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Labor Needs

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Author: Alonso de Zuazo

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Annotation:

Christopher Columbus believed that Indians would serve as a slave labor force for Europeans, especially on the sugar cane plantations off the western coast of north Africa. Convinced that the Taino Indians of the Caribbean would make ideal slaves, he transported 500 to Spain in 1495. Some 200 died during the overseas voyage. Thus Columbus initiated the African slave trade, which originally moved from the New World to the Old, rather than the reverse.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, Spain's experiments in enslaving Indians were failing. To meet the mounting demand for labor in mining and agriculture, the Spanish began to exploit a new labor force: slaves from western Africa.

Slavery was a familiar institution to many sixteenth-century Europeans. Although slavery had gradually died out in northwestern Europe, it continued to flourish around the Mediterranean Sea. Ongoing warfare between Christianity and Islam produced thousands of slave laborers, who were put to work in heavy agriculture in Italy, southern France, eastern Spain, Sicily, and eastern Europe near the Black Sea. Most slaves in this area were "white"--either Arabs or natives of Russia and eastern Europe. But by the mid-fifteenth century, the expansion of the Ottoman empire cut off the supply of white slaves. It was during the mid-fifteenth century that Portugal established trading relations along the West African coast, and discovered that it was able to purchase huge numbers of black slaves at a low cost.

Several factors made African slaves the cheapest and most expedient labor source. The prevailing ocean currents made it relatively easy to transport Africans to the Caribbean. Further, because Africans came from developed agricultural societies, they were already familiar with highly organized tropical agriculture. The first African slaves were brought to the New World as early as 1502, where they would mine precious metals and raise sugar, coffee, and tobacco--the first goods sold to a mass consumer market.

The African slave trade would be an indispensable part of European settlement and development of the New World. By the mid-eighteenth century, slaves could be found everywhere in the Americas from French Canada to Chile. Indeed, the number of Africans forcibly imported into the New World actually exceeded the number of whites who would come to the Americas before the 1830s. Between 1492 and 1820, approximately ten to fifteen million Africans were forcibly brought to the New World, while only about two million Europeans had migrated. In this excerpt, Alonso de Zuazo (1466-1527), the Spanish Judge of Hispaniola, argues that slavery is essential for Caribbean development.

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Indeed, there is urgent need for Negro slaves, as I have written to inform His Highness, and in as much as Your Lordship will see that part of my letter to His Highness, I shall not repeat it here, except to say that it is urgent to have them brought. Ships sail from these islands for

Seville to purchase essential goods such as cloth of various colours as well as other merchandise, which is used as ransom of Cape Verde whither the goods are carried with the permission of the King of Portugal. By virtue of the said ransom, let ships go there and bring away as many male and female Negroes as possible, newly imported and between the ages of fifteen to eighteen or twenty years. They will be made to adopt our customs in this island and they will be settled in villages and married to their women folk. The burden of work of the Indians will be eased and unlimited amounts of gold will be mined. This is the best land in the world for Negroes, women and old men, and it is very rarely that one of these people die.

J.A. Saco, *Historia de la Esclavitud de las Raza Africana*, Tomo I, 143-144

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