The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa

G. R. Crone

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The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century

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Translated and edited by

G. R. CRONE

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PREFACE

THE importance of Cadamosto's narrative has long been recognized by students of African historical geography. It is clear, however, from a study of the literature, that considerable misconception is current concerning his achievements and the character of his work. This is largely due to the lack of a critical edition of the text, and of a modern translation. The sole English translation, in a condensed form, appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century.

It was thought appropriate to add to the present version translations of other documents comprising our authorities for this important period in Portuguese expansion, so that the volume might form a sequel to the edition of Azurara's 'Chronicle' by C. R. Beazley and Edgar Prestage (Hakluyt Soc., Ser. I, vols. XCV and C).

Without the assistance received from others, I should not have been able to carry through the task of editorship. In particular I am much indebted to Mr E. W. Bovill, who has co-operated throughout. He is the author of the first section of the Introduction, and of a number of footnotes. Indeed, it is at his wish alone that his name does not appear on the title-page as co-editor. I am also grateful to Professor Edgar Prestage for his generous advice and help; and to Senhor Armando Cortesão for considerable assistance in translating the extracts from Barros. As all editors of volumes for the Hakluyt Society will appreciate, Mr Edward Lynam, the Honorary Secretary, has rendered me many kindnesses throughout.

G. R. CRONE

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INTRODUCTION

I

The trade between the Western Sudan and the Mediterranean

THE course of the Portuguese exploration of the western coast of Africa has been narrated by Sir Raymond Beazley and Professor Prestage in their introduction to the Hakluyt Society edition of Azurara's *Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*[1], although that work ends approximately at the year 1448. The documents printed in the present volume carry on the narrative from that date until the closing years of the century, and in this introduction emphasis will be laid upon the relations between these coastal voyages and the trade of the interior, which had been highly organized on well-defined routes for a considerable period before the beginning of Portuguese expansion.

Throughout the Middle Ages there had been a thriving trade between the Christians of Europe and the Moslems of the Maghreb, as they called North Africa. Christian galleys were constantly putting in and out of a dozen or more African ports, of which Massa, Saffi, Salee and Tangier on the Atlantic, and Honein, Algiers, Bone and Tunis on the Mediterranean, were the most important. The Normans of Sicily had been amongst the first in the field, but later the Pisans, Genoese, Marseillais and Venetians acquired their respective rights and privileges along the Barbary coast. Each nation had negotiated treaties to protect its nationals and its interests, and maintained a consul and a *fonduk* in the ports with which it traded. So firmly was this trade established that it was seldom interrupted by the scourge of piracy—a constant source of international friction, in which Christians, more often than Moslems, seem to have been the aggressors.

[1] Hakluyt Soc., First series, vols. XCV (1896) and C (1899).

In spite of their consuls and their *fonduks*, the Christians were rigorously excluded from the interior. Occasionally an enterprising merchant might penetrate as far as Marrakech, Constantine or Kairwan, but here his treaty rights gave him no protection against the middlemen who jealously guarded their control over the trade of the interior against the interference of interlopers. Consequently there was a marked contrast between the extraordinary journeys of Europeans in Asia and their complete ignorance of the interior of northern Africa, although they had long known it to be a region of great commercial activity.

That there was great wealth in the remote interior was patent enough, for the articles which attracted Christian merchants to the Barbary ports were not products of the coastal belt. The most important of these were gold, negro slaves, malaguetta pepper or chillies, which so puzzled Europeans that they called it grains of Paradise, ivory, ebony, and gaily dyed goat skins. For these the Christians eagerly bartered their glass beads, cloth and the miscellaneous trade goods which probably differed but little from those in demand in the remoter parts of Central Africa to-day. Themselves confined to the coast, the Christians found in the Jews a valuable source of information about the trade of the interior. The Jews had long played an important part in the commercial life of northern Africa, and from their *mellahs* on the coast had spread into the oases of the Sahara and thence into the Sudan.

In the fourteenth century the Jewish cartographers of Majorca had produced several remarkable maps of Africa containing information about the interior, which till then had never been made known. The source from which they got it was evidently their co-religionists in Africa. The most notable of these maps was the so-called Catalan Atlas made for Charles V by Abraham Cresques in 1375, on which appeared such names as *tenbuch* (Timbuktu), *ciutat de melli* (Mali), *geugeu* (Gao) and *tagaza*, which were soon to become famous. The Atlas Mountains are shown broken by a pass used by 'merchants going to the Land of the Negroes of Guinea'. Across the centre of the Sahara appears the figure of a negro monarch enthroned with a sceptre in one hand and a nugget of gold in the other. 'This negro lord', runs

the legend, 'is called Musa Mali, Lord of the Negroes of Guinea. So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble King in all the land.'

Gold was the article of trade which most interested Jews and Christians alike and was shortly to become still more important. By the beginning of the fifteenth century the demands of a rapidly increasing foreign trade and a series of disastrous wars had greatly denuded Europe of precious metals. Consequently the period was one of financial stringency which continued till the discovery of the American mines. Meanwhile men looked for relief to Africa, whence they had long imported gold, brought overland from an unknown source beyond the Sahara. It is not surprising therefore that the fifteenth century witnessed many determined efforts by sea and land to discover whence the gold came.

Most of the gold of North Africa was shipped from the port of Massa, the ancient Temest, in the extreme west on the Atlantic coast, and in the fourteenth century the trade was chiefly in the hands of the Pisans and Venetians. Massa owed its importance to its proximity to Marrakech, the northern terminus of the great gold route of the Sahara. From Marrakech the road crossed the Atlas, as shown on the Catalan map, to Sijilmasa, which, lying on the edge of the desert, had long enjoyed importance as an entrepôt for trade and a fitting out place for caravans. As early as the tenth century it was known for its importance in the gold trade. Ibn Haukal, Masudi, Yakut and Idrisi all bear testimony to this. From Sijilmasa the road ran south to the salt mines of Taghaza[1], some twenty days' march away.

For many centuries these mines played an important part in the economic and political life of the interior of northern Africa. Although in many respects so richly endowed by nature, the negro countries of the south were always hard put to it to obtain adequate supplies of salt. Shut off from the sea by dense forests, and with only a few hopelessly inadequate salt deposits of their

[1] This Taghaza, in 25° N., is not to be confused with two other sources of salt of the same name, but of much less importance. Midway between this Taghaza and Taudeni was Taghaza el Ghizhan or Taghaza of the Gazelles. Further west, in 23° N., are deposits to-day called Sebka d'Ijil formerly known as Taghaza el Gharbie, or West Taghaza.

own, they were dependent for this necessity of life on what they could import. This circumstance has been exploited to the full by foreign merchants throughout history down to the present day. For this reason the control of the Taghaza mines was a matter of the first importance to Morocco.

El Bekri in the eleventh century says Taghaza was constantly thronged with merchants, and that the mines were producing an enormous revenue. Three centuries later Ibn Battuta gave the following description of what he saw there:

After twenty-five days, we reached Taghaza, an unattractive village, with the curious feature that its houses and mosques are built of blocks of salt, roofed with camel skins. There are no trees there, nothing but sand. In the sand is a salt mine; they dig for the salt, and find it in thick slabs....No one lives at Taghaza except the slaves of the Massufa tribe, who dig for the salt; they subsist on dates imported from Dar'a and Sijilmasa, camels' flesh, and millet imported from the Negrolands. The negroes come up from their country and take away the salt from there. At Iwalatan (Walata) a load of salt brings eight to ten *mitkal*, in the town of Malli it sells for twenty to thirty, and sometimes as much as forty. The negroes use salt as a medium of exchange, just as gold and silver is used (elsewhere); they cut it up into pieces and buy and sell with it. The business done at Taghaza, for all its meanness, amounts to an enormous figure in terms of hundredweights of gold-dust[1].

An anonymous writer of the twelfth century describes the bartering of salt for gold as follows:

In the sands of that country is gold, treasure inexpressible. They have much gold, and merchants trade with salt for it, taking the salt on camels from the salt mines. They start from a town called Sijilmasa... and travel in the desert as it were upon the sea, having guides to pilot them by the stars or rocks in the deserts. They take provisions for six months, and when they reach Ghana they weigh their salt and sell it against a certain unit of weight of gold, and sometimes against double or more of the gold unit, according to the market and the supply[2].

From Taghaza the road continued south across the desert, probably dividing and offering two alternative routes, one

[1] Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb, Lond., 1929, p. 317.

[2] *Tohfut ul Alabi*, in Palmer, H. R., *Sudanese Memoirs*, II, p. 90.

through Walata, a market of Soninke origin which enjoyed a considerable period of prosperity, and the other farther to the east leading to Timbuktu.

Timbuktu first became an important market as early as the eleventh century. The notable part it so long played in the commercial life of the interior of north-western Africa was due to its geographical position. Situated close to the navigable waterway of the Niger and on the threshold of the desert, it was the meeting place of those who travelled by water with those who travelled by land—the people of the Sudan and the people of the desert. The former brought gold, grain and kolanuts which they exchanged for the salt, dates, and merchandise of the Maghreb. By the end of the thirteenth century it had become an important entrepôt for the trade between Jenne, higher up the Niger, and Walata, and was trading not only with all parts of the Maghreb but also with Egypt. The road through Timbuktu followed the Niger up to Jenne, the Soninke city long noted as a centre of trade and culture. Surrounded by a network of waterways, Jenne had long preserved independence of the powerful neighbouring state of Mali, the capital of which—Niani—was only a few days' march to the south-west.

Mali or Melli was a Mandingo kingdom which had attained considerable importance in the previous century under Mansa Musa, or Kankan Musa, who extended his kingdom eastwards to include the greater part of the Middle Niger. Mansa Musa acquired a European reputation as the result of a spectacular pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, when he dazzled Cairo with his prodigal display of wealth. As we have already seen, the impression he then made earned him a reputation sufficient to win him a prominent place and a tribute to his wealth on the Catalan map of Abraham Cresques who calls him Musa Mali, and he continued to appear on the principal world maps until the sixteenth century.

His wealth, like that of the independent city of Jenne, was due to the proximity of Wangara. To-day this name survives only as that of a Moslem branch of the Mandingo people, but for centuries it was the name of the great gold-bearing districts of Bambuk and Bure, bounded on the north by the Senegal, on

the west by the Faleme, on the east by the Niger and on the south by the Tinkisso.[1] It was this region to which the great trans-Sahara gold route led, either by way of Timbuktu or Walata. It was for centuries the goal of all who travelled this ancient road, and somewhere here was the scene of the silent bartering of salt for gold. This curious traffic was first described by Herodotus; in the tenth century Masudi found that they knew of it in Sijilmasa; Yaqut described it two centuries later, and finally we have Cadamosto's account. Although this curious method of silent barter is chiefly associated in men's minds with the West African gold trade, it has been recorded in many other parts of the world. It appears usually to have arisen through difficulties of language, or perhaps more often when dire necessity drove a timid people to trade with dreaded and more powerful neighbours. In Wangara salt was the supreme need of the people, and perhaps for nothing else would they have been brought to trade their gold. The story that they would exchange gold for an equal weight of salt is not as improbable as it sounds.

Wangara was probably not the only source from which Barbary drew the gold which so attracted European merchants. Possibly at this period gold was being worked at Lobi on the Black Volta, where there are gold workings of great age. South of Lobi too were the Ashanti gold fields, which may also, but less probably, have been contributing their quota.

Nor was the Taghaza road the only route by which gold

[1] The gold of the negroes was obtained from sedimentary deposits of pliocene and pleistocene age widely distributed throughout western Africa, and from river gravels washed out of older formations. In addition to the above area, extensive primitive workings are found in the Bouré and Sieké valleys in Upper Guinea, in the Lobi district, and throughout the Gold Coast. In the sedimentary deposits, shafts were sunk through the laterite cover to a depth of three or four times the height of a man, the women carrying away and washing the 'dirt'. The work was done between January and May, to avoid flooding of the pits during the rainy season. Nuggets of considerable size were sometimes found; one weighing 30 kilograms was found at Diébélé at the beginning of this century. In the rivers, the gold was obtained by diving during the low-water season. A description of native methods will be found in Meniaud (*Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, II, pp. 166 ff.). The use of the pits no doubt gave rise to the legend that the gold was produced by gigantic ants, and the percolation of fresh sediment into disused pits was the basis of the negro belief that gold 'grew'.

reached the Mediterranean. There were other caravan routes, each one doubtless playing its part in the gold trade. One road appears to have run from Timbuktu to Tuat and Wargla, and thence to Tuggurt and through the El Kantara gorge to Constantine. Farther east there was another road running south from Tunis through Ghadames and Ghat to Gao on the Niger.

Gao, Cadamosto's Cochia and the capital of Songhai, was destined shortly to succeed to the predominant position in north-western Africa long held by Mali. The original Songhai capital was Kukia, probably situated in Dendi to the east of the Niger and close to the present north-west frontier of Nigeria. Early in the eleventh century the capital was transferred to Gao, some four hundred miles farther north on the left bank of the Niger. It seems probable, however, that Kukia remained the name by which the Songhai capital was known to foreigners. It was used by Idrisi in the twelfth century, and in the middle of the fifteenth century not only by Cadamosto but by one of his successors on the coast, Diego Gomes, who referred to a great city in the interior called Quioquun, which can scarcely have been other than the Cochia of Cadamosto. In later years Gao became immensely wealthy by reason of its stores of gold, and it is therefore not improbable that in the fifteenth century, when it was already of commercial as well as political importance, it was consigning gold to the north, drawing its supplies from Lobi, and perhaps from other gold fields farther west.

II

The Portuguese on the coast of Western Africa, 1448–90

Prince Henry's resolve to devote his energies to the exploration of Africa probably dated from 1415 when, aged twenty-one years, he won his spurs at the capture of Ceuta. In Africa he first heard of the ancient caravan traffic of the Sahara bringing gold, slaves, ivory, and ebony from the remote countries of the negroes, already known as Guinea. It was this rich trade which kept the ports of Barbary thronged with Christian galleys

bartering the trade goods of Europe with the Moorish merchants who controlled this traffic. Though at various times during the fifteenth century the directors of Portuguese policy toyed with the idea of territorial expansion in northern Africa, with the object of securing the trans-Saharan traffic for themselves, an alternative method and one promising more success, was to attempt to establish contact with the sources of this wealth by sea, and so divert trade from the land routes and the Moorish middlemen[1].

It is probable that some knowledge of the coast of Africa as far as the Gulf of Guinea was current in western Europe at that time. The Catalan Atlas of 1375, which may be taken as a typical fourteenth-century cartographical document, displays some slight acquaintance with the trade routes and markets of the Niger basin. More significantly it records a voyage by Jaume Ferrer in 1346 along the coast in search of the semi-legendary Rio de Oro. From another contemporary document, the *Libro del Conoscimiento* of the anonymous Spanish Franciscan, it is possible to obtain a glimpse of the trading activities of the Moors along this coast, and to deduce that these extended as far as the Gulf of Guinea[2]. It is therefore very probable that the delineation of the great gulf on the coast of West Africa, which first appears in the world maps of Sanuto at the beginning of the fourteenth century and reappears in maps one hundred years later, before the Portuguese had pushed thus far to the south, was based upon a substratum of fact.

The rediscovered island groups of Madeira and the Canaries added to the awakening interest in this quarter and formed suitable bases for voyages along the western coast, though the

[1] This motive is, in fact, attributed to Prince Henry by Dr J. Munzer, who moved in official Portuguese circles, and may here be recording a tradition. 'Knowing that the King of Tunis, that is, of Carthage, obtained much gold each year, he (Prince Henry) sent spies to Tunis, and having ascertained that this king despatched merchants to southern Ethiopia who exchanged their goods for slaves and gold, determined to do by sea what the king of Tunis had done for many years by land.' Munzer, *Itinerario*, ed. B. de Vasconcellos, p. 141.

[2] See Taylor, E. G. R., 'Pactolus, river of gold' (*Scottish Geogr. Mag.* XLIV (1928), p. 129), and Cortesão, J., 'O designio do Infante' (*Hist. do Portugal*, vol. III).

Portuguese never succeeded in establishing themselves firmly in the latter.

The voyages initiated by Prince Henry were not, therefore, thrusts into the unknown, but part of a sustained attempt to wrest control of an important economic artery then in alien and often hostile hands. This detracts in no way from their achievement, for its execution demanded courage, skill, and determination of the highest order.

The control of this trade was no doubt Prince Henry's initial objective. During the same period, interest in the mysterious Christian priest-king, Prester John, was increasing. His identity had puzzled Europe for centuries, but he was at this period believed to be the Negus of Abyssinia. As the Portuguese came to learn of the various potentates of north central Africa, they were eager, on very slender grounds, to identify them in turn with this monarch. The problem was not finally solved until the journey of Covilhã, begun in 1487. Since Prester John was regarded as a ruler of 'the Indies', the attempts to establish contact with him no doubt widened the goal of the explorations, and thus led to the circumnavigation of Africa and the opening up of the route to India at the close of the century[1].

The narratives printed in this volume continue the history of Portuguese enterprise on the western coasts of Africa from the point to which it was carried by Azurara in his *Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* to the closing years of the century. Azurara's narrative deals with events which took place approximately before 1448. The extent of coast-line explored by the Portuguese by that year is difficult to determine with accuracy. In Santarem's opinion their navigators had already reached Sierra Leone: 'on voit...que les navigateurs portugais poussèrent les explorations avant 1448 à cent dix lieues au delà du cap Vert, et conséquemment au delà de la Sierra Leoa, qu'ils reconnurent le Rio Grande, le Rio do Lago, et d'autres points[2].'

[1] An ambassador from Prester John is said to have been in Lisbon in 1452; 'Jorge embaçador do preste Joham que lhe mandamos pera mantyamente de hũ mes' (quoted from Peres, D., 'O caminho da India' (*Hist. do Portugal*, III, p. 565). If so, it is strange that the Portuguese were not better informed as to the situation of his country.

[2] Santarem, Vcte de, *Recherches sur la priorité, etc.*, p. 294. J. Cortesão considers that Cape Palmas had been reached before the death of Prince Henry.