Learning About Life in the Past

History & Archaeology

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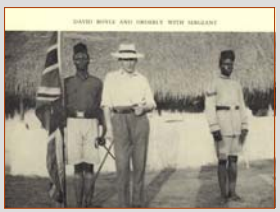
We can learn about the past in many ways: through **oral histories** shared by elders; through **written documents**; but also through **objects** used and thrown away by people in the past.

Kofi Asempasah, head of Gbeenlee Katoo in Gbau, sharing family history with James Anane, 1982.



District Commissioners like David Boyle (DC, Wenchi, 1916) wrote reports that tell us something about life in the colonial era.

Historians study oral histories and documents. **Archaeologists** learn about the past by studying objects (pots and tools) and features (houses) that are buried in the ground.

Pottery made in Dorbour.

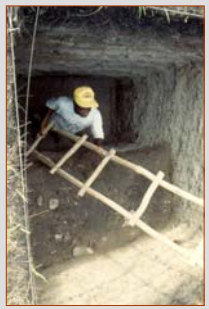
Iron tools and ornaments from Ngre Kataa.

Features in mound 148 at Kuulo Kataa. The dark area is a pit that was dug into the mound and later filled. To the left is an old floor. To the right is a burned basin, and behind are hearth stones. These are what archaeologists call "features."

Why do Archaeologists dig?

The objects that people use and throw away tell us a great deal about their daily lives. Archaeologists excavate sites (*kataas*) in order to learn about:

--what people ate and how they prepared it



A deep midden at Kuulo Kataa (mound 101)
Enoch Mensah at the base of this 4 metre deep unit.

Deep middens ("dumps") contain remains of plants and animals used for food. Archaeologists screen dirt in order to find animal bones and tools that people used in food preparation. Some soil is "floated"—the dirt is put in water and the burned plant remains (seeds) float to the surface. Seeds scooped from the water with a sieve are dried and studied. Amanda Logan has studied these and found maize, sorghum, pearl millet, and tobacco among other plants.

Screening dirt for artifacts at Makala Kataa, 1994.

"Floating" dirt for plant remains. Mensah Listowell, 1994.

--the houses they lived in

Plastered floor & walls of a house built 400 years ago at Kuulo Kataa.

--the tools they made and used

Iron knife and a pottery jar made by ancient crafts people who lived at Kuulo Kataa.

--the ornaments they valued

Copper rings made from metal imported from the Sahara (above) & glass beads imported by Saharan & Atlantic trade.

Ivory bangles from Kuulo Kataa

People in the past valued copper rings, ivory bangles, and glass beads.

--their connections to other places in West Africa & beyond

For centuries people in the Banda area have obtained goods through long distance trade.

Banda people participated in Saharan trade from AD 1000; trade with coastal regions increased after AD 1500.

How do things come to be buried in the ground?

When we throw things away, or when our houses collapse, they make layers in the ground. If people keep living in the same place and throwing things away, these layers build up. If people leave a place, plants begin to grow over top of their old places. Wind and rain can bring in soil. Over time, a thick layer of earth forms on top of places where people lived in the past.

Metal working area at Ngre Kataa. Grindstones & pots left here 600 years ago were buried by the build-up of soil over time.

Layers build up over time when people live and work in the same place over time. People at Ngre Kataa worked metals in this place for many years. Grinding & anvil stones in the lower levels were covered over by soil and things that people left behind over time.

How old is it?

The layers formed when people throw things away help archaeologists to know how old the things are. Older things are buried deeper in the ground than newer ones. When they dig, archaeologists take measurements and make notes that help them to know about the position of things in the ground. This helps them to understand how old a site is and the things that people did while they were living at a site.

Archaeologists also learn about the age of sites by **radiocarbon dating** old charcoal. Scientists have a way of knowing how old a piece of wood was when it was burned. When we find charcoal from a cooking fire, radiocarbon dating helps us to know how many centuries ago it was used.

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