

APWH: Postclassical Era  
Primary source excerpt: "Africa Through the Eyes of a European Merchant"

Instructions: Answer each question as specifically as possible *on a separate sheet of paper*, and support your answers with examples/excerpts from the reading. You may work with partner; hand in one set of answers.

1. What information in the reading reinforces information you have learned about Africa in the postclassical era? Include at least four different examples.
2. Is there anything stated by the author that challenges what you have learned?
3. Select and cite at least two passages that provide evidence of the author's POV toward the Africans he depicts. Based on these passages, what appears to be his POV? What characteristic(s) about the author or the historical context might help us understand his POV?

**Background:** Antonius Malfante wrote from Tuat (Tawat) in the central Sahara in 1447, to a colleague in Genoa. His travels suggest growing European outreach, for contact with Africa below the Sahara had been limited since the fall of the Roman Empire. Genoa was increasingly active in Mediterranean trade, and presumably Malfante's venture was part of this activity, as his account implies.

After we had come from the sea, we journeyed on horseback, always southwards, for about twelve days. For seven days we encountered no dwelling—nothing but sandy plains; we proceeded as though at sea, guided by the sun during the day, at night by the stars. At the end of the seventh day, we arrived at an oasis, where dwelt very poor people who supported themselves on water and a little sandy ground. They sow little, living upon the numerous date palms. At this [oasis] we had come into Tueto [Tawat, a group of oases]. In this place there are eighteen quarters, enclosed within one wall, and ruled by an oligarchy. Each ruler of a quarter protects his followers, whether they be in the right or no. The quarters closely adjoin each other and are jealous of their privileges. Everyone arriving here places himself under the protection of one of these rulers, who will protect him to the death: thus merchants enjoy very great security, much greater, in my opinion, than in other North African kingdoms such as Tunis.

Though I am a Christian, no one ever addressed an insulting word to me. They said they had never seen a Christian before. It is true that on my first arrival they were scornful of me, because they all wished to see me, saying with wonder "This Christian has a countenance like ours"—for they believed that Christians had disguised faces. Their curiosity was soon satisfied, and now I can go alone anywhere, with no one to say an evil word to me.

There are many Jews, who lead a good life here, for they are under the protection of the several rulers, each of whom defends his own clients. Thus they enjoy very secure social standing. Trade is in their hands, and many of them are to be trusted with the greatest confidence.

This locality is a mart of the country of the African Muslims, to which merchants come to sell their goods: gold is carried hither, and bought by those who come up from the coast. There are many rich men here. The generality, however, are very poor, for they do not sow, nor do they harvest anything, save the dates upon which they subsist. They eat no meat but that of castrated camels, which are scarce and very dear.

It is true that the Arabs with whom I came from the coast brought with them corn and barley which they sell throughout the year.

It never rains here: if it did, the houses, being built of salt in the place of reeds, would be destroyed. It is scarcely ever cold here: in summer the heat is extreme, wherefore they are almost all blacks. The children of both sexes go naked up to the age of fifteen. These people observe the religion and law of Muhammad. In the vicinity there are 150 to 200 oases.

In the lands of the Blacks, as well as here, dwell the Tuareg, who live, like the Arabs, in tents. They are without number, and hold sway over the borders of Egypt to the shores of the Ocean (present day Liberia), and all over the neighboring towns of the Blacks. They are fair, strong in the body and very handsome in appearance. They ride without stirrups, with simple spurs. They are governed by kings, whose heirs are the sons of their sisters- for such is their law. They keep their mouths and noses covered. I have seen many of them here, I have asked them through an interpreter why they cover their mouths and noses thus. They replied: "We have inherited this custom from our ancestors." Their faith is that of the Blacks. Their sustenance is milk and flesh, no corn or barley, but much rice. Their sheep, cattle, and camels are without number. One breed of camel, white as snow, can cover in one day a distance which would take a horseman four days to travel. Great warriors, these people are continually at war amongst themselves.

The states which are under their rule border upon the land of the Blacks. I shall speak of those known to men here, and which have inhabitants of the faith of Muhammad. In all, the great majority are Blacks, but there are a small number of white [i.e. tawny Moors]...

These adhere to the law of Muhammad.

To the south of these are innumerable great cities and territories, the inhabitants of which are all blacks and idolaters, continually at war with each other in defense of their law and faith of their idols. Some worship the sun, others the moon, the seven planets, fire, or water; others a mirror which reflects their faces, which they take to be the images of gods; others groves of trees, the seats of a spirit to whom they make sacrifice.

The lord in whose protection I am, here, who is the greatest in this land, having a fortune of more than 100,000 *doubles* [a coin], a man worthy of credence, relates that he lived for thirty years in that town, and, as he says, for fourteen years in the land of the Blacks. Every day he tells me wonderful things of these people. He says that these lands and peoples extend endlessly to the south: they all go naked, save for a small loincloth to cover their privates. They have an abundance of flesh, milk, and rice, but no corn or barley.

The slaves which the blacks take in their internecine wars are sold at a very low price. These peoples, who cover the land in multitudes, are in carnal acts like beasts. They breed greatly, for a woman bears up to five at birth. Nor can it be doubted that they are eaters of human flesh, for many people have gone hence into their country. Neither are there ever epidemics.

When the blacks catch sight of a white man from a distance, they take to flight as though from a monster, believing him to be a phantom. They are unlettered, and without books. They are great magicians, evoking by incense diabolical spirits, with whom, they say, they perform miracles.

The ware for which there is demand here are many: but the principal articles are copper, and salt in slabs, bars and cakes. The copper of Romania (the Byzantine Empire), which is obtained through Alexandria, is always in great demand throughout the lands of the blacks. The Egyptian merchants come to trade in the land of the Black with half a million head of cattle and camels- a figure which is not fantastic in this region.

The place where I am is good for trade, as the Egyptians and other merchants come hither from the land of the Blacks bringing gold, which they exchange for copper and other goods. Thus everything sells well; until there is nothing left for sale. The people here will neither sell nor buy unless at a profit of one hundred percent. For this reason, I have lost on the goods I bought here, two thousand *doubles*.

From what I can understand, these people neighbor on India. Indian merchants come hither, and converse through interpreters. These Indians are Christians, adorers of the cross. It is said that in the land of the blacks there are forty dialects, so that they are unable to understand each other.