Part II
Thematic descriptions

1. The Dutch on the Coast of Guinea

Introduction

To understand which sources are available for the study of the Netherlands Possessions on the Coast of Guinea, it is necessary to follow in some detail the institutional history of the Dutch presence in West Africa. In Part I of this guide, the different archives and sets of archival material were described. This description already gives a rough overview of the successive administrations in the Netherlands and on the Coast of Guinea responsible for policy, organisation, and the daily running of affairs.

However, the administrative system behind the main series of the archives is often highly complicated for the modern researcher, as it was designed by administrators of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, who had their own peculiar systems of reference, and served government interests and demands that changed over time. Nevertheless, the type and quality of the information the sources provide stayed curiously consistent over time.

In this chapter, we first look at the foundation of the Dutch presence in Africa: the charters, royal decrees, and ministerial dispositions that regulated the position of the WIC between 1621 and 1791, provided the instructions for the government on the Coast of Guinea, and controlled the departure of the Dutch in 1872. Most of these documents were prepared in the Netherlands, and more often than not meant for Dutch counterparts either in Africa or in the Netherlands. Moreover, much of the materials produced in the Netherlands with regard to the Coast of Guinea were prepared in conjunction with general policies for the colonies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the chartered WIC was responsible for politics and trade in the Atlantic basin as a whole, with settlements in Brazil, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America.

Finally, we look at the official relationship of the Netherlands with the British Gold Coast (Ghana) after 1872, focusing on the consular archives.

Charters, royal decrees and treaties

The Dutch interest in West Africa started in the last decade of the sixteenth century. In 1590 the Dutch seaman Barend Erickszoon stranded on the island of Principe, where he was captured by the Portuguese. From