

An Overview of the Benefit of Archaeology to the Study of African History

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Abstract

Every place around the world has a past. Effort has been made to improve the method of historical studies and research in an effort to better understand the past events, culture, people, places, traditions, values etc. The quest to acquire all these knowledge berried in the distant past is critical to academic excellence not just history as a discipline. Archaeology involves surveying, excavation, and eventually analysis of data collected, to learn more about the past. In broad scope, archaeology relies on cross-disciplinary research. Africa has the longest record of human habitation in the world. The first humans emerged 6-7 million years ago, and among the earliest anatomically modern human skulls found so far were discovered at Omo Kibish, Jebel Irhoud, and Florisbad. However, Africa has the larger part of its past unwritten because of lack of writing knowledge, hence, the critical role of archaeology to supplement oral traditions which modern African historians relied heavily on. This research aim to explicitly detail the benefit of archaeology to the study and understanding of African history, it reveals how archaeology could further aid in debunking Eurocentric views of Africa lacking history and also emphasized the role archaeology could play in helping history students understand the past.

Keywords: Archaeology, Artefacts, Cross-disciplinary, Excavations, Pre-historic

Introduction

Archaeology is a way of learning about the past through the objects that former occupants left behind which according to Falola (1986) include artefacts, architecture, bio-facts and cultural landscapes. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 8th edition define archaeology as the study of ancient cultures and historical periods via the examination of artefacts and building remnants discovered in the ground. Archaeology often appears to evoke exotic images of historical architecture, ageless structures, spectacular ground-breaking buildings that defy the state of engineering at the time. Without referencing these historical sites, modern revolution and cutting-edge engineering would scarcely be able to attain such successes. How could we have access to all these information buried in the distant past after thousands of years? The Stonehenge in England, Opa Oranyan in Ife, Pyramids in Egypt, Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan, Anko Wat in Cambodia, Pyramid of Technochichlan in Mexico. While all of these amazing artefacts, buildings and fabulous structures are familiar to most of us, they are so compelling that they most times mask a more significant and poorly understood fact. Every place has a past, and every past is relevant. Moreso, countless virgin areas exist that needs excavation to

understand the people and their past. Archaeology gives new opportunity to further understand previously studied cultures and peoples through the objects they left behind. Through the lenses of archaeological findings historians are provided with additional opportunities to verify findings in the course of investigation.

Due to the fact that archaeology involves the study of the remains (trash) of previous human behaviours, it has been dubbed 'the science of rubbish'. Archaeology covers a wide range of topics. It involves a variety of subject areas, such as bio-archaeology (the study of human remains), zoo-archaeology (the study of animal remains) pale-ethno botany (the study of stone tools) and experts who uncover and interpret maps or analyse archaeological sites. The longest record of human habitation is found in archaeology. The oldest Archeulian sites can typically be located in Eastern Africa in the Rift valley and on the South African plateau. Between 500,000 and 250,000 year ago, tribes of Homo erectus appear to have colonised the lower Nile and Eastern Sahara, as well as the North Western coasts of Morocco (Jebel Irhoud) and Algeria (Ogundele, 2008).

Without doubt, archaeological research gives wide room for objectivity, the curse of most historians has to do with inability to dissociate themselves from their investigation, which suppress the beauty of fact-finding and truth in the interest of historical scholarship. It's needful to note that, archaeology can positively affect the classroom study and teaching of history. Most schools hardly have archaeology as a course in a department but it's an integral part of history as a discipline or social science as a faculty.

Archaeological research in Nigeria dates back to the 1940's when a rock-shelter named "Rop" was investigated, Bernard Fagg did a limited excavation in the Nok Valley area of Central Nigeria. Similarly, rescue excavations were carried out in Igbo-Ukwu in the Eastern part of the country by Thurstan Shaw and his team in the latter part of the 1950's. Since then, several archaeological efforts have been made in few locations such as Ile-Ife, Old-Oyo, Benin and Daima all situated in the Western and Northern parts of Nigeria respectively. (Shaw & Daniels, 1984)

What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of past human behaviour through the systematic recovery and analysis of material remains or objects. These objects, called artefacts, can be as small as a pin or as large as a building. Either large or small, they are the evidence of past cultures, traditions, values and religion. These artefacts are proof of those before us and serve as a physical connection to our past.

According to Obayemi (1989) Archaeology is divided into prehistoric and historical archaeology. Prehistoric archaeology is the study of cultures that did not have a written language. Although prehistoric peoples did not write about their culture, they left remains such as tools, pottery, ceremonial objects, and dietary refuse. Historical archaeology studies the remains of cultures for which a written history exists. Historical archaeology examines records from the past that include diaries; court, census, and tax records; deeds; maps; and photographs. Through combining the use of documentation and archaeological evidence, archaeologists gain a better understanding of the past and human behaviour.

Why is Archaeology Important?

Extremely important. It is our best way of debunking one-source mythology, and giving way for new methods of inquiry. Homer, wrote about something that happened decades or centuries before his time, this is our only source for the Trojan War, and Herodotus recorded a lot of superstitious rumours. The Old Testament reference to the Jews being slaves in Egypt

has led to millennia of belief that they built the pyramids, disproved by recent discovery of the pay records of the workers who actually did build them. Archaeology is giving study of history the opportunity to revisit countless records of past events in a calculated effort to ascertain its validity and authenticity.

The Rosetta stone, which led to the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics, opened up a vast store of documents and stone carvings, which in turn told us where to look for more clues. The discovery of Arab coins from Baghdad in a Viking jarl's grave in Denmark provides direct evidence of the commercial connections of the East and West during what we think of as the Dark Ages. In another vein, the Eurocentric view of Africa lacking history before the arrival of European is insulting to the vast array of African rich history, culture, religion and knowledge of science halted by European invasion and eventual subjugation. Archaeology is proving the idea wrong and providing inroads to complement oral traditions or debunk ambitious claims guided by pride and subjective views. Either ways, archaeology is to provide the missing link in the cause of historical research and opportunity to arrive at objective conclusions.

Sometimes it becomes problematic, especially when one ethnic group claims a place as its "homeland," only to have the archaeological record show that they came from somewhere else. Regardless, it's a vital component of the study of history, and gives up hard data where otherwise we would be left with oral tradition, religious doctrine, and an idealized past. First, it either confirms or refutes known historical facts. An example is the dig which uncovered the skeleton of Richard III. It was thought until then that the hunchback was just Tudor propaganda. Now we know that it wasn't, that Richard suffered from severe scoliosis of the spine, possibly making one shoulder higher than the other. (Christian, T. et.al, 2010).

It fills in gaps in our knowledge. For example, no one knew of the Minoan people until a dig on Crete found their palaces. It tells us the plain facts behind legends such as the sacking of Troy and helps put firm dates to buildings and events. It teaches us more about history. The best example is the discovery of the Roman waterwheels found in Gresham Street in London.

The goal of archaeology is to understand how and why human behaviour has changed over time. Archaeologists search for patterns in the evolution of significant cultural events such as the development of farming, the emergence of cities, or the collapse of major civilizations for clues of why these events occurred. Ultimately, they are searching for ways to better predict how cultures will change, including our own, and how to better plan for the future.

Archaeology is not only the study of these broad issues but also provides a history and heritage to many cultures. Nothing would be known of the cultural developments of prehistoric peoples if it were not for archaeology. Falola (1986) added that, archaeology paints a picture of everyday life for groups such as slaves, coal miners, and other early immigrant workers who were poorly documented by historians.

Today, our culture seems to document everything through books, newspapers, television, and the Internet. However, there is frequently a difference between what is written and what people actually do. Modern media often puts a "spin" on a story that reflects an editorial bias on what has taken place. Although the written record may be tremendously useful, it is biased by the beliefs and mistakes of those who produced them. Archaeology frequently provides a more objective account of our past than the historic record alone.

Our past is our cultural heritage, and how we choose to use this information for future generations is an important role for archaeologists. Understanding patterns and changes in human behaviour enhances our knowledge of the past. It aids us in planning, not only our

future, but for generations to come. Many people believe that public archaeology is critical to understanding, protecting, and celebrating our rich and diverse cultural heritage. Archaeologists recognize the importance of this role and are developing various mechanisms of media outreach, publications, Internet, and public programs, to publicize the contributions of archaeology.

Caring for the Past

Archaeological sites and artefacts on private land in the Commonwealth are the property of the landowner. When they occur on public land or in the path of proposed projects like highways or developments, a number of state and federal laws provide for their study and their protection. The intentional excavation or removal of antiquities on public land is a criminal offense forbidden by law. When project construction threatens archaeological sites, archaeologists in the employ of public agencies, consulting firms, or universities work closely with project planners and designers. The archaeologists conduct fieldwork to locate the sites, and preservation of sites in their original location is always the best and first option. When that's not possible, samples of the data and artefacts from the most important sites are carefully excavated prior to construction. The results of these excavations include technical reports, museum collections, public exhibits, films, Web sites, and lesson plans, ensuring that both researchers and taxpayers benefit from our efforts to manage the buried past.

Why Archaeology Matters

Ducker & Spielvogel (2012) submitted that archaeological sites are non-renewable resources; once they're destroyed or excavated by archaeologists, they're gone forever and can't be replaced. The loss is significant. In the end, archaeology isn't about artefacts or excavations or exhibits, it's about people! Our decisions about the future are based on the lessons we learn from those who came before us. The worlds of Native American hunters, Revolutionary War soldiers, 19th century coal miners, pioneer farmers - entire generations of our predecessors and ancestors - can be reconstructed from the things they left behind in archaeological sites.

Prehistoric Archaeology

Prehistoric archaeology refers to the study of material remains from cultures that have left behind no written records. Since written records came into use at different times in history throughout different parts of the world, prehistory has no definite time period. For example, written records were in common usage in Europe long before they were in the Americas. Our understanding of prehistoric cultures, therefore, is largely dependent upon archaeological research (Agbaje, 1990). Prehistoric archaeologists sometimes choose to further define their specialty by narrowing their focus onto such areas as lithic analysis, which is the study of prehistoric stone artefacts, or ceramic analysis, which is the study of archaeological pottery remains. Through such analyses, archaeologists have the ability to determine such things as the origin of the material and the function of the artefacts.

Historic Archaeology

According to Obayemi (1989), Historic archaeology refers to the study of peoples and cultures since the end of prehistory. Historic archaeology differs from prehistoric archaeology in that it makes use of both material remains and written records in order to understand the past. For example, an archaeologist studying the remains of a seventeenth-century French homestead would consult written records pertaining to that time and place in conjunction with the archaeological remains in order to gain better insight into its history.

Historical archaeologists utilize a variety of written records in their research. Examples of written records that they might use include: archival records, explorers' accounts, census records, election returns, tax lists, old newspapers and other periodicals letters, diaries and historic maps.

Prehistoric and historic archaeology are not the only specialties that archaeologists may narrow their focus to. They also generally choose to focus their research on specific geographic locations that interest them and major cultural developments that took place in the past. For example, some archaeologists may choose to study the Warring States Period of Ancient China or Japan. Bronze-Age Greece, or the Antebellum South of the United States. Others, however, may choose to study broader cultural developments in Oyo depending on the king, or such as the African Diaspora or the Industrial Revolution.

Archaeological field school is generally the first place that an aspiring archaeologist gets hands-on training in the basics of the profession. As the most fundamental level of archaeological training, the successful completion of an accredited field school is almost always a prerequisite for employment in the archaeological field. Thus, it is an absolutely critical step toward setting in motion your career as a professional archaeologist.

Archaeological field school is a hands-on course meant to train aspiring archaeologists in such basic field techniques as: surveying, excavation, artifact and feature identification, collection of soil samples, operation of total transit station, drawing sketch, maps, laboratory processing and analysis. .

Challenges

Until very recently, all the archaeologists working in Nigeria were mainly Europeans and they did not often stay long enough to embark upon systematic and long-term archaeological surveys. In other words, Nigerian archaeologists are still disappointingly few and largely as a result, some systematic archaeological investigations of the entire country is still a far cry. Closely related to the problem listed above, is the fact that Nigeria is a vast country, too large for a handful of archaeologists to manage. In addition, the geographical character of the region is extremely complex. Thus for example, the major vegetation zones (especially the thick forests and swamps in the south, and the very desert area to the north), constitute in themselves, distinct obstacles to archaeological field-work. (Ogundele, 1990)

Another major difficulty has to do with the fact that Nigeria is situated in the humid tropics and as with other humid tropical regions, the soils are acidic and erosion is generally very pronounced. These have adversely affected the preservation of archaeological remains especially fragile items like bones and wooden objects of great time-depth. However, there are still some depositional cases such as deltaic conditions, rock-shelters and caves, where archaeological materials are relatively better preserved. Overall however, the archaeologist working in Nigeria is left with just the imperishable such as stone tools and potsherds and little else in the way of human occupation to analyse reconstruct and interpret.

The lack and in places paucity of data has tended to encourage unrestrained speculation which in fact largely accounts for some insupportable hypotheses being put forward by many early or pioneer archaeologists, concerning the nature of culture change in Nigeria. One of such hypotheses was that the peopling of the forest region (southern Nigeria and indeed, all of the Guinea zone of West Africa) was a much later development than that of the Northern open savanna area. Recent archaeological research has shown that people were already living in South-Western Nigeria (specifically Iwo-Eleru) as early as 9000 BC and perhaps earlier at Ugwuelle-Uturu (Okigwe) in South-Eastern Nigeria (Agbaje, 1990).

Lack of adequate funding and dating facilities has also caused a lag in archaeological research in Nigeria and indeed, all of Africa. Many sites threatened by construction work such as bridges, roads, houses and dams are not normally rescued because there are no sources of funding. The governments of African countries have not been supportive enough of archaeological work, partly because both the leaders and the peoples do not recognize the role a sound knowledge of the past can play in nation-building.

There is up to now, no well-equipped dating laboratory either to process charcoal samples or potsherds. The only laboratory in West Africa is in Senegal and it is far from being well equipped. Consequently, it is restricted mostly to processing charcoal samples collected from sites in Senegal. Given this problem, samples collected from archaeological excavations have to be sent abroad for processing. This delays the rate at which archaeological information is put into its proper time perspective.

Conclusion

Archaeology needs serious attention and funding. It seems also that a great deal more time and attention are paid to the later phases of human settlement history than the earlier. Consequently, much more is known of Iron Age and historic settlements in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Some considerable amount of work has been done for these phases in Benin City in Nigeria, Niani in Niger Republic and Jenne-Jeno in Mali, among other places in West Africa. One reason for this interest in the later phase seems to rest in the fact that there is a meeting point between historic settlement archaeology and oral traditions in the region generally and the fact that people can identify much more easily with this phase because it is more recent and by this fact closer to our times.

It is pertinent to note that there is no settlement archaeology tradition(s) in Nigeria up to the early 1980's. Even at places like Ife, Old-Oyo, Benin and Zaria where some relatively limited archaeological work has been carried out, efforts were mainly concentrated on walls. In Southern Nigeria, proto-historic settlements were generally composed of mud or sun-dried brick houses. Most if not all these house structures and defensive and demarcation walls have either been destroyed or obliterated by erosion. The tradition of constructing houses with stones in the pre-colonial past was well reflected in many parts of Northern Nigeria. In fact, many hill-top settlements in this area of Nigeria were composed. There is no longer any question as to the importance of archaeology in understanding both the contemporary development of human existence and ancient cultures from the past. It is important for understanding human experience and activities during the pre-historic period of human evolution. Important historical evidence is provided by the earth's geography and description as well as the materials culture found in ancient sites. This evidence is used to reconstruct important historical facts. Thus archaeology allowed historians to piece together the past when written sources were scarce or incomplete.

Archaeology has been useful in confirming data from various sources, both oral and recorded. A way to learn about the past is through archaeology. It supports other sources of writing history of historical events that are related to the past. The amount of history for which we have written documents and oral testimony is a fairly small portion of the enormous and plentiful sources of historical data, believed the only way important sources pertaining to the tools and equipment utilised by people in the past could be exposed was via the use of archaeology. 'Indeed the past is filled with knowledge berried in it, archaeology is the best method of retrieving it.'

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