

Maritime Empires Link Regions

*You grow your peanuts
And plenty millet
The king sets a hand on everything
And says it is not yours anymore!
In the deepest of your sleep
The king beats his drum
And says wake up!
You are not free anymore –*

—Anonymous West African griot (storyteller) song

Essential Question: How were the empires of European states established between 1450 to 1750, and what economic and labor systems fueled them?

European nations, driven largely by political, religious, and economic rivalries, established new maritime empires and administered trading posts in Asia and Africa and colonies in the Americas. Asian trade frequently exchanged silver and gold for luxury goods such as silk and spices, while newly developed colonial economies in the Americas often depended on agriculture.

American plantations relied on existing labor systems and also introduced new labor systems. Among these were **indentured servitude**, arrangements through which servants contracted to work for a specified period of years in exchange for passage. Another was **chattel slavery**, a system in which individuals were considered as property to be bought and sold. The appalling shock of free people being seized and enslaved is captured in the griot (storyteller) song of the West African Wolof people. The growth of the plantation economy increased the demand for slaves in the Americas, leading to significant demographic, social, and cultural changes.

State-Building and Empire Expansion

The explorations of European states (see Topic 4.2) were the foundation of maritime empires. States claimed lands and established the basis of an empire in the areas they explored.

Trading Posts in Africa and Asia

Certain regions of East and West Africa were the targets of European conquest during the late 15th century. Portuguese ruler Prince Henry the Navigator was keenly interested in navigational technology. (See Topic 4.2.) He financed expeditions along Africa's Atlantic Coast and around the Cape of Good Hope, exploring African coastal communities before other European powers.

With the cooperation of local rulers, first Portuguese and then other European traders set up trading posts along Africa's coasts. Some local rulers traded slaves to the Europeans in exchange for gunpowder and cannons, giving those coastal governments a military advantage when battling neighboring villages. Some African city-states grew wealthy by selling enslaved Africans to Europeans. In particular, the Kingdom of Dahomey grew stronger because it raided other villages to enslave people, and sold them to European merchants.

African States In central West Africa, Portuguese explorers, traders, and missionaries made inroads into the Kongo and Benin kingdoms. Artwork from these societies bears signs of European as well as African cultural influences. As early as the 16th century, Benin artisans incorporated images of the European “intruder” into their carvings and sculptures. Yet the expansion of maritime trading networks supported the growth of some African states, including the **Asante Empire** and the **Kingdom of the Kongo**. Their participation in trade led to an increase in their influence.

In 1498, Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (see Topic 4.1) invaded the Swahili city-states of East Africa, most of which were thriving commercial centers in the Indian Ocean trade. The Portuguese took over trade in Kilwa, Mombasa, and other city-states by sending heavily armed ships and building fortresses. This takeover threw the region into a devastating decline.

Japan Just as European states were expanding their trade networks, Japan was sharply restricting its networks. Japan had tolerated the first Portuguese and Dutch traders and missionaries in the mid-16th century. Thousands of Japanese converted to Christianity. Some Christians, intolerant of other faiths, destroyed Buddhist shrines. In response, in 1587, the Japanese government banned Christian worship services. Over the next 40 years, Japan took additional steps to persecute Christians and limit foreign influences. By the 1630s, the government had expelled nearly all foreigners, banned most foreign books, and prohibited Japanese people from traveling abroad.

For more than two centuries, Japan was partially isolated from the rest of the world. They allowed some Dutch merchants to live on a small island in Nagasaki harbor, in almost total seclusion. In addition, Japan continued some trade with the Chinese, mostly carried out by regional lords who were far from the capital city with easy access by sea to Korea, Taiwan, and Okinawa. The Japanese thought that they were through with the “uncouth” Europeans. However, Europeans and Americans would return in the mid-19th century.

China After the voyages of Zheng He in the 15th century, the **Ming Dynasty** tried to limit outside influence on China by restricting trade. The

Ming prohibited private foreign trade, destroyed some dockyards, limited the size of ships that could be built, and began reconstructing the Great Wall. These changes were part of a broader pattern of conservatism under the Ming to undo the influence of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty that ruled China before them. For example, the Ming reemphasized the importance of Confucianism and reinvigorated the traditional exam system. Many of the limits on trade were eventually reversed, and China resumed its important role in global trade.

European Rivalries on Five Continents

European rivalries fueled by political, economic, and religious motives shaped the expansion of empires. Several powers established trading posts in India:

- The British East India Company had begun a commercial relationship with the Mughal Empire in the 17th century.
- Portugal controlled a coastal trading post in the southwestern state of Goa.
- France controlled Pondicherry, a city in the southeastern state of Tamil Nadu.

During the mid-18th century, France and Great Britain, along with their respective allies, competed for power on five continents in the Seven Years' War. Britain's victory in that war in 1763 drove the French out of India. The Portuguese remained in India until driven out in the mid-20th century.

British in India At first, British trading posts in India were typical of those established by Europeans in India and elsewhere. The East India Company (EIC) established small forts on the coasts that focused solely on making a profit through trade. Limited by the power of India's Mughal Empire, the EIC posts controlled very little territory.

However, the EIC then began to expand. It took advantage of the tensions between Muslims and Hindus in India and began to increase its political power through treaties with local rulers. With the help of European-trained Indian private forces called sepoys, the East India Company moved inland, spreading its influence. Ultimately, Britain intervened in India politically and militarily to such an extent that it controlled much of the subcontinent.

The British Global Network The British also set up trading posts in West Africa, where the Asante Empire limited their impact. Trading posts in Africa, India, and elsewhere paved the way for globalization. Each post became a node, an intersection of multiple points serving as a trade center for goods from many parts of the world.

Europeans in the Americas

Before the arrival of Europeans in the late 15th century, the **Aztec Empire** in Mexico and the **Inca Empire** in South America each included 10 million to 15 million people. However, the spread of European diseases caused their populations to plummet. Both empires collapsed quickly when attacked by Spanish forces.

In Mexico, helped by groups that the Aztecs had conquered, Cortés's forces overthrew the Aztec by 1521 and established the colony of **New Spain**. The Spaniards melted down the Aztecs' treasures and sent the gold back home. They destroyed Tenochtitlán and built their own capital, **Mexico City**, on its ruins.

In the Andes of South America, **Francisco Pizarro** and his crew attacked the Inca and captured their ruler, **Atahualpa**. Pizarro offered to release Atahualpa if the Inca would fill a large room with gold. The Inca complied. However, in 1533 the Spanish killed Atahualpa anyway. By 1572, the Spaniards had completed their conquest of the Inca Empire.

Spain Versus Portugal In the **Treaty of Tordesillas** of 1494, Spain and Portugal divided the Americas between them. Spain reserved all lands to the west of a meridian that went through eastern South America. Portugal reserved all lands east of this line. This arrangement put Brazil under Portugal's rule, while Spain claimed the rest of the Americas.

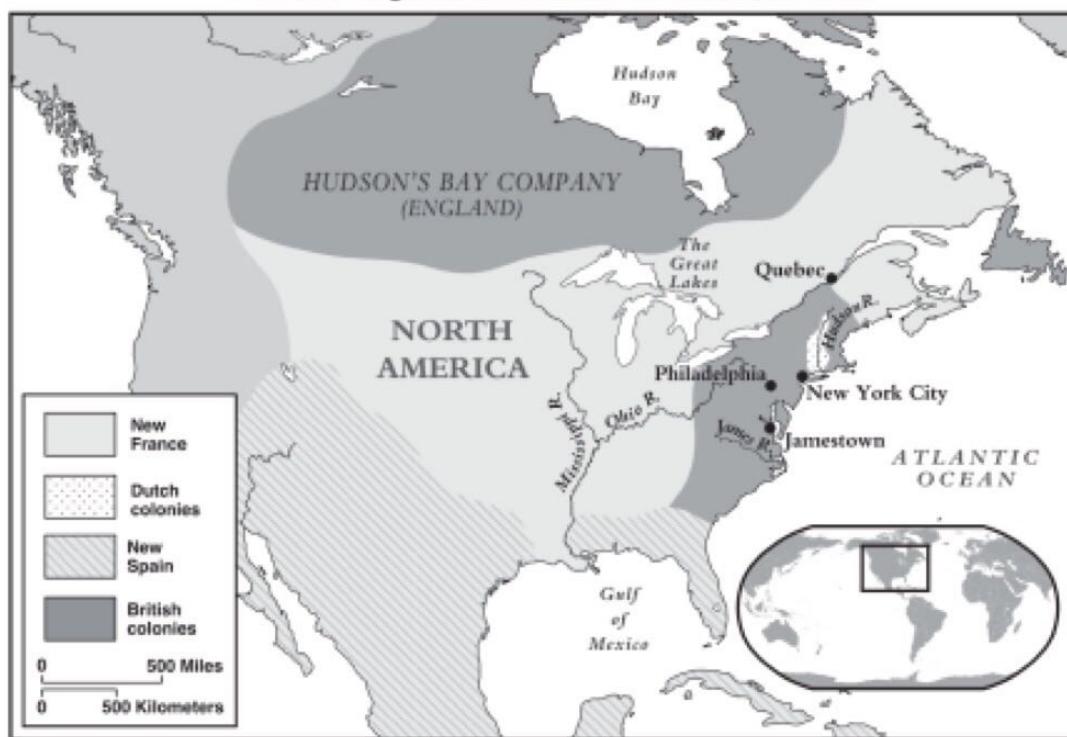
Spanish and Portuguese Colonies, c. 1600



In addition to establishing colonies in Mesoamerica and South America, Spain explored other parts of North America north of present-day Mexico. The explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés established a fort in St. Augustine on the east coast of Florida in 1565, which became the oldest continuous settlement in what later became the United States. Spain would not be able to control all of North America, however, because the French, British, and Dutch later made claims and settlements there.

France Versus Britain France and Britain continued to vie for dominance in North America. As British settlers moved into former Dutch territory in upper New York, they began to form ties with the powerful Iroquois, who had been in conflict with the French over trade issues for decades. The British hoped that the Iroquois could frustrate French trade interests. Over time, the Iroquois began to realize that the British posed more of a threat than the French. In a shift of alliances, the Iroquois and French signed a peace treaty known as the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701. In the same war in which Britain drove France out of India, the British drove France out of Canada as well. The North American portion of this war is sometimes called the French and Indian War.

French, English, and Dutch Colonies, c. 1650



Continuity and Change in Economic Systems

Although the intensification of trade and the increasing influence of Europeans brought some disruption to the Indian Ocean trading networks, on the whole, the system absorbed the changes and continued its familiar ways of doing business. Merchants in the Indian Ocean networks were used to paying taxes and fees to states controlling sea lanes and ports and operated often through

religious and ethnic ties. They did not use arms to protect their trade, and if the fees in one trading center became too high, they were free to move elsewhere.

Europeans in the Indian Ocean Trade The Portuguese, however, arrived with superior naval forces, religious zeal, and a determination to profit from the increasingly diverse products being traded, both from Asia to Europe and also within Asia. In addition to porcelain and silk from China, cloth from Gujarati weavers in western India, agricultural goods from Java, and spices from many places created an abundant market for trade and profit. In contrast to the ethnic and religious trading ties developed over hundreds of years, the Portuguese used their military superiority to take control of trade, creating a string of armed trading posts along the trade routes of the Indian Ocean. In 1509, for example, the Portuguese had a decisive victory in the Battle of Diu in the Arabian Sea over the combined forces of Gujaratis, the Mamluks of Egypt, and the Zamorin of Calicut with the support of Venice, Portugal's European competitor.

Despite the differences between the traditional trading networks and those controlled by European powers, merchants in the Indian Ocean trade networks continued as before in many ways—paying for the right to use certain ports or passageways and developing trade links through traditional networks.

Spain and Gold in the Americas The Western European search for profit began with Columbus. On his first voyage, he was convinced that gold was plentiful on **Hispaniola**, the name he gave the island now occupied by Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But gold was sparse in the Caribbean. Desiring to return home with something valuable, Columbus and his crew kidnapped Tainos, indigenous peoples, and took them, enslaved, to Spain.

In the early 1500s, the Spanish established a system called the **encomienda** to gain access to gold and other resources of the Americas. **Encomenderos**, or landowners, compelled indigenous people to work for them in exchange for food and shelter, as landowners required of serfs in Europe's manorial system. This **coercive labor system** was notorious for its brutality and harsh living conditions.

The Spanish crown often granted land to **conquistadores** as a reward for their efforts. The **hacienda system** arose when landowners developed agriculture on their lands—wheat, fruit, vegetables, and sugar. They used coerced labor to work the fields.

Silver While gold did not yield riches for Spanish conquistadores, the discovery of **silver** in Mexico and Peru revived economic fortunes—for both individual explorers and Spain. The use of mercury to separate silver from its ore increased the profitability of silver mining. By the end of the 16th century, the cities of Zacatecas, in Mexico, and especially Potosí, in the Andes Mountains in modern-day Peru, became thriving centers of silver mining.

For this industry to flourish, Spanish prospectors needed labor. The indigenous populations would do all but the most dangerous work in the mines. In response, Spanish authorities in Peru transformed the traditional

Incan **mit'a system** of labor obligation, in which young men were required to devote a certain amount of labor to public works projects, into a coerced labor system. Villages were compelled to send a percentage of their male population to do the dangerous work in the mines for a paltry wage.

Silver and Mercantilism The silver trade not only made individual Spanish prospectors wealthy, it also strengthened the Spanish economy. European powers at the time were adopting **mercantilism**, an economic system that increased government control of the economy through high tariffs and the establishment of **colonies**, claimed lands settled by immigrants from the home country. In the case of Spain, the main purpose of the colonies in the Americas was to supply as much gold and silver as possible.

Another way to increase national wealth, according to the mercantilist system, was for a colonizing country to export more than it imported. A percentage of overseas silver production went directly to the Spanish crown. The empire used this wealth to build up the military and establish foreign trade.

Continuity and Change in Labor Systems

Different regions and different economies used different labor systems.

Types of Labor in the Early Modern Period			
Laborer	Location	Type of Work	Freedoms/Limits
Slave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Americas Africa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic labor Agricultural labor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Considered property Had few or no rights
Serf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Europe Asia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subsistence farming Most of the yield belonged to the lord 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attached to the land: not free to move at will Had little or no legal protection
Indentured Servant	All regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic labor Field work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employer paid for transport to a new location Individual worked without pay for up to seven years
Free Peasant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Europe Asia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farming Craft labor (blacksmithing, weaving, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked on their own land Sometimes owned a business Paid taxes to the lord Paid tithes to the church
Nomad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Europe Asia Africa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal breeding Pastoralism Herding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did not own land permanently Used land temporarily Had freedom to move
Guild Member	Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skilled craft labor Workers organized to set standards for quality and price 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started as an apprentice Could eventually work independently

During this era, Europeans sought sources of inexpensive labor in the Americas. Western European countries such as Portugal, Spain, and England were developing their naval technology, but Portugal was ahead of the others. In West Africa during the latter part of the 1400s, Portuguese trading fleets arrived in the Kingdom of the Kongo seeking slaves. Initially they took the enslaved Africans back to Europe to work as domestic servants.

Slavery existed in Africa—including the extensive enslavement of women as household workers—well before Europeans sought labor for their investments in the Americas. For example, in many societies, the entire community shared the land. In order to establish positions of wealth and power, individuals not only showcased the property they owned, but also showcased the enslaved people they owned.

Europeans were also not the first foreigners to seek out African labor. Arab merchants during the Postclassical Era (600–1450) often bought enslaved people during their travels to the Swahili Coast of East Africa. However, it was the Atlantic slave trade that wreaked the most havoc on African societies. (Connect: Compose a graphic organizer comparing slavery during Sub-Saharan Africa's early colonial period with slavery from 600 to 1450. See Topic 2.3.)

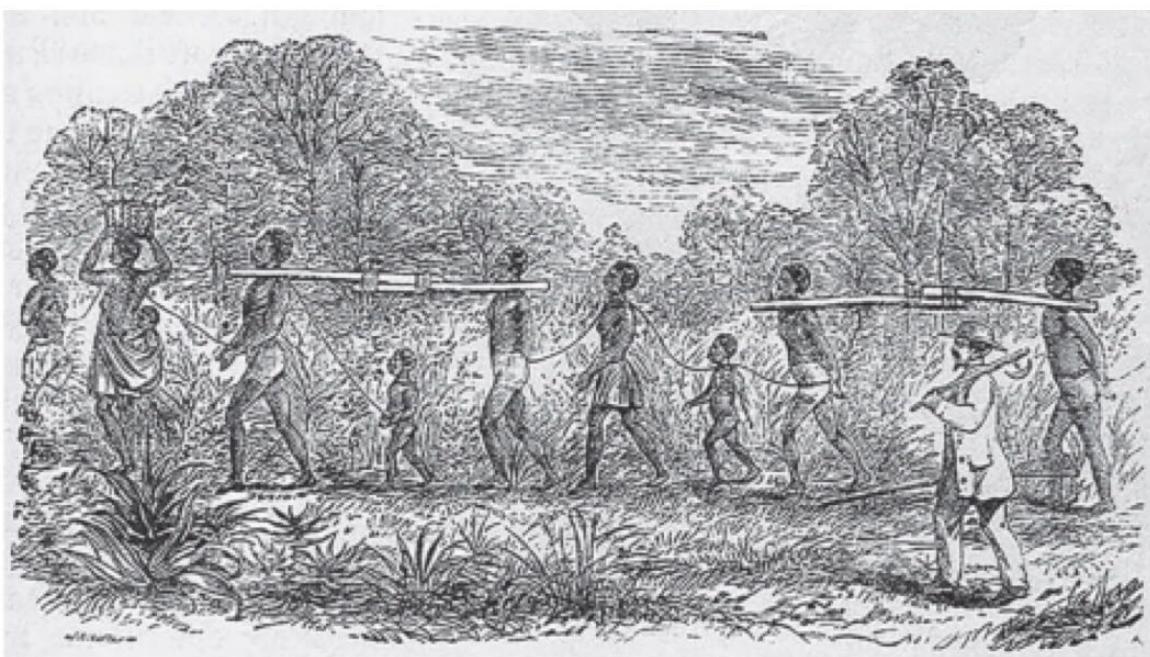
Why Africans? Several factors converged to make Africa a target for slave raids by Europeans after 1450. Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean began toward the end of the 16th century, when European conquistadores sought fortunes in gold, silver, and sugar. Land was plentiful, but labor to make the land profitable was scarce.

Europeans initially forced indigenous people to do the hard labor of mining and farming, but European diseases wiped out large portions of these coerced laborers. The indigenous slaves who survived often escaped bondage because, in comparison with the Europeans, they were more familiar with the territory, had social networks that could protect them, and could easily camouflage themselves within the native population. Repeated efforts to enslave Native Americans failed, although other efforts to coerce labor did have some success.

Labor for Plantations In North America, plantation owners recruited European indentured servants who would come to work, mostly to grow tobacco, for a specified period in exchange for passage, room, and board. However, most of these people were not used to the backbreaking agricultural working conditions and the climate of the Americas. In addition, indentured servants were required to work for only about seven years. If they survived their indenture, they became free laborers. Thus, landowners did not think of indigenous captives and European indentured servants as ideal workers.

Capture and Shipment of Slaves to the Americas Capturing Africans for slavery was invariably violent. When African leaders along the coast realized that their kingdoms could economically benefit from the slave trade, they invaded neighboring societies in a quest for slaves to take back to the coast. At times, African rulers were also willing to hand over individuals from the lower rungs of their own societies, such as prisoners of war, servants, or criminals.

However, King Afonso of Kongo understood that slave raids were not easily controllable. Though he had initially allowed slave trading in his kingdom, he had no intention of giving up his society's elite to slavery, nor did he want Kongo to be depopulated. King Afonso also saw that his authority was undermined because his subjects were able to trade slaves for European goods without his involvement. Before the Europeans came, he had been able to control all trade in his domain.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Slaves being transported in Africa, 19th century engraving

The Horrors of the Journey Captive Africans, swept away from their families, were taken to holding pens in West Africa known as barracoons, or “slave castles.” The modern country of Ghana has preserved these “Points of No Return,” where thousands upon thousands of Africans saw their homeland for the last time. Today, people can visit one such holding prison—the so-called House of Slaves on Ile de Gorée (Gorée Island), on the coast of Senegal.

From these holding pens, slave traders next crammed their captives into the dank cargo section of a ship, providing them little water, food, or even room for movement. The grueling journey across the Atlantic was known as the **Middle Passage**, because it was the middle part of the captives’ journey. Many captured Africans attempted rebellions at sea, but most uprisings were crushed.

During the journey to the Americas, which usually took about six weeks, up to half of a ship’s captives might die. Over the hundreds of years of the Atlantic slave trade, from the early 1500s to the mid-19th century, 10 to 15 percent of all African captives perished before reaching the Americas. (Connect: Write an outline of the effects of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa. See Topic 4.3.)

Destination of Enslaved Africans by Colonial Region	
Destination	Percentage
Portuguese Colonies	39%
British West Indian Colonies	18%
Spanish Colonies	18%
French Colonies	14%
British Mainland Colonies	6%
Dutch West Indian Colonies	2%
Other	3%

Source: Stephen D. Behrendt et al. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*.

Demographic, Social, and Cultural Changes The growth of the plantation economy and the expansion of slavery in the Americas led to significant changes that affected not only countless individual lives but also broad patterns of history. The physical migration of captives had significant impact on the demographics of both their African homes and the countries of their captivity. The exportation of enslaved people that was required to keep the population continuing in the country of captivity caused a century-long decline in population in African home countries.

In addition to physical migration, slavery resulted in a migration of status, from free person to enslaved, setting up social classes that remain influential in post-slavery countries. Further, it disrupted family organization, since families were often separated, and more men than women were taken captive. Polygyny (having more than one wife) became more common. With people treated as commodities, as chattel slavery, social and family groupings were determined more by supply and demand than by the familial bonds of kinship.

Each region in which slavery was introduced was affected in a unique way. However, in all of them, people with African roots helped shape and enrich the language and culture of the societies into which they were brought. The mixing of ethnic groups resulted in new groups of multiracial people, such as mestizos and mulattos.

The Indian Ocean Slave Trade While most Africans who were enslaved and transported to the Americas came from west and central Africa, there was a long-running slave trade in the eastern part of the continent. By routes overland or in the Indian Ocean, slaves from eastern Africa were sold to buyers in northern Africa, the Middle East, and India. Many were transported to the islands off the southeast coast of Africa, such as Madagascar. The trade reached its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Slaves taken in the Indian Ocean trade suffered different fates from those taken across the Atlantic. Slaves in the Indian Ocean were more likely to work in seaports as laborers in the shipping industry and as household servants. Some worked as sailors or even soldiers. Living in towns or cities, they had some opportunity to develop communities and to work alongside free laborers. Slaves who ended up in Islamic communities had certain rights, such as the right to marry. As a result of the Indian Ocean slave trade, African words, musical styles, and customs can be found in Oman, India, and elsewhere.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

GOVERNMENT: African States

Asante Empire
Kingdom of the Congo

GOVERNMENT: East Asian States

Ming Dynasty

GOVERNMENT: Americas

Aztec Empire
Inca Empire
New Spain
Mexico City
Francisco Pizarro
Atahualpa
Treaty of Tordesillas
Hispaniola
conquistadores

ECONOMY: Products

silver

ECONOMY: Economic Systems

mercantilism
colonies

ECONOMY: Labor Systems

indentured servitude
chattel slavery
encomienda
encomenderos
coercive labor system
hacienda system
mit'a system
Middle Passage