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WESTERN AFRICAN HISTORY

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THE WESTERN SUDAN IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Al-Hassan ibn Muhaimiad al-Wizaz al-Fasi was an Andalusian Moor born in 1493 of wealthy parents. The family was driven from Spain and settled in Fez, from which Al-Hassan made numerous journeys throughout North Africa and the western Sudan as judge, clerk, merchant, and diplomat. In 1518 he was captured by Christian corsairs off Tunisia, taken to Rome, and baptized Giovanni Lioni, from which the more popular Leo Africanus was derived. His famous The History and Description of Africa and the Notable Things Therein Contained, which he wrote in Italian, was completed in 1526. The manuscript was published in 1550 in Ramusio's collection entitled Voyages and Travels. An English translation was published in London in 1600. Al-Hassan's description is the most authoritative one of the western Sudan between the writing of Ibn Battuta and the accounts of Heinrich Barth, the great mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-German explorer of the Sudan.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE KINGDOME OF GUALATA [WALATA—ed.]

villages, with certain granges and fields of dates. From Nun it is distant southward about three hundred, from Tombuto [Timbuktu—ed.] northward five hundred, and from the Ocean sea about two hundred miles. In this region the people of Libya, while they were lords of the land of Negros, ordained their chiefs princely seats; and then great store of Barbary-merchants frequented Gualata: but after-

This region in regard of others is very small: for it containeth onely three great

From Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa and the Notable Things Therein Contained*, trans. from the Italian by John Pory (1600) and edited by Robert Brown (London, 1896), pp. 821, 823-827, 829-830, 832-834.

ward in the raigne of the mighty and rich prince *Heli*, the said merchants leauing Gualata, began to resort vnto Tombuto and Gago, [Gao—ed.] which was the occasion that the region of Gualata grew extreme beggerly. The language of this region is called *Sungai*, [Songhay—ed.] and the inhabitants are blacke people, and most friendly vnto strangers. In my time this region was conquered by the king of Tombuto, and the prince thereof fled into the deserts, whereof the king of Tombuto hauing intelligence, and fearing least the prince would returne with all the people of the deserts, graunted him peace, conditionally that he should pay a great yeerely tribute vnto him, and so the said prince hath remained tributane to the king of Tombuto vntill this present. The people agree in manners and fashions with the inhabitants of the next desert. Here groweth some quantitie of Mil-seed, and great store of a round & white kind of pulse, the like whereof I neuer saw in Europe; but flesh is extreme scarce among them. Both the men & the women do so couer their heads, that al their countenance is almost hidden. Here is no forme of a common wealth, nor yet any gouernours or iudges, but the people lead a most miserable life.

OF THE KINGDOME OF MELLI [MALI—ed.]

This region extending it selfe almost three hundred miles along the side of a riuer which falleth into Niger, bordereth northward vpon the region last described, southward vpon certaine deserts and drie mountaines, westward vpon huge woods and forrests stretching to the Ocean sea shore, and eastward vpon the territorie of Gago. In this kingdome there is a large and ample village containing to the number of sixe thousand or mo families, and called *Melli*, whereof the whole kingdome is so named. And here the king hath his place of residence. The region it selfe yeeldeth great abundance of corne, flesh, and cotton. Heere are many artificers and

merchants in all places: and yet the king honourably entertaineth all strangers. The inhabitants are rich, and haue plentie of wares. Heere are great store of temples, priests, and professors, which professors read their lectures onely in the temples, because they haue no colleges at all. The people of this region excell all other Negros in witte, ciuilitie, and industry; and were the first that embraced the law of Mahumet, [Muhammad—ed.] at the same time when the vncle of *Ioseph* the king of Maroco [Yusuf ibn Tashufin—ed.] was their prince, and the gouernment remained for a while vnto his posterity: at length *Izchia* [Askia Muhammad, 1493–1538—ed.] subdued the prince of this region, and made him his tributarie, and so oppressed him with greuous exactions, that he was scarce able to maintaine his family.

OF THE KINGDOME OF TOMBUTO

This name was in our times (as some thinke) imposed vpon this kingdome from the name of a certain towne so called, which (they say) king *Mense Suleiman* [Mansa Sulayman—ed.] founded in the yeere of the Hegeira 610, [1213–1214—ed.] and it is situate within twelue miles of a certaine branch of Niger, all the houses whereof are now changed into cottages built of chalke, and couered with thatch. Howbeit there is a most stately temple to be seene, the wals whereof are made of stone and lime; and a princely palace also built by a most excellent workman of Granada. Here are many shops of artificers, and merchants, and especially of such as weaue linnen and cotton cloth. And hither do the Barbarians bring cloth of Europe. All the women of this region except maid-servants go with their faces couered, and sell all necessarie victuals. The inhabitants, & especially strangers there residing, are exceeding rich, inasmuch, that the king that now [in 1526—ed.] is, married both his daughters vnto two rich merchants.

Here are many wels, containing most sweete water; and so often as the riuer Niger ouerfloweth, they conueigh the water thereof by certaine sluices into the towne. Corne, cattel, milke, and butter this region yeeldeth in great abundance: but salt is verie scarce heere; for it is brought hither by land from Tegaza, which is fye hundred miles distant. When I my selfe was here, I saw one camels load of salt sold for 80. ducates. The rich king of Tombuto hath many plates and scepters of gold, some whereof weigh 1300. poundes: and he keeps a magnificent and well furnished court. When he trauelleth any whither he rideth vpon a camell, which is lead by some of his noblemen; and so he doth likewise when hee goeth to warfar, and all his souldiers ride vpon horses. Whosoever will speake vnto this king must first fall downe before his feete, & then taking vp earth must sprinkle it vpon his owne head & shoulders: which custom is ordinarily obserued by them that neuer saluted the king before, or come as ambassadors from other princes. He hath alwaies three thousand horsemen, and a great number of footmen that shoot poysoned arrowes, attending vpon him. They haue often skirmishes with those that refuse to pay tribute, and so many as they take, they sell vnto the merchants of Tombuto. Here are verie few horses bred, and the merchants and courtiers keepe certaine little nags which they vse to traueil vpon: but their best horses are brought out of Barbarie. And the king so soone as he heareth that any merchants are come to towne with horses, he commandeth a certaine number to be brought before him, and chusing the best horse for himselfe, he payeth a most liberal price for him. He so deadly hateth all Jewes, [Jews—ed.] that he will not admit any into his citie: and whatsoeuer Barbarie merchants he vnderstandeth haue any dealings with the Jewes, he presently causeth their goods to be confiscated. Here are great store of doctors, iudges, priests, and other learned men, that are bounti-

fully maintained at the kings cost and charges. And hither are brought diuers manuscripts or written bookes out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize. The coine of tombuto is of gold without any stampe or superscription: but in matters of smal value they vse certaine shels brought hither out of the kingdome of Persia, fewer hundred of which shels are worth a ducate: and sixe peeces of their golden coine with two third parts weigh an ounce. The inhabitants are people of a gentle and chereful disposition, and spend a great part of the night in singing and dancing through all the streets of the citie: they keepe great store of men and women-slaves, and their towne is much in danger of fire: at my second being there halfe the town almost was burnt in fye howers space. Without the suburbs there are no gardens nor orchards at all.

OF THE TOWNE AND KINGDOME OF GAGO

The great towne of Gago being vnwalld also, is distant southward of Tombuto almost fower hundred miles, and enclineth somewhat to the southeast. The houses thereof are but meane, except those wherein the king and his courtiers remaine. Here are exceeding rich merchants: and hither continually resort great store of Negros which buy cloth here brought out of Barbarie and Europe. This towne aboundeth with corne and flesh, but is much destitute of wine, trees, and fruits. Howbeit here is plentie of melons, citrons, and rice: here are many welles also containing most sweete and hollesome water. Here is likewise a certaine place where slaves are to be sold, especially vpon such daies as the merchants vse to assemble; and a yong slaue of fifteene yeeres age is sold for sixe ducates, and so are children sold also. The king of this region hath a certaine priuate palace wherein he maintaineth a great number of concubines and slaues, which are kept by

eunuchs: and for the guard of his owne person he kepeth a sufficient troupe of horsemen and footmen. Betwene the first gate of the palace and the inner part thereof, there is a place walled round about wherein the king himselfe decideth all his subiects controuersies: and albeit the king be in this function most diligent, and performeth all things thereto appertayning, yet hath he about him his counsellors & other officers, as namely his secretaries, treasurers, factors, and auditors. It is a wonder to see what plentie of Merchandize is daily brought hither, and how costly and sumptuous all things be. Horses bought in Europe for ten ducates, are here sold againe for fortie and sometimes for fiftie ducates a peece. There is not any cloth of Europe so course, which will not here be sold for fower ducates an elle, and if it be anything fine they will giue fiftene ducates for an ell: and an ell of the scarlet of Venice or of Turkie-cloth is here worth thirtie ducates. A sword is here valued at three or fower crownes, and so likewise are spurs, bridles, with other like commodities, and spices also are sold at an high rate: but of al other commodities salt is most extremelie deere. The residue of this kingdome containeth nought but villages and hamlets inhabited by husbandmen and shepherds, who in winter couer their bodies with beasts skins; but in sommer they goe all naked saue their priue members: and sometimes they weare vpon their feet certaine shooes made of camels leather. They are ignorant and rude people, and you shall scarce finde one learned man in the space of an hundred miles. They are continually burthened with grievous exactions, so that they haue scarce any thing remaining to liue vpon.

OF THE PROVINCE OF CANO

[KANO—ed.]

The great province of Cano staddeth eastward of the riuier Niger almost five hundred miles. The greatest part of the

Western and Central Sudan

inhabitants dwelling in villages are some of them herdsmen and others husbandmen. Heere groweth abundance of come, of rice, and of cotton. Also here are many deserts and wilde woodie mountaines containing many springs of water. In these woods growe plentie of wilde citrons and limons, which differ not much in taste from the best of all. In the midst of this prouince standeth a towne called by the same name, the walles and houses whereof are built for the most part of a kinde of chalker. The inhabitants are rich merchants and most ciuill people. Their king was in times past of great puissance, and had mighty troupes of horsemen at his command; but he hath since bene constrained to pay tribute vnto the kings of Zegzeg and Casena [Katsina—ed.]. Afterwarde Ischia the king of Tombuto faining friendship vnto the two foresaid kings treacherously slew them both. And then he waged warre against the king of Cano, whom after a long siege he tooke, and compelled him to marie one of his daughters, restoring him againe to his kingdome, conditionally that he should pay vnto him the third part of all his tribute: and the said king of Tombuto hath some of his courtiers perpetually residing at Cano for the receipt thereof.

OF THE KINGDOME OF BORNO

[BORNU—ed.]

The large province of Borno bordering westward vpon the prouince of Guangara [Wangara—ed.] and from thence extending eastward five hundred miles, is distant from the fountaine of Niger almost an hundred and fiftie miles, the south part thereof adioining vnto the desert of Set, and the north part vnto that desert which lieth towards Barca. The situation of this kingdome is very vneuen, some part thereof being mountainous, and the residue plaine. Vpon the plaines are sundry villages inhabited by rich merchants, and abounding with come. The king of this region and all his followers dwell in a cer-

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taine large village. The mountaines being inhabited by herdsmen and shepherds doe bring forth mill and other graine altogether vnknown to vs. The inhabitants in summer goe all naked saue their priue members which they couer with a peece of leather: but al winter they are clad in skins, and haue beds of skins also. They embrace no religion at all, being neither Christians, Mahumetans, nor Iewes, nor of any other profession, but liuing after a brutish manner, and hauing wiues and children in common: and (as I vnderstood of a certaine merchant that abode a long time among them) they haue no proper names at all, but euery one is nicknamed according to his length, his faines, or some other qualitie. They haue a most puissant prince, being lineally descended from the Libyan people called Bardoa. Horsemen he hath in a continuall readiness to the number of three thousand, & an huge number of footmen; for al his subiects are so seruiceable and obedient vnto him, that whensoever he com-mandeth them, they wil arme themselves and follow him whither he pleaseth to conduct them. They paye vnto him none other tribute but the tithes of all their come: neither hath this king any reuenues to maintaine his estate, but ouely such spoiles as he getteth from his next enimies by often inuasions and assaults. He is at perpetuall enmitie with a certaine people inhabiting beyond the desert of Set; who in times past marching with an huge armie of footmen ouer the said desert, wasted a great part of the kingdome of Borno. Whereupon the king of Borno sent for the merchants of Barbary, and

willed them to bring him great store of horses: for in this cuntry they vse to exchange horses for slaues, and to giue fiftene, and sometime twentie slaues for one horse. And by this meanes there were abundance of horses brought: howbeit the merchants were constrained to stay for their slaues till the king returned home conquerour with a great number of captiues, and satisfied his creditors for their horses. And oftentimes it falleth out that the merchants must stay three months together, before the king returneth from the warres, but they are all that while maintained at the kings charges. Sometimes he bringeth not home slaues enough to satisfie the merchants: and otherwhiles they are constrained to awaite there a whole yeere together; for the king maketh inuasions but euery yeere once, & that at one set and appointed time of the yeere. Yea I my selfe met with sundrie merchants heere, who despairing of the kings payment, because they had trusted him an whole yeere, determined neuer to come thither with horses againe. And yet the king seemeth to be marueilous rich; for his spurs, his bridles, platters, dishes, pots, and other vessels wherein his meate and drinke are brought to the table, are all of pure golde: yea, and the chaines of his dogs and hounds are of golde also. Howbeit this king is extremely couetous, for he had much rather pay his debts in slaues than in gold. In this kingdome are great multitudes of Negros and of other people, the names of whom (bicause I tarried heere but one moneth) I could not well note.