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Europeans Engaging the Atlantic: Knowledge and Trade, c.1500–1850

An Introduction

Susanne Lachenicht

1. Defining the Area – Atlantic History

Atlantic History became popular when American historian Robert Palmer and Freya Stark “re-invented” the already existing concept of “Atlantic Community”. In the 1960s, it was linked to a geo-political concept: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Community (or European Economic Community). In the 1970s, it started to take the form of a “common cultural identity” which sought to move beyond justifying the historical predecessors.

In his Sounds in Atlantic History, Latin America, 1500–1830, Bernard Bailyn explains that the Atlantic was “impinging on and often shaping developments” (Bailyn 2009, 3).

“The question is not whether Europeans, Americans, and involvements in other regions of the globe are links that are wholly autonomous, never wholly discrete, or not even somewhat related. The vital question is whether these links did not at times constitute a genuine Atlantic world. … The Atlantic world of the eighteenth century, in its impact on the social and cultural life of the Americas and Europe, and from the perspective of trade, governance, and cultural life, those elsewhere on the globe, and whether they have distinctive characteristics that shaped them” (Bailyn 2009, 3–4).