

Lachenicht, Susanne (Hrsg.): *Europeans Engaging the Atlantic. Knowledge and Trade, 1500-1800*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag 2014. ISBN: 978-3593501703; 185 S.

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*Europeans Engaging the Atlantic* is a welcome contribution to a growing research field that tries to shed light on the connection between the early modern Atlantic and so-called European „peripheries.“ Although the book’s title does not reflect this, most of the essays focus on Central Europe’s experience with the Atlantic – and they do so from the two angles indicated in the subtitle: Three discuss the distribution of knowledge about the Atlantic (which largely refers to the Americas) and three engage with Central European merchants and/or merchandise on the Atlantic market. Two facts about this essay collection as a whole strike me as outstanding: First, all essays are written by scholars for whom English is not the mother tongue (as far as I can tell, five authors are German-speakers, one Hungarian), which makes it possible for non-German speakers to access recent scholarship in the field. This connects to the second point: two international (English-speaking) authorities of Atlantic history – Philip D. Morgan and Nicholas Canny – finish up the volume with a comment and afterward respectively, putting the results of the previous papers in a larger context. Both of these aspects are vital: as both Susanne Lachenicht and Nicholas Canny acknowledge in this volume, few Atlantic historians have a working knowledge of German while Central European historians often prefer to write in their mother tongues. This has obviously led to a lacking integration of current research from Central Europe into larger international scholarship. This essay collection is a great step beyond this division.

In the introduction, Susanne Lachenicht provides a concise overview of the strengths and weaknesses of Atlantic history as a field of inquiry that both acknowledges the advantages of the field and critically engages its shortcomings, which she sees as the focus on Western European „empires“, a lack of interdisciplinarity and a pre-defined space. Lache-

nicht challenges the definition of centers and peripheries by focusing on the perspective of the actors and thus lays the foundation for the articles to come. The individual contributions are organized chronologically, but as suggested above, one could also cluster them thematically around knowledge and trade. Concerning the first cluster, the authors clearly illustrate that knowledge about the Americas – both in writing and in the form of maps – was rather widely distributed from the late 16th century onwards. As Julien Bérard’s analysis has brought to light, Abraham Ortelius’ carefully compiled maps of, amongst other things, the Caribbean were in high demand in the Holy Roman Empire. Not only do fair catalogues regularly contain copies, but with ten German-language editions, this market seems to have been the most prominent one (French comes in second with six editions).

Rainald Becker’s contribution concerning the distribution of knowledge about the Americas in Southern Germany goes into more detail about these demand structures. He points out that the 16th and late 18th centuries are better researched than the period in between and that Northern Germany generally receives much more attention in scholarship, which he attributes in part to the „stereotype“ of the more conservative South as opposed to the progressive North, with the South being either Catholic or conservative Lutheran. As Becker explains, the main problem is that most scholarship in the South was written in Latin which created a language barrier for many Southern Germans. Though Becker’s paper is highly intriguing and offers a fresh approach, it is a little overloaded with information – presumably because the short paper sums up the contents of his book on the same subject.

The third essay concerned with knowledge production about the Americas is that of Carsten Schliwski who ventures into yet another under researched area of Atlantic history: that of Jewish intellectual engagement with the Atlantic. Schliwski, who seems to have a working knowledge of Hebrew, asks how Jewish intellectuals could accommodate their faith with their interest in New World discoveries and finds that, in his particular case studies, the collection and distribution of this

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type of knowledge was put into the service of religion: learning about the Americas meant learning about God's greatness. Some Jewish intellectuals also made a connection between the fate of the Amerindians at the hands of the Spanish and their own story of expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. This result of Schliwski's analysis suggests that the „Black Legend“ that portrayed Spanish activities in the Atlantic as exceptionally brutal and that arose predominantly from English writings, may have been quite common in Jewish circles as well. The paper illustrates how much can be learned from approaching early modern Sephardim not simply as a group or minority in legal or economic terms, but also as a people with a specific religious background, understanding and worldview. Since this was not a homogenous group – which is pushed aside a little in the paper – scholarship would certainly profit from further case studies.

The second cluster of essays is concerned with Central European commercial ventures in the Atlantic and introduces some fascinating new topics, perspectives, and sources. Mark Häberlein's essay on the Welsers' involvement in the 16th century sugar business profits from some newly discovered archival material (the story of this discovery is almost as exciting as the results) that call into question some of the already established scholarly knowledge about the Welser enterprise. For example, scholarship usually assumed that the Welser office in Funchal was only active until 1510 while the newly discovered fragments of the merchant records suggest a later date. Häberlein arrives at a similar conclusion for the Welser office in Santo Domingo.

While Häberlein focuses on a well-known „success story“, Anne Sophie Overkamp and Csaba Lévai illustrate the value of looking at failures. Overkamp's intriguing investigation into the Elberfeld merchant Abraham Frowein's botched attempt to establish direct transatlantic trade connections for his tapes and ties provides a deeper understanding of the intricacies of Atlantic trade and its differences to continental trade. It seems to have been difficult for Frowein – a newcomer in the Atlantic game – to establish strong ties in the Americas and he apparently relied much more on German agents than he did on

the continental market, where his connections were more diverse. Overkamp's conclusion that his failure was the result of bad timing rather than bad business or even an unfavorable location is certainly convincing. Finally, Csaba Lévai discusses a little-known episode shortly after the establishment of the United States of America, in which the latter sought to establish business relations with the Habsburg Empire. Treaty negotiations failed, Lévai argues, for two main reasons: Joseph II increasingly struggled with internal problems and had other things to deal with and the US government reconsidered its previous free trade policy in favor of stronger commercial ties with the European sea powers. Lévai's essay illustrates that North Americans were interested in Central European merchandise and in Central Europe as a market for colonial produce – and vice versa.

It can be considered a big strength of the volume that these six contributions and Lachenicht's introduction do not simply end without comment or conclusion, as is often the case with essay collections. Following Lachenicht, Morgan's comment reminds us of the larger context of Atlantic history, its „original“ aim and the multiple „Atlantics“ that can be the subject of this particular perspective. He also cautions the reader to be careful with terms such as hinterland, backcountry, marchland or periphery, as all of them have a built-in assumption of a region of secondary importance to a „front country“ or „center“. This is a highly valid point – we should certainly reconsider whether we are using this term because it makes sense for our particular research topic or if we are already biased about what's relevant and where the actual center is located. Morgan suggests taking a page from studies of Central America that work with „far“ and „near“ Atlantics that we might expand to include „intermediate“ Atlantics. Critically pointing out that „historians of the Atlantic world tend to follow what moves“, Morgan invites more appreciation for people and things that – like Overkamp's merchant Frowein who never left home – stay still while engaging the Atlantic.

In his afterword, Canny engages with Lachenicht's „complaint“ that recent German

scholarship is not given much international attention and confirms that a lack of German language skills is a big part of the problem. Although Canny assures us that such contributions are welcome in the field, I would like to add something to his remarks. First, Central and Eastern European scholarship does not just consist of German-speaking academics, but also includes Hungarian, Czech or Polish scholars whose contributions are often overlooked, arguably to an even greater extent than those of their German-speaking colleagues. Second, even if Central European scholars publish in English, they are not always noticed by English-speaking colleagues (which, incidentally, is also a problem for Portuguese and even Spanish scholars). This is of course starting to change – this volume is a definite indicator – but English-speaking scholars should also be more active in looking beyond their own networks in order to gain a more balanced understanding of the early modern Atlantic world – something that both Morgan and Canny have thankfully been willing to do.

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