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Ludewig Ferdinand Römer's „Nachrichten von der Küste Guinea“ (mid-18th Century) as a Source on the Benin Kingdom History and Culture

Abstract

There is no need to go into details on the history of the former Kingdom of Benin (now a part of Nigeria) because it is well known to scholars (for its bibliography see, e.g. Fayioshe & Omobogie 1996). Therefore, a short abstract may suffice. The enclosed bibliography offers the interested reader an opportunity to look for more material in this context. No written records exist before the arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the 15th century and, therefore we have to rely on local oral traditions and the results of the few excavations carried out in Benin City. Written sources appeared in great numbers after European merchants, sailors, soldiers, missionaries and others began to visit Benin more or less frequently. However, it was only after the British invasion of Benin in 1897 that the astonished world became alert because of the fantastic works of art discovered in the capital of the doomed kingdom. Lots of researches were undertaken during past decades to shed light on many aspects of Benin history. Nevertheless, the extension of the kingdom to the west, beyond Lagos, is still more or less a guess. This situation may change, because there is a report by the Danish merchant Ludewig Ferdinand Römer (Roemer) (1769) entitled „Nachrichten von der Küste Guinea“ („News from the Coast of Guinea“) which points to possible Benin influence or contacts with the Gold Coast (today's Ghana). Part of this may even be interpreted as a conquest by Benin. At first, such ventures seem to be incredible but the report contains details which cannot be ignored and warrant closer examination. Besides, Römer left evidence on some important aspects of Benin culture.

Danish activities on the Gold Coast and Ludewig Ferdinand Römer

It is not the subject of the present manuscript to go into details on the activities of the Danes on the Gold Coast (contemporary Ghana) in Guinea during the past. Therefore, a few facts may suffice on this matter. Apart from obtaining gold, the Danish also partook in the slave trade because they needed labour for their possessions in the Antilles (Virgin Islands). The Danish possessions comprised the islands St. Thomas (1666), St. Croix and St. John. By the way, the latter faced the first slave rebellion in the Caribbean (1731). The white population was practically wiped out and only the intervention of French troops saved the day, otherwise St. John might have become the first black republic in the Caribbean. In 1917, Denmark sold the three islands to the United States who had been in need for Caribbean bases by the time they took part in World War I.

Let us turn back to events taking place on the Guinea Coast. The Danes drove out the Swedes and took over Christiansborg castle in 1659, which subsequently became their headquarters. By the way, Christiansborg castle in Accra is the seat of the Ghanaian Government today, being called Osu Castle. It is interesting to note that the Danish, like the other European merchants, had to pay rent for the land on which they erected their factories and castles. They had actually no power beyond the walls, except for the area covered by their cannon and muskets. Christiansborg was even captured by the Akwamu in 1693. However, it was given back to the Danes which had to hand over a large amount of gold to the Akwamu.