

# The Atlantic World

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines European efforts to achieve footholds in the Americas by establishing valuable commodities and organizing labor within the context of the Atlantic World. In particular, the trafficking of enslaved people from Africa was a key linchpin that kept the Atlantic World together. In addition, commodities such as sugar and rum from South America and the Caribbean and tobacco from North America gained New World colonies prominence in the Atlantic World.

Our discussion will break down like this:

## 1. Mercantilism

The colonization of the New World involved several groups—Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans. The interactions between these different continents and peoples contributed to the creation of what historians now call the Atlantic World. Everyone brought in their own assumptions, worldviews, and ideas. In the process, these groups contributed to the creation of societies in the Americas that Christopher Columbus and other early explorers would not have anticipated.

The Spanish, French, Dutch, and English empires that competed to establish footholds in the Americas were driven by political and religious impulses as well as by desires for economic gain. Yet, in order to extract wealth from the New World, Europeans needed to find or establish valuable commodities in the region and, more importantly, organize labor to produce these products.

By the mid-17th century, the geopolitical map of the Americas would become a patchwork of imperial designs and ambitions as the Spanish, Dutch, French, and English reinforced their claims to parts of the land. The economic influence behind much of these efforts was known as mercantilism.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Mercantilism

A political and economic philosophy that stated that governments should run the economy and that the economy should be a tool to expand the power and size of the government and therefore the nation.

Mercantilism rested on two key assumptions. First, European monarchs and their supporters believed that the world comprised competing nations rather than competing individuals. Second, they assumed that there existed only a fixed amount of wealth in the world, as measured by a nation's holdings of gold and silver. In order to survive and prosper, monarchs believed that their nations needed to acquire more colonies and their natural resources. Therefore, mercantilism influenced empire-building projects across the New World, with European powers vying with each other to gain their own economic footholds in the Americas.

According to mercantilism, the ideal condition of a nation was to be self-sufficient. A central government would manage the economy. Colonies would produce precious minerals, other raw materials, and commodities. Then, ships transported these materials and commodities across the Atlantic for consumption in Europe.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Gold and silver mined in Central Mexico would go only to Spain, sugarcane from Brazil would go only to Portugal, and tobacco grown in Virginia would go only to England.

Trade within a mercantilist economy and, therefore, the creation of wealth for Europe, depended upon the idea that each colony (and the peoples within them) played a specific role. In particular, European colonists, Indigenous Peoples, and laborers trafficked across the Atlantic bore the burden of producing valuable commodities for the benefit of distant European nations.

## 2. Slavery

By the middle of the 16th century, Africans formed an important element of the labor landscape of the Atlantic World. Denied control over their lives, enslaved Africans endured horrendous conditions while crossing the Atlantic Ocean and working on plantations to produce cash crops, such as sugar and tobacco, for European markets. At every opportunity, they resisted enslavement, and their resistance was met with violence. Indeed, physical, mental, and sexual violence formed a key strategy among European slaveholders in their effort to assert mastery and impose their will.

The Portuguese led the way in the evolving transport of enslaved men, women, and children across the Atlantic. They encouraged African rulers to go to war with each other and enslave the enemy on their behalf. Enslaved individuals, most of whom were captured in the interior by other Africans, were then sold to Europeans on terms agreed to by African sellers. In return for gold, ivory, and enslaved people, African merchants received European guns, horses, iron, copper, glass, rum, textiles, and other goods. Centers of trade in enslaved people on the western coast of Africa, such as Elmina Castle in Ghana, served as holding pens for people brought from Africa's interior. In time, other European powers, most notably the Dutch and the English, built upon the Portuguese model by conquering these centers (the Dutch seized Elmina Castle by 1637, for instance) or by constructing similar outposts on the coast of West Africa.

The transport of enslaved Africans to the Americas accelerated in the 1600s, and by the middle of the 17th century, the English dominated the trade. By 1660, Charles II created the Royal African Company, and its sole purpose was to trade in enslaved human beings. Charles's brother, James II, led the company before ascending the throne himself. Under both these kings, the Royal African Company enjoyed a monopoly over the transport of enslaved humans to English colonies in the Americas.

Between 1672 and 1713, the company bought 125,000 captives on the African coast, losing 20% of them to death on the Middle Passage, the journey from the African coast to the Americas.

 TERM TO KNOW

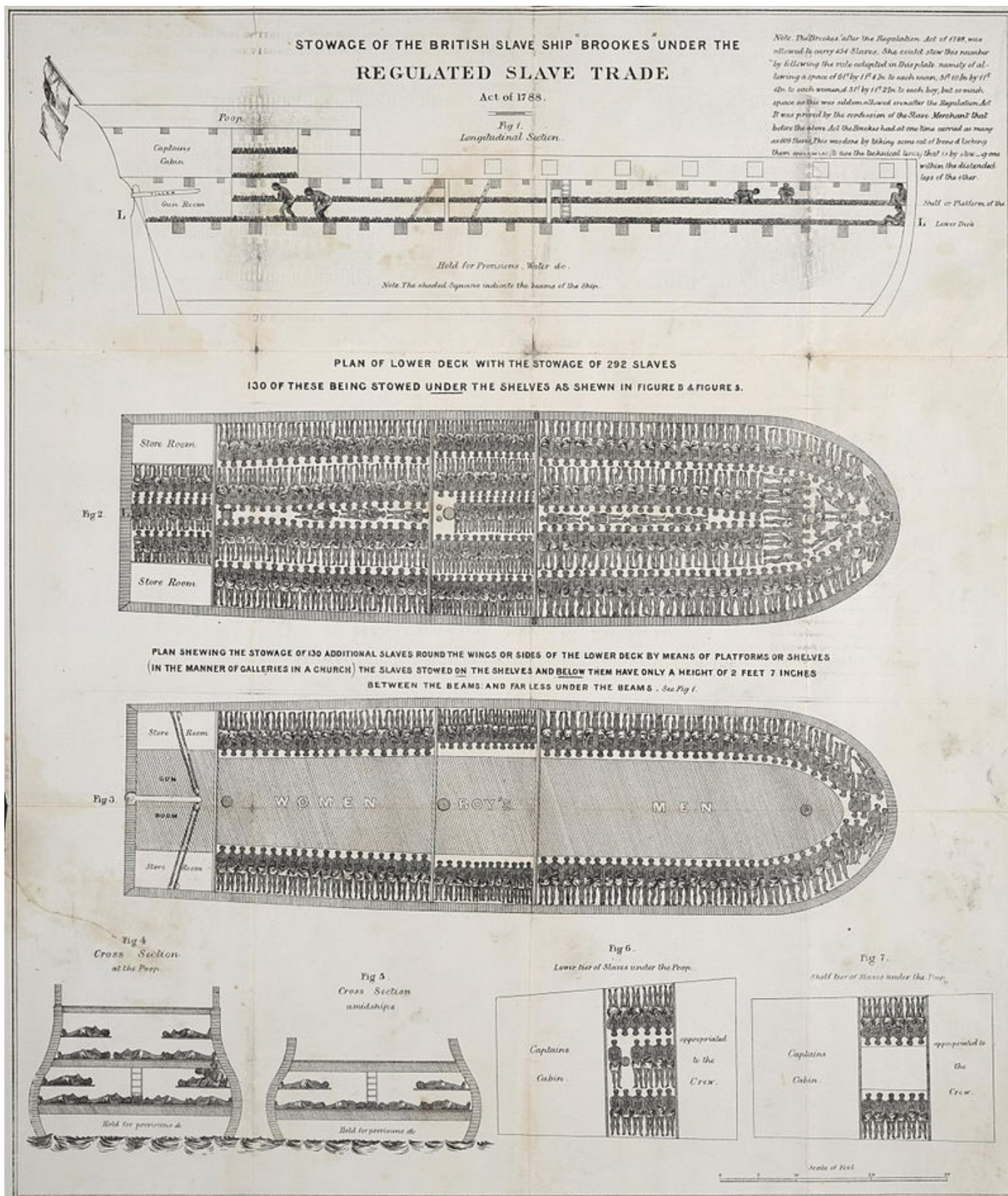
Middle Passage

The perilous, often deadly transatlantic crossing of ships carrying enslaved people from the African coast to the New World.

Once sold to traders, all enslaved Africans sent to America endured the hellish Middle Passage, the transatlantic crossing, which took one to two months. An astonishing number, some four million human beings, were transported to the Caribbean via the Middle Passage between 1501 and 1830. Africans who survived such violence and the brutality of the Middle Passage usually arrived in the West Indies, often in Barbados. From there, they were transported to the mainland English colonies on company ships. While merchants in London, Bristol, and Liverpool lined their pockets, Africans trafficked by the company endured a nightmare of misery, privation, and dislocation.



The 1686 English guinea shows the logo of the Royal African Company, an elephant and castle, beneath a bust of King James II. The coins were commonly called guineas because most British gold came from Guinea in West Africa.



Some Europeans made it to the New World in style and decadence. Enslaved Africans, on the other hand, were forced to live in horrific and terrifying conditions when shipped across the Atlantic in ships like the one shown here. Their experiences in the New World reflected that of their transport as well.

Additional Resources

### 3. Enslaved Labor and Commodities

Portuguese, Dutch, and English traders sold enslaved Africans in colonies throughout the Americas, particularly in South America and the Caribbean.

Here, sugar was a primary export. Thousands of enslaved Africans found themselves forced to grow, harvest, and process sugar cane in an arduous routine of physical labor. Enslaved workers had to cut the long cane stalks by hand and then bring them to a mill, where the cane juice was extracted. They boiled the extracted cane juice down to a brown, crystalline sugar, which then had to be cured in special curing houses to have the molasses drained from it. The result was refined sugar, while the leftover molasses could be distilled into rum. Every step was labor-intensive and often dangerous.

The use of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean Islands for the production of commodities such as sugar contributed to an economic relationship that historians have traditionally called the triangular trade system. Enslavers originating from European nations such as England and Portugal invested in the purchase of people along the coast of West Africa. These enslaved people were brought to the New World, where they labored on plantations and processed raw goods such as sugar cane into more refined commodities, the production of which was for the sole benefit of the European country. These commodities were then shipped to consumers throughout Europe or underwent another refining process, where the capital and goods gained from these transactions would ultimately go back into the purchasing of more enslaved laborers. It was a vicious, triangular system of exploitation, profit, and violence.

#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Triangular Trade

The economic exchanges that took place between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, wherein enslaved people and imported goods were transferred between continents.

Mercantilism, the trade of enslaved Africans, and the general rise in commodity exchanges, such as those associated with sugar, also contributed to a number of cultural and intellectual relationships that, when combined with the economic connections of the triangular trade, contributed to the emergence of an Atlantic World. Similar to the triangular trade system, the Atlantic World refers to the rapid increase in trade, the exchange of enslaved humans, and the rise of new forms of consumerism that contributed to a growing Atlantic marketplace.

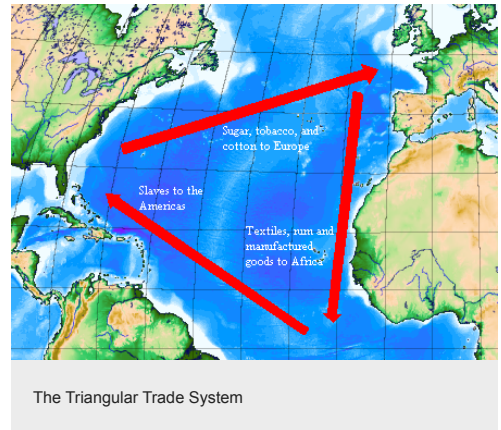
#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Atlantic World

The rapid increase in trade, the exchange of enslaved humans, and the rise of new forms of consumerism contributed to a growing Atlantic marketplace. Such exchanges allowed colonists in the New World to maintain connections with their respective mother countries and still consider themselves European while they produced valuable commodities, such as sugar. Another important result of these interactions was the creation of a system in which Europeans considered enslaved Africans as commodities rather than human beings. Enslavers viewed enslaved people in terms of profitability and the potential economic yield that they represented.

#### THINK ABOUT IT

How did mercantilism influence the ways that Europeans interacted with Africa and the Americas?



#### SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we discussed the growth of the trade of enslaved Africans and commodity exchanges. Both of these led to noteworthy economic changes along the Atlantic trade routes and contributed to the creation of an Atlantic World. Europe's fascination with mercantilism contributed to the rise of economic policies that promoted the creation of self-sufficient nation-states that extracted key commodities from New World colonies. The organization of labor, particularly African slavery, and the successful production of sugar, contributed to the creation of a triangular system of trade that saw enslaved humans and goods shipped across the Atlantic as commodities. In turn, such exchanges fostered the development of additional cultural, economic, and intellectual interactions that tied Europe, the Americas, and Africa closer together, although the benefits of such exchanges were not distributed equally.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Atlantic World

The rapid increase in trade, the exchange of enslaved people, and the rise of new forms of consumerism contributed to a growing Atlantic marketplace.

### Mercantilism

A political and economic philosophy that stated that governments should run the economy and that the economy should be a tool to expand the power and size of the government and therefore the nation.

### Middle Passage

The perilous, often deadly transatlantic crossing of ships carrying enslaved people from the African coast to the New World.

### Triangular Trade

The economic exchanges that took place between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, wherein enslaved people and imported goods were transferred between continents.



## DATES TO KNOW

1482

Portuguese traders build Elmina Castle in present-day Ghana, which becomes an important trading post for the trade of enslaved people.

1500–1700

Mercantilism influences the economies and colonization endeavors of European nations.

1637

The Dutch seize Elmina Castle from the Portuguese and dominate the trade of enslaved people in the Atlantic World.

1660

King Charles II creates the Royal African Company to transport enslaved people to English colonies in the Americas.

1672–1713

The Royal African Company transports approximately 125,000 enslaved Africans to the Americas via the Middle Passage.

1830

The total number of Africans transported to the Caribbean via the Middle Passage reaches approximately four million.