

ON THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PORTUGUESE-AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE 1400s

----- *Gomes Eanes de Zurara* -----

During the 15th century, Portuguese explorers sailed along the western coast of Africa seeking a water route to Asia. They also sought to make money trading in ivory, gold, and human beings. The traders captured Africans (whom they referred to as Moors) and sold them as slaves in Europe. This description of the capture and sale of Africans is believed to be one of the earliest descriptions available to historians. It was written by the Portuguese chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Motives

According to this account, were the motives of the Portuguese traders purely economic, or did they have other motives as well?

They took five boats manned by thirty men, six in each boat, and set out at about sunset. Rowing the entire night, they arrived about daybreak at the island they were looking for. And when they recognized it by signs the Moors had mentioned, they rowed for awhile close to the shore until, as it was getting light, they reached a Moorish village near the beach where all the island's inhabitants were gathered together. Seeing this, our men stopped for a time to discuss what they should do....And after giving their opinions, they looked toward the village where they saw that the Moors, with their women and children, were leaving their houses as fast as they could, for they had seen their enemies. The latter, crying the names of St. James, St. George, and Portugal, attacked them, killing and seizing as many as they could. There you could have seen mothers forsaking their children, husbands abandoning their wives, each person trying to escape as best he could. And some drowned themselves in the water; others tried to hide in their huts; others, hoping they would escape, hid their children among the sea grasses where they were later discovered. And in the end our Lord God, who rewards every good deed, decided that, for their labors undertaken in His service, they should gain a victory over their enemies on that day, and a reward and payment for all their efforts and expenses. For on that day they captured 165 [Moors], including men, women, and children, not counting those who died or were killed. When the battle was over, they praised God for the great favor He had shown them, in wishing to grant them such a victory, and with so little harm to themselves. After their captives had been put in the boats, with others securely tied up on land, since the

boats were small and could not hold so many people, they ordered a man to go as far as he could along the coast to see if he could sight the caravels. He set out at once, and, going more than a league from where the others were waiting, he saw the caravels arriving, because, as he had promised, Lançarote had sailed at dawn.

And when Lançarote, with those squires and highborn men who accompanied him, heard of the good fortune which God had granted to that handful of men who had gone to the island, and saw that they had accomplished such a great deal, it pleasing God to bring the affair to such a conclusion, they were all very happy, praising God for wishing to aid those few Christians in this manner....

The caravels arrived at Lagos, from where they had set out, enjoying fine weather on the voyage, since fortune was no less generous in the mildness of the weather than it had been to them in the taking of their prizes. And from Lagos the news reached the Prince [Henry the Navigator], who just hours before had arrived there from other places where he had spent some days....

August 8, the seamen began to prepare their boats very early in the morning, because of the heat, and to bring out those captives so that they could be transferred as ordered. And the latter, placed together in that field, were a marvelous thing to behold....But what human heart, no matter how hard, would not be stabbed by pious feelings when gazing upon such a company of people? For some had their heads held low and their faces bathed in tears, as they looked upon one another. Others were moaning most bitterly, gazing toward heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, as if they were asking for help from the father of nature. Others struck their faces with the palms of their hands, throwing themselves prostrate upon the ground; others performed their lamentations in the form of a chant, according to the custom of their country, and, although our people could not understand the words of their language, they were fully appropriate to the level of their sorrow. But to increase their suffering even more, those responsible for dividing them up arrived on the scene and began to separate one from another, in order to make an equal division of the fifths; from which arose the need to separate children from their parents, wives from their husbands, and brothers from their brothers. Neither friendship nor kinship was respected, but instead each one fell where fortune placed him! Oh powerful destiny, doing and undoing with your turning wheels, arranging the things of this world as you please! do you even disclose to those miserable people some knowledge of what is to become of them, so that they may receive some consolation in the midst of their tremendous sorrow? And you who labor so hard to divide them up, look with pity upon so much misery, and see how they cling to each other, so that you can hardly separate them! Who could accomplish that division without the greatest toil; because as soon as they had put the children in one place, seeing their parents in another, they rose up energetically and went over to them; mothers clasped their other children in their arms, and threw themselves face down upon the ground with them, receiving blows with little regard for their own flesh, if only they might not be parted from them!

And so with great effort they finished the dividing up, because, aside from the trouble they had with the captives, the field was quite full of people, both from the town and from the surrounding villages and districts, who for that day were taking time off from their work, which was the source of their earnings, for the sole purpose of observing this novelty. And seeing these things, while some wept, others took part in the separating, and they made such a commotion that they greatly confused those who were in charge of dividing them up.

The Prince was there mounted upon a powerful horse, accompanied by his retinue, distributing his favors, like a man who wished to derive little material advantage from his share; for of the forty-six souls who belonged to his fifth, he quickly divided them up among the rest, since his main source of wealth lay in his own purpose; for he reflected with great pleasure upon the salvation of those souls that before were lost....

Source: Excerpt from “The Beginnings of the Portuguese-African Slave Trade in the Fifteenth Century” by Gomes Eannes de Azurara, from *Children of God’s Fire*, edited and translated by Robert Edgar Conrad (Princeton University Press, 1983). Reprinted by permission of Robert Edgar Conrad.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that the Portuguese traders had religious as well as economic motives for enslaving Africans. An example supporting this is the last line, where the Prince reflects upon “the salvation of those souls that before were lost.” Students may also comment on the cruel way the traders treated the Africans, killing them in battle and separating family members. They may speculate about how the Portuguese perception of the Africans as inferior and non-Christian might help to explain this cruelty.