**Gold: Early European Contact and the Slave Trade**

When the first Europeans arrived in the late fifteenth century, many inhabitants of the Gold Coast area were striving to consolidate their newly acquired territories and to settle into a secure and permanent environment. Several immigrant groups had yet to establish firm ascendancy over earlier occupants of their territories, and considerable displacement and secondary migrations were in progress. Ivor Wilks, a leading historian of Ghana, observed that Akan purchases of slaves from Portuguese traders operating from the Congo region augmented the labor needed for the state formation that was characteristic of this period. Unlike the Akan groups of the interior, the major coastal groups, such as the Fante, Ewe, and Ga, were for the most part settled in their homelands.

The Portuguese were the first to arrive. By 1471, under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, they had reached the area that was to become known as the Gold Coast because Europeans knew the area as the source of gold that reached Muslim North Africa by way of trade routes across the Sahara. The initial Portuguese interest in trading for gold, ivory, and pepper so increased that in 1482 the Portuguese built their first permanent trading post on the western coast of present-day Ghana. This fortress, Elmina Castle, constructed to protect Portuguese trade from European competitors and hostile Africans, still stands.

1. What situation were the local inhabitants of the Gold Coast facing when the first Europeans arrived in the Gold Coast?
2. Who were the first Europeans to arrive in the Gold Coast? Who was their leader?
3. Why were Europeans interested in the Gold Coast in the first place?
4. What was the first European settlement on the Gold Coast? Why was it constructed?

With the opening of European plantations in the New World during the 1500s, which suddenly expanded the demand for slaves in the Americas, trade in slaves soon overshadowed gold as the principal export of the area. Indeed, the west coast of Africa became the principal source of slaves for the New World. The seemingly insatiable market and the substantial profits to be gained from the slave trade attracted adventurers from all over Europe. Much of the conflict that arose among European groups on the coast and among competing African kingdoms was the result of rivalry for control of this trade.

The Portuguese position on the Gold Coast remained secure for almost a century. During that time, Lisbon leased the right to establish trading posts to individuals or companies that sought to align themselves with the local chiefs and to exchange trade goods both for rights to conduct commerce and for slaves whom the chiefs could provide. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, adventurers--first Dutch, and later English, Danish, and Swedish-- were granted licenses by their governments to trade overseas. On the Gold Coast, these European competitors built fortified trading stations and challenged the Portuguese. Sometimes they were also drawn into conflicts with local inhabitants as Europeans developed commercial alliances with local chiefs.

1. What caused the increased demand for African slaves?
2. What effect did this have on the gold trade?
3. What role did local chiefs play in European trade in the region?

During the heyday of early European competition, slavery was an accepted social institution, and the slave trade overshadowed all other commercial activities on the West African coast. To be sure, slavery and slave trading were already firmly entrenched in many African societies before their contact with Europe. In most situations, men as well as women captured in local warfare became slaves. In general, however, slaves in African communities were often treated as junior members of the society with specific rights, and many were ultimately absorbed into their masters' families as full members. Given traditional methods of agricultural production in Africa, slavery in Africa was quite different from that which existed in the commercial plantation environments of the New World.

1. How did existing African slavery differ from the European Slave Trade?

Another aspect of the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on Africa concerns the role of African chiefs, Muslim traders, and merchant princes in the trade. Although there is no doubt that local rulers in West Africa engaged in slaving and received certain advantages from it, some scholars have challenged the premise that traditional chiefs in the vicinity of the Gold Coast engaged in wars of expansion for the sole purpose of acquiring slaves for the export market. In the case of Asante, for example, rulers of that kingdom are known to have supplied slaves to both Muslim traders in the north and to Europeans on the coast. Even so, the Asante waged war for purposes other than simply to secure slaves. They also fought to pacify territories that in theory were under Asante control, to exact tribute payments from subordinate kingdoms, and to secure access to trade routes--particularly those that connected the interior with the coast.

It is important to mention, however, that the supply of slaves to the Gold Coast was entirely in African hands. Although powerful traditional chiefs, such as the rulers of Asante, Fante, and Ahanta, were known to have engaged in the slave trade, individual African merchants such as John Kabes, John Konny, Thomas Ewusi, and a broker known only as Noi commanded large bands of armed men, many of them slaves, and engaged in various forms of commercial activities with the Europeans on the coast.

1. What role did individual African merchants play in the slave trade?

The volume of the slave trade in West Africa grew rapidly from its inception around 1500 to its peak in the eighteenth century. Philip Curtin, a leading authority on the African slave trade, estimates that roughly 6.3 million slaves were shipped from West Africa to North America and South America, about 4.5 million of that number between 1701 and 1810. Perhaps 5,000 a year were shipped from the Gold Coast alone. The demographic impact of the slave trade on West Africa was probably substantially greater than the number actually enslaved because a significant number of Africans perished during slaving raids or while in captivity awaiting trans-Atlantic shipment. All nations with an interest in West Africa participated in the slave trade. Relations between the Europeans and the local populations were often strained, and distrust led to frequent clashes. Disease caused high losses among the Europeans engaged in the slave trade, but the profits realized from the trade continued to attract them.

1. Why might the number of slaves shipped from West Africa be under-reported?

The growth of anti-slavery sentiment among Europeans made slow progress against vested African and European interests that were reaping profits from the traffic. Although individual clergymen condemned the slave trade as early as the seventeenth century, major Christian denominations did little to further early efforts at abolition. The Quakers, however, publicly declared themselves against slavery as early as 1727. Later in the century, the Danes stopped trading in slaves; Sweden and the Netherlands soon followed.

1. Why was anti-slavery feelings slow to develop among Europeans?

The importation of slaves into the United States was outlawed in 1807. In the same year, Britain used its naval power and its diplomatic muscle to outlaw trade in slaves by its citizens and to begin a campaign to stop the international trade in slaves. These efforts, however, were not successful until the 1860s because of the continued demand for plantation labor in the New World.

Because it took decades to end the trade in slaves, some historians doubt that the humanitarian impulse inspired the abolitionist movement. According to historian Walter Rodney, for example, Europe abolished the trans-Atlantic slave trade only because its profitability was undermined by the Industrial Revolution. Rodney argues that mass unemployment caused by the new industrial machinery, the need for new raw materials, and European competition for markets for finished goods are the real factors that brought an end to the trade in human cargo and the beginning of competition for colonial territories in Africa. Other scholars, however, disagree with Rodney, arguing that humanitarian concerns as well as social and economic factors were instrumental in ending the African slave trade.

1. Why do some historians claim that it was not a “humanitarian impulse” to end slavery but something more mundane? Describe this alternative theory.