

# Legacies of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Europe: *Time for a Continental Reckoning?*

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A continent-wide conversation on slavery-era legacies and the impact it has had – and continues to have – on European societies today is long overdue.

In 2012, the travel website Tripadvisor listed the Portuguese town of Lagos as the number one travel destination on a list of “15 destinations on the rise” worldwide. Known for its beautiful beaches on the Atlantic coast in the Algarve region, the tranquil seaside town of 22,000 inhabitants is an ideal enclave for a pleasant holiday. What is less known is that, in 1444, the Atlantic slave trade started in Lagos where enslaved Africans were bought and sold.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next two centuries, other European ports –Lisbon, Seville, Cádiz, Nantes, Bordeaux, Liverpool, Amsterdam, to name a few– entered into an increasingly lucrative venture in what has come to be known as the “triangular slave trade”. A trans-Atlantic enterprise, it saw ships laden with finished goods depart from European ports for the African coast where their products –weapons, porcelain, cloth, etc.,– were traded for enslaved people. In turn, these people were then transported across the Atlantic to the Americas, where they were again exchanged, this time for raw materials –sugar, coffee,

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<sup>1</sup> Although Portuguese ships first landed in Lagos, by the 1480s, Lisbon took fiscal control of the slave trade and, in 1512, slave boats could only enter Portugal through the River Tejo into Lisbon. Estimates in the trans-Atlantic database indicate the number of enslaved Africans taken from Africa by European nations between the years 1501-1875 with Portugal/Brazil having the largest number of 5,848,266. <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates> It should also be noted that slavery was not abolished in Portugal and its colonies until 1869.



1. The Mercado de Escravos in Lagos, Portugal. 9 July 2020. Roundtheworld (Wikimedia Commons)

chocolate, tobacco, among others— that were shipped to Europe for processing. The Slave Voyages database indicates that of the 12.5 million enslaved men, women and children transported from Africa to the Americas between the years 1501 and 1874, more than 5.8 million were carried on Portuguese ships as part of this triangular trade.

As one of Europe’s southernmost trading ports, Lagos holds the distinction of being one of the continent’s few places where enslaved people from Africa were known to be bought and sold. A small museum, the Mercado de Escravos (slave market), located on the edge of the square Praça do Infante D. Henrique, marks the site where, in 1444, Henry the Navigator traded the first African slaves on European soil. In 2009, excavations for a car park outside the old city gates unearthed remains of men, women

and children from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Forensic experts determined that the way these bodies were inhumed in a variety of positions, some of them buried with their hands and arms shackled, and the artefacts found with them, revealed that they were some of the first enslaved Africans brought to Europe. This is the only known site in Europe where enslaved Africans were found to be buried.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the importance of the find, there is no mention of the history at that site and no memorial or plaque. The location is currently used as a mini-golf course. The Mercado de Escravos museum, which opened in 2010, displayed some of the remains

<sup>2</sup> S. N. Wasterlain, M. J. Neves, and M. T. Ferreira, “Dental Modifications in a Skeletal Sample of Enslaved Africans Found at Lagos (Portugal)”, *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 26, no. 4 (2015): doi: 10.1002/oa.2453, 630

in the second-floor exhibition space from 2014 until 2016, at which point they were removed following protests by members of the Afro-Portuguese community. Although the creation of a proper memorial and visitors' centre to recognise Lagos's role –and the broader role of Portugal– in the slave trade has been discussed, very little has been done to date beyond the small museum, which itself has a controversial history.<sup>3</sup>

The Lagos study on the Mercado de Escravos is one of the more than 500 case studies, from 130 countries, collected by the Contested Histories project since 2016, a joint initiative led by the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation and EuroClio—the European Association of History Educators, in cooperation with the International Bar Association, Salzburg Global Seminar and Memory Studies Association, with research support from Harvard University, the University of Oxford and the Erasmus University, in Rotterdam, among others. The objective is to identify statues, monuments and sites, as well as place names, with complex historical legacies, ranging from colonialism and slavery to imperialism, fascism and communism, to authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, gender inequality and sexual violence.

Each case study examines the reasons behind the controversy, the historical background, the stakeholders involved and the decision-making process undertaken to address the contention, as well as lessons learned and best practices that could prove useful for stakeholders interested in these histories: local and national authorities, policy-planners, civil society activists, journalists and educators. The project has been supported by research and funding from a diverse range of sources, including the International Bar Association and the European Commission's Europe for Citizens programme.

Of the 500 case studies, 180 relate directly to colonial and slavery-era legacies. They range from the island of Gorée in Senegal, to the Coolela Monument in Mozambique, to the Josephine Bonaparte statue in

Martinique, to Valongo Wharf in Brazil, and more than a dozen sites in continental Europe. The case studies related to slavery can be divided into three categories: (1) contested statues and monuments erected in an earlier century that honoured discoverers, philanthropists, merchants who made their communities and themselves wealthier at a cost to enslaved and/or indigenous peoples; (2) contested sites linked to the history of enslaved people where that history is presented in a narrative that excludes or marginalises the larger multi-perspective reality of the time; and (3) contestations that are, in fact, an expression of underlying social issues such as racism and disenfranchisement that are linked to legacies of slavery-era injustices. While each case exhibits its own unique set of political, social, legal, cultural and even economic dynamics, they all have a common denominator: the contestation today is a reflection of a society in flux, where the values of the past are no longer broadly accepted without question or wider reflection.

Statues of historical figures tend to be the most visible objects of historical contestation, as has been seen in mass protests over colonial slave traders such as Edward Colston in the United Kingdom, and Jan Pieterszoon Coen in The Netherlands. Previously lauded for bringing riches to their homelands, both individuals have been reappraised in light of their role in how that wealth was acquired –namely through the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved people. Christopher Columbus has experienced a similar reappraisal. For centuries, Columbus was lauded as the “discoverer” of America, with cities, rivers, streets, schools, universities, public spaces –even the country of Colombia– named in his honour. Little was said about the atrocities perpetrated in the Americas under his command or the enslavement of indigenous peoples. As early as his first voyage in 1492, Columbus returned to Spain with six Taíno men he had kidnapped. By the mid-1500s, there were only a handful of Taíno people remaining on the island of Hispaniola, an eradication of the indigenous population that constitutes an act of genocide. One of the tallest Columbus monuments in the world is in Barcelona, where it stands 57 metres tall near the

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<sup>3</sup> For further information, see Contested Histories Case Study #130; 'Portugal: Old Slave Market, Lagos', available here: <https://contestedhistories.org/resources/case-studies/old-slave-market-in-lagos/>



2. Columbus monument in Barcelona during the protests of October 12, 2020. R. Conesa (EUROM)





3. Mauritshuis. The Hague. Rainer Ebert, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0)

port. Despite protests calling for its removal, city officials have remained staunch, arguing that it is better to retain and contextualise the monument, although little has been done to do so.

The contested history of the Dutch Golden Age is gradually and increasingly acknowledging that monuments and public spaces glorifying discoverers and merchants who made their fortunes on the back of enslaved people need to be re-examined and explored through a more nuanced lens.<sup>4</sup> The Mauritshuis, the museum in The Hague with the famous Vermeer painting of the *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, is named after its founder Johan Maurits, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century merchant who accumulated his wealth thanks to plantations worked by enslaved people in Brazil. In 2017, the removal of a bust of Maurits from the museum's lobby sparked a national outcry and debate. Erik Odegard, a scholar at the International Institute for Social History in The Netherlands, studied the history of Maurits in Brazil and contends that “[t]he societal debate is centred around the question: was the Mauritshuis financed with

money that Johan Maurits earned with slavery?” If so, “how are we supposed to deal with that now? My conclusion is that you have to look at it from different perspectives. Both sides of the debate have been presented much too simply.”<sup>5</sup> The Contested Histories case studies reveal that it is precisely the multi-perspective view that is so often absent in all the cases, regardless of legacy.

The process of memorialisation of the victims and the coming to terms with national slavery heritage in Europe has been a slow, sporadic and contentious process. There has been some progress in commemorating the victims of the slave trade, beginning in the first decade of the second millennium but not without contestations. In France, Act 2001-434, also known as Taubira's Law, came into effect in May 2001, which recognises the trafficking of human beings and slavery as crimes against humanity. The law also specifies that the history of the slave trade be taught in schools, commemoration days be introduced, and a national committee –Comité national pour la

<sup>4</sup> The Slave Voyages database estimates that The Netherlands brought 554,336 enslaved people to the Americas.

<sup>5</sup> “A broader look at Johan Maurits and his role in slavery”, NOW (Netherlands Research Council), 3 November 2021: <https://www.nwo.nl/en/cases/broader-look-johan-maurits-and-his-role-slavery>





4. Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, Nante. Flickr images uploaded by Flickr upload bot CC-BY-2.0.

mémoire et l'histoire de l'esclavage– be established with the responsibility to ensure that programmes, events, commemorations and research projects are organised and awareness of the history is raised publicly throughout France and its territories. The memorial *Le cri, l'écrit* by Fabrice Hyber, erected in the Luxembourg Garden in 2007, was one of the first actions undertaken.

Port cities such as Nantes, Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Le Havre were centres of the triangular slave trade, with Nantes being the largest. The city was the first to acknowledge its role by erecting monuments, organising museum exhibitions and tours of sites linked to slavery heritage, placarding streets named after slavers, etc. A walk along the former docks, known as the Quai de Fosse, was laid with more than 1,700 glass bricks inscribed with the names of the slave ships, the date of departure and the destination. There is also a memorial to the abolition of slavery, along with a small exhibition that was set up in 2012. Several of the streets named after slavers are placarded, and the Dukes of Brittany Museum has a permanent exhibition to the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

At national level, the story is more complex.



5. *Le cri, l'écrit: Hommage aux esclaves*, Luxembourg Gardens, Paris. Harmonide, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

In 2018, the Government of France announced plans to erect a national monument to slavery carved with the names of 200,000 enslaved people freed when France abolished slavery (for the second time) in 1848. The plans were met with controversy: the selection process of the winning design, the location size and, most of all, the concept. According to the Slave Voyages database, 1,381,404 Africans were enslaved by the French. Dr. Myriam Cottias, head of the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, argues that recognising only 200,000 enslaved men, women and children freed with the abolition of slavery “celebrates the Republic that abolished slavery and emancipated slaves –and never mind all the others”.<sup>6</sup> She contends that the victims should be at the heart of the narrative of France’s role in perpetrating the crimes against humanity, rather than focusing on the abolition as a great accomplishment for the Republic. For the time being, the monument is on hold.<sup>7</sup>

In the United Kingdom in 2007, on the bicentenary of the UK’s Slave Trade Act of 1807,<sup>8</sup> the International Slavery Museum (ISM) was opened in Liverpool, a city with one of Britain’s oldest Black communities. Situated near the docks where slave trips began their voyage, it constitutes the one museum in the world dedicated exclusively to slavery heritage. Nevertheless, it grapples with its own controversial history. It is one of the seven National Museums of Liverpool (NSL), where only 0.5% of the NSL employees identify as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement that swept many countries after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, NSL came under criticism for their lack of diversity and the systemic racism that polarises not only the communities in Liverpool but across the entire UK. The toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol was hailed by many as affirmative action against racist ideologies in the heated global debate over how to deal with monuments to historic figures who profited from African enslavement.

In Portugal and Spain, two of the largest former slave-trading countries have barely begun the journey to acknowledging that heritage today. Although plans for a memorial to enslaved peoples in Lisbon has been in the planning for almost a decade, little progress has been accomplished. In Spain, which took more than a million enslaved Africans into the trans-Atlantic slave trade, there is no monument commemorating the victims of its slavery-era heritage. However, there is some work underway to acknowledge Spain’s history in this realm. In 2016, Oriol López Badell, a historian at the European Observatory on Memories at the University of Barcelona, helped establish a

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Dodman, “Behind sketch of black MP in shackles, a French failure to confront slave legacy”, *France24*, 31 August 2020: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200831-behind-sketch-of-black-mp-in-shackles-a-french-failure-to-confront-slave-legacy>

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Contested Histories project, see [www.contestedhistories.org](http://www.contestedhistories.org)

<sup>8</sup> More than 3.2 million enslaved Africans were brought to the New World by British ships. The Slave Trade Act of 1807 abolished the slave trade but not slavery itself.

<sup>9</sup> Maya Wolfe Robinson, “Liverpool is built on transatlantic slavery’: how city’s museums are tackling race issues”, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/may/26/liverpool-is-built-on-transatlantic-slavery-how-the-citys-museums-are-tackling-race-issues>

slavery heritage tour in the city.<sup>10</sup> The tour includes a stop at the statue of Joan Güell, who made his fortune in Cuba and led an association founded in 1871 to defend slavery in the Caribbean. (By that date, slavery had been abolished in European countries but the practice continued in places like Cuba.) In Spanish cities other than Barcelona there seems to be a marked silence on the subject, perhaps because the country is grappling with more recent traumas stemming from the legacy of the Franco dictatorship.

Other countries with a lesser-known history in the slave trade have also been relatively silent. Denmark, which held colonies with slave plantations in what is known today as the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, has only recently acknowledged its role with a public exhibition. In Copenhagen, on 26 September 2019, a replica of the 'Freedom' sculpture, created by Ghanaian artist Bright Bimpong, was permanently put in place at an official ceremony by the Minister of Culture at the Eigtveds Pakhus, a building along the wharf formerly used by the West India Company as a warehouse to store goods brought in from the plantations in the colonies.<sup>11</sup> In front of the Eigtveds Pakhus also stands a sculpture depicting a Black woman titled "I Am Queen Mary", a transnational public art project created by La Vaughn Belle of the US Virgin Islands and Jeannette Ehlers of Denmark in 2018.<sup>12</sup> But do these monuments foster a national dialogue? In 2020, students at the Nærum High School in Greater Copenhagen revealed an interest in learning more about their country's involvement in the slave trade. «We have tons about the Second World War or Romanticism», one student said. «And close to nothing about our past on the West Indies.»<sup>13</sup> Erecting monuments is a first step, but whether there will be more public recognition of Denmark's historical legacy with slavery remains to be seen.

The traces and legacies of the slave trade reach far beyond trading ports themselves. The sale and consumption of slave trade-related products bore a social, cultural and economic impact across the continent. The shipping records from the port of Hamburg, a city with no immediately obvious link to the slave trade, suggests its commercial complicity in the triangular slave trade. In 1790 alone, for example, shipping logs indicate the importation of 28,665 barrels of coffee, 23,428 barrels of sugar, 1,559 bales of cotton, and 15,500 tons of rice from French colonies.<sup>14</sup> These products, especially

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<sup>10</sup> Oriol López-Badell, "Guided tour 'The legacy of slavery in Barcelona'. Public history as reparation", *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology (IJTA)*, Vol. 5, No. 3/4, 2016: <https://www.inderscience.com/offer.php?id=81786>

<sup>11</sup> The original 'Freedom' sculpture created by Ghanaian artist Bright Bimpong is in the Virgin Islands. In addition, replicas of the busts by Bright Bimpong of two Virgin Islands heroes, rebel leader Moses "General Buddhoe" Gottlieb and educator Hamilton Jackson, are also on display respectively at the Holbæk Museum, Northwest Zealand, and the Arbejdermuseet (Workers' Museum), Copenhagen. See Amy Roberts, "Freedom Statues' From V.I. Make History in Denmark", St. Thomas Source, 14 November 2020: <https://stthomassource.com/content/2016/11/14/freedom-statues-from-v-i-make-history-in-denmark/>

<sup>12</sup> The government approved the request for the statue to remain permanently in 2020; See the I Am Queen Mary website: <https://www.iamqueenmary.com/>

<sup>13</sup> Christian Thaaqaard Skov Sørensen, "Danish Students Want to Learn More About Colonial Past, Teachers Ready to Heed Their Call", St. Thomas Source, 30 October 2020: <https://stthomassource.com/content/2020/10/30/danish-students-want-to-learn-more-about-colonial-past-teachers-ready-to-heed-their-call/>

<sup>14</sup> Jonas Ludwig von Hess, *About the value and importance of the freedom of the Hanseatic cities*, JGB Vogel Publisher, 1814: [http://books.google.com/books?id=pERVAAAACAAJ&hl=&source=gbs\\_api](http://books.google.com/books?id=pERVAAAACAAJ&hl=&source=gbs_api)





6. I Am Queen Mary, Copenhagen. Flickr Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0)



7. Defaced Colston statue at the M Shed museum, Bristol. 8 June 2021. Adrian Boliston (Wikimedia Commons)

sugar and coffee, transformed social and cultural practices across the continent, along with helping finance the triangular slave trade, and creating an irrefutable if forgotten linkage to the legacy of the centuries-long trade in enslaved peoples.

In the case studies we have examined to date, the need for a continent-wide reckoning with the European legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is apparent. Many of the descendants of those victims are citizens of European nations –British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Danish, Portuguese, Belgian, Italian, etc.– and still live with the knowledge and legacies of their ancestors' enslavement.<sup>15</sup> While the situations can vary significantly from country to country, our case studies suggest that responsible acknowledgement of these legacies can help promote a sense of inclusiveness and can be used to confront and combat racism, inequality, injustice and intolerance.

Policy-makers, public intellectuals and educators have a pivotal role to play in fostering dialogue about past injustices in order to work towards building more inclusive and tolerant societies. It must be remembered that enslavement was a crime against humanity perpetrated and financed on a continent-wide scale, be it a slave market in Lagos or a sugar merchant in Hamburg. European societies can benefit from a continent-wide reckoning with this legacy and the impact it has borne and continues to bear on the nations of an increasingly diverse, multicultural Europe.

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<sup>15</sup> Belgium, although not complicit in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, has its own terrible history with enslaved people in its colonies, where an estimated 10-15 million people were killed by King Leopold's colonial forces. See Atrocities Watch Africa: <http://atrocitieswatch.org/king-leopold-of-belgium-in-congo/> Italy, not involved either in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, had slaves in Africa until 1935. See Matteo Impagnatiello, "When Colonial Italy Abolished Slavery in the Horn of Africa", Focus on Africa, 18 April 2021: <https://www.focusonafrika.info/en/when-colonial-italy-abolished-slavery-in-the-horn-of-africa/>