**CDA6: People, Labour, and Empire: The Royal African Company and Slavery in West Africa, 1672-1722**

**How to apply and further details:**

**Supervisors**

Dr Richard Blakemore (University of Reading, [r.blakemore@reading.ac.uk)](mailto:r.blakemore@reading.ac.uk)Dr)

Dr Philippa Hellawell (The National Archives, [philippa.hellawell@nationalarchives.gov.uk)](mailto:philippa.hellawell@nationalarchives.gov.uk)Dr)

Dr Mark Williams (Cardiff University, [williamsm64@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:williamsm64@cardiff.ac.uk))

Dr Richard Blakemore, Dr Philippa Hellawell, and Dr Mark Williams are experts on the history of empire, global mobility, and social history across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Blakemore has published specifically on West Africa in Atlantic history, as well as broader work on maritime empire; Hellawell on the connections between science and empire; and Williams on trading companies.

Each supervisor possesses valuable archival knowledge and experience. Hellawell is currently leading work on the Royal African Company records at The National Archives (TNA) and other adjacent collections. Blakemore and Williams have also accumulated a vast knowledge of legal and institutional records at TNA and elsewhere in the UK, the Netherlands, and the USA.

All three supervisors have familiarity with university teaching and collaborations with non-HEI organizations, including TNA, the National Maritime Museum, and Berkshire Record Office. They have experience supervising doctoral students, and the student on this project will join a vibrant community of postgraduate researchers in Reading, Cardiff, and TNA, including several working with these supervisors in similar areas.

**Subject**

This project develops a new, multivocal perspective on the experience of empire in West Africa. Through detailed analysis of the Royal African Company (RAC) records at The National Archives (TNA), the student will investigate the lives of people of varying social status, enslaved and free, men and women, African and European, while producing and promoting resources on this collection for TNA and its audiences.

From 1672onwards, the RAC monopolised British commerce in Africa, transporting enslaved African people as well as gold and ivory, negotiating and fighting with African rulers and other traders. Its fortifications and trading posts, located from Senegambia to the Bight of Benin, became cross-cultural meeting points and crucial nodes in the business of empire. Scholars have positioned West Africa primarily as a source of enslaved labour for other imperial centres, emphasising the RAC’s role in this trade, but the RAC as an institution remains understudied. The structure of its operations in West Africa, its role in international conflict and cooperation, and its employees’ relations with West African communities deserve greater attention.

Through a methodology that reads corporate records against the grain, an approach rarely applied to RAC records, this project provides new ways to interpret the voices and experiences of both African and European people at all social levels. The people at the centre of this project established, maintained, lived with, and resisted imperial systems, but they are less well-documented and often left out of conventional histories focused on imperial elites, and on the Americas and the Indian Ocean rather than Africa.

In light of ongoing public debate on empire and slavery, including the toppling of Bristol’s statue of RAC merchant Edward Colston, this project will respond to and inform an important cultural moment. Encompassing both bottom-up and top-down perspectives of empire, it will evaluate the relationships between enslaved and free African and European people, surface their voices within the RAC records, and provide a closer study of a formative institution in the creation of the British global empire and slave trade.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

The research questions cluster around a series of issues relating to the history of empire and slavery, particularly bottom-up perspectives, but will be shaped by the interests and research of the doctoral student in consultation with their supervisors. They might include:

• Whose voices are preserved in the RAC records, and what methodological challenges and opportunities exist for recovering the experience of different social groups in West Africa, particularly enslaved people?

• How did the RAC’s social, political, and economic presence in West Africa develop during its early stages?

• How and why did African and European empires, kingdoms, and trading companies cooperate or compete in late-seventeenth-century West Africa?

The student will adapt conceptual frameworks and practical methodologies around the question of voice and archival silences and omissions and apply these to the RAC records. They will begin their research by surveying these records and identifying specific items for closer analysis, before consulting other TNA collections and potentially other UK and international archives.

The practical methodologies to apply to these records will likely include:

• Qualitative analysis of well-documented individuals or incidents.

• Prosopographical reconstruction of identifiable individuals or groups, potentially using digital network analysis and visualisation tools.

• Visual analysis of the representation of specific RAC locations in maps and illustrations held at TNA, possibly using Geographic Information Software applications like QGIS.

**Research context**

This project will situate its analysis of the RAC primarily within scholarship on the history of West Africa and Atlantic empires. The last full-length study on the institutional workings and activities of the RAC was published in 1957, while more recent scholarship has focused on publishing selected source materials, exploring domestic politics and the regulation of the slave trade, or biographies of prominent individual merchants. More broadly, there has been growing interest in African-European interactions and life in trading posts, fortifications, and ports, with some historians focusing on a specific location or region within West Africa, while others have surveyed several European empires across a broad timeframe. The project can draw on these recent analyses of West African communities and their links to the Atlantic world.

In addition to this regional research context, this project will also contribute to scholarship on the history of the British empire in the Atlantic and elsewhere, including a substantial literature on the slave trade. General treatments of the British empire have given less attention to West Africa than to other regions such as the Caribbean, North America, and the Indian Ocean. This project will reinterpret the position of West Africa within this imperial system, as well as comparing the RAC to other trading companies and commercial initiatives, especially the English East India Company. The student may also draw on the concept of ‘entangled empires’ by exploring the British relationship with other European trading powers on the West African coast, and make a significant contribution to Atlantic history by reinforcing the significance of Africa in the broader currents of that scholarship.

**Main resources/collections in this area**

The project will focus primarily on the T 70 series at TNA, the official records of the RAC. This series contains letterbooks, minutes, financial ledgers, and several underused sub-series that range from official orders and instructions to ‘lists of the living and the dead’, which survey the occupants of the trading posts. The student will focus particularly on those records from the first 50 years of the RAC’s existence.

They will also be able to supplement their research on T 70 with other parts of TNA’s collections such as Admiralty, Chancery, Colonial Office, or Maps; for example, C 113/34-6 and C 113/261-95 contain private papers submitted to Chancery by RAC officials, and ADM 7/830A is Jean Barbot’s illustrated journal of his voyages to West Africa. Other collections in the UK, such as the British Library and the Bodleian Library, Oxford, may contain similarly relevant personal and official papers, such as East India Company records relating to West Africa. Should the student choose, there is also potential to conduct international research in the papers of the Dutch West India Company at Het Nationaal Archief (The Hague) or in the Portuguese Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (Lisbon), to provide a comparative perspective on the activities of the RAC.

**Skills developed by student and employability enhancement**

The close partnership between TNA, the University of Reading, and Cardiff University will provide the student with a unique and valuable skillset. This project connects to a suite of activities led by Dr Philippa Hellawell at TNA concerning the RAC records, which includes a cataloguing project on the RAC letterbooks. Besides their doctoral thesis the student will, as part of these activities, contribute to cataloguing work and produce one or more of:

• An academic article.

• Blogs or multimedia outputs.

• Internal research presentations.

• Document displays.

• Research guides (possibly including a new edition of TNA’s online research guide on transatlantic slavery).

The student will also have access to TNA’s researcher development programme, including virtual writing retreats, digital humanities training, records training by subject specialists, and privileged access to TNA’s PAST (Postgraduate Archival Skills Training) programme. In addition to this, the student can participate in Reading Graduate School’s Researcher Development Programme, and the SWW Training and Development programme. That training may include specific linguistic and digital skills through Reading’s International Study and Language Institute and Digital Humanities Hub.

Experience working with TNA will equip the student with knowledge and skills relevant to the archival sector, including cataloguing, archive handling, collections research, collections management, copyright, digitisation, and customer services. They will gain considerable experience in public engagement and acquire skills like multimedia publishing, communication and presentation for different audiences, and working with educational resources. Secondments to explore different departments at TNA, and/or placements at other institutions will also allow them to develop professional skills in other areas, such as finance, marketing, and exhibitions.