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Introduction

This book is the realization of an old idea. The material from Awdaghost (also known as Tegdaoust) was an important part of my graduate school years. It was an essential component of the seminar “Recherches en cours en Archéologie Africaine” taught by the late Professor Jean Devisse at the Sorbonne in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I have a copy of part of the original manuscript of Tegdaoust III, three chapters of the “Conclusions Générales” from the 1983 volume, with Devisse’s handwritten corrections. All the students enrolled in the 1979–1980 African Archaeology seminar were given a copy of these chapters in their final copyediting stage before publication, and were expected to read and comment on the original draft. As should be expected, none of us in the student group had a good grasp of the complexity and intricacies of the Tegdaoust/Awdaghost material at that time. The chapter on Tegdaoust palaeoenvironment was radically new, thrilling, and exciting. It was the main focus of the seminar discussions for at least three sessions. The glue that held all the distinct excavation units together was very clearly a chronological one. The spatial dimension was not ignored, but taken for granted and dealt with in terms of walls and their intersections. It was difficult to visualize, even in disparate fragments, the planes of the town’s life, the organization of coherent habitation units and their links to the rest of the city’s amenities, like streets and open places. There was always the confused impression that more could be done about the analysis of domestic space, but what? What would happen if contemporaneous levels were lumped within a single horizontal plan and analyzed as such? That was the simple idea that kept creeping in my mind. There was however no precise idea on how to proceed, or even how to try. The opportunity to write a book review of one of the volumes of the Tegdaoust collection (Holl 1988) reignited the old, almost forgotten, idea. And finally, the publication of most of the key archaeological projects conducted at Awdaghost/Tegdaoust made the project feasible.

The anthropological archaeology perspective adopted in this book focuses on the systematic analysis of the spatial organization of the inhabited space. It is anchored on the assumption that household internal space and structural patterning are responsive to demography, social standing and economic influences. The shaped and bounded spaces have a certain inertia and will tend to constrain activities and behaviors. Theoretically, then, the decision to erase a wall, or alter its course to reduce or increase the space size, is taken when the actual space is seen as unfit for the new emerging needs.

The chronological rearrangement of the material obtained from the medieval town Acropolis was a necessity. It was implemented through a narrow array of techniques and procedures that include stratigraphic considerations, radiocarbon dates, and datable imports. Instead of relying simply on the chronological tables published in the different Tegdaoust volumes, which appeared inadequate for a fine-tuned analysis of the household space, it was
necessary to look for more precise common analytical units. Three such units were generated, the Building Sequence, the Habitation Complex, and the Household Unit. They are distinct levels of an inclusive spatial taxonomy: the Household Units form the Habitation Complexes, which in turn form in the Building Sequences.

The Building Sequence is the key stratigraphic level of analysis. It includes all contemporaneous constructions that are considered to have been inhabited and used during the same time segment. As the concept suggests, each new rearrangement of the architectural features that resulted in the addition or substraction of a spatial unit triggers the shift to a new Building Sequence. Fifteen such building sequences, numbered from the earliest to the latest (BS-1 to BS-15), have been identified in that part of the town under consideration in this book.

The Habitation Complex is a set of contiguous housing units with the common use of some of their walls. It is a self-contained architectural complex separated from the others by streets and open places. And finally, the Household Unit consists of connected rooms, corridors, and courtyard, inhabited more often than not by the members of a family unit, whatever structure (nuclear, extended, polygamous) and size it may have had during the medieval period in West Africa. The number of household units per habitation complex varies considerably, as is the case for the number of habitation complexes per building sequence.

“Awdaghost” is the Soninké name of the medieval town under consideration in this book. It is the only name of that place to be found in Early Arabic historical sources. The name of the medieval town was dropped and, to please the Mauritania Moorish government, the ancient city was renamed “Tegdaoust,” after the ethnonym of a Moorish tribe still inhabiting the area where they settled initially in the seventeenth or eighteenth century AD. Even if unintentional, this name reshuffle does do some disservice to the study of West African history; it conveys the subliminal false association between Awdaghost the medieval town, and the Tegdaoust, a Moorish tribe that settled in the area a few centuries after the abandonment of the city. Hence, in this book I have chosen to shift back to the original and authentic medieval name of the town.

This book starts with an exploration of what has been learned so far from approximately one century of archaeological research focused on West African towns. A number of recurring themes have sustained the enthusiasm of generations of researchers, mainly limited to looks at markets, trade, long distance exchange, and architecture styles.

The sociopolitical, economic, intellectual, and cultural context of emerging West African towns is very rarely fully acknowledged, much less investigated by most researchers. The two notable exceptions are the Niani and Kumbi-Saleh projects which make explicit links to an overarching state apparatus: Niani with the Mali Empire, and Kumbi Saleh with the Ghana Kingdom. Unfortunately, most of the other projects—Awdaghost, Azelik, Azugi, Gao, Jenne-Jeno, Marandet, Sincu-Bara—have paid little attention to the sociopolitical frame. It goes without saying that the question is a difficult one with no easy solution; in most cases, however, towns were critical nodes of larger political and economic systems.

As far as the internal organization of excavated West African towns is concerned, the usual small-scale probes constrain the access to the organization of housing complexes, quarters, and the general layout of the city. Access to such high-resolution spatial infor-
information is generally cumulative and predicated upon the excavation of large completely open probes. Despite all competing claims, the Awdaghost excavation is by far the most extensive, accurate, and finest archaeological field project ever conducted in West Africa. It is the only site that could provide the high-resolution material required for a foray into household archaeology.

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 1 summarizes the data on ten West-African towns and singles out their similarities and differences as well as their potentials for an archaeology of household. Chapter 2 discusses the main theoretical and practical aspects of household archaeology and how it can be tailored to make the best of the material from Awdaghost. Chapter 3 describes the development and implementation of the Awdaghost archaeological project. It also outlines the appealing potential this well-published program offers for an archaeology of households.

Chapters 4 to 7 are the core of the book. They present the material excavated from Awdaghost Acropolis in light of the new methodology aiming at the fine-tuned analysis of domestic spaces. Chapter 4 deals with the early segment of Awdaghost settlement, with the significant shift from an undated pre-urban phase to the development of the town’s urban layout in AD 900. Chapter 5 presents the material from the mushrooming town in 900 to 1000. Chapter 6 discusses the unstable plateau in the evolution of the town that lasted from 1000 to 1200. Chapter 7 investigates the downturn in Awdaghost settlement history, when the urban landscape disaggregates and the town was very likely abandoned, around 1500.

In Chapter 8, the archaeological reconstruction of Awdaghost settlement obtained in Chapters 4 through 7 is compared and contrasted with the Awdaghost described in early Arabic historical sources. Finally, Chapter 9 explores a range of interpretations for the patterns of space allocation discovered in the Awdaghost record.

In fact, this book presents another facet of what anthropological archaeologists do. Inferences have to be testable and propositions falsifiable, however difficult that may appear at first glance. There has to be a match between the research problem one wishes to tackle and the material record garnered to address the many facets of the selected questions, issue after issue. If we use the right approaches, archaeology should allow the West African past to speak for itself.
Archaeology of Early West African Towns

Introduction

What are the fundamental building blocks of West African early town landscapes? How were they shaped? How and why did they change—or not—through time? What can these building blocks tell us about social organization? These are some of the questions addressed in this book. Paradoxically, information on the fine-grained structure of most ancient West African towns is rare. There is an important record of published material on West African early cities (Bedaux et al. 2001; Bernus and Cressier 1991; Berthier 1997; Bivar and Shin-nie 1962; Bocoum and McIntosh 2002; Connah 1981; Filipowiak 1979; Insoll 1996, 1997, 2003; Levitzon 1973; McIntosh and McIntosh 1980, 1984, 1993; S.K. McIntosh 1995, 1999; Moraes-Farias 1990; Thulmans and Ravise 1980). Some, like El Mina (Decorse 2000) and Begho in Ghana, Kong in Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin and Ife in Nigeria (Connah 1975), are too far south to be relevant for the case under consideration in this book. Others, like Birni Ghazzargamo (Bivar and Shinmie 1961; Connah 1981) or Timbuktu (Insoll 2000a, McIntosh and McIntosh 1986), are of later foundation, dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth century onward.

Africanist historians have devoted considerable skill and energy to the issue of urban development in West Africa during the last two millennia (Devisse 1993; Levitzon 1973; McIntosh and McIntosh 1984). In much West African archaeology, however, the focus on chronology and the desperate search for earliest evidence and unique material culture and trade items has generated a counterproductive approach. Authors jockey for the “earliest,” “biggest,” “largest,” “richest” artifact/building/stratigraphy/artwork/site, ignoring their places in past West African social systems.

A number of urban sites have been subjected to archaeological investigation during the last century. The scale and scope of archaeological projects conducted in ancient West African towns vary considerably. Some important sites were visited, shallowly surveyed, and described but never tested archaeologically. Others were tested with one or a series of
trial trenches which aimed to assess the thickness of the cultural deposits and, using these, the site’s chronology. Others have been researched more ambitiously and systematically. A number of these works will be summarized below, and the most interesting cases will be singled out for further discussions.

**Niani: The Debate**

Despite its crucial involvement in the emergence and rise to primacy of the Mali Empire (ca. AD 1200 to 1400), the town of Niani, excavated in 1965, 1968 and 1973 by a Polish-Guinean research team (Filipowiak 1966, 1959, 1976, 1978), is still the object of a heated debate (Conrad 1994; Filipowiak 1978; Hunwick 1973; Insoll 2003; McIntosh 1998; Meillassoux 1972). Niani is located at 11°22'N and 8°23'W in the Sudano-Guinean climatic zone, at 370 m above sea level (Fig. 1). Filipowiak’s excavation program dealt with an extensive mound complex at the confluence of the Sankarani and the Farakole rivers, both tributaries of the Niger River located in the Guinea Republic. The complex measures more than 2.5 km north-south and 4 km east-west and includes river shores, low hills, steep slopes, more than thirty scattered mounds, as well as caves, settled with fluctuating population from the early sixth to the seventeenth century AD. The earliest cultural deposit is dated to the middle of the sixth century and confined to the southwest of the archaeological complex. From its beginning to the ninth century, Niani was a small village measuring some 80 m in diameter with wattle and daub houses. The settlement went into accelerated growth in the ninth and tenth centuries. Arab merchants settled in Larabou So northwest of the royal neighborhood and various compounds were dispersed throughout the landscape. Prime agricultural lands, hunting grounds, and fishing opportunities were all available within walking distance. Cabbage or turnip and lentils seeds were found in the ninth- or tenth-century level of Larabou-So. The different farmsteads were connected by a dense and intricate network of footpaths. The royal town included an audience room, a mosque, and a royal residence. *Pisé* or *banc* became the all-purpose building material. Iron production areas were also recorded in the Niani archaeological complex. From the tenth to the thirteenth century the main settlement seems to have shifted to the central part of the mound complex, in the area between the Farakole and Folonbadin rivers. The royal residence may have been located on Mound 6M1, the largest of the three large mounds (Filipowiak 1979: 182, see map, Fig. 10). The eleventh through thirteenth-century settlement was spread all over the mound complex. It included the mounds from Station 6, the newly developed Somonodougou (Station 5) and Krekreoudou (Station 14) neighborhoods, the extensive tell of Station 22, hamlets from Stations 42 and 45 upstream along the Farakole, and finally, iron smelter/blacksmith quarters on the west shore of the Farakole at Station 17 (Filipowiak 1979: 193-94). The royal quarter excavated in the southwest of the Niani Mound complex and sitting on top of the pioneer small wattle and daub village may have been founded in the late thirteenth century and inhabited up to the seventeenth or eighteenth century AD (Filipowiak 1979: 197-98). On almost every page of his book, particularly in the introductory chapter “L’histoire et l’état des recherches” (pp. 13-45), the conclusion “Niani—Capitale de l’empire du Mali” (pp. 296-306), and even a postscript on pages 307-8, Filipowiak insists heavily on the identification of the Niani he

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has excavated with Niani the imperial capital of Mali, mustering different strands of data to support his claims. On pages 40-41, specifically in notes 99-103, he develops a balanced and well-argued refutation of Meillassoux’s (1972) and Hunwick’s (1973) objections.

Meillassoux and Hunwick both were poorly informed of the results of the archaeological project in progress at Niani. They had access to a short report published in 1969 (Filipowiax 1969), but Filipowiax’s late 1979 monograph offered a wealth of information with an acceptable summary of the archaeological findings to which they did not have access.

Hunwick (1973), Meillassoux (1972), and McIntosh (1998) have different views on the location of the Mali Empire’s capital towns. Conrad (1994) is probably the most radical opponent to Filipowiax’s (1979) interpretation of the Niani record. His position, shared by Insoll (2003:320-22), is that the Mali Empire had several capital cities rather than one. He bases this on two arguments. First, there is a significant chronological gap in the archaeological record. The radiocarbon dates obtained by the Guinea-Polish Niani Archaeological Project are distributed into two clusters, the sixth to tenth century at one end and the sixteenth to seventeenth at the other, resulting in a six-century gap. Second, long-distance trade items, particularly elements like beads, glass and glazed wares, “types of artefacts which may be expected from so important a site” (Insoll 2003:322), are virtually absent. Conrad (1994:377) suggests that the excavated Niani may have been a political capital in the sixteenth century, while earlier capitals should have been located in the area of Djakajalan.

Unfortunately, Djakajalan is a sacred place, presently out of archaeologists’ reach. Insoll’s conclusion summarizes the position of the new skeptics: “[I]t is safe to conclude that the capital of Mansa Musa and Mansa Suleyman await the archaeologist’s attention, and it is not to be identified with Niani. Both the archaeology and its comparison with the historical description provided by Ibn Battuta make the Niani identification highly unlikely” (Insoll 2003:322). This may well be the case, but the argument developed here is very surprising. The purpose of an archaeological project is not to match the descriptions of an ancient writer, however prestigious he or she may have been. Ibn Battuta was commissioned by Sultan Abu ‘Inan to travel in Western Sudan. He visited cities like Walata, Niani and Takkada between February of 1352 and December of 1353. Ibn Battuta’s accounts were written later, in December, 1355, through February, 1356, by Ibn Juzayy, the Sultan’s scribe (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:279). Ibn Battuta may have had a phenomenal memory and his description of Niani is an important historical document, but it is one among many that also deserves to be looked at critically.

The arguments developed by Conrad (1994) and supported by Insoll (2003) are spurious, not to mention moot, since neither seem to have read Filipowiax’s 1979 monograph seriously. Capital or dominant political centers can shift from one part of the country to another depending on political circumstances and the network of allies and support the rulers can garner at any specific time; this idea is discussed in the Filipowiax monograph. The dynamics of the mound complex delineated by Filipowiax solves the chronological gap identified by Conrad. Conrad’s argument focused on the paucity of imported items and the reliability of Ibn Battuta’s description of the imperial residence and reception hall, are even weaker. Despite its limitations, Filipowiax’s monograph is the best that exists on all potential Mali capital cities. As the French saying goes, “la critique est aisée, mais l’art difficile.”

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Azelik/Takkada

Azelik—“Takedda,” or “Takkada”—to medieval Arab writers (Fig. 1)—is part of a late medieval settlement complex located southwest of the Air Mountains in central Niger. Azelik tell and the immediate periphery was investigated in the 1970s and 1980s by a series of French scientists (Bernus and Cressier 1991; Bernus and Gouletquer 1976; Grébènart 1985; Lhote 1972a). The settlement consists of two distinct parts: a set of mid-first millennium BC copper-smelting workshops, scattered over a surface of 8 ha located at some 300 m southeast of the tell with an occupation ranging from 540 to 90 BC (Grébènart 1985:219); and the main site, Azelik wan Birmi, which dates from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century AD (Person and Saliege 1991:120).

Azelik archaeological tell is roughly crescent-shaped and measures 750 m in maximum length and 500 m in maximum width. An extensive geophysical survey and mapping program was implemented along with the excavation of two archaeological probes. The largest probe, tested a surface of 300 m², 20 m in length and 15 m in width, and the smaller one, 144 m², 12 m by 12 m (Bernus and Cressier 1991:15). The limited size of the archaeological probes does not allow for an accurate reconstitution of the town’s landscape and urban layout. The geophysical survey has nonetheless revealed the presence of important buildings and mosques. A particularly large and intriguing construction was found in the western part of the tell. The walls were indicated by lines of stone rubble delineating a rectangular building 90 m in length and 65 m in width. A series of narrow rooms and corridors seems to have been built along the southwest, south, and southeast sides, with the central and northern parts left open (Bernus and Cressier 1991:158-60, Fig. 47). The use or function of this impressive building is still unknown, but in such a thriving Trans-Saharan trade town, a big caravansérail was probably not out of place. Three mosques were recorded and mapped. Mosque A, the largest and very likely the Friday or Cathedral Mosque, measuring 14 m in length and 8 m in width, was built in the northeast quadrant of the tell. Mosque B, slightly smaller and measuring 12 m in length and 7 m in width, is found in the southwest within the context of an extensive graveyard. And finally, Mosque C, located at some 200 m southeast of the town, is much smaller in size, 4.80 m in length and 3 m in width. As suggested by its location, Mosque C was very likely intended as a praying space for travelers. Imported items included glass beads, arm-rings and glazed wares. According to Ibn Battuta who visited the town in 1353 at the peak of its economic prosperity:

the people of Takkada have no occupation but trade. They travel each year to Egypt and import some of everything which is there in the way of fine cloth [thiyab] and other things. Its people are comfortable and well off and are proud of the number of male and female slaves [al-abid wa-khadam] which they have. The people of Mali and Iwalatan are like this. [cited in Levitson and Hopkins 1981:301-2]

The key socioeconomic activities of Azelik/Takedda were copper production from local native ore, salt production from brackish sources such as Guélé and Tegdida-n-Iesemt, livestock husbandry, and interregional and long-distance trade. The find of 13 copper coins indicates that a local coinage operated during the fourteenth and fifteenth century AD (Bernus and Cressier 1991:145-47). Egypt appears to have been the key economic partner of Takkada

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(Person and Saliege 1991:118). Paradoxically, North African material from Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and Morocco are virtually absent. In fact, Takkada/Azelik was the dominant economic and political center of a medieval polity ruled by a Sultan from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries that comprised five settlements, known today under the names of Azelik, Birni (Takkada), Tadraght in the east, Banguberi in the south, In-Zazan in the southeast, and finally, Guélédé in the west.

In summary, Takkada emulated Maran, and specialized in the intensive production of copper and salt that were channeled in the local, regional, and Trans-Saharan trade networks.

Azugi

Azugi is located next to the town of Atar in the Adrar region of northern Mauritania (Fig. 1). This site is strongly associated with the emergence and later expansion of the Almoravid revivalist movement of the eleventh century AD. In the 1960s, after its political independence, the Mauritanian government commissioned a series of archaeological surveys and excavations in and around Azugi. Land surveys on foot and automobile were conducted in
1968, 1971, and 1975 by S. Robert, D. Robert-Chaleix, and B. Saison. They were followed by an aerial photographic mission in 1980 by the French Institut Géographique National. These operations resulted in an improved knowledge of the landscape and its archaeological potential, as well as a more precise assessment of the Azugi ruins. Azugi is in fact an oasis situated at the confluence of two wadi courses, spread over some 63 ha, with date palm groves all along its east flank. It measures 930 m north-south and 700 m maximum east-west. The modern town developed to the south of the medieval one but was encroaching on the ruins in the early 1980s (Saison 1981). The town is divided into distinct zones, three of which have been singled out. First, the tell, located in the central part of the surveyed area, includes the highest density of medieval ruins. It is made up of a 100 by 70-80 m rectangular fortress built with two parallel walls and bastions, a series of collapsed and poorly preserved stone buildings spread over 1.6 ha (400 by 400 m), and a small cemetery with two distinct burial compounds, each with many graves. Second, the cenotaph of Imam el-Hadrami, a pilgrimage destination, is located at some 300 m northwest of the main tell. Finally, there is a rectilinear 25 by 12-15 m watchtower built on the cliff top at 800 m in the southeast of the tell (Saison 1981:69-70). Like the fortress, it is built with double parallel walls set slightly more than 2 m apart.

The 1980s were devoted to the excavations of the most promising architectural features. B. Saison organized two field seasons in June 1980 and June-July 1981. Three excavation probes were sunk in the north outer perimeter of the tell. A larger main excavation unit measuring 15 m by 10 m was opened within the confines of the fortress. The latter unit provided the archaeologist with a rewarding 2 to 3.5 m thick cultural deposit that was partitioned into four occupation levels. Level I deposit, recorded at 2.80 to 3.20 m, suggests a standard domestic occupation in an urban context with narrow streets, courtyards, rooms, and two wells. Level II, documented at 2.20 to 2.80 m, indicates a fully urban lifestyle with a habitation complex of two or three rooms, a latrine and two courtyards. Pottery, both local and imported, as well as metal artifacts in both iron and copper, and beads (carnelian, quartz and amazonite) are more abundant (Saison 1981:72). Level III deposit, at 1.60 to 2.20 m, presents evidence of a fire that destroyed the construction and charred the roof beams. The amount of portable cultural remains had shrunk considerably, with the material repertoire impoverished significantly. The quality of the architecture was also affected as the construction techniques were much less elaborate than those from the previous occupation. Finally, level IV deposit, recorded from the surface to 1.50 m below, is found only in the fortress area and is absent from the remaining parts of the site.

In chronological terms, Azugi appears to have been settled from the tenth century AD to the present. The earliest occupations I and II belong to the tenth through eleventh centuries. Occupation I is pre-Almoravid and occupation II coincides with the rise to regional primacy of the Almoravid revivalist movement. After the Almoravid, Azugi was not abandoned, but its urban status shrank to an intermittent settlement from the twelfth through the sixteenth century. A new revivalist and messianic movement preaching the return of the Almoravid emerged in Morocco and spread in the Adrar in the early part of the seventeenth century. This new movement “rediscovered” the tomb of Imam el-Hadrami, initiated a pilgrimage to the tomb of this holy man, and built the fortress that is part of the Azugi archaeological
landscape. Contrary to all speculations that associated the Azugi fortress (ribat) with the emergence and development of the original Almoravid movement, the fortress was actually built 500 years later. This “decoupling” is one of the greatest achievements of the Azugi archaeological program (Saison 1981).

**Dia**

Dia, on the Diaka, a tributary of the Niger River, is found in the western edge of the Inland Niger Delta floodplain. It is an extensive 100 ha mound complex divided into three components of different size: the 49 ha Shoma, the archaeological site; the 29 ha present-day town of Dia; and finally, the 28 ha Mara which includes the cemetery and a soccer field (Bedaux et al. 2001). A new research program was launched at Dia in 1998 by a consortium of European universities collaborating with Malian institutions. The project ran from 1998 to 2004. Accordingly, what is available in print so far is very likely of a preliminary nature susceptible to change in the final report or site monograph.

The excavation program has focused on Shoma in the western part of the mound complex. Seven excavation units (A to G) were opened on the mound, six of seven (A, B, C, D, E, and G) sunk in the northern tip of Shoma. The tested sample measures 142.50 m²; 50 m² for probe A and B (5 by 10 m); 25 m² each for probes C and D (5 by 5 m); 16 m² each for probes E and F (4 by 4 m); and finally, 10.5 m² for the trench of probe G (1.5 by 7 m). The uncovered mound deposit measures 3.5 m in thickness, for a site that appears to have been settled from the first half of the first millennium BC to the eighteenth century AD.

Dia settlement history has been segmented into five periods called horizons. The earliest Horizon I deposit belongs to a Late Stone Age site of remarkable size (Bedaux et al. 2001:841) with well-preserved floors. Bone tools and material culture elements that link the early Dia to the panregional Late Stone Age are well represented in the recorded assemblages. Iron artifacts are present at the end of the horizon, from 200 BC onwards. Horizon II occupation, bracketed between BC 300 and AD 300, appears to indicate a shift toward intermittent habitation during a particularly dry and arid period. The material culture repertoire is rather poor and for most of the cases appears to be a continuation of the previous Horizon I elements. Horizon III deposit, from AD 300 to 800(?), suggests the existence of a permanent settlement. The deposit was, however, seriously impacted by intrusive pits and burials from later occupations (Bedaux et al. 2001:844-45). House floors have nonetheless been recorded and mud-brick architecture seems to be represented. Horizon IV deposit was even more difficult to track as most of the sediment “has been removed by the subsequent erosional processes” (Bedaux et al. 2001:844). It appears to date from AD 800(?) to 1100, a time segment during which the area was turned into a cemetery. There is then a depositional hiatus or stratigraphic discontinuity resulting from the abandonment of the area and the ensuing erosion is documented to date from AD 1100 to 1400. Finally, Horizon V, dating from AD 1400 to 1700, attests for the existence of a large walled settlement. The city wall, visible from the surface along a 230 m stretch, consists of two parallel zigzagging 0.50 m thick walls with the 1-m interim space filled with rubble. Elongated rectangular houses or rooms were visible from the surface. The excavation probes A and B show these houses
to be situated on both sides of a narrow street, with each of the probed rooms attached to a courtyard (Bedaux et al. 2001:839, Fig. 2).

The preliminary report from the new Dia archaeological program is interesting and raises a number of important issues. It is not known if the “horizon” is a simple adoption of the geomorphology and soils science concept or if it has any anthropological meaning. Does it correspond to an occupation episode or to a lumping of many occupations within a loose chronological bag? Either option is possible, and the report does not clarify. The time range of the reconstituted Dia horizons varies from 300 years (Horizon IV: AD 800-1100; Discontinuity: AD 1100-1400; Horizon V: AD 1400-1700), to 500 years (Horizon I: BC 800-300; Horizon III: AD 300-800), and 600 years (Horizon II: BC 300-AD 300). The Shoma mound buildup may have been a relatively slow process as suggested by its 3.50 m deposit that spans approximately 2,500 years, from 3 BC 800 to AD 1700. But a mud or clay house floor used for 500 or 600 years would be really exceptional. Paradoxically, Dia Shoma was a cemetery and an abandoned part of the mound complex for the major part of the regional primacy of the Ghana and Mali states. It is as if the town’s potentials were thwarted and diverted by more powerful neighbors from the ninth to the early fifteenth century when they were allowed to re-enter the scene.

**Essuk/Tadmakka**

Essuk. “Tadmakka” to medieval Arab authors (Fig. 1) has never been probed ar
chaeologically. As the name “Essuk” suggests, it was a thriving medieval market place visited by merchants and caravan crews from North Africa and the Sudan. It was visited
and described by Mauny (1961) but its scholarly fame, other than the descriptions provided
by medieval Arab authors (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981), accrues from the presence of epitephed tombstones in some of its many cemeteries. This material recorded, presented, and discussed by Morias-Farias (1990) is considered to be the earliest extant writing of West Africa. The epitaphs from some tombstones, dated between AD 1000 and 1150, refer to kings and princesses.

According to Mauny (1961:487), Essuk/Tadmakka, along with Ghana Kumbi Saleh, was one of the most important centers of the medieval Sahara. The ruins of the town are located in the west periphery of the Adrar-n-Hogha at some distance north of the Niger River Bend (Fig. 1). The town is elongated, oriented north-south, and stretched along a series of low hills parallel to Wadi Essuk. The latter drainage divided the medieval town into three distinct parts. The main town is found on the eastern shore of Wadi Essuk. Limited on the east by low hills, it measures approximately one kilometer by 200 m in maximum width. A smaller component on an “island” measures 200 by 100 m. And finally, the western town on the west bank of the wadi measures 500 m by 200 m. Essuk ruins cover 32 ha and R. Mauny (1961:487) estimates that its population peaked at 3,000 inhabitants. The town is surrounded by six graveyards: west, east, southeast, southwest, northwest, and northeast.

The earliest mention of Tadmakka is found in Ibn Hawqal’s Kitab Surat al-ard (“The Picture of the Earth”) written in three successive versions between AD 967 and 988 (Levtzion

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and Hopkins 1981:44). The town is mentioned among many others, including Sidjilmasa and Awdaghust. It was one of the places with “water-points around which are tribes of unheeded Berbers who are unacquainted with cereals . . . and have never seen wheat or barley or any kind of grain” (Ibn Hawqal in Levzion and Hopkins 1981:46). Ibn Hawqal described the Berber tribesmen as in a state of wretchedness, wearing sashwise pieces of cloth, and subsisting on milk and flesh. Later on, he referred to the “kings of Tadmakka” (Ibn Hawqal in Levzion and Hopkins 1981:50) and speculated that their origins may have been Sudan but their skin and complexion turned white as they moved north, far from the land of Kawkaw (Gao). In the eleventh century Al-Bakri provided another interesting description of Tadmakka in his Kitab al-nasalik wa-l-namalik (“The Book of Routes and Realms”). The distances between the major Saharan and Sudan town are spelled out, as well as their dominant economic activities. For Al-Bakri (in Levzion and Hopkins 1981:85), Tadmakka is the town that most resembles Mecca, a resemblance supported by its name which means “the Mecca-like.” As Mecca, it is a large town in a mountainous landscape with ravines (Moraes-Farias 1999). Its inhabitants are veiled Berbers who subsist on flesh and milk, as well as wild and cultivated grains. They dress in cotton fabric and robes dyed in red and their king wears special accoutrements of blue trousers, yellow shirt, and a red turban. Their currency is a “bald” unstamped pure gold dinar. Al-Bakri’s final comments revolve around Tadmakka’s women and their “surprising” customs: “Their women are perfect beauty, unequalled among people of any other country, but adultery is allowed among them. They fall upon any merchant [disputing as to] which of them shall take him to her house” (Al Bakri in Levzion and Hopkins 1981:85).

Later references to Tadmakka found in writings of Ibn Hammad, Ibn Said, Al Dimashqi, and Al Umari, as well as the anonymous Kitab al-Isitibar and the Ibnidi excerpts (Levzion and Hopkins 1981), do not add significantly new information when compared to Ibn Hawqal’s and Al-Bakri’s descriptions. The town, ruled by a Berber king, was a commercial hub, where everything from slave girls to camels could be purchased and sold.

**Gao/Kawkaw**

With Kumbi Saleh, Gao (“Kawkaw” in the Arabic historical sources) is one of the most investigated urban sites of West Africa. It is a twin-settlement with Gao-Saney in the east and Gao-Ancien in the west on the left bank of the Niger River (Fig. 1). According to Mauny (1961:498), the town of Gao-Saney may have measured 800 m by 300 m, with the constructions built in pisé or banco. Gao-Ancien, the other center, was much more important, stretched on 2 to 2.5 km from the Sané tributary to the Niger River, with width varying from 300 to 600 m.

Gao and the surrounding land have been surveyed and tested archaeologically from the beginning of the twentieth century (Desplagnes 1907; De Gironcourt 1920; Insoll 1996, 2000, 2003; Lhote 1942, 1943; Mauny 1950a, 1951, 1952, 1961; Sauvaget 1950). A detailed summary of the history of archaeological research at Gao and its vicinity can be found in Insoll’s 1996 and 2000a edited volumes. In the 1900s, Desplagnes (1907) and De Gironcourt

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(1920) surveyed the area, recorded different kind of sites, and provided useful information relied on by following generations of researchers.

Lhote, Mauny, and Sauvaget took the research further, excavating different kinds of sites, uncovering Gao’s medieval architecture, and deciphering the inscriptions from a sample of royal tombstones. Lhote (1942, 1943) excavated a carnelian bead workshop on the shore of the Niger River and reconstructed the bead-drilling techniques. Mauny (1950a, 1951, 1952, 1961) undertook an important excavation program at both Gao-Ancien and Gao-Saney. He found a 43.4 m long and 27 m wide mosque, probed the cemetery of Gao-Saney, and found material evidence indicating contact with medieval North Africa. Sauvaget (1950) worked on a sample of ten “epitaphed” tombstones found at Gao-Saney in 1939. According to the deciphered inscriptions, all the tombstones analyzed belonged to royalty burials ranging from the twelfth to the thirteenth century AD. In one case, the marble tombstone may have been ordered from Gao, carved in Almeria in Spain and shipped to Gao where it was erected on the tomb of the deceased. In another, skilled stone carvers from Spain were invited to come to Gao with the needed raw materials to carve the tombstones (Sauvaget 1950:429). The context of the finds was poorly documented, but Sauvaget (1950:440) claimed it was obvious that “when the site [is] investigated more thoroughly and systematically, a critical analysis of the recorded epigraphic texts will produce sensational scientific results.”

Flight (1975a, b, 1979, 1981) and Insoll (1996, 2000b, 2003) implemented the latest phase of archaeological research at Gao and provided a broader and more detailed picture of the settlement history. The medieval occupation of the Gao settlement complex ranges from the sixth or seventh to the late sixteenth century AD. The complex developed locally even if “the earliest origins . . . are still largely unclear” (Insoll 2000b:150). Gadei appears to have been the earliest settlement in Gao, founded following a population move from Bentiya/Kukiya in the mid-first millennium AD (Insoll 2000b:26). The city grew considerably in the ninth and tenth centuries. Economic, religious, and cultural relations between Gao and the Islamic world reached its apex (Insoll 2003:232-50). A citadel surrounded by an enclosing wall with gateways, and including mosques, wealthy merchants’ houses, and very likely the king’s palace, was built at the core of Gao-Ancien. Gao-Saney was the Muslim settlement and manufacturing center. In the late eleventh or early twelfth century, Gao-Ancien acquired more of a cosmopolitan flavor, and developed into the Islamized neighborhood. The evolution of the town complex from the fourteenth century onwards, a period during which Mali was the regional “superpower,” is still poorly understood. If the fame of Gao and its integration in the Mali Empire are taken into consideration, “the absence of imports and recognizable monumental architecture dating from the mid-fifteenth and the late sixteenth centuries is surprising” (Insoll 2000b:27).

In summary, as was the case with Niani and Jenne-jeno, the Gao settlement complex was a transshipment locality. Goods moving one way or the other had to be shifted from one mode of transportation to the other. On the northbound route, kola nuts, animal skins, slaves, and foodstuffs may have been transferred from human carriers or dugout fleet to camel caravans. The opposite may have operated for the southbound trade, with goods unloaded from caravans to be reloaded on dugouts or human carriers.
Jenne-jeno

Jenne-jeno, Kaniana, and Hambarketolo, excavated by S.K. McIntosh and R.J. McIntosh (1980, 1995), are some of the largest mounds of an extensive mound-settlement system located in the floodplain of the Inland Niger Delta. Jenne-jeno at 13°53′20″N and 4°32′25″W is a teardrop-shaped 33 ha mound, 760 m long, 550 m wide, rising to 8 m above the surrounding plain (McIntosh and McIntosh 1980:63). Hambarketolo, immediately north of Jenne-jeno from which it is separated by a shallow water body, measures 8 ha in surface extent. Kaniana, on the other hand, is located at some 2-3 km northwest of the modern town of Jenne. It is the largest of the sites tested in the mound complex, measuring 41 ha (S.K. McIntosh 1995, 1999).

An archaeological sequence outlining the development of Jenne-jeno and its hinterland, based on a combination of careful excavation, stratigraphic correlation, radiocarbon dates, pottery seriation, as well as other material culture items, has been worked out. The sequence is divided into four phases (I to IV), ranging from 250 BC to AD 1400 (McIntosh and McIntosh 1980:188-98).

Phase I (250 BC-AD 50) witnessed the pioneer settlement of farmers equipped with iron tools, who raised cattle and goats, cultivated African rice, fished, hunted, and foraged in the relatively rich deltaic environment. Their dwellings may have been made of wattle and daub. The size of the original site is not known. It is however very likely that distinct domestic units settled in this optimal zone during the dry spell of the end of the first millennium BC, the site developing progressively from the fusion of these built discrete spots.

Phase II, AD 50-400, witnessed a relatively fast growth of the site and accordingly its population. The subsistence base remained the same but intensified resource exploitation and production certainly took place. It is inferred that Jenne-jeno’s size shifted from 12 ha in AD 100 to 25 ha in AD 400 (S.K. McIntosh 1999:70). There was no significant change in architecture, but iron, stone and a few glass beads of Mediterranean origin attest for the connection with local and interregional exchange networks.

Jenne-jeno reached its maximum extent of 33 ha around AD 800, during Phase III (AD 400-900). Mud architecture was adopted and dwellings consisted of round banco huts. The practice of urn burial emerged and a cemetery developed in the Jar-field I area. The deceased are nonetheless buried without grave goods. In addition to iron, copper and gold are present in the area archaeological record, suggesting a connection to the long-distance trade network. The size of the local population is inferred to have peaked during the later part of Phase III. Even if estimating population densities from mound size generally tends to inflate unverifiable population figures (S.K. McIntosh 1999:71-73), this does not diminish the relevance of Phase III settlement data if the tight correlation made between surface sherd scatter characteristics and chronology holds.

Phase IV, ranging from AD 900 to 1400, closes the developmental sequence of the Jenne-jeno town complex. It started with the construction of a 3 m thick and 2 km long fortification wall around the 33 ha site. Rectilinear buildings appear at the turn of the millennium in AD 1000 (S.K. McIntosh and R.J. McIntosh 1980:191; S.K. McIntosh 1999:71) with more frequent North African imports, such as brass, glass, and spindle whorls. In fact, building

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activities are shown to have been particularly intensive and impressive. In the Jenne-jeno Probe M2 Phase IV deposit, “houses 7, 4, and 3 were built and destroyed within a short period of time” (McIntosh and McIntosh 1980:191). However, the construction of three successive mud-brick houses on the same spot during a period of 150 years does not seem particularly unusual as it amounts to a remarkable 50 years use-life per building. From AD 1200 on, terracotta statuettes representing warriors became part of the Jenne-jeno cultural repertoire up to the final demise and abandonment of the site around AD 1400.

Despite repeated claims (S.K. McIntosh and R.J. McIntosh 1984, 1993; S.K. McIntosh 1995:360-98, 1999:77), the developmental trajectory outlined for Jenne-jeno does not seem to depart significantly from that of the other West African towns reviewed so far in this introduction.

Kumbi Saleh

Despite a long-lasting dispute, Kumbi Saleh (Fig. 1) is now accepted and recognized as the genuine capital of the Ghana Kingdom (Berthier 1997; Holl 1985). Located at 15°46’N and 7°59’W, it was “rediscovered” by A. Bonnel de Mezières in 1914 (Mauny 1950b, 1961; Berthier 1997). According to R. Mauny (1961:481), the town archaeological complex consists of two distinct parts. One, the “upper city,” is spread over 49 ha (700 by 700 m) and is entirely made of stone houses and located in the northeast. The other, the “lower city,” spread over 35 ha (500 by 700 m) is found in the southwest; stone houses are isolated and dispersed within an extensive urban area that was very likely settled and built up with pisé and mud-brick houses with thatched roofs. For Mauny (1961:481), the upper city was inhabited by Arab and Berber merchants up to the time of its destruction by the Mali army led by King Sunjata Keita in AD 1240. The lower city was inhabited by native Soninké (Mauny’s “Sarakolé”). Mauny’s estimates for the population of Kumbi Saleh range from 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants—according to him, the largest town that has ever existed in the medieval Sahara (Mauny 1961:482).

For Berthier (1997:1), the Kumbi Saleh archaeological complex consists of a large central tell, two main cemeteries, and numerous isolated tumuli distributed within a 25 to 30 km radius territory. The main tell is surrounded by a wall. The delineated space has a perimeter of some 2.4 km for a surface of 44 ha. The northwestern cemetery measures 1,600 m in length and 800 m in width; the southern one, where spectacular pillared tombs were found, is smaller, measuring 700 m by 400 m (Mauny 1961:482). Berthier (1997) focused exclusively on the “stone town.”

A series of excavation projects were conducted at the Kumbi Saleh ruins from 1914 to 1981. In 1915, Bonnel de Mezières sank four probes in the central part of the town. P. Lazarigues followed in 1939 with a single probe on the east flank of the large south plaza. R. Mauny, P. Thomassey and G. Szumowski excavated the central mosque and a series of houses in another probe in the south from 1949 to 1951. J. Devissé, S. Robert, and D. Robert-Chaleix conducted a new survey in 1968 and organized a short excavation project in 1972. Their four probes were in the southwest of the tell. And finally, S. Berthier organized four field seasons between 1975 and 1981 and traced the evolution of a household unit from the ninth to the fifteenth century AD.

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Berthier’s (1997:12) archaeological deposit is 6.25 m thick, divided into six occupation levels arranged into four periods. Period A, the pre-urban phase dated to the late ninth to late tenth century AD, is documented at the bottom of the sequence at a depth varying from 6 to 6.25 m. The settlement appears to have been ephemeral as suggested by the absence of solid constructions and the low density of other cultural remains.

Period B (AD 1000–1100) material is confined to level I at a depth varying from 5.60 to 6 m. It was the initial phase of urban growth, with the construction of a mud-brick and stone rectangular house. Period C (eleventh to fourteenth century AD) represents the peak of urban growth. It is documented in levels II, III, and IV and characterized by the construction of an elaborate stone house that was remodeled several times. Finally, Period D (late fourteenth through early fifteenth century AD) witnessed the demise of the town. The chronology devised by Berthier (1997:12–30) is too dependent on radiocarbon dating alone to be genuinely reliable for such a recent archaeological episode; radiocarbon method is too blunt a tool for historical archaeology. The suggestion that Kumbi Saleh, the capital city of the Ghana Kingdom, reached the peak of its urban growth in the fourteenth century AD, when the Mali Empire was reaching its maximum power, is intriguing and not necessarily surprising. However, the lack of supporting data garnered from a detailed analysis of the portable material culture elements, added to the significant range of variation of C14 dates obtained from each of the delineated occupation deposits (Berthier 1997:28–30), makes this chronological assessment doubtful.

The chronological issue raised above deserves to be spelled out in more detail. The number of charcoal samples collected from each of the occupation levels varies from three (levels I and III) to five (levels 0 and IV). Five samples collected from the pre-urban level 0, with one contaminated, range from AD 590 (LY-3146) to AD 1180 (LY-2533); three samples from level I range from AD 620 (LY-3147) to AD 1220 (LY-2534); four samples from level II range from AD 1070 (LY-2537) to AD 1360 (LY-1520); three samples from level III range from AD 950 (LY-1341) to AD 1240 (LY-2506); five samples from level IV range from AD 1170 (LY-2508) to AD 1510 (LY-1525); and finally, four samples from level V range from AD 930 (LY-2540) to AD 1720 (LY-1521). In all the levels, the minimum dates vary from AD 590 to AD 1170 and the maximum from AD 1180 to AD 1720, with a difference of 580 for the former and 540 for the latter. Berthier’s (1997:103) decision to narrow the time range offered by the radiocarbon readings summarized above to a ninth- to fifteenth-century occupation of the part of Kumbi Saleh she has excavated is driven by nonexplicit assumptions.

Unfortunately, the pre-urban levels were not probed, but urban development appears to have peaked in the tenth or eleventh century AD. Most of the houses exposed in the excavation were built of stone. But none of the excavation probes was large enough to allow for the exploration of the patterns of settlement layout. All the houses excavated by Mauny and Thomassey (1951, 1956) and Berthier (1997) are elongated and narrow. All the excavation projects have focused on the main tell. The Soninké part of the settlement has not yet been probed. If the Soninké were indeed the natives and the founders of the site, which was inhabited by the king, their settlement may and should provide a more accurate indication of the very beginnings of the town history. According to Al-Bakri, writing in the middle of the eleventh century:
[The city of Ghana consists of two towns situated on a plain. One of these towns is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques, in one of which they assemble for the Friday prayer... The king's town is six miles distant from this one and bears the name of Al-Ghaba. Between these two towns there are continuous habitations. The houses of the inhabitants are of stone and acacia wood. The king has a palace and a number of domed dwellings all surrounded with an enclosure like a city wall. [cited in Levitzon and Hopkins 1981:79-80]

Ghana kings and very likely many of the high ranking members of the kingdom did not convert to Islam: "in the King's town, not far from its court of justice, is a mosque where the Muslims who arrive at this court pray" (Al-Bakri in Levitzon and Hopkins 1981:80). The short chronology outlined by Berthier (1997) deals with the influx of Berber, Arab, and North African merchants who were part of the widespread trade diaspora that settled in Saharan and Sahelian towns from the ninth century onwards.

Marandet

Marandet (Maranda) is located south of Agades, in the eastern confine and at the foot of the Tigidit cliff in the Niger Republic. This medieval center is mentioned in most of the early Arabic historical sources. It is referred to by Al-Yakubi writing in the ninth century AD, Ibn al-Faqiq in the early tenth century, Al-Masudidi and Ibn Hawqald in the middle of the tenth century, and finally by Al-Idrissi in the middle of the twelfth century AD (Levitzon and Hopkins 1981). Maranda was "rediscovered" by a French army officer, Lieutenant Pratouis, in 1952. Pratouis, based at Agades and following R. Mauny's suggestion, went to the area and found impressive archaeological remains of an ancient city being eroded by the meandering of the local intermittent stream, the Kori Marandet. Pratouis sank a number of probes in the shallow archaeological deposit he found, the largest of which measured 50 m² (Grébénart 1985:350, 1993:375; Mauny 1952). But more important, he located a surprising accumulation of conical clay crucibles on the shore of the kori, scattered over an area of approximately one hectare, and clustered into about fifty workshops. Some copper ingots, 27 cm long and 1.5 cm thick, were collected from the same area. H. Lhote (1972b) visited Maranda in 1971 and 1972, tested several new spots on the site, and reported additional information on conical-shaped clay crucibles. He considered these pieces to have been used in gold working. But this inference was later shown to be inaccurate. D. Grébénart (1985, 1993) initiated a new archaeological project on Maranda in 1981. Marandet I, a small settlement that may have measured one hectare, developed on the shore of the Kori Marandet. The cultural deposit, partially destroyed by the stream, may have been more than 2 m thick. A number of pits and furnace remains (thirteen in total) inserted in the preserved archaeological deposit were exposed and many of them still contained a large amount of cone-shaped clay crucibles. By-products of metal production, including iron and copper implements, as well as traces of lead, are particularly noteworthy. "The total amount of these crucibles is particularly high. 42,500 specimens were counted, but the total amount may be around 200,000" (Grébénart 1993:376). According to Grébénart (1993), Marandet I was the craft quarter of a much larger town that developed at the foot of the Tigidit cliff. The set of radiocarbon dates obtained so far indicates the occupation of Marandet I to range from the third to the tenth century AD. "It is, however, only from the sixth century AD that the dated
charcoal samples are associated with the crucibles, with the peak of metallurgical activities taking place in the ninth to tenth century AD" (Grébénart 1985:379).

**Sincu Bara**

Sincu Bara, at 15°42'N and 13°23'W, is an extensive site measuring 67 ha and located on the left bank of the Sénégal River in the Middle Sénégal Valley (Bocoum and McIntosh 2002; McIntosh and Bocoum 2000; Thilmans and Ravisé 1980). It was one of the major settlements of the Tekrur Kingdom even if it cannot be related to any of the Tekrur localities mentioned in the medieval Arabic sources (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981). The site was an aggregate of different mounds that were fused into a single archaeological locality. It has an irregular crescent shape, concave in the south, with tips in the west, southeast and northeast.

Sincu Bara was investigated in the 1970s by G. Thilmans and A. Ravisé. They conducted six excavation campaigns from 1973 to 1978 and published their monograph in 1980. They probed an area of 180 m² and exposed a stratigraphic sequence of some 3.56 m in thickness. The village appears to have been settled from the early fifth to the mid-eleventh century AD (Thilmans and Ravisé 1980:86-87). They made spectacular discoveries of alloyed copper artifacts such as disks, bells, and 7,500 brass vireoles, as well as cowries, elephant tusks and an impressive assemblage of channeled and slipped wares. But their interpretation of the settlement history, according to which the whole archaeological sequence exposed at Sincu Bara attests to a single homogeneous occupation, was marred by postdepositional processes they were unaware of. A new project was launched by H. Bocoum in collaboration with S.K. McIntosh in 1991-1992. "The results of these excavations provide considerable new information about the chronology of occupation and metallurgy at the site, necessitating a substantial revision of the occupational history" (McIntosh and Bocoum 2000:3; Bocoum and McIntosh 2002).

Instead of one long and single occupation, the Sincu Bara archaeological sequence was divided into four phases based on an assortment of variables including radiocarbon dates, the site’s stratigraphy, and a pottery sequence. Phase I material found at the bottom of test pit 3 is particularly loose and may have resulted from the redeposition by erosion agencies (McIntosh and Bocoum 2000:37). It is nonetheless suggested to "correspond to Phase Ia Iron Assemblage at Cubalé" which is dated from 0 to 250 AD (McIntosh and Bocoum 2000:39, Fig. 22). This early if loose occupation is followed by a hiatus that may have lasted for one and half centuries, from AD 250 to 400. The occupation of Sincu Bara resumed in Phase II, dated from AD 400 to 600. The exposed surface presents evidence for intensive iron smelting, organized into batteries of cylindrical furnaces. The settlement appears to have been a small mixed farming community, whose inhabitants reared cattle, sheep, and goats, cultivated millet, fished in the nearby river and seasonal ponds, and hunted and gathered wild resources. There are minor changes in the material culture during Phase III, dated from AD 600 to 800-900(?). The settlement was still inhabited by mixed farming and herding, potters, iron-smelters and blacksmiths. There is a significant increase in the frequency of hearths and pits documented in the archaeological record but the processes at work are still poorly understood. Finally, the Phase IV deposit at the top of the stratigraphic sequence includes some house remains, large pits, and gravel platforms. Brass and other alloyed copper artifacts...
are more common. The deposit appears to date from AD 800-900 to 1100-1200(?) when the occupation of Sincu Bara seems to end. Surprisingly, the end of Sincu Bara occupation in the twelfth century appears to coincide with the peak of the Ghana Kingdom's power and influence. It is not stretching the evidence too far to suggest that this may indicate the end of Tekrur existence as an independent state.

**Conclusion**

The short review of the archaeology of a number of West African towns presented above focused on the Saharan, Sahelian, and Sudano-Sahelian zones. However, one must keep in mind that even in the best excavated cases the "unknown" by far outweighs the "known." This having been said, one is struck by the overwhelming locational and developmental similarities shared by most of the towns reviewed in this introduction.

Locationally, all the reviewed towns were built along the shores of an intermittent or perennial water course: Azugi in the confluence of a braided wadi, Awdaghost on the right bank of the Noudache, Niani on the Farakole and Sansandi, Dia on the Diarra, Jenne-jeno in the wetlands environment of the Inland Niger Delta, Gao Kawkaw at the River Niger Bend, Essou/Tadmakka on both shores of Wadi Essou, Marandet on Kori Maranda, Azelik Takkada in the middle of the fan-shaped headwater of the Azawagh drainage, and finally, Sincu Bara on the left bank of the Sénégal River. The location of Kumbi Saleh, far from any significant water course, has always intrigued many archaeologists (Mauny 1961).
In terms of developmental sequence, two towns, Dia and Jenne-jeno, were founded in the first millennium BC, Dia during the first quarter of the millennium around 800 BC, and Jenne-jeno during the last quarter around 250 BC. Both localities were settled with fluctuating populations up to the early fifteenth and seventeenth or eighteenth century AD. With the notable exception of Azelik and Azugi, most of the reviewed towns had their roots in the first half of the first millennium AD. The middle of the first millennium AD appears to have been particularly favorable for the emergence of urban centers, as is the case for Niani, Kumbi Saleh, Gao, Marandet, and Sincu Bara. The peak of urban growth occurred in the ninth to eleventh century AD, manifested by the acceleration of the pace of construction and reconstruction, and in the case of Dia, Jenne-jeno, Azugi, Kumbi Saleh, Gao, and Sincu Bara, the growth in size. At the very beginning of their different histories, each town seems to have been the center of a relatively small polity, ruled by a king. The intensification of local, regional, and Trans-Saharan social and economic relationships generated the influx of merchant and scholar diasporas from the Sahara, North Africa, and the Arabo-Muslim world (Fig. 2). The consolidation of political and economic power, peer polity competition, and the resulting expansion of the strongest polity, or polities, generated the rise and fall of a succession of states. The Ghana Kingdom, with Kumbi Saleh as the capital, emerged as the dominant regional power in the ninth or tenth century AD, and, with population fluctuations, lasted until AD 1200 when it fragmented into competing regional polities. The Mali Empire that emerged from the conquest of multiple regional polities toward the middle of the thirteenth century (AD 1230-1250) stretched from the Atlantic coast of the Senegambia...
to the Tilemsi Valley. Consequently, most of the towns reviewed in this introduction may have been at one time or another under the tutelage of the Mali (Mansa) kings. This was certainly the case for Niani, Kumbi Saleh, Jenne-jeno, and Gao. Dia seems to have been abandoned. Essuk would have remained an independent commercial hub, and Azelik was founded later, taking over the production of copper and salt that was previously dominated by Marandet (Fig. 3).

The decline of Mali and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain resulted in an eastward shift of the main trade routes. The fragmentation of the Mali Empire initiated another cycle of regional polity competition. The consolidation phase resulted in the emergence of the Songhai Empire centered on the Niger Bend in the fifteenth century. The Songhai emperors’ power probably extended eastward to include Azelik (Fig. 4).

The towns were centers for social, economic, political and other activities. Their spatial layout is not always well known and the predominant domestic architecture is even less known. Kumbi Saleh and Gao were twin cities (Insoll 2003). Niani was an extensive mound complex. Azugi had a central fortress. Gao had a walled Acropolis with heavily built gateways. Dia had a series of narrow streets with rectilinear buildings with enclosed courtyards; mosques and an unusually large building are found at Azelik. The shape and structure of domestic units is more often than not completely unknown for most of the towns, with the exception of Kumbi Saleh, and a minor portion of Niani. Beside the presence/absence of imports that may range from regional craft products to sumptuary items from faraway lands, it is difficult to probe and assess the nature and characteristics of the transformations that may
have been at work within each town society. Were the towns divided into socially/ethnically exclusive neighborhoods? What were the shape, size and structure of ordinary household units? How did these household units initiate or adjust to fluctuating social and economic circumstances? None of the simple issues raised above can be addressed using the record published from the archaeological work conducted in the sites reviewed in this introduction. Only the site of Tegdaoust—"Awqafost" of the medieval writers, and the term which will be used in this book—allows for such a research project to be implemented, for reasons that will be clarified later in Chapter 3. This monograph is an archaeological analysis of households in a West African medieval town.