

To Name, or Not to Name

An Article Review

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Dr. Rachael Pasierowska

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In her article, *All Aboard the King George and Happy Captive: European ship-naming practices in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, 1750-1755*, Dr. Rachael Pasierowska discusses the naming of vessels involved in the international slave trade during a period of the mid-18th century. Her work focuses on the types of names given to vessels and their significance. These include feminine and masculine names, ecclesiastical names, mythical and classical names, noble titles, types of creatures, place names, and abstract names. Feminine and masculine names of vessels— such as *Anne and Susanna* or *Hesketh*— reflected the names of their owners or their daughters. Ecclesiastical names of religious saints, like *S Antônio*, were often associated with the sea. Mythical and classical names were mythological deities or classical heroes from Ancient Greece or Rome. Names of vessels with noble titles often paid homage to royalty of a home nation, as did the *Cron Printz Christian* did for Denmark. Creature names included those belonging to the sky, water, and land. Vessels that were named after places were linked with the slave trade as either locations in Africa where enslaved persons were taken from or locations in the Americas where they would be subsequently sold. Abstract names represented what owners wanted to achieve with their vessels as well as how they viewed their enslaved cargo. In some cases, vessels like the *Happy Captive* just as well could have been named as an attempt to taunt or mock those enslaved onboard as the intention to portray the slave trade as a worthy cause.

While Dr. Pasierowska's article covers the superficial significance of the names of vessels during her period of study, it more importantly addresses the underlying significance of those names. This significance is that the names given to vessels were supposed to emulate the attributes of their namesakes. In order to survive the harsh conditions of the Atlantic Ocean and turn a profit more quickly, these attributes were generally power and speed. Dr. Pasierowska

skillfully utilizes several cases in support of her addressal of this underlying significance. One case in particular involving Father Erastius Villani of Padua contributes to the notion that the names of vessels were intended to emulate the attributes of their namesakes in a way that a reader could easily understand. In terms of a more general comprehension of the topic, there is, however, an aspect readers might have difficulty with in Dr. Pasierowska's article. This aspect comes from a negligence of addressing the subject of vessels having no name. The inclusion of this aspect, though limited, would have contributed to a reader's more general understanding of the practice of naming vessels.

The cases introduced by Dr. Pasierowska to foreground the underlying significance of vessel names emulating the attributes of power and speed prove invaluable to a reader's grasp of the article. Without them, the motives of merchants and sailors behind the naming practices of their vessels could only be understood to a certain extent with the possibility of their motives not being truly known at all. The case involving the story of Father Erastius Villani of Padua highlights why the Portuguese during this period named almost all their vessels after a religious figure. According to the story, Father Villani was on route to Italy when a terrible storm came upon his vessel:

After instructing the other passengers to pray to Saint Anthony, Father Villani threw some pieces of cloth that had touched a relic of Saint Anthony into the heaving seas. At once, the storm ended, the winds stopped and the sea became calm.¹

¹ Pasierowska, R. (2022). 'All Aboard the King George and Happy Captive: European ship-naming practices in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, 1750–1755'. *International Journal of Maritime History*, 34(1), 187.

Having taken place in 1647, Father Villani's story would not have been far removed from those of Dr. Pasierowska's period of study and would have proven to be a more than appropriate namesake for a vessel traveling the treacherous Atlantic Ocean. Just as Saint Anthony brought safe passage to Father Villani, the reverence shown through naming a vessel after him would surely have brought a similar level of safety to those on the vessel, or so one would think.

An aspect that is left to be desired in Dr. Pasierowska's article, which some readers might find as a hinderance in understanding the naming of vessels in a more general sense, includes the addressal of vessels without a name. While she includes the category of *no name* in her first figure of the article, this is the extent to which vessels without a name is addressed. Surprisingly, the category of *no name* is about the same size or larger as *noble titles*, *animals*, *classical names*, and *other names* in their individual shares of the pie graph for vessel names. With such a considerable portion of vessels having no name for this period, it seems rather unusual not to address the category. Just as she poses the question of what is in a name to the reader, a potentially equally important question could be what is in no name? If merchants and sailors named their vessels for them to emulate the attributes of their namesakes, what would be the point of leaving a vessel without a name? It might have been due to a record keeping error where the name of the vessel was lost. Maybe it was because of a more nefarious reason in not wanting to be identified to evade customs authorities in the international arms trade. For better or worse, this vacuum of information left in the article leaves a great deal of room for interpretation on the reader's part.

Dr. Rachael Pasierowska's article discusses the naming of vessels involved in the international slave trade during a period of the mid-18th century. More than this, though, she addresses the underlying significance of the intention by merchants and sailors for the names of

their vessels to emulate the attributes of power and speed. These attributes would have been welcomed in any capacity to more safely and efficiently cross the Atlantic Ocean in the context of the slave trade. More likely than not, this capacity would have been an unconscious comfort felt by those onboard the vessels. Without the discussion of cases such as the one involving Father Erastius Villani of Padua to support the notion that vessels were intended to manifest the same characteristics of their namesakes, Dr. Pasierowska's article would not be as strong in terms of reader comprehension as it is.

The central theme of the article is not what is the name of a vessel, but what is in the name of a vessel. If it weren't for the inclusion of cases pertaining to what exactly is in the name of a vessel, a reader would have come away from the article with a more limited understanding of the subject. On the other hand, the exclusion of any real acknowledgement of the category of vessels without names creates something left to be desired in the article on the part of a potential reader who may come to their own conclusions about the missing topic. Overall, Dr. Pasierowska's article brilliantly analyzes not only the names of vessels during her period of study, but also the symbolism behind those names. Her citing of cases and examples eloquently ties together the article in a way that benefits the reader enormously in their ability to understand why certain names were chosen for slave trading vessels of the mid-18th century.

Bibliography

Pasierowska, R. (2022). 'All Aboard the King George and Happy Captive: European ship naming practices in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, 1750–1755'. *International Journal of Maritime History*, 34(1), 183–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08438714221079551>.