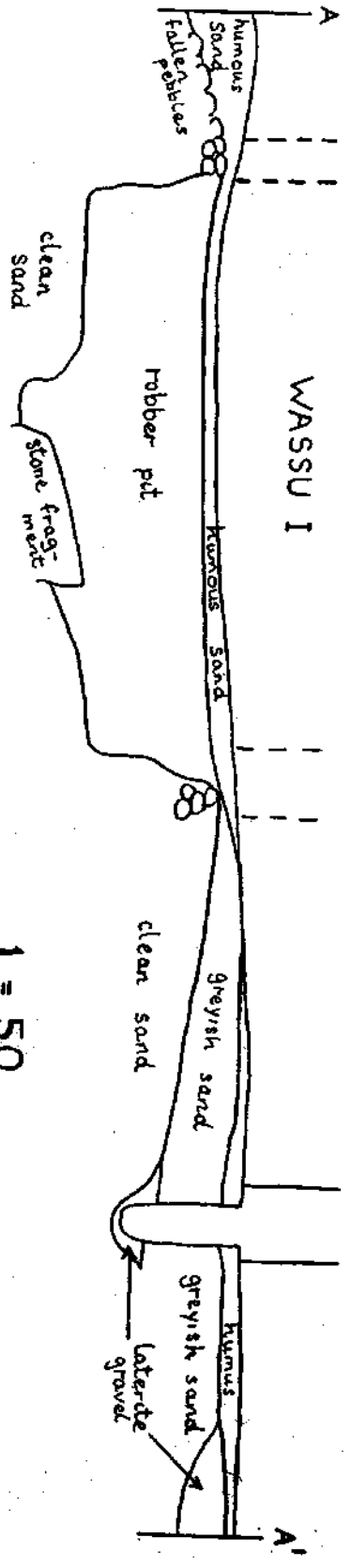
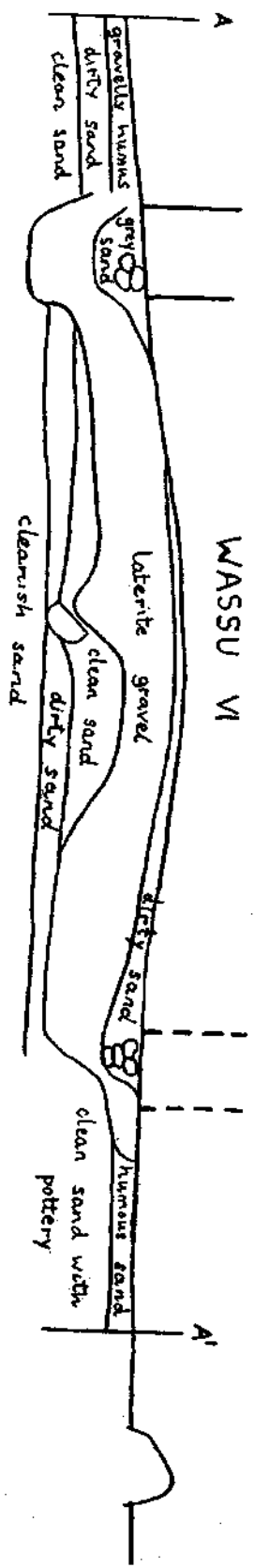


INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH REPORTSTHE ANGLO-GAMBIAN STONE CIRCLE EXPEDITION

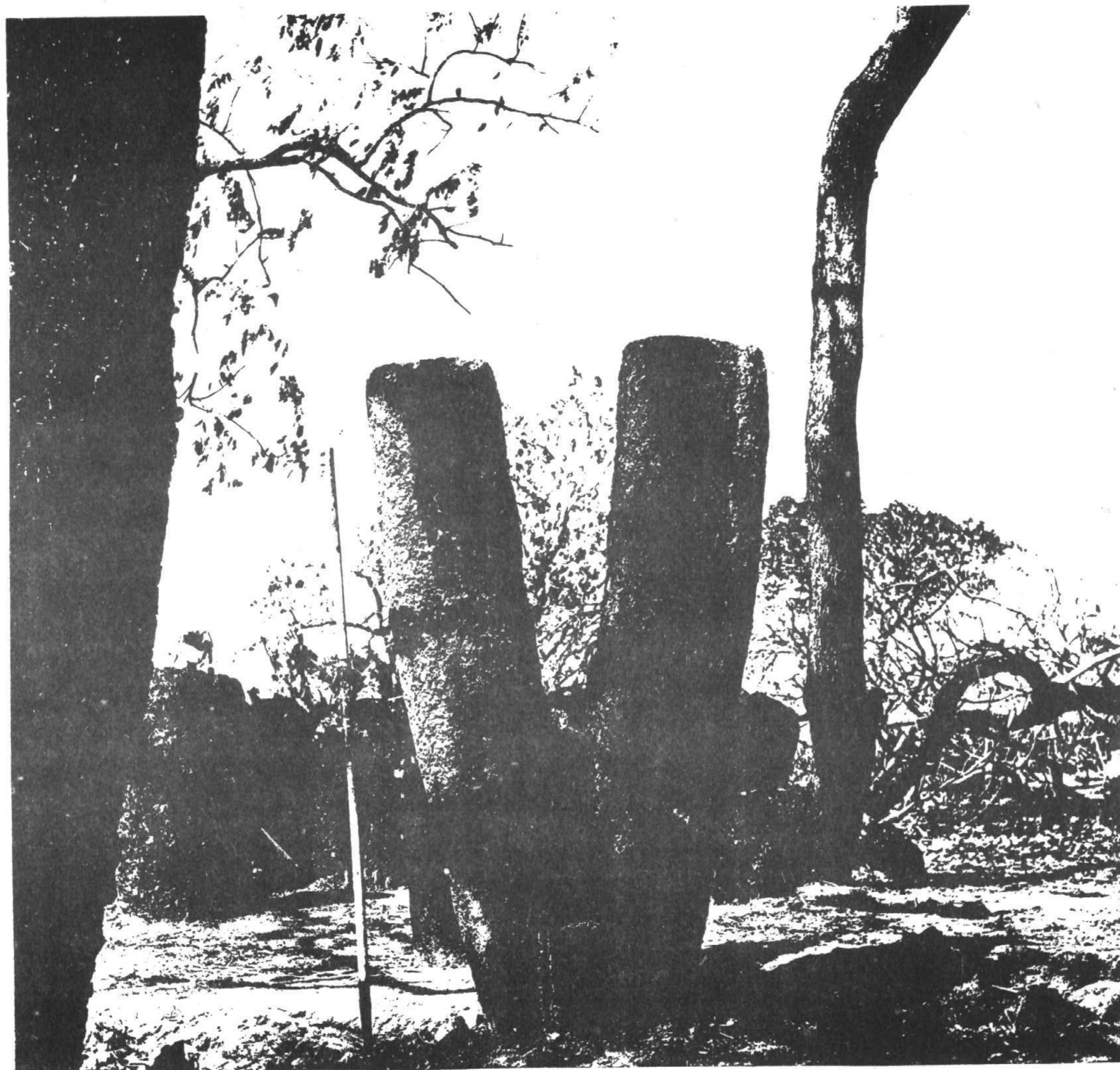
For the first few weeks of the Lent Term, by kind permission of the Vice-Chancellor, I joined an expedition to the Gambia, led by Mr. F.A. Evans on behalf of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. The main purpose of the expedition was to express to the people of the Gambia, on the eve of independence, the good will of various peoples especially those who at some time had been associated with the country. Its aim was to investigate the series of stone circles, commonly believed to be at least seven hundred years old, which lie in the middle of the country and in the adjacent part of Senegal to the north. In the short time available, little more could be done than to formulate the problems posed by these monuments, and the means through which further work might provide solutions.

These monuments are elaborate graves, grouped in cemeteries in a few groups in Senegal there are one or two score together, but in the Gambia the maximum is scarcely more than a dozen. The aspect of the circle is well portrayed by Parker's drawings, which are roughly accurate. The common feature is a circle of stones, usually with two or more outside to the east, aligned north-south. The circle may be only ten feet across, with stones standing seven feet above the ground, or more than twenty-five feet in diameter and less than four feet high; and various particularities - the doubling of a circle, the provision of extra stones which may have a hollow top or be formed into an upright V - are known. The stones, of 'laterite' - in this case a cementation of ferruginous sandstone - are careful and smoothly shaped, with a rectangular, D-shaped, or circular section.

Four configurations of the interior of circles were noticed. First, one circle was slightly hollow within the circle, with a low surrounding bank. This was at Wassu ($13^{\circ} 42' N$; $14^{\circ} 53' W$), a circle referred to as Wassu I, and excavation revealed that these features were due to earlier treasure-hunting (the diggers were not interested in pottery, but left it broken behind them, with a fragment of one of the upright); later it was learnt that during the few weeks after the end of the last war a party of British officers had ransacked this and some other circles. Second, at several cemeteries, the interiors were flat and sandy. Test trenches in two circles at Kerbach ($13^{\circ} 48' N$; $15^{\circ} 02' W$, Kerbach III and VI (Parker's Kerbach 7 and 4) indicated that these cannot yield a great deal of information, for two reasons: originally there was probably a sand mound containing much of significance, but this has been eroded completely; and in the loose sand, percolating water, plants, insects, etc, have leached all stratigraphical



1 = 50



Kerbach VI. The circle is in the background; in the foreground is a fine 'lyre-stone', carved in one piece. Similar stones have been found at several sites in Senegal.

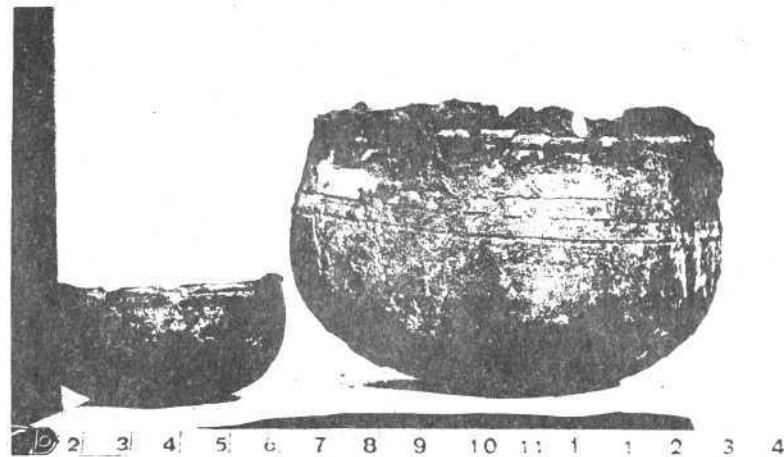


Wassu VI. The three main layers - dirty sand, sand mound, and gravel cover - can be seen at the centre.



'Small finds.'

A fragment of a stone knife, from the quarry site at Wassu; a typical sherd from the rubbish underlying the circles; and the three metal objects from Wassu VI - the socketed spear above, the tanged lance-head and copper bracelet below.



Wassu VI.

On the left is the pot found near the surface of the gravel, probably emplaced after a final libation; on the right, the large vessel, which probably originally held food for the dead person, found on the dirty subsoil under the sand mound.

distinctions, and nearly every trace of bone. Third, at Wassu some large circles contain a gravel mound, with a depressed sandy centre; they look like circles of the fourth type which have been eroded to a slight degree. If so, excavation would be profitable. The fourth type has a gravel mound within the stones, and excavation of one, Wassu VI, showed that this is the type upon which labour should be concentrated. The compacted gravel has protected lower levels from great disturbance, and stratigraphical evidence, bones, and other objects are comparatively well preserved.

Wassu VI thus provided an abundance of information, much of which was corroborated by slighter features at the three other circles which were partially dug. The sections revealed the following sequence of construction.

Before the circle was built - maybe some centuries; study of the pottery should provide clarification - the soil had become very dirty with domestic rubbish, including many small scraps of pottery. The layers above this sloped downwards and inwards over it, and from this it would seem that the first step in making the monument was to clear a foot or so of the dirty soil from the area of the circle. Then the pits for the stones were dug, and the sand placed as a small mound in the middle. The stones were emplaced, and laterite gravel, brought from a low hill a few hundred yards away was then used to cover the whole of the interior (but not the area between the circle and its eastern outliers) and to pack the stones into position. On the surface of this gravel, a narrow wall of pebbles was built between the stones; this may have retained a top capping of sand most of which has since blown away.

There was only one skeleton in this mound, and that was in a peculiar position. It lay with the bones unarticulated and spread out in the sloping lower six inches of the compacted gravel. The few traces of bone found in the two Kerbach circles suggested that there the skeletons had been similarly diffused. The only explanation conceived is that the body had been placed on a couch of light material over the central sand mound, before the whole was covered by the gravel; so that when both the couch and the ligaments joining the bones together dissolved, the bones slid apart amongst the gravel.

Six objects added information upon the burial ritual. Lying near the centre on the dirty subsoil were one and a half large pots. The sand of the central mound had fallen into the complete one, and the gravel had subsided into the hollow so formed; originally, it would seem, this vessel had been covered with a calabash, which later assume that these vessels contained food for the dead person.

The corpse wore a simple bracelet of copper or an alloy on one wrist, and over it were placed two spears. The iron head of one of these was socketed, and that of the other tanged; these call to mind the observation of Cadamosto in 1455, that the people of the Senegal fight with "numerous 'Azanage', which are their spears... they obtain iron from the kingdom of Bambra of the Blacks beyond... they carry also another weapon, a kind of lance similar to our javelin..."²

Close to the present surface of the mound, and near the centre, was a small pottery bowl, of a type which the local villagers thought was still used for pouring libation and or washing one's fingers. The funerary rituals may have ended in such a manner.

Some previous workers have found a large um over the centre of a circle. The only comparable discovery made by the expedition was at Kerbach III, where, near two stones of the circle, several fragments of such a vessel were found. It was in fact these that hinted that this circle originally contained a sand mound; for if an um had been placed in sand, and later the sand had blown and washed away, the vessel would be likely to roll aside and break.

Mr. Evans obtained valuable evidence of the cultural and technological background of the cemetery at Wassu. On the low hill to the west, the quarry site from which the stones had been taken was found. It was clear that the stone which was to be made into an upright was first trenched around, and then under-cut and lifted away; perhaps it was in the under-cutting that many of the larger uprights acquired their characteristic D-section. The local blacksmith demonstrated that the laterite could be cut and smoothed very easily with iron tools, especially an adze. No light could be gained upon how the stones were moved to the cemetery, but one or two were found on the slope, broken on the way down and abandoned. Near the quarries were masses of iron-slag, and iron-working seems to have been the main industry of the area. These finds show not only how tools were obtained for making the stones, but also the probable source of the wealth through which such expenditure of labour could be afforded. For it is most probable that the iron was being exported at good profit. The area of the Gambia and Senegal in which iron can be obtained, and the stones quarried for the monuments, is identical, for both industries depend upon surface exposures of thick laterite, which are restricted in distribution. The source of the iron used in Senegal in Cadamosto's time must have been in the area containing the stone circles; and, as will be seen, it is likely to have been bought from the people who built them.

No direct evidence by which to date the circles was found, but for various reasons the period 1300 - 1600 A.D. seems most probable. The basis of the idea that they are older than 1200 is the belief that this area became predominantly Muslim in the following century, and pagan burial practices would have been discarded. But in 1622 Jobson joined in a chief's funeral ceremonies at Setico, only a few miles outside the stone circle area, and these were pagan in form even at that late date.³ Furthermore, it can be argued that such massive cemeteries as Dialloubere, where there are fifty-four circles, must cover many cemeteries only if it is assumed that the buried people belonged to a single chieftancy. If, however, a cemetery was a mausoleum for a particular caste - e.g. a trading caste - within the society, no estimate of duration of use, but only of the importance of the particular community, could be based upon such numerical data.

The three well-preserved pots at Wassu VI, the only ones which are surely contemporaneous with the circles, are most proficiently made and differ from most early pottery in West Africa in that they have very little decoration, if any, and are coated with a uniform red-brown slip which is well burnished. The fact that modern villagers claimed to be able to identify the purposes of one of them increases the suspicion that they are not of great antiquity. We have seen how the two different spearheads found together could be explained by reference to a mid-fifteenth century description. The copper from which the bracelet is made provides further weight in assessing the probable date. We may rule out the Congo for its source, and if the object is older than 1450, when the Portuguese were exploring this coast, it must have come via the Empire of Mali - either from Takedda in Niger Republic, or, more probably, across the Sahara. Now Mali was selling copper to the gold producing countries at a very high profit, and according to al-Omari this was the main source of the king's wealth. Since iron is very widely distributed in West Africa, and in most parts of far lesser value than gold, it is most unlikely that copper would be sold against Gambian iron rather than Wangaran gold. Similar bracelets have been found in other circles in the past, and also in a few cases glass beads; similar arguments apply to the latter. It is therefore most probable that both the copper and the glass came from Europe, in European ships, after 1450.

Finally, we can see how this culture could have collapsed. During the sixteenth century the selling of iron bars to West Africa gained considerable importance in European trade. The value of iron must have fallen, and even more important is the fact that the sources of raw material were scattered all round the coast, and not concentrated in certain spots. The people whose living had depended upon the localisation of exposures of the laterite ore, itself of poor quality, would not be able to compete and maintain their previous prosperity. The labour force expended upon the quarrying of ore, and on the building of the monuments, would have to be diverted to obtaining the supplies of food, which could no longer be brought from elsewhere.

REFERENCES

1. H. Parker, Stone Circles in Gambia, J.R.A.I. LIII, 1923, 173-228
2. G.R. Crone (trans. and editor), The Voyages of Cadamosto, Hakluyt Society 1937, 33.
3. S. Purchas, Purchas His Pilgrimes VI, 1905, 245

Paul Ozanne.

EXCAVATIONS AT BUI: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

The existence of an early settlement on the south bank of the Black Volta at 2.16 W, 8.17 N, the point where the track from Banda Nkwanta crosses the river to Bui, has been known of for some time. Because of the threat of flooding by the proposed Bui Dam, the Volta Basin Research Project under the auspices of the Department of Archaeology in the University of Ghana, conducted excavations there between 20:xi:64 and 15:iv:65, which were directed by the author. The team was accommodated at Bui Camp by the Ministry of Fuel and Power, to whose authority we owe grateful thanks for generous hospitality and much practical assistance.