Introduction to West Africa during the Atlantic slave trade: archaeological perspectives


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Introduction

CHRISTOPHER R. DECORSE

The peoples of West Africa were an integral part of the dramatic transformations that shaped the world during the past five centuries. Yet the culture history of the region during this tumultuous period remains poorly investigated. In the wake of extensive research on the archaeological record of Colombian consequences in the Americas, the material record of many portions of West Africa is unstudied and even basic regional chronological syntheses are often lacking. This paucity of information is all the more striking in light of the fact that in some instances written and oral historical sources provide a poor chronicle of much of the area. Archaeology thus affords critical insight, as it offers both information and time-depth not accessible any other way.

This volume surveys West African culture history of the past five centuries from an archaeological perspective. The intended concentration is on the economic, social, and cultural transformations that unfolded during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. The objective is to assess the culture histories and the archaeological records of some of the areas from which enslaved Africans were taken, thus offering insight into the developments that occurred during this period and the possible impacts of the trade on West African societies, as well as providing a context for studies of the African Diaspora (see the concluding chapter by Singleton). Discussions, however, often extend well beyond the boundaries of direct African-European interactions and the period of the Atlantic trade. The past 500 years witnessed dramatic changes in West African societies, including the rise and decline of African states, the continued spread of Islam, changing environmental conditions, and a host of indigenously mitigated developments, as well as the advent of the Europeans, the growth and decline of the Atlantic slave trade, and the onset of colonial rule. Within this context of economic and sociopolitical transformation, it is notable the degree to which indigenous beliefs structured the form and direction of developments (DeCorse 2001; Thornton 1995). This is not to suggest that African societies were static or remained unaffected by the global transformations of which they were part. Indeed, the following chapters indicate that there were dramatic changes in economic relations, social organization, and cultural practices. Nevertheless, in many instances the unfolding of these events was interpreted and redefined by African cultural traditions. Hence, when considering sociopolitical transformations or the development of state society, it is reasonable to consider their African cultural underpinnings as well as the tapestry of broader economic and historical transformations of which they were part.

What is apparent from the discussions in the following chapters is that cultural interactions, the impetus for change, and the nature of West African
transformations during the past 500 years were very complex indeed. Diversity in the nature and expression of cul-

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ture contact and change are recurring concerns in the studies presented. The expanding Eurocentric economic system, of which the Atlantic trade was part, was only one aspect of an intricately textured mosaic of interactions extending much further back in time and involving a myriad of variables, many of them independent of Europe. While tantalizing clues are emerging, current archaeological, historical, and ethnographic work in West Africa often allows for only partial, restricted views of how these unfolded.

The coverage of this volume has been made as holistic as possible. It is intended as a resource for West Africanists, as well as all researchers interested in indigenous responses in the age of European expansion and the African diaspora. The studies presented synthesize archaeological research, including previous work and new material. All of the contributors were asked to concentrate on the culture history of the regions they surveyed, and on the insights afforded by archaeological data. The book progresses from west to east and, within sub-regions, from the coast to the hinterland.

As in all edited volumes, the contributions are varied in terms of the material surveyed, the theoretical perspectives presented, and the conclusions drawn. This diversity is, however, only in part the result of the differing perspectives of the authors. In addition to variation arising from climatic, geographic, cultural, and historical diversity (which is briefly examined below), a substantial amount of variation results from the uneven nature of the archaeological work that has been undertaken. Archaeological assessments of the economic, political, and cultural changes internal to African societies over the past 500 years are frustratingly incomplete. There is a paucity of work in many areas on the relevant time period. This problem pervades all of the following discussions, some more than others. Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria have comparatively well-developed research and educational infrastructures, and this is reflected in a more regular tempo of research, though not all portions of these countries have received equal attention. In contrast, discussion of the cultural history of some regions can be no more than preliminary reviews of limited literature. The studies selected for this volume represent some of the more substantive research projects that have been undertaken.

The research surveyed is also indicative of the methodological and theoretical concerns that have been brought to the study of the West African past. Some of this variation is the result of the background and training of the archaeologists working in the region, who include Africans, Europeans, and Americans trained at a variety of institutions (Ellison et al. 1996; Musonda 1990; Posnansky 1982; Robertshaw 1990; Shaw 1989). It is also reasonable to note distinctive trends within the former French and English colonies (de Barros 1990; Kense 1990). These distinctive traditions have shaped the topical and temporal foci of research, as well as the theoretical paradigms in which archaeologists have operated.
The volume's temporal focus on the past 500 years roughly marks the arrival of the Europeans on the coast. This period, however, also coincides with important developments in the interior—the implications of which are most clearly articulated in the contributions by McIntosh and Holl (Chapters 2 and 8). The contributions are all historical in that, to a varying extent, they all draw on oral histories and the documentary past to contextualize, evaluate, and interpret the archaeological record, though the specifics provided by these sources are highly variable in terms of the time-depth, content, and 'coign of vantage' represented. Although examples of indigenous writing systems can be noted, accounts by Arab and European visitors to the region provide the vast majority of the written accounts. Arabic sources for the Sahel extend back to the late first millennium AD, while the first European accounts for the coastal regions begin in the fifteenth century. These sources, while important, are incomplete and afford very limited insight into developments in many regions until the nineteenth or even twentieth century. In light of these lacunae it is not surprising that historians and archaeologists alike have frequently turned to oral histories and traditions, linguistics, and ethnographic analogy to strengthen their interpretations of the past (Ehret and Posnansky 1982; Henige 1982; Miller 1980; Vansina 1985). In fact, many researchers who have examined the West African archaeological record of the past 500 years have dealt with questions traditionally subsumed under the headings of ethnohistory, ethno-archaeology, and historical anthropology (e.g. Agorsah 1990; Atherton

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1983; DeCorse 1996; MacEachern 1996). With these observations in mind, the temporal boundary has been left flexible out of necessity. Indeed, recognition and discussion of what went before—of the population movements, events, and transformations that laid the foundation for future developments—is desirable and the majority of contributions delve into the context provided by earlier events. In this context, it is striking to note the limited degree to which information from Arabic and European sources has been drawn on. similarly, in many areas the roles of Arabic trade and European expansion have often not been emphasized or envisaged as the primary explanatory framework in archaeological studies. Examinations of African ethnic and cultural groups, indigenous development, and technological innovations have emerged as far more important considerations. There are good reasons for this. Developments ranging from brass casting technology to the rise of statelevel societies and indigenous cosmology have at times been ascribed to external agency, despite evidence to the contrary. Interdisciplinary archaeological and ethnographic studies have afforded important methodological insights into archaeological interpretation, as well as the presentation of pasts more directly relevant to the component populations of African nations. Studies have traced the origins of ethnographically known polities; sought insight into the archaeological perception of culture, ethnicity, and social boundaries; and examined the development of indigenous technology and artistic traditions.
Given the diversity of peoples, culture histories, and archaeological research represented it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to neatly synthesize West African culture history of the past 500 years. Admirable surveys have been presented (e.g. Brooks 1993; Jones 1983; Law 1991; McCaskie 1995; Reyna 1990; Rodney 1970; Terray 1995; Wilks 1993). Yet even these syntheses, out of necessity, have concentrated on certain sub-regions, cultural groups, or polities. Local developments were highly variable, despite the ways in which they may have been shaped by broader historical, economic, and political processes. Hence, the studies presented here cannot be taken as general models, but considered in light of the diverse patterns of which they were part.

West Africa before the Europeans

West Africa is here considered to extend from the Senegambia in the west to Cameroon in the east, bordered by the Sahara desert in the north and the Atlantic Ocean in the south. Few non-specialists realize the region’s vast size, an area that would incorporate most of the continental United States. The region subsumes tremendous climatic, geographical, and cultural diversity (Figs 1.1 and 1.2). Climatic regions extend in roughly parallel, east-west bands. The desert region in the north includes some of the driest places on Earth, while the annual rainfall in the tropical forests of the coast exceeds 250 inches of rain per year. Between eastern Ghana and Benin, open savanna vegetation extends all the way to the coast, dividing the tropical forest into western and eastern portions. The varying availability of natural resources in these different areas provided stimulus to trade and exchange, as well as conflict. Fluctuations in climatic conditions and the availability of water resources were critical variables to the societies of the Sahel and savanna, and they played pivotal roles in the movement of some populations. Languages of the Niger Congo family predominate throughout the region, and various commonalities in cultural practices have been noted within various sub-families and ethnolinguistic groups (Greenberg 1966; Murdock 1959). However, this shared linguistic classification belies a great deal of variation in subsistence strategies, social organization, and cultural history. Plantations of cash crops have become increasingly common in many areas during the present century. In the past, however, subsistence farming based on swidden agriculture predominated. Rice is the staple of preference among the Mande and West Atlantic peoples in the west, while yam cultivation has been more typical further east. West Africa was an independent center of domestication, and a diversity of species is represented, including sorghum, African rice, millets, oil palm, and some sixty varieties of yams (see reviews and bibliographies in Shaw et al. 1993). Throughout the region, however, many American and Asian crops have been introduced since the fifteenth century. A variety of domesticated animals, including cattle, chickens, goats, sheep, ducks, and Guinea fowls are
commonly kept, and were exploited in the past. Although new varieties have been introduced, most of these animals were known well before the fifteenth century. Pastoralism is historically of particular importance to some groups, as for example the Fulani, who range widely over the savanna and Sahel. On the other hand, exploitation of shellfish and marine fishing were traditionally significant in the coastal regions. Various patterns of descent, marriage customs, age-grades, puberty rites, and cultural practices further distinguish individual ethnolinguistic groups.

Technological developments in West Africa were equally varied in their specifics and distribution. For the most part, with a few notable exceptions, the Late Stone Age was superseded by iron technology without any intervening Bronze or Copper Age (e.g. Kense and Okoro 1993). The earliest conclusive evidence of iron production comes from first millennium AD sites in Niger and Jos Plateau in Nigeria. Spectacular finds of copper alloy objects, produced using cire perdue (lost wax) casting, are known from some sites dating to the ninth or tenth centuries AD. On the other hand, in some areas such as the Sierra Leone and Liberian hinterland, Sdo Tom6, and the firkki plains of northeast Nigeria evidence for iron smelting appears relatively late (approximately AD 700), and continues in association with Stone Age technology for several centuries.

West Africa did not exist in isolation during the millennia preceding the advent of the Atlantic trade. By the fifteenth century, when the first European arrived on the coast, West Africa was already linked by trade networks that extended throughout the coast and hinterland. There has been a tendency to conceptualize this trade as having been north to south in orientation: movement between the forest, savanna and Sahel and, later, between the European outposts on the coast and the interior hinterland. Clearly this was an important aspect of long-distance exchange. East-west trade patterns were, however, also important. By the first millennium AD interand intra-regional trade in resources such as
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阿拉伯貿易與北非的建立時間約為第一個千年。事實上，是伊斯蘭化的阿拉伯旅行者提供了關於西非的最早文獻記錄。我們對跨撒哈拉貿易的性質及其促生的文化交流的感知主要來自這些有限的源頭（Levitzion and Hopkins 1981）。阿拉伯文獻對象提及如黃銅、珠寶及天然資源等材料。

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slaves. Archaeological evidence for this trade is limited. Monad’s study of a caravan site, dating to the early second millennium AD, is as unique as it is tantalizing (Monod 1964). For the most part, archaeological data are limited to isolated finds of Chinese porcelain, beads, glass, and brassware from northern Africa (e.g. DeCorse 1989b; Garrard 1980; Silverman 1980). Materials such as kola, fish, gold, salt, and slaves, often presumed to have been of critical importance, are difficult to assess from an archaeological standpoint.

Prior to the fifteenth century the nexus of sociopolitical developments appears to have been in the Sahel and savanna. This may, in part, result from lacunae in our knowledge of the archaeological record of the forest regions. Currently available information, however, suggests urbanism and sociopolitical complexity occurred earlier in the regions to the north. In the fifteenth century, areas such as the coast and coastal hinterlands of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, and Ghana probably had relatively low population densities compared to portions of the interior. Some models have viewed the trans-Saharan Arab trade as the stimulus for these developments. Yet the origins of many of the settlements and polities referred to in later Arabic and European accounts—including ancient Ghana and Mali, Asanti, and Benin—can be traced back to the first or early second millennium AD (see the chapters by McIntosh, Gronenborn, and MacEachern). Some polities extended over large regions. For example, the Kingdom of Benin was ruled by the Oba who controlled a powerful army and a network of administrators, through which his influence reached throughout much of south central Nigeria (Connah 1975). In contrast, evidence for urbanization and political stratification is limited in some regions and acephalous societies appear to have predominated both before and after the period of the Atlantic trade. Such appears to have been the case in the forests of Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, where evidence for centralized, state-level societies is limited (DeCorse 1989a). Oral histories and documentary records suggest that settlements remained autonomous, or loosely united under a charismatic leader or prominent war chief.

A critical aspect of north-south interactions was Islam, which was introduced into West Africa late in the first millennium AD. The nature of this introduction was highly variable, involving a variety of dynasties, schools of Islam, and ethnolinguistic groups (Hiskett 1984; Insoll 1996; McCall and Bennett 1971; Trimingham 1978). Islamic beliefs were adapted and modified, producing religious practices that were syncretic combinations of Islamic and indigenous African belief systems. In addition to religion, the Arab trade brought common language, writing, and legal systems. In some cases, particularly during the initial centuries, Islam was spread through merchants and the ruling class. However, in many instances, ranging from the Futa Jallon in the west to the Mandara Highlands in the east, Islamic states waged jihads or holy wars on neighboring non-Islamic populations and occupied their lands (see chapters by McIntosh, Holl, Gronenborn, and MacEachern). The reasons—and the outcomes—of these conflicts were not entirely religious. They were frequently driven by economic, political, and cultural motives.

Archaeological work on sites known from Arabic sources has often concentrated on narrowly focused historical questions, such as the identification and
description of the Arab and African settlements mentioned in the documents (see chapter by Gronenborn; de Barros 1990). These studies serve to underscore the incomplete nature of the documents, which often provide such limited information that even the identification of the location and the organization of the settlements mentioned remain tenuous. Given these limitations, archaeological research can be important in

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refining our understanding of the events described in written and oral sources. Work on other sites has often dealt with questions of much broader interest, in terms of both theoretical implications and spatial focus.

The Atlantic trade

Europeans arrived on the West African coast in the fifteenth century. The Cape Verde Islands were settled during the middle of the fifteenth century, and São Tomé in the Bight of Benin was reached by the end of the century. Models of African-European interactions afford dramatic contrasts, both within West Africa and with other world areas. It was trade that brought the Europeans and it was within this arena that their activities took place (DeCorse 1998, 2001). Gold was the primary objective during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries but other commodities, including ivory, pepper, redwood, and hides, became increasingly important. The slave trade, shifting in focus and volume through time, had major consequences in many regions. Some 12 to 15 million individuals were removed from Africa (e.g. Debien 1974; Geegus 1989; Gemery and Hogendoorn 1979; Higman 1984; Inikori 1976, 1982; Manning 1997; Richardson 1980). The horror of the Middle Passage and the conditions enslaved Africans faced in the Americas have been treated in contemporary accounts and in more recent scholarship. However, many of the historical studies that have been undertaken have focused on the numbers of slaves or where the slaves were purchased, not their actual cultural or ethnic affiliations. As Lovejoy (1989:378) has noted: ‘. . . ethnicity under slavery tended to be identified with the commercial system through which the slaves passed in Africa; that is the region and/ or port of export.’ Names such as Congo, Gbe (Ewe-Fon), Yoruba, Igbo, Bambara, Akan, Mina, Angola, and Mozambique became glosses for broadly inclusive groups representing numerous, ethnically heterogeneous populations.

The ways in which captive Africans reached the trading enclaves on the coast varied a great deal. Although the European arrived on the coast in the fifteenth century, direct interaction with Europeans for the majority of West African societies was non-existent until the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries. On the Gold Coast more than 60 European trade posts, forts, and plantations had been established by 1800, but these were confined to the coastal margin and the total European presence never exceeded more than a few hundred (DeCorse 1992, 1993, 2001; Lawrence 1963; Posnansky and DeCorse 1986; Van Dantzig 1980). In the Senegal and Gambia river valleys, European traders reached farther inland, but their numbers remained small (Wood 1967). Many of the consequences of European expansion in both economic and cultural terms was played out far from the coast, with little direct European
involvement, and within African sociocultural contexts. Even in the coastal enclaves the perceptions, goals, and motivations of the African populations frequently circumscribed the actions of the Europeans (Kelly 1997 and this volume). Until the late nineteenth century and the partition of Africa, Europeans frequently exercised limited control over the immediate hinterland and there was never a substantial settler population. These scenarios are very different from those encountered in South Africa and portions of the East African coast, where substantial European settlement and conscription of the indigenous population into the labor force was an integral part of the contact setting.

Given the nature of the contact setting, it is not surprising that many studies of European-West African relations of the pre-colonial period have focused on trade and economic relations (DeCorse 1998; cf. Curtin 1975; Daaku 1970; Dike 1966; Hopkins 1973; Jones 1983; Kea 1982; Polanyi 1966; Reynolds 1974; Rodney 1970; Wallerstein 1986). Although specific models of the economic transformations within West African societies vary, the region became increasingly enmeshed in an economic system that was ever-widening in scope and increasingly Eurocentric in orientation. The societies most immediately affected by the European trade were the coastal and riverine towns that were the sites of early Portuguese, French, Dutch, English, Swedish, Danish, and Brandenberger entrepots. Within the hinterland, trade in commodities and enslaved Africans gradually transformed the sociopolitical structure of societies involved. The economic focus shifted from the forest-savanna ecotone to the coast. Some of the polities of the Sahel declined, while other

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regions and the coastal states thrived along the new frontier of opportunity provided by the European trade.

While an holistic perspective of regional, inter-regional, and global developments is desirable, there is an equal need to recognize the varied consequences of local economic, political, and cultural variation, and the disparate contact settings represented. Although the panorama of an expanding Eurocentric economy provides a backdrop—a context—for the structure of African-European relations, the timing and nature of individual contacts varied, as did the specific European policies initiated, the materials exchanged, and the volume of trade. Local responses were diverse—some African polities enjoyed relatively harmonious relations with the Europeans, while others vigorously opposed or regulated European activities. Given the small number of Europeans on the coast, interactions were frequently dictated more by historical incident, distinctive local conditions, and personal relations than by any unified policy on the part of the European nations involved.

Africa is replete with illustrations of the varied nature of African-European interaction. The Portuguese settlements in North Africa, such as Qsar-es-Seghir, can be viewed as ill-fated colonial experiments: economic failures that remained isolated from the hinterland and the interior trade (Redman 1986). In contrast, the lucrative traffic along the West African coast was at first conducted from ships.
without any established bases. This remained the predominant pattern in areas such as Liberia and Ivory Coast throughout the pre-colonial period. On the other hand, gold was found relatively close to the coast of modern-day Ghana, and the Europeans established fortified outposts to secure trade and allow for the accumulation and storage of goods. Although the specific function of these outposts varied, they were primarily small military garrisons staffed by men. Often the garrison personnel were ethnically heterogeneous, consisting of individuals of various European nationalities, as well as Africans. For example in 1679, the complement of the Danish Fort Christiansborg consisted of the Danish commander, a Greek assistant, and 40 slaves. What sense of Danish cultural identity may have evolved in this setting is open to question. Despite their size, these communities were nevertheless crucial in drawing the coast and hinterland into the broadening Eurocentric economic system.

The most enduring monuments to European expansion are the forts and trade posts that dot the coast. Research undertaken at these sites has primarily focused on the identification of specific outposts, the histories of extant European buildings, and on preservation and restoration concerns (Bech and Hyland 1978; Bessac 1952; Bessac and Dfkeyser 1951; Courr~ges 1987; Dahmen and van Elteran 1992; Diop 1993; Ephson 1970; Fage 1959; Flight 1968; Groll 1968; Hyland 1970, 1971; Jeppeson 1966; Joustra and Six 1988; Matson 1953; Mauny 1949, 1950, 1954; O'Neal 1951; Priddy 1977; Priestley 1956; Van Dantzig 1972, 1980; Van Dantzig and Priddy 1971; van den Nieuwenhof 1991; Varley 1952; Wood 1967). This work has generally not involved excavation, and archaeological data have been seen as incidental to historical and restoration interests. By far the most comprehensive work on European outposts in West Africa was undertaken by the late A. W. Lawrence between 1951 and 1957. Although Lawrence (1963, 1969) surveyed much of the West African coast, his work concentrated on the European forts and castles of Ghana. This area, encompassing the region historically known as the Gold Coast, was the site of more European trade posts than any other part of Africa. Lawrence's publications synthesize European archival material and field data to provide the seminal work on many structures and a limited amount of information on life in the forts. Lawrence provides virtually no discussion of the artifacts discovered in clearing the structures. His emphasis on building history is comparable to early work on European sites in other parts of Africa and, indeed, other world areas as well. Work on other European sites in West Africa has similarly been motivated by restoration and preservation concerns. In Ghana, the Central Region Development Commission is currently directing work on some of the major European structures, including Cape Coast and Elmina Castles, and Fort St. Jago, where a limited amount of excavation has been undertaken to complement restoration work (Hyland 1995). Similarly, research in Sierra Leone has focused on Bunce Island, a small British trade post in the Sierra Leone estuary that was surveyed in 1993. In Benin,
the Portuguese factory at Ouidah has been restored (Sinou 1992). Another case in point is Fort d'Estrees, on Goree Island off the Senegalese coast. With the help of international funding, the Senegalese government has been able to preserve much of the old townscape and renovated the Fort as the Historical Museum of Senegal. In Côte d'Ivoire no large European outposts were established prior to the nineteenth century. Scant archaeological work has been undertaken, but extensive restoration work has been done on French colonial buildings (e.g. Côte d'Ivoire 1985; Courrèges 1987).

A few European outposts have been the targets of systematic archaeological work. Funded through academic institutions, these projects were not driven by preservation concerns. Examples include Posnansky's 1976 excavations at Fort Ruychaver, a small seventeenth-century Dutch outpost on the Ankobra River, Ghana, and Calvocoressi's work at the supposed early Norman trading site at Bantoma near Elmina (Calvocoressi 1977; Posnansky and Van Dantzic 1976). More recently, a systematic survey of Danish forts and plantations in Ghana and excavations at Daccubie and Bibease were undertaken as part of a long-term study to examine culture change in coastal Ghana (DeCorse 1993), and to evaluate the nature of enslavement in a West African context (Bredwa-Mensah 1996; Bredwa-Mensah and Crossland 1997). The Danish plantations are interesting as they were, in part, established as an outgrowth of the abolitionist movement. They were, however, short lived and largely unsuccessful.

The continuing emphasis (as measured by funding) on the restoration and preservation of European structures is notable, as similar efforts have generally not been directed to African settlements. Most West African countries have only limited legislation protecting archaeological resources, and international funding to preserve or salvage sites has not been forthcoming. Multinational corporations have occasionally funded archaeological work on sites affected by development and mining activities, but these cases are the exception rather than the rule. The concentration on European structures is, in part, predicated by the need to strike a balance between preservation concerns and modern usage. Many European monuments served, and continue to serve, as government offices, prisons, and museums. More recently, European structures have been increasingly viewed as potential tourist attractions. The contrasting agendas represented makes interpretation and management of these structures difficult (Bruner 1996).

The preceding discussion illustrates the specialized nature of the European presence in West Africa and the dominance of historical and restoration concerns in research on European sites. Much more archaeological data could be usefully incorporated into restoration studies and interpretive displays. Further work on European sites also promises to provide important insights into European responses to varying contact settings and the nature of the European commodities' trade. Yet, while future research may provide valuable information, European sites can only offer insight into one side of the contact. In order to obtain a more holistic interpretation of West African culture dynamics, the associated African settlements and the vast hinterlands from which captive Africans were drawn need to be examined. This has been the focus of studies presented here.
Continuities and transformations
Relatively few studies have specifically concentrated on African settlements associated with European trade posts. Among the larger projects are the excavations undertaken at the early European trading sites of Elmina, Ghana (DeCorse 1992, 2001), and Savi in coastal Benin (Kelly this volume); in both instances the emphasis was placed on the interpretation of the associated African communities. These projects illustrate the limited amount of information afforded by European documentary accounts even in areas with long histories of African-European interaction. In terms of European source material, Elmina is one of the best described and illustrated sites in sub-Saharan Africa. It was the location of the first European trade post in the region, and the headquarters of both the Portuguese and Dutch in West Africa. The documentary evidence relating to the site is extensive. Nevertheless, specific information on life within the African settlement and African customs is far from complete. Like European illustrations of the settlement, the overwhelming emphasis is

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on the European presence and European concerns. Archaeological data have been used to illustrate cultural continuities in the midst of a great deal of technological and social change.

Sites such as Elmina and Savi have produced comparatively large amounts of trade items. However, more important than the number of trade items recovered is the inferences drawn from the appearance of European trade goods in the archaeological record. The presence or absence of certain categories of material goods does not automatically imply a particular stage of economic relations, certain sociocultural changes, or the assimilation of a certain suite of European cultural traits. European trade items were utilized in disparate ways. Archaeological data, nevertheless, afford an important means of assessing change in African societies. More important than the presence or absence of trade items, it is the changes in settlement patterns, defensive features, and settlement organization that testify most eloquently to the transformations that occurred in African societies. Given the general knowledge about the timing and foci of the Atlantic trade, and the relative numbers of captive Africans obtained in different areas that can be gleaned from the documentary record, we can turn to the archaeological record for evidence of the trade and its consequences. Direct evidence for slavery is exceedingly limited (DeCorse 1991). Assessment of this issue is dependent on a far better understanding of the archaeological record than is currently at hand, but the information does point to substantial change in many African societies between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Examining West African archaeological sites, several researchers have noted radical changes in the material record of the post-European contact period. In coastal Ghana, for example, there are significant differences in form, decorative inventory, and manufacturing techniques between the pottery of the Late Iron Age/Early Historic Period and later assemblages. Data also indicate change in subsistence, as well as increasing urbanization and craft specialization (DeCorse 2001). Additional indications of change during the post-European contact period
have been noted in the Birim Valley, 50 miles (80 km) west of Accra and Shai. On the basis of his excavations, Kiyaga-Mulindwa (1982) concluded that the earthworks found in this area ‘may be regarded as a deterrent to small-scale attacks, petty slave-hunting forays, and kidnappings.’ 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. Changes such as these have been widely reported in other parts of West Africa (DeCorse 1991). Archaeological data from northeastern Sierra Leone 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 of thorn bushes, and stockades of living trees (DeCorse 1989a). 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, and similar pressures may have precipitated the foundation of many of them. Reasons for change in African societies during the past 500 years are clearly complex, as are archaeological perceptions of these changes. Although overarching analytical frameworks may suggest certain commonalities in response to inter-regional trends, there were variations in individual contact settings due to cultural, demographic, economic, environmental, and historical factors. While the European presence can be seen as a critical mechanism for sociocultural change in an entrepot like Elmina, other economic, social, and cultural interactions need to be considered in evaluating developments in the hinterland. Understanding the latter developments is dependent on the elucidation of indigenous relations, some of which were well underway long before the arrival of Europeans. It is the particularities of these transformations that this volume best illustrates.

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