

# The Transatlantic Slave Trade

For over 400 years, Europeans enslaved millions of people from parts of West Africa, transporting them across the Atlantic Ocean in awful conditions. These people were sold into a life of unpaid work and cruelty in the Americas. This was known as the transatlantic slave trade: a brutal period of history which resulted in the deaths of millions of African people.

## The Triangular Trade



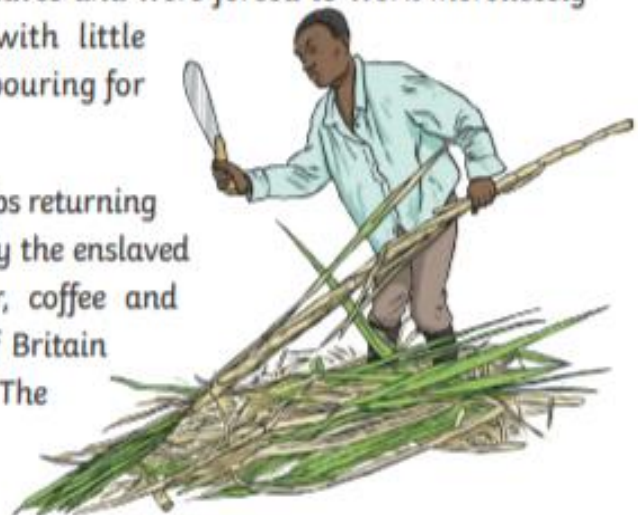
The Triangular Trade describes the three stages of the transatlantic slave trade during its most prolific period, between 1740 and 1810.

Firstly, huge ships travelled to West Africa carrying goods such as cloth, guns and ironware. After they arrived, these goods were exchanged for men, women and children who had been forcibly taken from their villages.

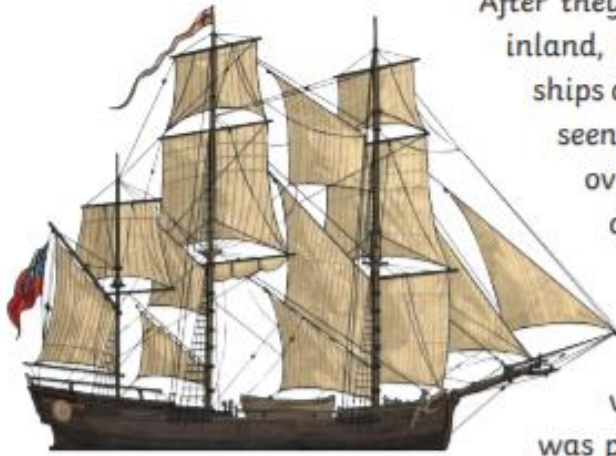
Throughout the middle passage across the ocean, people endured terrible conditions. The unsanitary, overcrowded and filthy ships spent months at sea. Many people died. When the ships arrived in the West Indies, their passengers were sold at auction to the highest bidder.

Thus, African people were bought and sold as if they were no more than an item in a shop. They were now known as slaves and were forced to work mercilessly on the plantations, growing crops with little chance of payment or freedom and labouring for long hours each day.

The third stage of trade involved the ships returning with goods grown on the **plantations** by the enslaved Africans. These goods (such as sugar, coffee and cotton) were then sold to the people of Britain and beyond, completing the triangle. The process would then begin again.



### What Happened to the African Villagers on the Middle Passage?



After they had been taken from their homes inland, the villagers were forced onto huge ships at the coast. Many of them had never seen the sea before. Ships often carried over 700 people at a time. They were chained together with little room to move because they were thought of simply as cargo by the ships' captains. The conditions were very dangerous to health: air quality was poor and many grew ill or even died as a result of illness, disease or maltreatment.

If they survived the middle passage, they were sold into slavery. People were separated from their friends and family and told to forget their earlier life. Slave owners gave them a new name and made them learn a new language. Slaves were then required to work for 14 hours, or even more, each day with harsh beatings for any mistakes or rebellion. However, many of the slaves did bravely rebel. Some were even able earn their freedom and fight for an end to slavery.

#### **Olaudah Equiano's Story**

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) was enslaved in West Africa as a child but was fortunate enough to survive and pay for freedom. He became an abolitionist – someone who was campaigning for an end to slavery – and travelled to Europe to share his autobiography.

'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano' was published in 1789. Due to its brutally honest account of slavery, it persuaded readers to think differently. Thus, it became a powerful argument for **abolition**.

#### **Did You Know...?**

Olaudah Equiano toured Britain in order to share his story. He spoke to audiences in Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester, Sheffield and Cambridge.

### Abolition at Long Last

Eventually, people in Britain began to recognise that slavery was unethical. In 1807, The Houses of Parliament outlawed the slave trade. However, it was not until 1833 when slaves were finally freed across the British Empire.

In the USA, slavery continued in certain states even after it was abolished. The different attitudes of northern and southern states even led to the American Civil War (1861-1865). Furthermore, the civil rights movement of the 1960s happened because of the continued **segregation** of black and white Americans over 100 years after slavery was officially ended.



### Glossary

<b>abolition</b>	The action of abolishing a system – in this case, slavery.
<b>plantation</b>	An estate on which crops, such as coffee, sugar and tobacco, are grown.
<b>segregation</b>	The enforced separation of different ethnic groups in a country.
<b>unethical</b>	Morally wrong and unacceptable behaviour.

# Questions

1. Which phrase is most similar in meaning to **enslaved**? Tick **one**.

- To make someone a slave
- To ship people across an ocean
- To exchange people with goods
- To grow crops on a plantation

2. Which goods were exchanged for African people? Tick **two**.

- ships
- cloth
- sugar
- guns

3. Fill in the missing words.

Throughout the \_\_\_\_\_ passage across the \_\_\_\_\_, people endured \_\_\_\_\_ conditions.

4. Look at the section entitled **The Triangular Trade**. Find and copy a word which shows that people had little room to move on board the ships.

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5. **They were now known as slaves and were forced to work mercilessly on the plantations, growing crops with little chance of payment or freedom.**

What does the word **mercilessly** mean in this sentence?

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6. Look at the section entitled **What Happened to the African Villagers on the Middle Passage?** How did the conditions during the middle passage affect the health of African villagers on board?

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7. **People were separated from their friends and family and told to forget their earlier life.**

What do you think the slave owners wanted to achieve by treating the newly enslaved Africans in this way?

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8. Why do you think it was important for people such as Olaudah Equiano to talk to the citizens of Britain and Europe about slavery and abolition?

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9. Life improved for some people during the 1800s. Do you agree or disagree? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Agree / Disagree (circle **one**)

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