

Review article

A history of African archaeology

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This 378-page book (Robertshaw 1990) has three chapters which deal with the whole of Africa and ten on the history of archaeology in different African sub-regions. Three chapters are personal memoirs of pioneer archaeologists in Africa still alive, and the volume is concluded by an overall analysis.

Structure of the book

The chapters can be broken down as follows:

General Africa, including the introduction and conclusion	– 5 chapters
Southern Africa	– 2
East Africa	– 1
Horn of Africa	– 1
Central Africa	– 1
West Africa	– 3
Maghreb	– 1
Egypt	– 1
Personal Memoirs	– 3

Thus, while three chapters are devoted to West Africa and two to Southern Africa, none covers such areas as the Sahara and the Sudan. It seems to me that more effort should have been made by the editor to solicit papers on these areas from scholars including African indigenous archaeologists. In devoting two of the regional papers to Southern Africa, the editor attempts to reflect 'both the great amount of research that has been carried out in Southern Africa, most of it by archaeologists domiciled there, and the surpassing interest of the political, economic and ideological contexts in which archaeologists have operated' (p. 11); but it could also be due to other unspecified reasons. These two chapters might have been combined in order to avoid repetition of ideas (*e.g.* pp. 52–3 and 68–9). The uneven regional coverage seems to suggest that the editor had no proper format or co-ordinated plan in mind in the preparation of this book. For instance also, the chapter by Holl, 'West African Archaeology: Colonialism and Nationalism', could as well have been devoted to the whole of Africa; and one wonders why West Africa was singled out for such a topic. The book seems to be made up of a collection of essays with the various authors using their own

different approaches. In such a circumstance there are bound to be some repetitions of events and ideas (see chapters 2, 3, 4, 5). Each chapter seems to hang on its own. However, the concluding chapter 18, by Trigger, makes an attempt at a comprehensive comparative study of the histories of archaeology in the various African sub-regions so that one can get some idea of the present state of the discipline in these sub-regions.

Although the book contains a few photographs of individuals and sites there is a need for maps of the regions dealt with in each of the chapters, with names of sites discussed – this would have made for easy reference.

It is not quite clear what criteria were used by the editor in the choice of scholars who wrote the various chapters. Robertshaw has, however, pointed out (p. 11) that ‘despite the training opportunities available over the last twenty years or so, African archaeology outside South Africa remains predominantly an expatriate pursuit. This is reflected in the authorship of the papers in this volume, among whom are numbered only two Africans’. But in Nigeria, apart from one Indian and one Ghanaian, there are no expatriate archaeologists presently working in the country. There are very few, if any, expatriate archaeologists in Ghana, Togo and Benin Republic. There are also a good number of African indigenous archaeologists practising the discipline in East Africa and at least one African archaeologist in Libya with a Ph.D. degree in the subject. Therefore the lack of proper African representation in the authorship of this volume and the lack of any contribution on the Sahara and Sudan cannot in any way be attributed to lack of manpower on the part of the Africans. It is really very unfortunate that in writing this type of book so few African professional archaeologists (many of whom have obtained their Ph.D. degrees in archaeology, several being senior to the authors of some papers in this volume) were adjudged competent to write on aspects of the history of archaeology in their own continent. At least they would have looked at certain issues from the African viewpoint. It is also very likely that because of this lack of proper African representation the tendency in almost all the papers in this volume is to lay emphasis on and discuss in great detail the works of European/American pioneer archaeologists and their contributions to the advancement of the discipline in Africa. Statements on the contributions of the first African indigenous archaeologists are only made in passing.

Finally, this book is published outside Africa, again reducing the number of its readers from Africa. The price of £15.95 for paperback and £35.00 for the cased version is out of reach for most academics in West, East and Central Africa given the economic situations in these areas and the value of their currencies; yet these are the people that should have benefited much from the information in this book.

Content

Gowlett in discussing ‘Archaeological Studies of Human Origins and Early Prehistory of Africa’ (chapter 2) focusses his attention on East and Southern Africa, with some use of examples from other parts of the continent. But almost nothing is said about the few finds from West Africa. Most probably due to the nature of the topic, Gowlett’s paper appears to be a catalogue of events and personalities, quite unlike Deacon’s paper (chapter 3) which contains some comparative analyses of events and approaches of scholars or professional

archaeologists to the study of African archaeology. Again, such a statement by Gowlett (p. 15) as 'in Africa the hominids and archaeology have stayed more closely linked' may be true of East and Southern Africa, but is not true of West Africa given the way archaeology started and is practised here. It would have been of some interest to the reader if Gowlett had commented on why more research on hominid remains and early prehistory has been done in East and Southern Africa than in other parts of Africa.

Chapter 3 by Deacon, 'Weaving the Fabric of Stone Age Research in Southern Africa' is quite analytical. It also contains three tables showing the number of professionally trained archaeologists in full-time employment up to 1987, including their places of employment, research interests and those with Ph.D. degrees, in South Africa and Namibia. Table 3.2 shows that 58 professionally trained archaeologists were in full-time employment as archaeologists in South Africa and Namibia by 1987. Although one cannot say categorically the number of professionally trained archaeologists in full-time employment as archaeologists in West Africa the statement that there are 'more full-time archaeologists in Southern Africa than any other region in sub-Saharan Africa' (p. 57) is debatable, bearing in mind that Nigeria alone had 30 professionally trained archaeologists teaching in her universities and about 15 working in National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria by 1989.

Chapter 4, 'Hidden History: Iron Age Archaeology in Southern Africa' by Hall, throws light on the dilemma of South African archaeologists: either to help to propagate settler opinion on the African past (in which no socio-political or technological achievement is attributable to indigenous Africans) or to use 'methodological standards drawn from the international scholastic community' (p. 63) to highlight the technological and socio-political achievements of indigenous people in the pre-colonial period. But since archaeologists are not bold enough in their condemnation of apartheid policies they have resorted to 'avoiding the contested ground and researching less controversial periods of antiquity, or retreating into highly technical analyses which effectively excluded all but the acolytes of the profession' (p. 63). Therefore 'for the black majority caught up in the resurgence of nationalism and resistance, the precolonial period was (and is) still a "hidden history"' (p. 76-7). Hence there is much need for the training of indigenous South African blacks who will bring archaeological results to the reach of their people.

Robertshaw's chapter 5, 'The Development of Archaeology in East Africa' is illuminating. However, important issues which he failed to treat but would have been valuable to the reader include comment on why the Leakeys have made and are still making such a great success in the practice of archaeology in East Africa, and why less emphasis was placed on the training of indigenous African archaeologists in East Africa than in West Africa. We are aware of the fact that 'East Africa as the cradle of humankind was of course itself a strong international selling-point in the quest for research funding' (p. 87). We are also aware that the British Institute in Eastern Africa in some of its archaeological researches has contributed to 'reversing the colonial denial of an indigenous African past' (p. 92). One wonders why emphasis was not laid on the training of indigenous African archaeologists who should continue effectively with the works of their predecessors (the present writer is not aware of any full-fledged department of archaeology in any university in Eastern Africa). One would also have loved Robertshaw to comment on why the few trained

indigenous African archaeologists have not been given the opportunity to wield as much influence in the practice of archaeology in their sub-region as their counterparts in West Africa, especially in anglophone West Africa.

Brandt and Fattovich in discussing 'Late Quaternary Archaeological Research in the Horn of Africa' (chapter 6) highlight the problems of political instability and the effects of European underdevelopment of Africa – which in this instance include the fact that presently 'there is only a handful of professionally trained Djiboutian, Ethiopian and Somali archaeologists capable of conducting (long term) research projects, and little government money with which to finance research' (p. 108). This chapter also attempts to suggest ways of solving these problems of scarcity of indigenous archaeologists and lack of funds.

Maret deals with 'Phases and Facies in the Archaeology of Central Africa' (chapter 7). This chapter, unlike most others, gives real credit to the indigenous people's knowledge of their cultural past – 'the majority of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa share with archaeologists a devotion to the past. Interest in the ancestors and the material relics of their existence must have started long before the arrival of the first Europeans. Oral traditions provide numerous examples of a relationship between material relics of the past and the history of a people'. He points out some of the problems facing archaeology in Central Africa immediately following independence. These include the ever-present problem of environment, political instability, lack of funds for archaeological research and lack of properly trained archaeologists – 'in all of Central Africa there was not one properly trained national to carry out archaeological research' (p. 131). Maret, however, should have commented more critically on the diffusionist interpretations of the technological achievements of ancient populations in Central Africa by earlier workers like Mortelmans. Among other things Maret should have commented on the now discredited idea of linking the beginnings of iron working in the north of Central Africa to the arrival of the Bantu in those regions (pp. 127–9).

We learn from chapter 8, 'Archaeology in Anglophone West Africa' by Kense, that compared with either East or Southern Africa few expatriate European or American archaeologists have worked in anglophone West Africa. Fewer archaeological works have been undertaken by expatriates in this sub-region than in Eastern or Southern Africa, but more emphasis has been laid on the training of indigenous African archaeologists than in East Africa.

It seems to the present reviewer that Kense does not have a clear idea of the African 'concept' of history especially when he states that 'the concept of "history" in African traditions also discouraged a more enlightened view. Most societies viewed the past and present as forming an interrupted continuum' (p. 138). One would have loved to know which African societies Kense was referring to and the case or cases in point. Kense goes further to say that 'there was little allowance for change or innovation in either the cultures or the traditions of the African groups which colonials encountered'. This is a statement which is not supported by any factual data. Trigger (p. 318) has an opposite view of Africa's cultural past when he states that 'it is clear that archaeology played a significant role in refuting colonial mythology about Africans and their past ... In addition to documenting earlier stages of cultural development ... , archaeology has demonstrated that in later times Africa was as culturally dynamic as any other major region of the world.'

Thirdly, Kense does not seem quite happy with the use of oral traditions for historical writings when he states that 'a drawback to their value as historical records, however, was the inability to verify details independently' (p. 140). Whatever may be the weaknesses of oral traditions Kense should be aware that they are an invaluable 'data bank' for reconstructing the histories of African peoples south of the Sahara in pre-Arab and pre-European times.

The above comments do not in any way reduce the quality of Kense's paper. He gives a comprehensive history of the development of archaeology in anglophone West Africa – starting from the period of the amateurs to the time archaeological practice in this sub-region came under the control of professionals. In the late 1960s and 1970s archaeological researches in anglophone West Africa shifted to a more 'problem oriented' approach (p. 151). In the 1970s also Africans began to assume leadership of the archaeological communities in Nigeria and Ghana. This is yet to happen in East Africa.

DeBarros' chapter 9 on 'Changing Paradigms, Goals and Methods in the Archaeology of Francophone West Africa' shows that, although the practice of archaeology in this sub-region was influenced by the theory and methods of archaeology as practiced in France, as against other areas where most archaeologists concentrated on the African Stone Age until the late 1950s, in French West Africa there were early emphases on the study of ancient cities and states (p. 161). In 1938 the *Institute Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire* (IFAN) was created with its headquarters in Dakar. With the establishment of this institute archaeological research and policies in French West Africa became centralized in keeping with the French colonial policy of centralization and assimilation of its African territories within a single political identity (p. 135). Before the 1960s the French dominated the field of archaeology in francophone West Africa. However, from the 1960s, major researches by non-French scholars emerged. With the creation of universities and history departments in Togo, Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso archaeological studies ceased to be centred in Dakar and the Sahelian belt but also shifted to the coastal states including Ivory Coast. 'By 1981, most archaeological research institutes and history departments, including IFAN-Dakar, were partially or fully Africanised. Foreign researchers were welcomed but they were asked to train host-country nationals, publish quickly and leave copies of their work in Africa' (p. 170). This is almost in line with what happened in anglophone West Africa where African leadership of archaeological communities has been well encouraged.

Although archaeology developed in francophone West Africa as an adjunct of history, due to the writings and influence of Delafosse, attempts should by now have been made to create separate departments of archaeology in the various francophone countries. Such departments should have the necessary facilities needed for the training of archaeologists to carry out researches in these countries. DeBarros has, however, failed to point out that compared with anglophone West Africa, the francophone West African countries have no full-fledged archaeology departments to train indigenous archaeologists.

The early archaeology of the Maghreb was carried out by amateurs (see chapter 10, 'Soldiers and Bureaucrats: The Early History of Prehistoric Archaeology in the Maghreb', by Sheppard). In the Maghreb there was emphasis on prehistoric research before independence. But after independence there has been more interest in studying a 'wide variety of historic and proto-historic sites which have a more immediate interest for the people of North Africa' (p. 189). This shift of emphasis to sites with immediate interest to

the people is common to other parts of Africa, but the marked division between pre-historians and historic or proto-historic archaeologists (see p. 187) does not seem to be much noticed in these other areas. Sheppard does not state whether efforts have been made or are being made to train enough indigenous archaeologists who would carry on with archaeological research in the Maghreb with the departure of the foreign archaeologists.

The personal memoirs (chapters 11, 12 and 13) of Desmond Clark (who worked mainly in Central Africa), Thurstan Shaw (mainly in anglophone West Africa) and Shinnie (in parts of North, West and East Africa) in the words of Robertshaw (p. 11) indeed 'significantly enhance our understanding of the development of African archaeology'.

O'Connor in his critical discussion of 'Egyptology and Archaeology: An African Perspective' (chapter 14) points out that archaeology in Egypt was at the early period linked with the exploration and study of monument sites and cemeteries. This is because of 'better survival and accessibility of cemeteries and monumental funerary sites on the low desert and in the cliffs, and a few major stone temples on the flood plain' (p. 239). Because of this emphasis on monuments 'urban village sites typical of the flood plain were less preserved and less accessible (hence) settlement archaeology was of much less interest' (p. 239). However, emphasis on archaeological survey and settlement archaeology has increased in Egypt.

Archaeology in Egypt, as elsewhere, is focussed upon excavations of monuments, sites and other features and analyses of materials and features, but to understand the history and future of archaeology in Egypt one must take into proper account the influence of Egyptological research which includes research in philology, epigraphy and art history (p. 240). Egyptologists have strongly influenced the ideas of scholars 'about cultural evolution throughout north-east Africa, and ... reinforced the idea of Egypt's dominant cultural position throughout the region' (p. 249). And the well preserved and frequently studied ancient 'monumental' texts and pictures from temples and tombs provided the most powerful support for the idea of Egyptian cultural and political dominance of this region (p. 249-50). In the Near East, however, the well-known archaeology and 'the literacy of several of its cultures, have enabled scholars to assess accurately the cross-cultural comparison with Egypt' (p. 50). But this is not the case with the less well-known cultures of north-east Africa without early form of writing. O'Connor, however, critically analysed this view of Egyptian cultural and political dominance or non-dominance of the north-eastern region especially when he correctly states that:

which of these two views is close to reality depends upon the reconstruction, in so far as is possible, of the dynamics of social and economic processes in the different periods of Egyptian history ... this in turn requires in Egyptology much greater recovery and analysis of settlement and lower-order cemetery archaeology in conjunction with substantial shifts in intellectual attitudes (p. 251).

However, because of the emphasis on the intellectual influence of Egyptology little attention is paid to the history of the development of archaeology in Egypt beginning from the time of the pioneers to the time it became a scientific discipline under the control of professionals. Secondly, not much is said about the training of Egyptian archaeologists and whether there are higher institutions equipped to train indigenous archaeologists for archaeological studies relevant to their own country's interests.

Schmidt is quite at home in his discussion on 'Oral Traditions, Archaeology and History:

A Short Reflective History', chapter 15. He shows the usefulness of oral traditions for archaeological investigations. However, Schmidt lays much emphasis on East Africa – this is most probably because a good number of researches have been done in this area by him and others. He also makes copious use of examples from centralized societies, most probably because they possess deep genealogies. But the works of Alagoa (1966, 1972) and Onwuejeogwu (1981) have demonstrated that the so called 'stateless' societies also possess deep genealogies. In dealing with oral tradition and archaeology one would have thought that Schmidt should have made some references to recent works by African archaeologists in West Africa like those of the present writer in the Anambra valley of Nigeria (Okpoko 1984) and the late Effah-Gyamfi (1985) in Bono Manso, Ghana.

Davis in his paper, 'The Study of Rock Art in Africa', chapter 16, deals mainly with North, Central and Southern Africa. Not much is said about the rock art of West Africa.

As already pointed out, the title of Holl's paper on 'West African Archaeology: Colonialism and Nationalism' (chapter 17) could as well have applied to all the continent of Africa. However, he needs to be critical of some of the views of some other scholars he expressed in the section of 'The Peopling of Africa from the Nile Valley' (pp. 302–3). For instance, the idea that the Yoruba of south-western (not south-eastern as in the text) Nigeria originated from the Nile valley is no longer taken seriously by modern scholars. The present writer does not see it as an advantage for Africa if 'scholars from all over the world' can come and carry out researches in this continent while this is not the case in Europe and America (p. 304). There should be strong regulations guiding foreign archaeologists carrying out researches in this continent; one such regulation should make African archaeologists' participation in such researches mandatory so that some information about the research findings can easily be retained within the host country. One is deeply impressed with the co-operative attitude of the educated Cameroonians towards archaeologists (see p. 305). In Nigeria this is not the case; even many of the Nigerian educated elites are ignorant of what archaeology is and hardly appreciate the work of archaeologists. Hence archaeological practice has to differ to some extent in methods and techniques in different countries given each country's awareness of the goals of the discipline.

Generally two main features characterize most of the papers in this volume. The first is that the pioneer archaeologists in the various African sub-regions were colonial masters who carried out archaeological studies in their spheres of influence using models and ideas operative in their own countries. This first phase was also characterized by the 'Hamitic hypothesis'. The second feature is the discussion of the development of the discipline in Africa and the increased archaeological studies in this continent due to an increase in personnel (both foreigners and Africans) and in some instances an increase in funding. This second phase, which continues till today, has seen the rejection of the 'Hamitic hypothesis' as a model for interpretation of the cultural and technological achievements of the past indigenous Africans.

Given the information in this book one very much agrees with Trigger (pp. 317–18) when he states that 'this survey indicates that African archaeology has been influenced by the successive major trends that have shaped the interpretation of archaeological data in Europe and America . . . Yet it is equally clear that the development of African archaeology has been, and continues to be influenced in many complex and subtle ways by social and political conditions in Africa'.

Concluding remarks

We can learn a few lessons from this book with regard to the practice of archaeology in Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa:

1. There is much need for increased involvement of indigenous African archaeologists in carrying out archaeological researches in their own countries. Such indigenous archaeologists will be in the best position to educate their own people on the relevance of the discipline for national development and (cultural) integration.
2. There is a need for adequate funding of archaeological researches by governments, government agencies, individuals and foreign countries who have benefited from the wealth of African countries.
3. There is a need for archaeological salvage or rescue operations in Africa, given the number of developmental projects now going on in various parts of the continent.
4. Finally, there is a need for further decolonization of the teaching and practice of archaeology especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Archaeology should be practised in this sub-region within the overall framework of ethnoarchaeology and cultural resource management. These are vital areas of applied archaeology relevant to Africa's developmental needs and aspirations (see Okpoko 1986:147-53).

On the whole this book is an asset to all African scholars and students especially those interested in understanding how archaeology began and developed in Africa. Information and ideas contained in this book came from various sources most of which are not easily available, especially to non-professionals. So the authors should be highly commended for the marvellous syntheses and critical appraisal of such information and ideas and for the energy and time spent in writing their various chapters. Our greatest thanks go to the editor for his efforts in creating this *magnum opus*. (It is very well produced – almost free of typographical errors.)

This book is the first standard text on the history of the development of archaeology in Africa and it will remain for a long time a useful reference for scholars and students of African archaeology. I would like to end this review by quoting Trigger (p. 319) for the third time: this book 'is of particular interest because it offers the first detailed account of the history of archaeology for a region that has seen European colonization followed by decolonization. It stands as a record of the exogenous forces that brought African archaeology into being'.

References

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