THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN

Perspectives on the African Slave Trade

Before enslaved Africans began their horrific Middle Passage across the Atlantic, they were captured by African slavers in the interior and then traded to European merchants and slave-ship captains along the coast. Some African kingdoms, such as Benin or initially the Kongo, made enormous profits from the slave trade, while other societies, such as the Ibo, were the unfortunate victims.

1 Nzinga Mbemba (Affonso I), letter to the king of Portugal, July 6, 1526. Portuguese priests brought Christianity to the Kongo Kingdom in 1491, and King Affonso I (r. 1509–1543) of the Kongo and the entire royal family converted. Nevertheless, slavery had existed in the Kongo before the Portuguese arrived. King Affonso I initially profited from the transatlantic slave trade, but by the 1520s the trade threatened the kingdom’s survival. Here Affonso begs the Portuguese king, João VI, to halt the trade.

July 6, 1526
To Dom João, King our Brother
Sir, Your Highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost . . . caused by the excessive freedom given by your factors and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom. . . .
And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, . . . they grab them and get them to be sold; and . . . our country is being completely depopulated. . . . We beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, . . . because it is our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them. . . . Otherwise we cannot remedy such an obvious damage. Pray Our Lord in His mercy to have Your Highness under His guard. . . . I kiss your hands many times.
At the town of Congo,
The King, Dom Affonso

2 William Bosman, description of the coast of Guinea, 1705. William Bosman, who arrived in West Africa in 1688, was employed by the Dutch East India Company at Elmina Castle (in modern Elmina, Ghana). He provides a detailed, first-person account of the African slave trade around the port city of Fida (modern Ouidah in Benin).

The first business of one of our Factors when he comes to Fida, is to satisfie the Customs of the King . . ., about 100 Pounds in Guinea value. . . . After which we have free License to Trade. . . .
Before we can deal with any Person, we are obliged to buy the King’s whole stock of Slaves at a set price; which is commonly one third or one fourth higher than ordinary: After which we [may] deal with all his Subjects. . . . But if there happen to be no stock of Slaves, the Factor must [trust] the Inhabitants with Goods to the value of one or two hundred Slaves; which Commodities they send into the In-land Country, in order to buy with them Slaves at all Markets, and that sometimes two hundred Miles deep in the Country. . . . Most of the Slaves that are offered to us are Prisoners of War, which are sold by the Victors as their Booty.
The Invalides . . . being thrown out, . . . the remainder are numbered, and it is entered who delivered them. In the meanwhile, a burning Iron, with the Arms or Name of the Companies, lies in the Fire; with which ours are marked on the Breast . . . that we may distinguish them from the Slaves of the English, French, or others (which are also marked with their Mark).

3 John Adams, description of the shore trade at Bonny, 1822. John Adams, an English ship captain who made ten voyages to Africa between 1786 and 1800, describes the shore method of trading at Bonny.

This place is the wholesale market for slaves, as not fewer than 20,000 are annually sold here; 16,000 of whom are natives of one nation called Ibo. . . .
Fairs where the slaves of the Ibo nation are obtained are held every five or six weeks at several villages, which are situated on the banks of the rivers and creeks in the interior, and to which the African traders of Bonny resort to purchase them.
. . . The [African] traders augment the quantity of their merchandise by obtaining from their friends, the captains of the slave ships, a considerable quantity of goods on credit. . . . Evening is the period chosen for the time of departure,
when they proceed in a body, accompanied by the noise of drums, horns, and gongs. At the expiration of the sixth day, they generally return, bringing with them 1,500 or 2,000 slaves, who are sold to Europeans the evening after their arrival, and taken on board the ships.

4 Portuguese doctor, report on the slave trade in Luanda, 1793. An anonymous Portuguese doctor offers a detailed account of the conditions of enslaved Africans in Luanda. Be sure to note how the enslaved peoples are clearly considered, and treated, as chattel.

The dwelling place of the slave is simply the dirt floor of the compound, and he remains there exposed to harsh conditions and bad weather, and at night there are only a lean-to and some sheds . . . , which they are herded into like cattle.

Their food continues scarce as before, . . . limited at times to badly cooked beans, at other times to corn . . . . And when they reach a port . . . they are branded on the right breast with the coat of arms of the king and nation, of whom they have become vassals . . . . This mark is made with a hot silver instrument in the act of paying the king’s duties, and this brand mark is called a carimbo . . . .

In this miserable and deprived condition the terrified slaves remain for weeks and months, and the great number of them who die is unspeakable. With some ten or twelve thousand arriving at Luanda each year, it often happens that only six or seven thousand are finally transported to Brazil.

5 Gang of captives met at Mbame’s on their way to Tette. This engraving is based on a sketch made by the Scottish missionary David Livingstone, who observed these enslaved African men, women, and children. Captured in the interior, the slaves were passing through the village of an African chief, Mbame, on their way to Tete, in modern Mozambique. Their African captors carry guns obtained from Europeans in the slave trade. Livingstone included the image in his account of his travels in central east Africa, Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi . . . 1858–1864. The engraving was published in 1865–1866 in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine.

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ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

1. According to King Affonso’s letter in Source 1, how were Portuguese merchants and foreign goods weakening his control over his people and depopulating his country?

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2. In Sources 2 and 3, William Bosman and John Adams describe some of the rules and procedures followed by Africans and Europeans while engaging in the slave trade. What were some of these, and how did they advantage one side or the other, or both?

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3. According to Adams’s account in Source 3, how did the European ship captains and the African traders work together to obtain slaves?

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4. Based on these sources, what assumptions can you make about how Africans viewed the slave trade?

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5. In the image in Source 5, how do the African traders ensure that their captives, especially the men, will not rebel or run away?

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Using the sources above, along with what you have learned from “The African Slave Trade” background text, write a short essay about the nature of the slave trade along the African coast. How did it operate, and what were the different roles that Europeans and Africans played in it?

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