

The Slave Trade

Duration

One or two class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Teacher's Commentary



2. Student Handout



3. Multiple-Choice Homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To identify some of the causes for the slave trade as well as explain its development
- To read a historical source with speaker, audience, and context in mind
- To practice the multiple-choice question format

College Board Objectives from the 2019–20 CED

- Topic 1.6—The Slave Trade (p. 50)
- Learning Objective 1.L: “Explain the causes for and the development of the slave trade.” (p. 50)

Student Activities

- Close reading of a historical source (either in class or for homework)
- Class discussion of the causes and development of the slave trade
- Practice for multiple-choice questions (Answer Key: 1. D, 2. B, 3. A)

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is organized around materials related to the First and Second Atlantic Slave Trade systems. While the Atlantic slave trade generally peaked in the eighteenth century, the earliest records of Atlantic slave trade in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries provide an important historical record of how and why chattel slavery became such a dominant part of the Atlantic Triangle Trade.

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Beginning with Roman incursions to the continent, European explorers routinely enslaved the native people of Africa, forced them to change religious beliefs, and brought them back as chattel slaves to Europe. By the middle of the fifteenth century, these practices were endorsed by some of the most powerful leaders in Europe. This lesson is built around “Romanus Pontifex,” a papal bull issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1455. In this document, Pope Nicholas V gives explicit permission for the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain to capture and enslave any people who are not Christian. It was used by the Portuguese and Spanish to justify their participation in the highly profitable African slave trade on religious grounds. The intent of exploring this document is to give students an opportunity to analyze ideas of audience, perspective, and point of view in historical documents.

We have provided a teacher commentary with annotations and discussion questions for “Romanus Pontifex” as well as some suggestions on supplemental activities. This is not an easy document for students. It is a dense text that requires both historical background and some help with the vocabulary. You may find it helpful to allocate some time for a reading comprehension “check in” before discussing it within the context of the AP® Exam.

You can conclude with a multiple-choice assignment to help students practice analyzing the causes and effects of the slave trade.



Portuguese traders attempted to forge alliances with African leaders so that they could rely on local cooperation seizing and exporting slaves. This image shows Portuguese soldiers and explorers showing respect to the King of Kongo. Portugal and the Kingdom of Kongo would be uneasy allies for almost 100 years.

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The Slave Trade

Passage

Pope Nicholas V, “Romanus Pontifex,” 8 January 1455

“Nicholas, bishop, servant of the servants of God. for a perpetual remembrance. The Roman pontiff, successor of the key-bearer of the heavenly kingdom and vicar of Jesus Christ, contemplating with a
 Line father’s mind all the several climes of the world and the characteristics
 5 of all the nations dwelling in them and seeking and desiring the salvation of all, wholesomely ordains and disposes upon careful deliberation those things which he sees will be agreeable to the Divine Majesty and by which he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and
 10 obtain pardon for their souls. This we believe will more certainly come to pass, through the aid of the Lord, if we bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who, like athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith, as we know by the evidence of facts, not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels,
 15 enemies of the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us...

We have lately heard, not without great joy and gratification, how our beloved son, the noble personage Henry, infante of Portugal...has not
 20 ceased for twenty-five years past to send almost yearly an army of the peoples of the said kingdoms with the greatest labor, danger, and expense, in very swift ships called caravels, to explore the sea and coast lands toward the south and the Antarctic pole.

And so it came to pass that when a number of ships of this kind had
 25 explored and taken possession of very many harbors, islands, and seas, they at length came to the province of Guinea, and having taken possession of some islands and harbors and the sea adjacent to that province, sailing farther they came to the mouth of a certain great river commonly supposed to be the Nile, and war was waged for some years
 30 against the peoples of those parts in the name of the said King Alfonso and of the infante, and in it very many islands in that neighborhood were subdued and peacefully possessed, as they are still possessed together with the adjacent sea.

Commentary

1 Questions for Discussion

This is a papal bull, which is an official proclamation by the Pope that was intended to be read by the entire Christian world. As an “open letter” to the world, it is not addressed to a specific person. Right after reading this sentence, you could ask students:

1. Who is Pope Nicholas V's audience?
2. Does the audience change the way that he makes his argument?
3. If so, how?

② In this passage, Pope Nicholas V is arguing that he, as pope, has control over all the world and all the nations in it. Many European leaders looked to the pope to solve disputes between nations because he was seen as having more authority than the leader of any single nation. It may be helpful for students if you remind them of the pope's power and reputation in the fifteenth century.

3 Question for Discussion

Pope Nicholas V argues that he can make decisions about African lands on the basis of his religious authority. Religion was only one way that European expansion into Africa was justified. You could ask students:

1. In addition to religion, how did Europeans justify their explorations of Africa?

④ The term “Saracen” was used by pre-modern Christian writers to refer to Arab Muslims.

⑤ Henry, infante of Portugal, is sometimes called Prince Henry the Navigator.

⑥ Caravels were an important technological innovation that allowed for more accurate navigation around Africa.

7 Question for Discussion

1. What does it mean for a European nation to have “taken possession of” African lands?

⑧ King Alfonso was the king of Portugal. Prince Henry (the infante) was his son and heir.

Passage

Thence also many Guineamen and other negroes, taken by force, and
35 some by barter of unprohibited articles, or by other lawful contract of
purchase, have been sent to the said kingdoms. A large number of these
have been converted to the Catholic faith, and it is hoped, by the help of
divine mercy, that if such progress be continued with them, either those
40 will be gained for Christ...

We [therefore] weighing all and singular the premises with due
meditation, and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of
ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid
King Alfonso—to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue
45 all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ
wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities,
dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods
whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons
to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his
50 successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions,
possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and
profit—by having secured the said faculty, the said King Alfonso, or,
by his authority, the aforesaid infante, justly and lawfully has acquired
and possessed, and doth possess, these islands, lands, harbors, and seas,
55 and they do of right belong and pertain to the said King Alfonso and his
successors...in the course of these letters we declare to be extended from
the capes of Bojador and of Não, as far as through all Guinea, and beyond
toward that southern shore, has belonged and pertained, and forever of
right belongs and pertains, to the said King Alfonso, his successors, and
60 the infante, and not to any others.

And we decree that whosoever shall infringe these orders...shall incur
the sentence of excommunication... Therefore let no one infringe or with
rash boldness contravene this our declaration, constitution, gift, grant,
appropriation, decree, supplication, exhortation, injunction, inhibition,
65 mandate, and will. But if anyone should presume to do so, be it known
to him that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the blessed
apostles Peter and Paul. Given at Rome, at Saint Peter's, on the eighth
day of January, in the year of the incarnation of our Lord one thousand
four hundred and fifty-four, and in the eighth year of our pontificate."

Commentary

9 Questions for Discussion

European kingdoms used exploration and warfare in Africa to gather slaves to bring back to Europe. This passage mentions that some slaves were seized by force and others were purchased.

1. Why did Europeans take slaves from Guinea?
2. How did Europeans acquire slaves from Africa?

10 Many slaves were forced to convert religions when they were captured in order to save their own lives. Europeans justified slavery by arguing that the forced conversions benefited the slaves.

11 Discussion

This is probably the most famous portion of "Romanus Pontifex." With this line, Pope Nicholas V grants King Alfonso the right to forcibly enslave anyone he considers one of the "enemies of Christ." European leaders, such as King Alfonso, used this to justify the growth and development of Atlantic slavery. This papal bull was used to justify removing people from Africa and, later, enslaving native populations in the Americas.

As a discussion exercise, students may find it helpful to discuss the impact of just this one line in small groups. If the technology permits, students can be encouraged to participate in a discussion board exercise where they come together to discuss the impact of this line on the development of the Atlantic slave trade as a whole.

12 Questions for Discussion

Pope Nicholas V is declaring large portions of Africa as exclusively belonging to Portugal. It may be helpful to lead students in a discussion exercise about the rights and voices of African people during the age of exploration. You may consider asking:

1. Whose point of view is left out of this decree?
2. Why does that matter?

13 Excommunication was the worst punishment that the pope could impose on a person. Someone who was excommunicated was considered no longer part of the Church. They could be subjected to the same treatment as the "enemies of Christ" mentioned earlier in the document.



Pope Nicholas V decreed that the Kingdom of Portugal had the right to reduce all “enemies of Christ” to perpetual slavery. This provided much of the justification for exporting slaves out of Africa.

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The Slave Trade

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Questions 1–3 refer to the passage below.

“Each day the traders are kidnapping our people—children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family. This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated. We need in this kingdom only priests and schoolteachers, and no merchandise, unless it is wine and flour for Mass. It is our wish that this Kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves.

Many of our subjects eagerly lust after Portuguese merchandise that your subjects have brought into our domains. To satisfy this inordinate appetite, they seize many of our black free subjects.... They sell them. After having taken these prisoners [to the coast] secretly or at night.... As soon as the captives are in the hands of white men they are branded with a red-hot iron.

Nzinga Mvemba, *Letter to the King of Portugal*, 1526

- The passage above most clearly shows the influence of which of the following historical developments in fifteenth-century Europe?
 - The revival of Christian missionary work in Africa and the Middle East
 - The continued reliance on African leaders as equal diplomatic partners in Atlantic trade
 - The creation of local African ordinances forbidding the sale of slaves to Europeans
 - The development of the Atlantic slave trade and the export of African people to the Americas
- Based on the passage, which of the following groups would most likely have supported Nzinga Mvemba’s position?
 - The conquistadors of Spain
 - The native people of the Americas
 - The missionaries from Portugal
 - The industrial capitalists of England
- Which of the following was the most significant factor behind European export of slaves from Africa to the Americas?
 - The need for labor in America’s plantation economy
 - The need for domestic help in America’s urban centers
 - The need for artisans to improve America’s domestic products
 - The need for people to increase America’s taxable population