

# The Early Years of the Slave Trade

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It is not a paradox that the start of the Atlantic slave trade coincides with the dawn of modern Europe. The trade was closely interwoven with the major changes that are associated with the making of the modern era.

In the century of the trade's birth—the fifteenth—Europe was undergoing that transformation of political authority which created the system of national states. It was the New Monarchies that took the lead in the slave trade—first the Portuguese, then the Spanish, and later the French and English. The Dutch, who established a republic while gaining ascendancy in the trade, were a special case, having no monarchy but having powerfully at work the economic forces that are contained in the Commercial Revolution.

This Revolution was related to the Renaissance, the secularization of culture, the rise of capitalism, the revolution in prices, agricultural change, and the development of long-distance trade and transport. The rise of capitalism was surely one of the most arresting of these changes. The distance of new markets, such as those in Africa and America, required specialized business knowledge and money in quantity. There was a high degree of risk and a need to foster productivity. Men who could mobilize capital—usually merchants—became a new class that exerted strong influence upon public affairs. Along with the spread of the domestic system of producing textiles and hardware emerged new industries: shipbuilding in Holland, England, and in time in North America; musket-making, at first on the Continent and later in Birmingham, England. With the relaxation of the medieval ban on money-lending, the banking enterprise that financed the slave trade flourished successively at Genoa, Amsterdam, and London. New commercial techniques of

credit, bills of exchange, of partnerships, and joint-stock enterprises, of marine insurance, and of bookkeeping came into practice.

Urging on commercial and social change for a century and a half, until about 1650, was a steady monetary inflation. Gold and silver, at first from Africa, giving Portugal its *cruzado* and England its guinea, poured from Spanish mines in the New World, especially from Potosí, where forced labor, both red and black, extracted the valuable metals. The harshness of this toil killed Indians so mercilessly that King Ferdinand of Spain in 1510 ordered the Casa de Contratacion to send out 250 Negroes. The event is taken as the beginning of the Negro slave trade between the Old and New Worlds. It was not yet a trade from Africa to New Spain, for these slaves were bought in Lisbon. Black slave labor continued to be employed in the New World's mines; and some time later, during the gold rush in Brazil in the early eighteenth century, the demand for miners stimulated the slave trade with Guinea. The African slave trade is an often overlooked theme in the history of Europe's price revolution.

Between the death of Henry the Navigator and the importation of the first Negroes into Virginia the European population probably doubled. Reversing a tendency to decline, this development vivified commerce, stimulated industry, and challenged agriculture. It made possible more wares to sell and more customers to buy. Agriculture managed to maintain a precarious balance between population growth and food production. It was in this period that the growing of sugar by African slave labor spread and became firmly established. Sugar, almost unknown to medieval Europe, began to be grown on plantations in the Mediterranean during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, moved in the fifteenth century to the Spanish and Portuguese islands in the Atlantic off the African coast, and migrated to America in the sixteenth. African slaves tended the canes on the Canary and Madeira islands and on the immensely productive island of São Tomé. But Brazil was the scene of the first great sugar boom by the end of the sixteenth

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century; and from its northeastern coastal plains the system of sugar plantations worked by African slaves extended in the seventeenth century into the Caribbean. The slave trade had transferred Europe's sugar bowl from the Mediterranean to America.<sup>1</sup>

Europe, Africa, and America were separated by immense distances which could not be traversed in the Middle Ages. Decisive improvements in ships and maritime technology made possible the exploration of the West African littoral and the discovery of the New World. Innovations in rigging and hull construction enabled ships to cope with Atlantic winds and currents. The lateen-rigged caravel proved the ideal craft for oceanic exploration. The quadrant made it possible to determine latitudes. And the combination of sails and guns gave European ships superiority over natives in African and American waters. Equipped with the means of transport, merchants and mariners from the fifteenth century on were able for the first time to drive the international trade in which African slaves figured so prominently.<sup>2</sup>

Africa long was called the "Dark Continent." As late as the eighteenth century Jonathan Swift wrote:

Geographers, in Afric maps,  
With savage pictures filled their gaps,  
And o'er uninhabitable downs  
Placed elephants for want of towns.

The phrase "Dark Continent" applied particularly to Africa south of the Sahara, for northern Africa belonged to Western history. The great changes of the Age of Reconnaissance that we have been describing brought black Africa within the European—or, more precisely, the Atlantic—scheme of things. The sea crusaders of the fifteenth century effected this achievement.

The slave trade was not the originating impulse to the exploration of the African coast. Europeans were searching for a way to India; in their quest they began the slave trade which in time dominated the relationship between Europe and Africa. When exploration started, in the early fifteenth century, Europeans probably knew of the caravan that brought northward ivory and gold dust from the Niger basin through Timbuktu, of the eastward projection of the Guinea coast, and of the large estuaries of the Senegal and Niger rivers.

The West African coast below Cape Bojador, where superstition said the sea boiled and the sun turned men's skins black, was inaccessible by sea until 1434 when a Portuguese, Gil Eannes, destroyed the superstition by sailing a caravel south of the dreaded cape. Within a few years the first Negro captives were coming into Portugal; in 1448 the trade in Negroes led to

the building of a fort on Arguim island. Between 1441 and 1446 the Portuguese carried home perhaps a thousand slaves.

It was West and central Africa where the Atlantic slave trade flourished. Eastern Africa—Mozambique and Madagascar—provided some slaves for the Atlantic trade, but the hazards of the approach to the cape and, more important, the length of the voyage deterred this traffic. Nearly all Afro-Americans were to come from the immense region below the Sahara stretching south through Angola. The coastline offered few natural harbors; the rivers did not invite penetration; the forests inhibited access to the interior. Geography combined with tropical disease to bar penetration of the continent until the nineteenth century. Beyond all this stood the formidable presence of the Africans themselves.

At the time of European contact the Dark Continent held a series of diverse societies. Fragmentation alone would have made European conquest and hegemony difficult. African state systems included kingships and empires; and Europeans deferred to and respected local rulers. Among West African societies long-distance inland trade flourished; among those between the Bight of Benin and the western Gold Coast maritime trade probably existed. Central Africans saw their trade stirred by the new European contacts. The Atlantic slave trade, then, did not initiate trading among Africans. It did change the pattern, redirecting trade from its old south to north orientation and reinforcing or starting coastal markets.

In these African societies "slavery" existed. It was not the chattel slavery that flourished in the Americas. Nor was it plantation slavery, whose keen harshness took so many lives in tropical America. It was not characterized by caste or class, and it was not the antithesis of the Western concept of freedom. It was an integral part of complex social structures. African slavery was not only different from the Western stereotype, but it also varied with African societies. "Every community has its peculiar characteristics, and there is a good deal of regional variation," one student has judged.

African slaves, it has been suggested, were acquired outsiders who did not fully become leaders, but remained marginal. In this view slavery has been described as the "institutionalization of marginality." This institutionalization having differing dimensions, consequently ambiguity and euphemism seem essential to discussing it. Analogies to European forms of servitude—slavery, serfdom, helotry—are thus misleading. White men's rationalization that the slave trade substituted American slavery for African is false. There does not appear to have been, as has been claimed, a

“reservoir” of slaves in Africa ready for export at the time of European contact .

We can note here, in a preliminary way, certain attributes of the Afro-American relationship. Only a very small portion of Africa was occupied by Europeans in the era of the slave trade. Tiny forts or castles were the characteristic European settlement. The number of Europeans was never sizable; as late as 1876 it is estimated they occupied only one per cent of the slaving zones. Confined to the coast, Europeans did business in places which were under the authority of African rulers. White men courted the favor of Africans, offering gifts, paying taxes, making treaties, and sometimes intermarrying. Africans were capable of making fearful political and economic reprisals. In the trading process, the evaluation of currencies and the determination of suitable wares in assortments offered by Europeans were prerogatives of the Africans. The legend of European ascendancy is dispelled by these circumstances. In political terms, control very largely rested with the Africans;<sup>3</sup> in economic terms, as time passed, the Africans increasingly became dependent upon European imports.

If the economic and political relationship between European and African had elements of equality and dignity, it is by no means true, as is sometimes asserted, that Europeans in these early times “supposed no natural inferiority in Africans,” and that this supposition was the byproduct of the slave trade. The historian W. D. Jordan has persuasively shown that Englishmen’s first impressions of Negroes were to look with disfavor upon their blackness, their heathenism, their alleged savagery, animality, and sexual potency. Of the Portuguese, who long monopolized the trade in slaves, we read: “The Portugals doe marke them as we doe Sheepe with a hot Iron. . . .” From early times, with some cultural differences among European nations, the color bar stood between white and black.<sup>4</sup>

Demand for African slaves sprang most of all from the development of a system of plantation agriculture. The severe manual labor of cultivating sugar required hands in numbers that, as it turned out, could be supplied only from Africa. At the outset European emigration could not solve the problem. Europe in the sixteenth century had neither the supply of laborers nor the theory to justify emigration. Statesmen held as a basic tenet that the defense of a country necessitated keeping soldiers and seamen available. The seventeenth century was one of population readjustment in Europe, ending in a return by 1700 to levels of 1600. In these centuries the African slave trade became strongly established. What was more, the numbers who offered to emigrate were small and the persons often unsatisfactory, hoping to get rich and go home.

Land existed in abundance, capital in sufficient supply, profits in plenitude—it was cheap labor that was deficient. Europeans in the New World made the obvious resort to Amerindian labor. But they witnessed a “demographic disaster.” A widely accepted estimate suggests that the aboriginal population on the Americas fell from 13.3 million in 1492 to 10.8 in 1570. The Indians of Hispaniola were virtually extinguished by the mid-sixteenth century. The toll in central Mexico is indicated by an estimated drop from 2,650,000 in 1568 to 1 million in 1605. Imported diseases account for this depopulation.<sup>5</sup>

Besides this, the Indian was the beneficiary of a moral ambiguity—the European notion that he was a noble savage, fulfilling an ideal of the ancients—whereas the African was not. The African was different; as the French West Indian proverb put it: “To look askance at an Indian is to beat him; to beat him is to kill him; to beat a Negro is to nourish him.” Material and moral considerations conspired against the Negro.<sup>6</sup>

Beneath these considerations lay the incidence of disease. It was often said that white men were unsuitable for hard labor in the tropics. Today it is clear that this is untrue; and racial explanations that Negroes were better adapted to the tropical climate and that Indians were a weak race do not answer. The Indian depopulation in fact was uneven, occurring heavily in the lowlands. White men can work in the tropics.

Africans had a higher immunity to two killer diseases that were African in origin: malaria and yellow fever. It was in this epidemiological sense that Africans were suitable for tropical labor. A case study of nineteenth-century British African troops revealed that they outlived a comparable group of Europeans 3.2 to 1.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted, however, that the African survival rate was high only in a relative sense—higher than that for Indians and whites in the Americas. Placed against the survival rate for Africans in Africa it was low. But if Africans had a relatively high survival rate, they did not form a self-sustaining labor supply. There were two main reasons for this. One was the widening areas of land brought under staple cultivation, as, for example, Jamaica beginning in the late seventeenth century, St. Domingue beginning in the early eighteenth century, and Cuba beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Secondly, planters preferred males as workers; and the slave trade transported two men for every woman. As a result the birth rate was skewed. Planters often wanted labor immediately, preferring to buy slaves rather than to breed them. Plantation mortality was high and planters would not wait a generation for a new labor supply. A British observer in Surinam in the late eighteenth century declared that “the whole race of

healthy slaves, consisting of 50,000, are totally extinct once every twenty years."

Moreover, there existed a connection between the stage of economic growth and slave importation. As colonies attained "full production," it has been suggested, they reduced importation. The sex ratio then came into better balance, and a tendency toward natural increase set in. The trend, however, was not invariable or universal. If rapid economic growth was at the cost of natural decrease of slaves, another factor was the kind of work to which slave labor was applied. Sugar cultivation was more lethal than coffee, tobacco, or cotton cultivation. A study of Jamaica, albeit after abolition of the slave trade, but before emancipation, concluded, "Wherever slaves were not engaged in the production of sugar, their chances of survival were greater."<sup>8</sup>

If white and red labor were infeasible in an unfavorable disease environment, black labor had the additional advantage of seeming cheap. White indentured servants might cost half the price of Africans, but white men served for a short time and became free. It was estimated that a Jamaica planter in 1695 could purchase a black slave for twenty pounds and a white servant for ten to fifteen pounds plus cost of transportation, but in the latter case the planter faced the certainty of early loss of his capital investment and the risk of greater mortality. Slave prices tended upward, as we shall see, but a brisk demand for slaves continued throughout the era of legitimate trade and helps account for its persistence after it was outlawed. Rising prices did not, in the long view, inhibit the trade. A news item from Jamaica in 1793 reported how a cargo of slaves was sold in the short space of four hours at an average of fifty-five pounds per head. At a sale the next day a Jamaican paid seven hundred pounds for seven women.

This continuing and extensive demand for African slaves may be illustrated by a number of examples. In Brazil in 1610 it was said, "What the Portuguese value most . . . are the slaves from the African coast; there is no risk of their running away; the people of the country [the Indians] would catch and eat them. They would not do that to the native inhabitants, who, besides, are less fit for labour than the Africans."<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Hyrne of Charles Town (later Charleston), South Carolina, about 1702 wrote to her brother in England, "If you can git any of our friends to lend but one hundred pounds it would doe us a great kindness [,] for we very much want slaves & we would pay them with int[e] rest in a very short time [,] for had we a good stock of slaves we might in a littell [sic] time git a very good estate of our plantation. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

One year after Louisiana came under the United States flag, Louisianans were alarmed by a congressional ban on importation of Negroes [from outside the

United States]. Without African labor, a government agent reported, the inhabitants "pretend that they must abandon the culture of both sugar and cotton. White laborers they say cannot be had in this unhealthy climate."<sup>11</sup>

Sugar, with a long-term rise in prices and in consumption, well illustrates why there was a continuing call for labor. Sugar prices expressed in English shillings per hundredweight in Amsterdam rose from 56 shillings in 1623, when production was not yet extensive, to 60 in 1806; in London from 24 shillings in 1728 to a range of 39-49 in 1806; in Nantes from 16 shillings in 1739 to 28 in 1789. During a span of years that experienced a boom in the slave trade, from 1739 to 1788/89, the price rise may be seen in tabular form:

	1739	1788/89
Amsterdam	23 shillings per cwt.	19-25
London	26 shillings per cwt.	34-36
Nantes	16 shillings per cwt.	28

Sugar consumption soared; in the eighteenth century Englishmen, for example, enlarged their use from four pounds per person in the first decade to three times that amount in the last decade. High prices for sugar and expanding consumption in the European market exerted their forces upon the New World's labor needs.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the economic phenomenon of demand was of long duration and continuity, and pervasive in the plantation economies of the New World. Plantation agriculture had special needs for a labor force that was numerous and could be depended upon to work long hours during a long growing season. An expanding market offered attractive prices for plantation products. Relatively cheap, African slave labor was characterized by a high mortality rate and a low birth rate. American planters persistently applied to Africa for a labor force.

What were the dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade? Before we go further we should note the total numbers imported into the Americas, the chronological incidence of the trade, African sources of slaves, American destinations, and the leading carriers. Helpful to all this is a recent study by Philip Curtin, which explodes some old myths and offers plausible estimates.<sup>13</sup>

Until recent years historians had with little question accepted the figure of fifteen million Africans transported to American slavery. This figure has been shown to be without foundation, originating, oddly and only incidentally, in the writings of an American publicist who was furthering the cause of the Juarez government in Mexico. Scholars for generations meekly

and uncritically accepted this estimate. Drawing on historical data, including direct evidence of slave import figures, shipping data, population numbers, sugar productivity, African trade figures, and contemporaneous estimates, Curtin suggested a vastly reduced total of about ten million. He emphasized that his figure was an estimate; and subsequent research, as we shall see, has in some degree altered the contours of his design.

In its chronological pattern the trade spanned four centuries, from the middle of the fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. It is an arresting fact that the trade early enjoyed a high growth rate, not a trickle. The flow rose to 10,000 a year by about 1650 and never dropped below that number for the next two centuries. By 1713, the time of the Treaty of Utrecht, it had attained a mighty volume of 40,000 per year, and never fell lower than that until about 1840. The eighteenth century had the greatest activity, the trade rising to a peak in the score of years after 1760. From 1741 to 1810 the annual volume averaged over 60,000. Perhaps three-fifths of the whole trade was concentrated into the span 1721 to 1820; four-fifths into the span 1701 to 1850. Abolition of the trade by Great Britain and the United States in 1808 did not have the impact on the whole traffic of precipitating a rush in anticipation of the closing nor of promoting a steady drop in subsequent decades. Though the trade was declining in the nineteenth century, albeit with a substantial 32 per cent of the entire traffic entering the Americas after 1810, the trend was upwards in the decades of the 1820s and 1840s.

The African sources of slaves varied with the fortunes of war, commerce, and politics. It is now certain that a larger number of slaves came from the Congo-Angola region than was once thought. In the fifteenth century trade started with the coast south of the Sahara and moved southward along with European exploration. But in the sixteenth century most of the slaves came from two disparate areas—the Guinea of Cape Verde and the area just below the mouth of the Congo. In the eighteenth century Liberia and the Ivory and Gold Coasts furnished large numbers of slaves in the early part of the century, but the largest suppliers were the Bights of Benin and Biafra and Angola.

Sources varied also with national carriers. England in the period 1690 to 1807 obtained nearly one-third of her slaves from the Bight of Biafra and 18 per cent from each of the Gold Coast and Angola-Mozambique. The French in the period 1711 to 1800 exported over one-third of their slaves from Angola, and one-half rather evenly divided from the Bight of Benin, the Windward Coast, and the Gold Coast. Slaves imported into the North American mainland, it has been

estimated, came largely from Angola (25 per cent), the Bight of Biafra (23 per cent), the Gold Coast (16 per cent), and the Windward Coast (11 per cent). Black population patterns in the New World reflected such variables in the availability and carriers of slaves.

The distribution of slave imports in the long period of the Atlantic slave trade holds some astonishing proportions. Only about 7 per cent of the whole went to the present-day United States. Brazil absorbed nearly two of every five slaves. Fewer than 2 per cent were sold in the Old World, with the island of São Tomé taking just over one-half the number, and with Europe taking only one-half of 1 per cent. The two great areas of concentration were the Caribbean and South America. In the first of these areas, where nearly 43 per cent of the Negroes were sold, the Greater Antilles took one-quarter of the grand total, Haiti being the largest consumer. In South America, where about one-half of the whole were sold, the Guianas accounted for under 6 per cent, Spanish South America under 6 per cent, and Brazil the great bulk. The heart of the American market lay in tropical regions reaching from Brazil through the Caribbean islands.

The Hispanic empire obviously held great importance as a market; and the Portuguese were the first and last European carriers. The Spaniards, at first prevented by papal bull from holding territories in Africa and long without a foothold, were generally dependent upon others for their slaves. Spanish colonial commerce, both human and inanimate, was a focus of European rivalry. The English held the lion's share of the trade in the eighteenth century; and the French were second. The Dutch, for a brief interval the leading carriers, were a persistent participant, accounting over a century and three-quarters for perhaps 10 per cent of the trade. North Americans developed a lively interest in the early eighteenth century, rising as the century progressed. Minor European states, including Genoa, Sweden, Denmark, and Brandenburg, participated in small measure in the trade. (See accompanying table.)

TABLE 1.1

Curtin's Estimate of Slave Imports for the Whole Period of the Trade*		
<i>Region and Country</i>	<i>Number (ooo omitted)</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Grand total	9,556	100.0
Old World	175	1.0
North America	651	6.8
Caribbean Islands	4,040	42.2
South America	4,700	49.1

\* Adapted from Philip Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 88-89.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar* (2 vols., London, 1949, 1950), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup>Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, Sails, and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion, 1400-1700* (New York, 1965).

<sup>3</sup>J. D. Fage and Roland Oliver, eds., *The Cambridge History of Africa* (8 vols., Cambridge, England 1975-in progress), III, 463-566. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa* (Madison, Wis., 1977), 3-78, quotation 358.

<sup>4</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968), *passim*: quotation 35. C. R. Boxer, *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion, 1415-1825* (Berkeley, 1969 reprint of 1961 publication), 42-44. William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), 29-33.

<sup>5</sup>Angel Rosenblatt, *La poblacion indigena y el mestizaje en America* (2 vols., Buenos Aires, 1954). Woodrow Borah, *New Spain's Century of Depression* (Berkeley, 1951).

<sup>6</sup>French West Indian proverb quoted in David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, New York, 1966), 174.

<sup>7</sup>Philip D. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," *PSQ*, LXXXIII (1968), 190-216.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade* (Boston, 1961), 59. Curtin, "Epidemiology," 215-216; *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wis., 1969), 29-30. B. W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica 1807-1834* (New York, 1976), 99-138.

<sup>9</sup>Sir Arthur Helps, *The Spanish Conquest in America and its Relation to Slavery* (4 vols., M. Oppenheim, ed., London, 1900-1904), III, 149. Pierre Verger, *Bahia and the West African Trade, 1549-1851* (Ibadan, 1964), 1. Richard N. Bean, *The British Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, 1650-1775* (New York, 1975).

<sup>10</sup>Elizabeth Hyrne to Burrell Massingberd, Charles Town, c. 1702, Massingberd Deposits, Mass 21/67, Lincoln Record Office, Lincoln, England; kindly furnished by Jack M. Sosin.

<sup>11</sup>Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 248-249.

<sup>12</sup>Deerr, *History of Sugar*, II, 530-532.

<sup>13</sup>Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, *passim*. Curtin's book has stimulated research, leading to a number of significant modifications of his census, as we shall note.