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# Fourteenth Century Normans in West Africa

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FOURTEENTH CENTURY NORMANS  
IN WEST AFRICA

Kaye Louise (Kooyers) Centers

Western Michigan University  
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## INTRODUCTION

During the seventeenth century, a legend grew among the French which claims that during the reign of Charles V of France, a group of industrious and daring sailors of Normandy sailed to northwest Africa and then into the unknown waters of West Africa. By 1383 these Normans had reached the Gold Coast and had established a flourishing trade with the people there. This story seems very remarkable because it was not until the mid-fifteenth century that the Portuguese, under the direction and guidance of Prince Henry, ventured for the first time into West African waters and not until 1486 that they rounded the Cape of Good Hope. The Portuguese have been given the credit for being the first Europeans to sail past Cape Bojadar (or Cape Bugiador), and to "open" the West African trade. This paper will look into this story of the Normans who supposedly reached the Gold Coast over a century before the Portuguese, and it will attempt to establish if there is any truth in this legend.

## THE STORY OF THE DIEPPESE

The earliest account of these Norman expeditions we have was written in 1666 by Villaut de Bellefond, a Frenchman who toured West Africa that year, and who had access to the Admiralty records of Dieppe, the northern port on the English Channel from where the sailors were supposed to have departed for Africa. Bellefond claims that there is enough proof in Dieppe to prove his story; unfortunately, this city was attacked and destroyed by the English in 1694 and all the naval records were burned. Here is Bellefond's story, translated and paraphrased by C. R. Beazley:

In November, 1364, certain merchants of Dieppe, taking advantage of the enlightened commercial policy of Charles V (1364-1380) determined to undertake distant navigations and fitted two vessels, each 100 tons, with the object of passing the Canaries and coasting along Africa. About Christmas they reached Cape Verde and anchored before Rio Fresca in a bay still (in 1669) called the Bay of France. The negroes, new to white men, crowded to see them, and though they would not come aboard, exchanged ivory, grey amber, and skins for the strangers' baguettes. The Frenchmen then sailed on to the south east, passed Boulombel or Sierra Leone, and rounded Cape de Moule, finally stopping at the mouth of the Rio Sextos off a village which they called Petit Dieppe from the resemblance of its situation to the Norman port. Here they loaded ivory and malaquette pepper, and from this point they returned home in May 1365, finding their cargoes most profitable, and incidentally giving a start to the famous ivory carving industry of Dieppe. In the following September, various merchants of Rouen joined with the Dieppese venturers, and four ships were dispatched to Africa, two of which were to trade from Cape Verde to Petit Dieppe, while the other two tried to push on still further. Of the latter, one stopped at a place called the Grand Sestre, on the Malaquette Coast, and took in pepper; the natives of this locality were so courteous, and its wealth seemed so great, that the discoverers called it Paris. The other vessel passed along the Ivory Coast to the golden shore whose inhabitants showed themselves much less ready to be friends, when their first astonishment had worn off.

The direction syndicate at home accordingly resolved to base their trade upon Petit Dieppe and Grand Sestre (Paris); hither ships were sent year after year, not without some attempt at colonization ...; loges or factories were established at Cape Verde, Cape Moule, and Sierra Leone.

Strangers now tried to get a share in this commerce, but found the French too firmly established ... yet such was the quantity of spices brought home (by Francois' and Etrangers') that the market became glutted, and in 1380 it was decided to make a fresh attempt upon the Gold Coast. In September of this year, therefore, the Notre Dame de Bon Voyage, of 150 tons, was dispatched to this destination; she arrived before the end of December; and in May or June for the next summer she returned. The success of her voyage was so great that it was naturally followed by other expeditions upon a larger scale: on September 28, 1381, a fleet of ships (La Vierge, Le St. Nicolas, and L'Esperance) sailed from Dieppe for the Gold Coast; the Esperance after trading at Fantin, Sabon, and Cormentin, passed to Akara, and in 1383 the plantation of a regular settlement, centered round a loges or trading-station, was undertaken on the shoreland which the French had named La Mine, from the abundance of its precious metal. At the same time efforts were made to explore the southern coasts beyond Akara.

As to the Mine Colony, thus established in 1383, it grew to such importance in the next four years that in 1387 a church was needed for the colonists; this church was still to be seen when Bellefond visited these parts in 1666-67.

And now, having brought the Norman Guinea Coast trade to the acme of its fortunes, the Narrative breaks off abruptly, adding only that some time after the accession of Charles VI (1380-1422)

government and commerce alike went to ruin in France, that the station at the Mine was abandoned before 1410, and that the maritime ventures from Normandy almost entirely ceased from that time until the middle of the fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

There is one other major work pertaining to this story that dates before the destruction of Dieppe in 1694. The author of the work is unknown, the original manuscript is gone, and the origin of the work is uncertain. In 1866, a friend of Pierre Margry met an old man in the British Museum in London, who had in his possession a French manuscript which the friend copied because of the old form of French it was written in. The old man and the manuscript disappeared, but Margry published the text of this manuscript. From the type of French used, he dated the work at about 1650.<sup>2</sup> Margry's account closely parallels that of Bellefond's, but with several important details added. This account mentions that the Normans of Dieppe and Rouen sailed from Dieppe in September of 1364 and at Christmas anchored at Cape Bugiador, where the sailors traded with the black men. This voyage was led by Captain Jehan de Rouenois, who went back to Normandy, and returned to Africa two more times. On his third voyage, the ships were damaged by squalls, and Messire Jehan got permission from the people of those parts to take land and build houses to protect his merchandise and men. "The chiefs of those parts much desired the alliance of Messire Jehan, and from this time began the commerce between the sailors of Normandy and these black men."<sup>3</sup> In September, 1379, Captain Jehan sent out the Notre Dame de Bon Voyage and returned at Easter the next year, with much gold, and was received

<sup>1</sup>Villaut de Bellefond, Relation des Costes D'Afrique ... (Paris: D. Thierry; 1669) pp. 410-435, trans. and ed. by C. R. Beazley, The Dawn of Modern Geography (2nd ed.; New York: Peter Smith, 1949) Vol. III, 430-434.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Henry Major, The Life of Prince Henry the Navigator (2nd ed.; London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1967).

<sup>3</sup>Pierre Margry, Les Navigations Francaises et la Revolution Maritime ... (Paris: 1867) quoted & trans. in Major (Ibid.) pp. xxx.

warmly by all in France. The following is a description of this reception:

The King, who was then at Dieppe, sent the Count of Pontieux to Messire Jehan and his companions, and charged him to tell them that he wished to see them immediately. Then Messire Jehan and those of his ships went instantly with the Count, and were very well received by the King, his barons, and gentlemen, for they had been very grieved on their account, and thought that they were dead in those parts.

"Fair sires Prunauts, God keep you all!" said the King, and kindly feasted them for two days, and they made good cheer, and there was joy such as cannot be described. And the King prayed Messire Jehan, the Captain, to relate to him the news and the marvels of the country whence they came. When the King had heard of his great prowess, he gave him gifts, and bestowed on him a fair estate in land. He also made him admiral of his navy which greatly rejoiced Messire Jehan, who rendered honor to the King as his seigneur.

So I will tell you that from this came the name of Prunaut to Messire Jehan, and that he kept it because he was very valient, high-spirited, and bold in feats on the sea, and a man of great sense. Also the King desired that his progeny and lineage should be called Prunauts, as the sons of a valient, gallant, and gentle sailor. And these gifts the King confirmed with his seal on charters, so that he might hold them from heir to heir. Then after Messire Jehan and his companions were well feasted, they turned towards Rouen; and Messire Jehan the bold sailor, rode with his shield at his side, on a palfrey richly harnessed and adorned, and the rest followed as they could. The Archbishop of Rouen and all his clergy hearing that he was coming with all his ships' company, went out to meet him and did him much honor; for he knew already that Messire Jehan had returned, and that he was beloved by God and His saints, for he had built in those parts a little chapel, and had appointed as its priest Friar Pierre, the Norman, a very worthy clerk, to teach the Pagans and unbelievers the love of God, to speak well, to preach, and to destroy the Pagan law. In this chapel, which was dedicated to our Lady, were buried very honorably the sailors who died ... as has been said, of the pestilence. Then at Rouen, with the Archbishop, came to meet Messire Jehan and his companions, a grand cavalcade of lords and such high folks, and many peasants on foot, sergeants, and burghers of Dieppe, Caen, Cherbourg, and all the cities of Normandy, who had come to see the gentle captain and his bold companions, Natent, the wife of the Captain, a wise and beautiful dame, and she was certainly the most beautiful there ever was, and was of great lineage in Saxony, with Legier, her son, and Eskenbous, his brother--both little children--who embraced and kissed their good father and these lords, burghers, and peasants in great numbers, and all together brought him to his lodging ...<sup>4</sup>

Margry's story also says that situated at La Mine "is that Chapel of the Blessed Mother of God which Messire Jehan founded ..., with a little

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. xxx-xxxii.

fortalice, and a square house which he had made on a hill ..."<sup>5</sup> There were some Normans buried in this place, who had succumbed to a pestilence: "There died there (God rest their souls) Legier, brother to the Captain, Gervois, Sebille, Haibiers, Torcol, Tiebau, Doumare, Odon Cambers, all valiant sailors of Normandy."<sup>5</sup>

Margry's account closes as abruptly as Bellefond's by simply stating that affairs in France deteriorated to the point that the African trade had to be abandoned by 1410.

#### EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN BACKGROUND

Before trying to look for evidence to support or deny the legend, it is necessary to look at the conditions in Europe and in West Africa at the time of the alleged Norman voyages, to see if there were any conditions that could have precipitated the voyages.

The death of Louis IX at the end of the thirteenth century was the end of a golden era of peace and prosperity for France.<sup>7</sup> The Hundred Years War began in 1337 when England invaded France to secure the commercial advantages of Flanders and Northern France. Normandy was systematically pillaged and burned in 1346 by the English; Calais was destroyed. From 1347 to 1355 there was a cessation of hostilities only to renew again soon. During this period, a new invader, The Black Death, swept England, France, and the rest of Europe, and took its toll in the millions. The plague hit the towns the worst, the center of trade and commercial activities. When war renewed with England, France was again pillaged and destroyed. By 1355

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid. xxxii.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. xxx.

<sup>7</sup>Material on French background from James W. Thompson, Economic and Social History of Europe in the Later Middle Ages (1300-1530) (New York: The Century Co., 1931) chaps. II and XII.

France was on the verge of economic and financial exhaustion. The estates-general, the nobles, and peasants all began demanding more power and rights, and turmoil and revolution swept the war-torn country. Philip VI had had to levy many more taxes because of the war, but much of the money was wasted because of extravagance, corruption, and incompetence. In 1360 a temporary peace with England was proclaimed, and England was given control of Gascony, and Guienne, as well as Poitou, Perigord, Quercy, Saintonge, Rouerque, Agnois, Limousin, and Bigorre, and in return Edward III gave up his claim to the French crown.

The tide turned for the French in 1360 when Charles V came to the throne. His strict control of finances, commerce, and taxes allowed the cities and towns to revive their activities. All the towns now fortified themselves, and the French army was reorganized and made more efficient. A new period of commercial and agricultural prosperity ensued until 1380. The English were soon on the defensive, and driven out of all of the territory she held except Bordelais and the Pale of Calais. Charles' commercial policies of protection and control of town commerce, coinage, sea trade, and protection of Jews and other influential minorities, were only blighted by the fact that he had to over-tax his people to pay for the War. This prevented the kingdom from recovering completely.

There was great hope of economic prosperity when Charles V died in 1380, but the regency of Charles VI caused civil and political discord throughout France. The nobles and peasants began rebellions against the heavy taxation, and the Northern provinces were very insecure because of the English. The long period of agitation (1380-1415) meant disaster for French commerce and industry. Civil war broke out in Northern France and in 1417 the English, under Henry V, invaded and took Lower Normandy. France was plagued with war and civil discord for another thirty-six years before peace

and security came again.

During the Middle Ages the North African Moors were the middlemen in the trade between Europe and Africa south of the Sahara. They traded European and Middle Eastern products for West African pepper, ivory, and gold.<sup>8</sup> Though Europeans had been importing African products throughout most of the Middle Ages, they knew very little about the land south of the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert. There was much speculation as to the origin of the gold. In 1447, just prior to the Portuguese investigations of the West Coast, a merchant, probably from Genoa, was able to travel with a Muslim caravan to the south, where he wrote to his employers from the oasis at Touat:

To the south of the state there are many states and territories solely inhabited by idolatrous negroes, incessantly at war with one another to sustain their beliefs and their fetishes ... A very great river flows through those lands ... They have upon it many barks in which they carry on their commerce ... I have often asked where the gold is found and collected, but my protector says, "I have stayed fourteen years in the lands of the negroes, and I have never heard of, not seen any one who could speak of it with certain knowledge. Wherefore it must be thought that it comes from a far-off land, and according to my belief from one particular place." ...<sup>9</sup>

It was the legend of the "River of Gold" which caused many Europeans to try and find the river which they believed to be beyond the Sahara.<sup>10</sup> The gold actually came through three main routes from West Africa to the North African coast. The first went from the region of Elmina to Timbuktu, the second from the region of Cape Coast and went through Assin to Begho, and at Tafo this branched off to a northeasterly direction to Hausaland. The Third linked Accra, the Volta gorge and the Afram plains to the markets of

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<sup>8</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, ed. by M. Postan and E. E. Rich (2 vol.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956) Vol. II, 313.

<sup>9</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages, ed. by P. A. Newton (2nd. ed.; London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1930) pp. 171-173.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Cambridge History, p. 313.

Hausaland and Mali.<sup>11</sup> These trade routes indicate that the gold and ivory was traded by West Africans to Muslim traders who crossed the Sahara, and who then traded with Europeans to the north, and Egyptians to the East.

The commercial rivalries between the European cities (especially among the Italian city-states), curiosity about new routes to India, and the desire to find the fabled "River of Gold" caused Europeans to begin to explore the North African Coast outside the Pillars of Hercules. The Genoese, led by Malacello, discovered the Canary Island in 1270. Soon afterwards, these islands were visited by the Castilians and the Portuguese (who arrived in 1336). But the Italian cities soon lost interest in exploration to the west and concentrated on easterly routes to the East. War began between the Castilians and the Moors, and internal revolts occurred in the Portuguese royal house. This caused their explorations to cease temporarily. "We have no record of ocean voyages during the last half of the fourteenth century ... though it would be rash to conclude that none took place ... If their results proved disappointing the Chroniclers might well omit to register them but unless the voyages continued, it is difficult to explain the activity displayed in that sphere from the second decade of the fifteenth century on ways, and the enthusiasm with which Prince Henry devoted himself to the work of discovery."<sup>12</sup>

It was just during this period (1360-1410) that Villaut de Bellefond asserts that the Normans of Dieppe began making voyages to West Africa. The proofs for these voyages were the Admiralty records in Dieppe (which were burned in 1694), and the use of the French language in West Africa. On the Island of St. Thomas, Bellefond says, the natives use a French expression,

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<sup>11</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, A Thousand Years of West African History, ed. by J. F. Ade. Ajayi and Ian Espie (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1965) p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Travel and Travellers, p. 197.

"Malaquette, tout plein, tout a force de malaquette", which is the little of the French language that they retained from the earlier Dieppese explorations.<sup>13</sup> Another proof, claims Bellefond, is the great love the natives of West Africa hold for the French people, caused by the fair and honest dealings the Dieppese had with the Africans. "It does not appear that the kindly relation which united the Africans with their guests ever altered. They are, on the contrary, deeply rooted in the memory of the people."<sup>14</sup>

Bellefond states that the French built the first trade house and church at "La Mine", the site of the later Portuguese settlement of St. George of the Mine (Elmina). In 1666, Bellefond asserts that still standing was the so called "French Battery", one of the four batteries at Elmina, and the coat of arms of France was still to be seen on the church there.<sup>15</sup>

For many years Portugal had been able to maintain a strict control of the trade and exploration along the coasts of Guinea. The Portuguese evidently treated the Africans harshly, for Elmina and other forts were built for defense against the Africans as well as for defense against European intruders.<sup>16</sup> During this time mercantile rivalries were at their height, and a colonial nationalism that probably prompted Bellefond to write to Colbert, requesting him to testify to the Norman expeditions, so the French would receive credit for their discoveries.

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<sup>13</sup>Villaut de Bellefond in Catherine Coquery, La Decouverte de L'Afrique (France: Rene Julliard, 1965) p. 152.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. Major, p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Coquery, p. 152.

<sup>16</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, Europeans in West Africa, 1450-1560, trans. & ed. by John Wm. Blake (2nd ed.; 2nd series, The Hakluyt Society; Germany: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1967) pp. 54-56.

## 19th CENTURY VIEWS OF THE LEGEND

There does not appear to be any other mention of these Norman ventures into West Africa prior to Bellefond and the anonymously authored work discovered by Pierre Margry. No chronicals of French merchants and explorers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries mention or indicate prior French claim to the coast of West Africa. Real criticism of the Norman claim did not come, however, until the nineteenth century, when historians began to look more carefully into the discovery and colonizing of Africa.

The Norman claims are most vehemently criticized by Richard Henry Major, a nineteenth century scholar. The following is a summary of his arguments:<sup>17</sup>

1. Although the Dieppese archives were burned in an English bombardment in 1694, it seems strange that there is no testimony in Rouen, the alleged partners in the Diepese trade.

2. A Swiss doctor (Dr. Braun) in 1617 claims that some Guinea negroes, a hundred and thirty years old (italics are Major's), told him that the French were there in the fourteenth century; and that a Dutchman, Oliver Dapper (who grossly mis-stated many things) stated in 1668 that the Castle of La Mine contained a ruined "French Battery" in which were the first two figures of the date 13--. Major asserts that the French Battery dates from the late sixteenth century, and the numbers don't necessarily indicate a date. And, "In opposition to the assertions of the super-annuated negroes ...", Major points to the expedition the Norman Jean de Bethencourt in 1404 which gave no indication of previous Norman voyages to Guinea.

3. In 1539, a Dieppese captain did not make prior claim to Portuguese Guinea, but a century and a half later, the claim was made.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid. Major, pp. xxiv to li.

4. No specimens of Dieppese ivory carvings have been found earlier than the late sixteenth century.

5. No maps made by Dieppese show locations of "Petit Dieppe", and "Petit Paris", etc., until 1631, five years after the Rouenese and Dieppese really did combine in a commercial pact.

6. The Margry account is completely unsubstantiated because the original was never again located, it was a copy of a copy (made by a Frenchman), the circumstances of its copying was very questionable, and the geographical account within the text of the document has many errors.

On the other hand, Par L. Vitet, a Frenchman writing in 1844, states that, as far as he is concerned, there are few historical facts so well substantiated as the presence of the Dieppese on the coast of Guinea toward 1364.<sup>18</sup> He used the work of Bellefond, and was well pleased with the story. He felt that the Normans should receive the credit due to them, as a point of national honor. "Finally, were there a need to cite a yet more convincing authority as to the Dieppese being first, wouldn't a statement made to 'parlement' by Louis XIV, August 17, 1668--that the experienced captains and pilots of Dieppe (the best in all Europe) were those who made the first discovery of the most distant lands--be sufficient?" Vitet supports this theory by (1) asking if Colbert would have allowed Louis XIV to bestow such praise were it not due, and (2) praising the Normans who made their way "from the pole to our shores as if they were a flock of sea-birds", and whose tradition it was to sail the seas (visiting Spain, Italy, and Sicily beginning in the eleventh century).

C. Raymond Beazley, writing at the turn of the twentieth century is somewhat more reserved in his criticism of the material than are Major and Vitet.

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<sup>18</sup>Par L. Vitet, Histoire de Dieppe (Paris: Librairie de Charles Gosselin, 1844) pp. 212-213. Trans. by Mrs. Susan Hartman, 11/10/69.

He briefly notes the discrepancies pointed out by Major, questions the validity of Bellefond (who misrepresented known facts) and concludes, "Personally I am afraid that both in Bellefond and in Dapper we may here be dealing with instances of that uncritical marvel-loving spirit which has at times vitiated both French and other history."<sup>19</sup> Beazley does not, however, dismiss the French claims entirely, for he points out that "according to the Canarian conquerors of 1402, various explorers had visited the African mainland shore, between Bojador and the River of Gold (Senegal River) before this time, and ... it may be that Gallic adventurers--men from Dieppe and Rouen among others-- may be covered by this reference."<sup>20</sup>

#### EVIDENCE ON THE 13th CENTURY NORMAN VOYAGES

C. R. Beazley allows the Norman legend to be plausible because of some map evidence. In studying medieval maps, there is reason to believe that there may have been some pre-Portuguese explorations of Africa. Until 1351, all maps made by Europeans showed Africa in detail only as far south as Cape Non (about 29 N.), with the shape of the continent being usually rectangular, two times longer east to west than from north to south. However, during the fourteenth century, many advances were being begun in scientific map-making, culminating in the schools established by Prince Henry of Portugal. During the late 1300's, maps of the African coast began to show, in detail, the area further south to Cape Bojador (about 26 N.), indicating that Europeans were making their way along the African coast. The maps of the Pizzigani brothers of Venice, published in 1367, and the Atlas Calatan, published in 1375,

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<sup>19</sup>C. R. Beazley, The Dawn of Modern Geography (2nd ed., New York: Peter Smith, 1949) (Vol. III, p. 438).

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 420.

are maps of this type.<sup>21</sup> The reason for the exploration was probably due to stories told by the North African Moors, with whom the Europeans traded, of the great wealth further south, and of the "River of Gold". The surprising map, however, is the Laurentian Portolano, published in 1351. "The Laurentian Portolano gives us an Africa startlingly in advance of ordinary notions of the times, an Africa which in fact shows a nearer approach to general correctness than is to be found in any work anterior to the discovery of the Cape (of Good Hope) in 1486."<sup>22</sup> This map is a mystery to geographers and historians. The absence of names on the shoreline south of Cape Bojador make many believe that it was drawn from stories and descriptions told by merchants of North Africa who traded with the people further south. Yet the contours of the continent are so nearly correct that others feel that there must have been an actual circum-navigation of Africa. Beazley feels that if the Laurentian map was drawn from an actual voyage, then Norman voyages to the Bight of Benin do not sound at all incredible.

Both the Bellefond and Margry accounts mention that the Normans traded with the black people for pepper, skins, and amber, and ivory, and that the city of Dieppe began flourishing ivory-carving industries in the mid-fourteenth century. However, no examples of these ivory carvings have survived from that period, according to Major, and the earliest examples of Dieppe ivories date from the sixteenth century, when there really was French trade with the West coast of Africa. It is uncertain when this ivory-carving industry actually did begin, but even if it had begun in the fourteenth century, Dieppe may have been supplied with ivory by direct trade, as Bellefond suggests, or through the North African trade routes mentioned earlier in this paper.

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<sup>21</sup>G. E. Azurara, The Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, trans. & ed. by Beazley & Prestage (2nd. ed.; 1st series, Hakluyt Society; New York; Burt Franklin, MDCCCXCVI) Vol. II, cxxv-cxxvii.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. Beazley, Geography, p. 439.

Bellefond claims that the Africans used some French in their language. He claims that "malaquette" is a French word, but it is rather a place-name given to a type of pepper from West Africa, and had been imported into Europe many years before the alleged Norman voyages.<sup>23</sup> Major is quick to refute Bellefond's claim based on this one word, but he does not deal with the phrase "Malaquette, tout plein, tout a force de malaquette" used on St. Thomas Island. It must be pointed out that St. Thomas Island, from its "discovery" in 1471 by the Portuguese was unpopulated, and it was opened to colonization by merchants of all nations, including those of France.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is possible that the African inhabitants did use a French expression in 1666, although it is also possible that the African immigrants to the island already had the expression in their language. Now it is almost impossible to verify or identify this use of the French language, for careful linguistic research was not done at the time of Bellefond's visit or before.

Bellefond states that since the Normans "were too weak to attempt to govern the natives and reduce them to submission, the colonists and sailors felt the necessity of gaining their affection and confidence. In this they succeeded without trouble ... It does not appear that the kindly relations which united the Africans with their guest ever altered. They are, on the contrary, deeply rooted in the memory of the people."<sup>25</sup> When the French began trading in Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they claimed that they were better liked by the Africans than any other Europeans. A Dieppese captain in 1540 reported, "In this land (i.e. Guinea), they barter one article for another, because the people have no money, and the lords of

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid. Major, p. 121.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. Europeans in W. Africa, p. 156.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. Major, p. 118.

of the land are very pleased when the Francesi go there."<sup>26</sup> (The editors give this footnote: "This reference to the welcome given to the French by the negroes is repeated in other contemporary French accounts of conditions on the coast of Guinea, and it must be attributed to national prejudice and envy of the Portuguese.") The question is, of course, was it really French national pride, or did the Africans "remember" the French from an early experience? One critical piece of evidence that may give a clue to this problem was given by Dr. Samuel Braun, who resided at Fort Nassau from 1617 to 1620. Dr. Braun states:

In this Fort (Fort Nassau), as well as at Accra, I saw some people above a hundred and thirty years old, who told me that the Fort Mina had begun to be built many years before by French merchants who came to traffic there. As every year for three months there were constant rains with strong whirlwinds which the sailors call Travada, so that the goods were damaged, the French begged permission of the inhabitants to build a magazine or warehouse, which, as they were on very friendly terms, the blacks willingly conceded. Accordingly they built a tolerably large warehouse and brought their goods to land. This was a great furtherance to traffic, as the natives who had neither coin or weights exchanged their gold for merchandise without any measurement but that of the eye. When the Portuguese learned that the French carried on this profitable trade with the negroes they fell on them unawares, took possession of the magazine, gave the merchandise to the inhabitants, and assured them that they would deal with them on better terms than the French. These poor people readily believed them and assisted in murdering those who came there afterwards. Finally the magazine was converted into a castle (or chapel?), which is now very strong, and only serves to the great injury of the natives.<sup>27</sup>

Major dismisses this story as preposterous, yet he never actually dealt with the story of the "super-annuated negroes", but turned to the lack of evidence in the account of Jean de Bethencourt in 1404. Major seems to be exhibiting a strong vein of racism here, as elsewhere (he was trying to prove that the "Portuguese race of sailors" went to West Africa first), in his criticism.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid. Europeans in W. Africa, p. 166 (see footnote #2).

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. Major, p. 122.

By totally ignoring evidence offered by Africans, and by assuming that no one could be a hundred and thirty years old, he sidesteps the whole issue. Modern evidence, however, seems to indicate that many tribes of West African peoples had certain men trained to be grioes, or "rememberers", whose duty it was to preserve orally all the accumulated stories and events of the tribal history, and to add on events of their own life time. In some areas archeologists are finding physical evidence that prove that these stories of the grioes are very accurate.<sup>28</sup> In light of this evidence, it seems that the story of Dr. Braun's Negroes should be more seriously considered.

Along with the story of Dr. Braun, and in a source evidently unknown to R. H. Major, is the account of Michael Hemmersam, a young and uneducated German who had joined the Dutch Company for fun and adventure. He had gone to Elmina and resided there from 1639 to 1645. In discussing Elmina, Hemmersam states that:

This was told to me by a certain Moor, himself a hundred years old. The French tried to force the Moors to reveal their gold mines (or graves?). (The Moors) said to the French, whom they did not wish to trust, that they should go with them into the forest. When they were far into it where only two men could walk side by side, the Moors set fire to the forest ahead and behind, and they were separated. They wanted to cut off their heads. The French suffered great losses. Though they still held the battery, after this the French traveled back home ...<sup>29</sup>

At first this story seems to be about the relations between the Africans and the Portuguese, who were always on strained ground. But if it is put beside Dr. Braun's story, it seems that it could be about the French, whom the Portuguese were trying to drive out of the area by turning the Africans

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<sup>28</sup>"African Origins of the American Negro", lecture by Dr. Peter Schmitt, WMU, for class: Negro in American Life, 9/14/68.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Hemmersam, Reisebeschreibungen von Deutschen Beamten und Kriegsleuten, ed. S. P. L'Honore Naber (Haag: Martinus Nyhoff, 1930) Trans. and paraphrased orally by Dr. John Sommerfeldt, 2/6/70.

against them. Together with Dr. Braun's story, it could be the basis for some real evidence.

When we start looking for physical proof of the Norman trade in Africa in the late 1300's, we run into a lack of evidence; there are no remains of buildings in Africa dating from this period, with one possible exception, at any of the many sites the Dieppe sailors were supposed to have established. Critics feel that this in itself is enough to disprove the Norman voyages. Yet there are at least two possible reasons for lack of physical remains. One possible reason, though not probable, is that if the Portuguese had found evidence of previous European occupation in this area, they may have destroyed it to have the honor of "discovering" the new land, as well as the trading rights to it. European powers were developing strong ideas of nationalism during this time, and commercial rivalry was paramount in relations between countries. Portugal had a policy of strict secrecy in regard to her African discoveries, and would not allow any journals or chronicals to be published about the explorations of Africa. " ... a policy of secrecy was adopted, which included the suppression of information that might serve competitors, and at the same time measures were taken to find out foreign plans and the title deeds relating to the claims of rivals ..." Even the Chronicle of Guinea has been tampered with and truncated, as an examination of the two existing MSS proves, and we have hardly any information about the Atlantic voyages to the West in the last half of the fifteenth century, though we know that some were made ... The policy of secrecy not only led to the suppression of historical works; nautical guides, maps, instructions to navigators and their reports suffered the same fate ..."<sup>30</sup>

Another possible reason for the lack of physical evidence in Africa

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid. Travel and Travellers, pp. 212-214.

is the climate and geography of West Africa. All along the Grain and Ivory Coasts the humidity is very high; the average annual rainfall is 80" to 140".<sup>31</sup> Though the French accounts do not specify, we can assume that their settlements (at Cape Moule, Petit Dieppe, Grand Sestre, etc.) consisted of a trading post, a house or two, and maybe a church, all made out of wood, the natural building material of these parts, (as the later Portuguese settlements were). If this was the case, wooden buildings would have deteriorated rapidly in this climate of high humidity. Even today travelers complain that all but the strongest of materials is quickly ruined by fungi and rust.<sup>32</sup>

On the Gold Coast, where La Mine and Accra are located, the weather is dryer and more agreeable, and stone is the natural building material. However, this area is subject to earthquakes; just since 1862 there has been at least one major shock which almost completely destroyed Accra, and some ten minor tremors.<sup>33</sup> It is safe to assume that there were earlier earthquakes, and under those conditions, it hardly seems possible that buildings dating from the late 1300's would remain standing very long.

There is some possible physical evidence, however. In the Bellefond story, Petit Deippe was so named because of the resemblance of its situation to the Norman port. Sir H.H. Johnston, an historian of Liberia stated that this place "might be identified with the Basa Cove, near the modern town of Lower Buchanan at the mouth of the Biso River (Grand Basa)."<sup>34</sup> He did not mention that he had found any buildings at this place, but only that the

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<sup>31</sup>R. J. Harrison Church, West Africa (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1957) p. 46 ...

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>34</sup>Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston, Liberia (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1906). Vol. I, 30-32.

site could be identified.

Elmina Castle was built by the Portuguese in 1482. They used it as a trading post and as a defense stronghold against other Europeans who tried to intrude, and against resentful African inhabitants of the region. The castle was remodeled several times until it was a labyrinth of high walls and secret passageways. The Dutch attempted to take the castle for many years, and finally succeeded in 1637. A Dutchman, Pieter de Marees described the castle as best he could in 1602, without going inside it, and supplemented his observations with stories of others.<sup>35</sup> Oliver Dapper, who did not visit the castle himself, borrowed his description directly from Marees (who is considered to be a reliable source). Published in 1668, Dapper's description includes the following:

In a fallen down protection-hut, which the Frenchmen, who were already there before the Portuguese, built, and which was enlarged by the Dutch, one finds the number 13-- and two numbers by it that no one can recognize. In a small place one finds some writing between two old columns carved in stone which one cannot read because they are weather worn. At the same time in one of the official buildings built in 1484, one can see that John II ruled in Portugal; one can see this from the inscription over the gate. This inscription remains as clean and unworn as it was built. From this one can judge the other to be very old.<sup>36</sup>

Michael Hemmersam wrote a description of the castle in 1639, just two years after the Dutch take-over. He wrote that "... In the same place there is another courtyard, and there are kept many civets and which is called the 'Cat Yard' and there is a small battery which is so very low, and it has its name from the French who built it themselves and who were the first possessors of this place."<sup>37</sup> Bellefond, writing in 1666, asserts that

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<sup>35</sup>A. W. Lawrence, Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963) pp. 117-127.

<sup>36</sup>O. Dapper, Beschreibung von Afrika (Johnson Reprint Corp.; 1967) p. 435. Trans. orally by Dr. John Sommerfeldt, 11/21/68.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. Hemmersam, p. 57.

"The Dutch are now served there (at Elmina) in the churches which we built, and the proof is that one can still see the coat of arms of France on the church, and the title of French Battery at the fort."<sup>38</sup>

All these references indicate that during the 1600's, there was at least a LEGEND of prior French possession among the Dutch inhabitants and French visitors to the fort. However, a modern British archeologist who feels that the French claims is absurd, in referring to the "French" Battery states that, "... Actually the shape of the battery and the considerable height prove that it cannot be older than the last quarter of the sixteenth century, at which time the castle held many French prisoners, who may have scratched inscriptions on the walls."<sup>39</sup> However, since the castle had been rebuilt dozens of times, Lawrence also admits that the original Portuguese buildings and layout have been changed almost beyond recognition, and it is very difficult to ascertain the original work of the building.<sup>40</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

All of the critics talk of the lack of naval and commercial records in Normandy, but it is unclear if this includes other records as well. For instance, using Margry's account, there are several possible things to be looked into further. One is to see if there are records of the events surrounding the granting of the name "Prunaut" to Messire Jehan by the King of France. Another is to see if there are records of the reception of Captain Jehan by the Archbishop of Rouen. Still another possibility is to see if the names of the men who died in Africa can be traced, as well as

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid. Coquery, p. 152.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid. Lawrence, p. 126.

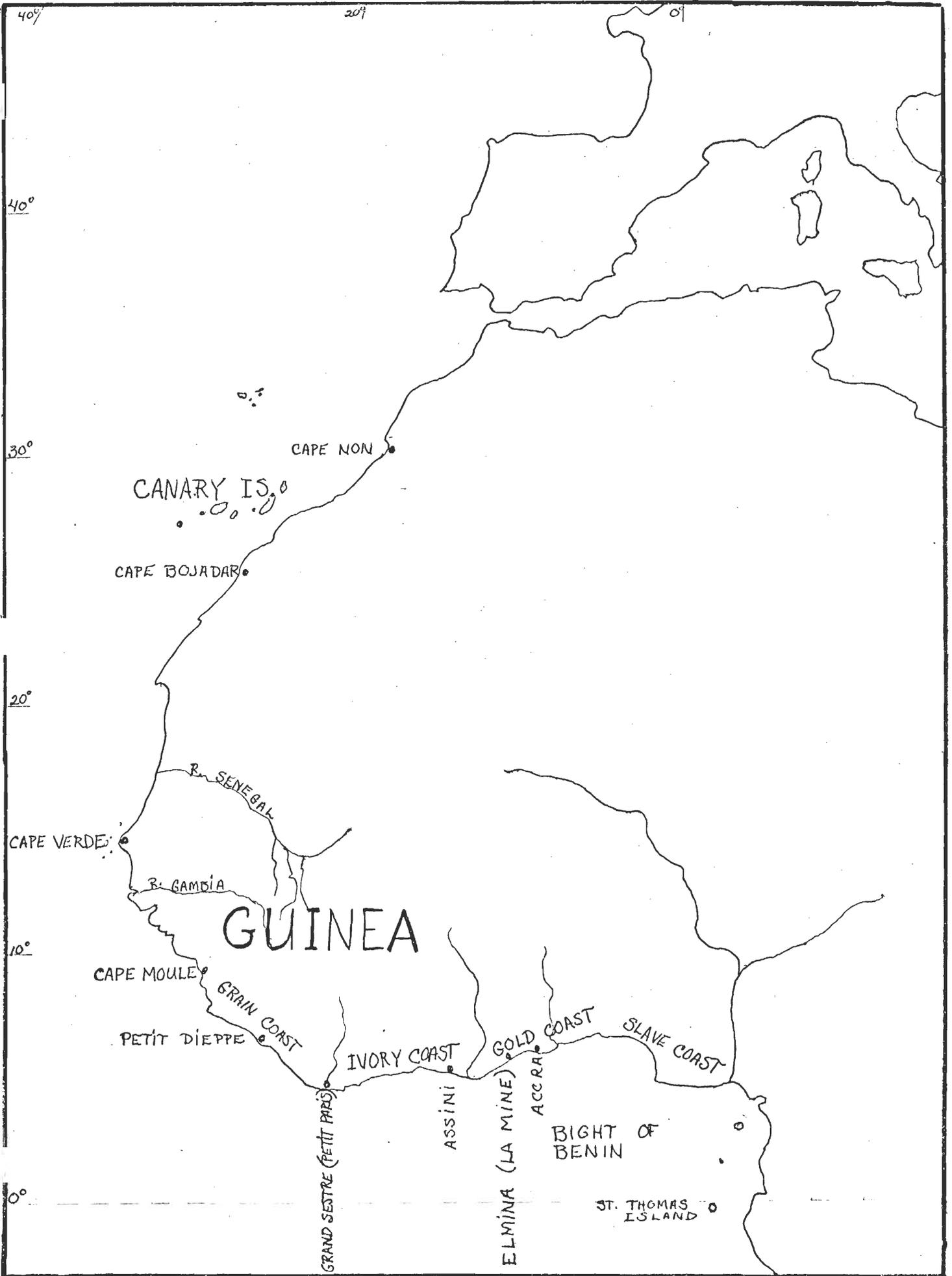
<sup>40</sup>Ibid. Lawrence, p. 103.

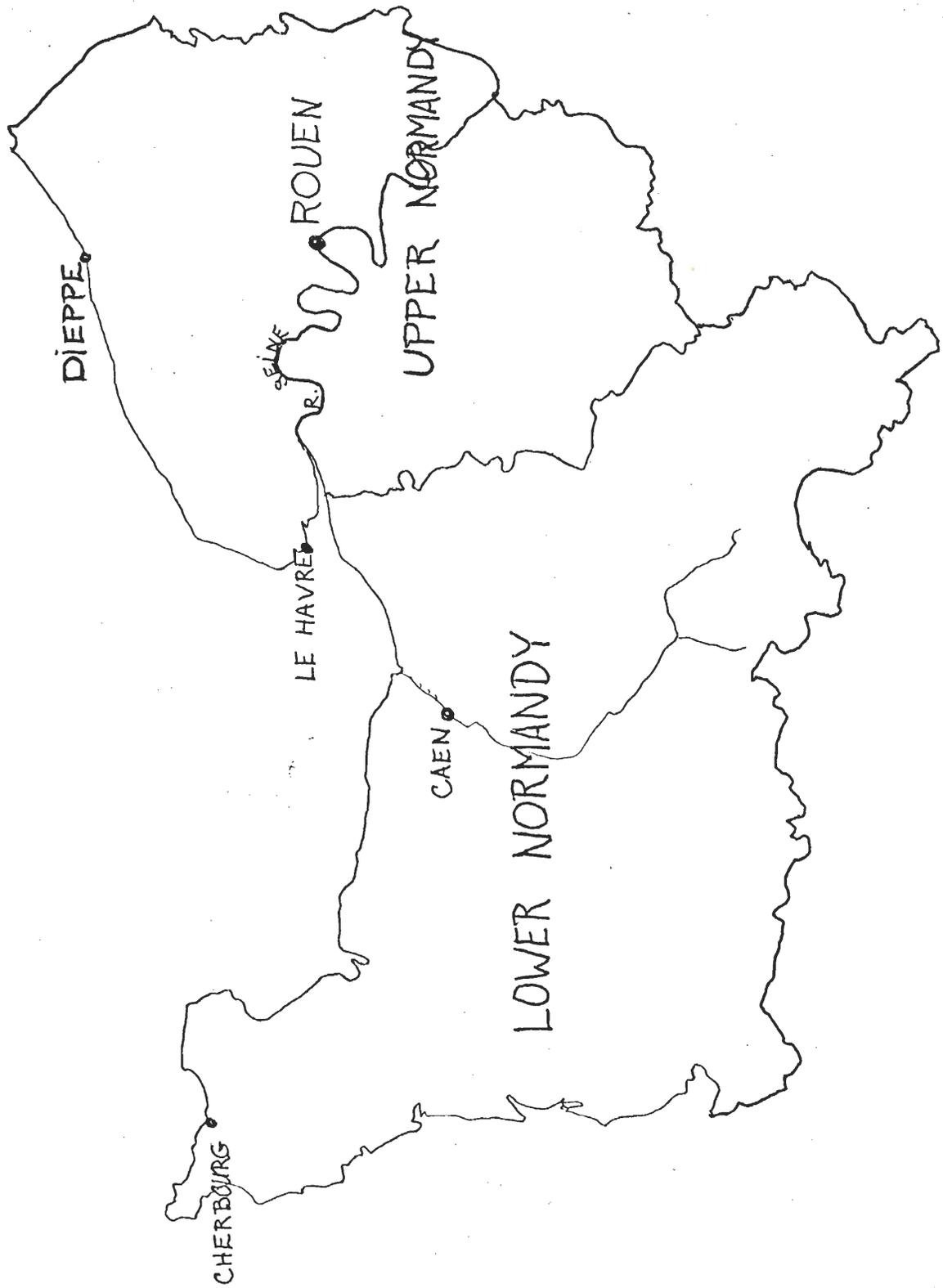
the names of Jehan, and his wife Natent (who was of "great lineage in Saxony"). If it can be proved that any of these things or people existed, it would add some weight to the Bellefond and Margry accounts.

The evidence given against the fourteenth century Dieppese voyages tends to outweigh the evidence in support of them. There is indication that the nineteenth century criticism against the voyages is highly prejudiced against the French for racial, nationalistic, and scholastic reasons. The only serious evidence of the voyages are the stories of the Africans related to Dr. Braun and Michael Hemmersam, but these are almost impossible to verify now. So, until more evidence is discovered one way or the other, the legend remains unproved and unprovable. We are forced to the conclusion that C. Raymond Beazley was forced to: "If we cannot adopt a believer's attitude in this question, neither can we declare an absolute disbelief ... we are only compelled to be agnostic in the face of so many and great difficulties."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid. Beazley, Geography, p. 438.





DIEPPE

ROUEN

UPPER NORMANDY

LE HAVRE

CAEN

LOWER NORMANDY

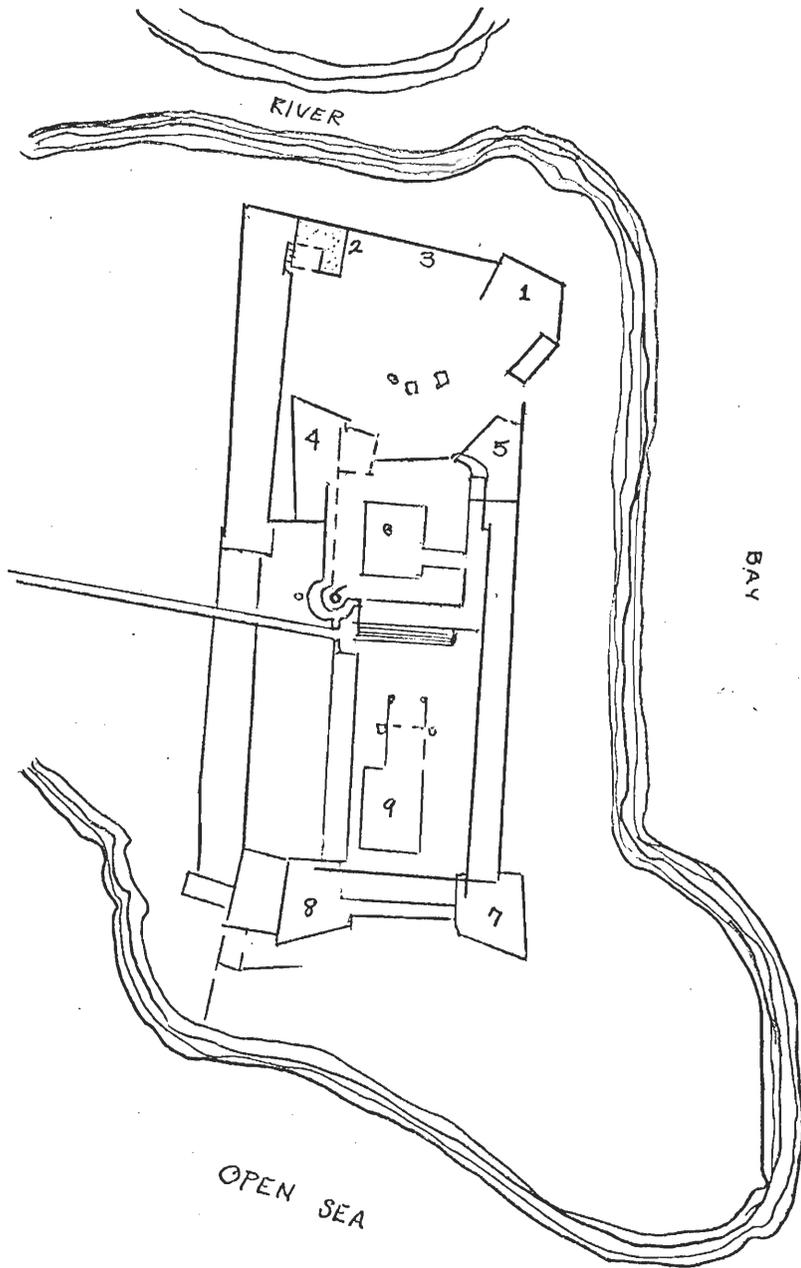
CHERBOURG

R. ELNE



AFRICA  
FROM THE  
LAURENTIAN PORTULANO

R. H. MAJER (INSET)



- 1 French Battery
- 2 Burial Yard
- 3 Yard beside the civet cats
- 4 West bastion
- 5 New battery
- 6 Merchants' tower
- 7 East bastion
- 8 South bastion
- 9 Church on the court

ELMINA CASTLE 1637

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