The Atlantic Slave Trade

This survey is a synthesis of the economic, social, cultural, and political history of the Atlantic slave trade. It provides the general reader with a basic understanding of the current state of scholarly knowledge of forced African migration and compares this knowledge to popular beliefs. Given the tremendous growth of a monographic literature on the Atlantic slave trade in the past twenty years, there are surprisingly few serious works of synthesis attempting to evaluate basic revisions and provide the general reader with an assessment of their meaning. Even though most of this research has invalidated traditional perceptions of the Atlantic slave trade, those perceptions still have tremendous force and are repeated in the standard primary and secondary school texts. Even at the university level some new works of interpretation have totally ignored this new research, or dismissed it, in order to return to even older models. The popular understanding of the slave trade, and its organization, meaning, and significance, is currently in a state of flux and confusion. This book makes accessible to academic readers an arcane and complex subject, but it also appeals to a much wider audience of educated lay readers who have still not incorporated the new interpretations into their knowledge of world history.

The book examines the four hundred years of the Atlantic slave trade, covering the West and East African experiences, as well as all the American colonies and republics that obtained slaves from Africa. It outlines both the common features of this trade and the local differences that developed. It discusses the slave trade's economics, politics, demographic impact, and cultural implications in relationship to Africa as well as America. Finally, it places the slave trade in the context of world trade and examines the role it played in the growing relationship between Asia, Africa, Europe, and America.

Herbert S. Klein is the author of several books about the social and economic history of Latin America, about African slavery, and on international migrations, including *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* and *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*. He has received, among other awards, several Social Science Research Council and Fulbright grants and was a Guggenheim and Woodrow Wilson Fellow.

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Herbert S. Klein

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To
Judith Claire Heiser Schiffner

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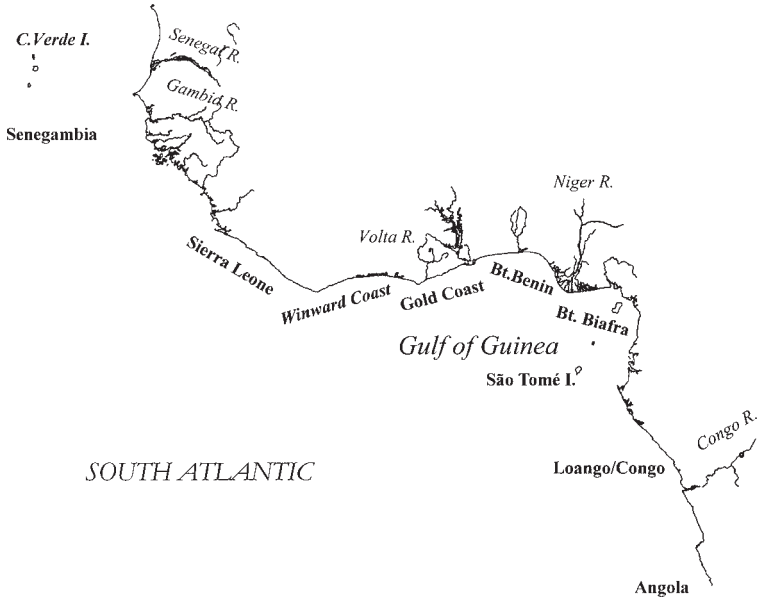

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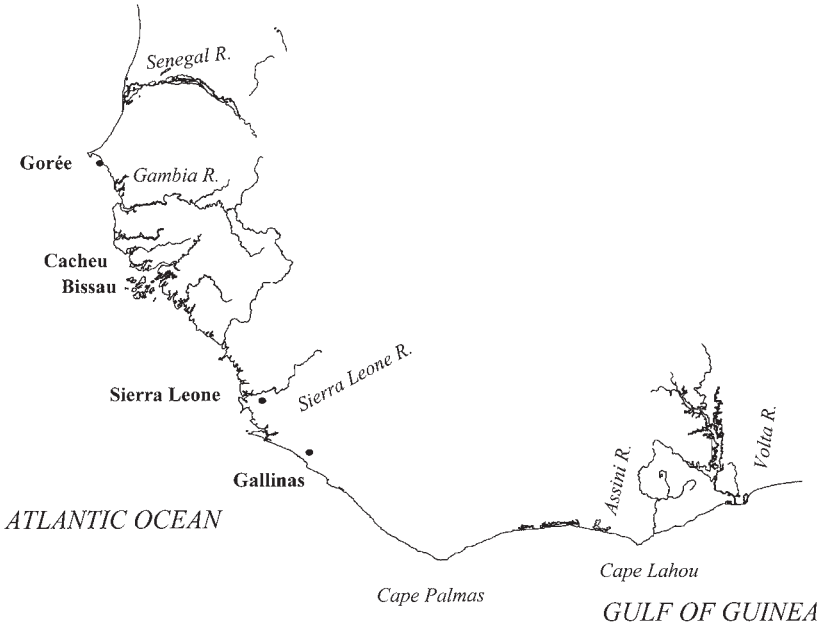

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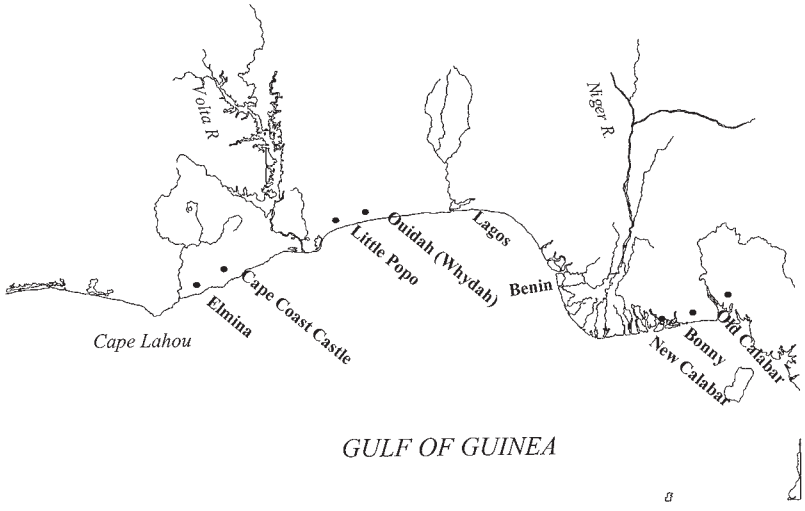

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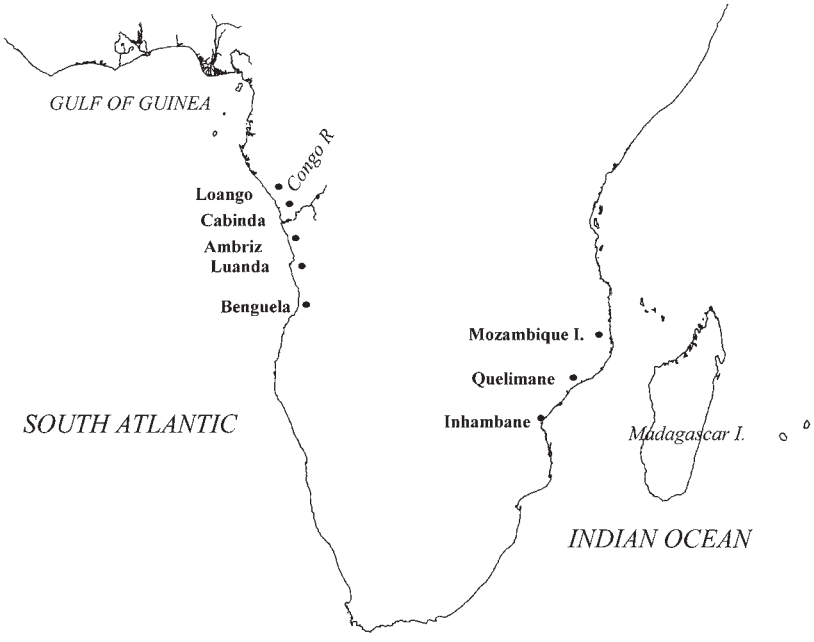

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Introduction

Despite its central importance in the economic and social history of Western expansion, its fundamental role in the history of America, and its profound impact on African society, the Atlantic slave trade remained one of the least studied areas in modern Western historiography until the past quarter century. This late start was not due to any lack of sources, for the materials available for its study were abundant from the very beginning. Rather it was ignored because of its close association with European imperialism and a resulting lack of interest in a morally difficult problem and because of a lack of methodological tools with which to analyze the complex quantitative data.

Even today, despite a quarter century of sophisticated multinational studies, the gap between popular understanding and scholarly knowledge remains as profound as when the trade was first under discussion in literate European circles in the eighteenth century. For a variety of political and intellectual reasons having a great deal to do with the nature of contemporary North American politics, the scholarly research is largely ignored as a society riven by racial conflict finds the trade a topic too difficult to treat in a rational manner. Yet in the heat of the debate it is this rationality that is most needed.

Not only has there been a failure in the dialogue between the academic and general literate world, but there is a surprising ignorance even within the scholarly world at large about the nature of the trade. There exist few coherent summaries of the recent literature on the slave trade for the general or scholarly public, and this failure to communicate the recent scholarly research has allowed the general discussion about the trade to become so politicized and emotional that most academics and intellectuals refuse to confront the trade with anything

approaching a rational analysis. It is for all these reasons that I have undertaken this survey of the current knowledge of the Atlantic slave trade. Though much is still unknown about the trade, there is already a surprising consensus among scholars as to its general shape and its economic arrangements. There is even some fundamental scholarly, if not popular, agreement about the numbers involved. This consensus crosses academic areas and national boundaries, and as much as possible I have tried to incorporate the latest findings from all the relevant disciplines and international literature.

In many ways the delay in providing a survey such as this is due to the very depth and complexity of the materials. To understand the trade one must be literate in demographic history and quantitative analysis, have a good grounding in economics, and read several languages. This is aside from having a detailed knowledge of the history of Africa and the Americas in this period. Even these tools are insufficient, as some basic anthropological understanding is also required. While any one scholar can only approximate these requirements, I hope that I have laid enough of a foundation so that scholars more prepared than I in any one of these areas can build on the work I have provided.

Before examining the trade in detail, it is worth exploring the historiography on this subject, which goes back to the eighteenth century. The first studies of the Atlantic slave trade began in the 1780s at the very height of its momentum, when some 75,000 slaves were arriving in the ports of America each year. In an attempt to build a case against the forced migration of African slaves, English abolitionists tried to determine the basic dimensions of the trade, the patterns of mortality of slaves and crew, and the relative economic impact of the trade on the African and American economies. Though the aim was to provide useful propaganda for their campaign, the abolitionists did engage in some serious research. When the English Parliament began to impose the first formal constraints on the traders in the 1780s and 1790s, it initiated the systematic collection of statistical materials on the trade by British government agencies, a service that the government would continue until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Along with these published sources, almost all European slaving nations kept detailed statistical records on the trade for tax purposes. A good many private company records found their way into the national archives of Europe and America in the nineteenth century. Finally, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries commercial newspapers kept detailed records of African slave ship arrivals

and departures. From all these published and documentary sources, something like half or more of the slaving voyages ever undertaken have left a written record.

Yet after the 1810s, there was little interest in analyzing the trade. The British abolitionists had convinced their own government to terminate the trade, and then proceeded to use force and coercion to abolish the trade of other nations. At the same time, the termination of the Atlantic slave trade in the middle decades of the nineteenth century coincided with the European conquest and colonization of Africa, as well as the growing domination of imperialist and racist ideology in metropolitan thought. In this context there was little interest in discussing the slave trade, which was deemed by most writers to have been a necessary evil at worst, if not a positive benefit to the world through its supposedly "civilizing" efforts.

It was not until the crisis of World War I that European intellectuals began to question the basic assumptions behind imperialism. In this debate, the Atlantic slave trade became one of the "crimes" of Western imperialism and could only be denigrated. It was from this perspective of paternalism that writers began to restudy European contact with the rest of the world. The result was a narrative filled with stories of violence and exploitation, based on a minimum of research and an ignorance of the archival sources. This literature created a series of myths about the costs of the trade, the pattern of shipping slaves across the Atlantic, the mortality they suffered, and the ultimate gains and benefits to the Europeans. "Tight packing," "astronomic" mortality rates of 50 percent or more, "cheap slaves" bought for supposedly worthless beads and costless rum, and the so-called triangular trade all were added to the crimes list.

But despite the dominance of this uncritical literature, which still survives in many of the history texts for secondary- and university-level courses, critical studies began to appear as early as the second decade of the twentieth century. The first modern scholarly studies were the work of a small group of dedicated French and North American scholars. Gaston-Martin and Padre Rinchon in France and Elizabeth Donnan in the United States were the first to begin the systematic study of the trade, gathering together much of the archival material available in French and English archives. These scholars published a series of pathbreaking studies in the 1920s and 1930s. These included several collections of documents, plus the impressive initial survey of the French trade by Gaston-Martin, all of which laid the foundations

for the modern study of the slave trade in the post–World War II period.

But it was the growth of the new field of African history as well as the awakening of interest in Afro-American history in the 1950s and 1960s that finally opened up a major research effort in this area. Though many scholars were beginning to work on various aspects of the trade from the African, European, and American perspective, the work of Philip Curtin provided a major new impetus to slave trade studies. In 1969 he published *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, which was an attempt to estimate the volume of the trade from the available secondary literature. An original contribution to historical methodology as well as to the field of slave trade studies, Curtin's work provided an estimate of the total volume of the African slave trade to Europe, the Atlantic islands, and America from the 1440s until the 1860s. This involved a careful scrutiny of all the published estimates and a reconstruction of the numbers by zone and period based on explicit demographic and economic models. Though concentrating on the theme of the numbers of Africans shipped, Curtin was required to survey all of the issues that would eventually become basic themes in this latest period of research. The demographic evolution of the American slave populations was a fundamental concern of Curtin, as was the mortality suffered in the Atlantic crossing, since these primary factors permitted estimates of the numbers of Africans transported when no known figures were available. He also touched on the problems of African population growth and European economic interests in the trade.

But it was his estimate of some 9.5 million arrivals and 11 million Africans transported over the course of the trade that caused the most immediate response among scholars. The resulting debate generated a major search among the unpublished sources for new numbers and new sources to challenge or refine the numbers he provided. It was this international search of the European, American, and African archives for all the extant data on slave ship crossings that led to a major new period of research and analysis of the Atlantic slave trade. Once this new body of materials was made available, many older debates could be directly addressed and new and more sophisticated questions raised about the economic, social, and even political history of this major transoceanic human migration. This new scholarship resulted in a surprisingly large international output of publications, which have made

this field one of the more active and productive in modern historical scholarship.

The questions that have been addressed by this recent scholarship can be grouped around a series of interrelated themes, and it is these issues and the debates they generated that I would like to analyze in this book. These questions concern the origins of the trade; its basic economic structure; its demographic, social, and economic impact; and, finally, the causes and consequences of its abolition.

In writing this book I have had the encouragement and support of a number of friends and colleagues. Frank Smith, my editor at Cambridge University Press, encouraged me to undertake this book in the first place, and without his support it would never have been written. I am equally indebted to Philip D. Curtin who provided me with the earliest help in dealing with these complex records, and encouraged me to publish my results. Stanley Engerman was always willing to lend a hand in helping me to analyze these voyages, and we often published the results together, and David Eltis aided me greatly with his own encyclopedic knowledge and kept me abreast of the latest from our slave voyages project. My old friend Charles Garland generously took the time to explain the workings of his ships. Jean Boudriot kindly allowed me to use his drawings, based on the construction notebooks of Mathias Penevert, of the slave ship *L'Aurore* built in Nantes in 1784, which appear as illustrations in this book. I am also grateful for the careful reading both David Eltis and Stanley Engerman gave to this manuscript. Finally, this book is dedicated to Judy, who has made such a profound difference in my life.