

Rechtsgeschichte Legal History

www.lhlt.mpg.de

<http://www.rg-rechtsgeschichte.de/rg31>
Zitiervorschlag: Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History Rg 31 (2023)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.12946/rg31/254-255>

Rg **31** 2023 254 – 255

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A Deep Dive into England's Early Africa Companies

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In the context of English trading companies, the historiography's principal focus has traditionally been on the East India Company and its role in the Indian Ocean trade, with little attention being paid to the earliest English Africa companies. Julie Mo Svalastog's book ›Mastering the Worst of Trades. England's Early Africa Companies and Their Traders, 1618–1672‹ seeks to remedy that, by offering a more nuanced history of England's early Africa trade, drawing attention to the legal agents who were part of these early companies and combining our conceptions of Indian Ocean trade and Atlantic trade into one commodity chain.

The Guinea Company (GC) was the first English Africa company with joint stock to be granted an official patent by King James I, which gave them complete and exclusive access to the West African coast in 1618. The first three chapters of this book focus on the company, its journeys and its members. The company initially started out as a small and limited structure that functioned on a *voyage-by-voyage* basis, importing assortments of goods from the West African coast into England, and with the hopes of obtaining – or finding a source of – gold. However, a large majority of the members left the company after several drawn-out court cases with superior traders and extensive financial difficulty had developed. The relaunch of the GC went hand in hand with new patent negotiations in the 1630s and 1640s. A trust-based system was created when the company became divided among four merchants who were tied together through close partnerships. Due to the flexibility they had obtained through processes of lending within this system of trust, profit (in the form of the coveted gold) was coming in more effectively. But over-stretched funds, debt, political turmoil and both transnational competition and competing domestic private traders became a strain on the company. The volatility of this trade led to the diversification of their activities and the push towards plantation and slave trade. Problems persisted and eventually the

East India Company (EIC) entered the picture. The GC ended up moving their trade over to the EIC in 1657/8 up until 1663/4. The EIC would purchase gold directly from the African states on the coast and transport it to their factories in India. However, their monopoly on the West African coast ended when a new patent was negotiated and the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa (RA) – the focus of the book's fourth and fifth chapters – took over. This patent, granted by the English state in 1663, explicitly stated that it was for the purpose of the slave trade, thus creating yet again a monopolized trade with formal company structure. As this trade was developing on a large credit basis, the growing debts proved to be entirely challenging. The costs started to consistently outweigh the benefits. Throughout all the financial strain as well as internal and external competition, all these companies acted as representatives of England; their patents stipulated that they had obligations to the Crown and had to serve the English drive for exploring and, eventually, managing the Empire's newly acquired realms.

The book is the result of a PhD conducted at Universiteit Leiden with the research project ›Fighting Monopolies‹ funded by the European Research Council. The project centres around providing comparative overviews of free agents and informal empires and their responses to each other, an approach which fits this book perfectly. At the forefront of the research project as well as the book is the role of the individual or the agent. Svalastog applies a *longue durée* perspective on both the companies and the private individuals that constructed and engaged with them, going against the construed and perceived dichotomy of private vs. corporate. A focus on these influential individuals – company men – helps us better understand these companies as institutions. The impact of the individual on the company is not unidirectional but flows both ways, with personal interest steering company interest and vice versa, and this is shown throughout the book.

* JULIE MO SVALASTOG, *Mastering the Worst of Trades: England's Early Africa Companies and Their*

Traders, 1618–1672, Leiden/Boston: Brill 2021, X + 272 p., ISBN 978-90-04-44082-1

Svalastog sets out to argue that the consistent tendency to perceive these companies (GC, EIC on the coast of Africa and early RA) as insignificant or irrelevant for further study due to their lack of profit is undeserved, saying that there is a need for deeper comprehension of and attention to them. The author manages to convince the reader of the benefit of bringing nuanced accounts by showing the extensive histories of these companies and their agents, and the foundation they provided for later profitable companies. However, her secondary goal is to change our usually negative assessment of these companies. This intention is felt throughout the entire work yet seems much less convincing. Svalastog attempts to move away from labelling the companies as failures because of their lack of profit; she wants the reader to perceive them for more than their profitability and tries to highlight the positive or beneficial actions taken by individuals within the respective companies as a reason not to see them as failures. Contextualisation with inclusion of stories by agents is important in order to better understand the start and the longer narrative of these companies – as the author does here – instead of perceiving the companies as irrelevant for the sole reason of lack of monetary profitability. This nuance does not take away from the fact that, nevertheless, these companies consistently failed to achieve success.

One cannot help but notice the lack of writing devoted to the interaction with local structures, considering that a work on agents in early Africa companies should not merely include British male

merchants, but also the African agents they engaged with to establish their trade. But Svalastog points out that »the sources give us frustratingly little detail about transnational interactions between local structures and the GC at this early stage« (9), which addresses and explains this lack. Additionally, however, her choice of primary sources in a work on traders as agents raises some questions, since most of the primary sources are court, council and state documents from The National Archive in London. In an attempt to uncover the individual convictions, personal trade interests and benefits to the traders that caused them to undertake certain company decisions or have a lack of interest in the company's wellbeing, one would expect more correspondence, personal diaries or travel notes to have been consulted. There are references to the work by Makepeace ›English Traders on the Guinea Coast, 1657–1668: An Analysis of the East India Company Archive‹, who analysed some correspondence, but it might have been valuable for Svalastog to consult these correspondence pieces herself in a work so heavily centred around agency.

A clear and logical chronological structure is used throughout all five chapters, with an overall comprehensive writing style. It is a good read for anyone interested in early Africa companies and accounts on early trade, or for those interested in the individuals who interacted with corporations throughout history.



Winner Ijeoma

Rule of Law im kolonialen Afrika?*

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Inhaftierungen ohne vorausgehende Gerichtsverfahren in den afrikanischen Kolonien. Jede der behandelten Regionen wird ausführlich in den historischen und geografischen Kontext gestellt, was nicht nur Wissenschaftlern der afrikanischen Rechtsgeschichte ermöglicht, die Zusammenhän-

* MICHAEL LOBBAN, *Imperial Incarceration. Detention without Trial in the Making of British Colonial Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press 2021, XII + 450 S., ISBN 978-1-316-51912-7