

# THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

THE SETTLEMENT AND EXPLOITATION of the New World by Europeans led to more and more enslaved Africans being shipped across the ocean from Africa to the Americas until there were more slaves than ever before in human history. For hundreds of years, the traffic in slaves was accepted by almost everyone as normal. The sufferings of the enslaved were ignored.



### Sailing into New York Harbor

Enslaved Africans, brought by ship to New Amsterdam (later New York) as early as 1626, helped build the city. In 1664, when the British took New Amsterdam from the Dutch, 500 African slaves lived in the city.

The first enslaved Africans are brought to the Caribbean.

The first African slaves are brought to the British colony of Virginia.

The first African slaves are landed in southern Portugal.

African ruler King Alonzo of Kongo protests at the behavior of Portuguese slave raiders.

Spain grants Portuguese merchants the "asiento"—or monopoly—of the sale of slaves to their American colonies.

The Dutch seize the fort at Elmina from the Portuguese.



Ships from the North American colony of Rhode Island join in the Atlantic slave trade

The RAC monopoly ends and slave trading is thrown open to all British merchants

The Atlantic slave trade reaches its peak, with 80,000 enslaved Africans embarked every year

Britain and the United States make the slave trade illegal

Brazil is the last country officially to ban the Atlantic slave trade

# PORTUGUESE PRELUDE

PORTUGUESE VOYAGERS WHO SAILED DOWN the west coast of Africa in the 1400s brought back enslaved Africans for sale. The first human cargo was landed at Lagos in southern Portugal in 1444. By 1540 some 12,000 slaves a year were being imported into Europe in Portuguese ships. Enslaved Africans made up one in ten of the population of Portugal's capital, Lisbon. The importing of slaves into Europe subsequently declined, but the slave trade grew, as the Portuguese began to carry enslaved Africans across the Atlantic to the Americas.

## Powerful protest

Kongolese King Nzinga Mvemba allowed Portuguese traders to live in his country, although they had to



## African fort

The Portuguese established the first European fort on the African coast at Elmina in modern-day Ghana in 1482. The fort was not used to defend the Portuguese against Africans, but against rival European powers. The Portuguese could only trade in Africa with the permission of local rulers since they were outnumbered and had no military advantage over African states.



## Royal ally

Portugal established good relations with some West African rulers. Nzinga Mvemba, known to the Portuguese as Afonso I, was the ruler of the kingdom of Kongo from 1509. He exchanged ambassadors with the king of Portugal and agreed to be baptized a Catholic.

The Portuguese gave the Kongolese king this European-style coat of arms.

### Buying slaves in Africa

Although the Portuguese sometimes kidnapped free Africans, or organized armed raids on villages, they also purchased slaves from other traders whenever they could. They used goods brought with them from Portugal to barter—or exchange—for the slaves, or paid for them with West African money such as metal bracelets called "manillas."

### WEALTHY CITY

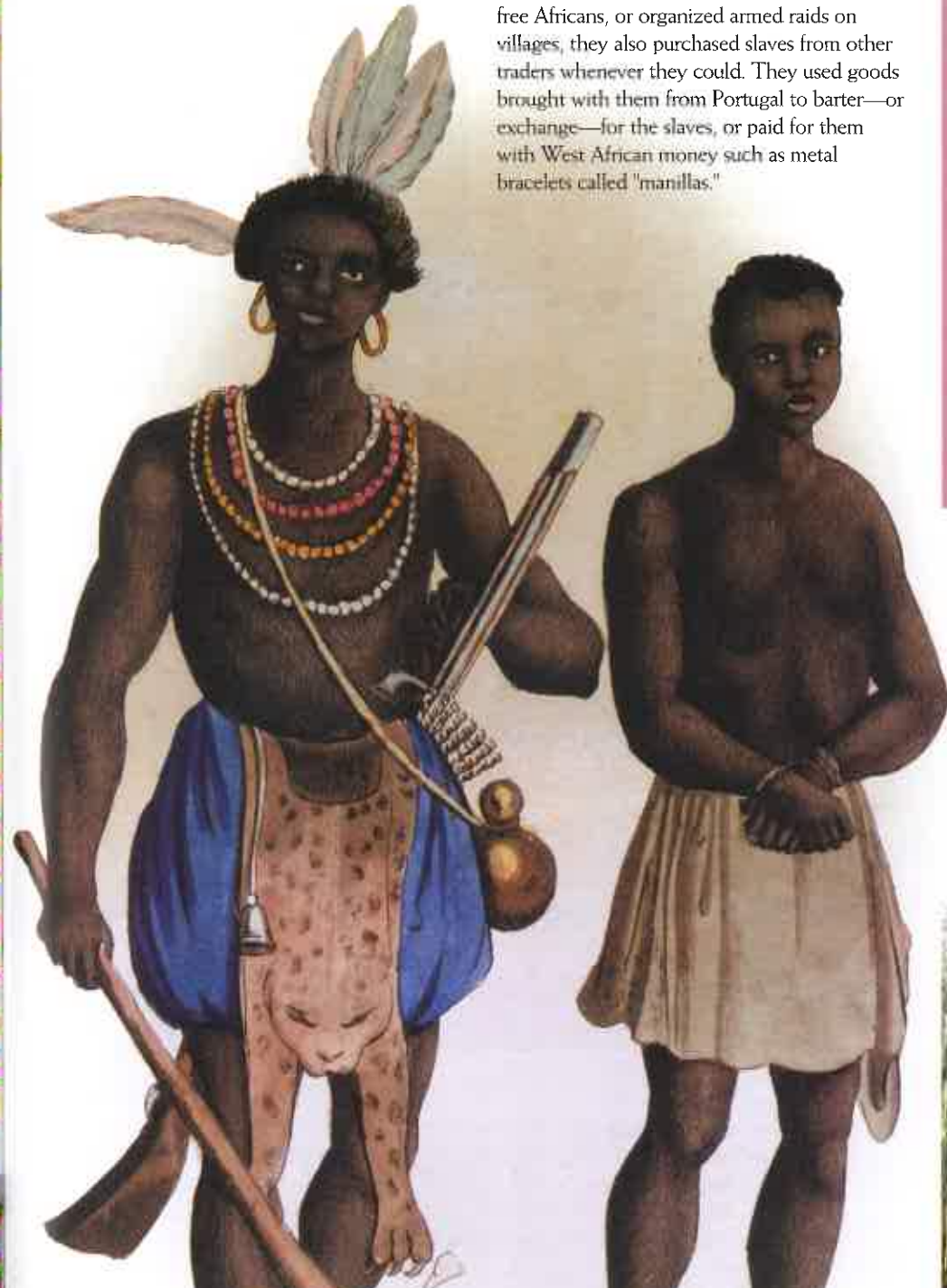


Portugal's rulers grew rich on the wealth of trade, especially the trade in slaves. The king received a percentage of the price of every slave sold. Many fine buildings were constructed in the capital, Lisbon, paid for partly with the profits from the slave trade. They included the Jerónimos Monastery, built in the 1500s, and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### Tokens of trade

Manillas were worn by African women to display their husbands' wealth.

The Portuguese made copies in Europe to ship to Africa, where they became the main token of exchange for slaves.



# RISE OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

THROUGH THE 1500S AND 1600S the trade in enslaved Africans across the Atlantic swelled from a trickle to a flood, as European colonists in the Americas found demand for plantation labor soaring. Portugal was the first leader in the trade, carrying thousands of slaves to Brazil and the Spanish Empire in the Americas. But other Europeans—British, French, Dutch, and Danes—soon muscled in, establishing bases on the West African coast and fighting for control of American colonies. By 1700, the slave trade was an established part of economic life on both sides of the Atlantic.



**John Hawkins**  
The first Englishman to play a significant part in the Atlantic slave trade was John Hawkins. The Spanish wanted to shut the English out of trade with their American colonies, but in 1562 Hawkins obtained a cargo of Africans by theft, raids, and trade on the West African coast. He succeeded in selling it in the Americas.



PERIOD	NUMBER OF SLAVES EMBARKED
1500–1550	64,000
1551–1600	213,000
1601–1650	668,000
1651–1700	1,208,000
1701–1750	2,561,000
1751–1800	3,934,000
1801–1850	3,648,000

### Slave trade across the Atlantic

The chart shows the number of enslaved Africans carried across the Atlantic every 50 years between 1500 and 1850. The figure rose to a peak of 6,495,000 in the 1700s. Overall, the Portuguese were the largest carriers of slaves, transporting 5.8 million Africans between 1500 and 1850, mostly to Brazil. But the British dominated the trade in the 18th century, carrying more than 2.5 million enslaved Africans.

### Dutch West India Company

In the early 17th century, the Dutch were the world's finest sailors—and aggressive enemies of the Spanish and Portuguese. The Dutch West India Company was set up by Dutch merchants to trade in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas. Enslaved Africans were one of their main cargoes. Their profits allowed them to construct this fine headquarters in Amsterdam.



*From 1500 to 1800, four-fifths of all people who crossed the Atlantic to the Americas were enslaved Africans.*



#### Slave-trading fort

Forts built on the African coast often changed hands as European countries fought each other for control of trade. Cape Coast Castle in Ghana was originally founded by the Swedish Africa Company, but was taken over by Denmark, then captured by the British in 1664.

### Royal African Company

In 1672 the British monarchy and London merchants founded the Royal African Company. Its charter granted it a monopoly—complete control—of trade in African slaves. The company







# THE SLAVE TRADE AT ITS PEAK

THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE reached its peak in the 18th century. By the 1780s, 80,000 to 100,000 enslaved Africans were being forcibly transported to the Americas every year. They provided the massive labor force required to produce sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cocoa on plantations in the Americas. Growing demand for these small luxuries in the cities of Europe and North America made them profitable items of trade. So slavery expanded to satisfy European consumers and enrich merchants and bankers.

## Bitter sweet

Sugar plantations created the first large-scale demand for enslaved Africans in the Americas. Sugar production spread from Brazil to the Caribbean islands, where British-owned Barbados and Jamaica and French-owned Martinique and Guadeloupe became major sugar producers. As work on sugar plantations was so hard, slaves died in large numbers. They were replaced by newly purchased slaves.






## Coffee houses

In 18th-century Europe, coffee houses were the place for men to meet, read newspapers, and discuss the events of the day. They were central to the lifestyle of the city-dwelling elite. But the coffee these people drank was produced by slave labor. Customers rarely thought about the origin of the products they enjoyed.





CONSUMER PRODUCE	
	<b>Sugar</b> European consumption of sugar rose dramatically—in Britain from 2 lb (0.9 kg) per person in 1650 to 24 lb (10.9 kg) per person by 1800.
	<b>Coffee</b> In 1750 Britain imported 270 lb (123 kg) of coffee from the West Indies, by 1775 the figure was almost 60,000 lb (27,215 kg).
	<b>Cocoa</b> This was used by the Spanish to make drinking chocolate from the 16th century—a habit that spread to France and Britain. Chocolate for eating appeared in the 18th century.
	<b>Tobacco</b> British imports of Virginian tobacco grew from 60,000 lb (27,215 kg) in 1620 to 76 million lb (34.5 million kg) a year in the late 18th century.

### Rise of consumerism

Between 1650 and 1800, the British became among the main consumers of slave-produced goods. Sugar was the most important plantation product, but consumption of coffee and cocoa (as a warm drink and to make chocolate) was increasing. Tobacco imports saw a consistently high growth year-on-year, with the port of Chesapeake, Virginia, exporting 38 million pounds (17,273 million kg) by 1700.

### New England traders

North Americans—from Rhode Island and Massachusetts especially—became heavily involved in the slave trade. By 1750 over 20 ships were sailing from the small colony of Rhode Island to Africa each year. They not only went to Africa to buy enslaved Africans and carry them back across the Atlantic, but also supplied goods to the British slave plantations of the Caribbean—including corn, salted fish, rum, and lumber.



### Britain dominant

Almost half of the slaves brought across the Atlantic in the 18th century were carried by the British, a reflection of the growing strength of Britain's shipping and finance. The ship painted on this earthenware bowl was based at the port of Liverpool in northern England.



### Slavery in North America

Only a small percentage of the slaves carried across the Atlantic went to Britain's North American colonies. Still, ports such as Charleston in South Carolina were major importers of enslaved Africans. This slave auction is taking place in Virginia, where tobacco was the main crop.



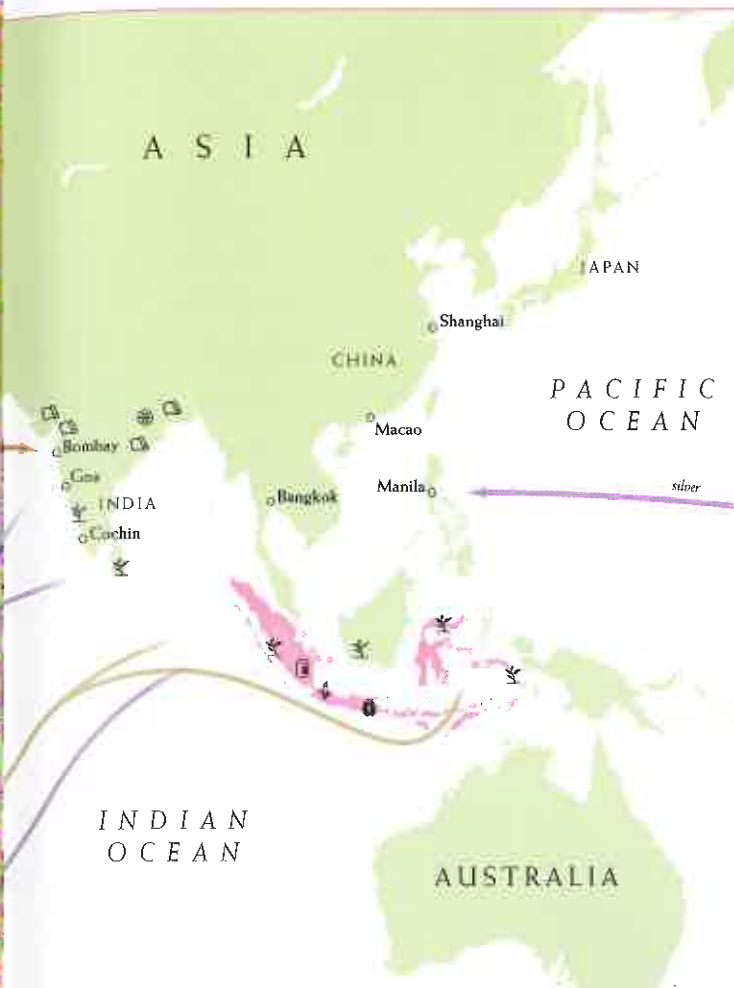
# PATTERNS OF TRADE

THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE involved more than simply carrying human cargo. European and North American traders bought goods to exchange for enslaved Africans, ranging from European items to cotton cloth from India. The products of the slave-worked plantations in the Americas were sold mostly in Europe. Merchants engaged in slaving maximized profits through "triangular trades": a ship might set off from Britain carrying trade goods, which were exchanged in Africa for slaves, who were then sold in the Caribbean. The ship might return home with a cargo of sugar.



**Made for Africa**  
European manufacturers often produced goods specifically to be traded with Africans in return for slaves. Firearms made in Britain are a prime example. They were part of a policy of promoting armed conflict in Africa, which, in turn, increased the flow of captives to European ships.

The World Slave Trade 1400–1860



- major slave-trading nation
  - export center for African slaves
  - export center for Muslim slaves
  - distribution of African slaves
  - distribution of Muslim slaves
  - African nations with active slave trade
  - routes of European slave traders
  - routes of Ottoman slave traders
  - routes of Saharan slave traders
  - routes of Arab slave traders
  - exports of Muslim slaves from Southeast Asia
  - goods exported in exchange for slaves
  - goods exported for slaves
  - European exports to Africa
- Goods produced using slaves
    - cacao
    - coffee
    - cotton
    - diamonds
    - gold
    - silver
    - sugar
    - tobacco
  - Other goods traded
    - dyestuffs
    - furs and hides
    - pepper
    - silk and textiles
    - spices
    - tin
  - Goods imported for slaves
    - salted cod

Complex exchanges

By the 18th century, European and North American ships linked far-flung areas of the world in a web of trade routes. The trade in slaves across the Atlantic and the products of slave labor in the Americas were at the heart of this system.

Rum and slaves

New England traders developed their own "triangular trade," buying molasses—a by-product of sugar manufacture—in the Caribbean, using it to make rum in New England, then taking the rum to Africa to exchange for slaves. The slaves were then sold in the Caribbean, after which the traders shipped another cargo of molasses.



*In the late 18th century, Britain was exporting about 300,000 muskets a year to Africa.*



Busy Bristol

Merchants in the port of Bristol in the west of England equipped ships for slave-trading voyages to West Africa, and imported large quantities of goods produced on slave-worked plantations in Britain's colonies in the West Indies and North America. Bristol grew to be the second-largest city in Britain by 1800.



### Prosperous ports

Port cities such as Liverpool and Bristol in England, Lisbon in Portugal, Newport in Rhode Island, and Charleston in South Carolina grew rich on the trade in slaves and slave produce. Some of this wealth was invested in fine buildings such as this theater in Nantes, a city that controlled most of the French slave trade.

# A WORLD OF WEALTH

IN THE 18TH CENTURY, the Atlantic slave trade was not considered a shameful or illegitimate business. Money was put into slaving voyages by upstanding citizens of Boston, Massachusetts, by members of the British royal family, and by ordinary artisans or shopkeepers with savings to invest. Men from respectable families might run a sugar plantation or captain a slave ship. Money and goods from the slave system were everywhere in the booming economies of Europe and the Americas.



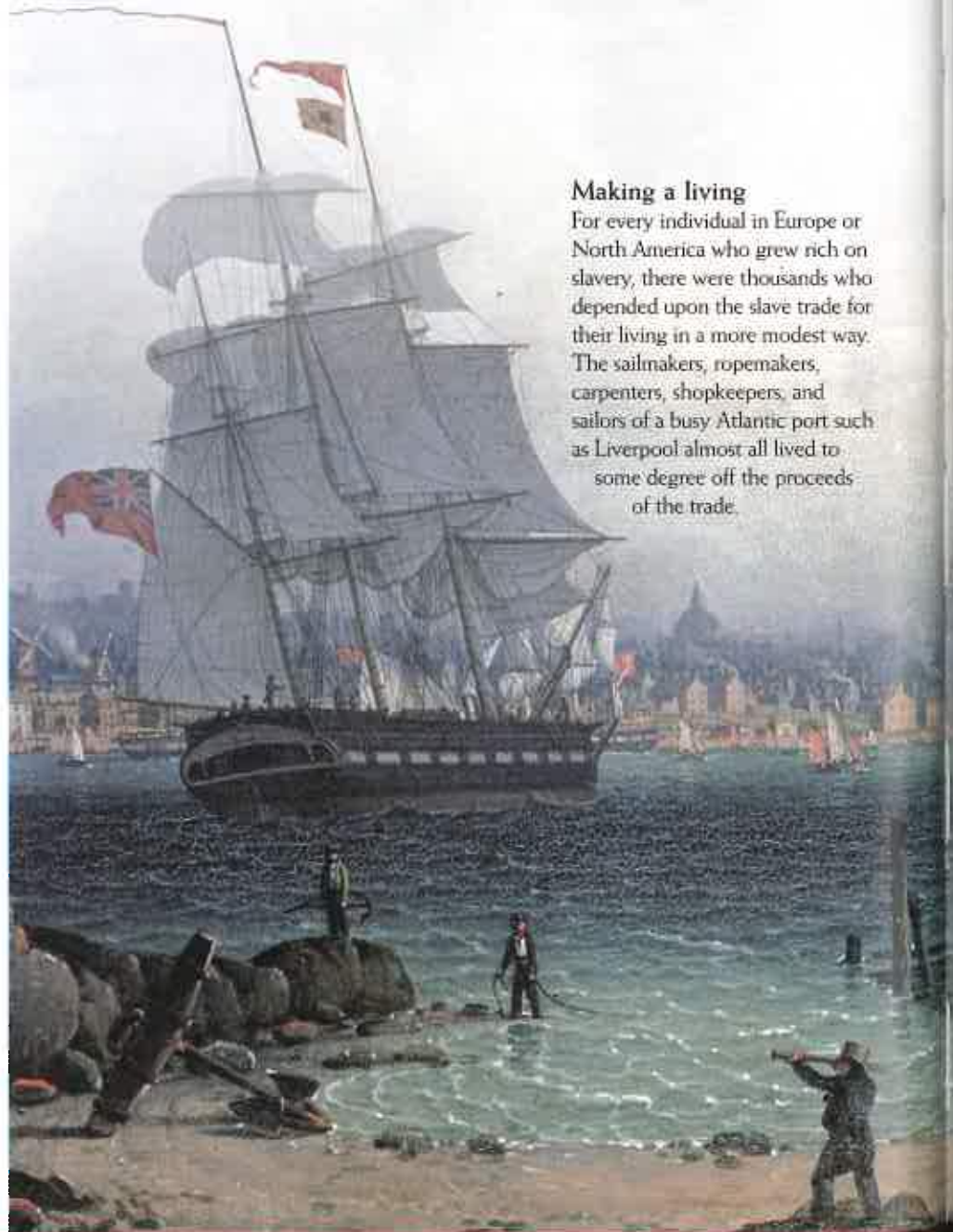
### Financing slavery

Wealthy financiers who put up large sums of money to promote slave voyages could make substantial profits without seeing anything of the suffering and brutality of the trade, which happened far away. Sir Francis Baring—portrayed here on the left with his two business partners—was one of many bankers in the City of London who made fortunes out of investment in slavery.



### Anglican slaver

John Newton became famous as a preacher in the Anglican church and is remembered today as the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." But as a young man in the 1750s he had been a slave-ship captain. At the time he had no misgivings about it, although later in his life he denounced the trade.



### Making a living

For every individual in Europe or North America who grew rich on slavery, there were thousands who depended upon the slave trade for their living in a more modest way. The sailmakers, ropemakers, carpenters, shopkeepers, and sailors of a busy Atlantic port such as Liverpool almost all lived to some degree off the proceeds of the trade.



### Philosopher of liberty

John Locke was a thinker whose ideas on freedom were to inspire the revolt of American colonists against British rule that led to the founding of the United States. But Locke was a shareholder in the slave trading Royal African Company.



### Respectable slavery

Some merchants and landowners became extremely wealthy on slave trade proceeds. Harewood House in Yorkshire, northern England, is one of Britain's most famous stately homes. The Lascelles family, who built it in the 18th century, were involved in sugar and slave trading, and became major plantation owners in Barbados and Jamaica. At their peak they owned almost 3,000 slaves.

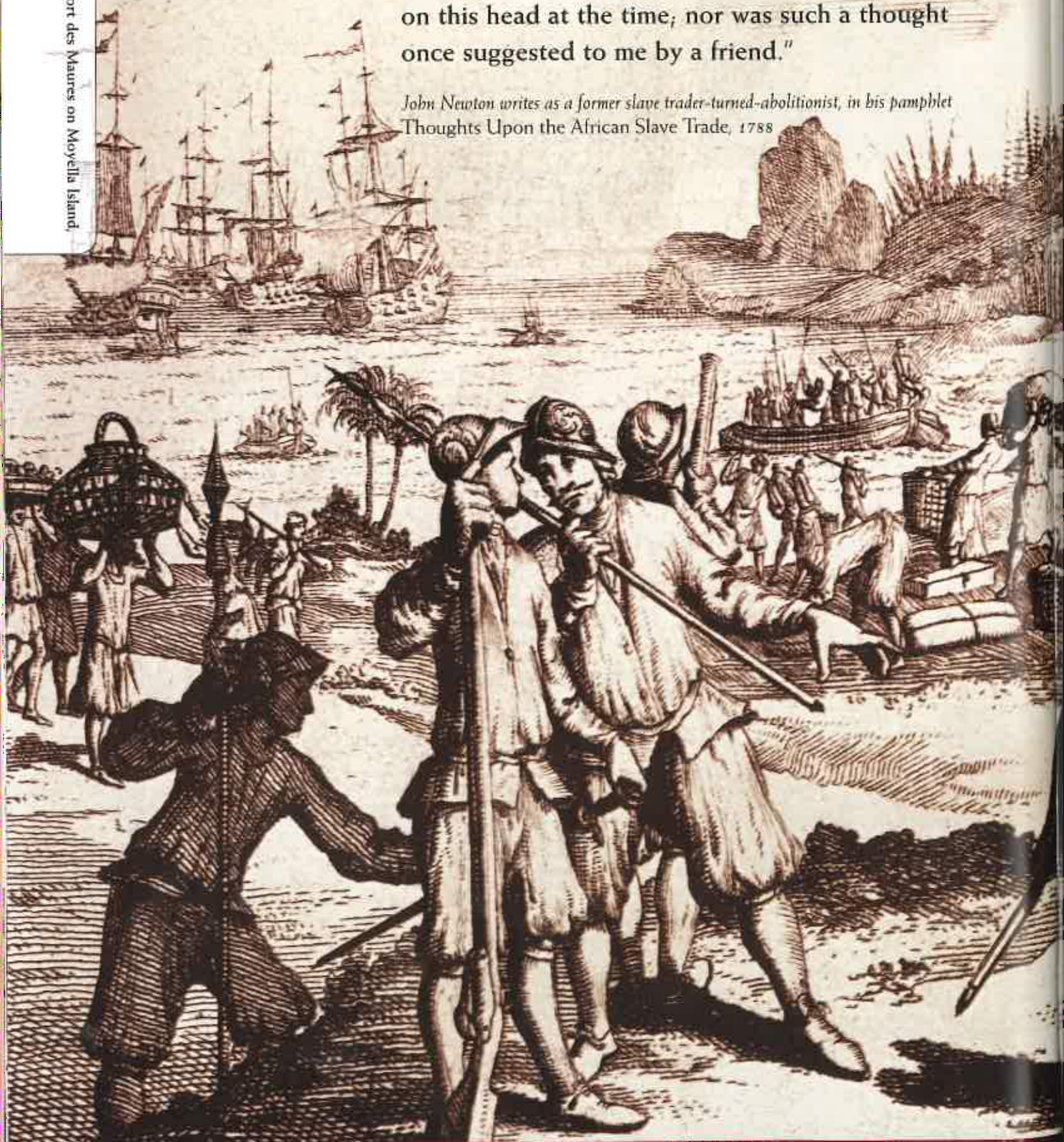
*William Beckford (1760–1844), a British aristocrat, earned the equivalent of about six million dollars a year from his family plantations in the West Indies.*



"I think I should have quitted it [the slave trade] sooner, had I considered it, as I now do, to be unlawful and wrong. But I never had a scruple on this head at the time; nor was such a thought once suggested to me by a friend."

*John Newton writes as a former slave trader-turned-abolitionist, in his pamphlet Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade, 1788*

Slave trading at Fort des Maires on Moyella Island,  
West Africa







# THE IMPACT ON AFRICA

MOST OF THE ENSLAVED AFRICANS carried across the Atlantic were bought from the rulers and merchants of the West African coast. Some African states refused to trade slaves, but others saw it as an opportunity. Coastal kingdoms such as Dahomey, Oyo, and Asante grew rich on the spoils of the slave trade, which became their principal activity. Using guns supplied by the Europeans, they waged wars or sent out raiding parties to capture people for sale. These constant raids depopulated large areas of Africa far inland.

## Friendly relations

European and North American traders had to establish friendly relations with African rulers and merchants. They brought them gifts and in return were invited to feasts. They even on occasion took the sons of African merchants back to Europe or North America to live in their houses. Both sides saw themselves as engaged in business and were indifferent to the fate of the humans they bought and sold.



## Sharp traders

Africans were demanding traders who only supplied slaves if they were offered high-quality goods in exchange. In addition to practical items such as salt, iron pots, knives, and firearms, they liked Asian silks, American rum (left), and French brandy. They accepted cowrie shells, brought from the Indian Ocean, as money. In about 1760, approximately 80,000 cowries would buy a slave.

## Imported food

The opening up of trade routes between Africa and the Americas affected what Africans ate.

Cassava (above) and maize were important crops brought to Africa from the New World.

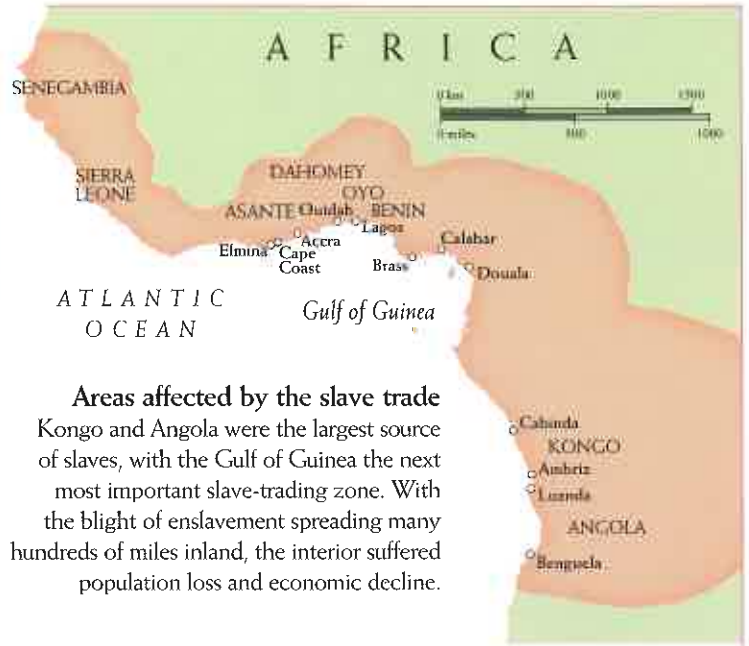
They soon became staple African foods, and remain so to this day.





### Kingdom of gold

The Asante kingdom became wealthy through trade in slaves, obtained mostly as prisoners through aggressive warfare. The Asante did not see themselves as enslaving fellow "Africans"—they regarded black people of other ethnic groups as foreigners. The Asante king sat on a gold throne and Asante artisans made figures of solid gold.



**Areas affected by the slave trade**  
Kongo and Angola were the largest source of slaves, with the Gulf of Guinea the next most important slave-trading zone. With the blight of enslavement spreading many hundreds of miles inland, the interior suffered population loss and economic decline.

### West African slave trade

Region of slave trade activity in West Africa



### Merchants of Bonny River

The Africans who traded with Europeans were not always part of warlike states. The British obtained many slaves from the African merchant families of Bonny and Calabar, who were traders rather than warriors. They bought their slaves from inland and sold them on to the Europeans. Slave ships anchored in the Bonny River while a human cargo was assembled.

### Easy targets

The Africans who were victims of the slave trade often lived far from the coast. They were easy prey since they did not have European-supplied guns and generally lived in small villages. The search for slaves inevitably ranged wider and wider as some areas became depopulated and the demand for slaves increased.



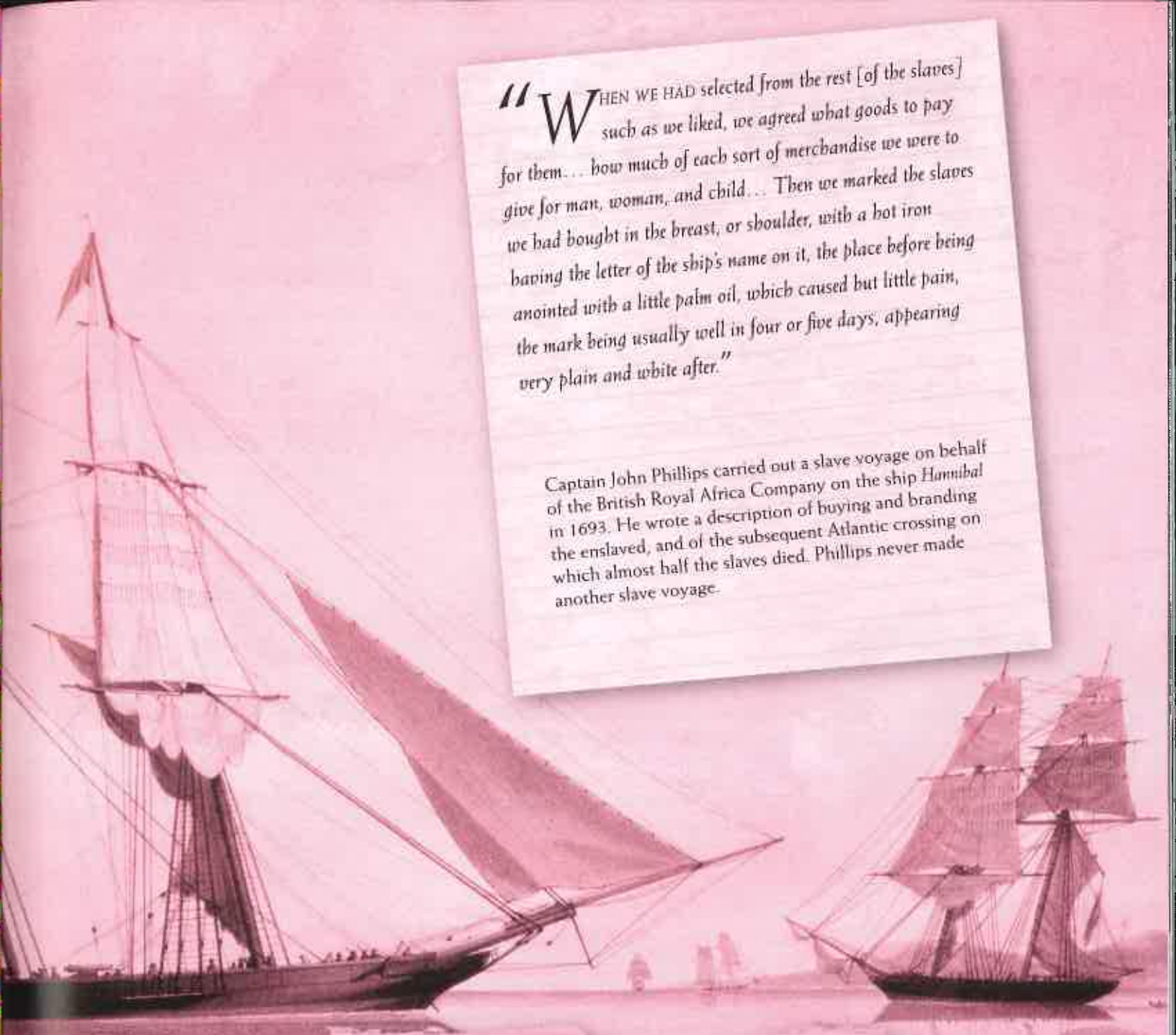
# VOICES ON THE AFRICAN COAST

Buying slaves on the West African coast was a business both for those who bought and those who sold. Africans soon became fluent in foreign languages and exchanged polite letters with merchants in Europe and North America. Yet it was a business in which suffering and death were ever-present, not only for the victims, but also for traders and seamen exposed to disease during long stays on the tropical coast.



*"AS YOU ARE appointed commander of our new ship the Essex on board such we have shipped a well assorted cargo for the Windward Coast of Africa... barter your cargo for prime young slaves, none less than 4 ft 4 in [1.32 m] high... stay on Windward coast if trade brisk and can get away in 4 to 5 months... A few presents to the [African] traders now and then will not be lost, and will promote your trade and quick dispatch... for lying long on the coast brings distemper [illness] into your ship and often proves very fatal in the end..."*

*In 1784, Captain Peter Potter took the slave ship the Essex to West Africa on behalf of Liverpool merchant William Davenport. These were the instructions that Davenport wrote to Potter before he set out.*



**“**WHEN WE HAD selected from the rest [of the slaves] such as we liked, we agreed what goods to pay for them... how much of each sort of merchandise we were to give for man, woman, and child... Then we marked the slaves we had bought in the breast, or shoulder, with a hot iron having the letter of the ship's name on it, the place before being anointed with a little palm oil, which caused but little pain, the mark being usually well in four or five days, appearing very plain and white after.”

Captain John Phillips carried out a slave voyage on behalf of the British Royal Africa Company on the ship *Hannibal* in 1693. He wrote a description of buying and branding the enslaved, and of the subsequent Atlantic crossing on which almost half the slaves died. Phillips never made another slave voyage.

**“**I WANT A good many ship to come, for the more ships the more trade we have for them... So merchant Lace, if you send ship now and good cargo, I will be bound she no stand long before she full for go away... They [the slave traders] shall be used with nothing but civility and fair trade.”

The ruler of Old Calabar on the Nigerian coast, known to the British as Grandy King George, was an important trader in slaves and other goods. He tried to maintain good relations with foreign merchants. He wrote this letter to merchant Ambrose Lace of Liverpool in 1773 encouraging him to trade.

# COUNTING THE COST

THE SCALE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC slave trade is almost inconceivable. Although outlawed by many countries in the early 19th century, a large-scale Atlantic slave trade continued into the 1860s. By that time it is estimated that 12.5 million Africans had embarked on slave ships, of whom 10.7 million survived the Atlantic crossing. Since many captives died in Africa on marches to the coast, or awaiting shipment, the number actually enslaved may have been between 15 and 20 million. The survivors created a new population of African origin throughout the Americas.

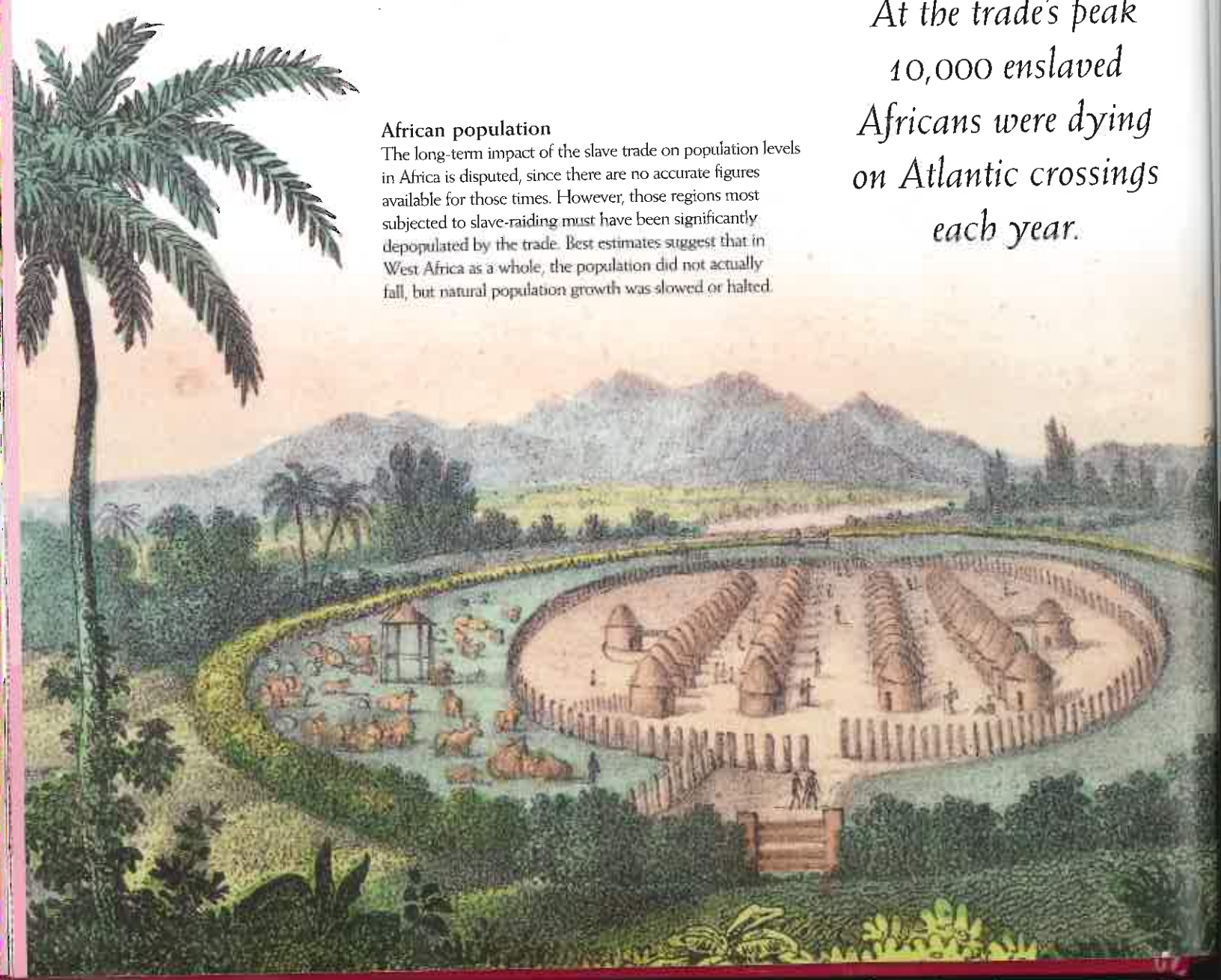
SLAVE IMPORTS	
Brazil	4,864,000
British Caribbean	2,318,000
Spanish America	1,293,000
French Caribbean	1,120,000
Mainland North America	389,000

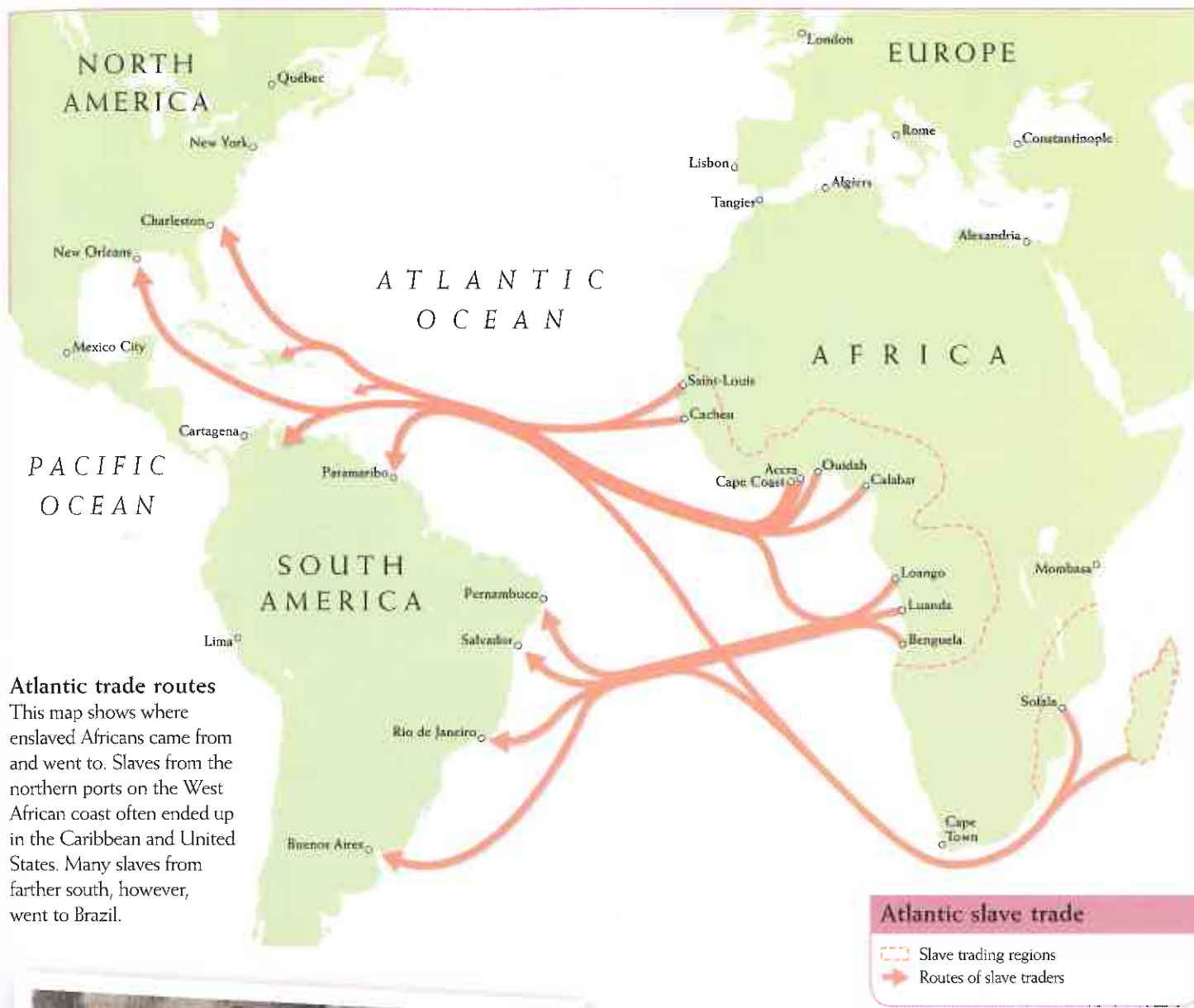
**Where enslaved people went**  
Almost half of the 10.7 million enslaved Africans who arrived in the Americas were taken to Brazil. British and French islands in the West Indies were another major destination. A large proportion of the slaves carried to Spanish America went to Cuba. The United States took less than four percent of slaves imported to the Americas.

*At the trade's peak  
10,000 enslaved  
Africans were dying  
on Atlantic crossings  
each year.*

### African population

The long-term impact of the slave trade on population levels in Africa is disputed, since there are no accurate figures available for those times. However, those regions most subjected to slave-raiding must have been significantly depopulated by the trade. Best estimates suggest that in West Africa as a whole, the population did not actually fall, but natural population growth was slowed or halted.





**Atlantic trade routes**  
This map shows where enslaved Africans came from and went to. Slaves from the northern ports on the West African coast often ended up in the Caribbean and United States. Many slaves from farther south, however, went to Brazil.

**Atlantic slave trade**  
 - Slave trading regions  
 - Routes of slave traders



**Death toll**  
The precise cost of the slave trade in African lives cannot be established. An estimated 1.8 million enslaved Africans died on Atlantic voyages over four centuries, an average death toll of about 14 percent of those who embarked. But very large numbers died in Africa before embarkation, and countless more died within a few months of arrival in the Americas.

PERIOD	NUMBER OF DEATHS
1500–1550	19,000
1551–1600	59,000
1601–1650	140,000
1651–1700	213,000
1701–1750	392,000
1751–1800	493,000
1801–1850	466,000

**African deaths at sea**  
In the early years of the Atlantic trade, only small numbers of enslaved Africans were embarked. But death rates were high—about one in five up to the 1650s. By the late 18th century, the death rate had fallen to under one in ten, but the number of people carried by ship was far higher.

# HOW THE SLAVE TRADE WORKED

THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE was a system for turning human misery into financial profit. Millions of enslaved Africans were violently torn away from their familiar lives and their loved ones. As "goods," they were deprived of their freedom and their basic humanity. Hundreds of thousands died of mistreatment and disease on the long journey from their villages across the ocean to the Americas.



### The start of a terrible journey into slavery

At West African ports, Africans were forced by traders on to slave ships. Here, white men brutally separate an African family. Strong men often fetched a better price than women and children.

## MERCHANTS

step 1  
Merchants get together to finance a slave-trading venture.

step 2  
A ship is loaded with trade goods, and a captain and crew are hired.

step 3  
The slave ship departs from Europe to sail to West Africa.

step 4  
The slave ship arrives on the coast of West Africa.

## SLAVES

step 5  
An African is captured by slave raiders at a village in inland West Africa.

step 6  
The captured African is marched to the coast with others in a slave coffle.

step 7  
The slave ship captain bargains with local traders, offering trade goods in exchange for human captives.

step 8  
Arriving at the coast, the African captives are held in a barracoon, ready for sale.



With its human cargo confined below decks, the slave ship sets sail from the coast.

Captives are purchased by slave ship captains, some are branded.

The slave ship arrives off a West Indian island or the coast of the American mainland.

The human cargo is sold on the deck of the ship or by auction on land.

Slave owners take their newly purchased captives to plantations and put them to work.

step 9

step 10

step 11

step 12

step 13

step 14

step 15

step 16

step 17

The Middle Passage: the ship carries its captives across the Atlantic ocean, a voyage of some six weeks.

The ship takes on a cargo of export goods and sets off back to Europe.

The African captives are held by the European slave traders on board ship or on land while enough slaves are purchased to make a full cargo.

Surviving captives are prepared for sale, sometimes their bodies are used to make them appear healthier.



**Village people**  
Most Africans lived in villages. Every enslaved African had once had a clear identity within such a society—a hunter or a farmer, someone's husband or wife, son or daughter. From this familiar life they were brutally torn away to become simply a piece of saleable property.

## BECOMING ENSLAVED

SLAVERY EXISTED WITHIN AFRICA at the time of the Atlantic slave trade. But on the whole Africans on the coast did not sell their personal slaves—these were people who had become enslaved as a result of debt or poverty and were regarded as part of a big extended family. To feed the demand for slaves to be carried across the Atlantic, they depended instead on warfare or raiding inland. A typical victim destined for the Atlantic slave trade was made captive in some violent way. He or she was then marched to the coast and held there, awaiting sale to the traders from overseas.

### Men of war

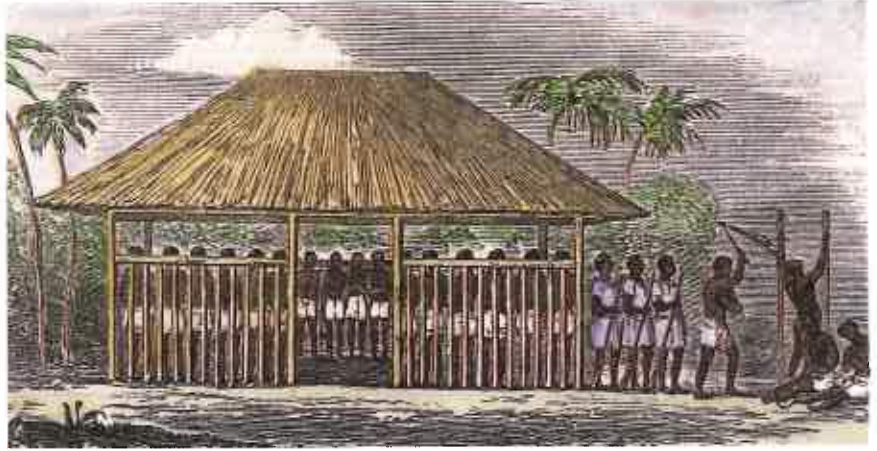
Africa was not a peaceful continent. African warriors prided themselves on their fighting skills and warfare was common between neighboring peoples. When prisoners were taken they were either killed or made household slaves. The coming of the Europeans gave those prisoners an extra value to the warring tribes. It even led to more fighting, with the specific aim of taking prisoners for sale.



### Raiding parties

Individuals were kidnapped as they went about their daily lives. Raiding parties would hide outside a village and wait for a chance to ambush victims. The raiders took their captives away from their old homes as quickly as possible. African rulers tried, without success, to limit this terrible human theft.





### The barracoons

When enslaved people from the interior arrived at a coastal slave-trading station, they were often held in large enclosures, known as barracoons, to await the arrival of European slave ships. Men were kept chained; women and children were held separately.

### HOUSE OF SLAVES

The House of Slaves on Gorée Island off the coast of Senegal, West Africa, has become a much-visited memorial to the victims of the slave trade. Several thousand enslaved Africans were shipped from Gorée through the 18th century. The House of Slaves, built in 1776, was the home of a wealthy trader. Inside the house is the famous 'Door of No Return' through which enslaved people were said to leave. There is no evidence of this, however.



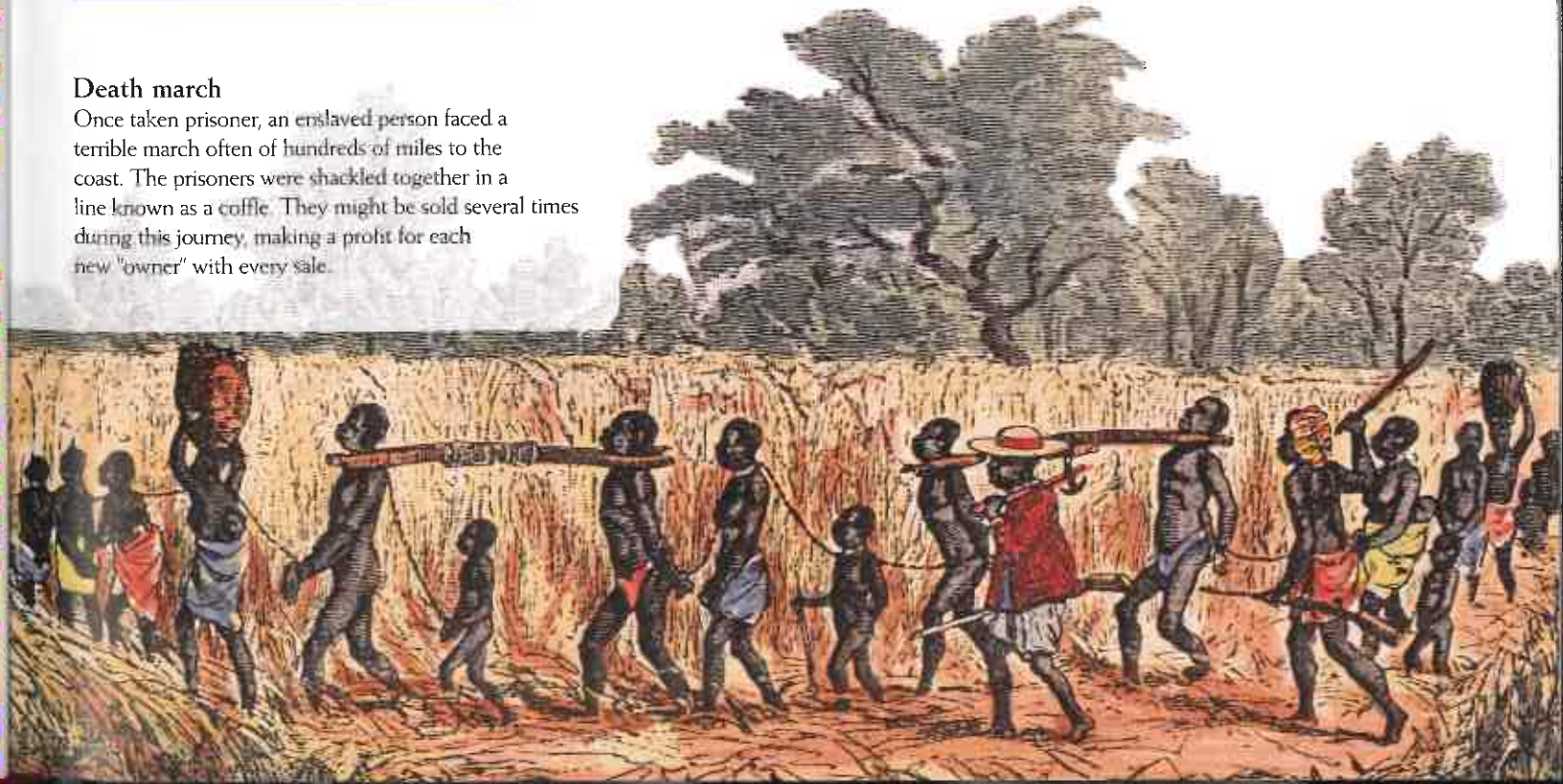
### Bonds of slavery

Chains used to restrain captives were made from wrought iron and included leg irons, handcuffs, and, shown here, neck collars. Most were made in Britain.

*Long chains were used to shackle up to 50 enslaved captives at a time.*

### Death march

Once taken prisoner, an enslaved person faced a terrible march often of hundreds of miles to the coast. The prisoners were shackled together in a line known as a caffle. They might be sold several times during this journey, making a profit for each new 'owner' with every sale.



# BUYERS AND SELLERS

SLAVE TRADING WAS A COMPLEX business operation. Merchants in Europe or North America worked to equip a ship for a voyage that might last a year or more. They bought trade goods and hired a captain to be responsible for sailing the ship and the buying and selling of slaves. When the ship reached the African coast, trading was complicated. The supply of enslaved Africans was not guaranteed, and experienced African merchants struck a hard bargain with the foreign buyers. The humanity of the Africans being bought and sold was ignored by all concerned.



### Captains after fortune

The captain of a slave ship carried a heavy responsibility for the success of the enterprise. Most captains were on commission—if the voyage ended in a substantial profit, the captain could expect a handsome payoff, either in cash or in slaves given to him to sell on his own account.



### Unhappy sailors

It was hard to recruit crew for slave ships. Conditions were poor—the death rate among sailors on slave voyages was as bad as that among the enslaved Africans. Often seamen were tricked into service—lured into debt and then forced to serve on slave ships to pay what they owed. Many deserted when they got a chance; in Africa or the Americas.

*On average one in eight sailors on a slave ship died on a voyage, mainly from tropical diseases.*



### Long stay

A slave ship typically spent four to six months on the African coast assembling a full cargo of enslaved Africans, who were bought in small batches. During this time a number of officers and crew were likely to die of tropical diseases. The ship might cruise along the coast in search of slaves for sale, stopping off at trading posts. There was plenty of contact with free Africans when seamen went ashore.



### Factor on the coast

Some European merchants established “factories” on the African coast—buildings where their agents or factors could live and where slaves were held before being taken on board ship. The factor’s tasks included ensuring that any taxes levied by the local ruler on the export of slaves were paid, and establishing a relationship of trust with African traders.



### Branded humans

Once purchased, enslaved Africans were branded with the mark of the merchant who had paid for them, as if they were cattle. Their heads were shaved and their clothes taken—supposedly to prevent the spread of disease, but perhaps also as a humiliation for the captives. Many died while still on the African coast, waiting months for shipment across the Atlantic.



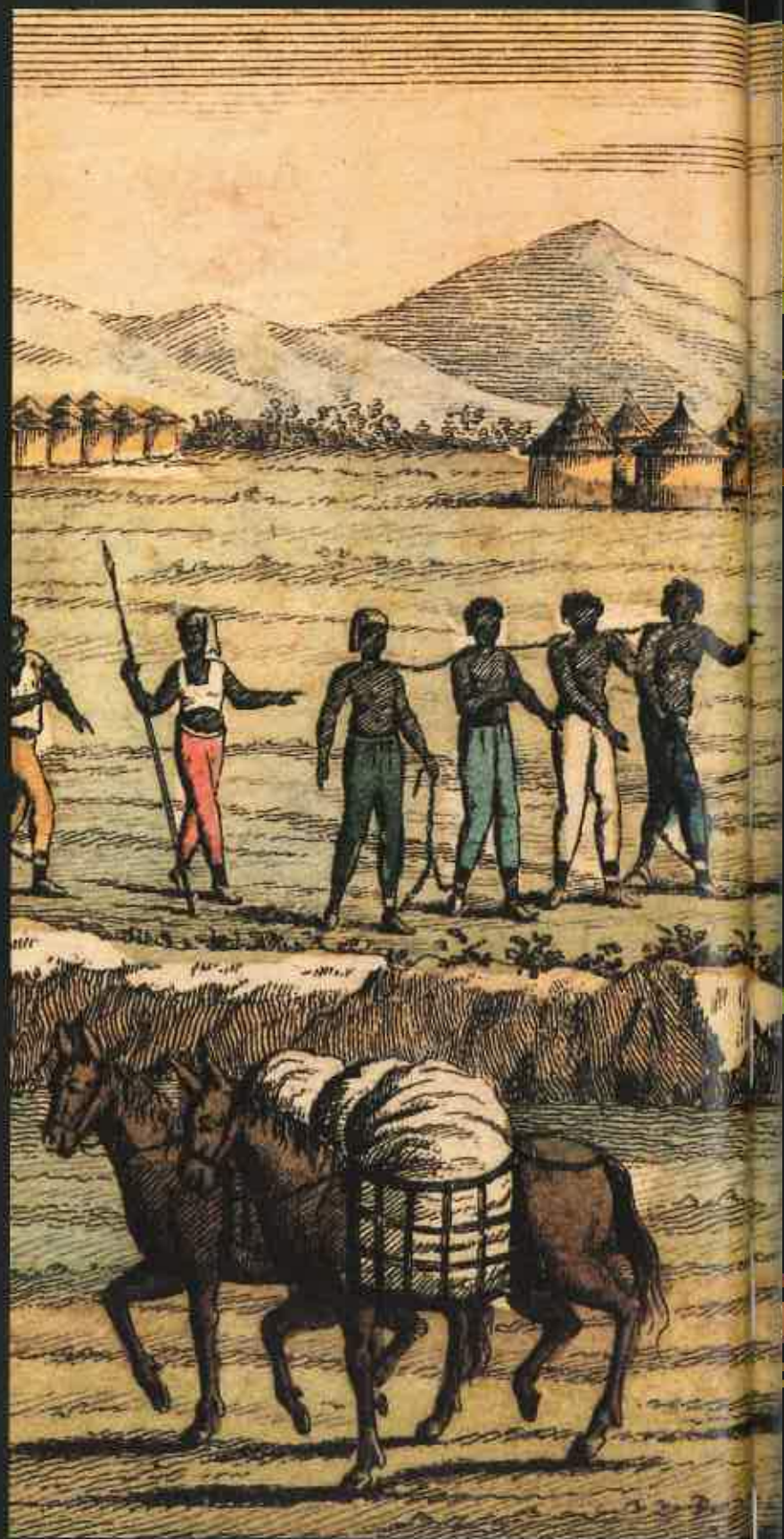
### Buying people

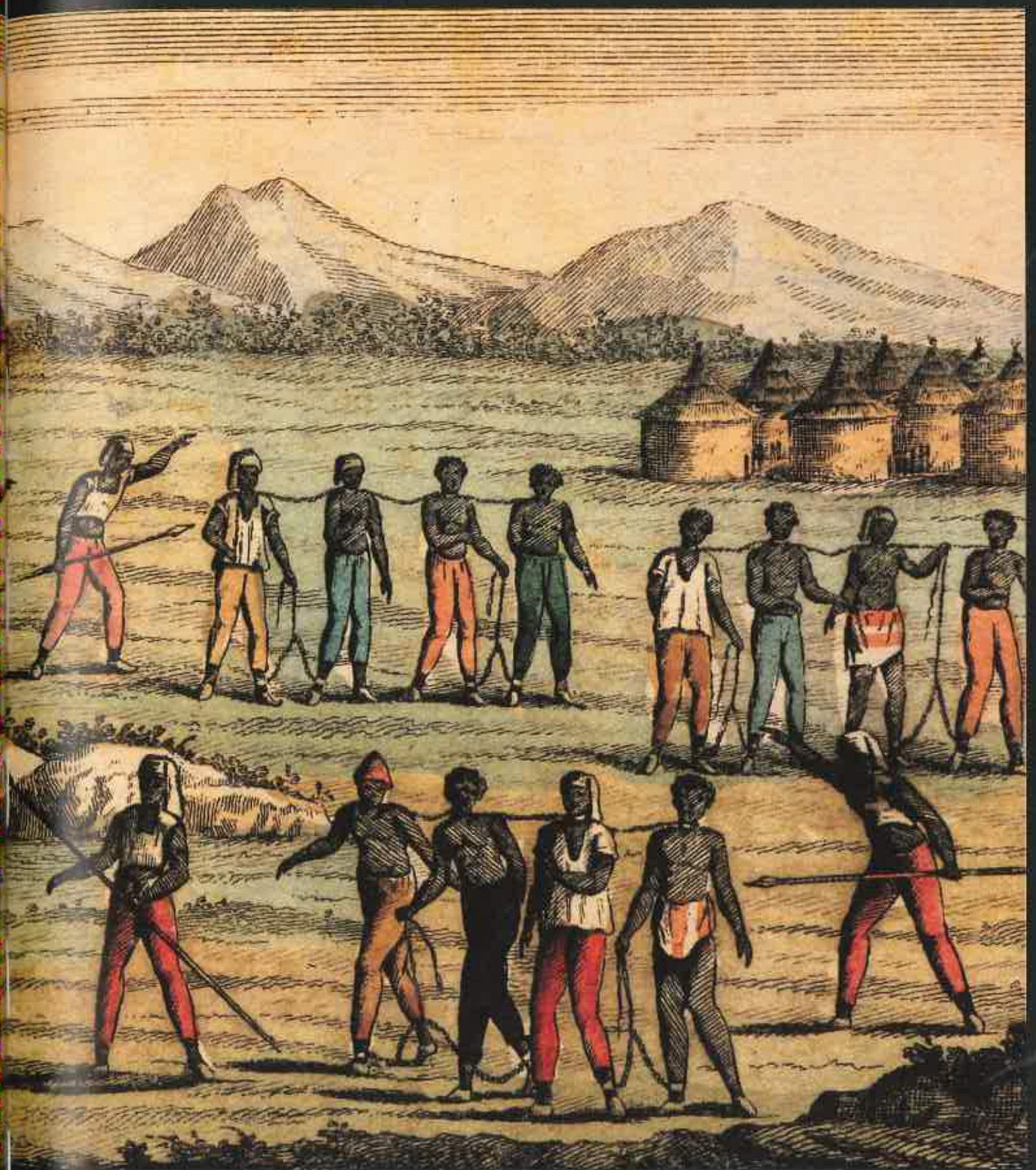
Buying slaves was a degrading business. Europeans examined the enslaved people physically, as if they were animals, to see if they were healthy. Fit men with a long working life ahead of them were most wanted. Twice as many men as women were taken.



"Is it not strange to think, that they who ought to be considered as the most learned and civilized people in the world, that they should carry on a traffic of the most barbarous cruelty and injustice, and that many... are become so dissolute as to think slavery, robbery, and murder no crime...?"

*Former slave Ottobah Cugoana, Narrative of the Enslavement of a Native of Africa, 1787*





# THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

KNOWN AS THE "MIDDLE PASSAGE," the crossing of the Atlantic from West Africa to the Caribbean or the American mainland usually took around six weeks. Such a voyage was fraught with dangers and hardships, since the ships were threatened by storms, shortages of food and water, and outbreaks of disease. On a slaving ship it was a nightmare journey for the human cargo. They were imprisoned below decks in filthy, overcrowded conditions, subject to brutal treatment by the crew. Captains had a financial interest in keeping their valuable human cargo alive and in good condition, but deaths were commonplace. Bodies were thrown overboard to feed the sharks that tracked the ships across the ocean.

## Crowded conditions

Enslaved Africans were packed into the confined space of the ship's lower decks. Male slaves were often chained together in pairs, although women and children were usually not shackled. The ceilings were so low there was not even room to stand up. This model represents the tightly packed 18th-century slave ship *Brookes*.

*Brookes slave ship was built to carry 454 slaves but often had more than 600 slaves on board.*



## Stormy weather

Slave ships had ventilation holes to allow air into the overcrowded holds, but when ships hit rough seas all openings had to be closed. Conditions below deck then became even more appalling, with captives packed together without air or light, many of them violently seasick.



### Dancing on deck

Slaves were valuable property, and needed to be kept alive and healthy, so it was customary to force them to exercise on deck every day. They were made to dance, often wearing their shackles, while the crew looked on. This was humiliating for the prisoners, but any who refused to dance were flogged.

### Food and drink

On board slaves were typically fed beans, rice, yams, and salted pork or beef. Carrying enough food and water for some 600 captives and a ship's crew was difficult. If the ship made a slow crossing, thirst and hunger would set in.

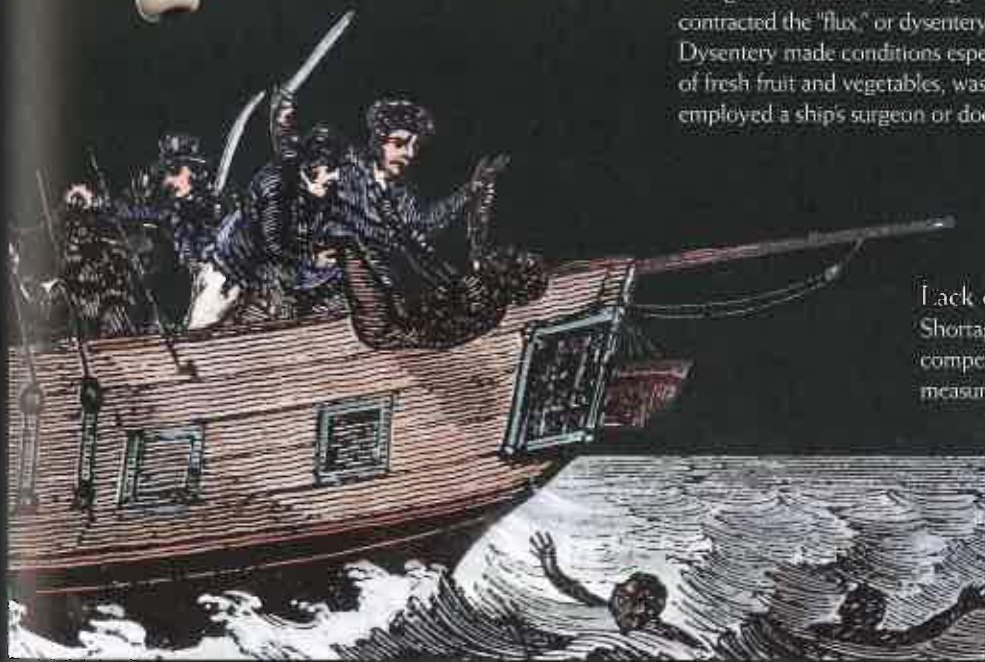


### Outbreak of disease

The greatest killer on a voyage was disease. Many of the enslaved Africans contracted the "flux," or dysentery, a disease caused by poor-quality drinking water. Dysentery made conditions especially foul below decks. Scurvy, caused by a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, was another common ailment. Most slave ships employed a ship's surgeon or doctor, but at that time few diseases could be cured.

### Lack of supplies

Shortages of drinking water and food compelled some captains to take drastic measures to save their cargo. In 1781, Luke Collingwood, the captain of the slave ship *Zowee*, with dwindling water supplies and a rapidly sickening cargo, ordered his crew to throw 133 sick but living Africans overboard. The ship's owners then filed an insurance claim to cover the loss.

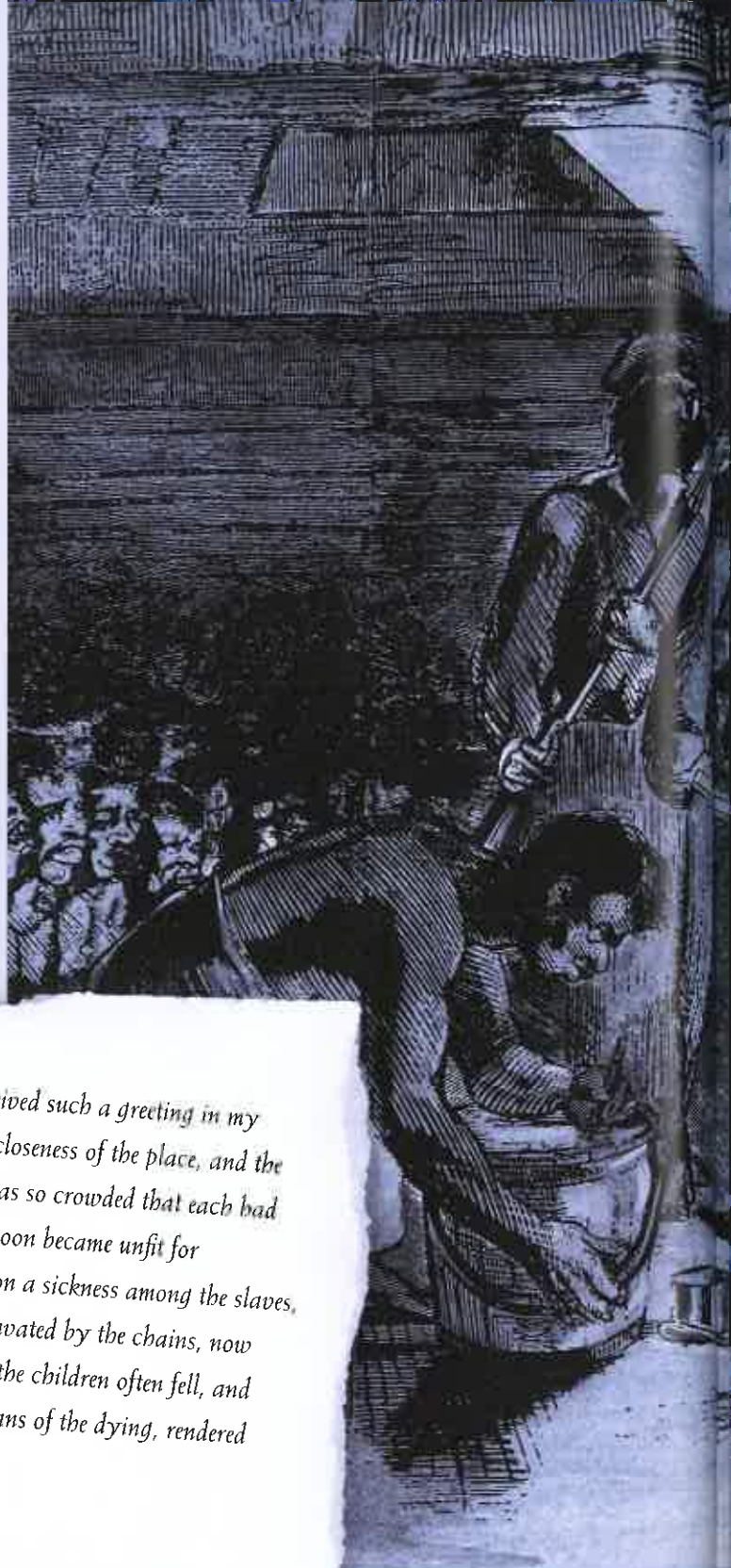


# VOICES THE CROSSING

Millions of enslaved Africans experienced the horrors of the "Middle Passage" aboard slave ships crossing the Atlantic. Today, we can scarcely imagine their sufferings. Only a few snatches of testimony have survived from the enslaved Africans themselves, but along with accounts written by slave traders and officers running the ships, they give us a vivid and detailed picture of the hellish conditions.

*"I WAS SOON put down under the decks, and there I received such a greeting in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life... The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. The air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. The wretched situation was again aggravated by the chains, now unsupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."*

Olaudah Equiano was born in Essaka, Nigeria, in 1745. He spent several years as a slave in Africa before he was shipped to the West Indies in the 1760s. A later master let him earn money on his own behalf, enabling him to buy his liberty. He became important as a campaigner against the slave trade.

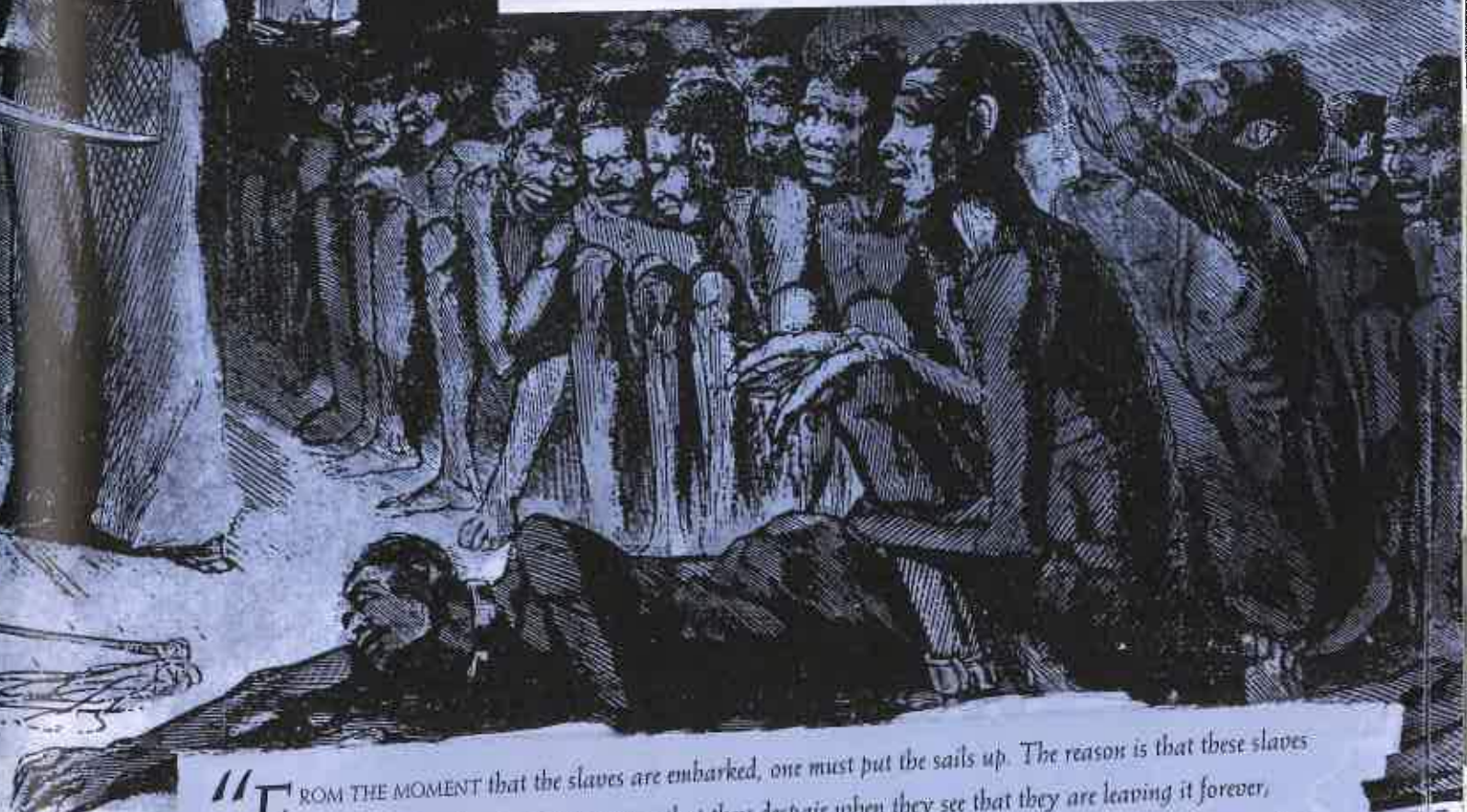






**"A**FTER BEING ABOUT 15 days out to sea a heavy squall struck the ship. The poor slaves below, altogether unprepared for such an occurrence, were mostly thrown to the side, where they lay heaped on the top of each other, their fetters rendered many of them helpless, and before they could be arranged in their proper places, and relieved from their pressure on each other, it was found that 15 of them were smothered or crushed to death. The captain seemed considerably vexed, but the only grievance to him was the sudden loss of some five or six thousand dollars."

The son of a king from the Kongo, Zamba Zembola was taken from his wife and family and transported to America as a young man of about 20. In the 1840s, to his amazement, he was reunited with his wife Zillah—herself now a slave—before both were given their freedom by a kindly master.



**"F**ROM THE MOMENT that the slaves are embarked, one must put the sails up. The reason is that these slaves have so great a love for their country that they despair when they see that they are leaving it forever, that makes them die of grief, and I have heard merchants who engage in this commerce say that they die more often before leaving the port than during the voyage. Some throw themselves into the sea, others hit their heads against the ship, others hold their breath to try and smother themselves, others still try to die of hunger from not eating..."

Born in France in 1622, Jacques Savary des Bruslons made his fortune as a successful merchant, operating out of the Loire River. Slaves, he saw, were a particularly profitable commodity; he certainly saw the importance of protecting a precious cargo.



# INSURRECTION AND RESISTANCE

**Armed crews**  
Slave ships carried far more sailors than an ordinary merchant ship, because of the need to control the captives in the hold. Even so, the crew was heavily outnumbered by the slaves. The sailors were understandably very afraid of these captives, who had every reason to hate their captors. Enslaved men were kept shackled, though the women and children were given more freedom on the voyage. Sailors always had guns and cutlasses (above) in preparation for any slave uprising.

ENSLAVED AFRICANS resisted transportation across the ocean with acts of individual defiance and collective insurrection, or open revolt. To launch a full-scale insurrection the men needed to free themselves from their shackles, aided by the women or child captives who were left unchained. Once loose, the men would try to overwhelm the crew by force of numbers. Sadly, even if they succeeded in seizing control, they were unlikely to know how to sail the ship.



**Self-destruction**  
The most direct form of resistance available to an enslaved person was suicide. There were many cases of slaves deliberately jumping overboard or refusing food until they starved to death. Self-starvation was so common that slave ships carried a speculum oris, a crude device used to force-feed any slaves who would not eat.



**Brutal captains**  
The captain of a slave ship had absolute power over his little realm during the voyage. Some captains were as reasonably behaved as was possible in such a brutal situation, but others were sadists and tyrants who made their ships a living hell. They repeatedly flogged and tortured both slaves and crew in a reign of terror.

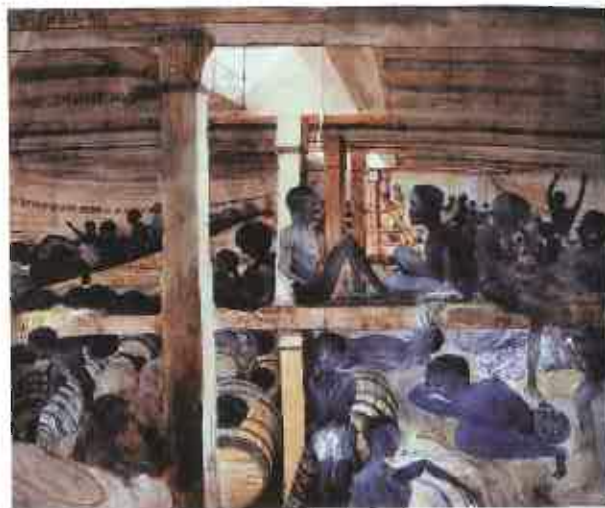
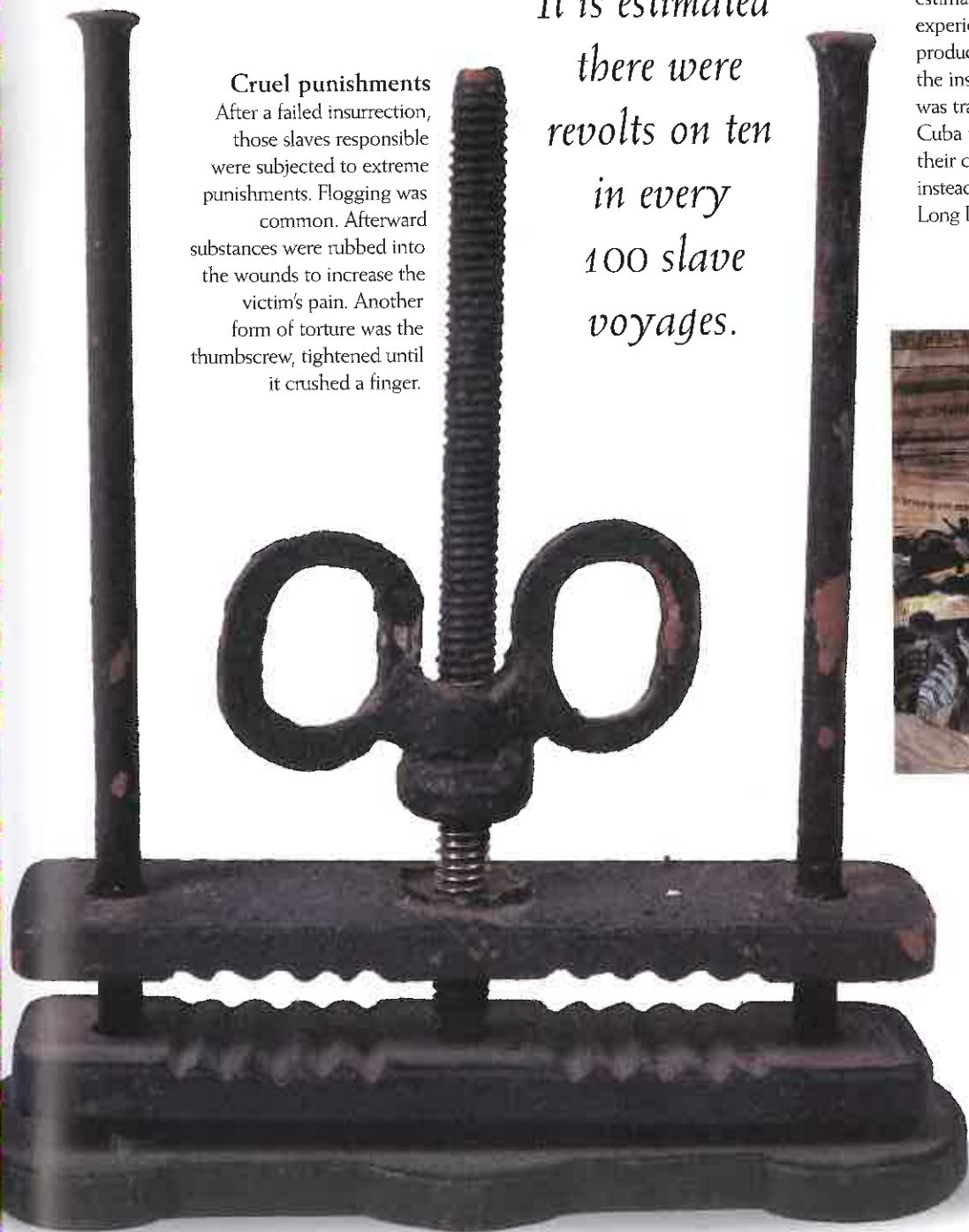


**Revolt aboard**

Insurrections were commonplace. Historians estimate that about ten percent of slave ships experienced insurrections significant enough to produce at least one death. This painting shows the insurrection on board the *Amistad*, while it was transporting 53 captives from Havana in Cuba in 1839. The captives violently attacked their crew before taking control of the ship. But instead of sailing back to Africa, they ended up in Long Island, New York.

*It is estimated  
there were  
revolts on ten  
in every  
100 slave  
voyages.*

**Cruel punishments**  
After a failed insurrection, those slaves responsible were subjected to extreme punishments. Flogging was common. Afterward substances were rubbed into the wounds to increase the victim's pain. Another form of torture was the thumbscrew, tightened until it crushed a finger.

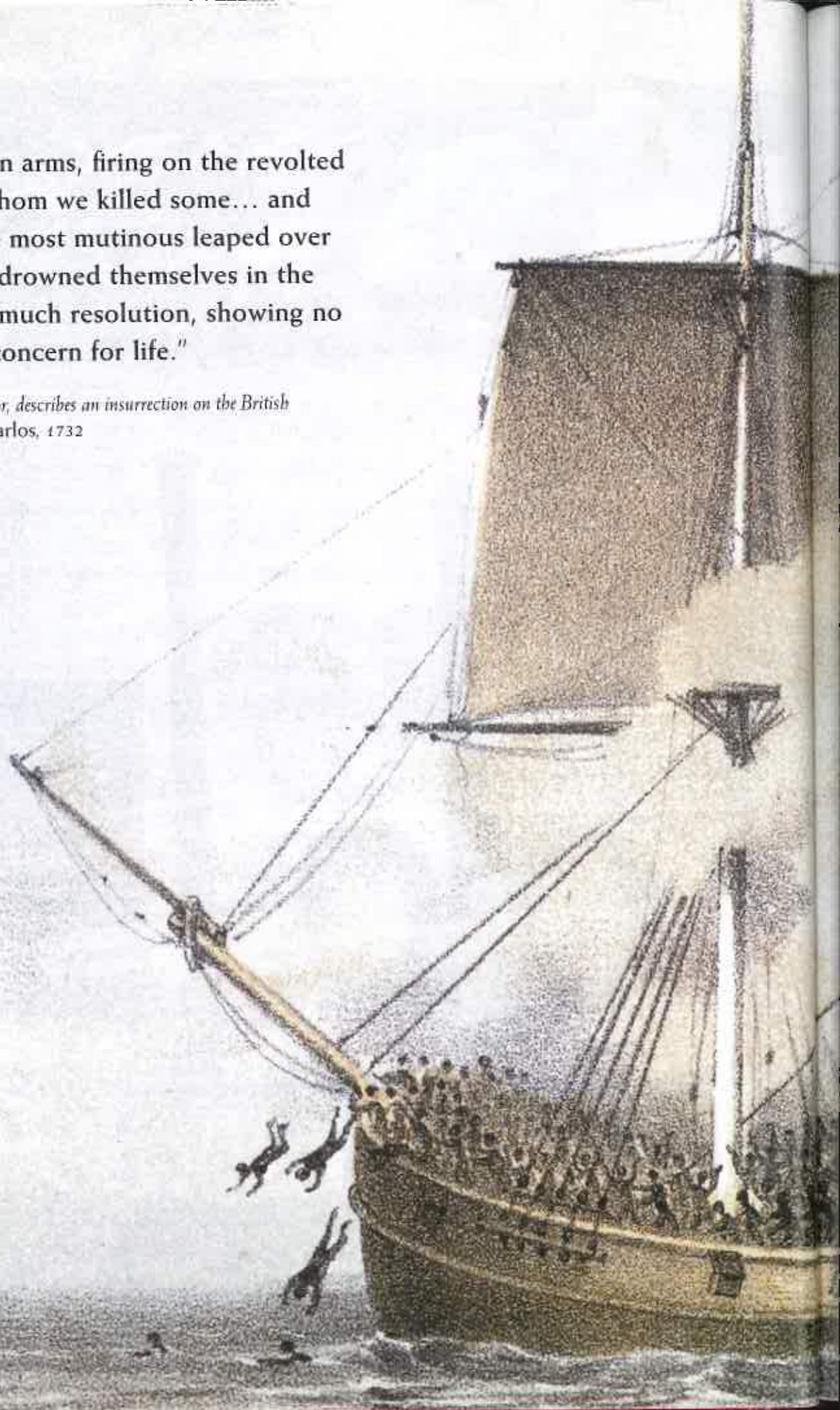


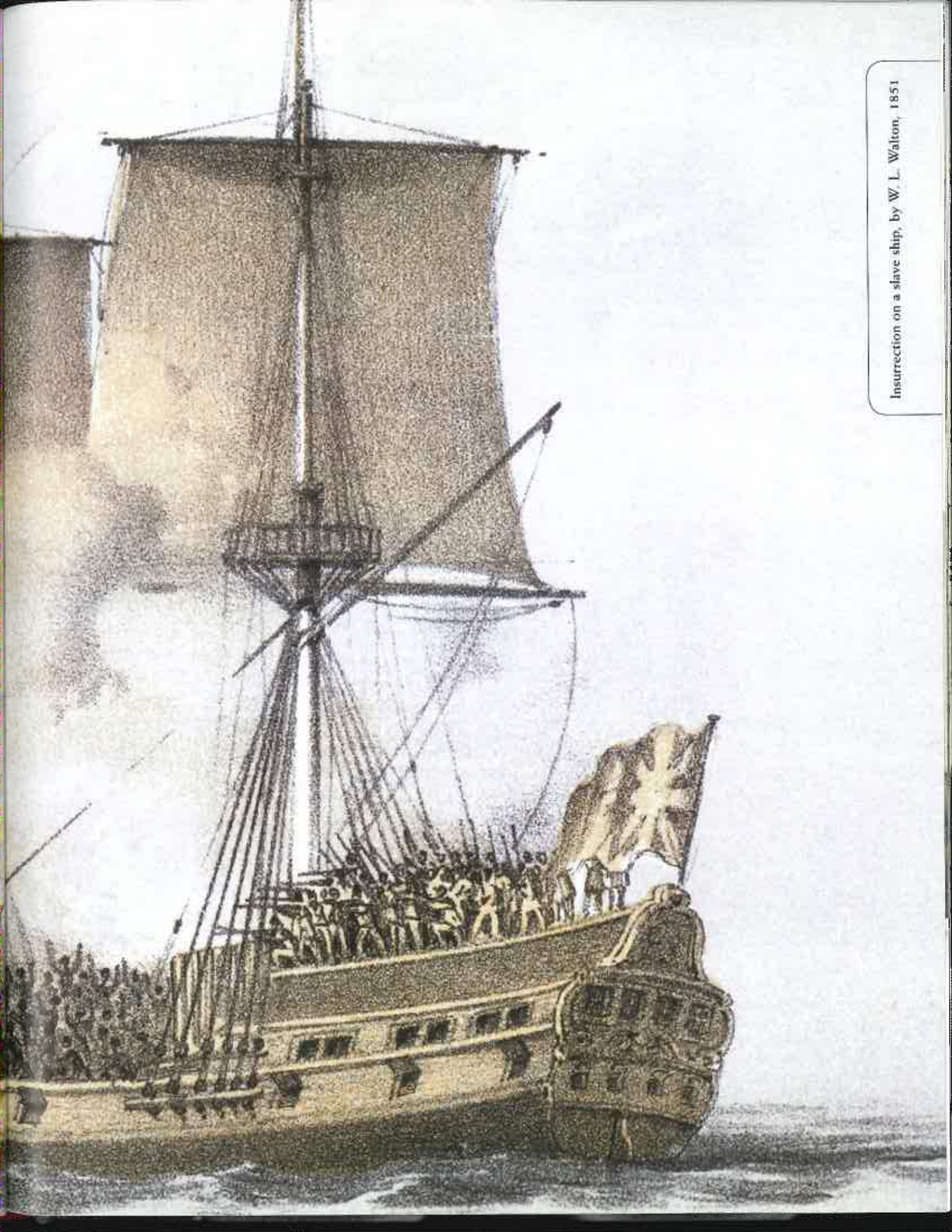
**Solidarity**

It was hard for all the enslaved Africans in a hold to cooperate because they usually belonged to different ethnic groups. These groups might be traditional enemies, and in any case could not understand one another's languages. But bonds of friendship and trust did develop between captives on their dreadful journey. Africans in the Caribbean used the term "shipmates" for people who had endured the Atlantic crossing on the same ship as they had.

"We stood in arms, firing on the revolted slaves, of whom we killed some... and many of the most mutinous leaped over board, and drowned themselves in the ocean with much resolution, showing no manner of concern for life."

*James Barbot, sailor, describes an insurrection on the British slave ship Don Carlos, 1732*

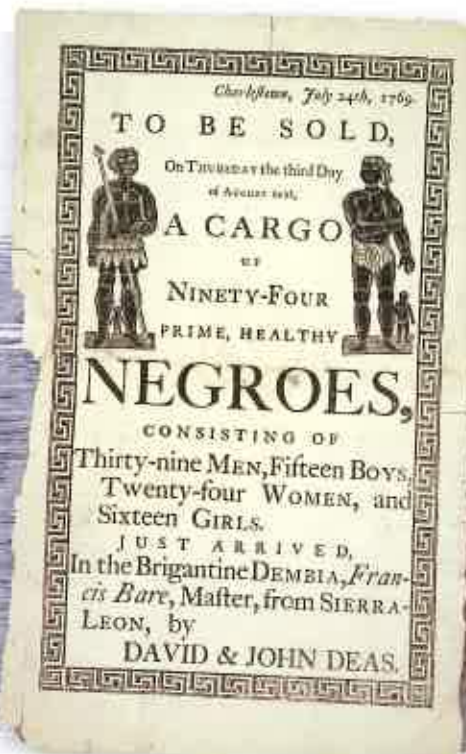
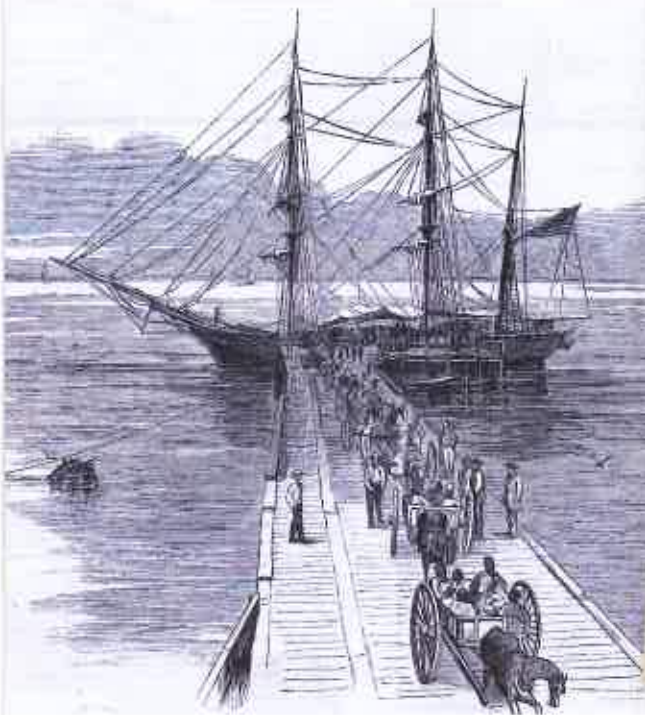
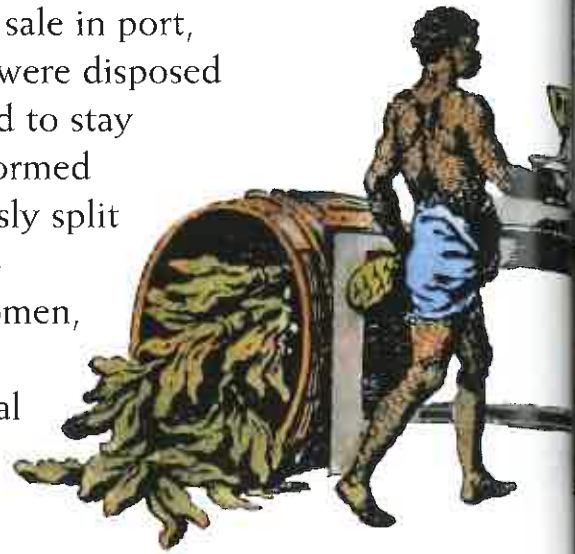




Insurrection on a slave ship, by W. L. Walton, 1851

# ARRIVAL AND SALE

THEIR ARRIVAL IN THE NEW WORLD was the start of fresh sufferings for enslaved Africans. Offered for sale in port, the enslaved had no control over how they were disposed of. Those who up to that point had managed to stay together with relatives from home, or had formed friendships on board ship, were now ruthlessly split apart from family and comrades, and sold to different owners. Large numbers of men, women, and children who had survived the ocean crossing died in the early months after arrival in the Americas, unable to cope either with unfamiliar diseases or with the shock of being put to work on a plantation.



### Coming ashore

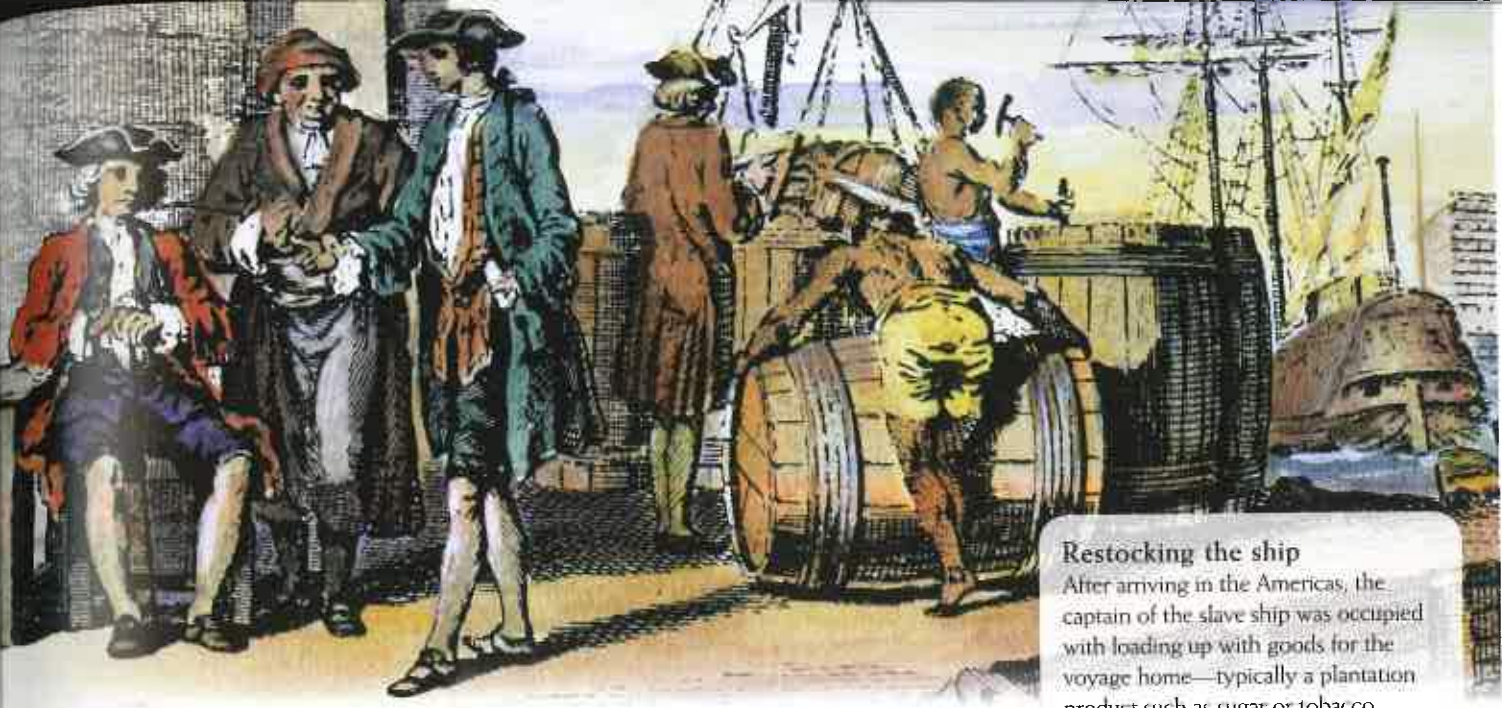
Traders wanted to make their captives look healthy to fetch a good price. Before landing, they were given better food for several days so they looked “refreshed.” Their bodies were rubbed with palm oils to make them appear in better physical condition.

### Advertised for sale

New arrivals were advertised by posters. Young men generally commanded the highest prices. Some buyers preferred slaves from particular African regions. This poster emphasizes that the slaves for sale are from Sierra Leone—they were valued in Carolina for their rice-farming skills.

### Selling methods

Enslaved people were often sold on deck or at the dockside. Buyers from the plantations visited the slave ship in port, and took their pick of the new arrivals. Another method of sale was a “scramble sale,” in which purchasers grabbed what slaves they could in a chaotic free-for-all.



**Restocking the ship**  
After arriving in the Americas, the captain of the slave ship was occupied with loading up with goods for the voyage home—typically a plantation product such as sugar or tobacco.

*As many as one in 20 slaves who reached the New World died before they could be sold.*



**Sold at auction**

Slave-importing towns had an auction block at which the enslaved were put up for sale. Prices would go up and down depending on supply and demand. The depressed state and poor condition of the Africans were usually only too obvious. This illustration shows a slave auction in the streets of New Amsterdam—the future New York—organized by Dutch traders in 1655.



**Careful buyers**

Being subjected to close physical examination was one of the humiliations visited upon the enslaved throughout the history of slavery. If slaves were in short supply, buyers would take almost any on offer. But when they were in a position to choose, they carefully selected those Africans they thought healthiest and most suitable for hard work.



# SUGAR PLANTATIONS

WORKING ON SUGAR PLANTATIONS in the West Indies or Brazil was probably the hardest life an enslaved person could face. Every year, thousands were literally worked to death. The slaves not only had to plant and cut the sugar cane, but also toil in sugar mills on the plantation, processing the cane into sugar. At the height of the harvesting season, enslaved men and women would be working by day in the fields and by night in the mill, with little time to eat or sleep. This relentless labor, done under the threat of the whip, generated large profits for plantation owners.

## In the fields

Throughout the year, the workers had to dig trenches to plant the cane shoots, weed and manure the ground for the growing plants, and then cut the cane. All these tasks involved backbreaking labor, but the slaves had no time to rest. Work in the cane fields was supervised by slave drivers with whips.





### Work in the sugar mill

The harvested sugar cane had to be crushed through rollers and the extract boiled in cauldrons. Cane waste was used to feed the furnaces. Conditions for those working in the sugar mill were hard and dangerous. The heat was intense. It was easy for an exhausted person to make a mistake and lose an arm by getting it trapped in the crushing rollers.



*The average life expectancy of an enslaved African imported to work on a sugar plantation was about six years.*

### Living space

The enslaved workers typically lived in simple huts. They were expected to feed themselves, growing food crops such as yams and beans on land not needed for sugar cane.



### Owners and overseers

The white owners, agents, and overseers who ran sugar plantations were heavily outnumbered. There might only be a couple of white people on a plantation with a hundred slaves. Fearing a revolt, they used harsh discipline as intimidation.



### Sugar cane

Originally native to Asia, sugar cane was brought to the Americas by European colonists. The first plantations were established in Brazil and spread to the Caribbean in the 17th century. Once cut, cane had to be processed almost immediately.

### MOLASSES AND RUM

Rum, an alcoholic beverage, was made from molasses, a by-product of sugar cane processing. Trade in molasses and rum became an important element in the slave system, especially from the point of view of the North American colonies. Rum production, using molasses extracted from the cane grown on Caribbean slave plantations, was big business in 18th-century New England.

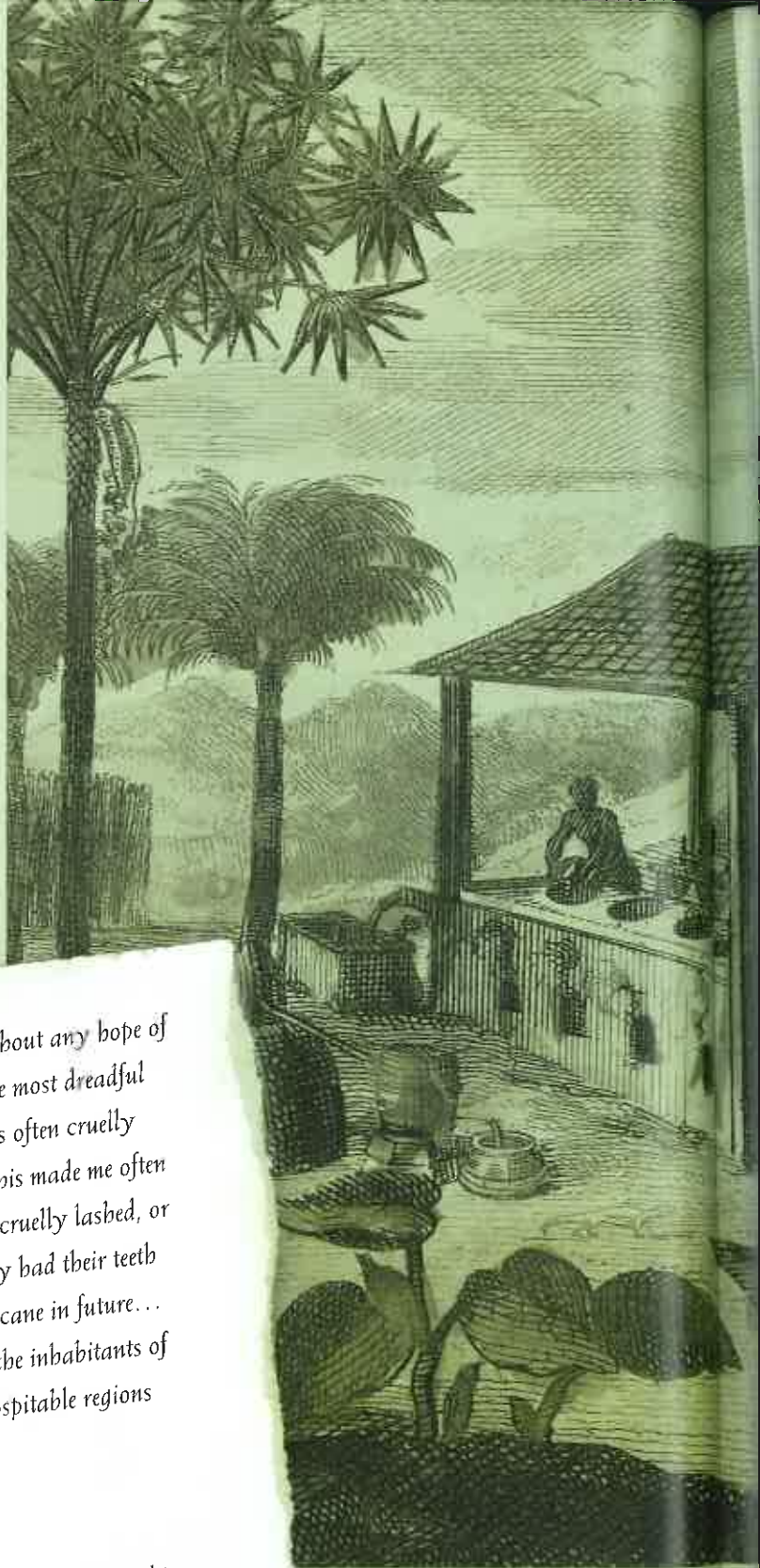


# VOICES FORCED LABOR

Many West Indian sugar plantations in the 17th and 18th centuries were run like prison camps. Enslaved people were subjected to a reign of terror. Any sign of resistance was met with savage punishment. Slave owners allowed the enslaved to die of maltreatment and overwork, knowing they could be replaced by new purchases from Africa.

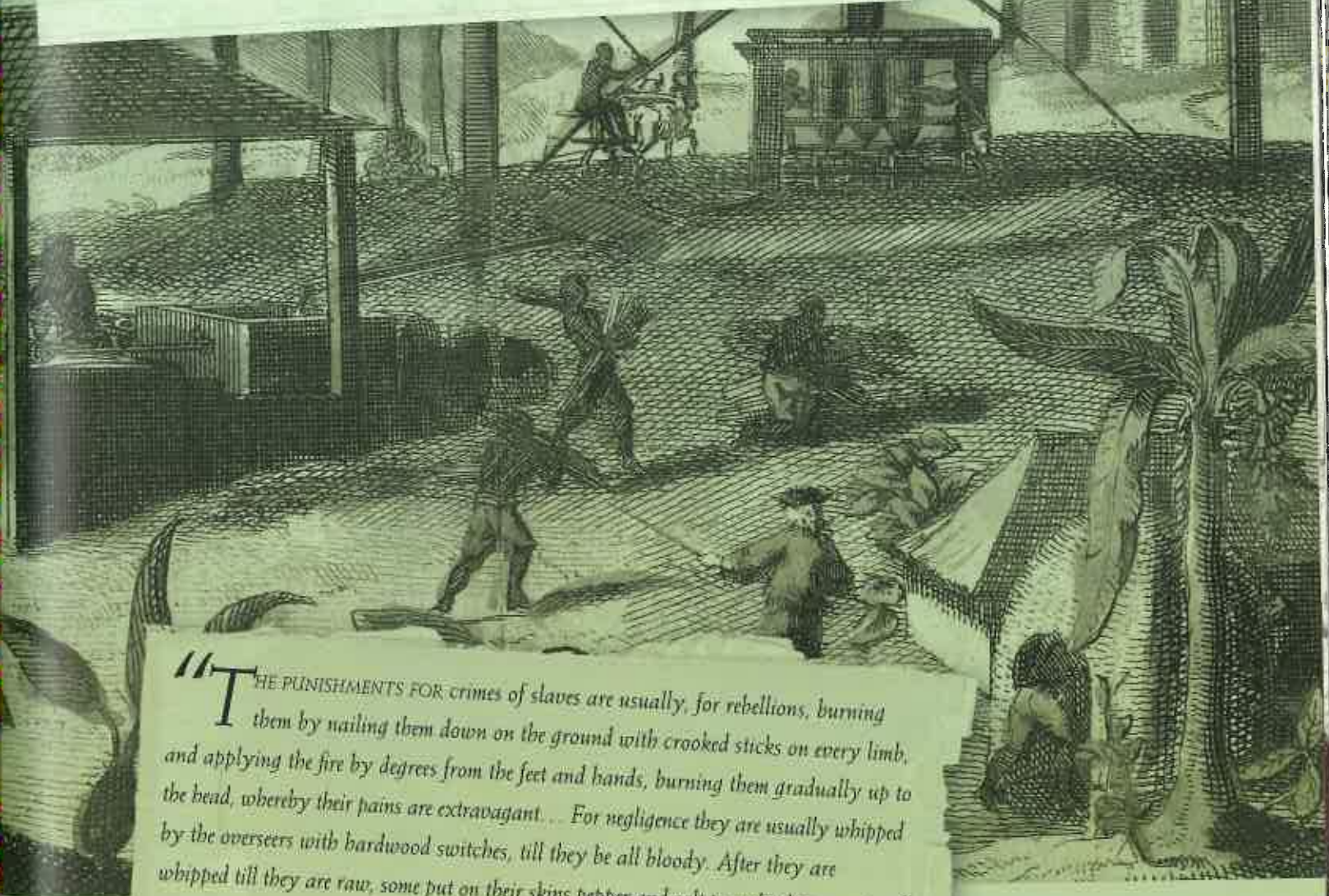
*"BEING IN THIS dreadful captivity and horrible slavery, without any hope of deliverance, for about eight or nine months, beholding the most dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty, and seeing my miserable companions often cruelly lashed, and, as it were, cut to pieces, for the most trifling faults, this made me often tremble and weep... For eating a piece of sugar cane, some were cruelly lashed, or struck over the face, to knock their teeth out... Some told me they had their teeth pulled out, to deter others, and to prevent them from eating any cane in future... I may safely say, that all the poverty and misery that any of the inhabitants of Africa meet with among themselves, is far inferior to those inhospitable regions of misery which they meet with in the West Indies..."*

Ottobah Cugoana, kidnapped as a youth in West Africa, was transported to Grenada in the West Indies, where he worked for nine months on a sugar plantation in the 1760s. He survived and, in 1787 in Britain, published his *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoana, a Native of Africa*.



**T**HE NEGROES WHO were all in troops are sorted so as to match each other in size and strength. Every ten negroes have a driver, who walks behind them, holding in his hand a short whip and a long one. You will easily guess the use of these weapons, a circumstance of all others the most horrid. They are naked, male and female down to the girdle [waist], and you constantly observe where application [of the whip] has been made."

Englishwoman Janet Schaw visited the Caribbean islands of Antigua and St. Christopher in the 1770s, as the guest of sugar-plantation owners. Despite her initial shock at the sufferings of the enslaved, she found that "the horror of it must wear off," convincing herself that Africans were less capable of suffering than Europeans.



**T**HE PUNISHMENTS FOR crimes of slaves are usually, for rebellions, burning them by nailing them down on the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and applying the fire by degrees from the feet and hands, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant. . . For negligence they are usually whipped by the overseers with hardwood switches, till they be all bloody. After they are whipped till they are raw, some put on their skins pepper and salt to make them smart. . ."

Hans Sloane (1660–1753), the Irish-born founder of the British Museum, was a learned doctor and president of the Royal Society. He accompanied his firsthand observations on punishments on West Indian plantations with the comment that these were "sometimes merited by the slaves" and only "appeared harsh."

# RESISTING BONDAGE

ENSLAVED PEOPLE naturally resented mistreatment and longed for freedom. There were some large-scale slave revolts, especially on Caribbean islands where the majority of the population was black. In some places, runaway slaves formed fiercely independent rebel communities that defended themselves against the white authorities. In North America, it was harder for runaways to find a refuge and revolt was doomed to fail, but the enslaved practiced passive resistance—going on a strike or working at a slow pace—and individual acts of disobedience.



**Fugitive war**  
Escaped slaves controlled large areas of the British-owned island of Jamaica, Dutch-ruled Surinam, and Brazil. The runaways, or fugitives, were skillful fighters who waged war on forces sent to suppress them. In Surinam, the authorities armed blacks to fight against the fugitive bands, rewarding them with freedom. This black ranger was painted by artist William Blake in 1806.

**Hunting runaways**  
Running away was a hard decision to make, since it meant not only taking a huge risk, but also leaving family and friends. Slave owners did all they could to track down fugitives, since they considered slaves their valuable property.





### Uprising in the North

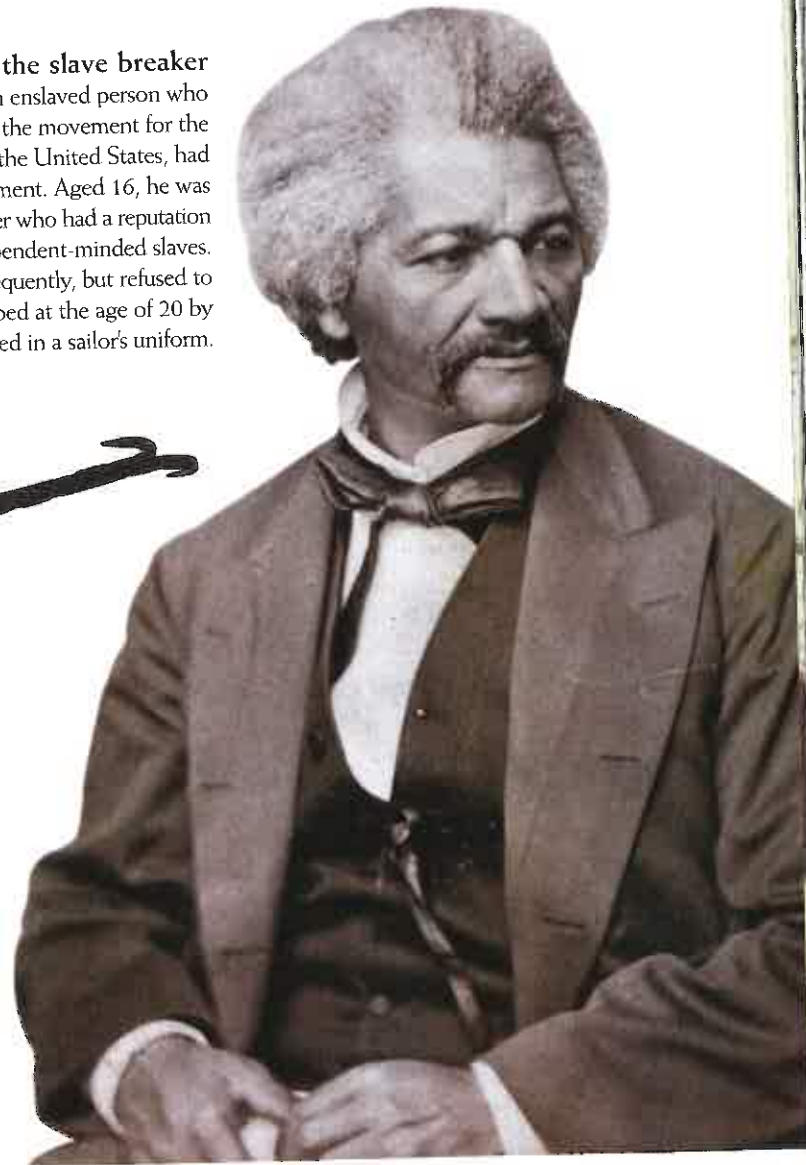
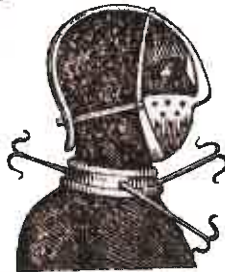
North American slave revolts were infrequent because the whites were too powerful. In 1739, for example, at the Stono River, South Carolina, a group of 80 slaves seized firearms and marched toward freedom in Spanish-owned Florida. All were hunted down and killed. Similarly, when Nat Turner led a bloody uprising in Virginia in 1831, left, it was brutally suppressed within two days.

*In 1739, the British signed a treaty with fugitive slaves—the Maroons—in Jamaica, allowing them to rule parts of the island.*

**Douglass and the slave breaker**  
Frederick Douglass, an enslaved person who became a leader of the movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States, had bitter experience of punishment. Aged 16, he was sent by his owner to a farmer who had a reputation for “breaking” independent-minded slaves. Douglass was whipped frequently, but refused to be broken. He escaped at the age of 20 by catching a train dressed in a sailor’s uniform.

### Brutal punishments

Disobedience and escape were discouraged by cruel punishments. These extended from whipping and being tied up to physical mutilation—the cutting off of ears or, in extreme cases, amputation of hands or limbs. Sometimes enslaved persons were made to wear iron masks or neck collars as a punishment for insubordination. Factories made a good profit manufacturing such items.



# VOICES TREATED LIKE ANIMALS

The experience of being sold at auction like farm animals was a gross humiliation for enslaved people. The emotional distress it caused was frequently multiplied by separation from loved ones as families were torn apart, with husbands, wives, and children sold to different people. Slave owners often used the threat of sale as a way of disciplining their enslaved workforce.



*"AT LENGTH THE vendue [auction] master, who was to offer us for sale like sheep or cattle, arrived, and asked my mother which was the eldest. She said nothing, but pointed to me... I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up to sale. The bidding commenced at a few pounds, and gradually rose to fifty-seven... and the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so young a slave."*

Mary Prince was born into slavery in Bermuda in about 1788. She was sold apart from her mother and sisters at the age of ten. She later became a prominent campaigner for the abolition of slavery, publishing her autobiography, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, in 1831.



**"M**Y OLD MASTER... apprenticed a brother and myself out to learn trades: he to a blacksmith and me to a cabinetmaker. If a slave has a good trade, he will let or sell for more than a person without one, and many slaveholders have their slaves taught trades on this account. But [then] my old master wanted money, so he mortgaged my sister and myself to one of the banks... My master was unable to meet his payments, so the banks had us placed upon the auction stand and sold."

William Craft and his wife, Ellen, held in slavery in Macon, Georgia, became celebrated figures in abolitionist circles after staging a bold escape to the North in 1848. William Craft describes here the insecurity of an enslaved person's existence.

**"T**HE WOMEN AND children were driven to the [railroad] depot in crowds, like so many cattle... The excitement was so great that the overseer and driver could not control the relatives and friends of those that were going away, as a large crowd... went down to the depot to see them off. Louisiana was considered by the slaves as a place of slaughter, so those who were going did not expect to see their friends again."

African Methodist Episcopal minister Jacob Strover, a former slave, describes the scene as enslaved African-Americans from a South Carolina plantation are sold to traders and transported by railroad to the cotton fields of Louisiana in the Deep South.