

Exercise being deemed necessary for the preservation of their health they are sometimes obliged to dance when the weather will permit their coming on deck. If they go about it reluctantly or do not move with agility, they are flogged!

... The poor wretches are frequently compelled to sing also; but when they do so, their songs are generally, as may naturally be expected, melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native country.

The women are furnished with beads for the purpose of affording them some diversion. But this end is generally defeated by the squabbles which are occasioned in consequence of their stealing from each other.

On board some ships the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. And some of them have been known to take the inconstancy of their paramours so much to heart as to leap overboard and drown themselves. The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure and sometimes are guilty of such excesses as disgrace human nature....

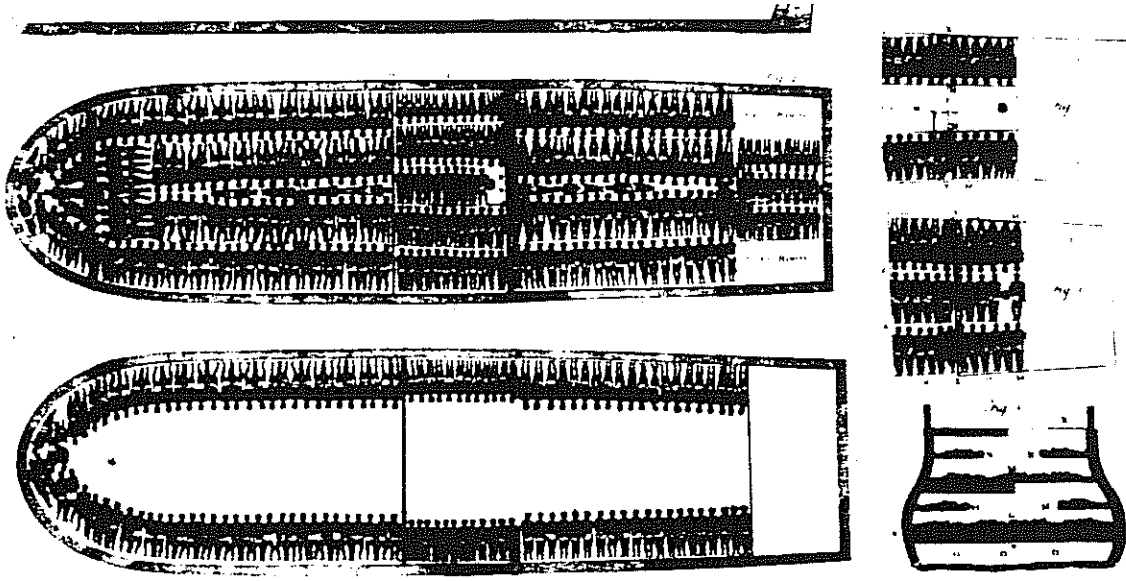
The hardships and inconveniences suffered by the Negroes during the passage are scarcely to be enumerated or conceived....

During the voyages I made, I was frequently witness to the fatal effects of this exclusion of fresh air [from the cargo hold]. I will give one instance, as it serves to convey some idea, though a very faint one, of their terrible sufferings.... Some wet and blowing weather having occasioned the port-holes to be shut and the grating to be covered, fluxes and fevers among the Negroes ensued. While they were in this situation, I frequently went down among them till at length their room became so extremely hot as to be only bearable for a very short time. But the excessive heat was not the only thing that rendered their situation intolerable. The deck, that is the floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house. It is not in the power of the human imagination to picture a situation more dreadful or disgusting. Numbers of the slaves having fainted, they were carried upon deck where several of them died and the rest with great difficulty were restored....



- Obliged: Forced.
- Agility: Grace and speed.
- Flogged: Whipped.
- Melancholy: Sad.
- Lamentations: To lament is to mourn or cry over something.
- Diversion: Entertainment.
- Are occasioned in consequence of...: i.e., "are a result of...."
- Procure: Obtain.
- Inconstancy: Unfaithfulness.
- Paramours: Lovers.
- Enumerated or conceived: In other words, "listed or imagined."
- Fluxes: A general term describing discharge of bodily fluids, though most likely the particular condition described was diarrhea.
- Ensued: happened as a result.

A diagram of a British slave ship showing the layout for stowing 292 slaves. In order to put more slaves on a ship, many slaves were forced to lay in extremely cramped quarters for the entire trip.
Courtesy of The Library of Congress.



Indiscreetly: Unwisely.

Forecastle: The crew's quarters, usually in the bow, or front part of a ship.

Fell: Attacked.

Parcels: Small groups.

Stoutest: Strongest.

Expir'd (i.e., expired): Died.

Boatswain: An officer in charge of maintaining the hull, or the body of the ship, along with other duties.

Pipe: Windpipe.

Terrif'd: Terrified.

Dispersing: Spreading.

Mutinous: Defiant.

Resolution: Determination.

Shewling: Showing.

Betwixt: Between—in this case, between decks, to the narrow cargo hold where slaves were kept.

Good words: In this context, "good words" probably refers to warnings regarding what would happen to slaves who revolted again.

Contrivers: Planners.

Mutiny: Uprising.

Office: job.

Mortality: Death rate.

Want: Lack.

Us'd: Used.

Prudent: Wise.

"A Supplement to the Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea"

About one in the afternoon, after dinner, we, according to custom caused them [the slaves], one by one, to go down between decks, to have each his pint of water; most of them were yet above deck, many of them provided with knives, which we had indiscreetly given them two or three days before, as [we were] not suspecting the least attempt of this nature from them; others had pieces of iron they had torn off our fore-castle door.... Thus arm'd, they fell in crowds and parcels on our men ... and stabb'd one of the stoutest of us all, who receiv'd fourteen or fifteen wounds of their knives, and so expir'd. Next they assaulted our boatswain, and cut one of his legs so round the bone, that he could not move, the nerves being cut through; others cut our cook's throat to the pipe, and others wounded three of the sailors, and threw one of them overboard in that condition, from the fore-castle into the sea.... [W]e stood in arms, firing on the revolted slaves, of whom we kill'd some, and wounded many: which so terrif'd the rest, that they gave way, dispersing themselves ... and many of the most mutinous, leapt over board, and drown'd themselves in the ocean with much resolution, shewing no manner of concern for life. Thus we lost twenty seven or twenty eight slaves, either kill'd by us, or drown'd; and having murther'd them, caused all to go betwixt decks, giving them good words. The next day we had them all again upon deck, where they unanimously declar'd, the Menbombe slaves had been the contrivers of the mutiny, and for an example we caused about thirty of the ringleaders to be very severely whipt by all our men that were capable of doing that office....

I have observ'd, that the great mortality, which so often happens in slave ships, proceeds as well from taking in too many, as from want of knowing how to manage them aboard....

It is true, we allow'd them much more liberty, and us'd them with more tenderness than most other Europeans would think prudent to do; [such] as, to have them all upon deck every day in good weather; to take their meals twice a-day, at fix'd hours, that is, at ten in the morning, and at five at night; which being ended, we made the men go down again between the decks; for the women



were almost entirely at their own discretion, to be upon deck as long as they pleas'd, nay even many of the males had the same liberty by turns, successively; few or none being fetter'd or kept in shackles, and that only on account of some disturbances, or injuries, offer'd to their fellow captives, as will unavoidably happen among a numerous croud of such savage people. Besides, we allow'd each of them ... now and then short pipes and tobacco to smook upon deck by turns, and some coconuts; and to the women a piece of coarse cloth to cover them, and the same to many of the men, which we took care they did wash from time to time, to prevent vermin, which they are very subject to; and because it look'd sweeter and more agreeable. Toward the evening they diverted themselves on the deck, as they thought fit, some conversing together, others dancing, singing, and sporting after their manner, which pleased them highly, and often made us pastime; especially the female sex, who being apart from the males, on the quarterdeck, and many of them young sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good-humour, afforded us abundance of recreation; as did several little line boys, which we mostly kept to attend on us about the ship....

A group of male slaves clubbing a white sailor during a slave revolt like one described by James Barbot.

Etching from Harper's Week Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

At their own discretion:

Nay: No; in this context it means "in fact."

By turns, successively: Not all at the same time.

Fetter'd (or fettered): Chained.

Offer'd to to...: i.e., "cause against...."

Much more might be said relating to the preservation and maintenance of slaves in such voyages, which I leave to the prudence of the officers that govern aboard ... and shall only add these few particulars, that tho' we ought to be circumspect in watching the slaves narrowly, to prevent or disappoint their ill designs for our own conservation, yet must we not be too severe and haughty with them, but on the contrary, *caress and humor them in every reasonable thing. Some commanders ... are perpetually beating and curbing them, even without the least offence, and will not suffer any upon deck ... under pretence it hinders the work of the ship and sailors and that they are troublesome by their nasty nauseous stench, or their noise; which makes those poor wretches desperate, and besides their falling into distempers thro' melancholy, often is the occasion of their destroying themselves.*

Such officers should consider, *those unfortunate creatures are men as well as themselves, tho' of a different colour, and pagans; and that they ought to do to others as they would be done by in like circumstances....*



What happened next...

It is hard to know what to think of Barbot's final paragraph, with its reference to Christianity's Golden Rule. ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.") Perhaps this is evidence that Barbot felt a degree of compassion for the slaves. Or perhaps he was merely being a hypocrite—someone who pretends they are doing the right thing when they know they are not.

On the other hand, Barbot may have believed in the popular justification of slavery on religious grounds. Some religions taught that by enslaving Africans (who were considered heathens), Europeans and their descendants in the Americas were providing them with an opportunity to save themselves from hell by becoming Christians. In this way, many slave traders and owners justified their participation in the practice of slavery.

Slavery Throughout History: Primary Sources

Vermin: Pests; in this case probably lice.

Diverted: Entertained.

Sporting: Playing.

Made us pastime: In other words, "provided us with entertainment."

Sprightly: Healthy.

Jollity: The quality of being jolly.

Particulars: Specifics.

Circumspect: Careful.

Haughty: Fierce.

Humor them in every reasonable thing: I.e., let them have their way whenever possible.

Curbing: Restricting.

Suffer: Allow.

Distempers: Illnesses.

Pagans: People who worship many gods instead of just one.

Be done by: I.e., want to be treated.



An engraving showing the hold of the slave ship *Gr*. During their trip to the World slaves were often forced to remain in cramped quarters with little food and water.

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Certainly supporters of slavery could find passages in the Bible to justify the institution, but many other Christians maintained that slavery went against Christian principles. Together with non-Christians who likewise opposed slavery on moral grounds (i.e., as an offense to the basic dignity of humankind) they began putting pressure on the American and British governments to end the slave trade.

Did you know...

- The European trade in African slaves began in 1441, when fourteen slaves were brought to Lisbon, Portugal, as a "gift" to Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460).
- The first slaves to cross the Atlantic Ocean on European ships were not Africans bound for the New World, but Native Americans taken from the New World to Europe. In 1495, Christopher Columbus returned to Spain with

Early Modern Slavery (1500–1900): James Barbot