TRANSATLANTIC SLAVERY

AGAINST HUMAN DIGNITY

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The Impact of the Slave Trade on the Societies of West and Central Africa

PATRICK MANNING

Africa is a vast continent with a large population made up of many cultures and societies. It was far more than a reservoir from which enslaved people were taken. The influence of the Atlantic slave trade brought turmoil and redirection to the lives of many Africans. It transformed their societies and lives, brought about population decline, built new kingdoms and destroyed old ones. It created systems for the gruesome work of collecting and exporting slaves, and brought the expansion of a system of slavery in Africa itself. The experience of the Atlantic slave trade tied West and West Central Africa tightly to the Atlantic world, and laid the groundwork for Africa's weakness and dependency in the world of today.

The basic story of the trade in enslaved people from West and Central Africa is well documented, and experts are in wide agreement on its outlines. But new research results continue to appear. Scholars approach the same evidence with differing outlooks – they come, for instance, from Europe, the Americas and Africa. As a result, scholars are engaged in important disputes over both fact and interpretation of the Atlantic slave trade. Most of the debates centre on the question, how seriously African society was harmed by the Atlantic slave trade.

Africa's contacts with the wider world were new but not unprecedented. Before the European voyages, African societies had contacts with each other and, through long-distance trade routes, with the Mediterranean world, western Asia and the Indian Ocean. New contacts came as Portuguese and then other European voyagers opened the West Coast of Africa to ties across the Atlantic.

The era of the Atlantic slave trade covered, at its maximum, over four hundred years from the mid-fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century. The changes in African life during the slave trade era are not a separate story or a sideline; they form one of the important elements in the story of the Atlantic slave trade as a whole.

In the first century or so of Atlantic contact, European visitors to Africa mostly sought gold and silver, and bought some spices. From the first, however, they also sought to capture and purchase slaves. European adventurers were always short of labour, and always seeking workers for agriculture and mining, and as servants and sailors. They sometimes captured and more often purchased captives along the African coast. This trade in chattel labourers gradually came to dominate all others.

The slave trade impacted Africa at the margins of its society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but the patterns set in those early days grew to importance in the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the exploitation of Africa for captive labourers hit its most severe peak. The effects of the Atlantic slave trade on African life are still visible as we come to the end of the twentieth century.

The availability of some African captives for purchase by early Europeans shows that slavery existed, in certain forms, in Africa before the Europeans. The fact of early African slavery has sometimes led to confusion, or to arguments that Africans, because they held slaves, were somehow responsible for the extent to which slavery expanded during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.

Rather than blame African victims or others, we should try to understand the operation of the whole Atlantic system and its reliance on enslaved labour. The new system – the Atlantic slave trade and modern African slavery – became quite different from early African slavery. In the early days, war captives and other dependents who fell under the control of African rulers did the bidding of their owners. Since medieval times, a sizable commerce across the Sahara had sent as many as 10,000 slaves in some years, mostly females, to serve masters in North Africa and the Middle East. But the number of persons held in slavery in Africa was small, since no economic or social system had developed for exploiting them.

After two or three centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, conditions in Africa had changed immensely. The five thousand slaves purchased by the Europeans each year in the sixteenth century had risen to nearly 100,000 per year

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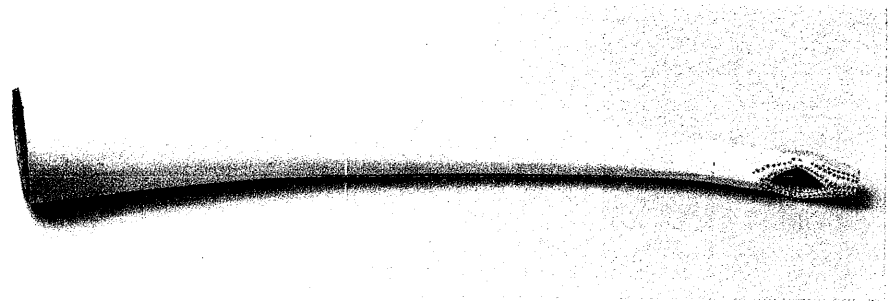
Plaque showing Bini figures
Brass, Benin, 16/17th century



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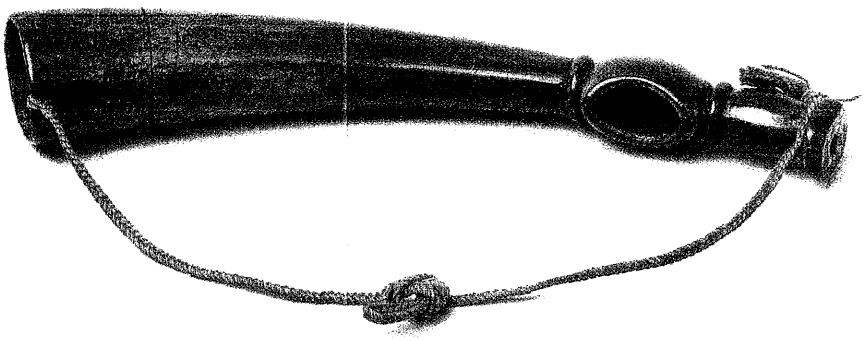
Trumpet
Ivory, Mandingo, Gambia



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War trumpet
Ivory, Congo, 19th century

at the end of the eighteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century perhaps five or six million persons were held in slavery on the African continent, many times more than could have been enslaved before the Atlantic slave trade began.

The initial European purchases of slaves disrupted society in limited areas of Africa. Waves of this influence then spread wider and grew more forceful. In the sixteenth century, two types of patterns emerged, depending whether or not large states were involved in the slave trade. First, in Senegambia, Angola and the large kingdoms of Jolof and Kongo, the effects of the slave trade soon led to civil wars and disruption, which brought about the decline of the existing kingdoms on the one hand and the rise of new but smaller states on the other. One of the new states was the Portuguese colony of Angola, centred on the port of Luanda, from which Portuguese warriors and merchants exported several thousand slaves each year.

The second early pattern developed in Sierra Leone and nearby areas of the Upper Guinea Coast. In this region the slave trade proceeded more by kidnapping than by warfare. Some of the many captives were retained rather than exported, so that domestic enslavement, especially of women, expanded in the Upper Guinea Coast. While slavery expanded in the region, powerful states did not emerge.

In the seventeenth century, the sale of slaves grew so rapidly in the Bight of Benin that the region became known as the Slave Coast. Later in the same century some adventurers in the neighbouring Gold Coast found the rising prices of slaves so attractive that they gave up their interests in gold mining and trading in goods, and turned to the capture and export of slaves. In both of these areas, the wars accompanying the development of large-scale slave exports led to the creation of powerful states: Dahomey in the Bight of Benin and Asante on the Gold Coast.

The social transformations of these areas involved far more than the creation of powerful monarchies. The population of both regions, and especially of the Bight of Benin, declined for

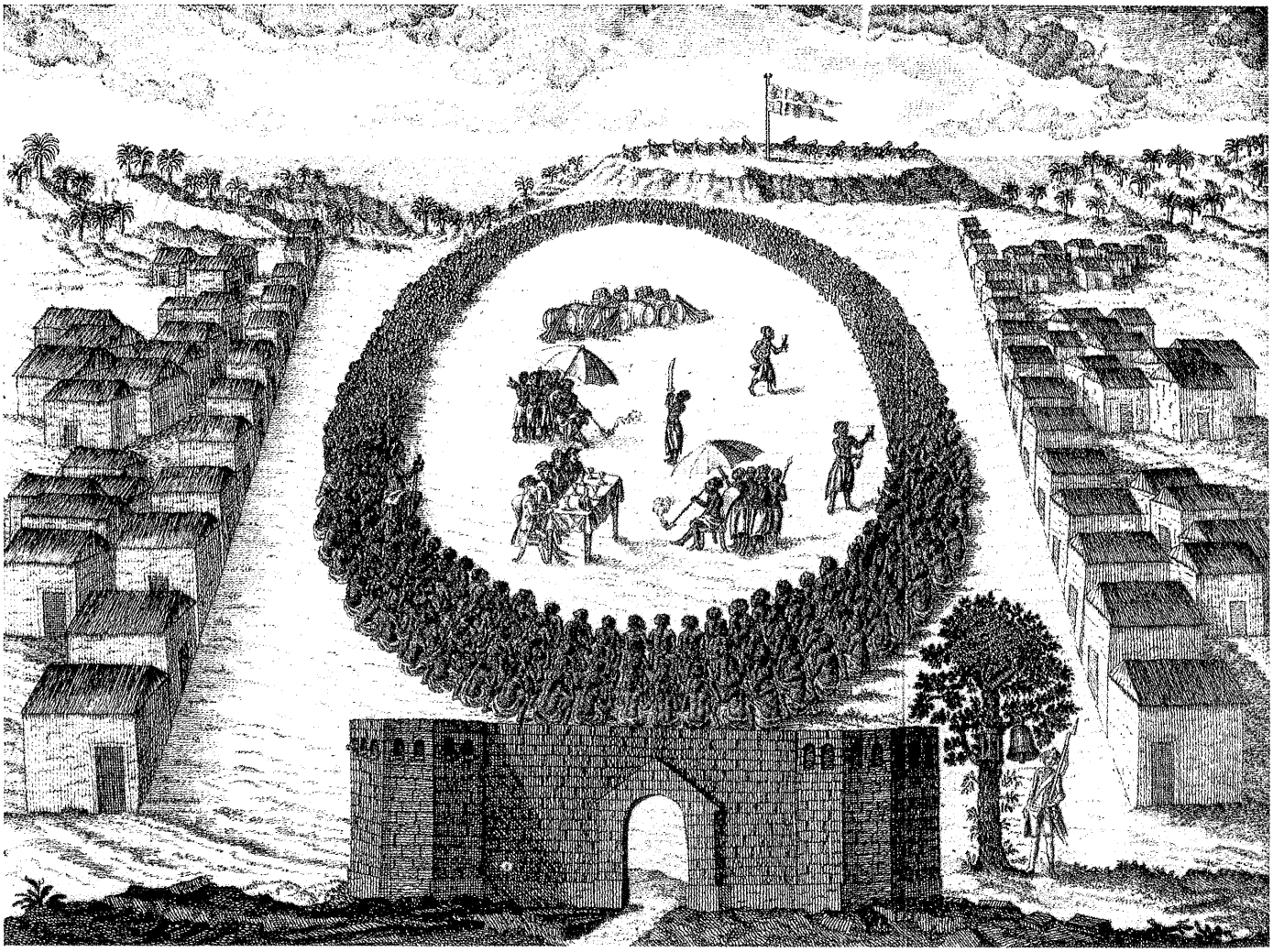
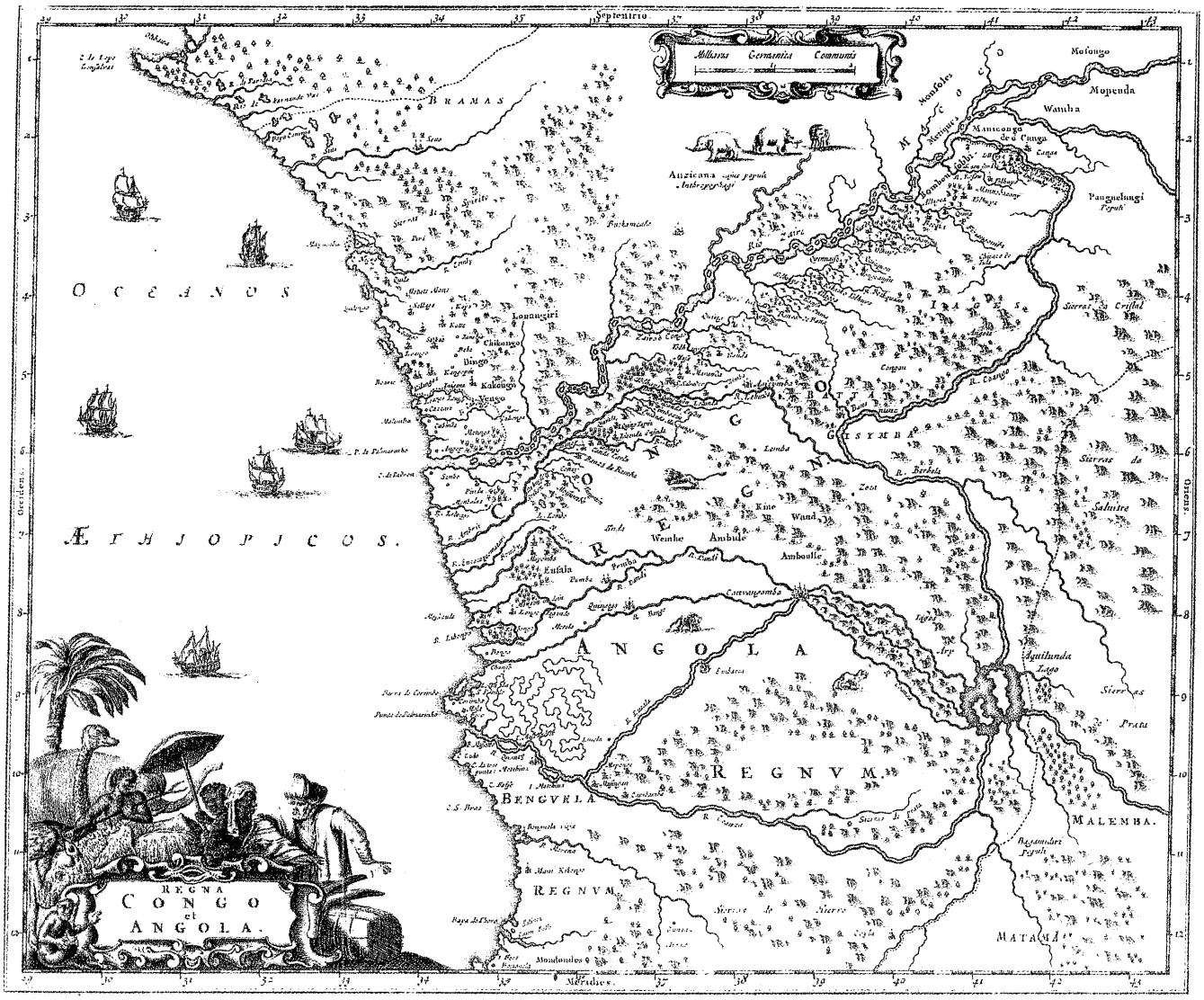


Fig.21
Danish traders negotiating with the Akwamu king in 1784, from P. E. Isert, *Neue Reise nach Guinea und den Caraibischen Inseln*, Copenhagen, 1788. The Danes sought the support of the Akwamu to defeat the Awuma people who were opposing completion of a Danish fort, seen in the background.

decades as a result of the continued warfare and export of slaves. In addition, since most of the captives sent across the Atlantic were male, these areas of the West African coast and its hinterland were left with a shortage of men. Many of the women who remained were now in slavery because of the wars. Women had to take on new tasks to sustain the economy, and the remaining men found it easier to take on second and third wives.

Slave exports from the Bight of Benin and the Gold Coast reached a peak about the 1720s, and declined somewhat thereafter – in part because the regional populations were now declining. Slave merchants then found new regions of the coast to draw into slave exports.

From the 1720s to the 1750s two forested regions without large kingdoms became the main new sources of slaves. These were the equatorial forest of the Congo (or Zaire) river basin, and the Bight of Biafra, populated especially by Ibo-speaking peoples. In both of these areas the demand for slaves and the rewards of selling them caused the development of new systems of delivering slaves. Slaves were captured primarily by individual kidnapping and by the sentencing of people to enslavement by court systems, following the earlier pattern of Upper Guinea. Through these devices, large numbers of people were taken to the coast and sold to European merchants, without, however, the formation of large kingdoms and massive raids of other parts of the continent. Perhaps the number of casualties was proportionately smaller in these areas. Nevertheless the export of people, besides the deaths due to exposure on long trips to the coast, was sufficient to cause the



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Map of Congo and Angola
John Ogilby, London 1670

populations of each of these areas to decline for much of the eighteenth century and some of the nineteenth century.

In the Bight of Benin in the nineteenth century the rise of one great kingdom and the fall of another brought decades of warfare. The Sokoto Caliphate, a Muslim empire, rose just after 1800 to control all of what is today northern Nigeria and adjoining areas, and the neighbouring Oyo empire collapsed three decades later. These wars brought enslavement for hundreds of thousands, and deportation – to the Atlantic or the Sahara – for many of them.

Finally Angola, already one of the centres of slave exports two centuries earlier, was drawn after 1810 into exports on the greatest scale in the history of the Atlantic slave trade. Three state systems combined to collect captives and relay them to the coast: Portuguese-ruled Angola on the coast, Kazembe in the inland valleys and Lunda in the savannas of the far interior.

These are some of the stories of the exports of slaves from Africa. But equally important are the stories of the changes in life for those who managed to remain in Africa.

After years of research and debate, scholars are now fairly well agreed on the number of people who underwent the Middle Passage: Paul Lovejoy's es-

timate of some twelve million persons loaded on ships at the African coastline is one most would accept. Far more difficult to agree, however, is the number of other Africans directly affected by the trade. This includes not only those who died on shipboard, but those who died during capture or during transportation within Africa, and the large number of enslaved people who remained in Africa or were traded to the Indian Ocean, Asia and North Africa. All agree that such a total is well beyond twelve million; research in progress may help reveal the details.

Where the slaves came from is also known in increasing detail. The regions of coast through which the greatest number of people passed were Angola, the Bight of Benin, Congo, and the Bight of Biafra, though other areas also lost large numbers of people. Debates continue on the ethnic origin of captives from each area of the continent, and on whether most captives came from near the coast or from the far interior. Recent research is showing that children became an increasingly important part of the Atlantic slave trade. One pattern is clear: while male slaves came from both the coast and the interior, female slaves came overwhelmingly from coastal areas. Women enslaved in the interior of Africa tended to be kept by African owners.

The overall size of the African population remains under debate. Views on the topic range from asserting that the slave trade had no effect on African population to estimating a drastic population decline. The most detailed recent research indicates a slow but steady decline in African population during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an overall shortage of men, and local effects that were quite serious.

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Map of Africa, printed and coloured
Probably from Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, Antwerp, 1570

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Plaque showing European with gun
Brass, Benin, 16/17th century

The demographic losses due to slave trading consisted not simply in the numbers of persons sent overseas, but deaths in the course of capture and transport within Africa, and the loss of reproductive potential as young women were sent away.

The growth of slavery within Africa during the era of slave exports has become a major focus of research and debate. The dominant view is that slavery in Africa expanded through ties to the export slave trade, and remained important after the export trade declined. Slaves became most numerous in the parts of Africa where there were strong states, such as the Sokoto Caliphate, to keep them in submission, but slavery expanded to a lesser degree in such areas as the Congo basin and the Bight of Biafra where states were small. In Africa as in the Americas, some slaves escaped and formed maroon settlements. European conquest of Africa, in the years surrounding 1900, halted raiding for new captives but did not liberate those already enslaved. As late as the 1920s, millions of people in Africa had still not gained their freedom.

The impact of the slave trade on African political life has been complex and contradictory. From the earliest campaigns for abolition, a debate has raged on the question whether the slave trade stimulated war in Africa. Those who say 'no' point to the stated war aims of participants in African wars, and note that the parties had other grievances and more specific objectives. Those who say 'yes' note the overall correlation between demand for slaves and the frequency of warfare. A parallel and unresolved debate continues between those who point out that the slave trade caused people to join in larger political units for protection, and those who emphasize that enslavement and greed caused the break-up of numerous states.

Similarly, the slave trade both created and destroyed fortunes in Africa. New social classes – of merchants, warlords and slaves – emerged in many areas of the continent. The export of slaves brought wealth to the African sellers, but very little of this wealth could be invested in expanding African production. Without slave exports, Africa would have had fewer imported goods, but would also have lost fewer productive labourers. As it was, many slaves were exchanged for various forms of money, and one ironic result of the Atlantic slave trade is that it expanded the money economy in Africa. The result did not make the continent any richer: the consensus among scholars is that the slave trade was bad for African economies. The remaining questions are by how much, and how African societies were induced to participate in the downward spiral of slave trade. Research in progress on the prices of slaves in Africa and around the Atlantic will clarify these issues. It will also help answer the question of how much effect the British anti-slavery squadron had in suppressing the slave trade after 1808.

The long experience of the slave trade must have had a profound effect on the thinking of Africans. These patterns of thought are not yet well documented, but we can hint at them. Slavery and the slave trade seem to have brought contradictory experiences and contradictory ideas. On one hand it brought dreams of wealth and power, as seen in the great commercial city of Kano, the golden regalia of Asante, or the imposing royal statuary of Dahomey. On the other hand it brought the rejection of hierarchy and a strong desire for independence and equality. This egalitarian ideal is evident in the willingness of people to live in isolated villages to avoid submitting to slave raiders, and in the development of an artistic tradition, abstract in form, that emphasized ties to the ancestors and to such basic life forces as the earth. The position of women in African society today reflects both sides of this earlier choice: women play full and independent social roles, especially in commerce; yet the majority of slaves in Africa were women, and all women have suffered some oppression as a result. The widespread significance of divination (to learn the future) and common fears of witchcraft in Africa owe something to the uncertainty of life brought by centuries of slave trading. In these and other ways, the Atlantic slave trade changed the thinking of Africans.

Europeans conquered Africa in the years surrounding 1900. As the new

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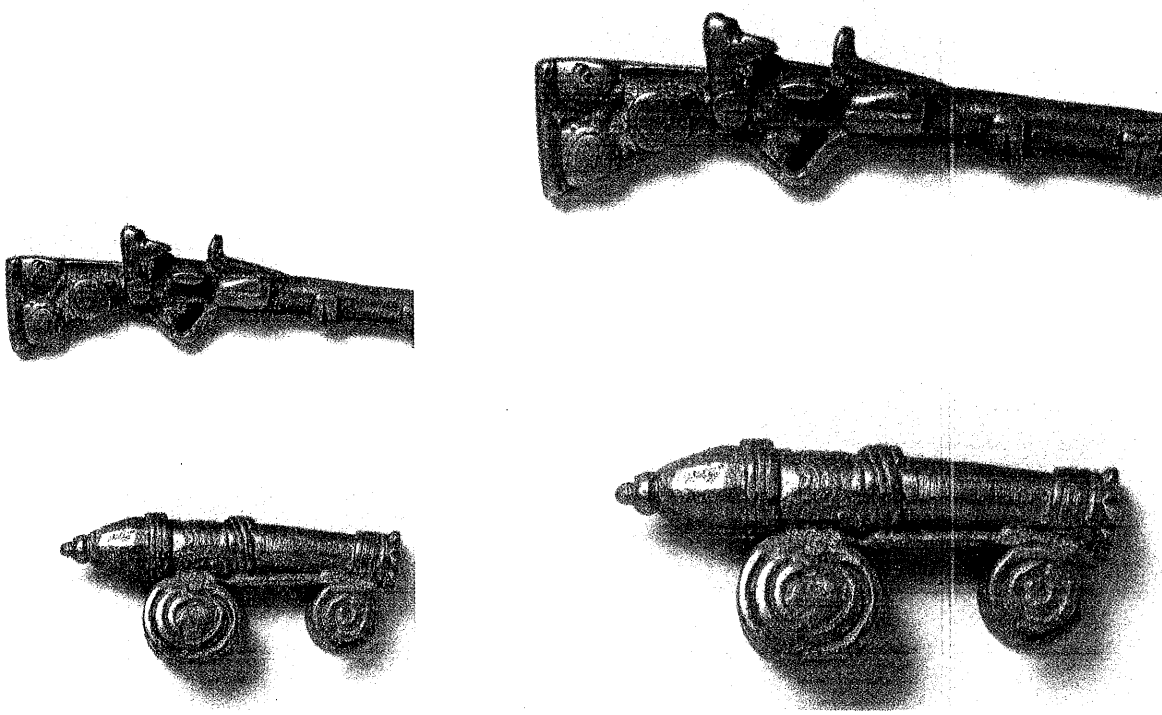
Trade gun, known as a dane gun



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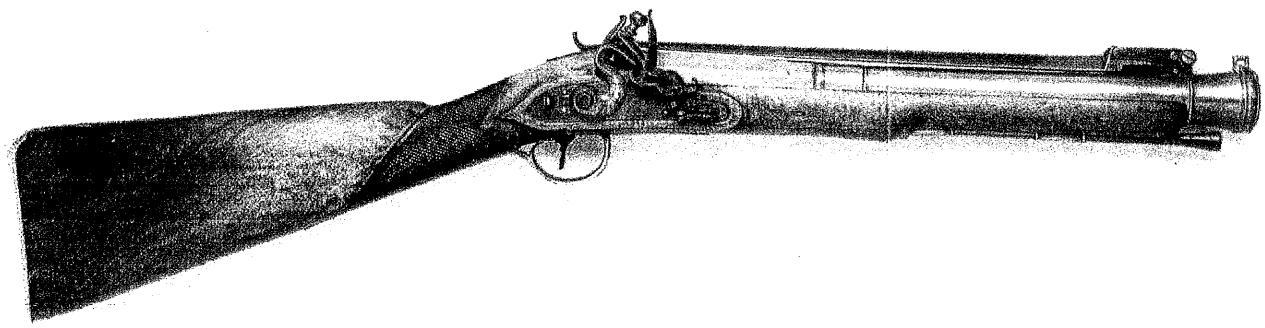
Weights representing a) a man with gun, b) a gun, c) a cannon
Brass, Asante, Ghana, c.18th century



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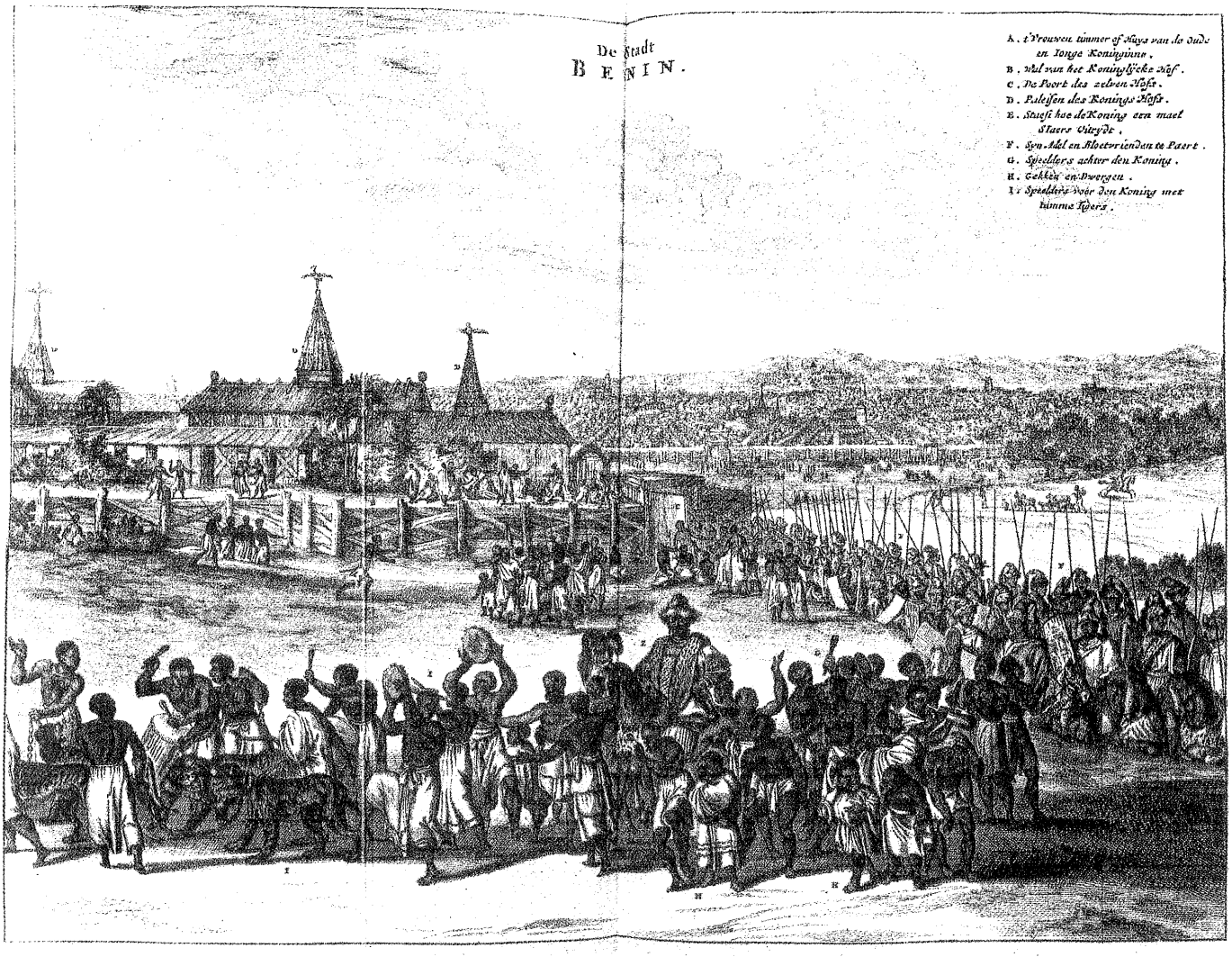
Flintlock blunderbuss
English, late 18th century



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Kuduo, cylindrical base on cage-shaped stand
Brass, Asante, Ghana, c.1730-49

Fig.22
A procession of the Oba in the City of Benin, from Olfert Dapper, *Nauwkeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaansche Gewesten*, Amsterdam, 1668
The Oba or king is shown processing with a group of musicians and warriors with a view of the city of Benin in the background.

rulers established direct control over African societies, and began to learn in detail about Africa, they often portrayed themselves as bringing about the first contact of Africans with the outside world. The reality was quite the contrary. Even though few Europeans had visited the African interior, West and Central Africa had been in close contact with the Atlantic world for four hundred years already, and those contacts had grown more intensive with each succeeding century. Unfortunately, the contact was dominated by the Atlantic slave trade, with its corrosive effects for the peoples of the African continent.