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Chapter 9

The beginnings of European enterprise in Africa

In 1415, the Portuguese took the fortress-town of Ceuta from the Moroccans, and shortly afterwards they embarked on some sixty years of exploration of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts of Africa. This led to the establishment of the first of a series of European footholds on these coasts which were to bring sub-Saharan Africa into closer relations with the rest of the world than ever before in its history. From these, by the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans were to advance to conquer and control virtually the whole continent. The motives which occasioned this European expansion which was so radically to change the history of Africa belong properly to European history. What is important in African history is what the Europeans did when they entered the continent, and the effect of their presence and their actions on African societies which hitherto had followed an essentially autonomous development.

Nevertheless, the actions of Europeans in Africa cannot be wholly understood without some consideration of the reasons which brought them to the continent. Initially these derived from the situation in the Mediterranean which had arisen after the rise of Islam. The establishment of Islamic civilization and power throughout the Near East and northern Africa, and also in the southern peripheries of Europe, provided southern Europeans at once with a major challenge and with new ideas and opportunities. Their first major reaction to the challenge, the Crusades, ultimately demonstrated that Europe was not yet sufficiently strong or united to advance with a counter-attack on the heart of the Islamic world. (And it is to be noted that Africa played its part in the military and political defeat of the Europeans through the mobilization of Egypt's resources by the Ayyubids and

Mamluks.) However, the Crusades did open up new opportunities, which Italian city-states were particularly quick to exploit, for southern Europeans to enter into commercial relations and intellectual dialogue with the major world civilization of the middle ages.

The Islamic civilization had made more of the intellectual heritage of the ancient civilizations than Europeans had been able to do. The Muslim occupation of lands like Sicily and the Iberian peninsula provided opportunities for Europeans to rediscover ancient Greek philosophy and to partake of the subsequent advances in science and mathematics made in the Islamic world. Of particular importance in relation to the subsequent European expansion was the widening of geographical horizons brought by contacts with Islamic peoples, and the acquisition of technologies which were to enable Europeans to venture into this wider world with confidence and purpose. Islam reached as far afield as China in the east and the Sudan in the south. With the compass, the astrolabe, and the astronomic knowledge and expertise of the Muslims, it became possible to construct representations of this wider world which were more accurate, positive and comprehensive than the schematic *mappae mundi* of the high middle ages. Here in fact it was southern Europeans, albeit men in close touch with the Islamic world, who made the major syntheses from which further advance was possible. By the fourteenth century, cartographers, largely of Jewish extraction, who were first based in Italian cities like Genoa, Venice and Pisa, but who later were centred principally in the Balearic island of Majorca, were drawing the charts, called *portolani*, of the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts, which are the ancestors of all modern maritime charts. It will be recalled that it was one of these map-makers, Angelino Dulcert of Majorca, who first placed ancient Mali on a map (1339). A later Majorcan atlas, attributed to Abraham Cresques, drawn for Charles V of France c. 1375, depicts the western Sudan quite recognizably, with the major cities of Niani, Timbuctu and Gao in the right relative positions. (See plate, p. 313.)

That it was southern Europeans, rather than members of the Muslim world, who so usefully capitalized on the skills and knowledge that were available by the fourteenth century, may be explained by the fact that by this time the initiative in trade and navigation in the Mediterranean had passed to the Italian entrepreneurs and seamen whose first major maritime ventures had been to transport the Crusaders to the Levant. Christian fleets regained control of the Mediterranean, and the Italian city-states were soon establishing resident

commercial agents in the major ports of the Near East, Egypt and North Africa. A flourishing trade developed in which European exports of timber, metalware and slaves were exchanged for the luxury produce which Muslim merchants could provide and which Europeans could increasingly afford – spices, perfumes, drugs, silks and other fine cloths, precious stones, sugar, ivory and gold.

Few of these commodities originated in the Near East or North Africa. Most were brought there by merchants of the Muslim world from market to market along trade routes which stretched back across the Sahara, or down the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to India, south-eastern Asia or the east coast of Africa. The amount of these goods available for re-export to Europe was of necessity therefore relatively small, and their prices tended to be high. In face of a growing European demand, this situation tended to be exacerbated by the fact that one particular group of Italians, the Venetians, partly because of their traditional ties with Byzantium and because of the close relations they succeeded in establishing with the Egyptian Mamluks, ended by engrossing the lion's share of the most lucrative trade, that with the ports of the eastern Mediterranean. Their competitors became increasingly confined to the less lucrative trade of the Maghrib west of Tripoli or to intermittent ventures into the Black Sea. In these circumstances it was not surprising that some of their competitors, most notably perhaps the Genoese, began to wonder whether they might not secure better supplies of the goods in demand in Europe more cheaply by by-passing the Mediterranean ports and by venturing to sources of supply beyond the political control of their Muslim rulers.

This idea became more practicable as more became known of the world beyond the Mediterranean. The journeys of members of the Venetain Marco Polo family (and of some other travellers) in Asia are the best known of the European explorations of the time, in part because of their great range, but also because Europeans were more interested in Asia than they were in Africa. Apart from gold, Africa was not known to produce many of the commodities which Europeans desired, nor was it known to have much in the way of organized civilizations with which it would be worth establishing commercial relations. However, some not inconsiderable exploring journeys were also undertaken in Africa.

The idea that there was a Christian king and government in Ethiopia with which it might be advantageous to establish relations had never wholly faded in western Europe, though initially there was some doubt as to where exactly Ethiopia might be. Indeed, the general conception – no doubt derived from the fact that it was most accessible from the east – was that Ethiopia belonged to Asia rather than to Africa: its king was therefore 'Prester John of the Indies'. However, the need of the Ethiopians to send to the Coptic Patriarch at Alexandria each time they wanted a new head of their church, and the fact that this church also had a monastery in Jerusalem, meant that contact of some kind with Ethiopia never wholly lapsed. After the restoration of the fortunes of central monarchy under the Shoan dynasty in the later thirteenth century, it was possible for both sides to begin to think of establishing more effective relations. A Dominican mission was sent to Ethiopia in the fourteenth century via Nubia, but thereafter this route was blocked by the growth of Muslim control over the upper Nile valley. Nevertheless there remained an intermittent trickle, via the Near East and the Red Sea, of European clerics and other travellers going to Ethiopia and of Ethiopian envoys to Rome and to other major centres of south-western Europe.

Whatever the resultant gain to European geographical knowledge of north-eastern Africa, it must have been clear that, so long as the Mamluks and the Venetians remained powerful and closely allied, there was no opening for rival European merchants to the trade of either Asia or Africa through the Levant and the Red Sea. But whereas Venice naturally looked eastwards down the Adriatic towards Byzantium and Egypt, her major competitors – Genoa, Pisa and Florence – were on the western side of the Italian peninsula, and their natural relations were more with the lands of the western Mediterranean, southern France, the Balearic islands, Catalonia and Aragon, and the western Maghrib. There were in fact a number of European journeys into or across the Sahara, some of which seem to have been in the nature of deliberate commercial explorations. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, a Catalan cardinal, Raymond Lull, a pioneer in the European study of Arabic, sent a mission to North Africa, one member of which seems to have succeeded in accompanying a caravan across the Sahara. Antonio Malfante, a Genoese merchant agent, certainly gathered information about trans-Saharan trade in Tuat in 1447, and in 1469–70 a Florentine, Benedetto Dei, seems to have succeeded in reaching Timbuctu.

But while it was not impossible for Europeans to reconnoitre the Saharan trade or even that of the Sudan, it must have quickly become obvious that neither the governments of North Africa nor the established Muslim traders of the Maghrib and the Sahara would willingly allow Europeans to compete in the trade with the Sudan overland. The Italian city-states possessed no military strength sufficient to allow them to force a way into the trans-Saharan trade against North African resistance; such power and skills as they possessed were essentially maritime. So, quite early on, some Italians conceived the idea of trading with Africa and Asia by sea. In 1291, shortly after the rediscovery of the Canary Islands, a Genoese merchant family called Vivaldi sent out an expedition through the Strait of Gibraltar, apparently with the express purpose of circumnavigating Africa. It may in fact have succeeded in this aim, for there is a hint that the end of the expedition came with shipwreck close by the entrance of the Red Sea. But, whatever the fate of the Vivaldi venture, the Italians must soon have appreciated – as had the Carthaginians nearly two thousand years earlier – that Mediterranean galleys were not suitable vehicles with which to develop and maintain trade in the great oceans.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, therefore, enterprising Italians who were unable to compete with the Venetians in the eastern Mediterranean, were equally finding their ambitions blocked in the west also. They lacked power to force their way into North Africa; neither did they possess ships and experience suitable for the conquest of the problems of oceanic navigation and commerce. However, both these things were developing in the Iberian peninsula. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Christian Iberians had had more than four centuries of experience of aggressive warfare against Muslim powers. Their crusade for the reconquest of their peninsula had had results very different from the splendid but ultimately futile crusades in the Levant. In the first place, it had been successful. By 1257, the Moors had been expelled from all but the small emirate of Granada in the extreme south-east. Secondly, in the reconquest, the Iberians had developed not only considerable military strength, but also strong institutions of monarchical government capable of focussing national energies to the one end of the defeat and expulsion of the Moors. Furthermore, on the maritime side, the Iberians living on the Atlantic coasts had evolved types of ship capable of development for long oceanic voyages. Unlike the Mediterranean galleys, which were designed primarily to be rowed by large numbers of oarsmen, and which were consequently long, slender and low in the water, and therefore fragile, difficult to manoeuvre and easily foundered, the

Iberian vessels were designed to be sailed, and were broad, high and strong, and – once the lateen sail had been borrowed from the Muslims and added to the traditional square rig – suited to manoeuvring even in high seas or coastal shallows. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Iberians had gained sufficient experience and skill in the use of such vessels to exploit the rich fishing of the Atlantic shelf to as far south as southern Morocco.

In this situation, ambitious Italians, particularly perhaps Genoese, began to seek employment for their capital and for their mercantile, navigational and cartographical expertise in the west. Genoese admirals went to organize navies for Portugal, Castile and France; the map-makers moved to Majorca; and Italian captains and super-cargoes sailed on Portuguese, Castilian and Catalonian ships to explore new commercial opportunities, especially perhaps in the Canaries and further to the south and west. Although it was men from Castile and France who first embarked on the conquest and colonization of the Canary Islands, it was Portugal which first fully grasped the possibilities of combining Italian capital and commercial and technical skills with Iberian Atlantic experience in one strong national enterprise under royal direction.

The Portuguese ports, looking south and west over the broad ocean, were obvious bases from which to embark on the exploration of the possibilities of maritime trade with Africa. It is true that Portugal did not have the resources of Castile, which also had an Atlantic coastline – albeit a shorter one – which was even closer to Africa. But until 1492, when they finally conquered Granada and also merged their dynasty with that of the other major Iberian power, Aragon, the rulers of Castile were hardly in a position to give high priority to western adventures. Portugal, on the other hand, had rid itself of Moorish neighbours by completing the conquest of the Algarve during the early thirteenth century. It was then faced with the problem of how to develop this devastated and depopulated southern province, and in the Aviz dynasty it had a new line of kings determined to maintain its power and independence against its more powerful neighbour. It was therefore both possible and politically advantageous for Portugal to continue the crusade against the Moors into Africa, and there were obvious incentives for her to look there for fresh resources.

With the conquest of Ceuta in 1415, Portugal became launched on a series of campaigns to conquer territory in Morocco. In the sixteenth century the newly united Spanish kingdom joined in, albeit on the

Mediterranean coastline rather than on the Atlantic front which attracted the Portuguese. The resultant wars have been looked at already, from the North African point of view, in chapter 7. Little need be said of them here except that by the end of the sixteenth century it had become apparent that, fighting on their own soil, the Moors were able to hold their own. Neither Portugal nor Spain were able to extend their power beyond a handful of coastal footholds. However, the possession of some Moroccan territory from 1415 onwards obviously gave the Portuguese better opportunities to learn about the trans-Saharan trade and the lands across the Sahara than before, and, possibly too, better opportunities than other Europeans.

Among those who participated in this knowledge was a younger son of the first Aviz king, John I, Prince Henry (1394–1460), who had taken part in the capture of Ceuta and had become its first Portuguese governor. The idea developed in his mind, and in that of his brother Pedro, that Portuguese resources might be more profitably engaged in a maritime outflanking of Moroccan power than in a direct assault on it. About 1419 Henry became associated with the exploring voyages southwards and westwards into the Atlantic which were to give him the name of Henry the Navigator. Apart from the discovery and subsequent colonization of Madeira (c. 1419) and the Azores (c. 1439), the initial results were not very impressive. Hitherto the accepted limit for both Christian and Muslim navigation on the Atlantic coast of Africa had been Cape Bojador, in the same latitude as the Canary Islands, and about 300 miles south of the southern limits of habitable Moroccan territory along the Wadi Dra which runs to the sea from the region of Tafilalt. Bojador is a considerable cape, extending out into the ocean for some miles, and apt to be invested with fog or with heavy surf. Muslim sailors are said to have conceived the notion that it was impossible to return from beyond it. Certainly the prevailing wind and current, both running from the north, made this difficult. Moreover, for some 800 miles beyond the cape, there was nothing but the waterless, surf-bound and very thinly habited coastline of the Sahara.

It was not until 1434 that this formidable technical and psychological obstacle was overcome, but thereafter Henry's enterprise began to gather momentum. In 1443 Henry established himself permanently at Sagres, on Cape Vincent, the most south-westerly point of Europe, and devoted his major energies to the direction of a carefully coordinated national exploring venture. Each year his captains probed further along the African coast, accurately noting its hydrography, its peoples and their customs and their economic life. The information so gathered was meticulously recorded and examined by some of the best geographers, cartographers and astronomers of the day, and collated with the information obtainable from other travellers and from the accepted geographers of both the Christian and Muslim worlds. Thus each new captain who set out from Portugal could have better knowledge, maps and equipment, and so greater confidence and more chance of success than his predecessors.

Henry's public motives have been recorded for us by a contemporary court chronicler, Gomes Eannes de Zurara (or Azurara). 'He desired to know what lands there were beyond the Canary Islands and . . . Cape Bojador, for up to that time no one knew . . .' He wanted to do this for two reasons. First, if in the newly discovered lands 'there should be any population of Christians, or any harbours where men could enter without peril', the Portuguese, as the first sea-traders from Europe, might be able to trade in bulk with low costs and great profit to themselves and the natives. Secondly, 'because every wise man is moved . . . to know the strength of his enemy', Henry wanted to find out 'the full extent of the Infidels' power', and to see whether beyond these limits there might be any Christian princes to aid him against the Muslims.

Zurara's references to the search for Christians and Christian princes with ~~which Portugal might ally~~ herself in her crusade against Islam, and so outflank Muslim power in the Mediterranean, seem to show clearly enough that Henry was hoping that his sailors might reach Ethiopia or even India, in which also Christian communities were thought to be. Circumnavigation of Africa and entry into the Indian Ocean and its trading system thus seem to have been aims of Henry's enterprise from the outset. But what no one could tell at the beginning was how long these aims might take to achieve, or how practicable it might be to establish regular communication with the Indian Ocean with the ships, equipment and navigational techniques available. It was therefore of some importance – although Zurara does not say so directly (perhaps because it was so obvious) – that the Portuguese knew from their knowledge of Arab geography and from their contacts with Morocco, that if they could pass beyond the western edge of the Sahara desert they should quite quickly arrive close by the West African territories with which North Africa traded for gold. If the Portuguese could divert this gold trade, or some of it, then their Moroccan foes might be weakened. They would also acquire supplies of bullion which would provide invaluable capital for the more ambitious enterprise, and which were also very necessary to enable them to purchase the spices and other goods which Europeans wanted from Asia (where, at this time, there was practically no market for European goods).

It is noteworthy how the process of Portuguese exploration accelerated by stages. The first stage, simply gathering enough momentum to pass beyond Cape Bojador, took something like fifteen years. After this, only ten years were required to explore about 1000 miles of Saharan coastline and to arrive (in 1444) at Cape Verde, significantly 'the green cape', a land where once again there was permanent vegetation, and where lived the Black peoples whom the Portuguese called *Guineus* (from the Moroccan Berber word for blacks), with whom the North Africans traded for gold but who were independent of their political control. Some time was needed to assimilate this discovery and its commercial possibilities. But by the time of Henry's death sixteen years later, in 1460, his captains had reached as far as Sierra Leone, 600 miles further to the south-east, and the Cape Verde Islands had been discovered and were being colonized to serve as a permanent base for trade with the adjacent Guinean coasts.

The fact that Prince Henry was no longer there to spur things on led to a slackening of momentum after 1460, and for a time the emphasis of Portuguese royal policy shifted back to Morocco. But private entrepreneurs were now willing to continue the work of exploration. From the 1440s onwards, the voyages of Henry's captains had begun to reveal increasingly attractive commercial possibilities, first of exploiting the rich fishing banks south of Cape Bojador, and then, from the Senegal mouth and Cape Verde onwards, of obtaining from the Blacks of Guinea not only gold, but also slaves, who could be used to exploit the empty ~~lands of the Algarve or the~~ Atlantic islands. The possibilities of this early African trade may be judged by the statement that a Portuguese company operating from the Algarve port of Lagos is said to have made profits during 1450–58 of 600 per cent. The Portuguese were soon grappling with the problem of rival European traders, especially from the Andalusian ports of Castile. Diplomacy secured them Papal Bulls giving them exclusive rights based on the claim of prior discovery. More practically, fortified bases were built on the island of Arguin (off the Saharan coast south of

Cape Blanco) and at Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands, from which Portuguese interests might be protected.

By 1469 the prospects of African trade and discovery were such as to inspire a prominent Lisbon merchant, Fernão Gomes, to secure a five-year lease of the trade beyond Sierra Leone on condition that his ships discovered a hundred leagues (about 400 miles) of new coastline a year. This contract was subsequently extended to 1475, by which time Gomes had kept his bargain. His captains had discovered the islands of Fernando Po and São Thomé, nearly 2000 miles east of Sierra Leone, and had proceeded some distance further south to cross the equator. In so doing, they had made a find of major importance. In 1471 they had discovered the land which the Portuguese called *Mina*, literally 'the mine', and which later Europeans were to know as the Gold Coast, the coast of modern Ghana, whose peoples from about the mouth of the river Tano to Accra displayed abundant evidence of their hinterland's wealth in gold. The short-term economic aim of Henry's enterprise, to tap the gold wealth of West Africa beyond the control of Islam, had been realized. Within a few years the Portuguese were securing from trade on the Gold Coast an average of something like 13 000 oz of gold a year, at that time a sizeable proportion of the total world supply.

There were three immediate and important consequences of the discovery of the Gold Coast. First, the Portuguese crown decided not to extend Gomes's contract any further. The trade of the Gold Coast was of such value that it should be brought under direct royal control. Secondly, to ensure this, and also to try and exclude the other European traders, Castilians especially, who were also rushing to try and exploit the new discovery, King John II decided that a third major fortified base was necessary. In 1482 an expedition was sent out to select the most suitable site for this on the Gold Coast. Its commander, Diogo d'Azambuja, chose a rocky promontory about midway on the coast and, after some initial difficulty with the local ruler and his people, secured permission to begin the construction of the impressive castle called São Jorge da Mina (now known as Elmina). Finally, with the confidence gained from the successes of Gomes's captains, and with the wealth obtainable from trade on the Gold Coast behind them, sailors in the direct employ of the Crown stepped up the rate of exploration even further. The mouth of the Congo, 500 miles south of the Equator, was reached by Diogo Cão in the same year that Elmina was begun. Less than six years later, in 1488, Bartolomeu Dias was over 2000 miles further south, rounding the tip of Africa and making a first tentative European foray into the southern Indian Ocean.

At this point there was another pause in the maritime expansion of the Portuguese. They were aware that in the Indian Ocean there was both a set pattern of navigation based on the monsoon winds, and also a long-established and complex maritime trading system linking the Near East and the East African coast with India, and India with the East Indies and the Far East. The Portuguese must have realized that they could not simply thrust forward into the Indian Ocean as they had into the Atlantic, where there were no established patterns of navigation and trade, but that they should first survey the Indian Ocean systems and decide how these might be best exploited to their advantage. Thus at the same time as Bartolomeu Dias was sent out to find the southern entry into the Indian Ocean, John II was also sending out exploring agents into the Indian Ocean lands by the established routes of communication through the Near East. It was obviously thought necessary to await their reports before proceeding further.

The most successful of these travellers was Pero de Covilhã, who left Portugal in 1487, the same year as Dias, in company with Affonso da Paiva. Paiva's mission was to go to Ethiopia, but he died before he got there. In 1488, however, Covilhã investigated the spice markets of the western coast of India, and then took ship in an Arab dhow for the Persian Gulf and East Africa. It seems likely that he travelled along the East African coast to as far as Sofala, the port for the gold trade of central Africa, and the southern limit of Arab commerce. If so, he came within about 1200 miles of the furthest point reached by Dias. In 1490 Covilhã was at Cairo on his way home when he was met by a messenger from John II who instructed him to complete Paiva's mission by going to Ethiopia. This Covilhã did, and he was well received at the Ethiopian court. But he was not allowed to return, and he continued to live there until his death some thirty years later.

It seems likely that some report of Covilhã's findings up to 1490 was sent back to Lisbon from Cairo. A number of factors may explain why it was that it was not until 1497 that Vasco da Gama was sent out on his voyage to India and back via the Cape of Good Hope and the East African coast. Some of these were purely Portuguese, for example the illness and death (1495) of John II. Time was probably spent on discovering a better sailing route through the South Atlantic than that used by Dias. To find the southern limit of Africa, Dias had necessarily kept close by the coast. This meant that south of the equator he was proceeding against the prevailing wind and current. Vasco da Gama, on the other hand, like all subsequent Europeans sailing to the Indian Ocean, followed a more favourable course by going much further westwards into the Atlantic. Then, of course, wholly exceptional care was needed to fit out a fleet for a voyage which was more than twice as long as any that Europeans had yet accomplished and one, moreover, which was deliberately trespassing into an established Muslim naval preserve. Finally, there was also probably a natural desire to await the fuller report on Indian Ocean conditions that Covilhã would have given had he been able to return to Lisbon.

In the event, when Vasco da Gama set out in 1497, he seems to have been well informed about the general strategy of his journey, but somewhat less understanding about some of the particular problems he was to face. This seems to have bred a sense of insecurity which led da Gama and his immediate successors to use force where it may not always have been necessary, and thus perhaps needlessly to antagonize local peoples, particularly perhaps on the East African coast.

Da Gama sailed directly to South Africa, making a landfall just north of the Cape, and then proceeded along the coast to Mozambique, where a pilot was secured for the East African coast. He then called at both Kilwa and Mombasa which, with Mozambique, were allied in the gold trade with Sofala, and where he was received with suspicion, and then at Malindi, which was hostile to Mombasa, and where another pilot was secured to take the Portuguese across the Indian Ocean to the spice port of Calicut, where they arrived in May 1498. When, a little over a year later, da Gama had returned to Lisbon, he had done and seen enough to convince the Portuguese authorities that the major aim of the enterprise begun three-quarters of a century earlier by Henry the Navigator was within their grasp. It would be entirely practicable to deploy Portuguese naval power in the Indian Ocean in such a way that the bulk of the Asian goods in demand in Europe would be taken there in Portuguese ships sailing directly to and fro around Africa. Da Gama's voyage was immediately followed up by the dispatch of annual fleets, the first of which, under Pero Cabral (1499–1501), discovered Brazil on the way. In 1502, da Gama, on a second voyage, began to impose Portuguese suzerainty on the major East African ports, and then between 1505 and 1515 the

first two Portuguese viceroys for the Indies, Francisco de Almeida and Afonso de Albuquerque, laid the foundations for Portuguese control of the Indian Ocean.

A permanent headquarters was established at Goa on the western coast of India; and control of the main shipping routes was secured by capturing Malacca, commanding the entrance to the China Sea, and Ormuz and Socotra at the mouths of the Persian Gulf and Red Sea respectively, and by controlling or neutralizing all the main East African ports. Malindi's hostility to Mombasa and Kilwa had already secured its allegiance for the Portuguese, and that of Zanzibar, not yet a major place of trade, was also secured without much difficulty. But Mombasa was sacked in 1505 (and again in 1528), and force or the threat of force was used to establish Portuguese forts at Kilwa, Sofala and Mozambique, which were needed to secure control over the East African gold trade. Kilwa was subsequently abandoned, while Mozambique, which had a better harbour for the Portuguese Indiamen (which were larger than most of the Arab vessels), and was in a more suitable position for ships sailing to India from the south up the channel between Africa and Madagascar, was developed into the local Portuguese headquarters under the Viceroy at Goa. When first Egyptian and then Ottoman fleets tried to dispute Portuguese control of the western Indian Ocean, they were decisively defeated.

Although men of many nationalities, including Italians, Spaniards, Flemings and Frenchmen, had initially shared in or competed with the early Portuguese voyages to explore the coasts of Africa and to develop trade with them, by the 1490s the Portuguese had the field virtually to themselves. They were thus effectually the sole pioneers of European trade south of the Equator on the west coast and along the whole east coast to the mouth of the Red Sea. The discovery of the Gold Coast and the subsequent acceleration of Portuguese exploration had demonstrated to the Portuguese crown what rich prizes lay within its grasp, and determined it to take steps to exclude other Europeans from access to them. Portugal's most dangerous competitors were the sailors and merchants of Castile, especially if they were backed by the full power of their government. But from 1492 onwards, the exploitation of the New World discovered by Columbus for the newly united kingdom of Castile and Aragon provided a more than adequate outlet for Spanish maritime energy and imperial ambitions. Spain's claims to the Americas were confirmed by Papal Bulls comparable to those earlier secured by Portugal for her African discoveries, and in 1494 areas of dispute between the two monarchies were settled by the treaty of Tordesillas, which in effect divided the world into distinct Spanish and Portuguese spheres of interest. This treaty did not, of course, bar seafarers of other nations, and during the first half of the sixteenth century there were a number of French and English trading ventures to Africa. But none of these voyages penetrated further afield than the Gulf of Guinea, so that the Portuguese monopoly of trade beyond this remained intact, and neither the French nor the English governments provided sufficient backing for their individual merchants concerned with the trade to Guinea to enable them to make any serious impression on the power deployed there by the Portuguese state. After about 1560, with the French and the English increasingly absorbed in domestic affairs or in raids on Spanish America, Portugal had virtually no competition at all in the African trade until, at the very end of the century, following upon the Dutch rebellion against their Spanish sovereign, who since 1580 had become king of Portugal as well, Dutch traders began to appear on the scene.

For rather more than a century, then, Portugal held an almost unbroken monopoly of European relations with tropical Africa. But her government sought to exploit it only in selected areas and for selected purposes. Compared with Spain or France, sixteenth-century Portugal was not a rich or powerful country, nor did she possess the advantages which were subsequently to make the United Netherlands and England into major commercial and maritime powers. Her population was small, no more than 1½ millions, inadequate to develop all her cultivable land, and she had very little in the way of minerals or industry. Indeed, as has been suggested, this very poverty and lack of population may originally have served as incentives to overseas expansion. But this expansion had been so spectacularly successful that by the early years of the sixteenth century Portugal had imperial interests stretching halfway round the globe, from Brazil to the Moluccas. She was hard put to it to find men to control, maintain and exploit her vast empire, certainly to find enough competent and trustworthy men. She also found it increasingly difficult to build and maintain sufficient ships to maintain her empire's long lines of communication and to carry its trade. Disease and shipwreck exacerbated the situation. A Portuguese sailor, soldier or official setting out for India had rather less than one chance in two of getting there alive.

It has been calculated that, of 912 ships sent to the Indies during 1500–1635, only 768 arrived, while only 470 ever returned to Portugal, and whereas in the first decade of the sixteenth century an average of some fourteen ships a year were sent out to India, by the 1630s the annual average was down to three.

The trade of Asia, which had for centuries been exporting commodities, spices especially, for which there was a lively demand in Europe, was by and large more highly valued than trade with Africa. It was also easier and more economical for the Portuguese to turn this trade to their advantage by seizing the strategic points commanding the established navigational system of the Indian Ocean than it was to employ their limited resources in inducing African societies, which outside the western Sudan and the east coast had had little or no contact with inter-continental trade, to develop exports of value to Europe. The principle of Portuguese policy in Africa was therefore to keep territorial and administrative responsibilities to the minimum necessary to control already extant commercial activities which could benefit Portuguese trade in Europe or elsewhere in her empire.

The same principle applied equally to Asia (or, for that matter, to Brazil), but the opportunities for applying it to Africa were appreciably fewer, because in the last resort the only things which Africa seemed to offer that were really of value to the Portuguese scheme were gold and slaves. Long stretches of the African coasts were almost totally ignored by the Portuguese because their inhabitants apparently did not possess the first, and had no established trading systems offering the second for sale. The most extensive of these was the 3000 miles of coastline from southern Angola right round to Sofala. This was simply an obstacle which had to be sailed round to reach India. On the east coast, Portuguese aims were effectively only two, to explore the possibilities of developing a working alliance with the Christian monarchy of Ethiopia, and to secure control of the export of gold from the mines of the Monomotapa country. So long as the sailors and traders of the Muslim towns on the 2500 miles of coast between Mozambique and Adal did not interfere with these aims, they were left very much to themselves.

Albuquerque had sent envoys to the Ethiopian court about 1510, but, like Covilhã, they were not permitted to leave the country. Another mission, sent out in 1520, was more successful in that after six years' residence it was allowed to return home, and it occasioned the first modern descriptions of the country and people, their church and government. But the Ethiopian authorities were not at all oncoming in response to Portuguese advances until they woke up to the dangers involved in Ottoman control of the Red Sea (Massawa, the main port of entry to Ethiopia, was captured by the Turks in 1536), the consequent acquisition of firearms by the Muslims of the area, and the opening of Ahmad Gran's offensive against them from Adal. In 1541, Portugal responded to King Lebna Dengel's appeal for aid by sending the small expeditionary force (commanded by a son of Vasco da Gama) which proved invaluable in helping to stave off a Muslim conquest of the Christian kingdom. The survivors of the Portuguese expedition stayed on in Ethiopia and were joined by Jesuit missionaries. The consequences included the training of Ethiopian soldiers in the use of firearms; the emergence of a permanent capital for the king (who hitherto had been in constant progress round his provinces) at Gondar, close by Lake Tana, where the Portuguese built royal castles; and, eventually in 1622, the conversion of King Susenyos to western Catholicism. But later missionaries were tactless in their exploitation of this advantage, and provoked a national reaction against interference with the traditional church. By 1648 the Jesuits had been expelled, other western missionaries were denied admission to the kingdom, and for the next two centuries Ethiopia deliberately cut itself off from contacts with the outside world. Its Christian church and kingdom became atrophied, and, in the face of renewed advances from the Oromo and from Islam, their authority over the Ethiopian highlands steadily shrank.

Thus the Portuguese intervention in Ethiopian affairs that had begun in 1541 achieved little. They were never strong enough to defeat Ottoman naval power in the Red Sea. Contact with Ethiopia could therefore only be intermittent, its landlocked kingdom became valueless to Portugal as an ally, and eventually it lacked not only the strength but also the will to help her.

In the long run, the Portuguese intervention in the gold trade from Monomotapa was also counter-productive. The initial idea was that if the Portuguese controlled Sofala, the principal outlet for this trade, where they built a fort in 1505, then the gold would come into their hands readily enough. But the gold was brought down from the interior by Muslim merchants who were more experienced and skilled than the Portuguese in inland travel, in trade with the Bantu, and in supplying suitable Asian commodities for which the latter were prepared to exchange their gold or ivory. Moreover, the Portuguese attacks on the principal coastal bases of the Muslim traders indicated the hostility of their intentions, and the Muslims had no wish to trade with the Portuguese if they could avoid it. Some gold did reach the Portuguese, but less than they had expected, and only fitfully. By about 1530 it was apparent that the supply was inadequate even to pay for the cost of the fort and establishment at Sofala, and that the bulk of the trade with the interior had been diverted to a selection of creeks and small ports north of Sofala whence it was shipped off in small vessels that could slip through the Portuguese attempts at control.

The Portuguese therefore needed to reconnoitre the mining areas and the routes to them for themselves, and then, if possible, to emulate the Muslim merchants and to establish inland trading places. The first of these things was successfully undertaken in two journeys made in 1514 by Antonio Fernandes. Efforts were then made to communicate ~~with the~~ Monomatapa kingdom by advancing up the navigable lower Zambezi, posts being established at Sena and Tete in the 1530s. From ~~these,~~ small groups of Portuguese advanced into the gold-producing highlands and, both expelling the Muslim traders and following their example, began to build small fortified trading settlements called 'fairs'. But the Portuguese wanted to go beyond this, and control the Mwene Mutapa and his kingdom. The first serious attempt at this took the form of a Jesuit mission in 1560–61 under Gonçalo da Silveira, the aim being to convert the king and his court and so link them to the Portuguese interest. After apparent initial success, however, the missionaries and their converts were killed, apparently at the instigation of hostile Muslims. There followed an ambitious military attempt at conquest in 1572 under Francisco de Barreto, but this ended in disaster, due as much to the fevers of the Zambezi valley as to Shona resistance.

Three years later, however, the Portuguese were able to conclude a treaty with the Mwene Mutapa under which the Muslims were to be expelled and the Portuguese were permitted to trade, to mine and to conduct missionary work. The explanation of this treaty on the African side seems to have been that the Mwene Mutapa's authority was declining, and that the Portuguese were seen as useful allies to help maintain it. In the 1640s, indeed, they seem to have been strong enough to penetrate into the southern kingdom of Butwa, and to restore to his throne a king who had been expelled by the Muslim traders. But this represents the high point of Portuguese power and influence. They were never strong in the south, while in the north their intervention in affairs on the side of the Mwene Mutapa by and large weakened, rather than strengthened, his regime. As the power of the Portuguese increased, so his income from their traders in the form of gifts and taxes decreased, and more of his land and people came under their direct control. On the other hand, the Portuguese authorities were neither in firm enough control of the situation in the interior, nor deriving enough revenue from it, to replace the Mwene Mutapa's law and government with their own. Individual Portuguese adventurers secured *prazos*, grants of land, initially from the African authorities and later from the government at Mozambique and, often consolidating their authority by marrying into local chiefly families, forced local people to become their retainers or slaves and began to build up petty kingdoms of their own. By this time little gold was forthcoming; such wealth as there was to be exploited was mainly in the form of slaves and ivory. The major power of the region became the new Zimbabwe-type kingdom of the Changamire away to the south-west in what is now called Matabeleland. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Mwene Mutapa called on the Changamire for aid against the Portuguese. These were driven off the plateau, but equally the result was the virtual extinction of the northern kingdom.

On the western side of Africa, the main focus of Portuguese attention was not unnaturally Mina, or the Gold Coast. This was not easy for them to control. There were a number of paths along which trade flowed between the coast and the interior, and the coastlands themselves were divided between ten or a dozen small kingdoms – Akan-speaking in the west and centre, Gã or Adangme in the east – which competed with each other for the trade. On the other hand, the very fact of this political division gave the Portuguese some advantage. It is noteworthy that their first fort, Elmina, was built on the boundary between the two states of Komenda and Afutu. Furthermore, once the Africans had realized that the Portuguese were no longer going to allow casual trade with any visiting ship, there was something of an incentive for an African king to agree to negotiate with the Portuguese for the building of a fort on his territory. Eventually the Portuguese built three other major forts besides Elmina, at Axim in the far west, at Shama at the mouth of the river Pra (which was the first point at which they had traded), and, east of Elmina, at the place on the coast of the Gã kingdom which became known as Accra, and

which was the most easterly point at which appreciable supplies of gold were available.

In each case, some sort of agreement seems to have been reached between the Portuguese and the local ruler. There is no contemporary documentary record of the terms of these agreements, but it is more than probable that they were the prototypes of the later agreements concluded by the Dutch and English with African kings when they in their turn came to build or to occupy forts on the Gold Coast, and which were embodied in written documents called 'Notes'. Essentially what was involved was that the African king accepted a European fort on his people's coast, and the Europeans agreed to make regular payments of trade goods to the king. On the African side, these payments seem to have been regarded as rent or tribute by which the Europeans, like any other strangers, acknowledged the supremacy of the local ruler. It is doubtful, however, whether the Portuguese looked at them in this way. In their eyes, their forts were overseas possessions of the Portuguese crown, and the payments made to the African rulers were most probably regarded as presents to secure their goodwill and to facilitate trade with them and their people.

The forts, strongly built structures of stone or brick on the very edge of the sea, were manned by Portuguese soldiers and officials, and served as depots where gold could be regularly collected and where stores of trade goods were maintained. They were not primarily intended for defence against local Africans or as means for their political domination. Few people other than fishermen and saltmakers lived on the coast at this time, and the major towns and political centres were in the interior. The extension of Portuguese political or military power into the interior was neither necessary nor really advisable, as the Portuguese were occupying points on the boundary of a well-developed trading system in which merchants from the interior were already coming to the coastal states for purposes of commercial exchange. The main role of the forts and the ships based on them was to keep other Europeans away from trading with the Africans, and to make the Portuguese the sole European purchasers of gold and suppliers of the imports that the Africans took in exchange. But this did not mean that the Portuguese exerted no political and military power on the coast. Communities of merchants and brokers, and of the slaves and artisans needed to serve the forts, developed around their walls, and these often came to accept their governors as the local authorities *de facto*. Equally, the Portuguese would undertake punitive expeditions against coastal peoples or kingdoms which, seeking to escape the monopoly which the Portuguese claimed, traded with visiting ships from other European countries. However, in the last resort, the Portuguese – and the other Europeans who followed them to the Gold Coast – could not maintain a fort in face of concerted local hostility. The Africans could deny the Europeans access to water or provisions, or indeed boycott a fort altogether if they wished. As early as 1576, the Gã king must have decided that the disadvantages of having such over-mighty subjects on his territory outweighed the commercial gains. The Portuguese fort at Accra was destroyed, and for the next half century there was very little commercial intercourse between the Gã and any Europeans.

In a good year in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese might obtain about £60 000 ($300 000) of gold from their Mina forts. Obviously in return they had to supply the Gold Coast traders with goods which the latter accepted as being of equivalent value. This the Portuguese did not find very easy. Clearly there was no established African demand for European goods. Furthermore, Portugal was not well endowed with minerals or with industry to produce goods for export. She was therefore an entrepôt trader, buying goods from abroad and re-selling them abroad. The commodities most in demand on the Gold Coast which she did attempt to supply seem to have been metalware and raw metals, cloth and clothing, beads and slaves. Europe supplied metals, brass in particular, which were cheaper than the metals which Africans produced. It also supplied some of the cloth and beads, though initially European varieties of these were not well adjusted to African tastes, and it was often better to secure supplies from Asia. But some cloth and beads and all the slaves sold on the Gold Coast were purchased through trade elsewhere in Africa. Initially much of the cloth was of North African manufacture, while both cloth and beads were brought from lands to the east of the Gold Coast. In both cases there is an implication that goods from these regions may have been reaching the Gold Coast, albeit doubtless in smaller quantities, prior to the Portuguese arrival, and that all the Portuguese did was to fasten their hold on already established African trades. (This was certainly the pattern of their activity in the Indian Ocean.) Slaves were also brought from coasts to the east, but this was doubtless a new departure occasioned by the African merchants' need of porters to carry back into the interior goods which were much more bulky than the gold for which they had exchanged them, and also by the need

for labour to increase gold production in forest lands which were presumably then thinly peopled.

Initially it was to Benin that the Portuguese looked as their main West African source of cloth, beads and slaves for their Gold Coast trade. Benin was not in fact a major producer of cloth or beads, but its organized state was in touch with people who were, the Yoruba and Ibo, for example, and through them with other producers even further afield. Also, until their Indian trade was established, the Portuguese were further interested in Benin as a source of peppers. In addition they were intrigued by the fact that its king, though clearly very powerful, sent to another potentate in the interior for confirmation of his accession, and that among the insignia which the Benin messengers brought back with them were metal crosses. Initially the Portuguese leapt to the conclusion that this inland potentate must be Prester John. In fact the name given to him, Ogane, suggests that he was the *Oni* (king) of Ife, still called Oghene in Benin, and by the early sixteenth century, the progress of their discoveries must have given the Portuguese a much better idea of the true distance from Benin to Ethiopia.

From about 1487 the Portuguese occupied a trading post at the Benin river port of Ughoton, though probably not continuously, but this seems to have been abandoned in 1507. The prime reason for this must have been that it was not producing the expected results, and the explanation of this seems to have been that the centralized kingdom of Benin would only allow trade with the Portuguese on its own terms. Although it possessed many slaves, and at the time was capturing numerous prisoners of war, its king seems to have been reluctant to supply either the quantity or quality of slaves that the Portuguese wanted. By 1516, indeed, the latter were virtually excluded from buying male slaves. Other factors in the Portuguese withdrawal were that they were no longer interested in African peppers (which were not the type preferred in Europe), and the high death rate from disease in the Niger delta – though this did not prevent them from operating elsewhere in the delta beyond Benin control. However, the main bases for delta trade were henceforward to be in the islands of the Gulf of Guinea, São Thomé in particular.

In 1514 the king of Benin sent an embassy to Portugal, in part to complain about the activities of traders from São Thomé and Principe, but also to invite Christian missionaries. This obviously suggested to the Portuguese a means of establishing their influence over the king and his administration and policy, and missionaries were duly sent. It seems, in fact, that what the king really wanted, at a time when he was in some political and military difficulty, was firearms. However, the indigenous social and political system was too strong to be penetrated by the resources the Portuguese could deploy, and the Portuguese were not willing to sell arms to people who were not their Christian allies. For the best part of two centuries, therefore, Benin virtually cut itself off from contacts with Europe: European trade was something it chose to do without.

Portuguese settlement of the islands of the Gulf of Guinea started about 1485. They were relatively healthy, and their situation in relation to the trade winds made them ideal places for ships going from Guinea back towards Europe or across to Brazil to call for water and provisions or for repairs. Except for Fernando Po, the largest and nearest to the coast, and of which the Portuguese took little notice, they were also uninhabited. They were therefore obvious places for Portuguese settlement. However, despite grants of land and of free trade with the mainland, few Portuguese wanted to settle so far afield in the tropics, and much of such Portuguese colonization as there was was effected by deporting undesirables and Jews. However these few settlers quickly appreciated that the islands' combination of volcanic soils and high rainfall made them highly suitable for the cultivation of tropical crops for the European market. Of these the most important was sugar, originally an Asian product fetching very high prices in Europe as a luxury good. Attempts to grow the sugar cane in southern Europe had not been very rewarding, but it was being grown very profitably in Madeira and the other Atlantic islands after their discovery, and from there it was introduced to São Thomé and the other Gulf of Guinea islands with outstanding success.

However, sugar cultivation requires a great deal of labour. Soon the colonists of São Thomé and Principe were looking for slaves not simply to send to the markets of the Gold Coast or of the Atlantic islands and Portugal, but for their own plantations. The numbers of slaves successfully supplied to all the earlier markets seem to have been small, possibly no more than an average of 600 to 700 a year. But a substantial labour force was needed to clear and maintain sugar plantations on the Gulf of Guinea islands, and it is thought that these alone absorbed an average of about 1000 slaves a year during the first quarter of the sixteenth century, and not much less than this during the next fifty years. By this time, i.e. the 1570s, the number of slaves

in the islands was so large as to make it difficult to control them, and thereafter both the import of slaves for the islands' plantations and the islands' plantation economy itself sharply declined. The focus for the production of tropical produce on plantations under Portuguese management had now in fact shifted across the Atlantic, to Brazil, to which many of the São Thomé planters emigrated, and to the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean islands and tropical America. Consequently São Thomé's economic role reverted from plantation production to one of being once again an entrepôt base in a maritime slave trade. But this trade was now on an appreciably larger scale, for the demand for slaves in the Americas was infinitely greater than the demand had been in the local African trade or in the Atlantic off-shore islands or in Europe.

But even before this, the São Thomé settlers had begun to look further afield than the Niger delta for the slaves they needed. Increasingly their attention was drawn to the Kongo kingdom, just south of the lower Congo, and to its satellite states both north of the river and further south. The Portuguese were obviously impressed by the size, organization and trading system of the Kongo kingdom which they had first touched in 1482, and it was here that they undertook their most ambitious attempt to secure control of an area of African territory by christianization and peaceful penetration. Embassies were soon passing between the courts of Portugal and Kongo, and in 1491 the first of a series of contingents of priests and skilled artisans was sent out to begin the conversion of the kingdom into a Christian state under Portuguese protection. In return for its modernizing aid, the Portuguese crown expected to receive a monopoly of Kongo's trade and other relations with the outside world, and a base from which it might be possible, via the Congo river, to establish direct overland communication with Ethiopia and the Mwene Mutapa.

Doubtless, as a political ally, the kingdom of the Bakongo was less valued than Ethiopia, and as an economic goal less attractive than the Mwene Mutapa's kingdom, but it did offer some advantages. It was more accessible than either. It was linked to its neighbours and to the interior by a network of trade routes, along which flowed commodities like salt, copper, shells and cloth (both of the latter being valued as currency), and which the Portuguese might hope to dominate and develop. Politically it was possibly better organized than its Bantu contemporary on the other side of central Africa, and yet its monarchy and its national ethos were not so strong as to be likely to resist

Portuguese influences, as they were resisted in both Ethiopia and Benin. Indeed the initial success of the Portuguese plans for the Bakongo seems to have been largely due to the welcome given to the Portuguese by a son of the king who was ruling at the time of their arrival.

Though this king, Nzinga Kuwu, accepted baptism in 1491, by the time of his death in 1506 he had for many years returned to the pagan practices of his ancestors. The election of a successor was the responsibility of the principal officers and provincial rulers of the kingdom, and in 1506, as doubtless often before, this led to a struggle for power between a number of contenders and their supporting factions. The victor was Nzinga Kuwu's son Mvemba Nzinga, who had been baptized Afonso, and who seems to have been a convinced Christian and a firm supporter of the Portuguese modernization programme. It seems likely that his motive was to use Christian thinking and Portuguese technical support to strengthen the position of the monarchy *vis-à-vis* that of the nobility. Certainly Afonso succeeded in getting the succession limited to his own direct descendants.

But by the middle 1520s, the schemes of both the Portuguese crown and of the Bakongo king were going wrong. The root of the trouble was that Lisbon's plan for a royal monopoly of Kongo trade conflicted with the grant already made of trading rights on the mainland to the settlers of São Thomé. The latter, as has been seen, simply wanted as many slaves as they could get. By as early as 1506 they were organizing slave caravans into the interior of the Kongo kingdom, and they cared nothing for the policies of Lisbon and Afonso. Lisbon was too far away to control the situation, and the priests and officials it could maintain in the Kongo too few. In 1526, for example, there were only four priests in the Kongo although fifty were needed. São Thomé was much closer, and its traders much more numerous. By the second quarter of the sixteenth century, about a third of all slaves being taken out of Africa by the Portuguese were coming from the Congo region.

In 1526 Afonso tried to ban all trade and to expel all Europeans except priests and teachers. But this was impossible. By now many Bakongo chiefs were actively engaging in slave trading and raiding, and the slave trade was a major economic activity of the kingdom. So Afonso was forced to turn to an attempt to bring the trade under royal control. One result of this was to cause many of the São Thomé traders to shift their attentions to areas not under his direct authority,

and notably to the nominally tributary kingdom of Ndongo further south (whose ruler was the *Ngola* – hence 'Angola'). In 1556 the official Portuguese faction persuaded Afonso's successor, Diogo (c. 1545–61) to go to war with Ndongo, but he was disastrously defeated. A few years later, further trouble struck the Bakongo kingdom in the form of the Jaga invasions. These were repelled by King Alvare I in 1572, but from this time on the official Portuguese cause in Kongo was lost.

When Alvare had restored internal order, he looked for external aid not to Portugal, but directly to the Vatican. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, although the Portuguese crown maintained that Kongo was still under its suzerainty, because of the independent spirit maintained by its rulers its attempt to control the kingdom had effectually been abandoned. Official Portuguese interest shifted south to Ndongo, and to a policy of direct colonization. In 1571 a young Portuguese nobleman, Paulo Dias, was given a charter or commission (*donatario*) to colonize Angola at his own expense. In 1575–6 a base was established at Luanda, and Dias and his followers embarked on a career of conquest. More than a century of warfare followed, involving many African peoples, including the Imbangala and Bakongo as well as the Mbundu of Ndongo, and also – during 1641–8 the Dutch. But the end result was the destruction of African political authority, and its replacement by a colonial system. By the end of the seventeenth century, three Portuguese towns, Luanda and Benguela on the coast and Massangano in the interior, constituted an arrowhead penetrating west central Africa, on which was based a system of military captaincies seeking the maximum exploitation of the surrounding territory. Initial dreams of rich silver mines in the interior had faded, agricultural colonization had failed, and the *raison d'être* of the whole enterprise had become to mount trading caravans and raids to secure as many slaves as possible for the mines and plantations of Portugal's transatlantic colony in Brazil.

It now remains to consider Portuguese activity in West Africa west and north of the Gold Coast. This was neither very successful nor very considerable. An early attempt to intercept the trans-Saharan trade from Arguin was soon abandoned. Thereafter the main activity was the trade which the settlers of the Cape Verde Islands conducted with the adjacent coastlands of Upper Guinea. This became concentrated on the coast from the mouth of the Gambia to about the modern border between Sierra Leone and Liberia. This coast possessed numerous rivers, creeks and offshore islands to encourage commercial penetration, and also represented the south-western fringes of the Mande trading system. By contrast, much of the coast further east, especially the modern Ivory Coast and the coast from Accra to Lagos, was surf-bound open beach which was dangerous to shipping. In the Ivory Coast and modern Liberia, the coast also fronted dense and thinly populated forests which backed onto mountainous lands, with the result that these areas had been little penetrated by the trading system originating in the Sudan.

As well as obtaining slaves to help in the development of the empty lands of southern Portugal and the Atlantic islands, the Portuguese hoped that they might be able to penetrate through the Upper Guinea coastlands to open up direct commercial and other relations with Mali and its resources of gold. But the empire of Mali was in decline by the fifteenth century, while the Portuguese were nothing like strong enough to advance effectively into the interior, and to weld the various Mande principalities and the congeries of heterogeneous peoples of the region into a new trading system directed to their interests. The one large Upper Guinea polity that was close to the coast, and so accessible to the Portuguese, was the so-called Djolof (i.e. Wolof) empire between the lower Senegal and the Gambia, i.e. in the westernmost Sudan. This had probably come into being less than a century before their own arrival on the scene. It seems to have been in some measure a response to the decay in this area first of the influence of Takrur and then of that of Mali. A group of Wolof leaders, influenced by the political, commercial and islamizing examples of these states, sought to fill the vacuum caused by their decline by instituting a hierarchical control of their own over the other Wolof and Serer chiefdoms. In the 1480s, the Portuguese took advantage of a dispute among this Wolof ruling class to convert one of its members, whom they called 'Prince Bemoym', into a Christian vassal of their own king. But Bemoym was soon killed in mysterious circumstances, and it does not seem that the Portuguese scheme to control the Wolof polity as they later sought to control Kongo ever really got off the ground. Nevertheless, the introduction of European trade seems to have been a factor which weakened Wolof control over their empire. On the coast, it eventually dissolved into its component parts, the small kingdoms of Walo, Cayor, Baol, Sine and Saloum.

Portuguese influence in the Upper Guinea coastlands was quickly reduced to a number of petty coastal trading settlements in which men from the Cape Verde Islands had informally established themselves to do what business they could with the Mande traders and the local peoples. In course of time these trader-settlers, the *lançados*, allied themselves with and married into the African trading and ruling families, and, like the later holders of *prazos* in the Zambezi valley, became members of African society rather than representatives of a Portuguese imperial system. All attempts to control them, for example by revoking the trading privileges of the Cape Verde islanders, failed, and by the second half of the sixteenth century they were already demonstrating – for example in their dealings with the English slave trader, John Hawkins – that they were motivated by local and not by Portuguese interests.

It may be doubted whether the period of Portuguese monopoly in the development of European trade and other relations with the coastlands of tropical Africa from the Senegal to Somalia had much significant effect on the course of African history. As has been indicated, large stretches of the coast were altogether ignored by the Portuguese. Where they were active, as in Upper Guinea, the Gold Coast, the Gulf of Guinea, Angola or on the east coast from Sofala to Mozambique, their main strength lay in offshore islands, like the Cape Verde Islands or São Thomé, or in forts or settlements built on the very edge of the sea, like the Gold Coast forts, Luanda, Sofala and Mozambique (and their first settlements in the last three were all in fact originally on small islands). The essential pattern of their activity was not to develop new trade or to establish territorial colonies, but to turn existing African trade or political systems to their advantage. On the Gold Coast, they were largely successful in a commercial sense. But even here, trade more than about 100 miles from the coast kept to its traditional inwards-orientation. The most that happened was that new sources of gold production nearer to the coast than most of those originally exploited by African chiefs and merchants began to be developed more intensively, but developed by Africans and not by the Portuguese, and for their own profit as well as that of the Portuguese.

Elsewhere the Portuguese largely failed in their original purposes – in Upper Guinea, in Benin, in the Kongo kingdom, in Ethiopia, on the East African coast. This did lead them in some cases to undertake positive steps to advance inland by force, for example Barreto's expedition in the Zambezi valley and Dias's conquest in Angola, both originating in the 1570s. But of these, only Dias's initiative really achieved a profitable outcome for the imperial economy, and only after a century of effort and only really owing to the energies of individual *conquistadores*. These *conquistadores* were often a law to themselves, and elsewhere the successful Portuguese in Africa – like the *lançados* of the Upper Guinea coastlands or the *prazo* holders in the Zambezi valley – were those who had largely emancipated themselves from the control of church and state, and had become more or less acculturated to African society.

Except in a few relatively small areas – the coastal states of the Gold Coast, Kongo, Angola, the Zambezi valley, the trading cities of the east coast – the political and economic life of tropical African peoples continued much as it had done before the century of Henry the Navigator and Vasco da Gama. The Portuguese were in fact harbingers of change rather than actual agents of change: African societies were far stronger than the Portuguese could ever be in Africa. Yet things were changing. In the coastlands from the Senegal to Angola, the Portuguese language or Africanized versions of it became a lingua franca for foreign trade and for the acquisition of new ideas. Some elements of the original christianization of the Bakongo kingdom lingered on into modern colonial times, and some knowledge of a wider world and of new kinds of social mobility filtered much more widely into Africa. Although the technological distance between western European society and African society was very much less than it was to become in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some Africans acquired new knowledge and new skills. Above all perhaps, African farmers were introduced to new crops, usually of tropical American provenance, such as maize and cassava, which in given circumstances could be more productive than their older cultigens, and which therefore were sometimes quickly taken up and adopted wherever they could usefully be grown. Thus within about fifty years of Columbus's voyage, two varieties of maize had reached Nigeria by two different routes, one along the west coast, and the other through the Mediterranean and across the Sahara. By the end of the seventeenth century, it was known virtually throughout tropical Africa.

Finally, the significance of the Portuguese expansion to embrace the coasts of tropical Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was that they showed other Europeans, with greater maritime and commercial strength than they themselves had, that there was profit

to be made out of contact with Africa. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese example had also shown western Europeans that the prime value of Africa for them was not as a source of gold or spices, or as an expanding frontier for Christendom, but as a continent where slaves could be secured for the exploitation of the Americas.