

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

R. Bedaux et al., eds. *Recherches archéologiques à Dia dans le Delta intérieur du Niger (Mali): bilan des saisons de fouilles 1998–2003*. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2005. Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies. Leiden University. Mededelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde Leiden No. 33. xi + 544 pp. Tables. Maps. Figures. Photographs. Bibliography. Appendixes. Index. 30.00. Paper.

This book details recent archaeological work done by a Dutch-Malian team as part of a cultural heritage project under the direction of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde at Leiden in partnership with several Malian and other European educational and cultural institutions. The subject is the city of Dia on the western edge of the Inland Niger Delta floodplain, reputedly one of the oldest cities in West Africa. The excavation involved two settlement mounds, one to the west, Dia Shoma, the other to the east, Dia Mara, of the current town of Dia. Five occupational horizons were identified, beginning at Level I (dated to the eighth century BCE), and concluding at Level V. The original settlement was at Dia Shoma; Dia Mara was not permanently occupied until Level III (500–1000 CE). By the time Dia Mara was abandoned at the end of the nineteenth century, oral tradition no longer remembered the existence of Dia Shoma.

Before this project, little was known of Dia or its place in the *longue durée* of early African history. Our knowledge of the Sahel and Niger Valley used to begin with the reports by Arab geographers of Ghana-Wagadou but today stretches back to the Sahara's final desiccation and moves through the rise and decline of the Dhar Tichitt culture, the migration into and out of Mema, and the founding and flowering of Jenne-Jeno. In the meantime, language groups split and spread, iron metallurgy was introduced, and people moved from foraging to sedentary economies. Where did Dia fit into this patchwork?

Both of the mounds and all of the levels have revealed treasures that will keep archaeologists and historians busy for a long time examining, for example, the great cemetery in Level III that included ten different types of burials or the parallel defensive walls of Level IV. But the most important finds come from Level I, which represents the very beginning of urbanization in West Africa. The list of "firsts" is, in the student vernacular, awesome: the earliest evidence for domesticated African rice; the oldest indication of iron metallurgy in the region; the first houses in West Africa to be built of banco as well as the earliest rectangular houses, to headline a few.

Not that this information leaps out—a reader must pay the archaeologists' price to be admitted to their secrets. As to be expected, most of the narrative concerns methodology or is descriptive; the punch lines are few and far between. The "conclusions" at the end of some chapters are mostly summaries, but the final chapter of ten pages is good in providing a con-

textual framework for the preceding 444 pages. This book is clear and well written by the standards of its genre although, that said, probably few will want to read it cover to cover. The target market will have to be research libraries and a handful of specialists.

In the end, although the authors maintain an air of caution, pottery and bone points without barbs, among other things, force them to make the leap and conclude that indeed Dia Shoma is a crucial link between Mema and Jenne-Jeno, between the retreat of the Saharans and the rise of civilization in the Niger Valley. For future scholars, however, they leave much to analyze and synthesize, to muse on and argue about. Why, for example, are there such differences between the inhabitants of Dia Shoma and Dia Mara during the periods in which they lived virtually next door to each other? Or why do the various levels in Dia Shoma indicate substantial differences in diet that do not appear to reflect changes in environment?

The veil over what Raymond Mauny once called “the obscure centuries” in what others have thought to be one of the world’s more obscure corners is slowly being lifted.

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