

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Anthropology - Faculty Publications

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public
Affairs

9-1991

West African Archaeology and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Christopher R. DeCorse

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/ant>



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeCorse, Christopher R., "West African Archaeology and the Atlantic Slave Trade" (1991), *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 12, #2 pp. 92-96

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology - Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

West African Archaeology and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Christopher R. DeCorse, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Recent archaeological research in the New World has focused on slave dwellings and post-emancipation communities, providing a great deal of insight into slave life and the emergence of African-American culture.¹ In contrast, the material record in West Africa has supplied little new information on the slave trade. Numerous European forts and barracoons serve as pervasive reminders of its existence.² However, excavation of these sites is only likely to attest to the meagre possessions of the slaves and their treatment prior to the middle passage, offering little insight into their cultural and ethnic origins.³ European forts were collection points; the slaves often being brought from diverse areas and comprising ethnically heterogeneous groups. Furthermore, identification of these slave populations within African communities is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, within an archaeological context. This was illustrated by recent excavations at the site of the African settlement of Elmina, Ghana, a major trading centre between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries.⁴ Although many of the town's inhabitants traded in slaves, and a large number of slaves lived within the town, the only artifacts recovered directly relating to slavery were two iron objects that may have served as slave burden weights and a single shackle.

Despite the paucity of data specifically relating to the institution of slavery, excavation may potentially offer much information on the impact of the trade on West African cultures. Archaeology has a time depth not assessable through ethnographic or documentary studies, providing a means of studying change during the pre- and post-European contact periods. A holistic examination of African archaeological sites dating to the slave trade period is lacking. In some areas little work has been undertaken and succinct regional chronologies have not been developed. However, the available data tends to support Lovejoy's conclusion that **[end of page 92]** 'the European slave trade across the Atlantic marked a radical break in the history of Africa'.⁵

In examining archaeological sites in Ghana, several researchers have noted radical change in the material record of the post-European contact period. Paul Ozanne, surveying surface material from Accra and Shai, noted significant differences between the pottery of the 'Late Prehistoric' and 'Historic' Periods.⁶ A similar pattern seems to be present in collections from throughout the southern forest area of Ghana.⁷ Additional indications of change during the post-European contact period have been noted in the Birim Valley 50 miles west of Accra and Shai. On the basis of his excavations, Kiyaga-Mulindwa concluded that the earthworks found in this area 'may be regarded as a deterrent to small scale attacks, petty slave-hunting forays, and kidnappings'.⁸ He further argues that increasing slave trading during the eighteenth century eventually led to the disappearance or displacement of the builders of the Birim earthworks.

Evidence of change during the post-European contact period is not confined to Ghana. Archaeological data from north-eastern Sierra Leone still being analysed at the present time provide evidence of significant change during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Settlements of the Limba, Yalunka, and Kuranko dating to this period were commonly surrounded by a variety of fortifications including earthen walls, entrenchments, hedges or thorn bushes, and stockades of living trees.⁹ Oral traditions and limited documentary accounts indicate these measures were necessary protection from slave raids. Similar defensive sites dating to the last 400 years are common throughout the hinterland of the Guinea coast.¹⁰ The foundation of many of them may have been precipitated by similar pressures.

A number of factors other than the emergence of the slave trade can be used to explain the changes observed in the archaeological record. Expanding trade relations and the gradual inclusion of Africa in a world economic system dominated by Europe had varying impact on local populations.¹¹ Other factors, including environmental degradation, over-exploitation of resources, introduced diseases, and changing technology also need to be explored.

It should also be pointed out that warfare, raiding and the need for fortified settlements are not confined to the post-European contact period. For example, archaeological material and oral traditions relating to the almost inaccessible hilltop settlement of Yagala indicate a Limba occupation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, artifacts from discrete deposits in the lowest levels of the excavations produced a thermoluminescent date of 1360±20% and a C14 date of 840±120, indications that the site had probably been used as a refuge **[end of page 93]** during an earlier time period. Evidence for defensive works predating the European presence have been noted in other areas.

Reasons for change in African societies during the past 500 years are clearly complex. However, pressures arising from the slave trade may have been the most likely catalyst in some areas. It is important to recognize that the effects of the slave trade, as well as other causal factors of change, were not equal in all areas.¹² There was variation due to cultural, demographic, economic, environmental, and historical factors. It is unlikely that there were comparable effects within the same time period in all areas: similar responses might only be expected in areas with similar economic, social, and historical backgrounds. For example, some societies were directly involved in slave procurement and trading, while others were extensively raided for slaves. Negative effects would be expected to be much greater in the latter situation, the ultimate consequence being interference in the societies' ability to reproduce biologically.

Some indication of the variable effects of the slave trade can be seen in the data from Elmina and sites in the Ghanaian hinterland. Documentary accounts suggest that after the European's arrival there was extensive change in the socio-political institutions of the coastal peoples. At Elmina there were changes in the political organization, economic relations, and interpolity relations. A wide variety of European trade items were added to the material inventory, clothing styles changed, and new building techniques appeared. Nevertheless, archaeological research suggests that in some respects there was little *culture change* in terms of the peoples' world view or shared system of beliefs. Ritual, burial methods, food preparation, eating habits, and the use of space within living areas all exhibit a continuity with African, predominantly Akan, cultural traditions. In contrast, the degree of disruption in other areas seems to have been much greater. As in the case of the Birim Valley, fortified sites appeared, populations were displaced, and eventually some areas depopulated.

This is an area of study that needs to be evaluated in the light of future research. Documentary studies of the slave trade have tended to be holistic in approach, focusing on the numbers of people exported and overall effects, not on case studies of particular settlements, communities, or regions. However, increasing attention is being focused on the regional and ethnic origins of slaves.¹³ Archaeological fieldwork should be undertaken in areas where slaves were known to have been procured. Changes in settlement patterns, appearance of fortifications, evidence of depopulation, rapid change in pottery styles, and modification of ritual practices all may provide evidence of disruptive effects. If [end of page 94] this information can be integrated with oral traditions and documentary records it may be possible to shed a great deal more light on the human tragedy of the slave trade in the West African context.

Notes

1. For example see Theresa Singleton (ed.), *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life* (Academic Press, New York, 1985); and Theresa Singleton (ed.), *Studies in African American Archaeology* (University of Virginia Press, Richmond, 1991).
2. A.W. Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1963); Merrick Posnansky and Christopher R. De Corse, 'Historical archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa - A Review', *Historical Archaeology*, 20, 1 (1986), 1-14; Albert van Dantzig, *Fortes and Castles of Ghana* (Sedco, Accra, 1980); W. Raymond Wood, 'An archaeological appraisal of early European settlement in the Senegambia', *Journal of African History*, 5 (1967), 39-64.
3. Excavations undertaken in the slave barracks of Cape Coast Castle, Ghana in 1972 recovered bones of domesticated fauna, beads, and cowries. Clay pipe fragments were also discovered suggesting a tobacco ration may have been given to the slaves. Doig Simmonds, 'A note on the excavations in Cape Coast Castle', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 14, 2 (1973), 267-269.
4. Christopher R. De Corse, 'An Archaeological Study of Elmina, Ghana: Trade and Culture Change on the Gold Coast Between the Fifteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries' (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation University of California, Los Angeles, 1989).
5. Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa: A review of the literature', *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), 365.
6. Paul Ozanne, 'Notes on the early historic archaeology of Accra', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 6 (1962), 51-70; 'Indigenes or invaders?', *Aniquity*, 37, 147 (1963), 229-231; and 'Notes on the later prehistory of Accra', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, III, 1 (1964), 3-23.

7. James O. Bellis, "A late archaeological horizon in Ghana: proto-Akan or pre-Akan?", in Enid Schildkrout (ed), *The Golden Stool: Studies of the Asante Center and Periphery*, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 65 (1):36-50.
8. David Kiyaga-Mulindwa, 'Social and demographic changes in the Birim Valley, southern, Ghana', *Journal of African History*, 23 (1982), 63-82.
9. John H. Atherton, 'Ethnoarchaeology in Africa', *African Archaeological Review*, 1 (1983), 75-104; Christopher R. De Corse, 'Material aspects of Limba, Valunka and Kuranko ethnicity : archaeological research in northeastern Sierra Leone'. in S. J. Shennan (ed.), *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (Unwin Hyman, London, 1989), 125-140. Also note D.J. Siddle, 'War-towns in Sierra Leone: A case study in social change', *Africa*, 38, 1, (1986), 47-56.
10. A. Abraham, 'The pattern of warfare and settlement among the Mende of Sierra Leone in the second half of the nineteenth century', *InstitUJe of African Studies, Fourah Bay College Occassional Paper No. 1*; H.J. Braunholtz, 'Archaeology in the Gold Coast', *Antiquity*, 10, 40, (1936); Oliber Davies, *Archaeology in Ghana* (Thomas Nelson, London 1961); Michael B. Gleave, 'Hill settlements and their abandonment in western Yorubaland', *Africa*, 33, 4 (1963), 343-352; Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernals* (Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1983), 169-173; G. Savonnet, 'Note sur quelques ruines situées dans la région de Leo (Haute-Volta)', *Notes Africaines*, 71 (1956), 65-67; J.M. Malcolm, 'Mende warfare', *Sierra Leone Studies*, 21(1939),47-52; D.J. Siddle, 'The evolution of rural settlement forms in Sierra Leone circa 1400 to 1968', *Sierra Leone Geographical Journal*, 13 (1969), 33-44.[end of page 95]
11. Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics, in the Seventeenth Century Gold Coast* (Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1982); Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545 to 1800* (Oxford University, 1970); Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa and the Modern World* (Africa World Press, Trenton, New Jersey, 1986).
12. See J.E. Inikori (ed.), *Forced Migration: the Impact of the Export Slave Trade of African Societies* (Africana Publishing Co., New York, 1982). David Eltis has suggested that lack of 'common themes' or 'threads' in West Africa are an indication of the limited impact of the slave trade as a whole, see *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1987). A critique of this idea and Eltis' other points is provided by Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade'. Given the historical and ethnic diversity represented in Africa a pattern of varying local themes seems more likely. This is, in fact, the pattern that seems to be present.
13. See review by Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade'. [end of page 96]