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A researchers perspective on the advances and challenges in slave trade research since the publication of the second Slave Trade Database

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Website

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Contribution to economic history

The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD) is the latest and the most significant contribution to quantify the volume of human trafficking across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The website www.slavevoyages.org hosts the most recent version of the database, also known as TSTD2. The authors of this project and all contributors to this major databank must be commended by their great efforts and achievements. The list of monographs and articles citing the database is absolutely impressive, and one would be hard pressed to find a historical data collection project that could rival the TSTD in this respect.

The TSTD is not only a breakthrough in advancing the study of the darkest episodes of Atlantic history and an inspiring effort to bring data together from across national boundaries, it is also one of the first major history projects to explicitly adopt open source architecture and open access licenses for its data. This has meant that the use of the database and website has moved far beyond a select group of academics. The database has also allowed scholars to raise new questions and continues to pose new challenges to its creators and users. In the last few years, for example, the database has contributed to answering questions regarding the African roots of Afro-Americans, patterns of African resistance on board slave ships, and the economic impact of the trade on regions in Africa, to name just a few. The present review deals primarily with the database as a resource to study early modern economic and business history. Taking this perspective we also discuss some of the pitfalls that other maritime and economic historians should be aware of when using the database without studying the original sources and literature on which TSTD is based.

Translation across various European business practices

The database offers insight into a trade, and an historical process, which was spread out over vast geographical distances, based on documents that are (necessarily) very diverse and spread across different continents, in several languages, and across different historical periods. Through the TSTD2 database researchers are given access and opportunity to make connections and comparisons along a multitude of lines. To make these connections and comparisons possible the website offers clear search and filter options. An example of this are the categories ship, captain and owner. These three variables in the dataset seem ideal to reconstruct the activities of a specific ship, a captain, a businessman, a merchant house or firm. To make these variables the data from many different sources had to be harmonized, which of course resulted in a loss of data as well as translation issues from, for example, Dutch, Danish, French or Portuguese to English. This becomes apparent when using the categories of ship captain and ship owner, especially if researchers are examining non-English participation in the slave trade. These categories were created according to an English model, which does not neatly fit the multiple categories for crew leadership and ship ownership within other organizational models of maritime activities. Within the Iberian World, for example, owning a ship as an item implied a set of rights over the property (*propriedade*), which were distinct from the rights of someone owning the use of a ship (*senhorio*), as property. As a consequence, both legally and in practice, the ownership of a vessel as an object and the right to its use could be in the hands of one, two or more separate merchants. However, due to the expanded categorization of ship owner in the TSTD some of this information is lost.

The examination of chartered companies' participation in the slave trade and their relationship with private merchants through the lens of the TSTD might also be misleading. The Dutch West India Company, for instance, appears as owner of various vessels. However, often ships were freighted by private merchants and cargoes were their property. Thus, crucial elements for the reconstruction of slave trade networks, such as information on freighters, insurers, credit providers, agents, and brokers still need to be added to the TSTD. But, we hope this data will be gradually incorporated in this databank allowing us to paint a more complete portrait of this commerce.

Sources and new additions

TSTD takes a quantitative approach, and it has an overarching goal of determining the size of forced mass-migration westward across the Atlantic in the early modern/modern period. However, in spite of criticism and a quantitative emphasis we argue that the database offers a very promising starting point for qualitative studies both of Afrocentric questions regarding the African perspective and African agency, and also for other topics within the social history of the Atlantic that are of a distinctly more qualitative nature. By using online search variables (within both Basic and General search parameters) such as 'Outcome of Voyage'; 'Outcome of Voyage for Slaves'; 'Outcome of Voyage if Ship Captured'; and 'African Resistance', the sources listings offered can beneficially be used as starting points for future archival research. The TSTD2 should of course not replace the study of primary documents. What the original and usually unknown researcher considered irrelevant to his or her inquiries and therefore ignored, we cannot know until we revisit the primary documents. When information that is twice/three times removed then is combined with a rigid search-grid there is no telling what is actually documented, and how much information is lost.

The Dutch archival material that records the history of the trans-Atlantic is surprisingly complete and much of the basic information has been published. This has mainly been the work of people like Thomas Biender, Cornelis Goslinga, Willem Unger, Johannes Postma, Henk den Heijer, and Ruud Paesie. This small but dedicated group has been unearthing material and comparing notes resulting in the occasional downward or upward revision of the Dutch figures. The TSTD has been a useful platform to collect the different sets of Dutch data and make it internationally comparable. New research is being conducted, although it is unlikely that this will add much by way of figures to the data already in the TSTD. Missing from the TSTD is the data on interlopers and a good system to have a more flexible system for the 'national' identification of ships. A major drawback remains the way data is added. Given how complete the Dutch data is, it seems likely that only mistakes will be introduced rather than improvements made.

The success of the database is clearly visible in the number of citations it has received and in the new questions that are being asked. These new questions are often beyond the scope of the present project. Examples are issues regarding African coastal trade and the intra-Caribbean slave trade. The transnational nature of its material calls for a more nuanced categorization than is presently possible, for example to investigate the trading of

slaves across European imperial boundaries from West African settlements. The TSTD is inspiring research to quantify the movement of enslaved people in the Indian Ocean and identifying major routes and nodal points there. In sum the TSTD is without a doubt an important tool and a great way of enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the early modern Atlantic world, transnational connections, and the dark history of the slave trade.

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