The Promise and the Challenge of Digitization

Women and the Prize Papers

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The Prize Papers in the British National Archives have, in recent years, excited a lot of attention on the part of historians, and they are now the object of a large, international digitization project. In this essay we explain what these papers are and offer a few remarks about their uniqueness as sources. Then we use them as a case study for a discussion of the implications of digitization for global and early modern gender history.

During the early modern period, and into the nineteenth century, attacks on merchant ships were a standard feature of war. The British were one of the more active countries in this regard, and around 35 000 ships were captured – ”taken prize” – between around 1650 and 1860 by the British navy and privateers. The capturing parties generally confiscated all the papers on ships they seized, and though some papers were later returned to their owners, many others still remain in the records of the High Court of Admiralty. As a result, the ”Prize Papers”, now in the British National Archives at Kew, include not just court records, but ships' papers, personal papers of all kinds, tens of thousands of pieces of undelivered mail, and even material objects like textile samples, quill pens and walking sticks. These records are truly global in scope and many of them are in languages other than English. According to Amanda Bevan and Randolph Cock, 18 different languages had been identified in the collection as of 2018.[1] Historians have taken an interest in these records both because they offer an unparalleled view of the globalization of both

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1. Amanda Bevan & Randolph Cock, ”High Court of Admiralty Prize Papers, 1652–1815: Challenges in improving access to older records”, *Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association* 53:137 (2018) pp. 35–58.

trade and warfare, and because they often include types of material that have not survived in other kinds of archives – most notably, letters to and from non-elite people. Though the focus of many of the documents in the Prize Papers is the largely male world of sailors, sea-going merchants and soldiers, the collection nevertheless also includes many letters, business records, reports, and so on either generated by or pertaining to women. The Prize Papers are a huge, unwieldy, and unpredictable collection, and it is only with digital cataloguing – still quite incomplete but advancing daily – and ultimately, the digitization of the entire collection, that we will be able to get a clear sense of what is there. In this contribution we briefly describe two projects aimed at increasing the accessibility of the Prize Papers, one of them being the big digitization project itself; the other being a project focused on finding Scandinavian materials in the vast Prize Papers archive. The body of the essay then discusses some sources, drawn from the Prize Papers, that are of relevance to two topic areas within women's history: the trade in enslaved women, and women as traders in their own right. At the end we will consider some of the advantages and disadvantages of digitization for women's history.

Two Projects on the Prize Papers

The first concentrated efforts to digitize parts of this enormous collection were made by Dutch researchers focusing on documents relating to the Netherlands. This work, in turn, inspired a team of German researchers at the University of Oldenburg including, between 2012 and 2020, Annika Raapke Öberg, to start their own project. The Oldenburg team established a collaboration with the UK National Archives that aimed to re-organize and digitize the entire collection and feed it into an open access-database. In 2018, the "Prize Papers Project", headed by Dagmar Freist, received funding from the German Academies of the Sciences and Humanities to carry out this mammoth venture, which is slated to be completed in 2037.[2] Since the beginning of the funding period, the project team at the National Archives, headed by Amanda Bevan, has been re-sorting and organizing large parts of the Prize Papers, and the institution's Collection Care department has been preparing the often crumpled, bundled, or stitched-together documents for digitization. The archive team's work has already begun to unlock a lot of previously

2. See <https://portal.prizepapers.de/index> for some already digitized material.

unavailable context and background information, including a number of sources pertaining to women. The research team in Oldenburg, led in much of its daily work processes by research coordinator Lucas Haasis, has a specific commitment to recording any document with a connection to women, both free and enslaved, as well as enslaved persons in general.

Between 2018 and 2023 Margaret Hunt at Uppsala University and Leos Müller at Stockholm University ran a complementary Swedish Research Council project entitled "In Pursuit of Global Knowledge: Scandinavian Ocean Travelers 1650–1810". A major part of the project involved identifying the Scandinavian ships in the Prize Papers, something which had never previously been systematically done. As a result of the project, the records of some 4 500 Swedish and Danish-Norwegian ships were identified in the High Court of Admiralty papers, and significant amounts of previously unknown early modern Scandinavian sources were discovered. The project also published an open-source handbook, *How to research Scandinavian ships and seamen in the Prize Papers of the British National Archives* (2023).[3]

The Trade in Women

The Transatlantic slave trade represented a massive transfer of populations. Some 12,5 million people were violently transported across the ocean between roughly 1500 and 1868 and before the 19th century enslaved people greatly exceeded voluntary emigrants in much of the New World. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of women actually on European ships during the late 1600s and into the 1800s, at least on voyages across the Atlantic, were African women destined for slavery in the New World. As a result, the Prize Papers fairly often mention enslaved women, and sources from the Prize Papers have contributed importantly to the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database,[4] the most systematic attempt to quantify the demographic impact of the slave trade. Moreover, sources on enslaved women in the Prize Papers are not just confined to the Transatlantic slave trade or slavery in the New World, but also extend to women enslaved in other parts of the world, for example in South and Southeast Asia.

The sources available in the Prize Papers on enslaved women show-

3. <https://doi.org/10.33063/diva-503969>.
4. <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.

case both the promise and the challenges of this collection. Most of the enslaved women who appear in the various documents preserved in the Prize Papers are nameless. They are described only in terms connected to their sale or purchase, or their economic value to an owner. For example, the ship *Abraham* from Nantes travelled down the West African coast in 1743 to buy enslaved persons who would later be sold in Martinique. Its accounts, which consist both of a sales book and of a big spreadsheet which was meticulously kept by captain Jacques Berthomé, show many purchases of women, as well as men and children, but only ever in an inventory format such as ”9 hommes 3 femmes 2 *negrillons*”.[5] While anonymity and a lack of contextual information are a general problem in the Prize Papers, partly due to the accidental nature of their preservation, this becomes extreme vis-à-vis enslaved people, and particularly enslaved women. Enslaved men would sometimes work in areas such as seafaring where their name – or at least *a* name, even if it was a slave name rather than their original name – might be recorded, as well as some kind of description. For enslaved women, names and descriptions are quite rare. Enslaved women are commonly mentioned in the Prize Papers, but mostly as quantities in lists and spreadsheets, not as identifiable individuals. They are treated not as persons, but as units of work.

Where the names of enslaved women do appear it is often in contexts that – once again – emphasize the subordination of human processes, such as birth and death, to the imperatives of work and profit. By way of an example, let us look at some papers from a Danish ship called the *Hannah* that was seized en route from St. Croix to Copenhagen in Autumn 1807. Among those papers is a plantation journal for a plantation called ”la Grange” in which is detailed the work enslaved people did as well as other information about them. Part of it is in spreadsheet form – as we saw in the previous section, slave-owners were great users of the spreadsheet – which allowed overseers and investors to see at a glance how inputs in terms of slave labor, both human and animal, translated into output in terms of hogsheads of sugar. Accompanying the spreadsheet

5. The National Archives, High Court of Admiralty collection (HCA), 32/97/1, Sales documents, Ship Abraham de Nantes. The italics and untranslated parts in the quote represent a conscious decision and follow Andrew S. Curran's suggestions for the handling of racist terminology in historical sources. See Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore 2011) pp. 9–11. This policy is followed throughout this essay except where it is important to the discussion to ”translate” the term.

are detailed notes that show what enslaved people were doing at any hour during any day of the week. Information on work-flow is seamlessly interspersed with the births and deaths of enslaved people, in a way that makes clear the commodified nature – at least in the minds of plantation managers – both of ”productive” and ”reproductive” labor – as well as the degree of surveillance to which enslaved people were subjected. ”*Negroes* cutting & planting tradesmen as usual Aline [an enslaved woman] delivered of a female child” reads one unpunctuated entry.[6] And further down the same page: ”Allowanced small gang [of enslaved workers] an old *manqueroon* woman named Terisa died [...].”[7] ”Manqueroon” was a disparaging term often used to denote an enslaved person who was not able to perform a full day's work due to illness, injury, disability or old age (”manque/manqué” literally meant ”lack,” ”failure” or ”deficiency”). Enslaved people were categorized by plantation managers according to their capacity for work, and those who could no longer work were essentially disposable. No other information is provided about Terisa or the circumstances of her death, and the impression we get is that she was also little mourned, at least by the person who penned the journal.

We also find, in the Prize Papers, evidence of another aspect of the lives of enslaved women: how easily they could be sexually exploited by their owners – and the worldview on the part of their exploiters that made that possible. In this case the evidence comes from a Danish East India ship named the *Copenhagen* seized in 1799 en route from Batavia, in Southeast Asia to Denmark. On that ship were a number of letters, including one from a young Frenchman named Paul Beillard, a lieutenant in a French battalion stationed in Dutch Batavia, Java, addressed to his mother in the town of Dreux in northern France.[8] Part of the letter is a complaint about how expensive it is to keep up appearances as a European in Batavia. For example, Beillard asserts that: ”A White can never go on foot”[9] which means that, to do his part for the maintenance of the racial order he has been forced to buy at great expense (2 625 rupees)

6. ”Tradesmen” would have referred to enslaved people who had been trained in a trade such as carpentry.

7. TNA HCA 32/1498/2841 Ship: Hannah (Danish) Master: Garleff Oolrog, Seized 1807.

8. Paul Beillard in Dutch Batavia, Java to his mother, Madame Beillard in Nogent-Roule-Bois (Dreux), France, dated 4 May 1799 in TNA HCA 32/562/278 Ship: Copenhagen (Danish) Master: Mullens, Seized 1799.

9. ”[L]es dépense qu'on est obligé de faire sont execives [*sic*], un Blanc ne va jamais à pied.”

a "voiture" (conveyance) with four horses. Apparently White status is also enhanced by owning Southeast Asian slaves, and he has bought two female slaves ("esclavise[s]") 2 000 rupees. Not only that, but "with one I have a child who is doing well". Then, probably anticipating that his mother might worry that an alliance with a slave would impede marriage to someone of his own race, Beillard hastens to assure her that this is in no way a permanent relationship: "I'm not married and have no desire to be." Never going on foot, owning slaves, getting one of them with child but without promise of a more permanent relationship, are all presented – to his mother no less—not just as prerogative of whiteness, but as a sort of racial obligation.

As these examples show, the Prize Papers do offer glimpses of the lives of enslaved women, but a good deal of the surviving material still represents the viewpoints of the enslaver and not the enslaved. The voices of Aline or Terisa or of Beillard's unnamed female slave and mother of his child are silent in these narratives. And yet, the Prize Papers still contain surprises, and it is possible that, as digitization proceeds, other kinds of voices will be heard.[10]

Women as traders

Women were very active traders in their own right in the early modern period and the Prize Papers reflect this. After ships were seized, the owners of ships and cargo often put in claims to the Prize Court which were then filed with the court papers. These claims typically listed the property sequestered by the court and offered proof that the claimant or claimants were not subjects of a state with which Britain was at war. For example, in 1747 several Norwegian women put in a claim in Prize Court for a ship called the *Charitas* which they owned together. They accompanied their claim with an attestation from the president, burgomasters and magistrates of Christiania (Oslo) in Norway certifying that "the Ladies Collett & Louck" had properly registered their ship in Oslo, that "both of them [were] Burghers & Inhabitants here at Christiania" and, furthermore, that they were "subjects of his Royal Maj[esty] of Denmark & Norway". The certificate also mentioned that the ship was to sail from Oslo for France, England, Holland, Spain, Portugal, the Straits

10. See for example, Erik van der Doe, P. J. Moree & Dirk J. Tang (eds), *De Smeekbede van een Oude Slavin: En Andere Verhalen uit de West*, Sailing Letters Journaal 2 (Zutphen 2009).

of Gibraltar and other places and that the two women had pledged that their ship would carry no contraband.[11]

The Prize Papers also contain a lot of information about C.S. Black's Widow & Co, one of the largest Danish shipping empires of the 1790s. Johanne Wadum Black's husband died not long after they were married and the firm carried on under her name, growing to include at least a dozen ships sailing both to the West and East Indies.[12] A number of Widow Black's ships were seized by the British – who saw the firm as a competitor, especially for the lucrative East India trade, and we can get a rather good sense of the nature of the company's trade from correspondence seized from her own and other ships.

More standardly though one sees women who did not own their own ships, but who were involved in wholesale shipping of one sort or another. Thousands of women shippers appear in the Prize Papers, usually operating on a relatively small to medium scale. Thus, tipped into the court records for one ship is a translation of a 1758 bill of lading from Bordeaux, France for brandy and "city wine", shipped "for the account and risque of Mrs. Johanna Christian Otterdahl of Gottenborough [Göteborg]." Otterdahl came from a prominent merchant family, and the bill of lading featured her special merchant's mark (ICO), carefully traced out by the translator. This same mark would also have been written or stamped on the wine barrels.[13]

Earlier we described how, and to what extent, enslaved women were represented in the Prize Papers. Women's trade is one of the few contexts in which enslaved women are represented not just as numbers, but as individuals. The surviving material – which, admittedly, is not abundant – was usually created by the enslaver or owner of the woman in question, and while it does not reflect the voice of the enslaved person, it at least provides a glimpse of situations in which enslaved women could gain agency by virtue of their abilities and competence. One example is Sainte (no last name given), an enslaved woman owned by a French widow by the name of Madame Thomas. Both women lived in Saint-Pierre,

11. TNA HCA 32/100/10 Ship: Charitas (Danish), Master: Johann Frederick Samuelson, seized 1747. The originally Danish certificate had been translated into English in the court papers.

12. Carol Gold, *Women in Business in Early Modern Copenhagen 1740–1835* (Copenhagen 2018) pp. 95–102; Personal communication, Gustav Ängeby.

13. TNA HCA 32/162, Ship: Anna (Swedish) Master: J. Solomon Sundberg, seized 1758.

the then-capital of the French Caribbean colony of Martinique, and the Widow Thomas was engaged in various kinds of trade. One part of that trade, a semi-itinerant small trade called ”pacotille”, seems to have been entirely dependent on the work of Sainte, who according to Thomas was an excellent tradeswoman.[14] When Sainte fell sick, her absence was felt keenly in the pacotille trade, as Thomas described in a letter of November 1778: ”The Pacotille which I have in my hands goes rather slowly, it would be more advanced if my *négresse marchande*, the little Sainte, had not been ill for two months.”[15] Mme Thomas was convinced that someone had poisoned Sainte (maybe because of her commercial prowess) and she (Mme Thomas) had, according to her own statement, invested a lot of time and energy in curing Sainte. While Sainte is presented more as a trade asset than as a human individual in this narrative, at least it is possible to see her as more than a number. She appears as a highly competent individual within the field of pacotille trading, which tells us a lot about her economic skills, but also her ability to form networks and her probably very impressive local knowledge. Research on the pacotille trade indicates that enslaved female pacotille traders like Sainte sometimes used their skills and contacts to liberate themselves through flight. Advertisements for fugitive tradeswomen would frequently highlight their knowledge both of the terrain and of those who lived in it.[16] Combining the Prize Papers with related archives – as in the pacotille example – can offer new and perhaps surprising information about women, provided that historians can actually find what they need in the sea of documents that is the Prize Papers collection.

The Prize Papers as a digital resource for women's history

At this point, where the digitisation of the Prize Papers collection and the building of the database and portal are still at a relatively early stage, it is still the original, analogue collection to which most researchers turn.

14. On the pacotille trade in the Caribbean, see Annika Raapke, ”Petites Affaires: Pacotille Commerce and the Intimate Networks of Free Women of Colour in the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean”, *Itinerario* 46 (2022) pp. 371–380; Annika Raapke, ”Unorthodoxe Praktiken: Ein Einblick in die Untersuchung von Pacotillehandel in der französischen Karibik, 1716–1810”, *Zeitsprunge* 1/2 (2023) pp. 196–215.

15. HCA 30/302, Widow Thomas, St Pierre de la Martinique, to her brother in France, 7 November 1778. ”La pacotille que jay entre les mains va aces lentement, elle seroit plus avencé si ma negresse marchande, la petite Sainte, n'avoit pas été bien malade pendant deux mois.”

16. See Raapke (2023) p. 201.

Finding testimonies relating to individual women is challenging because, while there is a lot of material created by and referring to women, it is not necessarily always visible, especially if a woman only shows up, say, as a mention in a letter or other document. It takes time and perseverance to find women, which travelling researchers on a budget may not be able to afford. The large number of languages adds another layer of difficulty. So, at the moment, identifying women in the massive Prize Papers collection, especially women who were neither white nor of European ancestry, is very much a matter of luck and perseverance.

But with every part of the collection that is added to the database and made accessible in the portal, the balance shifts in favour of systematic research, with more and more women from a wide variety of contexts becoming visible. The UK-German Prize Papers project is also trying its best to alleviate another key difficulty with the Prize Papers, namely, the lack of context of individual documents. While ships' papers and court documents are often preserved in bundles, so that a kind of narrative context can be established, many of the letters, bills of lading, bills of exchange, personal inventories, small trade documents, doodles etc. in the collection do not have any visible relationship to other documents and can only provide tiny, often fragmentary glimpses of historical lives. Names are often missing, destroyed or illegible, and even if a name exists it may prove impossible for historians to trace the historical person behind it.[17] Women often show up in exactly those unconnected and contextless parts of the collection, which makes this a serious issue for researchers. Here, the database work will help: while it cannot promise to restore names to the nameless, it can help to uncover connections between documents that are otherwise very hard to establish in the analogue collection. For example, digitization, coupled with careful indexing, can sometimes reunite documents that were separated during the court process, or identify those cases where one and the same person shows up in documents from different time periods and/or in different parts of the globe. Individuals can thus be linked to particular ships, to geographic areas, or to other individuals or groups at specific points in time.

17. For the difficulties of tracing fragmentary sources, see Margaret R. Hunt, "Negotiating Race and Slavery: St. Eustatius and the Gibraltar Garrison during the Seven Years War", in Lisa Hellman, Hanna Hodacs, Aryo Makko & Steve Murdoch (eds), *Connected Oceans: A Festschrift to Leos Müller* (Lund 2022) pp. 289–303.

Conscious data management may in the future create a different political problem issue for researchers by offering a misleading picture of how easy it is to find women, especially heavily marginalised women, in the Prize Papers. By making access to women in the archive easier and rendering it largely effortless to establish links and backgrounds –so that women of all backgrounds seem to be just jumping off the digitized pages – the realities of ”silencing”, both in the archive and in historical societies may become obscured for future researchers.[18] Still, the fact that, in future, though not at present, searching the database for women in general or using particular search combinations such as ”Enslaved Women”, ”French Women” or ”Women, 1742–1815”, will yield a multitude of results is, on balance, a positive thing. It will surely lead to greater diversity and complexity in the writing of women's history. Even so, as this contribution suggests, the greater search-capacity of the future is unlikely to fundamentally change the fact that enslaved women – and to some extent women in general – tend to appear in the Prize Papers in circumstances shaped by oppression and dehumanization. And yet, the Prize Papers do contain rarely preserved stories, they do represent women in a large variety of contexts, and they do allow access to historical lives that are usually absent from the record. In the final analysis, the Prize Papers, large parts of which were rather randomly ”stowed away” more than they were ”archived”, may do less silencing than many other archival collections. The Prize Papers are also among the few archival collections that represent globality, including global female lives, beyond the level of travelling or trading elites. They preserve records – even if they are often only bare mentions – of people from across the early modern social spectrum, enslaved and free, rich and poor, colonised and colonising, European and from other parts of the world. The careful digitisation and digital organisation of this collection is, therefore, a major opportunity for women's history. It will be up to future historians to handle this vast digital archive in a way that honors the painful histories of so many of the women found there.

18. See especially Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia 2016) for an important discussion of this issue, which goes far beyond just the Prize Papers.