

Captive Markets: Intra-European Trade on the African Coast

Anne Ruderman
Yale University

Abstract

This paper argues that intra-European trade on the African coast was essential to the European-African slave trade, as Europeans exchanged goods with one another in Africa in order to assemble the correct assortment of goods with which to purchase slaves. Throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans traded with one another on the African coast both out of opportunism and desperation, hoping at times to best rivals, and needing at times to remedy poorly selected or faulty goods of their own. But instead of following the norms of European long-distance commerce, which relied on specie and bills of exchange, Intra-European trade adopted the style of assortment bargaining that was the hallmark of European-African trade. Intra-European trade in Africa had different meanings for various participants. For the state-sponsored British Royal African Company, trading with private British traders and foreigners became part of a strategy to weaken competition. For French merchants, the African coast offered a way to circumvent mercantilist restrictions that limited slavers' options at home. Intra-European trade in Africa also mattered after captains had purchased their human cargo and became institutionalized in the Portuguese hospital on Principe, where captains could unload diseased slaves, paying for hospital housing and care with assorted European goods.