



FRENCH PORTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLANTATION ECONOMY AND THE TRADE OF ENSLAVED PEOPLE

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In modern times, European colonization was marked by the establishment of a plantation economy in America and the Indian Ocean, using enslaved labour deported massively from the African continent. France, as a maritime and colonial power, took an active part in this trade in human beings, driven from a small number of metropolitan ports. The trade of enslaved African peoples was legalized, regulated, and encouraged by the State.

Focus on the plantation economy, Atlantic trade, and enslaved people in the French colonies of America

The first form of European globalization, born in the 17th century in the wake of voyages of exploration and the territorial conquests that followed, led to the development in the colonies of a plantation economy or system. Named plantation, habitation, estate or ingenio according to the place in which these were found, these agricultural structures can be defined by three main criteria. Firstly, a production largely ensured by forced labour, often enslaved labour; secondly, a capitalist type of organization characterized by important financial investments and the search for high profits; and thirdly, an economic organization that was highly dependent on maritime trade for the export of its produce and the import of foodstuffs and manufactured products. If sugar cane production was the archetypal model, other exotic crops were also grown: tobacco, indigo, cotton, cocoa, and coffee.

Faced with the lack of technical progress, increasing numbers of workers were needed to produce more colonial products, in order to satisfy the growing needs of Europeans who consumed sugar, coffee, and tobacco, and wore the light coloured fabrics known as indiennes. The use of enslaved labour, massively deported from the African continent, was the solution favoured by Europeans, due to the considerable mortality rate of the Amerindian populations and low emigration rates of indentured workers from the old continent. Specialists estimate the scale of the deportation carried




out by Western trade from the 16th century to the 1860s, at between 12 and 13 million men, women, and children, of whom about 15% died during their voyage to the European colonies.

In total, France organized over 4,400 slave-trading expeditions between the 17th and mid-19th centuries that resulted in the deportation of 1.3 to 1.4 million Africans, mainly across the Atlantic Ocean to its American colonies in the Greater Antilles (Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti), the Lesser Antilles (Saint Kitts, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia), Guyana, Louisiana, and to a minor extent, the Indian Ocean (Bourbon and French islands, present-day Réunion and Mauritius).

Commerce with the plantation colonies and the trade of enslaved peoples contributed to the development of France's main ports and, more broadly, to the country's economic growth. The hierarchy of French trading ports was dominated at the very top by Nantes (about 1,800 expeditions and over 550,000 Africans deported), ahead of Le Havre (520 expeditions), Bordeaux and La Rochelle (480 expeditions each). In all, some twenty ports in metropolitan or mainland France fitted out ships for trading, seven of which participated in over one hundred campaigns. Amongst the various maritime traffics, the slave trade appeared to be particularly risky and uncertain, requiring a significant mobilization of capital. It was indeed a "rich trade" (O. Grenouilleau), which sometimes generated very large profits.

In the French colonies of America, the introduction of enslaved African captives began as early as 1626, thanks to a permission granted by Richelieu, only a few months after taking possession of the island of Saint-Christopher or Saint-Kitts (Lesser Antilles). In 1642, Louis XIII authorized his subjects to practice the trade of enslaved people, on the condition that the captives were converted to Christianity. Under the reign of Louis XIV, who sought to reinforce royal power in the colonies, a legislative arsenal, known as the "Black Code", a name that actually dates from the beginning of the 18th century, was created to structure the relationship between masters and slaves in several domains (servile status, housing, punishment, etc.). This set of texts remained in force, with adaptations and changes, up until the abolition of slavery, which occurred for the first time during the revolutionary period in 1794 and then, after its re-establishment in 1802 up until 1848. Enslaved people were deemed Christianized human beings, deprived of a legal identity, and legally owned by others. In practice, this legislation remained largely unenforced, mainly due to the resistance of masters who considered that the State had no business interfering in the slavery system.



Document: Gérard Mellier justifies the trade of enslaved African people, 1716

“Before speaking of the proposed regulation, it would not be useless to make the following observations on the trade of these enslaved Negroes, which is practiced with the support of our developing colonies in America. [...] The motives of these edicts [the author refers to the laws governing the trade of enslaved peoples] are based on the fact that the trade in Negroes transported to the American islands is absolutely necessary for the cultivation of sugar, cotton, indigo, and other commodities that are brought from these countries to France.

This trade, which by the venality of men renders the captives comparable to cattle, would not be authorized without the indispensable need for their service in our colonies; and without the Negroes we transport there coming out of error and idolatry to receive baptism, and that they are carefully instructed in the Roman religion by priests and missionaries proposed for this purpose.

Moreover, [N]igritia* is a large region of Africa divided into several kingdoms, whose peoples are so numerous that it would be difficult for them to subsist, if through the trade of enslaved peoples they were not relieved every year of a portion of those who inhabit there. Since these peoples are accustomed to making war on one another, they would be inclined to kill the captives taken during wars, without being obliged to keep them to sell or exchange for the goods and merchandise sent to them either by our ships or by those of the [A]nglish, [D]utch, and [P]ortuguese.

[...] Basically, Negroes are naturally inclined to theft, larceny, lust, laziness, and treachery, and if one can believe the gallant tales and anecdotes from Spain, they are used for purposes that should be avoided. In general, they are only fit for living in servitude, and for the work and cultivation of the lands on the continent of our American colonies.”



Modernized spelling and expressions

*Name given by the French in the early 18th century to a territory encompassing the present-day states of Mali, Niger, and Chad.

Insights: Justifying African Slavery (or Enslavement) in the 18th Century

At the time of the writing of this document, Gérard Mellier (1674-1729) was the sub-delegate of the Intendant of Brittany in Nantes, where he later became mayor in 1720. Several researchers, notably Pierre H. Boulle and Philippe Le Pichon, have already underlined the interest of this text, in that it prefigures the law adopted in October 1716, regulating the stay of enslaved Black people in the metropolis. Mellier was very familiar with the merchant milieu, to which he had connections, and unambiguously supported the development of the trade of enslaved peoples.

The author employs three main arguments which were constantly taken up by the “friends of the colonies”, i.e. the supporters of enslavement, until its second abolition in the French colonies in 1848.

The first argument was economic and consisted in underlining the necessity of enslaved labour to the development of the colonies: “the support of our developing colonies in America”, “absolutely necessary for [...] cultivation”, “without the indispensable need for their service in our colonies”, “for the work and cultivation of the lands on the continent of our American colonies”. To give up slavery would mean ruining an entire sector of the French economy, which was growing rapidly at the beginning of the 18th century, in the context of fierce competition between the European powers (the author mentions the “[A]nglish, [Dutch], and [P]ortuguese” who were also present along the African coast).

The second argument was that the fate of the enslaved people in the European colonies was better than if they had remained on the African continent (“so numerous that it would be difficult for them to subsist”, “they would be inclined to kill the captives”). In line with this argument, the religious aspect is highlighted (“come out of error and idolatry to receive baptism”): the enslaved people were to be converted to Roman Catholicism, a condition imposed by Louis XIII to legalize the trade of enslaved peoples in 1642. Their souls were now saved.



The third argument attempted to justify the enslavement of Africans due to their supposed inferiority (“they are only fit to live in servitude”): in other words, they are savages, practically animals, far from trustworthy. The animal vocabulary used by the author (“renders them comparable to cattle”) may also be found in the terms frequently used to describe captives during the trade of enslaved people: one refers to a “Negro’s head” as one would speak of “cattle’s heads”, one speaks of the enslaved people as “rejects”, or “defective”, or on the contrary, they are referred to as the “Blacks from India” to designate the most beautiful specimens, thereby illustrating the commodification of which the captives were victims.

The unbridled sexuality, alluded to by Mellier, also contributed to this negative vision of Africans and to their “animalization”. A process of racialization was at work, based on a pseudo-scientific discourse, developed in works such as Buffon's Natural History, published from 1749 onwards, and influencing certain Enlightenment authors. The result was that Black Africans were enslaved by their very essence or nature. For example, the word “negro”, borrowed from the Spanish “negro”, designated a person of black race in the 15th century, before taking on the meaning of a Black enslaved person in the 18th century.

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This article was prepared in partnership with





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Iconographies



The port of Nantes in 1776. Illustration taken from *Nouvelles vues perspectives des ports de France dessinées pour le Roi par M. Ozanne*. Engraved by Y. Le Gouaz in 1776. Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouvelles_vues_perspectives_des_ports_de_France)



Mascarons in the city of Nantes, Allée Brancas. Visible on the pediments of the houses that once belonged to the city's merchants, these effigies often bear the faces of African slaves. Source: books.openedition.org