

# Imperial Archaeology – prospects and realities: a case study from the Upper Nile in Uganda

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Some 47 years ago I proposed Historical Archaeology as a separate field of African archaeology<sup>1</sup>. Previously scholars had talked about the Proto-historic, a term that has happily departed from the literature<sup>2</sup>. It has been gratifying that historical archaeology has now been fully accepted and is a key component and expanding sector of African archaeology. A recent collection of essays edited by Peter Schmidt has provided acceptable definitions and directives<sup>3</sup>.

Today I want to propose as a new and distinct sub-field. Imperial Archaeology. Whereas Historical Archaeology refers to a period of time when there was access to either written documentation or oral testimony, and thus to a recognizable timescale, Imperial archaeology represents an aspect of the contact between two or more peoples, cultures, economies societies and technologies. Imperial archaeology implies a power relationship, an imposed new culture, a violent impact rather than the gradual development of relationships between juxtaposed populations. In West Africa, for instance, though European polities built forts and trading stations from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and possessed a lethal technology, one cannot refer to the relationship as Imperial before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The forts of the Europeans were manned by literally handfuls of foreign traders or factors, soldiers, priests and artisans. One estimate is that there were fewer than 400 Europeans on the whole African coast in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. Few stayed, or managed to survive the tropical diseases as long as two years. The forts represented a European presence within an African political environment, but until the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no dominance by Europeans over wide swathes of territory. The items traded by the forts and the ideas they brought with them certainly traveled further than those who imported them. The same situation applied to a lesser extent in Central Africa. In the Zambezi valley there were estates, markets or fairs for exchange. Influence there certainly was, much of it far from benign, but such activities did not provide control except over relatively small areas as in restricted parts of Angola and along the Zambezi valley. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was different, the technological gap had widened<sup>5</sup>, disease was better-controlled, soldiers better equipped and foreign armies were larger, numbering in the hundreds in West Africa and in the Upper Nile Valley. In Equatoria, the southern province of Egypt's empire in the Sudan and northern Uganda, military stations with over 1000 foreigners were not unusual<sup>6</sup>. In West Africa before the 19<sup>th</sup> century there had

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<sup>1</sup> Posnansky, Merrick "Progress and Prospects in Historical Archaeology in Uganda" in *Discovering Africa's Past*, Uganda Museum Occ.paper 4, Kampala 1959, pp 31-9.

<sup>2</sup> Though not without a fight. A formal resolution for its demise came at the 1965 Burg Wartenstein Symposium, *Back ground to Evolution in Africa*, ed. Walter W.Bishop and J.Desmond Clark, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1967 p.899.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology in Africa*, Altamira Press 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Even by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch had only 40 Europeans resident in their 23 forts and lodges. (A.D.Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*, London. 1963 p.45).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel R.Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, 1981

<sup>6</sup> According to the historical sources there were probably over 1000 people, largely Sudanese soldiers, at Dufile in 1888.

been mutual exchange between groups who considered themselves as equals, even though that exchange was far from equal and the trade was dominated by a commerce in humans for slavery. With Imperial contact there was no equality, no treaties to secure land for military stations, no partnerships in the same sense as those earlier on the West coast that ultimately helped facilitate the slave trade.

Dominance, control, effective administration, safe and speedy lines of communication between stations and directives from afar, were major considerations of the Upper Nile military stations rather than settlement, trade or even missionary activity. The forts on the Upper Nile were not small forts to contain rebellion or show the flag but were military stations to provide security, permanent administration and to assert territorial dominance. Imperial stations in the Sudan or northern Uganda were frequently 10 times larger than the forts of the later colonial period such as Kampala Fort built by Captain Lugard in 1890<sup>7</sup>. Dufile built nearly 20 years earlier by Colonel Gordon and Wadelai were over 10 acres in size. The forts in Bunyoro and in the Nandi<sup>8</sup> area of Kenya built in the first 15 years of the Colonial era were largely under an acre in size and only a few reached two acres. Their purpose was to safeguard either lines of communication or areas that were already administratively controlled in which trade and mission activity was being undertaken. In this sense they were temporary with no intention of making them permanent installations. The Imperial stations were designed for long term military control rather than for short-term pacification until civilian administrators, settlers and traders arrived. Many colonial forts were statements of sovereignty that were quickly succeeded by major settlements, like Fort Charter, the precursor of Salisbury in Rhodesia.

Up to now most research on the archaeology of Imperialism has been confined to locating and mapping forts that are well dated in the records, and to some extent classifying them according to shape, size and salient features. In Uganda the most detailed study has been that of Foweira<sup>9</sup> where Dr John Sutton has provided an exemplary indication of what can be done without digging. He has established three phases of the fort's history, demonstrated changed locations, surveyed surface remains and explained the significance of those features and related the fort to a turbulent period of Uganda's history. He has also challenged future scholars to undertake similar studies of Uganda's forts using every possible source, written, oral, environmental and archaeological that might be available. For many structures this may be all that is really significant if the forts are temporary, small and the actual building details are well documented. Nevertheless there are possibilities for discovering much more about internal spatial relationships, sifting through their trash heaps to reconstruct diet and the presence of non-European personnel. There is scope for differentiating between the varied groups who occupied the forts, the Sudanese, the Egyptians, the European administrators, locally recruited auxiliaries and in some instances British military personnel. In the case of Foweira we know that a Baluchi regiment was posted there for a time in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century just after the 1897 Uganda mutiny. There is however, scope at the larger military stations, like Dufile where we shall be working in December 2006, to get considerably more information. Though we have a sketch-plan of the spatial arrangements in the fort provided by Mounteney Jephson<sup>10</sup> what

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<sup>7</sup> Now sadly destroyed during the Amin period to make way for a central mosque, still not completed, being erected with funds from Saudi Arabia. The old museum building from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was removed and rebuilt close to the site.

<sup>8</sup> A.J.Matson and J.E.G.Sutton, 1965, "The Role of Forts in Safeguarding the Uganda road", *Uganda Journal*, **29**,2, pp 163-84.

<sup>9</sup> "Foweira on the Nile: camps, boat stations and forts of the late nineteenth century", J.E.G.Sutton, (in press *Uganda Journal* **51**,2006)

<sup>10</sup> A.J.Mounteney Jephson, *Emin Pasha and the Rebellion at the equator, London, 1890*

more do we really need? Such plans, as well as drawings in 19<sup>th</sup> century travelogues are interesting in themselves, but as in the Dufile case not always very accurate. Many of the book illustrations were the work of professional engravers, who had never been outside of England who used traveler's sketches as the basis for their copper plates. The Mounteney Jephson sketch plan depicts a rectangular fort with the long axis east-west whereas in reality the fort has its longer axis north to south. We know that the second major occupant of the fort Dr Emin Bey (later Emin Pasha) moved the location of the fort. After Emin Pasha left with Stanley in 1889 the fort's structures were burnt and the station was occupied briefly by Mahdist forces. It was finally reoccupied by the Belgians and was an important administrative post 1902-07. The first stage of any investigation mandates that we accurately map the different locations of a three-phase structure.

We do know that the fort was continuously occupied for at least 14 years, that a large number of local people, the Madi, worked in the fort as laborers of different kinds, Madi women became the wives of Sudanese soldiers and familial arrangements were established. The Madi had settlements outside the fort, and a lively trade took place between the fort and the local population. Up to 30 different crops<sup>11</sup> were regularly grown in the fort gardens or in the immediate area. The military station was thus interlinked with its catchment zone. Though we have some indication of what the Sudanese houses may have been like from the writings, and drawings, of European visitors, and also some knowledge of the important structures, like a mosque at Dufile, we have no really good drawings of either the form or spatial relationships of the Madi structures or the houses where the soldiers actually lived. We have no idea of where trash was thrown or buried. We have no idea of acculturation patterns. The fort represented a male dominated society. Did this mean that some of the domestic households were female dominated and thus displayed a predominantly Madi material culture? We certainly know that the Madi population had been heavily impacted by the slave trade from the north for more than two generations. Many Madi had fled to caves in the hills to the north of Dufile during times of conflict. Their material culture was restricted, they were deprived societies in an area where material culture, in the form of dress, ornaments, ceramics and other crafts, was highly limited. It would be interesting to find out whether any ritual objects, like rain stones, were used anywhere near the fort. Photographs of the rain stones suggest that they were 'neolithic' polished stone tools that are often exposed during rainstorms and soil erosion. They were originally made some 3-4,000 years ago indicating a probable depth in time for agriculture in the area. Other than beads were other European objects adopted by the Madi? We just do not know though bottles, imported ceramics and guns parts have come from both within the fort and from the surrounding area including the river.

The key to unlocking the process of acculturation can only come from looking at locations both within and outside the fort. It is obvious that if we are to understand past Madi material culture we really need to find out more about present realities which means that ethno-archaeology has to be an essential element in our work. Using collections from Museums and ethno-archaeology it should be possible to indicate something both about Madi culture at the present time and also from the 1950's when collections at the Uganda Museum were assembled. Do these collections exhibit change from whatever material artifacts we might discover in excavating our late 19<sup>th</sup> century sites? Change through time can also be accessed through linguistic evidence charting the adoption of loan words and the shifts in sounds that are often the result of cultural interaction.

One unusual and unexpected source of information that I've discovered recently has been the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Diary of A.J. Mounteney Jephson* ed. Dorothy Middleton, Hakluyt Society, 1969 pp.270-1 and, Mounteney Jephson, 1890, *op.cit* p.85

importance of postmarks<sup>12</sup>. Though there is now only one post office franking stamps in the area at Moyo, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century many small places had postal services so that we have postmarks for the forts at Wadelai, Foweira, Patiko and from 1907 at Dufile as well as from stations in the southern Sudan. The presence of a franking system provides some indication of not only which sites were administratively important but when their activity began and may have ceased.

The hope for the Dufile project is not that we will obtain *dejecta* from Gordon's or Emin's life at Dufile but that we shall learn more about how a disparate group of soldiers and civilians, lived in what for them was a relatively hostile environment away from their home countries. They certainly had an imported culture that at Wadelai included canned food but for how long did this dependence on home last? What we are particularly interested in is trying to get some idea of the Imperial impact on the local population, how did they fare, were their lives changed, and what happened to them after the Egyptians and others left? Was there an enduring impact, were agricultural practices or building methods significantly changed? Using linguistics we should be able to find out what new food procurement strategies or plants were obtained, what tools were used and even what animals were kept

Is it possible to say whether archaeology can yield anything about Imperialism and colonialism that is inaccessible to the documentary historian? As yet though we can shed light on the Imperial period where the attraction for the archaeologists exists in very prominent sites such as Wadelai and Dufile with their high banks and deep ditches, very little new about the workings of early colonialism, outside of the Cape in South Africa, has, however, been so far revealed but the potential clearly exists. The archaeologist is more multi and inter-disciplinary in approach than most documentary historians. Their focus on material culture and spatial relationships provides an essential way of looking at the acceptance and rejection of an intrusive and in many cases an enforced new culture. We can certainly find out about changes in diet both from trash heaps and the radiometric examinations of their food remains and the scraping from the insides of their stew pots. House forms and room sizes may have been little altered on immediate impact but the creation of new roads and tracks with greater widths might indicate that in some spheres of life Imperialism and colonial regulations had a greater impact than initially imagined.

Archaeologists have worked closely with architectural historians since both have a vested interest in conserving or at least recording old structures and charting their past development as well obtaining insights into the mind sets and behaviors that inspired the first colonial builders. With expanding cultural resource management in areas like West and South Africa early forts and similar structures are revealing more of their hidden history and providing clues to Africans within the Imperial system whose lives may have been neglected by the first generation of African historians who were much more focused on pre-Colonial states and resistance movements. Other insights into African rural areas will come from ethno-archaeology as archaeologists push back from the present. Archaeologists have a role to play in even relatively recent milieus and that the story has to be revealed from an African viewpoint using the tools and new methodologies available to the 21<sup>st</sup> century archaeologists without depending entirely on any of the inadequacies of documentary history. An African proverb that sums up our work is "until the lions have their own historians the stories of hunting will always glorify the hunters". Our task in African imperial archaeology is to make sure that we do tell the story from the lion's viewpoint.

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<sup>12</sup> I am particularly indebted to Peter Chantry who shared with me some of his material including a paper on "Fatko: Northern Uganda" which contains a photograph of a cover bearing postmarks from both Fatiko and Wadelai from 1906.

## **Aspects of Imperial Presence**

- Chronology: transitional, sudden
- Structures: forts, military earthworks
- Population: military, predominantly male
- Purpose: defense rather than settlement, control rather than integration, power impact
- Control dependent on outside administrators
- Material culture imported
- Growth dependent on intermarriage with local population or infusion of outside military
- Subsistence: dependent initially on imported supplies, later Farming with imported cultivars
- Contact with hinterland of military stations through marketing of essential foods, provision of labor, concubinage
- Effort concentrated on administration rather than settlement, on communications network (roads, ships) rather than trade

## **Anticipated archaeological impact**

- Military structures, principally rectilinear earthworks, located on lines of communication and at natural centers of articulation
- Structures suggestive of long-term defense – high banks, restrictive
- Entrances, food and water storage within defensive perimeters
- Initial impact through force, with evidence of destruction and population displacement
- Initial presence of outside containers, bottles for wines etc, tin cans,
- Furniture items
- Processes of acculturation after initial impact, use of local foods,
- Cooption of local women for cooking, development of mixed
- Households, evidence of local pottery and food preparation
- Initiation of supply gardens, securing of water resources through digging wells, expansion of trash disposal
- Imperial presence as opposed to temporary presence observable in permanent materials for house structures, size of redoubts, non-military administrative structures (mosques, offices etc) in permanent materials (stone, brick)