CHAPTER 1

# Slavery in Western Development

Why were Africans enslaved and transported to the New World? This is the fundamental question that faces anyone studying the Atlantic slave trade. Why were Africans the only ones enslaved and why did the American colonies need this type of labor? Could not America have been developed without slaves? In this chapter, I suggest answers to the first question, while in the following chapter I examine the nature of the American labor market in the fifteenth to the nineteenth century to answer the query about why slavery was the adopted solution to the perceived shortage of labor in America.

Though of limited importance, slavery still existed in Europe in 1492. Like almost all complex societies in world history until that time, the states of Europe also had known slaves from their earliest foundations, and slavery in earlier centuries had been a fundamental labor institution. As in most such societies this had involved what was called domestic slavery, in which the labor power of the household was extended through the use of these workers. But slaves in Europe at various times and places had performed all known tasks and had even formed separate classes and groups beyond the household level. Few European or other peoples escaped slavery themselves and almost all societies treated their slaves as outsiders, rootless and ahistorical individuals who were ultimately held against their will by the threat of force. In all societies where they existed, slaves were also the most mobile labor force available.

Slaves, of course, were not unique in either the work they performed or in their lack of control over their own lives. Peasants, serfs, even clansmen and kinsmen were often in temporary conditions of servitude. With peasants tied to the land, obligated to the nonagricultural elites for corvée (nonpaid labor), and often severely restricted in terms of age gradations and rules within their own kin groups, there was often little to distinguish slaves from other workers in terms of the labor they performed or the rights that were immediately available to them. But where slavery came to be a recognized and important institution, it was the lack of ties to the family, to kin, and to the community that finally distinguished slaves from all other workers. In fact, their lack of kin, community, and land made slaves especially desirable in the preindustrial world. True slaves were persons without the bindings and linkages common to even the lowest free persons, and were thus completely dependent on the will of their masters. Masters could use their slaves at far less cost in reciprocal obligations than with any other labor group in their societies.

Although many pre-fifteenth-century societies held slaves, in most cases such slaves were only a minor part of the labor force and were not crucial producers of goods and services for others. Most complex societies rested on the labor of settled village agriculturalists, and part-time artisanal specialists in manufactures who equally shared the peasant status. These two groups were the primary producers, and slaves were relegated to very specialized work for the elite, domestic service in the better households, and sometimes very hazardous state enterprises such as mining to which even obligated peasants could not be assigned to work. Sometimes, conquered warriors were enslaved and used in special public works activities, but in most societies it was the peasants who performed most of this labor.

Thus, while slavery was an institution known to many complex societies, slavery as a system of industrial or market production was a much more restricted phenomenon. Most scholars now date its origins for Western society in the centuries immediately prior to the Christian era in the Greek city-states and the emerging Roman Empire of the period and argue that, for slavery to become a dominant factor in society, it was essential that an important market economy at the local and international level be developed, that a significant share of the agricultural production for that market come from nonpeasant producers, and that slave labor become the major factor in that production. All these conditions, it is now assumed, were only met within our historical memory in the two centuries before the Christian era under the Romans.

With large artisanal shops using slave labor and producing goods for an international market, the classical Greek economy of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. was distinguished by the utilization of slave labor, which historians would later define as an original development of the institution. But the concentration of slaves in urban areas, their limited use in rural production, and other constraints on slave production meant that Greek slavery would not be as fully elaborated an economic institution as that which developed in the Roman Empire.

The Roman conquest of a greater proportion of the Eurasian land mass than any other previously known empire created a major market economy. Market economies obviously existed before, just as previous conquest states created large number of slaves as booty for the conquering armies, but the Romans carried all of these factors to another level of intensity. Their enormous armies absorbed as much as 10 percent of the male peasant work force in Italy at the same time as their elite began to purchase large tracts of land with their earnings from conquest and subsequent taxation of the conquered. In a time of economic expansion and limited supplies of free labor, and an initially cheap supply of conquered slaves, it was natural to turn toward slave labor. Although slaves became more expensive as conquests slowed, they were always less costly an alternative than paying wages high enough to attract peasants away from subsistence agriculture. It is this traditional problem of expanding markets and limited labor supplies that creates a condition ideal for slave or other servile labor arrangements if the political power exists to enserf and enslave given populations.

The Roman case is unusual among documented preindustrial historical societies in the size and importance of both major urban centers and long-distance markets. Up to 30 percent of the Italian peninsula's population may have been urban at the height of the empire, with another 10 percent being urbanized within the empire beyond. To feed these nonagriculturalists required supplies more abundant than could be produced by traditional peasant agricultural arrangements. Thus the growth of large landed estates manned by slaves, and supervised by overseers for absentee landlords, became a major force in the supply of foodstuffs for market consumption. The high degree of specialization of labor and the demands of the market for mass-produced goods to satisfy international as well as interregional consumption also provided an incentive for slave artisanal labor.

Finally, the sheer size of the slave labor force was unusual in premodern times. While all such figures are extremely speculative, it has been estimated that at the height of the Roman Empire, the population of Italy contained some 2 to 3 million slaves, who represented between 35 to 40 percent of the total population. While peasant agriculture was still the predominant form of rural labor, the size of the slave population meant that it played a vital role in most of the productive enterprises. Slave gangs were a common feature of rural agriculture, and slaves could be found in all parts of the empire and were owned by most classes in the society. It was also evident that slaves were often a large element in many local populations and well-developed slave communities appear to have been common. This is especially evident at times of major slave rebellions, where there existed a community of interests expressed among the slaves despite their diverse origins.

All this does not mean that Romans did not have household servants and domestic slaves, or that elites did not use slaves for highly specialized tasks, roles common to all societies where slaves were held. But in terms of the production of goods and services for the market, the Romans can be said to have created a modern slave system that would be similar to those established in the Western Hemisphere from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. It is for this reason, as much as its historic role in the origins of modern western European institutions, that Roman law and custom in regard to slave labor would prove to be so important to post-1500 slave regimes.

In their definition of the legal status of slaves, the Romans also profoundly influenced such legal precepts for American slave societies. It was the primary aim of Roman law to guarantee the total rights of property for the master. All slaves were absolutely denied the legal right to personal liberty. But beyond this, the society for its own purposes could put restraints on masters and their power over their slaves. Other fundamental aspects to legal personality, such as the rights to personal property and security, were not totally denied slaves. So long as these rights did not deter the mobility of the slave labor force, they could be partially or fully accepted. This more "humane" attitude often sprang from the self-interest of the master class, whose desire was for a stable labor force. This stability might result in the qualification of the master's absolute rights in the name of greater efficiency and social peace.

Roman slavery was a thriving institution so long as the Roman Empire survived. Although slaves did not disappear from Europe until well into the modern period, slavery as a major economic institution collapsed with the barbarian invasions from the fifth to the eighth century A.D. The same reasons that gave rise to the importance of the slave regime earlier explain its collapse at the end of the imperial era. The decline of urban markets, the breakdown of long-distance trade, and the increasing self-sufficiency of agriculture all created a situation in which slave labor was no longer efficient, and peasant agricultural labor again predominated. More and more, slavery was reduced to the level of household and domestic tasks. In the early Middle Ages the retrenchment of the international market and the stress on defense and security led to the rise of a new semiservile labor force with the creation of the serfs, peasants who sacrificed part of their freedom in return for protection by the local elite. Serfs soon became the predominant labor force, easily displacing the last vestiges of slave labor in agricultural production in Europe.

At no time during this period of retrenchment and enserfment, did slavery itself disappear from Europe. Among the Germanic peoples on the northern frontiers, it remained important as warfare continued to create a supply of slaves. In the non-Christian world of the Mediterranean, of course, slavery actually experienced a renaissance between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries. The Muslim invasions of the Mediterranean islands and especially of Spain brought the increasing use of slaves in agriculture and industry. Moreover, the existence of Islamic slave markets encouraged a lively trade in Christians.

It was the revival of European long-distance trade as a result of the first Crusades, which again brought Christian Europeans more actively into the slave trade and into slave production. From the tenth to the thirteenth century, the expansion of the Genoese and Venetians into Palestine, Syria, the Black Sea, and the Balkans, along with their possessions in the eastern Mediterranean islands of Crete and Cyprus, all created a new impetus to slavery. A lively market in Slavic peoples developed in this period, which gave rise to the use of the term slave to define this status. Slavs, of course, were not the only peoples to be enslaved. On the islands of the eastern Mediterranean, for example, black slaves could be found in the early fourteenth century, along with all types of Muslims from North Africa and Asia Minor, Christians from Greece and the Balkans, and northern Europeans.

Along with slavery, plantation agriculture and sugar production were also common to parts of the Mediterranean world after the eighth century. Sugar was introduced from Asia to Europe during the Islamic invasions, but it was the First Crusade at the end of the eleventh century that gave the Christians a chance to become sugar producers in their own right. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christian estates in Palestine began to produce sugar with a mixed labor force made up of slaves, villeins, and free workers. After the fall of these lands to the Turks at the end of the thirteenth century, the center of sugar production moved to Cyprus. Here Italian merchants and local rulers used slave and free labor to produce sugar. Cyprus in turn was soon replaced by the Venetian colony of Crete and then by Sicily, which had been producing sugar for the European market since the late eleventh century. With the fall of Palestine and Syrian centers to the Turks, Sicilian production became preeminent. The Mediterranean coast of Islamic Spain in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries became another important production center for northern and western Europe. The westernmost advance of European sugar production reached the southern Portuguese Atlantic province of the Algarve at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In not all these cases was sugar produced by slaves, nor were they the exclusive labor force in any particular area. But the identification of slavery with sugar was well established long before the conquest of America. The techniques of sugar production and slave plantation agriculture that developed on the Atlantic islands and later in the New World had their origins in the eastern Mediterranean in the early Middle Ages.

After the eighth century, slavery in mainland Christian Europe was reduced to a minor labor arrangement almost exclusively confined to domestic activities. Slaves no longer played the vital role within European agriculture that they had under the Romans. The slow revival of commerce and activities after the tenth century led to increases in land utilization and colonization and a subsequent growth of the peasant population, which proved more than sufficient to maintain the slowly developing market economies. In such a situation slave labor was too costly.

Only in the more advanced Islamic Mediterranean world could slaves be purchased in large quantities and the institution of slavery be revived as a major factor in production. The sole European state in this period to provide an important market for slaves was therefore Islamic Spain, which was a significant importer of Christian slaves from the eighth to the tenth century. But the decline of the Iberian Islamic states led to the closure of this market. The subsequent conquest of these states by the northern Iberian Christians resulted more in enserfment than slavery for the captured Muslim peasants and artisans. The experience of the Egyptian rulers who imported 10,000 Christian male slaves per annum in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, was not typical of Christian Europe at this time.

By the end of the Middle Ages several varieties of slave regimes existed in Europe, the most important of which were found in the Mediterranean region. No European state was without a few slaves, but the use of slave labor in agriculture and manufacturing on a large scale had long disappeared. The emerging power of the European economy was now fed by an expanding peasant labor force. Although the legal structures originating in Roman law were still intact in Christian Europe, the institution of slavery was not a major force by the time the first Portuguese caravels arrived on the Guinean coast at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

Slavery also existed in the African continent from recorded times. But like medieval Christian Europe, it was a relatively minor institution in the period before the opening up of the Atlantic slave trade. Slavery could be found as a domestic institution in most of the region's more complex societies, and a few exceptional states may have developed more industrial forms of slave production. But African slaves were to be found outside the region as well. With no all-embracing religious or political unity, the numerous states of Africa were free to buy and sell slaves and even to export them to North African areas. Caravan routes across the Sahara had existed from recorded times, and slaves formed a part of Africa's export trade to the Mediterranean from pre-Roman to modern times. But a new dimension to that trade occurred with the expansion of Islam in the eighth century. As the Islamic world spread into India and the eastern Mediterranean, Islamic merchants came to play an ever more important part in the African slave trade. The frontier zones of the sub-Saharan savannas, the Red Sea region, and the east coast ports on the Indian Ocean in turn became major centers for the expansion of Muslim influence. From the ninth to the fifteenth century, a rather steady international slave trade occurred, with the majority of forced migrants being women and children. Some six major and often interlocking caravan routes and another two major coastal regions may have accounted for as many as 5,000 to 10,000 slaves per annum in the period from A.D. 800 to 1600. The primary route remained North Africa, followed in order of importance by the Red Sea and the East African trades.

The majority of African nations continued to experience slavery as a minor institution within largely kin- and lineage-based social systems.

In these societies slaves performed largely domestic and even religious functions, serving as everything from concubines to sacrificial victims, and performed all types of service from those of warrior or administrator to agricultural laborer. But as in most societies where slaves were to be found, they were not crucial to the production process, which remained largely in the hands of other classes. In these societies, moreover, the status of slaves was not as precisely fixed as in regimes in which slaves played a more vital role in production. Children of free fathers and slave mothers would often become free members of the kin group; second-generation acculturated slaves would become less subject to sale and to totally arbitrary control and assume far more rights and privileges.

There were, however, a few exceptional societies where slavery was clearly a fundamental institution, playing a dominant role in either the economic, social, or political life of the local state. In many of the sub-Saharan Islamicized borderland regimes, slaves were used extensively as soldiers, and also in agricultural labor on a major scale. Several of the Wolof states had agricultural slaves who produced for local consumption as well as for export. The most famous of these agriculturally based slave systems was that developed in the Niger River valley in the Empire of Songhay in the fifteenth century. Irrigated plantations with up to several thousand slaves produced wheat, rice, and other commercial food crops, which not only supported the army of the local empire but also were sold to the caravans crossing the Sahara. Slaves were also used in western Sudanese gold mines and in the Saharan salt works. In East Africa among the commercial towns of the coast, some plantation slaves could also be found near Malindi and Mombasa in the north and on the island of Madagascar. (See Maps 1–4.)

But these major commercial uses of slaves were more the exception than the rule, and the shifting nature of trade, warfare, and ecology on the Saharan border meant that most of the western African Islamic savanna states were relatively unstable. They were subject to attack by non-African border states, which was the fate of the Songhay Empire, destroyed by Moroccan invaders in the 1590s. They were also often located in unstable ecological zones, and severe periods of drought usually led to the destruction of local economies and states. Major slave regimes in Africa, especially in the west, were thus relatively few and of limited longevity in the period prior to the arrival of the Christian Europeans.

Although large-scale commercial use of slaves was limited, the use of slaves within most African societies was widespread. The existence of this large number of slaves meant that a lively internal slave market and intracontinental slave trade existed. Thus a dual slave trade came into existence well before the opening of the West African–Atlantic routes. Through the north and to the east, slaves were being shipped outside Africa in steady numbers for at least some six centuries prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. In this period preceding the Atlantic slave trade, anywhere from 3.5 to 10 million Africans left their homelands. These streams of forced migrants tended to contain far more women and children than would the migrants later participating in the Atlantic slave trade, and they also came from regions that would only moderately be affected by the Atlantic movements. Along with this international slave trade, there was also a thriving internal slave trade that satisfied the needs of local African states. Given the overwhelming use of slaves for domestic and social purposes, the stress in this trade was even more biased toward women. For both these long-term trades, the whole complex of enslavement practices from full-scale warfare and raiding of enemies to judicial enslavement and taxation of dependent peoples had come into use and would easily be adjusted to the needs of the Atlantic slave trade when this came into existence in the early fifteenth century.

These pre-Atlantic trades, however, did differ in important respects from the European trade. Aside from the far greater participation of women and children, and their concentration on northern and eastern African peoples, they were less intense and had a slighter impact on local conditions. Although the number of persons who were forcibly transported was impressive, these pre-1500 northern and eastern African slave trades still fit in with a level of production and social and political organization in which slave trading remained an incidental part of statecraft and economic organization. There is even some question as to whether the internal trade was more important than the external trade in this pre-Atlantic period.

The arrival of the Portuguese explorers and traders on the sub-Saharan African coast in the early 1400s would ultimately represent a major new development in the history of the slave trade in Africa in terms of the intensity of its development, the sources of its slaves, and the uses to which these slaves would be put. But initially there was little to distinguish the Portuguese traders from the Muslim traders of North Africa and the sub-Saharan regions. Portuguese interest was primarily directed toward controlling the North African Saharan routes by opening up a route from the sea. Their prime interest was gold, with slaves, pepper, ivory, and other products as only secondary concerns. Even when they began shipping slaves in 1444, they were mainly sent to Europe to serve as domestic servants. Africans had already arrived at these destinations via the overland Muslim-controlled caravan routes, and thus the new trade was primarily an extension of the older patterns. The Portuguese even carried out extensive slave trading along the African coast primarily to supply the internal African slave market in exchange for gold, which they then exported to Europe. Their concentration on gold as opposed to slaves was based on the growing scarcity of precious metals in Europe. An expanding European economy was running an increasingly negative balance of trade with Asia, and the direct European access to the sub-Saharan goldfields helped pay for that trade. It was only with the introduction of sugar production to the Atlantic islands and the opening up of the Western Hemisphere to European conquest at the end of the fifteenth century that a new and important use was found for slaves. As once again slaves became a major factor in agricultural production within the European context, Portuguese interest in its African trade slowly shifted from a concern with gold and ivory to one primarily stressing slaves.

As long as the Portuguese concentrated their efforts in the regions of Mauritania, Senegambia, and the Gold Coast, they essentially integrated themselves into the existing network of Muslim traders. The Muslims had brought these coasts into their own trade networks, and the Portuguese tapped into them through navigable rivers that went into the interior, especially the Senegal and Gambia Rivers, or through the establishment of coastal or offshore trading posts: Arguin Island off the Mauritania coast, the Cape Verde Islands off the Senegambia coast, and the Guinean Gulf islands of São Tomé and Principé. Even their establishment of São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) on the Gold Coast in 1481 fit into these developments. Although Portuguese slave trading started slowly at about 800 slaves taken per annum in the 1450s and 1460s, it grew close to 1,500 in the next two decades and to over 2,000 per annum in the 1480s and 1490s, about a third of whom were sold to Africans themselves in exchange for gold. But a major structural change occurred after 1500, with a combination of the effective settlement of the island depot and plantation center of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea and the beginning of intense trade relations with the Kingdom of the Kongo after 1512, which brought West Central Africa into the Atlantic slave trade in a major way for the first time.