

Volume I
The Rise of the Gold Standard, 1660-1819

1735

Excerpts from John Atkins' account of his travels along the west coast of Africa, in the West Indies, and in Brazil in the early eighteenth century. Atkins travelled as a Royal Navy Surgeon aboard His Majesty's Ships *The Swallow* and *Weymouth*, and his travelogue includes a description of the various kinds of gold mined and traded on the Gold Coast of Guinea.

The Gold of *Guinea* is mostly traded for at the *Gold Coast* (thence denominated) and is either *in Fetish*, *in Lump*, or *in Dust*.

The *Fetish-Gold* is that which the *Negroes* cast into various Shapes, and wear as Ornaments at their Ears, Arms, and Legs, but chiefly at their Head, entangled very dextrously in the Wool; and it is so called, from some Superstition (we do not well understand) in the Form, or in their Application and Use, commonly mixed with some baser Metal, to be judged of by the Touch-Stone, and skill of the Buyer you employ.

The *Lump*, or Rock Gold, is in pieces of different weights, pretended to be brought out of Mines. I saw one of these which Mr. *Phips* had at *Cape Corso*, weighing thirty Ounces; they are always suspected to be artificial, and by the cunning Fellows in Trade, cast so, to hide some baser mixture of Silver, Copper or Brass: wherefore it is not safe trusting to the antique, but to cut or run it for satisfaction.

Dust Gold is the common Traffick, the best comes hither from the neighbouring inland Kingdoms of *Dinkira*, *Akim*, and *Arcana*, and is got (we are told) out of the River-Sands. *Tagus* in *Portugal* was once so famed;

Omnis arena Tagi, quodque in mare volvitur aurum. Juvenal. Satir. 3.

The Natives dig Pits nigh the Water-falls of Mountains abounding with this Metal; the Ponderosity of their Particles sinking them there: and then with incredible Pains and Industry, they wash the Earth and Sand in Trays and Vessels till it swims off, and they espy at bottom now and then two or three shining Grains of Gold that pays them (without great Fortune) only as Labourers.

This is the most probable Account, how they come by their Gold on this Coast: For if it were through Mines, and from Kingdoms so nearly bordering on our Factories as *Arcana* (whence the best and purest) it would long since, I imagine, have tempted us, or the *Dutch* to have dispossessed the Natives, and worked them solely to our own use.

Gold Dust is not gathered at *any* part of the same River, it's said, but at convenient Spots nearest the Mountains; because when too distant from the Floods that wash through Mines, their weight buries them too deep, or disperses their Particles too widely, to answer the Labour of Searching.

Masters of Ships customarily hire a Native, at so much *per* month, for this part of the Trade; he has a quicker sight at knowing, and by Practice, readier at separating the drossy and false Gold, with which the true has ever some Mixture, to impose on unskilful People.

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This impure Stuff is called *Crackra*, a Pin or brass Dust, current upon the Gold Coast among themselves, but is a gross Cheat in Traffick, some of it is very bad.

The way to separate, is by copper Blow-pans, shaped like Fire-Shovels; into this your Gold-taker throws three or four Ounces at a time, and by gently tossing, and blowing upon it, the lightest being the false, flies off: the larger Grains he discriminates by his sight, and separates by his Fingers with a wonderful dexterity.

Their way of counting Gold at the Factories, is by Ounces, Bendees, and Marks, lesser are Dumbays, and Doccys, or Toccus; 12 of this, or 24 of that, make an *Accy*, (about 5s)

All reserve it in Leather Pouches, and at *London*, the Gold-Smith runs it down in a Crucible [i.e., an earthenware vessel capable of bearing intense heat] at two pence *per* Ounce; it's kept dissolved for the Evaporation of Dross, (perhaps one Ounce in a hundred) and then cast into a solid Bar; a Chip from it he send to the Assay-master in the *Tower*, who by his Office is Judge, and on a small Fee, signs back a Note of it's Value, that is, how much above, or under Sterling; and so amounts to a Shilling or two over or under 4*l.* a Troy Ounce.

Source: Atkins, 1970, pp. 183-186.