

The Slave Trades out of Africa

Klas Rönnbäck

University of Gothenburg

1. Introduction

The institution of slavery is of ancient origin and we still today see both traces of slavery and legacies of historical slavery. Examples of the latter are the large populations of descendants of Africans in the Caribbean, the United States and Brazil, or Asian descendants in South Africa. Some of the earliest evidence of enslaved humans come from the Middle East and date from several thousand years ago. Over the following millennia, the institution of slavery waxed and waned in importance throughout the societies around the world. Slavery had a very large impact upon the African continent, not the least since many societies around the world came to acquire all or most of their slaves from Africa.

At the same time domestic slavery was a common feature in several African societies. Slavery in Africa was to a large extent transformed in the wake of the major growth and eventual abolition of the external slave trading, from around the 16th to the 19th century. The magnitude of Africa's external slave trades has been hotly disputed. Figures in the range of several tens – or even hundreds – of millions have sometimes been suggested. Many such claims are now generally recognized to have been vastly inflated. The impact of the external slave trades upon African demography and economic development was nonetheless substantial.

This chapter will in the following section first discuss the trans-Saharan, Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades. Section 3 focuses on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Section 4 describes who the slave traders were. Section 5 highlights the main consequences of the external slave trades for the development of African societies. Finally, the chapter discusses the abolition of the slave trades, and what this meant for the African continent.

2. The Trans-Saharan, Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades

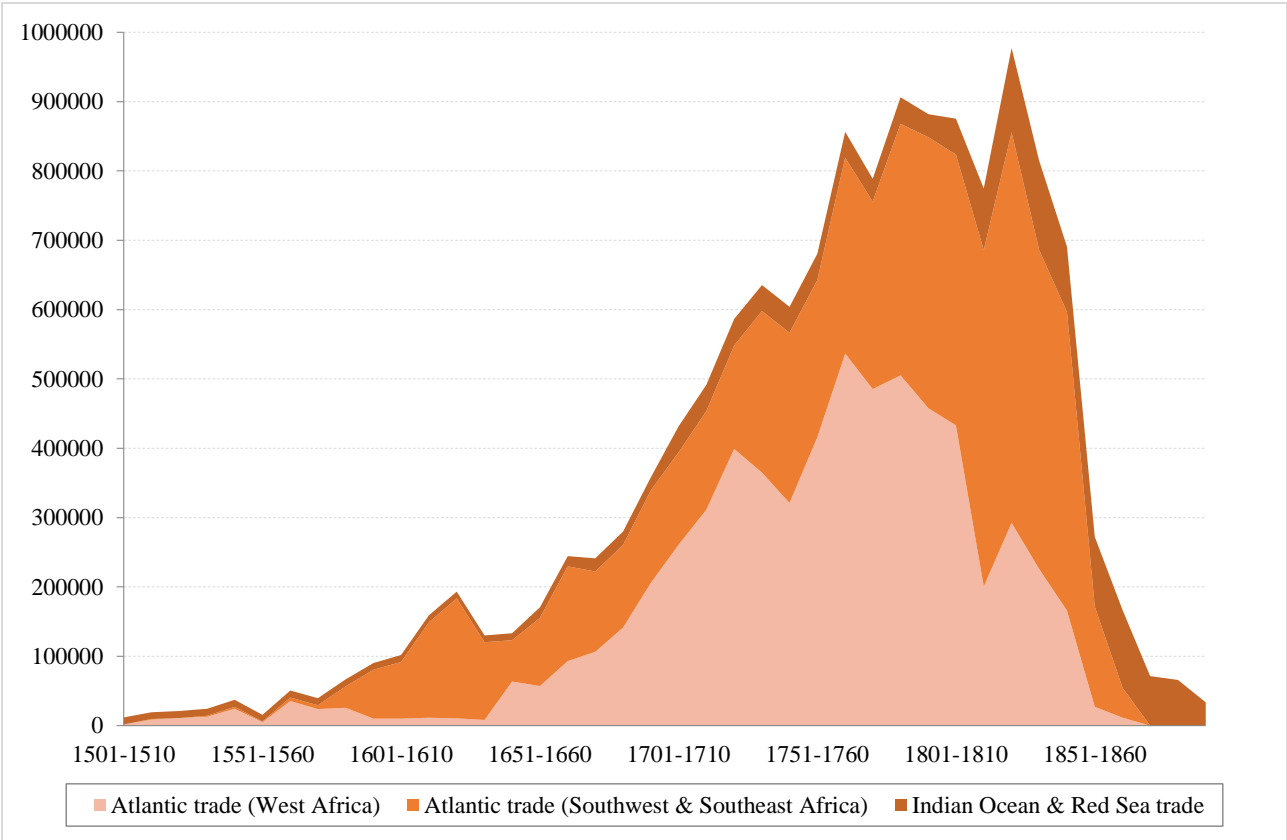
The slave trades north- and eastwards out of Africa have in the past not received as much attention as the slave trade to the Americas. There probably existed a trade in slaves from Africa to the Middle East since ancient times, but this might have been of a comparatively small magnitude, and therefore left few traces compared to the large diasporas of people of African descent that one can find in the Americas.

The militaristic expansion of Muslim caliphates in the Middle East and North Africa from the 7th century onwards, and later of the Ottoman Empire (an empire which from the 14th century onwards expanded from current-day Turkey to at its peak control much of the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa), created large numbers of prisoners of war. These prisoners of war were in many cases enslaved. The slaves imported into the caliphates and the Ottoman Empire at first originated from many different parts of the world, including the Balkans, Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The slaves were exploited for a wide variety of purposes, including military service and manual or skilled labour for men, and household work or concubinage for women. Trading in African slaves started to increase following the Islamic conquest of North Africa from the 9th century onwards. While many of these enslaved people most probably remained in North Africa, some of them were potentially trafficked elsewhere, including most importantly to the Middle East. Once the expansion of the Ottoman Empire slowly stopped in the 17th century, fewer prisoners of war were taken. There was nonetheless still demand for coerced laborers in the empire. As a consequence, this stimulated the purchase of slaves particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The magnitude of the Trans-Saharan, Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades are still not well-known. Vastly different figures have been suggested and numbers for the 650-1400 period can only be guessed at. However, scholars have suggested that it might have amounted to a couple of million people in total during this period. Figures possibly increased during the Muslim conquest of North Africa from around the 9th century, and then decreased again in the following centuries. More is certainly known about the slave trades from the 16th century onwards, but scholars do nonetheless not have an entirely clear picture of the magnitude of the Trans-Saharan, Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades. The most authoritative estimates by leading scholars in the field suggest that around 5 million people were trafficked from Sub-Saharan Africa during the period from the 16th to the 19th century. The vast majority of these slaves— about two-thirds of the total – were trafficked on the Trans-Saharan route, and were probably to a large extent purchased by slave-buyers in North Africa. These slaves would thus in reality have stayed on the African continent. It has therefore been argued that only a minor share of this trade should be labelled as “external” from the African continent.

Figure 1 shows how the magnitude of the trade on these routes, as well as the Atlantic trade, changed over time. In this figure, the Atlantic slave trade from West Africa and South-Western/South-Eastern Africa are reported separately as they exhibited quite different patterns over time. In total, the slave trades increased until the early nineteenth century. By the last decades of the eighteenth century, the trade had increased to around 900,000 people being shipped out of Africa per decade, i.e. almost 90,000 people per year. Overall, the trade peaked in the 1820s when close to one million people were coercively transported out of Africa. The figure also shows that the Indian Ocean and Red Sea trades were much smaller than the Atlantic slave trade. The Indian Ocean trade was furthermore most intense during the 19th century: perhaps as much as two-thirds of all slaves trafficked across the Indian Ocean were trafficked during the nineteenth century.

Figure 1: Magnitude of Africa’s external slave trades (number of people trafficked per decade), 1500-1900



Sources: Red Sea and Indian Ocean Slave Trades estimates based on Lovejoy (2000); Manning (2010); Toledano (2011); Ware (2011) and Manning (2014); Atlantic slave trade based on Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, online at slavevoyages.org.

3. The Atlantic slave trade

The European colonization of the American continent after 1492 brought back slavery to centre stage of the early modern economy, from the 16th to the 18th century. The vast natural resources available in the “New World” created a large European demand for laborers to work on plantations and in mines. Many indigenous populations in the Americas had been almost completely wiped out by the European colonizer’s military conquest and lethal germs. Too few Europeans were at the time desperate enough to accept the terms offered by landholders and other potential employers to migrate to the “New World” voluntarily to satisfy the demand, especially to the regions where labour demand was the highest – the tropical and sub-tropical zones of the Americas.

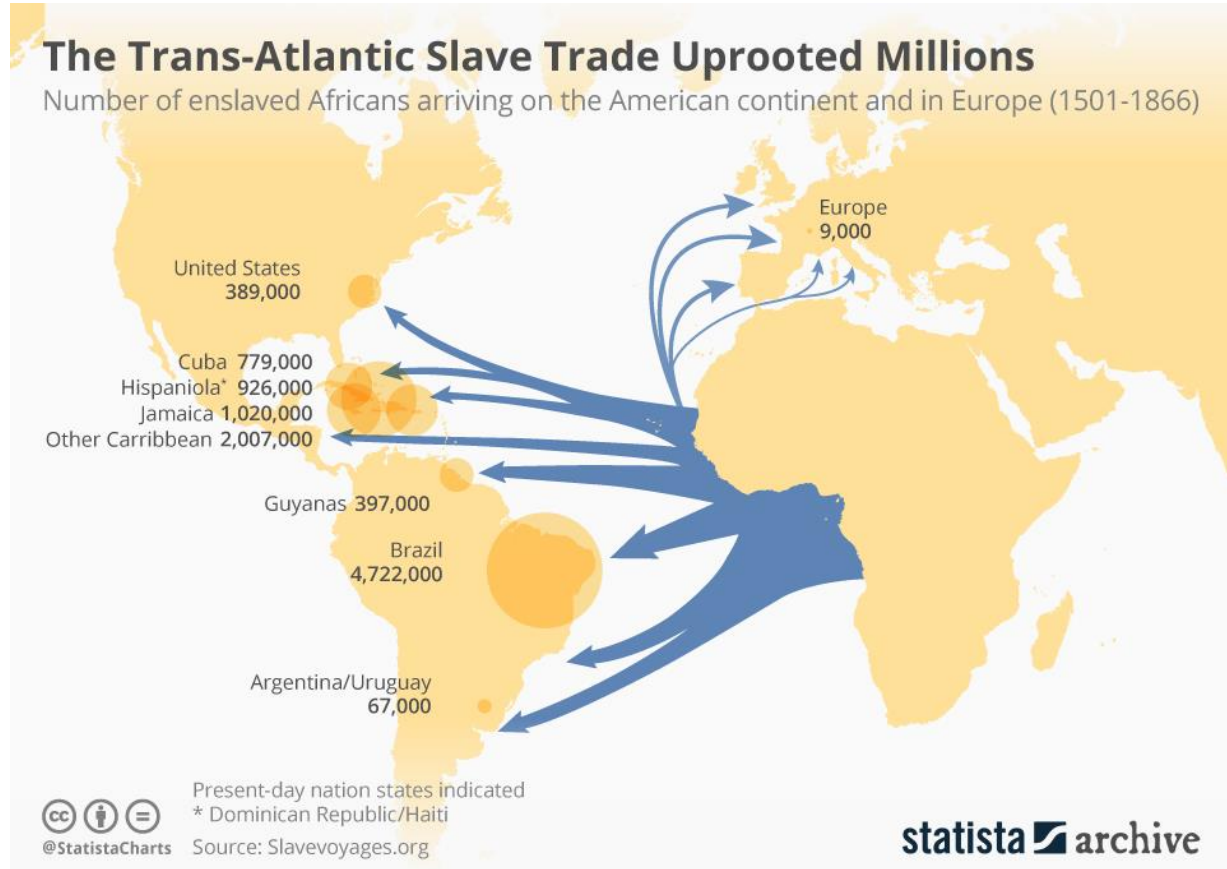
The solution that came to be preferred by the European colonizers was instead to purchase slaves. Most societies throughout history have prohibited the enslavement of their own population and have only allowed for the enslavement of “others”. This was also the case in Europe during the early modern period. While there were small trickles of criminals sentenced to be transported to some distant colony, and a slightly larger trickle of so-called “indentured servants” transported to the Americas, there was no enslavement of any Europeans at the time. The issue instead became one of finding some “others” that could be enslaved and transported to the Americas.

Slaves, many Europeans found, could in many cases be acquired from Africa, and racist ideas – widespread in Europe at the time – provided a justification for an inhumane treatment of the Africans enslaved. The general, highly ignorant discourse in Europe at the time had it that Africans in general were lazy and primitive. In particular, the fact that Europeans thought of Africans as lazy – a racist stereotype that survived well into the 20th century – would become important, as many therefore also came to believe that the only way Africans could be made to work was through coercion. Some would even go on to argue that this coercion was virtuous according to how they interpreted Christian dogma, since it was a deadly sin to be lazy.

This came to create the single largest coerced movement of people in history, from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to various places in the Americas. Following much scholarly research during the latest decades, the magnitude of the Atlantic slave trade is by now well-known. All the research has been pooled in an online-database called the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (shortened TSTD), where the data is available for free (via the website slavevoyages.org). In total, it is now estimated that more than 30,000 ships carried some 12.5 million humans away from Africa over the whole period of the Atlantic slave trade, from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Most of the slaves were carried to Brazil or to the islands in the Caribbean, as can be seen in Figure 2. It created some of the most intense slave societies known in history (in terms of the share of the population being

enslaved), in the Caribbean, Brazil and the southern states of what came to be called the United States.

Figure 2: Directions of the transatlantic slave trade, 1501-1866 (number of people trafficked)



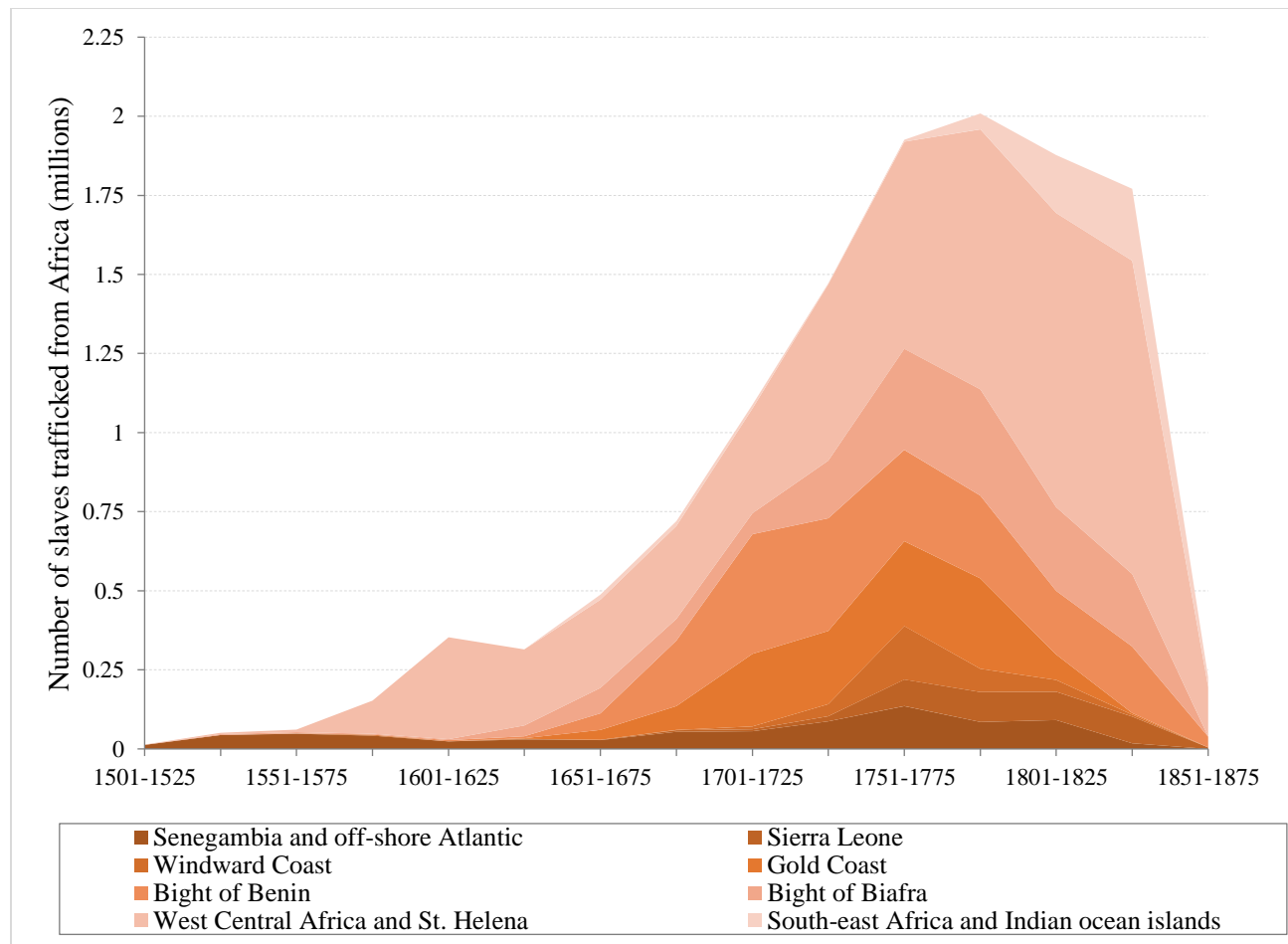
Source: [Statista](#) (accessed 2020-05-07).

The number of slaves trafficked, and where in Africa the slaves carried across the Atlantic were taken from, changed over time. Figure 3 shows the number of African slaves exported to the Americas by region of embarkation in Africa over the 1500-1875 period. The first slaves arrived in the Americas already in the early years of the 16th century. During this century, the trade remained of a relatively small scale, compared to what it later would become. Virtually all slaves were at this time shipped either from the region of Senegambia or from West-Central Africa. During the 17th century, the Atlantic slave trade grew in magnitude and slaves started to be exported from several other regions as well, including the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra. It was during the eighteenth century that the Atlantic slave trade came to have a massive magnitude. More than half of all the Africans shipped across the Atlantic, around 6.5 million people, were traded during the 18th century. As will be described in Section 5 below, the Atlantic slave trade started to be abolished in the 19th century. Nonetheless, almost 4 million Africans are

estimated to have still been transported to the Americas during this century, either before the trade was abolished or illegally after the trade had been abolished by the European nations.

The trade was to a large extent concentrated to a small number of ports in Africa. Three ports in particular – Whydah, Bonny and Luanda – were the ports of embarkation for more than 2 million slaves shipped over the Atlantic.

Figure 3: Magnitude of Atlantic slave trade, by region of African embarkation, 1500-1875



Source: Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, online at slavevoyages.org.

The trade in human beings across the Atlantic was one leg of what long has been called the “Triangular Trade”, due to the supposed geographical patterns of the trade. First, European and Asian manufactures such as textiles, alcohol or firearms were exported from Europe to Africa and exchanged for slaves. Then the slaves were transported across the Atlantic and exchanged for colonial commodities produced in the mines or on the plantations in the Americas, such as sugar, tobacco, coffee and cotton. Finally, the colonial commodities were exported back to Europe for

refining and final consumption. The key drivers of this “Triangular Trade” were thus, on the one hand, the growing demand for these types of colonial commodities in Europe, and, on the other hand, the European merchants and planters interested in profiting from satisfying this demand. Most of the slaves ended up working on sugarcane plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean. Estimates from the TSTD suggest that 44 percent of all slaves trafficked across the Atlantic were headed for Brazil, and 38 percent were headed for the Caribbean, while the remaining 18 percent were headed primarily for the Spanish Americas or the North American mainland.

We now know that the image of a “Triangular Trade” is a simplification that is somewhat misleading. Ocean currents and winds instead created two quite separate systems of trade: one in the North and one in the South Atlantic. The North Atlantic trade was to a large extent dominated by English slave traders, and primarily carried slaves from West Africa to the Caribbean or to North America. While all ships in this system of trade certainly did not follow a “triangular” route, it is perhaps fitting to talk about such a pattern to the trade on an aggregate level. The South Atlantic slave trade was, in contrast, almost completely dominated by Portuguese-Brazilian slave traders. These carried slaves primarily from West-Central Africa to Brazil. This trade was to a large extent not “triangular”, instead it exhibited a bilateral pattern.

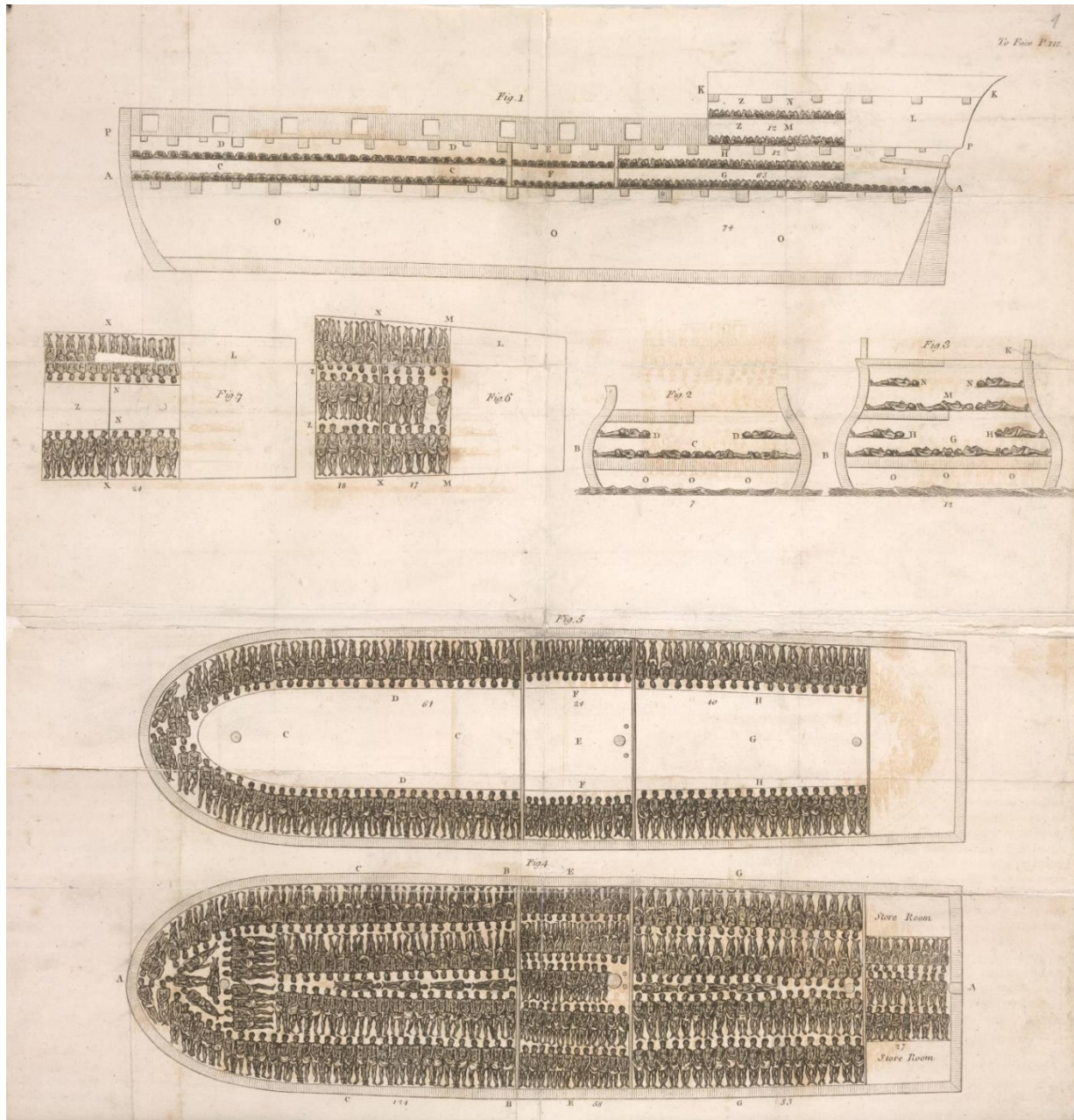
The transportation of Africans across the Atlantic came to be called “the Middle Passage”. The horrors of the Middle Passage have been much emphasized in both scholarly literature and popular culture. Many slaves were forced on board the small slave ships, leading to enormous crowding in the slave holds. One example of this can be seen in the famous picture of the slaves carried on board the slave-ship *Brookes* in Figure 4.

As horrible as the illustration in Figure 4 suggests that the conditions must have been aboard *Brookes*, the reality was actually even worse. The picture shows the situation after certain pieces of legislation had been imposed in Britain that limited the number of slaves that a slave-trader could carry in order to reduce crowding of the slaves – in the hope that this could reduce the mortality among the slaves transported across the Atlantic. It is known from primary sources that the very same ship, *Brookes*, on some previous journeys had carried almost twice as many slaves across the Atlantic as is shown in the figure.

On average, it took the ships around two months to go from the African coast to the destination in the Americas. Estimates are that, on average, around 12 per cent of those forced to embark on a ship never reached the intended destination, but died on board from epidemic diseases or accidents. The suffering was further intensified as the slaves often were confined below deck for more or less the whole time of the voyage, and not rarely chained together in shackles. No wonder that the

slaves in many instances rebelled during the Middle Passage. One example of such a revolt was when 96 slaves embarked on the Guinea Coast on the ship *Little George* rebelled a few days after the ship had left the African coast. The slaves managed to imprison the slave traders, and take control of the ship, which they then sailed back and abandoned at the Sierra Leone river. More common was perhaps that the slaves mutinied while the slave ships still lay for anchor in the African ports or were just about to leave.

Figure 4: A contemporary illustration of the slave-ship *Brookes*



Source: © British Library Board, shelfmark 522.f.23 volume 2, fold out.

4. Who were the slave traders?

The Atlantic slave trade was organized by slave traders from various European nations, including most importantly Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Denmark. The two major slave-trading nations in Europe were, as was noted above and as can be seen in Table 1, Britain and Portugal (the latter mainly via traders from the Portuguese colony Brazil). The slave trade towards the Middle East and the Indian Ocean was instead mainly conducted by Arabs.

Even though several European nations attempted to do so already from an early date, they were unable to do so throughout most of the continent prior to 19th century developments in medicine and military technology. The European slave traders were therefore for the most part confined to establishing minor footholds in the form of trading stations or forts along the African coast – often with the acceptance of local African rulers. African agents many times therefore also came to participate in the slave trades, as sellers of slaves to the Arab or European buyers. This has occasioned a large debate on why these people participated in such a business. There are comparatively few sources that can shed light on this topic, as few of these agents left any sources behind revealing their intentions. We can be quite certain that the motives varied between the individuals involved in the trade. It is also impossible to understand this issue without recognizing that many African societies were stratified societies, with substantial differences in terms of wealth, status and power between elites and the majority of the population.

Table 1: Number of slaves transported across the Atlantic, by flag of the slave-ship

	Spain	Portugal/ Brazil	Great Britain	USA	France	Others
1501-1600	119,962	154,191	1,922	0	0	1,365
1601-1700	146,270	1,011,192	428,262	4,151	38,435	247,322
1701-1800	10,654	2,213,003	2,545,297	189,304	1,139,013	397,348
1801-1900	748,639	2,469,879	283,959	111,871	203,890	19,342
Total	1,061,525	5,848,265	3,259,440	305,326	1,381,404	665,377

Source: Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, online at slavevoyages.org.

There were clearly some African rulers who were quite explicit about not wanting to participate in the trade at all. There were, at the same time, some rulers and merchants who chose to participate in the trade, seemingly with little or no regard for the fate of the enslaved. The institution of slavery had existed in many African societies long before the external slave trading took off during the 15th century. Through this institution, some members of the elites in these societies could gain access to foreign commodities – to a large extent luxury products including textiles and alcohol –

which could further elevate their status. One rare example of an agent who left a diary of his own behind was the chief and slave-trader Antera Duke from Old Calabar, in current-day Nigeria. The entries in the diary suggest that Duke's motives largely were of this type. Some rulers might also have believed there were few options to participating in the trade, as a guns-for-slaves cycle developed in the wake of the slave trade (see more on this below). A key method of getting access of firearms to defend the own population therefore was through selling slaves.

There were clearly conventions for who was eligible for being enslaved in Africa, just as there were elsewhere in the world. Several African societies thus seem to have adhered to similar ideas as many other societies, that only "Others" could be enslaved. There was at the time no pan-African idea, so people would not have perceived of themselves or others as Africans, but as belonging to a number of different ethnicities and nationalities. In such a context, the perception that it was legitimate to enslave "Others" meant that Africans of other ethnicity or nationality, in practice very often prisoners of war, were enslaved. Another category of people that could be enslaved in several African societies were people who had committed crimes, similar to the transportation of convicts that took place in many other societies around the world at this time.

5. The consequences of the slave trades for Sub-Saharan Africa

The consequences of the external slave trades for African societies varied considerably geographically and over time. Though slaves had been transported from African shores for several centuries or even millennia, the overwhelming share of the trade – in terms of the numbers of slaves transported – took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular. It is thus during these two centuries that we can expect the impact upon African societies to have been the largest.

Box 1: The story of Ottobah Cugano

For the individuals who became the victims of the slave trades, this was of course an enormous tragedy. Comparatively few of these victims were able to produce any testimonies of their sufferings that have survived to this day. There were, however, a few individuals that managed to do so. One example is Ottobah Cugoano, who had been enslaved on the Gold Coast (in current-day Ghana) at the age of 13, and transported to the Caribbean. Cugoano was eventually liberated, and became a learned scholar and an abolitionist activist. In 1787, he published his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery*. In this book, Cugoano recaptured his enslavement as a child:

I was early snatched away from my native country, with about eighteen or twenty more boys and girls, as we were playing in a field. We lived but a few days journey from the coast where we were kid-napped [...] we travelled on, and in the evening came to a town, where I saw several white people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion as children in the inland parts of the country. [...] the horrors I soon saw and felt, cannot be well described; I saw many of my miserable countrymen chained two and two, some hand-cuffed, and some with their hands tied behind. [...] I was soon conducted to a prison, for three days, where I heard groans and cries of many, and saw some of my fellow-captives. But when a vessel arrived to conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow-men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner.

When, how and where people were enslaved certainly differed between the individuals. The horrors experienced once they had been enslaved were, however, for all of them most certainly comparatively similar to what Cugoano here describes.

On a societal level, the slave trades had several consequences. A first, and the perhaps most obvious, consequence for African societies was a loss of population. During the 18th and 19th centuries, around 13 million people were thus transported away from African shores. How many further might have died when forced to march to the African coasts (or while waiting to be sold) is not known, but anecdotal evidence from some specific cases suggest that this figure might have been in the millions, too. No reliable figures exist neither on how many people might have lived in Africa, nor on the population growth rates in African societies at the time. It has, however, been estimated that there possibly were around 60-70 million people living on the whole African

continent by the early 18th century. Some scholars have therefore suggested that the annual population loss from the slave trade may have exceeded the population growth rates – leading to a net population drain for many African societies – at least during the 18th and 19th centuries, the two most intensive centuries of the external slave trades.

As the majority of the slaves purchased were people in the prime of their productive life, this would have put a further strain upon African societies. The different slave trades would, however, have different demographic impacts upon different parts of the African continent. Westwards, in the Atlantic trade, the demand was primarily for young male slaves that could be coerced to work on the plantations and in the mines in the Americas. Roughly two-thirds of the slaves transported across the Atlantic are thus estimated to have been men or young boys (one quarter of all slaves shipped across the Atlantic were actually recorded to have been children). Eastwards, in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trades, there was in contrast a comparatively large demand for young females, to be exploited as domestic workers or as concubines in *harems*. This would have important demographic consequences for these African societies, skewing the sex ratios. When primarily women were trafficked from a region, this would reduce the number of people who could bear a child, thereby reducing further population growth. Skewed sex ratios due to men primarily being trafficked might in other places have contributed to a pattern of polygamy, as there remained fewer males per females in these societies.

The potentially most devastating effects of the external slave trade came from the spirals of internal violence that it initiated or reinforced. The vast majority of all slaves exported were originally prisoners of war. Historians have certainly debated the direction of causality. Were the wars fought primarily in order to acquire prisoners that could be sold as slaves, or were the wars fought primarily for other reasons, with slaves more or less a side-effect? It is often very hard to disentangle the direction of causality given the scarcity of historical sources surviving on this topic. The process might furthermore very well have been dialectical (factors mutually influencing each other) rather than unidirectional (one factor causing another). What seems safe to conclude, however, is that the external slave trades at least reinforced spirals of violence in several parts of the African continent. In current-day Ghana, for example, there were recurrent wars between several of the polities in the coastal region during most of the years of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

These spirals of violence also led to the consolidation of several “predatory states” (states promoting the interests of a small elite, at the cost of the own or other populations) in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the wake of the slave trades, several new – and generally highly militarized – states emerged, for example in West and West-Central Africa. Their growth in terms of territory and

power was to a large extent associated with the Atlantic slave trade. Military conquests led to geographical expansion but also to the taking of large numbers of prisoners of wars. These prisoners could then be sold as slaves, in exchange for firearms and other goods, to the slave-traders. These goods, in turn, further increased the military strength and power of the predatory states, and thereby enabled further military conquests. This pattern has been labelled a “guns-for-slaves” cycle of trade. The Jolof Empire, Asante, Oyo and Dahomey in West Africa, and the Lozi, Lunda and Luba in West-Central Africa, are all examples of polities that have been described as having had such predatory states at the time.

We know from many historical examples that wars as a rule retard economic development. They lead to substantial losses of life, primarily among the younger strata of a society. Wars also lead to destruction of capital and infrastructure, necessitating heavy investments for rebuilding what was destroyed during the war. If people anticipate wars to occur again in the future, they also negatively impact people's willingness to invest in capital, as any investments run the risk of being destroyed. Over the long-term, wars can also be very negative for the level of trust in a society, or between different societies, thus for example hampering the development of peaceful commercial activities. All these effects would probably have affected African societies as the slave trades increased the level of violence across the continent, even though some of them might have been more severe than others.

As a rule, African societies resisted enslavement of the own population in various ways. Most societies thus had social conventions completely prohibiting or at least limiting enslavement of the own population. In order to maintain control over people, rulers also had an interest in defending subjects against enslavement by foreigners. Enslavement was therefore primarily a risk for peoples living in polities with weaker states, unable to defend the population against foreign slave-catchers, and particularly then people living at or close to the border-zones between different polities. Many people were therefore making attempts to defend themselves from enslavement, in various ways.

Scholars have noted that walled towns and villages, which helped to protect the population from slave-raids, were common in all areas where slave raiding was a threat. Relocation of villages was another option used in several instances. In some cases, the relocation simply meant migrating to areas that were considered less at risk from slave raids. It also meant the concentration of people into larger villages or towns, as people sought security in living together in larger numbers. Relocation sometimes also meant taking advantage of specific geographic locations, so that villages for example might be located in more inaccessible places, including taking refuge in hilly or mountainous areas – such as the Gurunsi (in current-day Central African Republic) or the Kabre in Togo – or in riverine or marshy areas. Another option employed was to build villages on stilts

in lakes, such as Ganvié and other towns in current-day Benin, or Nzulezo in Ghana. Resisting slavery in some cases took the form of the construction of underground shelters, which sometimes were developed into veritable fortresses, such as in some parts of the Sokoto Caliphate. In some instances, documented for example from the Balanta of Guinea-Bissau, African societies also mobilized counter-offensives against slave raiders, which gave them a reputation as resisting enslavement. While many of these defensive strategies might have been necessary given the high risk of enslavement, they came at a cost to the African societies undertaking them. Erecting fortifications or building shelters could for example require considerable investments, in practice in the form of labour that needed to be invested into construction. Relocation to geographically safer areas – including mountainous or marshy areas – could mean moving to more marginal lands, with a lower productivity of agriculture as a consequence.

There were, however, also African agents that gained from the slave trades, both directly and indirectly. Some members of the elites that participated in the trade, and sold other people as slaves, could certainly gain economically and socially from the trade by getting access to foreign commodities, including many high-status consumer goods, in exchange for the slaves that they sold. The forts established by European slave trading companies in some parts of West Africa, such as Gorée in Senegal or Elmina and Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, could also create a certain demand for local laborers, including craftsmen and hired day-laborers, in small enclaves around the forts. The wages paid were certainly not high for day-laborers such as canoemen but could at least provide a livelihood for those employed. The slave trade also created a certain demand for supplies. Most importantly for foodstuffs to feed the enslaved during the Middle Passage, which arguably contributed to a commercialization of some societies in coastal West Africa. Recent research has, however, shown that this demand must have been rather marginal compared to the output possible in the region at the time, and the demand already present from urban centers. Also, because many slave-traders brought along most of the required supplies from Europe, rather than having to rely on the possibilities to purchase them in Africa, the demand for agricultural products was kept down.

6. The abolition of the slave trades

By the late 18th century, an abolitionist movement started to develop, primarily in certain parts of Europe. In some circles, slavery as a whole started to be questioned. Rising prices for slaves in Africa, presumably as a consequence of the drastic increase in the numbers of slaves exported during the century, furthermore drove up the costs for the buyers in the Americas, and hence made the institution less profitable than it previously had been. Political struggles in European

metropolises – primarily in Britain – as well as in the Americas, eventually came to lead to the Atlantic slave trade being banned in one nation after another.

The first major slave-trading nations to abolish the Atlantic trade for all subjects of their nations were Britain and the United States. Both abolishing the trade in 1807. Although some trade continued illegally despite the ban, it had large ramifications for the North Atlantic slave trade, as demand from the Americas dried up quite considerably. Slave-exports from regions in Africa where slave-traders from these two nations previously had dominated, such as the Windward Coast and the Gold Coast, hence experienced a drastic drop in the number of slaves trafficked in the following years. Other European nations, such as France, would some years later impose a similar ban on the Atlantic slave trade, reducing the demand for slaves in for example Senegambia. In some parts, most notably in West-Central Africa, the Atlantic trade would however continue unabated for several more decades. Brazilian merchants (by the 19th century independent from Portugal), and merchants from the Spanish colony of Cuba, would continue to trade in slaves well into the 1840s and 1850s, and it was only following political pressure from Britain that these nations too, started to abolish the trade in slaves.

As for the Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades, these flows also continued largely unabated during much of the nineteenth century. Slavery was certainly officially abolished in the Ottoman Empire in 1847, as part of the process of modernization of the Ottoman society (*tanzimat*) during the nineteenth century. For a long time, however, comparatively little was done to enforce the law, so the trade could in practice continue for several more decades. It was only by the late nineteenth century that the trade in slaves to the Ottoman Empire really seems to have started to decrease.

Abolition of the external slave trades did not end slavery in Africa. Instead, the abolition led to a transformation of slavery in Sub-Saharan Africa. While domestic slavery had existed throughout many parts of Africa even before the external slave trades began, the institution was not always very intensive. As demand in the Americas rose, so did the prices paid for slaves in Africa. This prohibited domestic demand for slaves to grow in Africa, as there were limited opportunities as to where slave labour profitably could be exploited when the purchase price of the slaves was high. Within Africa, large – and geographically extensive – networks supplying the external slave trades, had however, developed over the centuries as a response to the growing external demand for slaves. These networks did not disappear just because the Atlantic slave trade was abolished, but rather continued to acquire and supply slaves in various places across the continent. Following the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, external demand declined in region after region of West Africa, in tandem with a continued supply. As a consequence, prices of slaves in West Africa started to decline. One key consequence of this, in turn, was that it started to become economically feasible

for local agents in Africa to purchase the slaves and exploit them as a labour force on locally established plantations.

Ironically then, the abolition of international slave trade caused an expansion of slave systems in Africa itself. Plantation economies, based on slave labour, experience a substantial growth in several parts of the African continent, for example in the Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa, or on the island of Zanzibar off the east African coast. The output from these plantations, along with other products, were to a large extent exported, primarily to the burgeoning industrial economies in Europe. This trade eventually came to be labelled the “legitimate commerce”, as Europeans – after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade – came to consider slave-trading “illegitimate”, and were ignorant of (or turned a blind eye to) the conditions under which many of the products of this “legitimate commerce” had been produced.

7. Conclusion

The slave trades out of Africa were of major historical importance, not only for the African continent, but for the whole world. It is hard to imagine how the American continents would have developed without all the enslaved laborers from Africa. The descendants of these slaves still make up a substantial – or in some cases even the vast majority – of the population in these countries. It is likewise hard to imagine that Europe would have been able to industrialize at the same pace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries without access to all the raw materials, such as cotton, produced by all these slaves. Meanwhile, the activities of the slave traders were devastating for the African continent and its populations. Recent research has suggested that African countries on average would have experienced a much higher economic growth rate, and thus have been much more affluent today than they currently are, had there been no slave trade and the negative consequences associated with this trade. Despite more than 200 years having passed since its initial abolition, the international slave trade therefore continues to matter for us today.

Study questions

1. Which were the main driving factors behind the development and growth of the slave trades out of Africa?
2. What were the magnitudes of the slaves trades out of Africa, and how did they change over time?
3. How large were the Transatlantic, Red Sea and Indian Ocean slave trades, respectively?
4. What were the main consequences suggested in the text of the external slave trades for African societies?
5. How did the abolition of the external slave trades impact upon African societies?

Discussion exercise

Divide the class in sub-groups of three to five students. Let each group discuss what they believe to be the most important consequences of the external slave trades for African societies in general, and how and to what extent the slave trade has impacted the country that they are living in.

Suggested readings

- Diouf, Sylviane (2003). *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Eltis, David and Stanley Engerman (2011): *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 3: AD 1420 – AD 1804*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Evans, E. W. and D. Richardson (1995), “Hunting for rents: the economics of slaving in pre-colonial Africa”, *Economic History Review* 48(4): 665-686.
- Lovejoy, Paul (2000). *Transformations in Slavery. A History of Slavery in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manning, Patrick (1990): *Slavery and African life: Occidental, oriental and African slave trades*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunn, Nathan and Leonard Wantchekon (2011). “The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa”, *American Economic Review* 101: 3221-3252.
- Rönnbäck, Klas (2016): *Labour and Living Standards in Pre-Colonial West Africa: The Case of*

the Gold Coast. London: Routledge

Stilwell, Sean (2014): *Slavery and Slaving in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the author



[Klas Römbäck](#) is Professor in Economic History at the Department of Economy and Society, University of Gothenburg. He has published research on African and Atlantic economic history in many different journals. His publications include *Labor and Living Standards in Pre-Colonial West Africa: The Case of the Gold Coast* (Routledge, 2016) and *Capital and Colonialism: The Return on British Investments in Africa 1869-1969* (co-authored with Oskar Broberg, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).