

Most children of slaves were assimilated into Muslim society. This explains the absence today of an easily recognizable, socially distinct black population in the Middle East.

On the African side a number of conditions produced slaves for export: warfare, criminal convictions, kidnaping, debt, and drought. African merchants gathered slaves for shipment by boat and caravan to the markets of the north. The export trade was relatively modest for many centuries before the fifteenth century C.E. and indeed did not really expand considerably until the nineteenth century. Exports amounted to a few thousand slaves per year at most times, and because the affected areas were often very extensive, the impact was usually minimized.

The slave trade that is by far the best documented is the Atlantic slave trade. One reason is that this trade transported a large number of people – approximately 11 million arrived alive in the Americas – between the mid-fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Second, the Atlantic slave trade and the type of slavery practiced in the Americas created a large population of African descent. The peak of the trade occurred in the eighteenth century (see **Graph 1**) during which approximately 6 million slaves arrived alive in the Americas.

The Atlantic slave trade differed in some important respects from the trade to the Middle East. First, about two-thirds of slaves traded to the Americas were men. Second, the slavery practiced in America differed from slavery in the Middle East and Africa. The major difference between slavery in Africa and the Americas had to do with the way slaves were used. In European societies, and in the colonies they controlled, slaves were employed in work for which no hired laborer or tenant could be found or at least willing to undertake under conditions that the landowner wished. Consequently, slaves typically had difficult, demanding, and degrading work, and they were often mistreated by exploitative masters who were anxious to maximize profits. With the nearly insatiable demand for labor that grew with European conquest of the Americas and the development of staple agricultural crops, sugar for example, Europeans turned to Africa to provide large numbers of slaves. Europeans wanted to make money out of their American colonies, and they used slaves like machines. Slavery became a permanent, racially exclusive caste. Slave status was passed on to the next generation. Slaves had very few rights and were generally at the mercy of their owners. Perhaps no statistic explains the brutality of American slavery better than the demography of slave immigrants as compared to European immigrants. “By 1820, some 10 million Africans had migrated to the New World as compared to some 2 million Europeans. But in 1820, the New World white population of some 12 million was roughly twice as great as the black.” (Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 37.)

This kind of chattel slavery in the Americas differed from what some historians call social or lineage slavery that existed in Africa prior to outside demand for slaves. In the preexisting African forms of slavery, slaves shared with their American counterparts an absence of freedom. African slavery differed from American slavery, however, in two important respects. First, slave status was not permanent. A gradual process of incorporation eventually resulted in the elimination of slave status, so that I might be a slave, but my children, and especially my grandchildren, would not share that status. Second, society was not arranged primarily around the creation of commercial wealth based on mass export of commodities like sugar to distant markets. Slaves might perform tasks disdained by free persons, but they were not worked to death on plantations geared around maximizing profit. Given the nature of African slavery (at least up until the nineteenth-century), some historians question the applicability of the term *slave*. Perhaps the eighteenth-century slave trader turned abolitionist John Newton best explained the distinction between African and American slavery:

The state of slavery, among these wild barbarous people, as we esteem them, is much milder than in our colonies. For as, on the other hand, they have no land in high cultivation, like our West India plantations, and therefore no call for that excessive, unintermitted labour, which exhausts our slaves; so, on the other hand, no man is permitted to draw blood even from a slave. If he does, he is liable to a strict inquisition. . . . A man may sell his slave, if he pleases; but he may not wantonly abuse him. The laws, likewise, punish some species of theft with slavery; and in cases of adultery, which are very common, as polygamy is the custom of the country, both the woman, and the man who offends with her, are liable to be sold for slaves, unless they can satisfy the husband, or unless they are redeemed by their friends.

Source: John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (London, 1788), p. 106.

There is no such thing as “good” slavery and “bad” slavery. As our definition makes clear, slavery was a form of exploitation that varied in its conditions. Over the course of the Atlantic slave trade plantation-style production was introduced to parts of Africa. As in the Americas, these African-owned plantations produced for mass export, and slaves faced conditions very much akin to those in the Americas.

The figures below are for slaves landed alive in the Americas. These figures are estimates based on extensive research in shipping and port records. An exact figure for numbers of Africans involved in the Atlantic slave trade is impossible due to the sheer enormity of the trade across time and space, mortality at sea and