

*European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850*. Richard B. Allen. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780821421079

This study, the resulting accomplishment of both thorough archival research and expert synthesis of existing scholarship, is a welcomed addition to the historiographies of the Indian Ocean, the history of slavery and abolitionism, and oceanic history more generally. Although the transatlantic slave trade, in which an estimated 12,521,000 Africans were enslaved and transported to the Americas, has rightfully received the bulk of scholarly analysis, author Richard Allen notes what Edward Alpers observes as the “tyranny of the Atlantic” in dominating slavery studies and hence attempts to illuminate the Indian Ocean slave trade’s “role in linking together the different parts of this huge and culturally diverse and complex oceanic world.” This Indian Ocean trade resulted in an interconnected global movement of slave, convict, and indentured labor, “the legacy of which continues to resonate in our own day and age.”

Allen identifies four areas of concern in the existing scholarship on the Indian Ocean slave trade. First, recent scholarship has focused the transport of slaves from Africa by Arab, Muslim, and Swahili merchants to Madagascar, the Middle East, and South Asia, the Afro-centric focus of which presents barriers “to developing a more comprehensive understanding of slave and other migrant labor systems.” For example, Africa was not the only source of slaves in the Indian Ocean, and slaves were transported to Africa as well as from it, which relates to Allen’s second concern, the scholarship of the trade from India and Southeast Asia being in its relative infancy. Though it may not shock the observer that the attention given to the transatlantic trade surpasses that of the Saharan and Indian Ocean trades, it is somewhat ironic given these trades’ antiquity in comparison to the much younger Atlantic trade. Third, scholarship on

European slave trading in the Indian Ocean is far too narrow and only examines “one set of Europeans at a time.” This was an interconnected commercial venture and also involved African, Arab, American, and Indian traders. And, fourth, Allen recognizes the limitation of scholarship viewing “the Indian Ocean as a self-contained unit,” instead choosing “to situate European slave trading in the Indian Ocean in broader historical contexts.” Europeans entering the Indian Ocean were not entering a world utterly distinct but rather interconnected with the world from which they had just come.

Noting these shortcomings of recent scholarship, Allen asks important new questions as to the overlapping of slave traders of different European nationalities, their effect on local societies, and in what ways and to what extent the slave trade affected the development of both free and forced migrant labor beyond the geographic and temporal parameters listed in the title. Allen appropriately does not ignore slave resistance in his tome, and as such the agency he assigns is remarkably well spread despite his shortcoming (which he himself recognizes) of heavily relying on British and French sources at the expense of Dutch and Portuguese—considering the interconnected nature of these trades, there is much yet to be uncovered about all four nations’ slave trading just by narrowly focusing on one alone. Slave resistance took many forms, commonly that of suicide by jumping into the ocean rather than submitting to their most clearly undesirable and inhumane condition. Slaves often revolted both at sea and in port, were often well organized and led, and in a few cases such revolts succeeded, with newly liberated either able to return to where they came from, or escape to new lands. Allen notes that the available data “undoubtedly underrepresent the extent” of slave revolts, calling attention to the need for further study on this point.

Allen's chapter on the French trade in the Mascarenes is particularly noteworthy because of how he demonstrates the increasingly interconnected and complex nature of this region's trade. Rather than reducing the Mascarenes trade to that of an isolated demand in those islands for chattel labor, Allen expands upon recent scholarship that places the Mascarenes trade into an expanded temporal and geographical context that illuminates the complicated social, economic, and political relationships of the region. This foothold of the slave trade into the region's broader history helps explain why the abolitionist movement's attempts to squash the trade in the early nineteenth century met such resistance as it did. The magnitude of this trade, its interconnectedness with far-flung areas and polities, its status as an emerging abolitionist battleground, and transition to migrant labor systems transporting Indians, Africans, East Asians, and Southeast Asians—"a new system of slavery"—highlight the need for fresh archival research and study.

Allen's emphasis of broad, complex geographical and temporal relationships challenges long-held assumptions about slavery and abolitionism. As he observes, this has recently become more evident in British imperial studies, with P.J. Marshall and Philip J. Stern's works suggesting that there were clear similarities between British Asia and British America to pair with the differences, pointing to a global maritime system. But the argument that understanding Atlantic slave status is often essential to understanding slave status in other regions is hotly contested. Admittedly, there are weaknesses to his arguments, notably sparse archival resources. Allen insists, however, that slave trading and abolitionism in the Indian Ocean was not only related to activities in the Atlantic but also the metropole, and his narrative is a convincing one as one nods approvingly at his mission for "the global history of European slave trading, abolitionism, and their legacy to be revealed in all of its dynamic and challenging complexity."

Allen writes with concise prose, and his narrative and arguments are easy to follow. The book includes tables, maps, and even illustrations that help provide context and supplement the text, and four appendices appear before a vast collection of end notes and references. This study is both accessible to the interested layperson and handy for an undergraduate student, graduate student, or even professional historian looking for an orientation within the field. The author dutifully considers his material within its historiographical context and for that reason it serves well as a call for historians to add to the relatively sparse existing material to this subject. In his stated goals of seeking to expand the Indian Ocean trade into the wider temporal and geographical realm and to “accord the Mare Indicum its proper place in slavery studies,” Allen does an admirable job.

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