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The Atlantic Passage: A Human and Economic History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

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Introduction

This book begins with a simple assertion: the transatlantic slave trade was a human catastrophe that also reordered economies, politics, and cultures on both sides of the ocean. The Atlantic Passage—those voyages that wove African interiors to coastal entrepôts, maritime circuits, and American markets—formed an integrated system of extraction and profit, but also of endurance, resistance, and cultural creation. By pairing individual stories with the structures that constrained them, this work offers a human and economic history that keeps people at its center while tracing the flows of capital, commodities, and power that made their suffering profitable to others.

Our approach is deliberately interdisciplinary. We read against the grain of shipping records—manifests, logs, insurance policies, and investor correspondence—to reconstruct routes, prices, mortality, and returns. We set these quantitative traces alongside coastal archaeology: the footprints of forts and factories, barracoons, wrecks, and burial grounds that anchor memory in place. Equally vital are African inland perspectives: oral traditions, court chronicles, land and lineage histories, linguistic evidence, and the material culture of caravan trade. These sources, when placed in conversation, allow us to follow captives from the sites of seizure to the holds of ships and beyond, and to see how African polities negotiated, resisted, and sometimes harnessed a violent commerce.

To treat the trade as a set of linked networks is to recover agency and complexity in Africa itself. States and communities from Senegambia to West Central Africa contended with shifting political ecologies—succession crises, warfare, droughts, and the rise of new militias—that intersected with Atlantic demand. Brokers and caravans connected inland markets to coastal forts; currencies and commodities—cowries, cloth, metals, firearms—translated human lives into exchange values. This was not a static exchange but a volatile political economy in which African rulers, merchants, soldiers, and captives confronted new incentives and constraints, reshaping sovereignty and security in the process.

The maritime dimension—ships, crews, instruments, and finance—was equally intricate. Slaving voyages were built through webs of credit and risk-sharing that linked provincial investors to imperial centers, insurers to captains, and outfitting houses to plantation buyers. Innovations in ship design and provisioning altered mortality and resistance; legal regimes and naval patrols reconfigured strategy and profit. Yet the very precision of ledgers and premiums can obscure the ethical stakes. This book therefore treats quantitative analysis as a necessary tool, not a sufficient explanation, and reads numbers with the humility appropriate to what they imperfectly represent.

At the heart of the narrative are human stories: the ruptures of capture, the solidarities forged in barracoons and below decks, and the many forms of resistance that erupted at sea and ashore. We follow women who sustained kin networks under extreme duress, children whose mobility and vulnerability shaped markets, and healers who preserved knowledge that crossed the ocean with them. We trace maroon communities in borderlands, insurgencies that reshaped empires, and everyday acts of refusal—refusals that made survival itself a form of defiance.

The long-term consequences of this traffic were profound. Across the Atlantic world, demographic structures shifted—age and sex ratios, fertility, and disease environments—not only during the centuries of trade but also in their aftermath. In Africa, opportunity costs and political militarization left legacies in state formation, economic specialization, and regional inequality. In the Americas, coerced labor underwrote plantation wealth and urban development, while diasporic cultures transformed religion, language, art, and cuisine. The afterlives of slavery persist in legal and civic exclusions, racial ideologies, and uneven access to property, education, and health.

The chapters that follow move from origins to operations, from coasts to interiors, and from ships to plantations and maroon settlements. They examine how prices were set and voyages constructed; how states rose, fractured, or reoriented around the trade; how people resisted and remade community; and how abolition—triumph and limitation alike—reshaped the Atlantic system without erasing its structures. Along the way, we foreground methods, demonstrate what different kinds of evidence can and cannot tell us, and keep the human stakes in view.

A final note on language and ethics. We use “enslaved people” rather than “slaves” to emphasize personhood and the coercive nature of the condition; we name places, polities, and individuals wherever sources allow; and we acknowledge the silences that no archive can fill. Quantification appears throughout, but we resist the comfort of round numbers and the illusion that counting equates to comprehension. The Atlantic Passage asks readers to hold together the ledger and the life, the network and the name, and to consider not only what happened, but what it continues to mean.

CHAPTER ONE: Before the Trade: Africa, Europe, and the Atlantic on the Eve of Contact

The grand sweep of the Atlantic Passage, with its tragic human cargo and transformative economic forces, was not born in a vacuum. Rather, it emerged from a complex tapestry of societies, economies, and nascent maritime capabilities that existed across three continents. To understand the profound disruption and reorganization wrought by the transatlantic slave trade, we must first cast our gaze to the late medieval and early modern worlds of Africa, Europe, and the Atlantic Ocean itself, examining their distinct characteristics and the subtle connections already forming between them.

On the African continent, a diverse array of polities flourished long before the arrival of European ships. West Africa, in particular, was home to powerful and sophisticated empires, kingdoms, and city-states, each with its unique social, political, and economic structures. The Ghana, Mali, and Songhai Empires, for instance, dominated the western Sahel sequentially for nearly a millennium, showcasing advanced systems of governance, extensive trade networks, and vibrant cultural traditions. These empires were often rich in gold, which fueled a massive regional and international trading system that stretched across the Sahara to North Africa and beyond.

The Mali Empire, peaking in the 14th century, was particularly renowned for its wealth, exemplified by the legendary pilgrimage of Mansa Musa to Mecca in 1324. He reportedly brought with him an astonishing entourage and vast quantities of gold, leaving an indelible impression across the Muslim world and even causing inflation in Cairo. This demonstrates not only the immense resources of West African states but also their established integration into broader Afro-Eurasian trade and diplomatic networks. Such interactions were centuries old, with West Africans having traded with Europeans through North African merchants long before direct maritime contact.

Beyond these larger empires, numerous other societies thrived, ranging from centralized kingdoms like Benin and Kongo to decentralized communities governed by councils of elders or kinship-based institutions. Agriculture was diverse, with farmers in wooded areas cultivating yams, palm products, and plantains, while savanna regions yielded rice, millet, and sorghum. Herders maintained sheep, goats, cattle, and camels in drier zones. Art, learning, and technology flourished, with Africans demonstrating skills in medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and producing intricate luxury items in bronze, ivory, gold, and terracotta.

It is crucial to acknowledge that various forms of coerced labor and social hierarchy

existed within African societies prior to the transatlantic slave trade, much as they did in societies across the globe. These systems often differed significantly from the chattel slavery that would later be imposed by Europeans. Individuals might become unfree due to war, debt, or as punishment for crimes. However, people were not commonly born into slavery, and their status was often more akin to indentured servitude or serfdom, with opportunities for social mobility and eventual freedom. Enslaved people were not typically regarded as mere commodities, and legal rights were generally not defined by racial categories.

Meanwhile, Europe on the eve of transatlantic contact was a continent undergoing significant transformation. Largely monarchical and aristocratic, European governments ruled through traditional loyalties and dynastic links. The 15th century, in particular, saw a surge in maritime innovation, driven by a desire for new trade routes and increased wealth. Europeans had long been engaged in various forms of slavery, particularly in the Mediterranean, where conflicts between Christians and Muslims often resulted in the enslavement of prisoners of war. However, chattel slavery was not prevalent in Western Europe in the centuries leading up to the transatlantic trade, with labor contracts, convict labor, and serfdom being more common.

The horizons of European rulers and merchants were expanding. Existing markets were no longer sufficient, and a growing emphasis was placed on global trade and conquest outside traditional European spheres. This ambition spurred advancements in shipbuilding and navigation. The development of ships like the caravel and the carrack, which combined square and lateen sails for better maneuverability, allowed for longer ocean voyages and substantial cargo capacity. The sternpost-mounted rudder, a northern European innovation, gradually merged with Mediterranean multi-masted designs, leading to the full-rigged ship capable of traversing vast distances.

Navigational tools also saw crucial improvements. The magnetic compass, refined from earlier Chinese designs, provided more precise direction, while the astrolabe allowed sailors to determine latitude by measuring the angle of celestial bodies. These tools, combined with a growing understanding of ocean currents and winds, made transoceanic travel increasingly feasible, albeit still perilous. The Portuguese, driven by Prince Henry the Navigator, were at the forefront of these explorations, seeking a sea route to Asia and establishing trading posts along the West African coast in the early 15th century.

The Atlantic Ocean itself, far from being an empty void, was a dynamic space with its own powerful currents and winds. The clockwise circulation of the North Atlantic, with its prevailing northeasterly trade winds and the Gulf Stream, would become critical for future transatlantic voyages. While pre-Viking explorations of the Atlantic by various seafaring peoples are debated, Norse sailors certainly ventured westward to Iceland and Greenland from around 800 to 900 CE. However, for southern Europeans, the vast

expanse of the Atlantic remained largely unknown until the 15th century.

This period, therefore, represents a convergence of distinct but increasingly interconnected worlds. Africa, with its established states, complex economies, and diverse social structures, was a continent of immense resources and sophisticated civilizations. Europe was on the cusp of a maritime revolution, driven by economic ambition and technological innovation. The Atlantic Ocean, a formidable barrier, was slowly yielding its secrets to improved shipbuilding and navigation. The stage was set for a dramatic reordering of these relationships, a shift that would tragically transform human lives and global economies in ways previously unimaginable.

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