

William Snelgrave, The Manner How Those People Become Slaves (1734)

William Snelgrave's A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea, and the Slave Trade includes the following description of how Africans were initially enslaved and then sold into the transatlantic slave trade. Captain Snelgrave was a thirty-year veteran of slaving when he wrote this work, which describes his 1727 and 1730 voyages to the slave ports of Whydah and Jakin in the kingdom of Dahomey (in the modern-day country of Benin). At that time, more captive Africans traveling on slave ships came from this area than from any other region on the African coast.

As for the Manner how those People become Slaves; it may be reduced under these several Heads.

1. It has been the Custom among the Negroes, time out of Mind, and is so to this day, for them to make Slaves of all the Captives they take in War. Now, before they had an Opportunity of selling them to the white People, they were often obliged to kill great Multitudes, when they had taken more than they could well employ in their own Plantations, for fear that they should rebel, and endanger their Masters Safety.

2dly. Most Crimes amongst them are punished by Mulcts (penalties such as fines) and Fines; and if the Offender has not wherewithal to pay his Fine, he is sold for a Slave: This is the Practice of the inland People, as well as those on the Sea side.

3dly. Debtors who refuse to pay their Debts, or are insolvent, are likewise liable to be made Slaves; but their Friends may redeem them: And if they are not able or willing to do it, then they are generally sold for the Benefit of their Creditors. But few of these come into the hands of the *Europeans*, being kept by their Countrymen for their own use.

4thly. I have been told, that it is common for some inland People, to sell their Children for Slaves, tho' they are under no necessity for so doing; which I am inclined to believe. But I never observed, that the People near the Sea Coast practice this, unless compelled thereto by extreme Want and Famine....

Several Objections have often been raised against the Lawfulness of this Trade, which I shall not here undertake to refute. I shall only observe in general, That tho' to traffick in human Creatures, may at first sight appear barbarous, inhuman, and unnatural; yet the Traders herein have as much to plead in their own Excuse...

First, It is evident, that abundance of Captives, taken in War, would be inhumanly destroyed, was there not an Opportunity of disposing of them to the *Europeans*....

Secondly, When they are carried to the Plantations, they generally live much better there, than they ever did in their own Country....

Thirdly, By this means the *English* Plantations have been so much improved, that 'tis almost incredible, what great Advantages have accrued to the Nation thereby....

Then as to the Criminals amongst the *Negroes*, they are by this means effectually transported, never to return again....

In a word, from this Trade proceed Benefits, far outweighing all, either real or pretended Mischiefs and Inconveniences....

I come now to give an Account of the Mutinies that have happened on board the Ships where I have been.

These Mutinies are generally occasioned by the Sailors ill usage of these poor People, when on board the Ship wherein they are transported to our Plantations. Wherever therefore I have commanded, it has been my principal Care, to have the *Negroes* on board my Ship kindly used; and I have always strictly charged my white People to treat them with Humanity and Tenderness; In which I have usually found my Account, both in keeping them from mutinying, and preserving them in health.

And whereas it may seem strange to those that are unacquainted with the method of managing them, how we can carry so many hundreds together in a small Ship, and keep them in order, I shall just mention what is generally practiced. When we purchase grown People, I acquaint them by the Interpreter, "That, now they are become my Property, I think fit to let them know what they are bought for, that they may be easy in their Minds: (For these poor People are generally under terrible Apprehensions upon their being bought by white Men, many being afraid that we design to eat them; which, I have been told, is a story much credited by the inland *Negroes*;) So after informing them, That they are bought to till the Ground in our Country, with several other Matters; I then acquaint them, how they are to behave themselves on board towards the white Men; that if any one abuses them, they are to complain to the Linguist, who is to inform me of it, and I will do them Justice; But if they make a Disturbance, or offer to strike a white Man, they must expect to be severely punished."

When we purchase the *Negroes*, we couple the sturdy Men together with Irons; but we suffer the Women and Children to go freely about: And soon after we have sail'd from the Coast, we undo all the Mens Irons.

They are fed twice a day, and are allowed in fair Weather to come on Deck at seven a Clock in the Morning, and to remain there, if they think proper, till Sun setting. Every *Monday* Morning they are served with Pipes and Tobacco, which they are very fond of. The Men *Negroes* lodge separate from the Women and Children: and the places where they all lye are cleaned every day, some white Men being appointed to see them do it.

It would be tedious to the Reader as well as to my self, should I relate all the Particulars of our Management of them, and the Care we take to keep them in health and order; wherefore I shall conclude with this remark, That if a Commander is himself well inclined, and has good Officers to execute his Orders, the Negroes on board may be easily governed; and many Difficulties (which unavoidably arise amongst such Numbers) got over with a little trouble....