CHAPTER 20 - THE ATLANTIC SYSTEM AND AFRICA, 1550–1800

I. Plantations in the West Indies
   A. Colonization Before 1650
      1. Spanish settlers introduced sugar-cane cultivation into the West Indies shortly after 1500 but did not do much else toward the further development of the islands. After 1600 the French and English developed colonies based on tobacco cultivation.
      2. Tobacco consumption became popular in England in the early 1600s. Tobacco production in the West Indies was stimulated by two new developments: the formation of chartered companies and the availability of cheap labor in the form of European indentured servants.
      3. In the mid-1600s competition from milder Virginia tobacco and the expulsion of experienced Dutch sugar producers from Brazil combined to bring the West Indian economies from tobacco to sugar production.
      4. The Portuguese had introduced sugar-cane cultivation to Brazil, and the Dutch West India Company, chartered to bring the Dutch wars against Spain to the New World, had taken control of 1,000 miles of sugar-producing Brazilian coast. Over a fifteen-year period the Dutch improved the efficiency of the Brazilian sugar industry and brought slaves from Elmina and Luanda (also seized from Portugal) to Brazil and the West Indies.
      5. When Portugal reconquered Brazil in 1654, the Dutch sugar planters brought the Brazilian system to the French and English Caribbean Islands.
   B. Sugar and Slaves
      1. Between 1640 and the 1680s colonies like Guadeloupe, Martinique, and particularly Barbados made the transition from a tobacco economy to a sugar economy. In the process of doing so, their demand for labor caused a sharp and significant increase in the volume of the Atlantic slave trade.
      2. The shift from European indentured servants to enslaved African labor was caused by a number of factors, including a decline in the numbers of Europeans willing to indenture themselves to the West Indies, the fact that the life expectancy of a slave after landing was longer than the term of the typical contract of indenture, and a rise in sugar prices that made planters more able to invest in slaves.

II. Plantation Life in the Eighteenth Century
   A. Technology and Environment
      1. Sugar plantations both grew sugar cane and processed the cane into sugar crystals, molasses, and rum. The technology for growing and harvesting cane was simple, but the machinery required for processing (rollers, copper kettles, and so on) was more complicated and expensive. The expenses of sugar production led planters to seek economies of scale by running large plantations.
      2. Sugar production damaged the environment by causing soil exhaustion and deforestation. Repeated cultivation of sugar cane exhausted the soil of the plantations and led the planters to open new fields, thus accelerating the deforestation that had begun under the Spanish.
      3. European colonization led to the introduction of European and African plants and animals that crowded out indigenous species. Colonization also pushed the Arawak and then the Carib people to extinction.
   B. Slaves' Lives
      1. West Indian society consisted of a wealthy land-owning plantocracy, their many slaves, and a few people in between.
2. A plantation had to extract as much labor as possible from its slaves in order to turn a profit. Slaves were organized into “gangs” for fieldwork, while those male slaves not doing fieldwork were engaged in specialized tasks.

3. Slaves were rewarded for good work and punished harshly for failure to meet their production quotas or for any form of resistance. On Sundays, slaves cultivated their own food crops and did other chores; they had very little rest and relaxation, no education, and little time or opportunity for family life.

4. Disease, harsh working conditions, and dangerous mill machinery all contributed to the short life expectancy of slaves in the Caribbean. The high mortality rate added to the volume of the Atlantic slave trade and meant that the majority of slaves on West Indian plantations were born in Africa.

5. Slaves frequently ran away and occasionally staged violent rebellions such as that led by a slave named Tacky in Jamaica in 1760. European planters sought to prevent rebellions by curtailing African cultural traditions, religions, and languages.

C. Free Whites and Free Blacks

1. In Saint Domingue there were three groups of free people: the wealthy “great whites,” the less-well-off “little whites,” and the free blacks. In the British colonies, where sugar almost completely dominated the economy, there were very few free small landholders, white or black.

2. Only a very wealthy man could afford the capital to invest in the land, machinery, and slaves needed to establish a sugar plantation. West Indian planters were very wealthy and translated their wealth into political power, controlling the colonial assemblies and even gaining a number of seats in the British Parliament.

3. Slave owners who fathered children by female slaves often gave both mother and child their freedom; over time, this practice (manumission) produced a significant free black population. Another source of free black population was runaway slaves, known in the Caribbean as maroons.

III. Creating the Atlantic Economy

A. Capitalism and Mercantilism

1. The system of royal monopoly control of colonies and their trade as practiced by Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries proved to be inefficient and expensive. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the two new institutions of capitalism and mercantilism established the framework within which government-protected private enterprise participated in the Atlantic economy.

2. The mechanisms of early capitalism included banks, joint-stock companies, stock exchanges, and insurance.

3. Mercantilism was a number of state policies that promoted private investment in overseas trade and accumulation of capital in the form of precious metals. The instruments of mercantilism included chartered companies, such as the Dutch West India Company and the French Royal African Company, and the use of military force to pursue commercial dominance.

4. The French and English eliminated Dutch competition from the Americas by defeating the Dutch in a series of wars between 1652 and 1678. The French and the English then revoked the monopoly privileges of their chartered companies, but continued to use high tariffs to prevent foreigners from gaining access to trade with their colonies. The Atlantic became the major trading area for the British, the French, and the Portuguese in the eighteenth century.
B. The Atlantic Circuit

1. The Atlantic Circuit was a clockwise network of trade routes going from Europe to Africa, from Africa to the plantation colonies of the Americas (the Middle Passage), and then from the colonies to Europe. If all went well, a ship would make a profit on each leg of the circuit.

2. The Atlantic Circuit was supplemented by a number of other trade routes: Europe to the Indian Ocean, Europe to the West Indies, New England to the West Indies, and the “Triangular Trade” between New England, Africa, and the West Indies.

3. As the Atlantic system developed, increased demand for sugar in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe was associated with an increase in the flow of slaves from Africa to the New World.

4. The slave trade was a highly specialized business in which chartered companies (in the seventeenth century) and then private traders (in the eighteenth century) purchased slaves in Africa, packed them into specially designed or modified ships, and delivered them for sale to the plantation colonies.

5. Disease, maltreatment, suicide, and psychological depression all contributed to the average death rate of one out of every six slaves shipped on the Middle Passage. Disease was the single most important cause of death, killing the European crewmen of the slave ships at roughly the same rate as it killed the slaves themselves.

IV. Africa, the Atlantic, and Islam

A. The Gold Coast and the Slave Coast

1. European trade with Africa grew tremendously after 1650 as merchants sought to purchase slaves and other goods. The growth in the slave trade was accompanied by continued trade in other goods, but it did not lead to any significant European colonization of Africa.

2. African merchants were discriminating about the types and the amounts of merchandise that they demanded in return for slaves and other goods, and they raised the price of slaves in response to increased demand. African governments on the Gold and Slave Coasts were strong enough to make Europeans observe African trading customs, while the Europeans, competing with each other for African trade, were unable to present a strong, united bargaining position.

3. Exchange of slaves for firearms contributed to state formation in the Gold and Slave Coasts. The kingdom of Dahomey used firearms acquired in the slave trade in order to expand its territory, while the kingdoms of Oyo and Asante had interests both in the Atlantic trade and in overland trade with their northern neighbors.

4. The African kings and merchants of the Gold and Slave Coasts obtained slaves from among the prisoners of war captured in conflicts between African kingdoms.

B. The Bight of Biafra and Angola

1. There were no sizeable states—and no large-scale wars—in the interior of the Bight of Biafra; kidnapping was the main source of people to sell into slavery. African traders who specialized in procuring people for the slave trade did business at inland markets or fairs and brought the slaves to the coast for sale.

2. In the Portuguese-held territory of Angola, Afro-Portuguese caravan merchants brought trade goods to the interior and exchanged them for slaves, whom they transported to the coast for sale to Portuguese middlemen, who then sold the slaves to slave dealers for shipment to Brazil. Many of these slaves were prisoners of war, a byproduct generated by the wars of territorial expansion fought by the federation of Lunda kingdoms.
3. Enslavement has also been linked to environmental crises in the interior of Angola. Droughts forced refugees to flee to kingdoms in better-watered areas, where the kings traded the grown male refugees to slave dealers in exchange for Indian textiles and European goods that they then used to cement old alliances, attract new followers, and build a stronger, larger state.

4. Although the organization of the Atlantic trade varied from place to place, it was always based on a partnership between European traders and a few African political and merchant elites who benefited from the trade while many more Africans suffered from it.

C. Africa's European and Islamic Contacts

1. In the centuries between 1550 and 1800 Europeans built a growing trade with Africa but did not acquire very much African territory. The only significant European colonies were those on islands; the Portuguese in Angola, and the Dutch Cape Colony, which was tied to the Indian Ocean trade rather than to the Atlantic trade.

2. Muslim territorial dominance was much more significant, with the Ottoman Empire controlling all of North Africa except Morocco and with Muslims taking large amounts of territory from Ethiopia. In the 1580s Morocco attacked the sub-Saharan Muslim kingdom of Songhai, occupying the area for the next two centuries and causing the bulk of the trans-Saharan trade in gold, textiles, leather goods, and kola nuts to shift from the western Sudan to the central Sudan.

3. The trans-Saharan slave trade was smaller in volume than the Atlantic slave trade and supplied slaves for the personal slave army of the Moroccan rulers as well as slaves for sugar plantation labor, servants, and artisans. The majority of slaves transported across the Sahara were women destined for service as concubines or servants and children, including eunuchs, meant for service as harem guards.

4. Muslims had no moral objection to owning or trading in slaves, but religious law forbade the enslavement of fellow Muslims. Even so, some Muslim states south of the Sahara did enslave African Muslims.

5. Muslim cultural influences south of the Sahara were much stronger than European cultural influences. Islam and the Arabic language spread more rapidly than Christianity and English, which were largely confined to the coastal trading centers.

6. The European and Islamic slave trade could not have had a significant effect on the overall population of the African continent, but they did have an acute effect on certain areas from which large numbers of people were taken into slavery. The higher proportion of women taken across the Sahara in the Muslim slave trade magnified its long-term demographic effects.

7. The volume of trade goods imported into sub-Saharan Africa was not large enough to have had any significant effect on the livelihood of traditional African artisans. Both African and European merchants benefited from this trade, but Europeans directed the Atlantic system and derived greater benefit from it than the African merchants did.