African Guardians, European Slave Ships, and the Changing Dynamics of Power in the Early Modern Atlantic

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POWER was nowhere more precariously held in the early modern Atlantic than aboard a slave ship. Because their cargoes were unwilling travelers, slave ships were distinguished by the unmitigated contest between African captives and the European seamen charged to transport them to American markets: between slaves with superior strength in numbers and sailors desperate to prevent rebellious uprising by any means necessary. Though it is true that “perhaps no more than one slave voyage in ten experienced an actual outbreak” of revolt, scholars accept as axiomatic Michael Craton’s further suggestion that “few voyages were ever completed without the discovery or threat of slave conspiracy, and no slaving captain throughout the history of the Atlantic trade ever sailed without a whole armory of guns and chains plus as many white crewmen as he could recruit and keep alive to act as seaborne jailers.” David Eltis’s characterization of the slave ship as a place where “naked physical force determined who would be in control” and where “any relaxation of vigilance or reduction in the amount of force available would mean rebellion” seems squarely on the mark.1 Yet slave ships were more complex than the reliance on naked physical force suggests. The dynamics of power aboard ship could also be affected by the use of African “guardians”: slaves appointed to police fellow captives during the Atlantic crossing.

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Slave ships were distinguished from other merchant vessels by their higher crew-per-ton ratios; nonetheless, crews were outnumbered by more than eight to one aboard English ships in the late seventeenth century. If arms were a vital accompaniment to manpower aboard all merchant vessels, they were especially so aboard ships carrying Africans as captive passengers. “We always keep sentinels upon the hatchways,” explained Captain Thomas Phillips in the journal of his slaving voyage aboard the Hannibal in 1693, “and have a chest of small arms, ready loaded and prim’d, constantly lying at hand upon the quarter-deck, together with some granada shells; and two of our quarter-deck guns, pointing on the deck thence, and two more out of the steerage, the door of which is always kept shut, and well barr’d.” “As you have guns and men,” the owner of the Caesar instructed Captain William Ellery, “I doubt not you’ll make a good use of them if required.” Another directive to an eighteenth-century slave ship captain read: “Let your Great Guns and small Armes be Loaded and in readiness for use and Service upon any occasion that may happen.”

If naked physical force was a resource captains needed, it also was just as important that they minimize their need to ever put such force to direct use against their human cargoes. In 1750 slaving captain John Newton “fixed 4 swivel blunderbusses in the barricado” of his ship, the *Duke of Argyle*. Yet he expected that these muzzle-loading firearms together with “the 2 carriage guns we put thro’ at the Bonanoes” would “make a formidable appearance upon the main deck, and will, I hope,” he wrote, “be sufficient to intimidate the slaves from any thoughts of an insurrection.”3 Only by disabusing slaves of the notion that there was something to be gained by rebellion did captains get from Africa to the Americas without either the loss of investors’ human property or casualties among the crew. A slave captain’s control resided as much in the depth and content of his symbolic power as in the real physical force at his command. The most secure slave ship was not necessarily the one with the largest crew or the biggest guns but rather that vessel where social relationships of power prevailed such that captives were effectively persuaded against ever challenging their captors to a physical contest.

For their part captives were quick to find opportunities to arm themselves with whatever objects they could seize, thereby aiming to subvert the dynamics of power aboard the slave ship. The guns strategically placed aboard Newton’s *Duke of Argyle*, for example, did not prevent the captives from obtaining “2 knives and . . . [a] bag of small stones.” Nor did they deter a young male slave from supplying other weapons to his fellow captives several weeks later. Let out of irons “first on account of a large ulcer, and since for his seeming good behaviour,” the young man used his liberty to take a “large marline spike” and pass it “down the gratings” to slaves below deck. By the events it put in motion, this single act was sufficient to begin eroding Newton’s command, as he well knew. In the hour the captives had the metal spike, they “made such good dispatch (being an instrument that made no noise) that this morning I’ve found near 20 of them had broke their irons,” Newton wrote. Two days later crewmen were reinforcing walls the slaves had begun to pry loose. “Their plot was exceedingly well laid, and had they been let alone an hour longer,” Newton admitted, “must have occasioned us a good deal of trouble and damage.” Aboard the *Clare Galley*, another eighteenth-century slaver, slaves “ma[de] themselves Masters of the Gunpowder and Fire

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Arms,” prompting the crew to abandon the ship and bringing the captives’ journey to South Carolina to a premature end.

If firearms were the definitive measure of power aboard the slave ship, every captain likewise understood that there was no limit to the range of items aboard an oceangoing ship that could become weapons. Theophilus Conneau cited the danger wooden billets (used as pillows) could pose. “This luxury is not granted,” he explained, “till well assured of the good disposition of the Negroes, as in many occasions slaves have been tempted to mutiny only by the opportunity at hand of arming themselves with those native pillows—indeed a very destructive missile in case of revolt.” Among the haphazard weapons devised by slaves aboard the Don Carlos in 1701 were “pieces of iron” the slaves “had torn off [the] forecastle door” and knives that had carelessly been supplied to them by the ship’s crew members. The slaves also had “broken off the shackles from several of their companions feet, which served them, as well as billets they had provided themselves with, and all other things they could lay hands on, which they imagin’d might be of use for their enterprize. Thus arm’d,” the first mate reported, “they fell in crowds and parcels on our men.”

Nonetheless scholars should not assume that captives inevitably exploited any freedom or latitude granted to them aboard slave ships as an occasion to rebel. When circumstances dictated a need for assistance, captains frequently called on the aid of slaves. Though such overtures sometimes led to disaster, they just as often passed without incident. When all but “three white Boys” among his crew deserted in 1726, the captain of the Ark recruited six men out of his slave cargo to help sail the vessel. Off the coast of Bonny (present-day Nigeria) in 1797, fifteen slaves helped save the James after the vessel ran aground and sprang a leak while trying to clear the shallow waters of the Niger Delta. The “assistance of the blacks” in operating the pumps enabled the exhausted and dispirited crew to keep the ship from sinking. In another case, anticipating hostility from enemy vessels while en route to the Americas aboard the Will in 1799–1800, Captain Hugh Crow trained one of the slaves he had purchased on the African coast to operate the ship’s artillery and praised the slave recruit’s “courageous and expert” perfor-


5 Captain Theophilus Conneau, A Slaver’s Log Book or 20 Years’ Residence in Africa (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1976), 84 (“This luxury”); “James Barbot’s Voyage to the Congo River,” in Donnan, Documents Illustrative of Slave Trade, 1: 451–65 (“pieces of iron,” 457); Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, no. 20207.
mane in a protracted battle that ensued with a French vessel. Slaves made similar contributions to defensive efforts aboard the Mary, which Crow captained in 1806. As the ship approached the West Indies, where French cruisers were likely to attack, Crow put his crew to regular practice “to work the great guns and small arms” and “selected several of the finest of the black men to join them in these exercises, as well as in passing along the powder, and in other minor duties that might become requisite in the hour of action.” For their service the men, “who were very proud of this preferment,” received “a pair of light trowsers, a shirt, and a cap.”

African guardians aboard English slavers, however, did more than just help keep the ship afloat or protect it from attack. Regularly used aboard some (but not all) ships trading on behalf of the English Royal African Company in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, guardians helped discipline and control their fellow captives. The only detailed description of guardians comes from the published account of Captain Phillips’s 1693–94 voyage aboard the Hannibal, where he mentions guardians in association with strategies for preventing shipboard slave insurrections. After describing the small arms, quarterdeck guns, and sentinels necessary for security, Phillips explained the role slave guardians played in his plans for defense against slave revolt aboard the Hannibal: “We have some 30 or 40 gold coast negroes,” he wrote, “which we buy, and are procur’d us there by our factors, to make guardians and overseers of the Whidaw negroes, and sleep among them to keep them from quarrelling; and in order, as well as to give us notice,

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6 William Smith, A New Voyage To Guinea . . . (1747), in W. Jeffrey Bolster, Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 57–59 (“three white Boys,” 58); Hugh Crow, Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool; Comprising a Narrative of His Life, Together with Descriptive Sketches of the Western Coast of Africa . . . (1830; repr., London, 1970), 63–64 (“assistance of the blacks,” 64), 71–72 (“courteous and expert,” 72), 102 (“to work”), 103 (“pair of light trowsers”). Captain Esek Hopkins of the Sally, a Rhode Island ship en route to Antigua from the Gambia River in 1765, reported that “soon after he left the [African] Coast, the Number of his Men being reduced by Sickness, he was obliged to permit some of the Slaves to come upon Deck to assist the People: These Slaves contrived to release the others, and the whole rose upon the People, and endeavoured to get Possession of the Vessel; but was happily prevented by the Captain and his Men, who killed, wounded and forced overboard, Eighty of them, which obliged the rest to submit.” See “News Items relating to Slave Trade, 1765,” in Donnan, Documents Illustrative of Slave Trade, 3: 213. For records on Hopkins, the captain of the Sally, as well as records about the James, the Will, and the Mary, see Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, nos. 36299, 81973, 84028, 82538. For other examples of slaves who turned requests for their assistance into opportunities to revolt, see Eltis, Rise of African Slavery, 233. On the particular shipboard collectivism produced by confrontations between man and nature (or other external threats), see Marcus Rediker, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750 (Cambridge, 1987), 94, 154, 243.
if they can discover any caballing or plotting among them, which trust they will discharge with great diligence.” The guardians also “take care to make the negroes scrape the decks where they lodge every morning very clean,” he continued, “to eschew any distempers that may engender from filth and nastiness.” Finally, their service as spies and disciplinarians came with a means to enforce their rule. “When we constitute a guardian,” Phillips explained, “we give him a cat of nine tails as a badge of his office, which he is not a little proud of, and will exercise with great authority.”

Additional documentation about the use of slave guardians aboard English ships comes from records produced by officials and employees of the Royal African Company: letters of instruction to ship commanders, correspondence between the company’s London headquarters and agents stationed on the African coast, and the account books prepared by the latter. These documents confirm that guardians were bought, not hired, personnel who would be sold in the same American markets as their shipboard charges. The English use of slave guardians entailed something distinct, in other words, from the employ of free black sailors or slave mariners recruited in American or African Atlantic ports.

The available records also leave no doubt that slave guardians were linked to the exigencies of social control within the confines of the slave ship. Associating slave guardians with shipboard safety, the records affirm the tenor of Phillips’s account yet do not specify precisely what that safety entailed. With the company’s employees having little reason to elaborate on a phenomenon whose rationale was self-evident (to them), the elusive figure of the slave guardian thus appears in these materials with sufficient regularity to confirm his or her existence but rarely in the kind of detail that would further enlarge understanding of his or her role aboard the ship.


8 Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 51–52. See also Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, Wis., 1988). Miller found that on ships plying the routes between Angola and Brazil in the eighteenth century, “captains customarily hired as nurses and surgeons African healers who could understand the slaves’ languages and, no doubt, also act as spies” (ibid., 409–10 [quotation, 409]). Miller believes these African slave ship workers were not purchased as part of the cargo being shipped but rather were “enlisted in Brazil, either as slaves trained by the merchants/shippers, or hired on from the Afro-Brazilian communities in the seaports there” (personal communication with author, September 2002). On the “unusual” Brazilian “use of slave sailors in international shipping,” including ships plying the slave trade routes linking Brazilian and African ports, see Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford, Eng., 1986), 76–77.
Slave ship guardians probably benefited from material perquisites that accompanied their status, perhaps receiving more food and water rations than their charges and enjoying other advantages in the daily rhythms of life aboard ship. In general practice, for example, male captives boarded slave ships with wrists or ankles bound by iron shackles that were removed only gradually once the ocean crossing was underway and the African coast disappeared from view; presumably, guardians were permitted to forgo the pain and indignity of shackles once aboard ship, since their duties required that they enjoy freedom from physical restraint if not full freedom of movement within the ship. Guardian status perhaps buffered the most extreme poverty and deprivation during the Middle Passage, putting some distance between the guardians' degradation and the still-more-excessive suffering of the larger body of captives.

Entrusted to people who were themselves part of the slave cargo, the guardian's position could embolden those who held it and therefore could, and arguably should, have functioned as a springboard for subversion aboard seventeenth-century English ships. Yet it appears that this practice, which could have produced rebel leaders, did not do so. The use of slave guardians as a regular custom and one explicitly associated with safety is indication enough that it was deemed effective. Indeed guardians apparently were not involved in any of the 383 revolts in a compiled data set documenting uprisings aboard slavers.9 The confident presumption that guardians would be allies rather than adversaries for the duration of the ocean crossing was well founded. It seems that guardians used their position exactly as English traders intended: against other slaves and rarely if ever against their maritime captors.

Small advantages held large meaning in the impoverished setting of the slave ship. Something more than the material perquisites guardian slaves may have enjoyed, however, should have been necessary to foster the reliable support to shipboard security that would justify a captain's confidence in their loyalty. After all, at any moment during the ocean crossing people appointed to the role could choose to make alternate use of their position, transforming themselves into dangerous and deadly adversaries. As a planned and deliberate approach to shipboard social control, the use of slave guardians seems counterintuitive given what scholars think they know about the nature of power aboard the slave ship.

Eltis has outlined one approach to understanding slave guardians, focusing on the apparent deliberate mixing of ethnic groups achieved by

pairing guardians from one African region with slave cargoes drawn from another, which in his view produced an effective political division. Eltis concludes that “these differences were important to Europeans precisely because they were important to Africans.” We should not assume an axiomatic relationship between ethnic plurality and a politics of ethnic difference. More specifically, one cannot assume that ethnic difference produced sufficient political division among the enslaved to guarantee the safety that the guardians were meant to secure during the Atlantic crossing. Tensions may indeed have prevailed between captives from the Gold Coast and others from the Bight of Benin, yet tensions among slaves, whether ethnically based or otherwise, do not explain the central relationship between the guardians and the ship captains and crews they served, on which the guardian system turned. To frame the issue this way begs more questions than it answers.

Exploring the guardian system involves trying to understand both sides of the relationship at the heart of this unusual practice: how did ship captains who used slave guardians and the African captives who served in that capacity understand the role? Evidence suggests that the seventeenth-century English guardian system had antecedents in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iberoatlantic system. In an Atlantic world dominated by the seventeenth-century emergence of a Caribbean market demanding unlimited supplies of slave labor, guardians were engaged in a struggle to continue a category of African maritime agency rooted in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century precedents. The guardians, therefore, elusive as they are in the documentary record, reveal an important contest regarding African and European understandings of slavery in the early modern Atlantic arena.

The earliest extant reference to the use of guardians aboard English ships concerns the ten slaves put aboard the Vine “for Guardians &ca.” when that vessel anchored before Cape Coast Castle (in present-day Ghana) in September 1679 (Figure I). Because the Royal African Company intended to profit from their sale in the American colonies, the ten slaves entered into the castle’s journal of accounts as cargo for which the captain, Andrew Branfill, was required to sign a receipt before proceeding to Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra, where the remainder of his human cargo came aboard.  

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10 Eltis, Rise of African Slavery, 244.
Atlantic Africa in the era of the slave trade. Drawn by Rebecca Wrenn. A color version is available on http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/64.4/smallwood.html.
Evidence of the use of guardians is available for twenty-four voyages undertaken by the Royal African Company from 1679 to 1705. In all but one case, guardians came aboard while ships traded on the Windward and Gold coasts (present-day Liberia and Ivory Coast and present-day Ghana, respectively), and nearly all the vessels obtained the major part of their slave cargoes at Arda or Whydah (towns in present-day Benin) in the Bight of Benin. Other evidence suggests the use of slave guardians was in fact more widespread. In May 1687 a Royal African Company accountant reported that agents at Cape Coast Castle had regularly failed to obtain bills of lading for guardians put aboard the Royal African Company’s ships, causing company officials in London to complain of being “uncertaine of our business.” Company officials advised that agents at the castle “ought to Remedy” the problem “by taking bills of Loading and by marking [branding] the Guardians.”

If guardian slaves sometimes boarded English ships having been spared the sting of the branding iron, as this language suggests, scholars may have another clue about the benefits that could accrue to those assigned to the role. Yet if branding guardians was the solution, the line separating guardians from other captives aboard English ships in the seventeenth century was exceedingly tenuous.

The economic substance of the officials’ concern is made apparent by their further observation that agents at Cape Coast “deliver[ed]” guardians “to almost all Ships that goe to Arda &ca.” The Bight of Benin was the single largest supplier of African slaves in the last four decades of the seventeenth century and produced one-third of English

12 Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, May 3, 1687, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 50: fol. 38. For a ship whose guardians did not come aboard on the Windward or Gold coasts, see the Return, whose captain, William Reeves, received guardians at the Royal African Company factory on York Island in the Sherbro River (Sierra Leone) before proceeding to the Bight of Biafra to complete his cargo. See Royal African Company to Thomas Corker, York Island, Oct. 16, 1694, ibid., fol. 157; Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, no. 15016. The ships with guardians that did not continue their slaving in the Bight of Benin are the Return, Capt. Andrew Branfill’s Vine, and Capt. John Soane’s Jeffrey, whose slave cargoes came from the Bight of Biafra; and Capt. Edward Daniel’s Mediterranean, whose slave cargo came from Angola. “Arda” and “Ardra” were among the numerous spellings used to refer to the Allada kingdom in the Bight of Benin. See Robin Law, The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society (Oxford, Eng., 1991), 22, 118–19; Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, nos. 9657, 14909. In the seventeenth century, the Royal African Company used the phrase Windward Coast to refer to area west of the Gold Coast, from roughly Cape Mount to Cape Three Points (present-day Liberia and Ivory Coast). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the phrase also designated parts of Sierra Leone. On the varied uses of the phrase, see Adam Jones and Marion Johnson, “Slaves from the Windward Coast,” Journal of African History 21, no. 1 (1980): 17–34, esp. 21.
slave exports from Africa during that time. The threat of lost revenue and financial uncertainty therefore was real. Estimates suggest more than 120 ships outfitted by the Royal African Company in the last quarter of the seventeenth century slaved at the Bight of Benin, meaning the number of slaves who may have boarded those vessels on the Gold Coast as undocumented guardians is substantial.  

The Royal African Company hired most of the ships it employed to transport slaves from Africa to the Americas, meaning most English slaving voyages in the late seventeenth century began with a contractual agreement (charter party) between the company and a syndicate of shipowners, which generally included the ship's captain. Perhaps in response to the accounting discrepancies identified in May 1687, the Royal African Company soon thereafter began to include reference to guardians in the summary “Instructions” delivered to captains hired for slaving voyages to the African coast. The first such reference appeared in the instructions prepared for Captain Robert Cowley in July 1687. “Itt is for your safety that wee order you in Charterparty to take in 30 Gold Coast Negroes for Guardians,” read the instructions delivered to Cowley at the outset of his voyage in command of the Hannah. Likewise he was ordered to “Signe bills of Lading att Cabo Corsoe [Cape Coast] for the 30 Negroes” he would receive as guardians, consigning these slaves to the company's agents in Barbados together with the four hundred slaves he was to buy at Whydah. The instructions presented to Edmond Bathurne, captain of the Elizabeth, in August 1687 ordered him to purchase “twenty Negroes for Your Guards to the other Negroes,” a directive explained again as a measure taken for the captain's “safety.” Indeed this language linking guardians and shipboard security was a standard formulation in letters of instruction to captains who would be using slave guardians. Other phrases commonly found in these directives made the same point. “If you meet with Stout Negroes,” read instructions to the captain of the Mary, for example, “you may buy to ye Number of Tenn for your Guardians.”

13 Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, May 5, 1687, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 50: fol. 38v. On the volume of slave exports from the Bight of Benin, see Eltis, Rise of African Slavery, 166 (table 7–1); Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, query with the following parameters: twenty-five-year period <1676–1700>; region where slaves embarked <Bight of Benin>; first owner of venture <Royal African Company>.

At least a portion of these slaves referenced in the records as “Gold Coast guardians” were expected to come more precisely from the area of the Gold Coast “windward,” or west, of Cape Coast Castle (see Figure I). When ship captain Abednigoe Strutt set out on a slaving voyage to the Bight of Benin aboard the Expedition in 1687, his instructions were to spend forty days to the windward of Cape Three Points, “where by contract with the Company,” he reported, “I am allowed to buy 20 Gold Coast slaves, for Guardians, and 230 chests of corn.” After the company put aboard the ship “Several Cargoes of Goods which you are to deliver & dispose of as hereafter Directed,” Strutt was ordered:

Therefore with the first opportunity of Wind that God Shall Send Sett Sail & apply as nere to Cape Mount on the Coast of Africa as your Shipp can conveniently come where & att all places of Trade on the Graine Coast Quaqua [Ivory] Coast & Gold Coast except att our Factorys before you arrive att Cape Tres Pontes you are to use you best Skill and endeavors to Dispose of the Cargoe of Goods here laden for our and your Owners Accounts . . . for Gold Elephants Teeth Mallagetta & what else is Vendible in Europe & 20 Negroes for your Guards to the other Negroes & when you have Disposed of your Cargoe of such part thereof as you shall find will sell in the Time Agreed for your stay in those parts then Sail to our Factory att Cabo Corsoe Castle and render our Three Cheife Merchants there a true account of the Disposall of the Said Cargoe.15

you meet”). On the Hannah, see also Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, July 5, 1687, ibid., vol. 50: fol. 41; Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, no. 9832. On the Elizabeth, ibid., no. 9834. On the Mary, ibid., no. 14982. The charter party contract outlined the mutual obligations of both parties and prescribed such details as “the size of the crew, the number of passengers, cargo to be carried on each stage of the voyage, places of lading and discharge and the time to be spent at each, and the freight charges.” See Davies, Royal African Company, 194–95, 197 (quotation), 201; Ralph Davis, The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (London, 1962), 166–70. No copies of the Royal African Company’s charter party contracts have survived in the documentary record. The Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 61, includes instructions for twenty-one voyages that mention guardians. Instructions for voyages undertaken in the years 1700–1719 are collected in vols. 62–63; I have not found specific references to guardians anywhere in these later volumes. For other examples of language identifying guardians with safety, see instructions to captains in command of the Dolphin, Dragon, Sherbrow, Henry and William, Princess, Princess Ann, and East India Merchant in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 61: fols. 46, 48, 49v, 51–51v, 53v, 61, 63v, 68v.

15 Abednigoe Strutt, aboard the Expedition, to Cape Coast Castle, Feb. 20, 1688, in Rawlinson MSS, C747, fol. 183v, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Eng. (“Gold
If captains were not able to buy the stipulated number of guardians before arrival at Cape Coast Castle, as was often the case, the company’s agents there were to supply the difference. In a notice announcing his arrival on the coast, Strutt reminded agents that if he had not obtained his stipulated number of guardians when he reached the castle, “you are to provide me withal.” Likewise in 1688 John Mascombe, captain of the Mary, had orders to purchase up to ten slaves “for guardians” while trading on the “Graine, Quaqua or Gold Coast” as far as Takoradi or to make up that number at Cape Coast Castle before continuing to Whydah for the rest of his cargo. James Crookshanke and Thomas Shirley received orders to follow the same itinerary in their commands of the Princess and the East India Merchant, respectively. Crookshanke was to receive sixty guardians on the coast west of Takoradi and at the castle, and Shirley was to obtain fifty. Both would then finish at Whydah and depart with completed cargoes of 550 slaves each, one destined for Jamaica; the other, Barbados.

This trading pattern, which assumed guardians would come from the Gold Coast (and particularly from the western part of that coast) and would police captives obtained primarily from the neighboring Bight of Benin, must be understood in the broader context of the organization of English slaving voyages in the late seventeenth century. Shipowners seeking to maximize their investment in a trading voyage to Africa often required more business than the slave trade alone could supply. K. G. Davies found that slave prices on the African coast before 1689 “[were] such that a ship from England destined to take in 450 negroes could carry the goods needed to purchase that number and still be much less than fully loaded.” The Royal African Company addressed this concern by allowing shipowners to participate in the lucrative trade for malagueta pepper, ivory, and gold along the stretch of coast windward of Cape Coast Castle. Because the commodity trade for gold was by far the most lucrative branch of English commerce in Africa in the...
seventeenth century, this share in the windward trade compensated for the limited value of slaves relative to gold and accounted for a significant portion of shipowners’ earnings on voyages to Africa.\footnote{Davies, *Royal African Company*, 200 (quotation).} Sending slave ships to trade first along the portion of coast windward of Cape Coast Castle thus served to give shipowners a secondary revenue stream; not incidentally, the practice also supported the company’s efforts to sustain the circulation of trade goods and information between London and its African headquarters at Cape Coast.

As a result most of the slave ships the company sent to Africa in the seventeenth century first visited the Grain Coast (in present-day Liberia), Ivory Coast, and westernmost area of the Gold Coast to dispense windward cargoes for malagueta pepper, ivory, and gold, whether the procurement of their human cargo was to take place on the Gold Coast or, more likely, in one of the three major slaving regions further east and south: the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, or West-Central Africa. Vessels hired by the Royal African Company typically departed England laden with three distinct trading cargoes: a cargo of goods and provisions consigned to the agents at Cape Coast Castle, a slave cargo made up of trade goods required to buy captives at the ship’s designated port of slave purchase, and a windward cargo of goods to buy pepper, ivory, and gold along some seven hundred miles of coastline between Cape Mount and Cape Coast Castle. Instructions issued to Captain Thomas Woodfine for his voyage aboard the *Sarah Bonadventure* in December 1685 illustrate the standard directive. “With ye first good Opportunity that god shall send, sett sail and apply as near to Cape Mount on ye said Coast as your Shipp can conveniently come, where and at all Places of Trade on ye Graine, Quaqua and Gold Coasts (except at our Factoryes) before you arrive att Cabo Corsoe, you are to use your best skill and endeavour to dispose of ye said Cargoe for Gold, Elephants Teeth, Mallagetta or what elce is vendible in Europe.”\footnote{Instructions to Captain Thomas Woodfine, Dec. 10, 1685, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 61: fol. 3. The practice of sending slave ships to trade first on the Grain Coast, Ivory Coast, or western Gold Coast is clearly evident in the correspondence between the company’s officials in London and their counterparts stationed at the castle. See for example Henry Greenhill, Cape Coast Castle, to Royal African Company, Jan. 15, 1683, ibid., vol. 16: fol. 53; Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, Mar. 22, 1687, ibid., vol. 50: fol. 35; Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, July 17, 1688, ibid., fol. 69. The account books for Cape Coast Castle also frequently note receipt of the remains of windward cargoes from ships.
Though the windward trade primarily focused on pepper, ivory, and gold, slaves began to appear for sale as ships approached the Gold Coast. For example Peter Blake, captain of the *James*, encountered traders selling gold, ivory, and also slaves when he reached Assini, on the western perimeter of the Gold Coast, in August 1675 after nearly three months of trading for ivory, camwood, and malagueta pepper along the Grain and Ivory coasts. While trading in the vicinity of Assini during the next ten days, Blake purchased seven hundred pounds of ivory as well as gold and at least eight slaves.19

The difficulties the English encountered in sustaining a regular flow of slave cargoes from the Gold Coast in the seventeenth century also help explain the specific geography of the guardian system. Slaves from the Gold Coast region had a favorable reputation among English Caribbean buyers, which was reflected in the market by the high prices planters were willing to pay for Gold Coast slaves. The Royal African Company therefore was eager to maintain a regular flow of slave exports from the region. The company’s efforts were stymied, however, by the interplay of high prices and intermittent supplies. Local demand, competition from other European nations, and the disruptive effect of war contributed to high prices as well as sporadic and unpredictable supplies of slaves on the Gold Coast.20

The opposite scenario held at the neighboring Bight of Benin, where slaves were cheaper and available in prodigious supply, which offered an economic rationale for putting contingents of Gold Coast captives aboard ships outfitted to complete their slaving at Whydah. Ordering ships to buy slaves on the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin was a second-best strategy that anticipated the difficulty of obtaining full preparing for the slaving stage of the voyage. See Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vols. 365–74. See also Davies, *Royal African Company*, 200; Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*, 294–95.


cargoes entirely on the Gold Coast within the limited time available to complete the task. “Could you have given us encouragement we would have sent before now severall ships only for Gold Coast Negroes, but you never give us encouragement to depend on any number except they have also a Ardra Cargoe,” read a missive to the company’s agents at Cape Coast Castle. In another piece of correspondence from London, company officials plainly declared that Whydah “is onely our remedie for want of Gold Coast Negroes to fill up such ships, who [would] have beene with you could you otherwise supply them altho at higher prizes.” Presumably, the company was willing to entertain the higher cost of slaves from the Gold Coast if only the agents there could produce enough captives to fill their ships in a timely fashion. Rather than run the risk of losing crew and slaves to mortality and accrue expenses that came with prolonged time spent on the African coast, captains and investors preferred to receive the fewer, readily obtainable Gold Coast captives and quickly continue to the neighboring Bight of Benin to finish their slaving.

Limitations of the documentary record make it impossible to know how many captains recruited these Gold Coast slaves to be shipboard guardians. Of fifty-four voyages dispatched with orders to trade on the Gold Coast or in the Bight of Benin in the years 1686–99, one-third included instructions to obtain guardians on the Gold Coast. In some cases captains received instructions to buy Gold Coast guardians and proceed directly to the Bight of Benin to finish their slaving. Alternately, ship captains sailed with instructions to seek a full cargo of slaves on the Gold Coast and with a proviso: if the agents at Cape Coast Castle were unable to supply a ship’s full complement in a timely manner, they were to supply Gold Coast slaves as guardians, adjust the ship’s cargo of trade goods accordingly, and promptly send the vessel on to the Bight of Benin. The company hoped the China Merchant would be dispatched from the Gold Coast fully slaved, for example, but if agents at Cape Coast Castle anticipated difficulty supplying the ship’s intended cargo of 450 captives, they were to give the captain “a speedy dispatch for Whydah” and “for what Negroes you supply him with for Guardians &ca. take from him a proportionable part of his Negroe Cargoe.”


22 On the China Merchant, see Instructions to Captain Henry Roberts, Dec. 6, 1692, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 61, fols. 101v–103 (quota-
The Gold Coast trading centers west of Cape Coast Castle were involved primarily in the export of gold in the late seventeenth century, whereas the region's growing exports of slaves flowed through ports east of the castle. The number of slaves purchased while ships traded windward of the castle was not large. Agents at the castle noted in February 1686, for instance, that the captain of the *John Bonadventure* had purchased two men and seven women during his windward trade, and the captain of the *Mary* reportedly obtained eleven men and five women during windward trade. Significantly, their recruitment from among slaves purchased on the western part of the Gold Coast meant guardians came from communities distinct from those that supplied most slave cargoes obtained on the Gold Coast, the latter coming predominantly from points east of Cape Coast. Moreover captains were not unwilling to obtain additional portions of their slave cargo on the Gold Coast before sailing to Arda or Whydah. After agents at the castle put guardians aboard the *Phineas and Margaret* in November 1680, they sent the captain to continue his slaving on the Gold Coast with instructions to “buy any along the Coast as he goes along till he comes to Arda.” In November 1690 Captain Shirley’s orders aboard the *East India Merchant* were to get “50 Negroes as Guardians” at Cape Coast Castle “and as many more as they have or can procure towards compleating your complement of 650 Negroes.”

There was also a gender dimension to the guardian system. Three of the ten guardians put aboard the *Vine* in 1679, for instance, were women. Like the fourteen women received alongside sixteen “very good men” at Cape Coast Castle “for Guardians and Cankey women” aboard the *Phineas and Margaret*, the female guardians aboard the *Vine* probably...
assisted in food preparation. It seems that guardians nearly always included a substantial number of women (Table I). In a sample of nine voyages, six captains received 50 percent or more of the company-stipulated number of guardians while at Cape Coast. Women were included in all but one of the groups, and each of the four ships in the sample that received all or nearly all their guardians at the castle obtained groups that were 30 to 50 percent female. Even allowing for the women counted among those designated guardians, the stipulated numbers are significant, putting upward of a dozen men in position to enjoy special privileges and powers aboard English slave ships.

The decision to recruit captives as guardians aboard English ships in the seventeenth century probably resulted from charter party negotiations between the Royal African Company and the owners of the ships they hired for voyages to the African coast. Writing to Cape Coast Castle, officials in London explained that the company was “obliged” to supply fifty guardians for Captain Shirley’s 1690 voyage aboard the *East India Merchant*. In 1694 officials likewise wrote to inform the agent at Sherbrow (in present-day Sierra Leone) of the Royal African Company’s “promise” to supply the captain of the *Returne* with twenty to thirty slaves “which he hath desired for Guardians . . . in part of the complement he stands obliged to take in at the Bight [Bight of Biafra].”

It is not difficult to understand why English trading interests were happy to receive additional assistance in the form of guardians from the Gold Coast. The value of Gold Coast slaves in American markets made guardians commercially attractive. Indeed the problem for the Royal African Company was ensuring that the company, and not captains seeking private gain, benefited from the sale of guardians to American buyers. Moreover astute captains (and the larger body of shipowners they represented) knew that after trading on the Windward and Gold coasts for several months, disease and death threatened crew numbers by the time the major part of their slave cargoes came aboard at the Bight of Benin, Bight of Biafra, or Angola. In such circumstances the additional strength guardians supplied could be a worthwhile advantage.

24 Nathaniel Bradley, Cape Coast Castle, to Royal African Company, Nov. 8, 1680, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 1: fol. 98 (quotation); Cape Coast Castle Accounts, ibid., vol. 365: fol. 11v (regarding the Vine). “Cankey” was the Akan term for the boiled corn mush that was a common food staple in Gold Coast communities. See Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 44. For other references to women’s shipboard employment as food preparers, see Cape Coast Castle Accounts, October 1686, ibid., vol. 371: fol. 87; Cape Coast Castle Accounts, November 1686, ibid., vol. 372: fol. 70; Cape Coast Castle Accounts, April 1687, ibid., fol. 106.

Captains sailing to the Bight of Benin in particular also knew that this region was notorious for its heavy surf and that time spent there would put a heavy burden on their crewmen, whether from the strenuous demands of work in the rough waters or from time spent idly waiting for unnavigable conditions to subside. When Captain Thomas Phillips traded there aboard the Hannibal in May 1694, the ship had already been on the African coast five months and passed two months more slaving at Whydah. Much of that time, Phillips waited for good travel conditions between ship and shore. Because it was the rainy season, the sea “chanc’d to be one time so grown and exceeding boisterous, that our canoes were not able to bring us any goods ashore for 18 days.” A similar situation explained the difficulties Captain Woodfine encountered there aboard the Sarah Bonadventure in 1686. The company’s factor at Whydah reported telling Woodfine on his arrival that “if please God weather permitted he should have his slaves in 10 or 12 days at farthest.” The weather did not cooperate and Woodfine was “everyday standing out on his quarterdeck fretting that the slaves could not be gott on board.” The delay was long enough that Woodfine succumbed to illness. “If it had pleased God the sea would have permitted he had had all his slaves on board and ready to sail by that time he fell first sick,” the factor wrote.²⁶


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaves Intended</th>
<th>Guardians Intended</th>
<th>Guardians Received at CCC Men</th>
<th>Guardians Received at CCC Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolphin</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sherbrow</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedition</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry and William</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vols. 61, 659.
These advantages meant nothing, however, unless captains could feel assured of the safety they ascribed to slave guardians, especially since the strategy was never without great risk. Neither their value as commodities in Atlantic markets nor their service aboard Atlantic slave ships explains the special disciplinary role guardians from the Gold Coast were invited to play aboard ship during the ocean crossing. Because English captains recognized the potential risks involved and yet used members of slave cargoes as guardians, it is useful to try to better understand how and when the role of guardian may have originated and what duties guardians performed.

Guardian had widespread usage in the early modern European maritime context. The term is found in Spanish maritime dictionaries, defined as “the individual who took care of the arms and hold of a ship.” Guardian appears also in a sixteenth-century account of a voyage aboard a Portuguese East India ship, where it is equated with quartermaster, a title also linked to, among other things, the activities of the ship’s hold. Relatedly, maritime historian Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaina identifies the “guardián” aboard sixteenth-century Spanish vessels as a “boatswain’s helper” whose position put him in charge of the ship’s lowest-ranked crewmen, making the guardian a constant disciplinarian as well. The “guardián,” writes Pérez-Mallaina, was responsible for “maintaining discipline among the apprentices and pages, the youngest, and therefore potentially the most turbulent, members of the crew,” these latter being “the ones who most frequently received the ‘caresses’ of the boatswain and the guardians, who were the fierce executors of orders from the superior officers.”27

These scattered references are not sufficient to suggest a specific historical relationship linking use of the title guardian across time and varied Atlantic maritime settings. They do not, in other words, demonstrate an etymological chain connecting seventeenth-century usage aboard English slave ships to more generic fifteenth- and sixteenth-century antecedents. Nonetheless, their shared association with the tasks and personnel involved in the management of ships’ holds and the care of cargoes therein merits attention because these concerns were universally important to investors in all arenas of Atlantic maritime commerce.

Whether it carried captive people, gold, or other commodities, the merchant ship’s hold was first and foremost a floating storehouse of property, its contents embodying the greatest part of the value of a trading voyage. The emergence of a maritime commercial arena in the Atlantic in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was accompanied by the development of shipboard duties and personnel responsible for managing merchant property as distinct from the seafaring and navigational work of managing ships. In the specific context of maritime commerce, handling merchant property involved overseeing cargo stowage in the hold, operating the ship’s boat, and supervising the skilled labor required in the lading and unlading of cargoes.

Shipboard responsibilities associated with handling cargoes also involved protecting, or guarding, merchant property during its time aboard ship, which usually meant controlling access to the hold. Aboard the caravels that carried trade goods and gold between Lisbon and the African coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, the Portuguese crown required the use of “guards” who went into the ships “before anything is put on board” to “conduct a thorough search below until nothing remains to be examined.” Thereafter they were to “remain in the caravel, and they are not allowed to leave it either by night or by day,” the “below deck” stowage space of the ship being, from that time, “entirely the responsibility of the guards.” When shipping arrived at São Jorge da Mina Castle, “no matter what the provenance of the arriving

(Greenwich, Eng., 1978), pt. 2: 235. For quartermaster, the OED gives the following example of seventeenth-century usage: “The quarter Masters hath the charge of the hold for stowage, rommageing, and trimming the shippe; and of their squadrons for their watch.” The quotation comes from Capt. John Smith, An Accidence or The Path-way to Experience. Necessary for all Young Sea-men, or those that are desirous to goe to Sea, briefly shewing the Phrases, Offices, and Words of Command, Belonging to the Building, Ridging, and Sayling, a Man of Warre; And how to manage a Fight at Sea . . . (London, 1626), 5. See also William Falconer, Falconer’s Marine Dictionary (1780), A Reprint (1769; repr., New York, 1970), s.v. “Quarter-master,” 226; Charles A. Le Guin, “Sea Life in Seventeenth-Century England,” American Neptune 27, no. 2 (April 1967): 111–34. Le Guin writes, “The quartermaster’s job was to care for the hold, to keep it in order, and to prepare it for stowing” (ibid., 113).
vessel, whether it was a provision ship from Lisbon or a slave vessel from
the nearby island of São Tomé,” a similar protocol accompanied the
unloading of ships.28

Slave ships shared with other merchant vessels a concern for protect-
ing merchant property. Surveillance aboard the slave ship was directed
most immediately not to spatial logistics or the problem of theft but
rather to the daily tasks associated with preserving perishable goods and
maintaining control over those made desperate by their anguish and suf-
fering. If the greatest threat to the value of a cargo of gold or other
goods was a sailor’s thieving hands or careless stowing, the greatest
threat to the value of a human cargo was disease and death. This cargo,
Furthermore, had the capacity for self-destruction; the slaves’ own will
could liquidate their value as property in an instant by a single act of
rebellious self-assertion. In the context of the slave ship, the surveillance
involved in guarding merchant property was a matter of social control.

Little is known about the management of human cargoes in the first
150 years of Atlantic slaving, and thus strategies for handling the threat of
shipboard rebellion are a mystery. Nor is it possible to know whether per-
soneel called guardians were responsible for social control aboard
fifteenth- and sixteenth-century slave ships. Since Portuguese traders
relied on the assistance of black maritime workers in all branches of
commerce along the African coast, it would be surprising if tasks related
to the management of human cargoes were not assigned to African per-
soneel aboard ships in the carreira dos escravos, or slave route, in the late
fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Aboard sixteenth-century slave
ships, captains could not demand absolute subordination from their
crewmen or rely on weaponry to make their crews equal to the strength
of the slaves they held captive; therefore, African personnel arguably
were better suited to disciplinary tasks in the slave holds than were their
European counterparts.

Presumably, a preventive strategy was not only the best defense
against slave insurrection but also arguably the only reliable defense.
Maintaining a minimum threshold of health among European crewmen

(London, 1942), 1: 99–100 (“before anything,” 99); John Vogt, Portuguese Rule on the
that in a 1508 crown document issuing revised orders about Portuguese trade to
Africa and India, “the portion pertaining to the guarding of the Mina caravels was
among” the document’s “longest sections” (ibid., 34–35). See also Clarence Henry
Haring’s classic study of maritime relationships between Spain and the American
colonies, describing in great detail the specialized offices that came to be associated
with the “visitations or inspections” required before trading vessels departed Spain’s
Atlantic ports at Cadiz and San Lucar as well as on their return. (Haring, Trade and
Navigation between Spain and the Indies [Gloucester, Mass., 1964], 287–92 [quota-
tion, 287]).
was a challenge of enormous proportions throughout the era of Atlantic
slaving. Beyond the inevitably substantial loss of able-bodied men to the
unfamiliar disease environment of the tropics, the Africa trade’s reputa-
tion as a death trap for European seamen made it a challenge to recruit
skilled sailors. Voyages to the Niger Delta region were “unpopular
among the Portuguese sailors because of the health hazards involved,”
for example, and their disdain meant that the demand for slaves at São
Jorge da Mina was handled mostly by small caravelões stationed on the
African coast; captains of full-size caravels based in Lisbon preferred to
avoid this branch of Atlantic commerce.29

Moreover the inglorious manual labor associated with the ordinary
seaman’s life gave sailors extremely low status in sixteenth-century
Iberian culture. Menial tasks such as “clean[ing] the deck” or guarding
convicts and slaves were the most despised of all, the former deemed
appropriate only for lowly grumetes and ship’s boys and the latter bring-
ing low regard to the sailors assigned to such duties aboard galley ships.
Supervision of African slaves must have been considered among the
most degrading of shipboard assignments for Iberian seamen. Maritime
labor relationships being more medieval than modern in the fifteenth
and sixteenth centuries, “neither the shipowners nor those who repre-
sented them had entirely free hands in exercising an arbitrary discipline
on the sailors for their own economic interests.”30 Iberian sea captains
who coerced crewmen into work deemed unacceptably abusive of their
health or their esteem did so at the risk of fomenting dissent and erosion
of their authority.

Most importantly, however, enough is known about the develop-
ment of weaponry in early modern Europe to conclude that Iberian sea
captains in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries faced the challenges
posed by human cargoes with more limited material resources than their
counterparts in the late seventeenth century and beyond. A variety of
weapons exploiting gunpowder technology’s destructive power were in
regular use aboard European ships by the commencement of Atlantic
slave trafficking, and it is likely that large cannon may have been used

29 Ivana Elbl, “The Volume of the Early Atlantic Slave Trade, 1450–1521,”
Journal of African History 38, no. 1 (1997): 31–75, esp. 44–45 (quotation, 45). See also
A. F. C. Ryder, “An Early Portuguese Trading Voyage to the Forcados River,”
300–321; Ryder, Benin and the Europeans, 1485–1897 (Harlow, Eng., 1969), 47–53;
Robert Garfield, A History of São Tomé Island, 1470–1655: The Key to Guinea (San

30 David Goodman, Spanish Naval Power, 1589–1665: Reconstruction and Defeat,
1589–1665 (Cambridge, 1997), 242 (“clean[ing] the deck”); Pérez-Mallaña, Spain’s
Men of the Sea, 210 (“neither the shipowners”).
aboard early slave ships to thwart rebellion by their ability to startle and frighten slaves in the same way large artillery would be used in the later period. But the “exchange of human energy for inanimate power” that guns afforded did not reliably transform the arming of men (as distinct from the arming of ships) in the maritime arena until the seventeenth century. Only with the development of guns that could be handheld, fired rapidly, and trained on fast-moving human targets with some measure of precision did gunpowder technology reliably enlarge the power of combatants engaged in man-to-man fighting in the enclosed terrain of a ship’s deck. In the first 150 years of Atlantic slaving, crews confronted with rebellious slaves had recourse only to the conventional hand arms—knives, cutlasses, bills, and other edged weapons—typically found on ships (missile weapons such as the crossbow being the tools not of sailors but of specially trained soldiers). The prospect of slave rebellion put crewmen already weakened in number and force by the inevitable ravages of sickness and death in a close contest with those they held captive.

Armed with cutlasses and other edged weapons, a ship’s crew might well put down a shipboard uprising, particularly if actual slave combat-

31 Carlo M. Cipolla, Guns and Sails in the Early Phase of European Expansion, 1400–1700 (London, 1965), 75–89 (quotation, 81); Davis, Rise of the English Shipping Industry, 44–45. On the development of gunpowder technology in early modern Europe generally, see Bert S. Hall, Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe: Gunpowder, Technology, and Tactics (Baltimore, 1997). On the uses of gun technology at sea specifically, see John Francis Guilmartin Jr., Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century (Cambridge, 1974); Ian Friel, The Good Ship: Ships, Shipbuilding, and Technology in England, 1200–1520 (Baltimore, 1995); Goodman, Spanish Naval Power; Jan Glete, Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe (London, 2000), 17–39; Lawrence V. Mott, “Iberian Naval Power, 1000–1650,” in War at Sea in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. John B. Hattendorf and Richard W. Unger (Suffolk, Eng., 2003), 105–18; Francisco Contente Domingues, “The State of Portuguese Naval Forces in the Sixteenth Century,” ibid., 187–97. Portable shoulder- and handheld guns had already appeared in the Iberian Peninsula by the mid-fifteenth century; the capacity to manufacture guns that maximized range, penetrative power, rate of fire, and accuracy, while minimizing weight, complexity, and cost of production, however, did not materialize until the seventeenth century. On the development and use of handguns generally and in early modern maritime settings in particular, see James D. Lavin, A History of Spanish Firearms (London, 1965); Hall, Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe; Glete, Warfare at Sea; Kenneth Chase, Firearms: A Global History to 1700 (Cambridge, 2003), 56–82. Of particular relevance to the utility of firearms aboard slave ships was the means by which guns were loaded and made ready to fire. Early firearms required that handlers ignite the powder with a lighted match. The development of a firelock mechanism for the arquebus (forerunner of the musket) was a significant advance. Though it was “the first type of a self-contained ignition system used on firearms,” it too was unreliable. See Roger C. Smith, Vanguard of Empire: Ships of Exploration in the Age of Columbus (Oxford, Eng., 1993), 154, 160 (quotation); Cipolla, Guns and Sails, 71–72.
ants did not outmatch the number of crewmen available to fight. Such perhaps was the scene when slaves tried to overcome the crew of the Portuguese ship *Fieis de Deus* in 1509 during a voyage from Arguim (an island off the coast of present-day Mauritania) to Lisbon. A "note explaining the loss of thirty broken links of chain" that had been put aboard at Arguim offers the only known details about the incident. "These links were thrown into the sea when the blacks on this ship rose and sought to seize the said ship and to kill the crew; and according to the testimony of the crew were lost as they were thrown by one side at the other during the quelling of the insurrection." Yet events aboard the *Misericordia* in 1532 demonstrated just how thoroughly a determined group of slaves could reverse the trajectory of a slaving voyage. En route from São Tomé to São Jorge da Mina Castle, members of the cargo of 190 slaves "rose up, seized the ship, and murdered the crew save for the ship's pilot and two mariners, who managed to escape in the ship's launch." These three sole "survivors" of the ship's crew somehow reached São Jorge da Mina and gave their account of the event. "but the *Misericordia* and her cargo of free Africans were never heard from again."32 We cannot know the fate of the Africans, but the European outcomes related to the *Misericordia* are certain: loss of the crewmen's lives and its human cargo.

If it was not clear already, the fate of the *Misericordia* in the first decade of regular transatlantic voyages carrying slaves to American markets certainly confirmed the point. The prospect of a slave uprising meant shipboard man-to-man combat with an enemy whose superior numbers and immeasurable desperation might well be decisive. Crew numbers that did not even approach parity with those of the slaves and the absence of the kind of weapons that would even the imbalance meant shipboard control had to be more a social than material function. If captains and their men could not be wholly confident of their ability to defeat slaves in the event of a challenge to their control, social relationships of domination were necessarily the leading defense against the disaster of a slave uprising.33

If black personnel functioned as guardians aboard early Iberian slave ships, their tasks would have been cognate to those of African auxiliary


33 A license granted by the Spanish crown in 1518 to deliver four thousand slaves to the Spanish American colonies was the first instance allowing transport of slaves directly from Africa to the New World. See "Permission Granted to the Governor of Bresa for Four Thousand Slaves," in Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of Slave Trade*, i: 41–42.
personnel designated by the title grumete, another Iberian maritime term that acquired distinct meanings in the context of Afro-European trade. In broad usage aboard early modern European ships, “grummet” designated the ship’s “boys,” apprentice seamen, or other unskilled personnel to whom fell the most menial shipboard labor. But in the context of fifteenth-century Portuguese maritime exploration of the African coast, grumete came to designate Africans who served as “interpreters, auxiliary seamen, and compradors” in Afro-European commercial relationships. “Once Portuguese caravels attained the Senegal River in the 1440s,” writes George E. Brooks, grumetes “soon became indispensable to European navigators and traders.”

The assistance of African personnel likewise was essential to the functioning of São Jorge da Mina Castle, the Portuguese fortress built on the Gold Coast in 1482. There Afro-European trade depended on two broad categories of locally recruited auxiliary labor. Canoe men, pilots, interpreters, and others drawn from the coastal towns of the region constituted the first group. Either freemen or dependents whose labor were owned by local elites, their hired services were vital to the daily operation of Afro-European trade. The second category of auxiliary personnel was slaves attached to the castle. Imported from elsewhere (primarily from the Bight of Benin and the Grain Coast west of Cape Three Points) and directly controlled by the resident Portuguese traders, they supplied the manual labor required to maintain the fort and assist in tasks such as the lading and unlading of ship cargoes.

All these categories of African labor were themselves involved in the enterprise of commercial slaving. In sixteenth-century Senegambia, African


grumetes worked specifically in the arena of the slave trade, handling many of the tasks associated with collecting and housing human cargoes on the coast and transferring them to Portuguese shipping. Likewise, since European small craft were of limited use in the heavy surf of the African coastline, African canoe men must have been involved in the transfer of slave captives between ship and shore at São Jorge da Mina Castle.36

There would have been little basis for shared social identity between free shipboard personnel recruited on the African coast and the slave cargoes they helped supervise. More to the point, the complexity of systems of slavery in precolonial Africa meant there was no basis for such shared identification between enslaved African shipboard laborers and those designated for maritime export. Slavery in precolonial African societies was not a fixed or universal category of debasement but rather featured diverse and clearly delineated categories of dependent status. Skin color being no reliable or consistent index of status, African slave ship personnel would not necessarily have shared any kind of racial identity with other Africans held captive below deck.37

Portuguese traders also did not have reason to violate the noncaptive status of Africans recruited as shipboard workers. Their dependence on African personnel made such duplicity foolhardy. More importantly, there was no economic motive to push African noncaptive into the Atlantic market for slaves. In the fifteenth century, most African slave exports went to Iberian destinations where their labor was not economically determinative. The development of a sugar industry on São Tomé in the first half of the sixteenth century made that island the largest single importer of African slaves in that period, but demand there and in Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Cape Verde Islands was constrained by limited land area for plantation expansion. Though the Spanish Americas began to import African slaves in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Africans did not become central to colonial economies there until after the middle of the sixteenth century, when the discovery of silver led to the development of a mining industry in Potosí that relied


heavily on the labor of imported African slaves. In the absence of an economic motive, there was nothing to gain by reducing African auxiliary maritime personnel to the status of captives eligible for export and sale in overseas markets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

P. C. Emmer has usefully argued for the importance of an analytic distinction between a “first” Atlantic system dominated by the Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and a “second” system dominated by Dutch and English actors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Distinguished from the “advanced capitalist economics” of the second system that emerged fully formed by the end of the seventeenth century, the first Atlantic system was characterized by uneven, incomplete, and “halfhearted” penetration of the market. “The main differences between these two systems,” he writes, “pertained to the location of their points of economic gravity, their demographic and racial composition, and their organization of trade and investment, as well as to the social fabric.”

By the time Thomas Phillips sailed in command of the Hannibal at the end of the seventeenth century, the dynamics of power in the context of the slave ship had shifted, reflecting the priorities of the second Atlantic system and militating against the shipboard use of African slave personnel such as guardians. European maritime labor relationships had moved away from the late-medieval ethos still much in effect during the “Age of Reconnaissance” toward a modern economic regime in which seamen’s labor was fully subordinated to the interests of merchant capital and its maritime representative (the captain). “No medieval law code,” writes Pérez-Mallaina, “permitted what became common during the eighteenth century: the unrestricted power of the captain to treat his men with extreme cruelty, without the possibility of defense or reciprocity.” The transition was felt with special force aboard the English and Dutch ships that came to dominate Atlantic commercial routes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Comparing Spanish and English maritime culture, for example, Pérez-Mallaina notes that, though sailors and masters were no longer comrades aboard Spanish vessels by the end of

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the sixteenth century, neither could the former be treated with impunity. Aboard English ships, however, the effect of merchant capital was powerfully felt. "The courts of admiralty," Pérez-Mallalana writes, "served fundamentally to sustain the authority of the captains and masters, giving preference to the rights of shipowners and, in the background, to British industry and commerce—to the detriment of the sailors." Edward Barlow, a seventeenth-century seaman who spent a half century in English naval and merchant ships, concurred. "Merchants and owners of ships in England are grown to such a pass nowadays that it is better sailing with any other nation," he observed.40

The introduction of substantially improved weaponry—most notably the small arms that greatly enhanced the power of the individual armed sailor—substantially distinguished the seventeenth-century slave ship from that of its fifteenth- and sixteenth-century predecessor. Improved weapons technology gave ship captains and the merchant investors whose interests they served unprecedented capacity to maintain shipboard security without dependence on personnel recruited on the African coast and despite the continued inevitable loss of European crew during the course of slaving voyages. The portability and reliability of flintlock muskets available by the seventeenth century aided slave ship crews in two ways. Being able to handle guns easily and to reload and discharge them quickly meant that seamen could train guns on human targets and shoot directly at slaves if needed with some measure of precision.

40 J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration and Settlement 1450 to 1650* (Berkeley, Calif., 1981), esp. 123–24; Pérez-Mallalina, *Spain's Men of the Sea*, 192 ("No medieval law code"); 196 ("courts of admiralty"); Edward Barlow, *Barlow's Journal of His Life at Sea in King's Ships, East and West Indiamen and Other Merchantmen from 1659 to 1703*, ed. Basil Lubbock (London, 1934), 1: 83 ("Merchants and owners"). According to Pérez-Mallalina, "Spain was not a republic of merchants in the sixteenth century" and "for that reason, neither the shipowners nor the owners of merchandise succeeded in having their interests defended in total disregard for the rights of the ships' crews." See Pérez-Mallalina, *Spain's Men of the Sea*, 196. See also William McFee, *The Law of the Sea* (Philadelphia, 1950), 49; Rediker, *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 212 n. 19. Notwithstanding criticism of Marcus Rediker's insistence that crewmen were thoroughly subordinated to the needs of merchant capital by the eighteenth century, there is little reason to question the expanded power captains held on behalf of merchant capital, the growing divergence of interests between captains and crews, and the increasingly sharp antagonism between the two groups. In her study of English merchant shipping, Dorothy Burwash notes that the greater equality between commander and crew that prevailed in medieval maritime culture continued to be felt in the early sixteenth century because "there was not as yet an unbridgeable gap between capital and labour." See Burwash, *English Merchant Shipping, 1460–1540* (1947; repr., Devon, Eng., 1969), 65. The key point is that there was such a gap and it was growing steadily during the course of the seventeenth century. See Daniel Vickers et al., "Roundtable: Marcus Rediker," *International Journal of Maritime History* 1, no. 1 (June 1989): 311–57. For a dissenting view, see Kenneth R. Andrews, *Ships, Money and Politics: Seafaring and Naval Enterprise in the Reign of Charles I* (Cambridge, 1991), 14, 62–83.
Most importantly, seamen could make much more efficient use of guns to quell insurrection by scaring would-be rebels. When negligence gave slaves aboard the Thames a great opportunity to revolt while the ship was anchored on the African coast in 1776, for instance, muskets enabled the small number of crew members aboard to regain control of the ship. “We only fired 2 masquets amongst them, one wt Powder only and one wt a little dust in it, had we fired more almost every one of them would have jumped over board, a few got cut wt cutlasses, but are geting well again, no white man excepting the boatswain got hurt.”

Whereas in the first Atlantic system slavery was not tied to the production of unlimited supplies of bonded labor, New World demand for slave labor produced a second Atlantic system whose center of gravity followed the westward pull of European colonization in the Americas and whose social order was determined in large part by skin color. In this sense the economic geography of the second Atlantic system was accompanied by a political geography as well: it was an Atlantic arena dominated by Europeans who could not comfortably bear the idea of blacks moving freely between African and American settings. Put differently, it did not easily accommodate African subjectivity outside the narrow and homogenous category of racialized slavery. The second Atlantic system composed a world shaped by racial categories that superseded all others, where skin color was a marker that, by its fixity, confined all those possessing the dark skin of African descent to a category of chattel slavery from which there was no escape and for which there was no ameliorative remedy. Thus, for example, Dick, “a free negro man” hired to serve as a linguist aboard the Rainbow in 1758, was taunted by one of the crew who “told Dick he was no better than a Slave, and woud. be sold as such when they arriv’d at the West Indies.”

The broad pattern in the organization of the English slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, was the enlargement of crew sizes relative to other sectors of maritime commerce, further expansion of the captain’s authority, and additional degradation and proletarianization of maritime labor. Unprecedented powers of domination


42 “Case of the Rainbow, 1758,” in Donnan, Documents Illustrative of Slave Trade, 4: 370–72 (quotation, 371); Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, no. 90466.
vested in Dutch and English sea captains made the opprobrious work of the slave quarters something more easily demanded of European seamen. The development of reliable handheld firearms gave European crews an unprecedented capacity to deter and if necessary overpower rebellious cargoes in the event of an attempted uprising. Slaving captains were now armed culturally with autocratic authority and materially with guns that supplemented the imposing appearance of naval cannon; all tasks associated with managing human cargoes fell to the hands of European seamen and black personnel were not needed.

From the vantage point of metropolitan investors, much more practicable and universally reliable than the use of slave guardians was the further exercise of coercion against the common seamen who manned slaving vessels. According to an English ship captain who testified before a British parliamentary committee late in the eighteenth century, “Seamen in general have a great aversion to the Slave Trade. They are in general procured by crimps, who are so constantly on the lookout that a strange sailor is almost sure to fall into their trap. These get them into debt and then put them in Gaol, from which there is no escape but in the hold of a Guineaman.” Another English captain testified that “Seamen in the African Slave Trade are treated with the greatest barbarity.” Writing to his London superiors in 1707, the Royal African Company’s chief agent at Cape Coast Castle advised that mariners employed aboard slave ships “must neither have dainty fingers nor dainty noses, [and] few men are fit for those voyages but them that are bred up to it. It is a filthy voyage,” he warned, “as well as a laborious [one].”

After more than fifty years of sustained involvement leading to English dominance in the Atlantic arena of human trafficking, there were pools of English seamen bred to the unique terrain of the slave ship. More to the point, there were even larger pools of Englishmen available for consumption in the British slaving industry. The onerous tasks associated with management of an unwilling human cargo thus became part of the contest between capital and labor embodied in the shipboard relationship between captain and crewmen. It was a contest won by captains and the ownership interests they represented, as European sailors fell ever more deeply under the arbitrary and coercive exercise of power on behalf of the merchant elite and the state. Indeed the proletarianization of maritime labor and consolidation of captains’ powers were developments without which England’s rise to ascendancy in the slave trade would not have been possible.

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43 Rawley, Transatlantic Slave Trade, 259 (“Seamen in general”); Rediker, Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, 49–50 (“must neither have”).

The Gold Coast guardian in the seventeenth century is best understood as the exception that proved the larger rule: shipboard roles in general and disciplinary roles in particular for black maritime labor receded aboard the slave ship from the seventeenth century onward. If black slave ship guardians were aboard Portuguese slavers in the first 150 years of Atlantic human trafficking, they had become an all-but-obsolete presence on slave ships during the seventeenth century. Making sense of the use of slave guardians from the Gold Coast aboard English ships in the seventeenth century thus requires that we try to understand why the Gold Coast produced the exception. Was there something exceptional or unique about captives from either the Gold Coast in general or the western part of the region in particular that made them useful as slave guardians, or could captives from elsewhere on the African coast have provided the safety ascribed to slave guardians? What made captives from this region ideal candidates for disciplinary roles aboard the slave ship? On the other side of the equation, to understand how the practice worked we must also try to comprehend the choices of the slaves appointed to the guardian’s role.

We are accustomed to finding people in dualistic roles—entailing the abjection of slave status and the power of social authority or physical arms—in every kind of slaveholding society, from ancient Greece and imperial Rome to the Islamic territories of Africa and the Middle East, from east Asian slave systems in dynastic Korea and imperial China to serfdom in early modern Russia, and even the oppressive slave societies of the Americas. In these instances roles that empowered slaves with the tools that might serve to undo their bondage shared an element necessarily missing in the setting of the slave ship: an extended personal relationship between master and bondsman. The slave janissary in the Ottoman Empire, the slave eunuch in China’s Ming dynasty, and the ubiquitous slave driver on the American southern plantation were all the product of a historical relationship grown thick with nuance and complexity over time.45

The core paradox of the guardian system, then, was the social relationships on which it rested: the use of guardians puzzles because it turned on a relationship between captive and captor that had no apparent origin, where there appears no historical ground in which such a relationship could take root. As David Eltis has quite rightly insisted, “the relationship between those charged with carrying the slaves to the Americas and the African slaves themselves was among the most uncom-

plicated of all forms of human interaction” because “unlike the slaves and masters in the Americas (or in Africa) or master and servant in the rest of the early modern Atlantic world, the two groups had little opportunity to get to know each other.”46 Formed in the atomized space and compressed temporal frame of the Middle Passage, the guardian system complicated what was ostensibly an exceedingly simple relationship. Bringing members of the slave cargo into alliance with ship captains and sustaining that relationship for the duration of the ocean crossing, the guardian system produced complex social relationships in a setting where they should not have existed. It triangulated what presumably should have been an unambiguous and fixed binary between African and European, black and white, captive and captor. It was one thing for slaving captains to turn to slaves for assistance in emergencies at sea. It was something quite different to plan slaving voyages with the expectation that members of the slave cargo empowered with resources and liberties that could support rebellion would reliably and predictably agree to align their interests with those of the captain for the entirety of the voyage.

The paradox unravels, however, when scholars remember that since the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iberoatlantic system, those from the Gold Coast (and the other regions from which guardians were recruited: Sierra Leone and the Windward Coast) were accustomed to categories of Atlantic slavery that put them in the service of mercantile elites and often in positions of authority and superiority in relationship to people held captive and designated for Atlantic export. Shifting perspective to an African view of the Atlantic arena and its history, it thus becomes possible to explain why the Gold Coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a region where Europeans could safely enlist Africans to occupy a role such as slave ship guardian. If such a figure were to continue to find a niche in the second Atlantic system, it could only be in a region where such roles were already suffused with meanings consistent with European intentions. From the vantage point of the Gold Coast, guardian status aboard the slave ship appeared to be an opportunity to enter into some other, less oppressive category of enslavement in the Euroatlantic system. It held close resemblance, that is, to the multiple and overlapping categories of slavery that had shaped Afro-European social relationships on the Gold Coast since their fifteenth-century beginnings in the first Atlantic world.

When English traders established their presence on the African coast in the second half of the seventeenth century, they and their Dutch competitors followed the Portuguese example of dependence on local hired labor of free people and locally owned slaves (“grometoes,” the English derivation of the Portuguese term “grumete”) as well as bondspeople

46 Eltis, Rise of African Slavery, 156.
attached directly to coastal trade forts in regions such as the Gold Coast, where onshore European settlements were primary sites of commercial exchange. Local canoe men ferried goods and passengers, including slaves, to and from English and Dutch shipping, and supervision of captives designated for export was among the tasks assigned to “castle” or “company” slaves owned by Dutch and English trade forts on the African coast.47

Just as guardians apparently carried out their role exactly as slave ship captains intended, so too were castle slaves and grommetoes unlikely to rebel, whether on their own or in collaboration with the chain slaves designated for export aboard European ships. In fact, writes Eltis, they “were more likely to betray than foment rebellion.” Castle slaves working at English settlements in the seventeenth century received a cash allowance for their subsistence, clothing, and periodic gifts of brandy or rum, particularly at times of holiday celebration. Most importantly, castle slaves knew that, barring serious criminal offense, their status ensured protection from export. Their positions protected them from the slave ships that would inevitably arrive to carry the chain slaves away.48

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47 Menne Postma, The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815 (Cambridge, 1990), 71-73 (“castle,” 72, “company,” 71); Davies, Royal African Company, 242-43; Gutkind, “Trade and Labor,” 29-38; Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery, 37, 41-42, 94. As with Portuguese predecessors, the common practice was to import slaves to be employed at the trade forts from other parts of the African coast. The Dutch brought such trainslaven to the Gold Coast from the Bight of Benin or Bight of Biafra. The English pattern was to import castle slaves for the Cape Coast fort either from the Bight of Benin (generally called “Arda slaves”) or from the Royal African Company’s trade fort in the Gambia River. See Postma, Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 72; Law, Slave Coast of West Africa, 24; Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery, 37. On the exchange of castle slaves between the Royal African Company’s James Island Fort in the Gambia River and Cape Coast, see Booker, James Island, to Royal African Company, Feb. 12, 1689, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 11: fol. 66; Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, June 11, 1689, ibid., vol. 50: fol. 93; Royal African Company to Booker, June 11, 1689, ibid., fol. 94; Royal African Company to Booker, Aug. 25, 1691, ibid., fol. 120. The Royal African Company also sent slaves from Sierra Leone to serve as grommetes at the English fort in the Sherbrow River and at the Gambia River fort. See Andrew Harbin, Sherbrow River, to Royal African Company, Mar. 20, 1684, ibid., vol. 11: fol. 157; John Snow, James Island, to Royal African Company, Mar. 31, 1707, ibid., vol. 5: fol. 29. For the reverse pattern (slaves sent from Gambia to be grommetes at Sierra Leone), see Robert Plunkett, Bence Island (Sierra Leone), to Royal African Company, June 16, 1718, ibid., vol. 6: fol. 79; Plunkett, Bence Island, to Royal African Company, July 10, 1721, ibid., vol. 7: fol. 27. On the English derivation of the term grometto (also grommeto) from the Portuguese grumete, see Walter Rodney, “African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave Trade,” Journal of African History 7, no. 3 (1966): 438; Eltis, Rise of African Slavery, 148 n. 53.

48 Eltis, Rise of African Slavery, 228 (quotation); Cape Coast Castle Accounts, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vols. 365-75. The distinction between castle slaves and those designated slaves-in-chains was neither artificial nor temporary. Though persons designated as slaves-in-chains occasionally were redeemed by
For slaves in chains on the Gold Coast, the misfortune of Atlantic captivity was a foregone and largely irreversible condition and quite possibly an unanticipated one for those recruited from west of Cape Coast Castle, an area not otherwise involved in the large-scale production of slaves for export. But there was good reason to expect and seek opportunities to negotiate the condition and ameliorate the outcome of their captivity. The region's long history of Afro-European labor relationships in which slavery held multiple meanings and outcomes authorized the expectation that the seventeenth-century slave ship ought to accommodate multiple categories of dependent status. Moreover, in the seventeenth-century castle slaves and grometoes, chain slaves had living evidence of current Afro-European labor relationships that accommodated plural categories of slave status. In May 1686, for instance, agents at Cape Coast Castle paid wages to Amo, an African maritime worker identified as a “guardian & sayler” aboard one of the sloops the Royal African Company employed on the coast.49

For those already consigned to the slave ship, the opportunity to become a guardian appeared to be, like the opportunity to become a castle slave, a chance to enter into a different, less oppressive category of enslavement. Guardian status appeared to cement a master-slave relationship similar to the dynamic that had prevailed between Europeans and Africans since the fifteenth century: master-slave relationships bound by ties of mutual interdependence and obligation. On the Gold Coast, English ship captains found slaves primed by the social relationships of power that governed the first Atlantic system to interpret the perquisites of their shipboard status exactly as was hoped. Here European ship captains could recruit slaves likely to recognize something familiar in the guardian's role and likely therefore to respond favorably, to regard what was in fact only temporary amelioration as something lasting on which to stake their hopes for an opportunity to improve their lot. In this sense giving guardian slaves power and privileges that could just as easily be turned against ship captains was not considered an undue risk.

The cat-o'-nine-tails was perhaps one of the most important means by which captains affirmed guardians’ expectation that theirs was a different category of maritime enslavement, since there is good reason to suspect the guardians’ onshore corollaries, the castle slaves and grometoes, were asked to carry arms at least on occasion.50 Particularly in the context of their social connections and allowed to join the ranks of the castle slaves, movement in the opposite direction rarely occurred.

50 There are numerous examples of officials at Cape Coast Castle supplying guns to castle slaves, largely for their use in defending the castle as well as to Africans aligned with English interests from other African groups and European competitors, namely, the Dutch. See Cape Coast Castle Accounts, ibid., vols. 365–75.
the slave ship, there was arguably no more effective strategy to secure the loyalty of slave guardians than this bold gesture. By arming guardian slaves with a weapon to wield against other captives, captains effectively pulled guardians into the orbit of their own power. Having risked something by entrusting a measure of their power to slave guardians, captains gave them reason to interpret the gesture as evidence that their enslavement was and would remain distinct from that of their subordinates. By giving slave guardians a measure of power in the slave hold and a small bit of freedom within the slave ship, captains created a group of enslaved men and women for whom the very resources that empowered them to rebel were those they dared not sacrifice for an uncertain outcome rooted in collective rebellion.

If it served their interests, European captains occasionally acknowledged the superior social rank implied by the guardian title. When the captain of the Mary withheld two “lusty men negroes” from delivery to Royal African Company agents for sale in Barbados in May 1681, he explained that the two were “freemen that he tooke for Guardians and are to be sent back to Guynie.” He likely intended to defraud the company by surreptitiously selling the two men for his own private gain. But, as Walter Johnson writes, “anyone who has ever told a lie [knows that] the best way to make a story seem true is to build it out of pieces of the truth.” The lie this slaving captain probably crafted is telling because it affirms the argument the guardians would make, could they speak directly through the documentary record. The guardians surely would have agreed that their title should hold the same meaning in the Americas that it had held on the African coast and therefore should exempt them from sale into plantation slavery.

When the Atlantic crossing had ended, so too had guardians’ shipboard social status. The sales of Royal African Company slave cargoes in the English American colonies in the late seventeenth century are extremely well documented, not just in the correspondence between company officials and agents in the colonies but more significantly in

51 Edwyn Stede, Barbados, to Royal African Company, May 12, 1681, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 1: fol. 106 (“lusty men negroes”); Walter Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery,” in Rethinking American History in a Global Age, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), 148–67 (“anyone,” 155). Indeed it was anxiety about dishonest ship captains that prompted the company’s May 1687 directive to keep better record on the purchase of slave guardians at Cape Coast Castle. When officials in London issued new orders requiring that the chief factor at Cape Coast Castle demand signed bills of lading for guardians put aboard ships there, they explained that it was “for want of [such] separate Bills of Lading for the Gold Coast negroes the late Commanders have had some pretences to Conceale the truth from us & we feare to deceive us greatly” (Royal African Company to Cape Coast Castle, July 5, 1687, in Records of the Royal African Company, T70, vol. 50: fol. 41).
the ledgers the agents prepared for every slave cargo they received on behalf of the company. In sharp contrast to their visibility in the letters of instruction and bookkeeping records produced on the other side of the Atlantic, guardians appear nowhere in the records produced when the ships reached the Americas. The eerie silence in the archival record hints at the remarkable effortlessness with which captors swiftly and summarily returned guardians to the status of captives available for sale in the market along with the rest, a status they in fact had never shed.

With the end of the Royal African Company’s monopoly on English slave trading at the close of the seventeenth century, the systematic notations of guardians in the documentary record disappeared, perhaps reflecting the end of the practice or the more fragmentary nature of the documentary record of the eighteenth-century trade. Scattered references suggest that practices similar to the English guardian system continued at least sporadically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An account of a nineteenth-century voyage, for example, describes a role strikingly similar to that of guardians for slaves recruited from among the Kru peoples of the Grain and Ivory coasts.52

What became of guardians once they entered the American landscape of plantation slavery? It is difficult to imagine that guardians did not come to regret their shipboard cooperation, yet perhaps this presumption goes too far. If what was at stake for guardians was not their captivity but rather the conditions of their Atlantic captivity, perhaps scholars should discard notions about guardians’ shock of betrayal. As John Thornton has suggested, slaves who understood one of the Atlantic creole languages were likely to become leaders in the plantation setting. Perhaps the same was true of people who arrived having served as guardians in the slave ship. In this sense the particularly prominent role men from the Gold Coast played as rebel leaders in the English Caribbean may represent a more nuanced cultural continuity than some historians have assumed.

Though the second Atlantic system insisted that all Africans brought to the Americas be reduced to chattel slavery, that mandate did not mean the first Atlantic system’s accommodation of stratification within Atlantic slavery could not continue beyond the reach of the slave ship.

Some who served captains reliably as guardians aboard the ships that carried them into American slavery probably were among those who were slaveholders’ worst nightmare, the dreaded Coromantee rebels. Now fully attuned to the disjuncture between African and European Atlantic worlds, they continued their battle to get “out of the history of [Atlantic] slavery.” In this new arena, their tactics were different but the agenda remained the same. Trapped at the epicenter of Europe’s second Atlantic system, they tried to remake the plantation world in accordance with the Atlantic history they knew, in which soldiers made war, not sugar.53

For African guardians at least, the history of the Atlantic arena was perhaps best characterized not as an orderly temporal progression from first to second Atlantic systems but as the very subject of contested debate over competing “historical and temporal narratives through which Africans and Europeans understood what was happening on the coast, in the slave ships, and in the slave markets of the Americas.” It is generally the winners who get to write history, and in that version of Atlantic history the guardians figure as naive subjects duplicitously caught in a story whose end had already been written before they ever boarded a slave ship. That narrative’s understanding of guardians as unwitting relics from the Atlantic arena’s past makes it difficult to see them as intriguing or important historical actors in any way. But as Johnson notes, “a historical account of the African experience of ‘the slave trade’ necessarily has a different shape from an account of the European experience.”54 What was at stake for the guardians was an Atlantic history whose shape charted the contours of an unfinished story: that of a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century system figuring in historical time not as a first system now dead and gone but rather as a tradition whose ongoing salience was precisely what they struggled to uphold.


54 Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America,” 149.