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West African Archaeology: New Developments, New Perspectives

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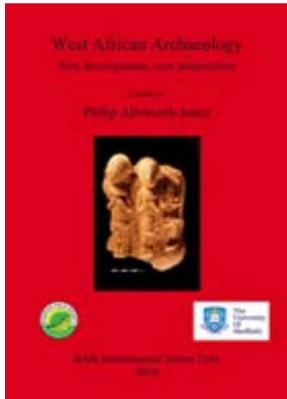
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Philip Allsworth-Jones, editor. *West African Archaeology: New Developments, New Perspectives*. British Archaeological Reports, BAR S2164, 2010. 170 pp., Paperback, ISBN: 9781407307084.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Abidemi Babatunde Babalola, Rice University.

This book is a collection of papers presented in a one-day conference organized by the editor at the University of Sheffield on June 27, 2009. As reflected from the title of the book, *West African Archaeology: New Developments, New Perspectives*, and the overall objective of the conference, the volume is aimed to “discuss the new discoveries and providing an update on certain key topics” issues in the archaeology of West Africa. In addressing this, the book is divided into fifteen chapters with each chapter or group of chapters focusing on a particular topic in African archaeology with much emphasis on West Africa. The editor added an introductory section, which does very well in capturing the discussions that unfold in the conference and the essence of each paper in the volume. Although the volume does not an in depth detail on each of the thematic subject, yet over the entire text is an important volume that shows how new archaeological studies are and should be directed in West Africa.

The first two chapters by Sylvain et al. (chapter one) and L. Bassel (chapter two) focus on the Middle Paleolithic or Middle Stone Age in West Africa. Although these chapters are similar in fore-stating the neglect and/or little attention on Paleolithic research in West African, they are individually significant. They both present a particular way in which West African is important for Paleolithic studies, although research on the Stone Age has been very limited or totally neglected. While the chapter by Sylvain et al. demonstrate that Ounjougou, Mali, was occupied by the Middle Paleolithic population with evidence of diversity in technical traditions in lithic

industry (p. 11), Bassel's chapter (p. 15) echoes the re-investigation of archaeological site in west Africa with evidence of Sangoan-Lumemban lithic through modern techniques in archaeology for reinterpretation of MSA population in the Sub-Continent.

Following the trend on Paleolithic studies, Allsworth-Jones et al make the transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene in West Africa with evidence from Iwo Eleru, southwestern Nigeria. The object of the discussion in this chapter is the cranium excavated from Iwo Eleru in mid 1960s by Thurstan Shaw. The authors follow-up on Shaw and Daniels characteristics of the population the cranium represents in terms of whether, is of the archaic or modern human. They also evaluate its affinities, and phylogenetic relationship (p 39). The authors take a step further by using geometric morphometric period to correlate the cranium with what was already known. The comparative sample for the Iwo Eleru cranium consist of 47 collection of fossil remain of human and over 140 crania from across Africa, Asia, and Europe. The authors conclude by reifying String's claim that although the cranium has overall modern feature; it also retains some morphological elements of the archaic man. Although this work is important in the area of the methodology, it is yet to reveal the secret of the Iwo-Eleru cranium. This inability to unravel the mystery of the Iwo Eleru skull still places us in the mid way on the true picture of the human population that inhabited the region at that time, although the date of 12,000 years BP is still something to reckon with in West Africa prehistory.

The transition to agriculturist is an important step in human history. Thus, Manning presents a general overview of the West African agriculture with emphasis on the developments of domestication in West Africa, in which pearl millet was a key crop. Based on the "synthesis of the recent research, including genetic, linguistic, and archaeological data", Manning argues that the evidence of later occurrence of pearl millet domestication in West African negates the "process of neolithization," which has dominated the debate on the transition to agriculture (p. 43). Manning concludes that although evidence of pearl millet in West Africa points to "rapid assimilation of northern domesticates," the overall situation further south is complex with no evidence of monocropping trend (p. 49). With the combination of archaeology, linguistic, and genetic Manning believes that a "regionalization" will be unravel even within the West African sub-region.

The chapter by Len Pole reviews the debate on the development of iron working in West Africa. This debate has been around for long as Africanist archaeologists have argued for various possibilities of the origin of iron working in the sub-continent. One of the major evidence for the argument on the origin of metallurgy in West Africa is the radiocarbon dates. Hence, Pole carefully reviews dates from iron working site across the sub-continent, which all point to between 5th and 8th centuries BC. Pole goes on to review the procedures in production, capacity, the politics of iron, and the process(es) of decline of iron production in West Africa. Although increase in importation of European iron and deforestation have been suggested as major reasons for the demise of iron production in west African, Pole suggests that detail studies are still needed in this direction. I agree with Pole's conclusion that instead of the focus on the origin and development of iron working, "future efforts directed toward elucidating the anthropology [economic, social, political, religious, and environmental aspect] of early metallurgy in West Africa will ... prove more rewarding" (p. 62).

For many years Nok culture in central Nigeria has been known through its enigmatic diverse sculptures and the date of 500BCE for iron working in the region. The date is one of the earliest got for Sub-Saharan Africa. The chapter by Nicole Rupp takes a step forward by giving special attention to answering specific historical questions that have hitherto not been asked about Nok culture complex through the study of the material culture, the economic and environmental context, and the settlement pattern (67). Recent preliminary archaeological investigation at Nok has revealed refuse pits, remains of wattle and daub or furnaces and ovens, unmodified hand-size stone, quartz boulder, and archaeobotanical remains. Also more pottery, terra cotta, stones, and iron were also excavated in context and association. With this hand full of materials, Rupp concludes that the preliminary investigations have reified the assumption that Nok arts represent population of complex cultural, economic, and social background. No doubt, this research at Nok will open a new and more nuanced direction for its archaeology, which is not only a very welcome but also an important contribution.

In Africa as well as many Western worlds, modernization poses a threat to cultural heritage. While some countries have been able to regulate the degree of destruction done to heritage sites through policies and education, others could not still find solution to the perennial global problem. In view of this, Randsborg presents an interesting summary of the over ten years archaeological project carried out in West Africa, especially Benin, Togo, and Ghana.

Randsborg's discussion focuses mainly on the discovery of massive cave at Agongointo, Benin, which was first discovered in 1998 during road construction. Further archaeological investigations at Agongointo recorded over 1600 caves belonging to the period of the kingdom of Dahomey in the 17th century. Ancient ore mine corridors were also discovered with heaps of slag. Randsborg states that the earliest phase of iron production in the region was on household level dating to 700 BC, and that iron was not produced on industrial scale until 1200 AD. While lamenting the treat facing all these archaeological resources, Randsborg proposes the need for education programs that will focus on both individuals and organizations to rescue the treasure of traditional society in the face of modernization (p. 82).

The dynamics of trade in the northern Ghana is the focus of Casey's chapter. Trade is not only an important subject in the study of West African prehistory, but also a catalyst for the development of social complexity. In the past, studies on trade in West Africa have focused on the region in the Sahel-savanna. Casey challenges this geographical complacency by studying the Guinea Savana region of West Africa - the region between the forest to the south and the dry Sudan savanna to the north (p. 83). Rather than focusing on the rare direct evidence (i.e. exotic materials) of trade in this region, Casey creatively explores the evidence of increase in the production for domestic economy. According to Casey Shea butter as "gendered resource" was an invaluable traded good, which was produced by women in the Guinea region (p. 89). Drawing from both historical and archaeological sources, Casey demonstrates the possibilities of trading of shea at "market towns." She therefore concludes that investigation on trade in Guinea region should stay away from the evolutionary capitalist perspective and explore on the seemingly less or non hierarchical approach without gender bias that looks "at changes to the domestic economy that signal production beyond the house" (p. 90).

Hellermann's chapter addresses the issue of whether or not Benin Empire in Southern Nigeria was a forest kingdom as mostly concluded by many scholars. The Benin kingdom was occupied in the late first millennium AD and reached its apogee between 13th and 16th centuries. At the peak of Benin, the kingdom expanded tremendously and acquired more territories. Hellermann's chapter relies on historical and archaeological records. Unlike many other polities in the southern Nigeria, Benin has more early Europeans accounts dating back to the 15th century AD. This therefore makes Hellermann careful use of the source plausible. Sifting through the records of the European on Benin's landscape, which includes the nature of the

vegetation and the prevailing animals, between 17th and 19th centuries, Hellermann argues that the city “was fairly forested, but not totally covered in forest; rather a mixture of more forested and more open parts” (p. 96-98). The argument that Benin was once open vegetation that sustained life was also supported by archaeological evidence. Analysis of charcoal samples from Okomu Forest Reserve in Benin reveals that most of the charcoals are from oil palm kernel, which has been proved through palynological studies to be an indicator of forest clearance for farming or open vegetation. Hellermann argues that the appellation “forest kingdom” given to Benin was an invention of the late 19th through early 20th centuries, which could be as a result of the change in the portrayal of West African people by the West, or change in the vegetation after much of the Benin Kingdom was deserted in the early 19th Century. She concludes that contrary to the conventional wisdom, Benin kingdom did not exist in thick forest but emerged in an open landscape after the dry period of 4-2,500 BP, and was populated and farmed by the 17th century AD.

Orijemie *et al* present a discussion that focuses on the preliminary result of pollen analysis from an abandoned settlement northeast Yorubaland, Nigeria. The analysis reveals a possible link between the Yoruba group and the Asia world dating back to the 13th century. It also demonstrates an evidence of human impact on the environment at the site, Ajaba. The samples for the pollen analysis were collected from the excavation at Ajaba, conducted in 2006. The excavation aimed to collect archaeological data to build on the issue of Yoruba inter-group relation in the region. While the result of pottery typology from the study did not show strong link between the group that occupied the site and other specific Yoruba group, e.g., Ife, Oyo (p. 110), the pollen analysis revealed occurrence of exotic ornamental plants. The authors identify three pollen of exotic ornamental trees: *Lagerstroemia indica*, *Delonix regia*, and *Casuarina equisetifolia*. Although the presence of the exotic pollen may suggest early Yoruba connection with the Asian and/or Arabian world, the authors could not rule out the possibility that two of these pollen, *Lagerstroemia indica*, *Delonix regia*, might be of indigenous origin as they recommend more such work in Yorubaland. The pollen analysis also shows human impact on the environment. While the pollen of forest decreases, there was increase in pollen of colonizers of disturbed forest (e.g. *Elaeis guineensis* and grasses), which could have resulted from human activity. This is consonant with the archaeological records.

The chapters by MacDonald, Muller-Kosack, Allwosrth-Jones fall under the themes ethnography and ethnoarchaeology in West Africa. Kelvin MacDonald's chapter on the stone ring and polished stone industries of Hombori, Mali, discusses the findings on the ethnographic data collected in 1993 on the making of stone bracelet from Hombori marble. The Hombori marble is a metamorphosed limestone, which would have resulted from ancient volcanic activities in the region. MacDonald states eight stages in the production of stone bracelet in Mali, which includes piercing, polishing, grinding, washing, and greasing (p. 119-120). He identifies three types of stone bracelet: type A with a rounded to triangle cross section, a wedge shaped cross section distinguishes type B, and type C has more ornate form with a very narrow ring and a central sharpened keel. Other domestic utensils such as small mortal and pestle and bowls were also made from Hombori marble. These are mostly used for local consumption. Beyond aesthetic and taste and function, stone bracelets and pendants symbolize charms for "good luck", and are indicators of prehistoric exchange economy (p. 124). Although the stones are known ethnographically, they have not been recovered archaeologically from the region. Instead many sites yielded Hombori marble in beads dating to between c. 200 BC and AD 1400. Evidence from ethnography and colonial records show that Hombori stone bracelets have some great antiquity, but it is yet to be established archaeologically. MacDonald concludes that Hombori stone bracelet industry "would have been an evolving tradition, responding to the new possibilities offered by the new technologies and as hardly envisaged as some kind of 'living fossil' of the Stone Age" (p. 125).

Muller-Kosack in his chapter presents a case for the contextualization of DGB sites in the Mandara region of northern Cameroon. DGB sites consist of 16 stone structures dating to between the second half of the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. Archaeological evidence from the site is compared with ethnographic, linguistic, and historical data for reconstruction of narratives on the pre-colonial history in the region. These evidences illuminate aspect of the tradition of migration in the region and the function of the sites. The fifteenth century dates from DGB 1, and 2 suggest that Wandala, the pre-Islamic state in Kirawa, was in existence during the period of DGB. This stance is supported by Wandala chronicles and historical sources, which provide information on the founding and formation of Wandala state in the pre-Islamic period. In terms of material culture, ethnographic data also show similarities between pots with small aperture at DGB sites with Lamang and Walanda speaking region (p.

133-4). Small aperture pots for example at Gwoza hill are associated with architecture in ritual context. The combination of various methods to understanding the historical narrative at DGB sites is a significant contribution to the archeology of the mountainous region of West-central Africa.

Although the excavations at Adesina Oja in Ibadan, southwest Nigeria, focuses on a period that could be considered “recent past” with handful of historical data, it throws light on aspects of the history of Ibadan. The ethnographic information collected by Philip Allsworth-Jones and his students in nearby villages and elsewhere made interpretation of the archaeological materials possible, which reify the normative narrative about Ibadan on the aspects of religious practice, settlement pattern, architecture style, subsistence economy, and dietary pattern. In view of this, Allsworth-Jones concludes “Adesina Oja fitted seamlessly into a pattern of continuity and change which characterized Ibadan in the first twentieth century” (p.155). As much as many may consider the twentieth century Yorubland as a “too late” period to be studied archaeologically, I see Allsworth-Jones chapter as a milestone in the archaeology of the Yoruba region.

It is established that civil unrest, looting, and neglect threaten many archaeological sites and Museum in African. Laranjeira’s chapter narrates the degree of threat to the functioning of Dundo Museum in Angola, which led to the close of the museum in 1992, and the process of its reopening. Although Dundo Museum houses both archaeological and ethnographic materials, Laranjeira focus is on ethnographic objects. While Laranjeira laments the closure of the Museum and the disappearance of several objects, she emphasizes the project to reopen of the museum, which she concludes will move forward more quickly with the keen interest of the new Minister of culture.

The linguistic geography of Nigeria and its implication for prehistory is the topic of the last chapter by Roger Blench (p. 161). Blench has investigated the relationship between linguistic and archaeology in explaining historical event in parts of Africa, especially West-central region. However, historical process underlying linguistic diversity in Nigeria is under-researched despite of the linguistic complexity of the country. Nigeria has over five hundred languages, three major language phyla, and some isolated languages. Blench’s paper therefore focuses on the classification of languages in Nigeria and their historical layering (p. 161). He presents a reclassification of Benue-Congo languages, which “radically revises” his earlier

classification placing Jarawan Batntu as a narrow Bantu language, West Benue-Congo as a wholly distinct family -- Volta-Niger, Furu cluster as a mainstream Bantoid language, Ndemli as a branch of Grassfields, and Ukan as a single branch of Benue-Congo (p. 165). Using linguistic evidence, Blench, proffers possible interpretation of West African prehistory relating to migration, environment and subsistence, and long distance trade. However, he decries the lack of these evidence in the archaeology of Nigeria, and suggests that an interdisciplinary research should be carried out in West African sub-continent for better understanding of her prehistory.

In conclusion *West African Archaeology: New Developments, New Perspectives* is an interesting collection of papers on the sub-continent. Although some of the papers are reviews of theme in African archaeology, overall the volume is informative and provides a pathway for future work in the region. It will serve as a good guide and background study for Africanists Archaeologists on most topics in African Archaeology from Paleolithic to metallurgical to museum studies.

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