

BOOK REVIEW

Oettinger, Johann Peter. *A German Barber-Surgeon in the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Seventeenth-Century Journal of Johann Peter Oettinger*, edited and translated by Craig Koslofsky and Roberto Zaugg. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020. lxxxvii + 131 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Appendix. Annotated Guide to Sources. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0813944456.

A German Barber-Surgeon in the Atlantic Slave Trade provides a remarkable glimpse of German connections to West Africa during the late 1600s from the vantage point of a relatively humble artisan. As a journeyman barber-surgeon, Johann Peter Oettinger (1666–1746) spent most of his teenage and young adult years traveling and working within the Holy Roman Empire and the Dutch Republic. From 1682 to 1696, he kept a journal documenting his experiences in order to eventually be able to demonstrate his competency to work as a master barber-surgeon. In addition to his other travels and occupational activities, Oettinger served as ship's surgeon on two slaving voyages. His journal provides few details regarding his participation in a Dutch West Indies Company voyage that transported over 400 enslaved Africans from Curaçao to Suriname between 1688 and 1690. By contrast, entries for his 1692–1693 voyage to West Africa and the Caribbean on a vessel owned by the Brandenburg African-American Company (BAAC) comprise roughly half of the journal (pages 18 to 52).

After departing from Emden in 1692, the ship *Friedrich Wilhelm* spent nearly two months at Castle Grossfriedrichsburg, a Brandenburg fortress in present-day Ghana, to prepare for the embarkation of Africans and the Atlantic crossing. In February 1693, the vessel set sail again, stopping at multiple locations along the Gold and Slave Coasts. While many captives were purchased in Accra, the majority were acquired in the Kingdom of Hueda, where the BAAC ship anchored for over three weeks. Oettinger, who lodged at King Agbangla's palace in Savi with the BAAC's factor and his commanding officer, was responsible for inspecting captives and supervising their transportation during the three-hour journey to the coast. By the time of their departure from Hueda, the enslaved Africans aboard numbered "738 men, women, boys, and girls" (44). Oettinger devotes several pages to Hueda, which as Craig Koslofsky and Roberto Zaugg

observe, was “the single most important slave exporter of all Sub-Saharan Africa” during this period (lix). The journal documents several forms of resistance among the captives aboard the *Friedrich Wilhelm*, including two attempted revolts. Despite the fact that the ship stopped for a week in São Tomé to take on supplies, at least 56 captives had died by the time the ship reached the Danish Caribbean island of St. Thomas six and a half weeks later.

Koslofsky and Zaugg advance several noteworthy arguments in the preface and introduction, beginning with their concise and successful demonstration of the relevance of Oettinger’s journal for multiple historiographies that are rarely in conversation with one another (the Holy Roman Empire, the Kingdom of Hueda, and the transatlantic slave trade, among others). When viewed in light of the traditional guild system of German-speaking territories and the typical occupational trajectories of barber-surgeons, readers may be tempted to view Oettinger in a somewhat sympathetic light that is difficult to reconcile with his participation in the inspection and commodification of African captives. The editors offer a nuanced reading of the barber-surgeon as a “subaltern perpetrator” who criticized the impunity and privilege of elites in both African and European contexts, but also willingly participated in the traffic of enslaved Africans and drew on European stereotypes when depicting them (xvii). Oettinger may have accepted racial categories as normative by the time he wrote his journal, but several passages suggest that for him, racial hierarchies also “coexisted with other categories of difference such as social status and, first and foremost, religion” (xxx-xxxi). The introduction concludes with a fascinating discussion of a fictionalized version of the journal written by Oettinger’s great-great-grandson in the 1880s, a period in which Germany sought to colonize various African territories as part of its own nation-building process, and in which the Brandenburg African Company came to be viewed as “the founding episode of German colonialism” (lxxv).

The introduction and translation are supplemented by an appendix with comparable accounts, an annotated guide to sources, an extensive bibliography, illustrations, maps, and an index. This book should be of great interest to scholars of West Africa and the transatlantic slave trade during the seventeenth century and will be a superb resource for undergraduate-level courses that address Africa’s role in the making of early modern Europe.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.21

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