



The Negro slave trade considered as the cause of yellow fever
Translation of an excerpt from a memoir by Mr. Audouard
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Yellow fever did not originate in any country. Warm climates favor the cause that produces it, and it is within man's reach to end this cause, for it lies in an infection peculiar to slave ships. To have an idea of this infection, it suffices to remember that on many occasions slave ships have been apprehended in which the slaves were living in the midst of their own filth. Hence the rottenness of the wood tar and of all that is within the ship, and the production of a focus of infection that does not disappear, save after having traveled through all the grains of putrid decomposition. We shall add that neither days nor months suffice for this disappearance: both of the latter two epidemics of yellow fever that scourged Spain, and to which the author of this writing was witness, that in Barcelona in 1821, and that in Porto da Passagem in 1823, originated on ships used for the slave trade before being laden with colonial merchandise in Havana.

Upon departing from this port, yellow fever did not rage there; therefore, they were not exporting a deadly product from this country. However, they attributed yellow fever to Barcelona and to Passagem; and what quite clearly shows that [the ships] held the cause in their broadsides is that the carpenters who labored to caulk them nearly all perished from yellow fever in but a few days, and were the first victims of these two epidemics. They smelled the great stench when they were working on the bottom of the vessel, for then the dung that was contained between the boards was uncovered, and the heat of the months of August and September contributed mightily to release of the deadliest emanations.

This single fact—that ships which departed from one place on the new continent where yellow fever did not rage caused this sickness to appear in two ports of Europe—dashes to the ground all ideas which were held concerning the origin and nature of yellow fever; because this illness is not due to the climates of America, for it has been carried to Europe by ships departing from Havana, whereas it did not rage in that place.

It does not originate in Europe, for Spain did not suffer it before the discovery of America, and America itself did not suffer it until 200 years later, given that the illness today called yellow fever was first named *mal de Siam*, given that its appearance in Martinique in 1694 coincided with the presence of ships coming from the gulf of Siam at the ports of this island: a designation that the passing of years has proved wrong. What is most probable is that the effects of the slave trade began to be experienced at this time, because then this commerce began growing more active, and governments stimulated it, even authorizing, through titles or *Cartas Regias*, certain companies to undertake it on a

large scale. Meanwhile these companies, engaging in commerce protected by law and having much capital available, enlightened by experience, were soon able to make the expenditures necessary for the establishment of slaves on board, so that they lost the smallest possible number during the journey: their interests led them to enforce observance of certain hygienal measures. Revolution having brought war between France and England, these companies ceased their work, and the trade was done by ships of commerce that were not built for this purpose.

The ones which were built for the purpose after this period were perhaps even worse, for to escape the corsairs, they had to be most excellent sailing vessels, and as a consequence arranged much differently from the transport ships. In another case, pirates, wishing to obtain much money, crammed the hold with slaves, not allowing them to go up to the deck even to satisfy their needs, and they penned or held them in so that, if one man died, those who survived oft times had to pass one day or more beside the corpse. Such was the trade during the maritime war; also commencing in 1793, the foci of infection which the war caused to be more numerous and more deadly, made yellow fever more frequent in America, and especially in Spain, where it had only been known until then. Commencing in 1800, date of the great epidemic that stole 61,362 inhabitants in Andalusia, yellow fever raged almost every year in Spain until 1823, date of yellow fever in Passagem, and it was in 1824 that the author of this memoir came before the academy of sciences to hold that yellow fever in Barcelona and Passagem had come from the ships which had just been used for the slave trade, ships that he denominated the foci of a special infection, producing a special illness, which is yellow fever. From whence he concluded that the climates of one and the other continent had only a secondary effect, which was limited to lending greater activity to the foci of infection engendered by the trade. Fortune has justified these assertions; because since 1824, Spain has suffered yellow fever no more; while during the twenty and four previous years of the illness, it had stolen 140,000 of its inhabitants. But it is meet to say that we are forewarned about the ships that have served for the slave trade.

