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*Foundations of the slave traffic
1600–61*

The slave trade from Africa to the Western Hemisphere was undoubtedly one of the major migrations in human history, a precursor to the even larger subsequent migration from Europe to the West. The migration from Africa was unique in that the emigrants were all forcibly transferred and, as slaves, were looked upon as social and racial inferiors by their European counterparts. As a consequence, the Atlantic slave trade made a significant and in many ways a lasting impact on the history of Africa and the Americas and to a lesser extent on Europe as well. Africa supplied the labor force, Europe the means of transportation and the necessary capital and commercial institutions, and the Americas the market for cheap labor for its plantations and mines. Thus, the slave trade provided a significant link between continents that surround the Atlantic. It contributed to the massive increase of world trade and the resulting accumulation of wealth, expanded the racial and cultural mosaic of Western societies, and became a major cause of racial conflicts in American societies. The slave trade itself produced one of the most embarrassing chapters in human history, which has haunted historians, moralists, and economists ever since.

For Africa, the Atlantic slave trade had major consequences, mostly negative. Although some scholars have suggested that its demographic impact was minimal and the economic results positive, others have stressed a wide range of negative consequences. Not only were many of its sons and daughters carried off, generally in the prime of life, but slave raids and increased warfare had an impact on the social and political fabric of African societies that will continue to be debated for many years. One scholar referred to the slave trade as “one of the greatest crimes committed against Africa, and one of the most disastrous episodes of its history.”¹

The Atlantic slave trade was also an important component in the global

1. J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), pp. 84–92; Adu Boahen, *Topics in West African History* (London: Longman Group, 1966), pp. 108–13.

economy that was evolving under European technological and administrative leadership. The trade provided Europe with a market for its manufactured goods with which slaves were purchased from African merchants. After the Atlantic crossing, the slaves were exchanged for precious metals or agricultural staples such as sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton, which were produced principally by slave labor. These products added to Europe's purchasing power and standard of living, at least in certain areas and for certain segments of the population. The wealth generated by this intricate process was invested in the expanding commercial network as well as in technological innovation. It is therefore with some justification, although unquestionably exaggerated, that the West Indian scholar and statesman, Eric Williams, a descendent of African slaves, asserted that the industrial revolution was based on the Atlantic system of slavery and the slave trade.² Although many Europeans were enriched by the slave trade, there were negative effects for others, in particular the sailors on the slave ships who experienced heavy death tolls. The moral predicament implicit in this trade in human beings became an issue among Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century, and this led to the gradual abolition of the traffic during the next century.

The American continents undoubtedly reaped the greatest benefits from the Atlantic slave trade. Millions of workers were brought in who with their descendents contributed their labor to the development of American societies and the accumulation of riches, receiving as their remuneration only the barest sustenance. Even if the cultural contributions of the Afro-Americans are ignored, their labor in exploiting and developing the resources of the New World was essential, and their economic contribution was recognized as early as 1663 as "the strength and sinews of the Western World."³

Measuring the Atlantic slave trade

The years 1441 and 1444 have each been cited as the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. During 1441 a Portuguese raiding party captured ten blacks on the African west coast, in what is perhaps present-day Mauritania or southern Morocco, and sold them on the Lisbon slave market. Black and white slaves were bought and sold regularly on several southern European slave markets at this time. Earlier, blacks were generally purchased in northern Africa and brought into Europe across the Mediterranean. In 1444 the

2. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Richmond: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. vii. The so-called "William's Thesis" will be examined further in Chapter 11.
3. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 10.

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Portuguese started sending regular trading expeditions to the northwestern coast of Africa, and before the end of that year they had carried 235 slaves from Africa to Portugal. This commerce was apparently so important that Prince Henry, who was in charge of Portuguese maritime activities, decreed the slave trade a state monopoly.⁴

At that time slavery and the trade in slaves was not novel to either African or European societies. Various forms of human bondage, including chattel slavery by which a slave is considered as an item of property that can be sold by the owner at will, have been practiced almost everywhere at one time or another since ancient times. The “great Mediterranean slave trade,” as David Brion Davis calls it, reached its peak during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and slave markets were held regularly in many of the southern European capitals such as Venice, Seville, and Lisbon, and even as far north as Antwerp. In Venice alone, approximately 1,000 slaves were sold during the years 1414 to 1423. Several of the slaves sold on these markets had been brought from across the Sahara desert, and this may account for the eagerness of the Portuguese to acquire African slaves directly from Africa now that a direct route by sea was open to them.⁵

Thus, the Atlantic slave trade was initiated with African slaves being shipped to Europe rather than to America. Philip Curtin calculated that by the early seventeenth century as many as 50,000 Africans were involuntarily shipped to Europe. During this same period the Europeans transported 25,000 African slaves to the Atlantic islands of Cape Verde, Madeira, and the Canaries, and another 100,000 were taken to the European sugar plantations of the African island of São Thomé. Collectively, this pattern has been called the Old World Atlantic slave trade.⁶

The trade to the Old World was only a prelude to what was to follow in the transatlantic slave trade. Although some of the slaves shipped to Europe were subsequently reexported to the New World, the year 1518 is generally thought to be the opening of the “real” Atlantic slave trade, directly from Africa to the American colonies. In that year the Spanish monarch, Charles V, granted the first of the well-known royal licenses, or *asientos*, allowing the holder to take African slaves to the Spanish-American colonies. Some writers have pointed to the year 1510 as the beginning of the trade, because

4. Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), p. 33; Elisabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1931), vol. 1, p. 1.
5. Davis, pp. 42–4; For an assessment of the trans-Saharan slave trade see: Ralph A. Austin, “The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade: A Tentative Census,” in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, eds., *The Uncommon Market* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 23–76.
6. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade; A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 17–28 and 268.

during that year King Ferdinand of Spain approved the transport of 250 slaves from Lisbon to the New World.⁷

By the 1520s the transatlantic slave trade had developed into an accepted and lucrative business, which was managed exclusively by the Portuguese, who at that time controlled the African bases of supply. Only sporadic intrusions by rival Europeans interrupted this pattern during the sixteenth century. By the middle of that century a few thousand black slaves were shipped annually across the Atlantic and these numbers increased steadily; one source even suggests that there were as many as 10,000 per year, but the evidence for such a high claim is lacking.⁸

A significant expansion of the Atlantic slave trade occurred in the seventeenth century, particularly during the 1640s. One author describes the phenomenon as an “explosion of the slave trade,” and another states that a “trickle became a flood.” This may well have been an exaggeration because the increase was limited to specific regions; nevertheless, a significant increase in the flood of forced emigrants was evident. The spread of sugar cultivation from Brazil to the Caribbean islands seems to have been the crucial factor in this upward trend in the slave trade, or the sugar revolution, as it was called. Sugar cultivation required large supplies of cheap labor, and the profits were adequate at that time to secure the needed workers in the form of African slaves. Developments on the island of Barbados clearly illustrate this trend. In 1641 the island counted only a few hundred slaves among its population, but four years later their number had increased to approximately 6,000.⁹

With the growing volume of the slave trade came an increase in participants. By the end of the seventeenth century the Portuguese had been joined by the Dutch, English, French, Danish, and even the Brandenburgers in the traffic in slaves. In fact at times during the century the Dutch may well have replaced the Portuguese as the leading slave traders. The volume of the Atlantic slave trade continued to expand until a peak was reached in the 1780s, when annually as many as 100,000 slaves may have been taken across the Atlantic. The outbreak of the American Revolution and the international crisis that grew out of this conflict caused a decline in the trade. By 1815, when this long period of intermittent warfare ended, a number of countries had responded positively to the crusade to end the slave trade, and others were to follow suit in the decades that followed. However, through the illicit

7. Donnan, vol. 1, p. 15; James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 10 and 26. See Chapter 2 for a more detailed examination of the asiento trade.

8. Davidson, p. 49; Curtin, pp. 115–16.

9. K. Polanyi and A. Rotstein, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 17; Curtin, p. 126; Donnan, vol. 1, p. 97; K. G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London: Longman Group, 1957), p. 14.

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trade and the persistent legal trade of a few southern European countries, the transatlantic slave trade continued to flourish until the 1850s.

The grand total of slaves transported from Africa to the New World has long been a matter of conjecture. Estimates have ranged from under ten million to as many as fifty million, with fifteen million long accepted as the most reasonable count. Curtin's pioneering and comprehensive evaluation of the volume of the Atlantic slave trade, published in 1969, has stimulated a great amount of research on this subject. Curtin calculated that nearly 9.6 million African slaves were landed in the New World, with approximately eleven million forcibly exported from Africa. Subsequent archival research has prompted some regional and chronological revisions, but Curtin's overall estimate has been raised only slightly. According to Lovejoy's synthesis of the figures, the total number of slaves landed in the West comes to nearly 9.8 million and, accounting for the losses on the middle passage, between eleven and twelve million must have been exported from Africa.¹⁰

Africa and slavery

With an increasing demand for workers on the plantations in the Western Hemisphere, and indigenous Americans and European immigrants being either inadequate to the task or unobtainable in sufficient numbers, Africa became a logical source for inexpensive labor for the most arduous work on the plantations. When the Atlantic slave trade got under way, slavery as an institution had been declining in Europe and had virtually disappeared in agriculture. Initially European indentured servants were taken to the New World, but the limitation of their time of service and the element of choice prevented them from becoming a reliable work force. On various occasions, native Americans had been enslaved by Europeans, but with devastating results. They could not or would not adjust to the harsh regimentation of slavery, and they were also decimated by diseases brought by the Europeans. As a result the Spanish authorities were persuaded to allow the importation of African slaves on a regulated basis through the so-called *asiento* trade.¹¹

For centuries slaves had been exported from Africa across the Sahara desert and the Red Sea. Various forms of human bondage had been practiced by many African societies, including the right to transfer ownership or to sell slaves. Thus it was possible for the Portuguese to purchase slaves from Africans during their early explorations along the African coast. Because the

10. See Curtin, pp. 3–13 and 265–73 on the various estimates and the major trends. For a revision of Curtin's figures see Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis," *Journal of African History*, vol. 23 (1982), pp. 496–7.

11. Williams, pp. 3–11.

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transatlantic slave trade grew slowly in intensity, it was possible for Africans to adjust the limited demand of the internal slave trade to the growing demand of the external trade.¹²

One of the crucial questions in the debate over the moral responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade is the difference between slavery as practiced in Africa and the system of slavery that was developed in the Western Hemisphere. One unfortunate African who experienced enslavement in the West reflected on the system in Africa as follows:

but how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us they do no more work than other members of the community, even masters; their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs (except that they were not permitted to eat with those who were free born), and there was scarce any other difference between them than a superior degree of importance which the head of a family possesses in our state, and that authority which, as such, he exercises over every part of his household. Some of these slaves have even slaves under them as their own property and for their own use.¹³

Outsiders have long been ignorant about slavery in Africa, as they have been about Africa in general. Recently, a groundbreaking study on the subject concluded that human bondage was widespread in Africa during the time of the Atlantic slave trade but that it should be seen as “one part of a continuum of human relations, which at one end are part of the realm of kinship and at the other involve using persons as chattels.” Slavery in the Western Hemisphere, perhaps one of the less humane forms of human bondage in modern times, has become our frame of reference for the term slavery. It has influenced our thinking about that institution everywhere, including Africa, where there was great variation in the forms of human bondage. One major contrast between slavery in Africa and the Americas was that in the former slaves were quite readily incorporated into the society where they resided, whereas in the Americas slavery was identified with race and with perpetual servitude.¹⁴

Whether or not African slave traders were aware of the differences between these systems is hard to determine. Europeans who purchased African slaves

12. This adjustment is illustrated in the specific case of the Vili of Loango by Phyllis Martin, “The Trade of Loango in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Richard Gray and David Birmingham, eds., *Pre-Colonial African Trade* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 139–48.
13. Olaudah Equiano, *Equiano's Travels* (New York: Praeger, 1967, p. 10; this autobiography is abridged and edited by Paul Edwards, and was first published in 1789).
14. Susanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp. 6, 11, 16 and 66; Walter Rodney, “African slavery and other forms of social oppression on the upper Guinea Coast in the context of the Atlantic slave trade . . .” *Journal of African History*, vol 7 (1966), pp. 431–43.

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were almost certainly ignorant of conditions in the interior of Africa because the European penetration of Africa did not take place until the nineteenth century. European apologists for the slave trade, on the other hand, were readily prone to justify the enslavement of Africans on the ground that the slaves' benefits of "civilization" and Christianity easily outweighed the "curse of savage Africa." The cruelties involved in the slave trade were by the standards of its age perhaps not all that unusual, until the humanitarian impulses of the eighteenth century began to introduce more humane standards, which in time also began to challenge the slave trade itself. It is undoubtedly safe to assume that African and European merchants alike were motivated chiefly by economic profit. Willem Bosman, a Dutch trader stationed on the African coast about 1700, describing the treatment and the branding of the slaves after they were sold by Africans to the Dutch, defended the institution merely by stating: "I doubt not but this Trade seems very barbarous to you, but since it is followed by mere necessity it must go on; but we yet take all possible care that they are not burned too hard, especially the Women, who are more tender than the Men."¹⁵

The base of operation in Holland

Why was it that the small Dutch nation with a population of no more than 1.5 million people during the seventeenth century played such a prominent role in the transatlantic slave trade? The United Provinces, as the republic was known until it became the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814, was going through its birth struggle in a war of independence against Spain when it became involved in the slave trade. Participation in the slave trade was only a by-product of the enormous economic expansion of the nation that during the seventeenth century became a world-wide maritime empire.

The Low Countries, particularly the maritime provinces of Holland and Zeeland, already controlled a large share of the seaborne trade of Europe before the Eighty Year War with Spain broke out in 1568. This war, however, greatly intensified the economic activities and power of the Dutch as they discovered that their best defense was an aggressive offense. Along with their periodic allies, the French and English, the Dutch made serious inroads into the maritime empires of Spain and Portugal, which were temporarily united through their monarchs during the period 1580 to 1640. The north-western European powers virtually robbed the Iberian states of their longtime mastery of the seas. For a time it appeared as if Holland had succeeded

15. Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), first published in Dutch in 1704, pp. 364–5.

Portugal in controlling the trade with the East Indies, the West African coast, and the slave trade to the New World. The Dutch, however, were forced to allow other European powers a share in these activities.¹⁶

The Dutch economic and cultural resurgence during the seventeenth century, a period characterized as the Golden Age, cannot be explained by one simple factor. The war of independence against Spanish rule tended to fuse many of these forces for growth into a unified policy. As a result of the war, the loosely federated provinces were forced to establish a common foreign policy, which gave force and direction to the military struggle and led to the formation of one of the most powerful naval forces of that time. The States General, the representatives of the various regions of the United Provinces, was given control over foreign policy, while the grand pensionary foreshadowed the role of a modern prime minister. The Orange family, which held the hereditary title of stadholder, became even more closely affiliated with the Dutch through this struggle; as stadholders they were empowered with military leadership and the power of certain appointments and various other forms of influence. Contrary to the rather advanced maritime and commercial institutions of the Republic, this governmental edifice was essentially a modified relic of medieval balance of power. One important difference in this situation, however, was that the commercial oligarchy rather than the hereditary aristocracy was the dominant social and economic class.¹⁷

Religious beliefs also played a role in the economic development of the young republic. An influential minority of the population, many of them merchants, were zealous Calvinists who saw the Catholicism of their Spanish overlords as the greatest danger to their religious convictions as well as to their economic interests. Periodic invasions by Spanish armies drove many Calvinist merchants and craftsmen from the southern provinces (now Belgium) to the north, where they contributed vitally to the religious and economic fervor of the new nation. This does not mean that Calvinism created the Dutch economic miracle in the seventeenth century; it is more likely that the Dutch were attracted to Calvinism because of its tolerance of capitalistic practices. As Schama puts it: "That lesson had been drunk with Dutch capitalism's mother's milk, in the earliest accounting between northern trade and the Christian gospel."¹⁸

One religious group that contributed to the economic growth of the Dutch Republic during much of the seventeenth century were the Sephardic Jews.

16. Charles R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (New York: Knopf, 1969), pp. 106ff.

17. Jan De Vries, "On the Modernity of the Dutch Republic," *Journal of Economic History* (1973), vol. 33, pp. 191-202.

18. Charles R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 8-13; Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 371.

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Many of these refugees from the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal found a haven in Amsterdam and Rotterdam and contributed significantly to the Dutch trade with their original Iberian homeland and its overseas colonies. The Sephardim also became a factor in the spread of sugar cultivation from Brazil to the West Indies and in the development of Dutch overseas plantation colonies. Similarly, at the end of the seventeenth century many Huguenots from France found refuge in Holland, after King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and they made their contribution to the economic development of the Dutch Republic.¹⁹

The Dutch Republic soon developed the largest merchant marine in the world and Amsterdam, its capital and principal seaport, became the world's center of insurance and financial institutions. Fernand Braudel summarizes the situation as follows:

The Amsterdam entrepôt trade verged on a monopoly. And if the Dutch really were 'the Carriers of the World, the middle persons in Trade, the Factors and Brokers of Europe', as Defoe wrote in 1728, this was not . . . thought because 'all the other nations were willing to suffer it to be so', but because they were unable to prevent it. The Dutch system was built on a network of commercial relations of interdependence which combined to produce a series of virtually obligatory channels for the circulation and redistribution of goods. It was a system that could only be maintained by constant vigilance, by a policy designed to thwart all competition, and by subordinating the whole of the Dutch economy to this essential objective.²⁰

One of the cornerstones of Dutch maritime and commercial organization was their shipping firm, the *partenrederij*, or literally "shared outfitting." Initially, shipping was a family venture, but as the size of the ships, the voyage distances, and the volume of trade grew, additional capital was attracted by allowing various individuals to purchase shares in a single shipping venture. Such shares could be bought and sold but were limited to investment in a single ship making a specific voyage. The individual shareholder, or *reder*, lost or profited only to the degree of the investment, and financial accounts were settled at the conclusion of each shipping venture. One of the investors was appointed as the manager (*boekhouder*), who supervised the outfitting of the ship. This system of operation attracted the necessary capital for the rapidly expanding Dutch merchant marine. Captains of ships were

19. Jonathan Israel, "Spain and the Dutch Sephardim, 1609-1660," *Studia Rosenthaliana*, vol. 12 (1978), pp. 6, 9, 26, 55-6; Cornelius Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and the Wild Coast, 1580-1680* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971), pp. 103, 338, 421, and 424-5; J. G. van Dillen, *Van Rijkdom en Regenten* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), pp. 396-8, 409, and 503.

20. Fernand Braudel, *The Perspective of the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); first published in French in 1979, p. 239.

frequently part owners, which increased their level of motivation and thereby the potential success of the undertaking. The *rederij* could also be broadened into a shipping firm, such as the the great joint-stock companies. During the early sixteenth century, the Dutch created two of these, the East India Company and the West India Company. Both existed for nearly two centuries and gained considerable success and renown. The West India Company was to play a formidable role in the Atlantic slave trade.²¹

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Dutch Republic held a prominent position in the world and attained a controversial reputation. To the Spanish and many other Catholic peoples, Holland was a land of money-hungry heretics. For many political and religious dissenters, such as John Locke, René Descartes, and Pierre Baille, Holland became a haven of freedom, although many Dutch Catholics had their own civil rights curtailed. The Dutch Republic was a country of new economic and professional opportunity for many exiled Spanish Jews, French Huguenots, and other Protestant dissenters. Its growing wealth contributed to the flourishing of the arts, scientific experimentation, and technological and organizational advancement in such areas as shipbuilding, maritime insurance, commercial organization, and financial institutions. But for some half a million unfortunate Africans who were transported across the Atlantic, the Dutch must have been remembered in a more negative way.

The Dutch enter the slave trade

The Dutch entry into the Atlantic slave trade was more by accident than by design, and their participation in it did not start in earnest until the 1630s. As early as 1528, Dutch names crop up in connection with the importation of slaves into the Spanish colonies, but these may well have been either Germans or Flemings from the Belgian provinces. One of the earliest direct Dutch connections with the African slave trade occurred in 1596, when a Rotterdam skipper, Pieter van der Haagen, brought 130 African slaves into the harbor of Middelburg, capital of the province of Zeeland. After lengthy debates, the city council decided that no slave market would be allowed there and that the slaves should be released and allowed to find jobs as free laborers. Similar incidents had taken place in Amsterdam in connection with the Portuguese Jews residing in that city, which suggests that the Dutch themselves were not favorably disposed to enter the trade in human beings, which was widely practiced in southern European cities at that time.²²

21. Boxer, *Dutch Empire*, pp. 8 and 18–19; F.J.A. Broeze, “Bedrijfsorganisatie,” in *Maritieme Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (Bussum: Uniboek, 1977), vol. 3, pp. 99–114.

22. E. van den Boogaart and P. C. Emmer, “The Dutch Participation in the Atlantic Slave