

EXCAVATIONS AT JAKPASERE - 1968

by R. Duncan Mathewson*

During the months of March and April, excavations were carried out at the site known as Jakpasere situated about one mile east of the village of Grunshi Zongo, and four miles south of Salaga on the Yeji-Tamale road.¹ The excavation was directed on behalf of the Department of Archaeology of the University of Ghana and the Ghana National Museum. In addition, a Training School was conducted at the excavation from 23rd March to 4th April. Nine students participated: three from the University of Ghana including a Nigerian graduate student registered for the M.A. in African Archaeology, three from the University of Science and Technology, two from O'Reilly Secondary School, and one from the National Museum.

Historically, the site of Jakpasere is of some interest, as the Kpembe oral tradition claims that it was a 'palace' constructed out of a mixture of shea-butter and honey which was built by 'Jakpa', the legendary hero of the Gonja state.² Preliminary work in August 1965 and May 1966 indicated that the site consisted of a ruined rectangular building about seventy-five feet long and thirty-five feet wide.³ Some of the walls, which were still standing, were about six to ten feet high, while the highest wall stood close to twelve feet high. An initial test of the deposit within the structure revealed that there was over five feet of stratigraphy, which for the most part represented collapsed walls.

Full-scale mapping and excavation of the site indicated that it was far more extensive than previously thought. Several large settlement-mounds were discovered about one hundred yards to the east of the main structure, associated with bilegas (bell-shaped water holes cut into the solid rock) all of which indicate intensive occupation within the immediate vicinity of the site. It became clear that the rectangular building was not an isolated structure, but part of a larger complex of

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buildings enclosing an open compound. There was a small building at the north-east corner of the main structure which was roughly perpendicular to it. This structure was about thirty-five feet long and had four rooms, two of which opened out on to the compound area. Other small buildings existed on the extreme eastern side of the site;⁴ these were more or less parallel to the main building and formed the other side of the enclosed compound.

The northern end of the main building was completely excavated and revealed a basement of small adjoining rectangular rooms. Small arched doorways of about four to five feet high connected these rooms which were aligned on two interior walls that appeared to run the entire length of the building. The only entrance into the building that was uncovered was a small passageway which connected the basement level with some type of exterior timber-roofed structure. The walls were built of gravel-swish and contained large quantities of broken sherds, which to some extent must have helped to bind the swish together. They were built in stages of horizontal swish layers which were about three feet high.⁵ In the lower courses, the walls thickened, producing a buttressing effect, which helped to provide the necessary stability for the upper storey. The building stood at least eighteen to twenty feet high and had at least one upper floor. This was indicated by joist holes in several of the walls. Another row of joist holes appear on the upper part of the west wall and probably represent the flat roof.⁶

The pottery showed a whole range of various wares, including several types of painted pottery. The most characteristic painted design consisted of fine red, parallel lines which occurred on several different fabrics. Of particular interest was the occurrence of several snuff pots, which appeared to be identical to the ones from Period VI, at Silima (New Bulpe).

The presence of a tuyère fragment and a considerable amount of iron slag indicates that iron was smelted in large quantities on the site. The iron work was particularly rich and a whole range of iron objects were recovered. Of special interest was a number of arrow-

heads and lanceheads, as well as part of a horse's bit and a curved blade, which represents a short slashing sword of probable Mande type.⁷

The dating evidence for Jakpasere is primarily derived from thirteen tobacco-pipe fragments which indicate that the site was occupied during the middle of the seventeenth century. The occurrence of types YD-1, 2, and 3 of the Yendi Dabari pipe typology suggests that the period of occupation may be very provisionally set from about 1620/30 to 1670/80.⁸ Closer reliable dating of the site is not possible at this time. However, there does seem to be some verification of the Kpembe oral tradition in the sense that the provisional date suggests possible correlation with 'Jakpa'.

'Jakpa' has been identified with Al-Lāta, the fifth ruling king of Gonja. He is believed to have reigned from 1622/3 to 1666/7, when he abdicated and died six years later.⁹ On the present evidence, it therefore seems quite possible that this site could very well have been associated with 'Jakpa'. Why it was abandoned is problematical, but it seems reasonable to suppose that it might have been evacuated after his abdication from power, or shortly after his death in 1672/3. However, there is no doubt that Jakpasere represents a period of concentrated Gonja power and indicates consolidation of the Salaga area from the early seventeenth century.

Many of the architectural features of the main building suggest a very close similarity to the structural evidence from the previously excavated mound sites.¹⁰ This resemblance is not fortuitous and reflects the widespread occurrence of traditional Sudanic architecture throughout northern Ghana.

The excavation was primarily conducted on a horizontal basis, in other words, a complete area was stripped with an emphasis on the plan of the site rather than on vertical sections through it.¹¹ This method results in a far more complete picture of a living area, and therefore provides a considerable amount of information as to how people lived and not just when they lived. The association of different types of pottery

and small finds (iron objects, bone, spindle whorls, etc.) on the basement floor of the individual rooms, as well as, in the collapsed wall material will provide some indication as to the normal activities within the various parts of the building just prior to its initial collapse. It therefore will become possible to say much more about some of the economic and social aspects of the Gonja community and of the Late Iron Age in the Volta Basin. With this in mind, it is hoped that a second season at Jakpasere can be planned which will complete the excavation of the main building and its smaller associated structures.

Through the facilities of the United States Information Service arrangements were made to film the students taking part in the training programme. For the most part, the filming was done at the excavation and during the evening lecture-work sessions. Some shots were also taken on an excursion to the excavated mound site at New Bulpe and to the Kintampo rockshelters. It was thought that a film of this type might be of some interest to the general public, as well as being a valuable aid in the teaching of Archaeology by visually portraying the various methods and techniques employed in an excavation.

During the course of the excavation, the site was visited by a number of interested local people, as well as, by twenty-five teachers from the Salaga region, and over fifty students from three primary and three middle schools. All showed a genuine interest in the site and it is hoped that in the very near future Jakpasere will be scheduled as a national monument.

The success of this excavation and training programme was largely due to the generous assistance and co-operation which was received from a number of people. In particular we wish to thank the United African Company for providing funds which helped to cover the students' expenses; the Director of the United States Information Service, Mr. Gordon Winkler, and the cameraman, Mr. George Bracher, for making possible the filming of the training programme; the District Administrative Officer at Salaga, Mr. S.K. Dosavi, the Public Works

Department Engineer, Mr. A.K. Dagadu, and the Medical Officer, Dr. A.W. Swiecicki who all helped to provide a most pleasant stay in Salaga; the Kpembewura and his elders for the entertaining Durbar and for their hospitality and interest in the excavation; and the people of Kpembe, Salaga, and Grunshi Zongo, for their friendliness and co-operation throughout.

Footnotes

1. I wish to thank Jack Goody for first bringing this site to my attention.
2. The site is very briefly mentioned by both E. Meyerowitz in The Akan Traditions of Origin 1952: 58 n.2 and D.H. Jones in "Jakpa and the Foundation of Gonja", Trans. Hist. Soc. Ghana, Vol.VI, 1962: 23.
3. Mathewson, R.D. in Research Review, I.A.S., Vol.2, No.1, 1965: 46 and in Archaeology in the Volta Basin 1963-66, V.B.R.P. and Department of Archaeology, Legon, 1967: 21-22.
4. As time was short, this area was only quickly tested.
5. The walls were previously described as being constructed of 'laterite-blocks'. This should be disregarded.
6. From the depth of the deposit it would seem that there was only one upper storey.
7. See Freeman, R.A., Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman, 1898: 417.
8. See "Excavation at Yendi Dabari", Shinnie, P.L. and Ozanne, P.C., Trans. Hist. Soc. Ghana, Vol.VI, 1962: 94-106.
9. Wilks, I., "The Chronology of the Gonja Kings", Ghana Notes and Queries, No.8, 1966: 26-28.
10. Mathewson, R.D., "Some Notes on the Settlement-Mounds of central Gonja", Research Review, I.A.S., Vol.4, No.2, 1968: 108-114.
11. I should like to thank the students and other members of the Department in assisting in the excavation.