

The Slave Trade in the Western Hemisphere

- According to *Stamped From the Beginning* (Ibram X. Kendi): “After Arab Muslims conquered parts of North Africa, Portugal, and Spain during the seventh century, Christians and Muslims battled for centuries over the prize of Mediterranean supremacy. Meanwhile, below the Sahara Desert, the West African Empires of Ghana (700-1200), Mali (1200-1500), and Songhay (1350-1600) were situated at the crossroads of the lucrative trade routes for gold and salt. A robust trans-Saharan trade emerged, allowing Europeans to obtain West African goods through Muslim intermediaries.”¹
 - Muslim people began trading in enslaved Slavic and African peoples.
 - In 1415, Prince Henry (*the Navigator*, 1394-1460) of Portugal convinced his father, King John of Portugal, to capture the Muslim trading post of Ceuta (Morocco) so they could “eliminate the Islamic middleman so they could find the southern source of gold and Black captives.”²



- Prince Henry became the first European to sail beyond the Western Sahara's Cape Bojador in order to capture and enslave Africans. On August 6th, 1444, Henry auctioned 240 enslaved Africans in Lagos, announcing Portugal's entry into the group of slave-trading nations.³
 - Slowly, Europe's trade in enslaved Africans began to eclipse that of enslaved Slavic Peoples.

¹ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 19.

² Ibid, 22.

³ Ibram Kendi, 25.

All of this is racist

- The Portuguese came the primary source of knowledge on Africa and African People for the slave-trading nations of Spain, Holland, France and England. The lens through which the Portuguese saw and presented African people – justifying their enslavement – was shaped by writers such as Gomes Eanes de Zurara that promoted, explained by Ibram Kendi, the racist “Climate Theory”:

- **Climate Theory:** Originally from Aristotle, this racist theory said that African People were “inferior” due to the hot African climate (and Europeans were better due to their more temperate climate which was reflected in their lighter skin tones).
 - Kendi argues that the “Climate Theory” of race would produce the first assimilationists – “Black People could be made like White People if they were moved to cooler climates”

Another theory would be added in the 16th century:

- **Curse Theory:** English travel writer George Best encountered Inuit on an Arctic voyage in 1577 that had darker skin, challenging the popular “climate theory.” Best offered another theory based on his interpretation of the Bible’s Noah and the Ark story (this interpretation has a lineage that goes back to Islamic and Hebrew sources)⁴. In Best’s version Noah orders his sons to abstain from sex whilst they were on the Ark – his son Ham disobeys and he and his descendants (Black Africans) are cursed.
 - Kendi argues that the “Curse Theory” of race would produce the first segregationists – “Black People were naturally and permanently inferior”⁵

- The Portuguese constructed Elmina Castle in West Africa (see a [3D rendering here](#)) which quickly became the centre of the European slave trade.
 - One of the daughters of Prince Henry the Navigator’s Genoese protégés married Christopher Columbus (who likely had experience trading in West Africa).
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- Spanish explorers and conquerors sought laborers to work lands in the Caribbean and Americas. As imported diseases ravaged Indigenous populations, the Spanish found themselves surrounded by vast tracts of land but with few laborers to work it.
 - The Spanish attempted to harness the labour of those who survived the diseases, but Indigenous Peoples frequently revolted or escaped to the hinterland.

⁴ Ibid, 21.

⁵ Ibid, 31-32.

- Vocal advocates of reform, most notably Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas, persuaded many in Spain that the abuses suffered by the Tiano at the hands of Spanish colonists were unacceptable on moral and religious grounds.

Because with great care we have procured the conversion of the Indians to our Holy Catholic Faith, and furthermore, if there are still people there who are doubtful of the faith in their own conversions, it would be a hindrance [to them], and therefore we will not permit, nor allow to go there [to the Americas] Moors nor Jews nor heretics nor reconciled heretics, nor persons who are recently converted to our faith, except if they are black slaves, or other slaves, that have been born under the dominion of our natural Christian subjects.

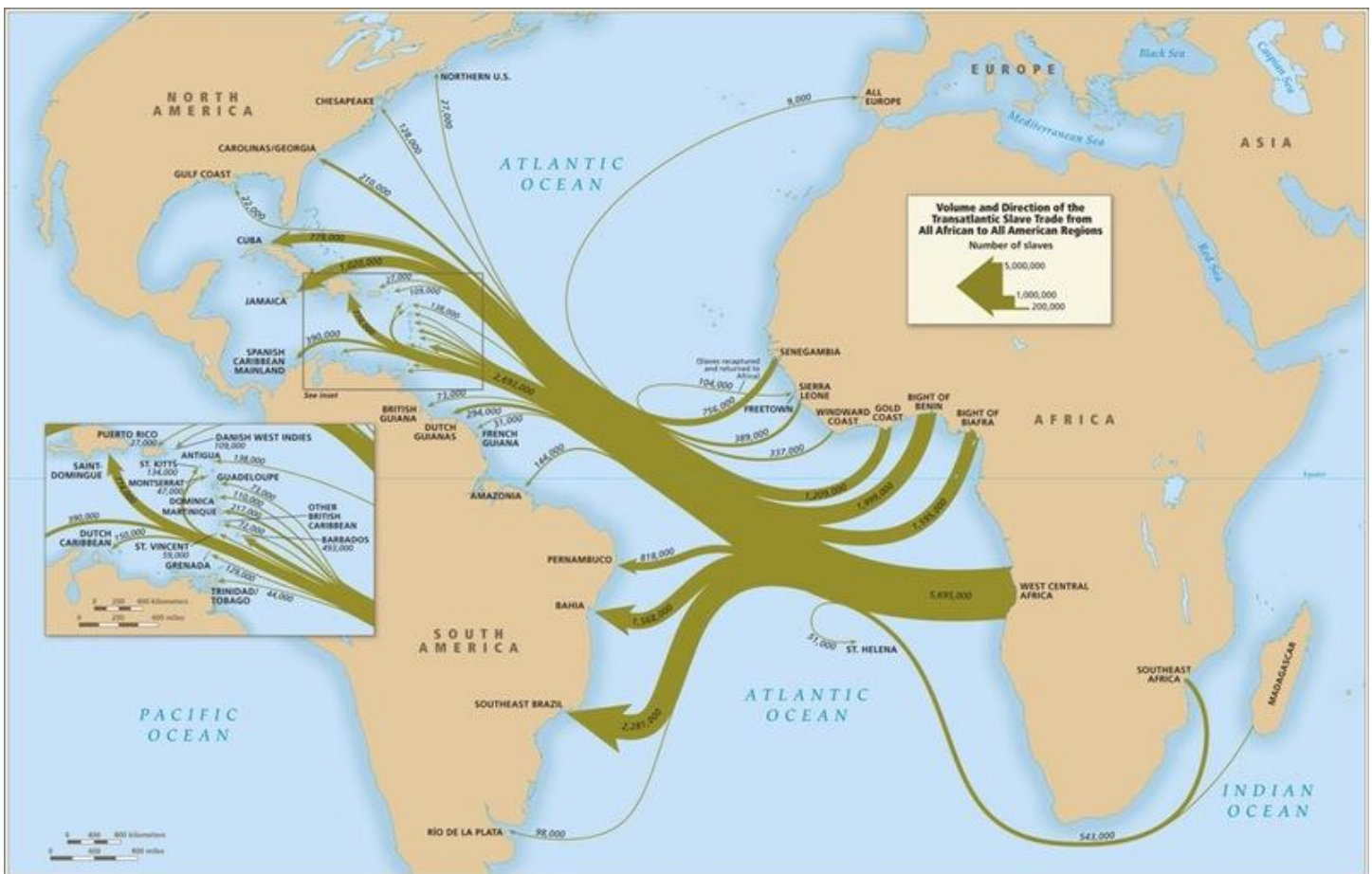
- A letter from Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel to Nicolas Ovando (the 3rd Spanish Governor of the Indies) allowing black slaves of African descent to be imported to Hispaniola (present day Dominican Republic and Haiti), 16 September 1501

**"The Indies" is how the Spanish referred to the Western Hemispheric lands. Christopher Columbus was the first Governor of the Indies.

- The first enslaved African arrived in Hispaniola, via the Portuguese, in 1502.
 - Many of the first enslaved Africans escaped into the interior of Hispaniola, participating in various resistance campaigns with the Tiano.
- In 1518, Emperor Charles V (Fernando and Isabel's grandson), issued a charter allowing four thousand enslaved Africans to be purchased directly from Portuguese traders in the Cape Verde Islands. The first slave ships presently known to have sailed with captives directly from Africa to the Americas embarked from the Cape Verde Islands and São Tomé, arriving in Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Cuba during the mid-1520s.⁶
- The Spanish Crown increasingly relied on large-scale slaving ventures based on contracts, or *asientos*, in which merchant houses agreed to transport a certain number of captives to Spanish American ports over a set period of time.

⁶ Wise, C., & Wheat, D. (n.d.). The early trans-atlantic slave Trade: Emperor Charles V - African laborers for a NEW empire: Iberia, slavery, and the Atlantic World · Lowcountry digital HISTORY INITIATIVE. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african_laborers_for_a_new_emp/emperor_charles_v
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- Due to the participation of non-Hispanic merchants—especially the Portuguese during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but also the Genoese and Germans, and later the English, French, and Dutch—the asiento system helped to internationalize the trans-Atlantic slave trade long before the establishment of non-Iberian colonies in the Americas, or non-Iberian trading factories in western Africa.⁷
- In 1542 “New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians,” are passed which abolished the enslavement of the Tiano in favour of Africans.
- Spain’s use of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans in its early Caribbean colonies set a precedent that was soon followed by other European powers, and beginning in the late 1600s, non-Iberian colonies developed forms of plantation slavery that would come to dominate much of the tropical Americas until the nineteenth century.⁸



⁷ Wise, C., & Wheat, D. (n.d.). The early trans-atlantic slave Trade: Emperor Charles V · African laborers for a NEW empire: Iberia, slavery, and the Atlantic World · Lowcountry digital HISTORY INITIATIVE. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african_laborers_for_a_new_emp/emperor_charles_v

⁸ Wise, C., & Wheat, D. (n.d.). Conclusion · African laborers for a NEW empire: Iberia, slavery, and the Atlantic World · Lowcountry digital HISTORY INITIATIVE. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african_laborers_for_a_new_emp/conclusion_african_laborers
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