ANCESTRAL LEGACIES IN OSUN GROVE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXHIBITION OF EARLY OSOGBO HISTORY
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ANCESTRAL LEGACIES IN OSUN GROVE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXHIBITION OF EARLY OSOGBO HISTORY
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Africana Studies Department
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA
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(National Museum Osogbo)
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Curator’s Remark

These past field seasons have been well spent traversing the Osun-Osogbo grove, digging into the deep wells of Osogbo history, and seeking satisfactory answers to my numerous questions. I am pleased that the pioneering archaeological study in this UNESCO’s world heritage site has yielded fruitful results. Since we began the research project in 2003, we have excavated more than 120-square meter area and archaeologically surveyed about 20 hectares within the Osun Grove. Our archaeological teams have made very exciting discoveries of some of the ancient remains of the founders of Osogbo, dating to the early seventeenth century.

This exhibition represents a very humble attempt to present the results of our archaeological investigations to members of the public. You will encounter in this exhibition few of the 20,000+ artifacts that we excavated. Each artifact tells a compelling story about the history of Osogbo. Our research findings show that right from its inception about 400 years ago, Osogbo was a cosmopolitan community of traders, artisans, farmers, and hunters. These people originated from diverse places in Yorubaland. They laid the foundation for a peaceful, interdependent, spiritual, and worldly community, even if sometimes with contested interests. Their accomplishments foretold a peaceful and prosperous present and future.

I hope this exhibition of “Ancestral Legacies” inspires us to redouble our efforts for the recovery, preservation, and study of our past, for the benefit of our common humanity. I am deeply grateful to the institutions and individuals who have supported this project.

Akin Ogundiran, Ph.D.
Director of the Upper Osun Archaeological & Historical Research Project
Osogbo, August 2011
In the Beginning...

According to traditions, the history of Osogbo began in Ipole-Omu with the adventures of Timehin and Larooye.

Many years ago, so the story goes, these two men led the migrations that led to the settlement of people in different places within the present Osun-Osogbo grove.

Artistic Representation of Timehin riding an elephant, Idi-Ogun, Osogbo

Artistic Impression of Larooye, Ataoja’s Palace, Osogbo
Archaeology of Osun-Osogbo Grove

After more than seven years of research: involving archaeological survey and excavations, we have identified one of the first sites of ancient Osogbo settlement in the Osun Grove. This early settlement was at Ohuntoto, the precursor to the present-day Osogbo Town. This exhibition is about the ancient Osogbo settlement that was founded in Ohuntoto in the northwest section of the Osun Grove.
What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the recovery and study of the material remains of past cultures and societies. Archaeologists are trained in the university for many years. Their job is to systematically search for, recover, document, and study ancient objects, landscapes, and contexts in order to educate the public and the scientific community about the past lifeways and the implications for the present and future.

Archaeology is one of the best ways to study the past because it gives us direct access to the remains of past cultures and societies. It is by studying these past remains that we now have a richer understanding of the ways of life of the pioneering settlers in Osogbo. The study of these artifacts will tell us a great deal about the economy, crafts, beliefs, sociopolitical organization, foodways, and fashion styles, etc. of those ancestors. By so doing, we will have a better understanding of ourselves, as individuals and as a community.

Left. Members of the 2011 Excavation Team, including the National Museum Osogbo Staff and field-laboratory assistants.
Settlement Phases in Early Osogbo

There were two phases of settlement in Ohuntoto. The first and the earlier phase was the TIMEHIN period. This period was characterized by hunting activities. It is named after one of the hunters of the period: Timehin. The man is still revered in the local lore as one of the greatest hunters of his time.

We have found the remains of animal bones left behind by these hunters in the 80 sq. m. excavated unit—N25E59, located on Lat. N745°45.449’ and Long. E4°32.922’ at 339.2m above sea level.

The picture above shows the oldest level in the unit. This was where the pioneering hunters butchered the animals that they killed. The bones of bush pig, gazelle, deer, monkey, and other large and small animals were found at the spots where these hunters camped. They often left the head and the vertebrae of these animals in situ, taking the rest of the carcass to their camps to cook after a long day or night of hunting.
Settlement Phases (conts.)

The second occupation phase was the LAROOYE period. This is the upper level (B) as shown in the stratigraphy below. During this phase, the Early Osogbo community was fully formed, and comprised of a diverse range of peoples pursuing multiple occupations and activities.

During the LAROOYE period, the hunting camp site (of the TIMEHIN period) was converted into a multi-purpose site. As you will notice in the subsequent sections, part of the site was used as a refuse dump, while another section was used for processing dyestuff, and yet another section for the manufacture of glass beads. The LAROOYE deposits consist of a wide range of artifacts shown in this exhibition.

Thousands of artifacts recovered from this multipurpose site are like jigsaw puzzles. Fitting them together will give us excellent pictures of the living conditions of the Early Osogbo ancestors.

To the right is the profile of the soil sediments that characterizes each period. The clay soil (C) represents the TIMEHIN phase, and the ash deposits (B) refers to the LAROOYE phase. The topsoil (A) denotes the period when the site was abandoned during the early eighteenth century. The TIMEHIN phase has been dated, using standard radiocarbon dating techniques, to the period between 1590 and 1620 AD. Approximately, this means that Early Osogbo settlement at Ohuntoto dates to the early seventeenth century.
Regional Geography and Network

By the late 17th century, Early Osogbo was a thriving commercial and crafts center in Yorubaland. Its location on the savanna and rainforest boundary was an advantage, making Early Osogbo an active meeting point for peoples from several small- and large-scale societies, each with diverse commodities and traditions. The political stability of the nascent community must have encouraged upstart young men and women to settle in Early Osogbo.

Archaeology bears witness that Early Osogbo at Ohuntoto was an entrepot for traders as far as Old Oyo in the north, and Ijesaland, Ife, Ijebuland, and Owu in the south.
Crafts and Technology

A fragment of glass bead crucible and many pieces of glass cullet (glass wastes and blanks) have been found in Ohuntoto. These constitute evidence of glass bead production, making Osogbo the second site in Yorubaland (and indeed, West Africa) where we have evidence of likely primary glass bead production. Until now, such evidence has come only from Ile-Ife.

Glass bead production is a very complicated process. It requires a very high level of skills in pyrotechnology—that is, the control of fire and understanding of the chemistry of the soil in high temperatures. Manufacture of glass beads is a testimony to the technological advancement of the Early Osogbo community. It shows that at least a family of bead-makers was living in the settlement.

It is likely that these bead-makers made use of mainly local materials for their products. Glass beads (segi) were highly prized as the ultimate emblem of status and wealth within the Yoruba cultural, socioeconomic, and political matrices of power, authority, and valuation. It is a form of social wealth and political capital that is highly desired by the elite—kings and chiefs. Osogbo must have enjoyed a pride of place as a source of such objects of immense value.
Most of the archaeological artifacts from Osun Grove are objects of everyday life such as these ornate comb (upper right), brass bangle (middle right), pedestal oil-lamp (lower right), as well as arrows for hunting and warfare (lower left), domestic knife (lower middle), and shaving knife (lower right). All of these objects were used in daily activities.

It is likely that some of these objects were traded in from other towns. The iron objects likely came from the areas of Ejigbo, Kuta, and Isundunrin, famous for large-scale iron production.

The brass bangle was possibly a European or Arab trade good, and would have come from either across the Atlantic or the Sahara respectively.

All these show that Early Osogbo was connected to far-flung commercial centers in the 17th and early 18th centuries.
The discovery of this ash pit (left) was one of the exciting moments of the 2011 excavations in the grove. Pure ash deposits filled the 60cm-deep pit. Ashes were commonly used as alkaline in dyestuff and glass bead production. This deposit is indicative that this site may have been used for dye or glass bead manufacture.

The dyestuff made in Osogbo was an important export good traded to the Ijebu traders on the coast, who then resold the dyestuff to the Europeans. Osogbo is famous for its indigo manufacture. Hence, the appellation: *Osogbo Ilu Aro* (Osogbo, the town of indigo dye).

*Right—A contemporary dyer continuing the craft tradition of her forebears.*
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Cowry shells are among the frequently-encountered artifacts in Early Osogbo. Two species are represented—moneta and annulus but the moneta species (right) is the most common.

Moneta cowries are native to the Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean from where they were imported to the West African coast by European traders beginning in the early sixteenth century. The Europeans used these cowries to pay for most of the exported African products, especially pepper, dyestuff, ivory, and later human captives. By the time Early Osogbo was established in the early seventeenth century, cowries had become the standard local currency across Yorubaland.

The use of cowry as currency facilitated easier market transaction as opposed to trading by barter. Soon, cowry was used as a means of storing wealth.

The pot to the left was excavated in situ. It was buried beneath the floor of a house. More than 100 cowries were found inside the pot. The owner(s) of the pot used it to store money since there was no formal bank in the olden days. The pot and its contents are about 300 years old.
Tobacco Pipes are also among the ubiquitous artifacts in Early Osogbo. They came in a wide variety of forms.

These pipes were used to smoke tobacco, a New World plant product used by the Native Americans for spiritual, medicinal, and recreational purposes.

Tobacco was introduced into the Yoruba region during the sixteenth century by European traders. Many residents in Early Osogbo, no doubt, engaged in the novelty of tobacco smoking.

Most of the tobacco pipes in Early Osogbo were traded in from across the region, likely from Ilorin and the savanna area. Documentary evidence indicates that tobacco itself was largely imported from Brazil to West Africa.

With traded pipes and imported tobacco, tobacco smoking must have been a relatively expensive recreational activity that only the elite could afford. The practice of smoking tobacco was therefore a sort of status symbol in the past. We should also note that tobacco-smoking is addictive and has the potential to temporarily alter the state of consciousness.
**Domestic Pottery**

The most common artifacts that archaeologists usually come across are broken pieces of pots and bowls. Early Osogbo is not an exception.

We have recorded more than 15,000 fragments of pottery in the course of our excavations in the grove. People used a variety of pots and bowls for domestic and commercial activities. These tend to break more frequently than any other domestic products. This is why pottery dominate the archaeological deposits of the site.

Domestic pottery are excellent sources of information on foodways (the social, functional, and aesthetics of food preparation, service, consumption, and discard), ceramic technology, regional interactions, and trading networks, among others.

We have found the grove pottery that originated from the Ile-Ife (a, b) and Oyo-Ile (c, d), once again showing the far-flung trading networks of Osogbo ancestors. We have also discovered ceramic forms that are unique to Osogbo (e-h). These are usually well fired, burnished eating bowls coated with red slip (e, f); and puffed light-weight specialized bowls (g-h).
Osinu Grove: An Excavation Unit, 2004-2009
Few other artifacts featured in the exhibition: from the top, tobacco pipe, serving bowl, mandible of a large bovid, and oil lamp.
APPRECIATION

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His Royal Majesty, Oba Jimoh Oyetunji, Larooye II, The Ataoja of Osogbo

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