

## The slave-trade era

All the estimates for the volume of the Atlantic slave trade that have been given so far are for numbers of slaves landed in the Americas, as such numbers are generally more readily ascertainable than figures for slaves leaving Africa. A fair proportion of these slaves never reached the other side of the Atlantic because of deaths from disease, maltreatment, or maritime disaster. Evidence from the 18th and 19th centuries, when the vast majority of the slaves were transported, suggests that on average the loss may have been about 15 percent; in earlier times losses are likely to have been higher, perhaps averaging 20 percent.

	Slaves taken from Africa as a whole		from north of the equator	
	arriving overseas	leaving Africa	percentage	estimated total
Before 1600	290,000	370,000	60	220,000
1601-1700	1,490,000	1,870,000	60	1,120,000
1701-1810	5,150,000	6,130,000	60	3,680,000
After 1810	2,780,000	3,270,000	33	1,090,000
Total	9,710,000	11,640,000	--	6,110,000

Not all the slaves were taken from western Africa as defined in this article. Considerable numbers were always taken from Africa south of the equator, and in the 19th century the measures taken to stop the North Atlantic slave trade were quicker and more effective than those against the trade across the South Atlantic. It seems safe to suggest that, up to and including the 18th century, 60 percent of the slaves were taken from the western African coasts from the Sénégal River to the Cameroons and that in the 19th century the proportion dropped to about one-third. It is thus possible to arrive at the following estimates for the loss of population to western Africa.

It is not easy to assess what effects such a loss of population may have had on western Africa and on the course of its history. In the first place, it must not be forgotten that almost all statistics concerning the slave trade involve some degree of estimation. Those used here are based on the analyses of the available data by the American historian Philip D. Curtin and by the Canadian historian Paul E. Lovejoy; they are unlikely to be more than  $\pm 20$  percent from the reality.

Second, there is really no means of knowing the size of the population of western Africa at any time during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. Working backward from the population data available in the 20th century (which are not themselves always very reliable), and from the evidence these provide for rates of growth, it is possible to suppose that at the beginning of the 18th century, when the Atlantic slave trade was entering its dominant phase, the total population of western Africa may have been about 25,000,000, and that its natural rate of increase may have been some 0.15 percent per annum. Although these estimates can be little more than guesses, they do tend to suggest that the commonly held idea that the export slave trade actually depopulated western Africa is not likely to be right.

When the slave trade was at its height during the 18th century, the export of slaves was averaging 45,000 a year. This loss would have been about equal to the assumed natural increase in population, so that the effect might have been to have checked population growth rather than to have actually diminished the population. In earlier centuries, or in the 19th century, it would not even have had this effect: population would have been growing, albeit more slowly than with no export of slaves.

But these are gross calculations that take no account of the uneven selection of slaves for export. Since the American planters, and hence the slave traders, looked in particular for fit slaves in the prime of life, between about 15 and 35 years old, it may be argued that robbing western Africa of people particularly from this group of its population would especially tend to reduce births and thereby reduce the capacity of the population to maintain its numbers. On the other hand, however, the planters preferred their slaves to be male, and only about a third of those exported were women. Thus, since western African men who could afford it were polygynous, the birth rate may have been less affected than might have been expected. There is also evidence to suggest that the fitter or more intelligent slaves were often kept at home, and that less fit individuals were in many ways prepared to deceive the European buyers as to their age or condition.

It can also be argued that, since some parts of the coast saw the export of many more slaves than did others, the regions adjacent to these coasts suffered much more severely than the overall figures for western Africa as a whole might suggest. In the peak period of the 1780s, the distribution of exports along the coast was approximately as follows: from the Senegambia and Sierra Leone, about 7,000 slaves a year (about 15 percent of the total from western Africa as a whole); from the Gold Coast, about 9,400 (20 percent); from the Slave Coast and the Benin region, about 16,000 (35 percent); and from the Niger delta and the Cameroons, about 13,400 (29 percent). The three last zones—Lower Guinea—today have populations as dense as any to be found in tropical Africa, and the available evidence suggests that their population was also relatively great in the 18th century—certainly by and large denser than that of most parts of Upper Guinea.

It is therefore possible to conclude that the largest numbers of slaves came from just those regions that could most afford to export population. It is also unlikely to be a coincidence that it was this same area—from the Gold Coast to the Cameroons—which was the most highly developed coastal region in terms of government, economic production, and trade. It was only in areas of low population and poor indigenous organization that foreign slave traders ever needed to set out to capture slaves for themselves. This naturally made the Africans involved hostile to further dealings with the traders, while it also tended to reduce the power of the population to maintain and feed itself, so that in both cases supplies of slaves were ultimately fewer. For the most part, the European traders bought the slaves they needed from African merchants and rulers who had organized to offer slaves for sale.

About half these [slaves](#) were unfortunates in their own societies: criminals, the mentally or physically handicapped, debtors or those who had been sold for debt or pledged as security for a debt, those who had offended men of power or influence, or simply those

who in some way had become outcasts from the family and tribal systems. Selling such people was usually simply an alternative to keeping them in some kind of servitude in domestic society or, in more extreme situations, condemning them to execution or to serve as human sacrifices in the festivals of ancestral or land cults.

The remainder of the slaves exported were strangers to the societies that sold them, sometimes unwary travelers or border villagers who were kidnapped, but for the most part prisoners of [war](#). Europeans sometimes argued that African kings went to war often with the prime purpose of securing slaves for the slave trade. In the 19th century, when the Europeans themselves had outlawed the slave trade, this argument was used to justify the advance of European colonial rule. On the other hand, in the 18th century, some European slave traders claimed that the acquisition of slaves was simply a consequence of wars which were natural occurrences. From this they argued that they were actually doing a service to such captives and to humanity by buying them and selling them into hard labour on the American plantations. They claimed that they were rescuing the slaves from the danger of being executed or of becoming human sacrifices and that slavery under civilized Christian masters was preferable to slavery in primitive, pagan African society.

Despite the speciousness of the latter claim, the 18th-century slavers' argument seems nearer the truth than that of the 19th-century abolitionists. African wars, like wars anywhere else, were the consequence of rivalries for wealth and power between states. Whereas elsewhere the wealth and power of a monarchy might be measured in terms of the amount of territory it controlled, or in terms of the monetary value of its resources, the prime measure of both power and wealth in Africa was people. By and large land in Africa had very little economic value. There was almost invariably far more land available than there were people to cultivate it or to develop its mineral and other resources. The key to the strength of a kingdom thus lay in its ability to gain control of human energy, and an obvious way to do this was to take people away from its neighbours and rivals. This, indeed, was how western African kingdoms had come to be built up, by the natural rulers of particular small kinship groups securing for themselves and their units more clients and slaves than their neighbours, and by using them to extend their power over these neighbours and even farther afield.

People then were the important resource. Often, indeed, a person was the unit of value in which other resources were measured: thus the value of horses, or guns, or parcels of trade goods was often expressed in terms of the numbers of slaves (*i.e.*, disposable people) for which they might be exchanged. If more people were available, then more land, or gold or iron or salt, might be exploited or more trade might be done (the environment was hostile to transport animals, so that trade depended heavily on the availability of porters and canoemen). Thus there would be greater surpluses available to support the monarch, his household, his administration, and his army, and to maintain specialized manufactures, crafts, and services.

The purpose of wars was thus to increase the power and wealth of a kingdom by increasing its human power and diminishing that of its rivals. The ruling philosophy

cannot therefore have been one favouring the export of slaves. But it was one in which the economic value of a person was very well established. With the growth of trade, and especially of international trade which made available desirable commodities that seemed as valuable or sometimes more valuable than people, it was natural for African kings and their traders to think of selling some men and women in exchange for these commodities, and especially so if the foreign merchants who offered these commodities were themselves interested in acquiring slaves.

### **Pre-European slave trading**

This situation had first arisen, and at a very early stage, in the trans-Saharan trade. Labour was needed to work the Saharan salt deposits, and the civilizations of the Mediterranean and Middle East had long had a demand for slaves. Some North African and Middle Eastern exports, particularly perhaps horses, were so valuable in the Sudan that its kings were quite ready to exchange some of their scarce human power to secure these. However, the problems involved in marching slaves across the Sahara with its scarce and widely separated resources of water were formidable. Although reliable estimates are lacking, it is generally supposed that the trans-Saharan slave trade could rarely if ever have transported more than 6,000 or 7,000 slaves a year. After the middle of the 17th century, however, the demand of the Atlantic trade for slaves was practically insatiable, and, as has been seen, at its peak during the 18th century, each year about seven times as many slaves were leaving the western African coasts.

A high proportion of these slaves, nearly a third, were being exported—as has been seen—from the [Niger delta](#) region. The communities of Ijo (Ijaw), Ibibio, and Efik fishermen and salt makers, who controlled the waterways to the interior, developed city-states whose whole fortunes came to be bound up with the slave trade. Most of their slaves were brought from their immediate hinterland. It is probably significant that some of this hinterland, particularly that inhabited by the [Igbo](#) (Ibo) and the Tiv, today has the highest population densities to be found anywhere in tropical Africa—some Igbo densities being as much as 1,500 persons to the square mile. Igbo country is not rich in natural resources, however, and its water supplies are poor. In the 20th century one result has been that many Igbo have emigrated to sell their labour in other parts of Nigeria. Some scholars believe that something of this population pressure may have already been evident during the slave-trade era.

It is noteworthy that, although the American demand for slaves was rising steadily from about 1630 onward, every other part of the coast seems quite soon to have reached a figure for slave exports which thereafter remained more or less constant until the 19th century. Then two things happened: first, there was a breakdown in the system of law and order that had hitherto operated in Yoruba country to the west of the Niger delta, with the result that exports from the Slave Coast began to increase; and second, after the early 1860s, the American demand fell off sharply. There is a strong implication that in the 17th and 18th centuries the other major slave-exporting regions with relatively large

populations had developed politico-economic systems which were able more or less consciously to calculate the balance of advantage for themselves of engaging in the export slave trade. By and large their conclusion seems to have been that it was more profitable to exchange some of their labour for European goods than it was to keep it all at home, but that it was dangerous to export more than a certain controlled quantity.

The Atlantic slave trade was not simply a rape of African labour to serve European purposes in the Americas. In any case, slaves were not the sole African exports by sea during the slave-trade era. Gold, gum, hides, timbers, palm oil, and other commodities were also traded, and the European merchants needed to buy large quantities of provisions to feed the slaves during the Atlantic crossing. The slaves and other exports had to be purchased, and in exchange Africans received supplies of other goods—cloth, metals, tools, knives and other hardware, guns and ammunition, beads and small manufactures, tobacco and spirits—that, however much their prices may have been inflated in relation to their cost in Europe or America, were thought by their purchasers to be at least as valuable as the slaves or other goods they had sold.

From the African point of view, the main importance of the slave trade may have been that it led to a great growth of all kinds of trade at the coasts and to a considerable stimulation of economic and political activity and organization for some distance into the interior of Guinea, a region which had hitherto been remote from the main centres of trade in western African history, which had been in the Sudan. It is difficult to quantify this growth of commercial activity, but coastal exports and imports combined, negligible prior to about 1500, may—in contemporary values—have been worth something like \$3.5 million a year by 1700 and \$8 million or more by 1800. This was a considerable trade by the standards of the time, as can be seen from comparison with an estimate in the 1850s of the value of the trade of Kano, then the most prosperous of the Sudanic kingdoms, at some \$500,000 a year.

Some consequences of this rapid increase of trade on the Guinea Coast were fairly general. One was the appearance on the coast itself of a new class of African merchants, who freed themselves from some of the restrictions of traditional society and were able to accumulate personal wealth and power to rival that of the local kings. Sometimes, indeed, as at Komenda on the Gold Coast or at Opobo in the delta, the new men actually set themselves up as kings. This development owed much to the direct influence of the European trade on the coast. Some Europeans settled more or less permanently in Africa, married local women, and created new merchant dynasties, such as the Brews of the Gold Coast. Others of the new men were former slaves who had returned from America, particularly perhaps from Brazil to the Slave Coast. Many were local Africans, but usually men who had started by gaining useful contacts and training in the service of European merchants. All the new men were experienced in European ways and often secured for their sons elements of a European education.

The growth of Guinea's international trade encouraged the spread and acceptance of regular systems of currency. Many, perhaps most, of the Guinea currencies were already extant on the coast when the Europeans arrived, but the growth of trade meant that certain

of these became the sole acceptable currency within relatively large and well-defined areas, such as iron bars in Upper Guinea and much of the Niger delta, ounces of gold dust on the Gold Coast, and cowrie shells on the Slave Coast. Another development was the emergence on a considerable scale of production for sale. In [Asante](#) (Ashanti), for example, some villages were given over to the production of a particular commodity, such as cloth, and some of the chief men ran plantations with slave labour (as also, in the 19th century, did the kings of Dahomey).

The emergence of the trading city-states of the Niger delta represented a social revolution as well as a political innovation. The kinship system gave way to the “House” system, by which both freemen and the large numbers of slaves needed to operate trading canoes and strategic and trading settlements were bound together by common economic interests into large corporations headed by the leading merchants. On the [Gold Coast](#) and Slave Coast, however, political development was more akin to that which had earlier taken place in the Sudan under the influence of trans-Saharan trade.

Behind the Gold Coast the original centres of Akan trade and power had been north of the forest and northward-looking. The growth of trade at the coast led to new developments among the settlements in the forest, which had hitherto served only to produce gold and kola nuts for the northern trade. In the 17th century three major forest kingdoms emerged: [Denkyera](#) in the west, [Akwamu](#) to the east, and between them, [Akyem](#) (see [map](#)). These competed with each other in expansion parallel to the coast to control as many as possible of the paths of trade to the European forts. Akyem lost, while Denkyera achieved such an overweening power that some of its northern tributaries secured guns and new techniques of political and military organization from Akwamu and rose in revolt. This was the effective origin of the new monarchy of Asante based on [Kumasi](#), situated in the central forest where the major trade routes from the Gold Coast converged and met with the major routes of the Hausa and the Mande-Dyula traders from the north.

By the beginning of the 18th century the power of Denkyera had been crushed, and in the next 70 years Asante armies went on to build up an empire that in the north engulfed Bono and Gonja (Guang) and levied tribute on Dagomba and in the south incorporated or made tributary virtually all the small states that had been involved in the rise of Denkyera, Akyem, and Akwamu. The only part of modern Ghana that was not under the sway of Kumasi was the central coastlands, where the small [Fanti](#) (Fante) states, gaining some measure of protection from their close association with the various European forts, began to come together in a federation to resist Asante influence.

## **The Guinea coastlands and the Europeans (1807–79)**

In addition to the Islāmic revolution in the Sudan, the major themes of western African history in the 19th century are the successful campaign against the export of slaves, the trade that for the previous 200 years had been the mainstay of Guinea commerce; the search by both Africans and Europeans for a stable new relationship in the absence of slave trading; and the failure of the major African kingdoms to adjust to the new

economic and social circumstances swiftly enough to withstand growing European pressures.

### The abolition of slavery

These three themes are closely interwoven in the course of events in Africa. It should be noted, however, that the major decisions regarding the abolition of the slave trade were taken outside Africa and were responses to economic and political changes and pressures in Europe and America. Many of the Christian churches had never accepted the morality of trading in human beings, and the 18th-century Evangelical movements in Protestant Europe led to open campaigning against the Atlantic slave trade and also against the institution of slavery itself. These things were equally condemned by new secular currents of thought associated with the French Revolution. Because plantation production in tropical America was no longer as profitable a field for investment by northern Europeans as industry, or as trade with other parts of the world, the propaganda against the slave trade began to take effect. Denmark outlawed slave trading by its citizens in 1803, Great Britain in 1807, the United States in 1808, Sweden in 1813, The Netherlands in 1814, and France (for the second time) in 1818.

The most significant of these actions against the slave trade was that of Britain. British ships had been by far the largest carriers of slaves at the end of the 18th century, and only Britain really possessed the naval resources necessary to secure enforcement of anti-slave-trade laws on the high seas. Furthermore, when Portugal, Spain, and some American countries expanded their slave trading to meet the deficiency caused by the British withdrawal, they met with strong opposition from Britain. The underlying reason for this was that Britain, more than any other European nation, had considerable amounts of capital, experience, and goodwill accumulated in trade with Africa. When British merchants tried to develop new lines in African trade to replace their old slave trade, however, they commonly found that, as long as their European or American rivals continued to buy slaves, African kings and merchants were generally not willing to organize alternative exports. Economic interest therefore combined with abstract morality to induce successive British governments to bring pressure on other governments to outlaw their slave trades and to permit the British navy to help enforce their laws on their ships at sea.

But these measures did not stop the export of slaves from Africa. Some nations, notably France and the United States, whose own naval controls were fitful, objected strongly to British warships stopping, searching, and, if need be, arresting their ships at sea. Furthermore, as long as there was a market for slaves in the Americas (*i.e.*, until all the American countries had abolished the institution of slavery), there were lawless individual traders who felt that the profits to be gained from running slaves across the Atlantic more than outweighed the risk of arrest. Except when actually embarking slaves on the African coast or unloading them in American waters, the chances of interception at sea were in fact quite small. Although the British navy maintained in western African

waters an anti-slave-trade squadron of up to 20 ships, which between 1825 and 1865 arrested 1,287 slave ships and liberated about 130,000 slaves, during the same period about 1.8 million African slaves are believed to have been landed in the Americas.

The final cessation of the export of slaves from Africa to the Americas took place toward the end of the 1860s. The decisive factor was the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865. Slavery was then legal only in Cuba and Brazil—and only to the 1880s—and the risks of transporting slaves to these two markets became too high. Before this, British governments had already embarked on a policy of taking or supporting active steps in Africa to stop slaves from being offered for sale on its coasts and to encourage the production of alternative exports. The immediate results of these efforts were often not very great. For example, many African governments and merchants were no more inclined than many European or American governments or merchants to enforce or to observe the anti-slave-trade treaties that British officials wished upon them. They saw no reason why their economic interests, which were bound up with slavery and trade in slaves, should be subordinated to the new economic interests of British traders following what was to them the capricious decision that slavery and the slave trade were wrong.