

‘THIS HORRID HOLE’: ROYAL AUTHORITY, COMMERCE AND CREDIT AT BONNY, 1690–1840*

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ABSTRACT: This article suggests that differences in local political structures and credit protection regimes largely account for Bonny’s displacement of Old Calabar as the principal slave port of the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth century, despite Bonny’s reputation for being particularly unhealthy for Europeans. We argue that this displacement occurred in the 1730s, several decades earlier than previously thought. We suggest that this was made possible by the early growth and consolidation of royal authority at Bonny. The use of state authority to enforce credit arrangements in Bonny proved more effective than the mechanisms adopted at its closest rival, Old Calabar, where, in the absence of a centralized political authority similar to the monarchy at Bonny, credit protection before 1807 was based on pawnship.

KEY WORDS: Pre-colonial, Nigeria, credit, slave trade, state.

RECENT developments in the study of international trade relations in both the medieval and post-medieval periods have been characterized by an emphasis on trust and on the cultural and institutional foundations upon which this was based.¹ Long-distance trade in particular depended upon credit and the mechanisms by which it was protected or secured at places geographically remote from merchants’ home bases, including those unattractive to European settlement or residence, are seen to have been vital to

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¹ Avner Greif, ‘Institutions and international trade: lessons from the commercial revolution’, *American Economic Review*, 82 (1992), 128–33; *idem*, ‘On the political foundations of the late medieval commercial revolution: Genoa during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries’, *Journal of Economic History*, 54 (1994), 271–97; Douglas C. North, ‘Institutions, transactions costs, and the rise of merchant empires’, in James D. Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade 1350–1750* (Cambridge, 1997), 22–41.

patterns of trade growth.² Put simply, levels of international trade would have been lower without the establishment of credit protection mechanisms. This was especially the case at the West African port of Bonny, which emerged in the eighteenth century as one of the leading slave trading ports on the African coast, despite having a reputation as a 'horrid hole'.³

This article examines the process by which Bonny, despite its unhealthy reputation, emerged as the principal port of embarkation of slaves in the Bight of Biafra, outpacing its competitors at nearby Elem Kalabari to the west and Old Calabar on the Cross River to the east. Specifically, we argue that Bonny became the leading Biafran port in the 1730s, several decades earlier than previously thought, and that its ascendancy largely accounts for the fact that the Bight of Biafra was a major source of enslaved Africans for the Americas from that time. Moreover, we suggest that Bonny's reliance on royal authority to enforce credit arrangements proved more effective than the mechanisms adopted at its closest rival, Old Calabar. There, in the absence of a centralized political authority similar to the monarchy at Bonny, the local institution of pawnship was adapted to underpin credit before 1807; and thereafter, further adaptations of local institutions, notably the Ekpe society, took place when it became no longer feasible to hold pawns as collateral for goods advanced on credit.⁴ In sum, we suggest that differences in local political structures and credit protection regimes largely account for Bonny's displacement of Old Calabar as the principal slave port of the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth century.

Security of credit can depend on personal or cultural ties between the parties involved, or on more impersonal institutional or political forms of protection. Reliance on personal or cultural ties was essential to trade growth where other forms of credit protection were weak or non-existent, but the scale of trade achievable through reliance on personal or cultural ties proved to be less than that possible where more impersonal forms of credit protection developed.⁵ Our analysis suggests that whichever mechanism evolved, other things being equal, those ports providing the greatest security of credit were more likely to attract trade, especially that of a long-distance character. This also implies that, where ports shared similar geographical advantages in terms of developing trade, differences in the efficiency of local arrangements to protect credit could prove decisive in determining the relative capacity of ports within a region to share in trade expansion with the outside world.

² On cross-cultural trade aspects of this, see Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984).

³ R. M. Jackson, *Journal of a Residence in Bonny River on Board the Ship Kingston during the Months of January, February and March 1826* (Letchworth, 1934), 133. Jackson was ship surgeon on the Kingston.

⁴ On Old Calabar, see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship, and Atlantic history: the institutional foundations of the Old Calabar slave trade', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 333–55; and *idem* and *idem*, 'From slaves to palm oil: Afro-European commercial relations in the Bight of Biafra, 1741–1841', in David Killingray, Margarete Lincoln and Nigel Rigby (eds.), *Maritime Empires* (Manchester, 2004), 13–29.

⁵ For one example of personal ties and their limitations, see Kenneth Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1993), 145–6.

The African slave trade was one of the principal long-distance trades of the early modern Atlantic world. Entailing at least two, and in most cases three, sea passages as well as stays in Africa and the Americas, slaving voyages often took twelve to eighteen months or even longer. This excluded time spent refitting ships in the homeport between voyages. At least half the time of most slaving voyages was normally spent in African waters awaiting delivery of slaves and in American ports awaiting payment for slaves sold. Although recovering remittances for slaves in America took time, the most important single factor determining variations in the overall length of voyages was the turnaround times of ships in Africa. The rate at which ships were able to load slaves was also crucial in determining the relative importance of places and regions in Africa as suppliers of slaves. Such places were often very unhealthy to Europeans and seen as terrible.

Although located in mangrove swamps, infested by mosquitoes and other disease-carrying insects, and frequently oppressively hot and humid, Bonny was able to achieve a dominant position in the trade of the Bight of Biafra because of the quick turnaround time for ships that more than compensated for its reputation as 'this horrid hole'. At Bonny, there was almost no land available for farming, although salt continued to be produced and fish was a staple of local consumption and export into the interior.⁶ The town, which had an estimated population of 25,000 in the 1790s, including dependent villages within a few miles radius of the principal settlement, was almost entirely focused on trade.⁷

Previously, efforts to understand how expansion of the slave trade was funded have largely focused on outlays on voyages in Europe and on the financing of slave purchases in the Americas. In both cases, credit was important. Some of the best available evidence relates to the British slave trade. It shows that up to a half or more of the cost of trade goods dispatched from Liverpool to Africa by 1770 was covered by credit, mostly of twelve months and largely provided by London, Birmingham and Manchester suppliers of goods.⁸ It is likely that purchase of slaves in British America was even more heavily dependent on credit at this time, most of it supplied by London finance houses in the form of guarantees of post-dated bills of exchange.⁹ Once accepted or endorsed by the firm upon which they were drawn, Liverpool traders might use such bills to fund further voyages. The indications are that both these spheres of the British trade in slaves were marked

⁶ As E. J. Alagoa has observed, trade between the delta and the interior was long standing; see 'Long-distance trade and states in the Niger Delta', *Journal of African History*, 11 (1970), 319–29.

⁷ For descriptions of Bonny town, see John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo, with an Appendix Containing an Account of the European Trade with the West Coast of Africa* (London, 1823; Cass reprint, 1966), 136–7; Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 68, 143–4.

⁸ David Richardson, 'Profits in the Liverpool slave trade: the accounts of William Davenport, 1757–1784', in Roger Anstey and P. E. H. Hair (eds.), *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition* (Liverpool, 1976), 71–2.

⁹ Richard B. Sheridan, 'The commercial and financial organisation of the British slave trade, 1750–1807', *Economic History Review*, 11 (1958–9), 249–63; Jacob Price, 'Credit in the slave trade and plantation economies', in Barbara L. Solow (ed.), *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (Cambridge, 1991), 313–17.

by important financial innovations based on the guaranteed bill system, which improved efficiency in credit management and flexibility in credit expansion. Such innovations were apparently more evident in the British trade in slaves than those of other nations and helped to sustain British supremacy in the slave-carrying trade until 1807.

Writing over forty years ago, K. O. Dike argued that credit (or 'trust') was central to Afro-European relations in the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century and, by extension, in earlier periods.¹⁰ The contemporary shipmaster, John Adams, writing about trade at Bonny in the 1790s, noted that the

natives of Bonny are expert traders, and obtain from masters of vessels very extensive credits, who grant them this indulgence, in order to bind them to their interests, and the *great secret* of the trade, both here and at Old Calabar, where credit is even more extensively given, is to discriminate properly in whom to place confidence; for many of them are so unprincipled, that, after having obtained in this way a large amount of goods from one captain, they take their native produce for sale to another. Others, however, are very punctual in their dealings; and when they see a captain too liberal in lending or giving, advise him to be more circumspect, or, to speak in one of their metaphors, to keep his hand shut.¹¹

Despite the importance of credit, the amount of goods advanced to African slave merchants remains impossible to quantify; there is evidence that credit was regularly employed in slave dealings by the late seventeenth century, at least on some parts of the coast.¹² There are also indications that the extension of credit became increasingly important, especially after 1750 when the Atlantic slave trade reached its peak. The pressures on African slave supply networks at this time were reflected in a rise in loading times of ships in Africa in general, from three to six months between 1730 and 1775, as well as inflation in the real price of slaves relative to imported trade goods after 1760.¹³ Bonny stands out, as we shall see, in its ability to keep loading times down. Nonetheless, pressures on slave supply encouraged extensions of frontiers of enslavement both coastwise and inland. It is difficult to envisage such trends taking place without reallocations of resources within African slave supply regions and infusions of external

¹⁰ K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885* (Oxford, 1956). Others have since extended Dike's insight with respect to trade in both the Delta and other regions. For the Bight of Biafra, see A. J. H. Latham, 'Currency, credit and capitalism on the Cross River in the pre-colonial era', *Journal of African History*, 12 (1971), 600–5. For other regions, see, for example, Ray Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore, 1982), and Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, 1988).

¹¹ Adams, *Remarks*, 245. Emphasis in the original. Though we recognize Adams's insight on the role of trust in giving credit, we are sceptical of his claims about the levels of credit advanced at Old Calabar relative to Bonny, at least by the 1790s.

¹² See Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics*.

¹³ On coastal loading times, see David Eltis and David Richardson, 'Productivity in the transatlantic slave trade', *Explorations in Economic History*, 32 (1995), 477–8. On coastal prices of slaves, see David Richardson, 'Prices of slaves in West and West Central Africa: toward an annual series, 1698–1807', *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 43 (1991), 21–56.

credit.¹⁴ At least a century before the period of 'legitimate' commerce on which Dike concentrated, credit or 'trust' was a central issue in Afro-European commercial relations, one that the merchants of Bonny seem to have addressed more successfully than most.

Although awareness of the importance of credit in slave transactions in Africa has increased, the impact of credit management or, more specifically, of credit security, on levels of Afro-European trade at particular places remains largely unexplored. Security of credit (or efficient debt recovery mechanisms) affected the ability of ports or particular groups of merchants to compete for and attract external credit and thereby expand their trade relative to other ports or groups. The relationship between credit, risk and trade growth has been an important theme in the application of modern microeconomic theory to economic history, though not in Afro-European trade relations.¹⁵ It is on these aspects of credit that we concentrate in this paper.

We focus on the Bight of Biafra, which emerged as a major source of slaves by the 1730s as the Atlantic traffic reached its peak and remained so through to 1841. Slave exports from the region were very largely dominated by British merchants before 1807, and, insofar as they depended on advances of credit, were thus dependent up to that time on British credit. The region's participation in the slave trade also centred on a small number of ports, among which two – Old Calabar and Bonny – were dominant by the early eighteenth century, with the latter operating a different credit management regime from and increasingly overshadowing the former as the century wore on. The article provides insights therefore not only into how credit relations worked in the Bight of Biafra at a time when the region's relative importance as a source of slaves was growing, but also why that growth of slave shipments centred largely on Bonny rather than Old Calabar. In this respect, it sheds light on the impact of credit relations on the relative standing of two major African slave-trading ports. The value of the analysis is enhanced by the fact that before 1807 both ports were almost completely dependent on slaves for export earnings.

BONNY'S RISE TO PRE-EMINENCE AMONG THE BIAFRAN SLAVE PORTS

The Bight of Biafra emerged as a supplier of slaves to America in the seventeenth century or even earlier, but remained a modest one until the 1730s. During the following century its importance expanded absolutely and relatively, largely as a result of the trade of British, particularly Bristol and Liverpool, merchants with the region. As Table 1 shows, numbers of slaves

¹⁴ There is a possible parallel here with inland expansion of the frontier of white settlement in the United States in the nineteenth century, the rate of which seems to have been related, among other things, to movements in international commodity prices (in this case for raw cotton and for wheat), to shifts in terms of trade, and to inflows of international capital (Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* [Englewood Cliffs NJ, 1961], 70; *idem*, 'International capital flows and the development of the American West', *Journal of Economic History*, 16 [1956], 493–505).

¹⁵ In addition to the articles by Greif cited earlier, see Oliver E. Williamson, *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism* (New York, 1985); Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York, 1995).

Table 1. *Slave exports from the Bight of Biafra, 1701–1810.*

Period	Number of slaves	Proportion of total trade (%)
1701–10	10,867	3.4
1711–20	21,956	5.5
1721–30	38,295	7.1
1731–40	34,069	6.6
1741–50	99,870	18.5
1751–60	97,968	15.7
1761–70	152,076	18.2
1771–80	119,005	16.3
1781–90	175,428	20.4
1791–1800	151,365	19.6
1801–10	100,567	14.7

Source: Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship, and Atlantic history', 337.

sent from the Bight totalled less than 4,000 a year in most years before 1740, with its regional share of all slave shipments to America being no more than 7.1 per cent. Shipments of slaves from the Bight, however, almost tripled between the 1730s and 1750s and then nearly doubled again by the 1780s. As a result, the region's portion of the Atlantic slave trade rose to over one fifth, almost all the increase since the 1730s being attributable to British shipping and heavily concentrated at Bonny. After the 1780s, the level of slave shipments from the Bight fell back and by the time Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807 amounted to some 10,000 a year. British abolition caused an immediate and sharp decline in slave shipments, but the collapse was not permanent. Within a decade, the resurgence in the slave trade was underway, as French, Portuguese and Spanish carriers filled the void left by the British, and by the 1820s slave shipments had returned to levels only moderately lower than those attained at the height of British slaving activity. This revival in slave exports, moreover, was largely sustained until 1841, when direct British action brought the traffic to an end. Overall, between 1660 and 1841, some 1.5 million slaves were probably shipped from the Bight of Biafra, two-thirds of them between 1740 and 1807,¹⁶ when British traders accounted for over 85 per cent of those shipped. Besides Portugal's control of the slave trade south of the River Congo, few European nations achieved such continuing dominance of slave trading in a particular region of Atlantic Africa as the British did in the Bight of Biafra.

Three ports – Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), Bonny and Old Calabar – dominated shipments of slaves from the Bight of Biafra, but the relative importance of the three ports shifted through time. The westernmost, Elem Kalabari, was probably the most important before 1700 but thereafter

¹⁶ David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom* (Cambridge, 1999).

Table 2. *Distribution of slave shipments by port, 1660–1840 (percentages).*

Period	Bonny	Old Calabar	Elem Kalabari	
Pre-1730	13.2	63.8	22.9	(21,011)
1730–79	58.2	33.4	8.4	(209,563)
1780–1807	66.3	21.9	11.9	(249,332)
1780–1840	66.8	21.9	11.2	(268,626)
1660–1840	61.0	28.5	10.5	(499,200)
	(304,309)	(142,393)	(52,498)	(499,200)

Source: Eltis *et al.*, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom* (Cambridge, 1999), based on 1,405 voyages (an estimated 499,200 slaves).

was overshadowed by its two eastern rivals. By the end of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, Elem Kalabari's trade was closely associated, if not mostly subsumed, by neighbouring Bonny.¹⁷ Figures on the embarkation of slaves at the three ports (based on a sample of nearly 500,000 slaves) are presented in Table 2.¹⁸ These show that before 1730 nearly two-thirds of the slaves loaded at the three ports boarded ship at Old Calabar on the Cross River, with Elem Kalabari loading most of the rest. Old Calabar's ascendancy in the Biafran slave trade, however, was under threat by 1730, and as Table 2 reveals, between 1730 and 1779 almost six in ten of the slaves taken from the three ports were loaded at Bonny, Old Calabar accounting for most of the remainder. The dominance established by Bonny over its rivals at this time was, moreover, sustained during the remaining years of the region's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, with two out of three slaves loaded at the three ports in 1780–1840 embarking at Bonny.¹⁹ By contrast, Old Calabar's share of slave exports continued to decline, falling to just over one in five in the same period. Overall, more than twice as many slaves entered the Atlantic slave trade through Bonny than at Old

¹⁷ David Northrup (*Trade without Rulers: Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* [Oxford, 1978], 52–3) suggests that Elem Kalabari held its premier position for most of the seventeenth century, but also notes that, of the two, Bonny was 'the dominant port' by the end of the century. On the figures produced by Northrup, Old Calabar was the leading port in the Bight by 1700. Also see John Thornton, 'African background of the slave cargo of the *Henrietta Maria*', unpublished paper. Thornton draws on Dutch and Portuguese sources on Elem Kalabari in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it emerged as the principal port in the eastern Niger delta.

¹⁸ Table 2 overstates the share of each of the three ports, since slaves were shipped at other places in the region such as Andoni, Cameroons, Gabon, Nazareth and Cape Lopez. These were all smaller slave ports than Elem Kalabari, though the growth of slave shipments from places east of the Cross River means that Table 2 gives a slightly exaggerated view of the relative importance of slave embarkation in the delta, especially after 1750.

¹⁹ These figures may understate Bonny's dominance, especially from the 1790s, since it appears that by this time Elem Kalabari had lost its status as 'an independent state', its inhabitants being 'compelled to take their merchandize to Bonny for sale, yet are not permitted to have any communication with the shipping' (Adams, *Remarks*, 136).

Calabar, despite Old Calabar's evident early advantage in attracting European slave carriers.²⁰

The figures on the distribution of slave shipments by port in Table 2 are consistent with contemporary views of the relative standing of Bonny and Old Calabar as slaving ports.²¹ In evidence included in the Parliamentary report on the African trade in 1789, Robert Norris presented figures that showed that some 14,500 slaves a year were shipped from Bonny and Elem Kalabari by European carriers at that time, more than twice as many as from Old Calabar and the Cameroons.²² The source of Norris's data is unknown but they are compatible with those underlying Table 2. John Adams, who travelled to Africa in 1794 and published recollections of his voyage thirty years later, also highlighted Bonny's dominance of the Biafran slave trade. Adams claimed that 'for a long time' Old Calabar had 'dealt in the productions of the soil', largely 'in consequence of Bonny becoming the great slave market, and monopolizing the trade in slaves, which Old Calabar carried on to a considerable extent before it'.²³ Adams exaggerated Old Calabar's loss of interest in the slave trade and was not as precise as one would wish about when this shift occurred, but it seems reasonable

²⁰ Bonny dealers sometimes traded at other ports. In 1727, Captain White 'of Banny' supplied slaves at Andoni to the Bristol ship *Castle* (Ship *Castle* Day Book, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, AMS/4).

²¹ In 1762 a report to the Chamber of Commerce of Nantes suggested that Bonny was part of Elem Kalabari and was 'l'endroit don[t] les Anglais tirent le plus de captifs', shipping each year some 12,000 slaves in some 30 ships. It was observed that 'il n'y a point dendroit ou la traite sois plus faciles et plus commodes' (Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique, Nantes, C 738, fo. 76, extrait de mémoire donne par M Lepinay en septembre 1762). Liverpool and Bristol merchants were aware of Bonny's importance in the slave trade before the 1780s. As noted in 1772, while there were 'two Liverpool & 1 Bristol Vessel at Newtown & 1 Liverpool man at old Town' in Old Calabar in June 1772, in August 'there were thirteen Sail at Bonny giving about £20 Ster[ling] a head for Slaves' (15 Dec. 1772, David Tuohy to John Chilcott, Tuohy papers, 380 TUO 2/1, Liverpool Record Office). Similarly, Joseph Banfield, who was involved in 12 voyages to Africa, mainly from Bristol, noted that on his voyage to Elem Kalabari in the *John* in 1771 there were 'at that time in the river 15 sail of vestles and as many more at Bonny'. He also noted that, as a result, 'the natives had rose the Slaves to such an Exorbitant price that the Vestles in General short of their purchase neare One half' (Joseph Banfield MSS, Huntington Library, San Marino, California). The competition presented by Bonny was also understood by 1780 by the traders of Old Calabar, who in seeking to attract more interest from Liverpool merchants, observed that they 'have Slaves Same a[s] Bonny or other place' (Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Letters of the Old Calabar slave trade 1760–1789', in Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould [eds.], *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic* [Lexington KY, 2001], 109).

²² Sheila Lambert (ed.), *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century* (145 vols.) (Wilmington DE, 1975), LXIX, Report of the Lords of Trade Committee of Council on the Present State of the African Trade, 1789, 39. According to Norris's figures, at this time Bonny and Elem Kalabari were the most important single sources of slaves shipped throughout Atlantic Africa, accounting for just under one fifth of the estimated total shipment of 74,200 slaves a year. Norris claimed that 38,000 slaves a year were carried away in British ships. In the same report, another trader, James Penny, also of Liverpool, suggested that shipments from Bonny and Elem Kalabari totalled 14,000 annually at this time, with 11,000 being carried in British ships and the rest in French. *Ibid.* 47.

²³ Adams, *Remarks*, 143.

to assume that he believed it was well before 1794. This assumption is supported by Adams's suggestion that 'the chiefs of Old Calabar' lost their trade in slaves 'by exacting from trading vessels exorbitant duties or customs'.²⁴ This claim was echoed in remarks by British traders about the high levels of 'comey' (duties) at Old Calabar in the 1760s and 1780s.²⁵

While Table 2 confirms the reliability of contemporary assessments of the relative standing of Bonny and Old Calabar, it suggests that historians have been over-conservative in estimating when Bonny superseded Old Calabar as the leading slave port of the Bight of Biafra. Suggestions that Bonny achieved ascendancy under King Opubo Pepple, whose reign some have argued began after 1792, can be disregarded, but it is still not appreciated how early Bonny overtook Old Calabar as a slave port. Drawing on Liverpool data for certain years between 1752 and 1799, Latham has suggested that 'Bonny *apparently* did handle more Liverpool ships than Old Calabar in most years, and in the late 1790s considerably more'.²⁶ More recently, Hargreaves has claimed that 'for at least the thirty to forty years before Opubo became king', which she claims took place in 1816, 'Bonny had enjoyed a trading advantage over its neighbours'. Although Hargreaves admits that the date when Opubo Pepple became king is uncertain, her chronology implies that, in her view, Bonny achieved ascendancy probably no earlier than the 1770s.²⁷ The shipping data reveal, however, that Bonny emerged as the region's leading slave port some forty years earlier. In this respect, we are suggesting a radical revision of existing assumptions about the relative standing of Bonny and

²⁴ *Ibid.* According to Adams (245, 248), duties on ships at Old Calabar were £250, or £100 more than at Bonny. At Old Calabar, moreover, duties depended on the size of ship, whereas at Bonny all ships paid the same rate. A contemporary of Adams, the Bristol merchant, James Jones, complained in 1788 that duties at Bonny and Elem Kalabari were 'very high being much more than at any other part of the Coast' but also acknowledged that the tax was 'on every Ship alike without distinction as to size', encouraging the employment of ships in the Bonny trade of 200–50 tons or more and capable of carrying shiploads of 400–600 slaves (26 July 1788, James Jones to Lord Hawkesbury, in Elizabeth Donnan [ed.], *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* [4 vols.] [Washington DC, 1930–5], II, 589). As loadings of 400–600 slaves were much less common at Old Calabar, Jones's remarks may not have been inconsistent with those of Adams.

²⁵ As he sailed for Old Calabar in 1762, the master of the *Marquis of Granby*, Ambrose Lace, was told to 'use your utmost endeavours to keep down the Coomeys which in Generall are to extravagant there and For which you have no Return at least not worth any thing to the Ownery'; Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers and Letters of Marque, with an Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade* (London, 1897; 1966 edn.), 486. For complaints about sharp rises in comey at Old Calabar in the late 1780s, see Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), Chancery Masters Exhibits C 107/12, Richard Rogers to James Rogers, 29 Oct. 1787.

²⁶ A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar 1600–1891: The Impact of the International Economy upon a Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1973), 20–1. The figures cited by Latham actually show that in four of the five years covered up to and including 1787 more Liverpool ships expected to trade at Elem Kalabari and Old Calabar together and to carry away as many, if not more, slaves than at Bonny.

²⁷ Susan M. Hargreaves, 'The political economy of nineteenth century Bonny: a study of power, authority, legitimacy and ideology in a delta trading community 1790–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987), 143, 181–2.

Old Calabar as slave ports. In short, Bonny became the leading port in the Bight of Biafra a generation or more earlier than historians have previously assumed.²⁸

What advantages did Bonny possess over its rivals that enabled it to dominate slave shipments from the Bight of Biafra during the century after 1730? Put slightly differently, why was Bonny better able to compete for British commercial credit than not only other Biafran ports but also most other ports in western Africa with which the British traded in 1730–1807? A paucity of data on Anglo-Biafran trade relations and lacunae in the political history of Bonny make these questions difficult, but some tentative suggestions can be made on the basis of available data on trade at Bonny and Old Calabar. This evidence reveals some similarities while also exposing significant differences in trade performance that point towards important political advantages at Bonny in credit security, commercial efficiency and the promotion of impersonal exchange.²⁹ These, it is argued, were crucial in allowing Bonny to attract more British capital than Old Calabar by the 1730s.

BRITISH-AFRICAN TRADING AND PERSONAL RELATIONS

British merchants achieved their dominance of the Atlantic slave trade by shipping slaves from various regions of Africa, of which the Bight of Biafra was one of the most important. Elsewhere we have examined British trade with Old Calabar, arguing that British commercial and credit relations with the port were largely a story of evolving institutional adjustments to changing economic and political parameters of trade.³⁰ Our analysis highlighted a number of features of the personal and commercial relations of British and local merchants. It also suggested that the adaptation by British and Old Calabar merchants of the local institution of debt bondage or ‘pawnship’ was crucial as a way of securing credit until Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807. This institutional adjustment brought some alleviation of the risks to British traders of advancing credit at Old Calabar while allowing local merchants to compete for access to British credit through loans of trade goods. These goods in turn were sent to interior markets scattered through the Igbo and Ibibio country and controlled by traders from Aro Chukwu. While not unique to Old Calabar, pawnship thus underpinned and promoted the expansion of slave exports from Old Calabar

²⁸ Bonny’s challenge to Old Calabar’s supremacy was implicitly acknowledged as early as 1729 when the Bristol merchant, Isaac Hobhouse, was informed that while four ships were reported trading at Old Calabar, ‘four or five Ships were at Bonny, but no p[ar]ticular acco[un]t’; 3 Jan. 1729, Tyndall & Assheton to Isaac Hobhouse, Hobhouse papers, Avon County Library. Ongoing research relating to extending and revising the dataset of slave voyages published by Eltis *et al.* (*Slave Trade Database*) suggests that the data presented in Table 2 may well understate the importance of Bonny before the mid-1730s.

²⁹ On the shift from personal to impersonal exchange, and the institutional and political conditions necessary to support it, see Douglass C. North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change*, Institute of Economic Affairs, Occasional Paper 106 (London, 1999), 21–2. ³⁰ Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Trust, pawnship, and Atlantic history’.

as long as Britain remained in the trade.³¹ Once Britain abolished its slave trade and sought to promote other forms of commercial exchange at Old Calabar, other mechanisms were adopted in order to secure Euro-African credit relations at the port. These included membership by Europeans in local debt-enforcing agencies and the use of notes of credit.³²

As at Old Calabar, Bonny's economic fortunes revolved around the export slave trade relations with British merchants.³³ Though the evidence is less detailed for Bonny, there were similarities in the structure of Anglo-African trade at Old Calabar and Bonny before 1807. As at Old Calabar, a small number of commercial houses tended to control eighteenth-century British trade at Bonny, with Liverpool houses outnumbering Bristol ones by some margin. For example, in the mid-eighteenth century, firms involving Thomas Kendall and Arthur and Benjamin Heywood accounted for over 40 per cent of Liverpool ships trading to Bonny, while towards the end of the century, three firms – William Boats and John Dawson of Liverpool and James Jones of Bristol – accounted for over half of all British slave shipments from Bonny.³⁴ The commercial expertise that such houses possessed in relation to trade at Bonny was central to their success and in some cases seems to have been passed down through marriage and other forms of personal association from one generation to another.³⁵

On the African side, in 1826 R. M. Jackson claimed that there were nearly one hundred 'principal Traders' at Bonny located in the 'principalities' that

³¹ On the adoption of pawnship as a credit security mechanism in other places, including the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, Cameroons, Gabon and the Loango Coast, see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'The business of slaving: pawnship in Western Africa, c. 1600–1810', *Journal of African History*, 42 (2001), 67–89.

³² Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Slaves to palm oil'.

³³ Referring to Bonny, Jackson suggested in 1826 that 'from the middle of the last century to its close, the English held exclusive possession of its traffic, which consisted entirely of Slaves'. He drew particular attention to Liverpool traders who were said to have carried away 15,000 slaves a year from Bonny at the end of the eighteenth century. See Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 144–5.

³⁴ For data on Liverpool ships trading to Bonny in 1751–5, see Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*. For late eighteenth-century data, see Stephen D. Behrendt, 'The British slave trade, 1785–1807: volume, profitability, and mortality' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1993), 302. Behrendt's data also show, however, that the spread of firms involved in British trade to Bonny increased in the decade before abolition in 1807. Interestingly, three firms also dominated British trade to Bonny's neighbour, Elem Kalabari, around 1790, though they were not the same as the ones that controlled the trade to Bonny (Behrendt, 'Slave trade', 301).

³⁵ The importance of such knowledge is revealed by the correspondence of the Bristol merchant, James Rogers, who was a major investor in voyages to Old Calabar in 1783–93 but also financed occasional voyages to Bonny. In the latter case, Rogers sometimes sought advice from experienced Liverpool traders, and on one occasion even bought an appropriate ship and fitted it out at Liverpool. On this occasion, however, he appears to have disregarded advice from his Liverpool correspondent relating to the season of trade at Bonny, an oversight that seems to have cost him dearly. PRO, C 107/13, correspondence with Captain William Woodville 1789–91. Data on British merchant involvement in the slave trade to each of the ports of the Bight of Biafra in 1750–1807 may be found in Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*.

comprised the port.³⁶ It appears, however, that when Jackson wrote – and earlier – the port’s export slave trade was concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of merchant houses. This pattern is first discernible in the 1690s.³⁷ Internal rivalry and variations in commercial skills meant that there was some shifting in the relative standing of different houses during the following century, with new houses emerging and some older ones falling into debt, becoming depleted in membership, or even being absorbed by their rivals. As at Old Calabar, however, a small proportion of the community at Bonny seems to have retained control of the export slave trade.³⁸ At the end of the eighteenth century a few trading houses or firms held quite large shares of slave exports, though apparently without any one being able consistently to dominate the trade. In 1790, six firms – Trade Boy, Jacques Paul, Faine Bonne (Finebone?), Bonifesse (Boniface?), Affriqua and Yongue Faubra – supplied all but 19 of the 228 slaves bought by the ship *Guerrier* of Nantes, one of the few French ships to visit Bonny at this time. The ‘king’ and Prince George supplied the remainder of the slaves sold to this ship.³⁹ Two years later, two traders – Allison and John Africa, the latter possibly being the Affriqua that dealt with the *Guerrier* in 1790 – supplied 102 of the 334 slaves purchased by the *Rodney* of Bristol, with the remaining 232 slaves being supplied by a further 26 traders. The latter included King Pepple.⁴⁰ Another account of slave transactions for the following year, this time relating to the ship *Jupiter*, also of Bristol, shows that many of those who had dealt with the *Rodney* in 1792 supplied slaves to its fellow Bristol ship.⁴¹ They included Allison and John Africa again, as well as King Pepple and his sons Prince Will and Prince Frederick. On this occasion, however, of over 40 suppliers of slaves, the largest were Finebone and Boniface, houses that seem to have been among the leading suppliers of slaves to the *Guerrier* in 1790. Together with ‘JuJ[u] House’, ‘JuJ[u] Boy’ and ‘King Stu’ or ‘R Stwd’ (Royal Steward?), Finebone and Boniface supplied 146 of the 368 slaves loaded by the *Jupiter*. As at Old Calabar, therefore, the political elite of Bonny, notably the king, his sons and some of his subordinates, were directly involved in slave trading, but others were heavily involved too. Scattered evidence suggests, moreover, that some of the firms

³⁶ Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 144; Jackson observed that each of the ‘principal Traders’ at Bonny kept ‘a large establishment, having at least from five to ten Wives & perhaps thirty Slaves or more’ (148–9).

³⁷ For an earlier description of the principal merchants of Bonny and its component principalities, see P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones and Robin Law (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678–1712* (2 vols.) (London, 1992) (hereafter Barbot, *West Africa*), II, 675. According to Barbot, the ‘Town of Great Bandy’ consisted around 1700 of about 300 houses and was ‘well Peopled with Blacks, who employ themselves in trade’. Barbot listed several of the leading traders.

³⁸ Ebiegberi J. Alagoa and Adadonye Fombo, *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny* (Ibadan, 1972), 45–9. On patterns of control at Old Calabar after 1750, see Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Trust, pawnship and Atlantic history’. Although the relative standing of merchant families at Old Calabar shifted between the 1720s and c. 1770, there is evidence of similar patterns earlier in the century; see Stephen D. Behrendt and Eric J. Graham, ‘African merchants, notables and the slave trade at Old Calabar, 1720: evidence from the National Archives of Scotland’, *History in Africa*, 30 (2003), 37–61.

³⁹ Brouillard de traite 1790, I J 679, Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique, Nantes.

⁴⁰ PRO, C 107/15.

⁴¹ PRO, C 107/59.

of the early 1790s, as well as their descendants, retained substantial influence over external trade two decades or more later.⁴²

Since the British dominated trade, it is perhaps unsurprising that, like their Old Calabar counterparts, traders at Bonny were often fluent in English, or at least pidgin or creole versions of it. William James observed in 1789 that the 'Black Traders of Bonny and Calabar' were multi-lingual, having both local and European languages.⁴³ Bonny traders were literate as well. Some carried ivory disks on which British shipmasters had inscribed notes of reference on behalf of those who had served them well.⁴⁴ Thomas Clarkson also provided testimony to their literary skills, noting

I must not forget here, that several of the African traders, or great men, are not unacquainted with letters. This is particularly the case at Bonny and [Old] Calabar, where they not only speak the English language with fluency, but *write* it. These traders send letters repeatedly to the merchants here [Liverpool and Bristol], stating the situation of the markets, the goods which they would wish to be sent out to them the next voyage, the number of slaves which they expect to receive by that time, and such other particulars, as might be expected from one merchant to another. These letters are always legible, void of ambiguity, and easy to be understood. They contain of course, sufficient arguments to shew, that they are as capable of conducting trade, and possess as good an understanding as those to whom they write.⁴⁵

The skills of Bonny traders also extended to reckoning, even when they were unable to read or write. John Adams, who visited Bonny in 1794, claimed that John Africa, to whom reference was made above, had 'an extraordinary memory' and was able to keep 'open running accounts with fourteen or fifteen vessels at the same time'.⁴⁶ According to Hugh Crow, who met him

⁴² Hugh Crow, for example, referred in his account of his last slaving voyage to Bonny in 1807 to John Africa, who had been to Britain at least once. Crow claimed that John Africa was nicknamed Billy Pitt by shipmasters on account of his 'political abilities and general acquirements', which included 'the favour or confidence' of King Pepple. Hugh Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool* (London, 1830), 139. The accounts of a ship that traded at Bonny c. 1810 reveal that John Africa, Tom Allison, Finebones, Jew Jew Boy and Jew Jew House were involved in trade; see Brig Stephen trading accounts, Papers of John Leigh & Co., PRO, C 108/214. For a more general listing of the names of the trading houses at Bonny in the nineteenth century, some of which included names identical with or similar to those mentioned by European traders in 1790–3, see Alagoa and Fombo, *Chronicle*, 50–66.

⁴³ Evidence of William James, in Lambert (ed.), *Sessional Papers*, LXIX, Report of African Trade, 49.

⁴⁴ One disk or bracelet was inscribed to 'Tom Buck of Grandy Bonny, an Honest Trader, he sold me 20 Slaves' from the ship *Liverpool*, and was one of three such bracelets given to local traders by the same ship, which made voyages to Bonny in 1782–5 (Albert Dock, Liverpool, National Maritime Museum on Merseyside NMGGM 1961.57; Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*, voyage ids 82321, 82322, 82323). Other examples of inscribed bracelets or disks, inscribed to 'John Pepper' and to 'Young West India of Grandy Bonny' by Liverpool and Bristol ships are to be found, respectively, at National Maritime Museum on Merseyside, NMGGM 4427M, and at the Wisbech and Fenland Museum, Thomas Clarkson collection, TCCI 282.

⁴⁵ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African* (London, 1788), 125–6. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶ Adams, *Remarks*, 140.

during his voyage to Bonny in 1807, John Africa could speak English 'with tolerable fluency', having been to England 'several times'.⁴⁷

Other Bonny merchants, like their counterparts at Old Calabar, doubtless learned or improved their English through visits to Liverpool and Bristol, where they would have met local slave traders and their families, thereby helping to build friendship and trust.⁴⁸ Most traders at Bonny, however, probably learnt English and other skills through regular commercial and social intercourse with British shipmasters.⁴⁹ Some of the latter made several voyages to Bonny,⁵⁰ where they often participated in social and other events, including feasts, visits to *juju* (or deity) shrines, and audiences with the king or other important merchants.⁵¹ Such practices did little to soften the disquiet expressed by Europeans for some African cultural practices and rituals – trade continued to be conducted between agents of different cultural backgrounds and traditions – but participation in social gatherings represented an important investment by British shipmasters seeking to personalize and promote trade relations. A shared language as well as inherited knowledge and personal connections thus seem to have underpinned British trade at Bonny, as at Old Calabar. Elsewhere we have argued that these personal relations were a necessary, though not sufficient, mechanism for the efficient operation of the trade at Old Calabar. The same, we would argue, applied to Bonny, though the fact that the local traders there carried notes of recommendation from British shipmasters inscribed on ivory disks points also to a higher level of impersonality in trade relations at Bonny than at Old Calabar. In neither case, however, were personal relations alone seen as an effective guarantee against malfeasance. At both ports, trust depended at least as much on institutional mechanisms as on personal relations. Nowhere was this more evident than in credit protection.

As we have demonstrated elsewhere, eighteenth-century British traders at Old Calabar demanded human pawns as security for goods advanced on

⁴⁷ Crow, *Memoirs*, 139.

⁴⁸ The earliest known resident of Bonny to visit England was the so-called 'Duke of Lorrain', a nephew of the then 'King of Bandie', who voyaged to London in 1702, well over a century before Crow put pen to paper on his memoirs. The visit was evidently brief, the 'Duke' returning to Bonny within a year of his arrival in London, whereupon he was expected to become a linguist (or 'linguister') in the service of the Royal African Company. PRO, T 70/151, p. 292. Tradition suggests that in the sixteenth century a son of King Asimini visited Portugal (Alagoa and Fombo, *Chronicle*, 7).

⁴⁹ At least one French trading firm in the 1820s, however, thought it appropriate to write a letter of introduction in French to the king of Bonny, reminding him of earlier dealings (Serge Daget [ed.], *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises à la traite illégale (1814–1850)* [Nantes, 1988], 423).

⁵⁰ On Liverpool shipmasters, including those who traded at Bonny, see Stephen D. Behrendt, 'The captains in the British slave trade from 1785 to 1807', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 140 (1991), 79–140.

⁵¹ For an early description of social gatherings of Europeans and Africans at Bonny, see Barbot, *West Africa*, II, 675. Hugh Crow reported attending a similar meeting in 1807 at the 'Palavar or Parliament-house', attended by King Pepple, 'all the Jew-Jew-Men [priests], and the Chiefs'. The objective of meeting was to discuss the illness of one of the wives of King Holiday (Halliday) (Crow, *Memoirs*, 139). Jackson noted a social meeting with King Pepple in July 1826 where the king 'chatted with us, for more than two hours' (Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 135).

credit. The earliest known instance of this practice dates from 1702 and later reports indicate that it was commonplace by the middle of the eighteenth century.⁵² Those pawned included relatives of local traders and, for this reason, shipmasters were sometimes reluctant to foreclose on debts, preferring to adjust holdings of pawns among themselves rather than sailing away with them. Nevertheless, there is evidence that ships took away pawns as slaves when local dealers failed to meet their obligations within an agreed time. Moreover, some dealers acknowledged their right to do so. In this respect, credit arrangements at Old Calabar were based on private-order, self-regulating contracts that had mutually accepted and recognized mechanisms of debt clearing that involved enslavement of those held as security. Old Calabar was not alone in relying on pawns to attract credit from British and other traders.⁵³ The practice, however, was not universal, as more than one witness before Parliament in 1790 testified.

Bonny was among the notable exceptions. One shipmaster claiming to have twenty years' experience of the slave trade, James Fraser, testified that, 'to his own knowledge', human pawns were used as pledges for credit at Angola and the Windward Coast, 'but seldom at Bonny'.⁵⁴ Others corroborated Fraser's views, and in the admittedly limited number of records so far unearthed on slave transactions at Bonny no evidence has been found to contradict them. In his memoirs, Hugh Crow, who regularly visited Bonny before 1807, attests to the honesty of

the more respectable of the Bonnians, among whom I have on some voyages sold goods on credit to the extent of £600 or £800, for which, when I reminded them of payment by merely giving them notice by signal, in the course of three or four days the whole of their debts would be punctually liquidated.⁵⁵

Crow made no reference to pawns. At Bonny, therefore, credit appears to have been protected in a different way from at Old Calabar. Moreover, relative to its rival, the protection offered at Bonny to creditors enabled a much larger traffic in slaves to be sustained.

Unfortunately, neither Fraser nor any other witness before Parliament was asked how British traders sought to protect credit advances at Bonny, and nobody volunteered such information. By the end of the eighteenth century, at least, there was sufficient local capital to fund slaving activities, in part at least. Some Bonny merchants maintained warehouses full of trade goods that appear to have facilitated the trade.⁵⁶ Hugh Crow observed that on one

⁵² In 1702, the master of the ship *Hunter* took away from Old Calabar the brother 'of a great man here', who had been 'under Confinemnt. On board his ship for a Debt, that he pretends of 11 slaves that is owing to him by another man' (15 Apr. 1702, Captain William Read to the Royal African Company, PRO, T 70/175, fo. 23). This instance of pawning in the export slave trade of Old Calabar pre-dates the earliest previously known case of such pawning by some sixty years (Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship and Atlantic history', 350).

⁵³ Pawning in the export slave trade of the Gold Coast pre-dates as far we know that at Old Calabar, perhaps by as much as several decades. For a fuller discussion of the extent of pawning, see Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Business of slaving', 25–50.

⁵⁴ Lambert (ed.), *Sessional Papers*, LXXI, Minutes of Evidence, 1790, 17.

⁵⁵ Crow, *Memoirs*, 225.

⁵⁶ For reports of stocks of trade goods at Bonny, see Adams, *Remarks*, 139–40; Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 74, 143–4.

voyage in the 1790s, 'the town being full of slaves we soon completed our cargo, and after a stay of only three weeks sailed to the westward'.⁵⁷ Such local capital was almost certainly protected by internal mechanisms, perhaps involving kinship or religion in the form of *juju* shrines. Despite the availability of local capital, however, it is plain that European firms advanced credit to Bonny merchants throughout the port's involvement in the slave trade. Describing a voyage to Elem Kalabari and Bonny in 1699, James Barbot reported that some at 'Great Bandy' acted 'as factors, or brokers, either for their own countrymen, or for the Europeans, who are often obliged to trust them with their goods, to attend the upper markets, and purchase slaves for them'.⁵⁸ Other visitors to Bonny, as we have seen, echoed Barbot's remarks on the importance of imported credit in lubricating trade during the following century and a quarter.

These comments, together with data on the ethnic origins of slaves shipped, suggest that credit, in the form of European trade goods, flowed from Bonny into the heart of the Igbo country as well as adjacent areas. Although specialists disagree over the precise ethnic composition of slaves shipped from the ports in the Bight of Biafra, there is agreement that the proportion of Igbo was high, especially from Bonny, ranging from 60 to 80 per cent of all slaves, with Ibibio making up most of the rest.⁵⁹ John Adams claimed, on the basis of his voyage to Africa in 1794, that some 16,000 Igbo and several thousand Ibibio (or 'Quaws') were annually shipped from Bonny. The procurement of slaves on this scale, as Adams knew, was impossible without local slave suppliers 'obtaining from their friends, the captains of the slave ships, a considerable quantity of goods on credit, according to the extent of business they are in the habit of transacting'.⁶⁰ What, however, motivated British traders to supply credit to the merchants of Bonny at the level sufficient to sustain the large volume of slave shipments from the port not just in the 1790s but for most of the century after 1730?

BONNY'S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN LOADING SHIPS FASTER

The limited documentary evidence on the history of Bonny before the late eighteenth century makes it difficult to answer such questions, but new data on shipping patterns of slaves at Bonny and other ports in Africa help to shed

⁵⁷ Crow, *Memoirs*, pp. 60–1. In 1826 Jackson reported that King People had given to the king of Warri goods equivalent to three ships' cargoes for the hand of his daughter (*Journal of a Residence*, 135).

⁵⁸ The practice of extending loans to the Bonny king and other local merchants is also reported by Barbot (*West Africa*, II, 675, 689).

⁵⁹ For the debate over the ethnicity of slaves leaving the Bight of Biafra, see Douglas B. Chambers, "'My own nation": Igbo exiles in the diaspora', *Slavery and Abolition*, 18 (1997), especially 73–7, where it is argued that 80 per cent or more of slaves exported were Igbo, and David Northrup, 'Igbo and Igbo myth: culture and ethnicity in the Atlantic World, 1600–1850', *Slavery and Abolition*, 21 (2000), 1–21, where it is argued that in the century after 1730 Igbo-speakers accounted for 'perhaps 60 per cent' of slaves leaving Bonny and much smaller proportions leaving Old Calabar (14). For data on ethnicity in 1821–2, see Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*, 60–2.

⁶⁰ Adams, *Remarks*, 130.

Table 3. *Daily loading rates, Liverpool ships on the African coast, 1750–1805 (slaves per day).*

Place	1750–75	1791–7	1800–5
Gambia	1.0 (23)	n.a.	n.a.
Windward Coast	1.0 (135)	1.5 (36)	n.a.
Gold Coast	1.3 (61)	2.2 (14)	3.0 (36)
Bight of Biafra			
Bonny	3.1 (60)	5.0 (38)	5.7 (59)
Old Calabar	1.5 (52)	2.6 (33)	2.6 (38)
Angola	1.7 (25)	3.4 (66)	4.1 (68)

Note: Figures in brackets refer to number of voyages. The data for 1791–7 are derived from specific information on turnaround times of ships in Africa and numbers of slaves loaded. Those for 1750–75 and 1800–5 are derived by adjusting evidence of slave deliveries in America and of the time taken for ships to travel from Liverpool via Africa to America to allow for slave mortality in the Atlantic crossing and the sailing times of ships to Africa and from Africa to America. Based on data for 1791–7, we assumed a combined sailing time of 145 days to Africa and from Africa to America to calculate loading times in Africa. This flat rate sailing time tends to bias our calculation of daily slave loading rates of ships in favour of regions to the west of the Bight of Biafra. In estimating slave loadings from slave delivery data we assumed shipboard mortality levels tended to fall between 1750 and 1805 but also varied by trading destination in Africa, ships visiting the Bight of Biafra often encountering slave losses in transit noticeably higher on average than those visiting other places (Herbert S. Klein, Stanley L. Engerman, Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Transoceanic mortality: the slave trade in comparative perspective’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 [2001], 114).

Source: Data derived from Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*.

light on them. Particularly significant are estimates of daily loading rates of slaves at different African ports constructed from information contained in a recently published voyage data set.⁶¹ A summary of some relevant data for Liverpool ships is presented in Table 3, which shows daily loading rates of slaves at different places on the African coast between 1750 and 1805. The figures given in the table disguise variations in loading rates per ship as well as some unevenness in slave purchases across individual transactions. The data do, however, provide an indication of the efficiency with which merchants at different ports were able to supply ships with slaves. It appears that Liverpool ships in particular became more efficient in loading their enslaved cargoes throughout much of Atlantic Africa between 1750 and 1805. In some cases, indeed, loading rates more than doubled despite continuing high levels of slaves shipped. What the data also show is that there were considerable variations among ports, with ships trading at Bonny consistently achieving not only higher loading rates than those visiting the Gold Coast and Angola but also rates double those achieved at Old Calabar. The differential between Bonny and Old Calabar reported in Table 3, moreover, disguises the fact that Bonny ships tended to take in

⁶¹ Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*.

proportionately more adults as well as possibly more healthy slaves in general than those trading in the Cross River.⁶² Bearing in mind that the number of slaves taken from Bonny was usually at least twice as great as that from Old Calabar in 1750–1805, the merchants of Bonny were evidently more efficient in supplying greater numbers of slaves than their eastern neighbours. This, in turn, suggests that, other things being equal, Liverpool traders advancing goods on credit at Bonny were more likely to obtain a quicker and possibly more reliable return on their investment than at Old Calabar.

Contemporaries were aware of the fact that loading rates of ships were higher at Bonny, and also Elem Kalabari, than at other places. According to Thomas Clarkson, ‘the regularity of the trade, and the small space of time in which a cargo may be completed, are considerations, which have made these places more resorted to than any other upon the coast’.⁶³ In 1788, James Jones of Bristol claimed that ships trading to Bonny and Elem Kalabari purchased slaves ‘much quicker than at any other place’.⁶⁴ The ability to load ships quickly and therefore reduce the time spent on the African coast can be attributed to a number of factors, including the availability of large canoes to

⁶² Children comprised 29 per cent of the slaves taken from Old Calabar between 1730 and 1807 (N=81 voyages); this was almost exactly double the ratio of children on ships leaving Bonny in the same period (N=92 voyages) (Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*). It is difficult to be precise about how children were defined in eighteenth-century voyage records, but it seems reasonable to assume an age of up to 14 years. There were contemporary suggestions that the health of slaves supplied at Bonny may have been better than those at Old Calabar, with the result that Bonny slaves were perhaps more able to survive the Atlantic crossing and even fetch higher prices in the Americas. One Liverpool firm noted in 1762 that ‘Callebar is Remarkable for great Mortality in Slaves’ (14 Apr. 1762, Crosbys & Trafford & Co. to Ambrose Lace, in Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers and Letters of Marque*, 486). Later, in 1788, James Jones of Bristol claimed that he ‘always declined sending’ ships to Old Calabar and Cameroons ‘as they are Sickly, and the Slaves inferior to any other, very Weakly and liable to great Mortality’ (British Library, Add. MSS 38416, fos. 154–5). Such views are corroborated to some extent by mortality data for the middle passage. While passage times from Old Calabar and Bonny to America were not significantly different, ships leaving Old Calabar in 1730–1807 lost 21.4 per cent of slaves shipped (N=93 voyages) compared to 15.5 per cent on ships leaving Bonny (N=142 voyages); Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*. One merchant noted in 1774 that a slave dealer of Kingston, Jamaica, had sold ‘all his prime Cargoes of Bonny and Gould Cost Cargoes in Town, and the bite and Calabar Ships he has sent to Montegua bay’, the implication being that the latter offered a better market for poorer quality slaves; 30 July 1774, John Fletcher to Peleg Clarke, in Donnan (ed.), *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, III, 292.

⁶³ Clarkson, *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 31. This important point was noted by Gwilym Iwan Jones in *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria* (London, 1963), 46: ‘[Elem] Kalabari and Bonny were in a position to supply slaves more speedily and in greater numbers than any other Oil River port’.

⁶⁴ British Library, Add. MSS 38416, fos. 154–5. By this time, Jones’s claim was echoed by others; Minutes of Evidence to House of Lords on the State of the Trade to Africa, 1793, in F. W. Torrington (ed.), *House of Lords Sessional Papers 1792–3* (Dobbs Ferry NY, 1975), I, 304.

ferry goods to and slaves from inland fairs and markets. As Falconbridge observed in the 1780s,

The preparations made at Bonny by the black traders, upon setting out for the fairs which are held up the country, are very considerable. From twenty to thirty canoes, capable of containing thirty or forty negroes each, are assembled for the purpose; and such goods are put on board them as they expect will be wanted for the purchase of the number of slaves they intend to buy. When their loading is completed, they commence their voyage, with colours flying and musick playing; in about ten or eleven days, they generally return to Bonny with full cargoes.⁶⁵

Similarly, Clarkson learned that merchants went in a

large fleet ... into the inland country, to attend the fairs which are held there. They are mostly absent about nine days. They return frequently with fifteen hundred or two thousand slaves at a time, who are thrown on the bottom of the canoes, their hands and feet being confined in mats, and other ligaments of the country.⁶⁶

The principal route into the interior was the Imo River, which entered the delta to the east of Bonny in the area inhabited by the Andoni. The major river ports were at Obete, Ohambele, Azuogu, Akwete and other towns in Ndoki, which were connected overland through the Ngwa region to the fair at Bende, in the heart of Igbo country. Bonny had a long association with Ndoki, even sharing claims of a common origin, which was consolidated through marriage.⁶⁷ Not all slaves came down the Imo River and through Ndoki, but many did. Through alliances with Elem Kalabari and Warri to the west, Bonny merchants also tapped markets from a wider interior.⁶⁸ Most of the slaves came from Igbo country to the north, and to a lesser extent from Ibibio areas. Falconbridge learned that the

Slaves are bought by the black traders at fairs, which are held for that purpose, at the distance of upwards of two hundred miles from the sea coast; and these fairs are said to be supplied from an interior part of the country.⁶⁹

In fact, the Bonny merchants remained on the river and did not visit these fairs, either the one at Bende, inland from the Imo River, or that at Uburu,

⁶⁵ Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London, 1788), 16.

⁶⁶ Clarkson, *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 31.

⁶⁷ Alagoa and Fombo, *Chronicle*, 3.

⁶⁸ For a brief discussion of Bonny's commercial network, see Dike, *Trade and Politics*, 41; Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*, 129.

⁶⁹ According to Falconbridge, the fairs were 'held at uncertain periods, but generally every six weeks, [when] several thousands are frequently exposed to sale, who had been collected from all parts of the country for a very considerable distance round'; see *Account of the Slave Trade*, 12. Adams (*Remarks*, 129–30) heard that Igbo slaves were purchased at fairs held every five or six weeks at several villages on the banks and rivers of the interior. In 1789, James Penny told the Parliamentary enquiry that goods were carried to inland markets about 80 miles upstream (Lambert [ed.], *Sessional Papers*, LXIX, Report of African Trade, 47). Others giving evidence before Parliament in 1788–90 made similar comments. In 1826 Jackson described 'the Eboe Country' as the 'principal resort for Trade' of Bonny traders (Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 151).

the location of a salt lake further north.⁷⁰ John Thornton has observed that Elem Kalabari, Bonny and Andoni were part of a single trading system, operating through the Rio Real entry to the delta.⁷¹ We would add that in the eighteenth century this system became centralized at Bonny, allowing it to benefit from the great expansion in slave exports from the Bight of Biafra.

The ability to supply large numbers of slaves in a short period of time depended upon a system of supply in the interior that was developed by Aro merchants, whose place of origin was Aro Chukwu, on the escarpment overlooking the Cross River on the border between the Igbo and Ibibio.⁷² By the end of the eighteenth century, the Aro had established a series of satellite communities throughout much of Igbo and Ibibio country, and stretching south to the banks of the Imo River where Bonny merchants ventured. Through their monopoly of the slave trade, the Aro became the principal suppliers of slaves to the coast, including both Bonny and Old Calabar. The westward expansion of the Aro should be noted, because their communities, in diaspora arranged through blood pacts with local village 'republics', were the bulking centres for slaves sent to Bonny; and according to Dike and Ekejiuba, many of these centres were established by the mid-eighteenth century. It is probably no coincidence that expansion of slave exports from the Bight of Biafra from the 1730s probably occurred at the same time as the consolidation of the Aro commercial diaspora. According to Bonny tradition, the *ibinukpabi* ('Long Juju') shrine at Aro Chukwu was consulted before the installation of one of its earliest kings, and apparently the Akpa, the ruling clan at Aro Chukwu, reserved for itself the trade with the Rio Real, and hence with Bonny. Reputedly there was a shrine dedicated to *ibinukpabi* at Bonny, and the oracle is credited with intervention when the source of fresh water for the town began to suffer from silting, the problem apparently being resolved by the sacrifice of a daughter of the king.⁷³

Neither river-based trade nor access to the Aro trade diaspora, however, was peculiar to Bonny. Old Calabar was similarly placed in both respects, yet supplied fewer slaves and at slower rates than its western rival. Moreover, the canoe system to which contemporaries drew attention at both places

⁷⁰ For a discussion, see Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*, 106, 129. Northrup notes that 'the Ngwa–Ndoki area was a major nexus for trade since through it ran routes from Bende and points north, from Ogua and Owerri, and from the Anang country'. The fairs at Bende and Uburu were held every 28 days, alternating at 14 day intervals, and connected with networks of markets held every four days in rotation. For a discussion of Ndoki–Bonny relations, also see Robin Horton, 'Some fresh thoughts on eastern Ijo origins, expansions and migrations', in Nkparom C. Ejituwu (ed.), *The Multi-Disciplinary Approach to African History: Essays in Honour of Ebiegeri Joe Alagoa* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 1998), 217–22. ⁷¹ Thornton, 'African Background of *Henrietta Maria*'.

⁷² For a discussion of Aro expansion, see Kenneth Onwuka Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba, *The Aro of South-eastern Nigeria, 1650–1980* (Ibadan, 1990), 96, 102, 176–8, 198–202; Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*, 104–7, 114–45; Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 69, 70; and G. Ugo Nwokeji, 'The Biafran frontier: trade, slaves and Aro society, c. 1750–1905' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1999), 38–45. Nwokeji argues that 'European trade encouraged Aro forays in the hinterland' (44), but, unlike us, does not link this to credit arrangements.

⁷³ Dike and Ekejiuba, *Aro*, 146, citing an unpublished manuscript by the Bonny historian, Adadony Fombo. See also Alagoa and Fombo, *Chronicle*, 6.

was dependent economically on those using such transport having access to plentiful supplies of European trade goods on credit. It would seem not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that credit arrangements between British and local traders at Bonny were a major factor in explaining the port's capacity to sustain a higher volume and more efficient system of slave delivery than at Old Calabar, giving Bonny traders an advantage over their competitors on the Cross River in dealing with Aro merchants. It is also perhaps more than a coincidence that the emergence of Bonny as the principal slave port in the Bight of Biafra coincided with the westward expansion of the Aro network, with the Imo River being the main route between the coast and the interior. Understanding how, institutionally or politically, credit was safeguarded at Bonny is the key, therefore, to explaining not only the port's ascendancy in slave exports but also the shifting economic geography of slave supply within the Bight of Biafra from the 1730s onwards.

ROYAL AUTHORITY AND CONTRACT ENFORCEMENT

Our attempt to explain Bonny's success in attracting credit reaffirms the view that politics and political institutions matter in terms of commercial performance. Unlike Old Calabar where the decentralized and sometimes unstable political environment in which pawnship became the instrument to protect imported credit is well understood, we still have much to learn about the political history of Bonny before the early nineteenth century. Some aspects of that history seem, nevertheless, to be clear. One is the importance of lineage. There is some dispute over the remote origins of the Ijaw-speaking Ibani. According to some reported traditions, they came from the Central Delta. Recent research, however, suggests that in the century or two before the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, they already lived around the eastern mouth of the Rio Real and along the creeks leading off it into the Andoni country, and had forged commercial ties (via the Imo River) and assimilated, culturally and linguistically, with Igbo-speaking Ndoki. An expatriate group of these bilingual Ibani is believed then to have moved downstream and resettled in their ancestral 'homeland' near or at Bonny as the export slave trade with the Portuguese began.⁷⁴ Importantly from our point of view, the Ibani, according to Alagoa and Tombo, 'have had kings for a long time' and before 1700 at least succession was closely linked to lineage, age, supernatural power, and service through sacrifice. These principles, they argue, achieved their fullest expression during the time of Asimini, who is also credited with receiving the first European traders at Bonny in the sixteenth century.⁷⁵ Such contact, in turn, is thought to have prompted expansion and change of the *wari*, or lineage-centred house, an institution that the Ibani brought with them during their migration from the Central Delta, and that was to play a critical part in the external trade of Bonny in the centuries after European contact. The institutions of kingship and trading house (or *wari*), therefore, were apparently well established at Bonny by the

⁷⁴ Horton, 'Some fresh thoughts', 220–2.

⁷⁵ Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 3–8 (quotation, 6).

end of the seventeenth century.⁷⁶ At that time, however, Elem Kalabari seems to have overshadowed Bonny as a supplier of slaves for export, despite the latter's location closer to the sea. What seems to have constrained Bonny's emergence as a significant slave port was restricted access to inland sources of slaves, a problem that its neighbour, Elem Kalabari, had seemingly resolved by success in war with Okrika in the seventeenth century.⁷⁷

Bonny's defeat around 1700 of its neighbour, Andoni, which 'in alliance with the Kalabari and Okrika' is said to have waged war on Bonny in the 1690s – a time when, because of war in Europe, few slave ships allegedly came to trade – is commonly seen to have opened up to Bonny a route via the Imo River to internal supplies of slaves.⁷⁸ Thereafter Andoni remained subordinate to Bonny, ultimately ceding its political autonomy in the 1840s.⁷⁹ The repercussions of the Andoni war for Bonny, however, seem to have been more far-reaching than simply opening up trade routes, important though that was. It appears to have been instrumental in reshaping the community's political and institutional landscape in ways that proved highly conducive to trade expansion and credit protection. According to Jones, in order to survive during this 'period of intense warfare, a much greater degree of centralized authority had to be accepted, so that the war leaders who became their kings became, temporarily at least, all-powerful'.⁸⁰ Even more radical claims are made by Alagoa and Fombo, who suggest that the Andoni war effectively initiated within Bonny a palace revolution in which a financially pressed and militarily ineffective Awusa (or Halliday) lineage was forced to concede royal authority to the Perekule (or Pepples). The latter held the title of *amanyanabo* (or military leader) and, having allegedly accumulated great wealth through trade, was said to be better placed to lead Bonny to success against its enemy. Described by Barbot in 1699 as 'a sharp blade, and a mighty talking Black', Perekule is claimed to have been 'a great war leader'. His accession is also considered to have been 'a turning point in Bonny dynastic history', with subsequent succession to the title of *amanyanabo* being restricted to his descendants.⁸¹ This concentration of authority in the hands of the Perekule was subsequently reinforced by controls over oracles and shrines, over sexual liaisons with strangers and over other areas of social life.⁸² Tradition suggests, furthermore, that Perekule's accession

⁷⁶ On his visit to Bonny in 1699, Barbot was somewhat dismissive of the use of the title of king. Noting that, in common with other places in Guinea, Europeans used the title to refer to the chiefs or captains of the villages near Bonny, he went on to suggest that they 'are at best such kings as the two and thirty that Joshua defeated at once' (*West Africa*, II, 701n). ⁷⁷ Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 37–8, 47. ⁷⁸ Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 9.

⁷⁹ Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 107–8, 115. Andoni's subordination to Bonny was institutionalized through the transfer of its *juju*, whose totem was the iguana, to Bonny. It is significant that the power of this shrine, which was not evident to Barbot when he visited Bonny at the end of the seventeenth century, came to supplant the *simingi juju* as the most powerful at Bonny (Hargreaves, 'Political economy', 36–9). There is evidence that Andoni occasionally supplied slaves directly to Europeans in the eighteenth century but such occurrences were rare relative to the trade at Bonny. ⁸⁰ Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 47.

⁸¹ Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 9–11.

⁸² There were various shrines at Bonny, including the *ikuba* (or iguana) shrine, which, together with its house of skulls, was appropriated from Andoni and fell under Perekule control. *Ikuba* became associated with protection of trade, supplanting in importance, as noted earlier, the principal deity of *simingi* at Juju Town (or Finama), where pilotage

triggered other institutional changes that strengthened ideologically the power of the *amanyanabo*, and thus the Perekule dynasty, while transforming the operation of lineage houses, shifting the basis of their leadership from descent to military prowess and economic ability. Perekule is alleged even to have sanctioned the right of slaves to become heads of houses, some of which subsequently became highly successful trading units in their own right and absorbed their less successful rivals.⁸³ In short, after the Andoni war, the house evolved into a quasi-military, commercial unit centred on the canoes that characterized river craft of the delta, its leadership being shaped by merit as much as by ancestry. Such concentration of political authority and increased meritocracy were seemingly features of eighteenth-century political and economic life that distinguished Bonny from Old Calabar.

The suggestion that the Andoni war promoted political centralization in the hands of the Pepples is not without its critics. Hargreaves, for example, argues that kingship was not uncontested in the eighteenth century and that the concept of a shared monarchy, in which houses claiming descent from the founding settlers were partners in government with the Pepples, was still perhaps normal at this time.⁸⁴ Such arguments appear to gain support from scattered observations that continue to identify the Halliday lineage with kingship and from the absence of a recognizable political narrative for Bonny that chronicles the succession of kings in the eighteenth century.⁸⁵ The last reflects, among other things, a veil of silence over Bonny's history that

was arranged. There were also shrines at Ayama, Fibiri and Kalaibiana, the one at Fibiri being consulted on matters relating to canoe house affairs, selection of the king and expeditions to interior markets (Hargreaves, 'Political economy', 35–9). *Juju* shrines also regulated social behaviour, including miscegenation with whites. According to Jackson, writing in 1826, whites were considered 'a superior race', being revered 'as Jujews', and mixing of blood between Africans and whites was outlawed, mulattoes being 'instantly destroyed', a fate that also befell twins and their mothers (Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 152).

⁸³ Perekule's nomination of the slave, Allison Nwaoju, as *alabo* is said to have initiated the right of slaves to become heads of houses (or *ama-alabo*) (Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 46). When this happened is unknown, but as noted earlier, a trader named Allison, possibly Allison Nwaoju or one of his descendants, was a major supplier of slaves to ships visiting Bonny in 1790–3. Other reforms allegedly introduced by Perekule included making aspirants to chieftaincy demonstrate military capability (or *mgbi aki*, win a cannon ball) (*ibid.* 11). Such changes clearly challenged ancestry as a benchmark for leadership of houses, while reinforcing Perekule's own status as *amanyanabo*.

⁸⁴ Hargreaves, 'Political economy', 141–6, 153–5.

⁸⁵ In his memoirs of voyages made before 1807, Hugh Crow, for example, referred to 'Pepple and Holliday [i.e. Halliday]', as being 'relations and copartners in the throne' (Crow, *Memoirs*, 217), but it is also clear that Crow saw Pepple as being 'superior' to Halliday, maintaining an ascendancy over him 'in a high degree'. On another occasion, when Pepple and Halliday were said to have disagreed, the latter, being 'the weaker party', is said to have been 'obliged to fly with his friends to Fish Town for protection, and there remain until the dispute was adjusted by the intervention of the priests' (211). The continuing pretensions of the Halliday family to authority may have rested on the fact that when Perekule deposed Awusa, the latter allegedly retained an important item of regalia – an ivory horn (or *edu*) – which in 1972 was said to be still in the custody of the Halliday House (Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 10). Alagoa and Tombo make some attempt to establish a king list for Bonny, going back to the sixteenth century (*ibid.* chs. 2–5), but their chronology before 1800 is contested.

commentators noted when the riddle of the Niger was a prominent subject of debate in nineteenth-century Britain.⁸⁶ A close reading of trade accounts, nonetheless, suggests that despite the possibility that elections were contested, the *amanyanabo*, once elected, was a very powerful, even dominant, figure in regulating external trade and that the Pepples probably asserted dynastic control over this position earlier than Hargreaves assumes. In this regard, we tend to agree with Jones and with Alagoa and Tombo in identifying the consolidation of royal authority with the emergence of the Pepples, even while accepting the problems of tracking the chronology of kings. The key point methodologically is that a view through the trade window suggests an earlier rather than later assumption of authority by the Pepple lineage.

According to Jones, the Pepple dynasty ‘came into being in the eighteenth century’, a view that is not inconsistent with that of Alagoa and Tombo, who date the accession of Pepple after 1700.⁸⁷ In a remarkable account of trade protocols at Bonny in 1699–1704, however, Barbot reveals that Pepple was already involved in regulating trade relations with Europeans by the end of the seventeenth century, and equally important goes on to show how the royal authority that Pepple subsequently assumed shaped trade relations at the port. Barbot suggests that the ships arriving there ‘usually give a salute of three, five or seven guns, according to the bigness of the ship, to the king of Bandy’, observing that the local people were ‘very fond of such civilities’ and that ‘it contributes much to facilitate the trade’.⁸⁸ He went on to draw attention to the part played by the king, in consultation with ‘the principal natives of the country’ and his brother ‘Pepprell’, in determining the initial terms upon which slaves might be bought, including exchange rates of trade goods and customs dues, ‘none of the natives having dared to come aboard of us, or sell the least thing, till the king had adjusted the trade with us’. Only after these negotiations, according to Barbot, did the king order ‘the publick cryer to proclaim the permission of trade with us’.⁸⁹ Negotiations with the king and his officials, including Pepple, seem to have taken place at intervals during subsequent trade dealings, such meetings culminating, as Barbot reported of a later voyage to Bonny in 1704, in a gathering at which ‘we treated the king and his principal officers, with a goat, a hog, and a barrel of punch’. This, Barbot observed, was ‘an advertisement to the Blacks ashore, to pay in to us what they owe us, or to furnish us with all speed, what slaves and yams they have contracted to supply us with, *else the king compels them to it*’.⁹⁰

Barbot’s account anticipates by more than a century similar descriptions of the elaborate rituals that preceded the opening of trade at Bonny when the Pepples unquestionably controlled trade with Europeans there.⁹¹ His

⁸⁶ On the difficulty of reconstructing Bonny’s history, see Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 105–12; and Hargreaves, ‘Political economy’, 135–72.

⁸⁷ Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 43; Alagoa and Tombo, *Chronicle*, 11.

⁸⁸ Barbot, *West Africa*, 1, 675.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 687–9.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 696. Emphasis added.

⁹¹ For a description of the visit of the *amanyanabo* to the various *juju* houses and the procession to newly arrived ships, see James Holman, *Travels in Madeira, Sierra Leone, Teneriffe, St. Jago, Cape Coast, Fernando Po, Princess Island, etc.* (London, 1834), 376–7; Jackson, *Journal of a Residence*, 73–9; Jones, *Oil Rivers*, 108–9; Hargreaves, ‘Political economy’, 165.

reference to Pepple as the king's brother almost gives him the status of a king, though he is also described elsewhere, together with some other traders, as a captain. Be this as it may, Barbot's account also suggests that the king – in this case, Awua, or William – not only profited personally through taxation and other means from the slave trade but also regulated the terms upon which trade might proceed and, perhaps most remarkable of all, underwrote and enforced credit arrangements. In effect, when Barbot visited Bonny, there appears to have been a ceremony of royalty, a code of ethics and mechanisms for self-regulation that, institutionally, provided a firm foundation for international exchange and credit protection. Barbot was, moreover, not alone at this time in identifying royal authority and power with contractual agreement and enforcement at Bonny. A similar assumption underlay the terms of trade that the Royal African Company sought to establish with Bonny at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Company anticipated potential problems arising from credit, and endeavoured to enlist the king's authority to 'oblige' his people 'to perform their Contracts and do us Justice and make us Satisfaction for Damage in delaying us in our Voyage or otherwise whensoever they do it'.⁹² Thus, in the eyes of British traders, royal authority and contract enforcement were inextricably linked at Bonny by 1700.

Trade relations at Bonny were not always as orderly as Barbot described them or as the Royal African Company hoped they might be. Yet, while the names of individual kings at Bonny are not always known, royal influence over trade, nonetheless, remained clear. In 1755, an English ship drove away from Bonny a rival French ship, despite efforts by the king to intercede on behalf of the Frenchman, 'afin de lui rendre justice autant qu'il pourrait'. It was reported, however, that on this occasion the king's authority 'ne servait de rien', perhaps because the incident happened offshore.⁹³ The identity of the English shipmaster involved in this incident is unknown, but his action may perhaps have been connected with another incident at Bonny a year later when, according to Captain Baillie of the Liverpool ship, *Carter*, 'trade was stopt (as it had often been before)'. Accompanied by the masters of three other British vessels, Baillie 'marched on shore to know the reason and applied to the King thrice', but, according to Baillie's report, the king 'constantly ordered himself to be denied, and wou'd not admit us', even though 'we heard his voice in doors'. Without a royal audience, trade evidently was impossible. Affronted by the king's inaction, the four shipmasters elected to bombard the town, but this proved counter-productive. One of the ships was lost as a result of 'a volley of small arms from the bushes' and 'several shot from the town [that] went through him'. Only when 'things [were] made up' did trade re-open, and even then it was reported 'very slow'.⁹⁴ The events described by Baillie remind us that, as in Barbot's time, trade at Bonny in the mid-1750s depended on royal approval. If those events,

⁹² 15 Sept. 1702, The Royal African Company to the Great King of Bandie, PRO, T 70/151, pp. 292–4.

⁹³ Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Serge and Michele Daget (Paris, 1978–84), 1, 421.

⁹⁴ Baillie to owners of the *Carter*, 31 Jan. 1757, in Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers and Letters of Marque*, 481–2.

furthermore, were a repercussion of British efforts to monopolize trade at Bonny a year earlier, they also suggest that the royal sanction for trade could not be overridden by Anglo-French rivalry.

Evidence from the late eighteenth century continues to emphasize the pivotal role of royal authority in the conduct of trade at Bonny. In 1790, James Fraser, who commanded five voyages to the port, claimed that when candidates for the kingship of Bonny were considered to 'be equal', the man preferred was usually the one 'best qualified to govern them with equity, and secure them against the depredations of their neighbours, and who understands the English language, and the mode of trading with Europeans'.⁹⁵ Three years later, John Goodrich, master of a Bristol ship, reinforced the point. Complaining in April 1793 of the slowness of trade since his arrival there over three months earlier, Goodrich attributed this directly to the death of the king in 1792. According to Goodrich, there had been 'but One fare [fair] Since I have been in the River[.] Owing to their being no King the Trade is much Stagnated here'.⁹⁶ Goodrich was unspecific about why the king's death had caused such problems, but other evidence both at this time and later suggests that only after visiting ships had 'broken' trade with the king could other trade begin.⁹⁷ This was evidently impossible as long as the succession to the king who died in 1792 remained unsettled. We do not know precisely how serious the king's death proved for Goodrich, and its impact may be masked by other events, including the sharp fall in the number of ships leaving Europe for Africa on the outbreak of war in Europe in 1793. There are nevertheless indications that, following nearly unprecedented levels of slave exports in 1792, Bonny experienced a more severe slump in slave ship arrivals in 1793–5 than its rival, Old Calabar. Thereafter, slave exports from the port returned to pre-1793 levels, reaching a new peak in 1800.⁹⁸ The succession crisis that Goodrich noted in April 1793,

⁹⁵ Evidence of James Fraser, in Lambert (ed.), *Sessional Papers*, LXXI, 16. Fraser also claimed that 'there has been an instance of a king being set up and supported by the masters of ships laying in the River'.

⁹⁶ PRO, C 107/59, 9 Apr. 1793, John Goodrich to James Rogers. Goodrich's remarks are consistent with suggestions that the king of Bonny died in 1792, though precisely who died and succeeded at this time remains a matter of debate; see Hargreaves, 'Political economy', 152.

⁹⁷ In 1790, Vincent Magouet, master of the French ship, *Guerrier*, was advised to visit the king and 'le presser d'ouvrir la traite, pour pouvoir acheter de suite ce qui vous est necessaire, pour caser, ne pouvant rien acheter sans que la traite soit ouverte par le roi' (Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique, Nantes, Observations Utiles sur Bany, 1790, 1 J 679). Writing in 1801 to the London merchant, Thomas Lumley, about fitting out a ship for Bonny, one Liverpool trader suggested that it was 'going to pay King Pepple another visit'; PRO, C 114/2, 28 Mar. 1801, John Livingstone to Thomas Lumley. Similarly, in 1820–1, a French ship was said to have been furnished with its 'Eboe' slaves by 'le roi Pepper', who brought them 'de l'interieur de l'Afrique'; Daget (ed.), *Répertoire*, 130. A few years later, in December 1825, the master of *La Fortunée*, J. J. Gimbert, found 'dix batiments qui ave traite avec le Roi a passer chacun a son tour d'après le Reglement etabli par Messieurs les Capitaines que aucun batiment ne pource traiter avec le peuple'. Gimbert noted that trade with other merchants was not allowed until twenty days after arriving at Bonny (*ibid.* 392).

⁹⁸ In 1792, the number of slaves shipped from Bonny totalled over 12,000, the second highest annual figure in the period 1783–1807. Numbers shipped slumped from the 1792 level by some 90 per cent during the following three years, before returning to a new

therefore, seems to have had a real, though short-term, impact on trade levels at Bonny, underlining the importance of royal authority to the port's trade performance. Moreover, its importance was further demonstrated in the period after Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807. In the mid-1820s King Opubo Pepple persuaded the master of a French ship to stay at Bonny rather than proceed to Old Calabar by contracting to supply 230 slaves within 45 days. At the time this contract was sealed, furthermore, Opubo Pepple had similar commitments of up to ten other ships.⁹⁹ Yet further evidence of the king's involvement in protecting credit is to be found in the emergent palm oil trade, when in the mid-1830s the then *amanyanabo*, William Dappa Pepple, was requested by British traders to cover debts incurred by local oil traders, a request to which the king acceded, albeit with some reluctance.¹⁰⁰ Although the evidence is less full than one would wish, the invocation of royal authority to secure credit and generally regulate trade relations seems to have transcended both British and French slave trading at Bonny as well as the shift of Britain's trading interests at the port from slaves to palm oil.

From the arrival of James Barbot in 1699 to the accession of William Dappa Pepple as *amanyanabo* in the 1830s, therefore, there is consistent, if intermittent and sometimes indirect, evidence that trade and credit protection at Bonny revolved around royal authority. This authority was rooted in tradition, lineage, military prowess and commercial ability and reinforced by ceremonial and spiritual practices and regulation of social behaviour. It has been claimed that third-party enforcement of contracts through political institutions is crucial if markets are to grow beyond the scale where personal reputation is effective as a means of ensuring delivery of contractual obligations.¹⁰¹ At Bonny, we would argue, political centralization, with its fiscal and other privileges, and centring on the cult of royal authority and the unification of military prowess and commercial skill through the house system, provided a highly flexible and low-cost method of safeguarding credit, thereby facilitating expansion of slave trafficking to much higher levels than at rival ports.

We have argued elsewhere that the adaptation of pawnship as a means of underpinning credit represented an important innovation in allowing credit expansion at Old Calabar, but we also noted the costs associated with this system of private ordering.¹⁰² Reliance on pawnship could entail protracted and sometimes unproductive negotiations between borrowers and lenders. It also involved risks to lenders in terms of absconding pawns and costs to borrowers in terms of provisioning hostages and loss of potential earnings from them during their enforced idleness. Disputes relating to pawning arrangements could provoke violence between European and local traders,

peak in 1800. A similar exercise for Old Calabar reveals a much shallower fall in shipments of slaves in 1793–5 from that port than at Bonny. Data from Eltis *et al.*, *Slave Trade Database*, search using the principal port of slave purchase as Bonny or Old Calabar, and dates of departure from Africa >1782 and <1808.

⁹⁹ The king agreed to supply slaves only of 'Belle calité', and to pay a penalty of 60 slaves should he fail to meet the deadline agreed (Daget [ed.], *Répertoire*, 392).

¹⁰⁰ Hargreaves, 'Political economy', 218–30. ¹⁰¹ North, *Economic Change*, 22.

¹⁰² Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship and Atlantic history', 351–2.

which, in the absence of a mutually accepted arbiter, resulted in some cases in deaths on one or both sides of the exchange.¹⁰³ Such costs cannot be precisely quantified, but they were unlikely to be less, and probably higher, than those associated with centrally enforced contracts, especially where royal power was absolute but not used wilfully.¹⁰⁴ Transactions costs in the slave trade at Old Calabar were therefore probably higher than at Bonny, thereby restraining the growth of market activity. It is also clear that pawnship was usually embedded in social relations and that, from the perspective of European traders, was likely to function most effectively as a credit protection mechanism if and when borrowers were related to those that they pawned.¹⁰⁵ Asymmetries in information between lenders and borrowers about the relationship of pawns to borrowers meant that Europeans were almost certainly unable to enforce this preference, but some pawns were clearly related to Old Calabar traders. Whether or not pawns were related to traders, the capacity to expand credit at Old Calabar clearly came to depend on local supplies of pawns and the willingness of creditors to accept those on offer. In this respect, as a device for protecting credit, pawnship remained rooted in personal relations and trust, and was thus incompatible with the achievement of levels of slaving activity witnessed at Bonny where less personal, more politically based, contract and credit enforcement methods seem to have prevailed.

CONCLUSION

Described in 1826 as a ‘horrid hole’ because of its health risks to visiting Europeans, Bonny had emerged, nevertheless, as one of the principal venues of slave trading in Africa during the eighteenth century. Until now, however, its shadowy history, in which even its king line and political structures remain murky, has meant that its rise as a slave port has been one of the least understood stories relating to Africa’s involvement in the transatlantic traffic in slaves. This article has sought to lift the veil from Bonny’s participation in that activity, and more particularly to explain how it came to dominate slave exports from the Bight of Biafra. We have shown that Bonny outpaced Old Calabar, which was the leading supplier of slaves in the first part of the

¹⁰³ On tensions at Old Calabar related, among other things, to pawnship, see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, ‘Anglo-Efik relations and protection against illegal enslavement at Old Calabar, 1740–1807’, in Sylviane Diouf (ed.), *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Athens OH, 2003), 101–21. Also see Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Odyssey* (Cambridge MA, 2004), 10–33.

¹⁰⁴ This is an important qualification and there is some evidence of malfeasance on the part of kings at times. In 1825, for example, King Opubo Pepple failed to supply within the expected time the number of slaves he promised to a French captain, but also refused to pay the penalty for failure that the latter thought they had agreed. The penalty was subsequently renegotiated, and the captain eventually sailed with 25 slaves more than the 230 stipulated in his original agreement with the king, so some compensation for delays in delivering slaves seems to have been paid by the king. Whether the slaves were of the quality expected is another matter; between 1 May and 17 July 1826, 123 of the 255 slaves shipped died (Daget [ed.], *Répertoire*, 392–3).

¹⁰⁵ Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Trust, pawnship and Atlantic history’, 352.

eighteenth century, at least a generation earlier than previously thought, commonly supplying two-thirds of all slaves shipped from the Bight of Biafra in the century beginning in the 1730s. We have also attempted to explain why this happened, an important issue given the contribution of the Bight of Biafra to the expansion in the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century. British merchants dominated trade with both ports but clearly favoured Bonny. We have argued that a critical factor in allowing ports to generate slaves for export was credit from European firms and that in this regard the early growth and consolidation of royal authority, linked to victory over Andoni about 1700 and to reform of the traditional house system, facilitated the emergence at Bonny of lower cost mechanisms of credit protection and expansion than at its closest rivals. These developments allowed Bonny to capitalize on its victory over Andoni and aggressively to pursue, through its trading house system and heavily manned river canoes, commercial ties with the inland Aro trading diaspora that also served its rival, Old Calabar. Bonny's rise thus had repercussions for the economic geography of slave supply within the Bight of Biafra, encouraging a previously little understood westward shift in Aro activities by 1750. Underpinned by well-protected flows of imported credit, these links with the Aro network allowed Bonny in turn to gain a reputation for efficiency in supplying large ships with slaves. In this respect, the story of slave trading in the Bight of Biafra is consistent with theories of modern microeconomics that highlight the relationship between the state and market-based levels of economic activity. More specifically, it underlines the importance of perceptions for economic behavior and the role of politics and political institutions in shaping creditors' evaluations of borrowers' credit worthiness.¹⁰⁶ In doing so, it further reminds us of the influence of African institutions on the scale and structure of the Atlantic slave trade and casts new light on the issue of why so many people of Igbo origin were forcibly shipped to the Americas in the century or so before 1840.

As Bonny was one of several ports in western Africa through which very large numbers of enslaved people were dispatched across the Atlantic, its story has still wider implications. Among other leading African slave ports were Cabinda, Luanda and Ouidah, each of which accounted for at least as many, and quite likely more, slave shipments to the Americas as Bonny.¹⁰⁷ In addition, other ports supplied slaves in numbers that collectively were large but individually much smaller than those shipped from Bonny and the other leading slave ports. As in Europe, slave trading at the Atlantic coast of Africa was a ubiquitous activity but came to be concentrated at a small number of ports, one of which was Bonny. What happened in the Bight of Biafra in 1660–1840 was, therefore, a microcosm of broader trends in slaving activity around the Atlantic world in terms of trade concentration. As a result, the

¹⁰⁶ On the importance of perceptions, see Douglass C. North and Barry R. Weingast, 'Introduction: institutional analysis and economic history', *Journal of Economic History*, 60 (2000), 414–17.

¹⁰⁷ For a general overview of African ports involved in the slave trade, see David Eltis, Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Slave-trading ports: towards an Atlantic-wide perspective', in Robin Law and Silke Strickrodt (eds.), *Ports of the Slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra)* (Stirling, 1999), 12–35.

history of Bonny between 1690 and 1840 should provide insights not only into how other African ports came to dominate local or regional slaving activities but also into how local adjustment and interaction at different places on the western coast of Africa characterized economic integration of the Atlantic world during the slave trade era.