Notes

Robinson Crusoe’s Brazilian Expedition and
*The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*

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EARLY in *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe indicates that he steps on board ship a prospective slave trader in Bahia, Brazil on September 1, 1659. The date is already significant in the context of the novel, “being the same Day eight Year that I went from my Father and Mother at Hull” (36). It may be that the year also has significance, specifically in terms of English involvement in the Brazil-based slave trade of the mid-seventeenth century. That Crusoe is shipwrecked in the course of a slave-trading expedition outfitted in Salvador da Bahia and headed to Africa seems to have inspired less scholarly curiosity than it ought. A striking aspect of the opening chapters of *Crusoe* is how unnecessary the sojourn in Brazil appears to be as a frame for the castaway narrative that forms the bulk of the novel. The reader wonders why an Englishman is mounting a slave-trading voyage from Brazil in the mid-seventeenth century and is inclined to ask: Is it historically plausible that an English slave trader like Crusoe could be based in Bahia at the period when the novel is set?

*The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD)* allows us to explore the historical significance of Crusoe’s Bahia-based endeavor, answering this question in the process. Spearheaded by historian David Eltis, the *TSTD* project has compiled records of close to 35,000 slaving voyages. The database is therefore an invaluable research tool for scholars in various branches of the humanities, providing them with
the evidence to answer new questions about familiar texts, in this case *Robinson Crusoe*.

From the earliest records available through the date of the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, the database lists 1036 voyages originating somewhere in Brazil. 410 of these voyages take place during the seventeenth century. Filtering these results by the category (database column) marked “Flag” yields interesting results. Between the years 1630 and 1649, the only successful voyages marked as leaving from Brazil fly the Dutch flag, which is to be expected, given that during this period Holland maintained a firm grasp on the colony. The database lists only ships flying the Portuguese flag from 1665 through the end of the century. What is strange is that only two ships are marked as departing from Brazil in the decade between 1653 and 1664, both flying the English flag and led by English captains. No other English ships appear among these results besides the *Brazil Frigate* in 1658 and the *Saint-John Baptist* in 1661. In fact, these are the only two ships in the database departing from Brazil (regardless of national affiliation), at least through 1719, whose captains bear recognizably English names. The uniqueness of the *Brazil Frigate* and the *Saint-John Baptist* as English ships with English captains departing Brazil just before and after the date of Crusoe’s fictional slaving demands further inquiry into their voyages.

The records for both ships direct us to the same footnote in Elizabeth Donnan’s documentary history of the slave trade, as well as to records in the Nationaal Archief of the Netherlands. It seems that the English crown sought reparations from the Dutch government, following a commercial treaty in 1662 (Donnan 165n.6), for English ships captured by the Dutch after the end of the first Anglo-Dutch war in 1654. Donnan’s footnote lists both the *Saint-John Baptist* and the “Brazil Fregat” along with other slave ships captured between 1654 and 1661. This list in turn derives from a document published in 1664 entitled *A Catalogue of the Damages for which the English Demand Reparation*. Thirty-three ships in all are listed in the document.

Regarding the *Saint-John Baptist*, the Catalogue indicates: “The *Ship, Saint John Baptist*, (Emanuel Hart, Commander, who had taken aboard some Negroes upon the Coast of Guinne, and barter’d them for Sugars and other Commodities at Baghia in Brazil) was seiz’d in his Return in June, 1661, by a Zealond Man of War…” (5). From this record, it is clear that Commander Hart was engaging in trade in sugar for enslaved people in Bahia, but there is no reason to think that the ship would then have departed from Brazil directly back to Africa for another roundtrip. The *Saint-John Baptist* is an example of an English ship encroaching on Portuguese trading but not based in Brazil.

The *Brazil Frigate* appears from its listing in the Catalogue to fall into the same category: “The *Ship, call’d the Brazil-Fregat of London*, (belonging to John Bushell, Edward Bushell, and Company of English Merchants) was seiz’d between Angola and Fernambuck, in the year 1657…” (10). While following the Portuguese (recently
Dutch) trade route from Angola to Pernambuco, the *Brazil Frigate* might have intended to complete a triangular itinerary from London to Africa to South America back to Europe. The database record, however, lists an article by C.R. Boxer as another source for the *Brazil Frigate*. Boxer suggests that that ship and others like it undertook a more complicated route. Continued hostilities between Portugal and Holland precluded either country’s sending of a fleet to Brazil in 1658. The English capitalized on this opening to send several ships of their own (Boxer 214). It is in August 1658 (not 1657, as indicated in the *Catalogue*), on the *Brazil Frigate*’s “return voyage from Luanda to Pernambuco,” that the ship is “captured off the Bahia da Traição by a Zeeland privateer” and re-routed to Dutch Essequibo (ibid.).

Regardless of whether either of the two English ships listed in the database were based in Brazil, Boxer indicates that the English had a long-standing, if sporadic, tradition of trade there: “The formation of the Dutch West-India Company in 1624...indirectly contributed to increasing the share of the English in the Portuguese Brazil trade” not only because conflict between Holland and Portugal created an opening for English ships, but also because the Portuguese valued the skills of English gunners (Boxer 198). The first peak of English shipping in Brazil occurred in 1649/50, having increased steadily since the Portuguese revolt against the Dutch controlling Recife in 1645 (Boxer 202, 229). The trade fell off sharply in 1650 after a diplomatic falling out between Portugal and England but revived following Cromwell’s Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1654 (Boxer 206–15). The second peak of English trade in Brazil began in 1657 and continued, thanks in part to a renewed treaty accompanying Charles II’s marriage to the Infanta of Portugal in 1661, until English West Indian sugar production came into its own later in the century (Boxer 229–30).

During the same period, Boxer also indicates, many English people settled in Brazil, either having been stranded as a result of the ongoing wars between the three powers or of their own accord (212). It is historically plausible, then, that a Robinson Crusoe would find himself in the Brazil of the 1650s and that his next-door neighbor would be someone like Wells, “a Portugueze of Lisbon, but born of English Parents” (31). Furthermore, Boxer notes that the Portuguese freely handed out commissions to privateers, English and others, to disrupt the Dutch trade: “The Atlantic Ocean soon became infested with a number of highly dubious characters of varying nationalities, whose vessels were provided with Portuguese letters-of-marque, and who preyed ostensibly on Dutch shipping, but in practice on anyone whom they thought weaker than themselves” (219). This practice, not surprisingly incurring considerable backlash from all sides, was discouraged following the Dutch-Portuguese negotiations of 1660 and 1661 and Charles II’s ascendency (ibid.).

From the point of view of Robinson Crusoe, English settler and would-be private slave trader, the years 1657 to 1660 appear to provide the ideal political window for a clandestine, Brazil-based voyage. Crusoe’s 1659 departure from Bahia
makes historical sense. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database provided a crucial starting point for this peculiar kind of close reading of the early pages of the novel. In searching the records, it soon became clear that there was something significant happening in English trade to and from Brazil right around the time Crusoe’s voyage would have taken place. It would be going too far to say that the voyage of the Brazil Frigate (or any other particular ship) served as a direct influence on Defoe. As Boxer’s analysis shows, English trading in Brazil, including the trade in slaves, was widespread at certain moments during the seventeenth century. The database points us in the direction of primary and secondary sources that indicate the larger pattern of English trade in Brazil. It appears that Defoe knew this history well enough himself to situate Crusoe’s slaving endeavor at a plausible moment in time.

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NOTES

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WORKS CITED


