Attempts by Portugal to control the supply of gold mined on the West African Gold Coast were regulated by detailed sets of royal instructions. One of these was the Regimento of 1529 which outlined the methods used to manipulate the price paid for gold. The fortress of Mina, built in 1481 and stoutly defended until the Dutch captured it in 1637, was the key trading factory in which gold was bought in exchange for textiles, ornamental jewellery and brassware. The Portuguese also sold slave labourers to the Akan gold merchants and mine owners. It is thought possible that Christopher Columbus may have visited Mina while in Portuguese service and before he set out to explore the gold-mining opportunities of the Caribbean on behalf of Castile. This article first appeared in the Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana (Vol. 11, 1971).

In 1529 the Portuguese had been trading at Elmina for 58 years. They had become an established part of the economic structure of West Africa. This article proposes to examine briefly the commercial activities of the Portuguese and the organisation of their trade. The information is derived from the Regimento da Mina, a 90-page handbook drawn up in 1529 by the King of Portugal. A copy of the Regimento can be seen in the Furley Collection at the Balme Library in Legon.¹ It gives detailed instructions about trading procedure to the captain and factor of the City of São Jorge da Mina, later known as Elmina Castle. Three years later a second section was added to the Regimento concerning the trade between Mina and the Island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. Since the document is in Portuguese it is hoped that the details given here will be of special interest to English-speaking historians of Ghana wishing to gain a clearer picture of the country’s trade in the early sixteenth century.

In 1529 Mina was inhabited by 56 Portuguese citizens each appointed by the crown and each receiving a royal salary. The ruler of this small fortress-city was the captain, a man of substantial importance who received an annual salary of 800 milreis² and was attended by 10 personal servants. The captain’s main strength derived from his wide judicial powers; he could try all civil and criminal cases in both Mina and Axim, whether they involved Portuguese
or Africans. There was no appeal from his decisions except where a sentence of death, or the cutting off of a hand, was passed on a senior official or chief; such cases were to be sent to the king in Portugal for confirmation. A secret provision also required confirmation of severe sentences passed on servants of the royal household who went out to Mina.

The second most important person in the castle was the factor whose task was the management of the warehouse. He had four personal employees to help with the heavy work and two highly-paid clerks to keep the books and records. Next in seniority to the factor was the surgeon who cared for the health of the garrison. He was assisted by a barber, who was also responsible for bleeding patients, a male nurse and an apothecary who dispensed medicines which were both imported from Portugal and obtained from the herbalists in the village. Health was a constant preoccupation of the Portuguese at Mina. Mortality from malaria was high and the regulations laid down in detail the line of succession in the event of one or more officers’ dying. The citizens also greatly feared the plague which might be brought in by ship. Because of the unhealthy conditions a tour of duty in Mina was limited to two years.

Next to the problem of medical survival was the problem of military survival. The defence of the castle was the joint responsibility of all the citizens, but especially of the two artillery men and the 13 salaried residents. These residents had no special duties to perform but were allowed to live in Mina and to draw their salary on condition that they were equipped with helmets, lances, swords and breastplates. The captain was to maintain a supply of guns, cross-bows and shields for issue in times of crisis. During a siege he was even permitted to draw money from gold reserves in the castle coffers to pay the costs of defence. From 1529 it became customary for the persons awarded the privilege of two years residence at Mina to be servants of the royal household.

One of the problems of Mina was the supply of food. The superintendent of provisions was a senior castle official who kept all food under lock and key. The staple of the Portuguese diet was bread. Every month the superintendent entrusted a supply of flour to the master baker, who employed four Portuguese women to knead and bake the bread. These women received a regular salary and were assisted by four other Portuguese women who received their keep but no pay unless a vacancy occurred in one of the four salaried positions. When the bread was baked four rolls were issued