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Postcolonial or Not? West Africa in the Pre-Atlantic and Atlantic Worlds

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Archaeological Views of the Past

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Archaeological Views of the Past

- 1 Much of my own entrée into the African past has been through the archaeological record. Archaeology has always been closely allied with African history, a disciplinary symbiosis that is not shared in many other world areas. My research and that of the Syracuse archaeology program has focused on the impacts of European contact, the Atlantic slave trade, and the integration of Africa into an increasingly Eurocentric global economy.¹ Archaeology is not tangential to an understanding of the African Atlantic. It is, in fact, archaeology that provides the primary means of revealing the transformations that occurred in African societies over the past 500 years. Archaeology, especially archaeological practice that documents variation, is well suited to revealing aspects of the past that do not fit into dominant narratives. Archaeological research has uncovered the varied nature of the African societies that participated in the Atlantic exchanges, challenging narratives that tend to view African societies as a single entity. Africa is, rather, revealed as a place with difference, complex meanings, and varied power relations, some of which were exploited by arriving Europeans. While my work has drawn on archaeology, my methodological grounding has been interdisciplinary in vantage. This perspective has been widely articulated by Africanists.² My research further utilizes an approach to documentary source material that underscores the careful translation and contextualization of the sources represented.³
- 2 Archaeological data make it clear that the Atlantic era was a period of dramatic change in the African past.⁴ Nevertheless, it is only relatively recently that archaeological research, as well as theoretical and methodological insights, has allowed an archaeology of Atlantic Africa to be realized. To a large extent the potential of archaeology to contribute to the understanding of Atlantic Africa was still unrealized if not unrecognized four decades ago. Development of regional chronologies and assessment of changes in settlement patterns that would reveal the transformations in African societies during the period of the Atlantic world were as yet uncharted. More importantly, even in cases where work had been undertaken on African archaeological sites of the relevant time period they had often not been approached or contextualized with an Atlantic perspective in mind. Emphasis was rather placed on the development

of basic archaeological sequences, delineation of artistic traditions, the tracing of ethnic and cultural origins, or particularistic description.

- 3 There were beginnings. In particular, many of the European forts and castles in West Africa were located and mapped during the 1940s and 50s. This included early work on Gorée Island in Senegal, James Island in The Gambia, and Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone Estuary.⁵ The majority of work was, however, undertaken in Ghana, where the greatest number of forts and outposts had been established. Yet, while now increasingly seen as iconic of the Atlantic era, the early studies of European forts were largely descriptive; structural histories undertaken within the context of restoration work. The research foci, however, were much more about the European forts than the enslaved Africans who were confined in them. The outposts have often been left unsituated within the wider African landscape and the sociopolitical contexts of which they were part. The associated artifactual material from the forts was virtually unreported.⁶ Sadly some of the recent work on these sites has remained particularistic and limited in scope, affording little insight into the fort's inhabitants as players in the Atlantic exchange.⁷ Doig Simmonds' limited excavations in Cape Coast Castle were unique in focusing specifically on the slaves' living conditions.⁸ The European forts and castles, the most tangible monuments to Africa's intersection with the Atlantic world, have only emerged as symbols for Africans in the Diaspora in the past few decades.⁹ They stand as monuments to European capitalism, colonial intrusion, and narratives that frame the African past in terms of European contact and colonization.
- 4 While initial archaeological research in West Africa was dominated by studies of the Stone and Iron ages, there was increasing research into the more recent past and in the vast hinterlands beyond the coastal margins, though to a large extent this was not undertaken with the impacts of the Atlantic World in mind.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the archaeologists of the newly independent nations of the 1960s placed emphasis on the archaeological records of the component populations.¹¹ In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah specifically saw archaeology both as a means of nation building and as a way of furthering pan-Africanism. The National Museum of a newly independent Ghana included displays of archaeological material from across Africa, as well as Ghana. The 1960s and 70s saw increasing work by expatriate researchers in many areas, as well as the continued expansion of archaeology programs in African universities and research institutes. To a large extent these institutions were partially if not fully staffed by African scholars by the early 1980s. By this time there were three times the number of archaeologists working in Africa as there had been two decades before. There was, indeed, reason to say that the pioneering era had passed and African archaeology had "come of age".¹² The tempo and direction of work continued to increase during the 1980s. In this respect, the decades between the mid-1980s and the present might be seen as the beginning of a golden age of the archaeology of Atlantic Africa, akin to the coming of age of precolonial African history in the 1960s and 1970s. This period has witnessed the start of many projects, some still underway, in Nigeria, the Senegambia, Ghana, Benin, Cameroun, Mali, Chad and other areas.¹³ As was the case with the earlier growth of African history, the archaeological research undertaken in the past three decades is made all the more striking by the dramatic increase in the amount of research undertaken by African scholars.¹⁴ Yet this burgeoning of research is more the case in some areas than others. While archaeological chronologies for some regions have been well established and research has been extended into many new areas, much

of the research has continued to concentrate in the countries where early colonial research centres had been established.

- 5 These decades also witnessed the development of historical archaeology as a discipline in the Americas, particularly the United States. The foci and objectives of Americanist historical archaeology have varied, ranging in view from being an ancillary of historical study, to the study of the modern world, particularly the expansion of European capitalism.¹⁵ An important contribution of these studies has also been in revealing the lifeways of peoples within colonial populations often marginalized or unmentioned in written documents, especially enslaved Africans.¹⁶ These studies reflect substantive research, as well as varied theoretical and interpretive vantage. However, since its inception American historical archaeology has retained a pervasive focus on sites associated with the European presence – colonial settlements, forts, missions, plantations, military, and trading sites – and the indigene communities directly associated with them, lesser attention being focused on Native American settlements of the wider hinterlands, these generally remaining the purview of prehistorians. While this Americanist perspective of historical archaeology has sometimes been employed with regard to Africa,¹⁷ to the extent the term has been used it has been more generally defined in terms of the presence of written source material, whether Arabic or European, and oral sources.¹⁸ The disciplinary concentration of American historical archaeology on capitalism and European expansion has been challenged by scholars working in Africa who see it as too limiting in terms of its stress on European expansion and associated documentary sources.¹⁹
- 6 In practice, the research foci of West African archaeology have increasingly shifted from an early focus on the archaeology of the Stone Age and Early Iron Age to the archaeological record of the more recent past. Notably, while this research often makes extensive use of archival and oral source material, it has often not been defined as historical archaeology by its practitioners. The trend is such that Holl has observed that in West Africa “Early and Middle Stone Age research is virtually extinct.”²⁰ The amount of data on the archaeological record of the post-fifteenth century period has, however, allowed for changes in artifact inventories, settlement patterns and associated sociopolitical changes, to be placed in context in a way that was previously impossible. These data provide both a context for the study of the African Diaspora and demonstrate the dramatic transformations that occurred in African societies during the Atlantic era.²¹ The parallel development of Diaspora archaeology and the archaeology of Atlantic Africa makes Akin Ogundiran’s and Toyin Falola’s²² recent volume bringing together contributions from both sides of the Atlantic particularly timely, signalling the emergence of a truly transatlantic archaeology. Foregrounding Africa and the African past will address some of the concerns that Africanists have long expressed with regard to the lack of engagement with African material that characterizes many archaeological studies of the African Diaspora.²³

NOTES

1. See DeCorse 1991, 2001a, 2001c, 2012. For work on the archaeology of Atlantic Africa by the Syracuse program see: Carr 2001; Chouin 2009; Cook 2012; Gijanto 2010; Horlings 2011; Kankpeyeng 2003; Pietruszka 2011, Richard 2007; Smith 2008; Spiers 2007; Swanepoel 2004.
2. E.g. Agbaje-Williams 1986; Andah 1995a, 1995b; Andah and Okpoku 1979; Ogundiran 2002; Posnansky 1969, 1975, 1994; Schmidt 1983; 1990, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Stahl 1994, 2001; Vansina et al 1964.
3. DeCorse and Chouin 2003. This is illustrated by the work of Robin Law, Adam Jones, Gerard Chouin, and the late Paul E. H. Hair (e.g. Barbot 1992; Chouin 2011; De Marees 1987; Jones 1986, 1987).
4. See DeCorse 1991, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c. The question of impact, or lack of it, has received significant attention from historians (e.g. Fage 1969; Lovejoy 1989; Manning 1990; Rodney 1966; Wrigley 1971).
5. DeCorse 2008a; 2010; Lawrence 1963; Posnansky and DeCorse 1986: 5–6. The first explicit mention of the Atlantic system in French literature was by Raymond Mauny in the 1960s (Holl 2009: 135).
6. In fact, it appears that at least in some cases archaeological deposits were intentionally removed to facilitate mapping.
7. See comments by Holl 2009: 140–141.
8. Simmonds 1973.
9. Bunce Island in Sierra Leone may have been the first European fort in West Africa to be proposed as a monument to the slave trade. In 1922, J. B. Chinsman suggested that the City Council of Freetown purchase the island from the British Colonial government “so that its caves and tombstones could be preserved as historical monuments of the slave trade” (quoted in Wyse 1990: 24; also see DeCorse 2008b). Nothing appears to have been done and efforts to preserve the site are still underway. Since the 1990s, other sites such as Goreé Island in Senegal, James Fort in the Gambia, Cape Coast and Elmina castles in Ghana, and Ouidah in Benin have increasingly been seen as places as memory for Africans in the Diaspora.
10. See DeCorse 1991; 2001b: 2–3.
11. Posnansky 1982; Holl 1995, 2009: 140–141.
12. Posnansky 1982, 2001.
13. See discussions and reviews in Andah 1982; Anquandah 1982; Atherton 1983; de Barros 1990; DeCorse 2001a; Kense 1990; Holl 1995, 2009; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012; Ogundiran 2005; Posnansky 1970, 1975, 2001; Posnansky and DeCorse 1986.
14. The amount of research, particularly work by African doctoral students both in the United States and Africa is very impressive, especially with regard to Nigeria. The range of work cannot be fully surveyed here. For examples of research focused on sites of the last five hundred years undertaken during this period see: Adediran 1980; Agbaje-

Williams 1983; Agorsah 1983, 1985, 2003; Akinjogbin 1992; Alabi 1996; Aleru 1993; Andah and Akpobasa 1996; Anquandah 1985; Apoh 2008; Aremu 1990; Bellis 1972, 1982; Boachie-Ansah 1986; Bredwa-Mensah 1996, 2002, 2004; Chouin 2002, 2008; Chouin and DeCorse 2010; Connah 1975; Cruz 2003; David et al 1988; David & Sterner 1999; de Barros 1985, 1988; DeCorse 1980, 1989, 1993, 2001c; DeCorse and Spiers 2009; Effah-Gyamfi 1979, 1985; Eyo 1974; Gavua 2000; Gosselain 2000; Gosselain et al 1996; Goucher 1981, 1984; Herbert and Goucher 1987; Hill 1970; Kelly 1997a, 1997b; Kense 1981; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1982; MacEachern 1993, 2001; Mayor 2010, 2011; Monroe 2003, 2007; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012; N'Dah 2009; Norman 2008; Oghuagha & Okpoku 1984; Ogundele 1990; Ogundiran 1990, 2000, 2002; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Posnansky 1987, 2004; Richard 2011; Shinnie and Kense 1989; Stahl 1994, 1999, 2001; Stahl and Cruz 1998; Sterner and David 1991; Swanepoel 2005; Thiaw 1999; Usman 1998.

15. Schuyler 1978; Orser 1996: 23–28. In one of the most widely read books on American historical archaeology, James Deetz noted a popular definition of historical archaeology as “the archaeology of the spread of European culture throughout the world since the fifteenth century and its impact on indigenous peoples” (Deetz 1977: 5). In fact, in wider, global perspective a variety of archaeological research focusing on pre- and post-fifteenth century periods ranging from classical to Medieval and Islamic archaeology make use of written sources and can be appropriately referred to as ‘historical archaeology’.

16. Yet if its potential was recognized, general acceptance of its contribution was not universal or quick in coming. In 1981 the Prime Minister of Jamaica could comment, with regard to Afro-Jamaican archaeology, that “the slaves had nothing so there was nothing to find” and further that tourists were “more interested in the tangible remains of the Spanish and the English such as their stone churches, sugar mills and plantation homes” quoted by Merrick Posnansky (2002: 46).

17. E.g. Robertshaw 2004: 376.

18. Africa has a long history of other ‘historical’ archaeologies, encompassing the archaeology of early Islamic settlements known through Arabic sources and Iron Age African history assessed through oral histories. As Behrens and Swanepoel (2008: 25) observe “If colonial contact, however broadly defined, delimits historical archaeology then much of Africa's past is left outside of history (prehistory), or rendered non-historical.” Also see Agbaje-Williams 1986; Behrens and Swanepoel 2008; DeCorse 1996, 1997, 2001b; Feerman 1993: 183; Hall 1997; Horton 1997; Reid and Lane 2004.

19. E.g. Agbaje-Williams 1976, 1986; DeCorse 1996, 2001b.

20. Holl 2009: 140.

21. DeCorse 1991, 2001a, 2001b; Posnansky 1984.

22. Ogundiran and Falola 2007.

23. DeCorse 1999; Hauser and DeCorse 2003; Kelly 2004; Posnansky 1984, 2002.