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A MEDIEVAL TRADE-ROUTE FROM THE NIGER TO THE GULF OF GUINEA

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THE Portuguese first sailed along the coast of what is now Ghana in 1471; thereafter regular trading relations were established at numerous ports of call between Axim and the Volta. The impact made by the newcomers upon local peoples with whom they came into direct or indirect commercial contact was marked. The creation of new maritime markets stimulated trade over wide areas, and the trend away from subsistence economies gained pace (so fortuitously producing conditions necessary for the subsequent development of the slave trade). Archaeological evidence from Southern Ghana bears witness to a sharp growth in urbanization in the sixteenth century; the numerous towns that arose show a pattern of settlement quite distinct from that of the earlier Iron-Age ('*paléonégritique*') agriculturalists.

The effect of the first arrival of European merchants on the Ghana coasts was not as economically revolutionary as might be supposed, however, for other long-range traders, in their own manner equally intrepid, had preceded the Portuguese. In the following notes I shall attempt a tentative sketch of the history of a pre-Portuguese trade-route that ran from the Niger to the Gulf of Guinea.

Although the production of gold in Europe, notably Hungary, rose in the fourteenth century, consumption rose still more rapidly—principally due to the minting of new gold coinages, and to the loss of the metal through the overland trade with the East. European gold merchants looked to Africa for increased supplies, and their demands were felt first at the North African ports, and later, via the trans-Saharan routes, in the gold entrepôts of the Western Sudan. (In the following century, with the development of the caravel, the same situation evoked a second and different response, when the Portuguese set in train their voyages of exploration of the coasts of Upper and Lower Guinea.)

It would seem that the increasing demand for gold occasioned considerable economic activity in the Western Sudan in the later fourteenth century. *Inter alia*, Mande-speaking traders (Malinke-Bambara-Dyula[1] and Soninke) from the region of the Upper Niger made a vigorous attempt to rationalize the structure of trade with the auriferous lands to the south, and especially along the Jenne—Lower Guinea Coast axis. The movement of Mande speakers into the Jenne area was probably part of a wider

[1] It is doubtful whether these three dialects were differentiated as early as the fourteenth century.

movement that took others into the Hausa lands of what is now Northern Nigeria, where, according to the *Kano Chronicle*, they were responsible for the introduction of Islam in the second half of the fourteenth century.

A route from Jenne to the south was reorganized—made, as it were, into an arterial highway.[2] Mande (Dyula, etc.) traders migrated southwards, and settled among the Bobo to found Bobo-Dioulasso, some fifteen days' journey south of Jenne; among the Senufo to found Kong, a further fifteen days' south of Bobo-Dioulasso; and among the Nafana and other peoples to found Begho, yet another fifteen days' south-east of Kong. An alternative and probably early route from Begho to Bobo-Dioulasso passed through Bouna. In this way such towns as Bobo-Dioulasso, Kong, and Bouna grew up as staging-posts for the caravans plying between the Jenne region and Begho, places where the caravaneers could rest and where their pack-horses, asses and possibly bullocks might be changed. For the journey was not without hazards; the peoples through whose country the route passed were subject to no central political control—the limits of Mali authority lay little south of the Niger—while they had the reputation (at least) of being anthropophagous (see, for example, Ibn Battuta).

Begho lay just north of the dense forest, in what is now the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana. Situated itself in a gold-producing area, it was also well placed as a collecting centre for gold from more southerly districts. The colonization of Begho marked the southernmost limit of permanent Mande settlement, though subsequently groups attached themselves to existing towns still farther south: there appears to have been, for example, a movement of Kari-Dyula traders to Dormaa (or Wam, about 45 miles south of Begho) in the sixteenth century, while the Sarakole, noted as lying on the route between Jenne and Kong by Abu Bekr es Siddik in the late eighteenth century, appear to have had offshoots as far south as Nkoranza (Dupuis).

Begho was probably colonized by the Dyula about 1400. W. E. Welmers has suggested[3] that linguistic and other evidence might indicate, as one would expect, the same period for the Dyula colonization of Kong. Begho is now ruined, but Dyula-speaking communities exist in many of the towns in the area. Other Mande languages—Hwela, Ligbi, and Numu—are also still spoken there; the so-called proto-Dyula probably represent an earlier, pre-Dyula migration, but they certainly came to form an intregal part of the Begho-Jenne trading complex.

Valentim Fernandes and Pacheco Pereira, both writing in the first decade of the sixteenth century, have interesting though incomplete accounts of the trade between Jenne and the gold-producing lands. The trade was controlled by the 'Wangaras', that is, the Mande Dyula. Pacheco Pereira speaks of the gold-producing 'Tom' of the south with

[2] Little is yet known of the earlier trading connexions between the Upper Niger and Lower Guinea, but the so-called proto-Dyula of the Bonduku area may have been active in the gold and kola trades before the fifteenth century.

[3] Personal communication.

whom the Wangaras did business; the Akan are still widely known in the Western Sudan by this name, e.g. Mande *Tõ*; Hausa *Tonawa*.

South of Begho, through the dense forests where the caravans could not pass, a number of lesser paths served the traders. A western path ran from Begho to Dormaa (Wam) and through Ahafo to Twifo and finally Elmina on the coast; it was probably by this path that the Portuguese sent their embassy from Elmina to Mali *temp.* King John II (1481–95). A second path passed through Wenchi, Tafo (later, Kumasi), Adansi, Assin, and so to the coast near Cape Coast. A third, easterly, and possibly somewhat later route, crossed the Afram plains and passed through the Volta gorge to the neighbourhood of Accra; it probably accounts for the early commercial importance of the Gã (Accra) towns with their inland free market of Abonse, and the Adangme (Ladoku) towns with their inland free market of 'Spice'.

By these paths traders from the forest country brought gold (and other merchandise—kola, etc.) to Begho. From Begho, conversely, itinerant Mande took their goods by head-load south into the forest in search of trade. They were already in the Elmina area when the Portuguese arrived there in 1471. Their influence on the coast had cultural as well as commercial aspects, for at least two fifteenth-century chiefs in the Elmina area had adopted the Mande title *mansa*, 'ruler', while part of the Mande loan-element in Twi undoubtedly dates from this early phase of contact.

The Portuguese found the Mande traders in the Elmina area eager to trade in, among other commodities, firearms, which the Portuguese brought from Europe, and slaves, which they brought from Benin and beyond. The trade in firearms, however, seems to have been banned early by Pope Sextus IV, and that in slaves by King John III (1521–57); in both cases the trade was considered dangerous since potentially contributory to the build-up of Moslem power.

Fage[4] has already drawn attention to the possibility of a pre-Portuguese maritime trade along the coasts of Lower Guinea, and it may be that at various places in Southern Ghana, notably in the Elmina and Accra regions, there occurred links between the north-south trade from the Niger and beyond and the east-west trade from Benin and beyond. Perhaps, then, the Portuguese were especially attracted to the Ghana (Mina) coast not only because of the quantities of gold available, but also because of the immediate opportunities open to them to operate as middlemen (and, with their larger ships, highly competitive ones) in an existing framework of trade.

In the sixteenth century the itinerant Mande traders appear to have largely relinquished their interest in the coastal districts, and the Portuguese emerged successful from the competition for the trade of the immediate hinterland. In the early seventeenth century Begho was known to European merchants on the coast, but no trade was done with it.

[4] Fage, J. D., 'Some remarks on beads and trade in Lower Guinea', pp. 343–7 of this number of the JOURNAL.

In the mid-seventeenth century the decline of Moroccan rule in the Western Sudan adversely affected the trans-Saharan trade in the north. On the other hand the collapse of the Portuguese trading monopoly on the Gold Coast to the south created favourable conditions of competition. In these circumstances trade between Begho and the coast revived. European merchants, Dutch, Danes, and English, were surprised by the quantities of gold reaching their forts and lodges along the whole Gold Coast from Axim to Accra. The path from Begho through Tafo and Adansi became particularly important in the last three decades of the century, a matter closely connected with the rise of the Ashanti kingdom. The capital of the new state, Kumasi, was built on this path, near the older urban centre of Tafo. The Muslim merchants of Begho, however, perhaps fearing the rising power of Ashanti, closed their town to the Akan, and all business had to be transacted outside the walls, in the bush. (Seventeenth-century Dutch records give accounts of Nsoko, a town that may, with confidence, be identified with Begho.)

The direction of Ashanti expansion in the eighteenth century was determined by its ambition to secure control of trade along the three-centuries-old route. In the first decade of the century Begho was occupied and the Ashanti advance only halted at the frontiers of the Dyula kingdom of Kong (the Dyula colonists of Kong having succeeded, in the seventeenth century, in making themselves rulers of a centralized Senufo state). In the upheaval following the Ashanti invasion Begho was abandoned by its merchants—an unsought for effect—but many shortly re-established themselves at near-by Bonduku and accepted Ashanti dominion (while others, who scattered throughout the area, became the 'southern Manding tribes' who, according to Dupuis, were permitted by Ashanti 'to enjoy their inheritances peaceably'). Not until the early nineteenth century was Kong defeated, when for a short time it accepted a shadowy Ashanti overlordship.

The trade route from the Niger to Begho, with its extensions into the forest, provided a (and perhaps the) major outlet for the products of the south for some four centuries, from *c.* 1400 to *c.* 1800. Gold, kola, slaves, etc., were despatched northwards, and products of the Western Sudan and North Africa, especially cloth and brass-ware, southwards. Economic effects were accompanied by political and cultural ones. Islam was carried farther south, until in the late eighteenth century even Ashanti seemed likely to become a Muslim state. Earlier, Mande (Bambara) groups—warriors rather than traders, and probably in most cases bands hired to protect the rich caravans—followed the route south and, on occasion settling there, sometimes succeeded in creating small centralized kingdoms of Western Sudanese type; such for example was the origin of Gonja in the mid-sixteenth century.

A series of violent conflicts between Ashanti and Kong in the late eighteenth century adversely affected the value of the route to traders. In

the early nineteenth century Ashanti, then in command of almost all of what is now Ghana and the eastern Ivory Coast, deliberately re-routed its trade away from the north-west and to the north-east, through Salaga, Yendi, Sansanne-Mango to the Bussa crossing of the Niger, and so into the Fulani Emirates of what is now Northern Nigeria. Nevertheless the older north-western route retained considerable importance, and although today the opening of new motor roads has altered its course, trade between Kumasi and the Mopti area (commercial successor of Jenne) remains an important factor in the Ghana economy.

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