

When Humans Became Inhumane

By Anita Ravi, Big History Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.21.16

Word Count 1,531

Level 1070L



In this illustration, a slave ship sights an English cruiser. Images: Big History Project

The Europeans, who were interested in making as much money as possible through colonialism, had figured out how to be effective middlemen. They bought goods like silver, tea, and fur, and then resold them for a profit.

Soon, Europeans wanted more: to begin producing the commodities they were trading. We know that Europeans successfully grew tobacco and sugar in the southern United States and the West Indies.

Raising these crops required a lot of labor — a lot of workers. One obvious source of labor was the indigenous Americans: the native peoples. But remember, 55 percent to 96 percent of the native population had died because of diseases brought by Europeans in the late 15th century (the dark side of the Columbian Exchange).

Why Africa?

To find workers, the Europeans turned to Africa. Why Africa, and not Europe? Why didn't the Europeans in the New World find European workers to work on the huge plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas?

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

...why slavery, and why were the slaves carried across the Atlantic exclusively African? The short answer to the first of these two questions is that European expansion to the Americas was to mainly tropical and semi-tropical areas. Several products that were either unknown to Europeans (like tobacco), or occupied a luxury niche in pre-expansion European tastes (like gold or sugar), now fell within the capacity of Europeans to produce more abundantly.

But while Europeans could control the production of such exotic goods, it became apparent in the first two centuries after Columbian contact that they chose not to supply the labor that would make such output possible. 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 again.

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.

Here, Eltis is saying that the crops Europeans wanted – sugar, tobacco, indigo – grew well in the tropical regions of the North American south, the Caribbean Islands, and parts of South America. This was convenient because these were the areas where Europeans landed and attempted to settle.

Still, Europeans were unfamiliar with these crops and did not know how to grow them. Eltis is also saying that there were not enough Europeans crossing the Atlantic — free or unfree — to work on these plantations.

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

The Atlantic slave trade continued until the early 1800s, when European countries began to outlaw it in response to outrage from people at home.

The chart below shows the volume of the trade at different points in time: 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 journey.

Overall, this table shows that about 2,700,000 enslaved Africans survived the middle passage across the Atlantic and were brought to the New World between 1519 and 1800.

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

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. Remember the Spanish who insisted on keeping records of everything that came and went through their ports? They are why we now have this data.

So what does it tell us? For one, the largest number of slaves went to one of the smallest places: the island of St. Domingue. (Today, the island is Haiti and the Dominican Republic). I know that this island was one of the major producers of sugar in the world.

"White Over Black"

I also know that the Africans had developed a resistance to European diseases (unlike the indigenous Americans). Still, many died of tropical diseases in the Caribbean. After surviving enslavement in Africa and the miserable middle passage, thousands died from diseases and lack of medical care on the islands.

I also know that the working and living conditions for slaves in the Caribbean islands were horrible. They had to work long hours in the heat. They were not given enough food. They suffered beatings and ongoing cruelty from their Portuguese and Spanish overseers. It's no wonder that one of the first colonial revolutions of the eighteenth century started in Haiti. (More on that later).

This data also tells me that the Spanish and Portuguese imported hundreds of thousands of slaves to Brazil and the Spanish-American mainland between 1519 and 1650. It seems they then stopped importing such large numbers of slaves for the rest of the slave trade era.

This tells me that the initial thousands survived — unlike their peers who were sent to the Caribbean. It also tells me that Africans have been in South America for almost 500 years. Later, we'll look at how different European powers approached race, slavery, and participation in mainstream society.

We know that slavery existed for a long time in the 13 Colonies and the early United States and that slavery there was severe.

I'm surprised, then, that the British imported fewer slaves than the Spanish and the Portuguese. It's surprising because slavery developed alongside the ideas that inspired the American Revolution (1775-1783): life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But as historian Winthrop Jordan argues, the English had deep beliefs about race and color that allowed them to keep slaves while also talking about freedom in ways that the Spanish and Portuguese did not. In his classic text, *White Over Black*, Jordan argues:

In England perhaps more than in southern Europe, the concept of 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. No other color except white conveyed so much emotional impact.

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... Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc."

The impact of the Negro's color was the more powerful upon Englishmen, moreover, 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.

While the enslavement of Africans may have begun as an economic undertaking, it was sustained through racist ideology for more than 200 years.

The Oxford English Dictionary, mentioned above, is the most respected dictionary of English. For hundreds of years, this source has provided all of the known uses of each word in the English language.

Jordan seems to be saying: the idea that black was evil was well developed in English thought as early as 1550.

Even before the English began any sort of trade with Africans, "black" had a negative connotation. When English travelers and explorers finally met people with dark skin, "black" was much more than just a color.

A huge trade network

A vast trade network developed across the Atlantic. There were large numbers of slaves, natural resources, and other goods moving back and forth. The profits from this network allowed Europeans to create colonial settlements and to become even richer.

To maximize profits, slave traders developed a sort of science around transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas. This is captured in the drawing to the right.

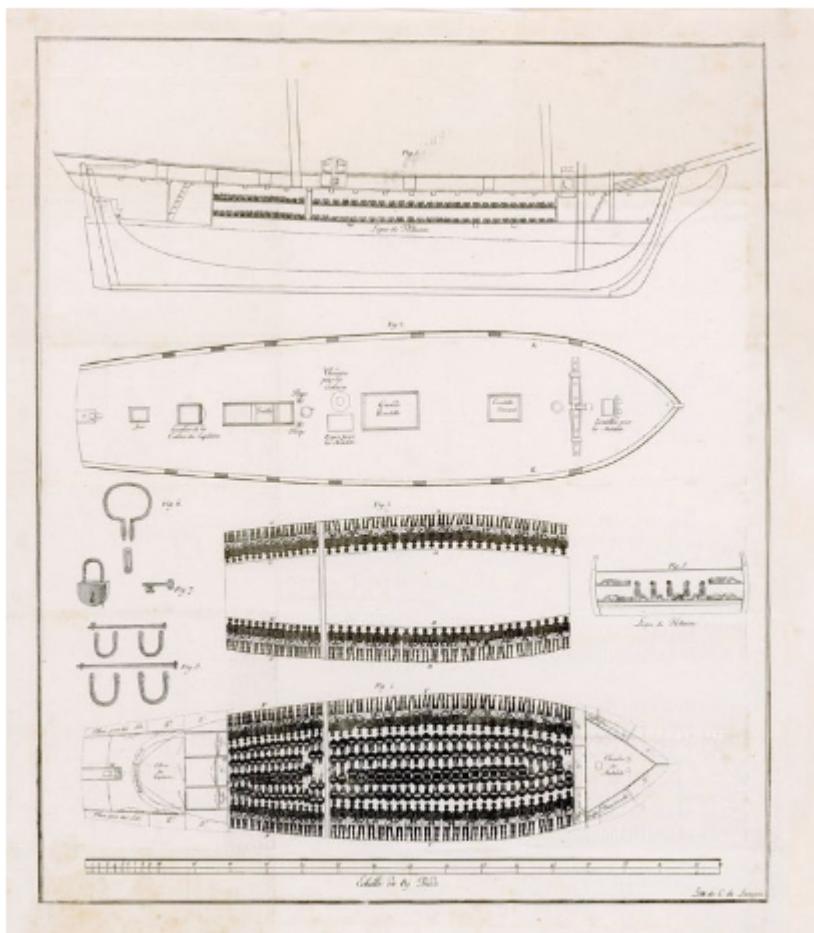


Illustration of the French slave ship the "Vigilante" from the nineteenth century.

Looking at the image and text above, I can tell that transporting slaves across the Atlantic had become a horrifying science by the early 1800s.

The images show how slave traders planned to pack in as many human bodies as possible lying down. They also show instruments that the traders used to restrain slaves during the journey.

Crossing the Atlantic usually took about six to 12 weeks. It's also important that the ship was called the "Vigilante," which means someone operating outside of the law.

We know that Britain finally outlawed the slave trade in 1833. This pamphlet was printed about 10 years before that.

The fact that it was printed as a pamphlet in Britain and France could mean the people who built the ship wanted to show how others could use such a small vessel to transport slaves in a similar way. Or it's possible the pamphlet was used to help fuel the abolitionist cause by showing the utter inhumanity of the slave trade.

The Atlantic slave trade, in all its horror, finally allowed Europeans to become the producers, the movers, and the consumers of goods that came from outside of Europe. In the process, it transformed European life and society by creating markets for objects and foods that were completely unknown in Europe before the 1500s.

Quiz

- 1 Choose the sentence from the last 8 paragraphs of the article that BEST supports the idea that the design of the slave transport vessel was influenced by monetary greed.
 - (A) There were large numbers of slaves, natural resources, and other goods moving back and forth.
 - (B) To maximize profits, slave traders developed a sort of science around transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas.
 - (C) They also show instruments that the traders used to restrain slaves during the journey.
 - (D) The fact that it was printed as a pamphlet in Britain and France could mean the people who built the ship wanted to show how others could use such a small vessel to transport slaves in a similar way.

- 2 Which paragraph from the middle of the article indicates that the journey for slaves from Africa to the New World was highly unpleasant and dangerous?
 - (A) So what does it tell us? For one, the largest number of slaves went to one of the smallest places: the island of St. Domingue. (Today, the island is Haiti and the Dominican Republic). I know that this island was one of the major producers of sugar in the world.
 - (B) I also know that the Africans had developed a resistance to European diseases (unlike the indigenous Americans). Still, many died of tropical diseases in the Caribbean. After surviving enslavement in Africa and the miserable middle passage, thousands died from diseases and lack of medical care on the islands.
 - (C) I also know that the working and living conditions for slaves in the Caribbean islands were horrible. They had to work long hours in the heat. They were not given enough food. They suffered beatings and ongoing cruelty from their Portuguese and Spanish overseers. It's no wonder that one of the first colonial revolutions of the eighteenth century started in Haiti. (More on that later).
 - (D) This data also tells me that the Spanish and Portuguese imported hundreds of thousands of slaves to Brazil and the Spanish-American mainland between 1519 and 1650. It seems they then stopped importing such large numbers of slaves for the rest of the slave trade era.

- 3 Read the introduction of the article [paragraphs 1-4].

Which of the following BEST explains how the introduction helps to develop the main idea?

- (A) It describes what was happening in the New World before the African slaves arrived.
 - (B) It explains the Europeans' context and why they thought slavery was an acceptable practice at the time.
 - (C) It illustrates the European thirst for economic success in the New World that led to inhumane practices.
 - (D) It explains the circumstances that led the Europeans to explore the New World and describes their relationships with the indigenous Americans.
- 4 Why does the author include the information about the English perception of the color black?
- (A) to accentuate the contrast of black and white colors and races
 - (B) to explain why the English chose African slaves instead of Native American slaves
 - (C) to justify the practice of slavery among the English, since it was part of their culture
 - (D) to explain how the English could hold contradictory ideas about freedom and slavery in their minds at once

Answer Key

- 1 Choose the sentence from the last 8 paragraphs of the article that BEST supports the idea that the design of the slave transport vessel was influenced by monetary greed.
- (A) There were large numbers of slaves, natural resources, and other goods moving back and forth.
- (B) To maximize profits, slave traders developed a sort of science around transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas.**
- (C) They also show instruments that the traders used to restrain slaves during the journey.
- (D) The fact that it was printed as a pamphlet in Britain and France could mean the people who built the ship wanted to show how others could use such a small vessel to transport slaves in a similar way.
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