





In the letters sent with the archive from Elmina (Elmina Castle, the principal Dutch slave fort, is shown on page 49), beads have now been found in no less than four envelopes. Beads played an important role in the slave trade. As a lover of African art and old beads I was more than pleasantly surprised, and must say that I have seldom seen such beautiful beads. Alongside textile designs for Ghanaian kente wax prints TNA now has even more alluring and colourful African art forms in-house.<sup>3</sup>

Beads have been encountered in the Prize Papers before. From West Indian Essequibo in the Guianas a string of garnets was sewn into a letter to Middelburg as a sample for subsequent shipments.<sup>4</sup> Garnets are dark red precious stones cut primarily to be used in traditional costumes in Zeeland. But now for the first time, glass beads have been found: solid-coloured, striped, with dots, large, small, round, long, and in a wide variety of colours.

What is in the letters? Who wrote them? And to whom were they sent? We discover who was in the bead trade in the Netherlands. To start with the beads are being ordered from Rijfsnijder in Amsterdam: a bead sample is included with a letter from J. A. de Marrée.<sup>5</sup> De Marrée knows what he is talking about. Not only was he then the secretary of the Council of Guinea at Elmina, he was also afterwards the author of the wonderful description of the area of the Gold Coast where the Dutch were: *Reizen op en beschrijving van de Goudkust van Guinea* (Voyages to and description of the Gold Coast of Guinea; 2 volumes, The Hague/Amsterdam, 1817/1818), which, as the title page declares, he had 'collected and for the most part seen for myself, encountered and brought together during a long residence there'. He carried authority: excerpts from his book were even published as

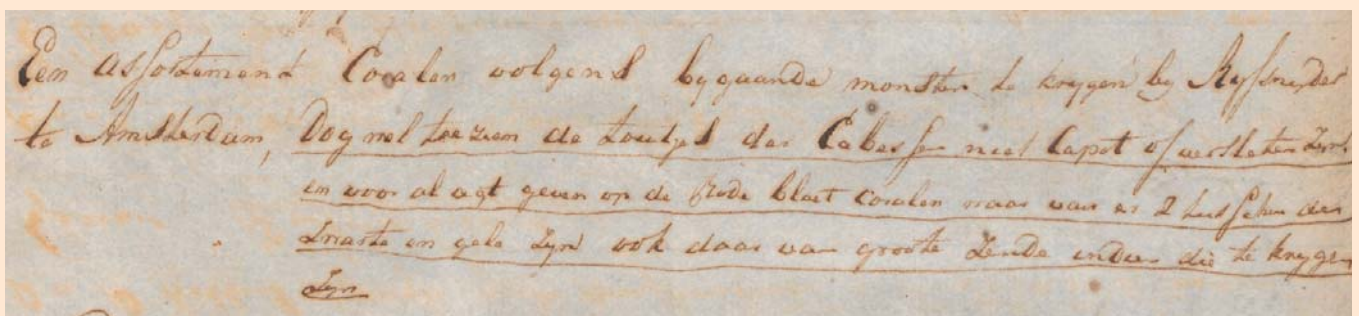


HCA 30/330: Letter from Essequibo into which a string of garnets has been sewn, 1781. (Photo by author.)

appendices in the Proceedings of the Dutch parliament due to the transfer of Dutch possessions in West Africa to Great Britain in 1872.<sup>6</sup>

The letter of 24 January 1803 is addressed to the firm 'Widow P. Rijfsnijder and Sons, at the Slijpsteen [Whetstones], Amsterdam'. Rijfsnijder was located at what is now the start of the Zeedijk, right by the port where the ships moored. The address refers to the place where whetstones and millstones were sold. They are acquaintances: in the salutation he writes 'my very dear friend'. After some courtesies he asks for some goods to be sent, such as knives, vanity mirrors and whalebone stiffeners (for clothes). And he emphasised '... send me without delay at the very first opportunity a sufficient quantity of beads as per the enclosed example'. It is a handsome string of beads, more than 150 small beads and almost 50 larger; unfortunately, the cord is broken.

More were being ordered from Rijfsnijder. There are another two specimens of beads sent to the Netherlands that must be samples for the firm. They are both from J. Spruijt van Opstall.<sup>7</sup> They are the same requests for goods, as well as 'to get an assortment of beads according to the accompanying sample from



HCA 32/996, no. 11: Request by J. Spruijt van Opstall to send beads, especially red blood corals. (Photo by author.)

Rijfsnijder'. One is addressed to his friend G. J. Ceijman at The Hague, the other to his wife, 'dear precious Chrissie'. The letters (in which they were enclosed) are dated 31 January and 12 February 1803. We read what was being ordered and from whom: knives, mirrors, gin, flat irons, shoes, saucepans, even dried apples and pears.

The beads are brought separately to the addressees' attention – they must be overseen carefully so that the cords are not broken or cut. This is no redundant statement, as is clear from De Marrée's broken string. And they must try to get red beads, and especially large ones: '... and above all give consideration to the red beads, send large ones thereof in case these are to be got.' To prevent misunderstanding, he spelled out that the red beads should sit between the yellow and black. To make the whole thing clear there is a note '2 red beads' tied between the relevant beads. That way things should not go wrong.

The samples sent are almost the same: here and there, of a number of beads of a particular colour there are a few more or less, or there are a couple inserted. The letter to his wife he would have written and handed over at the very last, because on the very same day the two chests with the archive of the slave forts and the 75 letters went aboard the ship *Diamond* at Elmina. In his request to Ceijman, Spruijt van Opstall scribbles that on top of everything else he really must have a proper invoice. And he further asks Ceijman to insist that the freight be as cheap as possible, and moreover to fix that it could be paid in slaves, gold dust or ivory.

And there is even a fourth letter with beads, which contains two strings of beautiful coloured beads. This is part of a packet of letters from L. de Sonnaville.<sup>8</sup> One of these is to his spouse, 'Dattie dear'. Here we find out

more about the trade in beads. This time the beads were intended for 'Mr Walland, living I believe on the Keizersgracht, largest merchant in beads'. This was Jacobus Walland (1736-1803) who with his brother Samuel (1725-1785) had a business trading in beads at Amsterdam at the end of the eighteenth century.

De Sonnaville requests that with each ship beads be sent worth some hundreds of guilders, and especially 'of that kind that Mr Rühle always specifies to Mr Walland'. He asks that from now on he may just pass on to the merchant the name of each sort of bead to be supplied. Then, in the future he need not send samples, but the names alone will suffice. This time he asks especially for 'green dust' beads, which were apparently in fashion at that moment. De Sonnaville wants at least one or two chests of these. The Walland company can indicate how they want to see the payment arranged: 'payable either in gold or slaves, or else in such way as you yourself desire.'

The Rühle named was not just anyone. He was Jacob Rühle, a rich merchant of mixed race. His father was Dutch, his mother African. He was the master attendant of the dockyard at Elmina and had recently (1802) gone to Amsterdam. His brother, Carel, remained a trader at Elmina. The wind was in the family's sails. Their eldest brother Matthijs was even the first black plantation owner in Surinam, South America.

Although beads were not the only merchandise the Wallands were trading, they were certainly lucrative. The brothers also had joint interests in Surinam. When in 1791 Nina d'Aubigny, the daughter of a German aristocrat on a journey through the Netherlands and a regular visitor with many affluent people, also dined with Jacobus Walland on the Keizersgracht (now house



*Slave ships of the Middelburg Commerce Company, oil on canvas by Engel Hoogerheyde, ca. 1770. (Zeeuws Archief, Middelburg, Collection City Hall, 22.)*

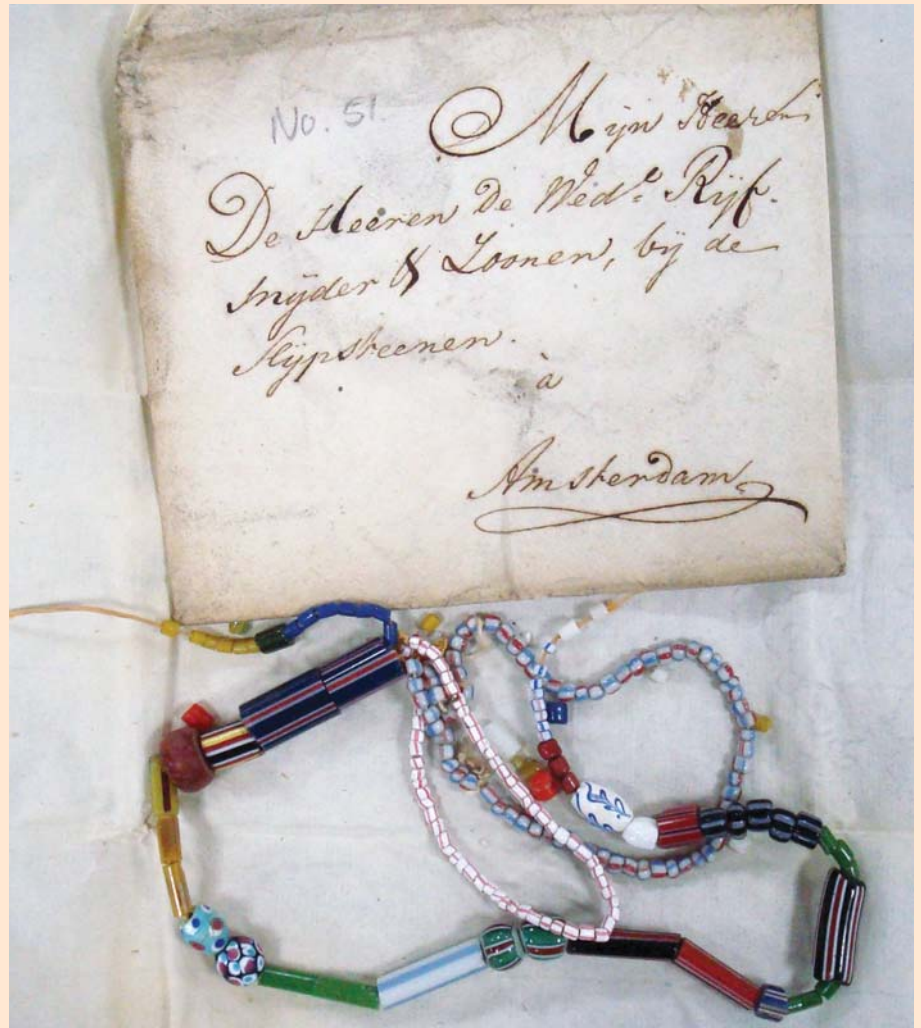


No. 431), she wrote about him: ‘... Mr Walland, who lives magnificently and has a million ...’<sup>9</sup> Samuel’s house was, like that of his brother, in the well-to-do centre of Amsterdam and he lived, if possible, even more handsomely. The estate of his widow (1795) shows a household of very expensive silver, porcelain and paintings.<sup>10</sup> Some city-centre connections with the slave trade are still visible today. Above the entrance of the heritage listed building on the Herengracht (now No. 514) are two busts of an African man and woman, clearly referring to the slave trade. Even though they had already been placed by a previous resident who had a plantation in Berbice, Guyana, it was also appropriate for a trade in beads.

Beads speak to our imagination, through all the centuries. Long before our era beads were already being made, mostly of stone or precious stones. Beads were used as adornment, but might also signify a particular meaning or denote a specific status. Glass beads, at the end of the middle ages, were a relatively cheap alternative to jewellery made of precious or semi-precious stones. Lois Sherr Dubin’s splendid overview *The World Wide History of Beads* shows beads in all their colours and lustre.<sup>11</sup> Worldwide, Dutch glass beads from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have only a modest share in the enormous diversity of beads, but they surely played an important role in world history.

Beads (also then called ‘corals’ in Dutch) were frequently used in the slave trade. Trade beads were intended as currency, just as cowry shells were also used as a type of payment method. Beads were shipped in chests or barrels. And they had sometimes the most beautiful names, like ‘large yellow master’, ‘little Margaret’, ‘oil in flames’, ‘coral with dots’, or ‘green dust’. Despite comprehensive research into the production of beads – especially the years of study by Karlis Karklins which have contributed much to our current knowledge of beads – there is still much research possible on the trade in beads.

In the light of the archive of the Middelburg Commerce Company (MCC), the Zeeland slave trading organisation of which the voluminous archive is almost



HCA 32/996, no. 51: Letter by J.A. de Marrée with a sample of beads to the company Rijfsnijder in Amsterdam. (Photo by author.)

completely preserved allows further research to be carried out. Because of its exceptional importance, in 2011 it was placed on the UNESCO list *Memory of the World*. The business set up in 1720 also took on the slave trade from 1730 when this fell vacant through the expiry of the patent of the West India Company to West Africa. Up to 1804, some 113 slaving voyages were made. Besides the journals of captains and surgeons, detailed account books were preserved. For every ship that set out, the quantity, type and prices of any beads carried on the outbound voyages are mentioned in the cargo manifests that cover such merchandise. The goods bartered for slaves, ivory and gold dust were diverse. Mirrors, scissors, earthenware, arms, gunpowder, brandy and textiles were taken along besides beads. An example worth mentioning here is *Aurora*, an MCC ship that was captured by the British in 1781 and of which the ship’s papers now lie in the Prize Papers at TNA.<sup>12</sup> With *Aurora* in 1780 went three kinds of beads: a load of so-called ‘white garnets’, ‘large red oils in flames’ and ‘long beads’.<sup>13</sup> The white cost 8½ stuivers (one stuiver is five cents, twenty stuivers make one guilder) per cabes (a unit of account in Guinea).

The red were dearer and cost 14 stuivers per cabes. The long were the cheapest (1 stuiver). The consignors bought the beads aboard *Aurora* for around 230 guilders (much caution must be used when comparing historical currency values, but this might approximate as a roughest guide to about £2500 - £3000 in today's money). This is comparable with what De Sonnaville writes via *Diamond*: he ordered beads for 'some hundreds of guilders' from Walland. The figure for *Aurora* was, though, merely a few percent of the total value of the cargo. By far the largest categories were textiles, arms, and gunpowder.

Anyway, these beads arrived as usual at Elmina and did not end up at TNA. En route to Surinam with 103 slaves, *Aurora* was taken off the Liberian coast by a privateer from Bristol. The ships went to the British slave fort at Cape Coast (a few miles west of Dutch Elmina), where the slaves were sold – extra revenue for the privateers. By so doing they were acting in anticipation of the legal process that still had to determine whether the capture really was legitimate.

There are roughly three ways to make glass beads:



House on the Herengracht in Amsterdam, rebuilt in 1766 by order of Samuel Walland, with two busts of Africans above the door. Photo, mid-twentieth century. (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Collection Photos, 10009-2899.)



The busts of an African man and woman above the door. (Photos by author.)

winding, drawing (extrusion) or fusing. Glass beads were made by pulling thin threads of a molten mass of glass (powdered coloured glass) that was then wound around a slim iron rod. By doing this multiple times and afterwards heating the iron rod once again, the colours would run into one another. Cooled, the glass was then cut perpendicularly to the axis of the rod so that all the pieces had the same small hole. Beads that look like the old European type are still made in Ghana today according to this traditional method. And beads are still being offered for sale in Africa, both European as well as indigenous; being already old, whole or unbroken beads grow ever rarer.

Glass beads can also be drawn. This is a less labour-intensive and cheaper method. A hollow thread of molten glass many meters long can be stretched by someone pulling away at one end. As the thread is cooled and solidifies it can be cut or broken into pieces. Above all, drawn beads signified a revolution in bead manufacture. In this way mass production could take place and many beads be made of the same kind. Last but not least, molten or powdered glass heated in small moulds could be melted together in one 'form'. With a pin a hole was pierced in the still-soft glass. The beads were then finished by polishing – either by tumbling together in a drum (the cheaper beads) and/or each buffed singly (the more expensive).

Through the addition of metal oxides colours were produced. And once made, glass can be crushed and melted and the colours mixed further. Especially desired were the more difficult to manufacture multi-coloured asymmetric *millefiori*-beads (literally 'thousand flowers', because of the mosaic-effect when seen in cross-section) and chevrons (with a star-shaped pattern in the centre). Neither of these two sorts, though, were found in the Elmina letters.

In the late middle ages glass production in Europe really got going, primarily in Venice and Bohemia. In





*Old beads from Ghana which have lost their sheen through use.  
(Author's collection.)*

the sixteenth century glass blowers also went to the Southern Netherlands. The oldest bead makers in the Northern Netherlands were based in Middelburg at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> That is not surprising because after the fall of Antwerp to Spanish forces in 1585 (during the Dutch revolt against Spain) merchants, and in their wake artists and (especially Italian) artisans like earthenware potters and glassblowers, arrived first in Zeeland, from where they then migrated to Holland. The centres of bead making (also appropriately named 'bead-blowing works') in the Netherlands were Middelburg and above all Amsterdam. These were also important port towns from where ships of the West India Company and those of private slave traders set sail.

By far the greatest production took place in Amsterdam. Many bead makers there have made glass beads over more than two centuries. At archaeological excavations in the centre and around the port, glass



*HCA 32/996, no. 11: The beads sent by J. Spruijt van Opstall clearly show the beautiful condition that the beads are still in.  
(Photo by author.)*

beads have been found at a number of locations.<sup>15</sup> Beads also surfaced fairly recently in London, not so very far from TNA: glass beads were found at excavations in Hammersmith in 2001 and 2005. For a period in the mid-seventeenth century beads were made here after the Amsterdam pattern. These were also intended for the West African slave trade.<sup>16</sup>

The beads found in the Prize Papers are of exceptional quality; they are like mint-condition coins where the stamp-gloss still remains on the surface. They were, then, always packaged (and thus well protected) and only opened by the Collection Care Department at TNA in 2017. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, millions of beads were shipped from the Netherlands to Africa (and not only there, Dutch beads are to be found all over the world). There are only a few of such museum quality because they were never traded and are undamaged; they show not a single scratch. It is not so much their rarity, but primarily their quality that



*HCA 32/996, no. 54: Letter of J. G. Coorengel to his sister with enclosed ring of fine twisted gold threads. (Photo by author.)*



*HCA 32/996, no. 54: Letter of J. G. Coorengel to his mother with two enclosed gold signet rings. (Photo by author.) In both photos above, the Dutch script underneath the rings reads, 'goude ring' and 'Goude Rieng' – which translate as 'gold ring'.*

makes them exceptional. And in the course of the eighteenth century, bead production decreased in Amsterdam as well as in Middelburg. The beads found in the Prize Papers therefore date from the time that the slave trade and bead production were coming to an end.

As if this is not enough, in the 75 letters sent from Elmina something else remarkable has been found: three gold rings. The two letters in which they were encountered, dated 20 January 1803, were written by J. G. Coorengel, later commander at Fort Shama and member of the Council of Guinea at Elmina.<sup>17</sup> His father had recently died and he thought that it would be comforting for his mother and sister if they should get a gold ring from him in Africa.

His sister Geertrui, who got her own note (enclosed in his letter addressed to their mother), he urged to take pity on their mother: 'My pen cannot express the way I really feel in my heart, how all us children lament over the loss of our gentle, beloved father'.

Coorengel mentions that he will shortly be sending his mother a bill of exchange with money, hopefully even 600 to 1000 guilders (worth very approximately about £5000 and £8000 respectively in today's money). But not just yet; she should really understand that, with a year's salary of 600 guilders, he cannot spare much while life at Elmina is so expensive. And she must really grasp that in his function he 'must appear each day in an orderly fashion', and therefore needs much for his clothes. But he does not complain. At the end of his letter, Coorengel writes further that he is always welcome 'at His Excellency the Governor at the office ... it is impossible to say just how well the man treats me'. He sends a beautiful ring of fine twisted threads and two signet rings, noting that his mother and sister will also be able to see something of 'what the blacks know how to make'. The signet rings are blank, so that she can have something engraved on them at home.

Besides trade in slaves and ivory, people went there for gold – the name says it all: Gold Coast. Accordingly, each part of the West African coast of Guinea had its own name. Starting from present-day, Liberia to Cameroon were respectively the Grain or Pepper Coast, Ivory Coast, Gold Coast, and the Slave Coast. The Gold Coast is today Ghana. And the

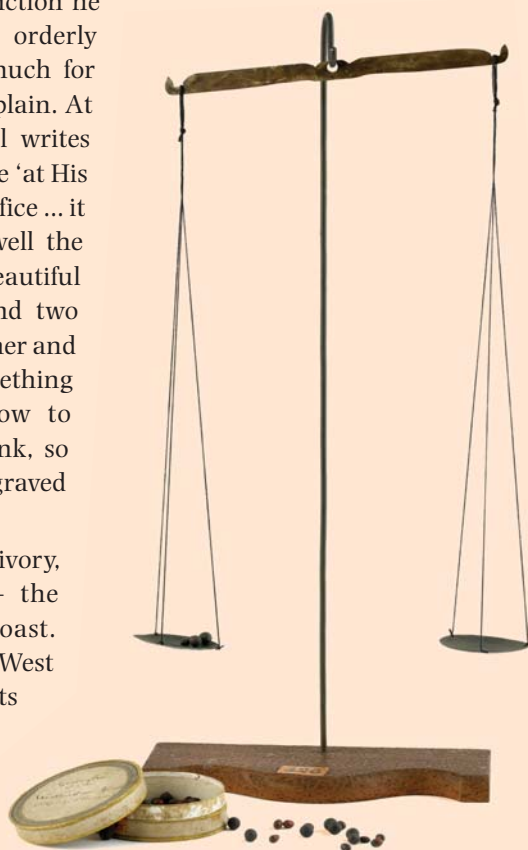


*Sulphide ore from Kumasi, Ghana, with small pieces of gold dust visible. (Author's collection.)*

gold was not so much in the form of nuggets, but in gold dust, from which the Ashanti people acquired great wealth and respect. Until the beginning of the twentieth century gold dust was the prevailing currency of the Ashanti. Gold dust is still being mined in Ghana today. Around Kumasi the raw sulphide ore is brought to the surface and crushed.<sup>18</sup> Originally, for weighing the gold dust there were special scales that could be calibrated with particular seeds. Richly-sculpted weights were used to weigh the gold; these ranged from abstract geometrical forms to elegant animal figures.

In his travel account of the Gold Coast, J. A. de Marrée also described the Ghanaian gold that was being traded: '... delved from the mines and then beaten into smaller pieces by women and finely ground on another stone, to be afterwards gathered in wooden boxes; subsequently men rinse the grit off the gold with water ... the same through its singular weight remains lying at the bottom of the bin. This pulverising is the reason that Ashanti gold is almost as fine as dust, although it still surpasses many other types in value.'<sup>19</sup>

In 1872 the Dutch left West Africa. A diplomatic and honourable transfer was prepared by former governor C. J. M. Nagtglas. For his efforts he was presented with



*Scales for weighing gold dust, from Ghana, of former governor C. J. M. Nagtglas, c. 1850. (Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg, Collection Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen, G3619.)*

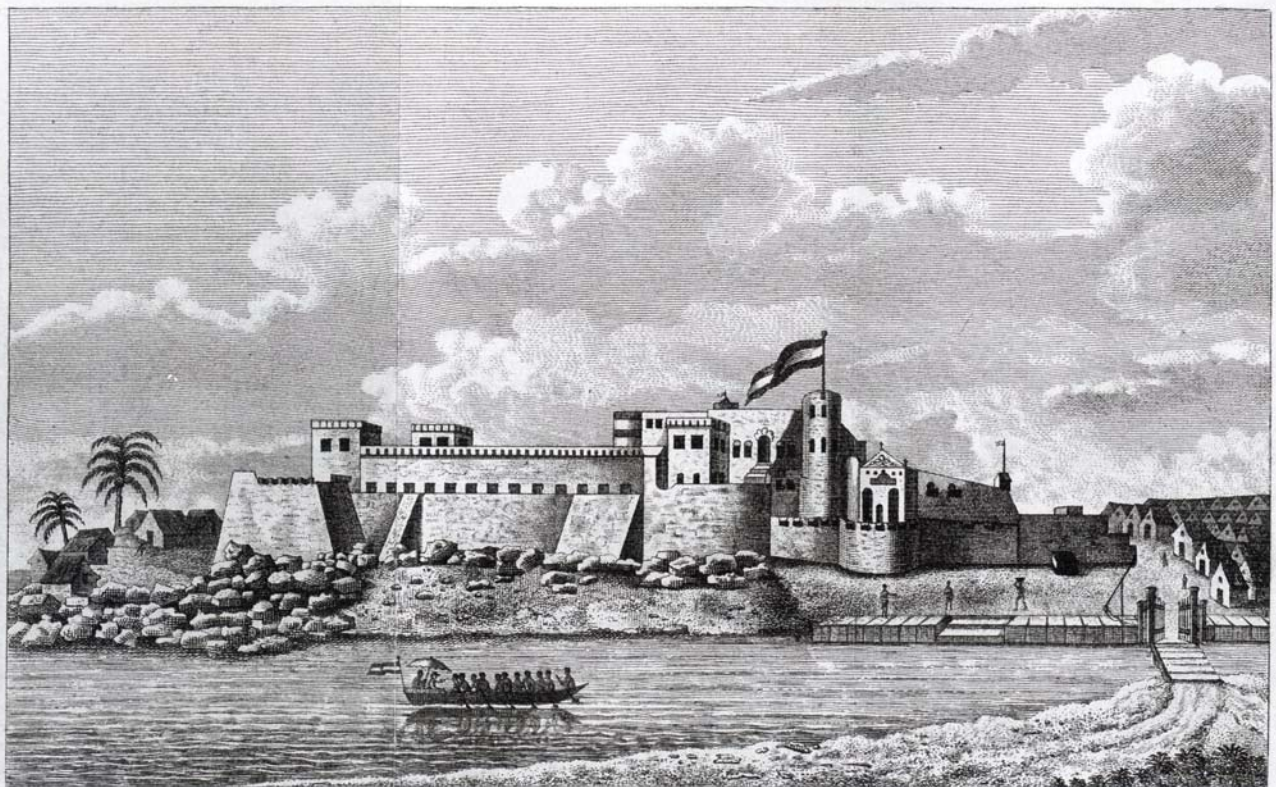




*Gold palm tree from Ghana, presented to C. J. M. Nagtglas by his staff at Elmina in 1871. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-NM-13189.)*

an appropriate 'Souvenir by the personnel at Elmina' – a gold palm tree. The territories on the Gold Coast were transferred to Britain and an end came to more than two and a half centuries of Dutch dominion in West Africa. The Netherlands was assigned £3790 (very approximately about £300,000 in today's money) as compensation for the supplies still remaining in the forts. At the same time Britain gave up its claims in the Dutch East Indies. On 6 April 1872 the Dutch flag was lowered at Fort Elmina for the last time.<sup>20</sup> By then the forts had long since lost their original function. The Dutch slave trade no longer existed. In 1814 the trans-Atlantic slave trade was banned and in 1863 slavery was abolished in Surinam and the Dutch Antilles.

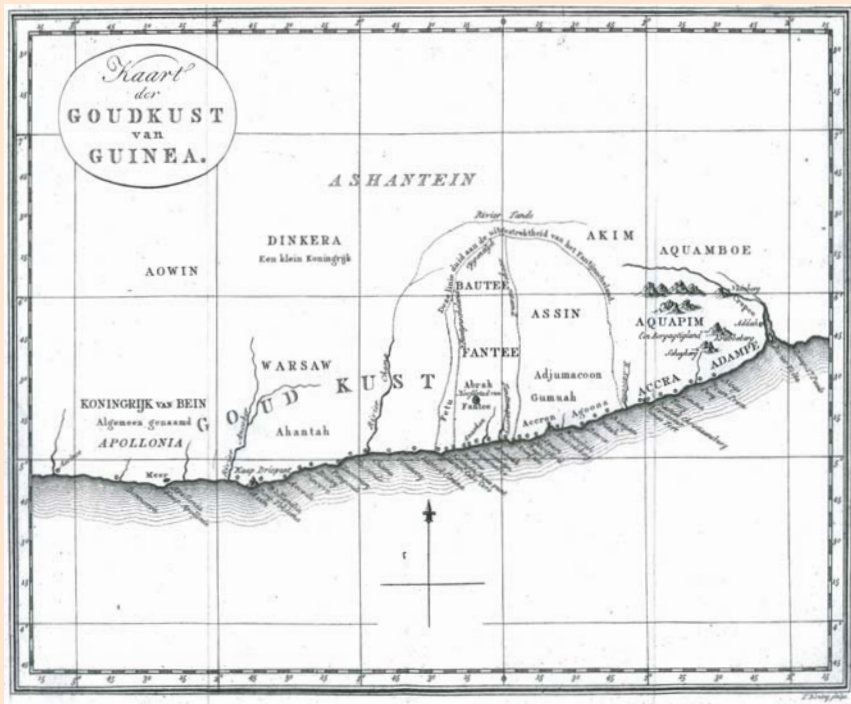
With so much Dutch and other international history, the Prize Papers are of global importance. Not only do they contain an enormous quantity of striking letters and ship's papers of substantial historical value and consequence, they also include objects of great significance. They have delivered the most beautiful beads. And so now we also have some names of Dutch bead merchants, and once again a corner of the veil can be lifted on the fascinating world behind the beads of this important era.



ST GEORGE D'ELMINA VAN DE ZEE ZIJDE TE ZIEN.

*Elmina Castle, the headquarters of the Dutch slave forts in West Africa, 1637-1872, in J. A. de Marrée, Reizen op en beschrijving van de Goudkust van Guinea (vol. 2, 1818), etching by A. L. Zeelander, opposite p. 1. (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, 237J2.)*





Map of the Gold Coast of Guinea, in J. A. de Marrée, *Reizen op en beschrijving van de Goudkust van Guinea* (vol. 1, 1817), etching by T. Koning, opposite p. 1. (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, 237J1.)

#### Author's Note:

My sincere thanks once again to Andrew R. Little for an expert translation, as with my article on the rediscovered archive of the Dutch slave forts in the Prize Papers (Magna 2017, No. 2). I also thank João Oliveira dos Santos for his fabulous art photographs.

#### Editor's Note:

I would like to thank Erik van der Doe and Andrew R. Little for all their help and expertise in the preparation of this article, and João Oliveira dos Santos for all his time, patience and expertise in producing superb photographs.

#### Notes

1. Erik van der Doe, 'By the ship Diamond, via the West Indies': The captured archive of the Dutch slave forts rediscovered in The National Archives', in: *Magna*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2017), pp. 44-51.
2. The Prize Papers project is being prepared by the research institute Huygens ING; the scans will come online on the website of the Dutch National Archives (Nationaal Archief). Huygens ING is building a special 'Virtual Research Environment' to make the documents accessible in a structured way.
3. Julie Halls, 'Wax prints, kente, and commemorative portrait cloths: A story of African taste', in: *Magna*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2018), pp. 6-9.
4. HCA 30/330. See also Liesbeth van der Geest, 'Graag nog drie bosjes granaatjes', in: *Buitgemaakt en teruggevonden. Nederlandse brieven en scheepspapieren in een Engels archief. Sailing Letters Journal*, vol. V (2013), pp. 206-207.
5. HCA 32/996, no. 51.
6. 'Verslag wegens de overdracht aan Engeland van de Nederlandsche bezittingen ter Kuste van Guinea', Bijlagen Tweede Kamer, *Staatscourant* 1873-1874, no. 156.1-3.
7. HCA 32/996, no. 11.
8. HCA 32/996, no. 34.
9. Helen Metzelaar, 'Niet zo erg Hollands'. *Dagboek van een reis naar Nederland (1790-1791) door Nina d'Aubigny* (Hilversum, 2001), p. 103.
10. Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Archive of the notary Cornelis van Homrigh, no. 12518. Inventory of the estate of Anna Maria Bosch, died 15-12-1795. The Amsterdam notarial archive is being further unlocked through the volunteer project 'Veel Handen' (Many Hands). In 2017 this was placed on the UNESCO list *Memory of the World*.
11. Lois Sherr Dubin, *The World Wide History of Beads* (London, 2009).
12. HCA 32/274. See also: Erik van der Doe, 'Zwart en zes maal wit: het slavenchip *Aurora*', in: *Buitgemaakt en teruggevonden, Sailing Letters Journal*, vol. V, pp. 210-211; Gabriëlle La Croix, 'De Zorg: The massacre that fuelled the abolition of the slave trade (1780-1781)', in: *Magna*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), pp. 13-15.
13. Zeeuws Archief, Archief Middelburgse Commerce Compagnie, no. 231.2. The MCC archive was conserved and digitised by means of a Metamorfoze subsidy. All scans can be seen online at the website of the Zeeland Archives (Zeeuws Archief).
14. Karlis Karklins et al., 'On the Chemical Variability of Middelburg Glass Beads and Rods', in: *Australasian Connections and New Directions*, Auckland 2001, pp. 187-195; Ruud Paesie, *Geschiedenis van de MCC. Opkomst, bloei en ondergang* (Zutphen 2014), pp. 92 et seq.
15. Karlis Karklins, 'Early Amsterdam Trade Beads', in: *Ornament*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1985), pp. 36-41; Jan Baart, 'Glass bead sites in Amsterdam', in: *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1988), pp. 67-75.
16. Karlis Karklins et al., 'A 17th-Century Glass Bead Factory at Hammersmith Embankment, London, England', in: *Beads, Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers*, vol. 27 (2015), pp. 16-24.
17. HCA 32/996/letter 54.
18. Edward S. Ayensu, *Ashanti Gold. The African Legacy of the World's Most Famous Precious Metal* (Accra/London, 1997).
19. J. A. de Marrée, *Reizen op en beschrijving van de Goudkust van Guinea*, vol. 2 (1818), p. 209.
20. For an overview of the history of Ghana see especially Gijs van der Ham, *Tarnished gold. Ghana and the Netherlands from 1593* (Amsterdam/Nijmegen, 2016).

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Cartouche of a sea chart of the Gold Coast. On the right goods are being sold, on the left gold dust is being melted, whilst above monkeys weigh gold dust with scales. Chart by Joannes van Keulen, c. 1700. (Zeeuws Archief, Middelburg, Collection Maps, BG0592.)

**Artefact in focus:** Beads sent from Elmina, West Africa by L. de Sonnaville to his wife in 1803, HCA 32/996, no. 34



**B**eads have been used as adornment all over the world throughout many centuries. They also played an important role in the slave trade. Dutch glass beads were especially famous. Trade beads were intended as currency. In 1803, several letters with beads as samples for next shipments were sent from the slave forts in West Africa to the Netherlands, but they never arrived. The letters in the Prize Papers have recently been opened and the beads still have their original quality and sheen.

*(Photo by João Oliveira dos Santos.)*