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**AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF KEBBI VALLEY, NORTH-WESTERN NIGERIA, CIRCA 1500 AD\***

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**Abstract**

*In the Nigeria of today, there is a keen interest in archaeology. Studies in archaeological field expeditions, ethnography, oral traditions and cultural remains found in different parts of Nigeria are examined, analyzed and presented to the public by archaeologists with a view to producing a coherent understanding of the past. The focus of this article is to discuss the pre-sixteenth century commercial interactions between the old Kebbi kingdom sites and the important centres of Gao, Timbuktu and others in the inland Niger Delta in West Africa. This is with a view to providing an overview and discussing early Arabic writings and archaeological evidence on the Kebbi Valley within the concept of Historical Archaeology. It is hoped that the information provided here acts as a reference to future historical archaeology works in this area of study.*

***Keywords: Historical Archaeology, Archaeological evidence, and Kebbi Valley.***

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**Introduction**

Historical archaeology has been undertaken in this study to aid the understanding of the early activities of humans in the Kebbi River Valley. There is evidence to show a meaningful economic link between Kebbi Valley and the important cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Jenne in Western Nigeria. This paper attempts to demonstrate the relevance of historical archaeology in the reconstruction of the commercial interactions between two geographically separated areas which nevertheless had evidence of far-flung trading links before the 16th century AD. It is proper to first give a brief definition of archaeology and a brief discussion about historical archaeology.

The main reason why past culture is studied is to place the material remains in certain historical contexts in order to increase people's understanding of the past. This in effect, underscores the interrelationship between archaeology and history. The systematic examination of material culture is capable of providing researchers with illuminating evidence to properly reconstruct the story of man in the past. The main assignment of an archaeologist, therefore, is to adequately identify, describe, classify and analyze the artefacts being studied.

Historical archaeology deals with landscape and material evidence from the past when written records and oral traditions can inform and contextualize cultural remains. It is the study of the past through written documents, oral tradition and material evidence.

Historical archaeologist usually works with both artefacts and texts with a view of helping to make clearer the history of humans.

Historical archaeology, therefore, is a process in which the past can be understood from the perspective of the present. Historical archaeology combines various sources of evidence such as written texts, oral traditions and artefacts to interpret and reconstruct the history of humans in the past (Aliyu 2006a). The discovery, description and examination of the material remains of the past are useful auxiliaries to the study of written records. Material culture does not only serve to complement but also supplement what may be known from written texts (Aliyu 2006b). Historical archaeology is, therefore, important because it promotes the knowledge that makes the cross-fertilization between history and archaeology a productive venture.

### **Geographical setting of Kebbi Valley**

The geographical location of our area of interest is the Kebbi River Valley. It covers the stretch of river Rima from its confluence with river Sokoto near the present Wamakko town in the north to where it joins the river Niger in the south. It is called Kebbi River in this section because it flows through the territory of the old Kebbi kingdom. This part of the river is not just a mere characteristic of the landscape but one of the most important features which conditioned early human settlement patterns and occupational pursuits.

The physical features of the area influenced the decision of where to locate settlements. The arid nature of the region meant that for people to overcome the problem of scarcity of water, they needed to settle close to the rivers where surface water could be guaranteed. It was not strange then that the early Kebbi sites of Maleh, Soro, Leka, Gungu and Surame were all located within the river valley. Other factors that attracted people to the place included light fertile and easily cultivable soil. There was also the availability of laterite for possible iron-working industry and the prevalence of clay for pottery production (Ologe & Sidhu 1983).

For a place in an arid zone, the settlement pattern assumes an important position in the evolution of the societies which eventually emerged in the area. With regard to Kebbi Valley, the sources from which to elicit information concerning the characteristics of human settlements are scanty. Recorded evidence and oral information have also not been consistently studied. It would appear most logical, therefore, to resort to the use of archaeological evidence no matter how little it may be. The examination of material culture in conjunction with written evidence will enable us to reconstruct the past of the area of focus more accurately.

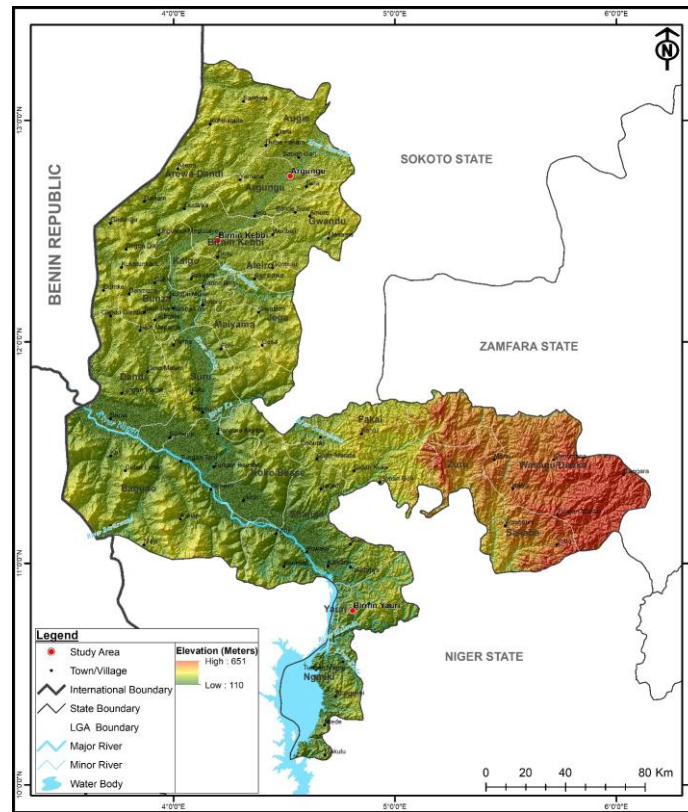


Fig 1: Topographical map of Kebbi State showing the Kebbi Valley

Source: <https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/>

### Early Arabic Writings

The earliest Arabic sources which specifically referred to “Guber” as a Rima valley place- came from two sources. The first was that of Leo Africanus who said that the people were cloth wearers and leather workers who made shoes and sandals like those formerly worn by the Romans and who exported these items to Timbuktu and Gao in one of their settlements resided by both local and foreign merchants (Last 1983). This position makes the discovery of the mineral galena and henna in Maleh very significant because it was probably used as part of the dyeing process of leather and tanning agents in the area. The second was *Asl al-Wangariyyin*, which is a Chronicle on the origin of the missionary activities of the Wangarawa translated by Al-Hajj (1968: 7-16).

Murray Last (1983) wrote:

*Leo’s “Gober” I suggest refers specifically to Gungu town and not, say, to Birnin Lalle or any other of the ancient towns of Modern Gobir. For ca 1500 AD it seems that Gungu with Leka across the river was the principal centre if not the only big town in the larger region called Gober. Certainly, Leo’s description fits Gungu better than other towns if we consider.*

- a. *Its relative proximity to the Niger, and its distance from Gago (Gao)*
- b. *The references to planting (reminiscent of the ways floating rice is still planted in the Rima Valley today).*

- c. *It's obvious prosperity and its subsequent destruction for which we have no evidence for any other town.*
- d. *Its position is not far from two prominent hills.*

*If Gungu was the manufacturing centre described by Leo, then Ibn Batutta's reference in 1353 AD to copper export from Takedda to "Kubur" (Gober) makes good sense.*

Talking about Gobir State in the Rima Valley, Ibn-Batutta linked the region with the copper trade from Takedda:

*The copper mine is outside Takedda. They excavated the earth for it and bring it to the town and smelt it in their houses. The copper is transported from there to the city of Kubar in the land of the infidels and to Zaghay, and to the land of Borno, which is at a distance of forty days from Takedda. (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981: 302).*

In reference to Gungu in the Kebbi Valley Al-Idris, located south of kawkaw, Gao wrote:

*The town of Kugha is situated on the Northern bank of the river from which the people obtain drinking water. It is one of the provinces of Wangara, but some of the Sudan regards it as being of the country of Kanim. It is a populous town without a surrounding wall. There are articles of trade manufacture and handicraft there, which they exchange for whatever they require. Witchcraft is attributed to the women of that town and they are said to be expert, famous and proficient in it...from Kugha to the town of Kaw kaw, situated to the north, is twenty stages travelling at camel's pace. The road leads through the land of Baghama. The people of Baghama are black Berbers...on this road which we have mentioned, from Kugha to Kaw kaw, through the land of Baghama, there are two waterless arid tracks, and the crossing of each of them takes five to six days (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981:112-113).*

The references cited here point to one fact that the early Arabic sources contain useful information in the effort to correctly identify places like Maleh, Gungu and others as likely trading centres in the pre-sixteenth century period in Kebbi Valley.

### **Archaeological Evidence**

Kebbi River Valley has evidence of human settlements which date back to the early Stone Age period (Soper 1965: 174-195). It is important to state however that the physical remains of early humans have not been discovered, but the evidence of their cultural activities has survived to attest to his presence.

The copper trade between Takedda and Kubar mentioned by Ibn – Batutta becomes interesting and instructive because there is already a radiocarbon date of 1350 AD for the site of Maleh (Leka) in the Kebbi Valley (Obayemi, 1984). The cultural materials discovered from the excavations of 1970 and 1972 were also articles of trade, which

indicated the directions of Kebbi's commercial contacts. This is because as early as 1353, the importation of copper to the town of Kubar situated in the country of pagans was consistent with the earlier reference to Kebbi as a centre where trade routes converged (Obayemi 1984). This trade equally confirms the suggestion that Gungu was one of the principal commercial centres in the Kebbi kingdom.

In 1919 at the village of Tumuni, bronze and copper vessels were also discovered and the materials were deposited at the National Museum in Lagos (Hogben & Kirk-Greene 1966: 244). Tumuni is located in the Kebbi Valley within a short distance from Gungu and Leka. It seems that these copper vessels were among the ones brought from Takedda. How else can one explain the appearance of copper products in this area if not as part of the articles of trade? The finds confirmed the existence of a recognized trade route identified by Adeleye (1976: 557-601) which ran from Agades – Takedda – Hausaland through Gobir and Kebbi.

In addition, Palmer (1942: 252-4) equally mentioned the bronze materials that came from the Kaduna River up past Jebba and Bussa, up to the region of Illo and the modern Gabi in the Kebbi Valley. This indicates that this region of our study was closely associated with the caravan trade linking the Kebbi Valley.

Archaeological studies point to the fact that the area has been supporting human occupation for a long period. Sutton (1976:9-14), for example, carried out a comprehensive archaeological reconnaissance in the region. The survey revealed early settlement patterns in the valley which confirmed the importance of water supply in the life of the people. He identified walled settlements, mounds and wall-less or open settlements.

Morphological variations such as rounded, cone-shaped and high-elongated mounds with a single double or even triple crest were found. The differences recorded may represent successive and closely related settlements. Some old Kebbi kingdom sites were associated with fortifications in which the most prominent and best documented were Gungu and Surame. This information confirms the oral tradition collected in the area (Harris 1939). These sites represent the early political centres of the Kebbi state. It was here that Obayemi conducted his archaeological excavations in 1970 and 1972 (Obayemi, 1977). The material evidence from these excavations provided the main thrust of the archaeological discussion in this article.

At Maleh (Leka) excavations revealed that the last artefact-bearing layer was very deep and the natural sub-soil was encountered at a depth of 4.1 meters from the surface. Three identifiable super-imposed occupation floors were exposed. The upper floor was laid with laterite and gravel while the other two floors were paved with potsherds. Obayemi suggests that the stratigraphy coupled with the rich and interesting artefacts deposited at considerable dept meant that Maleh was a permanent occupation site. The pre-pavement floors at the site were said to have been in existence before the 14<sup>th</sup> century which is clearly a period of two or three centuries before the famous Kanta, the founder of the Kebbi (Obayemi 1984). He added that archaeological finds in the Kebbi Valley were comparable with similar finds at various places in Mali. Archaeological finds included glass beads, fragments of multi-coloured glass bracelets, and decorated clay tobacco pipes. Others were cowry shells, gastropods including marginelloid shells and a piece of

mineral galena and a bone hairpin. Two axe heads and a grinding stone were also recovered. One radio-carbon date of 1350 A.D. from a piece of charcoal exists for the site (Obayemi 1984).

Soro was a settlement without walls. The cultural remains here included decorated fragments of clay tobacco pipes. This site was characterized by elongated mounds from where substantial surface finds were found. Others included clay spindle whorls, potsherds and animal bones and iron slag. It is remarkable that the glass bracelets, beads, cowry shells and marginelloid shells which were common in Maleh were absent from Soro.

Sutton (1976: 9-14) surveyed Surame, which was once the capital city of the Kebbi Kingdom. This site revealed remnants of an imposing structure. The settlement can still be appreciated for its well-preserved ruins. The city was surrounded by a ditch which is discernible in many sectors. It was flat-bottomed and would have provided good security for the settlement. A lot of stones were scattered all over the enclosed area. One is left with the impression that they were probably used for huts and foundations for granaries where grains were stored. The abundance of stones which featured prominently in the architecture of Surame was in sharp contrast to Maleh located on the same northern bank of river Kebbi, where stones were rarely used in building construction.

Recent fieldwork at Surame was conducted by the Department of Archeology in 2012 with the objectives of documentation and mapping of the house foundations on the site in order to map the settlement layout and to test the hypothesis that the defence walls were constructed during the last occupation of the site. Two hundred and Nineteen (219) circular and fifty-four (54) rectangular foundations were mapped on the site. Three (3) pits were opened near the defensive wall to its structure and foundations (Yusuf et al, 2021). The fieldwork by Opadeji and the field school report of the Department of Archaeology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria revealed the phases of occupation before the site attained the full status of *Birni*. Two types of wall were also categorized: the straight free-standing type and the laterite-filled standing type (Yusuf et al, 2021).

In the Kebbi Valley, the riverine settlements such as Gungu, Leka, Soro and Surame were associated with imported trade items. There is evidence to show that the inhabitants of these places were involved in the long-distance trade which entered the territory. The trade routes which developed took advantage of the settlements that eventually became termini, entrepot and transit centres for long-distance trade. This is consistent with the view expressed by Lovejoy (1978) that the *Wangara* traders played a prominent role in the incorporation of the Kebbi Valley into the general network of long-distance commerce. This conclusion reinforces the historical account, which showed the fact that throughout the 16th century, Kebbi state appeared to be one of the polities in Western Hausaland that could guarantee peaceful commercial dealings in the region as events in the neighbouring states made commercial transactions difficult.

Gungu was another old Kebbi fortified town located South-west of Surame. It was constructed with stones and mud. The ruins are still visible though the structure is not as well-preserved as that of Surame. The construction was simpler and the absence of complexity made Sutton (1976) suggest that it was more ancient than Surame. Other walled towns in the area, but of different ages and importance, included Birnin Kebbi,

Silame, Selma, Sauwa, Bunza and Argungu. Excavations at Selma near Zaki by Opadeji revealed mounds and wavy line pottery characterised by heavy stabbed collars at the base of the neck which is different from Surame pottery. This suggests an early Iron Age site probably predating Surame (Liesegang. 1995)

Information on commercial contacts is strongly revealed when the materials obtained at Maleh and Soro are compared. The decorated fragments of clay tobacco pipes and spindle whorls found on both sites are identical in form and in decoration. These were items of trade and a definite indication of links between the two sites for the exchange of these commodities. Maleh shows remarkable evidence of having been an important commercial centre with the discovery of glass beads, bracelets and more importantly cowry and marginelloid shells. The items were probably introduced into the Kebbi Valley from Western Sudan. This is because of the suggestion that Gao was the provenance of the marginelliod shells found in Maleh (Obayemi 1977). The presence of these shells is certainly indicative of a flourishing monetized economy in the area.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

An attempt has been made in this article to provide an overview and discuss early Arabic writings and archaeological evidence on the Kebbi Valley within the concept of Historical Archaeology. It is hoped that the information provided here acts as a reference to future historical archaeology works.

It is on the account of historical evidence presented here and the evaluation of the established economic interactions that the authors put forward the view that the 1353 reference by Ibn-Batutta to “Kuba” referred to no other place than the Kebbi Valley where there is evidence of pre-sixteenth century centres of commerce. The archaeological materials found in Gungu, Leka and Soro put the region forward as a strong contender for the fourteenth-century reference.

Tangible evidence of a thriving commercial exchange such as cowry shells, beads, clay tobacco pipes, bracelets, and copper vessels have survived as part of the articles of trade, supporting the view of a far-ranging commercial contact between the Kebbi sites and Songhai and Mali in the West. This article argues that such trading activities most probably passed through the Niger and Kebbi River system. It, therefore, concludes that the commercial transactions between the two geographically separated regions were indeed facilitated by a network of trade routes with rivers Niger and Kebbi playing a major role.

Pottery, an important cultural material is an industry that also thrived in the region. Features relevant to pottery making are common in the area. They include suitable clay, and wood to serve as fuel for firing and availability of markets such as Maleh, Soro, Gungu and Surame where pottery products could be sold. The presence of potsherds which were abundantly represented in all the sites would reinforce the view that pottery was a preoccupation of the inhabitants of the area. A detailed study of them would certainly throw some light on pottery production, manufacturing process, classification and functions as well as pottery distribution in the area.



Finally, given the fact that written records about many communities in Nigeria are recent, the use of historical archaeology should be regarded as one of the most important sources for the historical reconstruction of the past.

**Appendix**



*Fig. 2: The Defensive wall at Surame (Source: Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, ABU Zaria 2012)*



*Fig 3: House foundation at Surame (Source: Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, ABU Zaria 2012)*





*Fig 4: Excavation at Surame site (Source: Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, ABU Zaria 2012)*

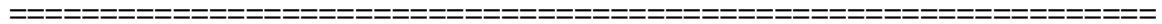


*Fig 5: Defensive wall at Maleh (Source: Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, ABU Zaria 2020)*

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