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WHEN HUMANS BECAME INHUMANE

The Atlantic Slave Trade

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A HISTORIAN'S JOURNAL ENTRY / BY ANITA RAVI

Once the Europeans discovered the New World, they worked hard to make as much money there as possible. At first, they just bought and sold goods. For example, they bought silver, tea, and fur and then resold them for a profit.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



Soon they wanted more. They wanted to produce the goods. This way they could make even more money. The Europeans could grow tobacco and sugar there, for example. These products were very expensive back in Europe.

Growing crops like tobacco and sugar required a lot of labor: many, many workers. The Europeans did force Native American people to work. But there weren't enough Native Americans left. Huge numbers of them had died from diseases brought by the Europeans when they came to the Americas.

To find more cheap workers, the Europeans turned to Africa. But why did they want African workers? Why not European ones?

To answer the second question, I turned to historian David Eltis at Emory University. He wrote *A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*. Here's his view:

The short answer...is that European expansion to the Americas was to mainly tropical and semi-tropical areas. Several products...like tobacco...or like gold or sugar...now fell within the capacity of Europeans to produce more abundantly.

But...they chose not to supply the labor...Free European migrants and indentured servants never traveled across the Atlantic in sufficient numbers to meet the labor needs of expanding plantations. Convicts and prisoners — the only Europeans who were ever forced to migrate — were much fewer in numbers...

Slavery or some form of coerced labor was the only possible option if European consumers were to gain access to more tropical produce and precious metals.

Eltis is saying that the crops Europeans wanted grew well in the tropical regions of the New World. This was convenient because these were the areas where Europeans landed and settled.

Still, Europeans needed workers to grow these crops. Eltis is also saying that not enough Europeans crossed the Atlantic — free or unfree — to work on these plantations.

The Atlantic slave trade began in 1519. That was when the Portuguese began to enslave African people and send them to the Americas.

It continued until the early 1800s. European countries began to outlaw slavery when their citizens became outraged by it.

The chart below shows how many slaves arrived at different ports in the New World. "Region of disembarkation" is the place where the slaves ended up — if they survived the terrible journey.

This table shows that about 2,700,000 African slaves were brought to the New World between 1519 and 1800.

These figures come from a database project. The project gathered information from ports in Africa, Europe, and the Americas and collected it all in one place. The Spanish kept records of everything that came and went through their ports. It is why we now have this data.

What does it tell us? For one, most of the slaves went to a very small place: the island of St. Domingue. Today this island contains Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In those days, the island produced a lot of sugar.

African slaves were resistant to European diseases. They did not die from these diseases like Native Americans had.

Still, many Africans did die when they arrived in the Caribbean. Tropical diseases and the lack of medical care led to their deaths.

I have read about the horrible working and living conditions for slaves in the Caribbean islands. They were forced to work long hours in the heat. They weren't given enough food. They were beaten by their Portuguese and Spanish masters. I'm not surprised that one of the first revolutions of the eighteenth century started in Haiti. But more on that later.

The data also tells me that the Spanish and Portuguese imported hundreds of thousands of slaves. They mostly brought them to South America between 1519 and 1650. After this, they stopped bringing in so many slaves.

Perhaps more of the slaves who went to Brazil and the mainland of South America survived. Africans have now been in South America for almost 500 years. Later, we'll see how these Africans were treated over the years.

The 13 colonies and the United States used slaves as well. In fact, slavery there was quite terrible.

Surprisingly, slavery developed alongside the ideas that inspired the American Revolution (1775 — 1783): life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The American revolutionaries were English subjects. This may have been part of the reason.

Volume of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade by Region of Disembarkation

1519 to 1800

| Dates | British Mainland/ North America | Barbados | Guianas | French Windwards | St. Domingue | Spanish-American Mainland (incl. Brazil) | Dutch Caribbean |
|--------------|------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|--|--------------------|
| 1519 to 1600 | 1,400 | 25,400 | | 2,000 | | 151,600 | 2,000 |
| 1601 to 1650 | 900 | | 63,200 | 8,200 | 6,500 | 187,700 | 38,800 |
| 1651 to 1675 | 9,800 | 82,300 | 27,800 | 16,600 | 4,800 | 7,000 | 26,000 |
| 1701 to 1725 | 37,400 | 91,800 | 24,400 | 30,100 | 44,500 | 30,000 | 30,500 |
| 1726 to 1750 | 96,800 | 73,600 | 83,600 | 66,800 | 144,900 | 12,700 | 10,200 |
| 1751 to 1775 | 166,900 | 120,900 | 111,900 | 63,700 | 247,500 | 5,000 | 15,300 |
| 1776 to 1800 | 24,400 | 28,500 | 71,200 | 41,200 | 345,800 | 10,200 | 6,900 |
| TOTAL | 337,600 | 422,500 | 382,100 | 228,600 | 794,000 | 404,200 | 129,700 |

Source: Eltis, David, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein. The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. An online version of this can be found on the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior website: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/ethnography/aah/aaheritage/histContextsD.htm>

Historian Winthrop Jordan argues that the English had deep beliefs about race and color. Their beliefs allowed them to keep slaves while also talking about freedom. In his classic book, *White Over Black*, Jordan argues:

In England...blackness was loaded with intense meaning. Long before they found that some men were black, Englishmen found in the idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their most ingrained values.

As described by the Oxford English Dictionary, the meaning of black before the sixteenth century included, "Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul...Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister...Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked..."

The impact of the Negro's color was the more powerful upon Englishmen...because England's principal contact with Africans came in West Africa and the Congo where men were not merely dark but almost literally black: one of the fairest-skinned nations suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest peoples on Earth. (6 – 7)

Enslaving Africans may have begun as an economic plan. Still, racist ideas kept it alive for over 200 years.

The Oxford English Dictionary is the most respected dictionary of English. For hundreds of years, it has tracked the meanings and uses of each word in the English language.

Jordan is saying that people in England thought of black as evil since the 1550s.

Even before the English had met black people, they had very negative feelings about the color black. "Black" was much more than just a color to them, Jordan believes.

Through slavery, a huge trade network developed across the Atlantic. There were large numbers of slaves and natural resources moving back and forth. The profits from this network allowed Europeans to create colonial settlements in the New World. In turn, the colonies allowed them to become even richer.

To make as much money as possible, slave traders became efficient at their evil trade. They wanted to move as many slaves to the New World, as cheaply as possible.

We can see from the image that they had a horrifying system by the early 1800s.

The images show how slave traders crammed as many human bodies as possible onto a ship. They also show the chains slave traders used during the long journey. Crossing the Atlantic took about 6 to 12 weeks.

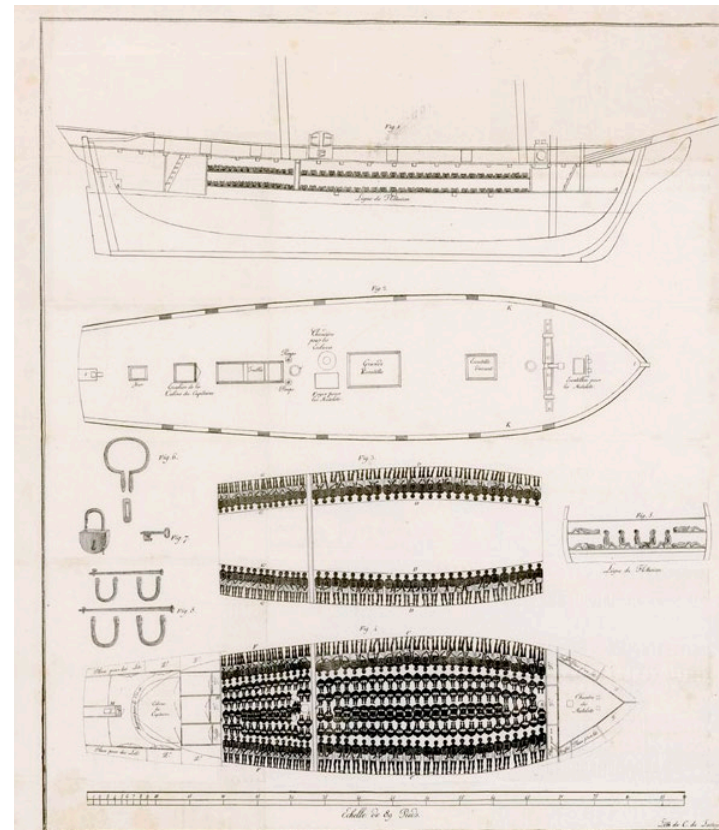


Illustration of the French slave ship the "Vigilante" from the nineteenth century.

The name of the ship is important: "Vigilante." A vigilante is someone who's breaking the law.

We know that Britain finally outlawed the slave trade in 1833. The pamphlet was printed about 10 years before that. It was printed in Britain and France. This could mean the people who built the ship wanted to show others how to transport slaves efficiently. Or it's possible that the pamphlet was used by anti-slavery activists. They might have printed it to show how horrible the slave trade was.

There is no doubt that the Atlantic slave trade was inhumane, and evil. It allowed Europeans to begin producing new goods, and sell them. It allowed Europeans to get rich from their colonies.

Working Bibliography & Notes

Eltis, David. "A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade." *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database: Voyages*. Emory University, 2009. Web.

Eltis, David, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein. *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. CD-ROM.

Image of the slave ship "Vigilante" courtesy of *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. Emory University, 2009. Web.

Winthrop, Jordan. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968. Print.

Cover image: The Slave Ship Sighting an English Cruiser, Magazine Illustration Published in *Harper's Weekly*. Courtesy of Corbis.

This short journal entry is an example of how historians go about exploring important questions and looking at new information. They use a mixture of historical documents and the writings of other historians to inform their thinking. All sources are listed in the working bibliography.