

## Transatlantic Moment

European engagement with the Muslim world contributed to a cultural awakening and commercial expansion resulting in profound political transformations. An energetic Europe burst upon the world scene in the fifteenth century, ushering in a new era. Labor exploitation was key to the expansion, and critical to such labor was the capture and enslavement of Africans. African captives in the Muslim world were important and numerically significant, but the transatlantic trade was exceptional for its high volume and compact duration, with the overwhelming majority of Africans transported in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The consequences for Africa and its exported daughters and sons were catastrophic.

Like the inner workings of a clock, the interconnectedness of several global developments gave rise to the transatlantic slave trade. Christian–Muslim conflict, international commerce, sugar, and New World incursions were foremost in creating circumstances whereby the African emerged as principal source of servile labor, laying the foundations of the modern world.

### Reconquista

Muslim forces in al-Andalus, never in control of the entire Iberian peninsula, were continually threatened by Christian enemies during their nearly 800-year rule. The latter stages of the struggle for Iberia, referred to as the “reconquest” by the Christians, unfolded at the same

time as an equally momentous contest between Christian and Muslim powers raging near the Black Sea. There, Muslims fought for control of the old Byzantine or eastern Roman empire (referred to by the Muslims as *Rūm*). In both Iberia and the Black Sea region, Muslims and Christians sold their captives into slavery.

The means by which captives were marketed underscores the period's expansive commercial activity. Maritime innovations allowed the Italian city-states of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice to participate in an eastern Mediterranean trade principally involving silk, spices, and sugar; but they also trafficked in war captives. The Genoese, for example, sold Christian captives to Muslims, and Muslim captives to Christians, by the thousands, while the Venetians purchased captives from the Black Sea. Many, mostly women, were brought to Italy, where they performed agricultural and domestic tasks left undone by an Italian population reeling from the Black Death. The newly enslaved joined the ranks of the similarly exploited in Crete and Cyprus, but especially in Sicily, southern Italy, Majorca, and southern Spain, where slavery was of a considerable vintage. The enslaved in Sicily were mostly Muslim and, like Venice and other Italian sites, female.

If the fourteenth century saw increased reliance upon captive labor in the Mediterranean, the fourteenth and fifteenth witnessed changes in the source of that labor. The reconquest of Portugal in 1267 signaled the beginning of the end of territorial disputes between Muslims and Christians. Muslim power in Spain also began to gradually decline as a result of battles and treaties. Iberia as a source of servile labor dried up, forcing Europe to turn elsewhere. By the end of the fourteenth century, the demand for slaves was largely met by captives from the Black Sea. But the struggle for Byzantium ended in 1453 with the Muslim conquest of Constantinople (henceforth Istanbul) and the consolidation of lands in Anatolia (Asia Minor) and adjoining the Black Sea. Captives were thereafter funneled to Muslim markets. Some forty years later, the combined forces of Castile and Aragon defeated the last Muslim bastion in Iberia, Granada, bringing the reconquest to an end in 1492.

With these reservoirs of servile labor tapped out, the northern Mediterranean was in need of workers, a demand occasioned by, among other projects, the cultivation of sugarcane. Spreading from southeast Asia to India in antiquity, sugarcane was introduced to Persians and Arabs during Islam's early years. They transferred its production to Syria and Egypt, and later to North Africa, southern Spain,

Sicily, Cyprus, and Crete. European crusaders first came into contact with sugar in the Holy Lands, and they developed their own sugar plantations in Cyprus, Crete, and Sicily by the early thirteenth century. Europe gradually acquired a taste for sugar (although expensive until the nineteenth century and frequently used for medicinal purposes), having known only honey as a sweetener. Italian merchants spearheaded its production by supplying the capital and technology for its expansion into southern Iberia and (eventually) Madeira and the Canary Islands off the West African coast.

While the Italians provided the financing, the Portuguese supplied the labor. How the Portuguese secured the labor, however, is very much connected to Indian Ocean commerce. Both the Italians and the Portuguese had long been interested in accessing its lucrative trade directly, as opposed to going through the Red Sea and Arabian peninsula. This long-range goal of eliminating the Muslim middleman, together with such short-term objectives as securing outlets for West African gold, led the Portuguese and Italians to explore the West African coast during the first half of the fifteenth century. By 1475, the Portuguese had crossed the equator, and by 1487 they had rounded the Cape of Good Hope. By then, the Portuguese were exporting as much as 700 kilograms of West African gold in a peak year, and averaged 410 kilograms per year in the first twenty years of the sixteenth century, accounting for nearly one-fourth of all West African annual gold production. Vasco da Gama's 1497–1498 voyage signaled Portugal's entrance into the Indian Ocean; by 1520 the Portuguese were an Indian Ocean power.

Busy with gold and empire, the Portuguese also tapped into West African labor. The Guanches, the indigenous population of the Canaries, were taken by the Portuguese and enslaved in both Madeira and the Mediterranean in the early fifteenth century. Lisbon began importing as many as 1,000 West Africans annually from 1441 to 1530; from there they were dispersed to southern Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. However, it was Madeira that emerged as the most important Portuguese possession, with its cultivation of sugarcane, initially with Guanche and then West African mainland labor (the Guanches were eventually extinguished as a group by European diseases). By the 1490s, Madeira was a wealthy Portuguese colony, exporting sugar throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. In 1495, the planters of Madeira began operations in the West African islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, operations so successful that the Old World

slave trade remained numerically dominant until the middle of the sixteenth century.

The use of black slaves to cultivate sugarcane therefore did not begin in the Americas, but in the Mediterranean and on West African coastal islands. Columbus's 1492 voyage to the "Indies" (to avoid circumnavigating Africa) set into motion a process that, among other things, transferred a system of slavery from the Old World to the New. The gradual exploitation of African labor was consequently not the result of some far-reaching European design to demean and debilitate Africans and Africa – at least not by the fifteenth century. In a real sense, Africa was a casualty of geography as much as greed.

### Scope of the Trade

The trickle of African captives in the second half of the fifteenth century turned into a veritable flood by the seventeenth century. Columbus made his "discoveries," and in 1501 Pedro Cabral returned to Portugal with claims to Brazil. The movement of the Portuguese and Spanish into the New World saw the rise of mining and agricultural industries and an increased reliance on captive African labor that was due, most importantly, to epidemiology. In sum, Europeans introduced an entirely new disease environment into the Americas, from which indigenous peoples had no immunity. The latter were subjected to smallpox, measles, influenza, diphtheria, whooping cough, chicken pox, typhoid, trichinosis, and enslavement, and the results were catastrophic: In central Mexico alone, an estimated pre-Columbian population of 25 million fell to 1.5 million by 1650, after which it slowly recovered; in Hispaniola, native Arawak numbers plummeted from approximately 7 million to less than 500 by the 1540s. In total, an indigenous population as high as 100 million (or less than 20 million, depending on the estimate) was decimated by as much as 90 percent by the late eighteenth century, a process referred to as the Great Dying.

Africans, in contrast to the indigenous population, shared with Europeans a certain proportion of the Old World disease environment. African mortality rates in the Americas were alarmingly high as a result of other factors, as were those for Europeans in places like seventeenth-century Virginia, but neither was quite as devastating as those visited upon the indigenous. The Great Dying, European familiarity with African enslaved labor, and the cost-effectiveness of

transporting Africans to the Americas explains their enslavement in the Americas, one of the most extensive mass movements in history, a displacement to beat all displacements.

Within ten years of Columbus' 1492 voyage, enslaved Africans were in the New World, along with sugarcane and experienced planters from Portugal and the Canaries. Hispaniola (current day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Cuba, and other Spanish-claimed territories were early destinations, and by the 1520s, Africans were replacing the indigenous Taíno in servile capacities, including gold and silver mining. From 1521 to 1594, from 75,000 to 90,000 Africans were brought to Spanish-held territories, with over half going to Mexico. Approximately 110,525 Africans entered Mexico and Peru between 1521 and 1639; by the time of formal emancipation in 1827, some 200,000 Africans had labored in Mexico alone. By 1560, Africans outnumbered Europeans in Cuba and Hispaniola, and by 1570 they equaled the number of Europeans in Mexico City and Vera Cruz.

Not all Africans entering the New World in the sixteenth century were enslaved. Free Africans took part in the military conquest alongside white conquistadores. Africans and their descendants had long resided in various Spanish towns, where they often experienced a freedom qualified by substantial financial hardship. The opportunity to sail for the New World was welcomed by individuals like Juan González de León, who among other things served as an interpreter of the Taíno language, and Juan Garrido, who came to Seville in 1496 and thereafter enlisted for service in the Americas. Garrido fought against the Taíno in Hispaniola, and both men participated in Ponce de León's conquest of Puerto Rico beginning in 1508. From Puerto Rico, Ponce de León raided the Caribs for captives in Santa Cruz, Guadeloupe, and Dominica, with the assistance of both men. The two even accompanied Juan Ponce de León to Florida in 1513 and 1521, mining for gold for a time.

Though there were black explorers and conquerors (dubious distinctions to say the least), slavery in sixteenth-century Spanish-claimed lands was far more significant, and even more so in Portuguese-held Brazil. Sugarcane was planted as early as the 1520s in the northeastern region of Pernambuco, and with the arrival of planters from Madeira and São Tomé, the industry grew slowly. Portuguese involvement in Kongo and Angola saw a dramatic increase in the importation of African captives, and by 1600 Brazil had outstripped Madeira as the world's leading sugar producer. Brazil was the port of call for the vast

majority of captive Africans for the whole of the seventeenth century, accounting for almost 42 percent of the total.

The early African presence in the Americas was but the beginning of woes. The export figure remains a matter of debate, with some arguing for estimates that trend toward 100 million (including losses in Africa). The scholarly consensus, however, is that approximately 11.9 million Africans were exported from Africa, out of which 9.6 to 10.8 million arrived alive, translating into a loss during the Middle Passage of about 10 to 20 percent. Some 64.9 percent of the total were males, and 27.9 percent children. The transatlantic slave trade spanned 400 years, from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The apex of the trade, between 1700 and 1810, saw approximately 6.5 million Africans shipped out of the continent. Some 60 percent of all Africans imported into the Americas made the fateful voyage between 1721 and 1820, while 80 percent were transported between 1701 and 1850. In comparison with the trade in Africans through the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean, the bulk of the Atlantic trade took less than one-tenth of the time.

Many European nations were involved in the slave trade. Britain, France, Sweden, Denmark, and Holland all joined Spain and Portugal at different points in time, as did Brazil and the United States. From the fifteenth century through the middle of the seventeenth, Spain and Portugal controlled the trade; Spain transported relatively few captives under its own flag, relying instead upon foreign firms to supply its territories under a licensing system called the *asiento*. From the mid-seventeenth century, a number of European entities entered the slaving business in addition to those previously mentioned, including the Brandenburgers, Genoese, and Courlanders. Throughout the eighteenth century and into the first decade of the nineteenth, the height of the trade, British and French involvement accounted for at least 50 percent of the trade.

Of all the voyages for which there is data between 1662 and 1867, nearly 90 percent of captive Africans wound up in Brazil and the Caribbean; indeed, Brazil alone imported 40 percent of the total trade. That part of the Caribbean in which the English and French languages became dominant yet transformed through African inflections, syntaxes, and vocabularies, was not far behind Brazil, receiving 37 percent of the trade in more or less equal proportions. Spanish-claimed islands accounted for 10 percent of the Africans, after which North America took in 7 percent or less.

## African Provenance

Nearly 85 percent of those exported through the Atlantic came from one of only four regions: West Central Africa (36.5 percent), the Bight of Benin (20 percent), the Bight of Biafra (16.6 percent), and the Gold Coast (11 percent). The busiest ports in these regions were Cabinda and Luanda (West Central Africa), Cape Castle and Anomabu (Gold Coast), Bonny and Calabar (Bight of Biafra), and Whydah (Bight of Benin). Slavers (slave ships) often took on their full complement of captives in single regions of supply, and Africans emanating from the same regions tended to be transported to the same New World destinations. Captives from West Central Africa comprised the majority of those who came to Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) and South America, accounting for an astounding 73 percent of the Africans imported into Brazil. The Bight of Benin, in turn, contributed disproportionately to Bahia (northeastern Brazil) and the francophone Caribbean outside of Saint Domingue; six out of every ten from the Bight of Benin went to Bahia, while two out of every ten arrived in francophone areas. The Bight of Biafra constituted the major source for the British Leeward Islands and Jamaica, although the Gold Coast supplied 27 percent of those who landed in Jamaica and was clearly the leading supplier to Barbados, the Guyanas, and Surinam. Sierra Leone (a region that includes the Windward Coast in this discussion) provided 6.53 percent of the total export figure, followed by Southeast Africa and Senegambia at 5.14 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively. Transshipments between New World destinations could be substantial.

A review of these regions reveals considerable complexity not only with respect to language and culture, but also as it concerns forms of government, agriculture, regional and transregional commerce, and technologies relating to each of these categories. Stated differently, while there were many similarities, there were appreciable differences of every kind among the captives.

West Central Africa was a vast region dominated by the states and populations of Kongo and Angola. Life conformed to the four ecological zones (river, swamp, forest, and savannah) of the Congo River basin, the people further linked by closely related Bantu languages. Statecraft in the region ranged from kingdoms to villages, with Kongo, Ndongo, Kasanje, and Loango representing states of substantial size and elaboration. Agriculture, the material basis for these societies,



MAP 4. West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

was usually performed by women (except land clearing), whereas men hunted and tended fruit and palm trees.

Communities throughout West Central Africa believed in a supreme deity, often referred to as Nzambi a Mpungu, and related spiritual entities. Since the fifteenth century, a tradition of Christianity was established in the region, the result of Portuguese commercial activities. The social history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kongo arguably revolved around the exchange between Christianity and Kongolese religion, giving rise to an Africanized Christianity best symbolized by the life of Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita (1682–1706), leader of a



MAP 4. (Continued)

religious movement that sought to reconstruct a Kongo reeling from war. A prophet–priest or *kitomi*, her claim to be the incarnation of St. Anthony, combined with her teachings that Jesus, Mary, and the prophets were all Kongolese, are examples of the way Christianity was reconfigured to accommodate West Central African values. Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita was burned at the stake for heresy.

In West Central Africa, spirits of the dead who had led good lives were believed to live in *mpemba*, a subterranean realm separated from the living by a large body of water, or *kalunga*. The deceased changed color within ten months of their demise, becoming white. It is therefore



FIGURE 1. Cape Coast Castle, Gold Coast, 1948.

no surprise that Europeans were initially viewed as departed spirits, having crossed the *kalunga* of the Atlantic.

The Bight of Benin, the second leading source of captives, was the land of the Fon, Ewe, and Yoruba groups. The Ewe (concentrated in present-day Togo and southeastern Ghana) were organized into more than 100 autonomous states, whereas the Fon of Dahomey (contemporary Benin) absorbed Weme, Allada, and Whydah to form a single centralized power in the eighteenth century. The Yoruba of what is now southwestern Nigeria also witnessed expansionist polities, but they were more centered on their respective towns and thereby much more urban than others. There are many exceptional features of Fon–Ewe–Yoruba cultures, not the least of which are the bronzes and sculptures of Benin and Ife. However, the gods of the Fon–Ewe (*vodun* or *loas*) and the Yoruba (*orishas*) are so numerous and unique that they further distinguish the region. The Yoruba *orishas* include Olodumare (high god), Oshun (goddess of fresh water and sensuality), Ogun (warrior god of iron), Eshu–Elegba (or Ellegua, trickster god of the crossroads), Shango (god of thunder and lightning), and Yemanja (mother of all *orishas* and goddess of the oceans); and they correspond in some instances to the Fon–Ewe *loas* of Mawu–Lisa (high god), Aziri (a riverain goddess), Gu (god of iron and warfare), and Legba (god of the crossroads; keeper of the gate). Mawu–Lisa, for example, is a composite of female and male characteristics, representing the Fon–Ewe ideal.



**MAP 5.** West Central Africa, 1600–1800.

These beliefs would become central to practices in such places as Haiti, Brazil, and Louisiana.

In contrast to the Yoruba, most of the Igbo, Ibibio, Igala, Efik, Ijo, Ogoni, and other groups of the Bight of Biafra (southeastern Nigeria) were organized into villages. The Igbo, Ibibio, and Ijo were the largest, and the Igbo in particular were marked by dense populations and agrarian economies. For the most part, theirs were independent “village democracies,” in which important decisions were made by a male peasantry individually distinguished by varying statuses of achievement. Men conducted long-distance commerce, but women controlled local trade, keeping any money they earned in communities that were

mostly patrilineal (tracing descent and inheritance through the male line). Women also regularly fought to defend their villages. Above all else, though, women were revered as mothers, wives, and keepers of the soil. Regarding the latter, they enjoyed a special connection to Ala (or Ana), the earth mother. Ala and the land (*ala*) were highly esteemed and inextricably interwoven, forming the basis of Igbo law. Ala was functionally the most important deity in Igbo society, although she was not the high, creator god. That honor was held by Chineke or Chukwu, who, like the Fon–Ewe’s Mawu–Lisa, was a blend of male and female components (*chi* and *eke*), and from whom sprang powerful spiritual forces known as the *alusi* or *agbara* as well as the personal guardian spirit or *chi* of each individual. The ancestral dead, the *ndichie*, added to the realm of the disembodied.

According to Igbo beliefs, the individual in consultation with his or her *chi* undertook a plan of action that resulted in high individual achievement, guided by a philosophy and value system stressing success and known as *ikenga*. The individual drive of the Igbo, together with their regard for the earth and belief in destiny, would clearly influence the direction of African-derived cultures in the Americas.

Regarding the Gold Coast, its southern half was dominated by Akan and Ga speakers, the former in turn divided into Twi and Baule speakers. As was true of the Igbo, women were prominent in Akan societies, as is evident in the belief that their ancestresses came from the sky or earth to found the first Akan towns in the forests. Matrilineal for the most part, Akan clans each claimed descent from a common mother. Each clan had a male and a female head, and women played critical roles as advisors and heads of the matrilineal clans. Similar to the Igbo, the Akan espoused belief in the earth mother, Asase Yaa, who, together with the high god Onyame (or Onyankopon), created the world. In keeping with most African theologies, the Akan high gods were remote, but the next order of deity, the *abosom* (who numbered in the hundreds), were accessible.

Akan societies contributed to the wide variety of political contexts out of which captives were taken. In this case, Akan speakers were either a part of the expansionist Asante empire (established around 1680) or they lived in its shadow. Asante was a vast realm ruled by the *Asantehene* (king) and a bureaucracy intent on maximizing trade with both the African hinterland and with Europeans on the coast. Gold, in addition to captives, was a key export; gold dust was the standard currency of Asante. One of the most militarily powerful and

structurally complex states in all of Africa, Asante's political union was symbolized by the *Sika Dwa*, the Golden Stool.

Sierra Leone was a region whose interior was dominated by the large Muslim theocracy of Futa Jallon, and by a series of independent, small-scale villages along the coast composed of multiple groups. A discussion of the coast underscores the rural existence of a majority who were farmers, fishers, and hunters. Although many groups were patrilineal, women tended to wield extraordinary influence through their roles as expert agriculturalists and leaders of "secret societies." Concerning the former, women cultivated rice, cotton, and indigo, skills that would be coveted in North America. Secret societies, in turn, were instrumental in intervillage diplomacy and commerce, and they were critical to the maintenance of social order. The Sande or Bundu society of women was one of the better known organizations, but women also played leading roles in such male societies as the Poro. What therefore emerges from the Sierra Leonian region are gender relations that may have been more egalitarian than elsewhere.

While located in Sierra Leone's hinterland, Futa Jallon was also vitally connected to the Senegambian region. We have already discussed Islam in Africa, so it is sufficient to observe that from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, militant or reformist Islamic states were founded in Senegambia (and indeed throughout West Africa), and Futa Jallon was a key participant in this development. Muslims captured non-Muslims in wars and were themselves captured, and captives from both sides wound up in the Americas. Muslims were exported through Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Bight of Benin, the latter mostly the result of conflict between Muslim Hausa-Fulani (related groups in contemporary northern Nigeria) and Yoruba combatants (some of whom were Muslims themselves). Muslims were also exported from the Gold Coast, but to a lesser extent. A number of Malagasy and Swahili captives from the coast of Southeast Africa were probably Muslim, but many would have been from the interior and therefore non-Muslim.

## Belly of the Whale

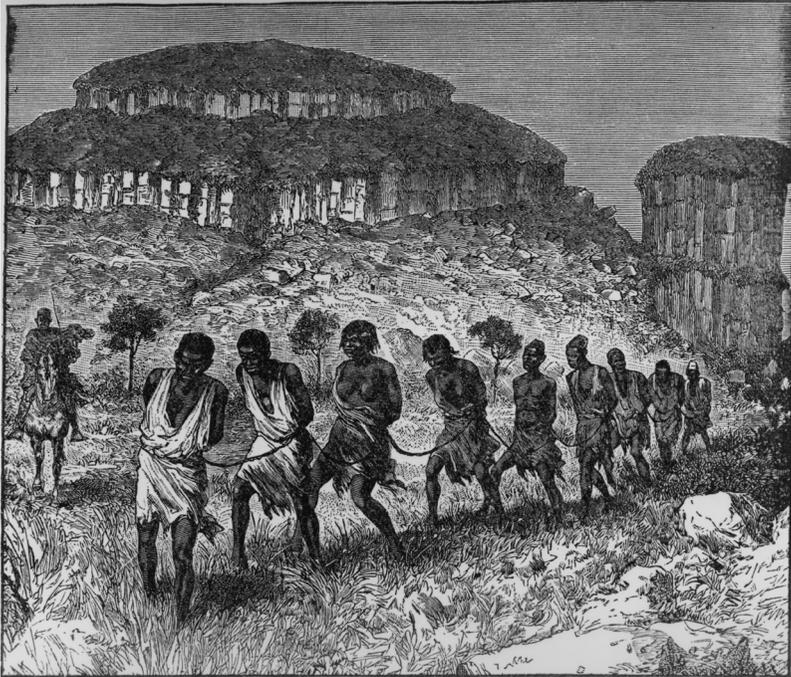
The transatlantic transport of all of these various Africans to the Americas qualifies as the quintessential moment of transfiguration, the height

of human alienation and disorientation. It is a phenomenon unlike any other, with millions forcibly removed from family and friends and deposited in lands foreign and hostile. It cannot be compared with the millions of Europeans who voluntarily crossed the Atlantic, a journey which for all of their troubles was their collective choice. Words will never convey the agony, despair, and bewilderment of these innocents, the depth of their suffering, the pain of their separation. The transatlantic voyage, also called the Middle Passage, was an unspeakable horror.

The movement across the Atlantic actually began on African soil, where those captured in the hinterland were brought to coastal holding stages, or barracoons. Between initial capture and the barracoon, anything was possible, including escape. Alternatively, they could have been taken north to the transsaharan trade, or retained in Africa as slaves, where eventual export to the Americas (or the Mediterranean) was a continual possibility. Welcome to the realm of uncertainty and fear, gateway to the land of the macabre.

Reference to captives points to the debate over the capture itself. Do scholars who maximize African involvement in the capture and sale of other Africans do so for the purpose of minimizing Western culpability? Are those who are appalled by the very suggestion of African participation in the slave trade motivated by the same logic, only in reverse? The truth of the matter may be more nuanced than straightforward. There can be no doubt that European and American demand for slave labor drove the entire enterprise. It is also the case that Europeans entered Africa and hunted humans like prey, especially in the case of the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique. But it is equally undeniable that, as was true of the transsaharan trade, there were African groups and governments involved in the capture of other Africans, together with instances of cooperation between European and African traffickers. At Bonny in the Bight of Biafra and points along the Gold Coast, for example, Europeans used "boating," or the sailing of small vessels upriver to purchase captives from villages along the banks, a practice also found along the Windward Coast. While other African states and groups resisted the slave trades and may have been successful in defending some, they clearly could not save nearly 12 million others.

Notions of African unity, and even "race" for that matter, were alien to Africa until relatively recently. As has been discussed, Africa was inhabited by people of differing cultures, religions, and political agendas, and these differences were exacerbated (or created) to feed the slave



**FIGURE 2.** Slave coffle, western Sudan, 1879–1881. From Joseph Simon Galliéni, *Mission d'exploration du Haut-Niger: Voyage au Soudan Français* (Paris, 1885), p. 525. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-32008.

trade. Raids, kidnaping, and warfare produced most captives, while individuals found guilty of crimes, or sold into bondage to pay debts, were also taken. Indeed, with the acceleration of the slave trade came a corresponding surge in the number of persons convicted of crimes. Can African participation in the slave trades be divorced from the engines of European and American demand? Culpability was shared, but was it symmetrical, and does the answer matter?

Captured Africans, in their forced march from the hinterland to the sea, could cover substantial distances, anywhere from 100 to 700 kilometers, depending upon place and time. They could take four months or longer to reach the coast. Loss of life during the trek is conservatively estimated to have averaged 10 to 15 percent, and in Angola it reached an obscene 40 percent. Captives who reached the shore could remain there for months, as a result of poor health and the need to convalesce, or to wait for the next slaver. Ports with established

traffic attracted larger numbers of slavers with greater frequency and differed, along with other barracoons, in type and size. Some barracoons were simply pens exposed to the elements, sometimes adjacent to European factories (trading posts). Others ranged from weather-protected dwellings to fortified castles. Still others, according to Mungo Park's late-eighteenth-century observation along the Gambia, were compounds attached to nearby communities, for "if no immediate opportunity offers them to advantage, they are distributed among the neighbouring villages until a slave ship arrives, or until they can be sold to black traders who sometime purchase on speculation." Park described their circumstances, stating that "the poor wretches are kept constantly fettered, two and two of them being chained together, and employed in the labours of the field; and I am sorry to add, are very scantily fed, as well as harshly treated."

The Gambian experience paralleled that of the Angolan. The latter involved coffles averaging 100 captives from the interior. They were fed the cheapest food, often rotten, which they were forced to carry. Bound and brutalized, they were taken to Luanda, where conditions remained deplorable, and there branded three times: on the right breast with a royal coat of arms, on the left breast or arm to indicate individual ownership, and on the chest with a small cross, as captives were baptized before embarking for Brazil. They then waited for weeks if not months, chained and exposed, with little to eat and little to wear, eating, sleeping, and eliminating in the closest of spaces. As many as 12,000 captives arrived annually in Luanda for export; between 6,000 and 7,000 survived for eventual shipment. The "putrid miasmas" of human filth and disease and death filled the air, circulating throughout the city.

The boarding of captives did not necessarily mean that the voyage was underway. There were often further delays of weeks if not months, as the slaver sailed from barracoon to barracoon until a full complement was achieved. A Middle Passage of only two or three month's duration was not the experience of many; rather, the total amount of time from the initial capture to embarkation could last the better part of a year.

The *James* departed England on April 5, 1675 and did not arrive in Barbados until May 21, 1676. Having reached Assini (on the Gold Coast) on August 30, the *James* exchanged commodities for both gold and captives at several points along the coast until January 11, 1676, when the vessel arrived at the English factory near Wyemba. There the

slaver boarded captives each day for about a week, most of whom were described as “very thin ordinary slaves,” indicative of the preceding ordeal onshore. The *James* made yet another stop at Anomabu and did not set sail for Barbados until March 8, 1676.

Similarly, the Dutch slaver *St. Jan* began loading captives at Ardra in the Bight of Benin, also called Slave Coast, on March 4, 1659. The ship continued east, picking up additional captives and supplies in the Bight of Biafra. By the time the *St. Jan* left the Biafran area for the Cameroon River on May 22, it had boarded 219 Africans. From that time to August 17, the vessel journeyed along the coast in search of food as far as Cape Lopez (just south of the equator). The search for provisions was a major preoccupation for slavers, and the captain of the *James* complained that his search for food was a “great trouble.” His concern was echoed by the captain of the *Arthur* operating in the Biafran Bight in February of 1678: “This day we sentt our Boat att Donus to see whatt might be done there, wee findinge negroes to be Brought on Board of us fast enough but wee nott free to deale in many fearing lest wee should take in negroes and have noe provitions for them.” It was Barbot’s calculation at the beginning of the eighteenth century that a “ship that takes in five hundred slaves, must provide above a hundred thousand yams; which is very difficult, because it is hard to stow them, by reason they take up so much room.”

Once purchased by European slavetraders, captives were often branded with the company’s coat of arms. These became their only coats, as they were usually stripped of all clothing. In 1699, Bosman recorded that “they came aboard stark naked as well women as men; in which condition they are obliged to continue, if the master of the Ship is not so charitable (which he commonly is) as to bestow something on them to cover their nakedness.” Some 128 years after Bosman, Mayer noted in 1827 that two days before captives were loaded onto the slaver, the heads of both males and females were shaved. And then:

On the appointed day, the *barracoon* or slave-pen is made joyous by the abundant ‘feed’ which signalizes the negro’s last hours in his native country. The feast over, they are taken alongside the vessel in canoes; and as they touch the deck, they are entirely stripped, so that women as well as men go out of Africa as they came into it – *naked*. This precaution, it will be understood, is indispensable; for perfect nudity, during the whole voyage, is the only means of securing cleanliness and health.

Brantz Mayer, *Captain Canot, or, Twenty Years of an African Slaver* (New York: Appleton, 1854), p. 102.

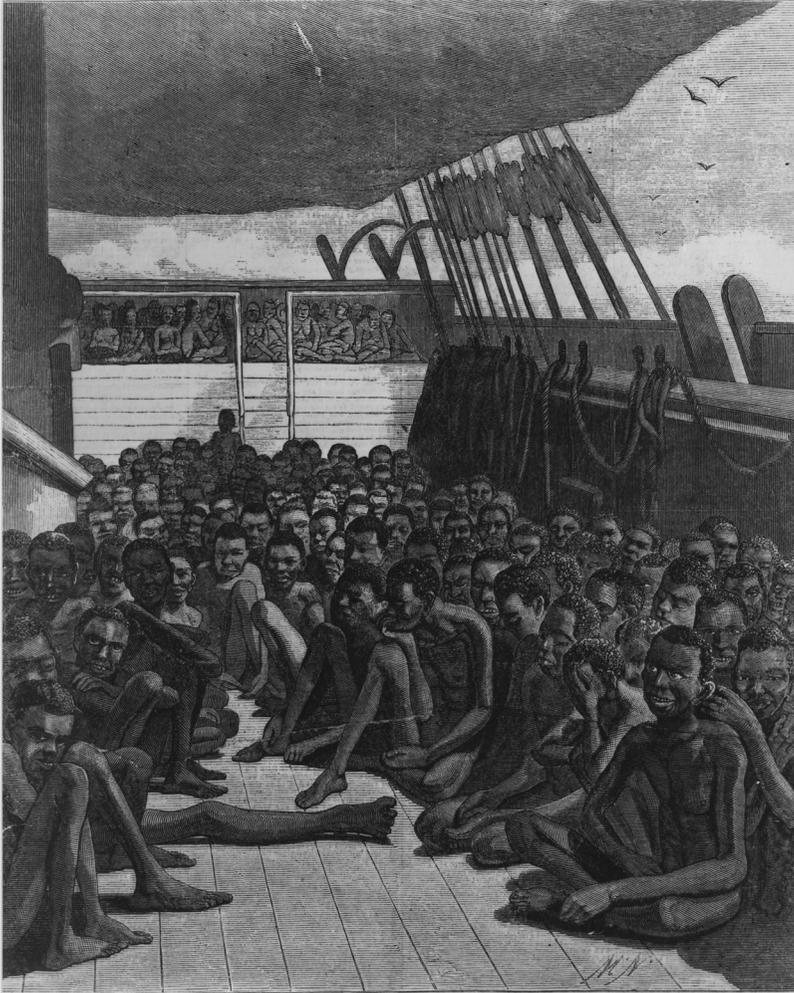
While slavetraders may have been primarily concerned with hygiene, they were not oblivious to the psychological implications of denuding. Contrary to popular ignorance, most Africans did not go about butt naked, swinging through trees, but in fact placed great value on textiles, the primary commodity for which captives were traded to Europeans in the first place. The humiliation of prolonged nakedness before captors, the opposite sex, and children seared into the psyche an overwhelming sense of vulnerability.

Captives did not suffer silently. To the contrary, they often rebelled. To prevent mutiny and escape, male slaves were chained together at the wrists and ankles in groups of two as soon as they were boarded. Women and girls were physically separated from the males and usually unfettered, an arrangement that became standard procedure by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The segregation of the sexes was maintained throughout the voyage except under certain circumstances on deck. Europeans had learned to prepare for rebellion as early as 1651, when captain Bartholomew Haward was told that “there is put aboard your Pinck *Supply* 30 paire of shackles and boults for such of your negers as are rebellious and we pray you be veary carefull to keepe them undr and let them have their food in due season that they ryse not against you, as they have done in other ships.”

The separation of male and female captives also facilitated the long, sordid history of the rape of African women and girls by European men, a humiliation that began before they were ever sold to New World planters (who promptly went out and did the same). In point of fact, crews were given sexual access to captive females as a matter of policy. Even a small number of females violated infrequently was sufficient to establish the assailability of the captive population.

In addition to fetters, captives were often kept below deck, in the hold of the slaver, until the African shoreline was no longer in sight. This was done to discourage revolt, for the African maintaining visual contact with her homeland was sorely tempted to return. The *Hannibal's* Captain Phillips poignantly records the African response: “The negroes are so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap'd out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned to avoid being taken up and saved by our own boats, which pursued them; they having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbadoes than we have of hell.”

That the African viewed the New World as hell is related to her fear that Europeans were cannibals. Barbot records that it “has been



**FIGURE 3.** The Africans of the slave bark *Wildfire*, brought into Key West on April 30, 1860. From *Harper's Weekly* (June 2, 1860), vol. 4, p. 344. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-41678.

observ'd before, that some slaves fancy they are carry'd to be eaten, which make them desperate; and others are so on account of their captivity: so that if care be not taken, they will mutiny and destroy the ship's crew in hopes to get away." Olaudah Equiano, upon seeing whites for the first time, became "persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. . . . When I recovered a little, I found some black people around me. . . . I asked them

if we were not to be eaten by these white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair.” Equiano’s apprehensions were consistent with those in West Central Africa (Equiano was an Igbo from what is now southeastern Nigeria), where Europeans were seen as spirits, their advent a portent of death. Such was the fear of the New World, so overwhelming was the sense of separation from family and land, that many chose to starve themselves; refusing to eat was an option so pervasive that crews often had to use force. Those who resisted were given a “cat,” or flogging. In the face of their past capture, present suffering, and less-than-bleak future, many chose suicide by other means. Those who could went over the side; those who could not often went insane.

But many did not go insane or over the side, and because the slave trade was, in the final analysis, a business transaction, the African had to be maintained in some fashion. Captives were therefore usually fed twice a day aboard the slavers. Their diet included horse beans, rice, yams, limes, lemons, ground Indian corn, and palm oil. Meat was extremely rare, though fish caught along the voyage was occasionally provided. Water was obviously highly valued and rationed.

Medical practitioners called surgeons were often included among the crew to attend the medical needs of the captives. Of dubious ability and questionable reputation, these surgeons were further restricted by few resources. They monitored the health of the captives on a regular basis, segregating those with serious illnesses and treating them with such physics as wine or sago, a starchlike substance. The surgeons examined captives on African coastal shores to determine their fitness, and they prepared them for market once the New World was reached.

The consequences of the surgeons’ limitations and the cramped, filthy conditions aboard the slavers was nothing short of ruinous. Diseases assailing the captives included dysentery (the “flux” or the “bloody flux”), measles, scurvy, and “fever.” Ophthalmia, a condition leading to blindness (possibly related to river blindness), was widespread. Yaws was as prevalent and potentially fatal. Intestinal worms added to the collective misery. Aside from the bloody flux, contracted from food and water contamination, smallpox was of greatest concern; whole ships were quarantined upon reaching New World destinations until the pox had run its course and was no longer contagious.

Spacing also contributed to captive misery, and “tight packing” occurred frequently aboard slavers. Scholars disagree over its precise frequency and over its impact on the health of the captive population,

but there can be little doubt that tight packing contributed to suffering, and suffering is definitely a health issue.

In addition to those who did not survive the Middle Passage, many perished in Africa itself. Depending upon the specific region in question, from 10 to 40 percent of those captured in the interior died en route to the sea, at which point at least another 10 percent expired while awaiting export along the coast, during the barracoon phase. When mortality rates from points of capture through the Middle Passage are combined, rates that do not take into consideration those initially killed in slaving raids and wars, from 30 to 70 percent of those captured for eventual export to the Americas never arrived. Mutinies and shipwrecks added to the hosts of the dead. Slave ships, in the Dutchman Bosman's words, were "always foul and stinking." The "stench of a slave ship could be scented for miles," the slave deck "so covered with blood and mucous that it resembled a slaughter-house." The surgeon Isaac Wilson was convinced that two-thirds of the 155 who perished aboard the *Elizabeth* (out of 602) died from "melancholy," observing that once the captives were taken aboard, "a gloomy pensiveness seemed to overcast their countenances and continued in a great many." The sounds emanating from slavers usually included a "howling melancholy noise." To combat this mother of all blues, captives were brought on deck and forced to dance and sing, and sometimes had to be beaten to get them to comply. An early form of minstrelsy, this feigned animation in the midst of such sorrow demonstrates the deep and complicated history of black performance, its relationship to coercion both disturbing and instructive.

From the belly of the whale, the sons and daughters of Africa were dispersed all over the New World, occupying every conceivable place, performing every imaginable task. The terror of the passage would be forever seared into the memory of the dispersed, a memory passed on to descendants. But for all of the horror of the transatlantic slave trade, it did not completely rupture ties to the homeland. Africa would remain a central consideration in the hearts and minds of many, the dream of reconnection, of reversing sail, one of the Diaspora's central challenges.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

The best place to begin examining the volume of the transatlantic slave trade is the database compiled by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt,

David Richardson, and Herbert Klein entitled *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1999), which contains records for over 27,000 voyages, the most comprehensive response to Philip D. Curtin's groundbreaking *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: U. of Wisconsin Press, 1969). Works mentioned in the [preceding chapter's](#) suggested reading section, such as those of Patrick Manning and Paul E. Lovejoy, are applicable here as well. The literature on the transatlantic slave trade, exploring the economic, political, and social implications for all or segments of those involved, is in fact vast; one would want to include, however, Joseph E. Inikori's *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (New York: Africana, 1982); Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 1992); and Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: U. of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1998), 2nd ed., and David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1984), have excellent chapters on the emergence of the trade in the Mediterranean and Iberia. The work of A. J. R. Russell-Wood, especially *A World on the Move: The Portuguese in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, 1415–1808* (Manchester: Carcanet Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), provides keen insight into Iberian developments as they relate to the slave trade. Ruth Pike's *Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U. Press, 1972) is also pertinent, while Eric R. Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1982) remains a pathclearing contribution.

For the Middle Passage, see Olaudah Equiano, *The African: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (London: Black Classics, 1998) for a firsthand account. Elizabeth Donnan's *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute, 1930–35) has information on this and other aspects of the slave trade. For interpretative analyses, see Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1978).

A discussion of the Middle Passage as well as the origins and cultures of transported Africans can be found in Michael A. Gomez,

*Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1998). An interesting and at times technical study of the impact of Old World migrations into the New is located in Guy A. Settignano, ed., *Columbus and the New World: Medical Implications* (Providence, RI: Oceanside, 1995). Finally, treatment of these and other issues is contained in Joseph E. Harris, *The African Diaspora*, eds. Alusine Jalloh and Stephen E. Maizlish (College Station: Texas A & M U. Press, 1996).