

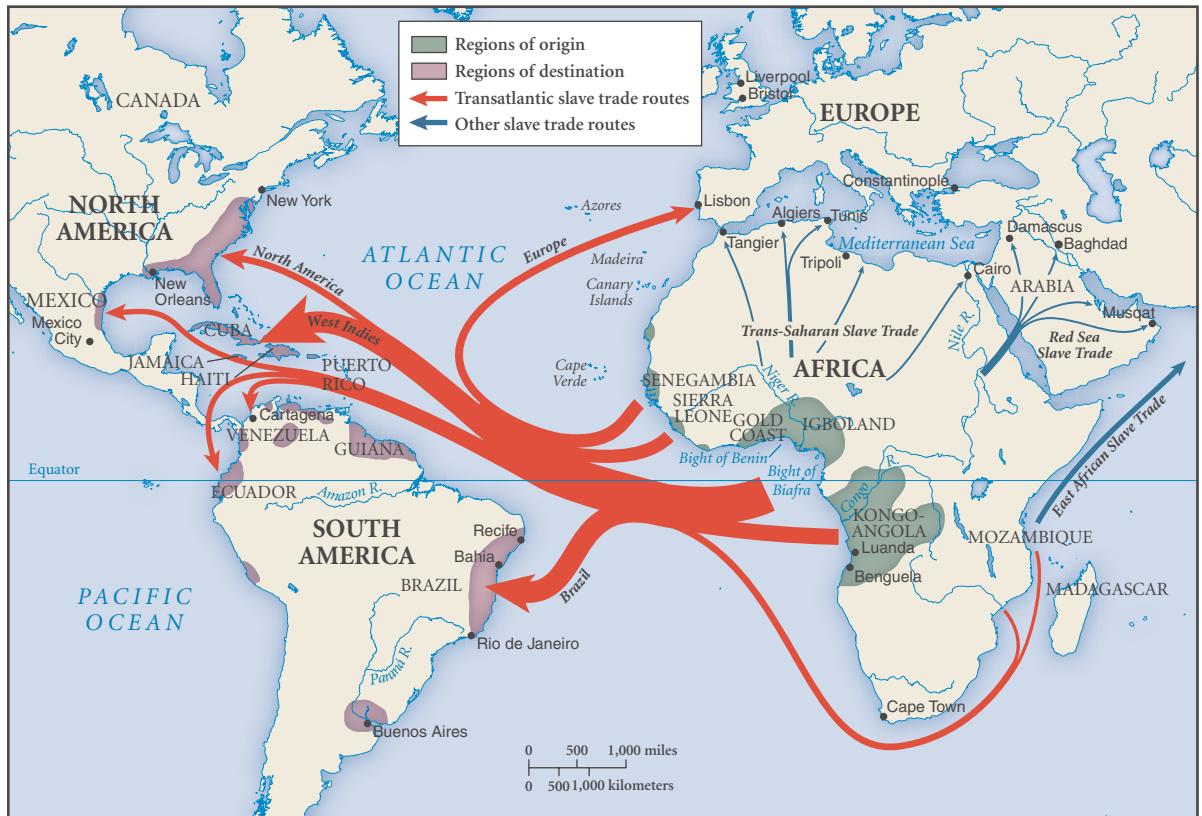
## Commerce in People: The Atlantic Slave Trade

Of all the commercial ties that linked the early modern world into a global network of exchange, none had more profound or enduring human consequences than the Atlantic slave trade. Between 1500 and 1866, this trade in humankind took an estimated 12.5 million people from African societies, shipped them across the Atlantic in the infamous Middle Passage, and deposited some 10.7 million of them in the Americas, where they lived out their often brief lives as slaves. About 1.8 million (14.4 percent) died during the transatlantic crossing, while countless millions more perished in the process of capture and transport to the African coast.<sup>18</sup> (See Map 15.4 and Documents: Voices of the Slave Trade, pp. 700–09, for various perspectives from the slave trade.)

Beyond the multitude of individual tragedies that it spawned—capture and sale, displacement from home cultures, forced labor, beatings and brandings, broken families—the Atlantic slave trade transformed the societies of all of its participants. Within Africa itself, some societies were thoroughly disrupted, others were strengthened, and many were corrupted. Elites were often enriched, while the slaves themselves, of course, were victimized beyond imagination.

### Map 15.4 The Atlantic Slave Trade

Stimulated by the plantation complex of the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade represented an enormous extension of the ancient practice of people owning and selling other people.



In the Americas, the slave trade added a substantial African presence to the mix of European and Native American peoples. This African diaspora (the transatlantic spread of African peoples) injected into these new societies issues of race that endure still in the twenty-first century. It also introduced elements of African culture, such as religious ideas, musical and artistic traditions, and cuisine, into the making of American cultures. The profits from the slave trade and the forced labor of African slaves certainly enriched European and Euro-American societies, even as the practice of slavery contributed much to the racial thinking of European peoples. Finally, slavery became a metaphor for many kinds of social oppression, quite different from plantation slavery, in the centuries that followed. Workers protested the slavery of wage labor, colonized people rejected the slavery of imperial domination, and feminists sometimes defined patriarchy as a form of slavery.

### *The Slave Trade in Context*

#### ■ Comparison

What was distinctive about the Atlantic slave trade? What did it share with other patterns of slave owning and slave trading?

The Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas represented the most recent large-scale expression of an almost universal human practice—the owning and exchange of human beings. With origins in the earliest civilizations, slavery was widely accepted as a perfectly normal human enterprise and was closely linked to warfare and capture. Before 1500, the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean basins were the major arenas of the Old World slave trade, and southern Russia was a major source of slaves. Many African societies likewise both practiced slavery themselves and sold slaves into these international commercial networks. A trans-Saharan slave trade had long funneled African captives into Mediterranean slavery, and an East African slave trade brought Africans into the Middle East and the Indian Ocean basin. Both operated largely within the Islamic world.

Furthermore, slavery came in many forms. Although slaves were everywhere vulnerable “outsiders” to their masters’ societies, in many places they could be assimilated into their owners’ households, lineages, or communities. In some places, children inherited the slave status of their parents; elsewhere those children were free persons. Within the Islamic world, the preference was for female slaves by a two-to-one margin, while the later Atlantic slave trade favored males by a similar margin. Not all slaves, however, occupied degraded positions. Some in the Islamic world acquired prominent military or political status. Most slaves in the premodern world worked in their owners’ households, farms, or shops, with smaller numbers laboring in large-scale agricultural or industrial enterprises.

The slavery that emerged in the Americas was distinctive in several ways. One was simply the immense size of the traffic in slaves and its centrality to the economies of colonial America. Furthermore, this New World slavery was largely based on plantation agriculture and treated slaves as a form of dehumanized property, lacking any rights in the society of their owners. Slave status throughout the Americas was inherited across generations, and there was little hope of eventual freedom for the vast majority. Nowhere else, with the possible exception of ancient Greece, was widespread slavery associated with societies affirming values of human freedom and equality.

Perhaps most distinctive was the racial dimension: Atlantic slavery came to be identified wholly with Africa and with “blackness.” How did this exceptional form of slavery emerge?

The origins of Atlantic slavery clearly lie in the Mediterranean world and with that now common sweetener known as sugar. Until the Crusades, Europeans knew nothing of sugar and relied on honey and fruits to sweeten their bland diets. However, as they learned from the Arabs about sugarcane and the laborious techniques for producing usable sugar, Europeans established sugar-producing plantations within the Mediterranean and later on various islands off the coast of West Africa. It was a “modern” industry, perhaps the first one, in that it required huge capital investment, substantial technology, an almost factory-like discipline among workers, and a mass market of consumers. The immense difficulty and danger of the work, the limitations attached to serf labor, and the general absence of wage workers all pointed to slavery as a source of labor for sugar plantations.

Initially, Slavic-speaking peoples from the Black Sea region furnished the bulk of the slaves for Mediterranean plantations, so much so that “Slav” became the basis for the word “slave” in many European languages. In 1453, however, when the Ottoman Turks seized Constantinople, the supply of Slavic slaves was effectively cut off. At the same time, Portuguese mariners were exploring the coast of West Africa; they were looking primarily for gold, but they also found there an alternative source of slaves available for sale. Thus, when sugar, and later tobacco and cotton, plantations took hold in the Americas, Europeans had already established links to a West African source of supply.

Largely through a process of elimination, Africa became the primary source of slave labor for the plantation economies of the Americas. Slavic peoples were no longer available; Native Americans quickly perished from European diseases; marginal Europeans were Christians and therefore supposedly exempt from slavery; and European indentured servants were expensive and temporary. Africans, on the other hand, were skilled farmers; they had some immunity to both tropical and European diseases; they were not Christians; they were, relatively speaking, close at hand; and they were readily available in substantial numbers through African-operated commercial networks.

Moreover, Africans were black. The precise relationship between slavery and European

### ■ Causation

What explains the rise of the Atlantic slave trade?

### The Middle Passage

This mid-nineteenth-century painting of slaves held below deck on a Spanish slave ship illustrates the horrendous conditions of the transatlantic voyage, a journey experienced by many millions of captured Africans. (The Art Archive)



racism has long been a much-debated subject. Historian David Brion Davis has suggested the controversial view that “racial stereotypes were transmitted, along with black slavery itself, from Muslims to Christians.”<sup>19</sup> For many centuries, Muslims had drawn on sub-Saharan Africa as one source of slaves and in the process had developed a form of racism. The fourteenth-century Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun wrote that black people were “submissive to slavery, because Negroes have little that is essentially human and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals.”<sup>20</sup>

Other scholars find the origins of racism within European culture itself. For the English, argues historian Audrey Smedley, the process of conquering Ireland had generated by the sixteenth century a view of the Irish as “rude, beastly, ignorant, cruel, and unruly infidels,” perceptions that were then transferred to Africans enslaved on English sugar plantations of the West Indies.<sup>21</sup> Whether Europeans borrowed such images of Africans from their Muslim neighbors or developed them independently, slavery and racism soon went hand in hand. “Europeans were better able to tolerate their brutal exploitation of Africans,” writes a prominent world historian, “by imagining that these Africans were an inferior race, or better still, not even human.”<sup>22</sup>

### *The Slave Trade in Practice*

#### ■ Connection

What roles did Europeans and Africans play in the unfolding of the Atlantic slave trade?

The European demand for slaves was clearly the chief cause of this tragic commerce, and from the point of sale on the African coast to the massive use of slave labor on American plantations, the entire enterprise was in European hands. Within Africa itself, however, a different picture emerges, for over the four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, European demand elicited an African supply. A few early efforts by the Portuguese at slave raiding along the West African coast convinced Europeans that such efforts were unnecessary and unwise, for African societies were quite capable of defending themselves against European intrusion, and many were willing to sell their slaves peacefully. Furthermore, Europeans died like flies when they entered the interior because they lacked immunities to common tropical diseases. Thus the slave trade quickly came to operate largely with Europeans waiting on the coast, either on their ships or in fortified settlements, to purchase slaves from African merchants and political elites. Certainly Europeans tried to exploit African rivalries to obtain slaves at the lowest possible cost, and the firearms they funneled into West Africa may well have increased the warfare from which so many slaves were derived. But from the point of initial capture to sale on the coast, the entire enterprise was normally in African hands. Almost nowhere did Europeans attempt outright military conquest; instead they generally dealt as equals with local African authorities.

An arrogant agent of the British Royal Africa Company in the 1680s learned the hard way who was in control when he spoke improperly to the king of Niimi, a small state in what is now Gambia. The company’s records describe what happened next:

[O]ne of the grandees [of the king], by name Sambalama, taught him better manners by reaching him a box on the ears, which beat off his hat, and a few thumps

on the back, and seizing him, disarmed him together with the rest of his attendance, among which was Benedict Stafford, commander of the *Margaret*. . . (who made his escape and ran like a lusty fellow to his ship) and several others, who together with the agent were taken and put into the king's pound and stayed there three or four days till their ransom was brought, value five hundred bars.<sup>23</sup>

In exchange for slaves, African sellers sought both European and Indian textiles, cowrie shells (widely used as money in West Africa), European metal goods, firearms and gunpowder, tobacco and alcohol, and various decorative items such as beads. Europeans purchased some of these items—cowrie shells and Indian textiles, for example—with silver mined in the Americas. Thus the slave trade connected with commerce in silver and textiles as it became part of an emerging worldwide network of exchange. Issues about the precise mix of goods African authorities desired, about the number and quality of slaves to be purchased, and always about the price of everything were settled in endless negotiation (see Document 15.2, pp. 703–05). In most places most of the time, a leading scholar concluded, the slave trade took place “not unlike international trade anywhere in the world of the period.”<sup>24</sup>

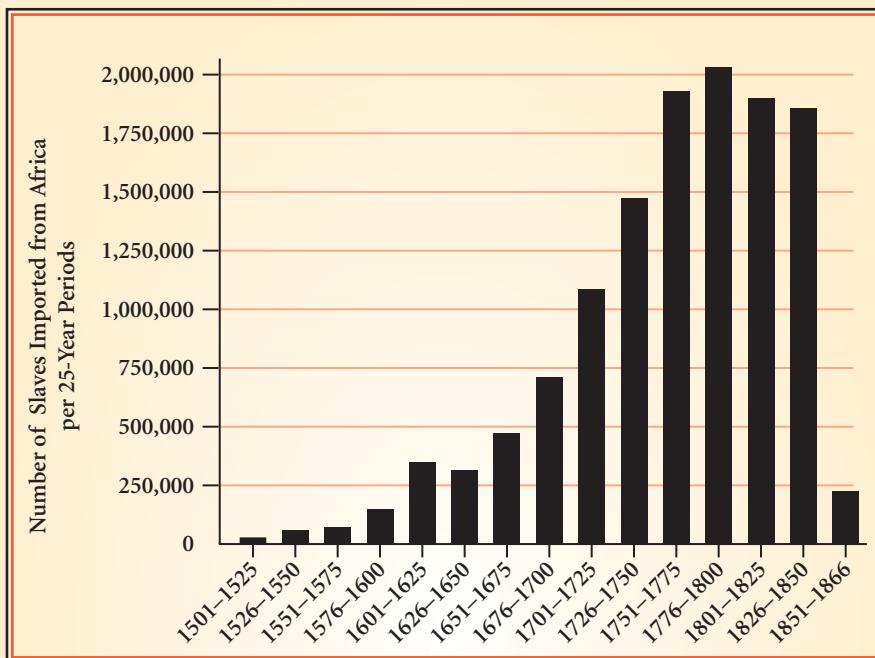
If African authorities and elite classes in many places controlled their side of the slave trade, on occasion they were almost overwhelmed by it. Many small-scale kinship-based societies, lacking the protection of a strong state, were thoroughly disrupted by raids from more powerful neighbors. Even some sizable states were destabilized. In the early sixteenth century, the kingdom of Kongo, located mostly in present-day Angola, was badly damaged by the commerce in slaves and the authority of its ruler severely undermined (see Document 15.3, pp. 705–07).

Whatever the relationship between European buyers and African sellers, for the slaves themselves—who were seized in the interior, often sold several times on the harrowing journey to the coast, sometimes branded, and held in squalid slave dungeons while awaiting transportation to the New World—it was anything but a normal commercial transaction (see Document 15.1, pp. 700–03). One European engaged in the trade noted that “the negroes are so willful and loath to leave their own country, that they have often leap'd out of the canoes, boat, and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats.”<sup>25</sup>

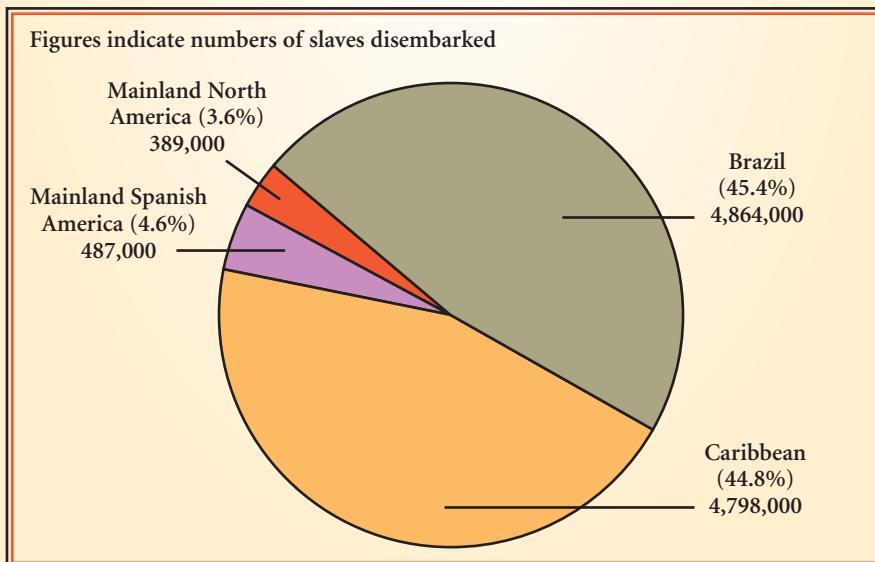
Over the four centuries of the slave trade, millions of Africans underwent some such experience, but their numbers varied considerably over time. During the sixteenth century, slave exports from Africa averaged under 3,000 annually. In those years, the Portuguese were at least as much interested in African gold, spices, and textiles. Furthermore, as in Asia, they became involved in transporting African goods, including slaves, from one African port to another, thus becoming the “truck drivers” of coastal West African commerce.<sup>26</sup> In the seventeenth century, the pace picked up as the slave trade became highly competitive, with the British, Dutch, and French contesting the earlier Portuguese monopoly. The century and a half between 1700 and 1850 marked the high point of the slave trade as the plantation economies of the Americas boomed (see the Snapshot on p. 694).

## Snapshot The Slave Trade in Numbers (1501–1866)<sup>27</sup>

### The Rise and Decline of the Slave Trade



### The Destinations of Slaves



Where did these Africans come from, and where did they go? Geographically, the slave trade drew mainly on the societies of West Africa, from present-day Mauritania in the north to Angola in the south. Initially focused on the coastal regions, the slave trade progressively penetrated into the interior as the demand for slaves picked up. Socially, slaves were mostly drawn from various marginal groups in African societies—prisoners of war, criminals, debtors, people who had been “pawned” during times of difficulty. Thus Africans did not generally sell “their own people” into slavery. Divided into hundreds of separate, usually small-scale, and often rival communities—cities, kingdoms, microstates, clans, and villages—the various peoples of West Africa had no concept of an “African” identity. Those whom they captured and sold were normally outsiders, vulnerable people who lacked the protection of membership in an established community. When short-term economic or political advantage could be gained, such people were sold. In this respect, the Atlantic slave trade was little different from the experience of enslavement elsewhere in the world.

The destination of enslaved Africans, half a world away in the Americas, was very different. The vast majority wound up in Brazil or the Caribbean, where the labor demands of the plantation economy were most intense. Smaller numbers found themselves in North America, mainland Spanish America or in Europe itself. The journey across the Atlantic was horrendous almost beyond description, with the Middle Passage having an overall mortality rate of more than 14 percent (see Document 15.1, pp. 700–03). About 10 percent of the transatlantic voyages experienced a major rebellion by the desperate captives.

### *Comparing Consequences: The Impact of the Slave Trade in Africa*

From the viewpoint of world history, the chief outcome of the slave trade lay in the new transregional linkages that it generated. Both commercially and demographically, Africa became a permanent part of an interacting Atlantic world. Millions of its people were now compelled to make their lives in the Americas. West African economies were increasingly connected to an emerging European-centered world economy. These vast processes set in motion a chain of consequences that have transformed the lives and societies of people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the slave trade did not result in the kind of population collapse that occurred in the Americas, it certainly slowed Africa’s growth at a time when Europe, China, and other regions were expanding demographically. Scholars have estimated that sub-Saharan Africa represented about 18 percent of the world’s population in 1600, but only 6 percent in 1900.<sup>28</sup> A portion of that difference reflects the slave trade’s impact on Africa’s population history.

That impact derived not only from the loss of millions of people over four centuries but also from the economic stagnation and political disruption that the slave trade generated. Economically, the slave trade stimulated little positive change in Africa because those Africans who benefited most from the traffic in people were

#### ■ Change

In what different ways did the Atlantic slave trade transform African societies?

not investing in the productive capacities of African societies. Although European imports generally did not displace traditional artisan manufacturing, no technological breakthroughs in agriculture or industry increased the wealth available to these societies. Maize and manioc (cassava), introduced from the Americas, added a new source of calories to African diets, but the international demand was for Africa's people, not its agricultural products.

Within particular African societies, the impact of the slave trade differed considerably from place to place and over time. Particularly in small-scale societies that were frequently subjected to slave raiding and that had little centralized authority, insecurity was pervasive. Oral traditions in southern Ghana, for example, reported that "there was no rest in the land," that people went about in groups rather than alone, and that mothers kept their children inside when European ships appeared.<sup>29</sup> Some larger kingdoms such as Kongo and Oyo slowly disintegrated as access to trading opportunities and firearms enabled outlying regions to establish their independence. However, African authorities also sought to take advantage of the new commercial opportunities and to manage the slave trade in their own interests, as the contrasting experience of the neighboring kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey illustrates.<sup>30</sup>

The kingdom of Benin, in the forest area of present-day Nigeria, was one of the oldest and most highly developed states in the coastal hinterland of West Africa, dating perhaps to the eleventh century C.E. Its capital was a large walled city with wide avenues, a lavish court, a wealthy elite, and a powerful monarch, or *oba*, who strictly controlled the country's trade. Benin's uniqueness lay in its relatively successful efforts to avoid a deep involvement in the slave trade and to diversify the exports with which it purchased European firearms and other goods. As early as 1516, the *oba* began to restrict the slave trade and soon forbade the export of male slaves altogether, a ban that lasted until the early eighteenth century. By then, the *oba*'s authority over outlying areas had declined, and the country's major exports of pepper and cotton cloth had lost out to Asian and then European competition. In these circumstances, Benin felt compelled to resume limited participation in the slave trade. But even at the height of the trade, in the late eighteenth century, Benin exported fewer than 1,000 slaves a year.

Among the Aja-speaking peoples to the west of Benin, the situation was very different. There the slave trade had thoroughly disrupted a series of small and weak states along the coast. Some distance inland, the kingdom of Dahomey arose in the early eighteenth century, at least in part as an effort to contain the constant raiding and havoc occasioned by the coastal trade. It was a unique and highly authoritarian state in which commoners and chiefs alike were responsible directly to the king and in which the power of lineages and secret societies was considerably weakened. For a time, Dahomey tried to limit the external slave trade, to import European craftsmen, and to develop plantation agriculture within the kingdom, but all this failed. In view of hostile relations with the neighboring kingdom of Oyo and others, Dahomey instead turned to a vigorous involvement in the slave trade, under strict royal control.

The army conducted annual slave raids, and the government soon came to depend on the trade for its essential revenues. Unlike in Benin, the slave trade in Dahomey became the chief business of the state and remained so until well into the nineteenth century.



## Reflections: Economic Globalization— Then and Now

The study of history reminds us of two quite contradictory truths. One is that our lives in the present bear remarkable similarities to those of people long ago. We are perhaps not so unique as we might think. The other is that our lives are very different from theirs and that things have changed substantially. This chapter about global commerce—long-distance trade in spices and textiles, silver and gold, beaver pelts and deerskins, slaves and sugar—provides both perspectives.

If we are accustomed to thinking about globalization as a product of the late twentieth century, early modern world history provides a corrective. Those three centuries reveal much that is familiar to people of the twenty-first century—the global circulation of goods; an international currency; production for a world market; the growing economic role of the West on the global stage; private enterprise, such as the British and Dutch East India companies, operating on a world scale; national governments eager to support their merchants in a highly competitive environment. By the eighteenth century, many Europeans dined from Chinese porcelain dishes called “china,” wore Indian-made cotton textiles, and drank chocolate from Mexico, tea from China, and coffee from Yemen while sweetening these beverages with sugar from the Caribbean or Brazil. The millions who worked to produce these goods, whether slave or free, were operating in a world economy. Some industries were thoroughly international. New England rum producers, for example, depended on molasses imported from the Caribbean, while the West Indian sugar industry used African labor and European equipment to produce for a global market.

Nonetheless, early modern economic globalization was a far cry from that of the twentieth century. Most obvious perhaps were scale and speed. By 2000, immensely more goods circulated internationally and far more people produced for and depended on the world market than was the case even in 1750. Back-and-forth communications between England and India that took eighteen months in the eighteenth century could be accomplished in an hour by telegraph in the late nineteenth century and almost instantaneously via the Internet in the late twentieth century. Moreover, by 1900 globalization was firmly centered in the economies of Europe and North America. In the early modern era, by contrast, Asia in general and China in particular remained major engines of the world economy, despite the emerging presence of Europeans around the world. By the end of the twentieth century, the booming economies of India and China suggested at least a partial return to that earlier pattern.

Early modern globalization differed in still other ways from that of the contemporary world. Economic life then was primarily preindustrial, still powered by human and animal muscles, wind, and water and lacking the enormous productive capacity that accompanied the later technological breakthrough of the steam engine and the Industrial Revolution. Finally, the dawning of a genuinely global economy in the early modern era was tied unapologetically to empire building and to slavery, both of which had been discredited by the late twentieth century. Slavery lost its legitimacy during the nineteenth century, and formal territorial empires largely disappeared in the twentieth. Most people during the early modern era would have been surprised to learn that a global economy, as it turned out, could function effectively without either of these long-standing practices.

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## Second Thoughts

### What's the Significance?

To assess your mastery of the material in this chapter, visit the **Student Center** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

Indian Ocean commercial network	British/Dutch East India companies	Potosí “soft gold”
trading post empire	Tokugawa shogunate	African diaspora
Philippines (Spanish)	“silver drain”	Benin/Dahomey

### Big Picture Questions

1. In what specific ways did trade foster change in the world of the early modern era?
2. To what extent did Europeans transform earlier patterns of commerce, and in what ways did they assimilate into those older patterns?
3. Describe and account for the differing outcomes of European expansion in the Americas (see Chapter 14), Africa, and Asia.
4. How should we distribute the moral responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade? Is this a task appropriate for historians?
5. What lasting legacies of early modern globalization are evident in the early twenty-first century? Pay particular attention to the legacies of the slave trade.

### Next Steps: For Further Study

For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

- Glenn J. Ames, *The Globe Encompassed: The Age of European Discovery, 1500–1700* (2007). An up-to-date survey of European expansion in the early modern era.
- Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998). An account of the early modern world economy that highlights the centrality of Asia.
- Erik Gilbert and Jonathan Reynolds, *Trading Tastes: Commodity and Cultural Exchange to 1750* (2006). A world historical perspective on transcontinental and transoceanic commerce.
- David Northrup, ed., *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (2002). A fine collection of essays about the origins, practice, impact, and abolition of Atlantic slavery.