

PROLOGUE · C-11

Ceuta, 1415: The Prototype for Everything That Followed

1415 CE – 1444 CE

PERSECUTION · SECULAR & POLITICAL



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

I. The Opening Move

In July 1415, King João I of Portugal personally led a fleet of over 240 ships, accompanied by his sons — including Prince Henry, later known as Henry the Navigator — to capture the North African port city of Ceuta from the Marinid Sultanate. The city fell after a short siege on August 21–22, 1415. Ceuta is conventionally marked by historians as the beginning of the Portuguese overseas empire, and by extension, the beginning of the European maritime expansion that would eventually reach West Africa, the Americas, and beyond.

II. 1441: Antão Gonçalves and the First Twelve

In 1441, a young Portuguese captain named Antão Gonçalves, sailing under Prince Henry's sponsorship on what was originally intended as a seal-hunting expedition, decided on his own initiative to capture Africans to bring back to Portugal. He and his men seized a small number of people, and joining forces with a second captain, Nuno Tristão, the combined crews captured roughly twelve people in total, including a nobleman named Adahu who spoke Arabic and negotiated his own release. The captives were brought back and presented to Prince Henry, essentially as a curiosity.

III. 1444: The First Mass Shipment

The scale changed fast. In August 1444, Lançarote de Freitas, a tax collector from Lagos, Portugal, organized a company specifically to trade with the West African coast and landed 235 kidnapped Africans in Lagos in a single shipment — widely documented as the first large-scale importation of enslaved Africans into Europe, sold publicly to help fund further expeditions. In the span of three years, the pattern moved from one captain's improvised kidnapping of a handful of people to an organized commercial operation transporting hundreds at once.

IV. 1452 and 1455: The Church Makes It Official

Eight years after Freitas's shipment, Pope Nicholas V issued the bull *Dum Diversas* (1452), authorizing Portugal to reduce non-Christian peoples to perpetual servitude — followed by *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), which granted Portugal a formal trade monopoly. The Church did not invent the demand for enslaved African labor in 1452 — it granted religious and legal cover to a trade that Portuguese captains had already been actively running for over a decade.

NC LOCAL LENS

This entry documents events in North Africa and Portugal with no documentable Fayetteville/Cumberland County connection. Per project standard, no local lens is forced.

Sources & Citations (Chicago, Notes-Bibliography)

1. "Portuguese Conquest of Ceuta." *De Re Militari*, translation of Gomes Eannes de Azurara's Chronicle. Accessed August 2026. <https://deremilitari.org/2025/02/capture-ceuta-portuguese-1415/>.
2. Thomas, Hugh. *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

3. “Portuguese Establish a Foothold in Africa.” EBSCO Research Starters. Accessed August 2026.
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/portuguese-establish-foothold-africa>.
4. “Antão Gonçalves.” Citing the Chronicle of Gomes Eannes de Zurara. Flagged for replacement with a direct citation to Zurara's Crónica do Descobrimento e Conquista da Guiné before 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.