Sugar and Slaves? French Atlantic Trade before 1730

By 1730, France was well under way to becoming Europe's largest supplier of sugar, due in no small part to the cultivation of sugarcane on its Caribbean island Saint-Domingue. Although Martinique and Guadeloupe had already produced considerable amounts of sugar since the second half of the seventeenth century, it was Saint-Domingue that turned the French Caribbean into Europe's sugar basket from the 1720s onwards. The increasing need for African slave labor on the island also fueled the transatlantic slave trade from Western Africa. However, the prominence of sugar that is clearly visible in trade records from this time, has obscured our view of other, less visible, merchandise exported from the Caribbean islands as well as other types of trade on the coast of Western Africa. In the decades that preceded the French sugar boom, several commodities had proven lucrative for trade in both regions—and most of them continued to be lucrative throughout the entire eighteenth century.

French trade in the Atlantic world is much better documented for the 1720s than the period before, and in this chapter and the two that follow, the official trade statistics for this period function as a gateway for the analysis of earlier decades. This approach helps us to see how these later developments can easily cloud our understanding of the earlier period and can make other aspects of the French Atlantic world seem marginal. The chapter's goal is to demonstrate why it is sensible look beyond the slave and sugar trades and towards seemingly marginal materials and processes in order to better understand the impact of the Atlantic world on early modern Europe. To this end, it first provides an assessment of the nature of the source material in order to understand its limitations. The second and third sections address cultivation on the Caribbean islands and the transatlantic slave trade more thoroughly. In the final section, I introduce the materials that silently moved across the Atlantic alongside sugar and slaves, and argue that they, too, have a story to tell.

State Interests and Regional Privileges

By the early eighteenth century, the possessions in the Caribbean accounted for the lion's share of the French state's overseas profits. That this was indeed the case can be gleaned from the official trade records of French Atlantic port cities. In order to better control and profit from overseas trade, the state
had started to request annual compilations of overseas imports and exports from the ports, which list merchandise arriving and departing from the ports throughout the year, their origin, price, quantity, and overall value. However, ports were initially reluctant to provide them, and it took several years for this to become common practice in the kingdom. Throughout the reign of Louis XIV, France’s overseas commerce had been marked by a struggle between private and state interests that manifested itself in a struggle between Paris and France’s port cities. France was indeed a fragmented country at the time, especially concerning fiscal matters.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the crown continuously imposed laws regulating or even prohibiting trade with foreign nations or in certain products, but many French regions still traded relatively unhindered due to regional privileges. The elites of Atlantic port cities resisted attacks on these privileges and used all the means at their disposal to guard and expand them. This complicated system—and the fact that regions and ports jealously guarded their independence and privileges—partially explains the problems surrounding France’s chartered companies and overseas trade in general. As Philippe Haudrère suggests, England and the Netherlands had both been able to create national markets in the early seventeenth century, while France was separated by internal tolls and diverse regional taxation.1

The state had tried to circumvent this problem through the establishment of companies for overseas trade since the early seventeenth century. Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642), advisor to the Sun King’s father Louis XIII, had shown quite an interest in the French crown’s overseas expansion. In 1626, he granted monopolies to the Compagnie de Saint-Christophe for the Caribbean and the Compagnie Normande for Western Africa, which was later renamed Compagnie du Cape-Vert et du Sénégal. At the time, however, the crown lacked the financial means to create such companies independently. Instead, Richelieu turned to existing self-organized merchant houses that had already been involved in trade in certain regions. Now they continued to do so, officially sanctioned by the crown. These commercial companies established fortified posts in their respective regions on behalf of France. As soon as finances and politics allowed, Richelieu attempted to establish chartered colonial companies that included a military arm and were specifically aimed at the production of staple

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