WEST AFRICA DURING THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Archaeological Perspectives

Edited by Christopher DeCorse
West Africa During the Atlantic Slave Trade
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The History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade
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The Archaeology of Atlantic Africa

Preface to the 2016 Edition
By Christopher R. DeCorse

Since the original publication of this volume, research on the archaeology of Africa in the Atlantic world has burgeoned. Nonetheless, the works represented here remain pivotal case studies in the archaeological examination of the West Africa during the Atlantic period. They are representative of a refocusing of research that has increasingly brought African archaeology to bear on the evaluation of the impacts that the Atlantic world and especially the slave trade had on African societies, and on the examination of the varied contexts from which enslaved Africans were taken. The era of the Atlantic slave trade is definitively demonstrated to have been a period of dramatic transformation in West African societies. The archaeological record delineates the expanding frontier of the Atlantic world, driven by the plantation economies of the Americas, and its intersections with earlier pre-Atlantic economies and the margins of the trans-Saharan trade. The studies also well illustrate the diverse nature of the contact settings represented and the varied nature of the changes that occurred in the African hinterlands far from the coastal enclaves of European trade. Equally important is the placement of these changes within the geographic scope and temporal depth of Africa’s deeper, pre-Atlantic past.

Many of the areas treated in this volume have remained the focus of ongoing research, which has provided a great deal of new information, as well as opened new avenues of research. A number of contributors to this volume have pointedly brought their research to bear on wider discussions, underscoring the relevance of African research to general archaeological method and theory. As observed in the Introduction, the vast majority of this research is inherently interdisciplinary, African and Africanist researchers long having integrated archival material, oral sources, and ethnographic data with studies of the archaeological record. Oral sources remain a key aspect of West African research, as European documentary sources afford scant information on the vast majority of West African interior until late in the second millennium AD. Notably, many of the sites of the African hinterland dating to the last five hundred years continue to produce very little in the way of European trade materials, even in archaeological contexts extending through the majority of the nineteenth century, thus providing poor indicators of the limits of Atlantic oriented trade networks and affording little in the way of chronology. This paucity of European trade materials is not an indication of the margins and impacts of European trade, but more likely a reflection of the nature of the trade materials represented; many of the key items of trade such as iron, cloth, metal goods—and slaves often having limited archaeological visibility.

Research in the Senegambia, surveyed in Chapter 2 by Susan McIntosh with contributions by Ibrahima Thiaw, has benefited from additional research by Thiaw that
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has underscored the complexity of population migrations, identity formation, and sociopolitical transformations in the coast and hinterlands of the Senegambia during the Atlantic period. This work can be usefully contrasted with François Richard's ongoing research on the Siin in west-central Senegal. A small coastal kingdom that was not a major supplier of slaves, Siin provides a counterpoint to developments in the larger, surrounding polities. Also of note is Thiaw's archaeological work on Gorée Island. A European slave trading entrepôt located 18 kilometers off the coast of Dakar, Gorée has emerged as an iconic image of the trade that brought millions of enslaved Africans to the Americas. Thiaw's research has afforded insight into everyday life in this early Afro-European community and its varied component populations.

Ghana has remained a center of archaeological research and is among the best archaeologically known regions of West Africa. Ann Stahl's long term project in Banda, located in central, western Ghana, discussed in Chapter 3, has produced an impressive range of publications that has afforded an increasingly nuanced view of the region's intersection with the Atlantic world. This work highlights the varied, often improvisational responses to the emerging Atlantic world and slavery, including the use of varied ritual practices. A great deal of research undertaken in other portions of Ghana is uncovered in this volume. This is regrettable as a great deal of the work undertaken has specifically focused on African sites of the Atlantic period, as well as excavations at European trade posts and plantation sites. Of particular note is the Central Region Project focusing on the Ghanaian Coast, which has specifically aimed at assessing the archaeological record of the second millennium AD. This long term project has charted the rise and fall of coastal polities from the pre-Atlantic period into the post-colonial era, and the varied ways in which these changes are preserved on the landscape and in the material record. Among the most significant outcomes of the project is the increasing evidence for sociopolitical complexity in the southern forest during the first and second millennia AD. Represented by substantial settlement sites, earthworks, and distinctive ceramics, these well settled agricultural communities undergirded the societies that were present on the Ghanaian coast when the Europeans arrived in the fifteenth century.

Philip de Barros' research on Bassar in the Togo hinterland (Chapter 4) still affords one of the best studies of indigenous West African iron production and its relation to state formation during the pre-Atlantic and Atlantic periods. Ongoing work by de Barros has provided a substantial amount of new data on iron working sites, including the collection of ethnoarchaeological data on production sites, bloom crushing mortars, and smithing ateliers in relation to settlements. These data have provided unique insight into iron production from the Early Iron Age into the post-colonial period. De Barros' work continues to reveal how slave trading impacted the Bassar polities and the movement of specialist iron workers. His future research is examining diet and mortuary practices within Bassar, as well as iron production and slag chemistry.

The work by Ken Kelly on the sites of Ouidah and Savi in the Republic of Bénin (reviewed in Chapter 5) has been the focus of additional research by Neil Norman, his research into
the archaeological record of the Kingdom of Hueda now spanning over two decades.\textsuperscript{15} Hueda, preceded by Allada, emerged as important intermediaries in the slave trade during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries through their respective control of the port towns of Jakin and Whydah. More recent work has included further study of the Huedan royal capital of Savi, but also of the wider sociocultural landscapes of which the settlement was part, charting the rise and demise of the polity within the context of an Atlantic focused trade. Research in Bénin’s interior by Cameron Monroe, Klaves Randsborg, and Didier Ndah has offered fresh insight into the past of societies in the deeper hinterland.\textsuperscript{16} Of particular interest is Monroe’s research on the Kingdom of Dahomey, which conquered Hueda and Allada in the eighteenth century. His archaeological work on the Abomey Plateau has revealed a series of Dahomean royal palaces that both expressed and enforced royal authority.

Portions of the areas of Nigeria and Cameroun discussed by Detlef Gronenborn (Chapter 6), Scott MacEachern (Chapter 7), and Augustin Holl (Chapter 8) have also been the focus of additional study. Collectively, these studies are all particularly interesting in their examination of the articulations of Islamic polities and populations with the emerging Atlantic economy in the Central Sudan and adjacent areas. Gronenborn’s and MacEachern’s focus is on the southern margins and hinterlands of the Lake Chad Basin. Incorporating portions of modern Nigeria and Cameroun, this region is notable as having been the focus of early Islamic states, the lineal descendants of which remain today. In Nigeria, new data on Takusheyi burials in the Bilad al-Sudan complement Gronenborn’s discussion of Kanen Bornu. Although they slightly precede the opening of the Atlantic slave trade, the burials and related archaeological and historical data on the region wonderfully illustrate how deeply embedded the region was in the Islamic world prior to the arrival of the Europeans on the West African coast.\textsuperscript{17} This provides rich counterpoint to the rippling effect of the expanding Atlantic economy seen in the southern savanna and forest. In his work in the Mandara Mountains of Cameroun, MacEachern has recently reassessed his earlier interpretations presented in this volume that viewed the Mandara cultural landscape as having been largely shaped by predatory slave raiding during the Atlantic period.\textsuperscript{18} More recent data has led him to complicate this model, integrating environmental change and the role of earlier, pre-Atlantic polities and social hierarchies in shaping the landscapes of the Atlantic period. This complicating narrative provides a useful frame for assessing some of Holl’s review of contrasting regions of Cameroun, as well as other contributions to this volume. In a different vein, Holl’s recent work more generally discusses the wider context of European expansion and the circumnavigation of Africa, its aftermath, and consequences for the continent.\textsuperscript{19}

Here it is important to underscore that great deal of research has been undertaken in many areas not covered in this volume.\textsuperscript{20} One of the major gaps is discussion of the archaeological record of southern Nigeria. This region has long been the focus of research and understanding of the culture history and sociopolitical developments in this area during the second millennium AD has become increasingly refined. Graham Connah’s seminal work on the archaeology of Benin City has been followed
by extensive research on the history and archaeology of the Yoruba. This research grounds the historically known polities of the region in the pre-Atlantic past and examines developments during the Atlantic period in terms of the indigenous sociopolitical processes. An equally regrettable omission from this volume is the lack of discussion of the extensive research that has been undertaken in in Mali. These wide-ranging areas present views of a deep and complex past that archaeology is in a unique position to reveal.

Unfortunately, while a great deal of new research has appeared, many gaps and lacunae remain. As observed in the Introduction to the original volume, the foci and tempo of archaeological research in West Africa has been dramatically uneven and this continues to be the case. Work in areas that have long established archaeological programs and institutional infrastructures such as Senegal, Mali, Ghana, and Nigeria has continued apace, while the pasts of Cabo Verde, Guinea Bissau, the Republic or Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Liberia remain very poorly known. This paucity of information has dramatic implications for the views of the past of these areas, as well as for researchers interested in the contexts from which enslaved Africans were taken. In the absence of additional information, constructions of the past only emerge through the fragmented lenses afforded by European documentary sources that are both temporally and spatially restricted.

Research is gradually emerging on some of these previously underrepresented regions. In the Gambia, ongoing research by Liza Gijanto has focused on the African communities associated with the European trading enclaves on James Island. There have also been important initiatives in the study of the history and archaeology of the southern portion of the upper Guinea coast. Work directed by Ken Kelly has focused on the Rio Pongo in the Republic of Guinea, while work to the south in the Sierra Leone Estuary under the auspices of the Syracuse University Archaeological Initiative for the Sierra Leone Estuary (AISLE) has provided insight into the British slave trading entrepôt on Bunce Island and the adjacent hinterlands. The research in both Guinea and Sierra Leone is particularly interesting as it highlights the dramatic transformations that occurred in Africa during the nineteenth century—a period that witnessed the expansion of slave trading in many regions, despite the move toward abolition and the passage of abolition legislation.

The information surveyed here remains crucial for the study of African diaspora populations. As Theresa Singleton underscores in Chapter 9, West African archaeology is of central importance to archaeologists examining the possibility of African cultural practices, traditions and technologies in the African diaspora. The emerging data from West Africa continues to reveal the complex contexts from which enslaved Africans were taken and the varied processes of enslavement. Research into the archaeology of West Africa during the slave trade and the African diaspora has been richly complemented by emerging research in other fields. A particularly notable area of research is the integration of historical, isotopic, and genetic data, as well as the archaeological studies, to untangle the complexity of diaspora populations. Another area of growing importance is the varied work on heritage and memory.
Yet, while there has been movement toward a pan-Atlantic dialogue, the paucity of data for many portions of West Africa remains a constraint. In addition, the potential of the available African data has in many instances not been fully realized by Americanist researchers of the African diaspora in terms of conceptual frames and methodological approaches employed. Studies of the archaeology of the African diaspora at times continue to lack appreciation of the complexity of the West African settings from which enslaved Africans were taken. Researchers continue to draw selectively from widely disparate analogues, at times with limited regard to the tremendous cultural diversity represented within Atlantic period Africa, their material expressions, and the complexities of the processes of enslavement. The tendency also remains to see Africa as timeless, populated by unchanging 'traditional' societies frozen in time. Such views belay both African sociocultural complexity and the impacts of the past five centuries. As more information on Africa emerges a fuller understanding of the contexts from which the enslaved populations of the Americas will hopefully be realized.