Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy: Portuguese Relations with West Africa, 1441–1521*

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The diplomatic aspect of early Portuguese-West African relations has received little scholarly attention thus far, but something similar might be said about the history of pre-1500...
diplomacy and cross-cultural diplomacy in general. Because the Portuguese enterprise in West Africa marks the beginning of European overseas expansion, placing the relations between Portugal and West African societies in their proper historical context represents a fundamental element in analyzing the development of relations between western and overseas societies. Were these "cultures in conflict," or simply societies in contact? It has often been assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that the early Portuguese-West African relations were antagonistic: the Portuguese are perceived as invaders who because of their technological superiority were able to deal with the Africans from a position of strength or to promote their interests by force. The writings of João de

2 The standard authorities on fifteenth-century European diplomacy still remain G. Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy (Harmondsworth, 1965; 1st ed. 1955), and F. L. Ganshof, Le Moyen Age, vol. 1 of P. Renouvin, ed., Histoire des relations internationales (Paris, 1953). There exists a substantial body of case studies and documentary evidence, both published and unpublished but, as Mattingly has pointed out, it is sadly underexploited, especially in the area of diplomatic institutions (Renaissance Diplomacy, p. 283). A. B. Bozeman's Politics and Culture in International History (Princeton, 1960) is exceptional in that it systematically encompasses the relations between world societies and cultures throughout history with remarkable insight, but its usefulness is undermined by the fact that it works from an "international" premise that is mostly applicable before the emergence of the nation state in sixteenth-century Europe. Currently, however, the interest in pre-modern diplomacy is being renewed by works such as D. M. Nicol, Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations (New York, 1988), and G. P. Cuttino, English Medieval Diplomacy (Bloomington, 1985). W. Kolb's Herrscherbegegnungen im Mittelalter (Bern, 1988) provides a new and much needed point of departure in the study of medieval diplomatic institutions despite its unfortunate tendency to treat the entire era from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries as homogeneous. In the area of cross-cultural relations, the collection of essays by Urs Bitterli, Cultures in Conflict: Encounters Between European and Non-European Cultures, 1492–1800 (Stanford, 1989), opens the doors to a stimulating debate. Philip D. Curtin's outstanding synthesis, Cross-Cultural Trade in World History (New York, 1984), provides a much needed antidote to the excessive weight ascribed to the impact of the European commercial expansion overseas and constitutes a basis for a realistic assessment of commercial relations among heterogeneous political, cultural, and social entities. More contributions are likely to emerge either in connection with the Columbus quincentenary or as a result of the renewal of scholarly interest in world history.

3 The reference is to the title of Bitterli's book, Cultures in Conflict.

4 This perception is more often a matter of tone and allusion than of explicit argument (for discussion, see Thornton, "Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations," pp. 183–85, with specific reference to the works of Duffy and Davidson). A good example is the title of Vogt's Portuguese Rule on the Gold Coast. The title implies that the Portuguese were in the position of hegemony or at least widespread control over that part of coastal West Africa. Yet in the text Vogt clearly acknowledges that "the Portuguese never were able to extend their political influence far beyond the limits of São Jorge da Mina" (p. 86), mostly did not intervene in local affairs, and depended on the goodwill of the immediately surrounding African states for suc-
Barros, the key source on early Portuguese overseas diplomacy, and other Portuguese sixteenth-century narratives seem to support such a view: they often include haughty speeches reportedly delivered by the Portuguese spokesmen to African dignitaries, and they refer to threats of force, reduction of coastal states to vassalage, and the Portuguese sense of religious and cultural superiority. However, once these narrative sources are complete-
mented by the mosaic of evidence preserved in documents relat-
ing the day-to-day operations of the Portuguese court and the Afri-
can outposts, it appears that the guiding principle in most types
of negotiations was pragmatism, that the Portuguese were in a
very vulnerable position, and that they did not enjoy any special
advantages. Where there was mutuality of interests, negotia-
tions were usually successful, but the results were often precarious
and the negotiating efforts faced serious linguistic, logistic, and
conceptual problems that are reflected in the confusing and often
misleading language of the sixteenth-century Portuguese chroni-
cles and histories.

The most problematic and volatile aspect of the Portuguese–
West African encounters was the first contact, especially in the
decade that followed the first voyages south of the Senegal River
in 1444. The first Portuguese expeditions to this area were merely
extensions of earlier raids on the Saharan coast, which in their
turn were an extension of the religiously justified petty warfare
and piracy plaguing the western Mediterranean as well as the
shores of Algarve and Morocco. Slaves and other booty were their
main objective; the Portuguese captains considered themselves
entitled to such a just and honorable reward for the risk and dis-
comfort they faced in the service of God and Henry the Naviga-
tor. Various kidnapping episodes in Walo, Kayor, and the Cape
Verde Islands only contributed to the bad reputation they had
acquired on the Mauritanian coast, and the farther south they
went the more hostile the reception from the local people. Every
landing attempt was greeted by highly effective African war par-
ties lying in ambush, ready both to defend their territory and to
capture booty of their own.

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6 The most useful materials are preserved in the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do
Tombo, Lisbon (hereafter cited as ANTT), collections Corpo Cronológica, Gavetas,
and Núcleo Antigo. Some of them have been published in such collections as J. M.
de Silva Marques, ed., Os descobrimentos portugueses: Documentos para a sua his-
tória, 3 vols. (Lisbon, 1944–71); A. Brásio, ed., Monumenta missionaria africana: 
Africa occidental, ser. 1, vols. 1–2 (Lisbon, 1952–53), and ser. 2, vol. 3 (Lisbon, 1963);
7 This attitude is reflected throughout Azurara’s chronicle. For a specific
example, see Gomes Eannes de Azurara, The Chronicle of the Discovery and Con-
99), 1:506, 114–15, 2:134. The subsequent references will be to this English edition
because it is by far the most commonly used, although for closer analysis a Portu-
guese edition would be preferable.
8 Azurara, Chronicle, 1:90, 2:140, 142, 178–79.
9 The ambushes were partly the reason behind the hostile actions of Gonçalo
The African show of military prowess quickly resulted in significant casualties among the Portuguese and gained the black Africans the respect in Portuguese eyes that the apparently helpless Sanhaja fisherman of coastal Mauritania could not command.\(^\text{10}\) Loss of life and diminishing returns persuaded the Portuguese to seek peaceful relations and trade rather than combat and military glory.\(^\text{11}\) Although in Mauritania this change of policy proved relatively easy to implement, south of the Senegal River friendly relations were first established only with difficulty,\(^\text{12}\) partly because of linguistic obstacles. In Mauritania, the Portuguese could make themselves understood using Arabic or Berber.\(^\text{13}\) South of the Senegal they were at first dependent on signs because they had no interpreters and spoke no African language.\(^\text{14}\) Attempts at nonverbal communication often compounded the misunderstanding. In 1445, for example, Gomes Pires tried to signal his desire for a peaceable meeting with the inhabitants of Cape Verde by leaving ashore three tokens: a mirror, probably for trade; a cake, possibly to symbolize hospitality; and a drawing of the Cross, to identify the seamen as Christians. The locals promptly destroyed the tokens, an act that goaded the Portuguese into yet another attack.\(^\text{15}\) Communication difficulties, together with memories of recent conflicts and understandable apprehension on both sides, combined to make the situation in the late 1440s very volatile. Mutual distrust often sabotaged well-meant attempts at normal relations.\(^\text{16}\) The first serious diplomatic negotiations, conducted in Bawol by Abelhart (Vallarte), an adven-

\(^\text{93}\) of Rodrigo Eanes de Travacos and Dinis Dias (2:220), of Alvaro Fernandes in 1446 (2:258–61), and of Stevam Eanes and Gil Eanes (2:262–65). See also Luis de Cadamosto, Viagens de Luis de Cadamosto e de Pedro da Sintra (Lisbon, 1948), p. 120.

\(^\text{10}\) Azurara reported that after Nuno Tristão's death in 1446, it was considered too dangerous to fight with the blacks (Chronicle, 2:262).


\(^\text{12}\) Azurara, Chronicle, 1:54–55, 95, 107, 110–11.

\(^\text{13}\) Martim Fernandes, Dom Henrique's alfaqueque (ransomer of captives), was fluent both in Arabic and in Berber dialects (Azurara, Chronicle, 1:57), and so was Joham Fernandes, who stayed behind in the Mauritanian desert for seven months in an attempt to establish relations (1:95, 101, 107).


\(^\text{15}\) Azurara, Chronicle, 2:102–93.

\(^\text{16}\) Alvaro Fernandes, for example, felt fooled and deeply frustrated when the ten Cape Verdiens to whom he extended hospitality aboard his ship during his 1445 voyage proved to be an intelligence party gathering information for an attack by six large war canoes, each carrying forty warriors (Azurara, Chronicle, 2:225–28).

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turous Danish noble in the service of Dom Henrique, ended in tragedy when opponents of the local ruler used his temporary absence to mount an attack on the Portuguese during which Abelhart was killed.\textsuperscript{17} For their part, the Portuguese could not bring themselves to abstain completely from slave raiding. Alvaro Fernandes's 1446 voyage almost ended in disaster when he resorted to kidnapping in the Sine-Saloum area and was attacked with poisoned arrows.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite these problems, in the course of the first decade of contact, 1445–55, peaceful trading relations were established with all three coastal Wolof states north of Cape Verde.\textsuperscript{19} The situation south of Cape Verde, however, remained volatile for some time. Bad reputation preceded the Europeans, and not even the use of the newly trained interpreters could prevent a hostile reception. In 1446, two Portuguese expeditions suffered debilitating casualties in the Saloum area and in the mouth of Gambia.\textsuperscript{20} In 1455 Usodimare lost an interpreter in the Saloum Delta when he and Cadamosto tried to inquire about the land and its trading opportunities.\textsuperscript{21} Later, when they entered the Gambia River, their ships came under intense attack from a large number of war canoes, which they repelled only with great difficulty. When the two Italians inquired, through interpreters, about the reasons for the hostility, they were told that the whites were cannibals and that the purpose of the attack was to kill the whites, seize their possessions, and make a present of them to the local ruler.\textsuperscript{22} In 1456, however, the combined efforts of Cadamosto and Diogo Gomes led to the establishment of peaceful relations with several Gambian states, including Badibu, Niani, Wuli, Sankolla, and even the bellicose Niumi in the mouth of the Gambia.\textsuperscript{23} The news of peaceful and mutually advantageous trading on the Gambia River changed the perception of the Portuguese in African eyes. As they progressed southward, they were no longer attacked, but rather were offered merchandise.

The linguistic diversity of the West African coast\textsuperscript{24} came to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 2:280–85.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 2:258–61.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Cadamosto, \textit{Viagens}, p. 33.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Cadamosto, \textit{Viagens}, p. 53.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 54–58.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., pp. 64–66; Gomes, \textit{Viagens}, pp. 39–43.
\item \textsuperscript{24} For detailed discussion, see the contributions of P. E. H. Hair, “Ethnolinguistic Continuity on the Guinea Coast,” \textit{Journal of African History} 8 (1967): 247–68;
\end{itemize}
represent the main challenge. Both Cadamosto in 1456 and Pedro de Sintra in 1461 were forced to abandon their explorations in the Guinea Rivers (on the upper Guinea coast) and Sierra Leone because south of the Rio Grande they encountered speakers of Southern West Atlantic languages, a language group entirely new to them and their interpreters. The Portuguese, however, gradually learned to cope with such situations. Where they did not know the language, they showed merchandise and indicated by signs their wish to trade. Where possible they bought slaves to be trained as interpreters. Where that was not possible, they either tried to persuade one of the local inhabitants to go as an ambassador to Portugal, or attempted to have one delegated by the local political authority, or simply kidnapped somebody at random. The latter method, however, served only as a last resort, and the Portuguese tried to lessen the resulting anger and resentment by taking as few persons as possible, leaving abundant gifts behind, and promising to return the unwilling guests alive and well. The willing or unwilling ambassadors were hosted lavishly at the royal court, issued good clothing, taught Portuguese, and returned to their homes with many gifts. Slave interpreters were also well treated. They were often manumitted and permitted to pursue their own trading interests, in exchange for committing themselves to long years of service to the Portuguese expeditions plying African waters. Because they were

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25 See, for example, Cadamosto, *Viagens*, p. 52.

26 Pedro de Sintra, for example, had to resort to kidnapping one of the Africans who came aboard his ship near Cape Mesurado, in hope that the black interpreters in Portugal would be able to question him and obtain information about his country (ibid., p. 79).

27 See, for example, Sintra's actions near Cape Mesurado (ibid., p. 79) and Diogo Cão's in Kongo (Barros, *Da Asia*, pp. 86–87).

28 See, for example, Ruy de Pina's description of the reception and treatment of the first ambassador of Benin in 1486 (Crónica, p. 74). In 1514, another Benin envoy also received generous gifts of clothing (ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 16, doc. 118). In 1493, an envoy from Cantor received rich apparel for himself, very good garments for his groom, and a female slave (Silva Marques, *Os descobrimentos*, 3: doc. 265).

indispensable to the success of the negotiations, their loyalty was crucial to the proper representation of Portuguese interests. The African rulers in turn often had their own interpreters, trained to safeguard their masters' interests, whose task was to question the strangers and those who spoke for them.32

Once equipped with interpreters, the Portuguese would inquire about the political situation in the area they were planning to visit. They would then attempt to seek out local rulers in order to initiate diplomatic relations and secure permission to trade. They would identify themselves as representatives of the king of Portugal and as Christians, state the desire of their king to live in peace and friendship with the local potentate,33 and inquire whether he was interested in things from Europe.34 The main purpose of the contact was to obtain a promise of protection and security for both persons and goods.35 Such assurances were essential for the conduct of trade and were in accord with contemporary European practices.

The majority of the early Portuguese negotiations with West Africans had to do with trading arrangements. Once the Portuguese had succeeded in establishing their reputation as traders rather than raiders, they acquired the same standing and received the same treatment from the local societies as did any other visiting merchants.36 They were welcome as long as they were useful—in other words, as long as they offered attractive merchandise at a good price and did not make a nuisance of themselves. They were also strangers, however, and their wealth in trade goods invited attack, theft, or fraud.37 The Portuguese sources contain many complaints of such mistreatment, often pertaining to specific areas or groups. As a rule, societies with extensive commer-

33 For European parallels, see Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, p. 32.
34 For a participant's account, see Cadamosto's negotiations with the mansa of Badibu (Viagens, p. 64).
35 Abelhart, who carried out the first diplomatic mission in Bawol, was instructed "to see if [the expedition] could obtain sureties from the King of that land" (Azurara, Chronicle, 2:280).
36 On issues concerning the position of long-distance merchants in the local societies, see Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade, chap. 3.
cial interests were considered safer and more reliable than peasant societies dominated by a warrior aristocracy or kinship-based societies only marginally interested in trade.38

The early trading sessions were frequently also ad hoc diplomatic encounters. Their purpose was to establish a truce and an agreement on measures that would safeguard the interests of both parties. When a Portuguese ship reached a prospective trading spot, its arrival was announced through interpreters to the local ruler or his representative in order to secure consent and to work out security measures, which sometimes involved an exchange of hostages.39 The ruler was also informed of the composition of the merchandise and was invited to inspect it personally.40 He often would have the right of first choice or at least would be able to choose presents for himself.41 Even straightforward transactions involved hours and even days of negotiations and haggling, and the local hosts felt obligated to provide food, lodging, and other comforts to the visiting merchants.42 The conclusion of

38 For example, the commercially minded Manding were more trusted and better liked (Fernandes, O Manuscrito, pp. 77-78) than the Wolof, whose society was characterized by a peasant–warrior aristocracy dichotomy. Fernandes wrote with contempt that “the Wolof men or merchants ... steal from friends as well as from enemies” (O Manuscrito, p. 69). According to Pacheco Pereira, the Wolof were “liars who never spoke the truth”: Duarte Pacheco Pereira, Esmeraldo de situ orbis, ed. A. E. da Silva Dias (Lisbon, 1905), p. 89. Pacheco Pereira held an unflattering opinion of most African societies north of the Rio Grande, claiming that “they are all thieves, cheats and liars” (Esmeraldo, pp. 81, 89, 91). He had a better opinion of the Africans south of the Rio Grande, at least of those friendly to the Portuguese. The small-scale societies of this area could be quite unpredictable as well. The Bullom of the Sherbro River in Sierra Leone were especially notorious for switching from peaceful trade to hostility and back again (Esmeraldo, p. 102).


40 After the damel of Kayor had been informed of the arrival of Cadamosto’s ship, he came to the coast with 15 horsemen and 150 followers on foot (Cadamosto, Viagens, p. 34). The Gambian rulers also inspected the ships in the presence of a large following (Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 64–65; Gomes, Viagens, pp. 40–42).

41 Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 64–65. In Benin, the oba’s subjects were allowed to trade with the whites only after his own business had been concluded: R. E. Bradbury, The Benin Kingdom and the Edo Speaking Peoples of South Western Nigeria (London, 1957), p. 24.

42 After the huge feast that celebrated the end of their trading session, Cadamosto stayed with the damel for almost a month, waiting for him to assemble the payment and enjoying his hospitality (Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 34–43). Jelen, the bumí of Jolof, was followed by a train of merchants even during his most troubled years (Barros, Da Asia, pp. 100–101). For the length of the Mina trading sessions, see Vogt, Portuguese Rule, pp. 63–80.
a trading or negotiating session was usually an occasion for festivities. The African host would entertain first, and then the hospitality would be reciprocated by the Portuguese, often aboard their ships.43

Once trade became routine, the local rulers or headmen often left the handling of affairs to trade officials. In Senegambia and Guinea rivers, it was often the chief of the seashore or riverside village located close to the place where ships usually landed.44 On the Gold Coast, this function was performed by an official called xarife, who stood high enough in the social hierarchy to be eligible to become head of state.45 In Benin, practical matters were handled by the chief of the Gwato village, the port of Benin, but the overall responsibility for Portuguese affairs belonged to the osodin, one of the four town chiefs of Benin and one of the main advisers of the oba, the ruler of Benin. The dealings of the Portuguese with the Benin dignitaries were assisted by an official interpreter chosen by the oba.46

The success of both the trading sessions and long-term commercial relations depended on the development of customs, traditions, and practices that would guarantee Portuguese as well as African interests.47 Such arrangements were especially important

43 Gomes, Viagens, pp. 40–42. The custom had its risks. In the 1470s, an unidentified Gambian ruler and his retinue were carried off to slavery after they had mistaken an interloping Castilian ship for a Portuguese one. Queen Isabel of Spain eventually ordered the ruler freed and transported back home, but many members of his family and retinue were lost: Blake, Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560, 1:213–17.


47 The establishment of such institutions and customs was indispensable for medieval trade in general. See Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade, chap. 1 ("Trade Dias-
in matters of credit, a commercial tool indispensable to both sides. The advantage in such matters lay with the Africans, because they could always appeal to the local political authority to invoke the principle of collective responsibility\(^48\) and seize property and persons from the next visiting European ship. The only real protection the Portuguese had was to shun locations that had a bad name. The ability of the Portuguese crown to intervene on behalf of its subjects in Africa was extremely limited and mostly ineffective\(^49\).

Gradually, with the establishment of sustained links with their African counterparts, the Portuguese came to rely on principles governing hospitality and the landlord-stranger relationship, widespread African institutions facilitating the operations of a stranger in the host society\(^50\). The latter arrangement, very similar to a combination of medieval brokerage and hostelage,\(^51\)

\(^{48}\) The principle of collective responsibility was commonplace in medieval Europe and North Africa and contributed greatly to the insecurity of commerce in that period. It was gradually abolished only in the course of the fifteenth century: for example, Portuguese trade with Flanders was exempted from it as early as 1411, but Flemish trade with Portugal achieved a reciprocal concession only in 1457 (Silva Marques, Os descobrimentos, vol. 1 suppl., docs. 62, 140).

\(^{49}\) The Portuguese crown first became involved with Jelen ("Bemoim"), the bumi of Jolof, in response to the complaints of Portuguese merchants about his failure to pay for the goods he had purchased from them. The crown sent an envoy who achieved little more than securing a gift of 100 slaves. The merchants' accounts were not settled (Barros, Da Asia, pp. 99-101). The crown was even less successful in protecting the contract of Antonio Carneiro, which entitled him to exclusive trade with Benin. The contract only annoyed the oba and caused him to impose unfavorable trade policies (ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 20, docs. 19 and 27).


\(^{51}\) J. A. Van Houtte, "Les courtiers au moyen age," Revue historique de droit français et étranger 15 (1936): 105-141, offers an excellent overview of the development of these two parallel European institutions.
demanded that the stranger attach himself to a local protector (landlord) who, in return for some form of commission, would represent the stranger in the community, assume liability for his actions, provide him with advice and information, and look after his commercial interests in his absence. This arrangement greatly improved Portuguese–West African commercial relations, especially after some Portuguese, known as lançados (those who had “thrown themselves” among the Africans), settled permanently on the mainland, became integrated into the African societies, and began to provide services to both sides as intermediaries.

Another form of the landlord-stranger relationship was the establishment of permanent trading outposts on the mainland. While some lançado establishments eventually grew to the size of settlements, outposts were more typical for the Portuguese crown enterprise. The crown would secure land leases from the African authorities to found fortified trading stations (factories) at key commercial points, ostensibly to enhance its commercial opportunities and the security of its trading operations. The main objective, however, was not so much to assure the safety of crown trade as to exclude or at least control potential competitors, such as private traders from Portugal or foreign European interlopers. The African rulers were not blind to this aspect of the Portuguese crown’s agenda. Despite other attempts, only three such outposts on African-held territory were successfully established: São Jorge da Mina (Mina) on the Gold Coast, Wadane in Mauritania, and Gwato in Benin. Of these three, only Mina achieved permanence. The other two factories were closed after a short period as a result of the hostility of local political and commercial leaders who believed, with reason, that their interests were being dam-


54 This was the reason given by Diogo de Azambuja to Caramansa for the building of the São Jorge da Mina fortress (Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 11).

55 One of the main concerns that Caramansa had in connection with the proposed Mina fortress was that it would prevent other Europeans from coming to trade (Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 11). The oba was very displeased by the attempts of the Portuguese crown to limit the access of private traders to Benin (see, for example, ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 20, doc. 19; and Ryder, Benin, pp. 52-53).

56 See Blake, Quest, pp. 102-103.
aged by the crown’s hindrance of other Europeans’ participation in the traffic.\(^57\) The Mina outpost survived mostly as a result of the complex political situation on the Gold Coast, which made it advantageous for the ruler of Aguafo to strengthen his own position by acting as a landlord to the Portuguese crown representatives.\(^58\) The success of the trade and often the survival of the Portuguese depended on good relations with their African hosts.

The Portuguese were well aware of the precariousness of their situation. Their technology—fortifications, weaponry, and sailing ships armed with artillery—was of little advantage in African conditions. In confined coastal waters and on rivers, the sailing ships were vulnerable to concentrated attacks by large war canoes and often fell prey to determined African parties.\(^59\) Metal armor was a torment in a tropical climate. The late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century firearms were often too clumsy to have more than a psychological effect against small or moving targets.\(^60\) While the Portuguese certainly could look after themselves militarily, African weaponry and tactics were still highly effective against them, and poisoned arrows usually caused horrible damage.\(^61\) The Portuguese outposts on the African mainland were small. The largest, São Jorge da Mina, was manned by only fifty to fifty-five peo-

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\(^57\) On Wadane, see Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo*, p. 77. The Gwato factory was abandoned partly because of high mortality among the Portuguese staff and poor trade resulting from lack of competitiveness (Ryder, *Benin*, p. 33). From later correspondence it is also clear, however, that the *oba* and his officials resented the idea of dealing only with the royal factor or persons appointed by the Portuguese crown (ibid., p. 48; ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 20, doc. 19). The concerns that Caramansa had about the proposal to build a fortress near his village also focused on the fear that it would prevent other Europeans from coming to trade (Ruy de Pina, *Crónica*, p. 11).


\(^59\) In 1455, the three caravels of Cadamosto’s expedition to the Gambia River managed to repel an attack of seventeen war canoes only with difficulty, after a pitched battle (Cadamosto, *Viagens*, pp. 55–58). Pacheco Pereira reports that in a suitable geographical location war canoes were fully capable of seizing an armed caravel. Cape Sagres was especially notorious in this respect (*Esmeraldo*, p. 93).

\(^60\) See, for example, Cadamosto, *Viagens*, p. 56. Crossbows caused much more damage than guns in the 1456 fighting (p. 57). In the early 1500s a few espingardas were among the arms carried by Portuguese in direct contact with the Africans (ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 3, doc. 89). Crossbows were much more common as projectile weapons, however, and most of the Portuguese armament consisted of cold steel weapons, such as lances: *Regimento das casas das Indias e Mina*, ed. D. Peres (Coimbra), pp. 21, 25.

pie, only about one-third of whom were professional soldiers. The crown outposts lived in an all too justified fear of attack: Axim, a small Portuguese fortress near Cape Three Points on the Gold Coast, was overrun and looted in 1515 by the neighboring Ahanta warriors lured by easy opportunity, and the Gwato factory was perennially at the mercy of the oba of Benin. Small size and distance from home made these installations quite susceptible to sustained attack.

The Africans did not always have to resort to force, however, to safeguard their interests. Boycotting or disrupting trade was a more subtle and efficient weapon. The Africans could and did draw on alternative market networks, while the Portuguese suffered considerable losses if for some reason they were unable to engage in satisfactory trade. Their success depended greatly on the reputation they and their merchandise enjoyed among the Africans. The Mina gold trade, for example, could entirely dry up if rumors spread northward that the Portuguese merchandise was poor or that the roads to the coast were too dangerous. The forest merchants would simply choose to take all their business northward and sell to the Mande networks linked to the trans-Saharan trade. São Jorge da Mina was of little use if African merchants did not come there to trade.

Assuring the goodwill of the African political elite was of key importance to the Portuguese. First of all, the rulers were often the best customers. This was especially true in Senegal where the Portuguese found a ready market for horses, an important status symbol and a means of transportation for the warrior elite. The Senegalese rulers and nobility were ready and willing to protect the Portuguese and offer them good business terms. The damel of Kayor enjoyed a particularly high standing in the 1450s, as did the buur of Siin in the latter part of that decade, and the regent of Jolof in the 1480s. More important, the Portuguese were well aware of the power the local authorities wielded over them. Even

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62 Vogt, Portuguese Rule, pp. 46-47.
63 In 1508, for instance, the captain of the Arguim outpost paid about three times the regular price for an escaped slave converted to Christianity when his master al-Mansur, the overlord of the region, arrived and "threatened to break the peace" unless he was given proper compensation (ANTT, Núcleo Antigo, no. 888, fol. 25).
64 Vogt, Portuguese Rule, p. 86.
65 Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 35-36; Gomes, As Viagens, p. 45; Barros, Da Asia, p. 203.
if they did not attack the Portuguese directly, hostile leaders could prohibit their subjects from trading with the Portuguese or harass long-distance traders coming to trade with the Europeans. Most of the diplomatic activity of the officials of São Jorge de Mina was concerned with persuading and enticing the neighboring rulers of Aguafo, Afutu, and Asebu not to interfere with the gold merchants on the way from the interior to the Mina fortress. The officials were under explicit instructions from the crown to treat visiting rulers and their relatives well and to keep them supplied with expensive presents of their choice.

Gifts played a much more important role in African political and commercial societies than in late medieval Europe, and it was difficult for the Portuguese to master the customs that determined when and to whom presents were due, and how rich they should be. Yet a proper assortment of presents was often crucial to the success of a commercial expedition. The oba of Benin, for example, regulated the volume and composition of merchandise available for sale to the Portuguese almost entirely according to the value and quantity of the presents that he and his officials received. In 1516, he allowed as many as 400 slaves to be sold to an interloping São Thomé expedition that presented him with gifts amounting to 12% of the value of their return cargo, while he allowed only 100 slaves to be sold to the agents of the Portuguese crown. To their complaints he replied that if only he were given proper presents he would gladly open wide the market in slaves of both sexes and any other merchandise of interest. Other political figures were less demanding: al-Mansur, the overlord of Nuakchott Bay in Mauritania, was content with presents amounting to only 5.4% of the value of the Portuguese return cargo; in 1522 the Ijo chiefs of the Niger Delta were satisfied with only 3%. The headmen and petty rulers of Sierra Leone and Guinea Rivers on

66 The oba of Benin frequently employed or threatened to employ this weapon (Ryder, Benin, p. 45).
67 ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. I, maço 9, docs. 60, 61. The local notables were not uninterested in trade, they merely wished to force it to pass through their territory rather than that of a rival state.
68 See, for example, ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 2, maço 71, doc. 101; maço 72, docs. 24, 26; maço 73, docs. 112, 135.
69 Sundstrom, Exchange Economy, pp. 13-14; Curtin, Economic Change, 1:286-90.
70 ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 20, doc. 19.
the upper Guinea coast were even less demanding, although both they and the Ijo chiefs expected further gifts to be given to the members of their retinue, relatives, and aides in charge of trade.73

Profit and enhancement of their style of living were not, however, the only factors that prompted African political authorities to create conditions favorable to the Portuguese trade. Because this trade added to the prosperity of their communities and raised their standing in the local balance of power, it also strengthened their regional position and reputation. For example, the Susu of Sierra Leone still remember the son of the founding chieftain, Manga Kombeh Balla, as the man who persuaded some Portuguese to settle in the Susu country in the uplands of Sierra Leone.74 Similarly, the Ijo traditions report that the first amanyamabo (king) of Bonny, a city-state in the eastern Niger delta, was elevated to office in recognition of his role in broadening the Rio Real estuary and attracting Portuguese ships to trade there.75 On the Gold Coast, the permission for the Mina fortress to be built was secured from Caramansa, the head of the local settlement, partly because a strong Portuguese presence bound to him by stranger-landlord obligations gave his village an edge against his neighbors.76 The Portuguese were useful to their African hosts in three ways: they represented a new and significant source of wealth, their presence offered various strategic advantages, and like representatives of other trading diasporas, they were specialists who could perform expert services within their area.

Abede of the Portuguese need for their goodwill, the African leaders would often make their cooperation conditional on Portuguese help in matters ranging from regional trade embargoes and transfer of technological know-how to military assistance and formal alliances. The more credible the Portuguese became as a new autonomous factor in coastal politics, the more pressure was put on them to enter the fray on behalf of their hosts or trading partners in exchange for continued or increased support of their trading activities.77 However, the Portuguese, including the crown rep-

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76 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, pp. 10, 12.
77 See, for example, Barros, Da Asia, pp. 202–204; Boulègue and Pinto-Bull, "Les
resentatives, were as a rule unwilling to become embroiled in local matters. They realized that their understanding of the nature and limitations of the African political structures was insufficient and that deep involvement could be detrimental to their commercial interests. The Mina officials were in a particularly stressful situation because the alliance with the ruler of Aguafo that resulted from the location of their fortress caused them to be often included in the hostilities against Aguafo by the neighboring state of Afuto. Afuto did not have to attack the Mina fortress to get the message across: it was enough to disrupt the commercial traffic from the interior. Aguafo would of course react similarly if it was felt that the Portuguese officials were not doing their bit against Afuto or that they were otherwise compromising Aguafo’s interests. Moreover, because of the papal bans on supplying weapons and technological aid to non-Christians, the Portuguese were often reluctant to comply with requests for such assistance unless the request was preceded by a conversion.

The issue of conversion and religious proselytization was a touchy one. West African rulers were accustomed to the fact that members of long-distance trading diasporas often doubled as Muslim missionaries. In the 1450s, several Senegambian rulers found it quite entertaining to organize religious disputations between the resident Sanhaja clerics and the Christian visitors. Diogo Gomes boasted that his performance in one such disputa

relations avec Cayor,” pp. 663–67; ANTT, Corpo Cronolóxico, pt. 1, maço 9, docs. 60, 61; Ryder, Benin, pp. 46–49.

78 ANTT, Corpo Cronolóxico, pt. 1, maço 3, doc. 119; maço 9, docs. 60, 61; maço 12, doc. 72; maço 13, doc. 48; maço 16, doc. 30; pt. 2, maço 73, docs. 112, 135.

79 Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 39–40; Gomes, Viagens, pp. 42–43.

80 Gomes, Viagens, pp. 42–43.

81 Jelen, the bumi of Jolof, invoked this reason to explain his hesitation to convert to Christianity (Barros, Da Asia, p. 204).
of African rulers hinged on animist beliefs, the renunciation of which could lead to loss of office, because the essential link between the rulers, their ancestors, and the surrounding forces of nature would be severed. On the Gold Coast, however, the local chiefs and commoners began to accept baptism soon after the Portuguese outpost had been completed. The ruler of Afutu converted to Christianity in 1503. Several of his neighbors apparently promised to follow suit, but there is no evidence that they ever acted on their promise. In most instances, the Portuguese would desist, however, before annoying their hosts too much: after all, trade was the overwhelming priority, and fulfillment of the political and ideological agenda represented only an added advantage.

Difficulties arose only when Portuguese soldiers or arms shipments represented a key issue at the negotiating table. Noncompliance with papal proscriptions might have potentially severe repercussions on the Portuguese right to control maritime access to West Africa. Romanus Pontifex, the papal bull that awarded suzerainty over the African waters to Portugal, did so on the grounds that the Portuguese, unlike other unnamed Europeans, could be trusted not to supply weapons, raw materials, and military technology to the infidels. The Portuguese rights might have been promptly questioned by Spain and other European states if Portugal had not maintained a show of restraint.

The African rulers often tried to devise a compromise that would feed the proverbial wolf and leave the goat untouched. They were often willing to accept Christian missionaries, include the Christian god among the deities and spirits to be worshipped,

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82 This was particularly true of the oba of Benin who, by the virtue of his office, was indispensable to the spiritual wellbeing of his people (Bradbury, The Benin Kingdom, pp. 40–41).

83 Pacheco Pereira, Esmeraldo, p. 114.

84 ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 3, doc. 119.

85 Ibid.; also maço 8, doc. 72.

86 The Portuguese had closer relations with the ruler of Águafo, the landlord of São Jorge da Mina, than with his rival, the ruler of Afuto, despite the fact that the latter had converted to Christianity and the former had not (ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 3, doc. 119; maço 9, doc. 60; maço 16, doc. 30). The Portuguese also continued to trade with Benin, even though their hopes of Christianizing the country had been frustrated (Ryder, Benin, pp. 40–75).

87 Silva Marques, Os Descobrimentos, 1:505, 507.

88 For a discussion, see Saunders, "The Depiction of Trade"; Blake, Quest, chaps. 1, 3.
and even promise large-scale conversions in a not-so-distant future. The *oba* of Benin was the most accomplished of those who developed the temporizing game into an art. According to Barros, but not Ruy de Pina, he was willing to accept Christian missionaries soon after the first exchange of ambassadors. When that did not satisfy the Portuguese, an embassy was dispatched from Benin to Portugal in 1514, which led Dom Manuel to believe that the *oba* and his state would become Christian as soon as politically feasible. The Portuguese crown eventually acted on the promise and provided the *oba* with a small number of soldiers who distinguished themselves in his service. In 1516, the *oba* came close to being baptized, but to the disappointment of the Portuguese he decided at the last moment to try out the new religion on one of his sons and some lesser dignitaries instead. Shortly thereafter he died, and the relations between Benin and Portugal cooled off significantly. Nonetheless they were not broken, despite the fact that the new *oba*, already annoyed by the trading policies of the Portuguese crown, severely limited the volume and range of merchandise offered for sale to the Portuguese.

The time-honored policy of far-flung commercial diasporas—avoidance of political alliances, pragmatism, and level-headed neutrality in local affairs—was the best eventual solution to such tense situations. This utilitarian approach, however, was on occasion difficult to reconcile with the strategic considerations and ambitions of the Portuguese crown. These ambitions had less to do with West Africa itself than with the enhancement both of the Portuguese image on the European international scene and of the Portuguese position in Morocco. The often vaguely defined “grand strategy” mostly took the form of a search for allies. The Portuguese crown attempted to establish diplomatic relations with as many powerful West African states as possible in the misconceived hope of “outflanking” the North African Muslims, in

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91 ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 20, doc. 127.
92 Ryder, *Benin*, p. 50.
93 Ibid., p. 45.
95 This is well reflected in the title of Barros’s key chapter on the Portuguese diplomatic missions to West Africa, which proposes to discuss the “lianças, e amizades, que El Rey teve alguns Senhores do Sertão d’aquelle Guiné” (Barros, *Da Asia*, p. 355).
particular the Moroccans. Originally, there had been speculation that some of the West African states might prove to be Christian.96 Zurara tells us that Vallarte (Abelhart), the unfortunate Danish noble who was the first to negotiate with the teen of Bawol, was instructed to inquire of an unspecified ruler of the Cape Verde region, whom Dom Henrique wishfully believed to be Christian, whether “if he truly upheld the law of Christ, it would please him to aid in the war against the Moors of Africa, in which the King D. Affonso, . . . and the Infant in his name, with the others their vassals and countrymen, were continually toiling.”97 The outcome of such missions was invariably disappointing. The misguided hope of finding such allies was fueled by the legend of Pr?ster John, a Christian ruler of a vast and wealthy realm located somewhere in the interior of Africa.98 According to João de Barros, rumor had it that the Mossi warrior horsemen who periodically raided the empire of Mali from the southeast were Christian: “from the report D. João received about this ‘Rei de moses’ and of his customs and habits, he presumed him to be a vassal, a neighbor or some agent of Pr?ster John, because he and his people behaved in a Christian manner, and a majority of them were named after the Apostles of Christ, whom they worship.”99 Dom João II dispatched two embassies to meet with the Mossi king, one along the Senegal River and the other northward from the Gold Coast, but with little result.100 Moreover, the Mossi were neither Christian nor allies of Prester John.101 Similarly, the news that the ogane, the spiritual

96 According to Azurara, search for Christian allies was one of the five reasons that prompted Dom Henrique’s explorations along the coast of Africa: “Therefore, he sought to know if there were in those parts any Christian princes in whom the charity and love of Christ was so ingrained that they would aid him against those enemies of the faith” (Azurara, Chronicle, 1:28).

97 Ibid., 2:280.

98 Ruy de Pina mentions Prester John only in connection with Covilha’s mission to the Near East (Crónica, p. 71). Barros, on the other hand, tentatively places Prester John in Africa (Barros, Da Asia, pp. 181–83).

99 Barros, Da Asia, pp. 258–59.

100 Ibid.

101 The Mossi were non-Muslim horsemen who in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries used to make devastating raids into the empire of Mali. They were eventually defeated by the askiya of Songhay in the 1480s: N. Levtzion, Ancient Ghana and Mali (London, 1973), p. 84. Yet they remained firmly entrenched in the upper Volta River region where they established several kingdoms: I. Wilks, “The Mossi and Akan States 1500–1800,” in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder, eds., History of West Africa (London, 1976), t.413–55.
overlord of Benin who confirmed the oba in office by sending him a bronze cross, might be the long sought Prester John also proved false. Shortly afterwards, Prester John was unequivocally located in Ethiopia, and the hopes of finding a Christian ally in West Africa waned.

Even though not Christian and all too often actually Muslim, the powerful states of the West African interior still represented an important card in Portuguese diplomatic strategy. One of the most ancient foreign policy principles postulates that a neighbor of one's enemy is a potential ally. After all, exploiting the animosity between Persia and the Ottoman empire in the sixteenth century was one of the main reasons why the Portuguese were able to preserve an edge in the Indian Ocean spice trade as long as they did. Commercial considerations combined with hopes for political alliances. The Portuguese crown was well aware that the coastal regions were located on the fringes of main commercial routes criss-crossing the savanna and interlocking at the desert edge with the trans-Saharan trade network, and that more direct access to the inland trade could be obtained through the establishment of regular diplomatic relations with the states that had political control over key commercial centers. As early as the 1450s, a Portuguese embassy left from the coast of Senegal for the great commercial town of Timbuktu to establish relations and gather intelligence, with unknown results.

The main flurry of diplomatic activity occurred during the reign of Dom João II, the only Portuguese monarch who harbored a comprehensive vision of Portuguese relations with West Africa. Dom João was a Renaissance prince interested in glory, power, and riches. The establishment of commercial and political ties with the powerful inland states of West Africa seemed to him an

102 Barros, Da Asia, pp. 181-83.
103 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 71; Barros, Da Asia, pp. 198-201.
104 This idea was expressed already in Kautilya's Arthasastra, written in the fourth century B.C.E.: Bozeman, Politics, pp. 121-23.
105 Gomes, Viagens, pp. 51-54; Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 17-24; Fernandes, O Manuscrito, pp. 51-54; Pacheco Pereira, Esmeraldo, pp. 81-82, 88, 144; Barros, Da Asia, pp. 230-21. Pacheco Pereira reported that in his time one million ducats of gold were exported annually through the Sudan across the Sahara (Esmeraldo, p. 82). This sum is about four times higher than the figure he gave for the Portuguese gold exports (pp. 112-15).
106 Gomes, Viagens, p. 40; Barros, Da Asia, pp. 255-60.
107 Gomes, Viagens, p. 42.
obvious way of promoting these interests.\(^{108}\)

In the course of the 1480s, three diplomatic missions were dispatched to Africa to pave the way for Dom João’s ambitions. An eight-member embassy was sent out to open relations with the rulers of states along the Senegal and Niger rivers as far as Timbuktu; a second delegation traveled through Cantor, the trade center on the Gambia River, to the court of the *mansa* of the Mali empire; and a third one set out from the Gold Coast to open relations with the *askiya* of the expanding Songhay empire.\(^{109}\) By doing so, the Portuguese succeeded in contacting most of the key states of western Sudan, but achieved few immediate results other than establishing awareness about the existence of their own kingdom.\(^{110}\) The only ruler of western Sudan who showed some interest in maintaining relations with the Portuguese was the beleaguered *mansa* of Mali, whose territory was disintegrating and suffering from external attacks along its entire eastern border.\(^{111}\) However, even he was very skeptical about the advantages of an alliance with the distant and obscure king of Portugal.\(^{112}\)

The failure of the Portuguese embassies to develop stronger links with the main power centers of West Africa may be partly ascribed to the fact that Portugal and Christian Europe lay outside the West African world image. This image did reach beyond the Sahara desert, but it encompassed an essentially Muslim world, defined by the pilgrimage route to Mecca. The claims of the Portuguese ambassadors, describing a powerful Christian king whose friendship would be worth cultivating, seemed far-fetched and exaggerated to the rulers of the great empires of western Sudan. According to Barros, the *mansa* of Mali declared that none of the “4,444 kings” from whom he was descended had ever heard of or received messages from a Christian king, nor had he had notice of other powerful kings than the following four: “rey de Alimaem” (the Holy Roman emperor); “rey de Baldac” (the caliph of Baghdad), “rey de cairo” (the sultan of Egypt), and “rey de Tuculor” (the ruler of Futa Toro).\(^{113}\) The credibility of the Portu-

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\(^{110}\) Ibid., pp. 256–60.


\(^{112}\) Barros, *Da Asia*, p. 260.

\(^{113}\) Barros, *Da Asia*, pp. 259–60.
Elbl: Portuguese Relations with West Africa, 1441-1521

Portuguese embassies was further undermined by the small size of the delegations, unsatisfactory selection of presents, and the poor state in which they arrived after their long travels.114

The problem of image haunted the Portuguese even in their dealings with the small states and settlements of the West African coast. João de Barros noted that before the appearance of the royal Portuguese war fleet in the mouth of the Senegal River in 1489, the local people, nobles and commoners alike, considered the mariners' claims that they served a powerful king only a tall story.115 A similar situation allegedly prevailed on the Gold Coast before the founding of the Mina fortress. When Diogo de Azambuja and his fleet arrived to secure permission and build the Mina fortress in 1482, he and his company put a great effort into impressing the local headman, Caramansa, by dressing in their finest outfits and putting on the best airs in order to compensate for the bad impression made on the local people by the poorly dressed and ill-behaved merchants and sailors who had previously visited the area.116 According to Barros, Azambuja's appearance and performance was in such contrast to what the Africans were accustomed to from the Portuguese that it led Caramansa to believe that Azambuja had to be the son or some other close relative of the king of Portugal. He was awed at Azambuja's insistence on being only one of the least of the "200,000 noble vassals" of the Portuguese king.117

It is important to realize, of course, that rather than the actual impression the Africans had of the Portuguese, these episodes reflect the self-conscious marginality of the Portuguese presence.

114 Of the eight members of the delegation sent to open relations with states located along the upper Senegal and Niger rivers, only one survived the voyage. The delegation carried horses and other things "valued among them" (the West Africans): Barros, Da Asia, p. 257. The small size of the delegation suggests that even if the envoys guessed correctly what gifts were desirable, they could not have brought enough with them to impress or even satisfy their hosts.

115 Barros, Da Asia, pp. 255-56.

116 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 11; Barros, Da Asia, p. 163.

117 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 11. Barros repeats the episode but leaves the number of vassals out: Da Asia, p. 166. Oliveira Marques suggested that at most only 10% of the Portuguese population could have had noble status and sets the number of nobles at 5,000-6,000: Portugal na crise dos séculos XIV e XV (Lisbon, 1986), p. 242. Since the Portuguese concept of nobility was quite flexible (Oliveira Marques, History of Portugal, pp. 179-80, 183-84), it is possible that the number may have been higher, depending on what criteria were applied. A peasant holding enough land to keep a house of a certain standard, a horse, and an appropriate armament could automatically be counted as a knight: A. H. de Oliveira Marques, Daily Life in Portugal in the Late Middle Ages (Madison, 1971), p. 123.
on the West African coast, and the deep prejudice that both the noblesse d'épée and noblesse de robe felt against their commoner compatriots. This applies to the depiction of other aspects of the Portuguese–West African diplomatic relations as well. The credibility of the narrative accounts that contain most of the commonly quoted information on diplomatic relations between Portuguese and West Africans usually is compromised by the fact that most of them are not, strictly speaking, primary but rather secondary and tertiary sources. Only the accounts of Cadamosto and Diogo Gomes are based on personal experiences. The other narrators not only were not present during the negotiations, but because most of them wrote thirty years or longer after the events, they could not have had access to fresh eyewitness reports. At best they could rely on archived relações submitted by the delegation heads or scribes or on old stories that became

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118 Members of the royal bureaucracy, many of them originating from the lower ranks of the nobility or recently ennobled by virtue of their office, were just as eager to dissociate themselves from the commoners as were the old feudal nobility, but because in Portugal the distinguishing line between the second and third estate was unclear (Oliveira Marques, History of Portugal, pp. 128-29, 183, 186-89), even aspiring commoners in the royal service could develop this posture.

119 Alvise (Luis) de Câ da Mosto (Cadamosto) visited West Africa on two occasions, in 1455 and 1456. He had completed his relazione before he left Portugal in 1463 (Cadamosto, Viagens, p. 79). As customary for Venetian citizens traveling abroad (Bozeman, Politics, pp. 466-67), he deposited a copy with the Venetian Senate. Two manuscript copies survive in the Marciana Library in Venice (Cadamosto, Viagens, "Abbreviaturas"). Diogo Gomes visited West Africa in the 1440s, in 1456-57, and in 1460, first in the service of Dom Henrique and then as a royal captain. According to Valentim Fernandes, in whose compendium of sources on the early Portuguese expansion the account is preserved in manuscript form, Gomes narrated his account to the German humanist, Martin Behaim, during the latter's visit to Portugal. The account cannot be dated securely, but it is clear that it was written around 1483-84, more than twenty years after Gomes's last voyage to West Africa (J. Barradas de Carvalho, "Gomes, Diogo," Dicionário de historia de Portugal (Lisbon, 1965), 2:350-51. This fact somewhat compromises the account's reliability.

120 Ruy de Pina completed his Crónica about 1513, some twenty-five years after the key events of the Portuguese-African relations it describes: M. E. Cordeiro Ferreira, “Pina, Rui de,” Dicionário de história de Portugal (Lisbon, 1968), 3:383-85; A. Martins de Carvalho, “Prefácio,” to Ruy de Pina, Crónica, pp. xxvi–xxvii. García de Resende finished his chronicle of Dom João II's reign, most of which is a copy of Ruy de Pina's work, in 1533; João de Barros's Da Ásia was first published in 1552; Damião de Gois's works were printed in 1566 and 1567 (for concise information, see the relevant articles in the Dicionário de história de Portugal (Lisbon, 1963-71).

121 Ruy de Pina reports, for example, that Diogo de Azambuja submitted to the king a long account of the events surrounding the building of São Jorge da Mina (Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 13). Barros fails to mention such a report (Da Ásia, pp. 169-70).
increasingly distorted with the passage of time. But even if these narratives were actually based on eyewitness reports, they still would be bound to misconstrue both the negotiations and the reality of the Portuguese presence in West Africa. The Portuguese and Africans saw each other through the prism of very different ideas: the Portuguese tried to fit the Africans into their own institutional and political framework, a mixture of feudal and Renaissance concepts, while the Africans tried to employ their accustomed mental mechanisms for dealing with strangers.

Because only the Portuguese picture of these relations survives, we must be wary of inevitable conceptual misinterpretations introduced by its authors. Most of the relevant narrative sources present a triple danger of distortion: the primary sources on which the account is based may have been unreliable, they may have been interpreted out of context, or they may have been used idiosyncratically to suit the author's literary purposes. Renaissance historiography was, after all, a form of literature in which telling a story well, in an erudite fashion, and with all the literary embellishments, was at least as important as relating the facts or adopting a critical approach to sources. Direct speeches by the protagonists are particularly suspect: they are almost always fictional because no minutes of the negotiations were kept, and in the best cases only summaries and later recollections were available to the chronicler. They reflect what the chronicler thought might have been said under the circumstances, not what was actually said. Such speeches were employed purely as a literary

123 See, for example, Martins de Carvalho, "Prefácio," pp. i-liv. On Renaissance historiography in general, see E. Cochrane, Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance (Chicago, 1981); on the relationship between form and narrative, see H. White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore, 1987).
124 One of the worst instances of such speeches is the one in which João de Barros has Caramansa declare that it was understandably difficult for the Portuguese to contend with "a pobreza, e simplicidade daquella barbarous terra de Guiné" ("the poverty and simplicity of that barbarous land of Guinea"; Da Asia, p. 164). In a preceding passage, a paraphrased direct speech of Diogo de Azambuja to Caramansa suggests that the king wished to pay for the permission to build the fortress "com amor, que tinha mais vantaje que o seu, que era amor da salvação de sua alma, cousa mais preciosa que os homens tinham, por ella ser a que lhe dava vida" ("with that love, which renders more advantage than his, being the love of salvation of the soul, the most precious thing that man can have because it is that which gives him life"; ibid., p. 159). It is most unlikely that such utterances were made during actual negotiations.
device and were often copied both from chronicler to chronicler and by authors of pseudohistorical chivalric romances.125

The two sources that contain most narrative evidence on the early Portuguese-West African diplomatic relations are Gomes Eanes de Zurara's Crónica dos feitos notáveis que passaram na conquista de Guiné126 and book 3 of João de Barros's Da Asia: Primeira Decada.127 Both are excellent examples of this problem. Zurara's chronicle, completed as early as 1463, contains much of the information available on the first-contact negotiations between the Portuguese and West Africans. Zurara, who was appointed royal archivist in 1454, is likely to have had excellent access to information, in particular to the account of an actual participant, António Cerveira. But Zurara himself neither visited West Africa in person nor participated in any direct diplomatic encounter. His crusading zeal and chivalric bias resulted both in a rather selective approach to his material and in the choice of a specific literary form, a heroic panegyric of Henry the Navigator.128 His accounts of the early encounters and comments on the Portuguese diplomatic methods must therefore be treated with substantial caution.

Barros's Da Asia contains the most complete picture of the early Portuguese overseas diplomacy, including unique information on the missions to the West African hinterland and on the background of the "Bemoim" affair.129 João de Barros is generally


126 The best known manuscript of the chronicle is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Two more manuscript variants are preserved in Munich and Madrid. The most recent critical edition was published by the Academia Portuguesa da História: Gomes Eanes de Zurara, Crónica dos feitos notáveis que se passaram na conquista da Guiné por mandado Infante D. Henrique, 2 vols., ed. T. de Sousa Soares (Lisbon, 1978).

127 The first decade of Barros's Da Asia was first published by Germão Galharde in 1552 in Lisbon, under the title Asia, de Ioam de Barros dos fectos que os Portuguese fizeram na descobrimento & conquista fos mares & terras do Oriente.


considered a very reliable source and is often quoted almost verbatim,\textsuperscript{130} because he served for a long time as a factor of the Casa da India e Mina and also because he frequently identified his sources of information—the accepted mark of a solid historian, but one that may be misleading in the Renaissance literary context.\textsuperscript{131} Barros’s treatment of the crucial episodes of the early Portuguese–West African relations (in particular the founding of São Jorge da Mina and the relations with the state of Kongo), on which most of the conclusions about the character of the Portuguese–West African diplomatic relations have thus far been based, represents more or less a literary elaboration of earlier, shorter, and more down-to-earth comments by Ruy de Pina.\textsuperscript{132} The passages were designed to fit Barros’s particular concept of the Portuguese overseas enterprise, a concept combining the mid sixteenth-century Portuguese sense of pessimism and pride in military glory and service to God with a humanist’s tendency to emulate the ancient Roman historians and treat Portugal as a successor of Rome, a civilizing power with a paternalistic regard for barbarous frontier peoples willing to submit to its stern guidance.\textsuperscript{133}

The fact that Ruy de Pina’s earlier account of these episodes is remarkably pragmatic and relatively devoid of chauvinism is quite significant. Although writing some twenty years after the events, Ruy de Pina was a courtier-diplomat in Dom João II’s service\textsuperscript{134} and therefore much closer to the pulse of court affairs and contemporary dealings with the overseas than the later sixteenth-
century Portuguese historians, such as García de Resende, Damião de Gois, and João de Barros. He is much more likely to have captured accurately the tone and atmosphere of the events. Even the writings of Ruy de Pina, however, must be subjected to rigorous criticism, especially where direct speeches by both Portuguese and African characters are concerned.

From the point of view of source criticism, there can be no doubt that the trustworthiness of the narrative evidence supporting the notion that the Portuguese were in a superior negotiating position (and were aware of the fact) is highly questionable. Need for appeasement and Portuguese vulnerability were simply not characteristics that the official historians of the realm could link with the overseas enterprise, the only claim to glory that their kingdom had left by the mid sixteenth century. Their writings reflect their values and even more the values of their patrons, who wanted to be portrayed as empire builders and champions of Christianity. These caveats have to be kept in mind when considering the few episodes of early Portuguese–West African relations that have been invoked in support of the argument that the Portuguese dealt with Africans from the position of strength and were able to bully their way through: the Bemoim affair, the founding of São Jorge da Mina, and the Portuguese-backed succession in the kingdom of Kongo.

The affair of the Kongo succession has been cited as one of the earliest examples of a truly colonial situation, involving the takeover of an entire African state by a European country, with tragic consequences for the African society in question. John Thornton’s work on Kongo history has effectively dismantled this image and placed the relations between Kongo and Portugal in their proper historical context. Thornton has clearly demonstrated the misleading effect of uncritical and anachronistic interpretation of the Portuguese narratives. He points out that these sources direct attention to only one aspect of Kongo reality, the relations with Portugal, whose character is distorted because of the inherent bias.

135 See note 120.

136 See, for example, Barros, Da Asia, pp. 10–16, 262–63. See also Banha de Andrade, João de Barros, chap. 6, 7; A. J. Saraiva, História da cultura em Portugal, 1:332–38, 548–66, 603–628.

137 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, caps. II (Mina), XXXVII (Bemoim), LVII–LXIII (Kongo); Barros, Da Asia, caps. I–II (Mina), VI–VIII (Bemoim), III, IX–X (Kongo).

One element, however, remains to be discussed: the changing Portuguese perception of Kongo. The story of the opening of relations with Kongo and its conversion to Christianity occupies a larger space in both Pina’s and Barros’s histories than the other three main episodes of Portuguese relations with African states, because this was the encounter the chroniclers valued the most. It represented an important strategic achievement: the Portuguese located an African state that not only appeared large, powerful, rich, and willing to enter into an alliance, but also was almost immediately ready to convert to Christianity. As years went by, however, the need for Portuguese tutelage repeatedly expressed by the Christianized king of Kongo diminished the respect in which he was held by Dom João II’s successors, Dom Manuel and Dom João III, who began to perceive him as an inferior rather than an equal partner. Thornton is quite right when he argues that Dom Affonso I of Kongo employed the obsequious language of Portuguese court and diplomacy to pursue his own goals, rather than out of naive admiration for the Portuguese or out of a sense of dependence on them. It is also true, however, that some diplomatic missives of his Portuguese counterparts, especially those of Dom João III, contain definite snubs. The most obvious instance followed the failure of the Portuguese monarch to respond to a number of Dom Affonso’s letters, written over a span of two years, letters that were in the end answered collectively in a single communication cast in a pontificating, paternalizing tone. The letter also contains a very indicative breach of protocol: while Dom Affonso addresses the Portuguese king as “Sua [Vossa] Alteza, nosso irmão” (Your Highness, our brother), the proper form of address in correspondence between equal monarchs, Dom João casts his response in the second person plural while he refers to himself in the first person singular “eu” rather than in the proper first person plural, using the royal “nos” (we). This form of address could imply intimacy and familiarity of personal friendship, but the unilaterality and context of the letter make it clear that it was meant as a condescending affront.

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139 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, pp. 148–78; Barros, Da Asia, pp. 224–45.
142 Ibid., doc. 153.
143 See the documents cited in notes 141, 142.
It would be a serious anachronism, however, to take the change in the Portuguese crown’s perception of its Kongolese counterpart as an indicator that a colonial situation was beginning to emerge. It reveals rather how deeply engrained feudal values and attitudes were in the thinking of the Portuguese crown. In the complicated maze of feudal relationships, equality meant self-sufficiency. The mutuality of the feudal relationship was based on the idea of protection and service. By accepting Portuguese help in Christianizing his kingdom and by inviting his “brother,” the king of Portugal, to give him advice on how “a Christian king” should run his kingdom and to supply him with suitable advisers, the ruler of Kongo gave the Portuguese crown the impression that he depended on the Portuguese for essential guidance and therefore surrendered some of his self-sufficiency. While the Portuguese crown never questioned his sovereign rights in his kingdom, he was reduced in its eyes from a potentate of equal rank to a slightly lower status.

The idea of hierarchy inhered deeply in medieval European political thought on foreign relations. While a king was lord in his own kingdom, he could also be the vassal of a higher power such as the pope or the emperor, or even of another king. The king of Portugal was at least technically the vassal of the papacy. There was no loss of honor involved in such an arrangement. The idea of Christendom united in one realm, a “universal empire,” was a key element of European medieval civilization, even though it proved to be a vain fancy time after time. Ancient historians, rediscovered by the Renaissance humanists, offered more than a glimpse of the grandeur of Rome’s imperial age, and this reinforced the image of an emperor with many kings in his following, not all of

144 Brásio, Monumenta, ser. 1, 2: docs. 64, 65. The latter contains a blueprint of the Portuguese government structure (pp. 244-46).


146 Oliveira Marques, History of Portugal, pp. 42-43. The echo of an oath of fealty, if clearly symbolic, resonates in the 1485 obedience to Pope Innocent VIII delivered by Vasco Fernandes de Lucena: V. Fernandes de Lucena, The Obedience of a King of Portugal, trans. F. M. Rogers (Minneapolis, 1958), pp. 41, 51-52. In the conclusion to this famous speech, the king of Portugal hints at the role of the papacy in Portugal’s rise to the status of kingdom (p. 41) and pledges himself and all that is his to the service of the Holy See (p. 52). While this statement is clearly ceremonial and not substantive, it highlights the importance that feudal discourse still held in the language of Renaissance foreign relations.

147 For an excellent discussion, see Bozeman, Politics, pp. 240-54; Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, pp. 15-21.
whom were equal in power. Ranking of nobles with nominally identical status was current practice at most European courts and served as a guiding principle of etiquette and protocol. The same applied to kings. The king of Portugal ranked among the top ten kings of Europe, on a list headed by the Holy Roman emperor and the king of France.

The Portuguese applied the same principles to the political circumstances they encountered in West Africa. They were confronted with a multitude of kings and kingdoms, because their interpreters, limited by the vocabulary of social and political terms available in Renaissance Portuguese, would translate all African titles of authority into their most likely Portuguese equivalent, namely, kingship. The heads of large African states, such as Jolof or Benin, came to share the title with mere petty chiefs and village heads who nonetheless appeared sovereign within their territory. Hierarchical classification was the most obvious way out of the confusion. The mansa of Mali came to be seen as the titular paramount ruler of the West African interior, a vague equivalent of the Holy Roman emperor in Europe. The major rulers of West Africa, such as the buurba of Jolof, the “king” of Tukulor, the “king” of the Fula, the “king” of the Mossi, the askiya of Songhay, and the oba of Benin, were considered to possess the same standing as the North African rulers: they were legitimate rulers whose right to wield authority over their subjects and territory was fully recognized and whose place in the commonwealth of states was readily acknowledged. Political authorities who acknowledged their dependence on a higher power were classed as high ranking vassals. The heads of the Senegalese states of Wuli, Kayor, and Bawol were perceived as vassals of the buurba of Jolof, the numerous mansas and farims of the region between the Gamb and Corubal rivers as vassals of the mansa of Mali, and so

148 For the influence of Roman history, see, for example, Barros, Da Asia, pp. 9–12.


150 Fernandes mentions that south of the Gambia there were many large villages, each of which had a “king” (Fernandes, O Manuscrito, p. 81). On the Rio Grande there were five or six “kings” (p. 87). In Sierra Leone, each of the many villages had a “king,” though his powers were limited by the village council (p. 89).

151 Cadamosto refers to “Meli imperio nigri” (Viagens, p. 20) and “Io Imperador de Meli chera si gran signor di negri” (p. 22). Fernandes mentions “the land of Mandimansa where resides the emperor of all these kings” (O Manuscrito, p. 86).

152 Barros, Da Asia, pp. 255–60.
Thus the heads of the numerous small states or independent communities were accepted as rulers in their own right but assigned a low place in the power hierarchy. But as non-Christians, African rulers both large and small were technically of lower status than Christian ones: their authority derived from natural law rather than divine grace; they were disqualified from any form of military aid and could be subjected to a "just war" if they harmed Christians or hindered Christian proselytization in their territories. In practice, these fine points of political theology were often disregarded in favor of what Bozeman called "one great knightly fellowship" of warrior aristocracies, where perceived social status and the corresponding code of behavior often ranked above religious considerations.

It is in this context that the narrative sources refer to attempts to establish vassal-lord relationships between African political figures and the king of Portugal. A feudal contract was seen as a mutual and honorable relationship: the vassal promised loyalty and support to the lord and his interest, and the lord promised reward, protection, and loyalty to his vassal. In African terms, such relations were often expressed through a kinship metaphor: the vassal would claim to be a descendant of the junior branch of the ruling family or claim such relationship symbolically. In either case, such relations were intended more to advance the diverse interests of the parties involved than to codify the superiority or inferiority of their position. While the Portuguese crown may have been tempted to claim the overlordship of "Guinea" to enhance its prestige in Europe, it knew very well that its claim

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153 According to both Pacheco Pereira and Fernandes, the buurba of Jolof was the overlord of the entire territory between the Senegal and Gambia rivers (Esmeraldo, pp. 80-81, 87; Fernandes, O Manuscrito, p. 65). Cadamosto perceived the farim of Sankolla, an area between the upper Cassamance and upper Cacheu rivers, as the overlord of the Gambia regions and vassal of the mansa of Mali (Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 63-64). According to Fernandes, all the small states on Rio Grande and the lower Geba Rivera paid allegiance to the mansa of Mali (O Manuscrito, p. 86).


155 Bozeman, Politics, p. 400.


157 See, for example, the relationship between the ruling lineage of Jolof and Walo (Boulègue, Le Grand Jolof, p. 36).

158 D. João II, for instance, was the first Portuguese king to have claimed the title "lord of Guinea." In 1485, Vasco Fernandes de Lucena asserted in his speech
was empty and had no intention to meddle in African internal affairs. Apart from onerous practical implications, doing so would go against the principles of the feudal relationship. On their part, some of the African political figures may have seen advantages in declaring allegiance to a very distant king of Portugal and using the trump card of potential Portuguese assistance against their local adversary or former overlord. In 1529, in an attempt to break away from the weakening Jolof empire, the damel of the Senegalese state of Kayor offered his vassalage to the king of Portugal, claiming that “he would die with more honor than the [buurba of] Jolof if he died as a vassal to the king of Portugal.” He invited the Portuguese crown to build a fortress on the Gorée Island off the coast of Kayor as a compensation for its support. 159 This episode was seen by some scholars as yet another illustration of the Portuguese propensity to intervene imperiously in African affairs. 160 From a strategic point of view, however, the damel was the one who had more to gain and who was clearly trying to entice the Portuguese crown into cooperation. If his offer were accepted, he would not only secure a more benign and distant overlord, but also would enjoy greater power thanks to the overlord’s feudal obligation, no matter how theoretical, to protect his vassal, and would enrich himself from trade revenue generated by the fortress as a permanent trading outpost. The Portuguese crown was aware of the complications and costs involved in such entanglements and tried to avoid them. The damel’s offer, for example, was not accepted. Similarly, the crown tried to maintain neutrality as much as possible in already existing partnerships: while allied with Aguafo it tried to appease the latter’s adversary, the state of Afuto, and resisted the attempts of Aguafo to use the Mina garrison as a police force against external and internal enemies. 161

The posture of neutrality might be upset, however, when an important trading partner demanded help and was willing to con-

160 Ibid., pp. 663–67. Boulégue speculated that the damel was cajoled into the offer against his wishes (Le Grand Jolof, p. 112).
161 ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 9, docs. 60, 61; maço 13, doc. 48; maço 16, doc. 30.
vert to Christianity to obtain it. In one such instance, Jelen, the bumí of Jolof, a long-standing customer of the Portuguese horse merchants in the 1480s, found himself in political difficulties that decreased both his purchasing power and his ability to resist his enemies in the field. He appealed to the Portuguese crown for assistance but was rejected on the usual religious grounds. In 1488, he was defeated and forced to seek refuge at the Portuguese outpost of Arguim. From there he and his sizable retinue proceeded to Portugal to make a case before the king. Jelen was received with great interest and sympathy, given princely treatment, acknowledged as a royal vassal, and baptized with great pomp. The following year, the crown outfitted a large fleet to restore him to his estates (but not his office) and to build a fort on the Senegal River. The expedition was a failure, but the Portuguese believed that the show of naval force on behalf of an ally had nonetheless increased their prestige in African eyes.

Jelen's story made a deep impression on Portuguese chroniclers and also, for different reasons, on modern historians. Some of them have read the Bemoim affair as an unsuccessful Portuguese attempt to install a puppet ruler in the Jolof empire in Senegal and to use the fortress that was to be built at the mouth of the Senegal River as a base from which to expand their influence farther into the interior. However, to consider this episode as a form of colonial intervention would represent a deep misunderstanding of the medieval diplomatic approach to dealing with noble exiles. The Portuguese, seeing the Senegambian political situation through the prism of feudal concepts, understood that Jelen, one of the major lords in the land and a former regent, had

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162 Barros, Da Asia, pp. 202–208.
163 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, pp. 90–95, 200–201, 208–213.
164 Ibid., pp. 95–96; Barros, Da Asia, pp. 222–23.
165 Barros, Da Asia, pp. 223, 255.
166 The term puppet was used as a label for bumí Jelen even by such a reserved scholar as J. D. Fage: "Upper and Lower Guinea," in The Cambridge History of Africa (Cambridge, 1977), 3508. Barros provides some justification for the view by claiming that the king hoped that the fortress and the Christianized Wolof people would allow the Portuguese to penetrate into the interior of Africa and join up with Prester John (Da Asia, pp. 221–22). Since Ruy de Pina offers much more prosaic reasons, however, (Crónica, p. 95) it is clear that Barros's explanation should be taken with a grain of salt. For discussion of the Bemoim affair, see Teixeira da Mota, "D. João Bemoim," pp. 22–63; and Boulégue, Le Grand Jolof, pp. 111–12, 150–54. Curtin considered the affair an "exceptional episode which broke the pattern of European non-intervention" (Economic Change, 19) but did not bring any results and was not repeated.
been driven out by his political opponents after the death of his protector, the late buurba.167 In such situations, it was quite customary for European and North African nobles to seek refuge at a friendly foreign court and try to stage a comeback from there.168 Thus in the 1430s two Aragonese princes, brothers to the ruling king, sought refuge in Portugal; in 1446, the regent of Portugal sent a military expedition to Castile to aid his friend, the beleaguered royal favorite Dom Alvaro de Luna; in 1449, after the disastrous battle of Alfarrobeira in which the regent had been killed, his son, Dom Pedro, and many of his followers fled either to Castile or to Burgundy and received asylum there. Providing support to these fugitives was quite acceptable because they were almost always in a position to claim that their legitimate feudal rights had been violated.169 By chasing Jelen from his lands despite a long and faithful service to his royal predecessor, the new buurba of Jolof had clearly violated Jelen's rights and thus abrogated the lord-vassal contract. Jelen was entirely free to find a new lord, one who would treat him fairly and properly defend his interests. The king of Portugal was indeed acting exemplarily when he tried to reinstate his new vassal in his lawfully inherited estates by providing him with significant military force. To require a service in return—in this case reserving a small part of the new fief for the crown fortress that was to serve as a commercial and diplomatic link with the interior170—was also in concordance with medieval European customs.171

The most important aspect of the Jelen (Bemoim) episode is the detailed description the narrative sources provide of the reception and treatment of the only high ranking African political personage who visited Portugal in the early period. Jelen was treated with a courtesy equal to that which would have been accorded a visiting European dignitary. After he and his retinue had arrived in Lisbon, they were supplied with housing, high quality clothing, furnishings, appropriate household officials,

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168 Curtin makes it clear that the same was true of Senegambian political figures: Economic Change, i:9.
169 This argument was used, for example, by the Burgundian delegation dispatched by the duke of Burgundy to the court of Dom Afonso V of Portugal to defend the memory of Dom Pedro, the former regent killed in the battle of Alfarrobeira in 1449, and the interests of his family and followers who had been subjected to severe persecution by the young king.
170 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 95.
and all other necessities appropriate to Jelen’s status. They were escorted to the royal presence by high ranking nobles, led by the count de Marialva and Dom Francisco Coutinho. The king and queen of Portugal received Jelen and his following in full regalia and in the company of the heir to the throne, Dom Afonso, of the future Dom Manuel, then duke of Beja, and of a large contingent of lay and ecclesiastical lords of the realm. Jelen met with Dom João on several other occasions as well, including several major feasts and formal court entertainments. Jelen’s baptism furnished the occasion for another impressive ceremony, with the king of Portugal acting as his godfather and the queen as godmother. In another ceremony, Jelen was dubbed knight of the realm, and a few days later the members of his retinue were baptized with suitable pomp. The ceremonies in Jelen’s honor outshone those that welcomed some European embassies, for example the embassy of the king of Bohemia, which visited Portugal in 1468, seeking alliance against the Turks.

The interest that Ruy de Pina, the official chronicler of this period, had in such matters can be partly explained by the fact that he himself was a diplomat, but it is also true that major embassies were one of the subject matters customarily recorded in Portuguese chronicles. Because of the relative richness of both narrative and documentary primary information on Portuguese diplomatic usage in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it is possible to compare the methods and attitudes evident in Portuguese diplomatic dealings with West African and European states. It is clear that the Portuguese applied the same standards in both cases, standards that wholly matched medieval western European practice, but somewhat lagged behind the Renaissance approaches emerging in France and Italy in the second half of the

172 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, pp. 90–92.
173 Ibid., p. 94.
174 According to the envoy Schaseck, Dom Afonso V received the Bohemian delegation “most honorably” and gave them as a parting gift two excellent horses and two black slaves, a gift well within the range of those given to African ambassadors. He also paid their expenses during their stay in Braga where his court was at that moment. He did not provide them with housing, however, letting them lodge in a local inn. According to another envoy, Tetzel, the king received them with great courtesy in Evora, but the description of gifts and hospitality otherwise agrees with Schaseck: The Travels of Leo of Rozmital, ed. and trans. M. Letts (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 110, 120. However, the gifts presented in 1485 by Dom João II to the Venetian ambassador, Ieronimo Donato, far exceeded those given to the Bohemian and most African delegations: Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 69).
fifteenth century. The Portuguese would thus deal with both sovereign and nonsovereign political units and were prone to grant both types of envoys ambassadorial rank rather than reserving this for representatives of sovereign units alone.

In accordance with contemporary customs, African ambassadors and other representatives would be expected to provide for themselves until they had presented their credentials and gifts to their host and had been acknowledged in their capacity. From that point on, the host was expected to provide them with material support corresponding to their station, present them with suitable gifts for themselves and their rulers, and ensure their safety until they left his territory. The social status of the African envoys differed significantly. On some occasions, African leaders dispatched close relatives or ranking officials, while on other occasions the envoys were of low rank and so unacceptable that the Portuguese would judge them unfit for ambassadorial status. The Portuguese diplomatic missions to West Africa differed in tone and personnel, depending on the rank of the host and the perceived complexity of the negotiations: missions whose pur-

176 Both the envoy of the bumi Jelen (Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 90) and later the envoy of the damel of Kayor (Brásio, Monumenta, ser. 2, 2: doc. 33) were explicitly acknowledged as ambassadors, despite the fact that the Portuguese were aware that their masters were not sovereign rulers.
177 Instead of a letter of credentials, the African political figures would often equip their envoys with a symbolic object. Jelen’s ambassador, for example, carried a large gold “manilla” (a U-shaped, heavy bracelet). Ruy de Pina believed that it was in accord with African diplomatic practice (Crónica, p. 90).
178 Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, pp. 32–47.
179 Jelen, for example, sent his nephew (Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 90). The oba of Benin sent as his first ambassador the chief of Gwato, the river village that served as port for the city of Benin (p. 74) and in 1514 two envoys referred to by the Portuguese as Dom Jorge and Dom Antonio. The honorific title Dom suggests that the Portuguese believed the envoys to be men of high nobility, perhaps related to the oba. Their reception and treatment at the Portuguese court was, however, much less glamorous (Ryder, Benin, pp. 46–47) than was accorded to the chief of Gwato, the first Benin envoy (Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 74).
180 In 1515, for example, the oba used as his envoy a colored man with a Portuguese name, Pero Barroso. The royal order that he be issued clothing refers to him as “Pero Barroso, homen pretro que ve[io] a nós com cartas del Rey do Beny[m]” (“Pero Barroso, a black man who came to us with letters from the king of Benin”; Brásio, Monumenta, ser. 1, 2: doc. 91). While the clothing he was issued was not much different from that received the year before by Dom Jorge and Dom Antonio, acknowledged ambassadors (doc. 85), his status at the Portuguese court would have been very different.
pose was a strategic alliance were staffed with high ranking negotiators seasoned in similar proceedings in Europe, whereas first-contact and trade negotiations were often entrusted to minor officials, private individuals, or even foreigners sailing under the Portuguese flag and sometimes equipped with detailed written and oral instructions.

The character of Portuguese diplomatic practice as well as its underlying premises point to the conclusion that in the early period West Africa represented for the Portuguese an extension of their political world, not its periphery. The Portuguese behaved toward the West African states in the same fashion as toward their European or North African counterparts. They respected the territorial prerogative of the African rulers, and the political principles underpinning their behavior disapproved of unjustified use of force once peaceful relations had been established and contact had become routine. The Portuguese adhered to these principles in most situations. Contrary to the claims based on João de Barros that the permission for founding the fortress of São Jorge da Mina on the Gold Coast was allegedly extracted from the local ruler by the threat of force, Ruy de Pina's more immediate account portrays Diogo de Azambuja persuading Caramansa through outlining the strategic advantages that the fortress would give him over his neighbors and competitors. Caramansa, far from resigning himself to the Portuguese pressure, did not fail to stress that should the Portuguese presence prove harmful to his

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181 The first Portuguese embassy to the kingdom of Kongo was headed, in succession, by two members of the high ranking Sousa family, one of whom, Ruy de Sousa, had served previously as ambassador to the king of England (Ruy de Pina, Crônica, pp. 22, 156) and subsequently as ambassador to the king of Spain (Barros, Da Asia, p. 253). The diplomatic missions to the interior of West Africa were a major exception: they were staffed with very low ranking officials (Barros, Da Asia, p. 257). While the risk associated with these missions is likely to have been the reason for such low profile representation, it may have contributed to their failure.

182 See, for example, Gomes, Viagens, pp. 42-44; Barros, Da Asia, p. 257. Nicolão Garcia, who was dispatched in 1517 to open relations with the ruler of Akan, in the interior of the Gold Coast, had no ranking whatsoever (ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, pt. 2, maço 72, doc. 26). See also Vogt, Portuguese Rule, pp. 82–83.

183 For example, the Danish noble Abelhard (Vallarte) (Azurara, Chronicle, 2:280–81) and the Venetian merchant Cadamosto (Cadamosto, Viagens, pp. 64–66).

184 See, for example, the regimento issued by Dom Manuel to Simão da Silva, a fidalgo of his household who had been appointed ambassador to Kongo in 1512 (Brásio, Monumenta, ser. 1, 2: doc. 65).

185 For fluctuations in this principle, see F. H. Russel, The Just War in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1975), in particular chap. 7 and the conclusion.
interests, his village and its trade would simply move to a different location, leaving the Portuguese stranded. Later, when the Portuguese builders were attacked while laying foundations for the fortress because they inadvertently dug up local sacred grounds, Azambuja hurried to appease the offended Africans with rich presents to put an end to the matter "without scandal." This hardly seems the action of a commander ready to ensure the building of a vital fortress by resorting to violence. Similarly, when the new oba of Benin reneged on the promise of his predecessor to convert his people to Christianity and enforced trade restrictions highly prejudicial to the interests of the Portuguese crown in the late 1510s, both Dom Manuel and Dom João III chose diplomacy to deal with the situation rather than an expensive and unfeasible war.

As a final example of the Portuguese attitude to sovereign African states, we may consider the issue of the protection that African political authorities extended to both Portuguese subjects and other Europeans who were in violation of the Portuguese laws governing trade with Africa. In the well-known proclamation of sanctions against the newly outlawed lançados, issued in 1518, Dom Manuel ordered his officials and captains to inform "the kings and blacks" of Guinea of the ban and entice them with gifts to extradite or kill whatever whites there might be in their territory. Such action was in full accordance with current European practice, when the home government would ask its foreign counterpart through diplomatic channels for the apprehension and extradition of offenders rather than using its own agents to capture them, fully aware of and reconciled to the possibility of refusal. In this particular instance, the crown obviously deemed the likelihood of refusal rather high because it directly instructed its officials to attempt bribery.

While direct relations remained equitable, in the 1520s and 1530s the perceptions that rulers on both sides had of each other deteriorated. As Ryder has pointed out, the tone of Dom João III's letters to the oba of Benin grew increasingly hostile, and the treat-

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186 Ruy de Pina, Crónica, p. 11.
188 Ryder, Benin, pp. 50–75.
189 Brásio, Monumenta, ser. 2, 2: doc. 47.
190 For an example, see Ruy de Pina's description of the arrest of the count of Penamacor in England: Crónica, pp. 86–87.
191 Brásio, Monumenta, ser. 2, 2: doc. 47.
ment that the Portuguese emissaries received from the oba and his officials became cold and humilitating.\textsuperscript{192} The reasons are to be found in the increasing loss of interest in West Africa by the Portuguese crown, in favor of the countries in the Indian Ocean theater, such as Persia, which were richer and more powerful and therefore assessed as more respectable than the African states and which called for greater diplomatic attention.\textsuperscript{193} The shift of the Portuguese crown's strategic and diplomatic focus to Asia explains both the growing lack of interest in African alliances after the 1517 Benin debacle, and the tone of the Portuguese histories written in the mid sixteenth century, which portray the rulers of African states as too low in the hierarchy of power to be equal partners of the king of Portugal at the diplomatic table.

Any examination of the early Portuguese–West African relations thus must deal with three different perspectives: the actual face-to-face relations; the formal perceptions the distant heads of states had of each other; and finally the portrayal of these relations found in the narrative sources. The last perspective is the most heavily overlaid by an accumulation of ideological and intellectual factors, but it undoubtedly reflects the values of the period and of the audience for which the narrations were written. The formal perceptions mirror to a great degree a desire for status and status enhancement on both sides. The Portuguese crown's interest in West African states peaked in the 1480s, when contact with Africa greatly contributed to the growth of Portuguese prestige on the European scene, and began to decline in the 1510s, when Asia became the main object of Portuguese interest. The various African states similarly developed an interest in Portugal at different times and sought or rejected Portugal as an ally accordingly. These aspects are overshadowed, however, by the direct, practical relations, which were mostly of a commercial nature and followed principles of mutual accommodation and pragmatism, without which they could not be sustained.

\textsuperscript{192} Ryder, Benin, pp. 69–75.

\textsuperscript{193} See, for example, R. Bishop Smith, The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations in Persia (Bethesda, Md., 1970); Barros, Da Asia, books 4 and 5.