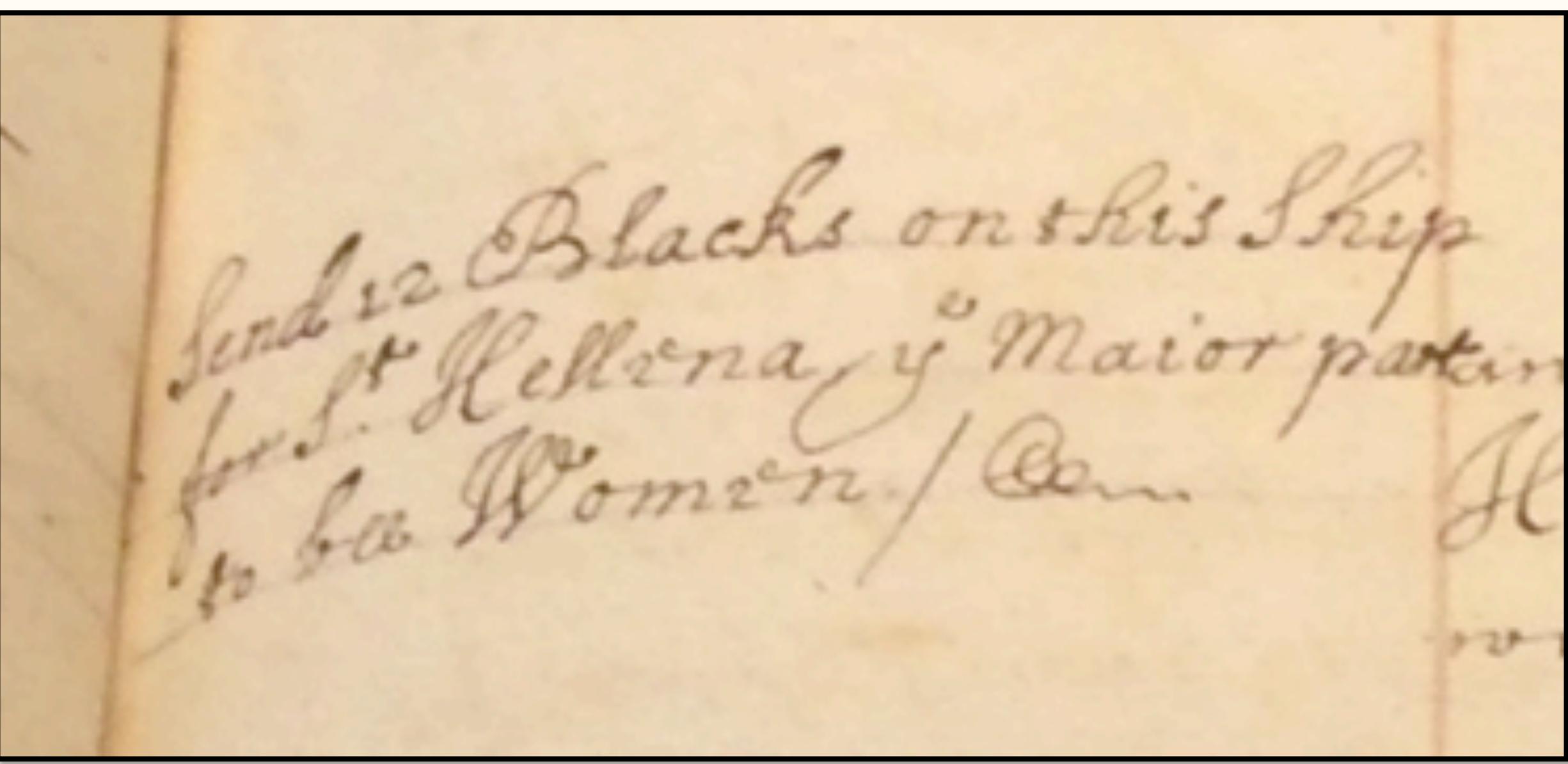
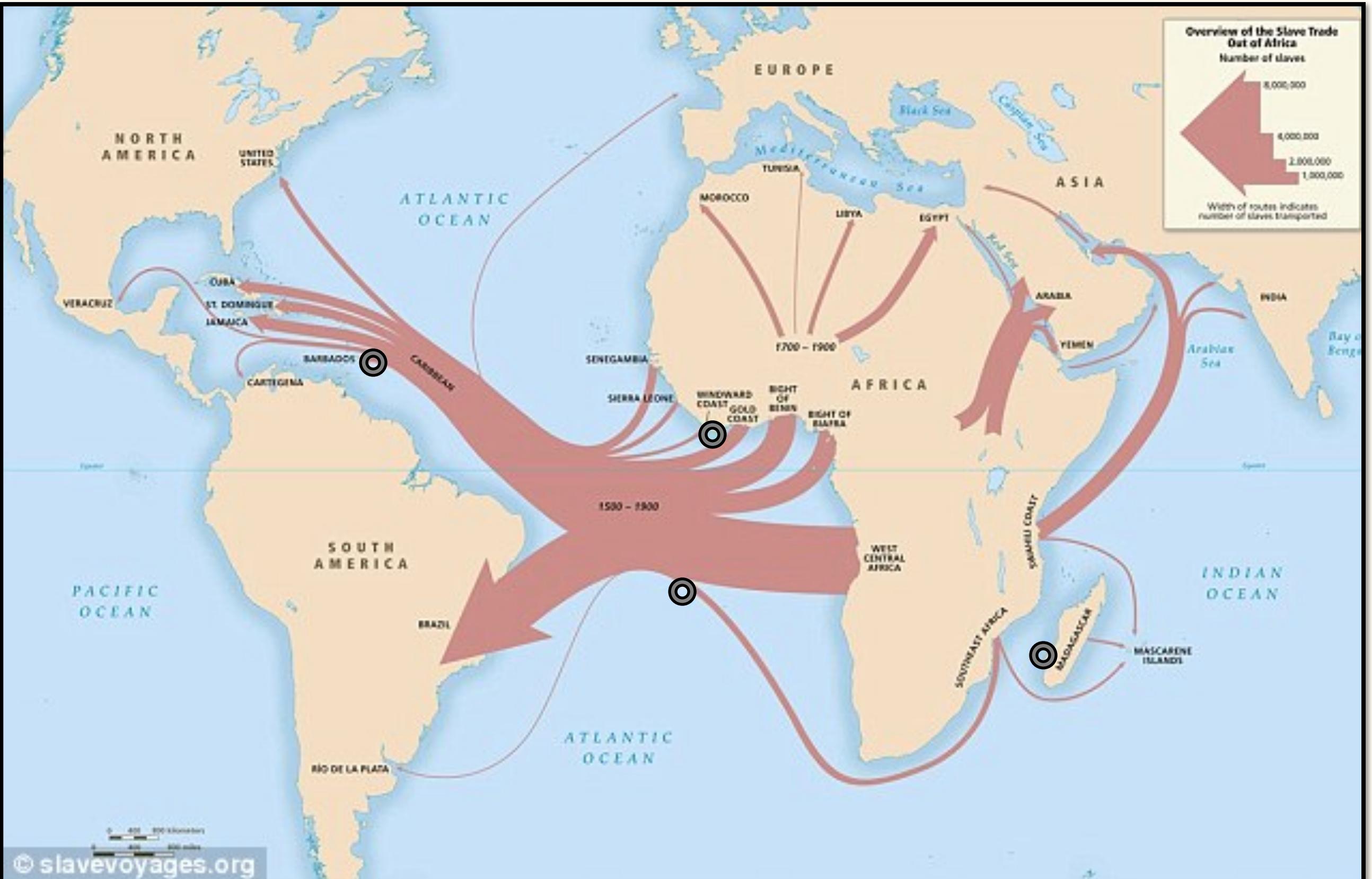


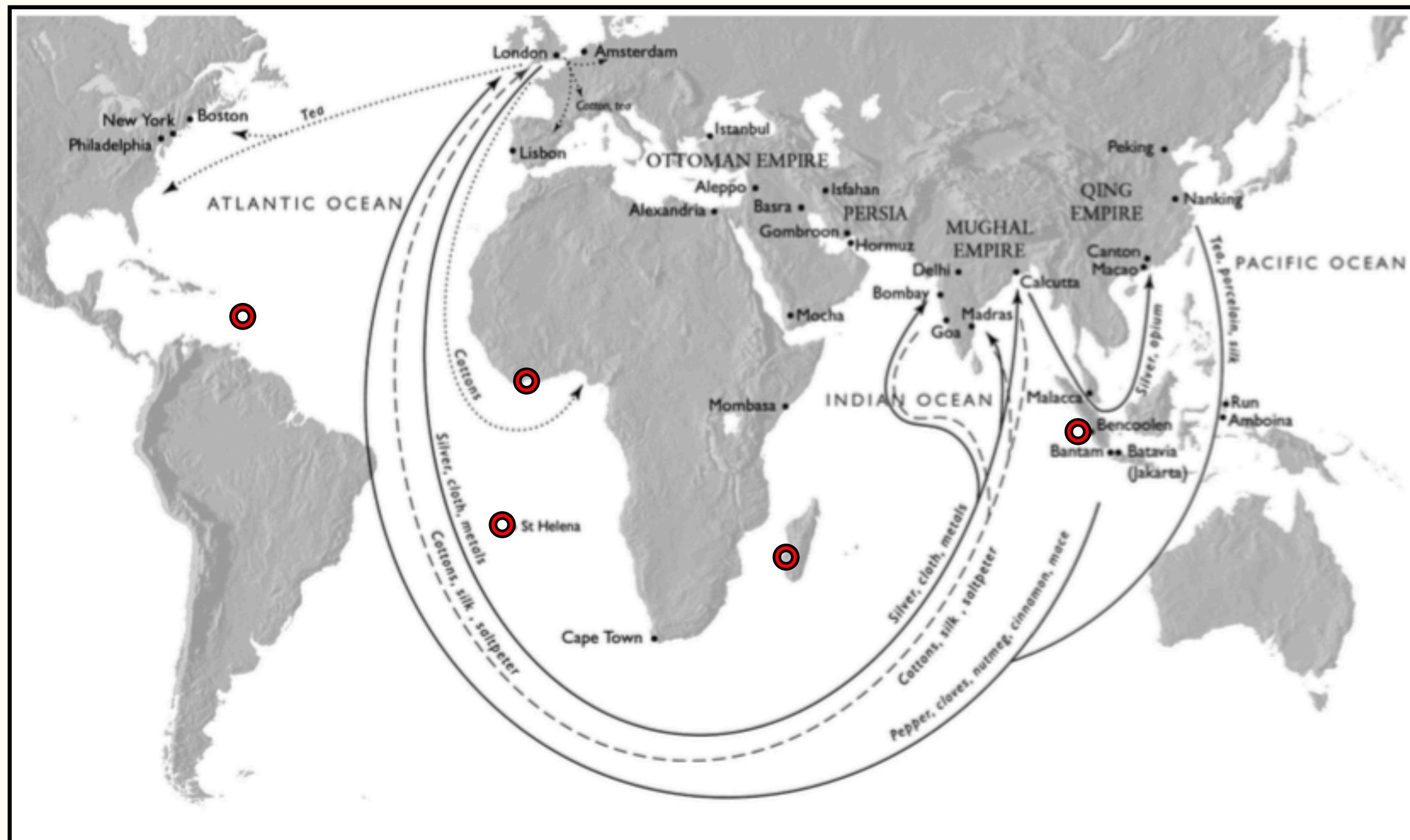


"We want Able Blacks": The East India Company's Relationship to African Slavery, 1658-1757

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Geography:

St. Helena, though within the Atlantic Ocean basin, is not considered part of the Atlantic World, which is defined more by the trans-Atlantic slave trade than geographic boundaries. Seventeenth-century explorer Peter Mundy accurately described St. Helena as "the Farthest Distant From any other Iland or Maybe than any other Iland else [sic] yet Discovered." The East India Company's joint-stock charter gave them exclusive rights to trade in the Indian Ocean, but only extended as far west as the Cape of Good Hope. In 1657, Oliver Cromwell granted the Company a separate charter to "settle, fortifie, and plant" St. Helena. Although the Company went to great lengths to preserve their monopoly on the Indian Ocean trade, they made exceptions for Madagascar slave traders; because the Company was able to benefit financially from the Madagascar slave trade, they had an incentive to leave it unrestricted.

The Company acquired Bencoolen, on the island of Sumatra, in 1685. Pepper production had very low profit margins and was particularly dependent on slave labor. The Company's slave trade entwined their management of St. Helena and Bencoolen; they sent ships almost every sailing season between 1698 and 1757 to trade between the two sites. At both sites Company modeled their closed slave systems after the British states in the Americas, specifically Barbados.

Abstract:

My thesis argues that the history of the East India Company cannot be fully understood without analyzing the Company's relationship to African slave labor, which inextricably linked the Company's trade and state-building efforts. Unlike the tea, cloth and pepper trades, which were driven by external demand, the Company's trade in slaves was a direct response to their internal demand for labor.

Beginning primarily in the 1660s, the East India Company began negotiating for, settling and fortifying territory throughout the southern Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Drawing on Company correspondence, consultation books, ships logs, ledgers and laws, I argue both that the East India Company was a slave trading Company, and that slavery was fundamental to the Company's ability to institute state structures at their holdings. I focus on two main sites – the island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic and Bencoolen on the Island of Sumatra – both on the periphery of the Company's territory and historiography, but where African chattel slavery was fundamental to the Company's operations. It is only through the labor of thousands of African slaves that the East India Company had the structural foundation necessary to become a colonial power in the nineteenth-century.

Chattel Slavery:

St. Helena's first slave code was compiled in the late 1670s. The code dictated punishments for slaves accused of theft, running away and verbal or physical attacks against a white person. It stated, for example, that "any slaves, male or female, who shall presume to strike any white person whatsoever with any weapon, they shall suffer death, except those white persons who demean themselves in conversing, corresponding and gaining with the blacks, as if they were equals, which we judge shall have no more benefit of those laws than blacks themselves." In 1684, the directors told the governor of St. Helena that they were, "convinced by experience of our own & all other European nations," that "it is utterly impossible for any Europe Plantation to thrive between [the] Tropicks upon any place without [the] assistance & labor of Negro's." At St. Helena specifically, the Company acknowledged they had "not yet found [another] way to produce any usefull or profitable Commodity."

In 1684, the Company hired Mr. Cox as the overseer for the Company's plantations. Cox had previously worked as overseer at the Codrington Plantations in Barbados. The Company appears to have hired Cox for his knowledge of the Barbados system and his experience in managing large slave populations, which is indicative of how the Company saw their state and their relationship to the island's slaves. The Company encouraged harsh punishments "the English could not keep the knife from their throats at Barbados if they did not Punish their theevish blacks with farr greater Severity."

Slave Trade:

The East India Company has been formally involved in trading slaves since as early as 1622. While the trans-oceanic slave trade was different from the Atlantic slave trade in scope, structure and stimulus, all the European powers involved in the Atlantic trade also participated in the trans-Oceanic trade. I argue that the East India Company was a slave trading company, and that, like the companies trading human cargo at much higher volumes, they developed a set of formal policies to reduce the high cost and risk associated with their trade.

The East India Company's slave trade remained quite small. In total, Richard Allen estimates that between 2,773 and 3,304 slaves were traded by British ships between 1622 and 1772. Rather than being grounds to dismiss the East India Company's slave trade, these numbers are a direct reflection of the unique and intentional structure of the Company's trade.

Slaves were not the primary cargo on most slave-carrying East India Company vessels, nor was their transport often the primary purpose of the voyage. By grafting the slave trade onto their established networks for shipping networks the company was able to reduce the high overhead costs typically associated with slave trading. Mixed-cargo trade was possible because the Company was responding to its own internal demand for slave labor, drawing a profit not from the sale of slaves, but from their productive capacity within the Company-State.

Slave State:

The East India Company's state at St. Helena was highly punitive. Such was the nature of states more broadly during this period, but resources were also in short supply at St. Helena and takes fewer resources for a state to maintain control through fear than it does through reward. As an island state facing limited resources, the provision of slaves, land and cattle were the Company's only real incentives to compel planter behavior. The Company-State structure meant that the Company was responsible for regulating all slaves, not only those in their own employ, because all the slave-owning planters were under their jurisdiction.

Slaves were also vital to the construction of state structures and infrastructure on the island. Madagascar slaves were particularly import to the project of building and maintaining the Company-State because the Company believed Malagasy were "each worth two or three of the natives of India," in terms of their labor output. Slaves were also vital to the Company-State's ability to defend itself from external threats from other European nations. In addition to being less susceptible to tropical diseases, the Company believed they could maintain five Malagasy slaves a less cost than than one European soldier, and they thus permitted officers on the west coast of Sumatra to use some of their settlements' slaves as guards. The Company also transferred English-speaking slaves trained in "bearing arms" from St. Helena to Bencoolen, to act as overseers for their newly acquired Malagasy slaves.