by scurvy and dysentery had suffered from supplies which had spoiled while at sea—problems faced by many European ships during the Atlantic crossing. The decision to still dispatch ships at a moment when it was sufficiently clear to Romberg & Consors' associates that many merchants in Europe were harbouring the same idea and that undoubtedly a massive competition would ensue on the African shore—which cost the prisoners of ships like the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* dearly—was a massive gamble. Yet due to the immense danger of death and disease, *any* slaving expedition sailing from Europe was in many ways a

gamble; the thoroughly speculative aspect part and parcel of the cynical lottery which was the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The hundreds of people who died within Romberg's business and the thousands who were traumatized trying to avoid the same fate thus were primarily victims of the inherently violent nature of the slave trade, rather than the careless and clueless practices of a minor slave carrier hoping to get rich quickly from an unprecedented commercial opportunity. Romberg was certainly a newcomer, but he was not a maverick.



CHAPTER NINE  
Seas of Silver, Seas of Status  
The Motives behind Romberg's Africa Trade

**I**N NOVEMBER 1790, THE *Venus* sailed into Havana, releasing its large Spanish ensign to the wind. The royal frigate lay deep in the water, heavy from all the silver she was carrying from the port of Veracruz. François Carpentier, who from the quayside had watched the vessel drift into the harbour, rushed off towards the house of Domingo de Hernani, Cuba's newly installed Intendant, to once again ask for the settlement of the Crown's debts. October had marked the conclusion of the agent's seventh year on Cuba, but the date had hardly posed cause for celebration. For several years now, Carpentier had tried to finish up his business on *La Isla* and get hold of the remaining sums that were due to the firm he represented. Yet fruitlessly so, and—without any sense of irony—the slave trader had begun to refer to his Havana assignment as his “imprisonment”. Arriving at Hernani's, however, the Intendant once again denied Carpentier's wishes by stating that Madrid had earmarked the silver for peninsular purposes and the cargo of the *Venus* was to pass to Cádiz undiluted.

Frustrated, Carpentier reported the deadlock to Romberg in Brussels. “*I am losing my patience*”, the merchant wrote, “*I cannot take this anymore*”.<sup>962</sup>

Why did Romberg move into the slave trade during the 1780s? A hope for material gain seems obvious. Tales of fabulous wealth amassed from single, successful voyages were frequently circulated among slave merchants. Yet every trader also knew the risks involved in human trafficking and the parade of perils that stalked the slaving enterprise from beginning to end. Protracted payment schemes in the colonies, bemoaned by Carpentier, were just one of these possible adversities. Ships risked perishing in every maritime sector, but the long periods slaving vessels spent on the high seas and on the African seaboard made the occasions of doing so all the more frequent. The brutal conditions to which Africans were subjected routinely prompted epidemic outbreaks on board. Lastly, market conditions shifted rapidly, and an ill-timed purchase or sale could spell financial ruin for a voyage.

Ever since the end of the eighteenth century, the profitability of slave trade has been widely debated among scholars. A particularly important spark for research was the ‘primitive accumulation’ argument raised by authors such as Eric Williams.<sup>963</sup> This hypothesis argued that the returns earned in the slave trade contributed significantly to Europe’s industrial take-off. Williams underpinned his argument by the profit rates of the British slave trade during the 1780s, which he—in line with nineteenth-century calculations—estimated at 30 percent and projected onto the larger period of slave trade.<sup>964</sup> In subsequent decades, three methods have been brought forward to test the Williams Thesis. Robert Thomas and Richard Bean, first, focussed exclusively on the market structure of the slave trade. Seeing a framework of ‘atomistic competition’, they argued that the slave trade could not have been highly profitable in the long run because any unusually high earnings would have quickly been diminished by the influx of competitors entering the market.<sup>965</sup> A

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<sup>962</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Carpentier to Romberg (Havana, 30 November 1790), “*ma detention*”, “*je n’y tiens plus & je perd patience*”; AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, Carpentier to the Governor (Havana, 11 March 1788), “*mi detencion*”.

<sup>963</sup> See also Chapter 5.

<sup>964</sup> See Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic trade and the British economy*, Chapter 3 for an overview of the (British side of the) debate.

<sup>965</sup> Robert Thomas and Nelson Bean, ‘The Fishers of Men: The Profits of the Slave Trade’, *The Journal of Economic History* 34:4 (1974) 885-914.

second method which has been employed by historians constitutes the use of aggregate numbers of slaves transported across the Atlantic and data on prices in the Caribbean region. Combining the two gives an estimate of profitability based on a large amount of available, albeit sometimes imprecise data. Roger Anstey, using this particular procedure, arrived at a profit rate of about 10 percent.<sup>966</sup> A third and final method consists of compiling the results of individual slaving voyages using the accounting books of merchants. Although the latter approach is generally considered the most precise and promising of the three, it is plagued by its own challenges. First, comprehensive numerical reports of slaving voyages preserved in private and official archives are scarce. The material that *has* been passed to posterity may contain biases toward either very successful or very underperforming voyages, which naturally skews the overall image of profitability.<sup>967</sup> Additionally, historians have used different methods of presenting profits in the slave trade. Some have employed the ratio between the investment and the net profits of the venture minus one, mostly called 'profit rate' in literature. This profit rate, however, does not take into account the important time element of slave trade, in particular the lengthy process of repatriating the proceeds which drastically reduced the real profits of the venture. In order to give a fair representation of returns, therefore, the profit rate of a particular venture should be 'annualized' and distributed over the amount of years it took the merchant to recuperate all (or the bulk) of his returns.<sup>968</sup>

While Joseph Inikori defended Williams by again highlighting the high profit rates of the 1780s, most historians subscribing to this micro-economical perspective have generally achieved results which suggested a downward adjustment of the large rates of return assumed by advocates of the 'primitive accumulation' thesis.<sup>969</sup> Gerhard de Kok calculated for the MCC that the company achieved an average annual profit of 4.23 percent between 1755 and 1794.<sup>970</sup> Historians such as Kenneth Morgan, David Richardson, and Stephen

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<sup>966</sup> Roger Anstey, 'The Volume and Profitability of the British Slave Trade, 1761-1807', in: Stanley Engerman and Eugene Genovese, *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton 1975) 3-32.

<sup>967</sup> Thomas and Bean, 'The Fishers of Men', 897; Daudin, 'Comment calculer les profits', 53.

<sup>968</sup> See for example Daudin, 'Comment calculer les profits'.

<sup>969</sup> Inikori, 'Market structure', 758-61.

<sup>970</sup> de Kok, *Walcherse ketens*, 84-6.



Behrendt have placed the profits of the eighteenth-century British trade in the range of 5-10 percent.<sup>971</sup> Guillaume Daudin contributed to the debate by incorporating French data on the more encompassing category of long-distance trade, arriving at an 'internal rate of return' of 6 percent.<sup>972</sup> However, the material basis for these calculations is relatively fragile, and the exact profitability of the slave trade remains a topic of debate. The data compiled for Romberg, which stems from the controversial period of the 1780s, will add new evidence to this discussion.

Material gain, however, was but one part of the rewards Romberg could hope to achieve by participating in slave trade. Colonial commerce was also intricately linked with social capital. Among merchants and the public at large, dealing in plantation crops such as sugar, coffee, and indigo was considered a more 'elevated' kind of trade than dealing in traditional commodities such as Baltic grain, wood, or iron. In contrast to the latter, colonial goods appealed to the senses, acted as a physiological stimulants, and still had a sense of luxury about them, despite their consumption over the course of the eighteenth century by an increasing number of people.<sup>973</sup> At the same time, because they were commodities transported to Europe over thousands of kilometres, colonial goods appealed to the vogue of exoticism and the fascination with overseas places, objects, and cultures which swept Europe during the Early Modern period.<sup>974</sup> Taken together, as Braudel reminds us, tropical goods were considered "a 'royal' merchandise, worthy of the great merchant".<sup>975</sup> Additionally, the knowledge, expertise, and experience necessary to set up and maintain transoceanic shipping networks bestowed even more prestige on colonial merchants.<sup>976</sup>

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<sup>971</sup> Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic trade and the British economy*, 44; David Richardson, 'Profitability in the Bristol-Liverpool Slave Trade', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 62:1 (1975) 301-8; Stephen Behrendt, *The British Slave Trade, 1785-1807: Volume, Profitability, and Mortality* (Wisconsin 2003) 283-5.

<sup>972</sup> Daudin, 'Profitability', 147-53. The 'internal rate of return' is a method which differs from the one used by other historians and which tends to be more conservative.

<sup>973</sup> See for example McCants, 'Exotic Goods', 433-62.

<sup>974</sup> See for example Roy Porter and G.S. Rousseau, *Exoticism in the Enlightenment* (Manchester 1990); Verberckmoes, ed., *Vreemden vertoond*; Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia 2015) 1-23.

<sup>975</sup> Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, 405.

<sup>976</sup> Delobette, 'Négociants', 288.

Plying Atlantic routes, therefore, was a source of status, and merchants tapped into it by ostentatiously showcasing their involvement in these shipping lanes. French slave traders, for example, routinely wore attire washed in Saint-Domingue, whose streams were known to cleanse clothes to a whiteness impossibly to achieve in France.<sup>977</sup> Others introduced members of their enslaved cargoes into European metropolises, where they forced them to work as unfree servants.<sup>978</sup> When merchants sat for a portrait, they often included symbols of their profession like ships (visible in the background through a conveniently placed window) or piles of correspondence, referring to the intricate network they commanded. Merchants engaged in colonial trade specifically surrounded themselves with Atlantic fauna and flora, the plantation crops they dealt in, or the African servants employed in their houses.<sup>979</sup> These visual artifacts symbolized the merchant's successful participation in the Atlantic system, the extensive knowledge necessary to do so, and the reach of his network and his operations. As Beth Fowkes Tobin argued, they simultaneously symbolized imperial power over overseas resources and peoples.<sup>980</sup> Taking this interpretation further, wielding control over maritime trade routes symbolized dominance over the seas, while exerting authority over crops produced in transatlantic territories signified control over these territories themselves. In other words, it represented the mercantile equivalent of the sovereignty exercised by princes. Lastly, as Jennifer Van Horn highlighted, the visual cues of involvement in the Atlantic system—in real life or in portraits—also functioned as a confirmation of belonging to an exclusive and elite community of Atlantic merchants, or as an aspirational claim to the membership of this group by an outsider.<sup>981</sup>

This chapter will deal with the motives behind Romberg's African scheme and the benefits which accrued to the merchant through the slave trade. First, I look at the material side of Romberg's rewards. Although no detailed

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<sup>977</sup> Francis Lefeuve, *Souvenirs Nantais et vendéens*, quoted in and translated by Boulle, 'Slave trade', 88.

<sup>978</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>979</sup> Jennifer Van Horn, *The power of objects in eighteenth-century British America* (Chapel Hill 2017) 1-26; Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power. Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-century British Painting* (London 1999) 27-55. See also the portraits of Dominique Deurbroucq and his spouse, Marguerite-Urbane Sengstack, in Figure 8.11 in the previous chapter.

<sup>980</sup> Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power*, 1-55.

<sup>981</sup> Van Horn, *The power of objects*, 14-6, 140-1.

concluding account of every individual voyage has survived, sufficient data remains to accurately compile the financial outcome of the firm's slaving venture. Few accounts of slave voyages have been preserved: Daudin estimated that 104 such documents still exist for Great Britain, while about 150 for France.<sup>982</sup> Contributing Romberg's case-study to this limited set of data, I conclude that the merchant's slaving business was extremely loss-making. I confirm the image of the early 1780s as a timeframe in which exceptional opportunities beckoned in the slave trade, but I also show that the sector was characterized by a high degree of competition. This led to periods of scarcity and abnormal profits being quickly followed by more dispatches from Europe, resulting in an increased supply, decreased prices, and large losses—as the financial catastrophe of the slaving scheme of Romberg & Consors exemplifies.

Second, I analyse the social rewards reaped by Romberg's 'maritime turn' during the early 1780s, especially his participation in colonial trade, first through the slaving business of Romberg & Consors and later through the Bordeaux branch Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie. I show how Romberg and his associates viewed maritime trade in general and Atlantic trade in particular as a source of social capital. As outsiders to the mercantile elite residing in Europe's Atlantic metropolises, they aspired to join their ranks, not only through practice but also by subscribing to their culture and symbols. This reputation gain was independent of the material success of Romberg's enterprise: the ascent in status was cemented in a noble title before the proceeds of the venture were realized. Partly, it continued to exist—at least in the eyes of Romberg—after its severe losses had become public knowledge, but the financial and judicial backlash of the merchant's financial troubles of the second half of the 1780s reduced it considerably. Overall, this chapter shows that to understand merchants entering and engaging in slave trade, we should consider more than material returns alone, and instead try to get a complete image of the various ways, economically, socially as well as culturally, in which these entrepreneurs used and envisioned the Atlantic Ocean.

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<sup>982</sup> Daudin, 'Comment calculer les profits', 53.

Seas of Silver:  
The Material Gains of Romberg's Africa Trade

*Selling: Looking for a Market in the Caribbean*

What material incentives drove Romberg & Consors to engage in the slave trade? First, there was of course the ever-present possibility of a windfall profit, which enflamed the 'animal spirits' of many merchants. More important, however, were the unique market conditions of the American War of Independence, of which the firm must have been informed through its wide network. With fewer ships calling at African ports of embarkation, prices for enslaved labour had dropped steeply along the African seaboard. Figure 2.1 and Table 6.8 highlighted the low point of Africa expeditions during the late 1770s and early 1780s, a bottom level which the slave trade had not witnessed since the War of the Spanish Succession (1700-14). Since the latter timeframe, the demand for plantation crops in Europe—and thus for the enslaved people who produced them—had only grown larger. As demand outpaced supply by a considerable margin, prices for captive Africans in the Caribbean soared. Although navigational hazards and other calamities were as present as ever, many merchants felt that the wartime circumstances had skewed the 'lottery' of the slave trade towards the success side and hugely increased the expectations of drawing large profits.<sup>983</sup> This was even more applicable to neutral firms, which (at least on paper) did not have to fear losing their investments to privateers.

Exactly how high Romberg & Consors expected prices to climb in the Caribbean becomes clear from several documents. In the spring of 1782, first, the firm had distributed a prospectus of a two-ship expedition to West Africa, one slaver (what turned out to be the *Comte de Belgioioso*) and one ivory-carrying vessel (the *Empereur et Roi*). At the time of drafting the document, the operations of Romberg & Consors were still geared towards the French Caribbean and so the stated destination of the slaving vessel was Saint-Domingue. The firm calculated the ship would be able to carry 440 enslaved Africans. Carpentier, Bapst, and Schepers reckoned the firm could expect to

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<sup>983</sup> Inikori, 'Market Structure', 745-76.

receive an average price of 900 guilders for every person, which equalled about 1,927 French *livres*.<sup>984</sup> This estimate was reasonable enough, although perhaps slightly on the optimistic side. Series on slave prices in the Caribbean have not yet been published, but Van Alstein, the Flemish slaving captain in Nantes service, wrote in June 1782 (a few months after the drafting of the prospectus) that bonded people currently sold on Saint-Domingue for 1465-1600 *livres tournois*.<sup>985</sup>

Several months later Madrid gave permission to Romberg & Consors to sell their prisoners in Havana and the Ghent branch reoriented its business towards the Spanish imperial realm. The granted access to Cuban markets for bonded labour substantially elevated the firm's ambitions, prompting a corresponding adjustment in projected profits. In 1765, a non-wartime year, the price for an enslaved African in Havana sat in the range of 200-250 pesos, the exact price depending on age, sex, and ethnicity. The Spanish government paid about 50 pesos less, but made payments in cash and more promptly.<sup>986</sup> Juan Bosco Amores similarly estimated an average price range of 225-300 pesos for the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>987</sup> During the American War of Independence, however, lack of imports created a scarcity in bonded labour, and prices increased drastically. According to Gloria Garca, they steadily began moving upwards from the late 1770s and reached a peak at 361 pesos for enslaved men and 341 for enslaved women in 1782.<sup>988</sup>

Romberg & Consors, however, projected returns significantly higher than this price, or indeed higher than *any* price ever paid for enslaved Africans in Havana over the course of the eighteenth century. In November 1782, the firm's associates expressed their conviction of being able to sell their human cargoes for 500 pesos per person.<sup>989</sup> In later letters, their estimates were adjusted

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<sup>984</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Armement à Gand sous la direction de Romberg & Consors de deux navires Pour la cote D'Affrique.

<sup>985</sup> Converted from 2200-2400 livres de colonies, see Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 210.

<sup>986</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements negriers*, 34. When the Crown decided to grant freedom to enslaved Africans who had helped defend Havana against the British invader in 1762, slaveholders were compensated with a sum of 350-400 pesos per person, a price Schneider rightly regarded as "generous", see Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana*, 246.

<sup>987</sup> Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 162.

<sup>988</sup> Garca, 'La explotacion de moneda', 79.

<sup>989</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Schepers to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 13 November 1782).

upwards still, and went as far as aiming for 600 to 700 pesos per person.<sup>990</sup> If we take every piaster to be worth 5 French *livres* and 5 *sous*, the average price of an enslaved person was estimated by the firm to be in the range of 2,625–3,675 *livres tournois*, a remarkable upgrade with regards to the earlier prospectus. These prices far exceeded the actual prices for enslaved labour in Havana, and seem to have been based on mere rumours; in no way, as Ressel believes, did they represent price guarantees brokered with the Spanish Crown.<sup>991</sup> It is unclear whether the large estimates formulated by Romberg & Consors were merely a tool to attract investors—in line with the inflated tone of their prospectuses—or if the firm actually *was* that misinformed about Havana’s markets. The exceptionally large ship outlays (cf. *infra*) would suggest the latter option.

Due to the complexity of preparing a ship for Africa and the distances involved in the voyage, a long period of time elapsed between setting up the venture and the ship’s eventual arrival in the Caribbean. In that way, it was common for the price signal which had sparked the decision of participating in the slave to be no longer valid a year or longer afterwards.<sup>992</sup> This was the firsthand experience of Romberg & Consors. In January 1783, the United States and Great Britain had signed preliminary peace agreements. The end of hostilities had prompted the dispatch of an unprecedented number of slave ships toward West and Central Africa. This surge in supply eventually relaxed the scarcity of bonded labour in the Caribbean, and by the time Romberg & Consors’ ships showed up in Havana, market conditions were much grimmer for the firm than expected. In December 1783, Vanstabel, the Dunkirk master we met in the previous chapters, reported that Destrais and Lacoudrais (captains of the *Conseil de Flandre* and the *Roi du Congo*, respectively) were “hoping for a beneficial sale “with the Spanish”, but, so predicted Vanstabel, “I am certain that M[essieu]rs de Romberg will not find success there”.<sup>993</sup>

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<sup>990</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 3 December 1782).

<sup>991</sup> Ressel, ‘Spoils of neutrality’, 793. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>992</sup> Anstey, ‘The Volume’, 19.

<sup>993</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 14 December 1783), “*Ce sera Mr Lacoudrais...qui doit aller à La Havane faire sa vente...et l’espoir d’une vente avantageuse chez les espagnols. Je suis certain que les armateurs Mrs De Romberg n’y trouveront pas leur compte*”.

TABLE 9.1 Proceeds of different sales of enslaved Africans made by Romberg & Consors on Cuba and Saint-Domingue, 1783-4.

Ship	Persons	Location	Pesos	Proceeds sale of human cargo		
				P/pp.	Liures tournois	£t/pp.
<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	299	Havana	70,401	236	369,610	1,239
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	495	Havana	116,677	235	612,556	1,234
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	30	Havana	4,698	157	24,665	822
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	321	Havana	82,757	258	434,474	1,355
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	34	Havana	5,742	169	30,146	887
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	289	Cap Français	—	—	315,213	1,090
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	64	Port-au-Prince	—	—	64,436	1,007
<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	200	Cap Français	—	—	218,376	1,092
<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	53	Port-au-Prince	—	—	53,014	1,000
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	92	Port-au-Prince	—	—	68,265	742

Source: AdP, *Liures de compte des commercants faillits*, D5B6, 336.

Vanstabel was right. In November 1783, almost a year after the preliminary peace agreements, prices for captive male Africans had dropped to 300 pesos, 280 pesos for enslaved women, 260 pesos for boys, and 240 pesos for enslaved girls.<sup>994</sup> This price level closely resembled the peacetime 200–250 piaster range of 1765, and the price of 260 pesos for men and 231 pesos for women noted by García for the year 1787.<sup>995</sup> As Table 9.1 shows, the *Comte de Belgioioso* (which had already opened the sale of her cargo when Carpentier arrived) ultimately sold its 299 captives for a value of 70,401 pesos or 236 per person.<sup>996</sup> Compared with the 1,927 *livres* the firm had put forward in its prospectus for the ship, the actual price level of 1,239 *livres* entailed a downward adjustment of about 35 percent. This low sum must have disappointed Carpentier greatly and presented an immediate reality check with the plans drafted in Ghent. Indeed, as the merchant confided in a letter with regards to the *Belgioioso*, “*If only I had been here when that ship arrived...the arrangements that had been made did not please me, I had to conform without being able to remedy what had been done*”.<sup>997</sup>

Yet it appears that the deals struck by the *Belgioioso*'s officers in the absence of their employer simply reflected market conditions in Havana instead of poor negotiation skills. In June 1784, under Carpentier's supervision, the *Roi du Congo* sold 495 people of her cargo of 525 for a total sum of 116,677 pesos or 235 pesos per person, almost exactly the same price as the *Belgioioso*.<sup>998</sup> With regards to the *Négrier Impérial*, Carpentier managed to sell 44 enslaved Africans to the *Real Factoría* (the tobacco factory under the administration of the *Intendencia*) for 330 pesos, a slightly more advantageous price—especially given the royal counterparty.<sup>999</sup> The total cargo of 321 enslaved Africans, however, went for a total sum of 82,757 pesos or an average of 258 per person, implying that the people sold elsewhere than the *Real Factoría* fetched prices

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<sup>994</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

<sup>995</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 34; García, ‘La explotación de moneda’, 79.

<sup>996</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 26 r.

<sup>997</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783), “*Si j'avais été ici avant l'arrivée du Batiment...et les arrangem[en]ts qui lon avoit fait ne me plaisaient pas, j'ai bien du me Conformer Sans pouvoir remédier ce ce qui etoit fait.*”

<sup>998</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 51 v.

<sup>999</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2821, Noticia de los negros vendidos a la Real Factoria de Tavacos por d[on] Pedro Juan de Erice (Havana, 27 June 1787).



resembling those of the *Roi du Congo* and the *Comte de Belgioioso*.<sup>1000</sup> Moreover, supercargo Senat, Bapst, and Carpentier were the chief beneficiaries of the elevated prices: Senat sold his 29 private slaves for an average of 328 pesos, Bapst four slaves for 320 each, and Carpentier six people for 300 each.<sup>1001</sup> Both the *Roi du Congo* and the *Négrier Impérial* sold a small leftover group at a later auction for a significantly lower price, likely reflecting their age and sex (the 30 prisoners of the *Congo* were all girls) and their unhealthy condition resulting from the month-long process of enslavement.<sup>1002</sup>

Slave traders were well aware of the importance of timing the disembarkation of their captives in the Caribbean, as a temporary dearth of slave labour could create high profits while a glutted market could spell ruin for a voyage. These market fluctuations could be prolonged—caused by factors such as wartime disruptions or metropolitan credit crises, as seen in the 1770s—or relatively short, driven by the agricultural cycles in the region. Carpentier, soon after the *Belgioioso* had arrived, referred to such a micro-cycle when he wrote that

I have no doubt whatsoever these...Vessels will do an excellent business; the Colonists need slaves to work the sugar canes and now the [harvesting] Season is beginning. I have high hopes to make a good business because if our ships arrive promptly, I will have barely any competition.<sup>1003</sup>

The sugar harvest generally began in mid-October and ran through the middle of March. As it turned out, however, both the *Roi du Congo*—arriving in June—and the *Négrier Impérial*—arriving in May—failed to successfully time their arrival: the pair of ships showed up in the low point of the cycle, too late for the previous sugar harvest and too early for the next one.<sup>1004</sup>

In Cap Français, the *Conseil de Flandre* sold 289 prisoners for 315,213 *livres tournois*, or 1,090 per person, the cargo of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* fetching an identical price. In Port-au-Prince, Cottineau & Choffard sold 53 remaining people of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* and 64 captives belonging to the

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<sup>1000</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 67 r.

<sup>1001</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336.

<sup>1002</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336.

<sup>1003</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

<sup>1004</sup> See Appendix A.12 and A.15.

*Conseil de Flandre*, both groups for a round price of 1,000 *livres* per person.<sup>1005</sup> As a reminder, prices for enslaved Africans had stood at about 1465-1600 in June 1782. In 1783, prices of 1300-1465 were common, while in 1784 Van Alstein sold his cargo of slaves for an average of 1,100 *livres tournois*, although the prices of 1783 were still attainable in that year for adult slaves.<sup>1006</sup> Both the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* and the *Conseil de Flandre* stayed (well) below these price marks, presumably caused by the (unknown) composition or the (confirmed) worn-out state of their human cargoes. The 92 people of the *Saxe-Teschen* were sold for 68,265 *livres tournois*, or 742 per person. Undoubtedly, this 30 percent downward difference compared with the cargoes of the other vessels reflected the even poorer health of this ship's prisoners (see Chapter 8).

If we again take every piaster to be worth 5 French *livres* and 5 *sous*, Romberg's vessels turned out to be better off on Cuba than on Saint-Domingue, as the firm itself had expected: enslaved Africans sold 25-30 percent cheaper in Port-au-Prince and Cap Français than in Havana (see Table 9.1). Much of this mark-up, however, must have been cancelled out by the need for revictualling in Cap Français and the additional deaths during the passage to Cuba, with over 1,000 kilometres by no means a negligible stretch of voyage. What also becomes abundantly clear from Table 9.1 is that the proceeds of the slaving business lay nowhere near the returns expected by everyone—managers as well as shareholders—involved in the firm. While the Saint-Domingue prospectus of spring 1782 estimated a price of nearly 2,000 *livres* per enslaved person, and expectations for Havana exceeded 3,000 *livres* per person, no single cargo of enslaved individuals achieved an average price above 1,355 *livres*. No doubt there had been a window of opportunity in the Caribbean for enterprising merchants, but it had never been as large as Romberg & Consors had imagined it to be. Even this smaller window, however, they had largely missed.

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<sup>1005</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 90 r.

<sup>1006</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 209-10.

### *Repatriating: Return Cargoes and Protracted Payments*

A large part of the appeal of participating in the Cuban slave trade stemmed from the relatively easy access to bullion in Havana. Every year, the royal treasury established in the town received a large subsidy of silver coming from Veracruz, which was used to pay off the debts of the Crown. For this reason, Carpentier had contracted with royal officials on Cuba to sell them “a large part” of the enslaved people brought by Romberg’s slavers.<sup>1007</sup> The Spanish Crown was a less generous contracting party than private entrepreneurs: in general, the Treasury paid less than plantation holders did on the private slaving market. In 1765, for instance, government officials paid 158 pesos per person, while market prices stood at 200 to 250 pesos.<sup>1008</sup> The main motivation to accept this cut in profits was that Crown officials provided better payment terms: they had privileged access to the flows of silver that arrived on Cuba from elsewhere in the Spanish Empire and thus were generally able to pay for their slaves quickly and in cash.

The first ship to finish her sale of enslaved Africans and to begin the assembling of her trading cargo was the *Comte de Belgioioso*. The *Belgioioso* embarked 60,000 piasters in her hold, which contained 85 percent of the total of 70,401 pesos which had resulted from the sale of the captive Africans. The remainder of the proceeds Carpentier converted in Campeche wood, a dying resource, as such obliging to his instructions to complete cargoes in bare currency “with commodities of low value but heavy weight”.<sup>1009</sup> In Bordeaux, the pieces of silver were swiftly sold to the Brussels Mint, while the Campeche wood was sold for a net sum of 28,101 *livres* to a local firm called Corbière et fils.<sup>1010</sup>

The assembling of a return cargo for the *Roi du Congo* went less smoothly. First, of the initial sale of 495 people, little over half of the money (64,171 pesos)

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<sup>1007</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Frederic Romberg to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 16 November 1786), “*une grande partie*”.

<sup>1008</sup> Rinchon, *Les armements négriers*, 34.

<sup>1009</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Instruction to François Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783), “*completter vos Cargaisons en marchandises de peu de Valeur et de grand encombrement.*”

<sup>1010</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, ff. 33 r., 37 r. For the Brussels Mint, see also Chapter 5.

was received immediately, with the remainder (53,685 pesos) due on a future date. Of the former sum, only 21,000 pesos were actually converted in silver pieces, the remaining value was transported as sugar (740 cases) and Campeche wood (483 *quintaux*). 178 cases of sugar and 2,144 *quintaux* Campeche wood passed to Europe in the *Marie* and the *Galvez*, two Spanish vessels.<sup>1011</sup> The *Négrier Impérial*—with 500 crates of sugar and 14,100 silver pieces stored in its hold—carried even less in bare currency.<sup>1012</sup>

The dwindling amounts of silver that were sent back to Europe reflected the increasing strains Carpentier experienced in recovering the proceeds of the slave sales in bare currency. Contrary to expectations, the Spanish government turned out to be a counterparty as hesitant in its payments as private planters were. Although the first payments for Romberg & Consors' enslaved Africans were made swiftly and in silver as per agreement, Juan Ignacio de Urriza, the Intendant of Cuba, soon began delaying payments, and after 1783 funds no longer reached Carpentier. The usual silver *situados* kept arriving in Havana, however, but the Intendant told Romberg's agent that the King had requisitioned them for different purposes, time and again saying to pay in three months' time.<sup>1013</sup> In Chapter 7, we attributed these delayed repayments to Havana's depleted treasury, the reversion of the Spanish slave trade to its exclusively British character, and, relatedly, Carpentier's inability to secure a privileged position among the Crown's creditors. Additionally, there was the factor of the French Revolution: the Intendant's claim in the introduction of having been ordered to dispatch all silver to the peninsula might have been an easy excuse to brush off Carpentier, but it might also have been a truthful indication of the precautions taken by the Spanish government against a looming war with France.

By the end of 1785, 27,315 piasters of the *Négrier Impérial* and 30,736 piasters of the *Roi du Congo* were still remaining in Havana.<sup>1014</sup> Urriza's promises increasingly rung hollow, and in 1786, Frederic Romberg finally lodged a complaint at the *Consejo de Indias* addressing the arrears, stressing that these caused

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<sup>1011</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 101 v.

<sup>1012</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 31 r.

<sup>1013</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Frederic Romberg to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 16 November 1786).

<sup>1014</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 190 r.

him, his credit, and his trade in general a harm even more keenly felt because he had no reason to expect it: he sold his slaves on behalf of Your Majesty, and by dealing with your Intendant, he is deemed to have dealt with the Sacred Person of Your Majesty himself, in the firm belief of receiving the payment without delay<sup>1015</sup>

The merchant demanded the immediate repayment of the “40 to 50 thousand piasters”, a 0.5 percent interest for every month of non-payment, and the reimbursement of Carpentier’s costs of residency.<sup>1016</sup> In March 1788, while the Cuban government was compiling lists of all foreigners residing on the island and requesting their reasons for being there, Carpentier submitted another appeal to the Governor, seeking the payment of 40,000 pesos. With the support of this key political figure, so wrote the agent, “*I hope to secure the resolution I seek and promptly depart for Brussels, where I am awaited with impatience and where I, too, am eager to return.*”<sup>1017</sup> Yet both Romberg’s and Carpentier’s plea yielded very little: only a small sum of 7,582 pesos was paid to the firm in 1788<sup>1018</sup>, and witness the scene we began this chapter with, not much had changed two years later.<sup>1019</sup> In October 1791, Bapst mentioned in a letter to Erice in Havana that 29,343 piasters were still remaining in Havana.<sup>1020</sup> A few weeks later, Carpentier confirmed Bapst’s calculation by saying that his firm was still to receive “approximately 25,000 piasters” from the Spanish treasury and “more or less 3,000 piasters” from several individuals—highlighting again the importance (if we assume private planters to be no better payers than Crown

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<sup>1015</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Frederic Romberg to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 16 November 1786), “*cause à lui, à son Crédit & à la Généralité de son Commerce, un préjudice d’autant plus Sensible, qu’il ne devoit nullement s’y attendre: il a vendu ses nègres pour compte de Votre Majesté, en traitant avec son Intendant il est censé avoir traité avec la Personne Sacrée de Votre Majesté même dans la firme persuasion d’en recevoir le prix sans retard.*”

<sup>1016</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Frederic Romberg to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 16 November 1786).

<sup>1017</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, Carpentier to the Governor (Havana, 11 March 1788), “*el Remedio que solicito para lograr prontamente mi Salida para Bruselas donde me esperan con Impaciencia y yo deser ir con ancia*”.

<sup>1018</sup> ADG, *Fonds des négociants*, 7B 2000, Bapst to Van Peteghem (Bordeaux, 9 November 1788).

<sup>1019</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Etat des recouvrements sur l’opération des Négriers sous la gestion de Messieurs Romberg & Consors de Gand (Brussels, 6 Novembre 1788).

<sup>1020</sup> ADG, *Fonds des négociants*, 7B 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 6 October 1791).

officials) of the Spanish state as a counterparty for Romberg's slaving business.<sup>1021</sup>

Since Carpentier's departure from the Austrian Netherlands, the structure of Romberg's business empire had gone through significant changes. First of all, Romberg & Consors had (unbeknownst to Carpentier) sold its offices in Ghent in November 1783 and had ceased to exist. At least in a physical manner: Frederic Romberg claimed that Romberg & Consors continued to exist in its three associates; indeed, a *circulaire* to inform the firm's network of the discontinuation of its operations—as was common in European commerce—was never sent.<sup>1022</sup> Around the same time of Romberg & Consors' disappearance from Ghent, Romberg had established a new side branch in Bordeaux with the aim of competing in colonial trade. The firm was helmed by his son Henry and by Bapst. From his new office in Bordeaux, the Ghent associate would preoccupy himself with the disarmament of the vessels returning from Havana and Saint-Domingue and the repatriation of the funds.<sup>1023</sup> In the ensuing years, Romberg, Bapst & Cie became ever more invested in the French Caribbean by buying up plantations on Saint-Domingue. Shipping the plantation crops—the returns on investment—back to Bordeaux and settling the colonists' debts, however, proved an extremely challenging and time-consuming task. In late 1788 and early 1789, it was even necessary for the firm and its principal backers, Romberg and the Walckiers brothers, to reshuffle its capital structure in order to deal with the severely stretched credit lines.<sup>1024</sup> On top of these financial strains, the firm faced significant governance challenges caused by the deaths of Henry Romberg, who passed away scarcely a year after settling in Bordeaux, and Ferdinand Romberg, who died on Saint-Domingue in 1787 while trying to recover funds for the same firm.<sup>1025</sup>

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<sup>1021</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Examination of François Carpentier (Brussels, 24 October 1791), “il reste encore a percevoir sur le trésor Royal...25000 Piastres environ, et en outre 3000 Piastres plus ou moins due par différents particuliers”.

<sup>1022</sup> Albert Michielsens, *De evolutie van de handelsorganisatie in België sedert het begin der 18de eeuw* (Turnhout 1938) 297.

<sup>1023</sup> The offices of Romberg & Consors on the Kouter in Ghent were sold on 5 November 1783, see UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 16 October 1783. The firm's books were carted off to Bordeaux around the same time, see AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 8 r., “pour des fraix de 8 malles ou Coffres de papiers & autres effets venus de Gand”.

<sup>1024</sup> Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*, 85-97.

<sup>1025</sup> Anspach, ‘Romberg’, 174.

As the payments dragged on over the years and Romberg's firm began facing severe financial strains, Bapst increasingly urged Carpentier to forego on the plan of converting the pending obligations into silver and return the due sums in the form of sugar instead. The firm would then be able to ship the colonial produce off to Cádiz for it to be sold in the Andalucian harbour. Sugar was a less than ideal carrier of value due to its price volatility and the danger of spoilage during the Atlantic crossing (indeed, on 26 May 1789 Bapst reported to Romberg that 41 of their 131 cases of sugar in Santander had remained unsold for over a year now due to their bad quality<sup>1026</sup>), but at least in this way, the affairs of the *anciens négriers de Gand* might finally be resolved and funds would be available to support the ailing firm.<sup>1027</sup>

For what officially were "affairs of the most utmost Importance", Carpentier returned to Europe in the summer of 1791.<sup>1028</sup> He made landing in Liverpool, passed to Dover, and crossed the English Channel to the Austrian Netherlands, immediately visiting Frederic Romberg in Brussels. During his stay in Havana, Carpentier had continued to correspond almost exclusively with Romberg (as per his instructions). This bypassing of Bapst, who was busy dealing with the disarmament of the vessels, greatly complicated the Bordeaux partner's liquidation of Romberg & Consors.<sup>1029</sup> Carpentier's itinerary and communication choices are also revealing of the relations within the firm, and adds evidence to the assessment that Romberg had been fully aware of his Ghent firm's slaving venture from the outset.

In Brussels, Carpentier quickly received letters from Bordeaux, in which Bapst summoned his former co-associate to the French town in order to give a full explanation of the status of the payments regarding the Ghent slaving

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<sup>1026</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 2000, Bapst to Romberg (Bordeaux, 26 May 1789).

<sup>1027</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 2000, Bapst to Carpentier (Bordeaux, 12 April 1791); ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 6 October 1791).

<sup>1028</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Carpentier to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 4 February 1792), "*des affaires de la plus grande Importance*".

<sup>1029</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Romberg & Sons (Brussels 13 November 1790), "*We have had no news from Mr Carpentier and it seems to us that he is corresponding directly with you about the anciens négriers. However, it would be essential for us to be kept informed at all times.*" [*Nous sommes sans nouvelles de M. Carpentier & il nous parroit qu'il correspond à droiture avec vous pour ce qui a rapport aux anciens négriers. Cependant il seroit essentiel que nous fussions toujours sur le courant*"]; ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 2000, Bapst to Carpentier (Bordeaux, 12 April 1791).

expeditions.<sup>1030</sup> The German merchant had been expecting Carpentier to return home for a few years now, and in 1789 had ordered Erice to diligently monitor the collection of remaining funds should he decide to sail to Europe.<sup>1031</sup> It is unclear if Bapst was fine with Carpentier returning home in 1789, but he clearly was not two years later. By now, the state of Romberg's firm had deteriorated significantly, and so the fact that Carpentier had come back without settling the lingering affairs of Romberg & Consors in Havana was an unpleasant surprise to Bapst. On 12 April 1791, in a letter of remarkable honesty, Bapst wrote that

it is therefore with as much sorrow as surprise that we learn [through Frederic Romberg in Brussels] that you have not finished anything, & that without regard for the cruel situation in which this house finds itself you have left behind the objects which were the main purpose of your journey, & which could alleviate the embarrassment in which Mr. Romberg finds himself...Please believe us, Sir, that we are telling you nothing but the truth when we say that he is suffering from your delays more than he dares to admit; his delicacy would undoubtedly be hurt if he had to tell you about his debts, and only we can convey this message to you.<sup>1032</sup>

Carpentier duly visited the firm's Bordeaux offices shortly after, and he and Bapst decided that the proper course of action moving forward would be for Carpentier to return to Cuba in order to recover the remaining funds.<sup>1033</sup> Moreover, Bapst reasoned that his former co-associate could also manage

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<sup>1030</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 2000, Bapst to Carpentier (Bordeaux, 6 October 1791).

<sup>1031</sup> See for example ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 23 June 1789): "Additionally, we eagerly await any overdue payments from previous dealings, which we have corresponded about with Mr. Carpentier. We assume he is preparing to return; therefore, as you are entrusted with the collection [of funds], we hope for the utmost satisfaction upon your diligence in concluding these matters" [*"Deseamos con mucha Ausia nos remeta Tambien algun Tanto de lo que se nos queda dever de los antiguos negreros temenos escrita sobre el particular à Mr. Carpentier, debemos sier esta ya apromlando su regreso; y que da usted encargado de las Cobranzas tendremos la Mayor para satisfacion haya"*].

<sup>1032</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 2000, Bapst to Carpentier (Bordeaux 12 April 1791), "C'est donc avec autant de peine que de surprise que par le canal de Bruxelles nous apprenons que vous n'avez rien terminé, & que sans égard pour la cruelle situation dans laquelle cette maison se trouve vous laissés en arrière les objets qui ont le principal but de votre Voyage, & qui pourroient diminuer la gêne ou se trouwe M. Romberg...Croyés Monsieur que nous vous disons la pure vérité en vous disant qu'il souffre plus qu'il ne l'exprime de vos retards; sa délicatesse serait blessée sans doute s'il avait à vous retracer sa pénurie & nous seuls pouvons vous la peindre..."

<sup>1033</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Act of 3 March 1792, "le Sr. Carpentier dit se trouver chez les desarmateurs de Bordeaux".



several new slave transports his firm would be sending to Erice in Havana, since revolutionary Saint-Domingue would no longer be an option for the foreseeable future.<sup>1034</sup> On top, as we discussed, the Council of the Indies had liberalized slaving markets within the Spanish Empire, allowing foreigners to legally sell human cargoes in Cuba.<sup>1035</sup>

The plan for Carpentier was to sail to Cap Français on Saint-Domingue, and then take a slave ship to Havana.<sup>1036</sup> In February 1792, as he had done ten years previously, Carpentier duly applied for a new passport for Cuba. This time, however, the application was denied—the Spanish Crown was of the opinion that this task could perfectly well be handled by a Spanish agent, and there was no need for a foreigner to go overseas in person.<sup>1037</sup> The answer of the Court was exemplary of the increased anti-foreign sentiment which had marked the policies of the Floridablanca administration since the outbreak of the French Revolution.<sup>1038</sup> Yet scarcely three weeks after Carpentier's petition, Spain's first minister was removed from power and replaced by the Count of Aranda, the very man who ten years previously, as ambassador in Paris, had facilitated Romberg & Consors' acquisition of its slaving permit by granting the firm access to key Spanish decision-makers. Moreover, as soon as Aranda arrived in Madrid, he set out to pacify relations with France and took a more benevolent attitude towards foreigners in the Spanish realm. These shifts in policy were quickly overturned, however, as the Revolution spilled beyond its borders and French armies marched against Prussia and Austria in the summer

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<sup>1034</sup> See for example ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 16 February 1792), "Mr. Francisco Carpentier manages to obtain various interesting information, which could put him in a position to coordinate with you, from Santo Domingo to the French islands to make consignments of more slaves that circumstances will direct towards Havana" ["Don Francisco Carpentier, logra a varios concimentos, interesante, que le podran en situacion de conciliar con usted, desde Santo domingo islas francesas para hazer le consignaciones mayora de negros que la circunstancia hara dirifir hacia la Havanna"].

<sup>1035</sup> Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America*, 83-94; Belmonte Postigo, 'A Caribbean Affair', 1-14.

<sup>1036</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 16 February 1792), "Mr. Francisco Carpentier is still intending to pass to Cap Français and from there to you with some slave ship" ["don Francisco Carpentier esta aun en estay siempre con intencion de passer al Cabo Frances y de alli a esa con algun negrero"].

<sup>1037</sup> AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Carpentier to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 4 February 1792); Council of the Indies to the Governor of Havana (Aranjuez, 16 May 1792).

<sup>1038</sup> Herr, *The Eighteenth-Century Revolution*, 256-7, 266.

of 1792.<sup>1039</sup> Still, the brief period of relaxations must have posed a window of opportunity for Carpentier, because unbothered by the dismissal of his petition, the trader went ahead anyway with his plan of returning to his Caribbean station. In June 1792, Bapst wrote to Erice that Carpentier “was by now certainly in Saint-Domingue”.<sup>1040</sup> He even seems to have made it back to Cuba, as a legal document from 1795 states that the merchant “returned to Havana after his sojourn in Brussels”.<sup>1041</sup> After this date, the absence of primary sources prevents further tracking of Carpentier’s operations but, as we will see in due course, he in all likelihood eventually managed to recover the sums due to Romberg.

### *Settling: Assessing Profits and Losses*

Which material gains, if any, did Romberg and his subbranches draw from their expeditions?

No detailed concluding accounts have been preserved which would enable us to make a minute assessment of the profitability of Romberg’s separate Africa expeditions. None of the accounting books of Romberg & Consors—which were carted in eight large boxes to Bordeaux after the sale of its offices—have been preserved either.<sup>1042</sup> One accounting book of Romberg, Bapst & Cie, Romberg & Consors’ successor, however, has survived. It is a so-called journal book, a day-to-day working instrument where every transaction made by the firm was listed in chronological order. Later, such transactions were added to the different accounts and balances in the ‘*grand livre*’, to keep track of debt and credit.<sup>1043</sup> The journal book in question covers the period between October 1783 and the end of 1785 and thus comprises many records which concern the *anciens négriers de Gand*, which were managed by Bapst after the dissolution of Romberg & Consors. Additionally, we dispose of significant quantitative

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<sup>1039</sup> Herr, *The Eighteenth-Century Revolution*, 269-71.

<sup>1040</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Erice (Bordeaux, 25 June 1792), “Carpentier ... [d]ebe estar ya en Santo Domingo”.

<sup>1041</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Mémoire pour Mr Romberg, rescribant, & MM Van der Dilft et Huysman sup[pliant]s (Brussels, 31 October 1795), “Mr Carpentier est retourné à la Havane apres avoir été a Bruxelles”.

<sup>1042</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 8 r., “pour des fraix de 8 malles ou Coffres de papiers & autres effets venus de Gand”.

<sup>1043</sup> Houtman-De Smedt, *Charles Proli*, 179-80.

material due to some lawsuits brought against Romberg by former investors during the late 1780s (cf. *infra*) and which resulted in the gathering and preservation of different prospectuses, accounts, letters, and receipts of dividend pay-outs. Thomas and Bean, assessing the possibility of deriving a clear view of slaving profits from the accounts of individual voyages, had worried that there existed a bias towards successful ventures, as they believed the books of bankrupted merchants were less prone to be preserved for future purposes.<sup>1044</sup> Daudin argued to the contrary, saying that catastrophe and financial failure made it all the more likely that sources were kept for posterity.<sup>1045</sup> As we will see in due course, the case of Romberg firmly supports Daudin's assessment.

The data at hand first of all gives insight in the financial structure and soundness of the plan drafted by Romberg & Consors. A major case-study in this regard is the *Comte de Belgioioso*, a ship for which we dispose both of the initial prospectus and the quantitative results of the eventual voyage. Both sets of data allow us to compare the voyage as it was imagined in the offices of Romberg & Consors with the voyage as it unfolded in the real world.

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<sup>1044</sup> Thomas and Bean, 'The Fishers of Men', 897.

<sup>1045</sup> Daudin, 'Comment calculer les profits', 52; Daudin, 'Profitability', 151.

TABLE 9.2 Expenses and proceeds of the *Comte de Belgioioso*, prospectus versus reality.

Type	Item	Value (in fl.w.g.)		
		Prospectus	Reality	Difference (in%)
Expense	Ship	24,000	22,848	-4.8
Expense	Outfitting	15,000	27,226	+81.5
Expense	Insurance (12%)*	19,200	27,943	+45.5
Expense	Trading cargo*	80,000	98,834	+23.5
Expense	Various expenses prior to departure	—	32,361	—
Expense	Commission for captain (6%)	21,600	—	—
Expense	Commission for officers	4,500	—	—
Expense	Provisions Caribbean	15,500	—	—
Expense	Disarmament in port	12,000	—	—
Proceeds	Freight return voyage	25,000	—	—
Proceeds	Sale of the ships*	15,000	10,093	-32.8
Proceeds	Sale of human cargo	360,000	172,714	-52.1

Source: RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Armement à Gand sous la direction de Romberg & Consors de deux navires Pour la côte D’Afrique and Romberg, Bapst & Cie to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784); AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336. \*Together with the *Empereur et Roi*, the ivory-carrying ship included in the prospectus.

The prospectus distributed in the spring of 1782 to possible investors and which we already discussed in Chapter 4 comprised two vessels: one slaver, the *Comte de Belgioioso*, and one ivory ship, the *Empereur et Roi* (see Figure 9.1 for the actual document). The total outlay of both ships was calculated at 160,000 guilders. The sale of the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and the sale of beeswax, copper, gold dust, and ivory, combined with the minor sources of income of selling the vessels and taking freight from the Caribbean was supposed to create a revenue of 512,400 guilders. With various expenses along the way established at 73,092 guilders, the net profit of the venture was estimated to be 439,308 guilders. This implied a profit rate of 174.6 percent, by all means a fanciful figure which bore little relationship with the actual profit margins of the slave trade, but which was in line with the general tone of contemporary prospectuses.

Table 9.2 compares the prospectus of the *Belgioioso* with the venture’s financial reality. The data first of all shows that the charges actually incurred for the *Belgioioso* differed wildly from those of the prospectus, exceeding the estimates in almost every aspect. Only the ship itself turned out to be slightly cheaper (-4.8 percent) than the actual purchase. It is hard to precisely assess

the other expenses mentioned in the prospectus, but everything points in the direction that these, too, were significantly off the mark—in fact, even before departure, the *Belgioioso* spent more than 30,000 guilders on items not accounted for in the prospectus. A bigger problem for Romberg & Consors, however, lay with the proceeds. The *Belgioioso* was expected to carry 440 enslaved Africans, which would be sold on Saint-Domingue for 900 guilders each. In this way, the proceeds—given an expected loss percentage among the captives of 9-10 percent—would amount to 360,000 guilders. In reality, the ship carried only 299 prisoners. To make matters worse, these prisoners were sold in a deflated market at 578 guilders per person, totalling 172,714 guilders (369,610 *livres*)—not even half the sum foreseen in the prospectus.



Given the fact that the fitting-out costs of the *Belgioioso* had amounted to a sum of 161,345 guilders (see Table 5.4 for a detailed breakdown), the ship turned a small gross profit (i.e. not including expenses) of 7.1 percent. The other Havana-going ships—the *Négrier Impérial* and the *Roi du Congo*—also put in a result close to break even, although with respectively -9.8 percent and -2.5 percent they were loss-making. The three ships who called at Saint-Dominican ports achieved results which were significantly worse than those of the Cuban vessels. Partly this was due to the reigning price level on Saint-Domingue, which was lower than in Havana (see Table 9.1). Mostly, however, the poor results of these three voyages reflected the health disasters that had taken place during the Middle Passage. As we established in Chapter 8, the *Conseil de Flandre* (-43.5 percent) had lost more than hundred captive Africans during the Middle Passage and another seventy people shortly after making landfall in the Caribbean. The *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd* (-52.8 percent) likewise was heavily afflicted by disease and needed to hospitalize an unknown part of its human cargo after arrival. The *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, lastly, made the most catastrophic voyage of Romberg’s fleet with only 92 people left alive by the time the ship had reached Léogâne, and this becomes abundantly clear from the losses (-80.0 percent) stated in Table 9.3.

TABLE 9.3 Gross result of Romberg’s sale of enslaved people, 1782-5.

Ship	Fitting-out costs (in fl.w.g.)	Gross product of slave sale (in fl.w.g.)	Gross profit	
			Absolute	Relative
<i>Belgioioso</i>	161,345	172,714	+11,369	+7.1%
<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	159,000	31,900	-127,100	-80.0%
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	240,878	217,112	-23,766	-9.8%
<i>Vlaemisch Zeepaerd</i>	263,716	124,481	-139,235	-52.8%
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	305,531	297,766	-7,765	-2.5%
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	314,091	177,406	-136,685	-43.5%
<i>Total</i>	1,444,561	1,021,379	-423,182	-29.3%

Source: RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065;

AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336.

In total, the six slavers turned a gross profit of -29,3 percent. This obviously was a very disappointing result, as the sale of slaves provided the main source of income for a slaving venture. As a comparison, Deguer, a Nantes *armateur*, recorded between 9.8 percent and 192.4 percent of gross profits on six slaving ventures during the 1770s, with an average of 71.6 percent. Chaurand Frères, a different outfitter, realized an average gross profit of 43.2 percent (range -8.1 percent to 106.6 percent) on eleven slavers dispatched between 1782 and 1787.<sup>1046</sup> These sizeable rates were necessary as they presented the *gross* product of the sale of the cargo, not the *net* product accounting for all expenses which occurred after the ship had left Europe. These sums—comprising revictualling, repairs, loading and unloading costs, crew salaries, and commissions to officers, agents, and brokers—were by no means negligible and were only partly offset by minor income sources such as freighting commodities to Europe, selling berths to civilian passengers, or the sale of the vessel.<sup>1047</sup> Roger Anstey calculated for the British slave trade that disbursements made in the Caribbean alone reduced profits by 14 to 20 percent.<sup>1048</sup>

The fact that the three ships calling at Saint-Domingue turned a negative gross profit after suffering epidemics and major loss of life during the Atlantic crossing is easy to understand. The negative or only slightly positive results of the Havana-bound ships, however, which had experienced average mortality rates during their Middle Passage, seems puzzling. Clearly, a major financial issue for the firm stemmed from the investments made in 1782-3, when the ships were fitted out in the Austrian Netherlands. In Chapter 5, we already established that the hiring and lodging costs of Romberg's maritime personnel were sizeable. The charges incurred to the firm for repairing its vessels were also apparently higher than usual. As Maze and Chevalier, a London-based correspondent of Romberg, reported (to a different Ghent merchant) on a talk with Hagueron, captain of the *Comte de Flandre*, during the latter's sojourn in London for dealings with the Admiralty:

If you want to send your ship to the coast of Guinea, it will need a refit, which will be more advantageous to you in all respects to be carried out [in London]. We

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<sup>1046</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 263-6.

<sup>1047</sup> Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 210-1.

<sup>1048</sup> Anstey, 'The Volume', 15.



discussed this matter with Captain Hagueron (he is the captain who was captured on the coast in a small ship belonging to Mrs Romberg & Consors of your city) who is currently here & who assures us that [work] of this kind is done very badly at your place & more expensive than here. He has been in a position to have repairs made to his ship [in Ghent], but he says that he had very much preferred to have them done here.<sup>1049</sup>

Simply a lack of skill was not the main reason of Hagueron's complaints: De Coster and De Smedt, the two tradesmen predominantly responsible for mending the *Count*, are described as being specialized in ship's repairs in local address books.<sup>1050</sup> Yet preparing a vessel for a voyage in European seas was a completely different enterprise than making it fit for the inhospitable waters of the southern hemisphere. Expectedly, in London, numerous tradesmen were acquainted with such assignments, which improved their quality and (through increased competition) brought down the price.

TABLE 9.4 Comparison capital outlay between *Henri IV* and the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen* (in fl.w.g.).

<i>Item</i>	<i>Henri IV</i>	<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	<i>Difference</i>	
Ship	35,930	28,560	-7,370	-21%
Repairs	18,777	23,741	+4,964	+26%
Trading cargo	73,313	54,473	-18,840	-26%
Provisions	8,983	12,133	+3,150	+35%
Salaries crew	1,738	12,155	+10,417	+599%
Insurance	unknown	16,115	—	—
Diverse costs	373	7,184	+6,811	+1827%
Commission	2,782	4,674	+1,892	+68%
Total outlay	141,896	159,000	+17,104	+12%

*Source:* RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065; Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 278. Meyer's sums have been converted from *livres tournois* to guilders.

To add to the data regarding wages and the anecdotal evidence with regards to repairs, I put the fitting-out costs of Romberg's ships into context by comparing them with the preparation of a contemporary vessel of similar size in France. The first comparison comprises the *Henri IV*, a slaving vessel of 150 tons which

<sup>1049</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/9, Maze & Chevalier to Janssens (London, 21 January 1783).

<sup>1050</sup> UAG, *Wegwyzer van Gent*, 1782-3, 97.

left Nantes in August 1783 for Angola, and Romberg's *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*, a slaver of 160 tons. As the figures in Table 9.4 show, the capital outlay of the *Saxe-Teschen* was about 12 percent larger than that of the *Henri IV*, despite a tonnage difference of only 6 percent. Most constituents of the fitting-out process prompted higher expenses with Romberg's ship than with the French slaver. As expected, crewing costs were much larger for the Austrian Netherlands firm than for the French *armateurs*. The costs of the trading cargo and the ship, however, were smaller, although the latter was caused by exceptionally high ship prices in the trade boom following the American War of Independence—the reason why Everaert thought the accounts of the *Henri IV* not really representative for the fitting-out process of slavers at large.<sup>1051</sup>

TABLE 9.5 Comparison capital outlay between *La Brune* and the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* (in fl.w.g.).

<i>Item</i>	<i>La Brune</i>	<i>Zeepaerd</i>	<i>Difference</i>	
Ship, repairs & equipment	41,440	90,695	+49,255	+119%
Trading cargo	93,437	86,468	-6,969	-7%
Provisions	10,242	25,185	+14,943	+145%
Salaries crew	2,994	24,236	+21,242	+710%
Insurance	8,194	22,009	+13,816	+169%
Diverse costs	1,103	7,261	+6,158	+558%
Commission	—	7,856	—	—
Total outlay	157,567	263,716	+106,649	+67%

*Source:* RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065; Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 49.<sup>1052</sup>

In order to give more credibility to the findings of Table 9.4, I repeat the exercise for the firm's *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* and *La Brune*, another French ship; both were engaged in the slave trade, both were of 300 tons, and both were fitted out in 1783. Table 9.5 makes abundantly clear that Romberg & Consors spent considerably more on almost every aspect of the fitting-out process, despite the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* being of the exact same size as *La Brune*. Again, crewing

<sup>1051</sup> Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 49-50.

<sup>1052</sup> The *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* had a separate post for medicine (1,228 guilders), which has been added to 'Provisions'. The sum dedicated to 'Ship, repairs & equipment' includes an insurance fee of unknown size for navigating from Amsterdam to the Austrian Netherlands, but given the short distance this will not have constituted a major sum.

costs, provisions and unspecified 'Diverse costs' constituted a much larger item of expense than with the French vessel.

TABLE 9.6 Comparison outlay costs between several French vessels and Romberg's fleet, 1767-86.

Ship	Year	Tonnage	Outlay (in fl.w.g.)	
			Total	Per ton
<b>France, 1767-86</b>				
<i>St. François</i>	1767	220	150,466	684
<i>Union</i>	1768	70	55,049	786
<i>Pompée</i>	1769	200	86,729	434
<i>St. Guillaume</i>	1770	250	136,021	544
<i>Glorieuse</i>	1772	80	52,689	659
<i>Jean-Baptiste</i>	1773	220	128,883	586
<i>Duc de Laval</i>	1773	250	149,593	597
<i>Nymphe</i>	1774	250	149,593	598
<i>Jean-Baptiste II</i>	1775	220	129,824	590
<i>Henri IV</i>	1783	150	141,891	946
<i>La Brune</i>	1783	300	157,567	525
<i>Aimable Aline</i>	1785	522	161,587	310
<i>Bailly Suffren</i>	1786	472	202,696	429
			<i>Average</i>	<i>591</i>
<b>Romberg &amp; Consors</b>				
<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	1783	120	161,345	1,345
<i>Empereur et Roi</i>	1783	60	81,245	1,354
<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i>	1783	160	159,000	994
<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	1783	300	263,716	879
<i>Roi du Congo</i>	1783	300	305,531	1,018
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	1783	300	314,090	1,047
			<i>Average</i>	<i>1,106</i>

Source: See Appendix. Calculation and tabulation for France from Everaert, *De Franse slavenhandel*, 49 based on Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 275-82 and 304-5. Sums concerning the French vessels are converted from *livre tournois*.

Lastly, to dispel any doubt, I analysed the capital outlay per ton of several of Romberg's ships (for the cases where tonnage was available, see Table 5.1) with the capital per ton ratios of thirteen French ships calculated by Everaert (Table 9.6). Once again, the image emerges of a significantly heavier capital outlay in Romberg's firm than for the French vessels. While the latter averaged 591 guilders per ton between 1767 and 1786 (with the *Henri IV* as a clear outlier, as

Everaert had suspected), Romberg's vessels averaged almost double that number with 1,106 guilders per ton. These increased costs were created by the elevated wage cost of personnel common to wartime, and specifically the overheated maritime labour market in Ostend.<sup>1053</sup> On top, Romberg & Consors spent vast amounts of money on lodging their captains and officers during their long presence in the Austrian Netherlands while overseeing the outfitting process (see Chapter 5). Additionally, the lack of experience with preparing ocean-going ships among Austrian Netherlands artisans created an uncompetitive market for ship's repairs. Necessities specific to the slave trade might have driven up the costs still. Inikori, in a paper contradicting Thomas and Bean, argues that the supply of trading commodities in the slave trade was not perfectly elastic. When catering for the wishes of clients, manufacturers tended to show attachment to long-running business relations, which complicated or thwarted altogether the entry to the sector of novel participants.<sup>1054</sup> What Inikori thus implies is that newcomers such as Romberg & Consors might experience difficulties to procure the necessities for the slave trade, possibly resulting in the firm being charged higher prices by suppliers. But even if this was not the case, the bare fact of being a 'geographical outsider' created transport costs which drove up the price. Additionally, the urgency to outpace the return of peace and the anticipation of exceptionally big proceeds presumably did little to encourage frugality among Romberg & Consors' associates. Larger profits-per-ton rationally warranted higher costs-per-ton, but the prolonged time gap between investment and realizing a return on investment severely increased the risk of market condition reversals. This was the eventual reality for Romberg & Consors' slaving venture: large investments without corresponding profits, exacerbated by multiple adversities beyond the control of the firm.

Romberg, in his *Mémoire de faits* of 1810, was candid about the returns of the Africa project of his Ghent office and claimed that "more than two thirds of the capital had been lost".<sup>1055</sup> The merchant thus implied that, in order to arrive at an overall result of -66.6 percent coming from -29.3 percent in Table 9.3, his

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<sup>1053</sup> Pannier, 'Reaping the Returns', and Chapter 4.

<sup>1054</sup> Inikori, 'Market structure', 753-6.

<sup>1055</sup> Romberg, *Mémoire des faits*, 9, "Toutes ces circonstances malheureuses firent perdre plus des deux tiers des mises, et le soussigné en fut pour 2,300,000 livres."

added costs amounted to about 35 percent. This is a higher rate than the one reached by Anstey, but not at all inconceivable given the expensive input factors and the fact that Romberg & Consors faced large costs such as the hospitalization of enslaved Africans.

In order to verify Romberg's claim in a quantitative way it would to a certain level be possible to add up all expenses recorded in the preserved journal book. This document, however, only contains payments up to 1785 and is bound to yield imprecise results due to the labyrinthian character of Romberg's—or indeed any Early Modern—bookkeeping. It is more rewarding, therefore, to analyse the payments made to shareholders proportional to their stake and, if necessary, use these to back-calculate the proceeds of the slaving venture. A document from 6 November 1788, for example, lists the contemporary financial situation of the *Real permiso* enterprise pursued by Romberg & Consors. It presents the investment of a core group of shareholders comprising Frederic Romberg and eight retail investors, mainly based in Brussels.<sup>1056</sup> Although the absolute numbers in Table 9.7 do not give a complete overview of the proceeds of the project, the proportional relations and the profit percentage are applicable to the whole firm.

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<sup>1056</sup> To wit, the Walckiers brothers, Chrétien and Léonard Huysman de Neufcour and Ameroix, Matthieu Verlat, Jean Simons, Jean-Marie van der Dilt de Borghvliet, Judocus Marous, d'Armencourt, le Fèvere de Terbecke (Jacques Joseph, or his son Louis Henri Ghislain), Eugène van den Berghe de Limminghe, and Jacques de Wallenbourg.

TABLE 9.7 Reported yield of the *Real permiso* project, with regards to Frederic Romberg and eight other investors (as of November 1788).

Flotilla	Ship	Investment (in fl.w.g.)	Net proceeds (in fl.w.g.)	Net profit	
				Absolute	Relative
I	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>				
I	<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	250,000	65,457	-184,543	-73.8%
I	<i>Empereur et Roi</i>				
II	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	420,000	75,135	-344,865	-82.1%
II	<i>Vlaemisch Zeepaerd</i>				
III	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	281,000	54,253	-226,747	-80.7%
III	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	289,000	91,798	-197,202	-68.2%
	Several sugar shipments	—	64,088	+64,088	—
Total		1,240,000	350,564	-889,436	-71.7%

*Source:* RAatB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Etat des recouvrements sur l'opération des Négriers sous la gestion de Messieurs Romberg & Consors de Gand (Brussels, 6 Novembre 1788). The proceeds of the two Le Havre ships bound for the East Indies were left out of this overview, but presented similarly disastrous financial outcomes (-65.2%).

As the figures reveal, the Africa project initiated by Romberg & Consors resulted in the loss of 71.7 percent of the total equity. The 1788 result, however, was not final as in the following years several sums would be repatriated still from the Caribbean by Carpentier. Yet these payments were tiny, and as Table 9.8 shows, at -70.7 percent by November 1790, they were barely able to improve the damage.

TABLE 9.8 Calculated yield of the *Real permiso* project, with regards to all shareholders (as of November 1790).

Flotilla	Ship	Investment (in fl.w.g.)	Net proceeds (in fl.w.g.)	Net profit	
				Absolute	Relative
I	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>				
I	<i>Saxe-Teschen</i>	401,590	99,735	-301,855	-75.2%
I	<i>Empereur et Roi</i>				
II	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>				
II	<i>Vlaensch Zeepaerd</i>	504,590	102,659	-401,931	-79.7%
III	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	305,531	137,337	-168,194	-55.1%
III	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	314,090	107,698	-206,392	-65.7%
Total		1,525,801	447,429	-1,078,372	-70.7%

Source: ADG, *Fonds des négociants*, 7B 1999 and 2000; AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336. Method: Where possible, totals of net proceeds were used in the calculations. Where these were absent, a back-calculation was made based on the dividends paid to shareholders and these shareholder's stake in the Flotilla equity, using the following equation:  $P = \frac{F}{S} D$ , where P=Proceeds, F=Flotilla equity, S=Share value, and D=Value dividend.

Even then, some assets of Romberg still remained in the Caribbean, but due to incomplete source material it is unclear when these were returned. But returned they were, with almost absolute certainty: the outstanding sum of 29,343 piasters (cf. supra) equalled 71,986 guilders, which if added to the net proceeds of Table 9.8 would lift the result to -66.0 percent. The loss rate suggested by Romberg's phrasing in the *Mémoire des faits* therefore seems to be a truthful estimate of the slaving venture's yield—or rather, the lack of it.<sup>1057</sup>

The material benefits accruing to Romberg's firm went further than simply the returns brought back to Europe. As we highlighted in Chapter 5, to correctly assess its profitability, it is necessary to consider the value chain of colonial trade as a whole, taking stock of possible forward and backward linkages. This was clearly the case for Romberg. On several occasions during

<sup>1057</sup> Romberg also included the two Le Havre ships bound to the Indian Ocean in his assessment, but since the net profit of these ventures amounted to -65.2 percent, it does not substantially alter the figure I calculated for the Austrian Netherlands ships. For information on these vessels, see Appendix A.2.

the fitting-out process of his slavers in the Austrian Netherlands, the merchant had tried to establish backward linkages within his own firm. These comprised victuals—Romberg & Cie of Bruges, for example, furnished the *Comte de Flandre* with wine—and possibly insurance, but most importantly trading commodities. Romberg Frères & Co, the cotton printing firm in Brussels, took care of several large shipments of Indian cottons to Romberg & Consors in Ghent. As Table 5.6 has shown, the firm transported cargoes of textiles worth 58,781 Flemish guilders to export these fabrics towards the African seaboard. This was a significant sum: on a total of almost 400,000 guilders, it presented 14.8 percent of the revenue of 1783.<sup>1058</sup> Still, compared to the losses incurred from the slave trade, this increased revenue—let alone the net profit remaining after expenses—could not possibly offset the deeply negative outcome of the Africa venture.

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<sup>1058</sup> Claessens, *Frederik Romberg*, 222.



Seas of Status:  
The Social Gains of Romberg's Atlantic Turn

*Showcasing the Atlantic: Maritime Trade and Social Ascendance, 1780-4*

The 'maritime turn' of Romberg during the first half of the 1780s yielded important social gains for the merchant. The opening of new branches of his firm in Ostend and inland ports, the acquisition of a large fleet and, especially, the entry in Atlantic trade heightened his already sizeable status in the Austrian Netherlands. The merchant's involvement with these shipping lanes were showcased on auctions, where quantities of sugar, coffee, and indigo were unpacked from 'FRC'-stamped crates. Undoubtedly, these public sales—widely advertised in newspapers—must have offered audiences a dazzling spectacle of exoticism and a testament to Romberg's commercial success.<sup>1059</sup> Additionally, in another act of deriving prestige from Atlantic trade, Pierre François Schepers of Romberg & Consors had purchased an enslaved African to serve as his personal servant.<sup>1060</sup> Perhaps to demonstrate his involvement in maritime trade, Romberg adorned the walls of his home with scenes of ships and bustling ports; by 1791, he owned seven such paintings.<sup>1061</sup>

Romberg's expanded maritime activities also improved his status in the eyes of the key political figures in the Austrian Netherlands as well as the Habsburg Monarchy. Romberg, of course, had been dear to the government since the 1760s (at least to the more monopoly-inclined institutions and ministers, see Chapter 2), when his firm had developed the route from Ostend to Central and Southern Europe and came to embody the transit policy developed at the Finance Council. Additionally, Romberg, together with other important merchants like Charles de Proli, was often asked for his opinion on economic and commercial matters. In 1771, for instance, when the government was pondering a project to kindle maritime trade between Ostend and Trieste,

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<sup>1059</sup> See for instance UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 22 September 1783 (Addendum). The use of this particular mark is evident from the Prize Papers, see for instance TNA, HCA32/345/16, *Groote Estafette*.

<sup>1060</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>1061</sup> RATB, *Notary*, 8727, Inventory of Romberg's paintings (Brussels, 14 March 1791).

Romberg gave his advice on the project.<sup>1062</sup> The merchant also provided services to the Monarchy on a personal level: Romberg frequently oversaw the transport of money and goods to the Hereditary Lands, and in 1777, he was trusted with the transfer of several paintings by Peter Paul Rubens from Brussels to Vienna.<sup>1063</sup>

Joseph II, eager to establish a Habsburg presence in other regions of the globe than Central Europe, was especially appreciative of Romberg's endeavours. During his tour through the Low Countries, the Emperor spent considerable time with the merchant in Ostend and Brussels discussing the commercial state of the country. Romberg was even allowed to join the Emperor on his subsequent voyage to Queen Marie Antoinette of France. As the merchant related in a letter,

the Emperor left on the 4th at 5:30 in the morning from Versailles. I had the honour of being presented by the Great Monarch to Her Majesty the Queen of France. The entire Court of Versailles, the ministers, and all those who had an audience with Her Majesty were deeply moved.<sup>1064</sup>

In Versailles, Joseph allegedly presented Romberg to his sister as the person “who has revived the commerce and the maritime trade in my Low Countries”.<sup>1065</sup> During the early 1780s, Romberg's ships showed the Imperial flag on increasingly distant shores, adding to the prestige of the House of Habsburg. His African affairs particularly seemed to have given even more

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<sup>1062</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 650, *Mémoire de Frédéric Romberg* (Brussels, 28 August 1771).

<sup>1063</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 924. The paintings originated from the Coudenberg Abbey. Romberg received a handsome sum of 1,630 current guilders for his service.

<sup>1064</sup> KBR, Ms. 19,959, Romberg to Chauvel (s.d.), “*L'empereur [sic] est partie le 4 S a 5 ½ heures matin de versailles, j'ai eu l'honneur d'être présenté par le Grand Monarque a sa majesté la Reine de France, toute la Cour de Versailles les ministres et tout ceux qui ont eu conference avec sa Majesté en sont penetré*”. Romberg's conspicuous mention of his noble companion undoubtedly aimed to elevate his status among his merchant peers—a strategy that proved successful, as evidenced by Chauvel's response: “*We offer you our compliments for having earned the confidence to accompany a Prince as respectable in every quality as the Emperor. This clearly shows his discernment in having chosen you as the most worthy of his subjects*” [“*nous vous faisons notre Compliment d'avoir vu la confiance d'accompagner un Prince aussi respectable par toutes les quallités quil reussi que L'Empereur, cela montre bien son dicernement de vous avoir choisy pour le plus dignes de ses sujets*”], see Chauvel to Romberg (Le Havre, 8 August 1781).

<sup>1065</sup> Romberg, *Mémoire de faits*, 17-20, quote 20, “*qui a fait revivre le commerce et la navigation dans mes Pays-Bas*”.

splendour to his track record as a merchant in the eyes of the government and political commentators. While setting up the project in 1781-2, officials had already argued that his business was “in every way advantageous to the Country”.<sup>1066</sup> Gomicourt campaigned to have a statue erected for the merchant, partly because Romberg had “shown his compatriots the way to Guinea”.<sup>1067</sup> In the *Vlaemschen Indicateur*, a contemporary enlightened periodical, a commentator conceded that Ostend would lose a lot of commercial traffic when peace would return to Europe, but voiced the firm conviction that due to Romberg’s *Real permiso* “at least the Trade with the Spanish Domains will remain in that Port and continue to be a beneficial and profitable Branch of trade for this Country”.<sup>1068</sup> Additionally, as we argued in Chapter 5, a part of the silver which resulted from his slave trade was sold to the Brussels Mint. Although Romberg clearly acted on the premiums promised by the monetary institution to those who deposited their silver piasters, the merchant emphatically cast his deliveries as a service to the government—and indeed it might as well have been viewed that way by policymakers.<sup>1069</sup>

On top of the perceived economic importance of his affairs, Romberg also improved his prestige by helping Vienna pursue its political goals. During the past decades, the field of ‘new diplomatic history’ has advocated for the application of a more actor-centred approach to the field of international relations. The actors of interest in this novel tradition are not limited to the narrow category of ‘career diplomats’, but also include private individuals engaging in diplomat-like behaviour, performing diplomatic or consular functions, or in other ways acting as a mediator or intermediary figure in international relations.<sup>1070</sup> In an Early Modern context, merchants like

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<sup>1066</sup> See for example ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401, Protocol of Baudier (24 July 1782), “Romberg faisant ce Commerce, à tous égards avantageux au Pais”.

<sup>1067</sup> Derival, *Le voyageur*, II, 274, “frayant, pour ainsi dire, à leurs concitoyens la route de Guinée”.

<sup>1068</sup> UAG, *Den Vlaemschen Indicateur ofte Aenwyzer der Wetenschappen en Vrye Konsten* 9:1 (1783) 13, “maer den Handel der Spaensche Bezitting zal altoos in die Haef blyven en er een voordeelligen en winstrijken Koophandel-tak overlaeten voor deeze Landen”.

<sup>1069</sup> Romberg, *Mémoire de faits*, 10.

<sup>1070</sup> Andreas Höfele and Werner von Koppenfels, eds. *Renaissance Go-Betweens: Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe* (Berlin 2005); Marika Keblusek and Badeloch Vera Noldus, eds. *Double Agents. Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden 2011), especially 1-10 and Sowerby, ‘Early Modern Diplomatic History’, 441-56.

Romberg were often ideally-placed to adopt such roles, as they were well-connected, wielded significant economic power, and knew how to navigate the sinews of power both at home and abroad.<sup>1071</sup> Magnus Ressel has applied the insights of new diplomatic history to Romberg's transport of naval stores from the Dutch Republic to France by way of Romberg & Consors. Ressel convincingly argues that these activities were not simply yet another part of Romberg's diverse economic portfolio, but chiefly a service to the Habsburg Monarchy: by shoring up the French Navy through Romberg's deliveries, Vienna provided support to its ally in its strife against Great Britain.<sup>1072</sup>

However, the ways in which Romberg helped to realize Vienna's political goals extended further still. Another important feat was his support—again through the organisational unit of Romberg & Consors—of the mission of Jan Baptist Vervier, who had been ordered by Vienna to seek out an island off the coast of West Africa which could serve as a base of operations for slave trade (see Chapter 2). Romberg realized the expedition by providing him with a ship (Vervier sailing on the *Roi du Congo*), surrounding him with experienced officers, and providing logistical and financial support to the diplomatic assignment. Almost certainly, this assistance in advancing Vienna's imperialist agenda further elevated Romberg's standing with the Habsburg Monarchy.

To consolidate the peak of prestige Romberg had achieved in the early 1780s, he decided to apply for a noble title. This he duly received: on 28 July 1784, during a visit to Vienna, Joseph II appointed him a baron.<sup>1073</sup> In this way, Romberg subscribed to a long tradition of thriving merchants, captains, and supercargoes trying to convert their material wealth into social capital by acceding to the aristocracy.<sup>1074</sup> In France, some traders acquired noble status by purchasing a government office, while others were awarded a title simply because of their commercial exploits. Romberg, in the Habsburg Empire, followed the latter path: in the eulogistic patent letter underpinning his ennoblement, Romberg's title of baron was emphatically motivated by his economic endeavours. Of singular importance was the merchant's thriving

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<sup>1071</sup> See for instance Antunes, 'Early Modern Business Diplomacy', 20-7.

<sup>1072</sup> Ressel, 'An entrepreneur', 83-108.

<sup>1073</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 779, 164-8; Anspach, 'Romberg', 170-2.

<sup>1074</sup> See for instance Boulle, 'Slave trade', 88-9; Everaert, 'Pierre-Ignace-Lievin van Alstein', 31-4; Paul Butel, *Les négociants bordelais. L'Europe et les Iles au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris 1974) 325-7.

maritime commerce, especially his Atlantic trade: the government stressed the fact that a “large part [of his fleet] had voyaged to the Gold Coast and to Guinea to pursue slave trade”.<sup>1075</sup> On top of the general economic importance of his business activities, Ressel writes that Romberg’s support to Vienna’s political projects helped him reach nobiliary status.<sup>1076</sup> There is no doubt his committed backing of the Vervier mission significantly contributed as well. Although the project ultimately did not yield any result, such was not yet clear by July 1784 (Vervier and the *Roi du Congo* having only just returned to Europe) and all that mattered was the support and benevolence Romberg had displayed before departure.

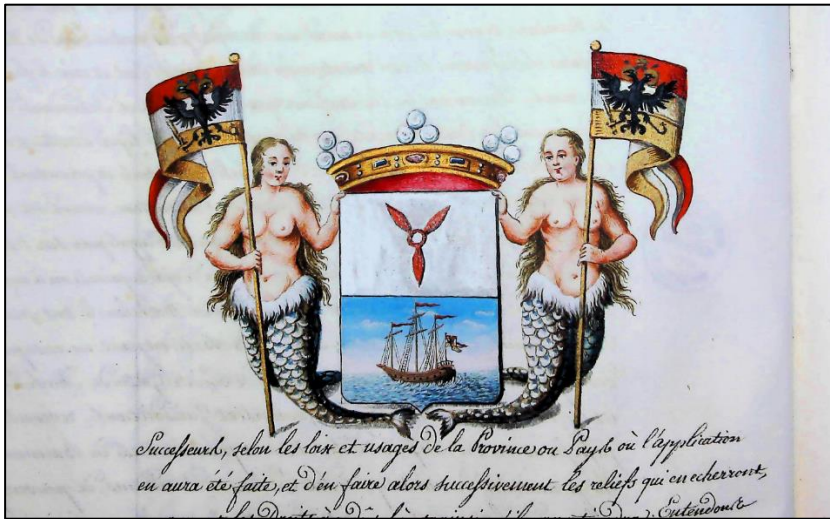


FIGURE 9.2 Romberg’s coat of arms, as granted in 1784. Source: ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 779, 166.

When picking a coat of arms (Figure 9.2), Romberg continued to stress his maritime trade. Seaborne commerce had always been part of his portfolio, but the success of his firm was grounded in the transit privilege which had granted him a monopoly on the overland routes to Central and Southern Europe. Nevertheless, instead of more fittingly displaying his mercantile prowess with a

<sup>1075</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 779, 164-8, “qu’un bon nombre [des navires] auroit fait le Voyage à la Côte d’Or, et à la Guinée pour la Traite des nègres”.

<sup>1076</sup> Ressel, ‘An entrepreneur’, 105.

carriage or a horse, Romberg decided on a different kind of craft: a vessel navigating on a foaming sea, a large Austrian Netherlands ensign flying from its stern. The fact that Romberg did not choose to include one of his packet boats but a large, ocean-going three-masted ship reveals his thought process: it was the ocean that had given him his status, and it was the ocean for which he wished to be remembered.

A second crucial constituent of an aristocratic lifestyle was the purchase of a domain. In October 1782—aided by the profits earned by his blossoming maritime trade—Romberg acquired an estate in Machelen, a town just north of Brussels. The domain included the castle of Beaulieu (see Figure 9.3) and 84 hectares of land, and would remain Romberg's chief residence in the Austrian Netherlands until he was forced to sell the estate in 1810.<sup>1077</sup> (The town of Machelen still uses Romberg's coat of arms to this day).<sup>1078</sup> Ten years after purchasing Beaulieu, the merchant decided to expand his real estate portfolio outside of the Austrian Netherlands, specifically in France. In the years immediately following the French Revolution, the country was confronted with economic downturn and a severe monetary devaluation. In addition, the properties confiscated from the Church were often sold. As Everaert has shown, the Ghent slaving captain Van Alstein exploited these unique opportunities for acquiring real estate and bought an estate in the neighbourhood of Gennes.<sup>1079</sup> Bapst also profited from these opportunities and purchased a house and several plots of land.<sup>1080</sup>

It was probably during the same period that Romberg acquired a few properties in France, including several abbeys, churches and a *chateau* to the south of Paris.<sup>1081</sup> The choice for Paris was motivated by both cultural and practical reasons. With regards to the former, the Austrian Netherlands elite was very much oriented towards France. French was the language used by the nobility and the *bourgeoisie*, and French tastes, theatre, and other art products

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<sup>1077</sup> Anspach, 'Romberg', 170-5, n27.

<sup>1078</sup> See <https://www.machelen.be/wapenschild>. It was granted to the town by royal decree in 1984, exactly two centuries after Romberg's adoption of the coat of arms.

<sup>1079</sup> Everaert, 'Pierre-Ignace-Lievin van Alstein', 80-1.

<sup>1080</sup> Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*, 109-10.

<sup>1081</sup> KBR, *Récit fidèle et succinct des faits relatifs à une liquidation entre le Sieur Frédéric Romberg, créancier, et le Sieur P. F. Stevens*, 23. These possessions, all sold in 1810 together with the Beaulieu estate, included the St. Honoré cloister, the St. Perrin abbey, the St. John church and abbey, and the *chateau* de Marolle, all inside or in the immediate environment of Paris.

made swift inroads in the Austrian Netherlands. This import was fostered still by the brief French occupation during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-8), an active culture policy oriented towards France stemming from the government, and the growing cordiality between Versailles and Vienna after the *renversement des alliances*.<sup>1082</sup> It was only natural, therefore, that a wealthy individual like Romberg would want to spend extended periods in the French capital to enjoy its high society life. Secondly, like other Brussels bankers such as Depestre, Romberg had over the years forged good connections in the French world of commerce and business matters often necessitated him to frequent Paris.<sup>1083</sup> Furthermore, the merchant's frustration with what he perceived as the government's lack of initiative to extend Ostend's success beyond the war years made him increasingly inclined to shift his main operations to France.<sup>1084</sup> Purchasing a grand estate in the vicinity of Paris would not only make his stays more convenient, but would also elevate his status in France and help solidify his position within the French mercantile community.

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<sup>1082</sup> See for example Davis, *Joseph II*, 40; the contributions to Roland Mortier and Hervé Hasquin, eds., 'L'influence française dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens et la Principauté de Liège au temps de Voltaire et de Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *Etudes sur le XVIIIe Siècle* 6:1 (1979); Hervé Hasquin and Jozef Smeyers, *Het culturele leven in onze provincies (Oostenrijkse Nederlanden, prinsbisdom Luik en hertogdom Bouillon) in de 18de eeuw* (Brussels 1983); Verschaffel, *De weg*, Chapter 1; Beatrijs Vanacker, Charlotte van Hooijdonk, Vanessa Van Puyvelde, and Tom Verschaffel, 'Fashioning "Belgian" Literature and Cultural Mediatorship in the Journal littéraire et politique des Pays-Bas autrichiens (1786)', *Journal of European Periodical Studies* 7:2 (2022) 130–46.

<sup>1083</sup> For example, the tobacco scheme he had devised with Schepers, see Chapter 2 and Dhondt, 'Een ondernemer', 331-2.

<sup>1084</sup> Romberg, *Mémoire des faits*, 9.

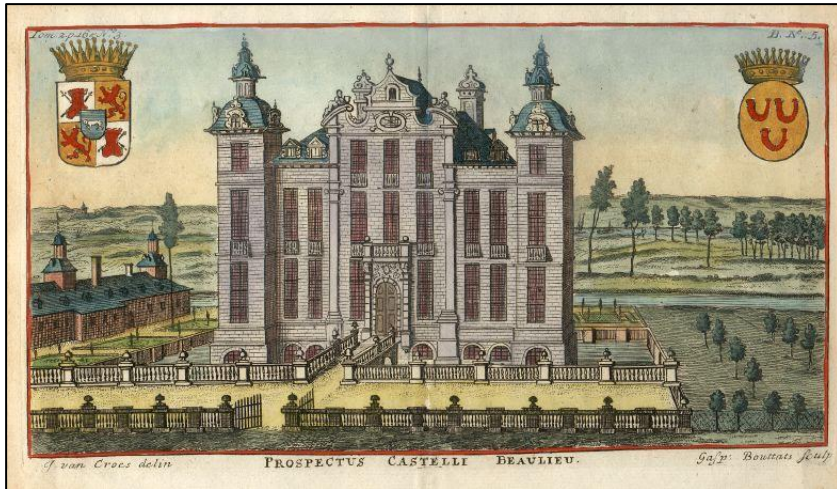


FIGURE 9.3 Beaulieu Castle in Machelen, c. 1700. *Source:* Jacob Harrewijn.

In the same light should we view the attempts of Romberg to acquire a piece of land in the environment of Bordeaux. On 16 February 1791, around the same time as the acquisition of his Paris estates, Romberg authorized Bapst to buy a property in the vicinity of the Atlantic metropole.<sup>1085</sup> It was not uncommon for merchants in the town to buy an estate outside the city: the many vineyards sitting on both sides of the Garonne river presented an additional source of income as well as a refuge for traders wishing to temporarily escape the noise and the rush of the big city.<sup>1086</sup> For Romberg specifically, just as it had in Paris, a Bordeaux estate would allow him to connect better with the local commercial elites. The projected worth of the “*bien fond ou terre*” in Bordeaux was to be in the vicinity of 50,000 *écus*, which translates to 150,000 *livres tournois*.<sup>1087</sup> This sum would likely have landed Romberg a very impressive plot of land: during the latter half of the eighteenth century, hardly any of the transactions involving domains and *chateaux* in the vicinity of Bordeaux surpassed the mark of 150,000 *livres*, and most of this real estate fetched much lower prices.<sup>1088</sup> In contrast to the Beaulieu estate, the Bordeaux domain was explicitly funded by Romberg’s profits earned in the slave trade:

<sup>1085</sup> RATB, *Notary*, 8727, Deed of 16 February 1791.

<sup>1086</sup> Butel, *Les négociants bordelais*, 352-5.

<sup>1087</sup> RATB, *Notary*, 8727, Deed of 16 February 1791.

<sup>1088</sup> Butel, *Les négociants bordelais*, 356-64.



the planned purchase, witness the notary deed, was backed by “the Value still to receive from Mr. Pedro Jouane [sic] de Erice and Mr. Carpentier in silver piasters”.<sup>1089</sup> Two months after assigning Bapst the role of land agent, however, Romberg revoked his associate’s authority to serve in that role.<sup>1090</sup> Likely the purchase never materialized: perhaps fresh unfavourable news regarding the recovery of the piasters had arrived from Havana, or perhaps the economic and political turmoil in France had discouraged Romberg from pursuing his plan any further.

*“Not all that glitters is gold”: Maritime Trade and Reputation Loss, 1784-97*

When Romberg applied for noble status, his career had reached a formidable peak. The merchant had profited handsomely from the neutral stance of the Habsburg Monarchy by striking more deals than ever before, he had moved into maritime trade and had swiftly acquired a fleet of over a hundred sail, and he had branched out to France by the establishment of Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie in Bordeaux. The latter by-house confirmed Romberg’s shift into colonial trade, which he had previously initiated from the Austrian Netherlands. Meanwhile, the firm could still take pride in the slavers launched by Romberg & Consors, as the disappointing return cargoes had not yet reached Europe—in fact, many of Romberg’s vessels had only recently anchored in a Caribbean port. Yet it must have been evident to the merchant that the temporary peak he had achieved could very well be the apex of his success, and that some affairs had taken a turn for the worse. Carpentier had settled in Havana in October of the previous year, and even via the slow communication channels spanning the Atlantic the news of a deflated market for enslaved labour must by this point have come through to Brussels. Perhaps it was precisely this realization—that the recent success of his maritime business might prove short-lived—that had enticed Romberg to enshrine his ephemeral status in a lasting noble title.

Although the impending financial catastrophe was still knowledge exclusive to the firm in 1783-4, it would in due time reach the general public.

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<sup>1089</sup> RATB, *Notary*, 8727, Deed of 16 February 1791, “*contre la Valeur a recevoir chez Mr. Pedro Jouane de Erice et Mr. Carpentier en piastres*”.

<sup>1090</sup> RATB, *Notary*, 8727, Deed of 2 April 1791. In 1791, 150,000 *livres tournois* indeed equalled 30,000 piasters, about the sum remaining in Havana.

Like every trading concern, the state of Romberg's company was continuously debated in mercantile spheres, both in the Austrian Netherlands and abroad. Trust was paramount to Early Modern trade, and any failure to honour agreements would soon result in damaged reputation, a loss of business opportunities, and hampered access to credit. Merchants kept track of the honesty and solvability of existing or prospective business partners by tapping into the continuous stream of news and rumours passing around Europe, either through merchant correspondence or by frequenting spaces where merchants congregated and talked business. While such information clearly served a crucial purpose in the world of commerce, gossip was also being circulated for mere entertainment's sake, or more maliciously, as a deliberate strategy to tarnish the reputation of competitors.<sup>1091</sup>

Although Romberg's reputation had been debated in quieter times, the extension of his (maritime) affairs during the 1780s saw a commensurate growth in the amount of rumours treating the merchant's business. "A gentleman arrived here from Brussels who announced at the French *café* the bankruptcy of Mr. Romberg", wrote one trader from Rotterdam in February 1783, "all those who were dazzled by that name will remember the old saying that not all that glitters is gold".<sup>1092</sup> It is unclear what the base of this particular rumour was (if any) but a similar set of gossip shortly after began circulating after a dispute between Romberg and the firm of William Herries. In August 1783, a conflict had arisen over the payment of a sum of 3,050 pounds sterling (31,872 fl.w.g.), which Herries (acting for the English house of Robert & Harrisson) was trying to recover but which Romberg was unwilling to pay as he thought the English merchants had no rightful claim to it.<sup>1093</sup> A Frenchman called Pierre Deruelles picked up on the news and, mistaking unwillingness for inability, immediately began declaring on the stock exchange of Lille that Romberg, specifically Romberg & Consors, had bankrupted, and incited all

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<sup>1091</sup> Mathias, 'Risk, credit and kinship', 31-2.

<sup>1092</sup> SAG, Family papers, 3301/5, Daufez to Janssens (Rotterdam, 17 February 1783), "*un Mr arrivé ici de Bruxelles qui a publié au café françois la faillite de Mr Romberg pere du dit lieu, le prelude n'est gueres sans effet & nous en avons des preuves tous les jours tous ceux qui ont été éblouis de ce nom se rapellerons du proverbe verdigne que tout ce qui reluit n'est pas de hors*".

<sup>1093</sup> UAG, 201F244, Herries c. Romberg (August 1783). In December 1783, the Grand Council of Mechelen would rule in Romberg's favour, see UAG, *Den Vlaemschen Indicateur* 11:2 (1784) 21.

those who were listening to pass on the news.<sup>1094</sup> Although several other merchants disputed Deruelles' story, his call yielded result: a few weeks later, the rumour of Romberg's alleged collapse had reached Painboeuf in southern France.<sup>1095</sup> Romberg & Consors immediately sued Deruelles for spreading false rumours and demanded a compensation of 60,000 *livres tournois* for the reputation damage suffered. In order to defend its reputation more swiftly and forcefully, Romberg & Consors did not wait for a court decision and dispersed a pamphlet in which it called out Deruelles' misdeeds and the legal steps taken against the Frenchman.<sup>1096</sup>

During the latter half of the 1780s, the cloud of rumours and unsettling news gathering around Romberg's firm grew increasingly denser. The main reason was the growing difficulties faced by Romberg, Bapst & Cie in recovering debts from planters in Saint-Domingue. Added to Bordeaux's increasingly troublesome Atlantic portfolio were the still unresolved slaving activities of Romberg & Consors. By the late 1780s, the firm was forced to conduct an emergency capital operation and a major restructuring of the firm's financial framework. These adversities, alongside the death of Henry and Ferdinand Romberg (both of whom had held crucial roles within the company) had a profound impact within the firm and reverberated across its different branches. Of course, as before, they germinated numerous inflated rumours. As one Brussels noble tellingly wrote to the Paris banker Louis Greffulhe in August 1788, "*You have without a single doubt already been informed about the disruption of the house of Romberg of [this town]*".<sup>1097</sup>

The patience of the investors in the slaving venture had been severely tested over the years. While it was not unusual in the French slave trade for profits to be fully repatriated only a decade after the initial launch of the voyage, many had thought trade with the Spanish colonies to be swifter (due to the payments in specie), or perhaps—especially the retail investors—had simply

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<sup>1094</sup> UAG, 201F244, Romberg & Consors c. Pierre Deruelles (August 1783).

<sup>1095</sup> SAG, *Family papers*, 3301/6, De Cooman to Janssens (Painboeuf, 4 September 1783), "*Il court ici un bruit que la Compagnie de Romberg a fait banquerout*".

<sup>1096</sup> UAG, 201F244, Romberg & Consors c. Pierre Deruelles (August 1783). The Ghent firm, for that matter, was complicit in similar strategies: in 1782, it had run a smear campaign against Laurent Janssens, a local competitor, forcing the latter to circulate a rebuttal in his commercial network, see Chapter 5.

<sup>1097</sup> AN, *Banque Greffulhe (61AQ)*, 100, De la Fosse to Greffulhe (Brussels, 10 August 1788), "*Vous êtes déjà instruit, sans doute, du dérangement de la maison F. Romberg & fils d'ici.*"

been ignorant about the practicalities of slaving investments.<sup>1098</sup> Matthieu Verlat, for example, who had concluded a loan in order to invest in Romberg's Africa business, had promised to pay back the owed sum in 14 months' time—a very optimistic estimate for the return of a slaving voyage (especially since the vessels had not even left Ostend when Verlat took the loan), let alone the full financial conclusion of the venture. When the loan expired two years later, indeed, the former professor was forced to ask for an extension of another two years “*because the Ships have not arrived yet.*” On 20 April 1787, Verlat found himself back in the notary's office, once again asking for a two-year extension on his loan.<sup>1099</sup>

The profits that did manage to make it back to Europe fell severely short of the expectations created by Romberg & Consors' generous prospectuses. The *vicomte* Moerman de Voorhoute duly noted down a sum he had received from Joseph-Louis de Keerle (from whom he had bought a share, see Chapter 4) but, tellingly, added a reminder for himself to “examine whether Keerle has not received anything more”.<sup>1100</sup> The slow repatriation of funds, the underwhelming profits, the (physical) disappearance of Romberg & Consors, and the numerous concerning news stories regarding Romberg's firm during the latter half of the 1780s made investors grow wary of ever recovering what they thought was due to them. Some continued writing inquiring letters<sup>1101</sup>, others took matters a step further and brought suits against—with Romberg & Consors gone—the main firm in Brussels.<sup>1102</sup> A first group of litigators consisted of the heirs of Charles-Joseph Vilain XIII, who had died in 1786 and whose shares had by testament been passed on to his children (who, by contrast, had not inherited their father's patience).<sup>1103</sup> A second court case was initiated in November 1788 by two other noblemen, Huysman de Neufcour and Van der Dilt, “*because it was well known that [Romberg's] affairs were so perilous that he had summoned his*

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<sup>1098</sup> Boule, ‘Slave Trade’, 83.

<sup>1099</sup> RAL, *Notary Joannes Baptiste Staes*, 16, Deed of 8 August 1782, with addenda for 12 August 1784 and 20 April 1787.

<sup>1100</sup> RAG, *Familie de Moerman d'Harlebeke*, 168, “*faire examiner si Keerle n'a rien reçu de plus*”.

<sup>1101</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négociants* 7 B, 1999, Bapst to Beaujarde (Bordeaux, 21 November 1789).

<sup>1102</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Count of Baillet c. Baron Frederic de Romberg (Brussels, 16 September 1787).

<sup>1103</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845 and 8065.

creditors”.<sup>1104</sup> Undoubtedly, Neufcour and Van der Dilft were referring to the events unfolding in Bordeaux and the ongoing attempts to stop Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie from collapsing, or discussions related to this crisis.<sup>1105</sup>

The particularities of the two cases differed slightly, but both groups of litigators shared the deep-felt conviction that Romberg had not paid what was due to them. In the winter of 1788, Huysman de Neufcour and Van der Dilft had even placed several *huissiers de justice* in the firm’s offices in Brussels to recover the alleged debts. Understandably, Romberg was outraged by this very public questioning of his solvability and honesty, an “insult” and “irreparable affront” that “even for half a million *livres* he would no longer want to endure”.<sup>1106</sup> Romberg denied the fact that the absence of profits meant that these profits were present but fraudulently withheld: as the merchant stated, the only obligation that had been created by him accepting investor’s money had been to effectively apply the funds to the fitting out of a vessel destined to West Africa. Although Romberg admitted that through the rosy picture painted in the initial prospectuses Carpentier “*leur a donné beaucoup de miel à la bouche*”, there had never been created an obligation “whatsoever to make the [invested] funds grow in value”.<sup>1107</sup> If such a blunt (though candid) statement was not clear enough, Romberg went on to develop a metaphor not unfamiliar to the slave trade: “*Suppose the [shareholders] had trusted [me] these funds to buy tickets in the lottery...would they be well-founded to claim anything else of [me] than to effectively apply these sums to the agreed goal?*”<sup>1108</sup> Lastly,

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<sup>1104</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilft and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 24 December 1788), “*il étoit notoire que les affaires dudit rescribent étoient si périlicâtes qu’il avoit convoqué ses créanciers*”. Both lawsuits ran well into the 1790s due to the court having to cease its activities during the Brabantine Revolution, and likely never saw a conclusion due to the French invasion of the Austrian Netherlands.

<sup>1105</sup> Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*, 85-91.

<sup>1106</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4164, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilft and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 22 March 1791 and 11 April 1791), “*un affront irréparable*”, “*pour un demi million il ne voudroit plus endure pareille injure*”.

<sup>1107</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilft and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 31 October 1795).

<sup>1108</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren*, 4764, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilft and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 31 October 1795), “*Le rescribent n’y a nullement contracté l’obligation de faire valoir ces sommes*”, “*Supposons que les supplians eussent remis au rescribent ces sommes pour les appliquer au lotto...seroient ils bien fondés à pretender autre chose de lui que le renseignement d’avoir effectivement appliqué ces sommes à la destination convenue?*”.

Romberg stressed that the whole lawsuit was void to begin with: highlighting the ‘problem of principals’ we identified in Chapter 4, the merchant stated that the three associates of Romberg & Consors had organised these voyages and held full responsibility, not him: he was “*simply a shareholder*”.<sup>1109</sup>

News of Romberg’s failed Africa venture soon spread beyond the confines of the court room. In 1791, for instance, the Ghent authors Jan Baptist Vervier (Romberg’s former ship’s surgeon), Bernard Coppens, and Karel Lodewijk Diericx published the *Livre blanc ou révolution gordune*, a satirical treatise on the Brabantine Revolution of 1789-90. The book briefly treated—in itself indicative of how well-known the affair must by then have become among the reading public—the slave trade initiated by Romberg during the 1780s in a passage as indicting for the nobility which had invested in the *Real permiso* ships as for Romberg himself:

It is easy to imagine that [the nobles] were not capable of making speculations on their own, but they found opportunities favourable to their greed [when the] Baron de Romberg, a kind of charlatan, announced his slave trade as an enterprise that in less than two years would produce heaps of gold. The [Nobles], enticed by this seductive bait and believing they were about to swim in riches, eagerly rushed to bring him their bags of money, begging him to accept them under such favourable conditions. Romberg, naturally obliging in such cases, played hard to get, yet always ended up accepting with an air of patronage and loudly proclaiming his services. But when he had caught as many *écus* as he desired, he disappeared, and the [Nobles], utterly stupefied, scratched behind their long ears very uselessly.<sup>1110</sup>

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<sup>1109</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulierien*, 4764, Frederic Romberg contra Vander Dilt and Huysman de Neufcour (Brussels, 31 October 1795), “*le rescibent est simplement actionnaire*”.

<sup>1110</sup> Vervier, Coppens, and Diericx, *Livre blanc*, 107-8: “*On s’imagine bien qu’ils n’étoient point en état de faire des speculations par eux-mêmes, mais ils rencontrèrent des occasions favorables à leur avidité, d’abord une espèce de charlatan, le Baron de Romberg se rendit chez les Gorduns, & y annonça la traite des negres, comme une entreprise qui en moins de deux ans devoit produire des monceaux d’or. Les Jonckers allechés par cet appas séduisant, & croiant d’aller nager dans les richesses, s’empresserent à l’envie de lui apporter leurs sacs d’argent, en le suppliant de les recevoir sous des conditions si favorables. Romberg, tout complaisant qu’il étoit naturellement en pareil cas, faisoit le difficile, & cependant finissoit toujours par accepter avec un air de protection, & en faisant sonner fort haut ses services, mais quand il eut attrapé autant d’écus qu’il en desiroit, il s’éclipsa, & les Jonckers qui en étoient tout stupefait, graterent derriere leurs longues oreilles très-inutilement.*”

Clearly, Romberg's failed attempts at slave trade were widely discussed in the Austrian Netherlands and had hurt his reputation in the process. Heavy losses and slow returns were far from uncommon in the slave trade, but the fact that Romberg's associates had—recklessly—promised spectacular yields and—more truthfully—quick returns due to the sale to the Spanish Crown instead of colonists had disappointed many. Additionally, the transfer of the activities of Romberg & Consors from Ghent to a place as far away as Bordeaux (although there were reasonable arguments to do so) paired with the management structure of Romberg's firm, which after years of debate in court remained as opaque as before, had created an aura of suspicion and the image of a merchant trying to escape his responsibilities. While it was not unheard of that merchants tried to cook the books and hide the real profits of their commerce, it was very rare as the accounts of one firm were generally used and scrutinized by different parties—indeed, Daudin cited Romberg as a prime example of a situation where the various accounting books were used by multiple actors on a daily basis.<sup>1111</sup> As the previous assessment has proven, everything points in the direction that the firm's slave trade was simply a financial failure, as many slaving ventures turned out to be during the Early Modern period. But as the above lines attest, some still refused to believe this version of the facts, and as his lawsuits piled up, Romberg was increasingly viewed as a fraudster (“a kind of charlatan”).

## Conclusion

With his title of baron, Romberg also earned the right to present his coat of arms as being supported by two mermaid-like figures or, as they were described in a more mythological phrasing in the patent letter, by two 'sirens' (see Figure 9.2).<sup>1112</sup> These double-tailed sea creatures, both holding a banner of the Austrian Netherlands, were undoubtedly included as innocent iconographic attributes to support the maritime theme of the coat of arms. Yet of course, from Antiquity, sirens had been known for more than simply roaming and inhabiting

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<sup>1111</sup> Daudin, 'Comment calculer les profits', 53.

<sup>1112</sup> ARA, *Departement voor de Nederlanden van de Hof- en Staatskanselarij*, 779, 167, 'Sirenes'.

the sea: with their sweet and enchanting song, they were said to lure careless seafarers away from their course until their ships crashed on a rocky outcrop. As it turned out, in the years following his accession to the nobility, Romberg's sirens would reveal exactly this sinister side—shedding of the supportive role bestowed on them by the patent letter, and slowly leading the firm to its doom.

As we have seen in the previous pages, Romberg's Africa trade turned a heavy loss. The seas of silver the firm had hoped to encounter in Havana largely evaporated due to health disasters during the Middle Passage, overinvestment in the fitting-out phase, a deflated market for enslaved labour, and a prolonged repatriation period of the meagre proceeds. The experience of Romberg & Consors shows that the slave trading sector of the 1780s was not uniquely paved with gold, that its so-called exceptional profits should not be overstated, and certainly not be projected on the whole period of slave trade as suggested by authors such as Williams. To be sure, short-run periods of exceptional profits clearly existed, especially in the early, disruptive stages of war. But the slaving sector was a competitive environment—probably not competitive in an 'atomistic' way as Thomas and Bean would have it, but competitive enough for periods of scarcity to quickly incite a speculative frenzy, an increase in outfitting efforts, and eventually an expanded supply and a reduction in prices. As slaving voyages took a long time to reach their markets of sale and price signals became quickly outdated, for every firm accruing exceptional financial rewards during the build-up phase, there was a firm, like Romberg's, which suffered exceptional losses during the coming-down phase.

Although financial gains failed to materialize, Romberg did manage to reap social rewards from his slaving scheme. The merchant and his associates leveraged the symbolic weight of Atlantic trade to enhance their prestige among the general public in the Austrian Netherlands, their fellow local merchants, and the Habsburg Monarchy. Romberg also actively sought to forge a deeper connection with France's commercial world, driven by a strong desire to belong to this social group as well as his frustration with the government's failure to develop national trade. These gains in reputation were realized before the returns of Romberg's slave trade became public knowledge and as such stood separate from them. Although the bankruptcies and connected lawsuits of the late 1780s and 1790s clearly tarnished the merchant's reputation, parts of the prestige distilled from engaging in transoceanic trade—not least in the eyes of



Romberg himself—remained. When Romberg again had to face the court in 1810 (by this time, as an octogenarian), he still boasted that he had “*occupied a large part of Europe through his astonishing trade across all the seas, in the four parts of the world*”<sup>1113</sup>. Whatever the financial catastrophes maritime trade had brought to his firm (of which his sheer presence in court was testimony), the sea continued to be in the eyes of Romberg what it always had been: a source of pride and status.

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<sup>1113</sup> KBR, *Récit fidèle et succinct des faits relatifs à une liquidation entre le Sieur Frédéric Romberg, créancier, et le Sieur P. F. Stevens*, 24, “Ce Romberg qui a occupé une grande partie de l’Europe par son commerce étonnant sur toutes les mers, dans les quatre parties du monde”.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Epilogue and Conclusion

**I**N THE WINTER OF 1784, FRENCH MARINERS busy scavenging the seabed north off Île d'Yeu noticed an Imperial flag drifting on the waves. Braving the foaming and treacherous waters surrounding the island, the men fished the piece of cloth out of the sea and laboriously hoisted it into their sloop. The large banner, soaked and shredded by the rocky surf, belonged to the *Conseil de Flandre*, the final vessel which Romberg & Consors had dispatched to West Central Africa. The voyage had been a catastrophe: epidemics and scurvy had wreaked havoc among the mariners and the ship's prisoners, killing more than a hundred people during the Middle Passage. On 20 October 1784, after fifteen excruciating months away from home, the crew of the *Conseil de Flandre* finally caught view of Europe—only to immediately hit a rock and sink to the bottom.<sup>1114</sup>

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<sup>1114</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Île d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, List of items salvaged from the wreck of the *Conseil de Flandre* (Île d'Yeu, 3 December 1784), “*un grand Pavillon imperial haché par le Rocher*”; Idem, Report of Jacques Allix, Louis Chevallier and Jean Dumonté (Île d'Yeu, s.d.), “*Le Conseil de Flandre naufragé sur le Rocher appelé Le champ qui est au nord de cette isle...la coste qui est le plus dangereux de cette isle*”.

In many ways the salvaged Imperial flag—drowned, battered, and torn to pieces by the Atlantic Ocean—symbolized the foray of Romberg & Consors into the Atlantic complex. An unexpectedly swift conclusion of peace, a series of devastating health disasters during the Middle Passage, and exceptionally large investments yielding poor returns had transformed what was once hailed as “this most fortunate event for our trade” into a colossal financial failure. Instead of generating the anticipated luxurious profits for the firm and its investors, the project ended up erasing two-thirds of its equity. In the process, thousands of African men, women, and children were forcibly transported to the Americas; many hundreds took their dreams and memories into a watery grave. For the survivors of this story, however, life went on—though each, to a greater or lesser extent, bore the lasting legacy of Romberg & Consors.

François Carpentier returned to Havana in 1792 to deal with the unfinished business of Romberg & Consors and oversee the new colonial ventures of Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie in Bordeaux. What was intended to be a brief stint in the Caribbean—Carpentier had spoken of *‘plier bagage’* just months after his arrival in 1783—had evolved into an undertaking that had taken almost a decade of his life.<sup>1115</sup> The slaving voyages of his firm had earned him a 2 percent commission but killed his brothers.<sup>1116</sup> His failure to fulfil his generous promises tarnished his reputation among the elite of the Austrian Netherlands, and probably derailed his nascent career in commerce. Perhaps this was why Carpentier had no reservations about returning to Havana and embraced the idea of making a fresh start in Cuba, living out the rest of his days there, free from troublesome investors and looming lawsuits. This would, in any case, explain his disappearance from the public record after 1792.<sup>1117</sup>

Throughout the 1780s, Pierre François Schepers continued to face the people he had persuaded to invest in his slaving expeditions in order to

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<sup>1115</sup> The Austrian ambassador to the United States, Beelen-Berthoff, had incorrectly estimated that Carpentier’s stay in Havana had lasted three years, see Hanns Schlitter, *Die Berichte des ersten Agenten Österreichs in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika Baron de Beelen-Berthoff an die Regierung der Österreichischen Niederland in Brüssel 1784-1789* (Vienna 1891), Letter of 22 December 1786: “Carpentier is, I believe, now back in the Austrian Netherlands from Havana, where he arrived nearly two years ago with a cargo of Africans, selling them there advantageously”.

<sup>1116</sup> ADG, *Fonds des Négotiants*, 7 B, 2000, Romberg & Bapst to Charles Carpentier (Bordeaux, 29 September 1789).

<sup>1117</sup> Poplimont, in his chapter on the Carpentier family, does not provide a date of death for François Carpentier, nor does he include a marriage date, see Poplimont, *La Belgique héraldique*, II, 367.

distribute the meagre dividends.<sup>1118</sup> Yet the entrepreneur emerged from his spell at Romberg & Consors with undiminished ambition and self-confidence. Even before the Ghent branch sold its offices, Schepers was already knee-deep into a new scheme: the establishment of a milling plant in the town of Oudenaarde in order to capitalize further on the commercial opportunities of the early 1780s by exporting flour to the Americas. Schepers purchased a large property beside the Scheldt River and, after receiving a permit in the summer of 1782, installed several water-powered mills. As Dhondt has shown, in the years that followed, the entrepreneur achieved considerable success in flour production while also eagerly engaging in speculative activities. The latter ultimately spelled the end of Schepers' mills: accused of driving up grain prices during the harsh winter of 1790, an angry crowd stormed the milling establishment—a traditional target during hunger crises—and destroyed it completely. Two years later, Schepers repurposed the site, converting it into a factory for processing wood, which he eventually sold in 1806. Presumably, at 70 years of age, the sale marked Schepers' retirement from commercial life. After spending most of his life in Ghent, Romberg's former associate relocated to Oudenaarde, where he lived until at least 1817.<sup>1119</sup>

Georg Christoph Bapst continued expanding the colonial activities of his firm, acquiring stakes in the Saint-Dominican economy and organising slaving expeditions to the Caribbean, despite being reminded on an almost daily basis of his prior experiences with the trade through the unresolved activities of Romberg & Consors. The returns on investment—the plantation crops—trickled back to Europe only very slowly, hampered by adverse weather, disappointing harvests, and maritime disasters. From 1789 onward, the debt spiral of the French plantation complex began to intersect with a series of seismic political events: the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the Coalition Wars against Great Britain. The colonists on Saint-Domingue were unable to settle their debts in a way that allowed Bapst to settle those of his firm, and in Autumn

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<sup>1118</sup> See for example ADG, *Fonds des Négociants*, 7B, 2000, f. 309 r., Bapst to Schepers (Bordeaux, 16 November 1790).

<sup>1119</sup> Jean-Jacques Heirwegh, 'La mouture économique et son introduction dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 6:1 (1975) 53-89; Dhondt, 'Een ondernemer', 335-58. For a pre-history of violence against millers during periods of high grain prices, see Hervé Hasquin, 'Cherté, interventionnisme et psychologie populaire: deux périodes de nervosité dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens (1767-69 et 1771-74)', *Etudes sur le XVIIIe siècle* 7:1 (1980) 47-56.

1793, the strained credit lines finally snapped. In December, after ten years of colonial business, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie was declared bankrupt. Bapst briefly went into hiding to evade creditors and the newly established Military Commission, which was targeting speculative merchants. In 1794, he appeared before the Commission still but was acquitted, and in subsequent years, Bapst preoccupied himself with the liquidation of his firm. In 1807, after protracted litigation, the liabilities of Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie were officially calculated at 34 million *livres tournois*, of which Bapst was personally held responsible for one million. To meet this obligation, he sold his personal library and most of his art collection. Having lost nearly everything, he moved to Paris, where he found a modest position in the firm of his cousin, Jacques-Eberhard Bapst. Unmarried himself, Bapst went to live with his sister, who had recently become a widow. He passed away on 5 November 1821, at the age of 64.<sup>1120</sup>

Frederic Romberg lived to see his business empire unravel. In 1797, the merchant withdrew from commercial life and—having been widowed in 1785—happily began his retirement by remarrying with the 26-year-old Anne Thérèse Buot. The remainder of his life, however, was largely consumed by the fallout from the bankruptcy of Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie, which dragged the rest of the firm into ruin. Eventually, Romberg was legally required to repay four million *livres* in debts, a ruling that forced him to sell much of his library, jewellery, and art collection, as well as portions of his real estate holdings in France and the Southern Netherlands. Among the losses was the Beaulieu estate, his home for many decades and the symbol of his social ascent to nobility. In a final effort to cast his legacy in a positive light, Romberg wrote the *Mémoire de faits*, a reflection on his career that highlighted his charitable works in Brussels and his native Hemer, while relegating his slave trade to a literal footnote. Romberg died in 1819, aged 90.<sup>1121</sup>

On a sugar plantation near Port-au-Prince, a tobacco factory in Havana, or a stately home in Ghent, the journeys of the enslaved Africans forcibly transported by Romberg and his three associates came to a provisional end. Perhaps some men, women, and children may have quickly succumbed to the

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<sup>1120</sup> Thése, *Négociants bordelais*, 194-211.

<sup>1121</sup> Anspach, 'Romberg', 162-82; KBR, *Récit fidèle et succinct des faits relatifs à une liquidation entre le Sieur Frédéric Romberg, créancier, et le Sieur P. F. Stevens, débiteur*, 22-3.

hardships of the journey and the gruelling work on the plantations, while others might have had the ‘fortune’ of being apprenticed to a local artisan, sparing them from years of backbreaking labour in the sugar fields. Perhaps some of them regained their liberty by fleeing to a Saint-Dominican *marronage* or a Cuban *palenque*. Or perhaps some lived long enough to wrest their freedom from their owners in the Haitian Revolution.<sup>1122</sup> Much like their pasts, we can only guess at their futures.

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What did it all mean?

Most of all, this book has shown how the Southern Netherlands were not excluded from the history of European overseas expansion. While its activities were dwarfed by those of other nations, portraying the country as merely a passive bystander is inaccurate. During the late eighteenth century, enterprising Southern Netherlands merchants entered the global Atlantic by facilitating the trade of foreign slave traders and pursuing it themselves. Its nobles and *bourgeoisie* funded the business, while its manufacturers earned an income from it. Its mariners enlisted on ships plying African shipping lanes. Its doctors meticulously—and transgressively—examined enslaved individuals on the African coast before purchasing and transporting them across the Atlantic. Its subjects embarked on Imperial missions to gather intelligence for colonial purposes. Finally, when offered the chance, people in the Austrian Netherlands expressed the same colonial gaze as other European countries and employed enslaved Africans as personal servants. By shedding light on all these ties with the Atlantic plantation complex in general and the trans-Atlantic slave trade in particular, I have established a deeper understanding of what James Shaw, the traveller who visited Ostend in the early 1780s, meant when he observed that “*the shores of Africa are also visited by the ships of [the Austrian Netherlands]; and the Flemings pursue on that coast the same unhallowed traffic, which other European nations have so long practised without scruple*”.<sup>1123</sup>

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<sup>1122</sup> Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore 1996) 49-59, 105-48.

<sup>1123</sup> Shaw, *Sketches*, 76.

This study is both a product of and a testament to the conceptual shifts that have shaped the history of the Atlantic complex in recent decades. The fields of Atlantic history, global history, transnational or transregional history, as well as recent trends in maritime history, have advocated to look beyond the national confines of the major colonial empires. By adopting an actor-centred approach to the history of the European colonial project, scholars have pointed to alternative ways of empire-building that extend beyond the formal acquisition of territories and their exploitation by chartered companies. The powerful, fresh lens on the Atlantic system offered by both approaches has revealed the participation in the European colonial project, through their own informal strategies, of nations and regions not previously considered.

Building on these perspectives, scholars have firmly established the Southern Netherlands' deep entanglement with the Spanish colonial realm during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the global connections of its successor, the Austrian Netherlands, and the Austrian branch of the Habsburgs as a whole, long remained obscure, recent scholarship—including this book—has demonstrated that similar dynamics persisted into the eighteenth century. Both the Austrian Netherlands and the Habsburg Monarchy lacked the military resources or the naval capabilities to carve out a piece of colonial commerce and protect it. What these polities did have as an asset was their 'smallness', their position of being 'outsiders' to the Atlantic system dominated by European states pursuing formal empire and, often during wartime, their ability to remain aloof from European conflicts, thereby securing neutrality. These traits allowed subjects of the Austrian Habsburgs to 'fly under the radar' of established empires or, more actively, to leverage their outsider or neutral status to acquire certain material benefits.<sup>1124</sup> Viewed from a traditional perspective, the participation of the Austrian Habsburgs into European overseas history is largely limited to the establishment of several East India companies in Ostend and Trieste, each with their own factories in India. In a perspective embracing other forms of empire-building than the mere formal sort, a rich history emerges in which Habsburg actors—just like in earlier

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<sup>1124</sup> Jan de Vries, 'Case studies in smallness', *Small is beautiful? Interlopers and smaller trading nations in the pre-industrial period. Proceedings of the XVth World Economic History Congress in Utrecht (Netherlands)* (Stuttgart 2009) 1-11.

centuries—participated in various ways in the Atlantic complex, either in a commercial, scientific, missionary, or diplomatic manner.

The ‘Belgian’ intervention in the African commodity and slave trade of the 1780s presents a crucially overlooked example of these dynamics. In an indirect form, this participation involved services to foreign slave merchants, whose trade had become impossible due to war on the high seas. By selling neutral ship’s papers to them, Imperial subjects enabled the continuation of these traders’ slaving business and the Caribbean plantation complex. As a result, an unknown but by all evidence large number of slave ships during the early 1780s made their Middle Passages and entered colonial harbours flying Imperial, Flemish, or Ostend colours over their sickly and emaciated human cargoes. The people in the Austrian Netherlands furnishing these documents earned a commission fee or acquired a stake in the profits of the venture. In a direct form, this participation entailed the funding and outfitting of Africa-bound vessels in the Southern Low Countries proper. The most prominent practitioner of both strategies was Frederic Romberg, along with his subsidiary branch in Ghent, Romberg & Consors.

Frederic Romberg, with his long life and a career spanning four decades, was both a product of an economy where the government sought to assert control and a precursor to the more liberal, global capitalism of the nineteenth century, where private entrepreneurs increasingly assumed a central role. Romberg’s early career profited significantly from the mercantilist and cameralist policies of the Cobenzl administration, which bestowed the transit privilege on the merchant and created a state-protected environment to develop his firm. By the 1780s, Romberg had emerged as a thoroughly modern entrepreneur, commanding a broad-ranging portfolio which included commerce, banking, and manufacturing. Driven by personal gain, portfolio integration, and a strong desire to belong to Europe’s commercial elites, Romberg harnessed the beneficial circumstances of the 1780s to venture into colonial trade. Through his wide network and varied activities, he connected with foreign merchants who saw their commercial interests clash with those of the states they were subject to. Through a partnership, Romberg provided a means for these merchants to escape the restrictive policies of their home country or to give them the ability to trade with the enemy under cover of neutrality. At other times, however, he collaborated with foreign state



administrations. From 1782 onwards, Romberg and his associates skilfully worked Spain's imperial framework and petitioned its ministers and ambassadors to gain access to the Spanish Empire and its resources. For Madrid, Romberg's firm presented an attractive alternative to the slave imports of rival Caribbean powers which Spain had been forced to condone for centuries but from which it now sought to break away. As a result, the merchant was granted a generous licence, which managed to survive the conclusion of peace. Romberg's eventual imports of over a thousand enslaved persons on Cuba reinforced the call for free trade among Spain's colonial residents, which, once implemented in 1789, set Cuba on a path toward becoming a slavery-based agricultural powerhouse in the nineteenth century. Although the position of Romberg and his agents remained fragile, their example demonstrates how traditional outsiders to the Atlantic system—as Antunes, Münch Miranda, and Paolo Salvado have recently argued—were perfectly capable of identifying windows of opportunity and exploit the empires of other nations for their own benefit.<sup>1125</sup>

The Brussels and Imperial governments acknowledged the importance of Romberg's African trade for the state. First, Vienna projected its fledgling colonial agenda on the merchant's business, harnessing it to gather information on a potential territorial acquisition off the African coast. Second, and more importantly, they recognized its economic significance, indeed considering it "in every way advantageous to the Country". Although the government was continuously wary of compromising the country's neutrality by allowing too many exports of warlike stores—necessary for trade in Africa—they occasionally demonstrated this perspective on Romberg's trade by being lenient on the firm's requests for firearms exports. In order to test the government's assessment, and following recent scholarship taking a broader view of the impact of colonial trade—looking beyond purely financial gains for its organizers and incorporating forward and backward linkages—I reconstructed the economic footprint of Romberg & Consors' African operations in the Austrian Netherlands. I showed how the outfitting of primarily slave ships in Ostend, Bruges, and Ghent likely effected the spending of over half a million guilders in the local economy, a massive sum of which a long list of people

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<sup>1125</sup> Antunes, Münch Miranda, and Salvado, 'The Resources of Others', 501-21.

benefitted. By significantly drawing on foreign money and funds from the aristocracy, moreover, Romberg injected capital in the local economy which otherwise would either never have entered the Austrian Netherlands, would have been invested in non-productive assets, or would have simply continued to lay idle. Although the venture ultimately presented Romberg and his investors with a loss, the Austrian Netherlands subjects embarking on these voyages who earned a fixed wage or had the opportunity to trade for their own account extracted significant wealth from their participation in slave trade. Lastly, Cuban silver ultimately returned to the Brussels Mint, stimulating the economy and shoring up the finances of the Austrian Netherlands and the Habsburg Monarchy.

The emphatic transnational, actor-centric, and micro-historical approach of this study has again proven to be an effective lens for examining the global ties of regions without formal empire. For the Southern Netherlands during earlier centuries, this perspective revealed the entanglement of traders, missionaries, and printers with the wider world, primarily through the Iberian overseas empires.<sup>1126</sup> In this book, narrowing the focus to Romberg's firm has not only illuminated this merchant's colonial business but also uncovered the connections of countless subjects of the Southern Netherlands—mariners, notaries, grocers, painters, teachers, and innkeepers—who were or became involved in the Atlantic world, whether knowingly or unknowingly. This approach could, and should, be emulated further. Jacobs, in his micro-study of Mason, Blundell & Masterson, similarly revealed the involvement of Southern Netherlands subjects in the organisation of this slaving firm.<sup>1127</sup> Yet many topics remain unexplored: other Southern Netherlands merchants engaged in the slave trade, such as Chapel and Van Schoor, have received little scholarly attention. Beyond the 1780s, a micro-analysis of linen, cotton, gun, or knife manufacturers—following Coenen's recent emphasis on the global aspirations of some of these producers and Steffen's study of Silesian linen—could further illuminate these industries' connections to the Atlantic system.<sup>1128</sup> Notary archives, like the one revealing the story of "Antonio", an enslaved mariner who

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<sup>1126</sup> See for example Everaert, 'De internationale en koloniale handel'; Thomas, 'Misioneros flamencos'; Thomas and Stols, eds. *Een wereld op papier*.

<sup>1127</sup> Jacobs, 'Geopolitiek en sociaal kapitaal', 115-58.

<sup>1128</sup> Steffen, 'A Fierce Competition', 37-56; Coenen, 'The International Textile Trade', 74-80; Coenen, *Carriers of growth*, 122.

escaped his owner in Ostend, may hold more such encounters with the Atlantic world, waiting to be rediscovered.

Romberg and his African activities may seem an anomaly in the overall history of the Southern Netherlands. Very few people in the Austrian Netherlands indeed commanded the network and wielded the financial power to set up a venture like he did—but, as we have shown, he was not the only one to do so. Additionally, Romberg was merely a dramatic reflection of economic ties and encounters with West Africa that long predated his emergence as a slave trader. Early examples include Eustache de la Fosse's fifteenth-century trading mission to West Africa, the sixteenth-century use of enslaved labour on Southern Netherlands-owned plantations, or the employment of African servants among Antwerp's elite during the city's heyday.<sup>1129</sup> Such connections were especially numerous during the eighteenth century. As Parmentier and Everaert have shown, the project to establish an African company in order to stimulate domestic industries was floated numerous times during the eighteenth century, and the 1710s and 1720s had witnessed several ships effectively trading Ostend for West Africa.<sup>1130</sup> Flemish seamen had enlisted and earned salaries in slaving companies of neighbouring countries before. Linen, the principal export product of Flanders, was extensively used in the Spanish Empire, partially to clothe enslaved Africans, while Dutch slave traders used the fabric to craft sails for their ships or to broker deals with African merchants. Firearms from Liège had long been the preferred make of weapons of French slave merchants when assembling their trading commodities. In short, Romberg tapped into ideas, mindsets, and structural connections with the Atlantic system which long preceded his business. Sometimes the merchant amplified them, but he also simply highlighted what has been obscured by an excessive focus on formal strategies of empire-building, yet had always been there: a pre-history of 'Belgian' commercial and colonial involvement in Africa.

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<sup>1129</sup> Stols, 'Mercurius met een exotische maraboet'; Verberckmoes, *Wij, Habsburgers*, 29-52; Puttevels, 'Een vergeten bladzijde'.

<sup>1130</sup> Everaert, 'Commerce d'Afrique', 177-85; Parmentier, *De Oostendse Guineavaarders*, 165-97.





## Appendix

### A.1 The quantitative scale of Romberg's Africa trade

How many enslaved people did Romberg embark in West and Central Africa, forcibly transport across the Atlantic, and disembark in the Caribbean?

The first estimate of the merchant's business was made by Damiens de Gomicourt (*nom de plume* Dérival) in his *Le voyageur dans les Pays-bas autrichiens, ou Lettres sur l'état actuel de ces pays*, published between 1782 and 1784.<sup>1131</sup> Gomicourt estimated that the *Marie-Antoinette*, Romberg's first vessel, could carry 290 people, and that the subsequent 'ten' vessels had a complement of 5,000 prisoners.<sup>1132</sup> Gomicourt's numbers have been repeated, in parts or as a whole, by Verhaegen<sup>1133</sup>, Donnet<sup>1134</sup>, and Everaert<sup>1135</sup>. They are, however, overdrawn, and do not represent the true capacity of Romberg's Africa-going fleet. They surely did not represent the number of people forcibly embarked by the merchant's captains on the African seaboard, as may be suggested by an uncareful reading of Gomicourt. In fact, the Frenchman could not possibly have known such prisoner counts: in April 1783, when he formulated his figures, several of Romberg's ships had either not yet reached Africa or had not even left the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>1136</sup>

Gomicourt's overestimations are due to several incorrect assumptions and a lack of information on the part of the journalist. To begin with, the Frenchman did not consider that some of Romberg's vessels were solely directed to trade commodities in Africa. This was the case for the *Comte de Flandre* (gold, ivory), the *Empereur et Roi* (ivory) and the *Lieve Catharina* (gum Arabic)—although the former, as has been mentioned, forcibly employed five enslaved Africans to compensate for the lack of Ostend seamen. Another two vessels never made it to the African seaboard: the *Prince Charles* was captured in Spanish waters, the *Prince de Starhemberg* went down off the coast of northern France.

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<sup>1131</sup> Henry De Groote, 'L'auteur du 'Voyageur dans les Pays-Bas Autrichiens'', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 26:1-2 (1948) 118-35.

<sup>1132</sup> Gomicourt, *Le voyageur*, IV, 102-10.

<sup>1133</sup> Verhaegen, 'Le commerce des esclaves', 259.

<sup>1134</sup> Donnet, 'Quelques notes', 17.

<sup>1135</sup> Everaert, 'Commerce d'Afrique', 183.

<sup>1136</sup> See Appendix A.2-A.15, especially the itineraries discussed from A.11 onwards.

TABLE A.1 Slaving statistics of Romberg's ships, 1780-84.

Vessel Name	Ton	Planned	Captives		Caribbean	Intended	Market	Realized
			Africa					
<i>Marie-Antoinette</i>	80	290	204		187	Guadeloupe	Saint Christopher	
<i>Comte de Flandre</i>	70	—	5		—	—	—	
<i>États de Brabant</i>	170	[325]	48-325		48-325	—	—	
<i>Prince de Starhemberg</i>	—	150	0		0	Havana	shipwreck	
<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	120	325	330		299	Havana	Havana	
<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i>	160	300-350	244-355		117	Havana	Saint-Domingue	
<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	[300]	450	371-450		371	Havana	Havana	
<i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i>	300	450	350-450		350	Havana	Saint-Domingue	
<i>Rot du Congo</i>	300	600	560		527-545	Havana	Havana	
<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	300	600	539		434	Havana	Saint-Domingue	
<i>Total</i>		3,015-3,065	2,651-3,218		1,938-2,628			

Sources: See Appendix.

Of the ships of the early phase which did successfully manage to embark a cargo of prisoners, the *Marie-Antoinette* did not comprise 290 prisoners; it left the coast of Africa with 204 enslaved people in its hold, of whom 187 survived the Middle Passage. For the *États de Brabant*, the figures are more obscure. During its outward-bound voyage, the vessels stopped at Île de Gorée (part of today's Senegal), where she embarked 48 enslaved Africans. This is the only reliable data available, but the ship later continued to the Gambia River and the town of Gilfrei, presumably in search of a larger cargo.<sup>1137</sup> The number of 48 thus should be considered a lower bound, ships in size similar to the *Brabant* could carry as much as 325 prisoners. There is no proof in the *Affiches américaines* that the *Brabant* ever called at a port in Saint-Domingue, but the ship did eventually return to Europe: sources report the transport of one of the ship's slaves from Le Havre to Ghent.<sup>1138</sup>

During the Spanish phase of Romberg's slaving business, the three Havana ships carried 1,197-1,215 enslaved Africans between them, the *Négrier Impérial* disembarking 371 captives, the *Roi du Congo* either 527 or 545<sup>1139</sup>, and the *Comte de Belgioioso* landing 299 people. Instead of Cuba, the three remaining vessels marketed their cargoes in several ports of Saint-Domingue: the *Prince de Saxe-Teschén* arrived with 117 surviving prisoners, the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd* carried 350, and the *Conseil de Flandre* brought 434—a total of 901 people.

In conclusion, based on all the available evidence, we can formulate the following numbers with regards to Romberg's fleet. With a combined tonnage of about 1,730 tons, they were equipped to carry between 3,015 and 3,065 enslaved people. Between 2,646 and 3,213 prisoners were embarked by Romberg's captains on the African seaboard, of whom 1,938 to 2,628 survived the Middle Passage.

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<sup>1137</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Report of the Maritime Trade Committee (Brussels, 7 June 1783); ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Le Sens to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Gilfrei, 27 July 1782).

<sup>1138</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 11 v., 'pour Valeur d'un Negre que Le Sens a fait passer du Havre à Gand, suivant lettre de Le Grand du 11 courant, £800'.

<sup>1139</sup> According to Cuban notary records, the *King* brought 545 people. When the ship called at Cap Français, however, she carried only 527 people, and 525 is the number of people that were effectively sold in Havana.



## A.2 Romberg's Indian Ocean slave trade

TABLE A.2 Ships bound for East Africa and Batavia, 1783.

<i>Departure from Le Havre</i>	<i>Vessel</i>	<i>Ton</i>	<i>Slaves disembarked</i>	<i>Destination</i>
29 June 1783	<i>Empereur &amp; Roi</i>	400	–	Mauritius/ Batavia
17 July 1783	<i>Comtesse du Nord</i>	–	–	Mauritius/ Batavia

Sources: RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, 'State of insurance'  
(Brussels, 11 September 1783).

TABLE A.3 Capital outlay (in fl.w.g.) ships bound for East Africa and Batavia, 1783.

<i>#</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Investment</i>	<i>Share (in %)</i>
1	Frederic Romberg	Brussels	323,768	79.8
2	Romberg & Consors	Ghent	30,000	7.4
3	Gammarage de Vlieringh	Brussels	28,000	6.9
4	Neufcour & Annecroix	Brussels	6,000	1.5
5	Verlat	Louvain	1,000	0.2
6	Simons	Brussels	3,000	0.7
7	Comte van der Dilt	Brussels	4,500	1.1
8	Judocus Marous	Lille	3,000	0.7
9	d'Armencourt	Lille	500	0.1
10	le Febvre de Terbecke	Ghent	2,000	0.5
11	Comte de Limminghen	Brussels	2,500	0.6
12	J.F.E. de Wallenbourg	Vienna	1,500	0.4
<i>Total</i>			<i>405,768</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Source: RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845.

In the margins of the Spanish enterprise, Romberg & Consors also fitted out the *Empereur et Roi* (O'Dievre commanding) and the *Comtesse du Nord* (Levasnier) for a journey from Le Havre to Mauritius ('Île de France'), Batavia, and finally the Dutch Republic. Like Romberg's *permiso* ships, they were funded by Romberg as well as Austrian Netherlands shareholders (Table A.2), although their number had dwindled compared with the earlier outlays.<sup>1140</sup> Every year, especially during wartime, Versailles chartered several ships to

<sup>1140</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845.

transport troops, munitions, or provisions to France's Indian Ocean territories.<sup>1141</sup> One source indeed states that Romberg's pair of ships was freighted "for the account of the [King of France]".<sup>1142</sup> In a different document, however, the King is replaced by Baudry Boulongere & fils, a merchant house in Le Havre.<sup>1143</sup> There is no proof any of these ships ever entered the Austrian Netherlands, which is why I did not include them in my analysis of the economic impact of Romberg's trade.<sup>1144</sup> Indeed, in the month preceding the departure, Pierre François Schepers travelled to the Norman town to change the persons in charge of the affair: Henry Tomasini, a contact of the Chauvels, was discharged of his armament duties in favour of Louis Le Grand. The *Empereur & Roi* and the *Comtesse du Nord* were also involved in the slave trade, though in the Indian Ocean one: a source mentions that their cargoes contained "a case of silver belonging to the said Messrs. Romberg & Consors...together with a watch in a golden case with Brilliant and Cord, also a brilliant intended by the said Messrs. to be given as a present to Mr. the Governor of Mozambique".<sup>1145</sup> Their subsequent operations are unclear, but they seem to have made it to East Africa.<sup>1146</sup> By November 1784, both vessels were in Rotterdam, and made their way to Bordeaux shortly after.<sup>1147</sup> Like all other Romberg ships, they turned a terrible loss for the firm.<sup>1148</sup>

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<sup>1141</sup> Villiers, *Le commerce colonial*, 276-7; Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 156.

<sup>1142</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Overview 10 vessels fitted out by Romberg & Consors, 23 September 1783.

<sup>1143</sup> ADSM, *Notary's Office*, 2E70, 639 (Le Havre, 3 June 1783).

<sup>1144</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gendt*, 1782-4.

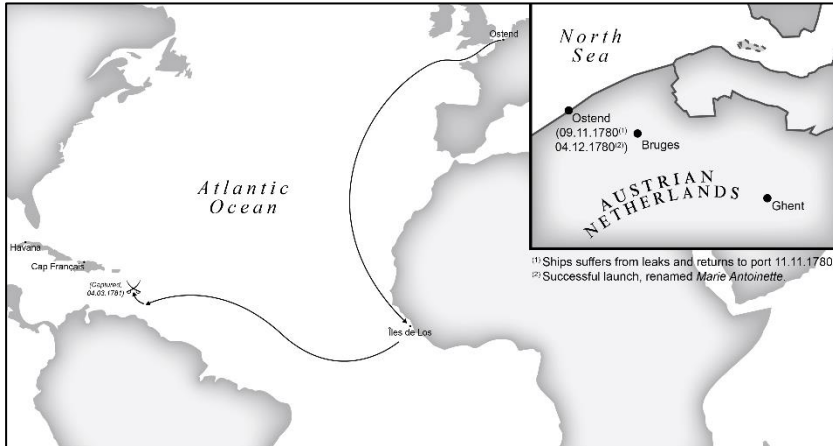
<sup>1145</sup> ADSM, *Notary's Office*, 2E70, 639 (Le Havre, 3 June 1783), 'une Caisse d'argenterie appartenant auxdits sieurs Romberg & consors destinée à l'usage desdits navires ensemble d'une montre a repetition a boitte d'or a Brillant avec son Cordon, aussi un brillant destinée par les dits sieurs a estre donnée en present a Mr Le gouverner de Mozambique'.

<sup>1146</sup> Ressel, 'Spoils of Neutrality', 798.

<sup>1147</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845, Etat des recouvrements sur l'opération des Négriers sous la gestion de Messieurs Romberg & Consors de Gand (Brussels, 6 Novembre 1788); AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 144 r. The *Empereur & Roi* was sold on 10 August 1785 to Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie in Bordeaux, see ADSM, *Admiralty of Le Havre*, 216BP, 415 (Le Havre, 10 August 1785).

<sup>1148</sup> See Chapter 9.

### A.3 Itinerary of the *Marie-Antoinette*



<sup>1</sup> Ships suffers from leaks and returns to port 11.11.1780.  
<sup>2</sup> Successful launch, renamed *Marie Antoinette*.

CAPTAIN: Kors Neurenberg • CREW: 13-15 • TON: 80-90 • TYPE: brig • TRADE: slave trade

Date	Event
27 September 1780	The <i>Belle Thérèse</i> arrives in Ostend from London with four crates of firearms. The ship is commanded by Jan Pieter Janssen. <sup>1149</sup>
18 October 1780	Romberg requests permission to take on board 23 additional crates of firearms, which have been purchased in Liège and transported to Ostend over Leuven. <sup>1150</sup>
28 October 1780	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1151</sup>
9 November 1780	The ship leaves for “de Kusten van Guinéau” [“the coasts of Guinea”], commanded by Kors Neurenberg. <sup>1152</sup>
11 November 1780	The ship meets with heavy snow and rain in the English Channel, and eventually returns to Ostend suffering from leaks. Every piece of cargo is unloaded. <sup>1153</sup>
2 December 1780	A new muster roll with minor crew changes is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1154</sup>

<sup>1149</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 2 October 1780.

<sup>1150</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4400.

<sup>1151</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Ryxc, sr.*, 102B/629.

<sup>1152</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 13 November 1780.

<sup>1153</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 13 November 1780; RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Ryxc, sr.*, 102B/662.

<sup>1154</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Ryxc, sr.*, 102B/695.

4 December 1780	Neurenberg leaves again, now with the <i>Marie-Antoinette</i> . Based on later claims by the crew, she is the same ship as the <i>Belle Thérèse</i> . <sup>1155</sup>
16 January 1781	The ship arrives at the Îles de Los. At a factory commanded by James Edward Colley and belonging to Miles Barber, a Liverpool merchant, she embarks 204 captives. <sup>1156</sup>
4 February 1781	The ship begins her Middle Passage, bound for Curaçao or Sint-Eustatius. <sup>1157</sup>
25 February 1781	The ship changes course to French Guadeloupe. <sup>1158</sup>
4 March 1781	The ship is captured by the <i>Tartar</i> , helmed by William Pinkerton, with 182-4 prisoners on board. <sup>1159</sup>
6 March 1781	The ship is brought to Basseterre on the island of Saint Christopher (Saint Kitts). <sup>1160</sup>
13 March 1781	The Admiralty of Basseterre declares the <i>Marie-Antoinette</i> a lawful prize. <sup>1161</sup>
1 August 1781	Louis Joseph Ricour, associate of Frederic Romberg & Cie of Ostend, files a claim for ship and lading. <sup>1162</sup>
8 March 1785	The capture is declared unlawful. <sup>1163</sup>

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<sup>1155</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 7 December 1780.

<sup>1156</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>1157</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>1158</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>1159</sup> TNA, HCA42/136. Neurenberg claims 182 people, mate Laurens Holm claims 184.

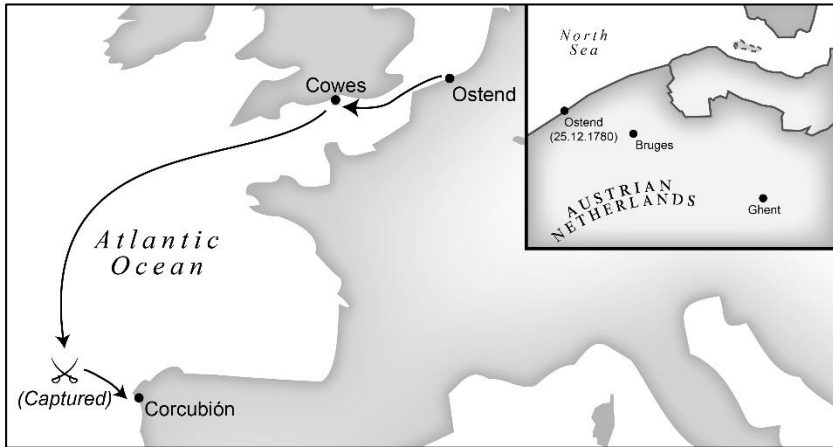
<sup>1160</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>1161</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>1162</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>1163</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

## A.4 Itinerary of the *Prince Charles*



CAPTAIN: Johan Weickaert • CREW: 10-11 • TON: — • TYPE: sloop • TRADE: slave trade

Date	Event
25 December 1780	The <i>Prince Charles</i> leaves Ostend for “de Kusten van Africa” [“the Coasts of Africa”]. According to the <i>Gazette</i> , the ship is commanded by N. Hermen. According to Romberg, the ship is bound to the 3les de Los. <sup>1164</sup>
—	The ship stops in Coves, on the Isle of Wight, in order to hire two additional crewmembers and to take on board eight cannons as well as letters from British merchants destined for Africa. <sup>1165</sup>
15 January 1780	The ship leaves Coves. <sup>1166</sup>
2 February 1780	The <i>Prince Charles</i> is captured by <i>La Flecha</i> , a privateer commanded by Balthasar Cinnero, near Cape Finisterre, and is brought to Corcubi3n. <sup>1167</sup>
3 March 1780	The man-of-war <i>Trevida</i> arrives in Corcubi3n, taking the crew to the admiralty of Ferrol. <sup>1168</sup>
18 March 1780	The crew arrives in Ferrol. <sup>1169</sup>

<sup>1164</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 2 October 1780.

<sup>1165</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2159-19

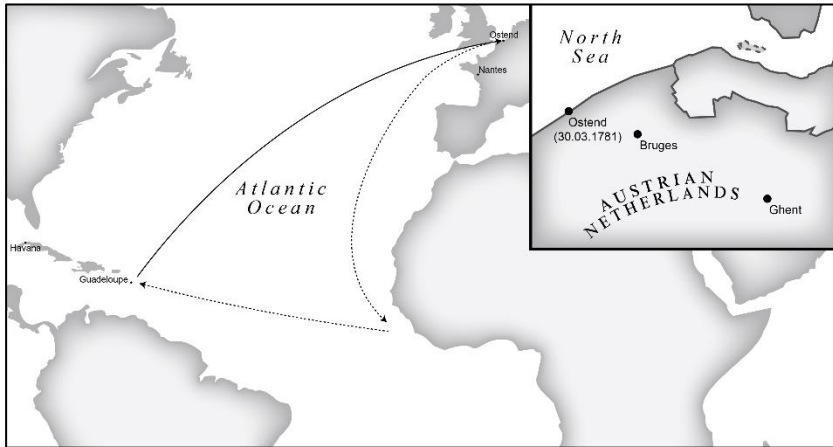
<sup>1166</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2159-19

<sup>1167</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2159-19

<sup>1168</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489.

<sup>1169</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 1489.

## A.5 Itinerary of the *Deugdelijke Sophia*



CAPTAIN: Gerd Gerdson • CREW: — • TON: — • TYPE: frigate • TRADE: slave trade

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
16 January 1781	The ship passes the Sound with tea, rum, wine, and brandy. Her destination is Ostend and “Guinea”. <sup>1170</sup>
23 February 1781	The ship arrives in Ostend. <sup>1171</sup>
24 March 1781	Ricour of Romberg’s Ostend offices says to the notary that de Coning, a merchant of Copenhagen, has placed a cargo in the vessel, but the ship is on Romberg’s account. <sup>1172</sup>
30 March 1781	The ship leaves Ostend for “de Kusten van Guinée” [“the Coasts of Guinea”]. <sup>1173</sup>
3 December 1781	The ship leaves the coast of Africa. According to the notary deed, she already has a cargo of cotton, coffee and sugar on board at this point, which seems unlikely. <sup>1174</sup>
5 January 1782	The ship calls at Guadeloupe, allegedly to repair damages. <sup>1175</sup>
21 March 1782	The ship leaves Guadeloupe. <sup>1176</sup>
6 April 1782	The ship meets with heavy weather on the high seas. <sup>1177</sup>

<sup>1170</sup> STRO, 16 January 1781.

<sup>1171</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 26 February 1782.

<sup>1172</sup> NAB, *Notary F.J. Van Caillie, Deposit 1941*, 103/191.

<sup>1173</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 2 April 1781.

<sup>1174</sup> RAB, *Notary F.J. Van Caillie, Deposit 1941*, 110/1118.

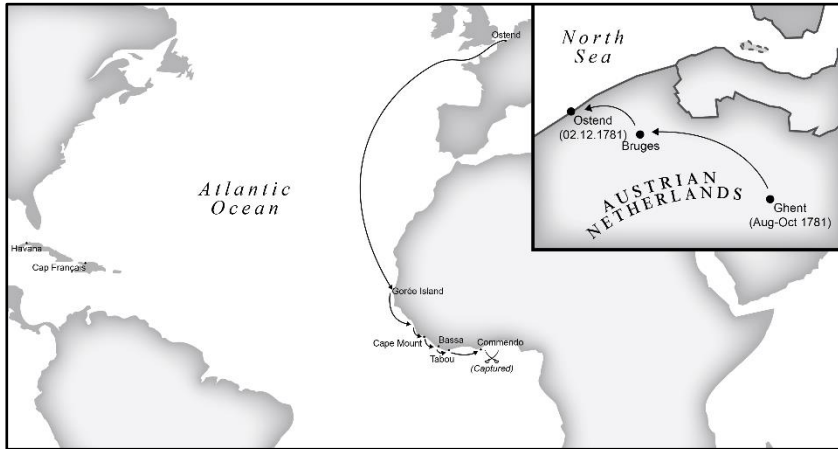
<sup>1175</sup> RAB, *Notary F.J. Van Caillie, Deposit 1941*, 110/1118.

<sup>1176</sup> RAB, *Notary F.J. Van Caillie, Deposit 1941*, 110/1118.

<sup>1177</sup> RAB, *Notary F.J. Van Caillie, Deposit 1941*, 110/1118.



## A.6 Itinerary of the *Comte de Flandre*



CAPTAIN: Jean Hagueron • CREW: 7 • TON: 70 • TYPE: one-mast-cutter • TRADE: ivory

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
16 July 1781	François Carpentier of Romberg & Consors declares to own the ship at the Ghent city council. <sup>1181</sup>
16 August 1781	The ship arrives in Ostend, coming from Dieppe. <sup>1182</sup>
31 August 1781	Carpentier confirms the presence of the ship in Ghent. <sup>1183</sup>
2 December 1781	The <i>Comte</i> leaves Ostend for “de Kusten van Guinée” [“the Coasts of Guinea”] <sup>1184</sup>
—	The ships stops at Île Gorée. <sup>1185</sup>
1 February 1782	The ship is at the Îles de Los and stays two days. <sup>1186</sup>
6 February 1782	The ship is at the Sierra Leone River and stays for ten days. Hagueron acquires four enslaved Africans to complement his crew.
22 February 1782	The ship is at Cape Mount and stays one day.
26 February 1782	The ship is at Bassa and stays four days. Hagueron purchases one enslaved girl.
4 March 1782	The ship is at Bottawa and stays two days.

<sup>1181</sup> SAG, *Koophandel*, 154bis, 1-2.

<sup>1182</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 20 August 1781.

<sup>1183</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 31 August 1781).

<sup>1184</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 6 December 1781.

<sup>1185</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, Examination of Jean Hagueron (London, 4 December 1782).

<sup>1186</sup> This reference and all subsequent from TNA, HCA32/296/1, Livre de traite.



9 March 1782	The ship is at Tabo and stays two days.
12 March 1782	The ship is at Drouin and stays two days.
14 March 1782	The ship is at the Sassandra river [ <i>“rivière Saint-André”</i> ] and stays two days.
20 March 1782	The ship is at Axim and stays two days.
25 March 1782	The ship is at Fort Hollandia and stays one day.
26 March 1782	The ship is at Akoda.
30 March 1782	The ship is at Botro.
31 March 1782	The ship is at Takoradi.
31 March 1782	The ship anchors off Komenda, a British fortress under the command of Thomas Price. She is visited in the evening by a contingent of British soldiers, of whom about twelve remain on board till the following day for purposes of trade. <sup>1187</sup>
1 April 1782	The ship is boarded in the morning by soldiers of Captain Kenneth McKenzie, commander of the British fortress of Moree, who seize the ship and cargo. <sup>1188</sup>
2 April 1782	The ship is taken to Moree. The captain and the mate disembark. Two cannons are brought on board to be transported to Komenda. In the passage to the latter fortress, the ship disappears. <sup>1189</sup>
21 April 1782	The <i>Comte</i> is observed from Cape Coast Castle for the last time. <sup>1190</sup>

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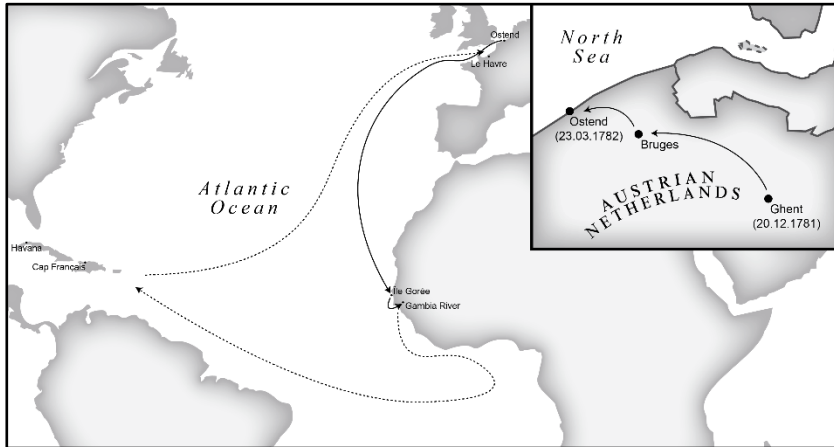
<sup>1187</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, Examination of Jean Hagueron (London, 4 December 1782).

<sup>1188</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, Examination of Jean Hagueron (London, 4 December 1782).

<sup>1189</sup> TNA, HCA32/296/1, Examination of Jean Hagueron (London, 4 December 1782).

<sup>1190</sup> TNA, *Treasury*, T70/33, Weuves to Treasury (Cape Coast Castle, 29 April 1782).

## A.7 Itinerary of the *États de Brabant*



CAPTAIN: Pierre Le Sens • CREW: — • TON: 170 • TYPE: brig • TRADE: slave trade

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
12 September 1781	François Carpentier of Romberg & Consors declares to own the ship at the Ghent city council. <sup>1191</sup>
5 December 1781	The <i>États de Brabant</i> arrives in Bruges from Honfleur, and continues to Ghent. <sup>1192</sup>
20 December 1781	The ship is in Ghent to load her cargo. <sup>1193</sup>
8 March 1782	The ship is in Ostend. Due to heavy weather during the night, around 5 AM a neighboring vessel crashes into the ship, causing considerable damage. <sup>1194</sup>
23 March 1782	The ship leaves Ostend for “de Kusten van Guinée” [“the Coasts of Guinea”]. <sup>1195</sup>
—	Due to bad weather and storm damage, the ships halts at Île Gorée. There the ship is plundered by Governor Joseph Wall. His men take provisions and give 48 enslaved Africans “of very

<sup>1191</sup> SAG, *Koophandel*, 154bis, 1-2.

<sup>1192</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 17 December 1781.

<sup>1193</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 24 December 1781.

<sup>1194</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 109/623 (Ostend, 9 March 1782).

<sup>1195</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 25 March 1782.

	bad Quality” (Le Sens) in return. Le Sens continues to the Gambia River. <sup>1196</sup>
—	In the Gambia River, the ship is again harassed by the <i>Brutus</i> , James Willcox commanding. <sup>1197</sup>
27 July 1782	The ship is in Gilfrei, in the Gambia River. Le Sens sends a letter to Brussels to report on the events. <sup>1198</sup>
19 December 1783	Le Sens is certainly in Le Havre, as an enslaved African from his cargo is sent to Ghent. <sup>1199</sup>

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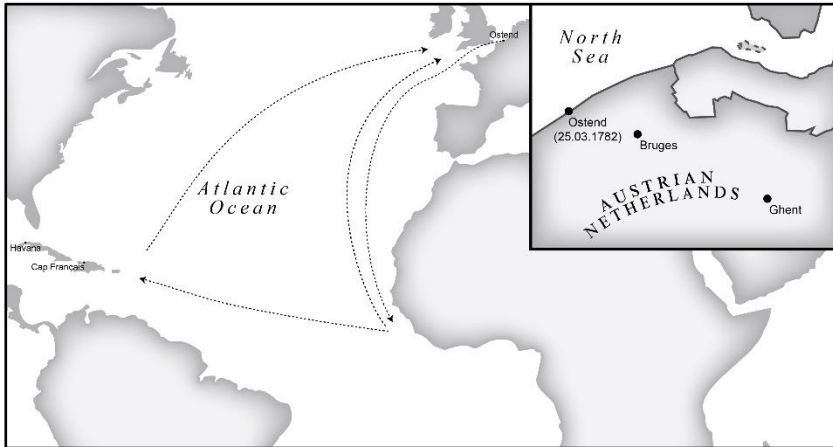
<sup>1196</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Report of the Maritime Trade Committee (Brussels, 7 June 1783); ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Le Sens to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Gilfrei, 27 July 1782), “*de très mauvaise qualité*”.

<sup>1197</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Le Sens to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Gilfrei, 27 July 1782).

<sup>1198</sup> ARA, *Secretarie van State en Oorlog*, 2160bis, Le Sens to the Secretarie van State en Oorlog (Gilfrei, 27 July 1782).

<sup>1199</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 11 v.

## A.8 Itinerary of the *Lieve Catharina*



CAPTAIN: Nicolas Paroselle • CREW: — • TON: 220 • TYPE: brig • TRADE: gum

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1 December 1781	François Carpentier of Romberg & Consors declares to own the ship at the Ghent city council. <sup>1200</sup>
27 December 1781	The <i>Lieve Catharina</i> arrives in Ostend, coming from Le Havre. <sup>1201</sup>
5 March 1782	Romberg & Consors requests permission to load firearms into the vessel. Putting the ship to sea has been hampered by ice in Ostend harbour. <sup>1202</sup>
25 March 1782	The ship leaves Ostend for “de kusten van Guinée” [“the coasts of Guinea”]. <sup>1203</sup>
4 December 1783	The ship is back in Europe, as Romberg & Consors receives 12,976 <i>livres</i> for their investment, on top of the 2,067 <i>livres</i> as a 1 percent neutrality commission. <sup>1204</sup>

<sup>1200</sup> SAG, *Koophandel*, 154bis, 1-2.

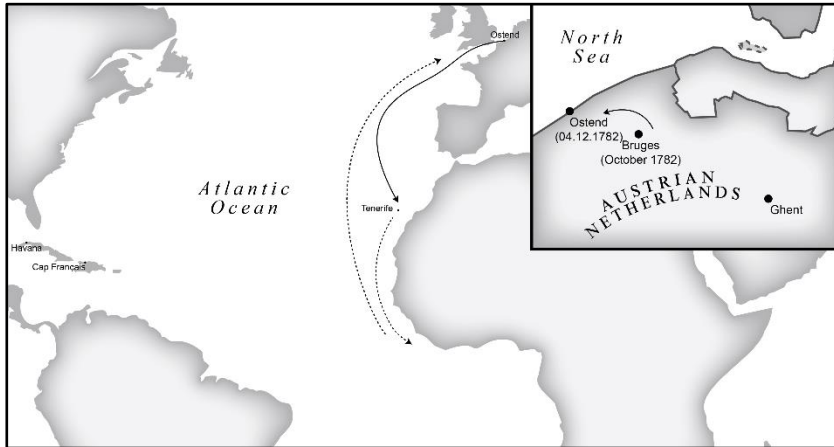
<sup>1201</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 31 December 1781.

<sup>1202</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 20 March 1781; ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 4401.

<sup>1203</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 28 March 1781.

<sup>1204</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 10 r.

## A.9 Itinerary of the *Empereur et Roi*



CAPTAIN: Jean Lambert • CREW: — • TON: 60 • TYPE: — • TRADE: ivory

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
15 September 1782	The ship arrives in Ostend, coming from Dunkirk. <sup>1205</sup>
4 October 1782	The ship arrives in Bruges and enters 'de Kom' on 10 October 1782. <sup>1206</sup>
8 October 1782	The ship is completing her cargo in Bruges. <sup>1207</sup>
19 November 1782	The ship leaves Bruges for an unknown destination, probably Ostend. <sup>1208</sup>
4 December 1782	The vessel leaves Ostend around noon for "de Kuste van Guinée" ["the coasts of Guinea"]. According to Romberg & Consors, the destination is "Senegal". <sup>1209</sup>
20 January 1783	The ship makes a stop at Tenerife and hires a lieutenant named Dubar le Blond. <sup>1210</sup>

<sup>1205</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 19 September 1782.

<sup>1206</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 7 October 1782; RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda* 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, October 1782.

<sup>1207</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 8 October 1782).

<sup>1208</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, October 1782.

<sup>1209</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 9 December 1782; RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, [5 December 1782]).

<sup>1210</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 43 r.

24 July 1784

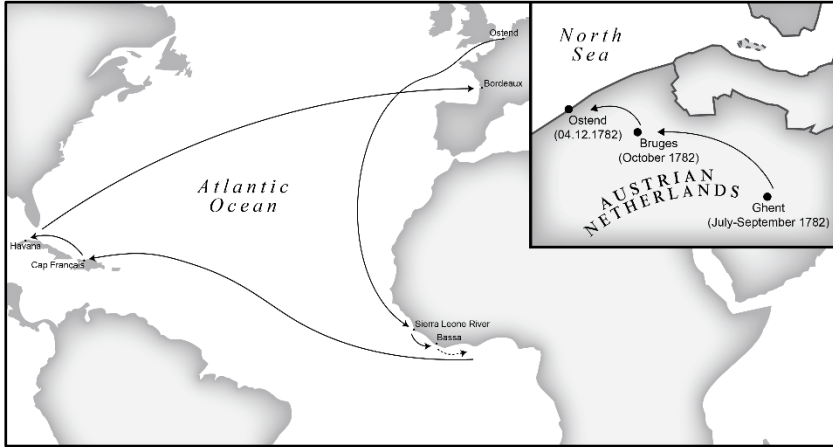
The *Empereur* seems to be back in Bordeaux with a cargo of ivory (both small and large tusks). The ship is sold for a mere 5,500 *livres tournois*, as she is heavily damaged by worms.<sup>1211</sup>

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<sup>1211</sup> RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784); AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 73 v.; RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784).

## A.10 Itinerary of the *Comte de Belgioioso*



CAPTAIN: Nicolas Louvet • CREW: — • TON: 120 • TYPE: SNOW • TRADE: slave trade

Date	Event
—	The ship arrives in Ostend.
2 July 1782	The ship arrives in Bruges. <sup>1212</sup>
20 July 1782	The ship leaves Bruges for an unknown destination, probably Ghent as she is observed there by shareholders. <sup>1213</sup>
8 October 1782	The ship is currently completing her cargo in Bruges. <sup>1214</sup>
4 December 1782	The vessel leaves Ostend around noon for “de Kuste van Guinée” [“the Coasts of Guinea”]; According to Romberg & Consors, the destination is “Senegal”. <sup>1215</sup>
29 March 1783	The ship is in the Sierra Leone River and has taken on board half of her planned cargo. <sup>1216</sup>
—	The <i>Belgioioso</i> is in Bassa. <sup>1217</sup>

<sup>1212</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, July 1782.

<sup>1213</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, July 1782; RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel* 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 16 November 1783).

<sup>1214</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 9 December 1782; RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, [5 December 1782]).

<sup>1215</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 9 December 1782; RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, [5 December 1782]).

<sup>1216</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 9 July 1783).

<sup>1217</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 17 April 1784).

<sup>1217</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 73 r.

30 May 1783	The <i>Belgioioso</i> is ready to depart the African coast with 330 Africans. <sup>1218</sup>
25 Augustus 1783	The ship calls at Cap Français. <sup>1219</sup>
4 October 1783	The ship arrives in Havana. <sup>1220</sup>
2 December 1783	The ship is insured at Midy, Roffhack & co for her passage to Bordeaux. It is insured again on 6 December 1783 and on 12 February 1784. <sup>1221</sup>
31 December 1783	The <i>Belgioioso</i> has sold 299 enslaved Africans in Havana, for a total sum of 70,401 piasters. <sup>1222</sup>
2 February 1784	The ships leaves Havana with Ostend as her official destination. <sup>1223</sup>
17 April 1784	Romberg, Bapst & Cie announce the arrival of the ship in Bordeaux. <sup>1224</sup>
30 April 1784	The 60,000 piasters are sold. <sup>1225</sup>
29 June 1784	The Campeche wood is sold. <sup>1226</sup>
31 July 1784	The <i>Belgioioso</i> is sold. <sup>1227</sup>

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<sup>1218</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 7845.

<sup>1219</sup> CAP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 236, f. 6. r.

<sup>1220</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1365; ANRC, PN, t.3, f. 2318 v. – 2330 r., 2393 v. – 2411 r., 2501 r. – 2510 v., 2736 r., 2744 r. (various folios).

<sup>1221</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 9 r., 10 v.

<sup>1222</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 26. R.

<sup>1223</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1365.

<sup>1224</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 17 April 1784).

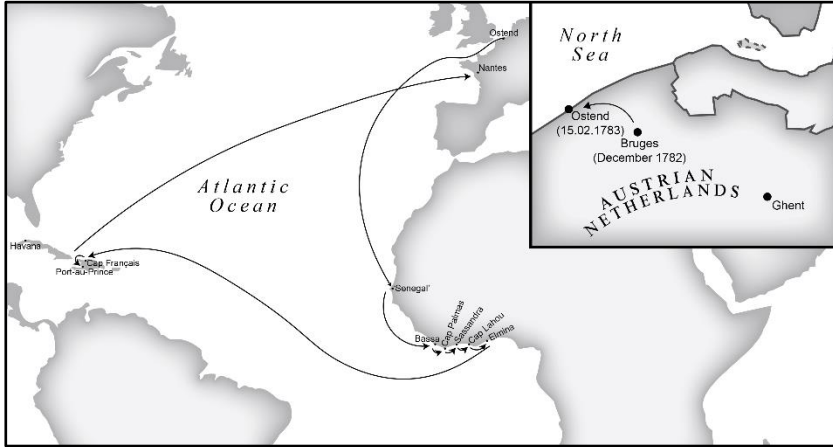
<sup>1225</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 73 r.

<sup>1226</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 73 r.

<sup>1227</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 73 r.



## A.11 Itinerary of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*



CAPTAIN: Jean Pierre Barabé • CREW: 38 • TON: 160 • TYPE: frigate • TRADE: slave trade

Date	Event
—	The ship arrives in Ostend.
5 December 1782	The <i>Saxe-Teschen</i> is with certainty in Bruges. <sup>1228</sup>
3 January 1783	The ship leaves Bruges, presumably for Ostend. <sup>1229</sup>
9 January 1783	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1230</sup>
15 February 1783	After being confined to port by contrary winds, the ship departs for “de kusten van Guinée” [“the coasts of Guinea”]. <sup>1231</sup>
12 March 1783	The <i>Saxe-Teschen</i> puts into Lisbon in order to buy tobacco. <sup>1232</sup>
—	The ship is in Senegal. <sup>1233</sup>
October 1783	The ship is in Grand Bassam. She has 80 captives on board. <sup>1234</sup>

<sup>1228</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, [5 December 1782]).

<sup>1229</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Penderanda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, September 1782.

<sup>1230</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 115/25.

<sup>1231</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 20 February 1782.

<sup>1232</sup> Maneuvrier-Hervieu, ‘Entre Honfleur et les Antilles’, 127.

<sup>1233</sup> ADC, F6120.

<sup>1234</sup> RATB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 17 April 1784).

—	The ship is at the Sassandra River. <sup>1235</sup>
—	The ship passes Cape Palmas. <sup>1236</sup>
—	The ship is in Cap Lahou and stays there for 15 days, increasing her cargo to 244 captive Africans. <sup>1237</sup>
—	The ship is in El Mina.
4 March 1784	The <i>Saxe-Teschen</i> starts her Middle Passage from El Mina. <sup>1238</sup>
1 June 1784	The <i>Saxe-Teschen</i> arrives in Cap Français after a crossing of 88 days with 117 surviving captives. To prevent further loss of profits, the captain decides to go to Port-au-Prince instead of Havana. <sup>1239</sup>
23 June 1784	Another 25 people die during the prolonged passage of two weeks from Cap Français. The ship disembarks her surviving cargo of 92 slaves in Léogâne and continues to Port-au-Prince. <sup>1240</sup>
2 July 1784	The ship arrives in Port-au-Prince. <sup>1241</sup>
23 September 1784	The <i>Saxe-Teschen</i> starts for Nantes from Port-au-Prince. <sup>1242</sup>

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<sup>1235</sup> ADC, F6120.

<sup>1236</sup> ADC, F6120.

<sup>1237</sup> ADC, F6120.

<sup>1238</sup> ADC, F6120. Maneuvrier-Hervieu mentions that the ship left on 1 March 1784, but this is incorrect. Although the handwriting is not clear and '1' and '4' are very similar, the captain specifies he left on a Thursday. 4 March 1784 is indeed a Thursday.

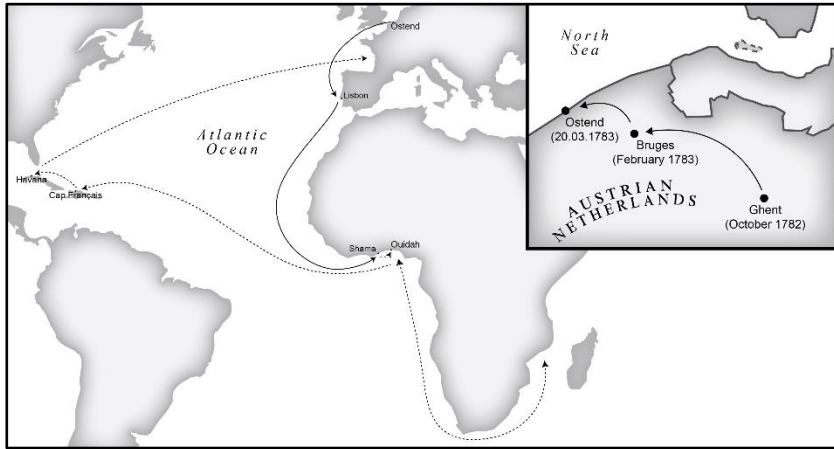
<sup>1239</sup> RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784).

<sup>1240</sup> RAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784); ADC, F6120.

<sup>1241</sup> ADC, F6120.

<sup>1242</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 25 September 1784.

## A.12 Itinerary of the *Négrier Impérial*



CAPTAIN: Simon le Coq ● CREW: 37 ● TON: — ● TYPE: brig ● TRADE: slave trade

Date	Event
18 October 1782	The <i>Négrier Impérial</i> arrives in Ostend, coming from Dunkirk. <sup>1243</sup>
22 October 1782	The ship arrives in Bruges and continues to Ghent. <sup>1244</sup>
17 February 1783	Romberg requests permission from the Finance Council to embark firearms. <sup>1245</sup>
4 March 1783	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1246</sup>
20 March 1783	The ship leaves Ostend for “de kusten van Guinée” [“the coasts of Guinea”]. Romberg & Consors specifies the destination of the vessel is Ouidah. <sup>1247</sup>
[April 1783]	The ship makes an intermediate stop in Lisbon to load 800 rolls of Brazil tobacco. <sup>1248</sup>
24 June 1783	The <i>Négrier</i> is spotted at Shama on the Gold Coast by Pierre van Alstein, a Ghent captain employed by Nantes <i>armateurs</i> . <sup>1249</sup>

<sup>1243</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 21 October 1782.

<sup>1244</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 28 October 1782.

<sup>1245</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 5200.

<sup>1246</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/283.

<sup>1247</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 24 March 1783; RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 24 April 1784).

<sup>1248</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 24 March 1783; RAAtB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consors to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 24 April 1784).

<sup>1249</sup> Everaert, ‘Commerce d’Afrique’, 183.

— Possibly, the ship proceeds to East Africa, as records from  
Havana indicate that it arrived from that region.<sup>1250</sup>  
14 May 1784 The *Négrier* arrives in Havana with 371 captives.<sup>1251</sup>

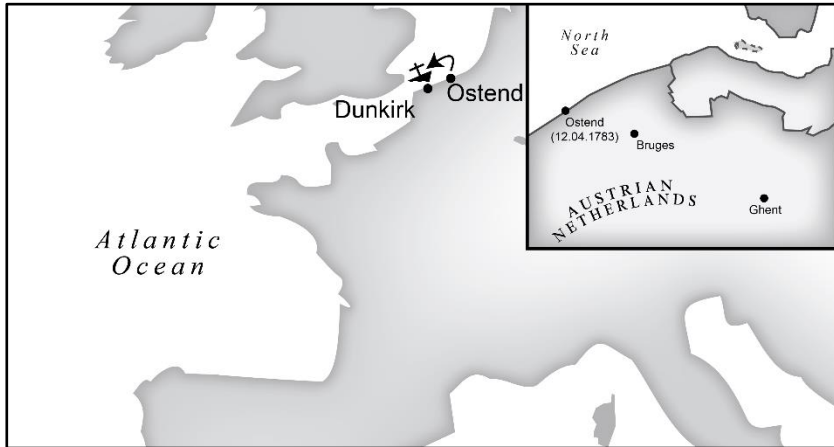
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<sup>1250</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366; ANRC, PN, t. 1, f. 1239 r. – 1240 r., 1242 r. – 1242 v.; t.2. f. 1365 v., 1591 v. (various folios).

<sup>1251</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366; ANRC, PN, t. 1, f. 1239 r. – 1240 r., 1242 r. – 1242 v.; t.2. f. 1365 v., 1591 v. (various folios).

### A.13 Itinerary of the *Prince de Starhemberg*



CAPTAIN: Francies Bouté • CREW: 22 • TON: — • TYPE: snow • TRADE: slave trade

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
20 February 1783	Romberg asks permission from the Finance Council to load 500 firearms into the <i>Starhemberg</i> . <sup>1252</sup>
19 March 1783	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1253</sup>
12 April 1783	The <i>Starhemberg</i> leaves Ostend for “de Kuste van Africa” [“the Coast of Africa”]. <sup>1254</sup>
13 April 1783	The ship hits a bank between Gravelines and Dunkirk and sinks. All crew members survive. <sup>1255</sup>

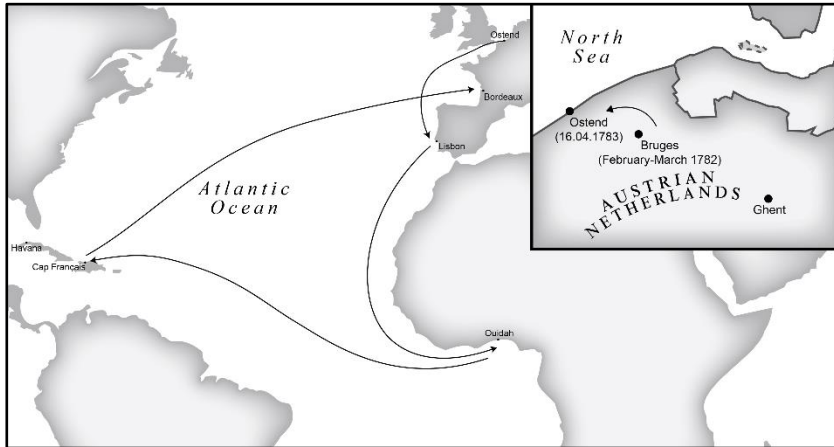
<sup>1252</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 5200.

<sup>1253</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/403.

<sup>1254</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 17 April 1783.

<sup>1255</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 17 April 1783; RAatB, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Romberg & Consorts to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 24 April 1783).

## A.14 Itinerary of the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd*



CAPTAIN: Guillaume Constantin • CREW: 53 • TON: 300 • TYPE: frigate • TRADE: slave trade

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
12 February 1783	The <i>Vlaemsch Zeepaerd</i> arrives in Bruges from Amsterdam. <sup>1256</sup>
31 March 1783	The ship leaves Bruges for an unknown destination. <sup>1257</sup>
16 April 1783	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1258</sup>
19 April 1783	The <i>Zeepaerd</i> leaves Ostend for “de kuste van Guinée” [“the coast of Guinea”]. <sup>1259</sup>
4 May 1783	The ship makes an intermediate stop in Lisbon to pick up 1,200 rolls of Brazil tobacco and is spotted by Pierre van Alstein, the Ghent slaving captain in Nantes service. <sup>1260</sup>
—	The ship trades at Ouidah, taking on board captives from the French fortress. <sup>1261</sup>
5 May 1784	The <i>Zeepaerd</i> arrives on Saint-Domingue with 350 enslaved Africans, coming from Ouidah. <sup>1262</sup>

<sup>1256</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 17 February 1783.

<sup>1257</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, February 1783.

<sup>1258</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/426.

<sup>1259</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 1 May 1783.

<sup>1260</sup> Everaert, ‘Commerce d’Afrique’, 183.

<sup>1261</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 74 r.

<sup>1262</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 12 May 1784.

11 May 1784	Lory, Plombard & Cie, local factors, have opened the sale of the human cargo. They sell 200 captives in Cap Français. <sup>1263</sup>
28 May 1784	A newspaper advert states that on 28 May, 50 more prisoners will be sold at the Court of Admiralty. The accounting books state that 53 Africans will be sold in Port-au-Prince. <sup>1264</sup>
18 July 1784	The ship is still in Cap Français, where 60 to 70 enslaved persons remain unsold. <sup>1265</sup>
22 August 1784	The <i>Zeepaerd</i> starts for Bordeaux from Cap Français. <sup>1266</sup>

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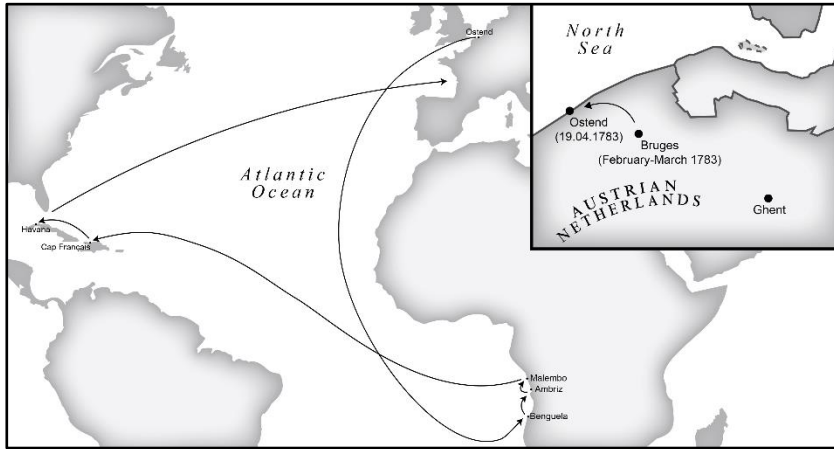
<sup>1263</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 12 May 1784; AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 74 r.

<sup>1264</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 26 May 1784; AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 74 r.

<sup>1265</sup> RA1B, *Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel*, 8065, Henry Romberg to Vilain XIII (Bordeaux, 12 September 1784).

<sup>1266</sup> BNF, *Affiches américaines*, 25 August 1784.

## A.15 Itinerary of the *Roi du Congo*



CAPTAIN: Armand Lacoudrais • CREW: 50 • TON: 300 • TYPE: frigate • TRADE: slave trade

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
22 January 1783	The <i>Roi du Congo</i> arrives in Ostend, coming from Honfleur. <sup>1267</sup>
8 February 1783	The ship arrives in Bruges. <sup>1268</sup>
20 February 1783	Romberg presses the Finance Council for the permission to load a larger amount of guns and firearms into the ship. <sup>1269</sup>
14 March 1783	The ship leaves Bruges for an unknown destination, either Ghent or Ostend. <sup>1270</sup>
7 April 1783	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1271</sup>
19 April 1783	The ship leaves Ostend for “de Kusten van Guinée” [“the coast of Guinea”]. <sup>1272</sup>

<sup>1267</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 27 January 1783.

<sup>1268</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, February 1783.

<sup>1269</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 5200.

<sup>1270</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Peneranda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, February 1783.

<sup>1271</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/401.

<sup>1272</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 1 May 1783.



—	The <i>Congo</i> calls at Ambriz to take on board 80 captives. Afterwards she proceeds north along the coast towards Malembo. <sup>1273</sup>
20 September 1783	The <i>Congo</i> arrives in Malembo, in the kingdom of Kakongo. <sup>1274</sup>
14 December 1783	The second surgeon accidentally sets fire to the kitchen, dying in the process. The crew and those of other ships in the harbour manage to extinguish the fire. <sup>1275</sup>
17 December 1783	The ship leaves Malembo for Havana. <sup>1276</sup>
20 February 1784	The <i>Congo</i> puts into Cap Français for stores, arriving with 527 enslaved Africans. <sup>1277</sup>
4 March 1784	The ship replenishes supplies for a sum of 17,727 <i>livres</i> . <sup>1278</sup>
13 March 1784	The <i>Congo</i> arrives in Havana. According to the official account, she carries 545 enslaved Africans. As the ship arrived in Saint-Domingue with 527 people, this implies that the <i>Congo</i> purchased more enslaved people in Cap Français. Alternatively, the recording officer in Havana made a mistake, as the ship is known to have sold 525 prisoners in Havana, close to the Cap Français number. <sup>1279</sup>
17 May 1784	The <i>Congo</i> leaves Havana. Her official destination is Ostend. <sup>1280</sup>

<sup>1273</sup> AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, Record of 24 August 1783; AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 29 November 1783).

<sup>1274</sup> AN, MAR/4JJ/71, Journal of the *Roi du Congo*, Record of 17 September 1783.

<sup>1275</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 14 December 1783).

<sup>1276</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Vanstabel to Tresca (Malembo, 14 December 1783).

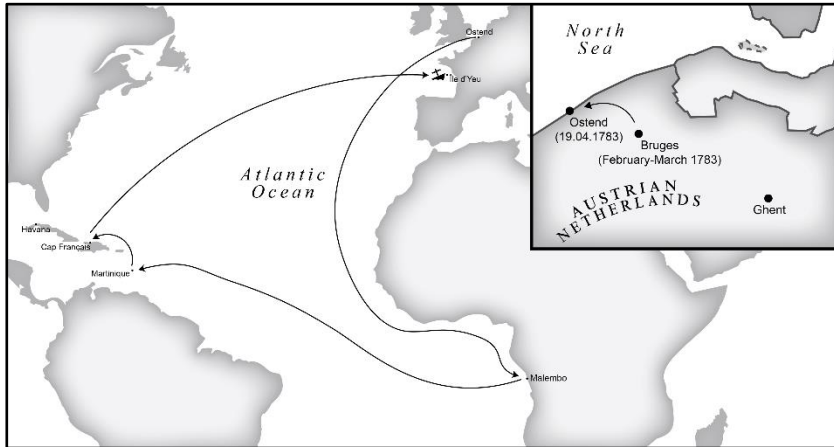
<sup>1277</sup> AMSO, Ms 1037, Lory & Plombard to Tresca (Cap Français, 22 February 1784).

<sup>1278</sup> AdP, *Faillissements*, D5B6, 336, f. 32 r.

<sup>1279</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366; ANRC, PN, t.1, f. 616 r. – 645 r., 676 r. – 734 v., 893 v. – 910 v.; t.2. f. 1350 r. (various folios).

<sup>1280</sup> AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366.

## A.16 Itinerary of the *Conseil de Flandre*



CAPTAIN: Pierre Destrais • CREW: 48 • TON: 300 • TYPE: frigate • TRADE: slave trade

Date	Event
22 January 1783	The <i>Conseil de Flandre</i> arrives in Ostend, coming from Honfleur. <sup>1281</sup>
20 February 1783	Romberg presses the Finance Council for the permission to load a larger amount of guns and firearms into the ship. <sup>1282</sup>
19 April 1783	The ship arrives in Bruges. <sup>1283</sup>
27 May 1783	The ship leaves Bruges for an unknown destination. <sup>1284</sup>
23 June 1783	The muster roll is signed by all hands in Ostend. <sup>1285</sup>
1 July 1783	The ship leaves Ostend for “de Kusten van Guinée” [“the Coasts of Guinea”]. <sup>1286</sup>
—	The ship arrives in Malembo, in the kingdom of Kakongo, meeting up with Lacoudrais’ <i>Roi du Congo</i> . <sup>1287</sup>
8 February 1784	The ship leaves Malembo for Havana. <sup>1288</sup>

<sup>1281</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 21 April 1783.

<sup>1282</sup> ARA, *Raad van Financiën*, 5200.

<sup>1283</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Penderanda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, April 1783.

<sup>1284</sup> RAB, *Comptabiliteit de Penderanda*, 218/2, List of incoming ships in Bruges, April 1783.

<sup>1285</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/401.

<sup>1286</sup> UAG, *Gazette van Gend*, 3 July 1783.

<sup>1287</sup> SHDR, *Inscription Maritime*\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 9 October 1783.

<sup>1288</sup> SHDR, *Inscription Maritime*\Quartier de l’Ile d’Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*, Record of 8 February 1784.

17 April 1784	The ship puts into Martinique in order to replenish supplies. Destrais buys foodstuffs at Terrier Delaistre & Cie. <sup>1289</sup>
5 May 1784	The ship arrives in Cap Français. The <i>Affiches américaines</i> claim falsely that the cargo of 434 people is in good health. <sup>1290</sup>
7 May 1784	Destrais begins the sale of his human cargo. Lory, Plombard & Cie, a local factor, sells 289 enslaved Africans in Cap Français. 64 others are sold in Port-au-Prince. <sup>1291</sup>
6 August 1784	Destrais leaves Port-au-Prince for Bordeaux. <sup>1292</sup>
23 October 1784	The ship perishes south of Île d'Yeu. <sup>1293</sup>

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<sup>1289</sup> AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, f. 40 r.

<sup>1290</sup> BNF, *Affiches Américaines*, 5 May 1784.

<sup>1291</sup> BNF, *Affiches Américaines*, 5 May 1784 ; AdP, *Livres de compte des commerçants faillis*, D5B6, 336, ff. 71 v., 90 r., 107 r.

<sup>1292</sup> BNF, *Affiches Américaines*, 11 August 1784.

<sup>1293</sup> SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Île d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Naufrage du *Conseil de Flandre*.

## A.17 Crew of the *Marie-Antoinette*<sup>1</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 14 • DATE OF SIGNING: 28 October 1780 • DATE OF LEAVE: 4 December 1780

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>2</sup>		Literate	Origin	Fate (if known)
			fl.c.g.	fl.w.g.			
1	Kors Neurenberg	captain	—	—	yes	Rotterdam	—
2	John Irvin*	1st helmsman	—	60	yes	—	—
3	Cornelis Feddersen	2d helmsman	—	50	yes	—	—
4	Jean Francois Fougere	surgeon	—	45	yes	France	—
5	Hendrick Pollman	carpenter	—	65	yes	—	—
6	Christopher Stormar	1st boatswain	—	50	yes	—	—
7	Joseph Coenraedt Drouet	2d boatswain	—	46	no	—	—
8	Christopher Schachteback	cook	—	50	yes	—	—
9	Pieter Ide	ordinary seaman	—	40	no	—	—
10	Pierre Fontain*	ordinary seaman	—	20	yes	—	—
11	Jan Hendrik Schultz	ordinary seaman	—	40	yes	—	—
12	Salomon Drouet*	ordinary seaman	—	40	yes	—	—
13	Jan Baptiste Langer*	ordinary seaman	—	40	yes	—	—
14	Joannes Hartman	cook's mate/boy	—	28	yes	—	—

<sup>1</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Rycx, sr.*, 102/629.

<sup>2</sup> It is unclear if the wages of the *Marie-Antoinette* were noted in fl.c.g or fl.w.g. The muster roll in the notary archives do not specify the currency, while several documents in the Prize Papers contradict one another.

\*Deserted in Ostend before departure.

Crew members added after desertion original crew members:<sup>3</sup>

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>4</sup>		Literate	Origin	Fate (if known)
			<i>fl.c.g.</i>	<i>fl.w.g.</i>			
1	Laurens Holm	1 <sup>st</sup> helmsman	—	60	—	Copenhagen	—
2	Mathis Jankerk	ordinary seaman	—	41	no	Rotterdam	—
3	C. Ansen*	ordinary seaman	—	40	—	—	—

\*Did not eventually join the voyage as Ansen was imprisoned by his former captain for desertion.

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<sup>3</sup> TNA, HCA42/136.

<sup>4</sup> See above.

## A.18 Crew of the *Prince de Saxe-Teschen*<sup>5</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 38 • DATE OF SIGNING: 9 January 1783 • DATE OF LEAVE: 15 February 1783

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>6</sup>		Literate <sup>7</sup>	Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>8</sup>
			fl.c.g.	fl.w.g.			
1	Jean-Pierre Barabé	captain	—	—	[yes]	Honfleur	survives
2	Daniel Wicard	supercargo	—	—	yes	Ghent	†
3	Jacques Guillaume Roussel	mate	—	—	yes	—	—
4	Pierre Gremond	1st lieutenant	—	—	yes	—	—
5	Jean Momenet	2d lieutenant	—	—	yes	—	—
6	Pierre Querquy	1st surgeon	—	—	yes	—	—
7	Joseph de Marlet	2d surgeon	—	—	yes	—	—
8	Pierre Nicolas Chaguet	‘officer’	—	—	yes	—	—
9	Johon Gorel	boatswain	70.8	60.7	yes	—	—
10	Alexander Kerry	2d boatswain	56	48.0	no	—	—
11	Joseph Desfriches	1st carpenter	65	55.7	yes	—	—
12	Josephus de Wint	2d carpenter	50	42.9	yes	—	—

<sup>5</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Ryex, sr.*, 115/25.

<sup>6</sup> Left column is the original currency of the contract. Right column presents wages in fl.w.g.

<sup>7</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate. Captains generally did not sign the muster roll, but literacy was crucial to rise to this rank.

<sup>8</sup> Death distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, 121 v.

13	Joseph Cadart	1st cooper	50	42.9	yes	—	—
14	Charles Frichoult	2d cooper	40	34.3	yes	—	—
15	David Henry	gunsmith	38	32.6	yes	—	—
16	Guillaume Urband	cook	50	42.9	yes	—	—
17	Antoine de Saint	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
18	Philippe Joses Clai	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
19	Joze Anacheto	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
20	Jean Robert	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
21	Jean Gagneux	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
22	Manuel Joseph	able seaman	50	42.9	no	—	—
23	Guiseppe Martin	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
24	Joseph Lardin	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
25	Nicolas Mahé	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
26	Jacques Cavé	able seaman	50	42.9	no	—	—
27	Pierre Mary	able seaman	50	42.9	no	—	—
28	Antonio Fioman	able seaman	50	42.9	no	—	—
29	Jean Hervy	able seaman	50	42.9	yes	—	—
30	Machair de Loof	able seaman	30	25.7	yes	—	—
31	Louis Frammezelle	able seaman	30	25.7	yes	—	—
32	Jean Bregingin	able seaman	38	32.6	no	—	—
33	Francois Joseph Flau	able seaman	38	32.6	yes	—	—
34	Thomas du Bois	able seaman	30	25.7	no	—	—

35	Allan Chardel	able seaman	38	32.6	no	—	—
36	Michel Coufrery	able seaman	45	38.6	no	—	—
37	Jacques Clost	boy	25	21.4	yes	—	—
38	Charles Monchoven	boy	20	17.1	yes	—	—

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## A.19 Crew of the *Négrier Impérial*<sup>9</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 37 • DATE OF SIGNING: 4 March 1783 • DATE OF LEAVE: 20 March 1783

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>10</sup>		Literate <sup>11</sup>	Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>12</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.			
1	Simon le Coq	captain	—	—	[yes]	FR	survives
2	Jean Baptiste Senat	supercargo	—	—	yes	FR	survives
3	Jean Baptiste Carpentier	supercargo	—	—	yes	ANL	† (African seaboard)
4	Louis Emanuel Dufau	mate	180	84.1	yes	—	—
5	Alexander Cary	1st lieutenant	120	56.1	yes	—	—
6	Pierre Verhulst	2d lieutenant	80	37.4	yes	—	†
7	Charles Louis Delalande	1st surgeon	180	84.1	yes	—	—
8	Francois Bisscop	2d surgeon	50	23.4	yes	—	—
9	Augustin Cauchoix	'officer'	50	23.4	yes	—	†
10	Jean Molinier	1st boatswain	80	37.4	no	—	—
11	Joseph Jersome	2d boatswain	70	32.7	no	—	—
12	Jean Pris	sloop master	60	28.0	—	—	—
13	François Capet	1st carpenter	90	42.1	yes	—	†

<sup>9</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/283.

<sup>10</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>11</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>12</sup> Deaths distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 77 r. and f. 177 v. Locations are derived from dates of death if available.

14	Jean Gauthier	2d carpenter	50	23.4	yes	—	—
15	Antone Ferrase	caulker	60	28.0	no	—	—
16	Simon Baron	sail maker	60	28.0	yes	—	—
17	Jean Jaegher	1st cooper	80	37.4	no	—	†
18	Jacques de Vinck	2d cooper	55	25.7	—	—	—
19	James Wall	gunsmith	50	23.4	yes	—	—
20	Philippe de Buck	cook	60	28.0	—	—	—
21	Moreel Fihaco	cook's mate	45	21.0	—	—	—
22	Jean Baptiste Luge	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
23	Laurent Marquies	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
24	Espit Tessie	able seaman	50	23.4	—	—	—
25	Joseph Rivero	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
26	Pierre Roqaut	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
27	Jean Deberger	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
28	Joseph F�r�re	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
29	Pierre Francois Blet�	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	—	—	—
30	Philippe Dufour	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	no	—	—
31	Pierre Letondu	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	—	—	†
32	Joseph Longuemassa	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	no	—	—
33	Jean Flosque	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	no	—	—
34	Charles Lacour	ordinary seaman	40	18.7	—	—	†
35	Nicolas Fraus	boy	18	8.4	no	—	—

36	Henry Dengis	boy	18	8.4	—	—	—
37	Jean Baptiste Morre	boy	12	5.6	no	—	—

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## A.20 Crew of the *Prince de Starhemberg*<sup>13</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 25 • DATE OF SIGNING: 9 April 1783 • DATE OF LEAVE: 12 April 1783

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>14</sup>		Literate	Origin	Fate (if known)
			£t.	fl.w.g.			
1	François Butté	captain	150	70.1	[yes]	—	—
2	Pierre Guilbaudt	mate	120	56.1	—	—	—
3	Baptiste Constant	1st lieutenant	120	56.1	yes	—	—
4	Jean Baptiste Lamisse	1st surgeon	80	37.4	—	—	—
5	Charles Pypaert	1st lieutenant	50	23.4	—	—	—
6	Francois Gonne	2d surgeon	110	51.4	yes	—	—
7	Francois Giraux	steersman	70	32.7	no	—	—
8	Germain Bastan	2d steersman	66	30.8	—	—	—
9	Jean Baptiste Marhe	sloop master	45	21.0	—	—	—
10	François Porret	gunsmith	90	42.1	no	—	—
11	Jean Christien	cooper	60	28.0	yes	—	—
12	Joseph Nicolas	cook	50	23.4	yes	—	—
13	Alexander Forel	[1st carpenter]	60	28.0	—	—	—
14	Jean Baptiste van Loye	2d carpenter	59	27.6	yes	—	—

<sup>13</sup> RAB, Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/403.

<sup>14</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

15	Pierre Bilauret	able seaman	52	24.3	—	—	—
16	Nicolas Chaval	able seaman	52	24.3	no	—	—
17	Francois Breton	able seaman	52	24.3	no	—	—
18	Andre Pindes	able seaman	52	24.3	yes	—	—
19	Gaylan Savin	able seaman	52	24.3	yes	—	—
20	Antoine Carrie	able seaman	52	24.3	no	—	—
21	Pierre Cline	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
22	Henry de Noyet	ordinary seaman	40	18.7	—	—	—
23	Jean François de Monday	ordinary seaman	40	18.7	yes	—	—
24	Thomas Pruyssenaere	[boy]	24	11.2	yes	—	—
25	Charles van Marcke	boy	18	8.4	yes	—	—

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## A.21 Crew of the *Vlaemisch Zeepaerd*<sup>15</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 53 • DATE OF SIGNING: 16 April 1783 • DATE OF LEAVE: 19 April 1783

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>16</sup>		Literate <sup>17</sup>	Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>18</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.			
1	Guillaume Constantin	captain	—	—	[yes]	FR	—
2	Philippe Carpentier	supercargo	—	—	yes	ANL	† (African seaboard)
3	Jean Cary	mate	—	—	yes	—	—
4	Pieter Marin Bernard	1st lieutenant	—	—	yes	—	† 06.03.1784 (at sea)
5	Francois Mongin	2d lieutenant	—	—	yes	—	† 31.03.1784 (at sea)
6	Jacobus de Windt	3d lieutenant	—	—	yes	—	—
7	Nicolas Noel Drouet	doctor	—	—	yes	—	—
8	Gregorius Flamand	surgeon	—	—	yes	—	—
9	Charles Joseph Descourcq	writer	60	28.0	yes	—	† 31.03.1784 (at sea)
10	Simon Benaudet	1st boatswain	100	46.7	yes	—	—
11	Francois Norichts	2d boatswain	90	42.1	no	—	—
12	Franciscus Verbiesse	1st carpenter	80	37.4	yes	—	† 08.10.1784 (at sea)
13	John Garritson	1st caulker	70	32.7	yes	—	—

<sup>15</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941)*, Antoine Rycx, sr., 116/426.

<sup>16</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>17</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>18</sup> Deaths distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 79 r., f. 84 r. and f. 84 v. Locations are derived from dates of death if available.

14	Franciscus Toulouse	2d carpenter	65	30.4	no	—	† 19.01.1784 (Ouidah)
15	Andries Douilly	2d caulker	60	28.0	no	—	† 10.08.1783 (Ouidah)
16	Josephus Drouillard	gunsmith	70	32.7	yes	—	† 11.08.1783 (Ouidah)
17	Lui Sularé	[3d] boatswain	60	28.0	yes	—	—
18	Antonius Magister	1st sloop master	60	28.0	no	—	—
19	Franciscus Medauy	2d sloop master	60	28.0	no	—	† 24.07.1784 (Cap Français)
20	Antonius Routtier	officer's cook	60	28.0	yes	—	† 20.02.1784 (Ouidah)
21	Franciscus de Vriendt	steward	50	23.4	yes	—	—
22	Franciscus Scely	crew cook	45	21.0	—	—	—
23	Alexander Everaerts	1st cooper	70	32.7	yes	ANL	† 21.02.1784 (Ouidah)
24	Joannes Aubert	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
25	Franciscus Plana	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	† 28.03.1784 (at sea)
26	Vincent Ferand	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
27	Manuel Del Moral	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
28	Joannes Barral	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
29	Giam Batista Ramella	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
30	Lucas Marin	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
31	Dominicus Arrige	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
32	Josephus Porro	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	† 13.09.1784 (at sea)
33	Franciscus Yccart	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
34	Joannes Castyllo	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
35	Antonnio Francesca	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—

36	Joannes Grozier	able seaman	50	23.4	—	—	—
37	Crispon de Silva	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
38	Dominicus Barrigalou	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
39	Ludovicus Lambert	able seaman	46	21.5	no	—	—
40	Joannes Perrona	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
41	Franciscus de Bonna	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
42	Franciscus Perris	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
43	Manuel La Borze	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
44	Mattheus Trihovils	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
45	Ludovicus Gerrin	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
46	Antonius Carry	able seaman	50	23.4	—	—	† 27.02.1784 (Ouidah)
47	Mattheus Fraten	able seaman	50	23.4	—	—	—
48	Joseph Joao	ordinary seaman	46	21.5	yes	—	—
49	Carolus Cittor	ordinary seaman	46	21.5	no	—	—
50	Josephus Garcy	ordinary seaman	40	18.7	no	—	—
51	Isaac Beims	ordinary seaman	25	11.7	yes	—	—
52	Josephus Carreyes	ordinary seaman	25	11.7	no	—	—
53	Ludovicus Wilkens	boy	20	9.3	—	—	—



Crew members unaccounted for in the original muster roll:<sup>19</sup>

#	Name	Rank <sup>21</sup>	Wage <sup>20</sup>		Literate <sup>22</sup>	Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>23</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.			
1	Dh. Oodts	Unknown	70	32.7	—	—	† 26.10.1783 (Ouidah)
2	Charles Enave	[boy]	20	9.3	—	—	† 28.11.1783 (Ouidah)
3	J. Felier	[boy]	20	9.3	—	—	† 19.01.1784 (Ouidah)
4	Francois Dewinet	[able seaman]	50	23.4	—	—	† 29.01.1784 (Ouidah)
5	Charles Wilbau	[able seaman]	50	23.4	—	—	† 10.03.1784 (at sea)
6	Perez Castri	[able seaman]	50	23.4	—	—	† 14.03.1784 (at sea)
7	F. Jassepret	[able seaman]	50	23.4	—	—	† 20.03.1784 (at sea)
8	J. Mocovich	[able seaman]	50	23.4	—	—	† 24.07.1784 (Cap Français)

<sup>19</sup> These seamen were either misidentified in the original muster roll or taken on board on a later occasion.

<sup>20</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>21</sup> Ranks between brackets have been assumed based on wage level.

<sup>22</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>23</sup> Deaths distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 84 r. Locations are derived from dates of death if available.

## A.22 Crew of the *Roi du Congo*<sup>24</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 50 • DATE OF SIGNING: 7 April 1783 • DATE OF LEAVE: 19 April 1783

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>25</sup>		Literate <sup>26</sup>	Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>27</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.			
1	Amand Lacoudrais	captain	—	—	[yes]	FR	—
2	Guillaume Francois Roger	mate	200	93.5	yes	—	—
3	Augustin Marchand	1st lieutenant	150	70.1	yes	—	—
4	Jacob Eelemen	1st lieutenant	90	42.1	yes	—	—
5	Francois Dufour	2d lieutenant	80	37.4	yes	—	† 01.10.1783 (Malembo)
6	Guillaume Bernard Roger	2d lieutenant	80	37.4	yes	—	—
7	Hendrik Jan ter Horst	2d surgeon	120	56.1	yes	—	† 13.12.1783 (Malembo)
8	Jan Baptist Vervier	doctor & surgeon	100	46.7	yes	ANL	—
9	Albert Senocq	writer	80	37.4	yes	—	—
10	Jean Perio	1st helmsman	110	51.4	no	—	—
11	Joseph Ozier	2d helmsman	80	37.4	no	—	†
12	Francois Bouling	boatswain	80	37.4	no	—	—

<sup>24</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Rycx, sr.*, 116/401.

<sup>25</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>26</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>27</sup> Deaths distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 79 r. and f. 84 v. Locations are derived from dates of death if available.

13	Jean F. Boses	sloop master	66	30.8	no	—	—
14	Bastier Ricard	gunner	66	30.8	no	—	—
15	Pierre Lhiardt	1st carpenter	110	51.4	yes	—	—
16	Albert Carliez	2d carpenter	80	37.4	yes	—	†
17	Alexander Monterre	1st caulker	66	30.8	yes	—	—
18	Louis Costy	2d caulker	60	28.0	yes	—	—
19	Leonard Fleury	1st cooper	110	51.4	yes	—	—
20	Jean de Liemans	2d cooper	80	37.4	yes	—	—
21	Bernard de Fabry	sailmaker	60	28.0	no	—	—
22	Louis D'aufresne	—	60	28.0	no	—	†
23	Gian Francos Dominicy	cook	60	28.0	yes	—	†
24	Francois Antoine Soyés	gunsmith	55	25.7	—	—	—
25	Pascale Montmarin	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
26	Frederick Bultman	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
27	John Cost	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	†
28	Joseph Royer	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
29	Jaques Ondregtin	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
30	Louis Leroy	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
31	Jean Brave	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
32	Bartelemy Houssan	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	†

33	Jan Barent Kaulijng	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
34	Raphael Souajot	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	†
35	Thomas Desubaran	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
36	Pierre Schevaene	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	†
37	Matthieu Brisson	able seaman	45	21.0	yes	—	—
38	Saimiago Alfonse	able seaman	45	21.0	no	—	—
39	Jean Prudhomme	able seaman	40	18.7	yes	—	—
40	Claude Pierre	able seaman	40	18.7	yes	—	—
41	Michiel Breby	cook	40	18.7	—	—	—
42	Louis Benard	ordinary seaman	33	15.4	no	—	—
43	André Soares	ordinary seaman	33	15.4	yes	—	—
44	Praire Charle Cottin	ordinary seaman	25	11.7	yes	—	—
45	Claude Faraselle	ordinary seaman	20	9.3	—	—	—
46	Louis Faguet	boy	20	9.3	yes	—	—
47	Jean Bonsamis	boy	20	9.3	yes	—	—
48	Pierre Jaque d'Ardanne	boy	20	9.3	yes	—	—
49	Jean Jaques Simon	boy	15	7.0	—	—	—
50	Jean Nicolas Gimer	boy	15	7.0	yes	—	—

Crew members unaccounted for in the original muster roll:<sup>28</sup>

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>29</sup>		Literate <sup>30</sup>	Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>31</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.			
1	'Fouache'	—	—	—	—	—	†

<sup>28</sup> These seamen were either misidentified in the original muster roll or taken on board on a later occasion.

<sup>29</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>30</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>31</sup> Death distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 84 r.

## A.23 Crew of the *Conseil de Flandre*<sup>32</sup>

PLACE: Ostend • CREW: 48 • DATE OF SIGNING: 23 June 1783 • DATE OF LEAVE: 1 July 1783

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>33</sup>			Origin <sup>35</sup>	Fate (if known) <sup>36</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.	Lit. <sup>34</sup>		
1	Pierre Destrais	captain	—	—	[yes]	Le Havre	survives
2	Jean Giffard	mate	200	93.5	yes	Honfleur	survives
3	Alexander Bunel	1st lieutenant	150	70.1	yes	Honfleur	survives
4	Gaspard Feddresen	1st lieutenant	182	85.0	yes	—	†, 21.02.1784 (at sea)
5	Felix Louvet	2d lieutenant	90	42.1	yes	Honfleur	survives
6	Jaques Robert	2d lieutenant	80	37.4	yes	—	—
7	Jean Azema	writer	100	46.7	yes	—	—
8	Louis Jean Dupond	1st surgeon	180	84.1	yes	—	†, 08.03.1784 (at sea)
9	Jean Caudron	2d surgeon	90	42.1	yes	—	†
10	Leonard Martin	1st steersman	110	51.4	yes	—	—
11	Guillaume Ruffin	2d steersman	90	42.1	no	Honfleur	survives

<sup>32</sup> RAB, *Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941), Antoine Rycx, sr.*, 117/611.

<sup>33</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>34</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>35</sup> Nationalities distilled from two crew lists in SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Liquidation. Both are dated on 27 October 1784 and contain the same maritime personnel, but sometimes mention vastly different places of origin. If the two documents are consistent, I recorded one place name. Where they differed, I mentioned both.

<sup>36</sup> Deaths distilled from SHDR, Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu MR 5 P, 4, 150, Journal of the *Conseil de Flandre*.

12	Jean Baptiste Voizard	1st carpenter	110	51.4	yes	Le Havre	survives
13	Joseph Delpierre	1st caulker	110	51.4	yes	Boulogne-sur-Mer	survives
14	Jean Francois Roux	boatswain	70	32.7	yes	Le Havre	survives
15	Jean Baptiste Doize	2d carpenter	60	28.0	no	Ostend/Bruges	survives
16	Pierre Verron	2d caulker	50	23.4	no	Ostend/Bruges	survives
17	Guillaume de Houlle	1st cooper	110	51.4	yes	Honfleur	survives
18	Nicolas Hares	2d cooper	80	37.4	no	—	†, 26.03.1784 (at sea)
19	Jean Hallé	cook	80	37.4	yes	—	†, 11.03.1784 (at sea)
20	Pierre Fautras	gunsmith	60	28.0	yes	Honfleur	survives
21	Jean Batin	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	†, 05.03.1784 (at sea)
22	Louis Sauco	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
23	François D'anoir	able seaman	50	23.4	no	Ostend/Venice	survives
24	Charles Martin	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	Ostend/Venice	survives
25	Pierre Dupuis	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
26	Nicolas Barde	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
27	Antoine Corps de Bielle	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	Dunkirk	survives
28	Gayelan Servy	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	Ostend/Venice	survives
29	Pierre Laurent	able seaman	50	23.4	no	Dunkirk	survives
30	Louis James	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
31	John Macky	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	—	—
32	Louis Nicolas La Coste	able seaman	50	23.4	—	Honfleur	survives
33	Jean Baptiste le Pretre	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—

34	Antoine De Grés	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	Calais	survives
35	Jean Kanel	able seaman	50	23.4	—	—	—
36	Joannes Marazin	able seaman	50	23.4	no	Ostend/Venice	survives
37	Francois Le Beau	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	Ostend	survives
38	Ferdinand Antoine	able seaman	50	23.4	yes	Dunkirk	survives
39	Joseph Pellegrin	able seaman	50	23.4	no	—	—
40	Pierre Saint Croix	ordinary seaman	36	16.8	yes	—	—
41	Jean Henrical	clothes maker	36	16.8	—	—	†, 26.02.1784 (at sea)
42	Michel de Menainville	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	yes	—	—
43	Pierre Baudelot	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	yes	Ostend/Sedan	survives
44	Charles Wathieu	cook	40	18.7	yes	—	†, 09.02.1784 (at sea)
45	Jean Francois Faguet	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	yes	Le Havre	survives
46	Pieter Daam	ordinary seaman	30	14.0	no	—	—
47	Jean Baptiste Gimer	boy	12	5.6	yes	Honfleur	survives
48	François Dieu	boy	12	5.6	yes	Honfleur	survives

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Crew members unaccounted for in the original muster roll:<sup>37</sup>

#	Name	Rank	Wage <sup>38</sup>			Origin	Fate (if known) <sup>40</sup>
			£t.	fl.w.g.	Lit. <sup>39</sup>		
1	Louis Auguste	'officer'	—	—	—	Toulon/Marseille	survives
2	Antoine Roussy	able seaman	—	—	—	Ostend/Genoa	survives
3	Grégoire Baldaquin	able seaman	—	—	—	Dunkirk	survives
4	Dominique Festin	able seaman	—	—	—	Dunkirk	survives
5	Louis Hipolite	able seaman	—	—	—	Le Havre	survives
6	Pierre Vikaert	ordinary seaman	—	—	—	Ostend	survives
7	Benoit Turissé	ordinary seaman	—	—	—	Ostend/Dijon	survives
8	Etienne Dufour	ordinary seaman	—	—	—	Ostend	survives
9	Jean Brancard	ordinary seaman	—	—	—	Ostend	survives
10	Charles Vanmarket	ordinary seaman	—	—	—	Ostend	survives
11	Michel Poulain	surgeon	—	—	—	Le Havre	survives

<sup>37</sup> These seamen were either misidentified in the original muster roll or taken on board on a later occasion.

<sup>38</sup> Converted from *livre tournois*.

<sup>39</sup> I assume seamen who sign the muster roll with their own name as literate. Conversely, those who sign with a cross are deemed illiterate.

<sup>40</sup> Death distilled from AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 84 r.

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Transitées

7510 Frappe des espèces d'argent

8580 Dictionnaire du commerce et de l'industrie des  
Pays-Bas, 1776

*Secretarie van State en Oorlog (T 100)*

1489/12 Saisie en Espagne du navire flamand Le Prince  
Charles, 19 mai 1781.

2160bis Prise du navire De Staeten van Brabant sur la  
côte d'Afrique, 7 juin 1783

2162

2180

2184 Déclarations et vidimations des lettres de mer

2189

Rijksarchief te Brussel (RAtB)

*Notariaat (I 923)*

8727 Amand Van Eynde

*Raad van Brabant: Processen van particulieren (I 67)*

4164 Baron Frederik de Romberg c. Vander Dilft &  
Huysman De Neufcour

4764 Baron Frederik de Romberg c. Vander Dilft &  
Huysman De Neufcour

*Raad van Brabant: Processen van de adel (I 86)*

7845 Van der Dilft & Huysman de Neufcour c. baron  
Frederik de Romberg

8065 Charles Amour Joseph de Baillet c. baron Frederik  
de Romberg

Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KBR)

*Gazette de Bruxelles*

Volume 1754

*Manuscripts*

19959 Correspondentie Romberg

20172 Correspondentie Romberg

20173 Correspondentie Romberg

II 28.848 C 9/4-5 Récit fidèle et succinct des faits relatifs à une liquidation entre le Sieur Frédéric Romberg, créancier, et le Sieur P. F. Stevens

II 4590 Correspondence commerciale Jacques-Joseph Chapel

IMP G 2077 Mémoire des faits Frédéric Romberg (1810)

Bruges

Rijksarchief Brugge (RAB)

*Brugse Vrije: Registers (INV 15-16)*<sup>1</sup>

17174 Registers met verklaringen van getuigen in criminele zaken, 1782-87

*Depot notaris H. J. Van Caillie te Oostende (1941) (TBO 132/8)*<sup>2</sup>

Antoine Rycx, sr.

102/629

103/191

109/556, 623

110/1118, 1128

115/25

116/283, 401, 403, 426

117/611

121/566, 569, 613, 614, 615

Stadsarchief Brugge (SAB)

*Comptabiliteit de Peneranda (Oud Archief 218)*

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Julien Verhaeghe, whose source abstracts and transcriptions allowed me to quickly locate criminal cases of interest for this book. Verhaeghe's work is preserved in the library of the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ).

<sup>2</sup> In order to navigate this vast body of documents, I made thankful use of Jan Coopman's inventory of Ostend's notary deeds. Coopman's monumental achievement is freely available at Familiekunde Oostende.

218/2 Lijst van inkomende schepen, 1782-3

Doornik

Stadsarchief Doornik (SAD)

*Overlijdensaktes*

Volume 1822

Ghent

Rijksarchief Gent (RAG)

*Familie De Moerman-d'Harlebeke (FM35)*

168 Erkenning van een participatie van 6000 gulden  
wisselgeld

*Oud Notariaat (NOT1)*

1561 Remy Vergult, 1783-84

*Raad van Vlaanderen (GW8)*

21698 Guill. Herries c. Frederik Romberg en cons.:  
wisselbrief.

30868 Correspondentie van de fiscalen, 1782 3de  
trimester

*Schenking d'Hoop (FM 54)*

978 Scheepsjournaal van "le Pactolle"

*Schenking d'Hoop, supplement (FM 55)*

30 Handelscorrespondentie Jan-Baptiste De Loose,  
1770-82

*Staten van Vlaanderen (GW 10)*

5837 Correspondentie van tesorier-generaal Cornelis  
Carpentier, 1774-84

Stadsarchief Gent (SAG)

*Betoogboeken Alexianen*

68/22

*Familiepapieren*

542 Handboek Laurent Janssens

1136 Carpentier

3301 Laurent Janssens

5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 18 Correspondentie

*Koophandel*

154bis

1, 2

Universiteitsarchief Gent (UAG)

*Diverse manuscripten*

BIB.VC.001787/05/29 Catalogue d'une très belle collection de livres délaissés par feu messire Charles Vilain XIII, seigneur de Welle

BIB.VC.001829/08/2 Catalogue d'une partie des tableaux et des objets d'art, formant le cabinet de feu Mr. J.B. Vervier

201F244 Précis pour les sieurs Romberg & Compagnie, Négocians à Gand

*Fonds 3385*

1080A

*Gazette van Gendt*

Volumes 1760-1785

*Vlaemsche Indicateur ofte Aenwyzer der Wetenschappen en Vrye Konsten*

Volume 1783

*Wegwijzer van Gendt*

Volumes 1770-1795

Leuven

Rijksarchief Leuven (RAL)

*Notaris Joannes Baptista Staes (882/797)*

16 Minuten 1780-83

*Oude Universiteit Leuven: Inschrijvingsregisters (682/1)*

28 Liber Decimus Intitulatorum: 31 août 1776 - 11 novembre 1789

Ostend

Familiekunde West-Vlaanderen

Veurne

Stadsarchief Veurne (SAV)

*Oud Archief*

269-270 Poorterboeken

*Cuba*

Havana

Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba (ANRC)

*Protocolos Notariales*

Volumes 1-3 (1783-1785)<sup>3</sup>

*France*

Aix-en-Provence

Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mers (ANOM)

COL C9 A

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Bordeaux

Archives Départementales de la Gironde (ADG)

*Fonds des négociants*

7B 1999 Correspondence

7B 2000 Correspondence

Caen

Archives du Calvados

*Legs Boudier 1943*

F/6120 *Le Prince de Saxe-Teschen*: journal de bord,  
livres des factures

Paris

Archives de Paris (AdP)

*Livres de compte des commerçants faillis (D5B6)*

336 Romberg, Bapst & Cie

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Alex Borucki and José Luis Belmonte Postigo for sharing these sources with me.

Archives Nationales de France (ANF)

*Banque Greffulhe (61 AQ)*

100

101

*Marine: Journaux de bord (MAR/4JJ)*

71 Journaux de bord du capitaine Armand Lacoudrais  
d'Honfleur

Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF)

*Affiches américaines*

Volumes 1782-86

Rochefort

Service Historique de la Défense (SHD)

Inscription Maritime\Quartier de l'Ile d'Yeu (MR 5)

P4 150 Conseil de Flandres: journal de bord et naufrage,  
1783-84

Rouen

Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime (ADSM)

Archives anciennes avant 1790: Juridictions consulaires

201BP: Juridiction de Rouen

550 Faillissements

216BP: Amirauté du Havre

414 Registres d'insinuations

415 Registres d'insinuations

Minutes des officiers publics: Notaires

2E70 Le Havre

639 Coste & Dorey: Inventaires & reconnaissances  
(1780-1784)

Saint-Omer

Archives Municipales de Saint-Omer (AMSO)



1037 Lettres de Bonaventure Tresca de Dunkerque<sup>4</sup>

Vannes

Archives Départementales du Morbihan (ADM)

*Great Britain*

London

The National Archives (TNA)

*Foreign Office*

Austrian Netherlands (26)

1-2

*High Court of Admiralty*

Prize Court (HCA32)

402/6 (*Minerva*)

296/1 (*Comte de Flandre*)

345/16 (*Groote Estafette*).

Appeals for Prizes (HCA42)

136 (*Marie-Antoinette*)

*Treasury*

Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading with  
Africa (T 70)

33 Letters received by Royal African Company

*Spain*

Sevilla

Archivo General de Indias (AGI)

*Gobierno: Indiferente General*

2820B Asiento de Negros: Cartas, ordenes

2821 Asiento de Negros: Cartas, ordenes

2823 Asiento de Negros: Cartas, ordenes

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<sup>4</sup> A good transcription of these letters is included as an appendix in Christophe Sergeant, *Mortalité et morbidité au cours d'une campagne de traite d'un navire négrier dunkerquois au XVIIIe siècle* (Lille 1989) 126-212.

*Gobierno: Santo Domingo*

1661 Duplicados de Intendentes del Ejército y de Real Hacienda

1665 Duplicados de Intendentes del Ejército y de Real Hacienda

2188 Expedientes del Consulado y comercio: Cuba

*Papeles de Cuba*

1355 Correspondencia del capitán general de Cuba, Luis de Unzaga

1365 Correspondencia del capitán general de Cuba, Luis de Unzaga

1366 Correspondencia del capitán general de Cuba, Luis de Unzaga

1410 Correspondencia del capitán general de Cuba, José de Ezpeleta



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