



# EUROPEANS, TRAFFICKING, AND THE TRADE OF ENSLAVED PEOPLES

Patricia Beauchamp Afadé

The trafficking and trade of enslaved peoples have existed since High Antiquity all around the world, particularly in Europe—in the Mediterranean basin—and in Africa. The generic term “slavery” refers to a diversity of realities and situations depending on the continent and the era.

The transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples and colonial systems, organised by Europeans from the 16th century onwards, reflected progress in navigation, the colonisation of new lands in America, and the need for labour for their development. These unprecedented phenomena may be characterised by their intensity and the volume of populations deported over long distances. These practices involved all of Europe, both the maritime and continental powers, and strongly contributed to the formation of modern Europe.

## Trafficking and the slavery: history and definitions

The terms “trafficking” and the “slavery” refer to different realities: trafficking refers to the trade of enslaved human beings and slavery to a type of social relationship that varied according to the region and the epoch. Some historians, like Frenchman Olivier Grenouilleau, define an enslaved person as follows. They are always an “Other or someone transformed into an Other”; they do not have the same culture, the same religion, etc. They are the possession of their master and can therefore be subjected to the most total arbitrariness. They are useful and profitable to their master. Finally, they are a human being whose humanity is denied: they are simply equated to the labour they can provide, and are assimilated to a commodity, animal, or machine.

## Slavery, a very old universal practice

Slavery is one of the most constant forms of the domination of human beings by other human beings. War and economic dependence (debt) are the biggest generators of slaves. If the first written testimonies of slavery concern Mesopotamia, its existence has been revealed across all human societies.

In Europe, the practice of slavery structured the economic and social life of Greco-Latin civilization since 500 BC. Slaves were very present in mines, quarries, grain-growing zones, cattle farms, or in



urban economic activities. Later, in the Middle Ages, the shores of the Mediterranean were the areas with the highest concentration of slavery-based societies. In Andalusia (Spain), Portugal, Genoa, and Venice (Italy), owning enslaved people was common and could be seen across all strata of society. In the late 16th century, the servile population was estimated at 4-5% of the total population of the Iberian Peninsula. The origin of the enslaved peoples was varied: Russians, Circassians (originating from the Caucasian valleys east of the Black Sea), Tartars (steppes of Central Asia), Slavs, in particular the Serbian populations, Barbary, Turks, Moors, Africans, etc.

The history of slavery in Europe and the origin of the word “slave”, *sclavus* (medieval Latin), which appeared in the High Middle Ages in Venice, where most of the enslaved individuals were Balkan Slavs, prove that the slave hasn’t always been “Black”.

## The birth and development of European trafficking

In the 15th century, progress in navigation, the search for commercial routes to India, and the increase in direct contacts between Europeans and Africans caused major changes in trade. The Portuguese essentially carried out maritime exploration campaigns along the African coasts, setting up forts and trading posts there, and developing relations with certain rulers or traders. Accustomed to introducing slave labour of African origin into Mediterranean Europe, the Portuguese took a major step at this time by using this labour in the development of São Tomé and several other Atlantic islands off the coast of Africa, and then later, in the exploitation of the American colonies. They may be said to have “invented” the transatlantic trade of enslaved African captives.

The trade in enslaved peoples was born from the growing need for labour for the development (colonization, clearing, cultivation, etc.) of the American colonies, and notably to produce colonial foodstuffs like tobacco, sugar, cotton, cocoa, and coffee. These luxury products were gradually becoming everyday consumer products in Europe, and demand grew considerably.

In the 17th century, a system of indentured labour developed in European states: young men, and more rarely young women, enlisted for a few years in the European colonies in the Americas. Their voyage, as well as food and accommodation on-site were paid for. However, candidates for such schemes soon became increasingly rare. They were dissuaded by the high mortality rate in these tropical regions. The colonists therefore attempted to recruit local populations like the Amerindians, but the latter were not numerous enough. Moreover, they were quickly decimated by the imported diseases and the extreme working conditions to which they were subjected. In addition, the natural increase of African servile populations was not sufficient to meet the growing demand for labour. The massive recourse to the transatlantic trade of enslaved African captives



towards the Americas was thus the solution favoured by Europeans. This form of labour trafficking and exploitation was not new, however. It merely represented a shift of ancestral trading practices long existing on the African continent towards the Americas, and a shift of oriental trade, practiced between the 7th and the 19th centuries by the Arab, Persian, and Ottoman empires, making use of non-Islamic populations or Africans living south of the Sahara.

Even if Portugal initiated the practice, the whole of Atlantic Europe quickly engaged in transatlantic trading. Soon, the powers of north-western Europe sought to challenge the Iberian colonial monopoly. From the 17th century onwards, after having conquered part of Brazil in 1630, the Dutch joined the Portuguese and the Spanish, and finally, the French and the English, whose involvement in trafficking reached its peak in the 18th century. Various navigation companies and joint-stock companies were established: in 1621, the Dutch West Indies Company; in 1658, the French Company of Cape Verde and Senegal; in 1672, the English Royal African Company. The highest bidders won the market on the African coast. The goods embarked on the trading vessels were increasingly numerous and of high quality to meet the demand of African sovereigns and merchants.

The principal actors of the trade in enslaved African peoples were Portugal, England, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark, but the whole of Europe participated in the slavery economy, either through the organization or financing of trading expeditions, or by producing goods intended for trading on the African coasts and therefore, in the purchase of captives. Others participated in the operation of plantations in America or benefitted from the distribution of colonial produce.

## Flux, circuits, and actors of the European trade in enslaved African peoples

Specialists estimate that between 1500 and 1870, twelve to fifteen million African men, women, and children were deported from their continent to the Americas by the main actors of the trade: Portugal and Portuguese Brazil (4.65 million deportees), the United Kingdom (3.097 million), Spain and Spanish America (1.6 million), France (1.313 million), the Netherlands (544,000 deportees), the North American colonies/the United States (367,000), and Denmark (103,000). Approximately ten million captives landed at their destination, due to the high mortality rates on board trading vessels (15% deaths on average).



## Profits and illegal trafficking

Even today, the question of the profits of the transatlantic trade in enslaved African peoples and its role in the industrial rise of Western Europe remains a subject of debate. Recent research shows that the profit rates were of modest return: 5 to 10% for the Dutch, 10% for the English, 6% for the French. However, impressive profits were occasionally mentioned, resulting from particularly successful expeditions that yielded profits of 100 to 150%. But the random nature of the activity could just as easily result in heavy losses.

Nevertheless, these profits were not limited to capitalistic profits, reserved for a small group of investors or speculators, but rather for an entire economy. All of the activities linked to the colonial economy, the role of which was essential for the countries of modern Europe, were concerned: the manufacture and sale of trade goods, naval construction and fitting out of ships, processing and marketing of colonial foodstuffs, circulation of capital (banks, insurance companies, stock exchanges). This economic situation motivated shipowners to continue trading illegally in France until the 1850s, with 674 expeditions recorded. Although imposed by the English on other European states and prohibited by the Vienna Convention of February 1815, trading in enslaved peoples was not abolished in France until between 1817 and 1831, and continued even later in the southern hemisphere, between the Congolese and Angolan coasts and Brazil.

The development of the port cities on the Atlantic seaboard dates from this period and more often than not, was the result of private fortunes. Enlightenment Europe witnessed an effervescent cultural sphere, the arts and letters were thriving, and the novelty of “exoticism” and “the islands” was increasingly popular. As writer Marc Elder (1884-1933) points out: “The bloody money from the seas was washed in beauty”.

## Today's heritage?

This Atlantic history has often been omitted from the history of continental Europe, yet it played a major role in the formation of modern Europe. The specificity of the transatlantic trade in enslaved African peoples and the colonial or plantation economy was the racialization of the status of the enslaved persons: there was now a correlation between the enslaved status and “Blackness”. This modern construction of “race” gradually established phenomena of identification between racial positioning and economic function. A construction that was subsequently reinforced by the colonization of Africa and the use of forced labour.

The role of the colonial slavery economy was significant in certain sectors of production and consumption, in the evolution of capitalism, in the renewal of the social hierarchy, and in the debate of ideas. Transatlantic trade contributed to driving many supply and redistribution markets, and



allowed for the amassing of large fortunes invested in a wide range of activities or forms of consumption. The philosophical and religious movements specific to current European culture, as evidenced in contemporary memorial issues, were in fact, nourished by the debates of “Enlightenment Europe” on the justifications of the trade in enslaved peoples, as well as abolitionist campaigns.

Today, we can see how this trading system has not only shaped the Americas, but also Europe, in the composition of its population, in the construction of otherness, but also in its relationship to the world, especially Africa.

*Translated by Emma Lingwood*



## About the author

Patricia Beauchamp Afadé, is a consultant in cultural project engineering, a museographer, and specialist in the transatlantic slave trade and colonial slavery with Les Anneaux de la Mémoire.

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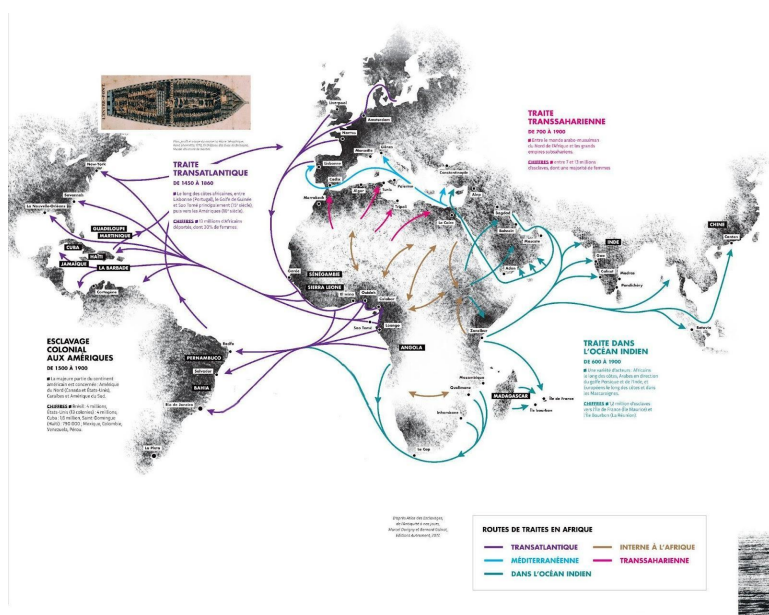
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## Further information:

<https://www.slavevoyages.org/>, database on the transatlantic slavery economy (maps, figures, origins, and destinations of expeditions, etc.).







Map of trafficking flows, taken from the exhibition *Women and slavery, lives and fights for freedom*, CCRI Ouidah (Benin) - Les Anneaux de la Mémoire, 2021.



*De Dam met Paleis en Waag* (Dam Square with the palace and weigh house), Jan van Kessel, before 1680 © City of Amsterdam



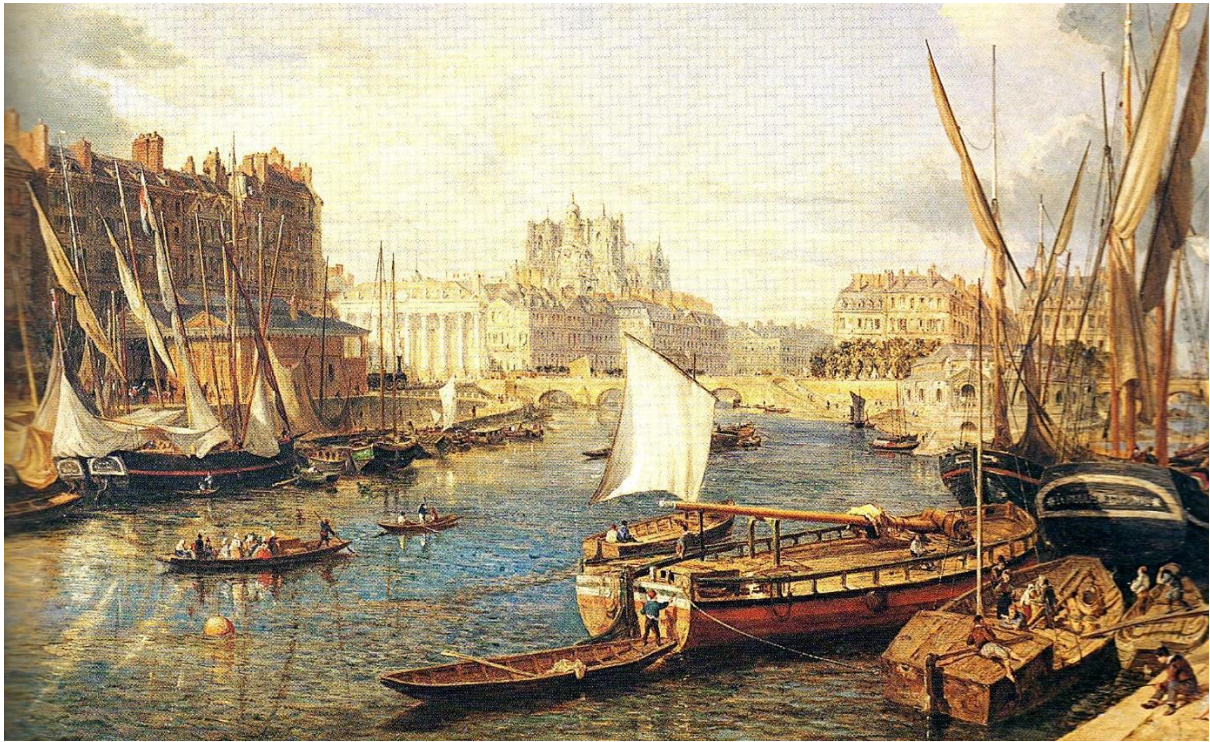


*West India Docks, London, Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Charles Pugin, 1810, Wikipedia.*



*Panorama of Nantes, from the Residence known as the "Bout du Monde" [Tip of the World] at the very end of the Ile Gloriette, Martens, 1838 © Castle of the Dukes of Brittany – Nantes History Museum.*





*View from the Quay Duguay-Trouin in Nantes, William Turner, 1829-1830 © Private archives.*