

The Discovery of the Americas and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

by Ira Berlin



Detail of El Mina from a portolan chart of the Atlantic Ocean published in 1633. (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Europe, Africa, and the Americas came together, creating—among other things—a new economy. At the center of that economy was the plantation, an enterprise dedicated to the production of exotic commodities—the most prominent being sugar—for a distant market. The sugar plantation, which first developed in the Mediterranean, was an enormously complex unit of production requiring the mobilization of vast amounts of capital, the development of new technologies (agricultural, industrial, and maritime), the invention of management techniques, and—because sugar production was extraordinarily labor intensive—the employment of huge numbers of workers. Because sugar was also a most lucrative commodity, plantation entrepreneurs drew capital from all corners of the Mediterranean and Europe, from as far away as the Germanies and the Netherlands. They also developed new technologies to grow, manufacture, and transport sugar great distances. But perhaps the most difficult problem these businessmen faced was securing the labor to sustain the vast economic enterprise they were creating.

Few people wanted to work on a sugar plantation. In the fifteenth century, most men and women labored to gain a competency—a livelihood—for themselves and their families. In the Mediterranean, peasants (generally attached to a lord in some sort of feudal subordination) grew enough to feed themselves and their families and a bit more to satisfy the demand of the lord. They wanted little to do with sugar, whose empty calories might provide a quick burst of energy but could not sustain life. Free workers also disdained sugar plantations, appreciating that the labor was brutal and dangerous—literally killing. Sugar entrepreneurs turned to enslaved labor, an ancient form familiar to all in the fifteenth-century Mediterranean, although rarely employed on a massive scale.

At first, the sugar entrepreneurs enslaved any men and women they could buy or capture. Christian and Muslim, European and African slaves worked side-by-side on the sugar estates. For reasons of propinquity, Slavic people taken from the Black Sea composed the majority of the enslaved population—hence the word “slave.” But, in 1453, when Ottoman Turks seized Constantinople and denied Christian Europeans access to the Black Sea, Africans—who had been carried across the Sahara—began to make up a larger and larger proportion of the slave labor force.

Africans loomed even larger in the slave population when the Portuguese carried the sugar enterprise onto newly discovered Atlantic islands: the Azores, the Canaries, and Madeira. On these islands, plantations were even larger and required even more labor. Portuguese planters, often backed by Italian bankers, began raiding along the west coast of Africa, seizing Africans and carrying them back to Lisbon, where they were sold to locals, sent to the Atlantic islands, or re-exported to other parts of Europe.

The Portuguese found slave raiding lucrative, but it was also dangerous. Africans resisted, counterattacking with punishing blows. Eventually, they forced the Portuguese to turn from unabashed kidnapping to trade, which proved more efficient, more profitable, and safer.

In Africa, native merchants were more than willing to sell slaves to European outsiders, but they did not sell their own people; rather they sold men and women of nations other than their own, usually men captured in war or guilty of some heinous offense. They also sold them on their terms. They kept the Portuguese and other Europeans who entered the trade at a distance, never allowing them onto African soil without permission, which generally had to be purchased by paying a tax of some sort. African merchants drove hard bargains with European traders, giving as good as they got. Responsibility for the slave trade rested with both Europeans and Africans.

The exchange of European goods for enslaved Africans that began in the middle of the fifteenth century set the terms of the slave trade for the next four hundred years, but the character of that trade was constantly changing for both traders and slaves. The number of slaves grew; their nationality, sex, and age fluctuated. New maritime technology changed the transport that carried slaves, which, in turn, affected everything from the price of slaves to the slaves' mortality and morbidity. And while the trade expanded enormously, reaching deep into the African interior and to all parts of the Americas, it also created opposition among Africans, Europeans, and the Americas, which eventually led to the slave trade's final demise during the middle years of the nineteenth century.

Over the course of its history, the largest change in the nature of the slave trade was simply the growth of the numbers. During the fifteenth century, some fifty thousand slaves entered Europe and the Atlantic islands. The number of Africans shipped across the Atlantic during the sixteenth century topped one quarter of a million. That number grew to nearly two million in the seventeenth century, some six and one half million in the eighteenth, and another three million plus in the nineteenth century, for an estimated total of some twelve and a half million.

The origins of the slave population and their destinations also changed over time. The vast majority of slaves sent to the Americas sailed from west central Africa—Angola and the Kongo—(over 5.5 million), followed by the Bight of Benin (nearly 2 million), Bight of Biafra (one and a half million), the Upper Guinea coast (1.5 million), and the Gold Coast (1.2 million). However, the point of disembarkation only provides partial clues to the origins of the Africans sent to the Americas, as slaves taken from various places in the interior often left from the same port.

The destinations of slaves taken to the Americas were equally diverse. Slavers carried most of the Africans caught up in the trade to Brazil (approximately five million), with another 2.25 million sent to the British Caribbean, and about 1.75 million to the French Caribbean. Most of the rest landed in Spanish America. The mainland North American colonies and United States, which would eventually have the largest slave population in the Americas, received less than 400,000 African slaves.

This distribution changed radically over time. For example, most of the slaves imported to the United States arrived before the American Revolution, while most of those shipped to Cuba landed during the nineteenth century. Likewise, the Bight of Benin was a bigger source of slaves than the Bight of Biafra during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but the reverse was true in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through the entire period of the slave trade, West Central Africa remained the largest source of slaves. In short, any account that estimates which slaves went where and when must consider changes of time and place. And what was true of slaves was also true of slave traders. The English who were hardly involved in the early slave trade became the largest slave traders in the world by the eighteenth century.

Although the nature of the slave trade constantly changed, one thing remained the same. The trade was a violent, deadly business that killed millions, mutilated millions, and traumatized millions. Enslaved Africans everywhere endured the trauma of enslavement. Although the initial deportees may have been drawn from wartime prisoners, by the eighteenth century enslaved peoples were rarely guilty of anything more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time, taken by mercenary armies, bandits, and professional slavers.

Captured deep in the African interior, Africans faced a long, deadly march to the coast. Traveling sometimes for months, they were passed from group to group, as many different African nations participated in the slave trade. But whoever drove the captives to their unwanted destiny, the circumstances of their travel were extraordinarily

taxing. Ill-clothed and ill-fed, the captives moved at a feverish pace, only to stop and languish in some pen, while middlemen bartered over their bodies, sold some, and purchased yet others to add to the sad coffle. The journey then began again. Taken together, the movement to the coast was nothing more than a death march for many. In some places, some 40 percent of the slaves died between their capture in the interior and their arrival on the coast.

Herded into dismal holding pens or factories along the Atlantic, the survivors—weakened and traumatized—did not simply await their fate. Even at this last moment, the captives sought to regain their freedom. Some tried to get word to their families, so they might be ransomed. A handful sought to escape, although once they entered the walled castles of the slave ports flight became increasingly difficult. That of course did not prevent them from trying and a small number from succeeding.

These were the fortunate few. Most captives faced the nightmarish transatlantic crossing, the dreaded Middle Passage. The depths of human misery and the astounding death toll of men and women packed in the stinking hulls shamed the most hard hearted. Slave traders themselves admitted the deleterious effects of the trade. Even among those who defended slavery, there were those who condemned the Middle Passage as an abomination. But, like all human experiences—even the worst—the Middle Passage was not of one piece. While the vast majority suffered below deck, a few men and women chosen from among the captives helped set the sails, steer the ships, and serve the crews that carried the mass of Africans across the Atlantic. Denmark Vesey, the former slave whose alleged conspiracy shook South Carolina in the 1820s, was but one of many slaves who sailed the Atlantic as the personal servant of the captain of a slave ship. The Atlantic passage of these captives differed greatly from those stowed below deck.

For all captives, however, some things never changed. Fear was omnipresent as the Africans, stripped naked and bereft of their every belonging, boarded the ships and met—often for the first time—white men. Brandishing red hot irons to mark their captives in the most personal way, these “white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair” left more than a physical scar.^[1] Many enslaved Africans concluded the slavers were in league with the devil, if not themselves devils. For others, the searing of their skin confirmed that they were bound for the slaughterhouse to be eaten by the cannibals who had stamped them in much the way animals were marked.

The branding iron was but the first of many instruments of savagery the captives faced. Eighteenth-century ships were violent places where imperious captains ruled with the lash, and the barbarity of the maritime world reached new heights on the slave ship, where whips, chains, shackles, and thumbscrews were standard equipment. When it came to subduing slaves, the captains’ autocratic power was extended to the crew, and men who had been brutalized often felt little compunction in brutalizing others. Indeed, the inability of the captives to defend themselves unleashed the most sadistic impulses among members of the crew.

While violence was ubiquitous on the slave ship, it was neither random nor purposeless. Rather, it was carefully orchestrated to intimidate captives in circumstances where there were few incentives for men and women to submit. Slavers hoped that awing captives with overwhelming power wielded without compunction for life or limb would convince them that resistance was futile. To that end, captives were stripped of their humanity: denied personal possessions, privacy, and other prerogatives accorded the meanest members of free society. Slavers used every occasion to emphasize the captives’ degraded status, indeed their lack of status. The filth and violence dissolved the carefully developed distinctions between the pure and impure upon which many African societies rested. The humiliation that accompanied such degradation was almost always public, giving the captives little means to maintain their dignity. Among the lessons taught in this systematic debasement was the sacrosanctity of a white skin. More than any single place, the origins of white supremacy can be found in the holds of the slave ship. Speaking through a black interpreter, one captain informed his captives “no one that killed a white man should be spared.”^[2]

Equally inescapable was the horror and anguish that accompanied the captives’ stark realization of what plantation slavery in the Americas entailed. Sometime during their journey, in one terrifying moment, they understood that family, friends, and country were gone, never to be seen again. The markers of identity—many of which were physically inscribed upon their bodies in ritual scarification, tooth filing, body piercing, and

tattooing—were rendered meaningless, if not a source of ridicule. Lineage, the most important source of social cohesion in African society, was dissolved. Sons could no longer follow fathers or daughters follow mothers. The captives had been orphaned, and their isolation shook them to the very essence of their beings. They had been separated from everything they knew and loved.

The violence and horror of isolation soon yielded to an even more pervasive companion. As the sharks that trailed understood, death was a universal presence aboard the slave ship. Its ubiquity was matched only by its variety, as some men and women died from disease, dehydration, and abuse. The damp, dank, crowded holds spawned an endless variety of deadly afflictions. Children, whose mortality exceeded that of adults, fared particularly poorly. Although mortality rates of those crossing the Atlantic improved over time, on average more than one in seven Africans who boarded a slave ship died, as the enslaved struggled for space, food, and water. Slaves squabbled among themselves endlessly. Men and women of many nations who spoke many languages and who frequently belonged to nations with long histories of animosity did not come automatically or easily make shipboard alliances. Indeed, to prevent such alliances, slavers sometimes deliberately loaded their ships with men and women of different nationalities and placed them in close proximity to one another. They understood that old enmities lingered. It was often easier—and more rewarding—to collaborate with slavers as an informer than with one's fellows. Slavers depended upon these collaborators as much as they did their own guns. When “the Jollofes rose,” according to one report, “the Bambaras sided with the Master.”^[3]

But as the inevitability of a common future manifested itself, the captives found reason to join together. Confederations born of shared anguish and pain made impossible situations bearable, as captives bolstered each others' spirits, shared food, and nursed one another through the inevitable bouts of nausea, fever, and dysentery—the feared bloody flux. Small acts of kindness provided the basis for resistance. A new order took shape below deck. Sullen men and women began to forge a new language from knowing glances and a few shared words. They watched the slavers carefully, studying their routines and habits so that they ultimately knew more about their captors than their captors knew about them. They awaited their chance, and when it arrived, they struck their enslavers hard. About one in ten slave ships faced some kind of insurrection. Most failed, and punishment was swift and unforgiving, but even those who watched the proceeding in silence learned powerful lessons. Shipboard alliances marked the beginnings of new solidarities.

Surviving the Middle Passage was but the first of the many tests faced by the forced immigrants. They would now have to make their way in perhaps the most difficult situations human beings have ever faced.

[1] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 9th ed. (London, 1794), 47.

[2] William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea, and the Slave Trade* (London, 1734), 184.

[3] Quoted in David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 229; Marcus V. Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), 271–276, 297–298; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 103.

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