7. Castles, Forts, and Towns

Introduction

Between the late fifteenth and early nineteenth century, a host of European powers descended upon the so-called Coast of Guinea, roughly comprising the coastal area of current Ghana, Togo and part of the Republic of Benin. The Portuguese were the first to arrive, but they were soon followed by the Dutch, British, French, Swedish, Danish, Brandenburgers, and some other European sea-faring nations, interested in exploiting the possibilities and opportunities of trade with the area. For strategic reasons mainly, the European nations started building stone structures for the defence of their position and personnel, both against European rivals and at times hostile African polities. The first, and to this day most impressive structure, is the castle of St. George d’Elmina, built by the Portuguese in 1482, and the oldest European stone structure in Africa south of the Sahara. Many other forts were to follow, the majority of them built in the seventeenth century when European rivalry – now mainly between northern European opponents – was at a high-point.

Over time, the function of the forts changed. In the early period they were a ‘ship at permanent anchor’, comprising and containing all the functions normally found on a European armed trading vessel, and being organised much in the same way, with a civilian administrative staff, artisans and labourers, and a military garrison, headed by a captain / governor who held a charter from his sovereign. In later times, the forts became administrative and economic focal points for urban development along the Gold Coast. In the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century, the Atlantic slave-trade enhanced the position and function of the forts as slave depots. It is for this function that the Ghanaian forts and castles are still best remembered, hence the common apppellative of ‘slave forts’ attached to them. In the nineteenth century decay set in, due to a loss of functionality. Gradually, many of the forts were abandoned altogether. However, in the twentieth century, the idea that these ancient buildings were to be regarded as important historical and cultural monuments gained momentum, and in 1979, UNESCO placed the forts and castles of Ghana collectively on the World Heritage List, at the request of the Government of Ghana.

The forts and castles are one of the better studied topics in Ghana’s history. Nevertheless, there are few broad studies available, in which historical description and analysis is coupled with a detailed documentation of the architectural and building history. Also, no effort has as yet been made to bring together in a comprehensive manner historical materials from the European archives – including maps and drawings – or from the Ghanaian archives for that matter, to form a complete documentary image of each and every fort in its own right, and in their mutual coherence. Useful English-language studies include the popular works by Van Dantzig (1980) and Anquandah (1999), and the technical descriptions and analyses
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Map 5. Forts and castles on the coast of Ghana

Source: Van Dantzig 1980: 89.
Note: This map, drawn up by professor Albert van Dantzig in the 1970s, lists all the forts and their then current physical condition.