

SECTION 2

Africa in an Age of Transition

Guide to Reading

Main Ideas

- European expansion affected Africa with the dramatic increase of the slave trade.
- Traditional political systems and cultures continued to exist in most of Africa.

Key Terms

plantation, triangular trade, Middle Passage

People to Identify

King Afonso, Ibo

Places to Locate

Brazil, Benin, South Africa, Mozambique

Preview Questions

1. How did European expansion affect Africa's peoples and cultures?
2. How were the African states structured politically?

Reading Strategy

Cause and Effect Use a table like the one below to identify economic and political factors that caused the slave trade to be profitable. List the economic and political effects of the trade.

Economic/ Political Factors	Economic/ Political Effects

Preview of Events

1510

1525

1540

1555

1570

1585

1600

1518

A Spanish ship carries the first boatload of African slaves to the Americas

1591

Moroccan forces defeat the Songhai army

Voices from the Past



Captured Africans, yoked and shackled

Early European explorers sought gold in Africa but were soon involved in the slave trade. One Dutch trader noted:

“As the slaves come down to Fida [a port on the west coast of Africa] from the inland country, they are put into a booth, or prison, built for that purpose, near the beach, all of them together; and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out into a large plain, where the surgeons examine every part of them, men and women being all stark naked. Such as are found good and sound are set on one side. Each of those which have passed as good is marked . . . with a red-hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English, or Dutch companies, so that each nation may distinguish its own and prevent their being changed by the natives for worse.”

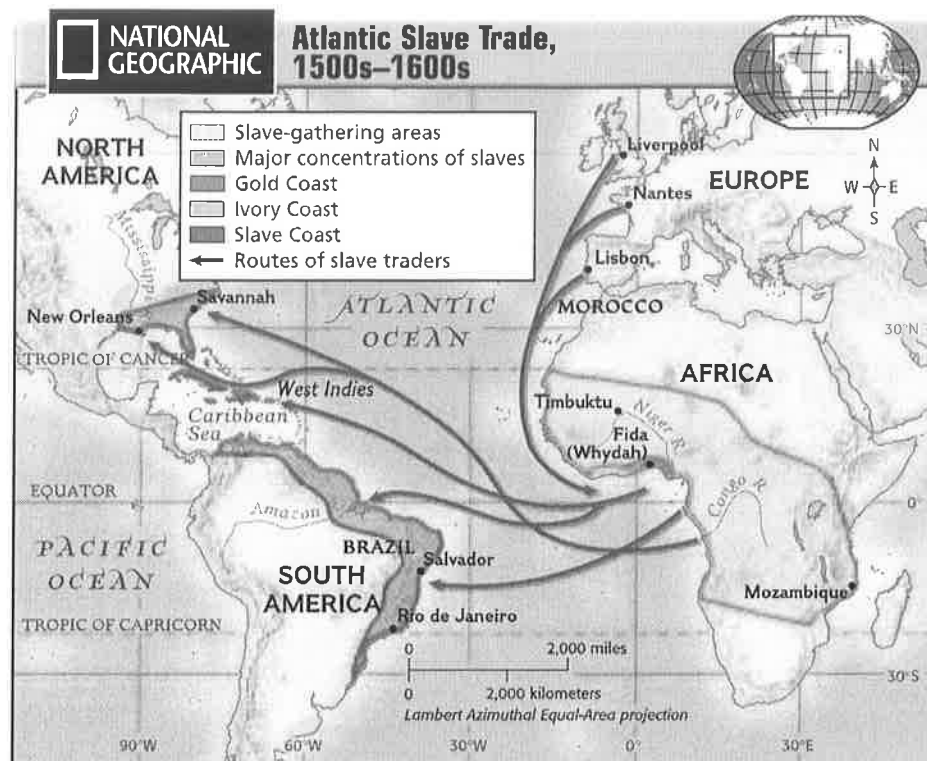
— *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, Elizabeth Dorman, ed., 1930

The exchange of slaves became an important part of European trading patterns.

The Slave Trade

Traffic in slaves was not new, to be sure. As in other areas of the world, slavery had been practiced in Africa since ancient times. In the fifteenth century, it continued at a fairly steady level.

The primary market for African slaves was Southwest Asia, where most slaves were used as domestic servants. Slavery also existed in some European countries.



During the last half of the fifteenth century, for example, about a thousand slaves were taken to Portugal each year. Most wound up serving as domestic servants. The demand for slaves changed dramatically, however, with the discovery of the Americas in the 1490s and the planting of sugarcane there.

Cane sugar was introduced to Europe from Southwest Asia during the Middle Ages. During the sixteenth century, plantations, large agricultural estates, were set up along the coast of **Brazil** and on islands in the Caribbean to grow sugarcane. Growing cane sugar demands much labor. The small Native American population, much of which had died of diseases imported from Europe, could not provide the labor needed. Thus, African slaves were shipped to Brazil and the Caribbean to work on the plantations.

Growth of the Slave Trade In 1518, a Spanish ship carried the first boatload of African slaves directly from Africa to the Americas. During the next two centuries, the trade in slaves grew dramatically and became part of the triangular trade that marked the emergence of a new world economy. The pattern of triangular trade connected Europe, Africa and Asia, and the American continents. European merchant ships carried European manufactured goods, such as guns and cloth, to Africa, where they were traded for a cargo of slaves. The slaves were then shipped to the Americas and sold. European merchants then bought tobacco, molasses, sugar, and raw cotton and shipped them back to Europe to be sold in European markets.

An estimated 275,000 African slaves were exported during the sixteenth century. Two thousand went every year to the Americas alone. In the seventeenth century, the total climbed to over a million and jumped to six million in the eighteenth century. By then the trade had spread from West Africa and central Africa to East Africa. Altogether, as many as ten million African slaves were brought to the Americas between the early sixteenth and the late nineteenth centuries.

One reason for these astonishing numbers, of course, was the high death rate. The journey of slaves from Africa to the Americas became known as the **Middle Passage**, the middle portion of the triangular trade route. Many slaves died on the journey. Those who arrived often died from diseases to which they had little or no immunity.

Death rates were higher for newly arrived slaves than for those born and raised in the Americas. The new generation gradually developed at least a partial immunity to many diseases. Owners, however, rarely encouraged their slaves to have children. Many slave owners, especially on islands in the Caribbean, believed that buying a new slave was less expensive than raising a child from birth to working age.

Sources of Slaves Before the coming of Europeans in the fifteenth century, most slaves in Africa were prisoners of war. When Europeans first began to take part in the slave trade, they bought slaves from local African merchants at slave markets on the coasts in return for gold, guns, or other European goods.



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At first, local slave traders obtained their supplies of slaves from the coastal regions nearby. As demand increased, however, they had to move farther inland to find their victims.

Local rulers became concerned about the impact of the slave trade on the well-being of their societies. In a letter to the king of Portugal in 1526, **King Afonso** of Congo (Bakongo) said, “so great is the corruption that our country is being completely depopulated.”

Protests from Africans were generally ignored by Europeans, however, as well as by other Africans. As a rule, local rulers who traded slaves viewed the slave trade as a source of income. Many sent raiders into defenseless villages in search of victims.

Effects of the Slave Trade The effects of the slave trade varied from area to area. Of course, it always had tragic effects on the lives of individual victims and their families. The slave trade led to the depopulation of some areas, and it deprived many African communities of their youngest and strongest men and women.

The desire of local slave traders to provide a constant supply of slaves led to increased warfare in Africa. Coastal or near-coastal African leaders and their followers, armed with guns acquired from the trade in slaves, increased their raids and wars on neighboring peoples.



Slaves were kept in the ship's cargo deck, called the hold.

Only a few Europeans lamented what they were doing to traditional African societies. One Dutch slave trader remarked, “From us they have learned strife, quarrelling, drunkenness, trickery, theft, unbridled desire for what is not one’s own, misdeeds unknown to them before, and the accursed lust for gold.”

The slave trade had a devastating effect on some African states. The case of **Benin** in West Africa is a good example. A brilliant and creative society in the sixteenth century, Benin was pulled into the slave trade.

As the population declined and warfare increased, the people of Benin lost faith in their gods, their art deteriorated, and human sacrifice became more common. When the British arrived there at the end of the nineteenth century, they found a corrupt and brutal place. It took years to discover the brilliance of the earlier culture destroyed by slavery.

✓ Reading Check Describing Describe the purpose and path of the triangular trade.

Political and Social Structures

The slave trade was one of the most noticeable effects of the European presence in Africa between 1500 and 1800. Generally, European influence did not extend beyond the coastal regions. Only in a few areas, such as **South Africa** and **Mozambique**, were there signs of a permanent European presence.

Traditional Political Systems In general, traditional African political systems continued to exist. By the sixteenth century, monarchy had become a common form of government throughout much of the continent. Some states, like the kingdom of Benin in West Africa, were highly centralized, with the king regarded as almost divine.

Other African states were more like collections of small principalities knit together by ties of kinship or other loyalties. The state of Ashanti on the Gold Coast was a good example. The kingdom consisted of a number of previously independent small states linked together by kinship ties and subordinated to the king. To provide visible evidence of this unity, each local ruler was given a ceremonial stool of office as a symbol of the kinship ties that linked the rulers



People In History

King Afonso I

c.1456–c.1545—African king

Afonso I was the greatest king of Congo (present-day Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo). He was born Mvemba Nzinga, son of the king of Congo. After the Portuguese arrived in the kingdom, Mvemba converted to Catholicism and changed his name to Afonso. After he became king in 1506, Afonso sought friendly relations with the Portuguese. In return for trade privileges, the Portuguese sent manufactured goods, missionaries, and craftspeople to Congo. Afonso soon found, however, that the Portuguese could not be trusted. They made more and more raids for African slaves and even attempted to assassinate King Afonso when they thought that the king was hiding gold from them. Afonso remained a devout Christian, building churches and schools.



together. The king had an exquisite golden stool to symbolize the unity of the entire state.

Many Africans continued to live in small political units in which authority rested in a village leader. For example, the **Ibo** society of eastern Nigeria was based on independent villages. The Ibo were active traders, and the area produced more slaves than practically any other in the continent.

Foreign Influences Many African political systems, then, were affected little by the European presence.

Nevertheless, the Europeans were causing changes, sometimes indirectly. In the western Sahara, for example, trade routes shifted toward the coast. This led to the weakening of the old Songhai trading empire and the emergence of a vigorous new Moroccan dynasty in the late sixteenth century.

Morocco had long hoped to expand its influence into the Sahara in order to seize control over the trade in gold and salt. In 1591, after a 20-week trek across the desert, Moroccan forces defeated the Songhai army and then occupied the great trading center of Timbuktu. Eventually, the Moroccans were forced to leave, but Songhai was beyond recovery. Its next two centuries were marked by civil disorder.

Foreigners also influenced African religious beliefs. Here, however, Europeans had less impact than the Islamic culture. In North Africa, Islam continued to expand. Muslim beliefs became dominant along the northern coast and spread southward into the states of West and East Africa.

Although their voyages centered on trade with the East, Europeans were also interested in spreading Christianity. The Portuguese engaged in some missionary activity, but the English, the Dutch, and the French made little effort to combine their trading activities with the Christian message. Except for a tiny European foothold in South Africa and the isolated kingdom of Ethiopia, Christianity did not stop the spread of Islam in Africa.

Reading Check Describing What was the most common form of government throughout Africa? What other political systems existed?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

- Define** plantation, triangular trade, Middle Passage.
- Identify** King Afonso, Ibo.
- Locate** Brazil, Benin, South Africa, Mozambique.
- Explain** how the Europeans obtained access to slaves. To what port cities in Europe and the Americas were the African slaves shipped?
- Identify** the effects of the slave trade on the culture of Benin.

Critical Thinking

- Analyze** Why did Africans engage in slave trade? Did they have a choice?
- Compare and Contrast** Use a table like the one below to compare and contrast the political systems of Benin, the state of Ashanti, and the Ibo peoples.

Benin	Ashanti	Ibo

Analyzing Visuals

- Examine** the picture of the inside of a slave ship shown on page 417. From looking at this picture, what conclusions can you draw about the conditions that slaves endured during their voyage to the Americas?

Writing About History

- Persuasive Writing** Does the fact that Africans participated in enslaving other Africans make the European involvement in the slave trade any less reprehensible? Write an editorial supporting your position.