Slavery was already fundamental to the social, political, and economic order of parts of the northern savanna, Ethiopia, and the East African coast for several centuries before 1600. Enslavement was an organized activity, sanctioned by law and custom. Slaves were a principal commodity in trade, including the export sector, and slaves were important in the domestic sphere, not only as concubines, servants, soldiers, and administrators but also as common laborers. The combination of enslavement, trade, and employment of slaves in the domestic economy indicates that a slave mode of production had developed, although the scarcity of source material limits an analysis of the transformation that resulted in this situation. From 1400 to 1600, the geographical area where slavery was most important included a strip of territory along the southern borders of the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea shores, and the East African coast. For the period as a whole, slavery tended to expand; the use of slaves followed trade routes further into the interior from this narrow strip of territory, and the source of slaves for export tended to be south of the desert edge and inland from the Red Sea.

The dominant influence was Islamic, both because the major external market for slaves was North Africa and the Middle East and because Islam had become a strong influence within many of the states and societies in the northern savanna, the Ethiopian highlands, and the East African coast where slaves were used extensively. The use of slaves in these places was similar to their use elsewhere in the Muslim world, although in sub-Saharan Africa slaves were more often used in production than they were in North Africa and the Middle East. A secondary influence in this period was the introduction of European commerce into the south Atlantic basin and the Indian Ocean. This contributed to the general expansion of slavery within Africa, in part because Europeans distributed slaves between different places on the African coast and in part.
because Europeans began to buy slaves on an increasingly large scale for their own use.

The Medieval Slave Trade: The African Frontier

The export trade across the Sahara Desert, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean was sustained on a level of 5,000 to 10,000 slaves per year for centuries before 1600 (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2). Ralph Austen has estimated the volume of this trade to the Islamic world – admittedly on very scanty evidence. The figures cited here, 4.82 million for the Saharan trade between 650 and 1600 and 2.4 million for the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade between 800 and 1600, could be twice as many slaves as the number actually exported or considerably less than the total volume. The time span is so great and the supply area so extensive that the estimated figure (7.22 million) is a rough approximation indeed; a figure of 3.5 to 10 million is more accurate in terms of range. Nonetheless, the argument here would not be changed whether the real figure was closer to 3.5 million or 10 million; hence Austen’s rough calculations are used as a convenient measure of the Islamic slave trade. This trade reflected a steady demand for slaves in the Islamic world and resulted in the maintenance of regular contact between sub-Saharan states and societies and Muslim merchants from foreign lands, who had an important influence on the spread of Islamic law and its conception of slavery. Although slave exports came from a commercial frontier that stretched thousands of kilometers along the southern edge of the Sahara, the Red Sea, and the East African coast, there were relatively few export points, and consequently the impact of the trade was more concentrated than the distance might suggest. Six major routes crossed the desert: one went north from ancient Ghana to Morocco; a second stretched north from Timbuktu to Tuwat in southern Algeria; a third passed from the Niger valley and the Hausa towns through the Air Massif to Ghat and Ghadames; a fourth traveled north from Lake Chad to Murzuk in Libya; a fifth reached north from Dar Fur in the eastern Sudan to the Nile valley at Assiout; and a sixth passed north from the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile to Egypt. Some of these routes were interconnected. The ones north from Timbuktu went to Morocco, Algeria, and Libya, whereas the Dar Fur-Egypt route, known as the “forty days’ road,” connected with the route north from the upper Nile valley. The Red Sea ports served the Ethiopian highlands and the Nile valley and included Suakin, Massawa, Tajura, and Zeila. The East African towns comprised one route that stretched northward along the coast. In total, therefore, there were approximately nine or ten outlets for the slave trade from Africa to the Muslim world.

When the trade is broken down according to the main routes, then East Africa accounted for a traffic on the order of 1,000 slaves per year in the period from about 800 to 1600; the Red Sea ports probably handled something like
MAP 1. The Islamic Slave Trade in the Sixteenth Century.
2,000 slaves per year in the same period; and the six main routes across the Sahara averaged from 3,000 to 8,000 per year. This suggests an average volume for each route of about 1,000 per annum. The Muslim slave trade involved a steady but relatively small flow over a millennium, and despite occasionally high levels for specific points, there was not the sustained volume in slaves that characterized the Atlantic slave trade at its height. For the period before 1500, estimates are based on scattered records that suggest that some slaves were always being exported, probably in quantities of several hundred and sometimes a few thousand at a time. Perhaps a majority of these were women and children, but eunuchs were also important. Ibn Battuta, who crossed the Sahara in the middle of the fourteenth century, found that the traffic in slaves was largely confined to females and eunuchs. Indeed, Ibn Battuta traveled in one caravan of 600 female slaves.\(^2\)

In the sixteenth century, slave exports from Songhay and Borno probably reached their peak. Songhay had great numbers of slaves, and the decline in gold exports probably required an increase in slave exports to make up the difference in revenue. Songhay princes amassed slaves in raids to the south.\(^3\) Borno expanded considerably in the sixteenth century and probably increased its supply of slaves to the trans-Saharan market via the Lake Chad–Murzuk route. The Borno kings continued a tradition of slave supply that had been

---

**Table 2.1. Trans-Saharan Slave Trade, 650–1600**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Annual Average</th>
<th>Estimated Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>650–800</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800–900</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900–1100</td>
<td>8,700</td>
<td>1,740,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100–1400</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>1,650,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400–1500</td>
<td>4,300</td>
<td>430,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500–1600</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>550,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4,820,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table 2.2. Red Sea and East African Slave Trade, 800–1600**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red Sea Coast</th>
<th>East African Coast</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,600,000</td>
<td>800,000</td>
<td>2,400,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transformations in Slavery

initiated centuries earlier when Kanem was the center of the state. This era of slave exports ended around 1600, after a final burst of activity that may have been unparalleled in earlier times. The Moroccan conquest of Songhay in 1591 witnessed a temporary increase in the scale of the trade, as thousands of captives were taken. Once the war captives were marched north, however, the trade probably settled back into the centuries-old pattern of a thousand or so per year on each route.

Slaves were also a major export from the Nile valley and the Ethiopian highlands in the sixteenth century. Muslim expansion and the reaction to Islam in both areas accounted for the volume of exports. In Ethiopia, a Muslim holy war, directed from the sultanate of Adal, temporarily overran the Christian kingdom, so that from the 1520s through the 1540s, thousands of slaves were exported across the Red Sea. Thereafter, a Christian revival checked the Muslim threat, with the result that more people were enslaved. By the end of the century, the nomadic Galla exploited the unstable political conditions of the region, and other slaves were exported. In the Nile valley, a Muslim state was established at Sennar by the Funj, and its wars of conquest, from which the earlier Christian kingdoms did not recover, resulted in the export of many slaves via the Red Sea and the desert crossings north to Egypt. The East African coast, although a source of some slaves, does not seem to have been particularly important in the sixteenth century.

The political history of those states participating in the export trade reveals that sub-Saharan Africa was not dependent on slave exports, even though revenue from the slave trade was probably a major source of income for some merchants and some rulers. The interaction between the external world and such states as Songhay, Borno, and Christian Ethiopia was on a relatively equal basis, at least until the sixteenth century. Portuguese intervention along the East African coast, the Muslim holy war in Ethiopia, and the Moroccan invasion of Songhay shifted the balance in favor of external powers temporarily, but even then the balance was restored by about 1600. The relative autonomy of sub-Saharan African states was reflected in the institution of slavery. Africa became a source of slaves, but not at the expense of its political and cultural independence. The incorporation of Islamic ideas and practices occurred gradually over many centuries in a form that was interpreted within a local context.

This autonomy meant that indigenous developments were more important than external influences in the consolidation of a mode of production based on slavery. The institutionalization of the enslavement process made it possible to export slaves and to use them domestically. Slaves were often a product of war and raiding; certainly very early in the history of the northern savanna and Ethiopia, enslavement of war prisoners became an acceptable practice. Slaves, therefore, tended to be a by-product of politically motivated military activities. The export trade may well have provided some incentive for enslavement, but localized political issues were probably more important. No matter what the relative importance of external and internal factors, both sectors were
mutually reinforcing. This is clear in the account of Cadamosto, a member of a Portuguese mission to the Senegal River in 1455–1456, who reported that the king of a small Wolof state raised revenue through “raids which resulted in many slaves from his own as well as neighbouring countries.” Cadamosto clearly did not understand the reasons why the king had reportedly attacked his own people – probably a campaign related to domestic political rivalry or rebellion, if his information was correct at all. Nonetheless, his report does indicate that the acquisition of slaves through wars and raids was common by the fifteenth century, which confirms evidence for elsewhere in the northern savanna, including Songhay, Mali, Borno, and the Hausa states.

These states shared a structural problem related to the prevalence of enslavement and slavery. Slave raiding could not be carried on indefinitely without depleting the population of the exploited societies. People were either seized or they fled, if they were unable to mount an effective resistance. War parties were forced to travel increasingly greater distances, thereby reducing their chances of successful raids. The consolidation of walled towns throughout the savanna further limited the raiding frontier, but then competing centers could attack each other in the hope of capturing slaves and depriving neighboring towns of their political independence. Both situations – the withdrawal of people from the raiding frontier and the political rivalries of states based on walled towns were inherently unstable. Ecological factors also influenced this instability. First, those states in the northern parts of the savanna had the military advantage over states further south through access to better breeding grounds for horses, the mainstay of military superiority. Nonetheless, the northern savanna was more exposed to raids from desert nomads, whose use of camels gave them the advantage of strategic surprise. Secondly, periodic droughts affected the northern savanna severely, and when drought lasted more than a year at a stretch, many people were forced to move south. Lands that were sparsely settled were available to these migrants, who might in turn become subject to future raids, once climatic conditions returned to normal.

In this cyclical pattern of history, warriors and politicians could consolidate large empires, as they did in the case of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Borno, and Sennar. In these cases, political success pushed the raiding frontier back considerably; now rulers were concerned with establishing tributary relationships with subjugated provinces and with transforming independent farmers into tax-paying peasants and tribute-paying serfs, as well as slaves. The tendency toward political instability, slave raiding, and rivalry between neighboring towns was temporarily halted. When empires collapsed, however, these tendencies reemerged.

The Institution of Slavery in Muslim Africa

In the narrow strip of territory along the southern edge of the Sahara, the Red Sea shores, and the East African coast, the Muslim presence contributed to the
transformation of society and political structures.\textsuperscript{8} As the political-commercial classes converted to Islam, they adapted things and ways that were identified with Islam to the African setting. These included political titles, for example. In Mali, slave officials were appointed as early as the thirteenth century,\textsuperscript{9} and slaves were drafted into the army. These uses in the military and government were parallel in function to the employment of slaves in the Muslim countries of the Mediterranean and Middle East heartlands. Not only was the external trade a source of valuable imports, but it also helped spread such institutions. Muslims increasingly assumed a role in politics, education, and trade in particular. This consolidation of a Muslim society, often as islands in a sea of non-Muslims, helped structure the political economy.

In supplying slaves, African rulers found it convenient to justify enslavement from an Islamic perspective: Prisoners of war could be sold, and because captive people were considered chattels, they could be used in the same capacities as they were in the Muslim world. They could be soldiers, administrators, concubines, domestic servants, and agricultural workers. The participation of such African states as Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem, Sennar, and Adal in the slave trade occurred together with the extension of Islamic influence to sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, the Muslim merchants along the East African coast – the ancestors of the Swahili – transferred the Muslim conception of slavery into black Africa there.

Muslim attitudes toward slavery were internalized in the African context. In a letter dated 1391–1392, Borno’s King Uthman ibn Idris protested to the mamluk regime of Egypt that Arab raiding parties were enslaving free Muslims, even members of the royal family, and selling them across the Sahara:

The Arab tribes of Jodham and others have taken our free subjects, women and children and old men of our own family and other Muslims…. These Arabs have pillaged our land, the land of Bornu, and continue doing so. They have taken as slaves free men and our fathers, the Muslims, and they are selling them to the slave-dealers of Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, and keep some of them for themselves…. Send messengers throughout your country … let them examine and enquire and so discover. When they have found our people, let them confront them…. If they say: “We are free men and Muslims,” then believe their word and do not suspect them of lying, and when the truth is made plain to you, release them and return them to their liberty and Islam.\textsuperscript{10}

Undoubtedly, Borno’s ruler was indirectly seeking support in his wars with Kanem, and by casting his enemies in the role of villains, Uthman hoped to confirm his own allegiance to Islam and thereby that he was worthy of support. Indeed, Uthman argued that he was descended from a dynasty of Middle Eastern origin, which was also an attempt at establishing the legitimacy of the Borno regime. Nonetheless, the letter documents attitudes toward enslavement that became standard in the Islamic belt of Africa. Free Muslims were protected from enslavement, at least theoretically; in practice, free men were enslaved, and little could be done to protect them, despite the efforts of influential men like Uthman.
In the reign of Idris Aloma of Borno in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, one military campaign in Kanem, north-east of Lake Chad, reputedly netted 1,000 female and 2,000 male slaves, who were divided among the soldiers. Another 400 free men, seized in the campaign, were supposedly executed.\textsuperscript{11} This suggests that the slave population of Kanem was substantial, although the actual numbers of slaves reported in this history cannot be accepted at face value, for the court historian, Ibn Fartua, may well have exaggerated to glorify his mentor's exploits. This report indicates that free Muslims were not supposed to be enslaved; only those already in bondage or those considered pagan were legitimate targets. For sixteenth-century Kanem, which was nominally Muslim, the free population was technically protected from enslavement, and hence Ibn Fartua apparently felt compelled to label all captives who were not executed as already being slaves. The ratio of women to men in the account is also revealing, given that more women than men were exported across the Sahara. Not only is this indirectly confirmed, but the availability of so many male slaves suggests that slavery must have been important in production.

Ahmad Bābā, an Islamic scholar from Timbuktu who lived from 1556 to 1627, wrote a book on slavery, \textit{Mi'raj al-Su'ūd īlā Nayl Hukm majlūb al-Sūd} (1614), in which he condemned the enslavement of Muslims but otherwise accepted enslavement as a legal pursuit for Muslims.\textsuperscript{12} After the Moroccan invasion of Songhay in 1591–1592, Ahmad Bābā was exiled to Marrakesh in Morocco, where he continued to pursue his scholarship and became famous for his relentless campaign to free Muslims who had been illegally enslaved. The collapse of Songhay was a tragic affair in the history of Islam, for both Songhay and Morocco were Muslim states, and many slaves were seized in the course of battle. Although the \textit{Mi'raj} was an indictment of contemporary politics, Ahmad Bābā's legal interpretation was based on earlier scholarly opinions; hence the book also chronicles attitudes toward slavery over many centuries:

\begin{verbatim}
[T]he reason for slavery is non-belief and the Sudanese non-believers are like other kāfīr whether they are Christians, Jews, Persians, Berbers, or any others who stick to non-belief and do not embrace Islam... This means that there is no difference between all the kāfīr in this respect. Whoever is captured in a condition of non-belief, it is legal to own him, whosoever he may be, but not he who was converted to Islam voluntarily, from the start, to any nation he belongs, whether it is Bornu, Kano, Songhai, Katsina, Gobir, Mali and some of Zakzak [Zazzau]. These are free Muslims, whose enslavement is not allowed in any way. Also the majority of the Fulani, except a group beyond Gao, as we have been informed, who are said to be kāfīr.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{verbatim}

Those countries that Ahmad Bābā considered Muslim formed an almost continuous belt of territory from the headwaters of the Senegal River in the west to Lake Chad in the east. Elsewhere in his book, he condemned these savanna states because they also enslaved Muslims. Ahmad Bābā was as concerned with the illegality of local practices as with those resulting from external invasion. The difficulty facing Muslims of this period was to justify slavery in the context of political expansion and rivalry, when such actions invariably led to
abuse. Allowance had to be made for an institution that was well established and commercially profitable, and yet Muslims had to be protected. Ahmad Bābā’s attempt to expose particular injustices reveals a fundamental contradiction in Muslim society that plagued thoughtful people for the next few centuries. There was no effective means of preventing abuse. Ahmad Bābā justified enslavement on religious grounds, clearly establishing a boundary between the land of Islam and the land of unbelief. This legalism is instructive of the process by which slavery spread in the savanna regions of Africa. For those who accepted a Muslim interpretation, enslavement was a legitimate activity; war was a normal relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims who did not accept their subjugation.

Slaves were not only used in the military and government, taken as concubines, and exported across the Sahara Desert; they were also employed in production. This use helps distinguish slavery in sub-Saharan Africa from slavery in the Muslim heartlands, where the productive function was not as important in the century or two before 1600. According to Cadamosto, the king of Wolof not only sold slaves to visiting merchants; he also “employs these slaves [whom he captures] in cultivating the land allotted to him.” These slaves had no opportunity to attain the material prosperity or social standing of the favorite slaves of savanna rulers. Instead, they farmed for merchants and officials alike, producing crops under conditions that bear some resemblance to the later plantations of the Americas or to the contemporary feudal estates of Europe. The more exact comparison, in fact, is with the agricultural estates of southern Morocco and the islands of the Mediterranean, with which they were contemporary and with which they shared a common legal and religious setting. These plantations were a by-product of a political order based on enslavement and the export of slaves. Throughout the borderlands between the Sahara and the more fertile savanna, these agricultural slaves were settled in villages of their own, often under slave overseers. Their absentee owners, whether they were merchants traveling to distant lands for gold, salt, and other goods, or government officials busy at the capital or some remote post, exploited slave labor for their own benefit. Agricultural output, including millet and sorghum, cotton and indigo, as well as vegetables and tree crops, supplied the large commercial establishments of caravan merchants and the palaces of nobles. The surplus was sold to desert nomads who transported goods from North Africa and who brought salt from the Sahara Desert or the Ethiopian coastal lowlands. The army consumed much of this plantation output; sometimes slave soldiers even contributed to agricultural production.

By the sixteenth century, Songhay masters had settled their slaves along the Niger River, so that the Niger valley had become well populated and agriculturally productive, probably more so than at any time since then. The nature of these slave communities is open to debate. Some historians refer to them as plantations, others compare them with feudal estates. But their existence is certain. Gao, which in the nineteenth century was an undistinguished hamlet,
was a large city in the sixteenth century, and near it were many estates with several dozen to several hundred slaves each. By the early sixteenth century, there were plantations along the river from Jenne to Dendi at more than thirty locations. Some of these concentrations were very large; there were an estimated 1,700 to 2,700 slaves at Faran-Taka, for example. This plantation sector reached its most extensive development under Askia Daoud, between 1549 and 1583. These slave estates demonstrate an important feature of the slave trade; wherever slaves were exported, they were often used domestically in large numbers. As the case of Songhay so clearly shows, exports on the scale of a few thousand slaves per year could reflect the existence of a domestic slave population of considerable size, although usually it is not possible to know the exact proportion of slaves in the population.

These plantations transformed the inner Niger valley into a heavily populated and productive region. With the millet, sorghum, wheat, and rice that came from these irrigated fields, the Songhay administration was able to expand militarily and to maintain the empire. The river not only permitted agricultural development, but it also made possible the transport of grain upstream and downstream as needed by the state. The general movement of agricultural goods was northward from the savanna to the towns of the sahel and to the desert market. In locally bad years, grain could move both ways, of course. The river increased the political options of the state, so that control of the Niger was essential to the functioning of a well-managed economy.

Slaves were used in gold mining, at least in the western Sudan, if not also in Ethiopia and the Zambezi valley. The western Sudanese sources included Bambuhu (Bambuk), Buré, Lobi, and the Akan fields. Valentim Fernandes records a report from the Senegalese coast that dates to the first decade of the sixteenth century (c. 1507), which states:

"The gold mines are seven in number. They are shared by seven kings, each of whom has his own. The mines are extremely deep down in the earth. The kings have slaves they place in the mines, and to whom they give wives they bring with them. Children are born and raised in these mines. The kings provide them as well with food and drink."

Since gold was a major export from West Africa at this time, the role of slaves in gold production suggests that here was another sector in which slavery had become crucial to the economy.

The same applied to the use of slaves in the Teghaza saltworks in the Sahara, and perhaps elsewhere too. At Teghaza, slaves cut the rock salt into slabs for transport to the savanna markets. Conditions in these desert sites were far from pleasant: it was hot; food was monotonous; and there were few ways to escape the hard work and boredom of the bleak desert. Houses were made of salt slabs. Virtually all the food was imported, but conditions of exchange were closely regulated by the slave masters, the Mossefa Berbers, and by the Tuareg transporters. If the economics of the trade dictated against a satisfactory life at these desert saltworks, the social and political setting assured that whatever
profit was to be made would not benefit the slave workers. Slavery was not always an essential feature of the salt trade, for it was possible, as at Bilma and other desert saltworks, for free peasants to be kept in economic and political conditions of servitude that were not very different from those for slaves. Nonetheless, slavery was one answer, and the type of slavery was far more brutal than the usual style of slavery in the middle ages, where slaves could be absorbed into domestic units. Similar conditions prevailed at the copperworks at Teguida n’tesemt.

The pattern of slavery in the Nile valley and the Ethiopian region was similar to that of the central and western Sudan. Despite the presence of Christian states as well as Muslim sultanates, the trend involved the consolidation of Islamic trade and society, and consequently Islamic patterns of slave use prevailed. Most merchants, for example, were Muslims, even in Christian Ethiopia, and hence the export trade across the Red Sea and along the Nile valley remained in Muslim hands. Slavery, too, conformed to an Islamic model that used slaves in the military, harems, agriculture, and government.

The East African pattern was somewhat different from that found along the southern side of the Sahara and adjacent to the Red Sea. Here there were no Islamic empires or strong states actively involved in slave raiding. Instead, the coast was dotted with a string of commercial towns that relayed goods between the Zambezi valley in the south to ports in Arabia and India. Gold, ivory, and slaves came from the interior of the Zambezi valley, and some slaves were obtained locally at many points along the coast. Nonetheless, slavery here was similar to that found elsewhere in the Muslim world. Concubines, domestic servants, officials of the petty rulers of the coastal ports, and plantation slaves constituted the servile population. Plantations were concentrated at several points, including the area around Mombasa and Malindi in the north and on the north-west coast of Madagascar, opposite the mainland.

The absence of a clearly defined slave class is a significant feature of Muslim Africa during the middle ages. Exploitation was based on a class that had access to political office and commercial credit. Merchants and officials benefited from tribute, taxation, commercial profit, and the output of slaves. Despite the restrictions placed on admission to the merchant community and to high office, slavery was not a barrier. Merchants had to be Muslims, and they identified ethnically. Rulers had to have an aristocratic heritage that showed a clear ancestry. In neither case were slaves excluded. Slave women were taken as wives and concubines, and consequently their children had legitimate claims. Slaves became commercial agents, if they could prove their competence and loyalty, and they were appointed to official positions. Seldom did slave agents inherit, but they could marry the free-born once they themselves were free, and by so doing they established a claim to a legitimate ancestry.

Slave labor was important, too. Without slaves, much of the salt would have had to be worked in other ways. A significant proportion of farm output also depended on slaves, and in most households, domestic slaves engaged in
textile production, mat and basket weaving, and other crafts. Livestock herders used slaves to dig wells, tend herds, gather firewood, and farm. These occupations were also performed by free peasants who paid tax or tribute, participated in corveé projects, and, if they were beyond the confines of the state or were part of a delinquent province, were subject to raiding, plunder, and enslavement. Castes like the blacksmiths and fishermen, though they owned slaves themselves, were subject to special exactions, too. Slavery was only one form of the many exploitative relationships that dominated African Islamic society in this period.

Slavery provides a key to understanding African history, however varied the relationships of exploitation were. The ultimate threat of the state was the slave raid. Raiding did not just involve enslavement; it also caused death. There was little need for the old or the very young, and many were probably killed during military campaigns. Families were divided, and because there was a greater demand for women and children, men were often executed. Even when communities survived raids, they frequently suffered the destruction of their fields and homes and lost their livestock and other moveable property. The danger of famine and crippling poverty were serious problems confronting the survivors.

For those who were enslaved, the dangers involved forced marches, inadequate food, sexual abuse, and death on the road. The Sahara crossing was the greatest risk for many slaves. The trip was so long, and food and water so carefully managed, that the slightest mishap from a raid on the caravan or an empty water hole could eliminate whole coffles of slaves. Still other captives, the prime boys, faced castration because the price for eunuchs was always very high – and no wonder the price was high, given that as many as nine out of ten died from unsuccessful operations.

The danger incumbent on enslavement, therefore, was one of the worst dimensions of slavery, for at the time of capture, the enslavers could treat their chattel however they pleased. Victims could be killed or left to face poverty and famine. They could be emasculated. They could be marched to their death, with each point of transfer bringing unknown prospects for the slave. The legitimation of enslavement, therefore, reinforced a tendency toward war and other forms of violence. Because this threat was ever present, people were placed in the dilemma of accepting some type of dependent relationship to political authority to minimize the risks of enslavement and death. The enslaved themselves were placed in positions that contributed to this cycle of oppression. They made up the armies, fed the political administration and the soldiers, and were the products of trade that benefited the powerful. Slavery infected all levels of society and economy. The threat of slave raids convinced people to pay tribute regularly, while the caste structure emphasized the distinction between slaves and free by maintaining a corporate identity for blacksmiths, minstrels, fishermen, and merchants. Despite the absence of a clearly defined class of slaves, slavery was the cement of the social formation. Slavery emphasized the
dependency that characterized all relationships, and as the ultimate punishment for those who refused to submit to a state, it held the whole range of possibilities that existed in the social order, from death to hard physical labor, to high position, to sale abroad. Slavery was the great equalizer, but it revealed the essential inequality of African society.

**Origins of the Atlantic Trade: The Muslim Connection**

The first Portuguese caravels edged down the Atlantic coast of Africa in the 1430s and 1440s, reaching the Senegal River by 1445. In so doing, they opened another route that paralleled the trans-Saharan roads. The Portuguese were more interested in gold than slaves, although they were willing to trade in pepper, ivory, and other products. Their investment in this exploration of the African coast was a conscious effort to bypass Muslim middlemen; initially, the Portuguese only succeeded in expanding the existing trans-Saharan trade by opening the maritime route; later, they participated in coastal African trade as middlemen themselves. Structurally, therefore, both the Portuguese and the Muslim traders filled the same functions: They connected sub-Saharan Africa with the Mediterranean world and they participated in the regional commerce of West Africa.

The early slave trade of the Portuguese demonstrates this similarity to the established commercial patterns in four ways. Firstly, some slaves were taken to southern Europe for employment as domestic servants, a demand similar to that in the Islamic countries of North Africa and the Middle East. Secondly, other slaves were sold to sugar planters on islands in the Mediterranean, and when sugar production spread into the Atlantic, to buyers on Madeira, the Canaries, and the Cape Verde Islands. In both cases – domestic servitude and sugar production – the market was already satisfied to some extent by the trans-Saharan trade. Thirdly, the Portuguese bought and sold slaves along the West African coast, merely transferring slaves from one place to another so that gold could be purchased as a result of the profits realized from the transit trade. Again, Muslim merchants in the interior of West Africa did the same thing. Finally, the link to the trans-Saharan trade is particularly evident in the commodities exported to West Africa by the Portuguese; these included textiles and other goods bought in North Africa. Cadamosto, who participated in a Portuguese expedition to the Senegambia in 1455–1456, was well aware of this competition with the trans-Saharan trade, evident in his observation that the Wolof king “sells many [slaves] to the Azanaghi merchants in return for horses and other goods, and also to the Christians, since they have begun to trade with these blacks.”

The scale of the Portuguese slave trade along the Mauritanian, Senegambian and upper Guinea coast was about 80,000 for the second half of the fifteenth century (see Table 2.3). The 800 or so slaves bought and sold each year largely fitted into other, established commercial patterns that the Portuguese were able
On the Frontiers of Islam

37

to tap. In the Senegambia region, for example, the Portuguese were able to buy gold, which came from Bambuhu and Buré in the interior, which were important sources of gold before new and larger deposits were discovered in the Americas. Another reason was that trade was well established in the Senegambia, and the particular geographical features of the region made it easy for seaborne merchants from Portugal to tap existing commerce. Both the Senegal and Gambia Rivers were navigable inland, and they crossed the routes north into the Sahara to the Mediterranean. It was possible, therefore, to divert some trade to the coast, including gold, slaves, and other goods. Major salt sources were located near the coast north of Senegal and the Gambia. Consequently, Muslim merchants were already moving goods – salt, slaves, textiles, i sh, and grain – back and forth between the coast and the interior. It was easy to introduce European commodities to buy gold and slaves. This trade continued throughout the whole period of the Atlantic trade, sometimes amounting to a few thousand slaves per year.

Elsewhere in West Africa, the Portuguese found an active trade in slaves on the Gold Coast, where they were also able to purchase gold. Muslim merchants had established commercial links this far south in pursuit of the same gold and, as with the Senegambia, they were on the coast itself. Gold was found in alluvial washings throughout the forest, so that it was easy once again for the Portuguese to buy gold there. The Muslim network was long established, however, so that the Portuguese dealt with these merchants as well as the actual producers of gold. The Muslim traders took gold north from the Akan deposits toward Timbuktu and thence across the Sahara. They traded in many other goods, too. They brought salt, livestock, textiles, and copperware south, and to the north they took kola nuts, which were widely consumed in the savanna as a stimulant.

TABLE 2.3. Estimates of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1450–1600

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Departures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1450–1500</td>
<td>81,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1501–1550</td>
<td>124,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1551–1600</td>
<td>213,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>418,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Ivana Elbl estimates that 155,800 slaves were exported from western Africa from 1450 to 1521, including exports to Europe and the islands off the African coast; “The volume of the early Atlantic slave trade, 1450–1521,” Journal of African History, 38:1 (1997), 73. The Slave Trade Database estimate for the period 1501–1525 is 13,000, which is considerably less than Elbl’s calculations. See David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Manolo Florentino, The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (http://wwwslavevoyagesorg/tast/indexfaces). The estimates presented here accept Elbl’s figures.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 54.70.40.11, on 08 Nov 2020 at 11:24:04, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139014946.006
The Portuguese imported slaves to buy gold. Perhaps ironically, the first European slave traders on this stretch of the coast became involved as carriers in the domestic slave trade of West Africa. As was the case in the Senegambia, therefore, the early contribution of the Portuguese to the slave trade was to modify existing patterns of commerce. The Portuguese began purchasing slaves in the “slave rivers” of the Benin coast sometime in the 1470s, and the 1480 expedition acquired 400 slaves. By the early sixteenth century, the trade between the Bight of Benin and the Gold Coast was on the order of 500 to 600 slaves per year. These were channeled through the Portuguese depot at São Jorge da Mina, later to be called Elmina. These slaves were sold to African merchants for use as porters in the trade with the interior, although a few were kept at São Jorge da Mina as laborers.

In the first two decades of the sixteenth century, slave exports totaled about 2,300–2,500 per year, rising to 5,400 per year in 1516–1521, a level that was maintained at least until the mid-century. This increase was related to the inclusion of the Kingdom of Kongo into the commercial network of the Portuguese and to the development of the island of São Tomé, located off shore in the Gulf of Guinea, as a transit point for the slave trade and a plantation center for the production of sugarcane. These developments were a further extension of existing commercial practices. São Tomé became another in a string of depots: Slaves were brought from Kongo to the island for shipment to the Gold Coast, Madeira, the Cape Verde Islands, and Portugal. Between 1510 and 1540, four to six slaving vessels per year were kept occupied hauling slaves to the Gold Coast, for example. Ships varied in size from caravels that could carry 30 to 80 slaves to larger vessels that could transport as many as 100 to 120 slaves.

The emergence of a trade that was independent of the Muslim sector was closely associated with the Kingdom of Kongo, the major state on the coast of central Africa when the Portuguese arrived there in 1482. King Afonso I (1506–1545) formed an alliance with the Portuguese crown, through their representatives at the Kongo capital of São Salvador and on the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. Afonso attempted to introduce reforms designed to increase his power, including the acceptance of Christianity and the reliance on Portuguese advisors. Afonso used the slave trade to promote the interests of the state. Through border skirmishes and tribute collection, the state acquired slaves for export. Afonso even managed the transport of some slaves to São Tomé through the agency of two members of the royal household who were stationed in São Tomé in 1526.

These efforts at centralization were only partially successful; indeed the recurrent theme of Kongo history in the sixteenth century was one of conflict between royal attempts at monopoly and the activities of private traders, both Portuguese and Kongo. On the one side, Afonso directed trade through São Salvador and the port of Mpinda, near the mouth of the Congo River. Except for the provincial governors of Ndongo, in the south, the nobility cooperated...
MAP 2. The Kingdom of Kongo and the Gulf of Guinea in the Sixteenth Century.
Transformations in Slavery

with these royal efforts. A board of inquiry protected official interests by investigating alleged kidnappings, which attempted to restrain the movement of private traders. Private traders, on the other hand, were not to be outdone. The clients of Fernão de Melo, who had the Portuguese charter for São Tomé, and Antonio Carneiro, who had the charter for Príncipe, bought slaves wherever they could. By the 1520s, their agents traveled into the interior beyond São Salvador, probably as far as Malebo Pool (Stanley Pool) on the Congo River and Ndongo in the south.37

The principal conflict was between slave traders, official and private, and not between Kongo and Portugal, despite occasional differences over the autonomy of the Catholic Church in Kongo and other issues. This struggle over the control of trade facilitated the growth of slave exports. In the 1520s, exports from Mpinda were on the order of 2,000 to 3,000 per year. By the 1530s, the volume had increased from 4,000 to 5,000 in some years, and in 1548 to between 6,000 and 7,000. Most of these slaves were sent to São Tomé, from where they were redistributed elsewhere or used on local plantations. São Tomé began exporting to the Americas in the 1530s, and by 1550 the bulk of the transit trade was destined for the Spanish Caribbean. Thereafter, the trade to the Americas predominated until the decline of São Tomé at the end of the sixteenth century.38

The Kongo-São Tomé axis collapsed in the last third of the sixteenth century. In 1568, invaders from the interior penetrated the kingdom, even occupying São Salvador until a combined Portuguese-Kongolese expedition relieved the capital. This weakened Kongo temporarily, which worked to the advantage of the private traders. In 1576, the Portuguese crown, interested in containing the interlopers itself but relying less on the Kongo monarchy than previously, established a base at Luanda Bay, which had become the main avenue into the interior south of Kongo.39 Now slaves were shipped directly to the Americas from Luanda, as well as from São Tomé. Official Portuguese efforts appear to have impeded the interlopers somewhat; before the establishment of Luanda, this southern trade from Ndongo was estimated at 10,000 slaves in peak years; after 1576, exports declined, although the government share increased. The private traders were forced to bypass the Portuguese stations, just as they had previously bypassed the Kongo capital at the height of Kongo control. As a result, the trade as a whole probably remained at about the same level, that is, several thousand slaves per year.

From 1450 to 1600, about 410,000 slaves were exported from Africa via the Atlantic basin, including those ending up on São Tomé and other islands off the African coast. Those slaves destined for internal African markets gradually became a smaller proportion of the total number. The trade was about a third of the scale of the external trade across the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean in the same period. Nonetheless, the development of the trans-Atlantic trade and the tremendous expansion beginning in the last half of the sixteenth century resulting from the shipment of slaves to the Americas represented a major departure in the history of the slave trade.
Slavery Along the Guinea Coast

By the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, slavery had already changed along some parts of the Guinea coast from being a marginal feature of societies based on kinship to being an institution that was related to more complex social structures. The growth of the European market for slaves accelerated this process: Slavery became associated with the export trade as well as domestic use. As enslavement increased as a conscious activity of ambitious men and governments, slaves became more available for both the export and domestic sectors.

Slavery was already an important institution in Kongo even before the Portuguese arrived. The Kongo nobility settled slaves in the capital district and in Mbanza Sonyo, the coastal area where Mpinda was located, and as a result these two provinces were much more densely inhabited than other parts of the state. The alliance with the Portuguese, particularly the use of Portuguese soldiers as early as 1514, enhanced the ability of the state to acquire slaves, who were either exported in exchange for imported goods and services or used to supplement the domestic slave population. Some slaves became soldiers, especially Tio captives from north of the Congo River; the Kongo nobles also retained slaves in their retinues. As nobles were transferred from one province to another for military or administrative duties, they took these slaves with them.

The establishment of slave estates and villages around São Salvador and in Mbanza Sonyo appears to have continued until the 1560s, when an invasion of warriors known as Jaga temporarily halted these developments. The Jaga occupied the capital from 1568 until 1572, before a combined Portuguese-Kongo army drove the intruders back into the interior. The Jaga may have sold some of the inhabitants around São Salvador to slave merchants; many slaves may have fled with their masters or escaped altogether. The Jaga had a reputation as cannibals, which at least indicates that people feared these warriors considerably. No matter what the effect of their occupation was, conditions in the province had been restored by the end of the century. A report that applies equally to São Salvador and Mbanza Sonyo makes clear that a large portion of the Kongo population in these districts was enslaved:

There are no [free] men who cultivate the ground, nor men who work by the day, nor anyone who is willing to work for a wage. Only slaves labour and serve. Men who are powerful have a great number of slaves whom they have captured in war or whom they have purchased. They conduct business through these slaves by sending them to markets where they buy and sell according to the master’s orders.

This report suggests that slavery was no longer a simple case of dependency in a society based on kinship. A complete transformation of the social order on the scale of Muslim areas probably had not occurred, but slave holdings were still large enough to indicate that a transformation was under way.

Kongo nobles even invested in plantations on São Tomé, which may indicate that slave labor in Kongo itself was sometimes organized on a plantation...
model. A Portuguese description of São Tomé in 1550 makes it clear that there were a number of black planters who were rich and whose daughters married Portuguese residents.\textsuperscript{43} By this time, the largest plantations ranged in size from 100 to 400 slaves. Slaves not only worked in the sugar fields but also grew their own provisions. They usually lived in huts with their families, although later in the century slaves were sometimes housed in barracks.\textsuperscript{44} These conditions were probably not very different from those on the estates in Kongo, except that it is unlikely that barracks were ever a feature of slavery in Kongo. The real difference between slavery on São Tomé and slavery in Kongo was in the intentions of the slave owners; São Tomé planters raised sugar for export to Portugal,\textsuperscript{45} whereas Kongo slave masters wanted food crops, particularly millet, which was consumed by the large establishments of the nobility and was not destined for export.

The demand for slaves on the Gold Coast, which the Portuguese satisfied by importing slaves from Benin and Kongo via São Tomé, reveals that slavery was an important institution in Benin and the small Akan states on the Gold Coast, as well as in Kongo. It may be that slaves were used in gold mining and panning at this time, as they were in the early seventeenth century. Local merchants on the Gold Coast used slaves as porters, which establishes their importance as common workers. Around 1600, de Marees reported: “Here there are no labourers to be found to serve people for hire and reward, but only slaves and captives who must wear out their lives in slavery.”\textsuperscript{46} At this time, and probably indicative of practice for sometime into the past, debtors could be seized – de Marees says that they could be enslaved. This indicates that local mechanisms were also responsible for establishing servile relationships.\textsuperscript{47} Debtors may well have become slaves, although de Marees appears to have confused pawns with slaves, or at best he learned of the illegal enslavement of pawns, who were theoretically protected from sale.

Slavery in the Sierra Leone hinterland was related to war. In the sixteenth century, a series of invasions from the interior displaced many people, some of whom were enslaved. In the 1560s, at least some of these captives were used in the fields. The English slave merchant and pirate, John Hawkins, who was there at the time, learned about the importance of slavery firsthand; from an island base, Hawkins led raiding parties to the mainland to seize slaves, which helps establish that the trade had not yet become firmly part of the slave supply mechanism that later characterized the trans-Atlantic trade from Sierra Leone. Otherwise, European merchants would simply have bought slaves, which usually took less time and involved fewer risks than capturing slaves.

In this Island we stayed certaine daies, going every day on shore to take the Inhabitants, with burning and spoiling their townes, who before were Sapies, and were conqueredy by the Samboses, Inhabitants beyond Sierre Leona…. These inhabitants have diverse of the Sapies, which they tooke in the warres as their slaves, whome onely they kept to till the
ground, in that they neither have the knowledge thereof, nor yet will worke themselves, of whome wee tooke many in that place, but of the Samboses none at all, for they fled into the maine.48

Hawkins’s description suggests that the slave population was large enough for many of the productive activities of society to be performed by slave labor. This exploitation of slaves may well have been confined to those captured in war; there is no evidence on the fate of slave children, who, nonetheless, probably would have been incorporated into lineages. Significantly, Hawkins’s party seized the ‘Sapi’ slaves, not the ‘Sambose’ masters; this appears to have been a common practice in many places. Slaves were often reenslaved, thereby preventing the assimilation and amelioration of status that was their due according to custom. Slavery was changing, but a full transformation had not occurred. The presence of Europeans on the coast and the growth in market demand probably encouraged this change. Now captives could be sold as well as used domestically. Whereas the size of the slave population may have fluctuated in the past in accordance with war and peace, now a steady demand for slaves drained victims from the area. The extent to which this was internalized into local society is not yet clear, but the number of slaves available for export soon became sufficient for European demand, so that it was no longer necessary for pirates like Hawkins to seize people. It is likely that the size of the local slave population also increased.49

Father Baltasar Barreira, a Jesuit priest who visited the Cape Verde Islands and Sierra Leone in 1605, enquired into the methods of enslavement on the upper Guinea coast, and, concerned with justifying the institution of slavery and Portuguese involvement in the slave trade, he collected useful information on the origins of slaves. Although his tract, Concerning the Slaves … that come from the Parts of Guinea which are called Cape Verde, contains a distorted view of African society and hence does not represent an African perspective on enslavement, Barreira did rely on information from slave owners and traders, as well as earlier Portuguese sources, which does establish the range of methods involved in the enslavement of people.50 Barreira lists captivity in war as common; he was even under the impression that local wars were sometimes fought to obtain slaves for export. Whether or not this was true, slaves were certainly readily available, and Europeans no longer had to raid for slaves, as Hawkins had done.

Convicted criminals were also enslaved. Barreira provides a list of offenses that were punishable through enslavement, although it is unclear how long such punishments had been inflicted or how often they were enforced.

There are other ways of enslaving in a legal way, as when it is proved that one black is a witch, or he confesses it himself; or that he has killed another with poison; or that he is intimate with any of the king’s wives; or that he is inciting war against the king; or that he asks the chinas – so they call their idols – to kill the king, in which case if the king happens to fall ill, not only do they kill the delinquent or sell him outside the kingdom, and confiscate all his possessions, but they also enslave and sell all his relatives,
for fear that any of them, in revenge, also asks the *chinas* to kill him. This is also done by subjects who are not kings.\(^1\)

In this description, “kings” referred to powerful men in general, for there were no large states in the interior at this time. Barreira also provides information on the means of determining guilt through poison ordeals and spirit possession. Besides these “legal” means, people were kidnapped, and given that neither local merchants nor the Portuguese enquired into the methods of enslavement at the time of purchase, these practices probably became more common as the export trade expanded.

The relationship between the European slave trade and developments in local African societies helps clarify the process of historical change related to the development of slavery as an institution.\(^2\) In its indigenous form, slavery functioned on the edge of society. There were some slaves who had failed to pay debts, been convicted of crimes, charged with sorcery, seized in war, or transferred as compensation for damages. Nonetheless, the basic structure of society was the kinship unit. Slaves emerged almost as incidental products of the interaction between groups of kin. Slaves could be sold to outsiders, and here lay the possibility for regular trade, although it was one that could vary in importance. The presence of merchants provided an incentive for developing a sustained trade, not a haphazard one that fluctuated depending on the problems of kinship. Once merchants organized the collection of slaves, the exchange was transformed. Whereas slaves continued to move back and forth between groups of kin, with little, if any, discrepancy in the balance of this flow, now slaves were funneled toward the export market too. The net effect was the loss of these slaves to Africa and the substitution of imported commodities for humans.