

Perceptions of Slave Marts

The slave trade drove the commercial system that connected Europe, Africa, and the Americas – or the Atlantic system. Until the 19th century, when abolitionist calls came to the forefront of dialogue about the slave trade, the traffic in human beings was seen first and foremost as a business. European monarchs issued charters and monopolies to companies to engage in the slave trade with Africa, and African rulers directed the slave trade overall by demanding certain goods and imposing taxes and tributes on European slavers. In the triangular trade of the Atlantic system, African rulers exchanged slaves for European metal goods, guns, and cloth. European slavers exchanged slaves for New World plantation goods such as tobacco, indigo, coffee, cotton, and especially sugar. In fact, the majority of Africans sent to the New World were destined for sugarcane plantations. Conditions of slaves that remained in Africa led some European slavers to contend that African slaves had a better life across the Atlantic. It is important to note that African rulers rarely exchanged their own countrymen as slaves, but rather exchanged those from other regions who were captured in the domestic slave trade or, at times, individuals accused of thievery or adultery. Moreover, the conditions and work of slaves varied by region, as did the levels of official servitude. However, approximately 15% of Africans transported to the New World did not survive the Middle Passage, and labor-intensive sugar cultivation exhausted slaves quickly, resulting in a continual demand for new slaves.

The timing of arrival of enslaved Africans to New World ports depended on a couple of factors. First, there were the prevailing winds and currents, which influenced the departure timing and length of a slave ship's journey across the Atlantic. Second, timing depended on the harvesting schedule of the plantation goods for which the slaves were exchanged. Those Africans who survived the Middle Passage and arrived at slave marts in the Americas were overwhelmingly male, accompanied by fewer women and even fewer children. Slave purchasers from North America usually purchased slaves from transit markets such as Barbados in the case of the British and Curacao in the case of the Dutch. Many slaves arrived ill, dehydrated, and malnourished. At the Spanish-American slave marts, religious men, including men of the Jesuit religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, tended to these particular needs. In many instances, slave purchasers selected their desired individuals right from the ship or from a yard into which Africans were ushered upon leaving the ship. This usually occurred within a week of a ship's arrival.

As contemporary accounts suggest, captains of ships and trading agents at New World ports made attempts to disguise the illnesses that slaves suffered during the sea journey. Marketing slaves as being healthy, and therefore being a desirable laborer, was the primary concern of captains and trading agents once the ship arrived. Nevertheless, most contemporary accounts reveal the

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dissatisfaction of buyers. At times, there were not enough young men, and any young men there did not appear as healthy as investors would have liked. At times there were too many women and children, which did not have the same labor capacity as men. At other times slave trade agents simply were unable to disguise the sores on the skin of newly arrived slaves.

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