HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS
(1450–1770)
FEATURED IN
Teaching World History Thematically
Essential Questions and Document-Based Lessons to Connect Past and Present
Rosalie Metro
**Event:** The Renaissance, c. 1300–1600

**Document:**


Event: Portuguese colonize Guinea, 1444

Document: Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, Gomes de Zurara, 1450

On the next day, which was the 8th of the month of August, very early in the morning, by reason of the heat, the seamen began to make ready their boats, and to take out those captives, and carry them on shore, as they were commanded. And these, placed all together in that field, were a marvelous sight; for amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned; others were less white like mulattoes; others again were as black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere. But what heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company? For some kept their heads low and their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another; others stood groaning very dolorously, looking up to the height of heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, crying out loudly, as if asking help of the Father of Nature; others struck their faces with the palms of their hands, throwing themselves at full length upon the ground; others made their lamentations in the manner of a dirge, after the custom of their country. [. . .] But to increase their sufferings still more, there now arrived those who had charge of the division of the captives, and who began to separate one from another, in order to make an equal partition of the fifths; and then was it needful to part fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers. [. . .]

The Infant was there, mounted upon a powerful steed, and accompanied by his retinue, making distribution of his favors, as a man who sought to gain but small treasure from his share; for of the forty-six souls that fell to him as his fifth, he made a very speedy partition of these; [among others] for his chief riches lay in [the accomplishment of] his purpose; for he reflected with great pleasure upon the salvation of those souls that before were lost.

And certainly his expectation was not in vain; for, as we said before, as soon as they understood our language they turned Christians with very little ado; and I who put together this history into this volume, saw in the town of Lagos boys and girls (the children and grandchildren of those first captives, born in this land) as good and true Christians as if they had directly descended, from the beginning of the dispensation of Christ, from those who were first baptized. [. . .]

And so their lot [those slaves taken back to Portugal] was now quite the contrary of what it had been; since before they had lived in perdition of soul and body; of their souls, in that they were yet pagans, without the clearness and the light of the holy faith; and of their bodies, in that they lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings—for they had no knowledge of bread or wine, and they were without the covering of clothes, or the lodging of houses; and worse than all, through the great ignorance that was in them, in that they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth.

Event: Spanish colonization of the Americas begins, 1492

Document: Requerimiento, Council of Castille, 1510

On the part of the King, Don Fernando, and of Doña Juana, his daughter, Queen of Castile and León, subduers of the barbarous nations, we their servants notify and make known to you, as best we can, that the Lord our God, Living and Eternal, created the Heaven and the Earth, and one man and one woman, of whom you and we, all the men of the world, were and are descendants, and all those who came after us. [...]

Of all these nations God our Lord gave charge to one man, called St. Peter, that he should be Lord and Superior of all the men in the world, that all should obey him [...]. And he commanded him to place his seat in Rome as the spot most fitting to rule the world from; but also he permitted him to have his seat in any other part of the world, and to judge and govern all Christians, Moors [Muslims], Jews, Gentiles, and all other sects.

This man was called Pope [...]. One of these Pontiffs [popes] who succeeded that St. Peter as Lord of the world, in the dignity and seat which I have before mentioned, made donation of these isles and Tierra-firme to the aforesaid King and Queen and to their successors [...].

So their Highnesses are kings and lords of these islands and land of Tierra-firme by virtue of this donation [...]. Wherefore, as best we can, we ask and require you that you consider what we have said to you [...].

If you do so, you will do well, and that which you are obliged to do to their Highnesses, and we in their name shall receive you in all love and charity, and shall leave you, your wives, and your children, and your lands, free without servitude, that you may do with them and with yourselves freely that which you like and think best, and they shall not compel you to turn Christians, unless you yourselves, when informed of the truth, should wish to be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith, as almost all the inhabitants of the rest of the islands have done. [...]

But, if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us.

**Event:** Martin Luther starts Protestant Reformation, 1517

**Document:** 95 Theses, Martin Luther, 1517

Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen. [. . .]

Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love.

Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.

Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.

Because love grows by works of love, man thereby becomes better. Man does not, however, become better by means of indulgences but is merely freed from penalties.

Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God’s wrath.

Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences.

Christians are to be taught that they buying of indulgences is a matter of free choice, not commanded.

Christians are to be taught that the pope, in granting indulgences, needs and thus desires their devout prayer more than their money.

Christians are to be taught that papal indulgences are useful only if they do not put their trust in them, but very harmful if they lose their fear of God because of them.

Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.

Christians are to be taught that the pope would and should wish to give of his own money, even though he had to sell the basilica of St. Peter, to many of those from whom certain hawkers of indulgences cajole money. [. . .]

Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death and hell.

And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace (Acts 14:22).

Event: Aztec Empire, 1428–1521

Document:

Figure 6.5. Aztec Calendar Stone (c. 1520)

**Event:** Inca Empire, 14th–16th c.

**Document:** Chronicles of the Incas, Pedro de Cieze de Leon, 1540

It is told for a fact of the rulers of this kingdom that in the days of their rule they had their representatives in the capitals of all the provinces, for in all these places there were larger and finer lodgings than in most of the other cities of this great kingdom, and many storehouses. They served as the head of the provinces or regions, and from every so many leagues around the tributes were brought to one of these capitals, and from so many others, to another. This was so well-organized that there was not a village that did not know where it was to send its tribute. [. . .]

The tribute paid by each of these provinces, whether gold, silver, clothing, arms and all else they gave, was entered in the accounts of those who kept the quipus and did everything ordered by the governor in the matter of finding the soldiers or supplying whomever the Inca ordered, or making delivery to Cuzco; but when they came from the city of Cuzco to go over the accounts, or they were ordered to go to Cuzco to give an accounting, the accountants themselves gave it by the quipus, or went to give it where there could be no fraud, but everything had to come out right. [. . .]

At the beginning of the new year the rulers of each village came to Cuzco, bringing their quipus, which told how many births there had been during the year, and how many deaths. In this way the Inca and the governors knew which of the Indians were poor, the women who had been widowed, whether they were able to pay their taxes, and how many men they could count on in the event of war, and many other things they considered highly important. The Incas took care to see that justice was meted out, so much so that nobody ventured to commit a felony or theft. This was to deal with thieves, rapists, or conspirators against the Inca. [. . .]

If there came a lean year, the storehouses were opened and the provinces were lent what they needed in the way of supplies; then, in a year of abundance, they paid back all they had received. No one who was lazy or tried to live by the work of others was tolerated; everyone had to work. Thus on certain days each lord went to his lands and took the plow in hand and cultivated the earth, and did other things. Even the Incas themselves did this to set an example. And under their system there was none such in all the kingdom, for, if he had his health, he worked and lacked for nothing; and if he was ill, he received what he needed from the storehouses. And no rich man could deck himself out in more finery than the poor, or wear different clothing, except the rulers and the headmen, who, to maintain their dignity, were allowed great freedom and privilege.

**Event:** Ottoman Empire, 1299–1922

**Document:** The Turkish Letters, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, c. 1555

No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man’s place is marked out by the duties he discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan [Suleiman] pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity, he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question. [. . .] If a man be dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; for such qualities there are no honours in Turkey!

This is the reason that they are successful in their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are not our ideas, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service.

[. . .] it is the patience, self-denial and thrift of the Turkish soldier that enable him to face the most trying circumstances and come safely out of the dangers that surround him. What a contrast to our men! Christian soldiers on a campaign refuse to put up with their ordinary food [. . .]. It makes me shudder to think of what the result of a struggle between such different systems must be; one of us must prevail and the other be destroyed, at any rate we cannot both exist in safety. On their side is the vast wealth of their empire, unimpaired resources, experience and practice in arms, a veteran soldiery, an uninterrupted series of victories, readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline, thrift and watchfulness. On ours are found an empty exchequer, luxurious habits, exhausted resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate soldiery, and greedy quarrels; there is no regard for discipline, license runs riot, the men indulge in drunkenness and debauchery, and worst of all, the enemy are accustomed to victory, we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result must be?

Event: Reign of Queen Elizabeth I, 1533–1603

Document: Speech to the troops at Tilbury, Queen Elizabeth I, 1588

My loving people, we have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery. But I assure you, I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people.

Let tyrants fear. I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good-will of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honor and my blood, even in the dust.

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonor shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

I know already, for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and We do assure you on a word of a prince, they shall be duly paid. In the meantime, my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble or worthy subject; not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valor in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over these enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.

Event: Dutch East India Company founded, 1602

Document: Charter of the Dutch East India Company, Alb Joachims, 1602

We let it be known that as the prosperity of the United Netherlands is principally a result of our shipping trade and commerce that has undergone praiseworthy increases from time to time and that the Netherlands have been involved therewith since the distant past, not only with neighboring kingdoms and regions, but also with those located further away than these, in Europe, Asia and Africa. [. . .]

The Directors [of the VOC] shall solemnly swear an oath on their honor and faith that they shall carry out the administration properly and honestly, keep good and honest accounts, and in collecting the moneys for the equipping and in the distribution of profits obtained from the return cargoes shall not favor the greater shareholders over the lesser ones. [. . .]

Similarly, east of the Cape of Good Hope and in and beyond the Straits of Magellan, representatives of the aforementioned Company shall be authorized to enter into commitments and enter into contracts with princes and rulers in the name of [the Netherlands] or the country’s Government in order to build fortifications and strongholds.

They may appoint governors, keep armed forces, install Judicial officers and officers for other essential services so to keep the establishments in good order, as well as jointly ensure enforcement of the law and justice, all combined so as to promote trade. In respect to trade and commerce the abovementioned governors, the judiciary and military shall be required to swear an oath of loyalty to [the Netherlands], or to the abovementioned government and the Company. These in turn may dismiss the abovementioned governors and members of the judiciary should it be found that they have acted corruptly and dishonestly, on the understanding that the aforementioned governors and officers shall not be prevented from coming forward to express to us or the Company their concerns and dissatisfactions should they have any. [. . .] Except with consent of the Company, none of the ships, cannon or ammunition that belong to the Company shall be used in the service of the country. [. . .]

All these points, liberties and benefits recorded above, we have ordered and do hereby order will be maintained and they shall be followed and complied with by each and every subjects and residents of [the Netherlands] without exception of any kind, either directly or indirectly and either inside or outside [the Netherlands] and in all possible ways.

Those who contravene this shall be punished as subverters of the better welfare of the country and as transgressors of our ordinances and shall be subjected to corporal punishment as well as material sanctions. We therefore categorically call upon and command all governors, members of the judiciary, officers, magistrates and the inhabitants of [the Netherlands] to permit the abovementioned Directors to quietly and peacefully enjoy the full effect of this our License, this mandate and this privilege that we have provided, while contraventions and difficulties to the contrary must desist, since we have found this license to be right for the country.

**Event:** Safavid Dynasty, 1501–1736

**Document:** Don Juan of Persia, Uruch Beg, 1604

[Don Juan of Persia] had left Persia in the year 1599, being one of the four secretaries to the Persian ambassador whom Shah Abbas was sending to the princes of Europe under the guidance and personal conduct of Sir Anthony Sherley, and Don Juan of Persia at this period was a Shi’a Muslim, and bore the name of Uruch Beg.

As regards the Englishman who was to conduct this Persian embassy, Sir Anthony Sherley was already of European fame for his services in the Low Countries under the Earl of Essex, and in France, where King Henry IV had knighted him, a rank, however, never officially confirmed by Queen Elizabeth. Also he had led a celebrated expedition to the West Indies and the Spanish Main, and then had left England late in 1598 on what proved a fruitless political mission to bring help and intervene in the affairs of the Duke of Ferrara. His services in North Italy, however, not being accepted or required, he and his brother Robert, with twenty-five other Englishmen, took ship at Venice in May 1599, proceeding to the East, where, landing at the mouth of the river Orontes, the party went up to Antioch. Thence they passed on to Aleppo, and then crossing the desert to the Euphrates, floated down in boats, reaching the neighborhood of the ruins of Babylon, which lay at no great distance from Baghdad, at that time in the occupation of the Turks. From here they made their way into Persia to Qazvin, and thence on to Isfahan, where the Englishmen found favor with [His Majesty] Abbas the Great. [...]

Persia, then a great power, was enjoying [...] prosperity that had been unknown since the Arab conquest in the 7th century. Its frontiers were once more very nearly those that had been held under the Sassanian kings. A century before this, the founder of the Safavid monarchy, Shah Ismail, great grandfather of [His Majesty] Abbas, had made the Persians a nation by the vigor of his rule, further by proclaiming that the Shi’a faith, with the peculiar doctrine of the Imams (from whom he traced his descent), was to be the one and only orthodox belief; thus branding the Turks of the Sunni sect as heretical and infidel. For a hundred years he and his successors down to Shah Abbas had continually waged war against the Turkish Sultans, but with such varying success that Shah Abbas had now made up his mind to seek alliances with the Christian powers or Europe, who, he trusted, would be willing to combine with him against the Sultan and by making a flank attack on [the Ottoman capital] Constantinople mortally harass the Turk.

Sherley therefore had come at a propitious hour; he had no credentials to show from Queen Elizabeth, but he represented himself as a noble in her confidence, and offered to introduce the Shah’s ambassador to her Majesty and to the sovereigns of the various courts of Europe. The Persians of that age were well accustomed to embassies from Christian potentates, and of Englishmen in particular in the reign of Shah Tahmasp, the grandfather of Shah Abbas, Anthony Jenkinson, coming from Queen Elizabeth, had been received very honorably at Qazvin in the year 1562. The embassy therefore was forthwith organized and set out, Sherley and one Persian ambassador being jointly accredited to eight of the European courts [...].

Event: Tokugawa Shogunate, 1603–1868

Document: Tokugawa Ieyasu, Military government and the social order, c. 1610

Once, Lord [Ieyasu] conversed with Honda, Governor Sado, on the subject of the emperor, the Shogun, and the farmer. “Whether there is order or chaos depends on the virtues and vices of these three. The emperor, with compassion in his heart for the needs of the people, must not be remiss in the performance of his duties—from the early morning worship of the New Year to the monthly functions of the court. Secondly, the shogun must not forget the possibility of war in peacetime, and must maintain his discipline. He should be able to maintain order in the country; he should bear in mind the security of the sovereign; and he must strive to dispel the anxieties of the people. One who cultivates the way of the warrior only in times of crisis is like a rat who bites his captor in the throes of being captured. The man may die from the effects of the poisonous bite, but to generate courage on the spur of the moment is not the way of the warrior. To assume the way of the warrior upon the outbreak of war is like a rat biting his captor. Although this is better than fleeing from the scene, the true master of the way of the warrior is one who maintains his martial discipline even in times of peace. Thirdly, the farmer’s toil is proverbial—from the first grain to a hundreds acts of labor. He selects the seed from last fall’s crop, and undergoes various hardships and anxieties through the heat of the summer until the seed grows finally to a rice plant. It is harvested and husked and then offered to the land steward. The rice then becomes sustenance for the multitudes. Truly, the hundred acts of toil from last fall to this fall are like so many tears of blood. Thus, it is a wise man who, while partaking of his meal, appreciates the hundred acts of toil of the people. Fourthly, the artisan’s occupation is to make and prepare wares and utensils for the use of others. Fifthly, the merchant facilitates the exchange of goods so that the people can cover their nakedness and keep their bodies warm. As the people produce clothing, food, and housing, which are called the ‘three treasures,’ they deserve our every sympathy.”

**Event:** Portuguese colonize Angola, 1575

**Document:** Letter from Queen Njinga of Ndongo to Bento Banha Cardoso, 1626

It gladdens my soul that Your Honor has come to the Fortress of Ambaca [a trading center] so that I may recount to you, as to my father, how a war party led by [Aire] attacked the men I sent [to escort] some slaves to the market of Bumba a Kissanzo, and stole about thirty slaves from me. When I dispatched a party to seek redress, as I would against any vassal of mine, it happened that my army encountered about nine of the men who were stationed inland with [Portuguese commander] Tigre. Having decided to face my army outside the fortress, these nine men, by God’s will, were defeated by my men, six of whom were brought to me alive. It caused me great grief that at [Aire’s] fortress there were Portuguese forces that I have received with great kindness because they are vassals of the king of Spain, to whom I recognize obeisance as a Christian. On Saturday, one of my [. . .] servants arrived here and told me that in Ambaca a large force had gathered, waiting for Your Honor to move against me to free the Portuguese held in captivity. Nothing is accomplished by force and to do so would bring both me and them to harm because everything can be done peacefully and without force. And if some of the lords who have settled here have incurred heavy debts and have put it in the minds of Your Honor and the governor that you should wage war in order to get out of debt, they are welcome to do so, but I do not want to make war with the captain. [. . .]

I ask that Your Honor send me a hammock, and four ells of red wool for a cover, a horse blanket, and good wine, and an arroba of wax for candles, and half a dozen lengths of muslin, and two or three lace tablecloths, and some purple, wine-colored, and blue garnets, and a large broad-brim hat made of blue velvet, or the one Your Honor wears, and four measures of paper.

Event: Reign of Louis XIV: 1643–1715

Document: Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Louis XIV, 1685

Be it known that . . . we have, by this present perpetual and irrevocable edict, suppressed and revoked . . . the edict of our said grandfather, given at Nantes in April, 1598, in its whole extent . . .; we declare them null and void, . . .; and in consequence we desire, and it is our pleasure, that all the temples of those of the said [Protestant Church] situated in our kingdom, countries, territories, and the lordships under our crown, shall be demolished without delay.

II. We forbid our subjects of the [Protestant Church] to meet any more for the exercise of the said religion in any place or private house, under any pretext whatever, . . .

III. We likewise forbid all noblemen, of what condition soever, to hold such religious exercises in their houses or fiefs, under penalty to be inflicted upon all our said subjects who shall engage in the said exercises, of imprisonment and confiscation.

IV. We enjoin all ministers of the said [Protestant Church], who do not choose to become converts and to embrace the Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion, to leave our kingdom and the territories subject to us within a fortnight of the publication of our present edict, without leave to reside therein beyond that period, or, during the said fortnight, to engage in any preaching, exhortation, or any other function, on pain of being sent to the galleys. . . .

VII. We forbid private schools for the instruction of children of the said [Protestant Church], and in general all things what ever which can be regarded as a concession of any kind in favor of the said religion.

VIII. As for children who may be born of persons of the said [Protestant Church], we desire that from henceforth they be baptized by the parish priests. We enjoin parents to send them to the churches for that purpose, under penalty of five hundred livres fine, to be increased as circumstances may demand; and thereafter the children shall be brought up in the Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion, which we expressly enjoin the local magistrates to see done . . .

X. We repeat our most express prohibition to all our subjects of the said [Protestant Church], together with their wives and children, against leaving our kingdom, lands, and territories subject to us, or transporting their goods and effects therefrom under penalty, as respects the men, of being sent to the galleys, and as respects the women, of imprisonment and confiscation . . .

XII. . . . liberty is granted to the . . . persons of the [Protestant Church], pending the time when it shall please God to enlighten them as well as others, to remain in the cities and places of our kingdom, lands, and territories subject to us, and there to continue their commerce, and to enjoy their possessions, without being subjected to molestation or hindrance on account of the [Protestant Church], on condition of not engaging in the exercise of the said religion, or of meeting under pretext of prayers or religious services, of whatever nature these may be, under the penalties above mentioned of imprisonment and confiscation.