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FONTES HISTORIAE AFRICANAE
Series Varia V

Pieter de Marees

Description and Historical
Account of the Gold
Kingdom of Guinea
(1602)

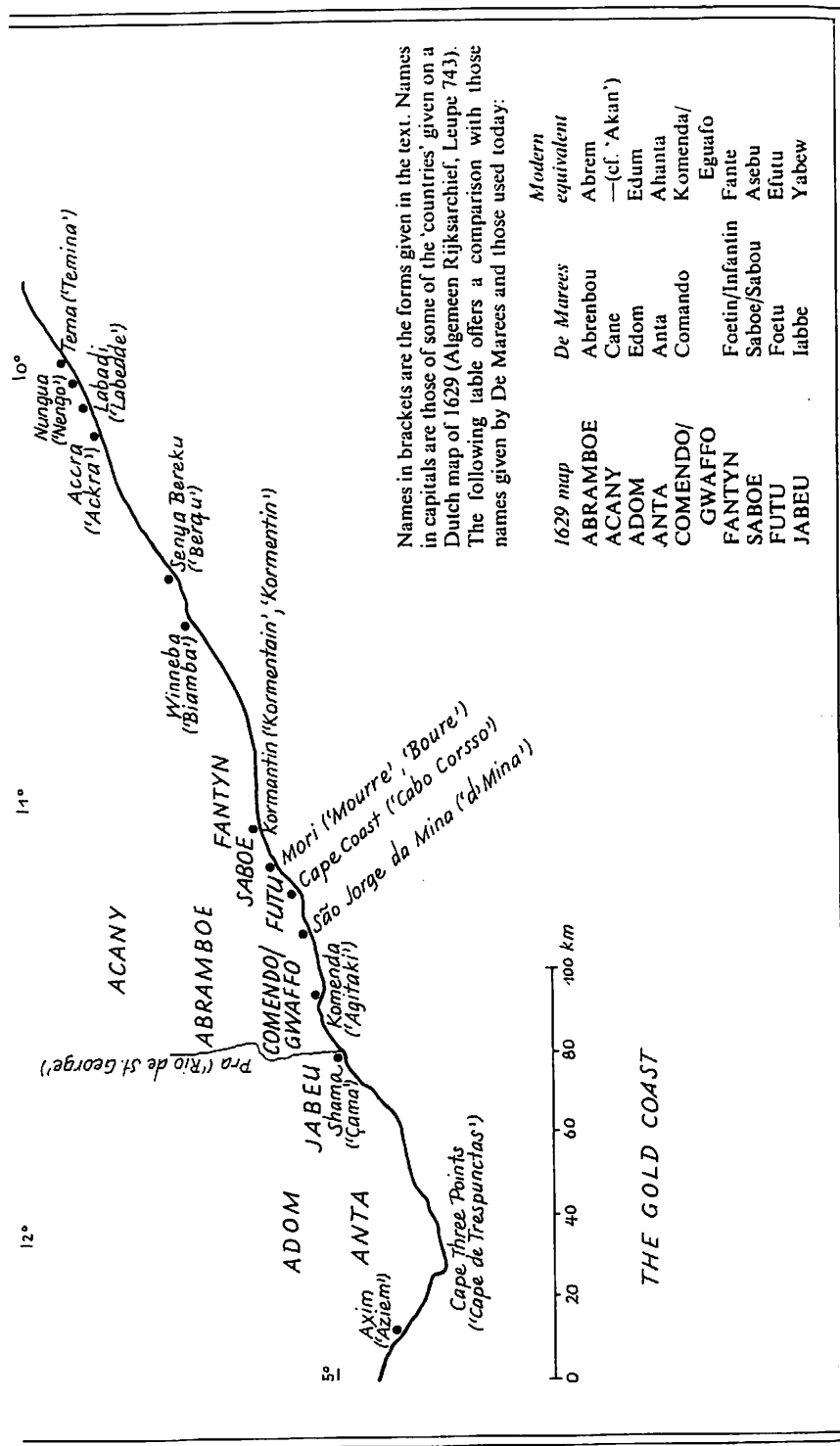
Translated from the Dutch and edited by
Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones



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Names in brackets are the forms given in the text. Names in capitals are those of some of the 'countries' given on a Dutch map of 1629 (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Leupe 743). The following table offers a comparison with those names given by De Marees and those used today:

1629 map	De Marees	Modern equivalent
ABRAMBOE	Abrenbou	Abrem
ACANY	Cane	—(cf. 'Akan')
ADOM	Edom	Edum
ANTA	Anta	Ahanta
COMENDO/ GWAFFO	Comando	Komenda/ Eguafo
FANTYN	Foetin/Infantin	Fante
SABOE	Saboe/Sabou	Asebu
FUTU	Foetu	Efutu
JABEU	Iabbe	Yabew

Map of West Africa by Luiz Texera (1602), overlaid

Two impressions of this undated map of West Africa are known to exist.¹ The last words of the inscription, 'eodem anno editus est liber amplam harum regionum descriptionem continens, per P.D.M.', suggest that the map was prepared for publication in the same year as de Marees' book and was intended to accompany it; but no surviving copies of the 1602 edition contain any map at all. According to the inscription, the map was drafted by 'S. Rovalesco' (in reality probably either Francisco Rovalesca or João Baptista Rovalasca) and improved by the Portuguese cartographer Luiz Texera (Teixeira). Two regions of the interior are particularly well covered—Senegambia (reflecting Portuguese knowledge also contained in André Alvares de Almada, *Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde*, 1594 and the western Gold Coast. Material on the latter was probably derived mainly from Portuguese exploration of the River Ankobra in the early 1570s.²

In his modern edition of de Marees, Naber decided not to republish the two engravings at the top of this map, on the grounds that they were of no historical value: he pointed out that one engraving included a European harp and the other showed a Benin nobleman riding naked on a horse—neither of which had much to do with African reality.³ These objections are valid; but similar criticisms could be made of several engravings in the book. It seems useful to publish the engravings here, if only for the sake of stylistic comparisons.

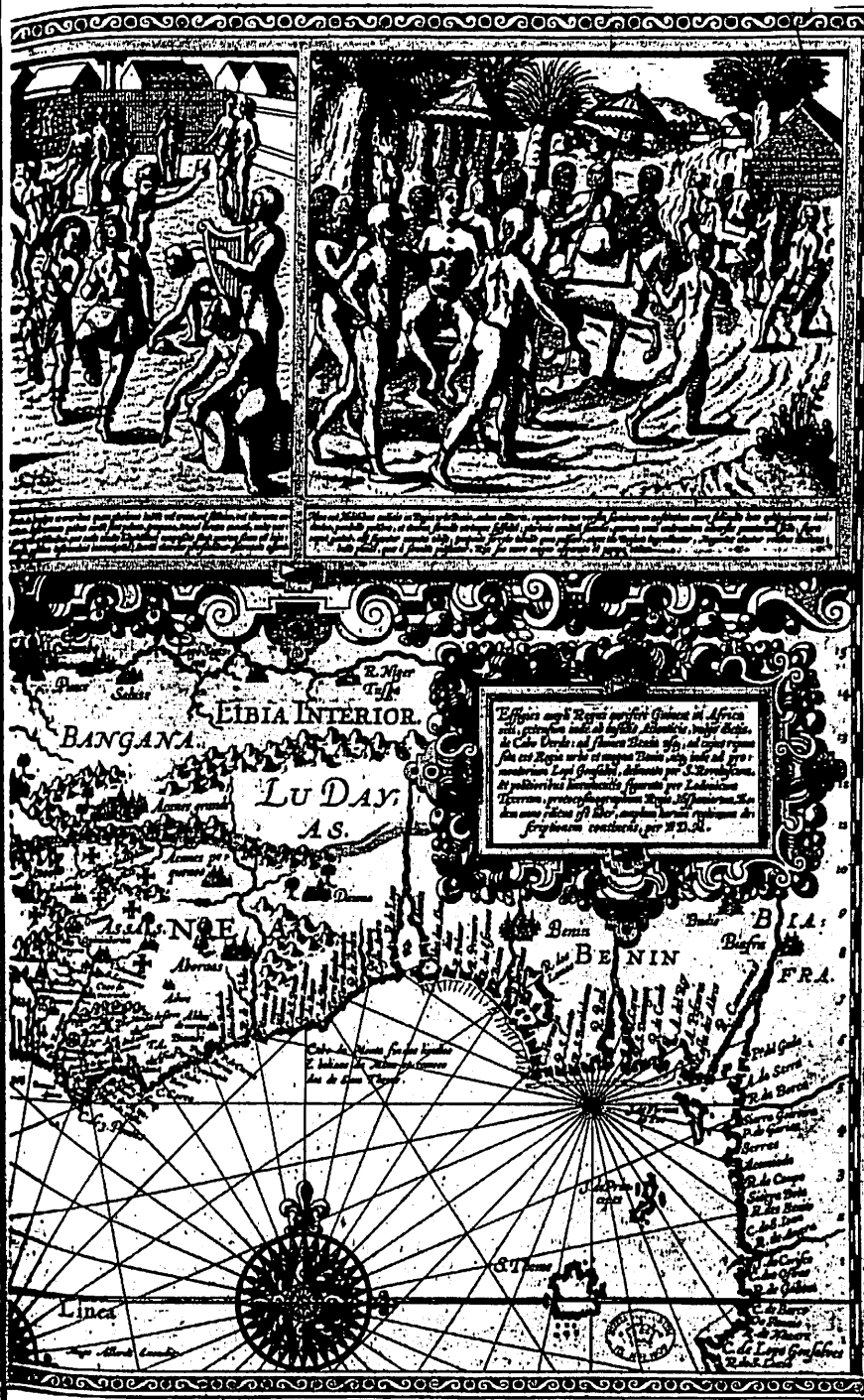
The Latin captions to the two engravings are loosely related to the text (Chapters 37 and [53]), but contain a little additional information. They may be translated as follows:

1. The dances with which the Guineans enjoy themselves thoroughly are of this kind. On their arms and legs they have very many rings of copper, pewter and ivory; many of them are equipped with little bells, producing various sounds. The instruments which they play are basins, drums, smooth hollowed-out tree-trunks, cow-bells and lutes made similar to those of our country, whose strings are made from certain reeds or from the hairs of elephants' tails, and whose sound is not unpleasant. They generally caper and stamp their feet alternately on the ground, intermingling this with various histrionic gestures. They do not like performing the dances in the presence of strangers.
2. It is customary for court noblemen in the royal city of Benin, when going to the court, to sit sideways on the horse in the manner of women in our country, with a little seat in place of a saddle-cloth and with their feet hanging down. They are supported by two servants on either side and accompanied by very many servants, one of whom carries an umbrella above his [= the nobleman's] head, [as protection] against the sting of the sun. Others follow, playing flutes, drums [and] small iron pipes which they beat; and thus they proceed to the court. The magnates use nets full of little bells, which are beaten by servants. The king, in his own manner, uses great splendour and pomp.

¹ One is in the library of the University of Amsterdam, the other in the British Museum. The best discussion of this map is to be found in A. Cortesão and Avelino Teixeira de Mota, *Portugaliae monumenta cartographica* (6 vols., Lisbon 1960), III, pp. 67–70. See also Kea, *Settlements*, 24–6 and Naber's edition of de Marees, pp. 281–4.

² See Brásio, *Monumenta* III (1953), 89–113.

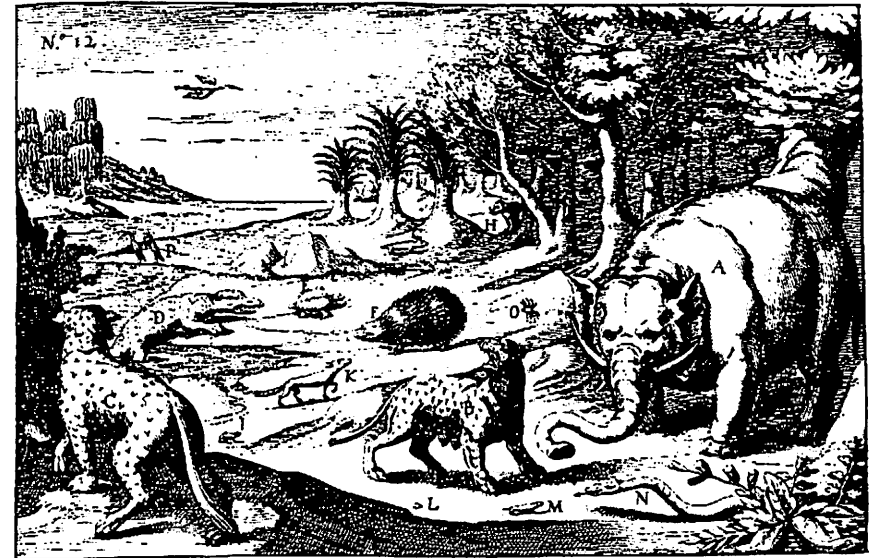
³ Naber, p. 284.



Everyone is free to hunt and catch wild Animals here, as long as he catches them without causing damage. There are many other kinds of wild Animals here, and they are of such diverse shapes that it would be difficult to compare them with anything; but as the Dutch ||66b|| here in Guinea dare not go far into the fields to catch wild animals, out of fear of being caught by the Portuguese or their allies and in consequence spending their lives in slavery, there is still a multitude of wild Animals of which we have no knowledge and also species which the Inhabitants themselves do not know or are unable to name.

The 31st Chapter

About the Birds and other Animals one finds and sees living in these Lands



Description of Plate No. 12

In this picture are Animals which are wild and savage; they have hatred and jealousy for one another and are harmful to man too. *A.* is an Elephant, which is a great enemy of the Rhinoceros. *B.* is a Tiger, a fierce and evil Animal, also very inclined to harm and destroy man.^a *C.* is a Leopard. *D.* is a Crocodile, which lives on Land as well as in water. *E.* is a Tortoise. *F.* is the iron Pig [porcupine]. *G.* is a Languado, similar in shape to a Crocodile, but staying on land and not going into the water.^b *H.* is a Rhinoceros, a great enemy of the Elephant. They are abundant in Pegu and Bengal.^c *I.* is a Frog, similar to ours. *K.* is a Fox. *L.* is an Ant. They are very big and numerous here, and do a lot of damage. *M.* is the Lizard, a great enemy of the Snake. *N.* is a Snake; those found here are very big. *O.* is a Spider; they are very big here. *P.* are Cranes.

The Birds found here are of various ||67a|| kinds; few of them are similar to ours. In the first place, there are blue [grey] Parrots; a multitude of them fly around in the wild, but if taken out of their Nest when young, they are tamed. If tamed when they are young, without

^a Tigers are not found in Africa. The animal in the picture looks the same as the leopard.

^b See Ch. 30, n. 3.

^c For Pegu see Ch. 32, n. 2. If de Marcees meant that rhinos occurred on the Gold Coast, this is interesting: the nearest recent records (19th and early 20th centuries) are for Chad. But had he seen a rhino, he would probably have described it in detail.

having flown in the wild, they can much better be taught to speak; but they are not as well-spoken and perfect as the green Brazilian Parrots.¹

They have another kind of Bird, which is small and green; it is like a Starling, and not very unlike the *Catelijntkens* of the West Indies, but with the difference that it cannot talk, and does not have as long a tail as the *Catelijntkens* either. These birds are called *Ahuront*,² and by us Dutchman *Paroquiten* [Parakeets]. They are caught with Nets, nearly in the same way as Finches are caught; they mostly live in the lowlands where much corn or *Millie* grows, which they like to eat. These little creatures keep on good terms with one another: if one puts a Male and a Female together in a cage, they will always sit together, without making any noise or singing. The female is of such a nature that once she has mated with the male, she respects him and lets him sit on her right, placing herself next to him on his left side. When he goes to feed she follows him; and they live in peace, just as Turtle-doves do. They are very pretty to look at, being of a green colour, with an Orange spot on their nose.

There is another species quite similar to these Parakeets and of the same character and disposition, except that they are of a blood-red colour, with a black spot on the nose and a black tail, and with a slightly larger body than the Parakeets.³

Other birds are found there which are not very different from Goldfinches, their body being yellowish; these birds do not grow [live] in fields, because the Snakes and other poisonous Animals prevent them from doing so; and because of this they weave their little nests very artfully on thin branches sprouting from high trees. They breed and live in them, so as to be free from the poisonous attacks of other animals.⁴

There are other small Birds, not very different from Hedge-finches, but these ||67b|| live in the fields, among the Corn. These birds they [the Blacks] put into their mouth whilst still alive, eating them together with their skin and hair [feathers].⁵ Sparrows are abundant too, as well as many other kinds of small Birds.

Furthermore, there is a kind of Bird like Eagles, but with the head of a Turkey-Cock: these are evil and wicked birds, which do much

¹ The African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*).

² Assuming that the last two letters are a misprint, *Ahuront* might represent *awiri*, the Akan name for a species of parrot: cf. Müller in Jones, *German Sources*, 293. This is a good description of the red-headed lovebird (*Agapornis pullaria*). Cf. the description of a parrot known in Brazil as *aiourou* in Léry, *Histoire*, 172.

³ None of the parrots known in West Africa today fit this description very closely. De Marees may have been referring to the Fire-crowned Bishop (*Euplectes hordeaceus*).

⁴ A description of a member of the weaver family, probably the very common Village Weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*). These birds 'weave' their nests out of strips of grass, hanging from a tree, with a spouted opening.

⁵ Cf. Ch. 8, n. 3.

harm to the Negroes, so that they have a great fear of them and for that reason take much food to the hilltops for them. They call them *Pastro de Diago*,⁶ meaning Birds of their God, and therefore they do not harm them, knowing quite well that they would take revenge. They are always scavenging in mud and other filth, and always stink like a latrine; one can smell them from far away.

Water-snipes can be found here too, but not many; likewise Turtle-doves, which have around their neck a black streak, like a crown.⁷

The Pheasants or field-fowls here are not very different from ours, except that their feathers are spotted white and black, and they do not have the long tails of our Pheasants.⁸ Their taste is not as good as that of other common fowls. I have also seen Peacocks and Peahens, and they are not very different from ours, but they do sometimes differ in their Feathers, some of which have a different colour. I have also noted the *Pittoir* here; they consider it a great Fetisso and Fortune-teller, as we mentioned above.⁹ Cranes are also found here, as well as Herons, similar in shape to Dutch Herons. Another kind of Bird is found here which looks like a Stork, except that it does not have such a long red beak and has a different face. Hooded Crows and grey Gulls are also abundant here,¹⁰ with a multitude of other Birds which look similar to our Birds; but if one watches them carefully, there is yet quite some difference between the two [ours and theirs]: some differ in their Feathers, others in their Beaks, others again in their feet or heads, so that there is in fact a considerable difference, no matter how much they may resemble one another. Since Birds are rarely shot or caught here, because ||68a|| they do not have the Implements for it and do not know how to go about it, the Animals and Birds multiply quickly in this Country and become less timorous. There is also an abundance of Birds flying by night, such as Owls and large Bats.

The place is also infested with big green Frogs and grey Grasshoppers; and not less with big land-Crabs, which live in the ground and are of purplish colour; they consider them a great present.¹¹

While walking at night in the fields, I noticed things in the Grass blinking like fiery coals; I put them in my handkerchief, whose Linen seemed to catch fire (from the glow of the little Creatures). On

⁶ A reference to vultures (see Plate 10, note e). *Pastro de Diago* is probably a corruption of *pássaro de diabo*, '(passerine) bird of the devil'. Alternatively *Diago* might represent Thiago, i.e. Santiago (St. James): there must have been many vultures near the top of S. Iago Hill, where the corpses of executed persons were left for the 'birds of the skies' (see Ch. 22, n. 7). Far from doing 'much harm to the Negroes', vultures in reality perform a useful service as scavengers.

⁷ 'Water-snipes': probably not snipes but some other species of wader. By 'turtle-dove' de Marees must have meant a local species of ring-necked *Streptopelia* dove.

⁸ Guinea-fowl (*Numida meleagris*).

⁹ Bittern: see Ch. 16, n. 11. It is hard to imagine what de Marees could mean by 'peacocks'.

¹⁰ 'Hooded Crows': the Pied crow (*Corvus albus*). 'Grey Gulls': probably the Grey-headed gull (*Larus cirrhocephalus*).

¹¹ Possibly the Hairy mangrove crab (*Sesarma*).

reaching the Town of the Negroes, I showed them this, and they were much astonished to see it. The following day, when I looked to see what they were, I discovered that they were small black Flies, like Spanish Flies, as black as Pitch.¹²

Flies, Mosquitoes and Bees are also found here. The Bees make their Hives and honey in the Trees. There are also big Ants which burrow in the ground, like field-mice;¹³ these Ants are very harmful to the Bees, robbing them of their Honey and Wax.

¹² It is curious that de Marees should have been so fascinated by fire-flies, which are quite common in Europe in summer.

¹³ Probably Driver ants (*Dorylinae*), which eat all sorts of things besides honey.

About the manners and nature of the Animals one finds in the Land and quarter of Gunea

First about the Elephant:

Beloved Reader, having mentioned what Birds and Animals are found on this Coast breeding here, I thought it would not be a bad idea to add something about the nature and character of these creatures, if only because they are described in some Books which often leave a man in ignorance if he desires to know about the disposition and nature of those Creatures. I therefore could not refrain from ||68b|| adding this.¹

As already mentioned, many Elephants are found in these quarters; they are enormous Animals and it must be the most powerful and the strongest Creature in the World. Elephants are found in many parts of the world, such as the East and West Indies, in Pegu² and Bengala, but nowhere as abundantly as between or below the Equator [in the tropics] which is the Land of Ethiopia, in Africa. There, many of them are caught or killed, not only because of their teeth, but also on account of their meat, which is eaten.

In the first place, the Elephant has many good characteristics, indeed, more than any other animal. Elephants are proud and use their sense of reason when this is demanded by their Mr. [Master] or Ruler, as one can find described often enough. On the other hand, they are also grateful and remember for a long time a favour or benefit they receive, as they are accustomed to do on the orders of their Mrs. [masters] in the Kingdom of Goa. At some times of the Year they are also tormented by some disease, and then they are half dull and possessed, so that one can hardly tame or satisfy them, and even if they have been tamed, they must be bound and tied up in this time, because they would otherwise cause great harm among people; for in their dullness and fury they do not respect anybody. But a person approaching them in this dullness who once conferred some benefit on them they will respect and leave unmolested, no matter how much they are out of their senses, from which one can appreciate the exceptional intelligence these Elephants have, in that they will recompense and be grateful to a person who has done them good,

¹ De Marees drew most of his information on elephants from the descriptions of Asian elephants published by Van Linschoten and Paré. In some cases what he wrote simply does not make sense, usually because he did not understand the text he was following.

² Pegu was the capital of the Mon kingdom in Lower Burma, about 75 km northeast of Rangoon.