

Slavery

and the natural world

A stylized orange branch with several leaves is positioned horizontally across the middle of the page. The branch starts on the left, passes behind the word "Slavery", and ends on the right. The leaves are simple, elongated shapes with a central vein. The branch itself is a thin, slightly curved line.

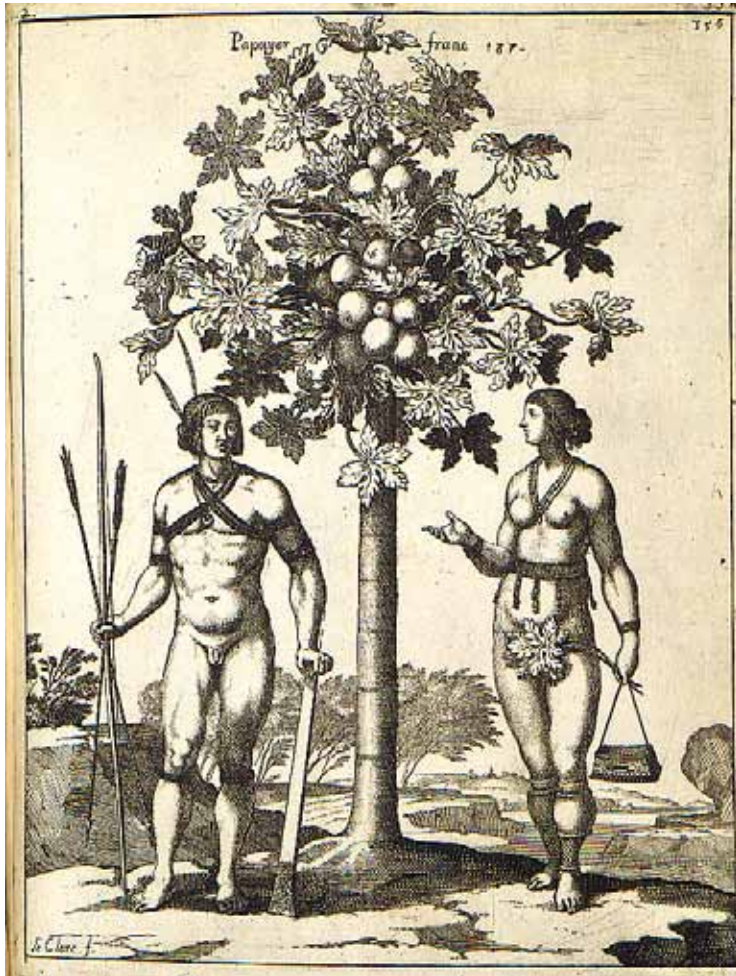
Voyages of Discovery (c1400-1600s)



- Hundreds of years ago people explored, exploited and colonised large parts of the world
- Explorers made long dangerous journeys on small wooden ships
- Natural historians discovered new plants to study scientifically or for food and medicine

Christopher Columbus arriving in America (1893, L. Prang & Co., Boston)

Why use enslaved Africans?



- Wars or disease killed many original people in the Americas and European servants
- African people were enslaved to work on plantations in the Caribbean and America
- The crops that grew there made huge profits for Europeans

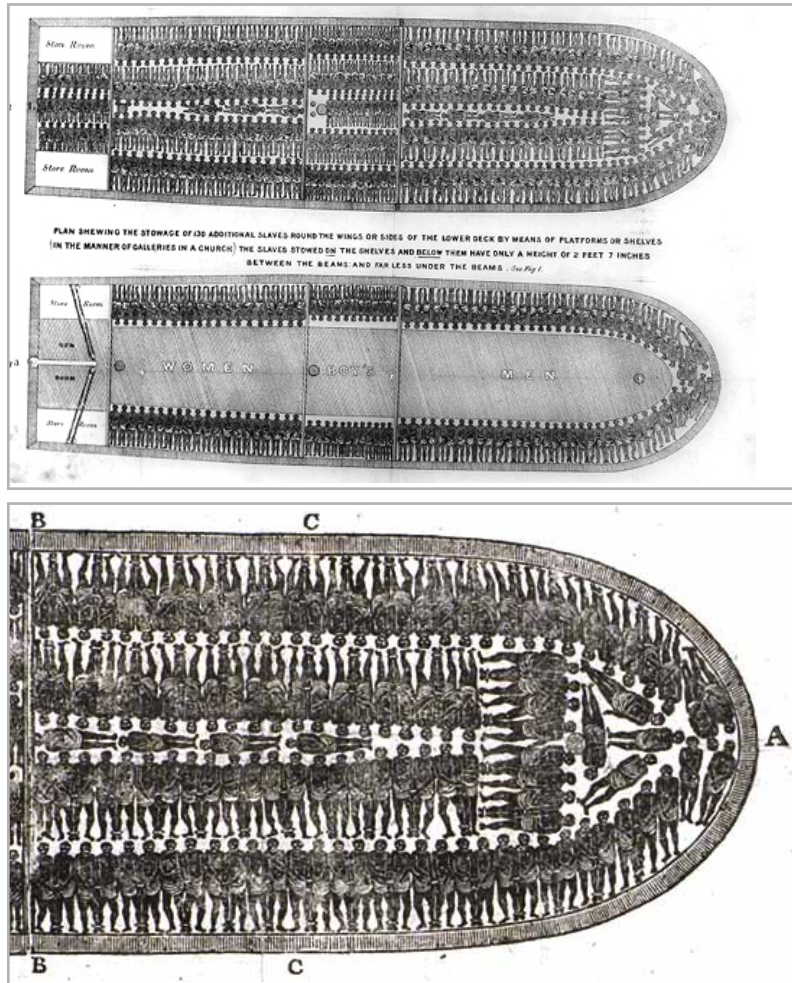
One of the earliest recorded examples of life in the Caribbean, Jean Baptiste Du Tertre, 1610–1687

Scale of the trade



- The transatlantic slave trade lasted over 300 years
- Historians estimate that 10-15 million people were taken from Africa by force
- Other estimates say 100 million Africans were taken
- Many African people tried to stop the trade but Europeans had guns and more power
- They took few possessions, except their skills, knowledge and ideas and sometimes a few seeds

Transport across the Atlantic



- Hundreds of African people were taken to the Caribbean and America on ships
- The journey was terrible and lasted six to eight weeks
- People were chained in a space 40 cm wide
- They could not sit up fully or stand

Plan of the slave ship, The Brookes, first published 1789

Food on board ship



- Food on slaving ships was often peanuts and maize (from South America)
- Drinking water was often dirty and caused many illnesses
- Enslaved Africans had to eat from the same bowls and could not wash easily
- Many died of dysentery
- At least 1.25 million Africans died crossing the Atlantic
- Africans often resisted enslavement by refusing to eat, starting revolts or suicide

Top: peanuts
Bottom: corn/maize

On the plantations



- Many enslaved Africans worked on plantations growing crops such as sugar, rice and cotton
- A third of all enslaved Africans died in their first three years in the Caribbean
- Punishments were common – people were whipped, tortured and sometimes branded with hot irons
- Africans often tried to escape slavery; some succeeded but others were punished even more
- However, they still kept aspects of their culture and spirit alive

Left: William Blake's illustration of the torture of a female slave, from John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 1796
Right: *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack* by William Blake, from Stedman, 1796

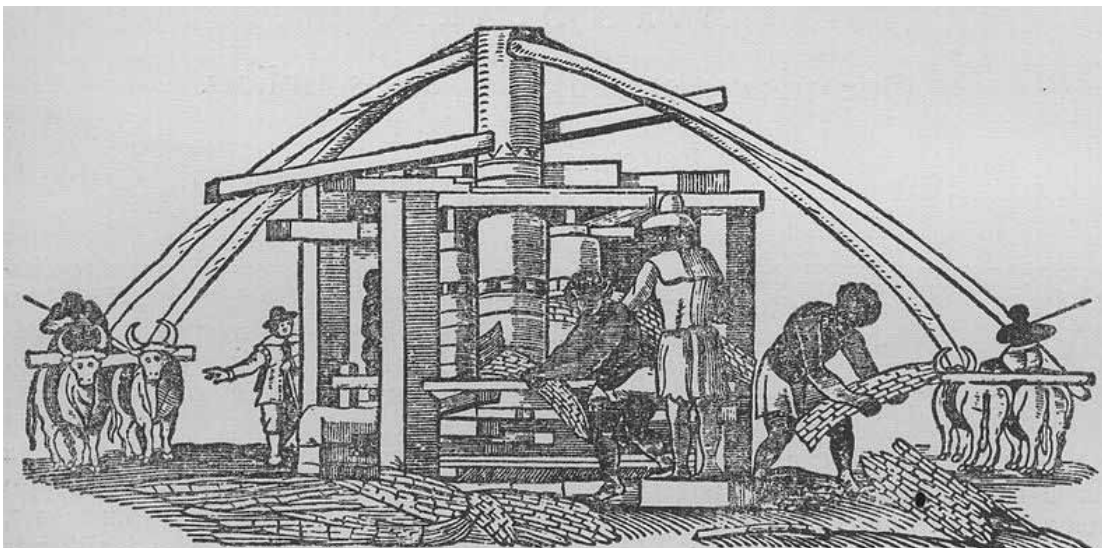
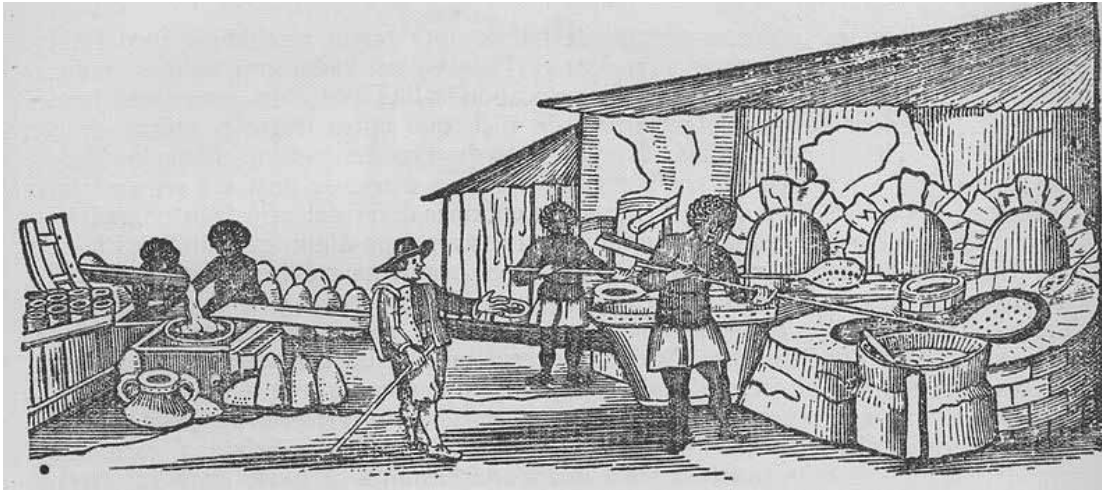
Abolition and freedom



- Many African and European people campaigned to end slavery
- Europeans typically showed Africans begging to be released
- In reality many Africans, especially Maroons, resisted slavery
- They poisoned the slavers and fought against them
- Slavery only ended in the Americas at the end of the 1800s, but racial inequalities continued
- Forms of slavery still exist in parts of the world today

Left: Official medallion of the British Anti-Slavery Society, designed by the Wedgwood factory, 1795
Right: Armed Maroon by William Blake, from Stedman, 1796

Daily life



- Enslaved Africans were woken at 4.00am
- They often worked from 6 in the morning until 6 at night, six days a week
- The food given to enslaved Africans was very basic
- The ration was about 1.36 kgs of dried meat and about 6 kg of corn for an adult for a week

Early illustrations of sugar milling and extraction, Piso, 1648

Provision grounds



- Enslaved Africans had to grow their own food
- They used their skills and knowledge to survive
- They grew okra and rice – plants that they grew in Africa
- They collected wild foods such as fruits, nuts and fish to survive
- These provided vitamins and minerals as well as extra protein
- Fresh fruit and vegetables provided vitamin C and animals were important sources of protein

Top: Okra

Bottom: Soursop, illustration from the Natural History Museum collections

Breadfruit and ackee



- Breadfruit is high in carbohydrate
- It was taken from Tahiti in the Pacific to the Caribbean to feed enslaved people cheaply
- The first journey ended in William Bligh's mutiny on the Bounty
- He succeeded on his second voyage
- Breadfruit is now a staple food in many tropical regions
- Bligh took hundreds of plants from Jamaica for the botanist Joseph Banks
- One of these was the fruit ackee – part of Jamaica's national dish 'ackee and saltfish'

Legacies



- Soul food is the traditional cooking of African-Americans in the Southern US where slavery was common
- Soul food can be traced back to Africa
- Rice, sorghum and okra from West Africa went to the Americas during the slave trade
- Enslaved people also used cheap foods with little waste
- Soups and stews were boiled over and over again
- Fried foods, foods rich in salt and well cooked vegetables are linked to diet at the time of slavery

Caribbean vegetables on sale at Brixton Market, London