

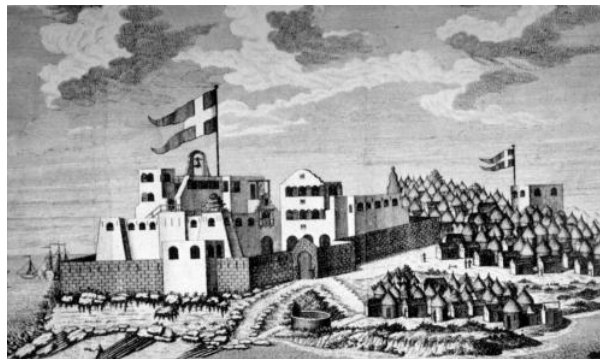
Scandinavians and the Atlantic slave trade

Seventeenth to early nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

Between the late seventeenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century, Scandinavians participated in the Atlantic slave trade like other Europeans. This trade led to the founding of Danish and Swedish establishments in Africa and the West Indies. However, the implication of Scandinavians in the slave trade was not limited to the tens of thousands of African deportees. It had other effects, especially by offering outlets for national products, or by stimulating trade between their colonies on a West Indian scale.



Fort Christiansborg, the primary Danish slave trade port on the Gold Coast.

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Scandinavians began to take an interest in large-scale Atlantic trade during the first half of the seventeenth century. They founded trading companies—most often with support from foreign investors—that were granted a monopoly over navigation to Africa, from where they were supposed to return with gold and ivory. The Danes and Swedes established their first trading posts in current-day Ghana in the mid-seventeenth century. Scandinavians, who established themselves in Africa before doing so in America, took up the slave trade. In 1650, the Swedes were authorized to provide slave labor to the Portuguese colony of São Tomé and to load sugar there, and were later granted the right to transport slaves to the Dutch island of Curacao. During its dozen years of activity, the Swedish African company ultimately transported approximately 2,000 slaves. But Swedish establishments in Africa declined after a few years, whereas Danish ones endured until 1850. On the other side of the Atlantic, aside from a

brief North American episode, the Swedes did not have any possessions in the West Indies before acquiring Saint Bartholomew in 1784. Here once again, the Danes had a larger presence. They acquired three islands where the Greater and Lesser Antilles meet: Saint Thomas (1672), Saint John (1718), and Sainte Croix (1733). While the two first Danish colonies were small and poorly supplied with water, the latter had genuine agricultural potential, which enabled the development of sugar plantations. The founding of American colonies pulled Danish trading posts out of their torpor. From 1674 to 1754, trade between Danish establishments in the intertropical Atlantic took place on ships belonging to the Danish West India and Guinea Company, which had a monopoly over navigation and trade between Africa and America.

Denmark developed regular Atlantic navigation. The Danes engaged in the triangular trade, with a total of approximately 260 voyages, and deported 100,000-110,000 Africans between 1660 and 1806, or approximately 1% of the total Atlantic slave trade. The average number of Africans taken on by Danish ships increased tenfold between 1660-1733 (236/year) and 1793-1806 (2,577/year). Throughout the eighteenth century, periods of Danish neutrality during French-British conflicts were prosperous times for the slave trade. In fact, the percentage of the slave population continued to grow in Danish colonies. In Sainte Croix, the development of sugar production stimulated demand for slaves, who numbered approximately 25,000 during the 1780s, or over 90% of the island's population, a level similar to that of other sugar-producing islands in the West Indies.

Close study of shipments of slaves and their subsequent fate during the eighteenth century shows that only 60% of them were bound for Danish islands, with the remainder ultimately arriving in neighboring territories. The absence of a plantation economy in Saint Thomas made it a place of transit for many slaves, who were subsequently smuggled to other islands. In the early eighteenth century, père Labat, who was travelling through Saint Thomas, noted the "secret trafficking" being conducted there, and took note in the primary city of Charlotte Amalie of the "many accommodations and warehouses for merchandise & for holding the negroes that it receives, & that it traffics with the Spaniards." The archives also conserve a number of cases of colonists from French islands who went to Saint Thomas to fraudulently procure slaves. The Danish island took advantage of the neutrality of its metropole during the last wars of Louis XIV's reign to take on smuggled slaves. Saint Thomas took part in this activity on a number of occasions during the century, especially from 1793 onward. However, at the time it had to contend with a rival for the trafficking of slaves within the West Indies: the Swedish colony of Saint Bartholomew.

The island was ceded by Louis XVI to Gustave III of Sweden in 1784. The Swedish West India Company was created two years later, and charged among other things with conducting the Atlantic slave trade. Despite the rapid liberalization of this activity, there were very few attempts at engaging in triangular trade in the absence of Swedish trading posts on African coasts. All told, between 1785 and 1839, 2,000 slaves were transported under the Swedish flag, although the Swedes of Saint Bartholomew took part in the deportation of over 7,500 Africans under different colors. The majority of them were directly bound for Spanish and French colonies, or indirectly after relaying through the Swedish island. The slave trade in Saint Bartholomew was particularly prosperous during the first decades of the nineteenth century, especially during the War of 1812-1814 between Great Britain and the United States. The passiveness of Swedish authorities opened the island up to all kinds of traffic, making it an attractive slave market where slave traders and colonists of all nationalities met.

Despite the lesser participation of Scandinavians in the effective deportation of Africans, Swedish and Danish merchants invested funds in slave trading expeditions flying under foreign flags. For that matter, European slave trading fueled needs that the Scandinavians were in a position to meet. The Atlantic slave trade represented a demand that was all the more important given that the price of slaves in Africa continued to increase during the eighteenth century. Some Danish expeditions to the Gulf of Guinea included national products, especially weapons. Swedish metal products were also among the slave trade merchandise that was frequently transported, including copper, brass, and especially iron, which served primarily as ballast.

Despite Gustave III's commitment in 1790 to do "everything he could" so that his subjects do not engage in the slave trade, Denmark was the first European country to abolish it, as a royal decree in 1792 banned the transportation of slaves under the Danish flag in ten years' time. However, the measure had a perverse effect, as it stimulated demand for slaves on the part of colonists, who hoped that their slave population would grow large enough to reproduce itself without external contributions. The abolition of slavery in Saint Bartholomew is less clear. Since the Swedes only had minor direct involvement in the slave trade, its abolition did not have a major impact. On site, the colonial administration's passiveness allowed the slave trade to endure. The first Swedish laws providing for punishments against slave traders were passed in 1830, although they did not succeed in eradicating the slave trade, given how much the colonists of Saint Bartholomew profited from it. In the end, slavery was totally abolished in 1847.

While Scandinavians were minor actors in the large-scale European slave trade, they were nevertheless involved in this traffic. While they lacked the demographic and financial means to support a genuine colonial policy and play a more active role in the deportation of Africans, for them the black slave trade was an avenue for opening up to non-European horizons, and for becoming a part of the dynamic of global interconnection.

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