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What Did Ships Transport On The Middle Passage

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The Human Cargo and the Commerce of Suffering: What Did Ships Transport On The Middle Passage?

The transatlantic slave trade remains one of the most harrowing chapters in human history, and at its core lies a journey of unimaginable suffering: the Middle Passage. To understand this period, one must ask the fundamental question: **what did ships transport on the Middle Passage?**The most immediate and tragic answer is, of course, human beings. But the cargo of these vessels was far more complex. The ships that braved the Atlantic were not simply filled with enslaved Africans; they were floating microcosms of a brutal economic system. Their holds contained a grim inventory of human souls, provisions for the living, commodities for trade, and tools designed to enforce captivity. This article aims to provide a comprehensive look at the full spectrum of items transported during this infamous journey, offering a clearer picture of the mechanics of the slave trade.

The Primary Cargo: Enslaved Africans

The defining characteristic of the Middle Passage was the transportation of enslaved African people. This human cargo represented the most valuable "commodity" in the triangular trade system. The ships were outfitted with specific modifications to maximize the number of captives they could hold. The decks, often constructed with low headroom, were divided into shelves or platforms to allow the captain to pack more individuals into the hold.

Conditions of the Human Cargo

The conditions under which enslaved people were transported were deliberately dehumanizing. Men were frequently kept in chains for the entire duration of the voyage. Women and children were sometimes allowed on deck, but they were subject to abuse. The physical and psychological toll was immense. Disease, malnutrition, and despair were constant companions. The mortality rate was staggering, often reaching 10 to 20 percent or even higher, depending on the length of the voyage, the quality of care, and the state of rebellion on board. The human cargo was not just a number; it was a collection of distinct cultures, languages, and personalities, all subjected to a brutal process of commodification.

Trade Goods: The Currency of Enslavement

To answer the question **what did ships transport on the Middle Passage**fully, we must look at what went into the holds before the captives were brought on board. The ships leaving European ports were loaded with goods intended for trade on the African coast. These items were the currency used to purchase enslaved

people from African coastal kingdoms and European slave traders.

European Manufactured Goods

- Textiles: Bolts of cotton, linen, and wool cloth were among the most popular trade items. Indian cottons, English broadcloth, and Dutch linens were highly valued in West and Central Africa.
- Firearms and Gunpowder: European muskets, pistols, and gunpowder were critical trade goods. They were used by African kingdoms to wage war and capture prisoners from rival groups, which then fueled the slave trade.
- Metalware: Iron bars, copper pots, brass pans, knives, and bells were common. African smiths often reforged imported European metals into tools and ornaments.
- Liquor: Brandy, rum, and wine were shipped in large quantities. Alcohol was often used as a "gift" to secure deals or as a medium of exchange.
- Beads and Jewelry: Glass beads, cowrie shells, and cheap jewelry were used for smaller transactions and as a form of currency.

Asian and American Goods

The global nature of the slave trade meant that goods from Asia and the Americas were also part of the trade cargo. Cowrie shells from the Maldives were a common currency in parts of Africa. Brazilian tobacco and rum were also used to secure captives. The triangular trade was truly a global network of commerce, with the Middle Passage as its most lucrative and terrible leg.

Provisions for the Voyage: Sustaining the Crew and Captives

A voyage across the Atlantic typically took between six and ten weeks. To keep both the crew and the captive Africans alive, ships had to carry **provisions** for the journey. These supplies were a critical part of **what did ships transport on the Middle Passage**.

Food and Water

The primary food for enslaved people was often rice, beans, yams, and cornmeal, known as "slabber sauce." These were heavily processed to ensure they could survive the journey. Captains also carried dried fish, salted beef, and hardtack biscuits for the crew. Water was stored in wooden casks, and it was strictly rationed. The quality of these provisions often deteriorated during the voyage, leading to malnutrition and disease.

Medical Supplies

While medical care was rudimentary, ships carried basic medical chests. These contained items like linseed oil, mercury (for syphilis), quinine (for malaria), and surgical instruments. The ship's surgeon, if one was present, was responsible for treating illness and ensuring that the human cargo remained saleable upon arrival. His role was less about compassion and more about economic preservation.

Cooking and Storage Equipment

Large iron pots, wooden buckets, and casks were essential. The ship's cook would prepare meals for the crew and a single daily meal for the enslaved people. Firewood was also carried for cooking. The storage of these items was carefully planned to prevent spoilage and maintain the security of the vessel.

Tools of Control and Punishment

Ships engaged in the slave trade were essentially floating prisons. As such, they carried a specific inventory of items designed to control and punish the human cargo. This is a dark but essential part of understanding **what did ships transport on the Middle Passage**.

Restraints

- Shackles and Handcuffs: Forged iron cuffs were used for legs and wrists. Many were linked together, chaining men in pairs or groups.
- Neck Rings and Collars: Metal rings were placed around the necks of enslaved people to restrict movement and prevent escape.
- Thumbscrews: A device used for torture and punishment, often applied to a single finger or thumb to cause immense pain.

Weapons for the Crew

The ship's crew carried weapons to enforce order and quell rebellions. Muskets, pistols, cutlasses, and boarding axes were standard. The ship's armory also contained swivel guns and cannons to defend against potential attacks from pirates or rival European ships. The crew was typically outnumbered by the captives, so maintaining a pervasive threat of violence was essential.

Other Commodities: The Return Leg of the Journey

While the primary focus is on the Middle Passage, the question of **what did ships transport on the Middle Passage**is incomplete without considering the intended final leg of the voyage. Once the ship arrived in the Americas, the enslaved survivors were sold. The ships were then cleaned and refitted to carry the produce of the New World back to Europe.

The Goods of the Americas

The ships that made the Middle Passage were designed to carry heavy bulk cargoes such as sugar, rum, tobacco, molasses, cotton, rice, and indigo. These were the raw materials that drove the European economy. The profits from these commodities funded the next voyage to Africa. The entire system was a continuous cycle, with the Middle Passage serving as the brutal connective thread.

Conclusion

When we ask the question **what did ships transport on the Middle Passage**, the answer is far more than a simple list of items. The ships carried the weight of a global economic system built on exploitation, violence, and human suffering. Beyond the enslaved people themselves, these vessels held the tools of trade, the provisions for survival, the instruments of torture, and the raw materials for the next cycle of commerce. The Middle Passage was not merely a transfer of goods; it was a process of dehumanization and commodification. The inventory of these ships tells a grim story of how global trade, human greed, and the pursuit of profit intersected to create one of the greatest tragedies in human history. Understanding this cargo is essential to understanding the true cost of the transatlantic slave trade.

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