

Colonialism and Abolitionism from the Margins of European Empires: Paul Erdmann Isert, Carl Bernhard Wadström, and the Structures of Transimperial Knowledge Production, c. 1780–1800

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ABSTRACTS

In den 1780er und 1790er Jahren erlangten der preußische Arzt Paul Erdmann Isert und der schwedische Mineraloge Carl Bernhard Wadström als Befürworter der Kolonisierung und „Zivilisierung“ Afrikas größere Bekanntheit unter französischen und britischen Abolitionisten. Sowohl Isert als auch Wadström reisten in den 1780er Jahren auf den afrikanischen Kontinent, Isert als Chirurg im Dienste des dänischen Sklavenhandelsforts in Ghana und Wadström im Rahmen einer schwedischen Expedition zu den französischen Besitzungen im Senegal. Nach ihrer Rückkehr nach Europa veröffentlichten Isert und Wadström Berichte über ihre Reisen, in denen sie den transatlantischen Sklavenhandel vehement kritisierten und dagegen die Möglichkeiten zur Kolonisierung Afrikas bewarben, indem sie praktisches Wissen über afrikanische Böden, Nutzpflanzen und Arbeitssysteme vermittelten. Für die wachsende Zahl der Abolitionist:innen in Frankreich und Großbritannien erwies sich dieses Wissen als sehr nützlich, da es ihnen ermöglichte, ihre eigenen Expansionsbestrebungen in Afrika durch Berichte aus erster Hand zu untermauern. Der vorliegende Beitrag befasst sich mit den transimperialen Routen, die Isert und Wadström einschlugen, um solche Kenntnisse über den afrikanischen Kontinent aus erster Hand zu erwerben. Außerdem wird untersucht, wie ihre Beobachtungen über Afrika von französischen, britischen und amerikanischen Abolitionist:innen rezipiert wurden. Somit zeigt der Artikel einige der sozialen und politischen Strukturen auf, in welchen im Zeitalter der imperialen Revolutionen Wissen transimperial produziert und vermittelt wurde, und wie Akteure aus den Randgebieten des imperialen Europas an umfassenderen Prozessen der imperialen Regeneration teilnahmen, die dem Aufstieg der Nationalstaaten vorausgingen.

In the 1780s and 1790s, the Prussian doctor Paul Erdmann Isert and the Swedish mineralogist Carl Bernhard Wadström gained traction among French and British abolitionists for their advocacy of the colonization and “civilization” of Africa. Both had traveled to the African continent in the 1780s, Isert as a surgeon in the service of the Danish slave trading fort in Ghana, and Wadström as part of a Swedish expedition to the French holdings in Senegal. Upon their return to Europe, Isert and Wadström published accounts of their travels in which they vehemently criticized the transatlantic slave trade and promoted new colonial opportunities in Africa, offering practical knowledge on African soil, crops, and labour systems. To the growing number of abolitionists in France and Britain, this proved to be very useful knowledge since it enabled them to anchor their own expansionist desires in Africa in first-hand accounts. This paper examines the transimperial trajectories that Isert and Wadström followed in order to acquire such first-hand knowledge of the African continent. It also explores the ways in which their observations about Africa were appropriated by French, British, and even American abolitionists. In so doing, it brings into view some of the social and political structures that mediated transimperial knowledge production during the Age of Imperial Revolutions and it highlights how people hailing from the margins of European empires participated in the broader processes of imperial regeneration that undergirded the rise of the nation state.

In 1799, the French republican journal, *La Décade Philosophique*, published a necrology honouring the life of the Swedish engineer, mineralogist, and abolitionist, Carl Bernard Wadström. Written by the British abolitionist Helen Maria Williams and addressed to the French economist and abolitionist Jean-Baptiste Say, the necrology celebrated Wadström for his contributions to French and British abolitionism and his efforts to promote “the emancipation and civilization” of the people of Africa. According to Williams, Wadström’s publication, *An Essay on Colonization*, based on his travels in Senegambia, had become of such interest that Napoleon Bonaparte desired a copy to take with him on his expedition to Egypt.¹ Across the channel, the indologist and naturalist John Leyden also sang Wadström’s praise. Repeating much of Williams’ necrology, Leyden further highlighted Wadström’s testimony to the Privy Council when the British parliament debated the abolition of the slave trade. Wadström’s evidence had not only been considered “highly curious, useful, and interesting”, but it also “gave rise to the British colonial settlements of Sierra Leone and Bulama.”² To Leyden, who saw colonization in Africa as a way to “vindicate insulted humanity”, Sweden could indeed “claim the glory of forming the first specific plan for alleviating the evils which the inhuman man-trade has occasioned in Africa” through the efforts of Wadström and his compatriots, although he also noted that it was the Danes who, “through the indefatigable exertions” of the doctor Paul Erdmann Isert, founded in Africa

1 Lettre de la Citoyenne Hélène-Maria Williams, au C. J.-B Say, sur la mort du Philantrope Wadström, in: *La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique*, 30 March 1799, p. 229 and pp. 233–234, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k423985j/f232.item>.

2 [J. Leyden], *A Historical & Philosophical sketch of the discoveries & settlements of the Europeans in northern & western Africa, at the close of the eighteenth century*, Edinburgh 1799, p. 123.

*the first agricultural establishment, for instructing the negroes in the cultivation of their fertile soil, and teaching them to avenge their wrongs on the abettors of slavery, by rearing a bulwark for freedom in the Land of Slaves.*³

These celebrations of Carl Bernhard Wadström and Paul Erdmann Isert by French and British abolitionists reflect the collaborative nature of anti-slavery advocacy across European polities and colonial empires in the late eighteenth century. They also reveal the degree to which abolitionism had come to embody new imperialist ambitions to colonize Africa and spread “civilization”. As such, European abolitionism was an inherent part of the age of imperial revolutions that straddled the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries in which older modes of European empire-making eroded and new forms emerged in parallel with the rise of the nation state.⁴ That this revamping of modes of colonial empire involved not only actors within leading colonial empires but also people from their margins is equally apparent in the above. Hailing from Sweden and Prussia respectively, neither Wadström nor Isert’s home countries could claim much of an overseas empire at that time. Still, both men were able to acquire insights, knowledge, and experiences on the ground in European colonial holdings in West Africa and inspire French and British advocates of abolition and colonization. How did Wadström and Isert, two relatively marginal figures, come to attain the knowledge and experience that later earned them such elevated recognition? What political and social structures did they have to navigate to penetrate and participate in foreign colonial empire? What skills and expertise did they mobilize to achieve their goals? What type of knowledge did they possess that merited wider European attention?

Paying attention to these questions draws us into eighteenth-century avenues of trans-imperial knowledge production. Scholars have long been aware of the ties between the production of knowledge (as it was understood within an early modern European epistemology) and the circulation of people, plants, and ideas across empires.⁵ Yet only recently has the “transimperial” itself – and the connections and entanglements that enabled it – become of interest as part of a wider effort to move history beyond a national or single imperial framework.⁶ Building on these recent efforts, I explore in this paper transimperial knowledge production as it relates to pan-European and transatlantic abolitionism from the point of view of people who did not have access to colonial empire

3 Ibid., pp. 106–107 and 129.

4 See J. Adelman, *An Age of Imperial Revolutions*, in: *The American Historical Review* 113 (2008) 2, pp. 319–340; J. Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic*, Princeton, NJ 2006; J. Fradera, *The Imperial Nation: Citizens and Subjects in the British, French, Spanish, and American Empires*, Princeton, NJ, 2018.

5 Historians of early modern science have long interrogated the movement across colonial empires of botanists, naturalists, and other men of science in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. For an introduction to this literature and some of its main authors, see for instance, L. Schiebinger / C. Swan (eds.), *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce and Politics in the Early Modern World*, Philadelphia 2005; J. Delbourgo / N. Dew (eds.), *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World*, New York 2008. They do, however, not frame such mobility and knowledge as “transimperial”, a concept that is only recently gaining traction within this field.

6 See, for instance, C. Kamsisek / J. Krienbaum, *An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge*, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 14 (2016) 2, pp. 164–182.

within their own polities. I first examine the avenues Wadström and Isert followed to enter the African colonial holdings of other European colonial empires. I then look at what type of knowledge they accumulated and how they disseminated it. Finally, I ask why it was of interest to French and British abolitionists as well as the political elites on whose support they relied.

1. Avenues into Foreign Colonial Empire

Within a few years of each other, Paul Erdmann Isert and Carl Bernhard Wadström visited parts of West Africa as foreigners through the colonial holdings of the Monarchy of Denmark-Norway and the French Monarchy respectively. Isert travelled there twice, first between 1783–1787 in the position of chief surgeon for the slave trading fort of Christiansborg in Ghana and then again in 1788, this time as author of the *Reise nach Guinea* and in the position of captain of infantry with instructions to found a new plantation colony on land purchased from the ruler of Akwapim. Backed by public funds and the protection of the finance minister of Denmark-Norway, Ernst Schimmelmann (who himself came from a wealthy German merchant family), the colony was meant to test the possibility of establishing cotton, indigo, sugar, and coffee plantations in Africa without using the inhumane labour system associated with the plantations of the Americas. Though off to a successful start, Isert, his wife Dorothea Plum, and their newborn died in Africa early in 1789, putting a temporary halt to the Danish experiment.⁷ Wadström, in turn, went to the French slave trading stations in Senegambia. Unlike Isert, Wadström was not there in the service of a foreign colonial empire but went as part of a Swedish explorative expedition that also included the naturalists Anders Sparrman and Carl Axel Arrhenius. Sweden had once been an influential colonial empire, but had lost all of New Sweden on the American mainland and its slave trading forts in Africa by the 1660s. Its recent purchase of the Caribbean island of St. Bartholomew in 1784, however, was meant to assist Sweden's return to empire. Hoping to acquire a trade station in Africa to purchase African gold (and likely also captives), the Swedish king, Gustav III, financed the expedition that set sail in 1787.⁸

7 On Isert's colonial activities in West Africa see C. Degn, *Die Schimmelmanns im atlantischen Dreieckshandel: Gewinn und Gewissen*, Neumünster, 1974; S. A. Winsnes, *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade: Paul Erdmann Isert's Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia*, Accra 2007; P. Hernæs, *Friederichsnope! A Danish Settler Colony in Akuapem 1788–1792*, in: *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 13 (2011), pp. 81–133; P. Røge, *An Early Scramble for Africa: British, Danish and French Colonial Projects on the Coast of West Africa, 1780s and 1790s*, in: R. Aldrich/K. McKenzie (eds.), *The Routledge History of Western Empires*, London 2013, pp. 72–86. On the string of experiments with cotton plantations that follow Isert's experiment, see D. Hopkins, *Peter Thonning and Denmark's Guinea Commission: A Study in Nineteenth-Century African Colonial Geography*, Leiden 2013; P. Hernæs, *Slave Trade, Slave Plantations and Danish Colonialism*, in: H. Weiss (ed.) *Ports of Globalisation, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade*, Leiden 2016, pp. 101–139.

8 On Sweden's resurgence as a colonial empire see E. Schnakenbourg, *Sweden and the Atlantic: The Dynamism of Sweden's Colonial Projects in the Eighteenth Century*, in: M. Naum/J. M. Nordin (eds.), *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity – Small time Agents in a Global Arena*, New York 2013, pp. 229–242.

The avenues Wadström and Isert followed into foreign colonial holdings in West Africa were therefore not alike. The social and political structures that conditioned Wadström's transimperial experiences were those of an intellectual and entrepreneurial elite. Born in Stockholm in 1746, Wadström came from a well connected family. His father was an assessor and entrepreneur with connections to the Swedish royal family (the latter of whom stayed at Wadström's house, Marieborg, when visiting Norrköping). In his youth, Wadström studied mathematics, mining, and engineering. In 1774, he was involved in industrial espionage with royal support, seeking to lure smiths from the city of Solingen east of Düsseldorf to relocate to Sweden to help them produce blades. Between 1776 and 1778, he accompanied Adolf Ulrik Grill (son of the Swedish merchant Claes Grill who owned several ironworks, ships, and factories) on an educational journey across Denmark-Norway, German states, France, England, and the Dutch Republic. Upon his return to Sweden, he married Ulrika Westerberg, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, in Norrköping in 1779. Two years later, in 1781, he was appointed director of the workshop for surgical instruments (*directör över kirurgiska instrumentverkstaden*) and then in 1782 named *Öfverdirekteur öfver kontrollverket*, a position similar to Master of the Mint, housed within *Kommerskollegiet*, the Swedish board of trade, industry, and shipping. Alongside these activities, Wadström had a great interest in scientific studies, literature, and political economy. He had ties to the Swedish Linnean circles but was also among the followers of theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, many of whom believed that populations deep within Africa possessed exceptional spiritual awareness and would be part of a new Jerusalem.⁹

Through this confluence of scientific, spiritual and career connections Wadström became involved in the explorative expedition that took him to the French slave holdings in West Africa. In his *An Essay on Colonization* from 1794/95, Wadström would later say that the expedition had its roots in plans crafted by a society (of Swedenborgians) who met in Norrköping in 1779, wishing to form a colony in Africa to serve the "advancement of the happiness of mankind".¹⁰ This expedition in search for the ideal location in Africa was delayed, however, in part due to the American Revolution. Yet after successfully petitioning Gustav III, Wadström was granted a leave from his position in 1787 to go to West Africa with Sparman and Arrhenius. The support of Gustav III, Wadström admitted, had not stemmed from royal interest in the Swedenborgian project, but from his interest in "the discovery of natural productions, especially gold".¹¹ Wadström clearly also had several reasons to go. Upon his return from Senegambia and his entry into the British abolitionist movement, he claimed that he had gone to Africa to "be enabled fully to inform myself of the nature of the slave trade; of the manner in which the negroes

9 This brief overview is based on P. K. Nelson, Carl Bernhard Wadström – Mannen bakom myten [The man behind the myth], Norrköping 1998. On the New Jerusalem in Africa, see R. Ambjörnsson, "La République de Dieu". Une utopie suédoise de 1789, in: *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 277 (1989), pp. 244–273.

10 C. B. Wadström, *An essay on colonization, particularly applied to the Western Coast of Africa, with some free thoughts on cultivation and commerce*, 2 vols, London 1794, p. 179.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

are treated by the Europeans, but more particularly of the possibility of improving, by cultivation, the fruitful soil of Africa.”¹²

Leaving Sweden in May 1787, Wadström and his companions enjoyed a common mode of travel among European scientific elites, passing through countries and empires by means of royal letters of introduction (a typical mechanism of sociability in the eighteenth century), and meeting a wealth of prominent figures along the way. They moved through Denmark and Germany before reaching Paris, establishing the political connections that would help them reach their African destinations. In the French capital, they were assisted by the Swedish Ambassador to France, Baron Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein, who had also been instrumental in negotiating the French sale of St. Bartholomy. With the support of Gustav III, Wadström, Sparrman, and Arrhenius were also aided by the Marechal de Castries, the French Minister of the Marine and the Colonies who

*expressly ordered the directors [of the Compagnie du Sénégal] not only to give us a passage, but to instruct their agents on the [African] coast, to give us every possible assistance, and to place all the expense to the account of government.*¹³

In Paris, Wadström was also introduced to some of the leading French botanists, politicians, and thinkers, including the botanist Michel Adanson who had resided in Senegal in the late 1740s and early 1750s and published the famous *Voyage au Sénégal* (1756).¹⁴ It was Staël von Holstein who ensured that Wadström and his companions made it onto a French ship at Le Havre, from where they sailed on 29 August 1787. Reaching the French colony of Gorée on 16 October 1787, Wadström and his companions explored the region and the mouth of the Senegal River with the assistance of the governor, Stanislas Jean, Chevalier de Boufflers who was instructed by Castries to offer such support.¹⁵ Beyond elite mobility and sociability, elements of misfortune, luck, and contingency also shaped Wadström’s transimperial trajectory as was the case for most early modern explorers. While aiming to travel from the French colonial holdings into the English possessions in Sierra Leone, the spectre of Franco-British warfare forced the Swedish expedition to return to Europe. Leaving on 3 January 1788, after only eleven weeks, their journey back went via London, where Wadström wished to call “on some friend he had left in England eleven years before” (Grill).¹⁶ At that exact point, the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson was preparing a list of witnesses to testify to the British Privy Council on the horrors of the slave trade. News that Wadström and Sparrman (the latter of whom had participated in Cook’s second voyage between 1772 and 1775 and written against the slave trade) had arrived in England from Africa, prompted their summoning before the

12 C. B. Wadström, *Observations on the Slave Trade, and a Description of some part of the Coast of Guinea, during a Voyage made in 1787, and 1788, in Company with Doctor A. Sparrman and Captain Arrhenius*, London 1789, p. iv.

13 Wadström, *An Essay*, p. 188.

14 Nelson, *Carl Bernhard Wadström*, p. 150.

15 Wadström, *An Essay*, pp. 189–190. Nelson, *Carl Bernhard Wadström*, pp. 44–48.

16 Wadström, *An Essay*, p. ii.

Council.¹⁷ After Wadström's departure from West Africa, he thus returned to England for another seven years, relocating to Paris with his wife in 1795. In the French capital, he became an instrumental part of the French *Société des amis des noirs et des colonies*, whose members included Jean-Baptiste Say (the abolitionist mentioned in the introduction) and a string of other French scientific, political, literary, and financial elites.¹⁸

In contrast to the wealth of information we have about Wadström's education and trajectory, little is known about Paul Erdmann Isert's origins. According to Selena Axelrod Winsnes, the modern editor and translator of Isert's *Reise nach Guinea*, Isert was born on 20 October 1755, in Angermünde, Brandenburg and was a son of a master weaver.¹⁹ Isert does not talk about his childhood in any of the letters in his *Reise*, nor in the correspondence he maintained with the Danish colonial administration during his years in Africa.²⁰ We only get snippets about his childhood from a letter he wrote to Joseph Banks (a famous English botanist and patron of the natural sciences who presided over the British Royal Society from 1778 to 1821), dated 13 January 1785, as well as from the dedication to Isert by his brother-in-law, published in the journal *Minerva*, after his death. In the letter to Banks, Isert revealed that he had studied the profession of apothecary in Berlin in his youth while also studying natural philosophy with the support of Marcus Elieser Bloch, a German naturalist and physician. Without the financial means to further pursue his passion for natural philosophy, he disclosed to Banks that

I concluded to study Physic, by which I was in hopes of visiting many Country's in the other parts of the World, & to make discoveries in natural Phylosophy, which without much money I sun [sic] found would be impossible.²¹

Isert's financial restriction combined with his ardent interest in scientific discovery was thus what made him pursue a career as a surgeon, a profession he understood could open up opportunities for employment within colonial empires. By his own words to Banks, this proved a successful strategy:

My Entertainment hitherto has been pretty successful. I went from Germany to Denmark & stayed there till I got a Commission as first Physician to the Danish Majesty's Settlements on the Coast of Africa, where I had the Success to collect a good number of natural products & made many Discoveries.²²

17 Nelson, Carl Bernhard Wadström, p. 150. On Sparrman, see M. Persson, Southern Darkness, Northern Light: 'Civilisation' and 'Savagery' in Anders Sparrman's Southern African Travelogue, in: South African Historical Journal 71 (2019) 1, pp. 1–20.

18 On Wadström's involvement with the French abolitionist society, see B. Gainot/M. Dorigny, Les sociétés des amis des noirs, 1788–1799: Contribution à l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage, Paris 1998.

19 Winsnes, Letters, 15.

20 Dokumenter betreffende det Isertine Colonialag. 1788–1795. Schimmelmanske papirer. Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, Denmark. Generaltoldkammeret, 412, Ældre del Vestindisk-Guineisk reteskriverkontor, 1778–1809.

21 Paul Erdmann Isert to Joseph Banks, Williams fort at Whydah, 13 January 1785, published in Winsnes, Letters, pp. 291–292.

22 Ibid.

Isert does not say why he chose Denmark, nor when he got there or how he got his commission and historians have not been able to fill these gaps of knowledge. He may simply have followed a trajectory that many men of medicine followed in these years. As Bernhard Bierlich has shown, it was not unusual for Germans to go to Copenhagen to study medicine, nor to find employment within the Danish slave trading business or in the Danish colonies. Although their numbers started to decline after the 1776 Danish *indfødsretslov* dictated that Danish citizenship became a requirement, this law did not have any drastic effects until 1830.²³ Even if Isert arrived after the law of 1776, he managed to receive his appointment as chief surgeon in 1783, leaving Copenhagen for Christiansborg in Ghana in July of that year.

Isert's years in Copenhagen prior to his appointment are as clouded in mystery as his youth. Winsnes speculates that he is likely to have met his future wife Dorothea Plum prior to his first journey to Ghana since their courtship would have been unusually brief had he only met her after his return to Copenhagen in the summer of 1787. This would not be an unreasonable guess and might explain how Isert ended up with the appointment of chief surgeon. The Plum family belonged to the upper political and economic echelons of the Danish capital. Dorothea's father, Claus Plum was a priest in Korsør. His wife, Elisabeth Amalie Rohn, was daughter of Anton Christopher Rohn, priest in Petri Kirken in Copenhagen (whose father was also an apothecary). Claus and Elisabeth had twelve children. One of them, Anthon Christian Rohn Plum became an apothecary in Vordingborg (1755–1802). Another, Frederick Plum, became Bishop over Funen bishopric (1760–1834).²⁴ It was the latter who wrote a dedication to Isert upon his death, celebrating his efforts to put an end to the European slave trade by “spreading industry” from his African colony.²⁵ Indeed, it could have been either Frederick or Anthon who introduced Dorothea and Isert to each other, Anthon being the exact same age as Isert and also a student of apothecary.

We know with more certainty that Isert had connected with scientific circles in Denmark prior to his departure for Africa and had a solid knowledge of a range of botanists, zoologists, and naturalists, including those who had benefitted from the patronage of Joseph Banks. In his letter to Banks, Isert notes that he wished to find hire as a naturalist on board scientific expeditions supported by the famous botanist. Isert explained that he hoped that Banks would show him the same support that he had granted Daniel Carlsson Solander, a Swedish student of Linnaeus, who had accompanied Banks on the first voyage of James Cook (Solander later found a position within the Natural History Department of the British Museum), or the Germans Johann Reinhold Foster and his son Johann Georg, whom Banks sent on Cook's second voyage. Moreover, he encouraged

23 B. Bierlich, The Danish Slave Trade, its surgeons and slave mortality, in: *Outre-mers* 96 (2009) 354/365, p. 235.

24 J. C. L. von Lengnick, *Genealogier over adelige og borgerlige familier*, Copenhagen 1851, Familien Plum, pp. 12–13.

25 F. Plum, Til -, in: *Minerva* 17 (1789), p. 267.

Banks to verify Isert's credentials as a connoisseur of natural history with "the Danish Natural Philosophers, or to Dr. Bloch at Berlin".²⁶

We can only guess whether it was Isert's scientific and medical credentials, his ties to the Plum family, or perhaps his German background which gave him access to the statesman Ernst Schimmelmann (Minister of Finance), but Isert managed to obtain his appointment as chief surgeon in 1783 and embark on his first travels beyond Europe. Unlike Wadström, however, Isert had to contend himself with the little envied position of surgeon within the Danish slave trade in order to participate in exploration and discoveries, the latter of which was thereby strictly constrained to his free time. The political and social structures that Wadström and Isert had to navigate to get to Africa were thus in no way alike. Nor were they in any way unusual. As much research has reflected in recent years, early modern Europe's imperial powers willingly drew on foreign labour, capital, and expertise to consolidate and strengthen their overseas possessions. Irrespective of sex, gender, or social status, people from across Europe could find employment in other empires. Some of these positions were based on coercion more than opportunity, as the manning of navies of the maritime empires reflect, but there were also numerous people who ventured out voluntarily. Entrepreneurial families set up merchant houses in the main colonial trading ports such as Bordeaux, Hamburg, or Copenhagen, while trading companies such as the various European East India Companies were underpinned by a multiplicity of private interest groups from different countries.²⁷ Missionaries, like the Moravian Brethren, spread across the globe in Danish, English, and Dutch colonies. Surgeons found employment on board slave ships and in colonies, and botanists, mineralogists, and naturalists joined as scientific labour on board explorative ventures.²⁸ Whether a denizen of a polity without colonies or one with an extensive colonial empire, Europeans of different social status could embrace avenues of transimperial mobility, though never on equal terms.

2. The Power of First-Hand Observations from the Margins

Ten years after Wadström's return from Africa, he and Isert had both passed away. Both had also gained considerable recognition among abolitionists within Europe's leading empires, especially for their advocacy of and pioneering role in crafting a new approach

26 P. E. Isert to J. Banks, in Winsnes, Letters, p. 290, footnote 1 and p. 292.

27 On Europeans finding employment in the navies of Europe's main colonial empires, see M. van Rossum et al., National and International Labour Markets for Sailors in European, Atlantic, and Asian Waters, 1600–1850, in: M. Fusaro/A. Polónia (eds.), *Maritime History as Global History*, Liverpool 2010, pp. 47–72. On German merchants in colonial ports, see K. Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel 1680–1830. Unternehmen und Familien in Hamburg, Cádiz und Bordeaux*, München 2004.

28 On the Moravian Brethren in colonies across the globe, see H. Richards, Distant Garden: Moravian Missions and the Culture of Slavery in the Danish West Indies, 1732–1848, in: *Journal of Moravian History* 2 (2007), pp. 55–74. On East India Companies, see the special issue on Crossing Companies edited by F. Gottmann and P. Stern, *Journal of World History* 31 (2020) 3. On surgeons see C. Koslofsky/R. Zaugg, Ship's Surgeon Johann Peter Oettinger: A Hinterlander in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1682–1696, in F. Brahm/E. Rosenhaft (eds.), *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850*, Woodbridge 2016, pp. 25–43.

to Africa that would spread “civilization” on the continent by means of colonization and agricultural production. Neither Isert nor Wadström, however, conceived this imperial discourse (whether in its formal or informal forms); they merely tapped into already existing tropes about European capabilities and Africa’s lack of development. Explanations for the appreciation of Isert and Wadström are therefore more likely to be found in their ability to lend support to an already familiar pan-European discourse by supplementing first-hand observations and on-the-ground experimentation as well as in their very marginality as subjects of polities that were not themselves one of Europe’s main colonial empires.

Critiques of using African slave labour in the European colonies in the Americas and suggestions to move away from such violent practices by cultivating sugar, coffee, cotton, indigo, and other cash crops in Africa had started to build in the late 1750s in response to the Seven Years’ War. Critical to this development were particularly a group of political economists in France, known as the “Economistes” or the “Physiocrats”. Attacking the monopolistic structures and prohibitive commercial systems associated with early modern colonial commerce, they also advocated for free labour and free international trade, believing it to be integral to “civilization” (a word they coined in the mid-1750s). In their view, the production of cash crops in the Caribbean islands, obtained through the exploitation of enslaved African labourers, was irrational, inhumane, and unprofitable in the long run. As one of their most fervent critics of French colonization in the Americas, Du Pont de Nemours, noted in the Physiocratic journal *Éphémérides du Citoyen*:

*It suffices only to create a few peaceful settlements on the coast of Africa and send artisans and builders of mills and boilers there and then say to the Blacks; friends, you see that cane, cut it, pass it between the two rolls that we offer you, make the juice boil in the boiler like this, and we shall pay you well for the syrup that results from it.*²⁹

Soon these suggestions were incorporated into the literature of Enlightenment critics of mercantilist colonial empire, including Diderot and Raynal’s famous *Histoire des deux Indes* in its 1780 edition. As this multi-volume work grew in popularity across Europe and the Atlantic World, so did the ideas it contained.³⁰

Neither the Physiocrats nor the likes of Diderot and Raynal had been to Africa. Their ideas were based on their reading of authors such as the French botanist Michel Adanson, who had described the dexterity of African labourers and the fertility of African lands in his publication on his years in Senegambia between 1749 and 1754. One of the Physiocrats, the Abbé Roubaud, had also read and reviewed the anonymous *Histoire du commerce des anglois* (which was likely written by Malachy Postlethwayt, an associate of Britain’s Royal Africa Company) in 1759, and supported the suggestion that Britain would benefit more from its commerce with Africa if based on exchanging its manu-

29 *Ephémérides du citoyen*, 1771, vi, p. 243.

30 See P. Røge, *Economistes and the Reinvention of Empire: France in the Americas and Africa, c. 1750–1802*, Cambridge 2019, p. 96 and chapter 2 more generally.

factured goods for raw commodities developed through the introduction of industry and the arts rather than by basing its African commerce on the slave trade.³¹ Someone like Wadström, who had travelled to France and its colonies, met with Adanson while in Paris, and was interested in Enlightenment debate and political economy, was surely already familiar with these earlier impulses to rethink colonial empire and Europe's approach to Africa.³² Yet what Wadström had to offer in addition was the ability to speak directly to the feasibility of these earlier designs based on his personal knowledge and observations of the African land and people in question. With the colonial knowledge he had accumulated from the French possessions in West Africa, he became a powerful witness of the violence of the European slave trade as Clarkson clearly understood when Wadström and Sparrman arrived in London in 1789, but also an important authority on the possibility for colonial expansion on the African continent.

This emphasis on offering empirical knowledge is already clear in Wadström's first publication, his *Observations on the Slave Trade* (1789), which came out on the heels of Wadström's testimony to the Privy Council. In it, Wadström depicted himself as a die-hard abolitionist whose commitment was not only based on moral or religious impulses but rooted in his personal experience of the European slave trade in West Africa. He made it clear that he wanted to contribute to the abolition of slavery "by making known what my own experience has dictated; in a word, to relate what I have seen".³³ Admitting that some of the information he related was collected "both from the black and white traders" on the coast of Africa, he made sure to stress when he conveyed information that had "come within my own knowledge".³⁴ In this way, he described his inspection of the prison at the French slave trading fort of Gorée, which held the African captives awaiting their transatlantic destiny, noting, "I there saw the unfortunate captives, chained two and two together by the foot. The mangled bodies of several of them, whose wounds were still bleeding [...]."³⁵ He described having seen "a poor child" of two years old with "a very deep wound in his side", pushed to the ground "so that the sand getting into it, put him to exquisite pain".³⁶ These horrific descriptions of the slave trade on the coast of West Africa were followed by Wadström's eye-witness accounts of the local populations, the quality of the land, and vegetation. He described how

[s]ugar canes grow wild in many places, which with a little cultivation might be rendered extremely valuable and productive. The same may be said of the tobacco plant. Several species of cotton are also spontaneously produced by this excellent soil.

31 Ibid., pp. 102–103.

32 The influences of political economic writings on Wadström's thinking has been discussed in the context of Scottish political economy by J. Ahlskog, *The Political Economy of Colonisation: Carl Bernhard Wadström's Case for Abolition and Civilisation*, in: *Nordic Yearbook for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7 (2010), pp. 146–167. Ahlskog stresses Scottish influences rather than French ones.

33 Wadström, *Observations on the Slave Trade*, p. iii.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p. 5.

36 Ibid., p. 15.

Similarly, he described the quality of labour in the local cotton industry, noting that “[t]he negroes spin it into very fine yarn, of which they make a good but narrow cloth”. As a connoisseur of the Swedish mining industry, he could further reveal that “[i]n Gallam is found a very tough and excellent kind of iron, and the negroes work it with much ingenuity”.³⁷ Including references to David Hume and Adam Smith and seemingly ignoring his own observations on the ingenuity of African industrious skills, he further echoed earlier stadial theory and notions of progress, claiming that Africans found themselves to be “in a state of infancy, solely because their faculties have not been cultivated”. From this, he stressed, “it may perhaps be concluded, that these raw nations are incapable of civilization”. Yet, this was not the case if the right approach was adopted.³⁸ It was the same type of experience-based knowledge that helped Isert to be put in charge of the colonial initiative he embarked on in the summer of 1788 and to achieve posthumous international fame. Upon Isert’s return from four years in Ghana, he published a collection of twelve letters that he had written to his friends and family between 1783 and 1787 under the title of *Reise nach Guinea und den caribaischen Inseln in Columbien*. The letters contained a wealth of information on the local populations, plants, and opportunities for land purchase. One letter showed that Isert had ventured inland and visited the ruler of Akwapim, Attiambo, whose lands he described as very fertile. Readers could learn of the presence of fresh water, trees 15 feet in diameter, types of aloe, citron, palm oil, and palm wine, fruits such as banana, pineapple, pawpaw and lime and a climate “considerably healthier here than at the seaboard”.³⁹ In his letter from the Caribbean (his return journey to Copenhagen took him first to the Danish West Indies), readers could also learn of the “ghastly toil and beatings, together with a wretched diet” that African captives were subjected to on the Caribbean plantations. Isert made it seem that it was these horrors, which let him to formulate the colonial project in Africa that he would soon be put in charge of, speculating in a letter addressed to his father: “Why were our forefathers not sensible enough to establish plantations of these products in Africa? There one could get enough workers for only a small wage!” Doing so would prevent “the shameful exportation of Blacks from their happy fatherland”. He was certain that the African population would willingly “concede to us the best and largest areas of land which have lain fallow for thousands of years, if we came to them with an olive branch in our hand instead of murderous steel; and for a small payment, they would help us.”⁴⁰ Like Wadström, Isert thus echoed a wider transimperial discourse centred on relocating the production of sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo to Africa to avoid the African slave

37 Ibid., pp. 42 and 45.

38 Ibid., p. 32. On stadial theory see H. Hodacs/M. Persson’s comparison of Anders Sparrman and Wadström’s use of the “savage” and stadial theory. Globalizing the savage: From stadial theory to a theory of luxury in late 18th-century Swedish discussions of Africa, in: *History of the Human Sciences* 32 (2019) 4, pp. 100–114.

39 Letter of August 1786, in Winsnes, Letters, pp. 218–221.

40 The descriptions of violence on St. Croix and the reference to the possibility of cultivating the crops of the Americas in Africa is found in Letter 11 to his father, written on St. Croix 12 March 1787. The statement about cultivating crops in Africa is on p. 252. Winsnes, Letters.

trade and plantation slavery without giving up access to these desirable goods. We also see from the Preface to the *Reise nach Guinea* that he was familiar not only with Diderot and Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* but also with Michel Adanson's publication. Nonetheless, his personal experience of Africa, the Middle Passage and the plantation complex in the Caribbean ensured that he could speak about such prospects with actual authority. To the Danish Finance Minister, Ernst Schimmelmann – who owned sugar plantations in the Danish Caribbean but was also a driving force behind the decree to abolish the Danish slave trade announced in 1792 – Isert's suggestions to establish plantation colonies in Africa upon his return from Ghana easily aligned with his own hopes to soon end the Danish slave trade.⁴¹ With public funding and government support and instructions in hand, Isert returned to Ghana in late 1788, where he reconnected with Attiambo, who agreed to sell off land measuring 20 square miles, located five to six miles from the seashore (1 land mile was about 7.5 kilometers). On this land, Isert and accompanying settlers started to develop a small town and cleared fields for cotton plantations using “100 to 200 Blacks” as labourers, including “the Few Blacks I own”. The use of enslaved labourers was permitted by Schimmelmann on the condition that the enslaved had “reason to consider themselves fortunate in having escaped a harder fate in West India” and they would be able to feel safe “under the protection of the law”.⁴²

Despite Isert's untimely death, his *Reise nach Guinea* would grant him considerable fame in North and Western Europe. The volume was translated into Danish in 1789, into Dutch in 1790, into French in 1793, and into Swedish in 1795.⁴³ However, it only contained the seeds of Isert's designs for colonies in Africa and carried no information on his subsequent attempts at Akwapim. Moreover, the Danish paper *Minerva* in which Isert's brother-in-law reported on Isert's colonial experiment and death was written in Danish, a language only few in Europe had access to. News of his achievements might therefore not have reached abolitionist circles in France and Britain were it not for Carl Bernhard Wadström. In his *An Essay on Colonization* from 1794/95, Wadström praised Isert's attempt to create a colony. He also praised the Danish ministry, of which he noted that they “seem[ed] determined to support this establishment” through “their general plan of eradicating the slave trade and introducing civilization.”⁴⁴ While referencing Isert's *Reise nach Guinea*, Wadström clarified that he had gotten his information about the Danish establishment from M. Biorn, the Governor General of the Danish settlements on the coast of Ghana, who had “passed through London, in August 1793, on his way home from Africa”.⁴⁵ Wadström also asserted that a “skillful farmer” had gone with Isert to

41 On the complexities driving the Danish abolitionist decree in 1792, see P. Røge, Why the Danes Got There First – A Trans-Imperial Study of the Abolition of the Danish Slave Trade in 1792, in: *Slavery & Abolition* 35 (2014) 4, pp. 576–592. On Ernst Schimmelmann, see Degn, *Die Schimmelmanns*.

42 Instructions from E. Schimmelmann and C.V. Brandt, Copenhagen 10 July 1788. Winsnes, Letters, pp. 304–308. From Isert to Schimmelmann and Brandt, Frederichsnopel 16 January 1789, *ibid.*, pp. 312–317.

43 On the various translations and dates, see Winsnes, Letters, pp. 25–26.

44 Wadström, *An essay on Colonization*, 2, p. 176.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

Akwapim to “introduce the plough, and there is little doubt but he will succeed”, a comment later abolitionists would return to.⁴⁶

Wadström’s own *Essay on Colonization* was translated into French in 1798. At that moment, he had become a prominent figure within the French *Société des amis des noirs et des colonies* that also counted the political economist J. B. Say and many other eminent economists, naturalists, and men of letters. It is likely due to the French translation of Wadström’s essay that both he and Isert continued to be mentioned as authorities among imperialists even after their deaths. As late as 1839, Pierre-Simon Fouché du Pussy praised not only Wadström in his *État de la civilisation en Afrique*, but also “the respectable Isert” for having introduced the first plough to the population of Akwapim.⁴⁷ The appropriation of their “knowledge about Africa”, moreover, continued even across the Atlantic in the United States. For instance, the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America, founded in 1816 by Robert Finley, drew on the knowledge and experiences of both to advocate the society’s colonial agenda. Developing a proposal for the United States to go to Africa to create settlements based on the model of the British colony of Sierra Leone, the society printed extracts from published works to show “that lands are attainable, and that the natural resources and productions of the country are rich, various, and abundant”. The first work they cited was Isert’s *Reise nach Guinea*. Under “Lands may be fairly purchased in Africa of the native kings and people on very moderate terms”, they quoted Isert saying

[t]he native Africans would resign to us, with all their heart, vast and fertile tracts of land which have lain uncultivated from the creation, if we would cease from our depredations, and live with them in peace.

The second extract came from Wadström’s essay on colonization, revealing the long trans-Atlantic afterlives of Isert and Wadström’s contributions to colonialism and abolitionism.⁴⁸

Why were supporters of abolition and colonization in Africa interested in getting such information from Isert and Wadström? Both France and Britain (and the United States) certainly had their own explorers of Africa and used such inter-imperial information in their fight against advocates of the transatlantic slave trade. Beyond the fact that Isert and Wadström provided an additional layer of first-hand observations, perhaps it was their Swedish and German backgrounds and their work within the small colonial holdings of Denmark-Norway that made their work attractive in an age of imperial rivalry among Europe’s leading powers. As scholars have noted, collaboration among French and British abolitionists during the French revolutionary wars became an Achilles heel

46 Ibid., p. 176.

47 P.-S. F. de Pussy, *État de la civilisation en Afrique* (1839), p. 23.

48 E. Burgess, Address to the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States, Washington 1818, pp. 33 and 36.

for France's first abolitionist society.⁴⁹ The very marginality of Isert and Wadström may have made their names less politically charged within various domestic contexts. Even if from polities on the margin of European empires, Wadström and Isert were thus able to participate in the restructuring of colonial empire that characterized the Age of Imperial Revolutions. Moreover, they earned a lasting legacy among promoters of nineteenth-century colonization based on the expertise and knowledge about Africa with which their names were associated. To get to this point, Isert and Wadström navigated the social and political structures that mediated transimperial knowledge production in uneven ways. While both came from polities without colonial holdings in West Africa, the differences in their social status and economic position conditioned their modes of access. But while their trajectories across imperial borders were distinctive, it led them down a similar programmatic path: they both nourished an ambition to create colonies in Africa that did not – in their view – exploit the local populations but furthered their so-called “development” and “civilization”. In articulating such ambitions, Isert and Wadström were swimming with the current of intellectual elites within Europe's dominant colonial empires. Whether or not one subscribes to the notion of a shared reservoir of transimperial knowledge, there was something recognizable and familiar about the discourses Wadström and Isert deployed.⁵⁰ It echoed physiocratic political economy, Scottish political economy, scientific discursive practices, and botanical colonial knowledge, while also embracing Enlightenment sentiments of progress. Yet, through their ability to offer first-hand observations about African soil, indigenous crops, and forms of local labour systems, they helped anchor these abolitionist and colonial expansionist discourses through experimental and empirical evidence within an increasingly knowledge-based culture.

49 Gainot/Dorigny, *Les société des amis des noirs*.

50 The notion of a shared reservoir of transimperial knowledge is discussed in Kamissek/Kreienbaum, *An Imperial Cloud?*