

LETTER TO THE KING OF PORTUGAL

1526

King Affonso

The slave trade of the 16th century was an economic boost to Portugal but was devastating to Africa. The Congo was a key location in the Portuguese slave trade. Initially, King Affonso, the Congolese leader, was cooperative with the Portuguese slave traders, letting them take lower-class citizens and prisoners of war. However, as Europe's demand for slaves grew, Affonso became increasingly alarmed as he saw the trade destroying his society. In the following letter to the King of Portugal, Affonso pleads for his country.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Hypothesizing

Why do you think that King Affonso let the Portuguese enslave his subjects at first? In the letter below, why does the king now request regulations?

Moreover, Sir, in our Kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of little service to God, and this is that many of our people [*naturaes*], keenly desirous as they are of the wares and things of your Kingdoms, which are brought here by your people, and in order to satisfy their voracious appetite, seize many of our people, freed and exempt men; and very often it happens that they kidnap even noblemen and the sons of noblemen, and our relatives, and take them to be sold to the white men who are in our Kingdoms; and for this purpose they have concealed them; and others are brought during the night so that they might not be recognized.

And as soon as they are taken by the white men they are immediately ironed and branded with fire, and when they are carried to be embarked, if they are caught by our guards' men the whites allege that they have bought them but they cannot say from whom, so that it is our duty to do justice and to restore to the freemen their freedom, but it cannot be done if your subjects feel offended, as they claim to be.

And to avoid such a great evil we passed a law so that any white man living in our Kingdoms and wanting to purchase goods in any way should first inform three of our noblemen and officials of our court whom we rely upon in this matter, and these are Dom Pedro Manipanza and Dom Manuel Manissaba, our chief usher, and Gonçalo Pires our chief freighter, who should investigate if the mentioned goods are captives or free men, and if cleared by them there will be no further doubt nor embargo for them to be taken and embarked. But if the white men do not comply with it they will lose the aforementioned goods. And if we do them

this favor and concession it is for the part Your Highness has in it, since we know that it is in your service too that these goods are taken from our Kingdom, otherwise we should not consent to this.

Source: Excerpt from *Historia de Congo* by Visconde de Paiva-Manso, translated in *The African Past* by Basil Davidson (Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Affonso probably saw benefits in letting the Portuguese take certain lower-class subjects out of his country. He could enjoy profitable trade with Portugal, and he could rid himself of less desirable elements in his society. But Affonso came to realize that the trade was unregulated and that all classes were in jeopardy of being enslaved.