

# THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

From the seventeenth century on slaves became the focus of trade between Europe and Africa. Europe's conquest and colonization of North and South America and the Caribbean islands from the fifteenth century onward created an insatiable demand for African laborers, who were deemed more fit to work in the tropical conditions of the New World. The numbers of slaves imported across the Atlantic Ocean steadily increased, from approximately 5,000 slaves a year in the sixteenth century to over 100,000 slaves a year by the end of the eighteenth century.

Evolving political circumstances and trade alliances in Africa led to shifts in the geographic origins of slaves throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Slaves were generally the unfortunate victims of territorial expansion by imperialist African states or of raids led by predatory local strongmen, and various populations found themselves captured and sold as different regional powers came to prominence. Firearms, which were often exchanged for slaves, generally increased the level of fighting by lending military strength to previously marginal polities. A nineteenth-century tobacco pipe from the Democratic Republic of Congo or Angola demonstrates the degree to which warfare, the slave trade, and elite arts were intertwined at this time. The pipe itself was the prerogative of wealthy and powerful individuals who could afford expensive imported tobacco, generally by trading slaves, while the rifle form makes clear how such slaves were acquired in the first place. Because of its deadly power, the rifle was added to the repertory of motifs drawn upon in many regional depictions of rulers and culture heroes as emblematic of power along with the leopard, elephant, and python.

The institution of slavery existed in Africa long before the arrival of Europeans and was widespread at the period of economic contact. Private land ownership was largely absent from pre-colonial African societies, and slaves were one of the few forms of wealth-producing property an individual could possess. Additionally, rulers often maintained corps of loyal, foreign-born slaves to guarantee their political security, and would encourage political centralization by appointing slaves from the imperial hinterlands to positions within the royal capital. Slaves were also exported across the desert to North Africa and to western Asia, Arabia, and India.

It would be impossible to argue, however, that transatlantic trade did not have a major effect upon the development and scale of slavery in Africa. As the demand for slaves increased with European colonial expansion in the New World, rising prices made the slave trade increasingly lucrative. African states eager to augment their treasuries in some instances even preyed upon their own peoples by manipulating their judicial systems, condemning individuals and their families to slavery in order to reap the rewards of their sale to European traders. Slave exports were responsible for the emergence of a number of large and powerful kingdoms that relied on a militaristic culture of constant warfare to generate the great numbers of human captives required for trade with the Europeans. The Yoruba kingdom on the Guinea coast, founded sometime before 1500, expanded rapidly in the eighteenth century as a result of this commerce. Its formidable army, aided by advanced iron technology, captured immense numbers of slaves that were profitably sold to traders. In the nineteenth century, the aggressive pursuit of slaves through warfare and raiding led to what is now the Republic of Benin, and prompted the emergence of the Chokwe chiefdoms from under the shadow of their Lunda leaders in present-day Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kingdoms on the Gold Coast of West Africa also became major slave exporters in the eighteenth century.

Ultimately, the international slave trade had lasting effects upon the African cultural landscape. Areas that were hit hardest by endemic warfare and slave raids suffered from general population decline, and it is believed that the shortage of men in particular may have changed the structure of many societies by thrusting women into roles previously occupied by their husbands and brothers. Additionally, some scholars have argued that images stemming from this era of constant violence and banditry have survived to the present day in the form of metaphysical fears and beliefs concerning witchcraft. In many cultures of West and Central Africa, witches are thought to kidnap solitary individuals to enslave or consume them. Finally, the increased exchange with Europeans and the fabulous wealth it brought enabled many states to cultivate sophisticated artistic traditions employing expensive and luxurious materials. From the fine silver- and goldwork of Dahomey and the Asante court to the virtuoso woodcarving of the Chokwe chiefdoms, these treasures are a vivid testimony of this turbulent period in African history.

## ***African Exports to Europe***

Slaves

gold dust

Ivory

bees wax

cloth (brocade, cotton, cotton wool,  
damask, palm bark, taffeta)

cloves

copper

elephant tusks

food

gum Arabic

hides

ivory

ostrich feathers

pepper

salt

- The sale of slaves seldom exceeded 10% of the total domestic product in Africa.
- European goods often supplemented rather than dislodged local African products.

## ***American/European Exports to Africa***

alcohol

beads

brass and copper bracelets

Brazilian brandy

Brazilian tobacco

cloth (Indian and European-raffia, taffeta)

guns

gun power

iron bars

chili pepper

potatoes

maize

## ***Exchange of Diseases Chart***

### **AFRICA**

hook worm

malaria

river blindness

yaws

yellow fever

### **EUROPE**

bloody flux

measles

sand flees

small pox

syphilis