Survey and Excavations in Ilorin, Nigeria: A First Archaeological Insight

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Introduction

Ilorin, in the northern part of the Yoruba-speaking area of Nigeria today, remains one of the historically best-documented towns in the recent history of West Africa. Long reported as a significant frontier city of the Oyo empire which collapsed in the first half of the nineteenth century, Ilorin is situated at the transition of forest and savanna regions of present-day Nigeria (**Figure 1**). Ilorin is also known for its craft industries, especially stone bead making and pottery and as a society of diverse peoples, and traditions. However, since no archaeological work had been undertaken in the city, little could be said of events prior to the past three centuries. This article presents the first archaeological contribution to the question.

Figure 1. Location of Ilorin within West Africa (Map by Macham Mangut 2021)

Background

To some degree, the known history of Ilorin has very much been written in relation to the Oyo empire (Johnson 1921: 193-205; Hermon-Hodge 1929: 36, 63-69; Elphinstone 1929: 5-68; Danmole 1980; Jimoh 1994: 1-33). The ruined capital of the Oyo empire, known as Oyo-Ile, lies some 60 km northwest of Ilorin today. Ilorin, which had been captured by Fulani jihadists in the early nineteenth century CE, had become the southernmost outpost of the Sokoto Caliphate (Johnson 1921: 203-204; Hermon-Hodge 1929: 63-69; Jimoh 1994: 76-78). When the city of Oyo-Ile (in Hausa, Katanga/Katunga) was attacked and destroyed by the Sokoto army in 1836 CE, the population of Ilorin expanded with Fulani, Hausa, and especially Yoruba immigrants from the disintegrating empire (Johnson 1921: 193-205; Jimoh 1994: 29-33). It became known as a major trading and manufacturing town (Hermon-Hodge 1929: 62), of which the major products were pottery, and the red beads made of lantana stone sourced upriver on the Niger and conveyed by Hausa traders (O'Hear 1984).

While archaeological studies since the 1950s had examined Oyo-Ile, Ilorin had remained largely uninvestigated - despite being inextricably linked to Oyo-Ile historical accounts. Relatively little research works conducted for the area prior to this doctoral research consisted of an early survey that included surface collections of pottery (Otukoko 2014: 21-52) as well as those by Kwara State University for archaeology students' training exercises. Unfortunately, these research works were not systematic enough to place Ilorin in a chronological framework or investigate the site relationships on a regional scale. This article reports on archaeological fieldwork conducted by one of the authors (BO) over eight months in 2020 as part of a doctoral research project which aims to start filling this gap in knowledge.

The Excavations

Today Ilorin is a densely built-up city with a population of about one million; as such, locations for excavation were limited to very restricted areas. However, a zone of early promise had been identified by one of the authors (BO) and colleagues, as lying within the grounds of the Kwara State College of Education. Here, the surface survey revealed the existence of pottery scatters and the remains of herringbone potsherd pavements. The area was also identified as part of the past location of the larger Okesuna, a distinct community inhabited by a diverse group of people connected through Islam (Jimoh 1994: 52). Today it is noted for the existence of a rocky hill which remains a focus of ritual activity to this day.

The excavation was conducted under the leadership of one of the authors (BO) and involved a team of 8-10 research and field assistants from the Universities of Ibadan, Jos, and Kwara State, as well as advice from National Museum Ilorin staff. Excavations were conducted by spits, and all excavations proceeded to sterile. Materials recovered include pottery (including potsherd pavements), lithics, utilised sherds, animal bone and teeth, shell, metal objects, beads, charcoal, and human remains.

Ten units of various sizes were investigated, all of which are situated within an area of about 100x110 m around the campus mosque. Six of these units involved excavations of areas where potsherd remains, stone fragments, and bone fragments were visible on the surface; the remaining four investigated the remains of potsherd pavements by way of surface cleaning, examining associated embedded material evidence, and in the case of one unit (termed PP II), excavation. In total, a volume of 35.39 m^3 was excavated across the seven units.

Of the six units excavated, the most substantial exposures were Test Pit 1 (2x4 m in size and reaching its lowest depth at 3.4 m), Test Pit 3 (2x1.5 m, reaching 1.2 m), Test Pit 5 (2x2m in size and reaching its lowest depth at 6.4 m) and Test Pit 7 (2x2 m, reduced to 1x1 m at 1.65 m and reaching its lowest depth of 1.85 m). Test Pit PPII for its part was important in

providing an insight into the pottery pavement traditions at the site. Test Pits 1, 7, and PPII were dated and will be briefly outlined here.

Test Pit 1 **(Figure 2)** was a complex unit that produced fourteen stratigraphic layers within which features identified include possible hearth remains, an assumed storage cavity and mud walls. The depth of the cultural deposits reached 3.2 m in places, and varied and abundant material remains were retrieved, including 8165 potsherds, representing almost half of the total assemblage recovered on the site.

Figure 2. Overall view of Test Pit 1 within the grounds of Kwara State College of Education (Photo by Jamiu Amuda).

Test Pit 7, near which Kwara State University student training excavations (independent from the present work) had revealed the existence of significant material deposits, produced thirteen stratigraphic layers with three significant features, including two human burials; there were no associated grave goods, but the surrounding area yielded pottery, bone fragments, lithics, shell, bead, ash, and charcoal. Cultural remains continued around and underneath the burials and one intriguing feature was a small clay mound plastered with potsherds.

Test Pit PPII was a 1x1 m exposure located on a potsherd pavement featuring edge-laid sherds placed in a herringbone pattern (**Figure 3)**. The pavement was removed for analysis of the pottery and excavation revealed some 90cm of cultural deposits underneath: pottery, shell, bone fragments, lithics, charcoal, and ash, with a clearly demarcated and gently sloping sequence of layers, indicating an occupation predating the construction of the potsherd pavements. Several other pavements were investigated by surface cleaning; one instance was associated with a grinding stone and a large potsherd while another one was

associated with buried pottery remains such as those found in the Ile-Ife, and Ilare (Garlake 1977; Ogundiran 2002) southwestern Yorubaland. Some pavements were extracted and preserved to help in the promotion of archaeological heritage studies in Ilorin. It should be noted that while some pavements have been dismantled over time by cultural and natural factors, investigations showed that others remain preserved beneath the ground.

Figure 3. Potsherd pavement prior to the excavation of Unit PPII (Photo by Bolaji Owoseni 2020)

Five radiocarbon dates were run, focusing on samples from the deepest stratigraphies (two dates each from Test Pits 1 and 7) and the remains of the pottery pavement (one date) (see Table 1). The two samples from Test Pit 1 are issued from significantly different depths – about 100-115 cm and 300-315 cm below the datum. The first was associated with a layer of a significant amount of ash and pottery and was the first substantial charcoal sample encountered, while the latter occurred at the level of the lowest cultural deposits. Both dates returned results in the late seventh to ninth centuries cal CE. The two samples from Test Pit 7 were, as in the case of Test Pit 1, taken from different depths and from deposits of very different natures. One was retrieved from a context containing two burials at a depth of 49 cm and the second from basal cultural layers at 275 cm below the datum. The date from the burial is the oldest obtained at the site thus far (mid-sixth to mid-seventh century cal CE), while the other is in line with the slightly younger dates from Test Pit 1. Lastly, the sample from Test Pit PPII returned a date more recent than the other four samples (eleventh-twelfth century cal CE), relating to an occupation predating the pottery pavement.

These unexpectedly early results amply demonstrate the long-time depth of occupation at the site, and the need to complement historical data with archaeological insights. An immediate parallel here is the case of Old Oyo (Oyo-Ile), where excavations have uncovered persistent indications that the site was occupied much before its historically documented heyday, back to the eighth century CE (overview and references in Haour and Nixon 2018). In addition, other parallel sites within the Yorubaland area and beyond such as Ile-Ife exist where archaeological work has revealed longer-time depth than reported historically.

The Finds

The excavations yielded a suite of artefacts, including metal objects, two beads, lithics, utilised sherds, a pot stand, shell, bone and teeth remains. Analysis of these finds is underway. The pottery assemblage consisted of 17385 items, including partial vessels and sherds drawn from the pavement unit, Test Pit PII.

Based on the small assemblage size, stratigraphy, recovered finds, and their position within the site, it was decided to exclude the material from Test Pits 4 and 6. Once this is considered, and once small items had been counted and recorded, the total pottery assemblage subjected to detailed analysis comprised 5760 (excluding a lid sherd) items.

Of these sherds, 66.3% (n=3823) were undecorated. The remainder featured a range of decorations, in two-thirds of cases (n=1291) occurring singly; most common here were striation, wavy dragged comb, and twisted cord roulette (**Table 2**). Other decorations largely consisted of variations of comb, stabbing, perforations, and incisions; no other type of roulette beyond twisted cord roulette was noted. When decorations were combined, as was the case in a third of the decorated assemblage, striation and wavy dragged comb continue to dominate and were often combined (n=179). The vessel shown in **Figure 4**, which was

recovered from a depth of about 290 cm in Test Pit 1, offers a good illustration here. In terms of morphology, analysis of the rim assemblage suggests that short-everted, simple and carinated rims were the commonest, all accounting for 64-69% of the assemblage.

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates obtained from selected excavated units from the Kwara State College of Education site, Okesuna Ilorin. The material dated was, in all cases, charcoal (Bolaji Owoseni)

Table 2. Occurrence of decorations across Okesuna Ilorin test pits (Bolaji Owoseni & Anne Haour)

Figure 4. Vessel recovered from Context 15, Test Pit 1. It has a medium everted rim with a tapered lip, burnished in the interior, and features raised banded punctate, dragged comb and boss decoration (Photo by Giulia Nazzaro 2021)

Discussion

The fieldwork conducted in 2020 included several strands of activity beyond those discussed here: notably survey, enquiries with present-day informants, and archival work. This article has, however, focused on the archaeological excavation, the first to be undertaken in this historically imported town of northern Yorubaland.

Historical data had connected its existence to that of the Oyo empire, suggesting that it acted as a frontier zone for the polity and a refuge zone for various populations before and after its collapse two centuries ago. While that model has recently been critically assessed

(Owoseni, in prep.), the archaeological data lend further depth to the picture, by demonstrating the antiquity of the settlement of the Okesuna quarter within the town. Indeed, although traditions connect it with Muslim communities, the recovery of two burials predating Islam indicates a more complex sequence. Three other dates, from two units, fall within the seventh to ninth centuries cal CE, and a fifth date, which sampled an occupation underlying (but not contiguous to) a pottery pavement, provides an eleventh-twelfth century cal CE terminus post quem for this pavement, broadly in line with the dating of comparable pavements in Ife which falls between the eleventh and the fifteen centuries cal CE. The recovery of buried pot remains associated with a potsherd pavement is a further commonality. The artefacts recovered also indicate the occupation at Okesuna Ilorin predated the period of Atlantic contact: the absence of cowrie shells and maize cob roulette impressions in the assemblage is suggestive here.

Within the variety of ceramics identified within the Okesuna Ilorin archaeological assemblage, striation, wavy dragged comb decorations, and twisted cord roulette were the dominant decorations. Such decorations have also been reported at Ile-Ife, Old Oyo, Igbomina, and Iwo Eleru, all in present-day Yorubaland, within pottery bearing horizons dated to the second millennium CE (Shaw and Daniels 1984; Ogundiran 2002; Aleru 2006; Usman 2012). In addition, the appearance of wavy dragged comb has been traced to the first millennium cal CE or earlier in such sites as the Nok area in northcentral Nigeria (Franke 2014). The dates were also associated with other material evidence such as animal bone and teeth, metal objects, grinding stones, utilised sherds, and shell. This indicates that by the first millennium cal CE, the past people of the area now known as Ilorin exploited for food various land and water resources within and possibly outside their immediate environment and engaged in other activities such as manufacturing and trading. Though no evidence of iron production was noted in the archaeological record, it is possible that iron metallurgy might

have occurred within the Ilorin area as suggested by historical accounts by the seventeenth century CE or earlier (Johnson 1921). However, future archaeological work in the area can shed light on this aspect. Ironworking is certainly documented elsewhere in northern Yorubaland at dates comparable to those of the occupation of Okesuna Ilorin, for instance at Iffe-Ijumu rock shelter (present-day Kogi State) which yielded dates between the fifth and the ninth centuries cal CE (Oyelaran 1998). Utilised sherds such as those which occurred in the Okesuna Ilorin assemblage have been interpreted as net sinkers, smoothing tools or architectural features (associated with walls, column, or pavements) in Yorubaland and elsewhere (Connah 1975, Garlake 1977, Aiyedun and Shaw 1989, Ogundiran 2002, Haour 2003, Usman 2012). Some of the small number recovered at Okesuna Ilorin were recovered below wall rubble remains within Test Pit 1.

The results presented here position themselves within a growing body of archaeological research concerned with various areas of Yorubaland – Ife and the settlements of the Oyo empire in particular. They provide significant insights into socio-political developments as well as the deep-time history of human occupation of these areas prior to the nineteenth century.

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