CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The South Atlantic Slave Trade in Historical Perspective

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Cultural encounters have been defining characteristics of the modern world. They involve the mixing of ideas, institutions and people across cultural boundaries and have produced a variety of humanly destructive as well as positive or beneficial outcomes historically. At the heart of these processes has been a millennium-long re-mixing through various forms of migration of peoples of different cultural backgrounds, a process which the European-led ‘Age of Discoveries’ and the associated colonization of the Americas by Portugal, Spain and other Western European powers accelerated dramatically. In tandem with colonization by Europeans there occurred a widespread collapse of the American indigenous populations through exposure to diseases to which they had no natural immunity. Faced with one on-going catastrophe, European colonial powers keen to maximum returns from the rich land and other resources of their new-established colonies sowed, according to some historians, the seeds of another by seeking to overcome insufficiency of local American supplies of manageable labour by recruiting new workers from overseas. Some came from Europe, often under some form of indenture, but the vast majority came from Africa as European ships carried across the Atlantic a rising tide of chattel slaves from the continent to work in mines and commercial agricultural activities run by Europeans. Overall, at least 12.5 million enslaved Africans boarded ship bound for the Americas in 1500–1867; some 10.7 million survived the Atlantic crossing.¹ It was the largest ocean-borne forced migration in human history, outstripping threefold or more the migration of all Europeans to the Americas before 1820.²

¹ For figures on slave shipments see: www.slavevoyages.com and David Eltis and David Richardson, Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
According to some historians, the transatlantic slave trade had a regressive impact on African short- and long-term economic development while simultaneously ‘unjustly’ enriching those who profited from slave trafficking and from the production, marketing and consumption of slave-produced commodities. Whatever the merits of such lines of argument are – and both remain highly contentious – it is evident that, together with Southeast Africa which became a regular supplier of African captives to the Americas from the 1780s onwards, Atlantic Africa became one of the world’s major arenas of cross-cultural exchange in the three and a half centuries after Columbus’ landfall in the Americas. A key goal of this collection of essays, largely written by scholars whose native language is Portuguese, is to shed new light on the workings of such exchange and thus on our overall understanding of the Atlantic slave trade as a cultural encounter.

The term ‘triangular trade’ has often been used to describe the Atlantic slave trade. At one level, this conceptualization may be seen to identify the linking of European capital and management skills with the labour of Africans to exploit the natural resources of the Americas. At another, it reflects the journey of ships from Europe to Africa for slaves, who were then carried across the Atlantic for sale in the Americas, with the proceeds being returned to Europe in the form of slave-grown produce, precious metals (or specie), or bills of exchange. The latter scenario reminds us of the sheer complexity of slaving voyages at a time when, in the age of sail, communications between those with vested interests in slaving voyages were often slow and erratic. It also provides in the second leg of the triangular voyage – commonly known as the ‘middle passage’ – a metaphor of the inhumanity and brutality of the Atlantic slave trade, as enslaved Africans, packed sardine-like on board ship for two to three months or more, struggled to survive the horrors of the Atlantic crossing or to escape their captivity through suicide or rebellion. When, from the late


\[4\] For images of the packing of slaves on board ship produced by abolitionists and for data on rebellions, see: Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*, 74, 77, 164, 189–191.