SLAVERY

 Slavery is when a person, called a slave, is treated as the property of another person or an organization like the WIC. They had no rights and nothing to say about themselves.

Slavery was already used by Ancient Romans and Greeks. At first, the Romans didn’t have that many slaves. In that time, when you won a war the people who lost became the property of you, so after the Romans won many wars they had loads of slaves. That’s why every roman army had slave traders who sold the slaves on slave markets. This was the beginning of slave trade.

In the 17th century it also happened a lot that the poor people looked for protection by the rich, which caused the poor to become the property of the rich. Someone could also become slave as a punishment if they had too many debts. This was called debt slavery. In times of hunger, people could sell themselves or their wife and children to become a slave. If your parents were slaves you became a slave by birth.

THE WEST INDIA COMPANY

 The West India Company, set up in 1621, ran the West Indies trade, including the slave trade. The WIC ships left Vlissingen, Middelburg or Amsterdam, loaded with goods like weapons, textiles and rum. With these goods the Dutch sailed to Africa and traded the goods for the slaves. With the slaves, they sailed to the West Indies, where they traded the slaves with the French and Spanish who had their plantations on the colonies. The Dutch got goods like tobacco, sugar and cotton from the French and Spanish and with that they sailed back to the Netherlands. This created a trade triangle: from the Netherlands to Africa to the West Indies.

TYPES OF SLAVES

There are different types of slaves. With this we mean the type of job they do. There were slaves that worked in the army, but also slaves who did the housework, worked on plantations or in mines. But there are many other types of slaves.

The household slaves had a better life and more freedom than other slaves. The slaves who did the housework also had the chance to earn money and buy their freedom. Working on plantations and in mines were the toughest jobs. Slaves who worked in mines had it the worst, they almost didn’t see any daylight and inhaled dangerous substances. Because of that they didn’t live that long. Slaves that worked on plantations had to work very long and didn’t get enough sleep. Sometimes a slave fell asleep during work, if that happened they were strictly punished.

It didn’t happen very often, but sometimes slaves worked for artists or craftsman. These slaves were seen as a student and had to do chores for their master. Compared to the other kind of slaves this slaves were very lucky and were treated well.

SLAVE TRADE

 When the Europeans found America, they needed a lot of workers to work on their plantations. First, they used the Indians for this but they weren’t strong enough or used to do this kind of work. Or they got sick because of the diseases the Europeans brought to America. That’s why in the 16th century the first Europeans went to Africa to get slaves and in the 17th century this happened in enormous amounts.

At first, the Europeans robbed villages and took the people who lived there with them to work as slaves. In Africa, slavery was very normal. The only people who were completely free were the African royals and rulers. The Europeans got a trade contract with the Africans, because of this they got the slaves from them and didn’t have to get them themselves, like they did before.  The merchants preferred slaves from the north-west coast, because they thought that those slaves were the strongest and most trustable.

When the ships arrived in Africa, they unloaded the goods from the ships. When everything was out, carpenters made a special deck for the slaves below the top deck. When they got the slaves, they brought them to the coast to stay there in prisons from the Europeans to wait for a ship to come and get them. Before they brought the slaves to the ships they were branded with the logo of the WIC. They did this to prevent the slaves from being stolen by other organizations and to recognize the slaves when they tried to run away or escape.

They took 500 slaves on the ships, sometimes even 600. Because more slaves meant more profit. The demand for slaves was so big that it was difficult to get enough slaves. Because of that, Dutch ships sometimes sailed 6 to 7 months along the coast of Africa until the ship was full.

When they had enough slaves, they started preparing for the big trip over the Atlantic ocean. Fresh drinking water, fruit, vegetables, but also living sheep and goats were taken to slaughter during the journey. To prevent panic they often left at night, when the slaves were sleeping and couldn’t realise that they were leaving their country of birth and would never see it again.

FROM AFRICA TO THE WEST INDIES

The journey from Africa to the West Indies was a real hell. A lot of slaves threw up, got sick or died. Bad diseases broke out, like malaria and scurvy. The floor of the ships were often covered in blood and spit that it almost looked like a slaughterhouse. It even happened that in the morning a dead slave was attached to a living slave. The slaves were so close together that the heat and the smell were unbearable. For months they were stuck in a very small space where they couldn’t even stand up straight. They were handcuffed to each other and chained to rings on the sides of the ship.

Sometimes they needed to go to the top deck to dance and sing for the crew members, the crew members said that this was good for their health and for their condition. The only way for the slaves to escape was to commit suicide by jumping overboard. This happened a lot so on some ships they hanged nets on the sides of the ship to prevent that.

When they arrived in the West Indies. They hardly knew what was going to happen with them there. The slaves were checked, their hair was cut, their bodies were refreshed by oiling, and for a few days they got better food to eat. After this they were sold to their new owners. From them they get a new name and from that moment on it was forbidden for the slaves to speak their own language or to keep doing anything of their culture. Their new life in the West Indies started here with their new identity.

THE END OF SLAVERY AND SLAVE TRADE

 If you think about the horrible things the slaves been through you’d understand why slaves revolted against slavery. These revolts happened when they thought they’d had a chance for success. If the security was weak the slaves could try to escape. On the plantations, for example, they would ruin the harvest on purpose or they would pretend they were sick. They even tried to kill their master by poisoning him or her.

But if they were on a slave ship, they would try to kill the crew members and sail back to Africa. But there weren’t many revolts on the ships for a couple of reasons. One was that they were afraid of the crew members because the way they were treated was torture. Also, the slave traders were well armed and so the slaves didn’t really dare to revolt. And the slave traders made sure there were good safety measures such as, like we said earlier, handcuffing the slaves together. And the slaves didn’t have a lot of contact with each other. Men, women and families were separated. And the people couldn’t understand each other because they were from different African tribes and didn’t speak the same language, so it was difficult to work together and to revolt.

Most Dutch people weren’t really interested in the slave trade, while those slaves in the West Indies were literally fighting for their lives. But in 1800, ordinary people started to think slavery was something that was inhuman and that it should stop. But it took the Netherlands really long to stop the slave trade. Eventually, the Netherlands stopped the slave trade in 1814. This didn’t mean that there was no slavery anymore, it just meant that no new slaves were coming from Africa. The Netherlands shut it down on the 1st of July 1863. It was one of the last European countries to do that.

CONCLUSION

There was a lot of slave trade in the 17th and 18th century. The Netherlands was one of the countries that traded a lot in slaves. The Dutch set up the WIC in 1621, this was an organization that traded, among other things, in slaves. There were different kinds of slaves, for example, plantation slaves, mine slaves or household slaves. In the 16th century the first Europeans went to Africa to get slaves and in the 17th century this happened in enormous amounts.

The slaves got branded by the WIC. The trip to the West Indies was awful. Slaves got sick or died and the heat and smell was unbearable. The slaves were chained together and to the ship. In the West Indies they were sold to a new owner and got a new identity. Slaves revolted against slavery and slave trade and later, in 1800, not only slaves but also ordinary people started to see how bad the slave trade really was. On July 1st 1863, the Netherlands shut down slave trade. Compared to other countries this took the Netherlands a really long time.