

Faculty of Letters and Languages.

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I - Europeans' Exploration of the West African Coasts:

The exploration of the African continent by the Western people goes back to the sixth century B.C when an expedition was said to have reached the Red Sea in the eastern part of the continent¹. A similar attempt of navigation through the West African coasts was undertaken by the Carthaginians centuries later. These seamen attained the River Senegal and probably reached the area of modern Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, little evidence was given to these early circumnavigations. It was not until the late Middle Ages that serious attempts to explore the African continent were undertaken.

It is worth noting that the Renaissance² that took place in Europe during the fifteenth century led to scientific and economic revivals. A new interest started to be given to trade in Europe and people there showed a great interest in the outside world. With the formation of new national states such as Portugal, France, and Spain, a competition increased between the traders of the same nationality as well as of different ones to gain power and capital which became the primary concerns of the Europeans after the breakdown of Feudalism. ³ The governments of these emerging nations of Western Europe were ready to accept any methods by which wealth and strength could be obtained. Thus, voyages of exploration and discovery were encouraged to search for new markets, labour and material⁴.

It was more especially the Indian spices which attracted the European merchants. For many centuries, the Europeans among them the Italians, used to trade with Asia. They provided the people there with timber, iron and slaves and could themselves obtain a valuable quality of spices, ivory, and other commodities that were not available in Europe. When Asia fell under the Muslims' control in the eighth century, the Italian merchants were denied access to the interior. Their trade was to be restricted on the coasts only because the Muslims feared

the influence of the Christians on Islam. The quality and the quantity of goods that reached the coast were limited and very expensive due to the damages before their arrival and could hardly cover the Europeans' needs. The European merchants believed that they could get more profits if they could find a direct route which was to lead them directly to India in order to search their commodities themselves⁵. A passage through Africa would probably lead them to the Asian original sources of spices. Therefore, voyages of exploration and discovery to the African continent had been encouraged.

The Italians were the first people to initiate the voyages of exploration towards the African continent. Their purpose was to reach the Red Sea, India and Ethiopia⁶, through an eastward sailing round Africa. However, they soon found their ambitions blocked by the existence of the Muslims who swept over the Nile Valley too. The Muslims categorically refused any European contact with the native Africans whether for commercial or religious purposes⁷.

Because an eastward exploration of Africa seemed impossible, the Italians directed their explorations through the North of Africa. Their aim was to reach the Sudan and the Sahara and to establish trade relations with the natives who had a flourishing commerce at that time. By the end of the thirteenth century, a mission was sent to North Africa by Raymond Lull, a pioneer in the European study of Arabic who could accompany a trans-Saharan caravan⁸. In 1447 a Genoese merchant, Antonio Malfante, acquired knowledge about trade in the Sahara, and in 1469 a Florentine pioneer named Benedetto Dei reached Timbuktu. Nevertheless, no other successive attempts were undertaken because of the Muslims' influence which swept throughout the African interior as well. The Italians, who did not have a military strength to fight against the Muslims in Africa, preferred to direct their explorations westward by circumnavigating Africa.

Genoese navigators known as Ugolino and Vivaldi sailed on the West African coasts as early as 1231⁹. However, their vessels were never found and little information was written down concerning their trip. Another journey was undertaken in 1320. It was led by Lan Zarotto, a Genoese adventurer who could plant a Spanish flag in the Canary Isles¹⁰. However, Italians' attempts soon came to an end. Although the Italian seamen had a high knowledge of the arts of accurate navigation, they were short of maritime materials that could enable them to go further in their explorations of the West African coasts and to fight against

the dangerous currents that were frequent there. In addition, there were no organized expeditions sponsored by the government. The Italian vessels that floated on the West African waters belonged to individual adventurers only. However, sailors from other emerging nations of Western Europe like Portugal had better opportunities.

Portugal emerged as a powerful national state during the late fourteenth century. It was ready to support expeditions that would explore the West African coasts and was in possession of highly developed vessels for that purpose. Through the exploration of Africa, the Portuguese aimed, in fact, to carry their crusade against Islam¹¹. Above all, the circumnavigation of Africa was a way to reach the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese ultimate aim. It was the Indian spices that attracted the Portuguese. They believed that they could become the wealthiest and the strongest nation in all Europe if they could provide directly from India the commodities that were not available in Europe.

In their explorations of the West African coasts, the Portuguese benefited from the Italians' technical skills and knowledge about Africa. As early as 1339, an Italian cartographer from Palma, Angelino Dulcert, was able to draw a sea chart describing the existence of a land in Africa rich in gold. The Portuguese also acquired knowledge about Africa through early Arabs' writings about the land of the blacks. The Arab geographers stated that the African continent could be navigated because all of it was surrounded by the sea. Most important of all, it was the occupation of Ceuta in Morocco in 1415¹² under the leadership of Prince Henry¹³ or "Henry the Navigator" as he is known in history, that the Portuguese enriched their knowledge about the blacks' land. They heard about the existence of a land across the Sahara in which gold was available and which was not under the Muslims' control. This land came to be called "Guinea", that is the land of the blacks which could only be reached by navigation¹⁴.

The Portuguese first attained Madeira¹⁵, a timber-bearing forest in 1418. They established a settlement there and started to plant sugar plantations by 1420. They reached the Azores in 1439. They discovered the White Cape, or Cape Blanco as it was called in 1441, and Arguin in 1443. As the island offered fishing opportunities, the Portuguese looked into the possibility of establishing trade relations there through the establishment of a trading fort in 1448. In 1444-5 the Portuguese explorers arrived at the Mouth of the Senegal and Cape Verde. Back to Portugal, they transported with them black slaves, as exhibits, to show

Prince Henry that they had reached “the land of the blacks”. They discovered Sierra Leone¹⁶ in 1460 and the Gold Coast in 1470. The coast was so rich in gold that the Portuguese started to erect a fort there as early as 1482. Eighteen years after the discovery of the Gold Coast, the Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Diaz (1450-1500) finally reached the Cape of Good Hope.

After the success of the first voyage to India by Vasco De Gama (1469-1524) in 1497, the Portuguese became less interested in Africa¹⁷. Asia could provide the Europeans with luxury goods which were not available in Europe and the traders there were used to maritime trade. West African people, however, had a commerce mainly directed inland through the Sahara and Sudan, and apart from slaves, ivory and gold they could offer but little to the European merchants’ needs at that time¹⁸. It was, however, the gold of the Gold Coast used as a means of exchange against the Asian goods, as well as the availability of slaves which made the Portuguese merchants change their attitude towards West Africa. They realized a new commercial profit in the transportation of African blacks to Europe. They believed that they could become wealthy by selling black people into servitude and elucidated their traffic in Christian terms. They claimed that the blacks who were taken to a foreign land would have the opportunity to get education and embrace Christianity¹⁹, but this was, in fact, just a pretext by which the Portuguese justified their business.

The importation of black slaves in Europe remained limited. Black women were used as house servants and concubines and black males worked as labourers, builders, ferrymen, dancers, singers and players in the European ceremonies. It was not until the discovery of the New World in 1492 and the rapid growth of the demand for labour there that the Europeans started to realize the importance of the African continent in supplying the American colonies with slaves to perform the agricultural tasks on the plantations.

The discovery of America revolutionized, to a great extent, African slavery²⁰. It is true that slavery, as an institution, was known among the earliest people of Africa and its existence goes back to countless centuries. The slaves in Africa could perform a variety of tasks. Black women were house servants and concubines, at times wives, and black males were agricultural labourers and victims of ritual sacrifice²¹. The slave in the African society was in the possession of some rights and was recognized as a member of a household²². In some societies as the Ashanti society, for instance, the slave could “marry, own property, himself own a slave, swear an ‘oath’, be a competent witness, and ultimately might become

heir to his master”²³. However, after the establishment of the first contacts between the Africans and the Europeans, African slavery became a profitable trade by which the westerners could acquire wealth and strength. Black slaves started to be transported in bulk across the Atlantic to meet the labour shortage in the Americas. Statistics show that the number of black slaves who landed overseas was estimated at about 293.000 slaves in the sixteenth century, 1.494.000 in the seventeenth century, 5.212.000 in the eighteenth century and 2.783.000 in the nineteenth century²⁴. (See table one).

Table one: Estimated numbers of African Slaves landed overseas by European traders (1451-1867):

	to old world destinations		To the Americas		totals
	totals	Annual average	totals	Annual average	
1451-1525	76.000	1.000			293.000
1526-50	31.300	1.200	12.500	500	
1551-75	26.300	1.000	34.700	1.400	
1576-1600	16.300	600	96.000	3.800	
1601-25	12.800	500	249.000	10.000	1.494.000
1626-50	6.600	300	236.000	9.500	
1651-75	9.000	120	368.000	15.000	
1676-1700	2.700	100	616.000	25.000	
1701-20			626.000	31.000	5.212.000
1721-40			870.000	43.000	
1741-60			1.007.000	50.000	
1761-80			1.148.000	57.000	
1781-1800			1.561.000	78.000	
1801-20			980.000	49.000	2.783.000
1821-67			1.803.000	38.000	
Totals	175.000		9.607.000		9.782.000

Source: J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, op. cit., p.254.

The establishment of plantations in the newly discovered land of America required a great deal of labour. With the quick demand in manpower, the West African coasts became the essential markets by which black human cargoes were being transported across the Atlantic to meet the labour shortage in the Americas.

Endnotes:

1 Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade (1440 – 1780)*, London, Paper Mac 1997, p.49.

2 The Renaissance was a cultural movement which emerged in the late Middle Ages first in Italy, then it swept throughout the rest of Europe. It witnessed a revival in different fields, namely art, literature, and economy. www.britanica.com

3 Feudalism is a form of government which swept Europe in the Middle Ages. In this form of government, the rulers considered themselves as the owners of all lands and the people living in those lands. www.britanica.com

4 O. P. Grenouilleau, *La Traite des Noirs*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p.28.

5 M. B. Norton and D. M. Katzman, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2nd Edition, 1986, I, p.15.

6 Because Ethiopia was easily reached through the East of Africa, it has long been believed that it belonged to Asia rather than Africa. J. D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p.218

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 H. Thomas, op. cit, p.50.

10 Ibid.

11 M. B. Norton, D.M. Kaczman, op. cit, p.15.

12 J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa: An Introductory Survey*, Cambridge University Press, 4th Edition, 1969, p.50.

13 Prince Henry was born at Porto, Portugal. He was the son of John I of Portugal. Being interested in the world outside Europe, he sent out expeditions to explore the West African coasts since the fourteenth century. www.wikipedia.org

14 H. Thomas, op. cit, p.51.

15 Madeira in the Portuguese language means ‘wood’. The Portuguese named it as such because of its timber-bearing forests. Ibid.

16 Sierra Leone in Portuguese means the lions' mountain. www.britanica.com

17 J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, op. cit., p. 229.

18 R. Oliver and J.D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*, Great Britain: Penguin books, 1970, p.101.

19 J. P. Davis, *The American Negro Reference Book*, New Jersey: Prentice- Hall, inc., Engle wood Cliffs, 1966, p.1.

20 A. Stamm, *L'Histoire de l'Afrique Pré -Coloniale*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p.114.

21 P. Kolchin, *American Slavery (1619-187)*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, p.20

22 S.M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2nd Edition, 1968, p.96.

23 Ibid.

24 J. D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, op. cit., p. 254.

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