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# American Black History

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# Mighty African Kingdoms

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Prior to the Age of Exploration, which began in the middle of the fifteenth century, Europeans referred to Africa as the “Dark Continent” and held many fanciful ideas about its human and animal inhabitants. Africans were believed to have no heads with eyes and mouths located in their breasts! Their feet were thought to be so large that they could lie on their backs and use them as umbrellas. African birds were said to spend their entire lives in the air because they did not have legs and could not land! It’s not surprising then, that when Europeans saw Africa for the first time, they were shocked to find civilizations as advanced as their own.

The first great kingdom to spring up on Africa’s west coast was Ghana. Roughly 400 miles northwest of present-day Ghana, this early African kingdom emerged in the 5th century A.D. Early Ghanaians were the first people in Africa to smelt iron ore. As a result, their army was equipped with iron swords and other weapons that enabled them to conquer and control neighboring peoples.

Ghana sat on a lucrative trade route. From Arab states to the north came such goods as cloth, fruit, sugar, salt, and wheat. In exchange, the rulers of Ghana exported gold, ivory, and slaves. Ghana’s greatness continued until the 11th century, when black Muslims living at the mouth of the Senegal River seized control of its capital city of Koumbi Saleh and killed all inhabitants who refused to convert to Islam. The government of Ghana crumbled thereafter.

The next great empire of West Africa was Mali, which reached its greatest height in the early 14th century under Emperor Mansa Musa. As with Ghana, Mali’s wealth was based in part on its vast supply of gold. To illustrate the empire’s wealth, the emperor, a Muslim, embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He took with him an entourage of (some sources claim) 60,000 people, including 12,000 servants and 500 slaves. Loaded on eighty camels were 10,886 pounds of gold. The gold was used to pay for the trip and to distribute to people along the way.

The pride of the Mali Empire was the city of Timbuktu. The city, which stands today in less glorious form, was a cultural as well as trade center. So many scholars lived in Timbuktu that merchants there made greater profits from books than from any other commodity. Timbuktu’s university and libraries made it the intellectual capital of West Africa.

Mali remained powerful until the mid 1400s, when it was conquered by the Songhay people who lived to the east of Mali. The empire established by the Songhay became the largest of the early West African empires. At one point, it stretched for 1,000 miles along the Niger River. It extended west to east from present-day Senegal to Chad. To the north, its boundaries reached Algeria, Tunisia, and part of Libya. To the south, it reached the jungles and forests of present-day southern Mauritania, northern Mali, and western Niger.

The greatest ruler of the Songhay Empire was Askia Mohammed. From 1493 to 1528, he made Timbuktu a leading center of learning. In addition to the University of Sankore at Timbuktu, universities in the cities of Jenne and Gao attracted scholars and students from all over Europe and Asia.

In 1591, Muslim armies from Morocco to the north overran Songhay, destroying libraries, books, and other cultural treasures. Although the empire fell, Songhay, along with Ghana, Mali, and smaller nations such as Benin and Ashanti, gave proof that Africa was not the “Dark Continent” medieval Europeans had thought it to be.

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## *Review and Write*

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1. What were some absurd beliefs Europeans had about Africa at the beginning of the Age of Exploration?
2. Cite evidence to prove that the kingdoms and empires that existed in West Africa were highly advanced.

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# Slavery: Its Beginnings

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Some students may think that slavery started when the first blacks were brought to America from Africa. But slavery goes back to the beginning of organized society. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and other early peoples all owned slaves. Ever since nations and empires were formed, people have enslaved war captives and other unfortunate souls.

Africans themselves practiced the institution of



slavery. When one tribe defeated another in battle, the victor often made slaves of prisoners. Africans also captured members of neighboring tribes and sold them as slaves to Muslim slave traders from northern Africa. When Europeans became involved in the slave trade, African chieftains sold slaves to them, too. In so doing, the chieftains avoided being sold into slavery themselves. They also acquired guns, cloth, and other items in payment for their transaction. The guns were used to defeat clans and tribes with whom they were constantly warring.

The European slave trade began in 1441 when a Portuguese sea captain named Anthony Gonsalves captured twelve blacks on the coast of west Africa and brought them back to Portugal. Soon the demand for blacks to serve as domestic slaves in Portuguese households grew. The Portuguese also used African slaves to work on their sugar plantations in Brazil. Seeing this, Spain soon got into the act, desiring slaves to work their own sugar plantations in the West Indies. Both countries had tried enslaving Native Americans, forcing them to toil on their plantations. Indians, however, did not take to enslavement, and many died from hard work and disease. Africans proved to be sturdier and more suitable to farm work in the climate of the Western Hemisphere.

England followed the example of Portugal and Spain—using African slaves in the New World—and the European slave trade flourished. No one knows exactly how many Africans were brought to the New World during this period of exploration and colonization. Estimates range from 9 million to as high as 25 million.

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## *Review and Write*

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1. How far back does the institution of slavery go?
2. Explain this statement: Slavery was not new to Africans who were captured and brought to the New World as slaves.
3. Why did the attempt by European powers to use Native Americans as slaves fail?

# Slave Ships to the Americas

Few chapters in history relate a story more horrible than that of the slave ships that transported Africans to the Americas. Chained together and crammed into spaces sometimes no more than eighteen inches high, many died before the long voyage across the Atlantic was completed.



The journey across the Atlantic is often referred to as the *middle passage*. The “first passage” consisted of the long trek to Africa’s west coast from inland areas where slaves-to-be were captured. Once the captives reached the coast, they were held in European forts or “factories” until a ship arrived to take them to the Americas.

In the 16th century, the voyage across the Atlantic took anywhere from 12 to 20 weeks. During this time, as many as twenty percent of the human cargo died. Diseases such as dysentery and smallpox were rampant. Forced to lie in their own waste and vomit, slaves had little chance to survive a serious illness. Sometimes, while being loaded on the ships, Africans who were chained together committed mass suicide by jumping overboard. Confined to a tiny space in the hold of a ship, many went mad during the long voyage. Others were strangled by the captives chained next to them who grew violent in their desperation to acquire a little more space and food. When a slave died, his or her body was separated from the others and thrown overboard.

One of the best descriptions of a slave ship comes from one who actually endured its horrors.

Olaudah Equiano, who later educated himself, bought his freedom, and recorded his experiences in his autobiography entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, was 11 years old when he was captured and brought to one of the slave forts to await transport to the New World. He recalled that his worst fear at first centered around the rumor that captives were often cooked and eaten by the strange white men at the fort. Once aboard a ship, he described the stench below deck as so repulsive and nauseating that he immediately vomited and could not eat. He also wrote that the crowded and unsanitary conditions, coupled with the cruelty of the crew and the “shrieks of the women” and the “moans of the men,” caused him and other captives to actually envy those slaves who found ways to commit suicide before the passage across the ocean was completed.

Few records survive to verify that slaves resisted their captors, but the fact that ships carried such instruments of punishment as thumb screws, chains, and whips indicate that crews were ready for anything. One well-documented rebellion aboard a Spanish slave ship occurred in 1839. Led by a slave named Cinque, rebellious slaves killed most of the white crew and took over the *Amistad*. Cinque and the others were brought to trial in the United States but were acquitted by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The third or final passage of an African captive’s journey into slavery occurred when the slave ship reached its final destination. There the captive was auctioned off to the highest bidder and his or her life of bondage began.

## Review and Write

1. Why did Europeans build forts or “factories” along Africa’s west coast?
2. Describe conditions aboard a typical slave ship. Explain why so many slaves died en route to the Americas.