

The Atlantic slave trade, sixteenth to eighteenth century

Slavery in Africa before the Atlantic trade

Slavery has a long history in Africa, as well as in Europe and Asia. In ancient pharaonic times captives from Nubia were transported down the Nile to Egypt. Some were also transported across the Sahara to north Africa in Roman times, while others were sent out of north-east Africa to labour in the states of the Persian Gulf and India. All of these numbers were small, however, in comparison to the Atlantic trade that came later.

The trans-Saharan slave trade

Slave labour was used in the mid-Saharan salt mines from ancient times, but the scale of this increased dramatically with the expansion of trans-Saharan trade that coincided with the Muslim penetration of north Africa and the growth in the empire of Ghana. Islamic law did not allow the enslavement of fellow-Muslims, so north African merchants sought their slaves from non-Muslim societies south of the Sahara. Consequently, the transportation of captives for sale into slavery in north Africa became a regular, if initially small, part of expanding trans-Saharan trade networks from the eighth century. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that over the next 11 centuries as many as five million Africans were transported across the Sahara to be sold into slavery. And over a similar period, up to two and a half million people were transported from east and north-east Africa into slavery in western Asia.

Slavery in the Muslim world was not plantation slavery, such as was to become common in the Americas. Male slaves were often incorporated into armies and through this, and their conversion to Islam, they became an integral part of Muslim north Africa: some former slaves rose to high office. Female slaves, for whom there was a high demand, became household servants or concubines and were to be found right across the Muslim world of north Africa and western Asia.

Some form of slavery or subservient labour had long been a part of African society south of the Sahara. Usually originating as war-captives in larger centralised states they were often thoroughly incorporated into the economy and society, almost as a way of strengthening and expanding the state. In small, decentralised communities, they tended to be treated more as outsiders, and on occasion were ransomed back to their origins. Slaves were sometimes sold in the markets of both large and small communities, but this was not a regular feature and their capture was not usually with intent to sell. Increasingly, however, from the eleventh century, as the rulers

8th cent

Integral part of society

The aims of Portuguese initiatives

of states on the southern fringes of the Sahara converted to Islam, their armies raided their non-Muslim neighbours to obtain captives for the trans-Saharan trade. This trade in human beings continued until at least the end of the nineteenth century, with some reports of it occurring well into the twentieth century. In all it lasted some fifteen hundred years, but it was never on the massive scale that Europeans were to initiate for the trans-Atlantic trade.

The origins of European maritime trade with west Africa

When the Portuguese first sailed out on their voyages of exploration along the west African coast, the desire to reach India was a distant objective. Of more immediate concern was their attempt to bypass Muslim north Africa and gain direct access to the gold-producing regions of west Africa. This would provide the poorly-endowed state of Portugal with a major source of national wealth, for sub-Saharan west Africa was known to be the main source of gold for the coinage of western Europe (see Figure 7.3 on p. 106, a fourteenth-century European map of Africa, showing Mali as a major source of gold). Once access to this had been achieved, the wealth it provided could finance further exploration round the southern tip of Africa and on to India. Ultimately, by reaching India via a southern route the Portuguese would be bypassing the Muslim-controlled trading routes of western Asia. In doing so they hoped to reap rich rewards from the Indian trade in spices, perfumes, silks and other luxuries.

Early Portuguese trade on the west African coast

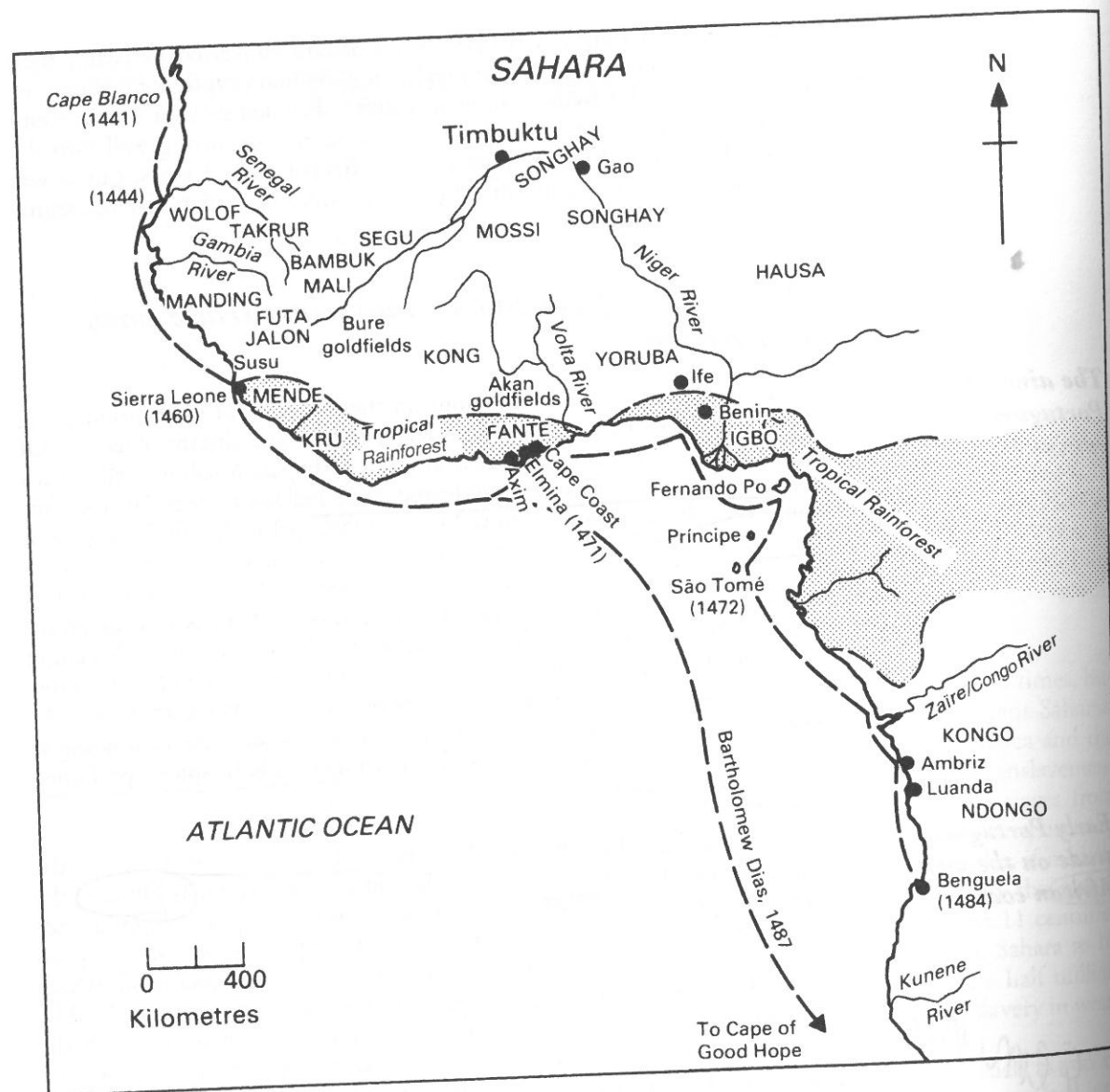
Portuguese sailing ships first reached the west African coast south of the Akan goldfields in the 1470s. They built a fort there, known as Elmina ('the mine'), to protect their trading post from rival European shipping (see Figure 12.1). At first the Portuguese traded copper, brass and European cloth in exchange for gold. They thus offered the forest peoples goods which they had previously got from Songhay and the trans-Saharan trade. The Portuguese also sold them a certain number of slaves brought from the forest kingdom of Benin near the Niger delta. It appears that for some time slave labour had been used to run the gold mines of the Akan forest region (see p. 201). In the early 1500s the Portuguese added cowrie shells and luxury cloths from the Indian Ocean trade to the range of goods they offered in exchange for west African gold. Cowrie shells quickly became a regular trading currency in west Africa. It was not long before half the produce of the Akan goldfields was being diverted southwards, away from Songhay and the trans-Saharan trade, and towards the European trading forts along the coast.

Origins of European-controlled plantation slavery

Meanwhile in the 1480s, the Portuguese had discovered the uninhabited equatorial islands of Príncipe and São Tomé. In the years that followed, Portuguese settlers developed thriving sugar plantations in the rich volcanic soils of these islands. They manned their plantations with slave labour drawn from the African mainland.

The plantation system for growing sugar cane had originally been developed in various Mediterranean islands and in southern Spain and Portugal

Elmina 1470s



Map 12.1 West Africa: Portuguese exploration and trade in the fifteenth century

during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The slave labour for these plantations was drawn not only from north Africa but also from among the Slavs of southern Russia. Indeed the European word 'slave' comes from the use of 'Slavs' for this kind of unpaid labour. As the Portuguese captured Atlantic islands from Madeira southwards to São Tomé, they extended to the tropics their plantation system for growing sugar.

* In the early sixteenth century São Tomé became the largest single producer of sugar for the European market. Ultimately, the São Tomé plantation system, owned and run by European overseers and manned by African slave labour, was to become the model for plantation slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Figure 12.1 Elmina Castle, Ghana, was built by the Portuguese in 1482 and used by them and later by Dutch and English traders as a base for dealing in slaves, gold and imported European products. Castles such as these were originally built to prevent rival Europeans from trading in that particular region, and to store slaves in the dungeons to await shipment across the Atlantic

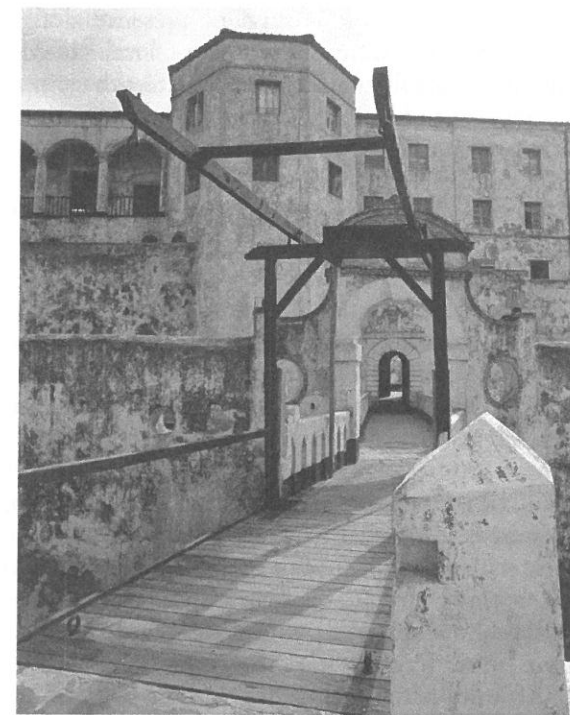
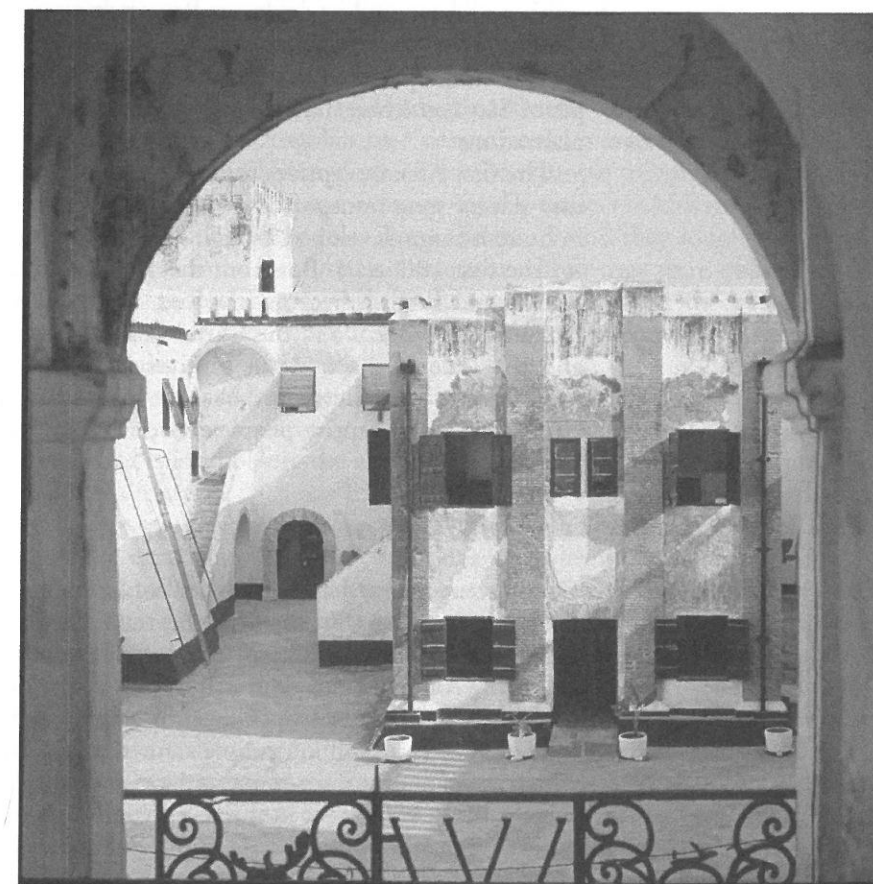


Figure 12.2 Inside the ramparts of Elmina Castle looking towards the market chamber where slaves were sold. Part of the coat of arms and monogram of the Dutch royal house can be seen on the wrought iron balustrade



Origins and development of the transatlantic trade in slaves

From early on in the Portuguese presence along the coast of tropical west Africa, captives were bought from local chiefdoms for sale into slavery. Initially, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they came largely from the Senegal and Gambia region and were transported to the farms and plantations of southern Spain and Portugal. Those taken from the Niger delta and the Congo River region went mostly to the island of São Tomé.

Meanwhile, Columbus's pioneering trans-Atlantic voyage of 1492 had revealed a tropical 'New World' that Europeans, led by the Spaniards, were quick to colonise and exploit.

These European colonisers soon felt the need for a large imported labour force to work the gold and silver mines of the mainland and their tobacco plantations on the Caribbean islands. The local indigenous Amerindian population quickly succumbed to the harsh treatment of the colonisers and unfamiliar European diseases. By the end of the first century of European contact, 90 per cent or more of the Amerindian population of the Caribbean islands had been wiped out – victims of European violence or disease. Criminals and outcasts from Europe were transported to the Americas in the early sixteenth century, but their numbers were limited. Those that were sent did not long survive attacks of tropical disease. Faced with these problems the European colonisers of central and south America turned to Africa for their slave labour force.

Africans had developed a certain level of immunity to some tropical diseases. They were known to have experience and skills in metal-working, mining and tropical agriculture. Portuguese experience had already shown that there was always somewhere along the west African coast where African rulers were prepared to sell their war captives and criminals. And the example of São Tomé had shown the possibilities of using African slave labour on plantations.

The first African captives to be taken directly across the Atlantic and sold into slavery were transported in 1532. Thereafter a steady transatlantic trade in human cargo developed though annual numbers remained relatively small for the first 100 years. But from the 1630s, as first the Dutch and then the French and English became involved, there was a rapid expansion of sugar plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean. Demand for slave labour increased and the scale of the trade in captives from west Africa reached enormous proportions. There developed over the next 200 years the largest-scale forced transportation of captive people ever devised in human history.

The nature of the slave trade

The question of scale

Over recent years there has been considerable dispute among historians about the numbers involved in the transatlantic trade. Recorded statistics show that at least ten million Africans were landed alive and sold into slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean in the 300 years that followed 1532. Allowing for a further two million that died on the trans-Atlantic voyage, a total of at least 12 million people were taken captive out of Africa. Numbers which stood at only a few thousand a year in the sixteenth century rose to an average of 20,000 a year in the seventeenth and further rocketed to between 50,000 and 100,000 a year for much of the eighteenth century. Numbers tailed off during the nineteenth century, but the trade did not altogether

Prods of African slaves →

The African dimension

cease until the 1870s and 1880s. Some historians argue that a huge amount of traffic went unrecorded and that the real scale of the trade was double the amount indicated here.

Although numbers taken out of Africa were clearly huge, they varied very widely from one region to another. Senegal in the sixteenth century was an important early source of slaves. The Angolan coastline was unusual in that it remained a major slave-exporting region for most of the period, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The effects of this on the peoples of Angola will be discussed further in Chapter 14 (pp. 206–7). With the rise of Caribbean sugar plantations from the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch, French, English, Danes and other Europeans became more actively involved in the carrying trade. Then the so-called 'Slave Coast' (the western coast of modern Nigeria) became a major source of slaves. With the rapid expansion of slave exports in the eighteenth century, virtually every part of the Atlantic coastline from Senegal to southern Angola became involved in the human traffic. The greatest concentration of European trading forts was along the so-called 'Gold Coast', the coastline of the modern state of Ghana. Slaves continued to be taken from the 'Slave Coast' and Angola until well into the nineteenth century when many other regions had ceased their trade in people.

On the whole European slave traders were not active in the business of capturing their victims. European traders did not have the military power to go on their own extensive raiding expeditions. In any case, why go on expensive raiding expeditions when captives could be bought more cheaply and with less risk at the coast? When they did enter the interior, as in Angola, European armies either suffered military defeat or were weakened by disease. Nevertheless, in the Angolan case they stirred up warfare within the kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo which provided ample numbers of captives for sale at the coast. European activity in the trade in Africans was usually restricted to their trading forts along the coast. And they sought permission to build these from local African rulers to whom they were obliged to pay tribute. In general it was African rulers who provided the captives, and specialist African and Afro-European slave dealers who conveyed them to the coast for sale.

The main source of people for sale into slavery was those captured in warfare. As we saw above (p. 176), slavery in Africa, and even the sale of slaves, had existed before the arrival of Europeans on the west African coast. A major difference with the European-initiated trade, however, was that the war-captives were being totally removed from their African societies, with a short life-expectancy in harsh conditions and with no hope of return.

It used to be assumed that most captives offered for sale at the coast were the product of wars deliberately waged for this purpose. This undoubtedly did happen on occasion, especially in the eighteenth century when prices offered by Europeans were rising. But research has revealed that there was considerably more local African initiative involved than was previously assumed to be the case.

A number of careful regional studies have revealed that the supply of captives at the coast was usually the result of specific local wars being waged in the interior. And the prime motive of these wars was the formation and expansion of states rather than simply a free-for-all in which the losers ended

For more information see www.palgrave.com/shillington

Impact of the slave trade

Walter Rodney, European slave trade singlehanded created African's chronic poverty & underdevelopment.

in slavery. Thus the forest state of Benin sold captives to the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century while they were undergoing a period of military expansion. Significantly, in the sixteenth century they refused to trade in people. The export of captives from Benin was only renewed in the eighteenth century as the formerly powerful kingdom went into decline. During the first half of the sixteenth century the Mane, a branch of the Mand-speaking peoples, colonised the highlands of Sierra Leone, making local people captive and selling them at the coast. In the early eighteenth century, the coastline of modern Guinea reached a peak of slave exports when the Muslim Fulbe of Futa Jalon created a new state and waged holy war against their neighbours. The result was a large number of captives for sale into slavery. Similarly, wars waged by the expanding states of Oyo (pp. 197-8), Dahomey (pp. 199-200) and Asante (pp. 201-3) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced specific local peaks in the supply of captives for sale to European slavers at the coast.

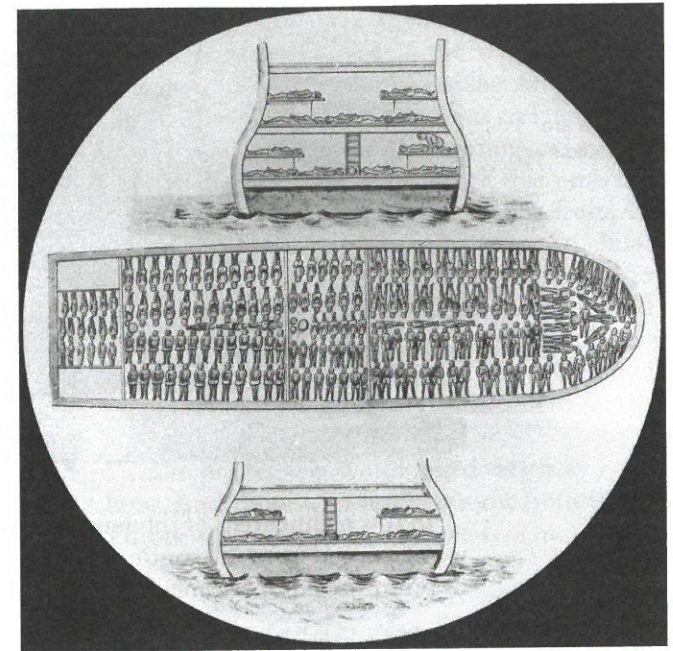
Basically, powerful African rulers provided captives when it suited them, and some of them became very rich in the process. But they rarely sold people from their own society, except unwanted criminals and outcasts. On the other hand, small societies, the weak states and 'stateless' village communities, the neighbours of the large expanding states, undoubtedly suffered greatly. Some disappeared altogether, their lands taken over by other, more powerful neighbours.

Wars in the west African interior may not have generally been waged deliberately just to produce captives for sale. But the presence of Europeans on the coast offering what appeared to be high prices for captives undoubtedly stimulated warfare. This was especially so in the eighteenth century when Europeans offered guns as their major trading item.

As a result of the slave trade, there was not only an increased level of general warfare in the west African interior. In purely economic terms, there was also a serious loss to the productive potential of the region. Previously war had produced tribute from the vanquished, and captives to work for the victors. But now the increased level of warfare produced a 'surplus' of captives. These were no longer kept, even as forced labour, within the African society that had captured them. They were no longer ransomed back to the society that had lost them. Instead, they were sold right out of Africa, and sold for goods which were worth a fraction of what those people might have produced within their own lifetime. In addition, those sold were the young, most productive sector of the population, mostly aged between 14 and 35. It varied from one region to another, but all areas of western sub-Saharan Africa were seriously affected at some time or other during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In an influential book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, first published in 1972, the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney argued that Africa's chronic poverty and underdevelopment at the time of political independence in the mid-twentieth century was a direct result of European action. He argued that the European slave trade out of Africa so weakened the continent that it left it open to Europe's mega-exploitation through colonisation in the nineteenth century and neo-colonialism in the twentieth (see later chapters in this book).

Figure 12.3 Diagram showing cross-sections of a trans-Atlantic slave ship. The drawing illustrates how space on board could be optimised to accommodate as many captives as possible, c.1800

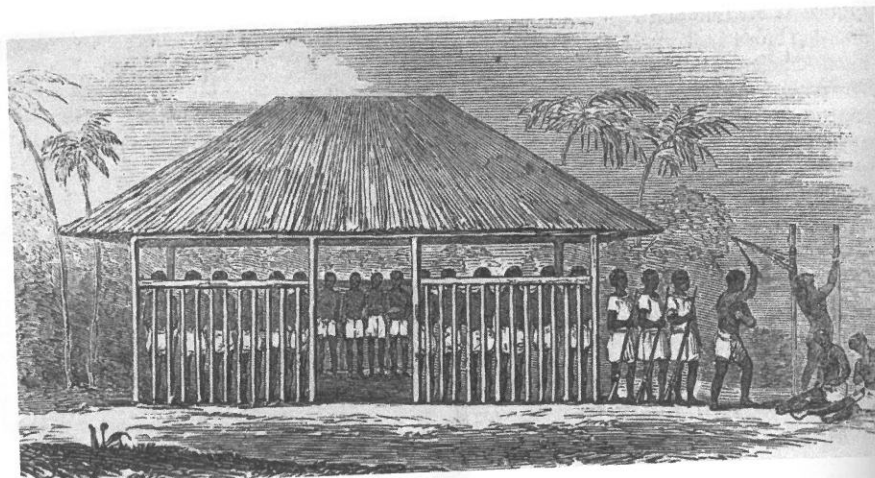


The transatlantic trade

Whatever its effect in terms of depopulating or distorting the development of the continent, the greatest evil of the transatlantic trade in people was the extent of human suffering involved, and the callous disregard for human life and dignity displayed by those who dealt in slaves. When a person was captured in the interior and dispatched to the coast for sale, it marked the beginning of a short remaining life of appalling degradation and suffering. Captives were no longer treated as fellow human beings but rather as property, like domestic livestock, to be herded together, examined and bartered over.

Captives were chained together and marched to the coast where they were locked up in wooden cages to await the arrival of the next European trading ship. They were then stripped naked, men and women together, and examined minutely to see if they were fit, strong and healthy. Once a deal had been struck between African middleman and European slave merchant the most terrible part of their voyage began. On board ship they were chained together in rows and forced to lie on specially constructed 'decks' which were arranged like shelves barely half a metre one above the other (see Figure 12.3). This made it impossible for a person to sit up straight or to move freely. They lay like this for weeks on end, suffering in the stench of their own excreta and urine and given barely enough food and water to keep them alive. Those that died were simply thrown overboard. On average between 15 and 30 per cent could be expected to die from disease, maltreatment or exhaustion during the three to six weeks of the transatlantic crossing. Ships' captains allowed for this loss by packing in more people. In this way enough could be expected to survive the crossing for sale in America to make a handsome profit for the merchant who financed the voyage. On occasion disease would spread so rapidly in the terrible conditions below decks that it wiped out a whole shipload of captives. But this kind of misfortune was rare and on the whole the trade in human cargo was a highly profitable concern for the shipping merchants. If it had not been, the trade would not have continued on such an ever-increasing scale.

Figure 12.4 Armed guards watching a slave being whipped outside a slave enclosure, c.1850. The captives in the cage are awaiting transportation

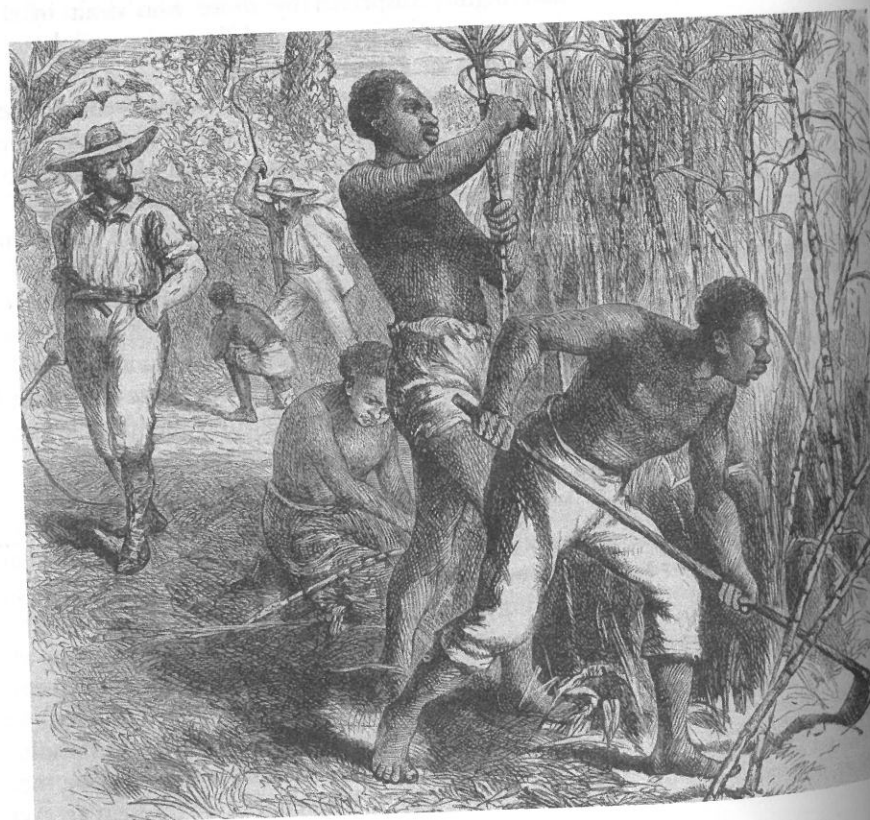


In this manner tens of thousands of Africa's fittest young men and women were removed from the continent every year (see Figure 12.3), all in the name of profit for European merchants and plantation owners.

Plantations in the Americas and their demand for slave labour

The main plantations grew sugar and coffee in Brazil, sugar in the Caribbean islands and tobacco and cotton in the southern part of north America. The largest number of slaves were taken to the Caribbean islands. For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the number and size of plantations was constantly expanding. This meant an ever-greater demand for new slaves.

Figure 12.5 Slaves working on a West Indian sugar plantation, c.1870



The 'triangular trade'

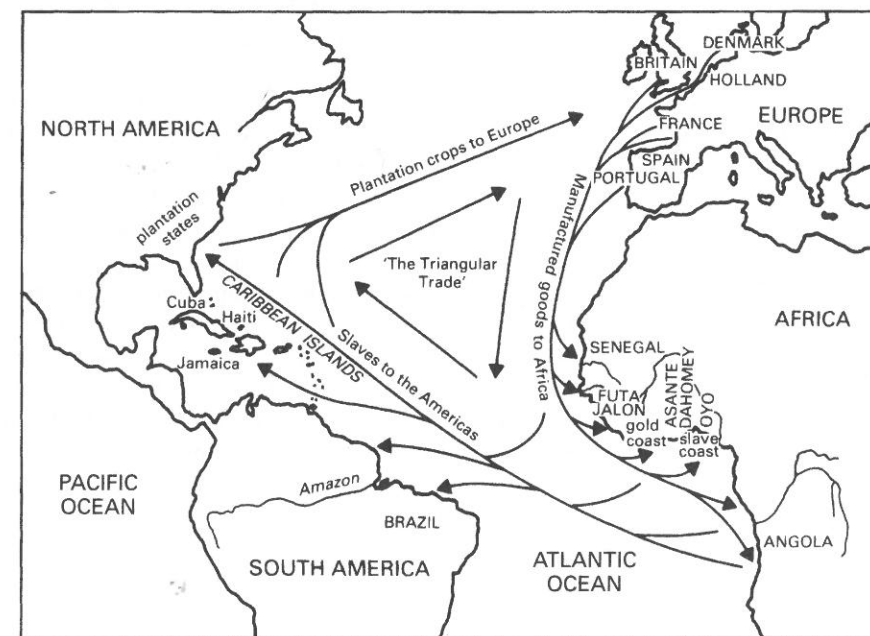
Even on the long-established estates there was a persistent demand for replacements. Life on the plantations of the New World was hard and short. Some never survived the trauma and depression of leaving Africa and the transatlantic voyage. A third died within the first three years and few survived beyond ten years. The main causes of death were underfeeding and overwork.

The economics of the plantation system was such that until the end of the eighteenth century it was cheaper to import fresh slaves from Africa than it was to allow them to rear their own children. A woman in childbirth could no longer labour effectively on the plantation, and a child had to be fed for a number of years before it could be forced to work on the land. Thus in the British colony of Jamaica, for example, three-quarters of a million slave workers were imported from Africa over a period of some two hundred years; and yet, at the time of emancipation in 1834 the population of Jamaica was only a third of a million.

The productive wealth of the New World rested very heavily on the shoulders of African labour. And those who profited most from this wealth were the merchants of Europe who financed the whole system.

Profit from the slave trade: the European dimension

To European merchants involved in the slave trade the export of Africans across the Atlantic was only one part of a wider trading system. A single ship setting out from Europe completed three main stages in its voyage, each with its own separate cargo, before finally returning to its home port in Europe. At each stage of this three-sided or 'triangular' trade there was profit for the European merchant who financed the voyage. The first stage carried manufactured goods from Europe to Africa.



Map 12.2 The Atlantic slave trade, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries

Significantly, the original Portuguese imports into Africa had included raw materials such as copper and other metals in exchange for gold. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this early pattern of trade had changed. Now the principal European imports into Africa were cheap manufactured goods – mainly cotton cloth and metal hardware, especially guns – in exchange for slaves. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century the special manufacture of cheap, substandard guns for the African market became an important source of profit for the new British industrial city of Birmingham. As dependence upon European manufactured imports increased, further development of African craft industries declined. At the same time, as we have seen, the import of European guns made African warfare more effective and increased the supply of slaves. This ensured that the price of slaves exported from Africa remained fairly static for most of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was not until the 1780s that increasing European competition along the west African coast finally drove up the price of slaves. It was only then that European merchants began to question the trade's continued profitability (see below, pp. 237–8).

Across the Atlantic, slaves were sold for two or three times what they had cost on the African coast. Sometimes they were sold for cash which was then used to buy plantation crops. At times, especially on the sugar-producing islands, slaves were directly bartered in exchange for sugar, which was then sold in Europe.

Though risks were involved, as ships could be lost at sea, profits to the European merchants were generally huge. Profits from the 'triangular trade' largely accounted for the rising wealth of a number of major European port cities, such as Bristol and Liverpool in Britain, Bordeaux and Nantes in France, and Amsterdam in Holland. Merchants moved into banking and ultimately helped finance the capitalist factory system of the European industrial revolution. And as European merchants were well aware at the time, the key to their source of Atlantic trading profits was the systematic exploitation of African slave labour.

Slavery and the origins of racism

It has been argued that the roots of European racism are to be found in the European exploitation of Africans through the trans-Atlantic trade and the plantation slavery of the New World. The deep roots of racism are probably more complex than this, though European enslavement of Africans undoubtedly played its part. For some three hundred years Africans were viewed by Europeans almost exclusively as slaves, as though this was their natural state. Europeans argued that in taking Africans out of their native continent, they were 'rescuing' them from a 'primitive' and 'barbaric' existence. It was a short step from this to arguing that Africans were naturally inferior. And when Europeans sought to colonise the African continent in the late nineteenth century, they used arguments such as these to justify their actions in the name of spreading Christianity and 'civilisation'.

chapter

13

West African states and societies, to the eighteenth century

The fall of the Songhay empire

Songhay on the eve of the Moroccan invasion

The empire of Songhay had reached the height of its power in the early sixteenth century under the rule of Askiya Muhammad Ture (see pp. 108–9). During his reign Islam became more widely entrenched, trans-Saharan trade flourished and the Saharan salt mines of Taghaza were brought within the boundaries of the empire. During the course of the sixteenth century, however, this position of strength gradually declined. The power of the Askiya was weakened by a succession of short reigns and dynastic disputes which erupted in civil war in the 1580s. At the same time the general population and agricultural basis of the economy were weakened by drought and disease. There was a loosening of Songhay's control over long-distance trading networks. In the east the growth of Hausa states, Borno and the Tuareg sultanate of Aïr, was drawing trans-Saharan trade away from Songhay and the western routes. And from the south the supply of gold declined as the chiefdoms of the Akan forest diverted some of their trade to the newly arrived European traders on the coast.

The weaknesses of Songhay, however, seem more real in retrospect. The historian has the benefit of hindsight. At the time, despite the natural disasters of the 1580s, the empire appeared secure enough. Though rival states might draw away some of Songhay's trade, this was a gradual process which gave no immediate cause for alarm. With no great wars of conquest to finance, the rulers of Songhay had not unduly oppressed the peasantry to the point where they might revolt. And there had been no danger of external threat for the best part of a century. The Askiyas had seen no reason to 'modernise' their army with the importation of primitive and unreliable, European-manufactured firearms. Immediate neighbours to south, east and west were minor states. In the north the Sahara desert continued to provide an apparently impenetrable barrier to the armies of the Ottomans and Moroccans of the Maghrib: until, that is, the opening months of 1591.

The Moroccan invasion and the fall of Songhay

The main reason for the Moroccan invasion of Songhay was to seize control of and revive the trans-Saharan trade in gold. To this end the Moroccan sultan, Ahmad al-Mansur, sent across the desert the cream of his army – a small but highly disciplined band of professional soldiers, equipped with the most up-to-date muzzle-loading guns. The Moroccan army consisted of 4000 soldiers, 600 non-combatants and 10,000 camels to carry their equipment. It took them two months to cross the desert and up to a quarter of

Significantly, the original Portuguese imports into Africa had included raw materials such as copper and other metals in exchange for gold. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this early pattern of trade had changed. Now the principal European imports into Africa were cheap manufactured goods – mainly cotton cloth and metal hardware, especially guns – in exchange for slaves. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century the special manufacture of cheap, substandard guns for the African market became an important source of profit for the new British industrial city of Birmingham. As dependence upon European manufactured imports increased, further development of African craft industries declined. At the same time, as we have seen, the import of European guns made African warfare more effective and increased the supply of slaves. This ensured that the price of slaves exported from Africa remained fairly static for most of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was not until the 1780s that increasing European competition along the west African coast finally drove up the price of slaves. It was only then that European merchants began to question the trade's continued profitability (see below, pp. 237–8).

Across the Atlantic, slaves were sold for two or three times what they had cost on the African coast. Sometimes they were sold for cash which was then used to buy plantation crops. At times, especially on the sugar-producing islands, slaves were directly bartered in exchange for sugar, which was then sold in Europe.

Though risks were involved, as ships could be lost at sea, profits to the European merchants were generally huge. Profits from the 'triangular trade' largely accounted for the rising wealth of a number of major European port cities, such as Bristol and Liverpool in Britain, Bordeaux and Nantes in France, and Amsterdam in Holland. Merchants moved into banking and ultimately helped finance the capitalist factory system of the European industrial revolution. And as European merchants were well aware at the time, the key to their source of Atlantic trading profits was the systematic exploitation of African slave labour.

Slavery and the origins of racism

It has been argued that the roots of European racism are to be found in the European exploitation of Africans through the trans-Atlantic trade and the plantation slavery of the New World. The deep roots of racism are probably more complex than this, though European enslavement of Africans undoubtedly played its part. For some three hundred years Africans were viewed by Europeans almost exclusively as slaves, as though this was their natural state. Europeans argued that in taking Africans out of their native continent, they were 'rescuing' them from a 'primitive' and 'barbaric' existence. It was a short step from this to arguing that Africans were naturally inferior. And when Europeans sought to colonise the African continent in the late nineteenth century, they used arguments such as these to justify their actions in the name of spreading Christianity and 'civilisation'.

chapter

13

West African states and societies, to the eighteenth century

The fall of the Songhay empire

The empire of Songhay had reached the height of its power in the early sixteenth century under the rule of Askiya Muhammad Ture (see pp. 108–9). During his reign Islam became more widely entrenched, trans-Saharan trade flourished and the Saharan salt mines of Taghaza were brought within the boundaries of the empire. During the course of the sixteenth century, however, this position of strength gradually declined. The power of the Askiya was weakened by a succession of short reigns and dynastic disputes which erupted in civil war in the 1580s. At the same time the general population and agricultural basis of the economy were weakened by drought and disease. There was a loosening of Songhay's control over long-distance trading networks. In the east the growth of Hausa states, Borno and the Tuareg sultanate of Aïr, was drawing trans-Saharan trade away from Songhay and the western routes. And from the south the supply of gold declined as the chiefdoms of the Akan forest diverted some of their trade to the newly arrived European traders on the coast.

The weaknesses of Songhay, however, seem more real in retrospect. The historian has the benefit of hindsight. At the time, despite the natural disasters of the 1580s, the empire appeared secure enough. Though rival states might draw away some of Songhay's trade, this was a gradual process which gave no immediate cause for alarm. With no great wars of conquest to finance, the rulers of Songhay had not unduly oppressed the peasantry to the point where they might revolt. And there had been no danger of external threat for the best part of a century. The Askias had seen no reason to 'modernise' their army with the importation of primitive and unreliable, European-manufactured firearms. Immediate neighbours to south, east and west were minor states. In the north the Sahara desert continued to provide an apparently impenetrable barrier to the armies of the Ottomans and Moroccans of the Maghrib: until, that is, the opening months of 1591.

The main reason for the Moroccan invasion of Songhay was to seize control of and revive the trans-Saharan trade in gold. To this end the Moroccan sultan, Ahmad al-Mansur, sent across the desert the cream of his army – a small but highly disciplined band of professional soldiers, equipped with the most up-to-date muzzle-loading guns. The Moroccan army consisted of 4000 soldiers, 600 non-combatants and 10,000 camels to carry their equipment. It took them two months to cross the desert and up to a quarter of

Songhay on the eve of the Moroccan invasion

The Moroccan invasion and the fall of Songhay