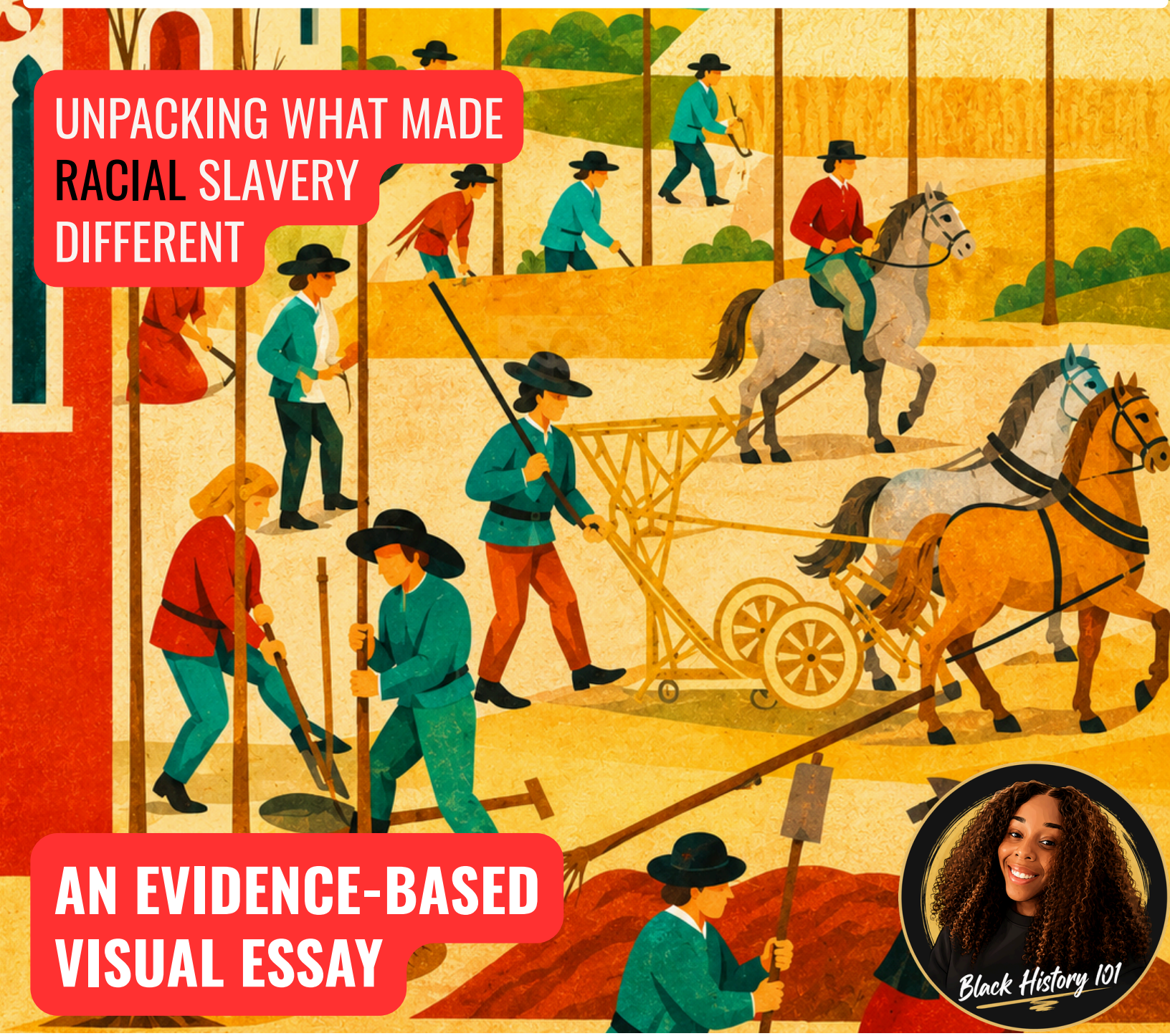
“BUT SLAVERY EXISTED EVERYWHERE.”

UNPACKING WHAT MADE RACIAL SLAVERY DIFFERENT



AN EVIDENCE-BASED VISUAL ESSAY

BLACK PEOPLE WERE IN EUROPE BEFORE THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE



African presence in Europe goes back to the ancient world.

Historian Olivette Otele points to Africans in the Roman Empire, including prominent figures such as Emperor Septimius Severus, Saint Augustine, and Apuleius.

Their presence continued for centuries. Africans appear in European history as rulers, intellectuals, members of royal courts, servants, and enslaved people.

In the 1200s, Frederick II employed Africans at his court, including John "the Moor," who became his chamberlain. North African Muslims also ruled parts of the Iberian Peninsula for centuries.

Black history in Europe did not begin with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Black History 101

SLAVERY WASN'T NEW



Roman World | c. 1st century BCE–5th century CE

Centuries before the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Roman world already had an extensive system of slavery.

Enslaved people were:

bought and sold • trafficked over long distances • forced to labor • born into slavery

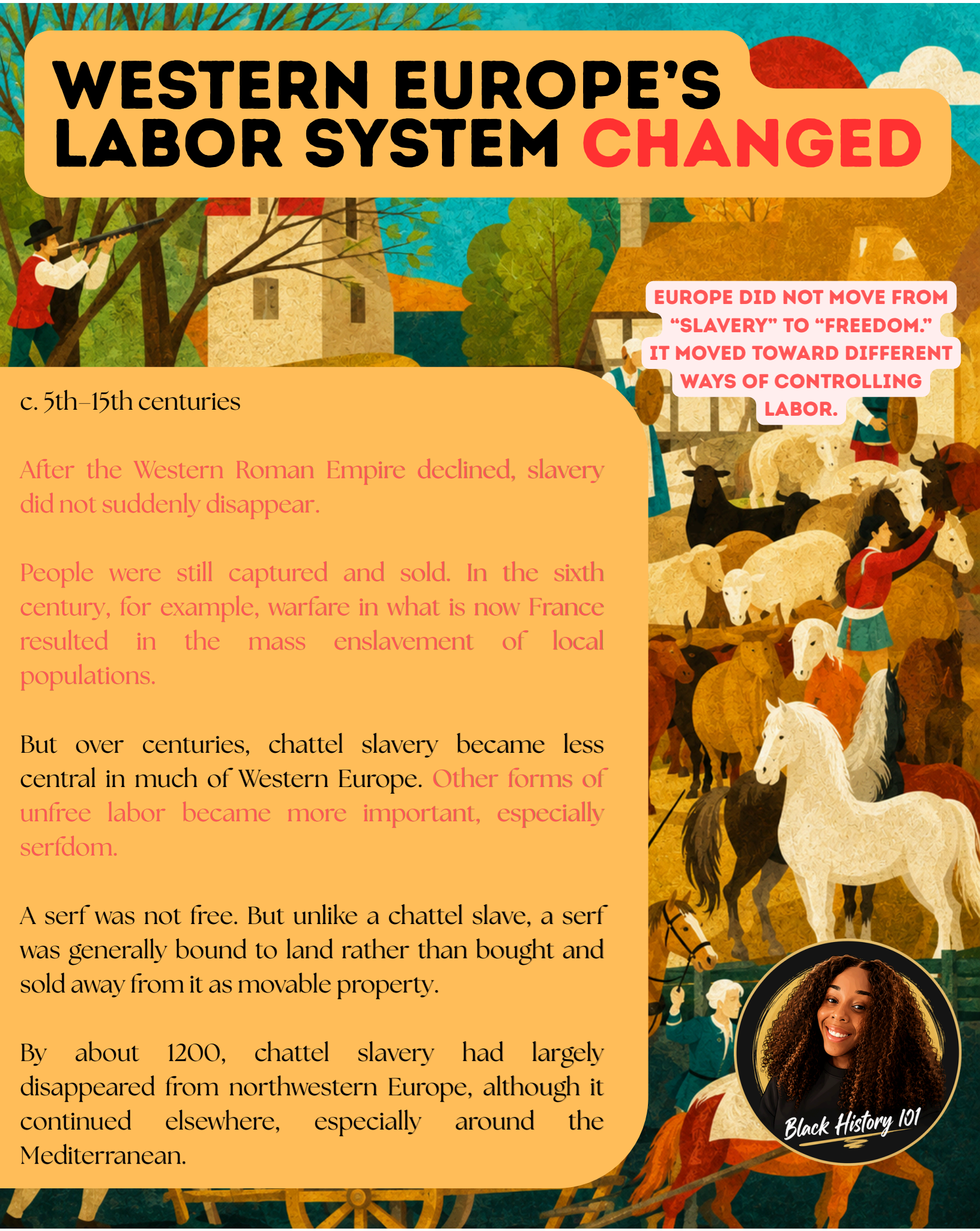
Roman slavery could be brutal and commercial. People from many different populations could be enslaved.

What it was not was a system built specifically around Blackness or African ancestry.

So property, violence, forced labor, and even inherited slavery cannot by themselves explain what later made racial slavery different.

Black History 101

WESTERN EUROPE'S LABOR SYSTEM CHANGED



EUROPE DID NOT MOVE FROM "SLAVERY" TO "FREEDOM." IT MOVED TOWARD DIFFERENT WAYS OF CONTROLLING LABOR.

c. 5th–15th centuries

After the Western Roman Empire declined, slavery did not suddenly disappear.

People were still captured and sold. In the sixth century, for example, warfare in what is now France resulted in the mass enslavement of local populations.

But over centuries, chattel slavery became less central in much of Western Europe. Other forms of unfree labor became more important, especially serfdom.

A serf was not free. But unlike a chattel slave, a serf was generally bound to land rather than bought and sold away from it as movable property.

By about 1200, chattel slavery had largely disappeared from northwestern Europe, although it continued elsewhere, especially around the Mediterranean.

Black History 101

CHRISTIANITY CHANGED WHO COULD BE ENSLAVED



Pope Zacharias

c. 6th–15th centuries

As Christianity spread, religious identity increasingly mattered in determining who Europeans believed could legitimately be enslaved.

The change was gradual.

644: The Synod of Chalons restricted the sale of Christian captives.

743: A church council prohibited selling Christians to "heathens."

748: Pope Zacharias tried to stop Christians from being sold to Muslim slave traders.

Christians continued to enslave other Christians. Christopher Paolella explains that the change was slow and uneven. By the seventh and eighth centuries, however, church authorities were increasingly trying to restrict Christians from selling fellow Christians to outsiders.

Black History 101

FOCUSED SHIFTED TOWARDS THE "OUTSIDER"



Pope Hadrian I

8th–15th centuries

As more of Western Europe became Christian, enslaving fellow Christians became increasingly difficult to justify.

But that protection did not extend equally to everyone.

pagans • Muslims • other non-Christian communities • foreigners could still be treated as legitimate targets for enslavement.

In 778, for example, Pope Hadrian I defended Rome against accusations that Christians were being sold to Muslim traders. The controversy wasn't over slavery itself. It centered on Christians being sold to non-*Christians.*

The moral boundary wasn't yet Black versus white.

It was still heavily shaped by questions like:

- Are you one of us?
- Or are you an outsider?

That distinction sets up the next historical shift.

THEN BLACKNESS AND AFRICAN ANCESTRY MATTERED MORE



15th–17th centuries

As Portuguese and other European powers expanded into the Atlantic, growing numbers of Africans entered European slave markets.

Europeans already possessed older negative ideas about Blackness and some African peoples.

Thompson documents associations with savagery, ugliness, animality, spiritual darkness, and cultural inferiority.

Africans were increasingly portrayed as naturally strong, suited to tropical climates, and suited to hard labor while simultaneously being described as inferior.

But European attitudes were contradictory. They also encountered African kingdoms, rulers, diplomats, merchants, farmers, and skilled craftspeople.

IN THE AMERICAS, BLACKNESS BECAME PROFITABLE



Jan Mostaert. Portrait of an African Man. Oil on oak wood, circa 1525–1530. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

16th–17th centuries

European colonization created enormous demands for labor.

Plantations producing sugar, tobacco, rice, and eventually cotton connected land in the Americas, European commercial interests, and enslaved African labor.

And Europeans increasingly claimed Africans were naturally:

strong • suited to tropical climates • suited to hard physical labor

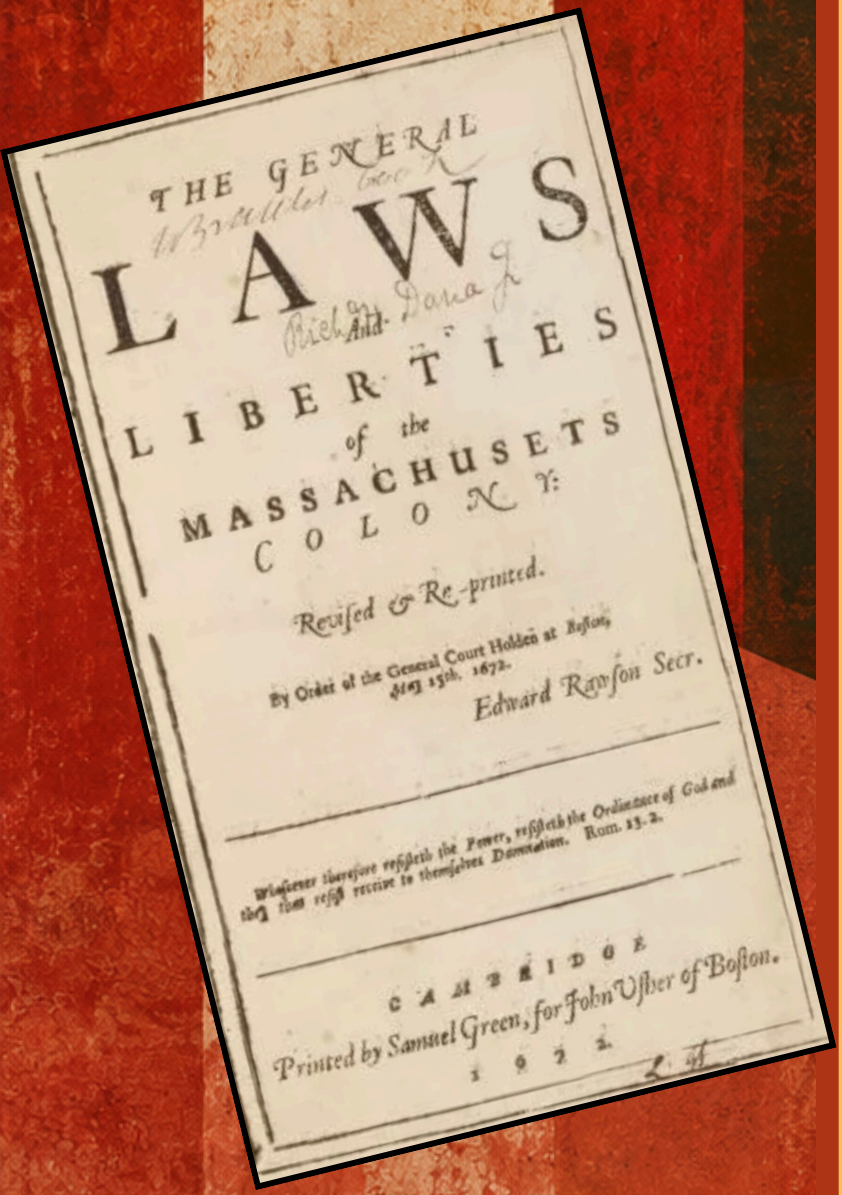
At the same time, Africans could be described as:

lazy • savage • immoral • inferior
Yes, those ideas contradicted each other.

Both sets of prejudice ideas were used to justify exploitation.Portrayed as inferior enough to enslave and physically suited enough to exploit.

Anievas and Nişancıoğlu describe the resulting plantation system as a historically distinctive combination of European capital, American land, and African slavery, different from both European serfdom and African systems of slavery.

THEN RACIAL SLAVERY BECAME LAW


THE GENERAL
LAWS
AND
LIBERTIES
of the
MASSACHUSETS
COLONY:
Revised & Re-printed.
By Order of the General Court Holden at Boston,
May 15th. 1672.
Edward Rawson Secr.
Whosoever therefore resisteth the Power, resisteth the Ordinance of God: and they that resist receive to themselves Damnation. Rom. 13. 2.
CAMBRIDGE
Printed by Samuel Green, for John Usher of Boston.
1672.

17th century | Colonial Americas

This system did not arrive fully formed.

Colonial governments increasingly turned the developing association between African ancestry and enslavement into law.

Virginia gives us a clear example:

1619 — First recorded Africans arrive in English Virginia.

1640 — John Punch receives lifetime servitude while the European men who escaped with him receive additional terms.

1662 — A child's legal status follows the mother.

1667 — Christian baptism no longer changes enslaved status.

Being Christian could no longer erase the boundary.

Ancestry increasingly could determine your status from birth.

Slavery was ancient.
Racial slavery was made.



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