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Letter 113	Letter 115
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Usbek to the same

We have nothing more to say about Asia and Europe ; let us turn to Africa. We can speak of little but its coasts, since we do not know its interior.

The Barbary Coasts, [1] where the Muhammadan religion is established, are no more populous than they were in Roman times, for the reasons we have already stated. [2] As for the coasts of Guinea, they must be stripped bare in the two hundred years that the petty kings or village chieftains have been selling their subjects to the princes of Europe to take to their colonies in America. [3]

What is singular is that this America that every year takes in so many new inhabitants is itself empty, and does not benefit from the continual losses of Africa. Those slaves who are transported into another climate perish there by the thousands ; and the labor in the mines to which they constantly put both the country's natives and the foreigners, [4] the maleficent vapors that issue from them, the quicksilver which is continually in use, inexorably destroy them. [5]

There is nothing so extravagant as to send a countless number of men to their deaths in order to extract gold and silver from the bowels of the earth, these metals being in themselves totally useless, and which are wealth only because they have been chosen to serve as its signs.

Paris this last day of the moon of Chahban 1718

[1] The whole north coast of Africa, from Egypt to the kingdom of Fez.

[2] See letter 108.

[3] The slave trade was practiced by the Portuguese beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, then changed rapidly into the triangular trade after the discovery of America, but it developed fairly slowly and irregularly until the eighteenth century. Montesquieu's native Bordeaux outfitted only six ships for Africa between 1707 and 1728, compared with 218 in Nantes.

[4] This particular criticism of the slave conditions relates only to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies : the work in the mines and the difference of climates, make it clear that the Antilles are not at issue. The subject is all the more important that it seems to furnish the only solid argument of the pro-slavery forces : never would free men accept such work - an argument which *The Spirit of Law* (XV, 8) will refute.

[5] Amédée Frezier, royal engineer, describes with illustration the process of dissolving ore in mercury (quicksilver), after which the mercury is evaporated so it can be recuperated (*Relation du voyage de la Mer du sud*, Paris, 1716, p. 140-143) ; "after they have remained there a while, they absorb the quicksilver so that most of them tremble all over, and die stupified" (p. 251).