

The geography of the Atlantic trade

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The Atlantic slave trade is often described as a triangular trade. Ships left European ports, among them Nantes, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Liverpool, Bristol, London and Amsterdam, loaded with trade goods: textiles, weapons, gunpowder, alcohol, metal goods and beads. They sailed to the coast of West Africa, where they exchanged these goods for enslaved Africans, who had been captured in wars and raids and sold by African and European traders. They then crossed the Atlantic, the so-called Middle Passage, to the Caribbean, Brazil or North America, where the survivors were sold to plantation owners. The ships returned to Europe with colonial goods, sugar, coffee, cotton and indigo, bought with the proceeds of the sale.¹

The scale of the trade was immense. Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, some twelve and a half million Africans were embarked on slave ships, of whom more than one and a half million died during the crossing. The survivors and their descendants were subjected to forced labour, violence and the denial of all rights. The trade and the plantation economy it supplied were among the largest economic enterprises of the early modern world. Their profits contributed to the accumulation of capital in Europe.

The triangular description simplifies a complex reality. Many ships did not follow the triangle. Goods, capital and credit moved in many directions, and the financing of the trade involved merchants, bankers and investors in cities far from the Atlantic ports, among them Basel. The geography of profit extended far beyond the ports. A Basel merchant who held a share in a Nantes slave ship, a Basel manufacturer who sold *indiennes* to a slave-trading outfitter, a Basel banker who discounted bills drawn on the proceeds of colonial sales: all participated in the geography of the Atlantic trade without leaving their city.

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1 Notes

1. On the structure of the Atlantic slave trade (the "triangular trade") and the estimate of some 12.5 million Africans embarked between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, see the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (www.slavevoyages.org). Figures to be verified. ↩

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