

Voyage from Lisbon to the Island of São Thomé

(1540)

Anonymous Portuguese Pilot

1942. Description of a Voyage from Lisbon to the Island of São Thomé. Europeans in West Africa 1540-1560. Edited by John William Blake. London: The Hakluyt Society.

Early descriptions of Portuguese travelers to West Africa are vital to our understanding of African life before the advent of colonial rule. These descriptions portray the nature of kingship, religion, social life, economic activity and slavery in Africa in the sixteenth century. This early account is particularly interesting because it describes the trade in gold and slaves in West Africa from someone other than an Arab traveler. It is well known that gold from West Africa was heavily traded in the trans-Saharan trade by Berber merchants making their way to the major trading centers in North Africa and Egypt. This is perhaps one of the earliest accounts of gold being traded directly with Europeans along the Atlantic coast. Eventually this shift in trade routes will undermine the caravan traders in the north, as Europeans make direct contact with African merchants nearer the gold fields.

The Portuguese pilot is fascinated by the extent of the slave trade and the items that are given up in the trade, including cowrie shells, glass beads, coral, copper, brass items and cotton cloth. Portuguese merchants and traders are also involved in the buying and selling of sugar grown on the islands off the west coast of Africa. Sugar was a lucrative trade item that was in high demand in Europe. It wasn't long after this time that Europeans began to set up sugar plantations in the New World.

The Ships which leave Lisbon to go to the island of San Thomé to load sugar, the wind they sail by to the Canarie islands, called by the ancients the Fortunate islands, the island of Palme, and the promontory called Capo di Boiador.

As your excellency knows, before I left Venetia, signor Hieronimo Gracastor ordered me, in his letters from Verona, to transcribe for him, as soon as I reached the Villa di Conde, from some notes which I had told your excellency I had with me, the whole of the voyage which we pilots made to the island of S. Thomé, when we went there to transport a cargo of sugar; together with all that happened during our voyage to this island, that seemed to him so wonderful and worthy of the study of a scholar. Your excellency also, on my departure, made the same request to me; and so, having arrived here, I began at once to write an account of the voyage in question, communicating also with some of my friends who took part in it. . . .

The various provinces of the West Coast of Africa, Guinea, the coast of Melegete [Malagueta], Benin, Manicongo; and the lords and kings of these lands; how the people worship their kings believing that they have descended from heaven; and of some of the ceremonies and customs of the kingdom of Benin on the death of the king.

To understand the negro traffic, one must know that over all the African coast facing west there are various countries and provinces, such as Guinea, the coast of Melegete, the kingdom of Benin, the kingdom of Manicõgo, six degrees from the equator and towards the south pole. There are many tribes and negro kings here, and also communities which are partly mohammedan and partly heathen. These are constantly making war among themselves. The kings are worshipped by their subjects, who believe that they come from heaven, and speak of them always with great reverence, at a distance and on bended knees. Great ceremony surrounds them, and many of these kings never allow themselves to be seen eating, so as not to destroy the belief of their subjects that they can live without food. They worship the sun, and believe that spirits are immortal, and that after death they go to the sun. Among others, there is in the kingdom of Benin an ancient custom, observed to the present day, that when the king dies, the people all assemble in a large field, in the centre of which is a very deep well, wider at the bottom than at the mouth. They cast the body of the dead king into this well, and all his friends and servants gather round, and those who are judged to have been most dear to and favoured by the king (this includes not a few, as all are anxious for the honour) voluntarily go down to keep him company. When they have done so, the people place a great stone over the mouth of the well, and remain by it day and night. . . .

The Negroes of Guinea are unmethodical even in their way of eating; they live long; certain superstitions among some of the negroes in this country; melegete spices; the tailed pepper; certain bushes with stems that have the flavour of ginger; soap made with oil of palms and with ashes.

The negroes of Guinea and Benin are very haphazard in their habits of eating. They have no set times for meals, and eat and drink four or five times a day, drinking water, or a wine which they distil from palms. They have no hair except for a few bristly strands on top of the head, and none grows; and the rest of the bodies are completely hairless. They live for the best part of 100 years, and are always vigorous, except at certain times of the year when they become very weak, as

if they had fever. They are then bled, and recover, having a great deal of blood in their system. Some of the negroes in this country are so superstitious that they worship the first object they see on the day of recovery. . . .

Why the fathers and mothers of these negroes send their own children to be sold, and what they take in exchange; and how these slaves are taken to the island of San Jacobo, where they are sold in couples, that is, the same number of males and females; the coast of Mina, and why the catholic king has built a castle there.

All the coast, as far as the kingdom of Manicongo, is divided into two parts, which are leased every four or five years to whoever makes the best offer, that is, to be able to go to contract in those lands and ports, and those in this business are called contractors, though among us they would be known as *appaltadori*, and their deputies, and no others may approach and land on this shore, or even buy or sell. Great caravans of negroes come here, bringing gold and slaves for sale. Some of the slaves have been captured in battle, others are sent by their parents, who think they are doing their children the best service in the world by sending them to be sold in this way to other lands where there is an abundance of provisions. They are brought as naked as they are born, both males and females, except for a sheepskin cloth; and they have glass rosaries of various colours, and articles made of glass, copper, brass, and cotton cloths of different colours, and other similar things used throughout Ethiopia. These contractors take the slaves to the island of San Jacobo, where they are bought by merchant captains from various countries and provinces, chiefly from the Spanish Indies. These give their merchandise in exchange and always wish to have the same number of male and female slaves, because otherwise they do not get good service from them. During the voyage, they separate the men from the women, putting the men below the deck and the women above, where they cannot see when the men are given food; because otherwise the women would do nothing but look at them. Regarding these negroes, our king has had a castle built on the said coast, at Mina, 6 degrees north of the equator, where none but his servants are allowed to live; and large numbers of negroes come to this place with grains of gold, which they have found in the river beds and sand, and bargain with these servants, taking various objects from them in exchange; principally glass necklaces or rosaries, and another kind made of a blue stone, not lapis lazuli, but another stone which our king causes to be brought from Manicôgo, where it is found. These rosaries are in the form of necklaces, and are called coral; and a quantity of gold is given in exchange for them, as they are greatly valued by all the negroes. They wear them round their necks as a charm against spirits, but some wear necklaces of glass, which are very similar, but which will not bear the heat of fire.

Description of the island of San Thomé, nowadays inhabited by many traders; the island called il Principe, the island of Anobon, and the city called Pouoasan.

The island of San Thomé, which was discovered 80 or 90 years ago by the sea-captains of our king, and which was unknown to the ancients, is round. It is 60 Italian miles in diameter, that is, one degree; and is situated under the line of the equator and half way between the north and south poles. The days and nights are of equal length, and one never sees the least difference, whether the sun is in cancer or capricorn. The Pole Star cannot be seen, but by turning a little one can see it; and the constellation called *il crusero* appears very far away. To the east of this island, 120 miles distant, there is a small island called *Il Principe* [O Principe]. This island is inhabited and cultivated at the present time, and the profits made from its sugar trade go to the king's eldest son; this is why it is called *Il Principe*. . . .

There is a bishop here, and the present one comes from Villa di Conde by order of the archbishop at the desire of the king. A corregedor dispenses justice. There must be 600 to 700 families living here as well as many Portuguese, Castilian, French and Genoese merchants; and people of any nationality, who wish to settle here are welcome. They all have wives and children, and some of the children who are born there are as white as ours. It sometimes happens that, when the wife of a merchant dies, he takes a negress, and this is an accepted practice, as the negro population is both intelligent and rich; the children of such unions are brought up to our customs and way of dressing. Children born of these negresses are mischievous and difficult to manage, and are called *Mulati* [mulattoes].

Description of how the inhabitants of this island treat sugar; of the goods which the ships bring in exchange for sugar; of the fertility of the land and the way they cultivate sugar cane and trade it; of why the flesh of pigs in this land is so healthy and easy to digest.

The chief industry of the people is to make sugar, which they sell to the ships which come each year, bringing flour, Spanish wines, oil, cheese, and all kinds of leather for shoes, swords, glass vessels, rosaries, and shells, which in Italia are called *porcellette* [porcelains] -- little white ones -- which we call *buzios*, and which are used for money in Ethiopia. If the ships which bring these goods did not come, the white merchants would die, because they are not accustomed to negro food. All the population, therefore, buys negro slaves and their women from Guinea, Benin and Manicongo, and sets them to work on the land to grow and make sugar. There are rich men here, who have 150, 200 and even 300 negroes and negresses, who are obliged to work for their masters all the week, except on Saturdays, when they work on their own account. . . .

Analysis Questions

1. In what ways are these accounts similar? In what ways are these letters different? What is the main focus of the

account by the missionary? What is the main focus of the account by the pilot?

2. It is evident from this primary account that Europeans had a precarious existence in the early days of trade and exploration along the west coast of Africa. Since only men go to Africa to trade and grow sugar, what accommodations to African life do these Portuguese men have to deal with? What aspects of daily life were most life-threatening to Europeans? What might be the importance of mulattoes to the Portuguese as they establish long-term connections to African kingdoms and the trade that makes their existence so viable?
3. What can we deduce from this document about the relationship of African kings to their native subjects? What importance does this relationship have to early Portuguese travelers to West Africa?
4. What is the value of gold in West African societies? What is the value of coral in the Manicongo (Kongo) kingdom? How do the Portuguese begin to tap into the thriving local economy of African kingdoms?
5. Why do some African fathers and mothers send their own children into slavery? What items are taken in exchange for African slaves? Why do you suppose these items are acceptable as equal items for the sale of a human life?



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