

# Understanding Slavery Initiative

## **Atlantic Crossing**

### **Middle Passage - the European perspective of the triangular trade route journey**

The term 'Middle Passage' is often used to describe the period that enslaved Africans endured in the holds of slave ships as they crossed the Atlantic. The term, however, is derived from the European perspective of the triangular trade route journey. It does not represent the view that for millions of enslaved Africans crossing the Atlantic was neither the middle, nor the end of the journey to their new lives as chattel in the Americas.

### **Slavery in Africa before the transatlantic trade**

The Africa that the first European explorers encountered in the 15th century was home to a variety of societies, and cultures including sprawling kingdoms and prosperous urban centres.

The cities of Katsina and Kano in what is now Nigeria each had populations of more than 100,000 people, and others along the Niger River, like Djenné, Timbuktu and Gao (now all in Mali), were home to between 10,000 and 30,000. Literacy was widespread in many regions, and luxury goods from as far afield as Venice, the Silk Road and the Maldives were traded in the forest kingdom of Bornu (north-eastern Nigeria).

The institution of slavery in various forms, existed in parts of West Africa before the arrival of Europeans and continued after slavery's abolition in the Americas and the Caribbean. Moreover, the slavery of the Americas could never have approached the scale it did without African collaboration.

Within the continent, ethical conventions had for centuries governed the taking of people to use as slaves, whose status, in most cases, resembled that of the serfs of Europe more than the chattel of the Americas. With the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, these conventions dissolved. That slavery existed in Africa prior to the late 15th century is a matter of fact, but European involvement would lead to what the historian Robin Blackburn has termed a 'degradation of slavery'.

### **The influx of outside capital**

The increase in African involvement in the trade from the 16th century onwards was caused by an influx of outside capital, the pre-existing trade

being spurred on by the growing demand for Europe's goods: fabrics and utensils, guns and alcohol.

Dahomey (now the nation of Benin) was one of the largest African kingdoms to arise between the 17th and 18th centuries. Its pre-eminence along the Volta estuary is directly attributable to its trade in slaves to transatlantic markets. By the second half of the 18th century, with 9,000 people being sold annually, slavery had become the kingdom's greatest source of revenue: in 1750, Tegebesu, the king of Dahomey, had an estimated yearly income of £250,000.

A free-for-all among African traders to capture their neighbours and rivals for sale to Europeans was deliberately stimulated by European traders anchored offshore or in coastal stations with their wares.

## **The march to the coast**

Following their capture, the captives would be marched to the coast. The only reliable European account of the harsh reality of the slave caravans comes from the explorer Mungo Park writing in the 1790s. Of the indigenous slave markets, he wrote: 'There are indeed regular markets where the value of a slave in the eye of an African purchaser increases in proportion to his distance from his native kingdom.'

Writing on behalf of the Africa Association, a British explorers' organisation Park reported that a typical column of slaves would spend eight hours a day on the road, covering about 20 miles. They were joined in pairs at the leg and a chain would attach them, one to another, at the neck. Park accompanied one such caravan from the banks of the Niger to the River Gambia and was touched by the sufferings of those 'doomed ... to a life of captivity in a foreign land'.

## **Coastal slave forts**

The ultimate destination of the enslaved would often be one of the European forts on the coast, such as Elmina, Bunce Island or the island of Gorée.

Close to Cape Verde, Gorée (in what is now Senegal) had a pleasant climate, an abundance of fish and fresh water. Its history was typical of many of the European forts and castles that dotted the Atlantic seaboard. First claimed by the Portuguese, it was owned in turn by the Dutch, the English and the French. Gorée was also famed among European traders for its many fine houses.

In a similar style, Bunce Island, on the Sierra Leone River estuary, had been occupied by the British since the 1670s, when it had come under the ownership of the Royal African Company.

The fort of Elmina in Ghana was the focal point of the southern trade, which encompassed the area from Senegal down to Nigeria. It was also the focus of the trade across the Sahara from the Ashanti territories to the north.

The coastal areas and tributaries between the forts and castles were also home to many solo traders. Some, like Thomas Corker of Falmouth and Richard Brew of Liverpool, married into local African families. Their mixed-race descendants would continue slaving long after abolition was declared in Britain. One stretch of the River Sherbro was even known as 'Black Liverpool'.

Within the walls of the forts, the African captives would languish, perhaps for months, in overcrowded dungeons. Conflict between different ethnic groups and between Europeans and their European masters was the norm. Revolts were commonplace, and their brutal and bloody suppression routine. Conditions in these forts accounted for many deaths during the transatlantic slave trade.

## **From shore to ship**

For most of the captives, the moment of greatest terror was when they found themselves crowded together in the canoes that were to transport them to the ships lying at anchor on the open seas. One slave-ship captain, Thomas Phillips, left this account:

When our slaves were come to the seaside, our canoes were ready to carry them off to the longboat if the sea permitted, and she conveyed them aboard ship, where the men were all put in irons, two and two shackled together, to prevent their mutiny or swimming ashore. The negroes are so wilful and loathe to leave their own country that they have often leapt out of canoes, boats and ships into the sea, and kept underwater till they drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved ... they having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbados than we of hell ...

## **Across the Atlantic**

The average slaving voyage from the West African coast to the Caribbean or the Americas took six to eight weeks. The new terrors experienced by the enslaved people and the inhuman discipline that accompanied this - ships' crews, outnumbered 10 to 1 by their captives, resorted to the use of iron muzzles and whips to exert control - would be a foretaste of the misery that awaited the Africans on the other side of the Atlantic.

Languishing below decks in the slave hold were people thrown together from very different societies, languages and cultures, some of whom had recently been at war with each other.

They were chained together on two tiers of shelves with less than 1 metre (330 cm) in which to sit up in - in fact, the shelves of many cargo holds measured less than 0.45m (1.5ft) in height. Male slaves were usually shackled together at the foot. In theory, each man was allotted a space of 1.8m (6ft) by 0.4m (1ft 4in) and each woman 1.5m (5ft) by 0.4m (1ft 4in). Girls were granted an area 1.4m (4ft 6in) by 0.3m (1ft). Men were quartered separately from the women and children. This separation and the levels of

violence and aggression aboard slave ships made acts of physical and sexual abuse by the sailors a feature of all voyages.

Food consisted mostly of starch: biscuit, flour, yam and beans flavoured with palm oil and hot peppers. Occasionally there were concessions of salt beef and lime juice.

The loss of life was high on all voyages, particularly during the first part, when disease and psychological trauma were especially lethal. Amoebic dysentery, scurvy, smallpox and measles were common causes of death. Between 1680 and 1688, an average of 23% of the Royal African Company's human 'cargoes' died en route to the Americas.

When disease began to spread, there was a tendency to throw the sicker Africans overboard. There was even a case where 132 captives were drowned so that the slave-ship owners could claim on the insurance. (see *The Zong*). In all, an estimated 5 million Africans - 30% of all those transported - perished before they reached the Americas.

Not everyone could survive such routine torture and deprivation, and the weak and frail were quickly broken both physically and mentally. Inevitably a level of insanity grew among the enslaved during the passage, and there is considerable evidence from slave owners that many Africans arrived in the Caribbean and the Americas psychologically traumatised.

The accounts of life on board a slave ship given by the captains differ considerably from those of their captives (see *First-hand accounts*). Speaking before the House of Commons, slave ship Captain Thomas Tobin likened the conditions on board his ship to those of a 'nursery in any private family' where the crew busied themselves 'making everything as comfortable as could possibly be for the slaves'.

## **The selling and the 'seasoning'**

The next great hurdle for the captives involved another stage of separation. Almost from the moment the ships docked on the other side of the Atlantic, a majority of the Africans were organised into groups and taken off to be sold, although on some Caribbean islands, laws were passed that people could not be sold within 24 hours of landing.

Public auctions were the most common method of dispersal. However, there were also direct consignments, by which a plantation owner would previously have made arrangements with a merchant to bring enslaved people direct to their plantation, a given number of slaves per year.

Following disembarkation, auction blocks and holding pens were the centres of activity. Captives deemed unfit for sale were classed as 'refuse' and were either sold cheaply in groups or left to perish where they lay on the docks. Those to be sold were washed, shaved and rubbed with palm oil to disguise injuries sustained during the voyage.

Following their sale, through a process known as 'seasoning', the Africans were forced, often under torture, to accept identities suited to lifelong servitude. Having already been branded once in Africa, they would be branded a second time by their legal owners, who would also give them a Christian name. African practices and customs of all kinds were discouraged. Some captives already weakened by the horrors of the voyage committed suicide. Others died under the pressure of the 'seasoning'.

## Preferences

With all transactions, buyers soon develop preferences. In the slave trade, it was believed that the Mandingos (Muslims from the Senegal region) tended to be very effective and loyal slaves if well treated and if their pride and dignity were respected. But if they were abused, physically or mentally, they were likely to be violent in response.

The Wolofs, also from Senegal, were supposed to be diligent and industrious workers because they came from highly developed agricultural societies and understood tropical agriculture.

This kind of stereotyping permeated the colonies but was far too general to be accurate. And when it came to slave resistance, all African ethnic groups were involved.

You can find [artefacts](#) in the theme of [Atlantic Crossing](#).

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