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Sierra Leone, a country in West Africa, had its own system of slavery which was not part of the slave-trade. This image depicts one of the ways in which a person could become a slave. If the King and his counselors found a defendant guilty, following a trial, that defendant could become a slave. To be sure the trial was fair, and the judges were impartial, the parties to the case had to wear masks. See the link, at the top of this chapter's Media Stream, to learn more about this illustration.

Before the fifteenth century, European sailing vessels could not easily travel long distances. Although West African countries had long-established trading relationships with Europeans, such activities took place mostly in the northern part of the African continent:

West Africans (this is a BBC link, see footnote* below for more details) *had traded with Europeans through merchants in North Africa for centuries. The first traders to sail down the West African coast were the Portuguese in the 15th century. Later the Dutch, British, French and Scandinavians followed. They were mainly interested in precious items such as gold, ivory and spices, particularly pepper.*

At that time, "before there was any regular commercial contact with Europeans," some African kingdoms and societies kept slaves. Among these were:

- The Ashanti (whose capital, Kumasi, is in today's Ghana);
- The kings of Bonny (in what is now the Nigerian delta); and
- The kings of Dahomey (known today as Benin).

In 1726, for example, it is said that the king of Dahomey agreed to supply slaves if Europeans established plantations in his kingdom.

The type of slavery which existed in Africa, before European slave-traders descended on the continent, "had a social and cultural context, rooted in kingship, which imposed definition and restraints on the slave master relationship." It was not, in other words, like the chattel slavery which later took hold in the Americas.

African people had a varied history before European slave-trading began. According to a synopsis prepared for the "Transatlantic Slavery" exhibit at Liverpool's Merseyside Maritime Museum:

The peoples of West Africa had a rich and varied history and culture long before European slavers arrived. They had a wide variety of political arrangements including kingdoms, city-states and other organisations, each with their own languages and culture.

Education and trade, among other things, were part of African life:

Art, learning and technology flourished and Africans were especially skilled in subjects like medicine, mathematics and astronomy. As well as domestic goods, they made fine luxury items in bronze, ivory, gold and terracotta for both local use and trade.

When the technology of sailing ships changed, however, so did the trading relationships between Europeans and Africans:

- With stern rudders, helmsmen could more easily steer their vessels.
- With three masts and many sails - instead of one mast and one large sail - a crew could more easily manage their ship.

Those two inventions meant that European ships could make much longer journeys. And when that happened, the cargo in their holds changed dramatically:

From their first contacts, European traders kidnapped and bought Africans for sale in Europe. However, it was not until the 17th century, when plantation owners wanted more and more slaves to satisfy the increasing demand for sugar in Europe, that transatlantic slaving became the dominant trade.

What prompted Europeans to think it was acceptable to kidnap Africans, treat them in the most barbaric ways and then sell them, as though they were cattle, in foreign lands?

* *The Story of Africa, told by Africans*, is a major BBC series. The link takes you to the index of programs - each lasting approximately thirty minutes - which you can hear online.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/AFRICA-BEFORE-SLAVERS-Amazing-Grace)

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Questions 2 Ponder

What Kind of Slavery Existed in Africa before European Slave-Trading?

Before African kingdoms had regular commercial contact with Europeans, some of those kingdoms and societies kept slaves. The African slave system, however, was not like the chattel-slave system which later took hold in the Americas.

Are you surprised to learn that a form of slavery existed in African kingdoms before Europeans began their slave-trading businesses? Why, or why not?

How Did Technology Contribute to Slave-Trading?

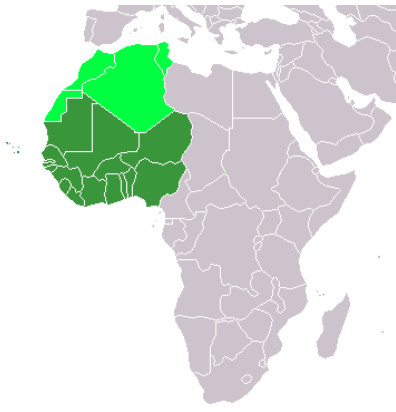
When the technology of sailing ships changed, adding stern rudders and three masts with many sails, Europeans could sail down the coast of Western Africa. With new ships came new cargo. Some of that new cargo included kidnapped humans.

“From their first contacts,” according to the BBC, European traders began to kidnap Africans to sell as slaves in Europe. In the 17th century, however, things changed when there was an increasing demand for sugar in Europe.

Sugar was a “New World” crop. Plantation owners in the “New World” needed more and more people to work their crops. Those new workers were slaves.

What may have prompted European traders - “from their first contacts” - to kidnap and sell Africans in Europe? Do you think that skin-color differences played a role in such actions? Why, or why not?

Media Stream

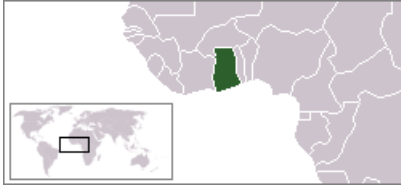


Map of West Africa

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Map-of-West-Africa>



Ghana - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy the [greenwichmeantime.com](http://www.greenwichmeantime.com) website.

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Nigerian Delta - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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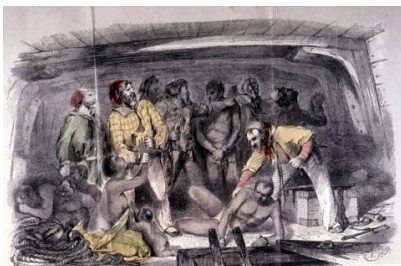


Benin - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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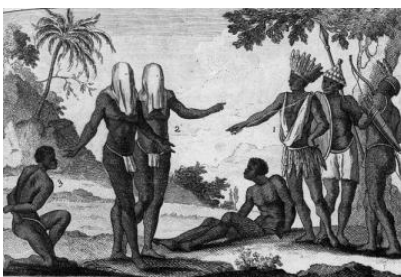
Stowing Cargo on a Slave Ship

Image LC-USZ62-15386 from the Library of Congress. Online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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