

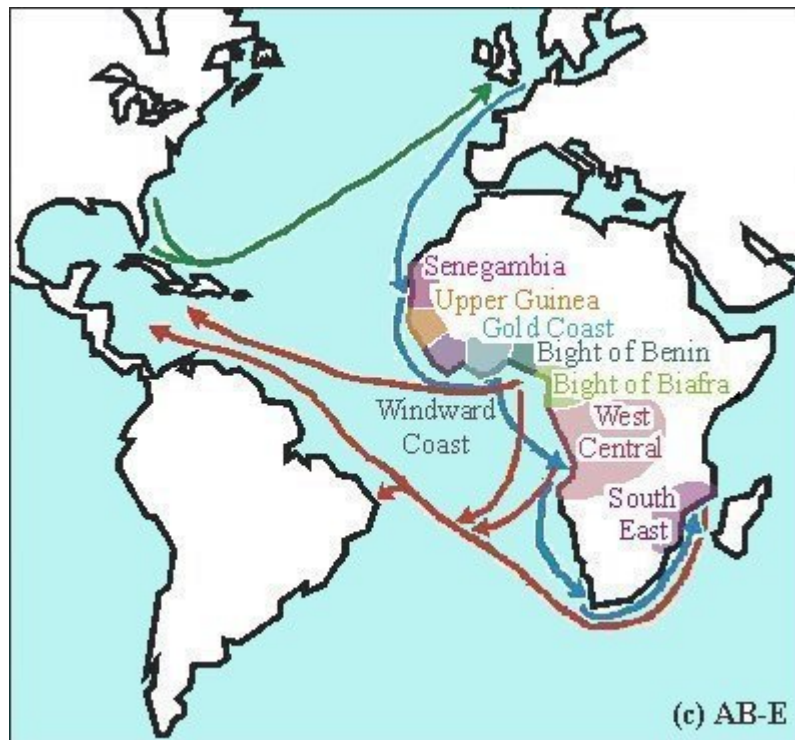
The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

A brief review of the *triangular trade* with particular reference to recent statistics.

For two hundred years, 1440-1640, Portugal had a monopoly on the export of slaves from Africa. It is notable that they were also the last European country to abolish the institution - although, like France, it still continued to work former slaves as contract labourers, which they called *libertos* or *engagés à temps*. It is estimated that during the 4 1/2 centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Portugal was responsible for transporting over 4.5 million Africans (roughly 40% of the total). During the eighteenth century however, when the slave trade accounted for the transport of a staggering 6 million Africans, Britain was the worst transgressor - responsible for almost 2.5 million. (A fact often forgotten by those who regularly cite Britain's prime role in the abolition of the slave trade.)

The triangular trade

Expanding European empires in the New World lacked one major resource -- a work force. In most cases the indigenous peoples had proved unreliable (most of them were dying from diseases brought over from Europe), and Europeans were unsuited to the climate and suffered under tropical diseases. Africans, on the other hand, were excellent workers: they often had experience of agriculture and keeping cattle, they were used to a tropical climate, resistant to tropical diseases, and they could be "worked very hard" on plantations or in mines.



Africans had been traded as slaves for centuries -- reaching Europe via the Islamic-run, trans-Saharan, trade routes. Slaves obtained from the Muslim dominated North African coast however proved to be too well educated to be trusted and had a tendency to rebellion.

Between 1450 and the end of the nineteenth century, slaves were obtained from along the west coast of Africa with the full and active co-operation of African kings and merchants. (There were occasional military campaigns organised by Europeans to capture slaves, especially by the Portuguese in what is now Angola, but this accounts for only a small percentage of the total.) In return, the African kings and merchants received various trade goods including beads, cowrie shells (used as money), textiles, brandy, horses, and perhaps most importantly, guns. The guns were used to help expand empires and obtain more slaves, until they were finally used against the European colonisers. The export of trade goods from Europe to Africa forms the first side of the *triangular trade*.

Trans-Atlantic exports by region 1650-1900		
Region	Number of slaves accounted for	%
Senegambia	479,900	4.7
Upper Guinea	411,200	4.0
Windward Coast	183,200	1.8
Gold Coast	1,035,600	10.1
Blight of Benin	2,016,200	19.7
Blight of Biafra	1,463,700	14.3
West Central	4,179,500	40.8
South East	470,900	4.6
Total	10,240,200	100.0

Data derived from tables 1.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.1 and 7.4
as presented in:
Transformations in Slavery
by Paul E. Lovejoy
Cambridge University Press, 2000,
ISBN 0-521-78430-1

The transport of slaves from Africa to the Americas forms the *middle passage* of the triangular trade. Several distinct regions can be identified along the west African coast, these are distinguished by the particular European countries who visited the slave ports, the peoples who were enslaved, and the dominant African society(s) who provided the slaves.

So, for example, Senegambia includes the Wolof, Mandinka, Sereer and Fula; Upper Gambia has the Temne, Mende, and Kissi; the Windward Coast has the Vai, De, Bassa, and Grebo. (A forthcoming article will look in more detail at the people and kingdoms involved in the slave trade.)

Slaves were introduced to new diseases and suffered from malnutrition long before they reached the new world. It is suggested that the majority of deaths on the voyage across the Atlantic - the *middle passage* - occurred during the first couple of weeks and were a result of malnutrition and disease encountered during the forced marches and subsequent interment at slave camps on the coast.

Conditions on the slave ships were terrible, but the estimated death rate of around 13% is lower than the mortality rate for seamen, officers and passengers on the same voyages. (Again, a forthcoming article will discuss 'mortality rates of the trans-Atlantic slave trade'.)

**Trans-Atlantic imports by region
1450-1900**

Region	Number of slaves accounted for	%
Brazil	4,000,000	35.4
Spanish Empire	2,500,000	22.1
British West Indies	2,000,000	17.7
French West Indies	1,600,00	14.1
British North America and United States	500,000	4.4
Dutch West Indies	500,000	4.4
Danish West Indies	28,000	0.2
Europe (and Islands)	200,000	1.8
Total	11,328,000	100.0

Data derived from table II as presented in:
The Slave Trade
by Hugh Thomas
Simon and Schuster, 1997,
ISBN 0-68481063-8

As a result of the slave trade, five times as many Africans arrived in the Americas than Europeans. Slaves were needed on plantations and for mines and the majority was shipped to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the Spanish Empire. Less than 5% travelled to the Northern American States formally held by the British.

The third, and final, leg of the triangular trade involved the return to Europe with the produce from the slave-labour plantations: cotton, sugar, tobacco, molasses and rum.

The statistics presented in this article are derived from various tables published in the following books:

[*Transformations in Slavery*](#) by Paul E. Lovejoy, Cambridge University Press, 2000, ISBN 0-521-78430-1, 367 pages.

The Slave Trade by Hugh Thomas, Simon and Schuster, 1997, ISBN 0-68481063-8, 908 pages.

THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE TRIANGULAR TRADE WITH RECENT STATISTICAL DATA

Answer the following questions by quoting directly from the text of the article.

1. What nation had a monopoly for 200 years and was the last to abolish slavery?
2. During the 1700s (18th Century) what European country was the greatest slave trader?
3. Why were Native Americans and Europeans not a reliable source of labor in the long term?
4. What made Africans an efficient labor source? **CONNECT ARTICLES:** Can you explain how this connects to *Rational Calculation* that we saw in last week's CAPITALISM article?
5. Why were slaves that were taken from North Africa considered to be too dangerous?
6. What items were traded to African Kings for the slaves that were received?
7. One of the items traded for slaves was a new invention: guns. What caused Europeans to stop trading these to African Kings?
8. Where in Africa were most of the slaves from?
9. What were the main causes of death for slaves during the journey called the Middle Passage?

10. What was the estimated death rate among slaves in the Middle Passage?

11. What country imported the most slaves?

12. What percentage of total slaves came to British North America and the United States? About how many total?

13. How many more times more Africans came to the New World than Europeans.

14. **SYNTHESIS QUESTION:** Based on the answers above, what can you conclude about the relationship that developed between Europeans and Africans during the Renaissance and Age of Exploration? Make at least three observations that help you make this conclusion