

PROLOGUE · C-10

Before the Atlantic: The Trans-Saharan Trade in Human Beings

c. 650 CE – 1400 CE

PERSECUTION · SECULAR & POLITICAL



A Learn More reference document — full narrative, sourcing, and context beyond the timeline card.

I. A Trade Older Than the One This Site Otherwise Documents

The Two Americas archive's persecution track begins in earnest with the Atlantic slave trade after 1452. That trade did not emerge from nowhere. A trans-Saharan trade in enslaved sub-Saharan Africans, moving captives north across the desert to markets in North Africa and the Islamic Middle East, had been operating since at least the 7th century CE — beginning not long after the Arab conquest of North Africa introduced regular camel caravan routes across the Sahara.

II. The Numbers, As Historians Actually Calculate Them

Estimates for the full duration of the trans-Saharan trade (roughly 650 CE to the early 20th century) vary by scholar, generally falling in a 6-to-17 million range. For the specific window most relevant to this Prologue — before 1452 — historian Paul Lovejoy's widely cited data breaks the pre-Atlantic period down by century: an estimated 150,000 people trafficked from 650–800 CE, 300,000 from 800–900, 1.74 million from 900–1100, and 1.65 million from 1100–1400 — a combined total of roughly 3.84 million people moved north across the Sahara before the Atlantic trade had transported a single person.

III. Mechanism and Destination

Unlike the Atlantic trade's plantation-labor model, captives moved through the trans-Saharan system were funneled primarily into domestic service, military service, concubinage, and skilled labor across North African and Middle Eastern households and courts. West African states' own participation in supplying captives to trans-Saharan markets, alongside their genuine governmental and scholarly sophistication documented elsewhere in this Prologue, is part of the complete, honest record — not something to omit because it complicates a cleaner story.

IV. Why This Matters

Placing this trade before the 1452 papal bull does two things at once. It refuses the myth that Europeans introduced slavery to Africa. And it refuses the opposite myth — that because an internal and trans-Saharan trade in captives already existed, the Atlantic trade was therefore unremarkable or merely more of the same. It was not. What follows in this archive's ERA I and II is a different order of scale, a different economic logic, and an unprecedented mortality rate in transit.

NC LOCAL LENS

This entry documents a trans-continental trade network (North Africa, West Africa, Middle East) with no documentable Fayetteville/Cumberland County connection for this specific pre-1452 window. Per project standard, no local lens is forced.

Sources & Citations (Chicago, Notes-Bibliography)

1. Lovejoy, Paul E. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
2. Austen, Ralph A. *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

3. “The Great Depopulation: How the Slave Trades Hollowed Out Africa.” World Politics Review. Accessed August 2026.
4. “Trans-Saharan Slave Trade.” Citing John Wright and Ralph Austen. Flagged for replacement with Wright's and Austen's primary published works before final publication.

This document is part of the Two Americas archive — a fact-driven historical record of Persecution and Contribution across nine eras of American history.