

### Sustained Patterns of Violence

Slavery has been an established institution since before written records existed. Many civilizations throughout history have followed a distinct pattern of coerced labor, whether consciously or unconsciously. Some historical instances of slavery have deviated slightly from established patterns as a result of geographical or cultural differences, but in general have adhered to the set pattern. Included in this pattern is exploitation of a group, slave trade and transportation, large-scale labor utilization, and violence. This pattern of coerced labor can be seen in many instances in the history of the world. Slavery was not a novel idea when its prevalence rapidly increased during the transatlantic slave trade. Transatlantic slavery was the 18<sup>th</sup> century trade of African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean. Millions were torn from their homes, transported across the ocean, and sold as slaves. The transatlantic slave trade, like many slave trades that preceded it, was not unique in its violence or cruelty but merely adhered to a well-established pattern of coerced labor.

First, this pattern of coerced labor can be seen in the history of ancient Roman civilizations. Humans have been enslaving other humans for thousands of years, as proved by Roman history. First, Roman slavery is similar to transatlantic slavery in respect to its prevalence in society. During Atlantic slavery, slave trade became an established form of commerce and it, “Evolved into an accepted norm of the international community” (Muhammad 892). Slavery was a very accepted practice both in the New World as well as in ancient Rome. In early Rome, “Among mature members of the household, the majority were slaves” (George 53). It was very common for each head of household to own several slaves in this time, as it was

in Atlantic slavery. Not only is Roman slavery comparable to New World slavery in that it existed abundantly, but it is also similar in its levels of severity and inhumanity. During Atlantic slavery living conditions were dire for African slaves before even arriving to the New World. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, annual death rates among slaves crossing the Atlantic in ships was 83 per thousand (Determinants of Slave and Crew). Living spaces were crowded and filthy and the spread of dysentery on the ships was, “Exacerbated by congestion and poor nutrition” (Determinants of Slave and Crew). Living conditions for slaves in the Roman Empire were no better. Roman slaves were housed in, “Barrack buildings in poor, prison-like conditions, and were most often kept in chains” (Slavery in the Roman World). Such conditions of inhumanity have been confirmed by skeletal remains from Pompeii which have, “Revealed the chronic arthritis and distortion of limbs which have been attributed to such terrible living conditions” (Slavery in the Roman World). Although the conditions that Atlantic slaves were forced to endure are appalling, slave traders and owners did not treat slaves in this time any more like property, or any less like humans, than did cultures of the past. Similarities in abundance and inhumanity of ancient Roman slavery and transatlantic slavery show that a pattern for coerced labor has been established and followed throughout history.

Next, these same patterns of coerced labor can be seen in the history of the Vikings. Slavery existed abundantly in this culture and parallels the Atlantic slave trade in several ways. First, slaves in the Atlantic period received treatment similar to that of Viking slaves from traders and owners in their time. African slaves were secured with iron cuffs around their hands, necks, arms, and legs, “In such a manner that one slave would be connected to the limb of another slave” (Muhammad 898). This treatment of slaves was intended not only to keep them from running away, but also to mark them merely as property. Viking slaves received similar

treatment that served to mark them as property. Viking slaves were identified by a slave collar and, “Short-cropped hair” (Slavery and Thralldom). This appearance gave slaves the identity of property, and nothing more. They had no rights; they could not own land, could not be married, and their children belonged to their owners. (Slavery and Thralldom). These slave owners had no objections to violence if disobedience arose, which was acceptable because, “There were few laws regarding slavery” (Slavery and Thralldom). Next, slavery among the Vikings is comparable to transatlantic slavery in its prevalence. It was a very common practice and, “The Vikings' most common trade item was the slave” (Slavery and Thralldom). The Vikings gained much wealth through this institution of exploitation. The abundance, violence, and inhumanity of both Viking and transatlantic slavery exemplify the established pattern of slavery that has existed for centuries.

Additionally, patterns of coerced labor can be seen in the history of Peru, most specifically at the silver mine, Potosí. During the sixteenth century, the Incan Empire first created and enforced the mita system. This system required all indigenous men age 18-50 to pay a labor tribute in the mine, working a specific amount of time each year. The mita system itself serves to exemplify both a difference as well as a similarity to transatlantic slavery. The deviation from the pattern in this instance is that these slaves were not imported from an outside place, as they predominantly were in other locations. The slaves utilized in Potosí were native to the land on which they labored. Despite this difference, the coerced labor at Potosí followed the basic pattern of slavery in several distinct ways. The most significant of these similarities is the harshness and brutality of the work imposed on the slaves. Working conditions were dire in both the transatlantic slave trade and in Potosí. Slaves in the New World had roughly a three year life expectancy once arriving to their destinations of labor. This short expectancy came as a direct

result of the intensity of the required labor, as well as the harsh weather they were forced to labor in. Slave owners forced their slaves to labor for, “Extensive periods in unbearable heat” (Muhammad 901). Poor living conditions also led to this low life expectancy as slaves were usually housed in run-down shacks, “Unfit for human habitation” (Muhammad 901). Slavery in Potosí, in this aspect, was no different from Atlantic slavery. In fact, as a result of the dire working conditions that existed there, slave labor in Potosí has been considered the, “Worst example of forced labor in history” (Gil 299). Potosí is situated in, “Cold, snow-covered, sterile, fruitless and almost uninhabitable high lands” (Gil 298). This land, although referred to as “uninhabitable,” was the land in which slaves at this time were forced to labor, thus leading to a low life expectancy. Although differences between slavery of the ancient world and slavery of the new world do exist, even more similarities can be seen. Atlantic slavery was most definitely not unique in its inhumanity, as clearly exemplified by the coerced labor in Potosí. Potosí is another example of the pattern that was set and followed by later slave traders and owners in the Atlantic.

Coerced labor and exploitation were not new ideas when their existence boomed during the transatlantic slave trade. New World slavery was not unique in its harshness or brutality, but simply followed a long-established pattern of coerced labor that is seen throughout world history. While this pattern that has been followed countless times throughout history is lucrative and effective, its prevalence has decreased in modern times as its moral issues have become more and more apparent. It is common knowledge that patterns or habits are hard to break, and this pattern is certainly no exception. Exploitation in one form or another will surely never die out completely, and such patterns will likely persist until the world’s end.

## Works Cited

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