

'Not Unlike Mermaids': A Report about the Human and Natural History of Southeast Africa from 1690

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In 1690, on the orders of Simon van der Stel, officials of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) interviewed one Nicolao Almede, a 'free black man of Mozambique' who had recently arrived at the Cape as a sailor aboard the English ship John and Mary. Almede informed his interlocutors about the country inland from the coast between Mozambique and Delagoa Bay (now Maputo Bay), into which he had previously ventured as a merchant. Although he does not mention the legendary name of Monomotapa, he does offer early descriptions of the Changamire dynasty, as well as the animals and people of the region, including its fabulous wealth. Some of the place names he mentioned are well known, while others cannot now be traced, perhaps because he was using indigenous rather than Portuguese names. The record of the interview concludes with Almede's description of mermaids, and the fact that their teeth could be had in the market at Mozambique. Together with producing a transcription and translation of the document this article explores it through a close reading to offer some speculations about the interweaving of legend and fact in the human and natural history of southern Africa in reports such as that of Almede.

Keywords

Southeast Africa, Zambezi, Changamire dynasty, trade, natural history, mermaids, VOC (Dutch East India Company)

In the autumn of 2012 I stumbled across an intriguing document from 1690 about the people and environment of Southeast Africa in the region of the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers.¹ It is worth exploring for two reasons. On the one hand, it is based on the views of a 'free black man of Mozambique' named Nicolao Almede. He is said to have been a private trader who had travelled extensively along the African coast from his home city as far south as Delagoa Bay (now Maputo Bay) and, it turns out, into the interior as far as modern Zimbabwe in the opening period of the rise of the Rozwi empire, getting to know the land, the location and strength of the Portuguese

1 My thanks to the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB) and Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study for the support I received as the KB Fellow in 2012–13, during which I worked on the papers of Gisbert Cuper and stumbled across this curious document. My special thanks to two of the curators of the KB: Ad Leerintveld who helped me to understand the Cuper collection, and Marieke van Delft who helped me to identify contemporary maps that proved very helpful. Further sincere thanks to the editors and anonymous referees of an earlier version of this article.

trading posts, the customs and material culture of the people who lived there, and the animals. While it used to be said that coastal traders rarely if ever came as far inland as the Zimbabwe Plateau, this document adds support to the views of more recent historians such as Michael Pearson who disagree.² Moreover, although we have many descriptive first-hand reports from the region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they are mainly focused on the Zambezi and are almost entirely from Portuguese sources; rarely do they originate with anyone born and bred there.³ There may therefore be elements in this report that offer some fresh historical details as well as some legendary or fantastical elements, such as a report of animals like mermaids. On the other hand, like many early modern documents, Almede's report had two lives. In the first instance, it served to pass information about possible opportunities for acquiring wealth within private and official channels, in this case within the Dutch East India Company, the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC). In its second life, it was copied and circulated among Dutch literati associated with the Company because it also contained information about exotic people and animals. In other words, it is a good example of how commercial intelligence could be appropriated for academic and 'scientific' pursuits.⁴ In the spirit of making the document more widely available, then, I offer it in the original Dutch and in English translation at the end of this article⁵ and discuss what might lie behind it.

Let us first note, however, that the document is not written by Almede himself. He arrived at the Cape station of the VOC aboard an English vessel and, having had experience as a trader on the Southeast African coast and places inland, he was subsequently interviewed by VOC officials, one of whom wrote up the report. Almede was identified as someone who had travelled along the southern parts of the Swahili coast and inland, having made eight different journeys from Mozambique to the rivers of Delagoa Bay and upriver aboard a vessel capable of carrying cargo up to one hundred lasts (about two hundred tons). He carried trade goods such as slave clothes

2 Michael N. Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 88–9. Perhaps Almede was one of the African traders known as *mussambazes*: M.D.D. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 199.

3 I have been greatly helped by referring to George McCall Theal (ed), *Records of South-Eastern Africa: Collected in Various Libraries and Archive Departments in Europe*, 9 vols (London: Government of the Cape Colony, 1898–1903); *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa 1497–1840*, 9 vols (Lisbon: National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and Centro de Estudos Historicos Ultramarinos, 1962–1989); M.D.D. Newitt, *The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415–1670: A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Siegfried Huigen, 'Travellers to Monomotapa: Representations of Southern Africa by the Dutch in the Seventeenth Century', *History and Anthropology*, 9, 1996, 207–30. Two studies recently edited by Newitt were also enormously helpful: António da Conceição, *Treatise on the Rivers of Cuama (Tratado dos Rios de Cuama)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and the British Academy, 2009), and Albino Manoel Pacheco, *A Journey from Tete to Zumbo (Uma Viagem de Tete ao Zumbo)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and the British Academy, 2013). A further two accounts should be mentioned here as helpful in identifying place names: T. Edward Bowdich, *An Account of the Discoveries of the Portuguese in the Interior of Angola and Mozambique: From Original Manuscripts* (London: John Booth, 1824); Paul Schebesta, *Portugals Konquistamission in Südost-Afrika: Missionsgeschichte Sambesiens und des Monomotapareiches (1560–1920)* (St. Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1966).

4 For other examples, see Siegfried Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism: Eighteenth-Century Travellers in South Africa* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009); Siegfried Huigen, Jan L. de Jong and Elmer Kolfin (eds), *The Dutch Trading Companies as Knowledge Networks* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010); and Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

5 My thanks to the Koninklijke Bibliotheek for permission to print this transcription of KW 72 C 14, fols 1–4v. It has been undertaken using the photographs I took in 2012, and I have been unable to return to consult the original since, but it seemed better to provide a working copy than nothing until a more perfect version could be made. I have numbered the paragraphs in the transcription for ease of reference. I am very grateful to A.H.M. Kerkhoff and Guido Golike for their assistance in translating words and passages in Dutch that confused me, and catching some errors. Any errors remaining are mine.

and other linen garments made in India, together with fine red coral, neck-, arm- and finger-rings made of copper, and copper thread of different thicknesses, all of which he exchanged there for ambergris, elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, and grain, oxen, cattle, sheep, goats, fowl, and other foodstuffs. All this fits well with what is known of the system of trade connecting inland East Africa with coastal ports and outward toward maritime South Asia.⁶

Not surprisingly, much of the document reports on Almede's description of the trading places controlled by the Portuguese. More unusual, however, is the report on 'King Sangacatto' and his people. This appears to refer to the historical *changamire* (ruler) of the Rozwi: if one ignores the suffixes, it is easy to imagine 'Sanga' as another version of 'Changa'. Moreover, the king is said to be resident in 'Simbao', which must be 'Zimbao', the residence of the Karanga rulers, often placed on contemporary maps in the midst of today's Zimbabwe, the region from which the Rozwi empire emerged.⁷ Almede also briefly recounts the situation along the Zambezi and what is presumably the legendary Monomotapa. But along the way he describes the people of Sangacatto as possessing household goods such as candlesticks, hand basins, plates, cups, and even seats made of gold and silver, while also saying that he had seen the fruits of a Portuguese expedition in the form of gold in heaps as high as a man and so wide that two men could not reach their arms around them.⁸ Added to the paragraph on animals that looked like mermaids, which he again saw with his own eyes, one has the impression of a document replete with exaggeration or even fabulation.⁹ We should probably simply move on. And yet, the report also contains several identifiable place names and other pieces of information that fit with contemporary events. Might there be something here worth further attention?

If we pause to have a second look, what methods of interpretation might we use to try to understand such a document? We might simply skip the question of whether there is information in it worthy of our notice, noting that various post-modern methods of interpretation highlight – sometimes even celebrate – the impossibility of getting at what really happened. Documents display layers of ideology, misunderstanding, willing belief or disbelief, self-serving justification, deliberate falsification, and many other conscious and subconscious motives that require our notice. Such issues cannot just be brushed aside in a simple search for nuggets of information. But they then raise difficult questions about meaning. Perhaps the document is simply provocative but impenetrable. Trying to understand anything else about it also poses special challenges for someone like myself not educated in African history or languages.

6 I am particularly indebted to the marvellous works of Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, and Newitt, *History of Mozambique*; also T.H. Elkiss, *The Quest for an African Eldorado: Sofala, Southern Zambezia, and the Portuguese, 1500–1868* (Waltham: Crossroads, 1981) and H.H.K. Bhila, *Trade and Politics in a Shona Kingdom: The Manyika and Their African and Portuguese Neighbours* (Harlow: Longman, 1982).

7 See paragraphs 18–33 of the appendix to this article, and the maps of Africa compiled in Pieter van der Aa, *La Galerie agreable du monde* (Leiden: Pierre van der Aa, 1728). For a more recent map that also locates Zimbao, see H.H.K. Bhila, 'Southern Zambezia' in *General History of Africa*, vol 5: *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, edited by B.A. Ogot (Paris: UNESCO, 1992), 657. Current interpretations associate the name not with a particular place but with the main settlements of the Karanga kings, which could change from time to time.

8 Paragraphs 19–20, 39.

9 Paragraph 40.

But in an age when even the best-attested facts can be challenged by organised agents of confusion who have an interest in substituting ignorance for knowledge, we often also need to question the merchants of radical doubt, and make an effort to look into it as best we can.¹⁰ Moreover, most historians I know wish to read any particular document in light of others with which they are familiar in order to examine their similarities and differences, and from which a provisional understanding might be formulated. We have been trained to read not only across the grain but with the grain, doing so in order to glimpse something of the people and period that produced the documents, however problematic the result.¹¹ For early modern historians such as myself, I immediately think of examples such as the famous study of a sixteenth-century miller, in which Carlo Ginzberg reinterpreted the documents of the Inquisition not to find where Menocchio had doctrinally erred but what he seems to have believed in light of the culture and knowledge networks of his time and place; or Natalie Davis's recent attempt to reconstruct the multiple lives of al-Hasan al-Wazzan / Jean Léon l'Africain, for whom she uses the word 'trickster'.¹² In such examples, the historian tries to disentangle fact from fiction as far as possible, as well as to engage with the imaginative resources available to the historical actors in question. In cases like Menocchio and al-Hasan, however, the persons who once lived can be tracked through several contemporary sources, allowing the careful piecing together of accounts based on more than one extant fragment of a life. That is not so here, where we know only Almede's name. But all historians have encountered documents that seem singular, standing out from the contexts in which they are found and so seeming to be anomalous. For me, the report about Almede's knowledge of East Africa is one of them, although there are aspects that suggest ground more familiar from my previous work, such as the final paragraph on mermaids. Indeed, that part of the report may well have been the reason it was retained in the first place, in the personal archive of an early eighteenth-century member of the Republic of Letters about whom much else is known. I therefore proceed to explore it as a document of interest not only for the history of European natural history but for the history of Africa as well, although with trepidation.

Testimonies of Africa

Let us begin with a closer look at what the document reports. We first notice the name of the informant, 'Almede'. It might derive from the name for a kind of ship used at the time for carrying large quantities of goods on the Zambezi and other

10 For instance, Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,' *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 2004, 225–48; Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010); Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger (eds), *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

11 The phrase is from Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

12 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

rivers, called Almadias.¹³ But since he came from the settlement of Mozambique, then under Portuguese control, his name is more likely to be a Dutch spelling of the common Portuguese name of Almeda or Almeida. His interviewers also noted his first name as 'Nic,' a common Christian name, which in Portuguese would have been Nicolao or Nicolau. He is further identified as black (*swart*), but this may simply indicate that to his interviewers he appeared as having a complexion darker than their own. The document uses the term *kaffer* as distinct from Almede himself, suggesting he was not from among the peoples for whom the Dutch used that term, the Bantu-speaking people of the region.¹⁴ He is also called 'free' (*vrije*), but this immediately sets up a mental contrast with unfree, suggesting that people like himself might sometimes find themselves enslaved, requiring clear designation in this case. Such clues point to Almede probably being descended from a kind of relationship quite common at the time, between a Portuguese man and a local woman, someone who had once been a person of property engaged in mercantile activities for his livelihood but who had recently taken service as a common sailor and might be mistaken as property of another person.

But while the report is best read as a document that records an interview shaped by Company agendas, conducted by Dutch officials with a vulnerable but knowing traveller, Almede himself may have come with his own brief. Toward the end of the report it is said that the Portuguese had sent a large expedition north of the Zambezi to seize gold, but that such expeditions upset the *kaffirs*, resulting in the murder of his brother.¹⁵ Perhaps Almede was therefore disaffected from the Portuguese and interested in helping himself by helping the Dutch displace them.

There are a few internal clues about the nature of the encounter. The opening header of the document says that it is a report (*relaas*) of what Almede said when he appeared 'in person ... by order of His Excellency, Commander Simon van der Stel', the governor of the Cape station. He did not, then, appear before Van der Stel himself, but had an interview arranged according to His Excellency's will. It would therefore have been an official occasion. One can imagine that at least one person would have been asking questions of Almede and at least one other person would have been needed to witness the interview and take notes; perhaps there was a person for each task, and perhaps more than one questioner was present. Almede is therefore likely to have been testifying to a small committee. It would be interesting to know about whether he spoke on board the *John and Mary*, the English ship where he served as a common sailor (*de Engels schiptje Ian en Marie als matroos bescheyden*). Perhaps the captain turned over his cabin for the occasion, since only a year previously William III (of Orange) and Mary Stuart had ascended to the English throne, beginning a period of Anglo-Dutch alliance. Or was Almede speaking on VOC ground? The length of the report (eight folio pages) suggests that in either case a table and chair must have been present for the recorder to take notes. Was Almede asked to stand or to sit,

13 Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, 39.

14 Paragraph 38.

15 *Ibid.*

among his interviewers or in front of them while they sat behind a table, free to go or held until dismissed? He is reported to have been 35 years old and widely travelled, someone who would have been acutely aware of how unpredictable pleasure or pain might result from speaking to people with power. The more one envisages Almede's circumstances, then, the more one imagines that he must have felt his situation to be potentially adversarial, even if he appeared voluntarily and was formally a free man. He would have proceeded with caution. He would not want to say anything that might suggest that he was being untruthful. But he may also have wished to pass onto the committee whatever attractive details he had, to entice them into intervening against the Portuguese.¹⁶

One can guess, too, that the interview was conducted in a language other than Dutch, which has implications for our reading. Few people outside Europe would know much of the VOC's language unless they lived in one of their settlements. Almede is never quoted in his own words. Moreover, many paragraphs in the document begin with 'he says,' indicating indirect speech. Almede must have had some pidgin English in order to understand and reply to the basic commands of the ship on which he arrived, and since he travelled up and down the coast and rivers of East Africa he is likely to have had at least some Swahili, a common trader's vernacular. But, given his connection with Mozambique, the fact that the chief European language of trade in the Indian Ocean was Portuguese and that the VOC employed many people reasonably comfortable in that tongue, the likelihood is that an official asked his questions in Dutch and communicated with Almede through a translator of Portuguese. While the clerk no doubt did his best to record the chief nuggets of information gleaned from the interview, he seems to have mangled the orthography of proper names: not surprising, given that Almede must have been speaking with an unfamiliar accent in a language that was not the recorder's mother tongue.

The reason why VOC officials were willing or even eager to talk to someone with knowledge of the lands east of the Cape shows itself in the last sentence: 'The Portuguese are now in a hot war with all the surrounding nations.' The moment was ripe with potential for the Dutch. For a century they had been hard at work displacing the Portuguese in order to establish a dominant influence in the Indian Ocean trading system. The importance of the East African trade within that system has caused Michael Pearson to employ the term 'African Sea'. As Almede's own business shows clearly, water-borne commerce connected East Africa with places along the western littoral of South Asia, sometimes directly but more often via Arabia and Persia. For centuries, then, sailors from Oman, Yemen and other places to the north had ranged down the African coast as far south as Delagoa Bay – also apparently the furthest extent of Almede's trade – bringing cloth and other goods to exchange for gold and ivory. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese had managed to elbow in on this trade, establishing themselves in coastal ports from the bay northward to Mozambique and on up to Malindi and Mombasa (in modern Kenya). They had held out against two

¹⁶ Paragraph 1.

major Ottoman expeditions under command of Mir Ali Bey in the 1580s and fended off Dutch attacks in 1607 and 1608. But the Dutch had been more successful at driving the Portuguese out of their fortifications in the eastern regions of the Indian Ocean, and the Portuguese were also having other troubles. In 1650 they lost Muscat to the resurgent Omani dynasty, the Ya'rubi, who, soon venturing further, attacked Portuguese Zanzibar in 1652, sacked Mombasa in 1661 and Diu (in Gujarat) in 1668, and returned to raid Mozambique in 1670. By the date of Almede's interview, the Omanis had recently wiped out the Portuguese settlement at Pate and threatened the whole coast north of Mozambique. The Portuguese would manage to hold on in a struggle for Pemba in 1694 but were finally forced to surrender Mombasa in December of 1698 following a siege of two and a half years.¹⁷

Inland, too, the Portuguese were losing control. As much as the port cities of the coast looked eastward across the trading sea for cloth and other goods, they looked inland for the acquisition of luxury items like gold and ivory. From Mozambique southward, important market towns such as Kilwa, Sofala, Angoche and Quelimane connected the people of the interior with those abroad. But there were also navigable rivers reaching inland. Almede spoke much of the 'Mamez', which was undoubtedly the river now known as the Inkomati, which flows into Maputo Bay; but he also travelled on the better-known Cuama River and the Zambezi. (The Cuama was sometime identified as the river that had Sofala at its mouth; more often it was identified with the lower stretches of the Zambezi.) Since the Zambezi was navigable for long stretches, the Portuguese had large establishments at Sena and Tete, with smaller trading posts (*feiras*) branching out along the upstream waters. Pearson and Newitt consider that the 'fluvial ports' of Sena and Tete should be seen as similar to the coastal port cities.¹⁸ By the time of Almede's interview, however, unhappiness about the Portuguese had become manifest among many of the people inland, including those of the Zimbabwe Plateau. Many Portuguese merchants were expelled from the kingdom of Maungwe in 1684, and Changamire Dombo I followed on by mobilising what would be called the Rozwi empire, continuing the process of suppressing a great many Portuguese *feiras* and, not long after Almede's interview, dominating the region.¹⁹

In 1690, then, the VOC was eager to collect information on people and events from south of Mozambique. Almede had fallen into their lap; or perhaps he presented himself as a possible broker and intermediary should the Dutch be eager to act.²⁰ The chief line of questioning directed to Almede therefore aimed to explore both the places and strength of Portuguese settlements and the sources of local wealth and

17 Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*; Newitt, *History of Mozambique*. More generally, see R.J. Berendse, *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century* (Armonk NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

18 Pearson, *Port Cities and Intruders*, 39.

19 Bhila, 'Southern Zambezia', 656–7; M.D.D. Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambesi: Exploration, Land Tenure and Colonial Rule in East Africa* (Harlow: Longman, 1973); Richard Gray (ed), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol 4: *From c. 1600 to c. 1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Elkiss, *The Quest for an African Eldorado*.

20 M.N. Pearson, 'Connecting Littorals: Cultural Brokers in the Early Modern Indian Ocean' in Ashin Das Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr and M.N. Pearson (eds), *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010), 32–47; more generally on intermediaries, see Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj and James Delbourgo (eds), *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820* (Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 2009).

power. Three decades later, the VOC's Amsterdam chamber would make its move, establishing a factory at Delagoa Bay, where the settlement endured many hardships before being disbanded in 1729.²¹ Documents such as the one on Almede's interview must have prepared the way for that decision.

To what extent could one trust what Almede said? That question must have been on the minds of Dutch officials at the Cape and in the Netherlands. They would have understood the report in light of their own universe of oral and written knowledge of Africa, sifting and comparing to see whether it stood up in places already known. We can do something similar. Given my own background, the best entry point is the description at the end of an animal 'not unlike mermaids' (*de meerminnen niet onge-lyk*). Since the existence of mermaids and mermen was much debated, the topic can help give us a fix on the document's character.

Reports of gods and goddesses appearing in mixed human and fish shapes can be found in legend and myth from many places in the Afro-Eurasian world, but Almede's interlocutors would have identified them with a sea-creature well known to Portuguese and Dutch sailors as the mermaid.²² The creature appears, for instance, in notebooks kept from the 1580s by the wholesale fish merchant and occasional dealer in specimens, Adriaen Coenen. He made watercolour drawings of all kinds of animals from the water, also setting down in words additional first-hand and second-hand information. One entry, of what looks like a depiction of a mermaid, is headed *delphinus* (dolphin), but mermaids per se appear in Book Two, in which Coenen collects images and accounts of 'sea monsters'.²³ But Coenen also clearly made efforts to disentangle myth from reality. He noted, for instance, that mermaids were sometimes called sirens.²⁴ And he introduced a note of scepticism. To one report, of a well-observed merman and mermaid appearing in the Nile River for several hours, he added the comment, 'I have never found or seen a person in the whole course of my life who has seen a merman or mermaid with his own eyes.'²⁵

A few years later, however, a Portuguese Dominican who had served as a missionary along the Zambezi, João dos Santos, published an account of creatures he had not only seen with his own eyes but tasted. He called them '*peixe mulher*', or

21 http://www.tanap.net/content/activities/documents/resolutions_Cape_of_Good_Hope/introduction_english/44.htm; <http://www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl/detail.aspx?page=dafb&lang=en&id=4800>, accessed 17 February 2015. On this factory, also see Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism*, 59–74.

22 Reports of mermaids were common among European seafaring peoples: Columbus famously spotted three of them in the Rio de Oro. On mermaids and European exoticism, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 15–16. But mermaids were also said to be present in China, and appear in Japanese texts from some of the earliest writings, in the seventh century. In Japan, they became more common in the seventeenth century: Martha Chaiklin, 'Simian Amphibians: The Mermaid Trade in Early Modern Japan' in Yoko Nagazumi, *Large and Broad: The Wake of the Dutch in Early Modern Asia. Essays in Honor of Leonard Blussé* (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 2010), 244–5. Since the Dutch remained the only Europeans to trade with the Japanese, might this resurgence be connected with Dutch interests? It was from the Dutch East Indies that specimens of mermaids were circulated, such as the one brought to London in 1822 by Samuel Barrett Eades, later purchased by Phineas T. Barnum, who exhibited it as 'the Feejee Mermaid': Ross MacFarlane, 'Exhibiting Mermaids', *Viewpoint: Magazine of the British Society for the History of Science*, 104, 2014: 6–7. Also see Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 178–82.

23 Florike Egmond and Peter Mason (eds), *The Whale Book: Whales and Other Marine Animals as Described by Adriaen Coenen in 1585* (London: Reaktion, 2003): on dolphins and mermaids, 90–1, also see 94–100; on mermen and mermaids proper, see 120–2. On wonders in general, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York: Zone, 1998).

24 Egmond and Mason (eds), *Whale Book*, 122.

25 *Ibid.*, 120.

‘woman fish’, commonly translated as ‘mermaid.’ In his *Ethiopia Oriental* (1609) he explained that they were very common in the islands of Bocicas, 15 leagues south of Sofala. They were caught by the natives using strong lines and iron hooks and chains, from which they made cutlets that resembled pork and which Dos Santos thought tasted very good, having eaten them many times. The creatures earned their name from being like humans between the neck and the waist, and from the fact that the females fed their young at the breast, which resembled that of women. Like Coenen, he thought that they must be the source of the legends of sirens and tritons, which he discussed at some length (indeed, the modern Portuguese word for mermaid is *sereia*, presumably derived from this association). But he also mentioned that they were hairless, had arms ending in fins rather than hands, a strange head with very large nostrils, a large mouth with hanging lips like a mastiff’s, and four long eye-teeth almost a span in length (in a spread-out hand, from the top of the thumb to the top of the little finger), from which beads were made that had great effect against haemorrhoids and the bloody flux. They neither spoke nor sang, as some would have it. Nor did they come out of the water like hippopotami, seals or crocodiles, and like fish they would die if pulled out the water, although it took them a long time to do so.²⁶ If we were to engage in a bit of cryptozoology, we would point to the Indian Ocean dugong as the most likely source of Dos Santos’ report. They certainly occur in the region and are often taken to be the true source of mermaid legend, along with the manatee now formally belonging to an order that bears the name *sirenia*.

Almede, too, reported having seen something with his own eyes, something the recorder carefully noted were ‘not unlike’ mermaids. Perhaps he continued to use Dos Santos’s term, calling them *peixe mulher*. The wording strongly suggests that the term ‘mermaids’ (*meerminnen*) was being used by the Dutch, not by Almede. His description varied somewhat from Dos Santos’s, however. He had observed these creatures on land as well as in the sea, in the area around Cabo Corientes. He said they were about twelve feet long, with a girth proportionate to their height, an upper body like a man but a lower body ending in a tail like a fish, a head like a pig, flippers like a turtle’s, and, in both males and females, genitals resembling those of humans. They were reddish in color and had muscles like animals rather than fish. They ate on land but were very shy of humans. In their mouths were four long teeth, the two below sticking out only two fingers in length but the ones above being almost as long as a span; the teeth could be found in the markets of the city of Mozambique, being used as an excellent remedy for gout and other problems and so selling for a great price. Furthermore, ‘He has heard them whistle, but they make no other sound.’²⁷

26 I have used the account printed in Theal (ed), *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, vol 7, which is based on a Portuguese reprint of 1891. The English text is on 245–7, and the Portuguese on 63–5. On the work of Dos Santos within the context of missionary science more generally, see Patrick Harries, ‘Natural Science and Naturvölker: Missionary Entomology and Botany’ in Patrick Harries and David Maxwell (eds), *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa* (Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 34–5.

27 Paragraph 40.

If Almede was describing dugongs, then one might confirm a few more details: they are large, if not quite twelve feet long; and they have tails like whales, flippers, incisors that in the males protrude like tusks, and exposed mammalian genitals. They also make high-pitched calls. It may also be that in the century between the reports of Dos Santos and Almede the medical uses of their tusks had also shifted, from staunching blood flowing from the anus to treating gout. But despite Almede's apparently eye-witness account, dugongs do not go on land, a point on which Dos Santos insisted. Clearly, there is more going on here than a simply trustworthy report as told by the recorder of the interview. We might conclude that Almede was giving a generally reliable description of the dugong while being more creative about its habits, and that the recorder was attempting precision by writing that the creatures were 'not unlike' mermaids.

In other words, while there are elements of the account of Almede's report that are similar to previous ones, and other elements that are inaccurate, there seems also to be something behind it other than simple invention. With that in mind, we can compare other aspects of Almede's travels to other known people and events. Let us focus on the proper names. By comparing this report with other accounts and contemporary maps it is possible to place his travels, allowing one to make some further educated guesses.

According to the report, Almede began by recounting the four rivers that empty into Delagoa Bay. He lists them in order from south to north: the 'Machiavan' (apparently the modern Maputo), the Tembe (still carrying that name), the Matos (Matola), and the 'Mamez' (apparently now the Rio Inkomati but then named after a settlement further upstream). According to Almede, the last is the largest of the four, and navigable for about 95 kilometres upstream. The lower Inkomati flows from the north, parallel to the coast. He explains that one goes up past the island of 'Xiphin' (clearly identifiable as the modern island of Xefina Pequena), and on to Bombo, Licodama, Macanda (perhaps the modern Manhica north of Maputo), Mamez and Intoubounga. At each of these places a Portuguese merchant could be found. The last of these settlements, which he reached several times aboard a large barge, was about 95 kilometres upriver. Above there the river ran too fast and narrow.²⁸ (Perhaps this head of navigation was in the region where a road, the EN1, now crosses the Inkomati, above which is a dam that creates a large reservoir.) Between this place and the land of Cuama and Sofala to the north is a place he calls 'Molomoni' (elsewhere 'Molomini'), also called the Punta de la Salud, ruled by King Iubana. (Perhaps 'Punta de la Salud' refers to the cape northeast of Maputo near modern Maxixe.)²⁹

But much of the report concerns a place Almede situates at 30 days' travel inland, in the document spelled 'Simbao' but appearing as 'Zimbao' on contemporary maps, being associated with what is now called Zimbabwe. Since Almede was responding to questions, this section probably indicates the particular interest of the Dutch in intelligence from that region, although perhaps Almede was pointing to a possible

²⁸ Paragraphs 3–10.

²⁹ For these and other modern names and descriptions I am indebted to Google Maps.

alliance between the VOC and the ruling *changamire*. Almede says he twice travelled to Zimbao from Molomini, the first time in command of 20 people and the last with five, but both times without any danger.³⁰ He said that the territory was ruled by King Sangacatto – probably a version of the title Changamire – but also that the king of Portugal had a large fortress and trading post there, at Iugome. He reports a church at the latter place dedicated to St. Sebastian and served by five monks, as well as an earthen-walled fort held by 30 soldiers who had small-arms but no big guns.³¹ Twelve days' further travel west of Iugome would bring one to the residence of King Sangacatto himself. This was at 'Mamboni', no doubt referring to Danamombe (as one of the capitals of the Rozwi empire is now sometimes known) located in the middle of modern Zimbabwe.

Almede describes King Sangacatto and his people in a series of short statements suggesting that his interrogators were peppering him with questions. He notes that King Sangacatto was a powerful lord, rich in people and gold; his retinue were dressed in blue and black Indian linen; his people considered salted and dried fish, which the Portuguese brought along in trade, to be a delicacy; the king of Portugal was trying to keep all the trade to himself; slaves and gold were sent down in a flood to 'Manica' (Manyika) and then onward; their household items were made of gold and silver; their seats were also covered in gold; he did not know of any pearls, diamonds or other noble stones from the area; their houses were made of wood and covered with reeds; they did not use brick or stone hearths; their riches were dug from the ground, including lumps of silver as thick as tobacco pipes; their garments were made of Indian linen draped over their shoulders and hanging below their knees; their god was named 'Missimos', to whom they made offerings in the woods;³² they celebrated marriages enthusiastically, singing and dancing to the sound of wooden trumpets and drums; the punishment for adultery was death by cutting the throat, as was that for theft and murder; when they went to war they fought with bows and arrows, pikes and swords; they always went on foot rather than on horseback, although their country was full of wild horses. The country also had elephants, buffaloes, rhinoceros, hartebeest, pigs, lions and tigers (presumably meaning leopards). There was also a kind of horse with two long horns that ran very fast, and many ostriches. Almede also shared a few anecdotes about the king himself: he dressed like a Portuguese and had learned to speak that language; he had three sons who could read and write, and about one hundred wives;³³ his subjects might have several wives, depending on their wealth. Almede also adds the names of the Portuguese commander at Iugome and the resident in Zimbao.³⁴

30 Paragraph 13.

31 A guess is that Iugome might refer to Dambarare, where a new Portuguese fort was built in 1684 but lasted only a decade or so: Newitt, *History of Mozambique*, 196–7.

32 Dos Santos also writes of *musimos*, but describes it as the days of feasting and dancing to commemorate the 'souls of dead saints', and naming a great god called 'Molungo': Theal (ed), *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, 199–200.

33 Dos Santos also comments that the king resident in Zimbao had a hundred wives: *Ibid*, 191.

34 The first is named 'Francisio Bayau'. Could this be a descendant of Sisnando Dias Bayão, one of the most powerful *sertanejos* of the region in the mid-seventeenth century? See Newitt (ed), 'Conceição', *Treatise*, xv. The second is named Emanuel Pereira.

Then the document moves to a few passages about lands further north, along the Nianbani (another name for the Zambezi, also called the Quelimane). There the trade is in Portuguese hands. The latter merchants bring all kinds of copper, Indian linen and coral, which they exchange for slaves, ambergris, elephant tusks, cows and oxen and other things, including wood that is very good for shipbuilding. Sena was the chief settlement, and large. But Almede also mentions two large expeditions that the Portuguese launched to the north in search of gold that had angered the indigenous people, as a consequence of which his brother was murdered.³⁵ From the second expedition he had also seen – the recorder writes that he had ‘pretended’ (*voorgeest*) to have seen – mounds of gold on their way to Mozambique, in the shape of pyramids as high as a man and thicker than two men could get their arms around.³⁶

The facts as reported in the document seem, therefore, to be based on real events in the region, although subject to further investigation. One observation I have, as someone not entirely familiar with the history of the region, is that while much of the secondary literature derives from Portuguese activities along the Zambezi and from its fluvial ports of Sena and Tete to the coast and up to Mozambique, from Almede’s point of view there seemed to be more opportunities for small traders a bit further south, inland from modern Maputo. He is noted as saying that at Sena the Portuguese are even more numerous than at Mozambique, and that ‘The King of Portugal keeps the whole of the trade to himself.’³⁷ But further south, where there was less gold to be had, the Portuguese were more thinly settled and so less able to control trade, with only one merchant at each of the *feiras*. In addition to giving a glimpse of the court of the *changamire* then, Almede’s testimony suggests various ways in which private traders like himself had been feeling the ill effects of Portuguese domination while also trying to profit from the circumstances. Since 1680 the Portuguese crown had loosened up trade for anyone in return for a 20 per cent levy at the customs houses.³⁸ So, despite problems mainly arising from the Portuguese methods of dominion, people like himself were venturing far inland to conduct business, and it was from south of the Zambezi that the fiercest opposition would emerge. No doubt not only the VOC but the *changamire* was frequently debriefing intermediaries like Almede, helping to make the political situation around 1690 quite fluid.

Collecting Evidence in the Netherlands

As well as considering the text itself, it is also worth attending to the afterlife of the document. It now sits among the large number of manuscripts once in the

35 Possibly this is a memory of the 1684 expedition of Caetano de Mello de Castro to the Maungwe region west of Manyika: Elkiss, *Quest for an African Eldorado*, 52; Newitt, *History of Mozambique*, 103.

36 Paragraphs 38–9.

37 Paragraphs 36, 17.

38 Newitt (ed), ‘Conceição’, *Treatise*, xv.

possession of the influential Dutch patrician and member of the Republic of Letters, Gisbert Cuper (1644–1716), now resting in the National Library in the Hague (the Koninklijke Bibliotheek).³⁹ It is bound together with miscellaneous other documents, in vellum. On the spine of this volume is a handwritten note in ink: ‘Nicolaes Almede 16’. It is probably labelled this way simply because Almede’s report is first among the papers in the miscellany, but the title also suggests that Cuper may have considered it to be the most important item in the volume. The rest of the miscellany is composed of papers related to other places and peoples of Afro-Asia, most of them originating with the VOC.⁴⁰ One contains a note in Cuper’s hand indicating that it came from Nicolaes Witsen, a powerful figure of Amsterdam and one of the Herren XVII, a director of the VOC.⁴¹ It was, then, because of the Cuper–Witsen relationship that the document exists in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek. But Cuper and Witsen may have been far more interested in the passage on mermaids than on the report of the people of Zimbao, and that interest may have had other consequences too.

To look into those possibilities, however, we need to shift our perspective to the Netherlands at the end of the seventeenth century. Witsen and Cuper had first met in the Hague in 1683, and they continued to share many interests to the end of their lives. Cuper became a figure in the contemporary Republic of Letters, being best known for his antiquarian expertise about the deep past resting on his exacting studies of coins, inscriptions and objects. He had begun his public life as the professor of history and rhetoric, then rector, of the Illustrious School in Deventer, but having been a loyalist during a period of French occupation he was rewarded with a place on the city council in 1675, going on to serve as a representative of the province of Overijssel in the States General in the Hague from 1681 to 1694. After returning to Deventer he continued to serve in high-placed city and provincial offices before taking up the position of one of the five representatives from the States General to the allied army during the War of the Spanish Succession in 1706. Then, in his sixties, he retired from public life and devoted himself fully to his correspondence and antiquarian studies, which he had kept up during his political life. It was also in this last period that Cuper reorganised his papers for easy reference, having many of them bound together. Saving the report of Almede’s interview in this way, even binding it first in the volume, Cuper must have considered the report to contain worthwhile, perhaps even verifiable, information.

39 Cuper’s papers were kept by his heirs for about a century after his death, after which they were auctioned off; the bulk of them were then deposited in the Algemeen Rijksarchief by P. Bosscha. Since Cuper was both a government official and a published author, the papers considered to be important for the Dutch nation were kept in the National Archive, while the bulk of his learned correspondence and other papers were turned over to the Koninklijke Bibliotheek. Fortunately for modern researchers, the two institutions continue to reside next to one another. For the first catalogue of the Cuper papers, see P. Bosscha, *Opgave en Beschrijving van de Handschriften, Nagelaten door Gisbertus Cuperus* (Deventer: M. Ballot, 1842).

40 The volume now bears a KB shelfmark 72 C 14.

41 The item is labelled ‘Nogh een andere uyt China geschrevē aen pere le Chaise 1689, met eene remarque’, dated The Hague, 13 Jan 1691 (KB 72 C 14, fols. 32–8). The document is in Dutch with a note at the end in French saying that it was communicated to him (Cuper) by Witsen, that the original was in French, that the Jesuit Gerbillian was the ambassador to the tsar in Moscow, and that the Jesuits were the ones to bring peace between the two empires.

The report was one among many sent to Cuper by Witsen.⁴² The two of them had early discovered a mutual interest in trying to disentangle the history of humanity, which proved life-long. Because of his family's long association with the Muscovy trade, Witsen was especially keen on collecting information about Central Asia (then termed Tartary), on which he published a map and a richly illustrated book.⁴³ But Witsen and fellow VOC directors such as Joan Huydecoper II were also eager to receive dependable information about the peoples and natural history from the edges of the known world. Witsen, for instance, promoted an expedition in 1696–7 to the maritime 'southland' (Zuijdland: Western Australia, or Nieuw Holland); one of the other reports in the Almede miscellany contains information from that voyage.⁴⁴ Moreover, encouraged by such interests on the part of the directors of the VOC, the governor of the Cape settlement – Simon van der Stel – was acquiring dependable information from nearby places, having supported an overland expedition to the copper mountains of Namaqualand in 1685–6 and asking for reports from Isaac Johannes Lamotius, until 1692 the governor of Mauritius (where the last three dodos were collected in 1688).⁴⁵

When Witsen and Cuper puts their heads together they attempted to give a new and accurate account of the history of humankind, based on the best and latest evidence. Both of them eagerly corresponded with other officials and learned men, collecting books, manuscripts, objects and images in their pursuit of new and correct information.⁴⁶ They did their best to assess the truthfulness of the evidence. For instance, given his interest in Central Asia and VOC possessions in the East Indies, Witsen was keen to establish the veracity of an early author on those parts, Marco Polo, although Cuper was more cautious. In a letter of 1711 Witsen told Cuper that he had heard a report from sailors who had been to the Zuijdland about finding a bird's nest on the shore so big that eight or ten men could sit in it; when they set it on fire it was like a barn going up. These were people who had been in his employ and so they would not lie to him, and they swore it was the truth. To Witsen, it sounded like an echo of the account Marco Polo gave the Great Khan of a huge bird from Madagascar, called the Rukh, which was so big that it could fly off with a whole elephant and

42 There are many exchanges between Cuper and Witsen extant; see for instance, Marion Peters, 'Nicolaes Witsen and Gijsbert Cuper: Two Seventeenth-Century Dutch Burgomasters and Their Gordian Knot', *Lias*, 16, 1989, 111–50. It may someday be possible to identify the original document among the papers sent back to the Netherlands and thus its original context. For a description of the Dutch VOC archives, see http://www.tanap.net/content/voc/archnl/archnl_intro.htm. An online search on that site, seeking documents from 'Kaap de Goede Hoop' in 1690, does not identify the report, but it is possible that a physical inspection would locate its identity among the registers of papers received in 1690 or 1691.

43 Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarije* (1692), expanded in an edition dated 1705 on the copperplate frontispiece but not published until many years after his death.

44 See item four in note 33 above.

45 M.L. Wilson, Th. Toussaint van Hove-Exalto and W.J.J. van Rijssen (eds), *Codex Witsenii: Annotated Watercolours: In the Country of Namaqua Undertaken in 1685–6* (Cape Town: Iziko Museums and Davidii Media, 2002); for an example of one report from Lamotius, see Huigen, *Knowledge and Colonialism*, 64–5.

46 Harold J. Cook, *Assessing the Truth: Correspondence and Information at the End of the Golden Age* (Leiden: Primavera, 2013; also at: http://www.nias.knaw.nl/Publications/KB%20Lecture/KB_09_Harold%20Cook). For further information on Cuper, see Bianca Chen, 'Wat van Ver Komt ... Gijsbert Cuper en de Zeventiende-Eeuwse Interesse voor de Tastbare Oudheid van Verre Streken' (Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2005); on Witsen, see esp Marion Peters, *De Wijze Koopman: Het Wereldwijde Onderzoek van Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717), Burgemeester en VOC-Bewindhebber van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2010); for Witsen's collection, see Rebecca P. Brienen, 'Nicolas Witsen and His Circle: Globalization, Art Patronage, and Collecting in Amsterdam Circa 1700' in Nigel Worden (ed), *Contingent Lives: Social Identity and Material Culture in the VOC World* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2007), 439–49.

drop it to the earth to kill it before dining on it. This was, Witsen thought, an early attempt to show that while the stories of half lion and half bird griffins were false they contained a kernel of truth.⁴⁷ Although Marco Polo may have been exaggerating, Witsen wrote, these recent experiences of the sailors proved that birds of enormous size existed. In reply Cuper simply agreed that Marco Polo had been engaging in legend-making, adding that he had not heard of any elephants from Australia. But he also passed back a comment about having read about very large birds in far northern lands in a work by Caspar Otto Sperling, and he had heard reports of big birds from North America too. The latter were, however, certainly not powerful enough to lift an elephant, nor did they look anything like the griffins on ancient medals.⁴⁸

Among their concerns was the question of what range of creatures could be called human. A couple of years after communicating about the huge bird's nest, Witsen sent Cuper a letter containing a copy of watercolours of exotic figures, including a very dark-coloured man from Papua New Guinea with a tail that he claimed had been drawn from life.⁴⁹ Witsen described the Papuans as beast-like men: 'These people are very wild, and live like animals' (*Dese menschen sijn zeer wilt, en leven den beesten gelyk*). He compared them to what had been published on orang outangs, who were said to express the full range of human emotions but could not speak. A report he had obtained from an eye-witness described orang outangs as the size of a human child of twelve or fourteen, walking on their hind feet and acting like people, although covered all over with hair. He wondered whether to call them apes or half-men (*sal ik ze Apen of halve menschen noemen weet ik niet*). In 1716, he also wrote to Cuper about the nature of differing skin colour in humans, eliciting a reply from Cuper about an early Dutch report about the 'wild men' of the Manicongo, who were proportioned like humans, with hair all over their bodies, having a flat nose, a wide mouth and a little tail over the cleft of their buttocks like a long and thick thumb. They could not speak and slept at night in the trees. Cuper added from his knowledge of ancient literature that the fifth-century BCE Carthaginian Hanno had reported something similar, also from the west coast of Africa (indeed, it is from Hanno's report that the word 'gorilla' originates).⁵⁰ In other words, they were debating a kind of sliding scale from apes to men in which some half-men had tails. Given such interests it may have been Almede's report of creatures like mermaids that caused Cuper to place those papers at the front of one of his bound miscellanies.

The interest displayed by Cuper and Witsen in human history and its place within the natural order, of which mermaids were a small part, was at the forefront of

47 A Dutch edition of Marco Polo's travels had been published in 1664, and a Latin edition had appeared in Venice in 1671. But Dos Santos also explored the story of the Rukh, which he doubted but thought that Marco Polo had placed on an island south of Madagascar: Theal (ed), *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, 237–8.

48 Koninklijke Bibliotheek, KW 72, C 32, fols 44v–46v. Also see K. van Berkel, 'Citaten Uit het Boek der Natuur: Zeventiende-Eeuwse Nederlandse Naturaliënkabinetten en de Ontwikkeling van de Natuurwetenschap' in Ellinoor Bergvelt and René Kistemaker (eds), *De Wereld Binnen Handbereik: Nederlandse Kunst- en Rareitatenverzamelingen, 1585–1735* (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers and Amsterdams Historisch Museum, 1992), 169–91.

49 Koninklijke Bibliotheek, KW 72, C 32, letter of 1 January 1713. About two decades ago, Jan van der Waals identified the origin of the image as a sketch sent from the chief medical officer in Batavia, Andries Cleyer (see his essay 'Exotische Rareitaten: Afbeeldingen en Voorwerpen van Vreemde Volkeren' in Bergvelt and Kistemaker (eds), *De Wereld Binnen Handbereik*, 155).

50 Cuper refers to the *Korte Historiaal* of Pieter van den Broeke's travels to West Africa (published in 1634); also see Harold J. Cook, <http://blog.kb.nl/humans-apes-and-skin-color>.

discussions among leading figures of the Republic of Letters. For a time, Carl Linnaeus considered grouping mermaids and mermen in the same category as humans and apes, as Siegfried Huigen as noted.⁵¹ Linnaeus had spent some of his formative years in the Netherlands, and from 1735 to 1737 lived on the estate of George Clifford III, another director of the VOC.⁵² People like Linnaeus knew, for instance, of the widely read, authoritative, encyclopaedic and well-illustrated work of the Calvinist minister François Valentyn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (1724–26), in which Valentyn vouched for having seen a merman in the East Indies on his trip home. He places the sighting on 1 May 1714, when he and the ship's officers, along with many of the sailors, saw a creature with the appearance of a man and the skin of a fish. It was killed but lost before it could be hauled aboard, although it clearly also had a long tail. (Valentyn also later noted that in 1725, Louis-Alexandre de Bourbon, son of Louis XIV, had a similar experience with a merman, which was harpooned and brought aboard but set free because it screamed so much from fright.) In his book Valentyn also printed an illustration of a mermaid, this one from the island of Buru, near Amboina (where Valentyn had served), based on a drawing from Samuel Fallours. Fallours reportedly made the drawing from life after having caught the creature in 1712; she lived for four days and seven hours, following which her body was turned over to the regional governor, Adriaen van der Stel.⁵³ Fallours wrote to Valentyn that she was about five and a half feet long, had excrement like that of a cat, squeaked like a mouse, but could not speak.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that these reports of mermaids were circulating among learned men associated with the VOC just at the moment when Witsen and Cuper were carrying on their conversations about the variety of creatures to include in the human race. All of them were interested less in the emblematic meaning of such creatures than in trying to record as empirically as possible their existence and description, from life.⁵⁵ Their interests were no doubt known to the team who interviewed Almede, presumably causing them to spend a bit of effort in recording what he knew of such sea creatures. The care with which the VOC clerk reported that they were 'not unlike mermaids' indicates the extent of this attempt at careful descriptive literalism.

Conclusion

One cannot, then, but be frustrated by the precise ambiguities apparent in terming the creatures in question something like mermaids. Clearly, the idea of the mermaid was strong, shaping the description of other animals even when conveyed as

51 Siegfried K.W. Huigen, 'Paradijsvogels en Zeemensen: Dieren als Retorisch Construct in François Valentyns Natuurhistorie van Amboina', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 125, 2012, 508; my thanks to Nancy Jacobs for drawing my attention to this article.

52 On Linnaeus, see for example Lisbet Koerner, 'Carl Linnaeus in His Time and Place' in N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E. Spary (eds), *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 145–62.

53 He was the son of the governor of the Cape; in 1754 there appeared, in Amsterdam, Louis Renard's *Poissons, ecrevisses et crabes, autour des îles Molucques et sur les côtes des Terres Australes, peints d'après nature sur les originaux de B. Coyet et A. van der Stel*; Valentyn's letter to Renard about Fallour's mermaid was collected for this: Huigen, 'Paradijsvogels', 515. But following Valentyn's return to the Netherlands, trouble broke out between Renard and the congregation: *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biographisch Woordenboek* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1911), 1070–1.

54 Huigen, 'Paradijsvogels', 515–16, 519.

55 *Ibid.*, esp 506. Also see Cook, *Matters of Exchange*; Brian W. Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Huigen et al (eds), *Dutch Trading Companies*.

eye-witness reports. Creatures such as the dugong may not have given rise to ideas of humans-as-fish so much as the power of imagined mermaids kept attaching itself to observed phenomena.⁵⁶ So, too, what the VOC took from Almede about the state of affairs in Zimboa was layered with hope of finding a new source of riches. Nevertheless, a comment about creatures like mermaids may have caused Cuper to preserve the report among his papers. It certainly caught my eye. And from that, another brief and no doubt partly fanciful, partly real description of the *changamire* and his people has emerged. At the edges of sight, shapes come into view. Perhaps they are only imagined. But more likely there were once real presences abiding in a particular time and place so powerful that their forms were symbolically materialised in the form of ink on paper. For now, that is as close as we shall get to imagining what Almede meant to say.

APPENDIX 1: The Original Text of the Dutch Report

[1] [Heading] Relas van Nic[olaes]. Almede vrije swart van Mosambique, oudt 35 jaaren, thans op t hier ter Rhede liggende de Engels schiptje Ian en Marie als matroos bescheyden, by monde gedaan aen Cabo de goede hoop den 8 Feb. 90 op ordre van den Ed. Hr. Command. Simon van der Stel.

[2] Hy verhaald aght verscheyde togten van Mosambique nae de rivier de la Goa en Mamez met een sloop van 100. last gedaan, en aldaar verhandelt te hebben, slavekleedtjes, en ander Indische linnegewaad; mitsgaders fyne rode corallen, copere hals, arm en vinger ringen, ook coper draat van verscheyde dikte, tegens Amber de grys, Elephantstande, Rhenoceros-horens, koorn, ossen, koeyen, schapen, geiten, hoenders, en andere levens middelen.

[3] Den Cap. jan jaques de grootste en aensiendykste van die gewesten, dien t galliot de Noord by syn eerste tocht, indē jaare 88. by gesontheit gelaten heeft, segt hy overledē te zyn. In de Bhay de la Goavolgens zyn voorgeven ontlasten sigh vier rivieren 1. Machiavan, 2. Tembe, 3. Matos 4. Mamez. De laaste soude de grootste zyn dewelke hy te meermalen met een schuytjen op 60. mylē landewaerts in bevaaren heeft.

[4] Int op varen van die rivier passeerdinen voorby t' Eyland Xiphin, t welk de portugiesen terwylse daar handelen bewoonen, op t welk zy ook een kerk hebben daar nae ontmoet men le Bombo, een plaats, alwaar de portugiesen, alse jaarlyx comen, om te handelen, so wel, als opt eyland Xiphin een coopma[n] laten.

[5] Verders comt men tot een plaats Licondama geheten; alwaar de portugiese mede een coopman plaatsen.

[6] De 4. post is Macanda, daarse ook een coopma[n] leggen.

56 Chaiklin, 'Simian Amphibians', 244. On the process of exoticisation as removal and decontextualisation followed by recontextualisation in the target language of the new place, see Peter Mason, *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 2-3.

[7] De 5. is Mamez daar sig all mede een coopma[n] onthoud ende dese plaats geeft den naam aen de river.

[8] De 6. post is, Intoubounga, daar hy Nicolaes segt t' elkens syn verblyf gehad te hebben, en noyd hoger geweest te zyn, also verder op de rivier niet vaarbaar is, zynde deselve smal en snellopend, sulcx men van Intoubounga na Xiphin in drie etmalen komē kan, zynde 60. mylen van malkanderen geleyen.

[9] Hy seght hy tegens Indisch linnen, gesorteerde coralen, en andere snuysteren, goud geruyld te hebben ent hoogste op een reys 33. pondt, dat seer goed, en volgens zyn voorgeven van 24 carattē was.

[10] Hy seght die voorsienigheet altoos gebruykt te hebben, van eenige koebeesten, in syn reys van Xiphin na Intoubounga op te kopen, en deselve ter voors. plaats gecomen zynde te slaghten, en by kleyne stukjes aen de arme luydē te verkopenwelke geen vee besitten, tegens brokjes goud te verruylen, en daar by syn beste rekening gevondē te hebben; aengesien beyder zyds geen gewicht gebruijkt wierd.

[11] Tusschen t' land van Cuama en Soffala, seght hy een plaats gelegen te zyn Molomoni, off punta de la salud genaamt, welkers Con. Iubana, en syn land piliao geheten is.

[12] De portugiesen bekomen hier veel slaaven, amberdegrys, eleph-tanden etc.

[13] Dertigh dag reysens landwaars in light t' lant Simboa wiens Con. Sangacatto gen[eraal?] is. Den Con. va[n] portugal heeft daar een vaste factorie, en handelt daar met baftas, slavekleedjes, en ander gemeen Indischlinnen tegens goud, t' welk hy langs de rivier Sena na Mosambique Hy seght 2. togten over land van Molomini nae Simbao, d' eerste met 20, en de laatste met 5. dienstboden gedaan te hebben, sonder enigh gevaar van quaad volk te loopen.

[14] Den Con. van portug. heeft een fortresse int land van Simbao, en daar in een besetting van 30. soldaten, dese vesting is Iugome genaemt, bestaat uyt een enkele aerde wall sonder gragt, leght in een vlak-land, heeft geen grof geschul, t'geweer bestaat in musquetten, degens en piquen: daar is een kerkjen St. Sebastiae[n] toegewydt, en van 5. munnuke[n] bediend.

[15] D. Francisio Bayau, gebore[n] portugies commandeerde voor 4. jaaren binnen dese vesting, se is 12. dag reysens van de Hoofstad Mamboni gelegen, alwaar sigh den Con. Sangacatto onthoud; t' is een magtig Heer, ryk in volk en goud, syn ondersate[n] klede[n] haar allemaal int blaauw, en swart Indisch linnen, t'welk haar de portugese[n], mitsg[ade]rs soud, tegens goud vercopen.

[16] De portugiesen brengen daar ook gesoute en gedrooghde vis, die daar gewild is.

[17] Den Con. van port. houd den gantsen handel aen hem selfs; sulix dat geen particulier t' minste van uytheem se waaren daar magh verkopen.

[18] De coopmanschappen, welke de Con. van portug. nae Simboa sent, worden tot Mosambique ingescheept en daar van daan nae kizmani versonden, en daar van daen met boots de rivier op na Sena en so voorts nae lange: alwaar se gelost, en daer van daen door slave[n] eerst nae Manique voorts nae Gombe, daar van daen nae Kaya, en eyndelyk tot Sangacatto gedrage[n] worden. Het goud is daarin sulke[n] overvloed, dat se het selve ongewoogen in clompen en staafs gewys tegens de voorn. coopmanschappen verreylen.

[19] Haar huys-raad als kandelaars, handbeckens, schotels, bekers en wes meer is uyt enkel gout en silver gemaakt.

[20] Haar stoelen syn met platen van louter goud overtrocken, en de huysraad, dien de portugiesn [portugiesen] in Mosambique uyt tin off koper hebben bestaet by haar uyt goud of silver, sy weten van geen perlen, diamante[n] off enigh edel gesteenten.

[21] Haar huysen zyn uyt houdt gemaakt, en met reed bedekt, door de bank kleyn en niet hoog; daar valt geen klin nog gebaeken steen; haar eergen [oergen?] bestaan uyt enkel sand uyt dewelke en uyt de vlakke grond, sy t goud en silver staafs gewys en dik als tabaxpypen, en sporten van gemeene stoele[n] graven.

[22] Mannen en vrouwen kleden haar op eenerlei wys met Indisch-linnen, en door de bank met Basta, nemende eerst een stuk t' welk sy eerst om haar middel lyf vastmaken daer na nayen zy twee stucken van t' selve linnen aen malkanderen [?] en hangen dat over haar schouders, en bedecken haar daar mede tot benede[n] de knyen.

[23] Haar Con. Sangacatto gaat gekleet als een portugies, spreckt ook die taal, dewelke hem s' Kon. van portugal opperhoofd in Simbao geleerd heeft, zynde genaamd Emanuel Pereira.

[24] De Con. Sangacatto heeft eytlyke 100. bywyven, syn onderdanen neemen ook meer dan een vrouw, sommige 2, 3, en 4. ook meer, na datse van vermogen zyn.

[25] Den Con. heeft 3. sonen, die lesen en schryven kunnen.

[26] Haar God, noemen se Missimos, diense aenbidden en groote eer bewysen, plegende haar Gods-dienst in bosseken.

[27] Op haar bruyloften maken zy haar lustig vrolyk, eten en drinken waeker; singen en springe[n] niet weynig, onder t geluyd van houte trompetten en trommels.

[28] Als iemand van haar in overspel bevonde[n] werd, so word man en vrouw de keel affgesneden.

[29] Dieven en moordenaars werde[n] ook op de selfde wys per doodt gebraght.

[30] Als sy ten oorlog voeren sy pyl en boog, pyk off assagay en een sweerd.

[31] Sy gaan alle te voet, ryen niet paard, hoewel haar land vol wilde paarde[n] is.

[32] Daar zyn ook in de wildernissen veel elephanten, buffels, renoceros, hartebeesten, varkens, leeuwe[n] en tygers. daar souden ook een slag van paarde[n] zyn die twee horen hebben en seer sterk loopen.

[33] Daar vallen ook seer veel struys-vogels.

[34] Drie dag-reysens noordelyk van Cabo Corientes legt een rivier gen[aam]t Nianbani, de portugiese[n] van Mosambique bevaren deselve met allerley vaartuyg, en handele[n] daar met koper, Indisch-linnen en coral, tegens slaven, amber de grys en elephants tanden etc.

[35] De Haven hiet Malinge; t' land Niangombe; daar zyn drie Conigen 1. Thembe. 2. Chamba. 3. Lanposse. Hun land is seer volk en veeryk, daar valt geen extr. maar veel houd gewas bequaa[m] tot huys en scheeps timmereng. Wasch is er in overvloedt; een os off koey kost 2.a.3 kopere armringen.

[36] De portuguese[n] hebben op de river Sena twee vestingen, drieven daar groten handel, en zyn daar meerder en sterker in getal dan tot Mosambique.

[37] Voor een stuk Indisch-linnen koopmen op de rivier Niobani voorsch. een slaaf, en na dat hy oud kloek en sterk is, ook voor een d. stucken.

[38] Hy verhaald, dat voor weynigh tydt 50. geboren portugiesen men te min 600. Caffers een tocht in lant van Niemba, en wel 20. dagh reysens noordtlyk van de rivier Sena deden; ten eynde om daar van dan een goed gedeelte goud af te halen; maar dat de portug. voorsch. mitsgaders de kaffers ten meeste[n] dele, waar onder ook syn broeder, door den land-aard, dient an geen moed ontbreckt, vermoord wierden.

[39] Dog een 2de tocht geluckte haar beter; sul[l]en sy belade[n] met goud weder keerden; t welk hy voorgeeft in de velde en weyden gesien te hebben, pyramyds gewys en hoger dan een man opreyken kan, uyt de grond groeyen; zynde t' selve op veel plaatsen duker [dikker?], dan 2. mannen te gelyk soude[n] omvademen konnen; en soude hy gesien hebben, dat syn Cap. een deser goude piriemiden met een touwmat om desselfs dukte, aen den Gouvern. tot Mosambique te vertonen.

[40] En eyndelyk verhaalt hy omtrent Caba Corrientes an land en in zee gesien te hebbe[n] seker gediertens, de meerminnen niet ongelyk, omtrent 12. voeten, min off meer groot, en dik na gelangen, hebbende t' hooft als een varken, en t boven lyf als een mensche; d' armen als de vlerken van een schildpad, ent onderlyf een staart; also een visch: hy heeft se te meermale[n] hore[n] fluyten; nog geen ander geluid maken; onder deselve zyn man en vrouw en haar schamelheydt, als die van menschen; zyn rood-aghtig van couleur, en haar vleesch is dat van de beesten gelyk en niet de visschen; zy hebben 4. slag-tanden in den bek, twee boven, en soo veel ander ter langte van een span; dog steken maar 2. vinger breed uyt de kinnebaiken. Sy asen opt landt, vallen seer schuw voor menschen, de voorsch. tanden werde[n] seer medicinael en goed voort podagra en andere qualen te zyn, kosten op Mosambique groot geldt.

[41] De portugysen zyn thans met alle de omleggend natien in een heeten oorlog.

APPENDIX 2: English Translation and Annotation

[1] [Heading:] Account of Nic[olao] Almede, free black of Mozambique, 35 years of age, an enrolled sailor aboard the English ship 'John and Mary' lying in the harbour, given in person at the Cape of Good Hope on 8 February 1690 by order of His Excellency, Commander Simon van der Stel.

[2] He told of having made eight different journeys from Mozambique to the rivers of Delagoa⁵⁷ and Mamez⁵⁸ with a small ship of 100 lasts, and there trading in slave clothes and other Indian linen garments, together with fine red coral, copper neck, arm and finger rings, and copper thread of different thicknesses, in return for ambergris, elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, grain, oxen, cattle, sheep, goats, fowl, and other foodstuffs.

⁵⁷ Delagoa Bay, now Maputo Bay.

⁵⁸ Apparently a reference to what is now called the Rio Inkomati.

[3] The Cap. Jan Jacques: the greatest and most important of these regions, to which the galliot⁵⁹ 'De Noord' left in his first voyage, in 1688, in good health; he says he has died.⁶⁰ In Delagoa Bay, according to his account, four rivers enter: 1. Machiavan, 2. Tembe, 3. Matos, 4. Mamez.⁶¹ The last would be the largest, which he several times with a small barge sailed up as far as 60 miles inland.

[4] In sailing up the river one travels past the island Xiphin,⁶² where the Portuguese have settled to carry on their trade, on which they have also built a church. Thereafter people come to the Bombo, a place where the Portuguese, since they come every year to trade, have also, as on the island of Xiphin, set up a merchant.

[5] Further on you come to a place called Licondama,⁶³ where the Portuguese have also stationed a merchant.

[6] The 4th post is Macanda,⁶⁴ where they also leave a merchant.

[7] The 5th is Mamez, where there is also a merchant settled, and this place gives its name to the river.

[8] The 6th post is Intoubounga, where he, Nicolao, says that he had to stay and go no higher, as further up the river is not navigable, becoming very narrow and fast running, so that people can get from Intoubounga [down] to Xiphin in three days.⁶⁵ It lies 60 miles from the first place.⁶⁶

[9] He says that for Indian cloth, coral, and other baubles he acquired pieces of gold, at the most 33 pounds on one trip, that was very good, and afterwards it was valued at 24 carats.

[10] He says that he always took the opportunity to buy any cows on his trip from Xiphin to Intoubounga, and to slaughter the same at the latter place, and to exchange them in small pieces with the poor people who have no cattle in return for gold grains [? *brokjes goud*]; by this he has found things to his best advantage, because neither side made use of weights.

[11] Between the land of Cuama⁶⁷ and Soffala, he says there is a place called Molomoni, also called the 'punta de la salud', where King Iubana is, and his land is called 'piliao'.

[12] De Portuguese here acquire many slaves, ambergris, elephant tusks, etc.

[13] Thirty days' travel inland lies the land of Simboa where King Sangacatto is the general.⁶⁸ The King of Portugal has an established factory there, and trades there with baftas,⁶⁹ slave clothes, and other kinds of Indian cloth in turn for gold, which he [sends] along the river Sena to Mozambique. He says he made two journeys overland

59 A small flat-bottomed boat used in coastal trade.

60 This is a confusing passage, but apparently it reports that Almede thinks that Jan Jacques, who captained a Dutch ship sent to the region, has died. Possibly it means that the ship itself came to a bad end.

61 The four rivers are now called Maputo, Tembe, Matola, and Inkomati.

62 Now called Xefina Pequena.

63 The fifth letter has been corrected in the original, but is uncertain. Possibly 'Licoadama'.

64 Possibly modern Manhica.

65 Perhaps where a road now crosses the Inkomati, above which is a dam that creates a large reservoir.

66 That is, the entrance to the bay.

67 The Zambezi river.

68 This would appear to be a version of the modern name Changamire, since 'Sanga' and 'Changa' are likely to be different spellings of the same pronunciation. If the Dutch abbreviation 'gen.' indeed means '*generaal*', then the identification is even more likely.

69 Cotton textiles from India.

on foot from Molomoni to Simbao,⁷⁰ the first with 20 servants [porters?], the last with 5, without any danger from evil people.

[14] The King of Portugal has a fortress in the country of Simbao, and there keeps a contingent of 30 soldiers. This fort is called Iugome. It is surrounded by a single earth wall without a moat, lies on a level field, and has no big guns: the arms are muskets, swords, and pikes. There is a church dedicated to St. Sebastian, served by 5 monks.

[15] One Francisio Bayau,⁷¹ born in Portugal, commanded the fort for 4 years. It is 12 days' travel from the headquarters of Mamboni,⁷² which is also held by King Sangacatto. He is a powerful lord, rich in people and gold. His subjects all clothe themselves in blue and black Indian linen, which the Portuguese sell here, together with salt, in return for gold.

[16] The Portuguese bring there also salted and dried fish, which is sought after there.

[17] The King of Portugal keeps the whole of the trade to himself, so that no private person can sell anything except secretly.

[18] The trade which the King of Portugal sends to Simboa is shipped from Mozambique, and from there sent on to Kizmani, and from there with boats sent up the river to Sena and so forth depending on where they are unloaded. There [at Sena] they are unloaded and from there they [the goods] are carried by slaves first to Manique⁷³ onward to Gombe, and from there to Kaya,⁷⁴ and finally to Sangacatto. The gold there is so abundant that they exchange the aforementioned goods for unweighed lumps and bars.

[19] Their household goods, such as candlesticks, hand basins, plates, cups and so forth are made of gold and silver.

[20] Their seats are covered with plates of pure gold, and the kinds of household things that in Mozambique the Portuguese have in tin or copper are here made of gold or silver. They know of no pearls, diamonds, or other precious stones.

[21] Their houses are made of wood, and covered with reeds [thatch], with small and not high walls. They use no tile or stone hearths [? *geen klin nog gebaeken steen*]. Their riches [? *eergen*] come only out of the sand, and from the flat ground, from which they dig gold and silver in bars heavy and thick as tobacco pipes and the rungs of an ordinary chair.

[22] Men and women dress themselves alike in Indian linen, and over their waist with Basta, taking first a piece which they secure around their middle and then sewing two pieces of the same linen on each other and hanging that over their shoulders, and covering themselves with that to beneath the knees.

70 Zimbao.

71 Perhaps a reference to Sisnando Dias Bayão, known as one of the Portuguese headmen of the mid-seventeenth century, or one of his descendants.

72 On some contemporary maps it is placed by Cape St. Sebastian, just south of Sofala.

73 Manica.

74 A place otherwise spelled Caia, Caya, or Kaia east of Sena, more recently called Chingadea.

[23] Their King Sangacatto goes dressed like a Portuguese, and also speaks their language, which the King of Portugal's representative in Simbao taught him. He is named Emanuel Pereira.

[24] King Sangacatto has approximately 100 concubines; his subjects also take more than one woman, some 2, 3, and 4, even more, as their wealth allows.

[25] The king has 3 sons; they can read and write.

[26] They serve their god, which they call Missimos, doing him great honour, offering their religious services in the woods.

[27] They celebrate their marriages with joyful fun, eating and drinking heavily. They sing and dance not a little to the sound of wooden trumpets and drums.

[28] If anyone of them is found to have committed adultery, both the man and the woman are killed; their throats are cut.

[29] Thieves and murderers are also brought to death in the same way.

[30] When they fight a war, they use bows and arrows, pikes or *assegai* and a sword.

[31] They all go on foot, not riding horses, although their land is full of wild horses.

[32] Also in the wilderness there are many elephants, buffaloes, rhinoceros, hartebeests, pigs, lions and tigers. There is also a kind of horse with two long horns that runs very fast.

[33] There one also comes across many ostriches.

[34] Three days' journey north from Cape Corientes⁷⁵ lies the river called Nianbani.⁷⁶ The Portuguese from Mozambique sail there themselves with all kinds of cargo, and trade with copper, Indian linen, and coral, for slaves, ambergris, elephants tusks, etc.

[35] The port is called Malinge.⁷⁷ The country is called Niangombe. There are three kings: 1. Thembe, 2. Chamba, and 3. Lanposse.⁷⁸ Their land is populous and rich in cattle. There is found no *extr.* but lots of wood that is good for building houses and ships. Wax is there in abundance. An ox or cow costs 2 to 3 copper armbands.

[36] The Portuguese have up the river [at] Sena two settlements, where they drive a great trade, and they are there more numerous and stronger in number than in Mozambique.

[37] For a piece of Indian linen, merchants on the river Niobani [earlier spelled 'Nianbani'] can purchase a slave, and if he is an old man and naked, even for a penny.

[38] He said that for a little time 50 Portuguese men and at least 600 Kaffers made an expedition to the land of Niemba, more than 20 days' journey north of the river Sena. The result of this was hauling away of a good deal of gold, but that the Portuguese thereby upset the Kaffers a great deal, among whom also his brother, [who] because of the requirement served with unbreakable courage, was murdered.

75 The easternmost point north of Delagoa Bay.

76 Possibly the Limpopo.

77 Possibly Linde.

78 Probably referring to Tembe, Chemba, and a place not yet identified.

[39] However, a second journey fared better. They came away loaded with gold, which he pretends to have seen in the field and pastures: heavy pyramids piled higher than a man can calculate rising out of the ground. In several places they were thicker than 2 men could reach around, and he has seen that his Captain wrapped up one of these gold pyramids in a rope rug in order to show it to the Governor of Mozambique.

[40] And the last thing he reported [is] about having seen many animals around Caba Corientes on land and in the sea, not unlike mermaids, about 12 feet long, more or less, and with a girth proportionate to their height, having a head like a pig, an upper body like a man, flippers like a turtle's, and the lower part of their body with a tail like a fish. He has many times heard them whistle, but they make no other sound. Both the males and females had genitals like humans. They were reddish in color and their meat is like animals rather than fish. They have four tusks in their mouths, the two above almost as long as a span but the ones below sticking out only two fingers long. They eat on land but are very shy of humans. The aforesaid teeth are excellent medicines and are good for gout and other complaints, so in Mozambique they cost a great deal of money.

[41] The Portuguese are now in a hot war with all the surrounding nations.