

## **HOMEWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE**

### **THE ORIGINS OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**

**KP1**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Today Africa is often seen as a continent of poverty, starvation and disease where millions of people are dependent on aid and charity from the developed industrial countries. This has not always been the case. During the sixteenth century, when Europeans first made regular contact, West Africa had highly developed civilisations such as the kingdoms of Yoruba and Benin. Africans were keen to trade their gold, copper, ivory and spices for European pots, pans, cloth and guns. However Europeans soon became more interested in buying people than anything else Africa had to offer. Slavery had a long history in Africa going back to the ancient Egyptians, the Romans and in more recent times the Arabs captured and enslaved Africans. In African societies, slavery was used as a punishment for serious crimes and prisoners of war were often made slaves. Most slaves were owned by other black Africans and there was no real organised trade in slaves. Accounts of slavery in Africa suggest that slaves were treated well, were not expected to work any harder than free men and lived in the same house and ate the same food as their owners.

- ☒ In 1492 Columbus discovered America and soon settlers from Spain, Portugal, France, England and Holland began to colonise the New World. They set up plantations growing new crops such as cotton, tobacco and sugar. The biggest problem they faced was to find enough people to do the work.
- ☒ At first Europeans made slaves of the native people. They did not make good workers and most died of disease, overwork or even committed suicide. Criminals from Europe were also sentenced to slavery but they had to be set free if they survived long enough.
- ☒ Africans were less likely to die from European diseases and often had the farming skills needed to grow crops in a tropical climate.
- ☒ The Atlantic slave trade began in the sixteenth century when the Spanish and Portuguese started to ship slaves to their colonies in South America the trade increased as other countries such as Britain and France became involved.
- ☒ African kings and traders became rich and powerful by selling slaves and began to organise raids and start wars to capture slaves. The slave trade began to penetrate deep into the African continent, as Europeans demanded more and more slaves.
- ☒ In 1672 British merchants set up the Royal African Company and by the eighteenth century Britain was the biggest slave trading country supplying slaves to North and South America and the Caribbean. The slave trade grew larger and crueller than anything seen before.
- ☒ Slaves had no freedom, worked until they died and even their children were born into slavery. They were no longer seen as human beings but as things to be bought and sold – it was even thought they did not have souls.
- ☒ As ships became bigger more slaves could be carried - between 300 and 700 on each voyage. The total number of Africans shipped to America and the Caribbean will never be known but it has been estimated that 20-30 million people were enslaved. Many millions were also killed in the wars raids and in the horrific conditions that slaves had to endure.
- ☒ Responsibility for the cruel trade in human beings is blamed on the white merchants who controlled the trade. But it must be remembered that without the help of African kings and traders they could not have captured and enslaved millions of Africans.