Africans on the move: the Transatlantic slave trade

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Africans on the Move: The Transatlantic Slave Trade

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The transatlantic slave trade – an institution through which millions of West Africans from various cultural backgrounds were uprooted from their home communities and transported to the Americas as enslaved laborers – constituted one of the largest and most systematic forced migrations in history. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD) (https://slavevoyages.org), which contains the most definitive compilation of historical data for transatlantic slaving voyages, some 12.5 million Africans were forced to cross the Atlantic onboard European ships between the years 1500 and 1875. Such statistics are baffling; however, they tell only part of the story. The immeasurable human suffering that this forced migration wrought can only be hinted at, and its effects on Atlantic societies can hardly be fully quantified.

This chapter briefly examines the history of this forced migration. It begins with an analysis of the origins and organization of the slave trade, followed by a discussion of the experiences of the migrants themselves during their removal and transoceanic voyage. It concludes by examining the abolition movement that ultimately brought the trade to an end.

Origins of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Any examination of the transatlantic slave trade must begin by considering why it arose at all. Why did European colonizers of the Americas use slave labor to develop their New World economies? And why did they import those slave laborers from Africa?

Most scholars trace the origins of Atlantic slavery to a time before the European discovery of the Americas, in particular to the mid-fifteenth century, when the Portuguese and Spanish began to expand their trade networks along the West African coast and colonize the uninhabited eastern Atlantic islands of the Azores, Madeira, Cape Verde, São Tomé, and the Canary Islands. The Iberians, in an attempt to gain a foothold in the lucrative Mediterranean sugar

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trade, established small-scale sugar plantations on these islands, worked by imported African slave labor from nearby West African coastal slave markets. Slavery and slave trading in Africa had existed since time immemorial, and slave laborers were easily purchased. This economic model quickly transformed Madeira, the Canary Islands, and São Tomé into competitive sugar producers. The Iberian experiments on the Atlantic islands opened up a major market for sugar in Europe, provided Iberians with experience in West African slave trading, and connected plantation-style sugar production to African slave labor in the minds of those who would later voyage to the New World. The foundations of a slave-based plantation system were thus well established by the time the conquest of the Americas began in earnest.[1]

Even then, however, the European invasion of the New World did not guarantee that African slavery would develop there. Although small numbers of African slaves were present from the start – the Spanish invading armies included hundreds of African slaves – there was no obvious economic incentive to adopt large-scale African slave labor in the earliest years of American conquest. The Spanish were initially almost exclusively interested in mining and extracting precious metals (especially silver and gold) in the former Aztec and Inca empires, and their first attempts at developing a labor force centered around recruiting (and forcing) local native Americans. Yet it quickly became clear that a supplementary labor supply was needed, especially as European diseases began to take a heavy toll on native communities, depopulating some areas almost entirely. As the conquest of the Spanish Americas became consolidated, moreover, new labor demands opened up in regions far from native populations – such as in the tropical lowlands, and in new imperial cities like Lima and Cartagena. With major reserves of precious metals in their coffers and a rising labor demand for their colonial enterprises, the Spanish could afford to start experimenting with more expensive African slaves in order to fill the gaps left by depopulation throughout their American possessions. As early as the first half of the sixteenth century, Spanish America was regularly importing enslaved Africans to work in the silver mines, sift for gold, cultivate supplies on truck farms on the margins of cities, and – most importantly – perform all manner of acutely needed urban colonial labor, from metalworking to construction to fishing.[2]

1 Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13–15; Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

2 See for example David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1640* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Alex Borucki, David Eltis, and David Wheat, eds., *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*

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Plantation agriculture – and by extension plantation slavery – began to develop some decades later, in the mid-sixteenth century, in parts of the Americas that Spain had neglected (precisely *because* they contained no gold or silver). It was this economic enterprise that would open the floodgates to a thriving trade in millions of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. Plantations first appeared along the fertile northeastern coast of South America, later on the Caribbean islands, and, finally, by the late seventeenth century, along the southeastern coast of North America. These regions were settled mainly by the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English, who were keen to develop cash crop export agriculture in order to make their colonies economically viable in the absence of precious metals.

Portuguese Brazil paved the way in the 1550s, establishing sugarcane plantations in Pernambuco and Bahia, essentially transplanting their plantation model from the Atlantic islands to the other side of the ocean. Their endeavors met with great success; by the end of the sixteenth century Brazilian sugar mills were already processing six times the amount of sugar per year than those of the Atlantic islands. The conquest and settlement of the Lesser Antilles, Guianas, and southeastern coast of North America by the English, French, and Dutch began shortly thereafter, in the early 1600s. There, too, plantation-based commercial agriculture was established, albeit initially with tobacco and indigo rather than sugar. Around mid-century, however, most of the Caribbean islands abruptly switched to more profitable sugar production as well – pressured to do so by Dutch merchants, financiers, and plantation owners, who briefly occupied Pernambuco between 1630 and 1654, took over Portuguese trading posts in West Africa, and proved crucial players in advancing the Atlantic sugar revolution. The success of the sugar islands proved contagious, spreading throughout the Caribbean, including Spanish island possessions such as Cuba (although not on a large scale until the Haitian Revolution opened up new markets for competitors after 1804). The Chesapeake region of mainland North America, where sugar could not be cultivated, remained the main tobacco producer of the New World.[3]

(Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 2020); Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamerica y el comercio de esclavos* (Seville: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 1977, 2014).

3 Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Herbert Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna, *Slavery in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3–34; Pieter C. Emmer, *The Dutch Slave Trade* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

By the end of the seventeenth century, an entire plantation system based on sugar had spread from northern Brazil throughout the West Indies, complemented by smaller and more regionally specific plantation economies along the coast of mainland North America. All of these regions adopted African slave labor in order to meet their essentially insatiable demand for unskilled agricultural workers, but the decision to import enslaved Africans was not quite as immediate or given as is often assumed. From the perspective of the European colonizers, the main goal was to maximize profit and turn their American possessions into economically viable colonies. African slaves were expensive, and initially, cheaper and more readily available sources of labor were mobilized.

Indeed, the Portuguese started out by experimenting with native American slaves, which they acquired from coastal communities through purchase or raids. Between 1540 and 1570 enslaved native Americans constituted some four-fifths of the slave labor force on northeast Brazilian sugar plantations, supplemented by more expensive imported Africans, who as yet still only trickled into the colony in relatively small numbers. The enslavement of native Americans proved untenable in the long run, however, mainly due to European diseases, which devastated local indigenous communities. Another factor was the constant warfare and retaliation that local slave raiding inevitably provoked toward the settler population. Finally, the Spanish Crown's increasing hostility toward the enslavement of native Americans dealt the practice a final blow after Portugal was incorporated into the Spanish Empire in 1580. Lacking local alternatives and already in command of West African trade routes that included thriving slave markets, Brazilian planters increasingly turned toward African slaves to meet their labor demands, just as they had back on their Atlantic islands. Eventually, African slaves came to replace alternative laborers altogether.

The rest of America's plantation regions followed a similar trajectory of first experimenting with alternative labor forces before ultimately turning to African slaves to meet their labor needs. On both the Caribbean islands and in mainland North America, early attempts to enslave native Americans failed due to the decimation of local populations through European diseases and warfare, hostilities and retaliatory raids, and escape. The British and French settled upon European indentured labor (in French called *engagés*) to cultivate their early tobacco plantations, both in the Caribbean and in the Chesapeake, supplemented with what few African slaves they were able to secure from the Dutch and other Atlantic traders. Indentured servitude was a system whereby relatively poor youth (supplemented by beggars and convicts) were apprenticed to New World plantations for an average of seven years in return for passage to the Americas. By the 1660s, however, the supply of indentured servants was drying up at precisely a time when the labor demand was increasing. Crucially, early modern European laborers could not be forced into indentured servitude (with the exception of criminals). They enjoyed certain rights and protections. They also could not be outright enslaved, not only because it was legally interdicted but also because of a broad consensus among early modern Europeans that Christians should not enslave other Christians. Such cultural notions of European (Christian) freedom from slavery ensured that enslavement could only apply to non-Europeans in the overseas colonies.[4]

With fewer indentured servants in supply and no mechanism to force European laborers to cross the ocean in adequate numbers, planters increasingly relied on the Dutch – who had wrested control of the as yet relatively minor slave trade from the Portuguese in the 1630s and 1640s – to supply them with expensive African slaves from their West African trading posts. But the floodgates to the transatlantic slave trade really opened up, especially to British and French colonists, in the late 1660s and early 1670s. Coincidentally, just as the supply of indentured labor was starting to dry up, the British achieved a number of decisive naval victories over the Dutch, capturing several important transatlantic trade routes and strongholds, including slave-trading depots on the west coast of Africa. The Royal Africa Company was established in 1672, guaranteeing direct slave-trading links between West Africa and the British colonies. No longer dependent on the Dutch, whose Atlantic position was weakened by warfare, planters in the English colonies now began to import African slaves directly and at a much lower cost. The French followed suit for their own colonies, establishing the *Compagnie du Sénégal* in 1672 and the *Compagnie de Guinée* in 1684. Command of the slave trade shifted from the Dutch as primary suppliers to an increasing share being controlled by the British and French to supply their own plantations. In Brazil, meanwhile, the importation of enslaved Africans not only continued unabated but expanded significantly.[5]

4 David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), chs. 4–6; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–28; Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, "Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era," *Past & Present* 25, 1 (2009): 3–40.

5 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 21; Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016); Laurent Dubois, "Slavery in the French Caribbean," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. David Eltis and Stanley Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 3, 431–449.

In all of the plantation colonies European planters increasingly acknowledged that African slaves were far more efficient than indentured servants or native American slaves. Unlike indentured servants, African slaves could be used for life, and ownership of their progeny guaranteed future generations of laborers. They also arrived disoriented and were visibly recognizable as slaves, making them less able to successfully escape and blend into local free communities. African slaves had furthermore been permanently and irrevocably alienated from their home communities – nobody would come to their aid and negotiate for their release, or retaliate against their masters in the form of rescue raids. Finally, African slaves had no legal rights, were not subjects of any European Crown, were not Christian, and could be threatened, beaten, and coerced into performing labor that no free European (indentured or otherwise) would perform voluntarily. The absolute control that could be exerted over a permanent and self-perpetuating labor force made African slaves – as expensive as they were – seem like a good investment. An intricate racial ideology and legal system developed to justify and secure the permanent enslavement of so-called heathens from Africa in the American colonies.[6]

Most plantation regions of the Americas rapidly shifted to African slave labor in the second half of the seventeenth century. Until 1700 Brazil had absorbed most imported Africans (some 500,000 to 600,000), but now the non-Iberian Caribbean rivaled Brazil, importing some 450,000 in the same period. The as yet still minor colonies in mainland North America were relatively small importers in this period, but even they had absorbed some 30,000 African slave imports by 1700, most of them destined for Chesapeake tobacco plantations.

In the century that followed, the success of the plantation system, coupled with chronic negative growth rates of population in all of the sugar regions, ensured the significant expansion and intensification of the transatlantic slave trade. By 1800 the number of enslaved Africans who had been forced to embark on voyages across the Atlantic had surpassed 7 million (with over 1.1 million dying en route). Even after the United States and English colonies prohibited the trade by 1808, the Spanish colonies (Cuba and Puerto Rico in particular – relative latecomers in plantation slavery) and Brazil continued to import thousands of Africans well into the nineteenth century. They took the place left by Saint-Domingue as the world's primary sugar producers in the era of what Dale Tomich and Michael Zeuske have dubbed the "second slavery." In the end Brazil imported over 5.5 million enslaved Africans, almost half

6 Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, 57–84; Ariela Gross and Alejandro de la Fuente, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

of the total number of forced migrants. The non-Spanish Caribbean absorbed over 4.7 million; Spanish America just under 1.6 million; and mainland North America took an estimated 472,000.[7]

The Plantation Regime

Although enslaved Africans were utilized in every sector of the economies to which they were forcibly moved – from urban to maritime to agricultural – most ended up working in some capacity in plantation agriculture. The eighteenth century witnessed a full-scale commitment to African slavery throughout the plantation regions of the Americas and the ascendance of what has been called a racialized regime, with vast gangs of African slaves controlled and ruled over by small numbers of Europeans. Plantation size mushroomed and plantation output exploded, especially in the sugar regions, which favored economies of scale.

The plantation regime varied from region to region but shared certain characteristics throughout the Americas. The demographics in the entire region, for example, were characterized by large black slave populations relative to their (free) white populations. In almost all of the regions and districts where slave-based plantation agriculture became dominant, dense populations of black slaves (whether African- or American-born) formed either a majority or a very large minority of the total population, ranging in extremes from the sugar islands, such as for example Jamaica (where slaves outnumbered whites by ten to one by the 1770s), to the relatively small tobacco plantations of Chesapeake colonies like Maryland (where slaves constituted one-third of the population in 1780). The mainland colonies of North America also differed demographically from both the Caribbean and Brazil; their slave populations achieved natural population growth during the eighteenth century, resulting in a quickly growing creolized slave population with relatively few imports from Africa. Both the Caribbean and Brazil, where mortality rates among the enslaved were extremely high, remained heavily dependent on the Atlantic slave trade to continually repopulate their plantations.[8]

Work patterns tended to share certain characteristics throughout the plantation regions of the Americas as well. Slaveholders organized their

7 https://slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates, accessed February 9, 2020; Dale Tomich and Michael Zeuske, "The Second Slavery: Mass Slavery, World Economy and Comparative Microhistories," *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 31, 3 (2008), 91–100.

8 Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 103–123.

work forces in ways that maximized production and ensured profit. From the Chesapeake to Brazil, most plantation work forces were organized by gangs of enslaved people working at a lock-step pace in the fields throughout most of the year. They worked under the supervision of one or more white overseers or black drivers (who were usually slaves themselves), who had the authority to mete out physical punishments for slow work and mistakes. In most regions, work under the gang system lasted from sunup to sundown, six days a week. The division of labor on most plantations was also heavily influenced by gendered notions of work, with women overwhelmingly limited to the most unskilled tasks, such as hoeing, and the more skilled positions such as plowing and processing reserved for men.[9]

The Organization of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

As the American labor demand exploded with the success of slave-produced cash crops, the organization of the trade in enslaved Africans underwent a major transformation. Well into the first half of the seventeenth century, the demand for African slaves in New World colonies could be met by the African slave markets along the coast where Iberian and Dutch merchants were already active, especially in the Senegambia region. According to the TSTD, over 725,000 enslaved Africans had embarked on transatlantic slaving ships by 1650, with over 580,000 landing in the New World, the vast majority in the Spanish Americas. The origins of these captives varied widely, but most were from coastal regions or their immediate hinterlands, and most had entered slavery as prisoners of war, although some were criminals sentenced to slavery. European purchases of these slaves had little impact on the nature of African slave trading. Indeed, for African slave traders, even intercontinental slave trading was nothing new, as long-distance trade routes through the Sahara to the Mediterranean world and even east into Arabia and South Asia were well established and had existed for hundreds of years. The Europeans who initially dabbled in slave trading along the West African coast may have had a different destination for their purchases, but to African traders they seemed otherwise much like their Arab counterparts.[10]

The increasingly insatiable American demand for slaves by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, changed both the

9 Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

10 Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*; Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–44.

scope and the organization of the trade for Europeans and Africans. The spectacular rise in demand resulted in an equally spectacular growth in supply, and coastal slave markets that catered to European traders soon sprang up all along the West African coast, from the Senegambia to Angola. Moreover, new methods and strategies were developed to acquire, finance, and transport slaves for New World plantations in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The transatlantic slave trade developed into one of the largest and most complex economic enterprises of the early modern world. It quickly became the largest organized transoceanic labor migration in the early modern period; spawned intricate business and transportation networks that connected merchants on three continents; involved complex financial arrangements that included both private and state capital; and even led to the development of new seafaring technologies and medical experiments aimed at reducing mortality rates.

African merchants and states played an active role in supplying European traders with an ever-increasing volume of enslaved people for shipment overseas, and they adapted and expanded their operations over time in order to meet changing market conditions. Shrewd international traders who fully controlled the supply, they negotiated from a position of considerable strength. They set the terms for transatlantic slave trading, demanded expensive commodities in return for slaves (especially firearms and Asian textiles), levied hefty taxes, and often required traders to purchase slaves through approved (and expensive) middlemen. Although West African coastal states sometimes granted permission for European merchants to establish trading forts along the coast, they largely rejected European attempts to monopolize their markets and conducted a policy of free trade with different European powers, forcing Europeans to travel along the coast and compete with each other for the best supply in various regions. Africans even developed lines of credit for European slave traders, whereby default could result in the imprisonment of Europeans.[11]

The methods developed by African traders to acquire an ever-increasing number of slaves for American labor markets had devastating effects on communities in coastal regions and their hinterlands. Although most slaves continued to be procured from regions relatively close to the coast – with Loanda and Angolan ports constituting important exceptions, where slaves were

11 John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chs. 1–4; Sean Stilwell, *Slavery and Slaving in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

brought from well into the interior – the scope of enslavement throughout West Africa grew dramatically. So, too, did violence. Before the transatlantic slave trade took off in earnest, most African slaves were acquired mainly as by-products of warfare, but captive-taking was rarely the purpose of these wars. What changed as a result of the transatlantic slave trade was that an increasing amount of violence and coercion was now being committed, at least in part, for the purpose of acquiring slaves. No longer mere by-products of violence, slavery now became one of the main justifications for various acts of violence and coercion all along the West African coast. The resulting demographic losses – through death and enslavement overseas – were significant. The Senegambia region suffered severe population losses in the early eighteenth century, for example. The Upper Guinea Coast experienced population decline in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Bight of Benin, on the so-called Slave Coast, suffered near-constant population decline from 1690 to 1850. The coastal communities of Loanda and Angola did not achieve population growth again until the mid-nineteenth century.[12]

The increased violence and coercion took various forms. Kidnapping became rampant, especially along the frontiers between various kingdoms – areas that were neither densely populated nor well protected – as small armed groups captured farmers in quick raids and delivered them to African slave traders, who added them to their coffles and marched them slowly toward the coast. Enslavement as a punishment for crime – including kidnapping, ironically – also increased, especially in relatively peaceful societies where warfare was not frequent enough to produce many exportable slaves. Larger states demanded tribute in the form of slaves from vassal states, which they then sold to overseas traders. And while wars continued to be waged for all sorts of reasons, the decision to engage in warfare was now greatly facilitated by the knowledge that it would produce valuable slaves for export overseas. Some wars were even waged specifically in order to acquire slaves or control over the slave trade.

The African organization of the slave trade was a highly sophisticated undertaking, one that required a detailed knowledge of local and international markets, as well as considerable investment. Slave traders had to build long-distance networks, purchase cargoes of valuable commodities to trade for slaves, and hire armed militias and guards. They had to not only purchase slaves along the way for overseas markets, but also for local African markets, where domestic slavery was common and both women and children

12 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 103–129; Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 66–107.

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more highly in demand. They had to arrive at the sea coast with slaves that Europeans would want to buy for their New World plantations, especially strong young men and women. Most importantly, they had to keep their prices reasonable, so that Europeans would purchase from them and not their competitors along the coast. None of these merchants stood at the head of a major company, let alone a monopoly company. The African slave trade was ultimately made up of relatively few slaves sold in small groups all along the West African coast.[13]

For European slave traders, the time and resources necessary to purchase and transport enslaved Africans to the Americas were even more substantial. The first transformation in the organization of the European slave trade was characterized by the establishment of monopoly slave-trading companies. With astronomically high starting costs, limited knowledge of African markets, and considerable state interest in developing the American colonies, the early slave-trading companies were heavily dependent on state involvement in the form of subsidies and state monopoly contracts, although there were important variations among the slave-trading powers. The Spanish Crown, for example, bestowed exclusive rights onto private and/or foreign firms and companies (with the so-called *asiento de negros*) for the delivery of slaves to the Spanish American markets, in return for paying the Crown, in advance, a fee and taxes per slave delivered to the Spanish Americas. The Portuguese, with their dominant foothold in Brazil and along the West African coast, were able to start out with private financing, although even they ultimately resorted to state monopoly companies in the eighteenth century. All other powers developed some version of joint-stock monopoly companies to finance the trade to colonies that were still undeveloped and lacked the capital to import slaves. The Dutch West India Company, based on private capital, was one of the most successful of the early monopoly companies in the seventeenth century, and was even hired by *asientistas* to transport African slaves to the Spanish possessions as well as their own. The English Royal African Company, also based on private capital, enjoyed a monopoly on slave trading to the English colonies until the end of the seventeenth century. The French experimented with both monopoly companies and free traders.[14]

As the demand for slaves in the Americas increased, however, monopoly companies proved incapable of adequately supplying the colonies with an

13 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, ch. 5; Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 45–107.
14 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 75–82; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 33–100.

enslaved labor force on their own. First, company attempts to enter into monopoly contracts with African states and traders failed, as stated above, and so they were unable to pin down exclusive markets on the West African coast. Second, monopoly companies were often contracted to transport a set number of slaves to specific colonies, regardless of local demand. Most operated at a loss and suffered intense competition from free traders, who were able to conduct the trade more flexibly and efficiently. In the case of the Dutch, warfare weakened the West India Company and Dutch naval dominance on the Atlantic, leading to a reorganization of the company in the 1670s that resulted in a loss of its trading monopolies; free trade had completely replaced it by the 1730s. The Royal African Company felt considerable pressure from free traders, also leading to an end of its monopoly on slave trading in 1698. Even the Spanish *asiento* contracts were increasingly subcontracted to individual free traders rather than organized companies. The Portuguese, who started out with free trade for their Brazilian territories, experimented with monopoly companies in the mid-eighteenth century in order to help develop new plantation economies in Brazil's northern Maranhão and Pernambuco colonies, but reverted back to free trade only a few decades later.[15]

The European organization of the slave trade therefore underwent a second transformation in the eighteenth century – monopoly companies were transformed into, or made way for, free trade and temporary slave-trading enterprises. The new slave traders organized individual slave voyages, rather than enter into state-sponsored monopoly contracts for specific routes for a set number of years. Wealthy financiers bought stocks, invested capital, and sometimes even organized several such voyages, spreading their risk among various slave-trading expeditions rather than sinking their money into a single monopoly company.

It often took between four and six months to organize a voyage. A trusted and experienced captain had to be engaged, who would be charged with the responsibility of executing the voyage and the trading itself. Credit mechanisms had to be arranged in order for him to carry out the voyage. A substantial crew had to be hired (sailors, cooks, and even doctors) – twice as many as for normal merchant voyages, due to the high mortality rates and risks

15 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 75–82; Nuala Zahedia, "The Merchants of Port Royal, Jamaica, and the Spanish Contraband Trade, 1655–1689," *William & Mary Quarterly* 43 (1986), 570–593; William Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672–1752* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Emmer, *The Dutch Slave Trade*, chs. 1–2; David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *William & Mary Quarterly* 58 (2001), 119–138.

involved. Finally, and most expensively, an adequate cargo of luxury goods had to be purchased to exchange for slaves on the African coast.[16]

European traders did not purchase their slaves all in one place. They had little choice but to practice what they called coasting, or traveling along the West African coast and purchasing relatively small lots of prime slaves at a time from different traders who offered them different deals. Not all of them were purchased from European slave forts. In season, African caravans regularly came to the coast to trade with European ships, sending out canoes of negotiators to ships anchored off the coast. The purchase of slaves took considerable time. Even under relatively good conditions, coasting often took between three and six months, and entailed purchases of fewer than five slaves at a time. When conditions were unfavorable, it could take over a year to fill a ship.

Once an adequate supply of slaves and provisions had been secured, European traders departed Africa for the Americas. The transatlantic leg of the voyage entailed its own risks, as European captains had to mitigate high mortality rates and ensure arrival in the Americas with enough healthy slaves to command good prices and clear a profit. At American slave markets the shipment of slaves was usually sold within two to three weeks, and the captain sailed back to Europe, sometimes with American goods, but usually without, as these were transported with different types of ships. Only back in Europe did the captain and his crew receive their wages and credit (although traders to the Spanish Americas and Brazil were often paid in silver, gold, tobacco and *cachaça*, a liquor made from fermented sugar cane), a process that sometimes took years.

The Middle Passage

For the enslaved, captivity and transportation to the New World entailed a traumatic and horrifying experience. Indeed, in the popular imagination the transatlantic journey – infamously dubbed the Middle Passage – embodied all of the immorality of slavery, one that came under considerable attack by contemporary opponents of the trade. Critics argued that slave traders were so callous to human suffering that they packed their ships as tightly as they could with as many slaves as could fit aboard, indifferent to the unnecessary loss of life caused by this greedy practice. Their outrage was not entirely unfounded. The tortuous tight-packing of enslaved Africans on board transatlantic ships

16 Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 65–100; Markus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

did occur – chained together as live cargo in the suffocating holds of ships, slaves had far less room than any other migrants to the New World, and slave ships were small compared to other passenger and cargo ships. Tight-packing, however, does not appear to have been the cause of the trade's high mortality rates. Indeed, despite tight-packing, shipboard mortality rates declined over time, from roughly 20 percent in the seventeenth century to just under 9 percent by the early nineteenth century, according to the TSTD. Mortality also varied widely among individual voyages, suggesting a prevalence of random unexpected outbreaks of communicable diseases or contaminated food and water supplies rather than systematic death by tight-packing.

Traders consistently adopted measures to reduce mortality. They shifted from ships of high tonnage carrying high ratios of slaves to vessels of mid-range tonnage carrying fewer slaves. They adapted their ships and sail constructions to make the transatlantic crossing more quickly. They added ventilation ports to their vessels. They improved their methods of adequately provisioning their journeys with enough food and water. Motivated solely by profit, all of these technological and organizational changes helped to reduce mortality rates over time. Even then, mortality rates for this massive forced migration were extraordinarily high compared to free migration (which averaged 2 percent).[17]

For enslaved people, the nightmarish shipboard experience was dominated by death. It started on the West African coast, at their places of embarkation, which were already deadly environments. Some port regions such as the Senegambia were affected by malaria and yellow fever, for example. Other regions experienced wars, famines, and ecological crises, weakening the migrating population and making them more susceptible to diseased environments and suffocating shipboard conditions. Between 18 percent and 30 percent of the mortality suffered by slaves purchased by Europeans in the transatlantic slave trade occurred even before the ships left the coast, during the initial purchase and the months of coasting.

Death during the oceanic voyage itself had various causes. The most important were fevers and gastrointestinal disorders, especially dysentery. Even these were often related to slaves' experiences prior to boarding the ships. Research on British ships in the 1790s, for example, show that dysentery was the biggest killer, and that it felled most of its victims during initial loading, coasting, and into the third to fifth week at sea, declining significantly after that, irrespective of tight-packing or time at sea. Other causes of death during the voyage were unrelated to disease and illness altogether, but stemmed

17 Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 65–152; Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 132–160.

from accidents, storms, shipwrecks, rebellions, and suicides. In a sample of over 24,000 slave-trading voyages, some 17 percent of ships ultimately delivered no slaves to the Americas. Slaves rebelled on 313 voyages; 148 ships were lost at sea; 443 ships were shipwrecked.[18]

For the enslaved Africans chained on board, the transatlantic crossing was an otherworldly experience. Many had never seen the ocean before, let alone been out so far as to not be able to see land in any direction. Out to sea in Atlantic space-time, as Stephanie Smallwood has called it, the vessel upon which they were confined seemed to be floating indefinitely in a vast nowhere.The constant death that accompanied them took on completely new meanings in an environment where the rituals and rites for dealing with the dead could not be carried out. Why did some people die while others did not? Were they the victims of evil spirits? How could the souls of the dead return home across water and without a proper burial? Were their deaths even final, or were they hovering in this abyss as a sort of living dead until their bodies could be returned home? The enslaved Africans on board transatlantic slave ships came from extremely diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but for most there was nothing in their world view to help them make sense of the deadly oceanic voyage. Accounts of suicides as Africans threw themselves overboard and drowned themselves speak volumes to the misery and hopelessness that characterized the journey.

Despite the constant death, violence, and misery, however, the vast majority of enslaved Africans reached the Americas, a journey that averaged between one and two months, depending on the destination. There they were subjected to new shocks, traumas, and challenges, as they were confined to jail-like pens and, in the language of trade, prepared for market. Their hair was sometimes dyed, their skin was oiled, and they were given new clothes and fresh food to bring life back to their weakened bodies. Within a week or two they were sold – at auction or by individual visits to the holding pens – and transferred to their new homes, where they were put to work as chattel slaves.[19]

The End of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Scholars have long debated why this tortuous but economically efficient and unfathomably profitable trade in human beings ultimately ended in the nineteenth century. It is undeniable that the British spearheaded the campaign to

18 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 151; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*.
19 Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 122–181.

end the slave trade, and that they framed this campaign as a moral crusade. The question is why. Traditional views were that slavery was becoming less profitable for the British Caribbean possessions, and that their decision to first abolish their own slave trade, and subsequently pressure the rest of the European and American powers to end their involvement as well, was motivated by fears of economic competition from more profitable slave colonies. In recent decades this explanation has been thoroughly debunked, however. Slavery in the British West Indies was instead more profitable than ever at precisely the time the abolition campaign started, and in the colonies abolition was feared as – and ultimately proved to be – a self-inflicted economic wound. The only explanation that makes sense for the rise of the British abolition campaign in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is that a broad coalition of groups within British society developed an interest in ending the slave trade and successfully pressured Parliament into taking action.[20]

The campaign to end the slave trade arose within the context of Enlightenment thinking and Protestant moral fervor in the eighteenth century. It was not based on any color-blind belief in equality for black people, whether in the colonies or elsewhere. Indeed, much of its rhetoric was essentially racist and arrogantly paternalistic. Whatever their opinions about Africans or their descendants in the colonies, however, the groups that pushed for abolition found common ground around the idea that slavery – and by extension the slave trade – was ideologically wrong. The most important arguments centered around three main themes: economic, legal, and religious. Throughout the eighteenth century prominent writers, especially in Britain and France, came to view slavery as backward to a modern market economy, which they argued should ideally be based on free labor and free trade. Other thinkers took a more legal approach, arguing that slavery was incompatible with the emerging concept of natural rights and the notion that no human beings should be excluded altogether from the justice system. Religious arguments held sway over a minority of church communities, but they were powerful and stimulated the loudest and most active responses. Quakers, Methodists, and other evangelical Protestants in America and Britain derided slavery as an abominable sin that went against the most fundamental precepts of Christianity. Taken separately, none of these groups had the ear of a very large portion of the general public. Together, however, they came to dominate Atlantic discussions on slavery.

20 Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 183–206; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 231–249. See also David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

With slavery itself coming under fire for the first time – a trend given added weight by the (partial) emancipations resulting from the American Revolution of 1775–1783, the French Revolution of 1789, and the Haitian Revolution of 1791 – the slave trade became a primary target for anti-slavery campaigners. There were two reasons. First, the slave trade was already widely perceived as the most inhumane and least defendable aspect of New World slavery, and therefore constituted an easy target. Second, by cutting off the slave trade to the Americas, opponents of slavery hoped to strangle the colonies of their labor supply and bring about abolition by such means.

By the 1780s formal campaigns to end the British slave trade had been launched, and between 1787 and 1792 Parliament was flooded with mass petitions demanding action. At first this led to new laws that were meant to regulate the conditions for carrying slaves. Aimed specifically at tight-packing, for example, the Dolben Act of 1788, amended in 1799, limited the number of slaves that could be carried onboard British vessels. Abolitionists continued to lobby for outright prohibition of the trade, however, with increasing success. In 1807 the British slave trade was definitively abolished (effective January 1, 1808).

The next step was to pressure other foreign governments to do the same. The former colonies of the newly formed United States had already followed suit and abolished the slave trade at the same time as the British. This step by the Americans was undertaken without inflicting much damage to slaveholders in the US South, where the institution of slavery itself continued to expand unabated due to the phenomenal success of cotton cultivation in the newly acquired territories of the southern interior. Natural population growth rates among enslaved people on the North American mainland, as stated above, allowed American slaveholders to acquiesce to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade without endangering their labor force. Indeed, despite the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade to North America in 1808, the slave population in the southern states mushroomed into the largest slave population of the Americas, from just under 1.2 million in 1810 to almost 4 million in 1865, when the institution was finally abolished at the end of the US Civil War.

For the other slaveholding territories of the western hemisphere, the British government – spurred to action by continual floods of mass petitions from its subjects – used its might as a major European naval power to muscle or cajole other nations. In 1815 the British negotiated a treaty with Portugal to abolish the trade north of the equator and begin the gradual abolition of the trade to subequatorial Brazil. British influence at the Congress of Vienna ensured that the Netherlands would be forced to give up its slave trade in 1815, and after the defeat at Waterloo that same year the French were forced to do the same.

By 1815 only Spain and Portugal were left, and Portugal only partly so. By this time there were over a thousand anti-slavery clubs and committees in Britain, and they ramped up the pressure on Parliament to ensure that abolition would become universal. By 1817 Portugal had been pressured into allowing the British navy to search its ships for illegal slave trading north of the equator. Even Spain signed a treaty that year to abolish its trade north of the equator and allow for similar British searches of its vessels; it promised total abolition by 1820.

The slave trade was now mainly conducted from West Africa to Spanish Cuba and Portuguese Brazil. Like the US South, slavery in both of these societies expanded in the early nineteenth century, especially with the successful cultivation of sugarcane in Cuba (which quickly took over the market from Haiti) and coffee in Brazil, respectively. Unlike the US South, however, both of these colonies experienced devastating mortality rates among their enslaved populations and were therefore highly dependent on new arrivals from African slave markets. Both colonies were therefore loath to give up on the transatlantic slave trade, even when placed under considerable pressure by the British to do so. Spain never enforced a total abolition and procrastinated as long as possible. And continued pressure and treaties with Portugal had little practical effect when Brazil became independent in 1822, making Brazil a new slave-trading force to be reckoned with. Yet the British continued to enforce abolition treaties on the high seas, continually infuriating Iberian ships by searching their vessels and seizing illegal cargoes. After 1822 Britain began to immediately place intense pressure on Brazil. This latter campaign resulted in an 1826 treaty with Brazil that promised total abolition by 1830. On paper, therefore, the transatlantic slave trade was completely illegal – and officially declared to be piracy – by 1830.

In practice, both Cuba and Brazil continued to illegally import enslaved Africans. The British now moved to direct interventions, not only on the high seas but even in African and American ports. In 1840 they began to land on the West African coast to liberate enslaved Africans in holding pens awaiting transportation. The British West African Squadron traveled up and down the coast searching for and liberating slaves, and Parliament passed several treaties with West African powers allowing them to do so. On the other side of the ocean, too, their actions became more intense. In the summer of 1850 the campaign to end the trade to Brazil came to fruition when British ships invaded Brazilian ports, seized slavers, and provoked a battle with Brazilian troops. Cuba held out for several years after that. Only joint British–US pressure and threats of US annexation finally pressured Spain into passing an anti-slave trade act and acknowledging defeat in 1866.

Thus ended four centuries of a brutal forced migration of millions of Africans to the New World. In a very literal sense, Africans in chains made and remade the Atlantic world. The transatlantic slave trade had profound social, demographic, cultural, and economic consequences for Africa, Europe, and the Americas, the legacies of which can still be felt today.

Further Reading

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