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Habsburg in Havana. Outsider Participation in the Spanish Empire: the Slaving Licence of Romberg & Consors of Ghent, 1780–90

Stan Pannier^{1,2,3} 

¹Flanders Marine Institute, Ostend, Belgium;

²KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium and

³Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, Brussels, Belgium

Email: stan.pannier@kuleuven.be

Abstract

The history of European overseas expansion has traditionally been studied from a national perspective. However, the rise of Atlantic history, global history, and a revitalized maritime history has prompted scholars to question the rigidity of Early Modern borders assumed by these conventional national or imperial frameworks. In parallel, researchers have contested the state-centric viewpoint by advocating for an actor-focused approach to Atlantic System history, emphasizing the role of private merchants and their informal, international networks. These approaches have uncovered the involvement of entrepreneurs belonging to polities without a formal empire in the colonial ventures of other nations. This paper examines one such trans-imperial enterprise: Romberg & Consors, a firm operating from the Austrian Netherlands. During and after the American War of Independence (1775–83), Romberg & Consors leveraged evolving Spanish attitudes toward the slave trade and the establishment of neutral trade to organize slave trade expeditions to Cuba. By closely analyzing the operations of this Imperial firm, this study illuminates a decisive phase in Spanish imperial history while contributing to the often-overlooked Atlantic history of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Austrian Netherlands.

Keywords: Maritime history; slave trade; Spanish Empire; Cuba; Southern Netherlands

Introduction

*“We have just received, by grace of the King of Spain, a privilege to send eight vessels to Havana with a cargo of slaves...I can think of nothing more urgent than to inform you of this most fortunate event for our Trade.”*¹ Thus Pierre François Schepers, associate of Romberg & Consors of Ghent, wrote hurriedly on 13 November 1782 to one of the firm’s investors. The decision of Charles III of Spain to grant a licence to the company from the Austrian Netherlands fitted into the policy of openness to foreign trade which his country was forced to embrace during the American War of Independence, a period often regarded as laying the groundwork for the emergence of free trade by the decade’s end. More broadly, the license underscored Madrid’s enduring, century-long reliance on foreign traders in

¹ Rijksarchief te Brussel (henceforth RATB), *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 8065, Schepers to Vilain XIII (Ghent, 13 November 1782), my translation.

the slave trade, despite concerted efforts in the latter half of the eighteenth century to assert Spanish control over this crucial economic sector. At the same time, the generosity of the privilege—eight ships—extended to an Imperial ‘outsider’ to the Atlantic system was an expression of the Spanish government’s growing unease with its dependence on rival Caribbean powers, particularly Great Britain, for slave imports. Although the slave trade during the American War of Independence has become progressively better understood in recent years, the role of Romberg & Consors remains little explored. By zooming in on the slaving activities of this Imperial firm, I shed light on this decisive period in the history of the Spanish Empire while simultaneously contributing to the previously disregarded Atlantic history of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Austrian Netherlands.

The history of European expansion and the complex that developed in and around the Atlantic Ocean throughout the Early Modern period has long been studied from a national perspective. During recent decades, however, the emergence of Atlantic history, global history and a reinvigorated maritime history has led scholars to question the rigidity of Early Modern borders implied by such traditional national or imperial frameworks.² Taking a bird’s eye view of Atlantic border regions or, through its methodological opposite, conducting in-depth studies of ‘microregions,’ historians have shown the permeability of demarcation zones with regard to people, commodities, and information.³ Other scholars have challenged the perspective of the state or the national empire by calling for an actor-centred approach to the history of the Atlantic System. They have revealed a world other than the one dominated by institutions and central power strategies of empire-building such as monopolies: an ‘informal empire,’ built on transnational, cross-imperial, and cross-cultural networks and interactions of private actors.⁴

These fresh perspectives on the European overseas project have enriched existing Atlantic histories of nations by incorporating new cross-imperial and informal connections. However, they also had the important consequence of drawing attention to the participation in the colonial project of European areas not yet considered. Elizabeth Buettner calls this the ‘Europeanizing’ of the imperial turn, shifting the study of empire beyond the exclusive focus on a few European nations with formal empires and embedding it within a

² Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006) 741–57; Patrick O’Brien, “Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history,” *Journal of Global History* 1:1 (2006) 3–39; Philip Morgan and Jack Greene, *Atlantic History: a Critical Appraisal* (Oxford 2009); Amélia Polónia, “Maritime History: A Gateway to Global History?,” in: Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia, *Maritime History as Global History* (Liverpool 2010) 1–20; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik Seeman, *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000* (London 2018).

³ See for example Karwan Fatah-Black, “A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics. The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *Low Countries Historical Review* 128:1 (2013) 31–52; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra ed., *Entangled Empires. The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1830* (Philadelphia, 2018); Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean* (Cambridge, 2020); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history* (New York, 1985); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: a new history of global capitalism* (London, 2015); Bin Yang, *Cowrie shells and cowrie money: a global history* (New York, 2019).

⁴ Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches. Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795* (Leiden, 1998); Jack Owens, “Dynamic Complexity of Cooperation-Based Self-Organizing Commercial Networks in the First Global Age (DynCoopNet): What’s in a name?,” *Journal of Knowledge Management, Economics and Information Technology*, special issue (2012) 25–51; Cátia Antunes, “Free Agents and Formal Institutions in the Portuguese Empire: Towards a Framework of Analysis,” *Portuguese Studies* 28:2 (2012) 173–85; Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia eds., *Beyond empires: global, self-organizing, cross-imperial networks, 1500–1800* (Leiden, 2016); Elisabeth Heijmans, *The Agency of Empire. Personal Connections and Individual Strategies in the Shaping of the French Early Modern Expansion (1686–1746)* (Leiden 2018); Cátia Antunes, Susana Münch Miranda, and João Paulo Salvado, “The Resources of Others. Dutch Exploitation of European Expansion and Empires, 1570–1800,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 131:3 (2018) 501–21.

broader, more inclusive European narrative.⁵ This rethinking of the history of European expansion has inspired significant scholarship centred on the ‘margins of colonialism’ or ‘colonialism without colonies.’⁶ A prime example is provided by the Austrian branch of the Habsburg dynasty, which has long been viewed as a ‘continental’ power devoid of a maritime or overseas history.⁷ Although Vienna never acquired a formal colony of its own and was a modest maritime power, the Monarchy’s subjects—either in a formal, informal, or hybrid role—participated in a wide array of intentional or unintentional colonial activities which contributed to European overseas expansion. These ranged from gathering intelligence on opportunities for formal empire, pursuing commercial opportunities, appropriating artifacts and knowledge, or engaging in missionary activities.⁸ While early historical interest in the colonial past of the Habsburg monarchy primarily focused on the nineteenth and twentieth century, recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted how the Atlantic world during the Early Modern period likewise was a place of emphatic commercial, cultural, and scientific interest to the Habsburg Monarchy and its subjects.⁹

Many of these overseas activities, ambitions, and aspirations were formulated, facilitated, and funded from the Southern Netherlands. Added to the Habsburg Empire through the Treaty of Rastatt (1714), this region along the North Sea provided Vienna with a new ‘window upon the world.’ During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the government undertook a concerted effort to develop the road, waterway, and port infrastructure of the Austrian Netherlands, while also implementing measures to enhance its commerce and manufacturing industries.¹⁰ These developments came to exceptional fruition during the American War of Independence (1775–83), when the Habsburg Monarchy claimed

⁵ Elizabeth Buettner, “Europe and its entangled colonial pasts. Europeanizing the ‘imperial turn,’” in: Britta Tim Knudsen e.a., *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage; New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and beyond Europe* (New York, 2022) 25–43.

⁶ Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, “The End of Innocence: Debating Colonialism in Switzerland,” in: Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (London 2015) 1–16, especially 7; Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk, and Patricia Purtschert, “Colonialism without colonies: examining blank spaces in colonial studies,” *National Identities* 18:1 (2016) 1–9.

⁷ Alison Frank, “Continental and Maritime Empires in an Age of Global Commerce,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25:4 (2011) 781–2.

⁸ See the various contributions to the special volume of *Austrian Studies*, “Colonial Austria: Austria and the Overseas,” especially Walter Sauer, “Habsburg Colonial: Austria-Hungary’s Role in European Overseas Expansion Reconsidered,” *Austrian Studies* 20:1 (2012) 5–23.

⁹ Klemens Kaps, “Mercantilism as private-public network: The Greppi Marliani company – a successful Habsburg Central European player in global trade (1769–1808),” in: Daniele Andreozzi ed., *Mediterranean Doubts. Trading Companies, Conflicts and Strategies in the Global Spaces XV–XIX* (Palermo 2014) 89–114; Klemens Kaps, “Small but powerful: networking strategies and the trade business of Habsburg-Italian merchants in Cadiz in the second half of the eighteenth century,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 23:3 (2016) 1–28; Heather Morrison, “Open Competition in Botany and Diplomacy: The Habsburg Expedition of 1783,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 46:1 (2017) 107–19; Jonathan Singerton, *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy* (London, 2021), especially 1–14; Jonathan Singerton, “An Austrian Atlantic. The Habsburg Monarchy and the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century,” *Atlantic Studies* (2022) 1–25; Dirk Rupnow and Jonathan Singerton, “Habsburg Colonial Redux: Reconsidering Colonialism and Postcolonialism in Habsburg/Austrian History,” *Journal of Austrian Studies* 56:2 (2023) 9–20; Indravati Félicité, *Le Saint-Empire face au monde. Contestations et redéfinitions de l’impérialité, XVe–XIXe siècle* (Paris 2024).

¹⁰ Michael Serruys, “The Port and City of Ostend and the Process of State Consolidation in the Southern Netherlands in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Geopolitical Approach,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 19:2 (2007) 319–47.

neutrality and declared Ostend a free port. As a consequence, unprecedented opportunities ensued for Imperial subjects to participate in the Atlantic empires of other nations.¹¹

Famously, the Spanish Empire was prone to such trans-national interactions ever since its inception in the fifteenth century. This feature became even more pronounced during the American War of Independence. The conflict, joined by Spain in 1779, resulted in the significant disruption of trade routes to its overseas territories. However, it also provided opportunities for reshaping commercial flows within the Empire, especially the slave trade. Ever since the defeat to Great Britain in the Seven Years' War (1756–63), Madrid had attempted to strengthen its empire and retain its spoils for Spanish subjects through the famous 'Bourbon reforms'.¹² In the slave trade, too, the Crown undertook steps to bring the trade under Spanish control, or, at least, to reduce the Empire's reliance on British traders, who had dominated the business overtly or covertly since the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). The war with Britain which erupted in 1779 cut these ties, while the distribution of slaving licenses and the establishment of *comercio neutro* welcomed new players to fill in the gaps.¹³

In this paper, I study one of these newcomers in the form of Romberg & Consors, a Ghent-based subsidiary firm of the Brussels merchant Frederic Romberg. Romberg, of Westphalian descent, had moved to the Austrian Netherlands in the 1750s and quickly made a name for himself in the so-called transit trade, the commercial routes connecting Ostend with Central and Southern Europe.¹⁴ During the 1780s, however, Romberg's firm cast its eyes toward the Atlantic complex and engaged in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, especially the trade directed towards Cuba.¹⁵ While Romberg's slave trade has for the past few years been thoroughly studied in terms of its connection with its German hinterland through the work of Magnus Ressel, I approach his trade from a decidedly Atlantic perspective.¹⁶

¹¹ John Everaert, "Le pavillon impérial aux Indes occidentales. Contrebande de guerre et trafic neutre depuis les ports Flamands (1778–1785)," *Bijdragen tot de internationale maritieme geschiedenis* 1:1 (1988) 43–67; Singerton, *The American Revolution*, 120–42.

¹² See, for example, Josep M. Fradera, *Colonias para después de un imperio* (Barcelona 2005); Gabriel Paquette, *Enlightenment, governance, and Reform in Spain and its Empire, 1759–1808* (New York, 2008) 93–126; Allan Kuethe and Kenneth Andrien, *The Spanish Atlantic World in the Eighteenth Century. War and the Bourbon Reforms, 1713–1796* (Cambridge, 2014) 231–304.

¹³ María Encarnación Rodríguez Vicente, "El comercio cubano y la guerra de emancipación norteamericana," *Anuario de estudios americanos* 11:1 (1954); Elena Schneider, "African slavery and Spanish empire," *Journal of Early American History* 5:1 (2015) 3–29; Elena Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana: War, Trade, and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, 2018); Emily Berquist Soule, "The Spanish slave trade during the American Revolutionary War," in: Gabrielle Paquette and Gonzalo Quintero Saravia, eds. *Spain and the American Revolution. New approaches and perspectives* (New York, 2020) 100–21; Alex Borucki and José Luis Belmonte Postigo, "The Impact of the American Revolutionary War on the Slave Trade to Cuba," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 80:3 (2023) 493–524.

¹⁴ C. Anspach, "Frédéric baron de Romberg. Seigneur de Machelen Sainte-Gertrude, 1729–1819," *Le Parchemin* 219:1 (1994) 162–82; Magnus Ressel, "The Hinterland of the Holy Roman Empire and the Slave Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century. An Economic Case Study Based on the Business Ventures of Friedrich Romberg (1729–1819)," *Journal of Global Slavery* 8:1 (2023) 269–301.

¹⁵ Paul Verhaegen, "Le commerce des esclaves en Belgique à la fin du XVIII^e siècle," *Annales de la Société royale d'archéologie de Bruxelles* 15 (1901) 254–62; Hubert Van Houtte, "Contribution à l'histoire commerciale des Etats de l'empereur Joseph II (1780–1790)," *Vierteljahrschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 2–3 (1910) 374, 383; Van Houtte, *Histoire économique*, 347–52; Fernand Donnet, "Quelques notes sur le commerce des esclaves," *Bulletin de la société royale de Géographie d'Anvers* 46 (1926) 6–37; Dieudonné Rinchon, "Les négriers belges au XVIII^e siècle," *Revue de l'Aucam* 9 (1934) 15–20; John Everaert, "Commerce d'Afrique et traite négrière dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 62 (1975) 177–85.

¹⁶ Magnus Ressel, "Das Alte Reich und der transatlantische Sklavenhandel. Drei Schlaglichter auf eine historische Verflechtung," *Wissenschaftsportal Gerda Henkel Stiftung* (2021); Ressel, "The Hinterland," 269–301. A recent article by Ressel focuses more on Romberg's Atlantic activities but, as the author acknowledges, does not cover

Although the picture of the Cuban slave trade during the American War of Independence has become clearer in recent years, drawing on a multinational array of sources, I argue that the role of Romberg & Consors has been overlooked. I begin this micro-study by discussing the evolution of slave trade in the Spanish Empire, particularly Cuba, during the second half of the eighteenth century and the steps taken to reduce the influence of other colonial nations. Subsequently, I show how Romberg & Consors leveraged its ‘outsider’ status in the Atlantic to acquire a trading permit from the Council of the Indies. While this position offered advantages in dealings with metropolitan authorities, it also carried the potential to become a liability in Havana itself, where the interests of local elites frequently diverged from those of the Court. To explore this hypothesis, I shift focus from the metropolitan perspective to an analysis of Romberg & Consors’ operations in Havana, where one of the firm’s associates took up residence. My findings confirm that their outsider status indeed caused significant challenges for the firm. At the same time, I conclude that the large-scale imports of enslaved Africans organized by Romberg & Consors during the American War of Independence played a crucial role in steering Cuba toward an agricultural economy centered on plantation crops. Simultaneously, this paper contributes to the Atlantic history of the Austrian Habsburgs, while also shedding light on the little-understood pre-modern participation of ‘Belgian’ subjects to the European colonial project.

1. Opportunities for Outsiders: the Spanish Empire, Cuba, and Slave Trade

Ever since the Crown of Castile had claimed dominion over large parts of the Americas, it was forced to condone foreign participation in its empire as Spain struggled to provide the capital and manufactures necessary to provision the overseas territories and keep the *carrera de Indias* afloat.¹⁷ Foreigners dominated the slave trade as well, although here the constraints were diplomatic in nature: the Treaties of Alcáçovas (1479) and Tordesillas (1494) had confined Spain’s sphere of influence to the western hemisphere, preventing it from setting up African coastal outposts and thus directly participating in the slave trade. Thenceforward, the business was outsourced to foreign merchants using *licencias*—individual, non-binding, non-monopolistic trading permits—or, increasingly so, through the *asiento*, which monopolized the slave trade for its holder.¹⁸

Of all Spanish overseas possessions during the eighteenth century, Cuba was the one which craved enslaved labour the most. Cuban slavery had its origins in the sixteenth century, when enslaved Africans came to replace the indigenous labour force deployed in the island’s silver and gold mines. Additionally, as Cuba served as a way station astride important shipping routes, the Spanish Crown purchased ‘royal slaves’ in order for them to construct fortifications along the coast, build war vessels, and be deployed in militias.¹⁹ In addition to state-sanctioned slavery, a significant private demand for

his operations within the Spanish Empire in depth, see Magnus Ressel, “Spoils of Neutrality: The Austrian Netherlands in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Early 1780s,” *The Journal of Modern History* 96:4 (2024) 765–801.

¹⁷ John Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (London, 1966) 239–50, 307–8; Geoffrey Walker, *Spanish Politics and Imperial Trade, 1700–1789* (London, 1979) 1–15; Antonio García-Baquero González, “Los extranjeros en el tráfico con indias: entre el rechazo legal y la tolerancia funcional,” in: M.B. Villar García and P. Pezzi Cristóbal (eds.), *Los extranjeros en la España moderna* (Málaga, 2003) 75–99; Xabier Lamikiz, *Trade and trust in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world: Spanish merchants and their overseas networks* (Woodbridge 2013) 1–21.

¹⁸ George Scelle, *Histoire politique de la traite négrière aux Indes de Castille: contrats et traités d’Assiento* (Paris 1906); Lutgardo García Fuentes, “Licencias para la introducción de esclavos en Indias y envíos desde Sevilla en el siglo XVI,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 19:1 (1982) 4–5.

¹⁹ Alejandro de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the sixteenth century* (Chapel Hill, 2008) 147–53; Evelyn Jennings, “The Sinews of Spain’s American Empire: Forced Labor in Cuba from the Sixteenth to the

enslaved labour emerged and grew dramatically throughout the eighteenth century as Cuba's plantation economy expanded and large swaths of *La Isla* were converted to sugar production.²⁰ Planters required an increasing number of enslaved Africans to work their growing cane fields, as well as to replace those who had died from the gruelling demands of plantation labour. Spain's tightly controlled slave trade, however, failed to deliver the bonded labourers necessary to meet the demands of plantation holders. Time and again, colonists pressed Cuban and metropolitan officials for greater imports, and to allow foreigners to trade in Havana. These foreigners were primarily British: the 30-year *asiento* won by the South Sea Company at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13) had forged strong ties between Spanish and British traders and established a vibrant intra-American commercial system where slaves both legally and illegally moved in large numbers across imperial borders. These networks continued to function unabated during the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739–48), which pitted Spain against Britain, and after the formal conclusion of the South Sea Company *asiento* in 1750.²¹ The commercial ties between Spain's and Britain's Caribbean empires were strengthened still during the Seven Years' War, when Havana fell to the British in 1762. The conquest of Cuba's capital immediately prompted a wave of immigration from British merchants, who subsequently imported thousands of captives.²²

The defeat by Britain in the Seven Years' War famously initiated major reforms within the Spanish Empire aimed at reinforcing the overseas domains and establishing a more forceful protectionist framework in which Spanish industry could flourish and royal revenues would grow. Among the most important emanations of these so-called 'Bourbon reforms' were the *comercio libre* acts of 1765 and 1778, which broke the former monopoly of Cádiz and allowed eight other port cities access to the Spanish Caribbean.²³ As Elena Schneider has noted, however, the British occupation of Havana—which returned to the Spanish Crown after the war—proved not only a catalyst for imperial reform but also for a reassessment of slave trade in the Spanish Empire. Whereas Spanish policy makers had previously focused on South America and its mines of precious metals, it increasingly dawned on reformers that—emulating the empires of other Atlantic powers—more wealth could potentially be extracted from the Empire by focusing on developing a plantation complex. A larger population of enslaved Africans was key to enabling this economic transformation. Coincidentally, two officials with roots in the Austrian Netherlands proved to be among the most vocal supporters of promoting the slave trade: Francisco de Craywinkel, whose father had been an Antwerp merchant, and Agustín Crame, a military engineer born in the Southern Netherlands. Crame in particular viewed an expanded population of slaves an important source of security for the Empire, as Black militias had proven to be loyal soldiers—not least during the recent siege of Havana.²⁴ Lastly, the occupation of the Cuban capital had highlighted that the close commercial ties between local elites and British traders had significantly directed the former's allegiance towards Britain. If the Court could provide enough slaves to the slaveholding or slave-selling elites, so Madrid reasoned, it could disengage these merchants from their British contacts and again gear their loyalties towards King and country.²⁵

Nineteenth Centuries," in: John Donoghue and Evelyn Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires. Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500–1914* (Leiden, 2016) 34–45.

²⁰ Manuel Moreno Fragnals, *El ingenio: complejo económico social cubano del azúcar* (Barcelona, 2001 [1964]); Mintz, *Sweetness*, 168.

²¹ Berquist Soule, "The Spanish slave," 100–3.

²² Paquette, *Enlightenment*, 118–9.

²³ Paquette, *Enlightenment*, 93–126; Kueth and Andrien, *The Spanish Atlantic World*, 231–304.

²⁴ Schneider, "African slavery," 23–5.

²⁵ Schneider, *The Occupation*, 237–8, 245–8, 256–9.

Although Cuban merchants had petitioned to keep the liberal slave trading policies of Britain intact after Havana returned to the Spanish Crown, the Council of the Indies quickly returned to its policies of exclusive permits and *asientos*. Metropolitan authorities had become wary of the importance of British commercial networks for providing Spain's imperial realm with essential supplies, which it increasingly viewed as a major security concern.²⁶ Yet as so often, the wishes of the metropolis did not align with the realities of the colonies, and immediately after the war Cuba again quickly became reliant on British traders, both through legal as well as illicit imports.²⁷ In an effort to bring the slave trade under Spanish control, the Council of the Indies granted the *asiento* in 1765 to a partnership of Cádiz and Basque merchants known as the *Compañía Gadicana de Negros*. The *Compañía*, however, organized a 'Spanish' slave trade in name only; once again, the firm quickly became a slaving enterprise dependent on British merchant houses, which sourced their human cargoes from Caribbean entrepôts such as Jamaica, Dominica, or Barbados.²⁸ Nevertheless, as was customary, the *asentistas* failed to supply enough enslaved individuals to meet the ever-increasing demand of Cuba's planters. In a bold attempt to boost imports and take control of the slave trade, Spain subsequently acquired Annobón and Fernando Po, two islets in the Gulf of Guinea, in a treaty with Portugal. However, strong resistance from the local population to Spain's claims of sovereignty, coupled with British military manoeuvres and a lack of experience in the slave trade, led to the swift failure of this initiative and resulted in lasting supply shortages for Cuba.²⁹

The contract of the *Compañía Gadicana* expired in 1779, the same year Spain, aligning with France and the fledgling United States, entered the American War of Independence. This marked a disruption in the longstanding commercial ties between Cuba and its neighboring British islands, leading to a collapse in the export of slaves to Havana.³⁰ Madrid, aware of the crucial importance of bonded labour for Cuba's nascent plantation complex, tried to shore up imports by taking several steps toward a more open imperial economy. First, in 1780, the Spanish Crown allowed the introduction of enslaved Africans from neighbouring French colonies in Spanish boats. Over the following year, however, this source of supply proved incapable of solving the shortages of slaves in Cuba. Madrid therefore decided to impose *comercio neutro*, which relaxed the restrictions of the mercantilist framework for merchants of neutral and allied nations.³¹ In addition to these general policies, the Crown continued to issue slaving licenses to individual merchants.³² Once again, the Spanish Empire in general and Cuba in particular became a commercial playground for enterprising, foreign merchants in the circum-Caribbean and in Europe's metropolises. In the space of only a few years, traders disembarked an unprecedented number of captives on the island. The massive imports of bonded labour under

²⁶ Adrian Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America, 1763-1808* (Liverpool, 2007) 67-8; Schneider, *The Occupation*, 219-65.

²⁷ Schneider, *The Occupation*, 250.

²⁸ Bibiano Torres Ramírez, *La compañía gaditana de negros* (Sevilla, 1973); Nikolas Böttcher, 'Trade, War and Empire: British Merchants in Cuba, 1762-1796,' in: Böttcher and Bernd Hausberger, *Dinero y negocios en la historia de América Latina: veinte ensayos dedicados a Reinhard Liehr/Geld und Geschäft in der Geschichte Lateinamerikas* (Madrid, 2000) 171, 186-7; Pearce, *British Trade*, 59, 62.

²⁹ Pablo Tornero, 'Emigración, Población y Esclavitud en Cuba (1765-1817),' *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 44:1 (1987) 6-8; Schneider, *The Occupation*, 275-7; Berquist Soule, 'The Spanish slave trade,' 100-3.

³⁰ Pearce, *British Trade*, 69-70.

³¹ Rodríguez Vicente, 'El comercio,' 72; Gloria García, 'El mercado de fuerza de trabajo en Cuba: El comercio esclavista (1760-1789),' in: *La esclavitud en Cuba* (Havana, 1986) 142-4; Stanley Stein, 'Caribbean Counterpoint: Veracruz vs. Havana. War and Neutral Trade, 1797-1799,' in: Jeanne Chase, ed., *Géographie du capital marchand aux Amériques 1760-1860* (Paris, 1987) 21-44.

³² García, 'El mercado,' 142-4; Tornero, 'Emigración,' 10.

comercio neutro firmly set Cuba on a course of becoming a slave-based agricultural powerhouse, while also creating a major precedent and inspiration for the free trade act of 1789.³³

Due to its importance for the long-term economic, social, and cultural history of Cuba and the Spanish imperial project, the slave trade during the American War of Independence has received ample scholarly attention, with researchers continuing to deepen our understanding of the traffic in enslaved people during this period.³⁴ Recently, Alex Borucki and José Luis Belmonte Postigo made a major contribution by providing the first exact estimate of slave imports by each nation. The authors computed a total number of 14,476 enslaved Africans disembarked in Havana over the course of four years (1781–5), mainly by American traders plying intra-Caribbean and trans-imperial slaving routes.³⁵ Nevertheless, the mercantile networks underpinning these forced migrations remain obscure, a situation compounded by the limited and, at times, unreliable information found in colonial sources. As I show in the coming pages, previous studies of the slave trade during the American War of Independence have largely disregarded the operations of one particular player organising trans-Atlantic slave trade from the outskirts of the Atlantic system: a player whose petition appeared on the desks of the Council of the Indies in the Summer of 1782 and was signed with *Romberg y Consortes del comercio de Gante*.

2. Contracting with the Court: The Real Permiso of Romberg & Consors

Romberg & Consors was established in Ghent on 5 August 1780 (see Figure 1).³⁶ The firm's principal in Brussels, Frederic Romberg, entrusted its leadership to three associates: Georg Christoph Bapst, François Carpentier, and Pierre François Schepers. Since the 1770s, Schepers (whom we have met in the introduction) had served as director of the Province of Flanders, a lucrative position overseeing tax collection from lower levels of government. On top of this public office, Schepers was a resourceful entrepreneur. In 1776, in a rather dramatic episode of his career, he had smuggled a British spinning device to Ghent in order to mechanically improve the production of cotton and linseed.³⁷ Around the same time, Schepers forged a partnership with Romberg. Together, they launched an ambitious venture to supply the French *fermes générales* with eight million pounds of tobacco, to be cultivated in the Austrian Netherlands. The ambitious scheme never panned out, but the commercial relationship between the two merchants remained intact.³⁸ Carpentier, the grandson of Nicolas Carpentier—a prosperous merchant who commanded multiple voyages to India for the Ostend Company and amassed considerable wealth later in life—had joined Romberg's firm in the 1770s as a regular employee, but through zeal and competence quickly rose to the rank of associate in Romberg &

³³ Pearce, *British Trade*, 83–94.

³⁴ José Antonio Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el nuevo mundo y en especial en los países americano-hispanos* (Havana, 1938, II) 268–9; Vicente, “El comercio,” 12; Juan Bosco Amores, *Cuba en la época de Ezpeleta* (Pamplona, 2000) 135; Tornero, “Emigración,” 10.

³⁵ Alex Borucki and José Luis Belmonte Postigo, “The Impact of the American Revolutionary War on the Slave Trade to Cuba,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 80:3 (2023), 493–524.

³⁶ Stadsarchief Gent (henceforth SAG), *Family Papers*, 3301, 8, Establishment act of Romberg & Consors (Ghent, 1 June 1780) and Archives Nationales (henceforth AN), *Banque Greffulhe*, 61 AQ, 101, idem.

³⁷ Hilda Coppenjans-Desmedt, *Bijdrage tot de studie van de gegoede burgerij te Gent in de XVIIIe eeuw: de vorming van een nieuwe sociaal-economische Stand ten Tijde van Maria Theresia*, (Brussels, 1952), 69–70; 247–48; Luc Dhondt, “Een ondernemer, notabelen en het volk van Oudenaarde tussen Ancien Régime en Nieuwe Maatschappij,” *Handelingen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring van Oudenaarde* 18:2 (1976) 331–2.

³⁸ Dhondt, “Een ondernemer,” 333–5.



Figure 1. The Kouter in Ghent, where Romberg & Consors was established (in the second house on the left). Source: Engelbert Van Sickers, *De Kouter in Gent* in 1763, Stadsmuseum Gent.

Consors.³⁹ Georg Christoph Bapst, contrary to his fellow associates, was no Flemish subject, but hailed from Romberg's German network. Being in his early twenties, Bapst was the junior member of Romberg & Consors and had previously gained experience by working in Romberg's offices in Brussels.⁴⁰ Romberg & Consors' central task was the greasing of the main firm's commodity chain between France and the Dutch Republic, an axis which could be conveniently managed from Ghent.⁴¹ From the outset, however, the firm sought to capitalize on the upheaval in international markets brought about by the American War of Independence. As Ressel has shown, in 1780, Romberg had brokered a deal with Versailles to supply French shipyards with naval materials from the Dutch Republic, and he had assigned Romberg & Consors to deal with the logistics of the contract.⁴²

From 1781 onward, however, Romberg & Consors expanded its operations to include the African shipping lanes. That year, the firm organized and dispatched two small expeditions from Ghent to the West African coast.⁴³ By the spring of 1782, they intensified their efforts, outfitting six additional slave ships bound for Saint-Domingue.⁴⁴ Around

³⁹ Karel Degryse and Jan Parmentier, "Kooplieden en kapiteins. Een prosopografische studie van de kooplieden, supercargo's en scheepsofficieren van de Oostendse handel op Oost-Indië en Guinea (1716–1732)," in: Christian Koninckx, ed., *Vlamingen overzee* (Brussels, 1995) 156.

⁴⁰ Françoise Thésée, *Négociants bordelais et colons de Saint-Domingue. Liaisons d'habitations. La maison Henry Romberg, Bapst et Cie, 1783–1793*, 26–7.

⁴¹ SAG, *Family papers* 3301, 8, Establishment act of Romberg & Consors (Ghent, 1 June 1780).

⁴² Magnus Ressel, "An entrepreneur as Central Protagonist of Foreign Relations in the Early Modern Period: Frederik von Romberg's Service to the Habsburg-Bourbon Alliance in 1780–81," *Annales Mercaturae* 8:1 (2022) 83–108.

⁴³ Stan Pannier, *Enterprising merchants in the global Atlantic. Frederic Romberg and the Austrian Netherlands Trade with West and Central Africa, 1775–95* (Leuven, 2025), Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ Archivo General de Indias (henceforth AGI), *Gobierno: Indiferente*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to Aranda (Ghent, 17 June 1782).

this time, however, news reached the firm of lucrative opportunities beckoning in the Spanish Caribbean. Perhaps this was by way of Jacques Chauvel, a French contact of the firm who was also petitioning Madrid for access to Cuban slave markets during this time.⁴⁵ Compared with the Spanish Empire, France's colonies presented a less appealing site of operations for the firm. French planters typically paid for their slaves in colonial produce rather than cash, and the realized profits often took years to be remitted to Europe.⁴⁶ In contrast, the Spanish overseas possessions abounded with cash. This applied especially to Cuba: in order to strengthen the island's position as the Spanish Empire's bulwark in the wake of the Seven Years War, the Council of the Indies ensured that substantial funds were transferred annually from the royal treasury in Veracruz, Mexico, to the state coffers in Havana. From there, these funds were distributed across other parts of the Spanish colonial realm. As authors such as Juan Marchena Fernández and Franklin Knight have shown, considerable parts of this subsidy (known as the *situado*) flowed towards non-military segments of the colonial economy, for example the sugar planting industry.⁴⁷ Likewise, Allan Kuethe stated that the *situados* turned Cuba into 'a capital-rich island where financial liquidity abounded and where the quick-witted and the enterprising could find personal opportunity.'⁴⁸ This was especially true during the American War of Independence, when 30 million pesos were injected into the island's economy in the space of a few years.⁴⁹

In a recent paper, Cátia Antunes explored the concept of 'business diplomacy,' which she defined as the 'channel through which the diplomatic agency of Early Modern firms and entrepreneurs took place.' Business diplomacy comprised the various ways in which businesses, both foreign and domestic, attempted to wrest commercial privileges from the state by drafting petitions or bidding for contracts. As Antunes highlights, successful commercial negotiations with state administrations were entirely dependent of the firm's knowledge of, and access to, these institutions.⁵⁰ The actions of Carpentier, Schepers, and Bapst, who began working the sinews of power in the Spanish Empire in the spring of 1782, are a great illustration of how business diplomacy worked in practice. Indicative of Antunes' stress on the need for knowledge on how to access power brokers, the Ghent triumvirate did not attempt to make inroads into Spain's institutional framework by petitioning the Council of the Indies directly. Rather, the firm leveraged its growing network of high-ranking ministers in Paris, strengthened in recent years through the negotiation of the aforementioned contracts with the French Navy and the *fermes générales*.

On 17 June 1782, Romberg & Consors began making inroads into the Spanish administration by petitioning Pedro Pablo Abarca de Bolea y Jiménez de Urrea, Count de Aranda, the Spanish ambassador to France. Romberg's associates notified Aranda of their willingness to redirect the six slaving vessels they were preparing in the Austrian Netherlands from France to the Spanish colonial domains. The Ghent associates made sure to cast

⁴⁵ AGI, *Indiferente General*, 2820B, Chauvel & fils to the Consejo de Indias, (Le Havre, 20 June 1782).

⁴⁶ Dieudonné Rinchon, *Les armements négriers au XVIII^e siècle: d'après la correspondance et la comptabilité des armateurs et des capitaines nantais*, (Brussels, 1956) 99–102; Meyer, *L'armement nantais dans la deuxième moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1969) 215–9; Pierre Boule, "Slave Trade, Commercial Organization and Industrial Growth in Eighteenth-Century Nantes," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 59:214 (1972) 48.

⁴⁷ Franklin Knight, "Origins of Wealth and Sugar Revolution in Cuba, 1750–1850," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 57:1 (1977) 242–3; Juan Marchena Fernández, "Capital, créditos e intereses comerciales a fines del periodo colonial: los cosos del sistema defensivo americano. Cartagena de Indias y el sur del Caribe," *Tiempos de America* 9:1 (2002) 3–38.

⁴⁸ Allan Kuethe, "Guns, Subsidies, and Commercial Privilege: Some Historical Factors in the Emergence of the Cuban National Character, 1763–1815," *Cuban Studies* 16:1 (1986) 123–38, quote 130.

⁴⁹ Schneider, *The Occupation*, 288.

⁵⁰ Cátia Antunes, "Early Modern Business Diplomacy: an Appraisal," *Diplomatica* 2:1 (2020) 20–7.

their plan as a wartime service ‘*esencial para España*,’ providing Cuba with highly sought-after enslaved labour and sparing the colonists from the excessive prices of the slaving markets in Cap François and the privateer-infested waters of Cuba and Saint-Domingue. In return, the firm requested exemption of all duties in Cuba.⁵¹ Aranda passed on the message to José Moñino y Redondo, the Count de Floridablanca, Spain’s first minister. Floridablanca, in turn, presented it to José de Gálvez, governor of the Council of the Indies. With Cuba’s supply problems in mind, Gálvez lent a ready ear to Romberg & Consors’ petition, and over the summer, the Council and the Ghent firm thrashed out the details of the deal. On 22 October 1782, Madrid officially granted the firm a licence to transport enslaved Africans to Havana.⁵²

There were several reasons which made Romberg & Consors an attractive contracting party for the Spanish Crown. Although he had little experience in the slave trade, the Council of the Indies conceded that Romberg, as the firm’s principal, at least disposed of the necessary funds to set up a slaving venture (‘*una de las poderosas [casas] de los Payses Baxos Austriacos*’).⁵³ Closely linked to this commercial success was Romberg’s wide network, which may have served as an additional motivation for the Council: what the merchant missed in expertise, he might be able to get through his international contacts. Undoubtedly Romberg’s most important trait, however, was that he was a subject of the Holy Roman Empire. Since its defeat in the Seven Years’ War, Madrid, driven by both economic concerns and national security interests, sought to disentangle itself from the many traders affiliated with rival Caribbean powers operating within its overseas empire—chiefly British and French merchants, but also Portuguese, Danish and Dutch traders.⁵⁴ In contrast, Vienna lacked a formal empire and, despite numerous exploratory expeditions organized by the Court and countless ‘bottom-up’ petitions advocating the acquisition of overseas territories like Tobago, had no serious plans to pursue such ambitions.⁵⁵ The absence of a formal empire also meant that the Austrian Habsburgs lacked an entrepôt for their manufactures, one that could serve as a launching pad for introducing contraband into Cuba under the cover of slave trade. These traits afforded the Habsburg Monarchy, and by extension, Romberg & Consors, an outsider status in the Caribbean, a position they were able to leverage when negotiating with the Spanish Court.

For Romberg & Consors, the main attraction of the slaving license lay in the lucrative opportunity to tap into the mineral wealth of the Spanish Empire. Additionally, wartime disruptions to shipping lanes had caused a shortage of enslaved labor in Cuba, leading to higher-than-usual profits for slave traders.⁵⁶ On top, slaving firms could enjoy exceptionally beneficial fiscal conditions: Romberg & Consors was required to pay only 6% in duties on the importation of enslaved Africans whereas normally, slave traders were taxed a so-called *derecho de marca* of 40 pesos per prisoner brought to Havana, implying a tax

⁵¹ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to Aranda (Ghent, 17 June 1782); AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Romberg & Consors to the Council of the Indies (Ghent, 4 November 1782). On privateer activity off Saint-Domingue, see Patrick Villiers, *Le commerce colonial atlantique et la guerre d’indépendance des Etats Unis d’Amérique 1778–1783* (New York 1977) 353–4. Spanish ambassadors served as negotiators of slaving contracts on later occasions as well: in 1784, Bernardo del Campo, envoy to Great Britain, worked out the contract of Dawson & Baker, see Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136.

⁵² AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Floridablanca to the Council of the Indies (San Ildefonso, 30 June 1782 and 22 September 1782).

⁵³ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Aranda to Floridablanca (Paris, 22 June 1782).

⁵⁴ Schneider, *The Occupation*, Chapter 6, especially 270 and 274.

⁵⁵ Everaert, “Le pavillon”, 61; Morrison, “Open Competition”; Pannier, *Enterprising merchants*, Chapter 2.

⁵⁶ Gloria García, “La explotación de moneda y el comercio de esclavos (Cuba, 1760–1800),” *Rabida* 11:1 (1992) 79.

of 16% on an average price of about 250 pesos per enslaved person.⁵⁷ Traditionally, one of the main prizes of slaving contracts was gaining access to the Spanish colonial market. Either in a legal way (cf. Britain's *navio de permiso* under the South Sea Company *asiento*) or an illegal way (through contraband trade), this entailed that foreign contract-holders had the opportunity to sell commodities such as flour in the Spanish colonies. In a chronically understocked market, these goods fetched high prices and often proved to be the most (or indeed the only) lucrative part of the slaving business.⁵⁸ In the case of Romberg & Consors, however, importing manufactures or staples in Havana seems not to have been a motive to apply for a licence. The firm readily accepted a contract which explicitly banned any contraband trading.⁵⁹ Although colonial officers frequently turned a blind eye to smuggling, there is no proof Romberg engaged in such activities as the accounting books of the firm do not report sales other than human cargoes, with the occasional leftover drinking water as an exception.⁶⁰ Carpentier, Romberg & Consors' agent on the island (see below), struck a close friendship with the intendant of Cuba, Juan Ignacio de Urriza, a politician who vigorously pursued smugglers on the island; presumably, if Romberg & Consors engaged in such activities, Carpentier's friendship with Urriza would have been untenable.⁶¹ Lastly, by the time Romberg's ships showed up in Havana, royal officials had assumed a firmer attitude against contraband trading as many captains had introduced illicit goods in 1781 and 1782, forcing foreign vessels to take on board Spanish guards while in port. Romberg's *Négrier Impérial*, arriving in May 1784, certainly received such treatment while in Havana.⁶²

Unlike licences of other trading houses, in which the details of the privilege were expressed in number of enslaved Africans or shipping tonnages, Romberg's *permiso* was stipulated in number of ships. Capped at six in the original proposal, the contract expanded during the discussions with the Council and comprised eight vessels, specified by name, by the time it was concluded in October.⁶³ In the six months following the acquisition of the privilege, all eight vessels were duly outfitted in Ghent, Bruges, and Ostend. Borucki and Belmonte Postigo observed that Danish slavers operating in the Cuban slave trade had a distinctly multinational character, and this characteristic also thoroughly applied to Romberg & Consors.⁶⁴ While the firm appointed supercargoes from its own circle of trustees, it also employed experienced captains and supercargoes from the ports of Le Havre and Honfleur.⁶⁵ The ships' crews were composed of a diverse array of nationalities, reflecting the international community of mariners who had migrated to Ostend in the early 1780s to take advantage of the high wages offered by the bustling port.⁶⁶ With regard to the venture's capital outlay, the firm drew funds from an equally international

⁵⁷ RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 7845, 'State of the insurance' (Brussels, 11 September 1783); Vicente, "El comercio," 14; James Ferguson King, "Evolution of the Free Slave Trade Principle in Spanish Colonial Administration," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 22:1 (1942) 38; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 132.

⁵⁸ Pearce, *British Trade*, 22–3; Andrea Weindl, "The Asiento de Negros and International Law," *Journal of the History of International Law* 10:2 (2008) 236; James Lewis, "Anglo-American entrepreneurs in Havana: the background and significance of the expulsion of 1784–1785," in: Jacques Barbier and Allan Kuethe, eds. *The North American role in the Spanish imperial economy, 1760–1819* (Manchester 1984) 112–4.

⁵⁹ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Council of the Indies to the Intendant of Havana (Madrid, 23 October 1782).

⁶⁰ Archives de Paris (henceforth AdP), *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, 26 r.

⁶¹ Lewis, "Anglo-American entrepreneurs," 120.

⁶² AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1366, Unzaga to Gálvez (Havana, 19 May 1784).

⁶³ AGI, *Gobierno: Santo Domingo*, 1661.

⁶⁴ Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, "The Impact," 505–6.

⁶⁵ Pannier, *Enterprising merchants*, Chapter 5.

⁶⁶ Stan Pannier, "Reaping the Returns of a Runaway Economy: Seamen's Wages in the Ostend Merchant Marine, 1775–1785," *TSEG - The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 21:3 (2024) 41–70.

group of investors based in the Dutch Republic, France, the Holy Roman Empire, but primarily the Austrian Netherlands.⁶⁷

As Table 1 shows, the eight permission ships were grouped in several flotillas. Investors could only buy shares in a particular flotilla, not in a single ship, in order to spread the risks of the venture. The different flotillas also served as a commercial separation, as the constituent vessels were helmed by a common supercargo. The ships traded across a diverse range of African regions, from the small commercial stations of Upper West Africa to the major slaving ports of Ouidah and Malembo on the Loango Coast, routes largely determined by the previous experience of the captains and supercargoes in charge. Six vessels eventually made it to a Caribbean destination, three ships calling at Havana, and three others finishing their journey prematurely on Saint-Domingue due to severe outbreaks of disease and high mortality rates during the Middle Passage (see Table 1). In January 1783, preliminary peace treaties were signed between the warring parties, marking the end of the privileged status enjoyed by foreign merchants in the Spanish Atlantic, and with the decree of 23 January 1783 admittance of foreign ships in Spanish ports was once more prohibited.⁶⁸ Seemingly uniquely, again brought about by his ‘outsider’ status, Romberg was allowed to (legally) continue his operations. A French contemporary observer confirmed the exclusive nature of Romberg’s licence:

*“The captives are worth or have been worth a lot in Havana, [but] it is not permitted to import them. Romberg of Brussels is the only house that has the permission of the Court and has made a treaty with the Spanish minister in Madrid...the port [of Havana] is closed to all foreigners, with the exception of the ships of Romberg.”*⁶⁹

On 25 October 1784, the Council officially prolonged Romberg’s permits for future purposes. The merchant made use of this peacetime extension to sell his remaining licences to the British merchant David Nagle, a resident in Havana, or an unknown firm represented by Nagle. On 22 December 1785, the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [II]* arrived in the Cuban port, disembarking 491 captive Africans. At some date in April 1786, the *Prince de Saxe-Teschén [II]* followed suit, carrying an unknown number of enslaved people.⁷⁰ It was not the first time that Romberg & Consors had transferred its Spanish privileges: in 1783, the licence of the *Comte du Nord* was sold to the British merchants Miles Barber and Samuel Hartley, who used it to trade for 674 enslaved people in Malembo. Eventually, Barber and Hartley decided against going to Havana, and sold their human cargo in Charleston instead.⁷¹

In total, the ships Romberg & Consors outfitted in the Austrian Netherlands disembarked 1,215 enslaved Africans in Havana over the course of half a year. This constituted 8.4% of the 14,476 slaves brought to Havana between 1781 and 1785, as calculated by Borucki and Postigo.⁷² If we add the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [II]*, outfitted outside of the

⁶⁷ Pannier, *Enterprising merchants*, Chapter 5.

⁶⁸ AGI, *Gobierno: Santo Domingo*, 2188.

⁶⁹ Archives Municipales de Saint-Omer (henceforth AMSO), Ms 1037, Mesnier Frères to Tresca (Cap Français, 11 May 1784).

⁷⁰ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente*, 2823, Troncoso to the Council of the Indies (Havana, 24 December 1785); AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, Nagle to the Governor (Havana, 1788). Most of the voyages organized or facilitated by Romberg were absent from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database and have been added since.

⁷¹ Nicholas Radburn, *Traders in Men. Merchants and the Transformation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven 2023) 179–82; TNA, E219/377, Barber to Penny (London, 3 November 1784). I would like to thank Nicholas Radburn for sharing his information, sources, and transcriptions related to the *Comte du Nord*.

⁷² Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, “The Impact,” 504. The *Roi du Congo* and the *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [I]* were included in the table under the header of France as the ships entered the harbour under a French flag, but

Table 1. Enslaved Africans embarked on the *permiso* ships of Romberg & Consors, 1782–85

Flot.	Departure Ostend	Vessel	Ton	Slaves			Trajectory		
				Int.	Emb.	Disemb.	Africa	Caribbean (Int.)	Caribbean (Disemb.)
I	04.12.1782	<i>Empereur & Roi</i>	60	0	0	0	Senegal	N/A	N/A
I	04.12.1782	<i>Comte de Belgioioso</i>	120	325	330	299	Gold Coast	Havana	Havana
I	15.02.1783	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i> [I]	160	300–350	>244	117 (92) [†]	Gold Coast	Havana	Léogâne
II	20.03.1783	<i>Négrier Impérial</i>	300	450	–	371	Ouidah ^{†††}	Havana	Havana
II	12.04.1783	<i>Prince de Starhemberg</i> *	140	–	0	0	shipwreck	Havana	N/A
II	19.04.1783	<i>Vlaemisch Zeepaerd</i> [I]	300	450	–	350	Ouidah	Havana	Cap Français
III	19.04.1783	<i>Roi du Congo</i>	300	600	560	545	Malembo	Havana	Havana
III	01.07.1783	<i>Conseil de Flandre</i>	300	600	539	434 (366) ^{††}	Malembo	Havana	Cap Français
–	London, 1783	<i>Comte du Nord</i> **	–	1000	674	571	Malembo	Havana	Charleston
–	–, 1784	<i>Vlaemisch Zeepaerd</i> [II]***	–	–	–	491	–	Havana	Havana
–	–, 1785	<i>Prince de Saxe-Teschen</i> [II]***	–	–	–	–	–	Havana	Havana

Sources: Algemeen Rijksarchief (*Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*); University Archives Ghent (*Gazette van Gendt*); City Archives Saint-Omer (*Ms 1037*); Archives de Paris (*Bankruptcies*), Bibliothèque Nationale de France (*Affiches Américaines*), The National Archives (*Records of the Exchequer*), Archivo General de Indias (*Gobierno: Indiferente* and *Papeles de Cuba*), Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba (*Protocolos Notariales*), Radburn, *Traders in Men*, 179–82. * Not included in the Spanish licence but still dispatched to Havana. ** Outfitted and owned by Miles Barber & Samuel Hartley after purchasing a permit from Romberg & Consors. *** Outfitted and owned by David Nagle after purchasing a permit from Romberg & Consors. † 25 people died between the first port of call (Cap Français) and actual disembarkation port (Léogâne). †† Shortly after arriving in Cap Français, another 68 enslaved Africans succumbed to the diseases that had plagued the ship's Middle Passage. ††† Ouidah was the ship's intended destination and sources confirm its presence in the latter port. However, Havana notary records claim the ship arrived from East Africa. As the *Négrier* spent almost a year on the coast of Africa, it would indeed not have been impossible for the captain to continue his journey after trading in Ouidah.

Austrian Netherlands but part of the same permit, Romberg & Consors facilitated the importation of 1,706 people, or 11.4% of the total number.⁷³ This puts the activities of the Imperial firm at a comparable level to British (1,958 captives) and American traders (1,878), although the latter disembarked many additional captives in Danish ships.⁷⁴ If the 901 people landed and sold on Saint-Domingue had made it to Havana as planned, Romberg & Consors would have been the third most important slave trader in Havana. An additional indicator of the importance of the Imperial firm's slave trade is provided by the flows of silver returning to Europe from Havana. Gloria García, using Havana harbour records, noted that during the American War of Independence, 275,600 piasters earned in Cuba's slave trade were exported towards Ostend, 16.3% of the total exports in this period. This figure positioned the Austrian Netherlands as the third-largest recipient of Cuban silver during this period, surpassed only by Saint-Domingue and Saint-Thomas, which further underscores the significance of Romberg's operations—presumably the main source of these bullion exports.⁷⁵

3. "I have many enemies here": Romberg & Consors in Cuba

To facilitate the marketing of the firm's human cargoes, Romberg & Consors deemed it prudent to send a trustee overseas to oversee its commercial operations. Moreover, to minimize the ships' turnover times, having a permanent agent on site would be beneficial for managing logistical tasks such as storage, debt settlement, and gathering intelligence on potential buyers. Logistics, however, would likely be the least of concerns for Romberg & Consors' future agent. As we discussed, the commercial interests of Cuban elites had been firmly tied to the British Caribbean ever since the early eighteenth century, had only deepened during the brief British occupation of Havana in 1762, and remained intact during the *asiento* years of the *Compañía Gaditana*. Even though the American War of Independence had disrupted the traditional British-Cuban slaving circuits maintained by the *Compañía Gaditana*, scholars have asserted how merchants involved in the latter company—especially its director, Jerónimo Enrile y Guerci—rapidly forged new ties with primarily Danish and American traders.⁷⁶ Many other Cuban elites followed suit in order to profit from the wartime peak in prices.⁷⁷ While metropolitan authorities considered Romberg & Consors a useful newcomer, Cuba's mercantile classes would almost certainly view the firm as an unwelcome intruder, an outsider encroaching on a trade they claimed as their own. This section explores the operations of the firm in its periphery, and tests whether and how the hostile social and commercial environment affected its activities.

The person chosen to take up residence in Cuba was François Carpentier. When the need arose for an overseas agent after the acquisition of the *Real permiso*, the associate emerged as a logical choice: he was thoroughly familiar with the project, had demonstrated his ambition in recent years, and, at just twenty-seven years old, his youthful constitution offered a chance of withstanding the illnesses prevalent in the tropics. He was also a Catholic, and in light of his future actions he had at least a decent grasp of Spanish. Both traits would help him integrate more easily into Spanish society. In early

belonged to Romberg & Consors. I thank the authors for explaining and sharing their data on Romberg & Consors' vessels with me.

⁷³ The *Vlaemsch Zeepaerd [II]* was not included in the estimate of Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, so with this ship the total number of slaves brought to Cuba between 1781 and 1785 increases to 14,967.

⁷⁴ Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, "The Impact," 504.

⁷⁵ García, "La explotación," 77.

⁷⁶ Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, "The Impact," 510, 518.

⁷⁷ Vicente, "El comercio," 94–104; Schneider, *The Occupation*, 288.

1783, Carpentier successfully applied for a Spanish passport and was allowed to make the Atlantic crossing. Carpentier's brothers, Jean-Baptiste and Philippe, joined Romberg's fleet as supercargoes. They were included simply to keep an eye on their French counterparts; neither Jean-Baptiste or Philippe had any experience with African trade, and their lack of habituation with the local disease environment cost them dearly as both men died shortly after arriving in Africa.⁷⁸ A fourth brother, Jean-Nicolas, was prompted by Carpentier to join him in Cuba. Much more than his supercargo brothers, Jean-Nicolas was fit for the job and well established in the Spanish realm, as he was stationed in Madrid as member of the *Compañía Flamenca de la Guardia de Corps*, the royal guard.⁷⁹ However, despite being employed in Spanish royal service, Jean-Nicolas' petition was denied, presumably because Spain's colonial ministers deemed one foreigner in Havana sufficient.⁸⁰

A few months after the decision to send him to Cuba, Carpentier traveled to Spain by coach, boarded a vessel in Cádiz, and sailed for Havana (see Figure 2).⁸¹ Carpentier's crossing was a tumultuous one. The vessel routinely had to plough through violent seas and bad weather, and almost perished in a hurricane off the Virgin Islands. Near Baracoa, a town on the eastern outskirts of Cuba, he was first-hand witness to the brutal realities of the Atlantic slave trade, when a Spanish vessel transporting 200 enslaved Africans from the Danish West Indies disappeared beneath the waves. The crew was saved, the young man observed, but 'nothing more.'⁸² Undoubtedly, this ship hailed from Saint Thomas, neutral Denmark's commercial bulwark in the Caribbean which Borucki and Postigo identified as the principal source of slaves for Havana during the years of the American Revolution.⁸³ Arriving in Havana in mid-October, Carpentier was forced to hit the ground running, as the *Comte de Belgioioso* had docked on 4 September and had already begun the sale of its cargo by the time the agent arrived.⁸⁴

Prior to departure, Romberg had provided his agent with a varied range of tasks. To what extent Carpentier followed those orders can be deduced from a couple of surviving letters and the expenses that were forwarded to Europe. A first instruction was for Carpentier to take up his place in Romberg's commercial network. Presumably, the associate was unfamiliar with anyone in Havana—a fellow Ghent émigré, Charles Habré, who had set up Havana's first printing company in the 1720s, had by now likely perished⁸⁵—making the individuals referred to him by Romberg crucial to his integration into the town's social fabric. Carpentier's principal contact was Pedro Juan de Erice, a businessman originally from Navarra who furnished local planters with credit and who according to Moreno Friginals became the 'single most important sugar refiner' on the island during the 1790s.⁸⁶ Erice also commanded a large network of foreign, chiefly American merchants. He maintained especially good contacts in New Orleans, where he

⁷⁸ Archives Départementales de la Gironde (henceforth ADG), *Fonds des Négotiants* 7 B, 2000, Romberg & Bapst to Charles Carpentier (Bordeaux, 29 September 1789).

⁷⁹ Thomas Glesener, "La renovación de la tradición: los flamencos y el servicio militar a la Monarquía hispánica a inicios del siglo XVIII," in: Enrique Martínez Ruiz, ed., *Presencia de flamencos y valones en la milicia española* (Madrid, 2018) 97–122.

⁸⁰ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente*, 2823, Jean Nicolas Carpentier to the Council of the Indies (Madrid, 31 March 1783).

⁸¹ AdP, *Bankruptcies*, D5B6, 336, f. 11 r.; RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

⁸² RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

⁸³ Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, "The Impact", 493–524, especially 505.

⁸⁴ RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783); AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1365; AGI, *Papeles de Cuba*, 1410, Noticia de los Extranjeros que existen en esta Ciudad (Havana, March 1788). Carpentier took up residence in the Calle San Ignacio, in the centre of the city.

⁸⁵ Huib Billiet Adriaansen, "Novena de 1722 destrona a la Tarifa como primer impreso de Cuba," *Opus Habana* (2010) 40–3.

⁸⁶ Friginals, *El Ingenio*, 65–71, quote 71.



Figure 2. View of Havana, c. 1785.

Source: Unidentified artist, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.

sourced wood to furnish sugar boxes.⁸⁷ Additionally, Erice represented Diego Echagüe in Cuba, an important merchant from San Sebastián with whom Romberg had arranged that Carpentier would be able to rely on Erice for all his mercantile needs on the island.⁸⁸ Outside Cuba, Carpentier ought to establish contact with French correspondents of Romberg on Saint-Domingue (the Mesnier Brothers) and write to other houses in order to acquire information on market conditions.⁸⁹

In addition to integrating in the head office's existing mercantile network, Carpentier was also instructed to expand it. Romberg's main concern was to acquire precise information on the solidity of Havana's principal slave owners. This enabled the firm to make quick sales of the enslaved cargoes when they arrived—crucial given the sickly and worn-out conditions of the prisoners at arrival—and recover profits in cash or through short-term credit. Romberg provided clear instructions on how to interact and connect with what he perceived as the stereotypical Spaniard:

*The cold and reserved Spaniard does not open up easily, it is advisable to imitate him, only opening up to him by degrees: a hasty confidence shocks him, he will take it as lightness, it is through prudence that you have to gain his esteem.*⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Linda Salvucci, "Anglo-American Merchants and Stratagems for Success in Spanish Imperial Markets, 1783–1807," in: Barbier and Kuethe, *The North American Role*, 130; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 75–6; Borucki and Belmonte Postigo, "The Impact", 515.

⁸⁸ RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 7845, Instruction to Carpentier (Brussels, 20 April 1783); Xabier Alberdi Lonbide, *Conflictos de intereses en la economía marítima Guizpzoana, siglos XVI-XVIII* (Bilbao, 2012) 831–7, 1228.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

In addition to integrating into Cuba's commercial circles, Romberg had also thought it crucial to gain the goodwill of the key political figures of the Spanish colony, the Intendant and the Governor, 'since all the difficulties that might arise will be submitted to their decision.'⁹¹ Not that Romberg necessarily expected trouble; to the contrary, he believed that the warrants of the Spanish Crown and the shortage of bonded labour would result in a warm welcome of his Imperial slavers. Yet he still advised Carpentier to keep his guard with regards to the former *asiento* holders—the *Compañía Gaditana*—'which...will not be of any competition to us at this present time, but may attempt chicanery.'⁹² Romberg, however, had clearly misjudged the extent to which the company, as well as other Cuban elites, would continue their slave trade during the war. Carpentier very soon attested of the difficulties he experienced in making swift inroads with local networks. Barely a month after his arrival, the agent bemoaned the lack of opportunities for engaging with his peers in Havana. According to Carpentier, the town was a 'backwater' ['*un trou*'], with 'little society life' going on.⁹³ On the rare occasions he managed to engage with Havana traders, the Habsburg merchant felt excluded from the local commercial community. "I have many enemies and jealous people here," wrote Carpentier, "there is so little good faith in this country that one cannot exactly trust anyone."⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, these reported 'enemies and jealous people' comprised members of the Cuban-British slaving circuits revolving around the *Compañía Gaditana* directed by Enrile. In confirmation of aforementioned scholarship, and in contrast to Romberg's assessment, these merchants *did* act as competition to his firm in the slave trade, and conversely, Romberg also did so to them. This explains why Carpentier, acting as the firm's representative, was viewed with hostility as an unwelcome interloper—an opportunistic outsider intent on exploiting wartime prices to the detriment of local merchants. Moreover, local elites, fully attuned to the anti-British sentiment within the government, perhaps recognized that this newcomer could become a more permanent fixture in Havana if Romberg & Consors demonstrated themselves to be a reliable partner.

Perhaps motivated by his experiences, Carpentier took his principal's instruction to heart and actively sought to earn the goodwill of Cuba's intendant, the highest political figure in Cuba after the Governor General. During most of Carpentier's residence, the *Intendencia* was held by Juan Ignacio de Urriza (in office between 1776 and 1787).⁹⁵ Among the intendant's principal responsibilities were increasing royal revenue and preventing fraud, particularly in relation to smuggling through the importation of enslaved people (see above). He was also tasked with procuring enslaved Africans for the Crown, making him a key figure with whom slave traders needed to maintain favourable relations.⁹⁶ In what can be considered an exceptional showcase of business diplomacy, Carpentier quickly managed to befriend Urriza, agreeing to have dinner together every Sunday. His nascent friendship helped him shape the commercial environment in Romberg's favour and remedy the envy he experienced in Havana: "If I did not have him as a friend, I would have experienced many difficulties which were now sought to facilitate," Carpentier wrote on Urriza.⁹⁷

Carpentier's acquaintance with Urriza prompted him to sell the majority of his enslaved Africans to the Spanish Crown. The downside of the deal was that the Spanish Crown generally paid less than the prices offered by colonists on private slave markets.⁹⁸

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Juan Bosco Amores, "Juan Ignacio de Urriza y la Intendencia de La Habana (1776–1787)," in: Ronald Escobedo Mansilla et al., *Euskal Herria y el Nuevo Mundo. La Contribución de los vascos a la Formación de las Américas* (Vitoria 1996) 227–47.

⁹⁶ Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 299–300; Paquette, *Enlightenment*, 121.

⁹⁷ RATB, *Council of Brabant: Nobility Trials*, 8065, Carpentier to Vilain XIII (Havana, 16 November 1783).

⁹⁸ Rinchon, *Les armements*, 34.

The advantage for Romberg's firm was that Urriza, as Intendant, had privileged access to the silver flows arriving in Cuba, offering a greater opportunity to swiftly sell Romberg & Consors' human cargo for hard currency. While the arrangement initially worked well, allowing Carpentier to remit large quantities of silver pesos back home, the situation changed dramatically after the war ended. With Romberg's licence being officially extended in peacetime, Carpentier was spared the fate of other foreign traders who were expelled from Havana.⁹⁹ However, after 1783, the Crown proved to be a far less reliable business partner than Carpentier had anticipated, directing only a meagre stream of silver to the merchant. Despite the substantial funds arriving in Cuba annually, the Havana treasury consistently ran a deficit, and by the end of the war, it was burdened with a debt of three million pesos, half of which Urriza had accumulated through his dealings with landowners and merchants like Carpentier. Additional silver was sent from Veracruz in the post-war years to address the arrears, but these extraordinary shipments were chronically insufficient, forcing Urriza to decide which creditors to prioritize.¹⁰⁰ Rather than favouring Romberg & Consors, however, the Intendant repeatedly told Carpentier that for the time being, the King had requisitioned the funds for different purposes, promising that payment would certainly take place in three months' time.¹⁰¹ Urriza's promises increasingly rang hollow, and in 1786, Frederic Romberg finally lodged a complaint at the Council of the Indies addressing the arrears, demanding a 0.5% interest for every month of non-payment and the reimbursement of Carpentier's costs of residency.¹⁰² Yet Romberg's plea yielded very little. "I cannot take this anymore," wrote Carpentier to his principal in Brussels as late as November 1790 when yet another *situado* passed by on him. One year later, the slave trader—who by now was, ironically, referring to his Havana assignment as his 'imprisonment'—returned home, only to depart for Havana again several months later (despite being denied a new passport by the Council of the Indies) in order to continue collecting the sums owed to the firm.¹⁰³

Cuba's established elites likely exerted pressure on Urriza to prioritize their own pay-outs, effectively sidelining Romberg & Consors in the process. Another major factor is that, following the American War of Independence, Spain's slave trade reverted to its exclusive and predominantly British-dominated nature. In 1784, the Crown conferred the *asiento* on John Dawson and Peter Baker, experienced slave traders from Liverpool who were well connected in Havana and had been indirectly involved in supplying slaves to Cuba for the past decade.¹⁰⁴ For the Spanish Crown, therefore, the prospects of the British firm becoming a reliable, long-term partner in the slave trade seemed more promising than those of Romberg & Consors, which had failed to deliver its eight ships.¹⁰⁵ Consequentially, Carpentier and Romberg had little leverage for a swift debt repayment and Spanish officials preferred settling with the people of Dawson & Baker first—who, indeed, appear to have encountered few difficulties in collecting their dues.¹⁰⁶ Clearly,

⁹⁹ Lewis, "Anglo-American entrepreneurs," 121–3; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ Bosco Amores, "Urriza," 239–40.

¹⁰¹ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente*, 2823, Romberg to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 16 November 1786).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ RATB, *Council of Brabant: Private Trials*, 4764, Carpentier to Romberg (Havana, 30 November 1790); AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2823, Carpentier to the Council of the Indies (Brussels, 4 February 1792).

¹⁰⁴ Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136–7; José Luis Belmonte Postigo, "A Caribbean Affair: The Liberalisation of the Slave Trade in the Spanish Caribbean, 1784–1791", *Culture & History Digital Journal* 8:1 (2019) 1–14; Radburn, *Traders in Men*, 212.

¹⁰⁵ Romberg & Consors' successor firm in Bordeaux, Henry Romberg, Bapst & Cie, maintained its involvement in the slave trade but shifted its focus to Saint-Domingue, where it acquired numerous plantations, see Thésée, *Négociants bordelais*.

¹⁰⁶ Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136–53

while Romberg & Consors' outsider status had once been an asset, now it had become a liability.

4. Conclusion

In 1784, Francisco Xavier de Esteban addressed the Council of the Indies in order to petition for a slaving license worth six vessels. In his request, the Madrid merchant expressed the hope of receiving the same 'powerful protection' the King had bestowed on various Spanish and foreign firms during the past few years, 'especially the [house] of Romberg of Brussels.'¹⁰⁷ The generous slaving policies of the American War of Independence to which Esteban referred, however, did not become a permanent situation after the war ended. As we have seen, the Council of the Indies returned to the old ways, granting an exclusive contract to the British firm of Dawson & Baker. Yet the seeds of free trade, sown during the Seven Years' War and extensively nurtured during the American War of Independence, proved unstoppable in their growth. Pressed by Cuban commercial elites, Madrid declared a complete liberalisation of the slave trade in February 1789.¹⁰⁸

Previous scholars of the slave trade with Cuba during the years of the American Revolution have primarily focused on intra-Caribbean commerce and the trade conducted by established Atlantic powers. As my analysis—and the Esteban petition—shows, however, the importance of transatlantic slave trade organised by a Habsburg 'outsider' in the shape of Romberg & Consors has been overlooked. When the Imperial firm submitted its petition to the Spanish Crown in 1782, Madrid, keen to reduce the influence of traders from rival Atlantic powers—particularly Britain—within its empire, was quick to embrace the initiative originating from Ghent. Although Romberg & Consors ultimately failed to provide all eight ships and live up to the expectations of the Spanish Crown, its importation of more than a thousand captives during the span of only a few years facilitated Cuba's shift from a mining economy to an agricultural economy based on plantation crops, strengthened the local slaveholders' perennial yearning for easier access to slaves, and eventually, contributed to the establishment of free trade in the Spanish Empire. More broadly, Romberg & Consors' Spanish slaving activities, as well as Carpentier's decade-long residence in Havana, presents an obscure foray of the Habsburg Monarchy into the Atlantic as well as an important example of pre-modern, 'Belgian' participation in the European colonial project.

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Stan Pannier is a maritime historian and doctoral researcher affiliated to the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) and the KU Leuven, both in Belgium. He currently studies the Austrian Netherlands trade with West and Central Africa between 1775 and 1795, within a project funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO).

¹⁰⁷ AGI, *Gobierno: Indiferente General*, 2821, Request of Francisco Xavier de San Esteban (Madrid, 10 January 1784).

¹⁰⁸ Pearce, *British Trade*, 83–94; Bosco Amores, *Cuba*, 136–53; Belmonte Postigo, "A Caribbean Affair," 1–14.

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