

Resource 6: West Africa Before Columbus (1492) - adapted from [here](#).

One misconception that people have had is that Africa was not as advanced as other continents around the time that Christopher Columbus landed in the “New World” (in 1492). Some relatively modern history books have contributed to this deficit way of thinking.

Most of the Africans who were eventually brought to America around the time of Columbus (about 600 years ago) came from the western parts of Africa. The peoples of West Africa had rich and diverse histories and cultures hundreds of years before Europeans arrived in the 1400s. Africans had kingdoms and empires, each with its own language and culture. The empire of Songhai and the kingdoms of Mali, Benin, and Kongo were large and powerful with kings and queens who ruled over well-developed governments that served hundreds of thousands of people. In other areas, there were smaller governments for people living in villages. Remember, places were diverse then as they are now.

Art, learning and technology flourished i.e., the achievements in Africa were reaching new heights. Africans were especially skilled with medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Before the Europeans started exploring Africa, African people were making fine luxury items in bronze, ivory, gold, and terracotta. See some examples below.



Sources of art images:
[here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

West Africans traded with Europeans through merchants in North Africa for hundreds of years. The first traders to sail down the west coast of Africa were from the European country of Portugal in the early 1400s. The Dutch, British, French, and Scandinavians followed. They were interested in valuable resources found in Africa such as gold, ivory, and spices, particularly pepper because it was so valuable (pepper helped cover up the taste of food that was often nasty because there were no refrigerators). But the Europeans brought their stereotypes and soon became interested in something else - African people. Those stereotypes and biases caused Europeans to view Africans as inferior. Those stereotypes and greed would cause great harm to Africa and its people.

The key point that you want to have in your mind at this time is that much of Africa and its people were remarkably advanced when Europeans started exploring the continent in the 1400s.