

# When Humans Became Inhumane

By Anita Ravi, Big History Project on 06.21.16

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

Once Europeans had figured out how to be effective middlemen – buying and selling silver, tea, and fur, they turned to figuring out how to also become producers of the commodities they were trading.

We know that they were successful growing tobacco and sugar in the southern United States and in the West Indies. Growing and tending to these types of crops required labor. The most obvious source of labor was the indigenous Americans. But remember that between 55 percent and 95 percent of the native population had died as the result of diseases brought by Europeans beginning in the late fifteenth century (the dark side of the Columbian Exchange). So Europeans turned to Africa. Why Africa and not Europe? Why couldn't the plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean be populated by Europeans?

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

*What can explain this extraordinary migration, organized initially on a continent where the institution of slavery had declined or totally disappeared in the centuries prior to Columbian contact, and where, even when it had existed, slavery had never been confined to one group of people? To pose the question differently, 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 great, since these are the areas where Europeans landed and attempted to settle. But these were crops that Europeans were unfamiliar with and did not know how to grow. Eltis is also saying that there were not enough Europeans crossing the Atlantic — free or unfree — to staff these plantations.

The Atlantic slave trade began when the Portuguese turned to Africa and brought over the first enslaved Africans to farm crops in Brazil in 1519. It continued into the early nineteenth century, with the European countries each outlawing the slave trade at different times in response to outrage from their people at home. The chart below shows the volume of the trade at different points in time. It shows the “region of disembarkation,” which means 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 and were brought to the New World between 1519 and 1800. These figures come from a database project that gathered demographic information from ports in Africa, Europe, and the Americas and compiled it all in one place. Remember the Spanish who insisted on keeping records of everything that came and went through their ports? This is 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, or modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic. I know that this island was one of the major producers of sugar in the world. I also know that though the Africans had developed a resistance to European diseases (unlike the indigenous Americans), 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 in the islands. I also know that the working and living conditions for slaves in the Caribbean islands were horrible. They were subject to long work hours in the heat, not enough food, 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. But 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, and then stopped importing such vast numbers of slaves for the remainder of the slave trade era. This tells me that the initial thousands survived — unlike their peers who ended up in 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.

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
1701to 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

Given the length and severity of American slavery, I’m surprised that the British imported fewer slaves than the Spanish and the Portuguese. Perhaps my surprise comes from knowing that the institution of slavery developed alongside the ideas that resulted in the American Revolution (1775-1783). But, as historian Winthrop Jordan argues, the English had long-standing beliefs about race and color that enabled them to engage in enslavement 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.” Black was an emotionally partisan color, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion...*

*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 over 200 years. The Oxford English Dictionary, mentioned above, is the gold standard of the English language. For hundreds of years, this source has provided all of the known uses of each word in the English language at different points in time. What Jordan seems to be arguing above is that 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 from the west coast and southern Africa. When they finally met people whose skin color they described as black in their traveler's journals, the term "black" was much more than just a color.

The vast trade network throughout the Atlantic region of slaves, raw materials, and goods flourished and fueled the development of colonial settlements and the wealth of European nations. To maximize their "investment," slave traders developed a sort of science around transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas. This is captured in the drawing to the right.

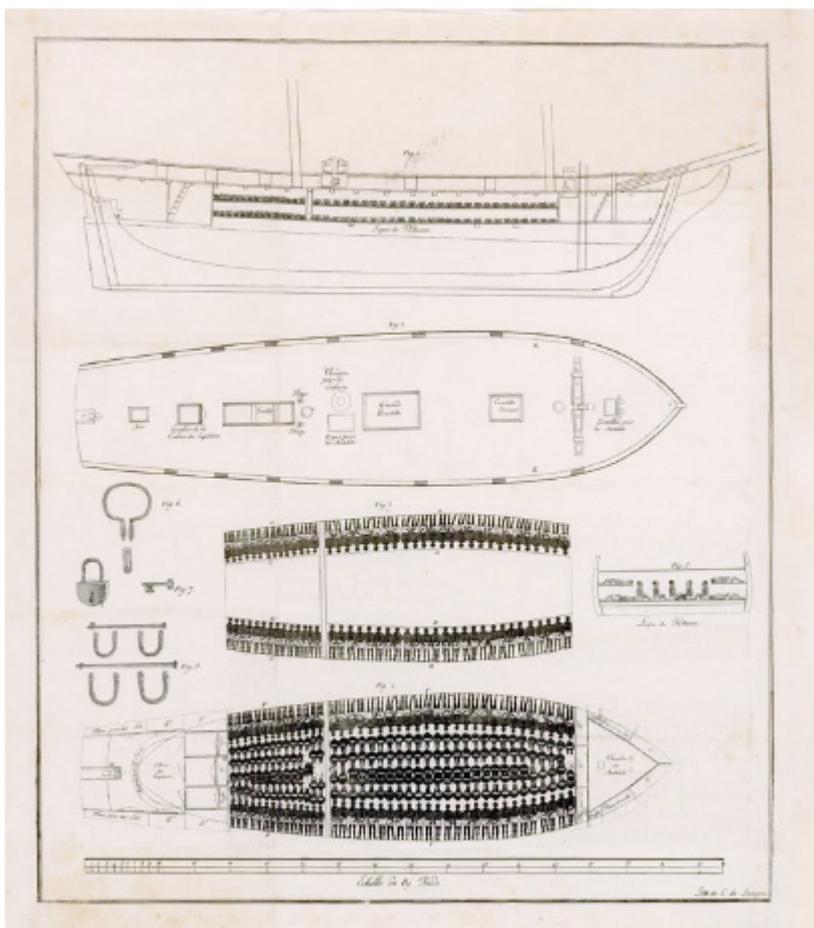


Illustration of the French slave ship the "Vigilante" from the nineteenth century.

This image and the text above us tell me that by the early nineteenth century, the business of transporting slaves across the Atlantic had become a horrifying science. The images themselves show how slave traders planned to pack in as many human bodies as possible lying down, alongside pictures of instruments used to restrain the slaves during the journey. The journey typically lasted anywhere from 6 to 12 weeks. It is also significant that the ship was called the “Vigilante,” which someone who is operating outside of the law. We know that the slave trade was finally outlawed in Great Britain in 1833. This pamphlet was printed about 10 years prior to that. The fact that it was printed as a pamphlet in Britain and France could mean the people who built the ship wanted to publicize how one might use such a small vessel to transport slaves in a similar manner. 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 originated 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 sixteenth century.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the following paragraph from the article.

*The vast trade network throughout the Atlantic region of slaves, raw materials, and goods flourished and fueled the development of colonial settlements and the wealth of European nations. To maximize their “investment,” slave traders developed a sort of science around transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas. This is captured in the drawing to the right.*

Which of the following conclusions can be MOST reasonably drawn from the selection above?

- (A) The author may disagree with the ethics of the slave trade, but she admires the ingenuity of the slave traders.
  - (B) The author believes the Atlantic slave trade was justifiable at the time, because it led to the wealth and dominance of the West.
  - (C) The slave trade, for all of its supposed benefits to Western countries, was the worst human calamity since the beginning of recorded history.
  - (D) Any celebration of the successes of the West is incomplete without acknowledgment of how much wealth was created through the slave trade.
- 2 Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?
- (A) European perspectives on economic development in the New World
  - (B) the scope of the slave trade and some of the countries involved
  - (C) African perspectives on the slave trade and effects on African communities
  - (D) an explanation of English beliefs that contributed to racism against Africans
- 3 Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of the article?
- (A) The article explores causes and some effects of the Atlantic slave trade.
  - (B) The article presents a list of facts about the severity of the Atlantic slave trade.
  - (C) The article compares different perspectives about the effects of the Atlantic slave trade.
  - (D) The article explores the cultural context in England and the New World before, during, and after the Atlantic slave trade.

- 4 What is the BEST way to explain the connection between the first and last paragraphs in the article?
- (A) The first introduces a European problem and the last focuses on the pain created by trying to solve that problem.
  - (B) The first introduces a European problem and the last provides a limited summary of results of efforts to solve the problem.
  - (C) The first focuses on the perspective of the Europeans and the last focuses on the perspective of the Africans sold into slavery.
  - (D) The first focuses on the material needs of the Europeans and the last reminds the reader that the Europeans' material success was based on racist ideas.

## Answer Key

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*The vast trade network throughout the Atlantic region of slaves, raw materials, and goods flourished and fueled the development of colonial settlements and the wealth of European nations. To maximize their “investment,” slave traders developed a sort of science around transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas. This is captured in the drawing to the right.*

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