

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

3. The Middle Passage

Activity 3: The Slave Ship *Zong*

Give students a copy of the Slave Ship *Zong* case study to read.

Tell the class that they will be taking part in an imaginary court case between abolitionist Granville Sharp and the *Zong*'s owners and crew. Sharp is taking the ship's owners and the crew to court to try them for the murder of 133 slaves.

A vital piece of evidence has been left out of the case study. It should not be given to the class until the court case has been acted out and the jury have come to their verdict.

PREPARATION

There are nine characters and a jury.

Characters:

Choose nine pairs and give each pair a character quote. Only one person from each pair will represent the character in the court case. But students should prepare the character's testimony in their pairs.

They should be allowed a good deal of time (perhaps one lesson and homework time) to prepare their roles.

Students should use other sources to build their testimonies, for example excerpts from this pack such as Olaudah Equiano's account of the Middle Passage, the excerpts from Thomas Clarkson's essay and the arguments in favour of the slave trade from the video and pack. They could also use some of the materials suggested on page 28 such as websites, narratives or other books.

Jury:

The remaining students will act as the jury. Their role will be to decide if the owners of the ship and its crew are innocent or guilty of murder.

While the characters are preparing their testimonies, the jury should also be preparing roles.

They should decide what character they would like to play on the jury. They should create a name for this person, a job, a personality and how they feel about being called to be on the jury for this trial (for example they may think it is a waste of time because the slave trade is a good thing, or they may feel strongly that justice must be served, depending on the character they choose to represent).

There would have been a number of different people with different opinions at the time. Some may have been directly involved in the slave trade (for example slave ship owners or Captains) and some indirectly and without even realising their involvement (like shopkeepers, or people working in the ports).

The jury should not prepare anything for the court case itself. They should not do any research on the case at all, so that they provide an objective opinion. And they should not ask any questions during the trial. They should just observe.

AIM:

The aim of this activity is to make students question the moral issues around the story of the slave ship *Zong*.

It is also to encourage students to use their imaginations, thinking about what society may have been like in a city like Liverpool that was growing enormously rich as a result of the slave trade.

It is important to note that in fact this court case never took place. In spite of the efforts of Granville Sharp, who wrote letters to people in positions of power, including the Prime Minister, everyone involved in the tragedy of the slave ship *Zong* went unpunished.

They were never brought to justice.

THE COURT CASE

When the characters and the jury are prepared, the classroom should be arranged to resemble a courtroom as far as possible. This will help students to fall into role more easily.

The jury should begin by standing up and presenting themselves to the court. Then the case should begin. Characters should act out their roles as convincingly as possible, having planned their arguments and evidence.

Each character should be given a maximum of five minutes in the dock. The case should take no more than one hour to act out.

AFTER THE COURT CASE

After all the characters have given evidence, the jury should be given only five minutes to reflect and decide individually whether the ship owners and crew are innocent or guilty. They should vote individually and the majority will determine the result.

Now tell the class the missing evidence:

When the ship arrived in Jamaica, in fact it had 420 gallons of water left on board.

Luke Collingwood, the ship's master knew this. However he died soon after the *Zong* tragedy. It is possible that none of the crew knew this and were just following his orders. It is also possible that some/all of the crew were lying.

The class should then discuss the case together. Out of their roles, students may have very different opinions about the characters they played. The following are discussion points that teachers may want to cover:

Is it right to treat human beings as property?
Is it possible to put a price on someone's life?
Slavery is against all Christian beliefs.
Slavery was a respected 'business'.
Africans were treated as less than human beings.
Could this happen today?

If appropriate, the trial could be performed again, to other classes or to the rest of the school for a special event to commemorate the slave trade.

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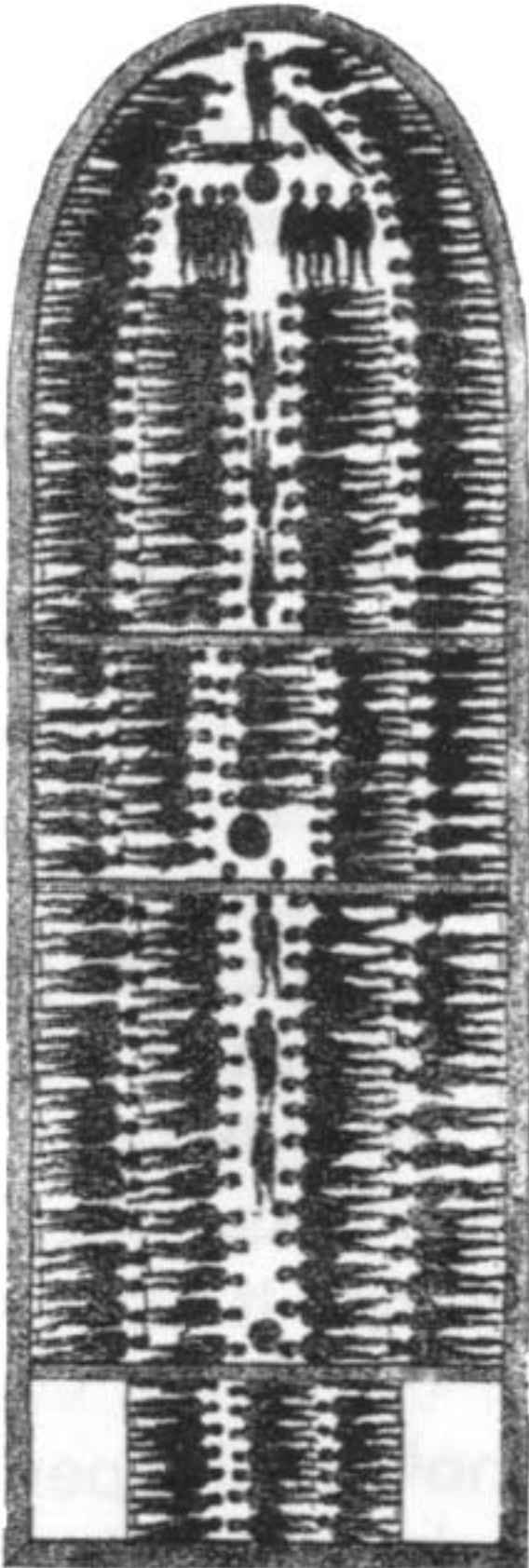
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Case Study

On 6 September 1781, the slave ship *Zong* sailed for the West Indies from Sao Tomé, an island off the coast of West Africa, carrying about 470 slaves and a crew of 17. The ship was owned by Liverpool banker and slave trader William Gregson and his colleague George Case. A month into the journey a high percentage of the slaves and crew had died or were sick and unlikely to recover.

Luke Collingwood, the ship's master knew that if death were a result of natural causes, the insurers wouldn't pay them for their losses. They would pay however, if it had been necessary to kill them for the safety of the ship. Luke Collingwood told the insurers that the water was running short and in order to save the crew and the ship, they had been forced to throw 133 slaves overboard, alive, into the sea. A small number of slaves managed to break free from their captors and jump to their death, before they were thrown.

As it happened, the insurers refused to pay the claim and the case was taken to court twice in 1783, the owners demanding to be paid £30 for each 'lost' slave. Abolitionist Olaudah Equiano heard about this case and told fellow abolitionist Granville Sharp, who immediately launched a campaign for justice. Within three days he had instructed solicitors to start proceedings 'against all persons concerned in throwing into the sea 133 slaves' and demanded that those of the crew who had survived should be tried for murder.



'The Print', Thomas Clarkson's image of a slave ship, showing slaves 'packed like books on shelves'.

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Role Cards

Granville Sharp - Abolitionist

This is not just an offence against God, but against all mankind. Those who have treated these PEOPLE as mere goods and chattel should face the most severe of punishments and this should be used as an example to prevent such inhuman practices from happening in the future.

Olaudah Equiano - Abolitionist

My eyes have borne witness to scenes of depravity worse than I could ever have imagined. You talk of savagery of the African... is not the unmerciful flogging of a man resulting in his death not savage? It is not only those poor wretches aboard the *Zong*, I know of so many of my wearied countrymen, who aboard the fateful slave ships, preferred death to a life of misery and jumped into the sea. It is often said that Africans are no more than animals and should be treated as such. But slavery depresses the mind and makes inhuman beings of all of us.

John Lee - Solicitor General

What is this claim that human people have been thrown overboard? This is a case of chattels or goods. Blacks are goods and property; it is madness to accuse these well serving honourable men of murder. They acted out of necessity and in the most appropriate manner for the cause. The late Captain Collingwood acted in the interest of his ship to protect the safety of his crew. To question the judgement of an experienced, well travelled captain held in the highest regard is one of folly, especially when talking of slaves. The case is the same as if horses had been thrown overboard.

William Gregson - Ship's Owner

I had never thought that slave ships were as bad as has been described to me recently. No doubt I cannot do without my slaves, they are my livelihood after all, but I can certainly ensure that they are treated as human beings.

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Role Cards

George Case - Colleague of ship's owner

The crossing was arduous and for natural causes such as weather, we cannot be held accountable. The water became short through no fault of ours or Captain Collingwood and it was not a voluntary act but one of necessity that brought about the difficult decision to dispose of those 130-odd slaves.

James Kelsal - Crew Member

There was no present want of water to justify such an extreme measure. It is true that they are only slaves but they did not choose this fate or merit such cruelty.

George Gregory - Rector of West Ham

To those who may think that the plea of wanting water is a sufficient justification, I will put one plain question: If those persons who suffered had been white men and not slaves, would they have been thrown overboard?

Charles Kingsley - Representing the insurance company

Luke Collingwood knew that if sick slaves died a natural death from diseases such as dysentery, smallpox or dropsy as are often contracted aboard the slave ships, the loss would be that of the ship's owners (and Collingwood himself would have had to bear some of it). If slaves had to be thrown alive into the sea to protect the safety of the ship and crew, the law states that we would be obliged to compensate the owners. Luke Collingwood stated shortage of water to be the case, however there is much evidence to the contrary.

Jim Stone - Crew Member

We followed our good Captain's judgement on how much water was left to the ship and he would have advised us to the best of his knowledge. It is true that some of the slaves were sick but with a shortage of water anyway, was it not less cruel to throw the poor sick wretches into the sea, rather than let them linger for a few days with the diseases that would kill them?