

An Ancient Practice Transformed by the Arrival of Europeans; Slavery existed in Africa long before Columbus, but the trans-Atlantic trade turned it into a very different institution

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FULL TEXT

Long before Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World, various forms of slavery flourished in Europe and Africa. But these Old World practices differed in important ways from the types of slavery that developed in the Americas after the institution of the Atlantic slave trade in the 1500s. New World slavery was a racialized institution in which slaves were black and slave owners were white. In contrast, owners and slaves in the Old World were generally of the same race. Distinctions between enslaved and freeborn people were often framed not in racial terms but in terms of language, culture and religion. The Greeks enslaved people whom they considered barbarians, and both Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages enslaved people whom they regarded as infidels. Slaves were seen above all as outsiders who lacked a social identity in their new community.

Servile institutions in Africa before 1500 were as varied as the political and social systems that enveloped them. Africa had large empires, powerful kingdoms, small chiefdoms and decentralized political systems in which the highest authorities were the patriarchs of extended families. Social systems ranged from the rigidly stratified Mande societies in the West African Sahel—which divided the population into hereditary categories of nobles, commoners, artisans and slaves—to highly egalitarian societies that rejected the authority of chiefs and kings.

Legacies of Slavery

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In West African kingdoms, slaves of the king often lived in separate agricultural villages and toiled to produce food for noble families and government officials. Away from the royal courts, however, enslaved people generally did the same agricultural and artisanal work as free people and dressed in a similar manner. Their role was to augment family and community labor rather than to replace it. In societies with decentralized political systems, slaves were dispersed instead of concentrated. Lacking a standing army to pursue runaways or crush rebellions, the village patriarchs gave enslaved people incentives to remain loyal by promoting incorporation and economic mobility. People in Africa became enslaved in a variety of ways. In regions dominated by powerful kingdoms, enslavement came about primarily through wars or raids. Because many regions of Africa were sparsely populated, capturing people to augment the labor force was often more important to the kings than seizing territory. In regions of Africa with decentralized political systems, wars were generally small-scale affairs that yielded few captives, and therefore the main forms of enslavement were kidnapping or judicial condemnation for a debt or a crime.

The captives would normally be sold to African slave merchants, who took them far enough from their homeland that they couldn't easily return. But they didn't normally travel long distances, because of the cost of feeding and guarding the captives. The major exception was the slave trade across the Sahara to urban centers along the Mediterranean coast, where high prices made the long journey profitable. Caravans of captives heading toward Tripoli were reported as early as 889. In 1353, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara along with a caravan that included 600 enslaved women bound for Morocco.

Early European attempts to acquire African captives—by raiding coastal villages in West Africa in the 1400s or sending armed forces into the interior of Angola in the 1500s—ultimately failed because of fierce African resistance. As a result, Europeans began to purchase captives from African kings, chiefs and slave merchants, paying for them with trade goods such as cloth, iron, beads, muskets and gunpowder. European trading companies such as the Dutch West India Company or the British Royal Africa Company established forts and trading posts along the coast in the 1600s and waited for African slave merchants to bring them captives for sale. With the exception of the Portuguese in Angola, the Europeans seldom ventured far from their coastal enclaves.

The 350 years of the Atlantic slave trade can be divided into two phases. Between 1500 and 1700, most of the African captives purchased by Europeans came from within 200 miles of the Atlantic coast. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, more than two million captive Africans were taken to the New World on slave ships during this period. After 1700, the plantations in the New World expanded rapidly, thus increasing the demand for enslaved laborers and driving up the prices that European slaving captains paid for captive Africans. As a result, it became profitable for African slave merchants to organize caravans that traveled as far as 600 miles into the interior to purchase captives and march them to the coast under armed guard. Some 10.4 million enslaved Africans were carried to the New World between 1700 and 1850.

The Africans who were taken away in slave ships were mostly freeborn people who had recently been captured or otherwise enslaved. They were not drawn from the ranks of the indigenous slaves. In most African societies, slaves who were born in captivity or assimilated into their new community were immune from being sold unless they rebelled or committed a crime. When armies returned from their wars and slaving expeditions, some of the prisoners were claimed by the king and the military officers for internal labor, while others were sold to African slave merchants who took them to the coast for sale to Europeans. As a result, the operations of the Atlantic slave trade didn't intersect with indigenous slavery in a major way.

Despite the loss of millions of African captives to the Atlantic slave trade, indigenous slavery remained robust because it was a way to integrate outsiders into a new society, albeit against their will. From the 1600s, enslaved young men who underwent military training formed the professional core of the army in several kingdoms in the West African Sahel. As outsiders, they had no ties to the competing factions within the kingdom. They usually remained loyal to their commander and their king, but they sometimes installed themselves as rulers or acted as kingmakers upon the death of their sovereign. In the trading towns along the Niger and Congo rivers in the 1700s, ambitious slaves could gain wealth, and some of them even took over the trading firm upon the death of the owner.

In other cases, however, involvement with the Atlantic slave trade brought unrest and fragmentation to once-powerful kingdoms. During the 1600s, most of the coastal kingdoms between the Senegal and Gambia rivers experienced rebellions against kings, who would sometimes enslave their own subjects and sell them to Europeans. In the Kongo kingdom near the mouth of the Congo River, the king's historical monopoly on foreign trade was threatened when Portuguese slave traders tried to purchase captives directly from local chiefs. In both cases, the distinction between insiders and outsiders had been blurred to the detriment of the kings.

For the captives who were sold to trans-Atlantic slave ships, their experiences of slavery in the New World were different from anything they had experienced or observed in Africa. In Africa, captives were inserted into fully functioning societies where they struggled to make a place for themselves. In the plantation economies of the New World, there was often no real society to fit into, and racism made them permanent outsiders. Their only chance of finding a sense of home in the New World was to create one among themselves.

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Credit: By Robert Harms

DETAILS

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