

“Transatlantic Slave Trade”

Summary of an article by Hugh Thomas in *The Atlantic World in the Age of Empire*

Since ancient times, black slaves had been traded in North Africa and the E Mediterranean—used as servants, soldiers, and in fields. In the later Middle Ages some slaves reached Muslim Spain and Portugal from Africa.

In the second half of the 15th century the Portuguese began searching for gold along African coastline, and when they found little, they made do with men and women—some kidnapped and some for whom they bartered.

Ferdinand of Aragon and Charles V allowed for the first passages of slaves to the New World.

This labor force would not have been available to Europeans if African kings, merchants, and noblemen had not been involved. There were relatively few instances of Africans opposing the nature of the traffic.

Occasionally, the Europeans procured the slaves themselves, but more commonly it was Africans selling their distant neighbors. Most of the slaves that were shipped from Africa were not part of an established slave population.

Excerpts from *The African Slave Trade* by Basil Davidson

The Portuguese broke the monopoly of North African slave trade. Slaves were not the only commodity with which the Portuguese were concerned—gold, wrought iron, ivory, tortoiseshell, pepper, and even textiles.

Davidson attributes the growth of the trade to demand for labor in the New World that was not met by either native Americans or by indentured servants.

Slaving became a royal enterprise in the case of Spain—a lot of money to be gained.

They don't want to enslave Black Christians or Moors (N African Muslims--make anti-Christian propaganda)—focus on Guinea Coast. There was the birthplace of the 'Great Circuit' in which goods from Europe were used to purchase slaves who were then exchanged for minerals and foodstuffs from the NW, which were then sold in Europe. Three separate profits were made.

The slave trade of the 16th century was essentially a Spanish-Portuguese monopoly. The Dutch, English, French, Prussians, and Scandinavians followed.

In the 17th century—trade in men is the only trade that matters for the African chiefs—the coastline was divided into regions considered slow or fast in their delivery of slaves. “African chiefs found that the sale of their fellow men was indispensable to any contact or commerce with Europe ... Trapped in this unforeseen and fatal circumstance, pushed by their desire for European goods (and firearms often became essential to chiefly survival), or blackmailed by the fear that what one or two might refuse their rivals would consent to give, the rulers of coastal Africa surrendered to the slave trade.”

Europeans paid tribal chief for the human goods not in coins, but in tobacco, rum, firearms, iron, copper, brass wares.

Slavery as an Outgrowth from old African Slave Trade—Mckay, Hill, Buckler, & Ebry—*History of World Societies*--p. 651

Islam had heavily influenced African slavery. African rulers justified enslavement with the Muslim argument that prisoners of war could be sold; and since captured peoples were considered chattel, they could be used in the same positions that prevailed in the Muslim world.

Bulliet, et. al. *The Earth & Its Peoples*

Comparing European and Islamic Contacts—p. 516-519

Fewer slaves crossed the Sahara than crossed the Atlantic, but their numbers were substantial. It is estimated that between 1600 and 1800 about 850,000 slaves trudged across the desert's various routes. A nearly equal number of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa entered the Islamic Middle East by way of the Red Sea and the Indian ocean.

Although Islam forbade the enslavement of Muslims, some Muslim states south of the Sahara did not strictly observe that law.

How did the European and Islamic slave trade affect sub-Saharan Africa:

(1) the effect of slave exports could not have been large when measured against the population of the entire continent, but (2) losses in regions that contributed heavily to the slave trade were severe.

Although both foreign Muslims and Europeans obtained slaves from sub-Saharan Africa, there was a significant difference in the numbers they obtained and thus in the overall effects of the two slave trades. Between 1550-1800 some 8 million Africans were exported into the Atlantic trade, four times as many as were taken from sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa and the Middle East.

Transatlantic Slave Trade¹			Est. Slave Imports by Dest.²	
Period	Volume	Percent	Dest.	Total
1450-1600	367,000	3.1	Br. N. Amer.	399,000
1601-1700	1,868,000	16.0	Sp. Amer.	1,552,100
1701-1800	6,133,000	52.4	Br. Carib.	1,665,000
1801-1900	3,333,000	28.5	Fr. Carib.	1,600,200
Total	11,698,000	100.0	Dutch Carib.	500,000
			Danish Carib.	28,000
			<u>Old World</u>	<u>175,000</u>
				9,566,100

The Slave Trade Continues

Allegations of the existence of slavery in the Sudan—Arabs from the North enslaving Christian and animist Dinkas in the South—continue. Christian Solidarity International has paid thousands of dollars to buy the freedom of slaves. Detractors of this program charge that rather than insuring the freedom of those bought, it encourages the continued enslavement of others. The program pays \$100/person or 3 cows/person.

The Prostitution Research & Education project (www.prostitutionresearch.com) estimates that the global trade in women as commodities for sex industries is estimated to be between 7 and 12 billion annually—much lower risk than trading in drugs or arms. See Donna Hughes, “The Natasha Trade: The Transnational Shadow Market of Trafficking in Women,” *Journal of International Affairs* 53,2, Spring 2000: 625-51.

In *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* Kevin Bales argues that there may be more than 27 million slaves in the world today. In this study he examines sex slavery in Thailand, chattel slavery in Mauritania, charcoal-makers in Brazil, brick-makers in Pakistan, and farmers in India.

¹ P.E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 19.

² P.D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, 268.