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*Outsiders and the Empires of Others: Frederic Romberg and the trade with West and Central Africa, 1776-1786*

The historiography on the Atlantic System has long been characterized by a focus on the major colonial powers and their central power strategies of empire-building, especially through mercantilist barriers and monopolistic companies. Recently, this traditional perspective has been challenged in numerous ways. First, historical strands such as Atlantic or global history have pleaded to look beyond nations and empires, describing the boundaries of Atlantic polities as spaces of transnational connection rather than separation. Second, scholars have reassessed the agency of private, enterprising merchants and their informal, international networks as a counterweight to the aforementioned focus on the monopolistic company. The transnationality of the former approach and the attention for individual agency of the latter has inspired scholars to explore an important aspect of the Atlantic System: the exploitation of foreign empires by subjects of other nations. This paper presents such a case-study, namely the mercantile activities in the French and Spanish empire of the Brussels-based entrepreneur Frederic Romberg (1729-1819). During the late 1770s and early 1780s, Romberg invested in a dozen vessels which were sent from the Austrian Netherlands towards West and Central Africa in an attempt to defy or appropriate the institutions of existing empires and capture the continent's resources. Uncovering trans-imperial dynamics, this paper will explore how and why 'outsiders' participated in the French and Spanish colonial realm during the Early Modern period.

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