The Atlantic System and Africa
1550–1800
European trade with Africa grew tremendously after 1650 as merchants sought to purchase slaves and other goods.

The growth in the slave trade was accompanied by continued trade in other goods, but it did not lead to any significant European colonization of Africa.
African merchants were discriminating about the types and the amounts of merchandise that they demanded in return for slaves and other goods, and they raised the price of slaves in response to increased demand.

African governments on the Gold and Slave Coasts were strong enough to make Europeans observe African trading customs, while the Europeans, competing with each other for African trade, were unable to present a strong, united bargaining position.
Exchange of slaves for firearms contributed to state formation in the Gold and Slave Coasts.

The kingdom of Dahomey used firearms acquired in the slave trade in order to expand its territory, while the kingdoms of Oyo and Asante had interests both in the Atlantic trade and in overland trade with their northern neighbors.
The African kings and merchants of the Gold and Slave Coasts obtained slaves from among the prisoners of war captured in conflicts between African kingdoms.
The Bight of Biafra and Angola

- There were no sizeable states—and no large-scale wars—in the interior of the Bight of Biafra; kidnapping was the main source of people to sell into slavery.

- African traders who specialized in procuring people for the slave trade did business at inland markets or fairs and brought the slaves to the coast for sale.
In the Portuguese-held territory of Angola, Afro-Portuguese caravan merchants brought trade goods to the interior and exchanged them for slaves, whom they transported to the coast for sale to Portuguese middlemen, who then sold the slaves to slave dealers for shipment to Brazil.

Many of these slaves were prisoners of war, a byproduct generated by the wars of territorial expansion fought by the federation of Lunda kingdoms.
Enslavement has also been linked to environmental crises in the interior of Angola.

Droughts forced refugees to flee to kingdoms in better-watered areas, where the kings traded the grown male refugees to slave dealers in exchange for Indian textiles and European goods that they then used to cement old alliances, attract new followers, and build a stronger, larger state.
Although the organization of the Atlantic trade varied from place to place, it was always based on a partnership between European traders and a few African political and merchant elites who benefited from the trade while many more Africans suffered from it.
Africa's European and Islamic Contacts

- In the centuries between 1550 and 1800 Europeans built a growing trade with Africa but did not acquire very much African territory.
- The only significant European colonies were those on islands; the Portuguese in Angola, and the Dutch Cape Colony, which was tied to the Indian Ocean trade rather than to the Atlantic trade.
Muslim territorial dominance was much more significant, with the Ottoman Empire controlling all of North Africa except Morocco and with Muslims taking large amounts of territory from Ethiopia.

In the 1580s Morocco attacked the sub-Saharan Muslim kingdom of Songhai, occupying the area for the next two centuries and causing the bulk of the trans-Saharan trade in gold, textiles, leather goods, and kola nuts to shift from the western Sudan to the central Sudan.
The trans-Saharan slave trade was smaller in volume than the Atlantic slave trade and supplied slaves for the personal slave army of the Moroccan rulers as well as slaves for sugar plantation labor, servants, and artisans.

The majority of slaves transported across the Sahara were women destined for service as concubines or servants and children, including eunuchs, meant for service as harem guards.
Muslims had no moral objection to owning or trading in slaves, but religious law forbade the enslavement of fellow Muslims.

Even so, some Muslim states south of the Sahara did enslave African Muslims.
- Muslim cultural influences south of the Sahara were much stronger than European cultural influences.
- Islam and the Arabic language spread more rapidly than Christianity and English, which were largely confined to the coastal trading centers.
The European and Islamic slave trade could not have had a significant effect on the overall population of the African continent, but they did have an acute effect on certain areas from which large numbers of people were taken into slavery.

The higher proportion of women taken across the Sahara in the Muslim slave trade magnified its long-term demographic effects.
The volume of trade goods imported into sub-Saharan Africa was not large enough to have had any significant effect on the livelihood of traditional African artisans.

Both African and European merchants benefited from this trade, but Europeans directed the Atlantic system and derived greater benefit from it than the African merchants did.