

THE BRUTAL BRITISH EMPIRE: SLAVERY

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Slavery is where one person is owned by another. A slave is treated as if he or she were a piece of property and is forced to work for nothing for their owners. Slavery has probably existed throughout human history and been practised by many different civilisations.

Slavery in Africa existed before the arrival of Europeans but the Atlantic slave trade changed the scale of the trade and the way it was conducted. Over the centuries up to 12 million African people were enslaved and transported to the Americas. The majority (48%) went to the Caribbean islands, with 41% going to Brazil and 5% to North America. These slaves were chattel slaves which meant that their children were also slaves.

The Atlantic slave trade arose because Europeans were keen to make money from the newly discovered territories of the Americas. The native Indian population had been very much reduced and in some places almost wiped out by the Europeans and the survivors proved unsuited to the heavy labour they required. The transport of slaves from Africa seemed to provide the profit-hungry Europeans with an endless supply of labour.

The trade in slaves was called the triangular trade because it had three stages. Manufactured goods from Europe such as blankets, beads and guns were taken to Africa where they were exchanged for slaves. The transport of slaves from Africa to the Americas was known as the middle passage. Finally, raw material and goods produced as a result of slave labour such as cotton, sugar, rum and tobacco from the Americas were brought back to Europe.

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