

# KEYPOINT REVISION: INTERMEDIATE HISTORY

## THIS ACCURSED TRADE: THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE: 1770-1807

### REVISION FILE

#### THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

KP3

#### BACKGROUND

The transport of slaves from West Africa to the West Indies became known as the 'Middle Passage' because it was the middle stage of the Triangular Trade route used by British merchants. African slaves were treated as cargo by the traders and were packed into the hold of the ship with no thought for their human rights or their health and safety. Slave ships could use either 'a loose pack' or a 'tight pack'. In a loose pack slaves had more space to move, lie down and sit up which meant that most of them survived the voyage. In a tight pack slaves were crammed together with very little space between them and many more died during the passage. By the second half of the eighteenth century more ships were using a tight pack because it brought bigger profits and British ships were carrying about 50,000 slaves a year. It has been estimated that more than 450,000 Africans died on British ships during the horrific 'middle passage'. One African historian wrote: -

**“If the Atlantic Ocean were to dry up, it would reveal a pathway of human bones, African bones marking the route of the Middle Passage.”**

- African slaves came from a huge area of the continent. Some were marched hundreds of miles and spent weeks or even months in a slave factory or baracoon before beginning the terrible 'middle passage' to the West Indies.
- Slaves were shackled together in pairs with leg-irons and ferried to the ships in canoes. Once aboard, their clothes were removed and they were branded with a red-hot iron, like cattle, to show who owned them.
- Slaves were then packed tightly into the ship's hold. The men were kept in chains and lay on specially built shelves with about 0.5 metres between them. While in the hold slaves had to remain lying flat on their backs.
- Women and children had separate quarters, sometimes on deck and were often allowed to move about the ship but this put them at risk of violence and sexual abuse from the crew
- At sea, the slaves were brought up on deck each morning. The men's' leg-irons were linked to a chain running down the centre of the ship's deck to prevent them jumping overboard. On some ships they were made to dance for exercise.
- In the darkness and filth of the hold seasickness and disease were rife. The temperature could be over 30°C and the slaves had no toilets or washing facilities. In these conditions disease spread and many slaves died. Their bodies would be thrown overboard. Royal Navy sailors said that they could smell the stench of a ship carrying slaves anything up to 10 miles downwind.
- The slaves were fed porridge made from maize or millet. While on deck a good captain had the slaves washed down with warm vinegar and scrubbed. Some did not bother and in bad weather the slaves would not be allowed out at all.
- Bad weather might make the crossing longer than planned, leading to a shortage of food and water. Sometimes, slave ship captains threw Africans overboard to save provisions. Sick slaves were also thrown over the side. The Africans were insured like cattle and the captain could make a claim for 'losses'.
- The crews of slave ships were always afraid of a revolt and discipline was imposed by floggings, torture and hangings. Very few slave revolts on ships were successful. Even if the Africans did get control of a ship, they did not know how to navigate and steer the vessel to shore.