



The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea
Gomes Eanes de Zurara
(Events described: 1444)

During the 1430s-40s, Portuguese ships made several exploratory and raiding expeditions down the western coast of Africa, reaching as far south as the Senegambia region. These expeditions were overseen by Portuguese infante (meaning, prince) Henry the Navigator, who personally received one fifth of all goods brought back from these ventures. In the early 1450s, royal archivist Gomes Eanes de Zurara wrote a laudatory account of these expeditions.

The following selections from Zurara's account describe a slaving expedition led in 1444 by entrepreneur Lançarote de Freitas. Lançarote's was not the first expedition to capture people in western Africa to carry back to Portugal as slaves; but he enslaved a considerably greater number of people than any of the previous expeditions, and his expedition was the first funded by merchants rather than by the infante. In the first selection, Zurara tells how Lançarote's men executed their first of several raids, against a Berber community off the coast of present-day Mauritania. Zurara calls the Berbers "Moors," a term that the Portuguese applied broadly to peoples of northern and western Africa. In the second selection, Zurara recounts the expedition's return to the port town of Lagos, in Portugal; there the enslaved Berbers were distributed among their captors, as well as to the infante, who received his customary fifth of the spoils (but then regifted his slaves to others in a display of largesse). Zurara professes to be grieved by the Berbers' suffering, but he justifies their enslavement on the grounds that they and their descendants became Christian.

[T]he infante usually remained always in the kingdom of Algarve, [...] and because the booty that his captains brought back was discharged at Lagos, therefore the people of that place were the first to move the infante to give them license to go to that land whence came those Moorish captives. For no one could go there with an armed ship without the express permission of the infante, as the king had granted him in [a] charter in which he presented him with the royal fifth [...] So Lançarote prepared six armed caravels to carry out his purpose and spoke to the infante about a license [...] And the infante was very glad of this and at once commanded his banners to be made with the cross of the Order of Jesus Christ,^a one of which each caravel was to hoist.

[...P]ursuing their voyage, they arrived at the Isle of Herons on the eve of Corpus Christi [...] Then they took counsel about their intended actions, and Lançarote began to set forth his reasons in this manner: "My friends! we have left our land to do service to God and to the infante, our lord, who may expect from us, with good reason, some performance to his advantage [...] And because the infante hath learnt, by some of those Moors whom Nuno Tristam brought home, that in the Island of Naar, which is close by, there are little less than 200 souls, it seemeth good to me, therefore, that Martin Vicente and Gil Vasquez [...] should go with these boats [...], and that if they can find [the islanders' settlement], they should return quickly [...], so that on their returning we shall [...] take counsel as to what it behooves us to do." [...]

^a An order of knights who took monastic-like vows; Prince Henry was its head. The order had historical roots in the medieval Christian crusades to the biblical lands and in the centuries-long fighting between Christians and Muslims in the Iberian peninsula. The fact that Lançarote's ships fly banners bearing the order's distinctive cross identifies their expedition as a military venture against enemies of Christianity.

And so these two captains made ready to go forthwith, and they took with them thirty men—to wit, six in each boat—and set out from the island where they were, about sunset. And rowing all that night, they arrived about daybreak at the island that they sought. [...T]hey hugged the shore for some way until they arrived, as it grew light, at a settlement of Moors, which was close to the beach, where were collected together all the people of the island. And seeing this, our men [...] did not know whether they should return to the caravels, as their chief captain had ordered them, or whether they should at once attack the settlement that was so near. And while they were still undetermined, each one thinking for himself, Martin Vicente arose and said, “[...N]ow we are so near this settlement that, as it is already morning, we shall not be able to get off to the caravels without being discovered [...] But [...] this is my counsel, [...] that we attack the Moors whilst they are unprepared [...]”

All replied that his counsel was very good and that they would go forward at once. [...T]hey looked towards the settlement and saw that the Moors, with their women and children, were already coming as quickly as they could out of their dwellings, because they had caught sight of their enemies. But they—shouting out, “St. James!” “St. George!” “Portugal!”—at once attacked them, killing and taking all they could. Then might you see mothers forsaking their children, and husbands their wives, each striving to escape as best he could. Some drowned themselves in the water; others thought to escape by hiding under their huts; others stowed their children among the seaweed, where our men found them afterwards, hoping they would thus escape notice.

And at last, our Lord God, who giveth a reward for every good deed, willed that for the toil they had undergone in his service, they should that day obtain victory over their enemies, as well as a guerdon and a payment for all their labor and expense; for they took captive of those Moors—what with men, women, and children—165, besides those that perished and were killed. [...]

And for this good booty, and all the grace that God had showed them [...], they rendered him much praise for his guidance and the great victory he had given them over the enemies of the faith. And with the will and purpose to toil still more in his service, [...] they took counsel of what they ought to do next, as men who strove to make use of time while they thought that the opportunity offered for doing their business.

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The caravels arrived at Lagos, [...] and [...] Lançarote bade the masters of the caravels that they should put out the captives and take them to that field where they were to make the divisions [...] But before they did anything else in that matter, they took, as an offering, the best of those Moors to the church of that place; and another little Moor, who afterwards became a friar of St. Francis, they sent to St. Vincent do Cabo, where he lived ever after as a Catholic Christian, without having understanding or perception of any other law than that true and holy law in which all we Christians hope for our salvation. And the Moors of that capture were in number 235. [...]

O thou heavenly Father—who with thy powerful hand, without alteration of thy divine essence, governest all the infinite company of thy holy city and controllest all the revolutions of higher worlds [...]—I pray thee that my tears may not wrong my conscience; for it is not their religion but their humanity that maketh mine to weep in pity for their sufferings. And if the brute animals, with their bestial feelings, by a natural instinct understand the sufferings of their own

kind, what wouldst thou have my human nature to do, on seeing before my eyes that miserable company and remembering that they too are of the generation of the sons of Adam?

[...T]hose captives [...], placed all together in that field, were a marvelous sight—for amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned; others were less white, like mulattoes; others again were as black as Ethiops and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere. But what heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company? For some kept their heads low and their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another; others stood groaning very dolorously, looking up to the height of heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, crying out loudly, as if asking help of the Father of nature; others struck their faces with the palms of their hands, throwing themselves at full length upon the ground; others made their lamentations in the manner of a dirge, after the custom of their country. And though we could not understand the words of their language, the sound of it right well accorded with the measure of their sadness.

But to increase their sufferings still more, there now arrived those who had charge of the division of the captives, and who began to separate one from another in order to make an equal partition of the fifts; and then was it needful to part fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers. No respect was shown either to friends or relations, but each fell where his lot took him. [...] And who could finish that partition without very great toil? For as often as they had placed them in one part, the sons, seeing their fathers in another, rose with great energy and rushed over to them; the mothers clasped their other children in their arms and threw themselves flat on the ground with them, receiving blows with little pity for their own flesh, if only they might not be torn from them. And so troublously they finished the partition [...]

The infante was there, [...] making distribution of his favors as a man who sought to gain but small treasure from his share; for of the 46 souls that fell to him as his fifth, he made a very speedy partition of these among others. For his chief riches lay in the accomplishment of his purpose, for he reflected with great pleasure upon the salvation of those souls that before were lost. And certainly his expectation was not in vain; for [...] as soon as they understood our language, they turned Christians with very little ado. And I, who put together this history into this volume, saw, in the town of Lagos, boys and girls, the children and grandchildren of those first captives, born in this land, as good and true Christians as if they had directly descended, from the beginning of the dispensation of Christ, from those who were first baptized. [...]

And so their lot was now quite the contrary of what it had been, since before they had lived in perdition of soul and body: of their souls, in that they were yet pagans, without the clearness and the light of the holy faith; and of their bodies, in that they lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings—for they had no knowledge of bread or wine, and they were without the covering of clothes or the lodgment of houses—and worse than all [other people] through the great ignorance that was in them, in that they had no understanding of good but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth. But as soon as they began to come to this land, and men gave them prepared food and coverings for their bodies, their bellies began to swell. And for a time they were ill, until they were accustomed to the nature of the country; but some of them were so made that they were not able to endure it and died, but as Christians.

Source: Gomes Eannes de Azurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, trans. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, vol. 1 (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1896), 61-66, 74, 79-85 (chaps. 18-19, 21, 24-26), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044051046597>. Public domain in the United States, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Footnotes and endnotes from the source publication omitted, but two textual clarifications that the translators placed in footnotes have been integrated directly into this edited text. Paragraph and sentence breaks adjusted for readability and a more compact presentation. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. *Infant* emended throughout to *infante*, to avoid confusion for readers. A spelled-out number converted to a numeral.

The lowercasing of the racial labels *white*, *black*, and *mulattoes*, but the capitalizing of *Ethiops*, reproduces the usage of the source publication; likewise the lowercasing of *pagans* but the capitalizing of *Moors* and *Christians*. For the sake of readability, various words capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase, including religious terms (*cross*, *church*, *holy city*, and divine pronouns), terms associated with royalty (*infante*, *king*, *royal fifth*, *lord*), and *nature*.

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