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# A Survey of Sites and Relics on the Slave Trade in Ghana: A History Archaeology Perspective

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**A Survey of Sites and Relics on the Slave Trade in Ghana:  
A History Archaeology Perspective**

**Brooke Takala**

**ISP**

**Spring 2003**

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Professor Anquandah – Thank you for taking on the task of another student. You opened doors and hence my eyes. Thank you for your dedication to this subject. I truly admire you.

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To the people of Gwollu, Sankana, Richter and Franklin House – Thank you for sharing your histories with this stranger.

To those who were stolen, those left behind and those who still struggle to survive- I will never forget.

## Abstract

This research consists of historical archaeological perspective synthesized as a survey of slave trafficking sites and relics. Personal observation combined with various sources such as written and oral histories have been consulted. As a student of ethnic Studies in the United States, my research has previously consisted of queries of race relations and current policies that invariably stem from the enslavement and forced migration of Africans to the “New World.” To further my understanding of race and ethnicity issues, I felt it imperative to acquire expanded knowledge of the slave trade in West Africa, particularly Ghana. Due to a short time frame for research, the final report is limited in scope. However, sites were visited from Gwollu in the north to the coastal forts and castles. This research is qualitative in nature relying heavily on personal observation and archaeological survey as main methodological resources. Oral histories had a questionnaire answered by the leading scholar in the field of Ghanaian archaeology, Professor James Anquandah, have proven to be enormously insightful.

## Introduction

Conducting research on the subject of the slave trade in Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) is extremely emotional endeavor. The effects of such a heinous phenomenon are everywhere. From the remains of defense walls in Gwollu to manacles found at Bui Park, to the castles and forts that dot the coastline of Ghana. Even the modern economic system is the lasting legacy of the slave trade. A “trading mentality” persists among those trying to earn enough to survive. The government, too, is still dependant on colonial powers as illustrated by the recent declaration of Ghana as a Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC).

It is impossible to speak of the slave trade as a single event that occurred long ago. Many scholars have researched extensively into aspects of the slave trade in Ghana and yet so much work is to be done. Since Ghana is HIPC, funding is minimal at best for research for archaeological projects. Therefore, funding comes from outside agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention has declared the forts and castles World Heritage Monuments in accordance with their philosophy. Prof. Anquandah sites the philosophy as “there are some parts of heritage which are of such outstanding value to the world as a whole that their protection, conservation and transmission to future generations is a matter not just for any one nation but for the international community as a whole.”<sup>1</sup>

One may ask the question “How could any human being treat another in such a dreadful manner?” Thus it becomes critical to obtain narrative of colonial opinion on the subject of slave trading. One such account by Ludvig Ferdinand Romer published in 1760 is based on his time of service at Christiansborg Castle where the Danish Guinea Company employed him from 1739-1749. As justification of colonialism in West Africa, Romer states that “[i]t is apparent that this magnificent land lacks nothing but better inhabitants who would appreciate what earthly paradise they have been placed in, than the Creator with up-lifted hands and eyes and submit themselves to reasonable laws.”<sup>2</sup> He describes the enslaved by saying, “[w]e have, among these slaves, seen people who one could hardly call human beings. They have an extremely wild appearance, a physiognomy like a tiger with just such teeth in their mouths. We have had them among other slaves and they had crept stealthily up to someone, bittern a big piece of meat off his arm or thigh and eaten it quite greedily.”<sup>3</sup> It is this mentality that was spread through “civilized” Europe by accounts such as Romer’s that perpetuated and rationalized the enslavement of Africans.

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<sup>1</sup> James Anquandah, Castles and Forts of Ghana, p.8 form Monumentum International Journal, 1984

<sup>2</sup> L. F. Romer, “Filforladelig Efterretning on Kysten Guinea,” translated by Irene Odetei, p.14

<sup>3</sup> Romer, p.21

Slavery has existed in the global society for centuries. Yet never on such a large scale as the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, slavery existed in Africa in the form of the corvee system. Corvee is akin to a feudal system of serfdom. This is the practice of “slavery” that existed in historical Ghanaian societies.<sup>4</sup> This practice was not used for direct profit or intentional commodification of human beings. A corvee could work toward freedom and in some cases, marry into the controlling family.

The slave trade was in effect from the 16<sup>th</sup> to late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and attained rates of extreme devastation during the time period of 1650-1810. As Professor Anquandah aptly states in his personal notes on the slave trade, “The Trans-Atlantic Slave Traffic represented the most spectacular manifestation of the slave economic phenomenon in the modern world.”<sup>5</sup>

Though the slave trade existed along the coast of then Gold Coast, the northern region of the area “was not drawn into the trans-Atlantic slave trade until the mid-eighteenth century.”<sup>6</sup> Once the north was drawn into the trade, much more devastation undeniable ensued. Debts and tributes were to be paid to the powerful Asante kingdom and slave raiders realized the incredible economic gain in the traffic of human beings. Travel to the north was embarked upon for this research. It should be noted that the roads are difficult to travel even in modern times. One can only imagine being forced to walk from the hinterland to the coast shackled, starved and denied water. This journey in historical times lasted up to one year from the time of capture to the destination in the “New World.”<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the raiders whose assaults lasted for generations, resistance to enslavement is evident throughout Ghana. Caves were used to hide from raiders, defense walls were constructed and even the architecture of houses reflected the struggle for survival.

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<sup>4</sup> James Anquandah, questionnaire

<sup>5</sup> James Anquandah, personal note on slave trade.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict G. Der, The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana, p.7

<sup>7</sup> James Anquandah, personal notes

## Methodology

The methodology for this research relies heavily on personal observation. It is the opinion of this researcher that the personal connections made through a body of work allow for misconceptions to dissolve. Personal connections cannot thrive on distance or barriers. Of course, such personal observations require a historical context. In the case of the slave trade, archaeological perspective is also imperative for a holistic understanding. Archaeology allows for one to completely connect with history, to touch history and to physically hold onto history. Through this connection, the sites and artifacts were able to voice their stories. These observations were documented through photography (see Appendices).

Professor James Anquandah, archaeologist at the University of Ghana at Legon, has generously given a wealth of information for this project. A questionnaire was prepared by the researcher and answered in detail by Professor Anquandah. Also, his personal notes on the slave traffic in Ghana have proved to be an invaluable resources along with his historical archaeology surveys of Cape Coast Castle and Fort Crevecoeur (Ussher Fort). Informal conversations on oral histories will not be quoted in this paper yet they have proved invaluable for enhanced understanding of the topic.

As discussed earlier, time constraints have led to a limited scope of study. That is not to say that areas are not many. It simply connotes that further analysis is necessary on the subject.

## Sites Visited

### A. *Gwollu*

The village of Gwollu is located in the Upper West region of Ghana along the Burkina Faso border. The name itself means that the people went around and around and settled in the spot known as Gwollu. During the time of the slave trade the villagers were being attacked, their people stolen by the Zabarima of Mali who assaulted from the north. Babatu and Samori<sup>8</sup> are said to be the raid leaders. The residents of Gwollu resisted the slave raiders through the construction of defense walls. At first one wall (now known as the inner wall) was constructed for protection. However, the village water supply and farms were located outside of the wall. So, another wall was constructed to enclose all of the needs of the village. Each wall, constructed separately, was built in two to three years. They acknowledged by their presence today. (see figure 1 & 2).

*The men would dig up the soil and mix it with the water that the women voluntarily fetched. The women were accompanied even to fetch the water because we still had instances of those who left on such an errand and did not return. The substance would be left for a while and then mixed with more water and grass to strengthen the mix. This was how sturdy bricks were produced. While we built the wall we would leave triangular spaces in the construction to allow one to see through the hole without being seen. We spent two years of intense and concerted communal labour building this defense wall.*<sup>9</sup>

The walls are a constant reminder of the past. When meeting with the elders, all of the village children were present. They too know the meaning of the walls. Were it not of the defense walls, most likely the village of Gwollu would not exist; the villagers stolen, sold at a slave market to be marched to the coast for a fateful voyage across the Atlantic ocean. The descendants live within the walls of their own history.

### B. *Sankana*

Another form of resistance to slave raiding in the north is evident at Sankana. Located near Wa in the Upper West Region, residents of Sankana used a system of caves to survive constant attacks. (see figure 3). Sentries stood atop the caves and large rock outcroppings. As with the

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<sup>8</sup> Longi Felix Y. T., "Final Report on the Oral History of the Slave Trade in Kasana and Gwollu," February 25, 2002

<sup>9</sup> Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, PhD, "And Still They Fight: The Material and Cultural Manifestations of Resistance to the Slave Experience in Selected Locales in Ghana and Benin," paper presented in Goree, Senegal, 11-17 November 2002.

village of Gwollu, Sankana was also terrorized by Samori and Babatu.<sup>10</sup> When raiders were spotted, a horn was blown or drums were beaten to signal danger and for the villagers to hide.<sup>11</sup> They spent long periods of time hidden in dark caves surviving on pito (a hydrating beverage made from millet) and any foodstuffs they were able to gather on their way to the caves. Three major caves were used. Visitors are allowed to see two of the caves. The third is kept secret in case its use is ever called for again. Generations of people from Sankana knew well the insides of the caves. There many died and many were born. Even special names were given to those born within the caves.

The villagers made their own gunpowder atop a large rock. The rock was worn by many years of continuous grinding. The deep groove poignantly marks the passage of time that the people fought for their lives (see fig. 4). When it seemed safe to return to the village, the people were called out of the caves. One can only imagine stepping into daylight after living in darkness for possible months at a time only to return to the dark soon thereafter. When they returned to the village, the people often found their homes raided and found and animals gone; all stolen by the slave raiders.

### *Salaga Market*

Although personal observations were not conducted at Salaga Market, mention must be made as to the significance of this large auction site. Originally Salaga was an important market with its main commodity being kola. In the nineteenth century it became a popular trading site of the Zabarima raiders. As mentioned earlier, it was the Zabarima that attacked both Gwollu and Sankana.

*Visitors to Salaga gave horrifying accounts of the treatment of slaves. The slaves were sold in the open in the slave section of the market. They were usually chained together in groups of ten to fifteen by the neck, and exposed the whole day from morning till evening in the burning sun. They were left hungry and thirsty, naked, ailing, often sick and weak and were kept standing in that condition till one after the other had been sold.<sup>12</sup>*

It was through Salaga market that many enslaved passed to Accra and even to Dahomey (to be discussed). An interesting point raised by Der regards Salaga in Accra. He states that, “Salaga market in Accra was probably established there in the late eighteenth or the early years of the nineteenth century to dispose of slaves from Salaga brought directly down to Accra through the

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<sup>10</sup> Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, PhD.

<sup>11</sup> Account from elders in Sankana. Visit by author, March 2003

<sup>12</sup> Benedict G. Der, p. 18

Afram Plains.”<sup>13</sup> This point is interesting due the construction of Richter House (Richter Site) in the early nineteenth century and its use as a “storage facility” and auction site for slaves.

### C. *Richter Site*

From the north, enslaved Africans were taken through Salaga Market to the coast. Many were taken to what is now known as “Richter Site”. The structure was built in 1809 by H and C Richter.<sup>14</sup> The place was used as a slave holding area and also as an auction site. Within the walls of Richter Site a tunnel existed to transport slaves safely to Christiansborg Castle and onto awaiting ships.

During field research at Richter site, an informal interview was conducted with a woman named “Dolly”. She gave the history of the site as a storage facility for enslaved brought from Salaga market in the north. “Dolly” also mentioned Richter’s use as an auction site.<sup>15</sup> It is through this information that it is speculated that Richter Site is the Salaga in Accra mentioned by Benedict Der.

The walls of Richter are constructed of wood, brick and a cement-like substance for maximum strength. They are a foot thick at most places to protect the “commodity” of human lives. A wall is partially destroyed from a British bombardment yet the remaining wall is still intact. Traditional Dutch architecture is apparent in the arches and brick style (see figures 5-7) At present, the structure is occupied and has been for nearly one hundred and twenty years.

At Richter there exists a tunnel to Christiansborg Castle (now closed and cemented over). Enslaved Africans were marched through the tunnel to the castle to await their shipment to the “New World”. One is left to wonder of the number of auction sites or holding areas with secure, underground tunnels to Christiansborg Castle or other forts along the coast of old Accra.

### D. *Franklin House*

Another occupied former slave fort is Franklin’s Lodge or Franklin House. Located in old Accra on Brazil Lane off of High Street, Franklin House holds a wealth of historical archaeology information on the slave trade in the Gold Coast. The structure has yet to be excavated. However, shackles and chains were found in the house by the former owner Mr. Franklin and are in the possession of his widow Mrs. Franklin.

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<sup>13</sup> Bendedict G. Der, p.19

<sup>14</sup> Ghana Monuments plaque on the building gives the history of Richter House.

<sup>15</sup> Informal interview conducted 10 April 2003. Translation from Ga to English by Mr. Partey of the Archaeology Department, University of Ghana at Legon.

As with Richter Site, Franklin House also functioned as an auction site.<sup>16</sup> A sealed dungeon exists with exit to the beach below the cliff on which Franklin House sits. Beyond the crumbling bastions located on the southern side of the fort, one can clearly see James Fort to the west with Fort Crevecoeur (Ussher Fort) to the east and Christiansborg Castle further down the shore to the east.

The Dutch build the fort on the site of a destroyed Portuguese fort. The structure is comprised of large archways characteristic of Dutch architecture and are comprised of small Dutch bricks. (See figure 8). Original iron bars are still in place on the windows of the structure to prevent the escape of those held captive. (See figure 9). A very haunting relic of the slave trade visible at Franklin House is a small hole in the brick wall. This hole was constructed for the sole purpose of feeding the captives. (See figure 11) Inside of the hole was a holding area. A boarded window is visible but that was constructed during the fort's use as a residence by the Franklins (See figure 12)

When standing at Franklin House, one senses the extreme magnitude of the slave trade and the number of forts and castles along the coast of Ghana. For three hours away are the castles of Cape Coast and Elmina and many in between.

#### *E. Cape Coast and Elmina Castles*

*IN EVERLASTING MEMORY*

*OF THE ANGUISH OF OUR ANCESTORS*

*MAY THOSE WHO RETURN FIND THEIR ROOTS*

*MAY HUMANITY NEVER AGAIN PERPETRATE SUCH INJUSTICE AGAINST HUMANITY*

*WE THE LIVING, VOW TO UPHOLD THIS<sup>17</sup>*

In Cape Coast and nearby Elmina stand two of the largest castles involved in the slave trade. They are both UNESCO World Heritage Monuments and both attract many tourists each year. Both are massive fortresses that attest to colonial power and economic politics that fueled the world through the bondage of human beings. Even in the hot African sun, one is chilled to the core at the thought of the large number of people that passed through each "door of no return".

Mention must be made of these two structures and their relationship to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, due to the historical data and archaeological excavations of the sites they are only mentioned in this body of work.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mrs. Franklin 3 April 2003, story corroborated by James Anquandah, "Historical Sketch on Franklin Lodge (St. Vicente) Ga-Mashie, Accra.

<sup>17</sup> Engraving on the wall inside Elmina Castle.

## Conclusion and Implications

We will never know the exact numbers of lives lost to the slave trade. Estimated of those transported are nearly 15 million. But that does not include those who died during raids, during hinterland transport, while held in dungeons, beaten, raped, starved and so on. The numbers do not include those who were left behind, alone and stricken with grief. The numbers do not include those who live within the walls of their own history today. Those who must ‘turn off’ a part of the psyche in order to survive another day. Or those whose minds are enslaved.

The scope of the trans-Atlantic slave trade reached (and some may say still reaching) horrifying proportions. From the then Gold Coast sailed the Fredensborg slave ship. On 23 April 1768.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the area of West Africa with the greatest loss of life during the slave trade in Benin (formerly Dahomey), which was dubbed the “slave coast”. Two sites deserve mention in this research as they provided great insight into the slave trade in the Ghana and the slave trade in general. One is the Route des Esclaves in Quidah and the other a stilt village name Ganvie.

The kings of Dahomey (the original name of Benin) were also in the business of slave trading and sent those captured to the village Quidah. To commemorate the journey to the sea, there now exists the “Route des Esclaves”. On this route one passes the Place Chaca, the slave market located next to the house of the wealthy slave trader, Francisco de Souza (his ancestors are currently rebuilding a mansion which overlooks the former auction site). Next along the route is the tree of forgetfulness. This is where women were made to encircle the tree seven times, the men nine times in order to forget their culture and their past. Slaves were then taken to “La Case de Zomai,” the place where light is not allowed. Here enslaved Africans were kept in the dark to discourage escape for if they saw the sun after a long period in the dark, they would not be able to see (one is reminded of the “light blindness” that the people of Sankana must have experienced after existing the caves after long periods of time). At the site of La Case de Zomai a statue has been erected to show the manner in which they were held. (see figure 13) If they survived, they were marched to the sea for a life of slavery in the “New World”. If no, they were thrown unceremoniously into a mass grave. The kingdom of Dahomey was similar to the kingdom of the Asante. Both profited handsomely from the commodification of human beings. Neither would enslave their own people so raids were made on surrounding areas. They traded their fellow Africans for canons and guns, beads and cloth. They rented their land to colonial powers for a small price. In the end they too were taken advantage of by those colonials. This is evident by the imprisonment and subsequent exile of the Asantehene to Suriname and the war of Yaa Asantewa in 1900.

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<sup>18</sup> Observation and information from the National Museum exhibit on the Fredensborg slave ship

The village of Ganvie was erected on stilts on a salt water lake to escape slave raiders. (See figure 14) The villagers ran away from their original village in the seventeenth century to escape enslavement. The raiders would not attack them in the water and so the village was constructed. The name Ganvie means “safety-now there is peace.”<sup>19</sup> At present, more than forty thousand people reside in similar structures of their ancestors. They must forage for potable water and now their history, their means of survival, is threatened by and subject to tourism. This current commodification is a result of the slave trade and is evident in Ghana as well.

Today, neo-colonialism threatens and enslaves the minds of many. Though not only Africans but the perpetrators of such slavery (i.e. current colonials). As mentioned earlier, Ghana recently was declared HIPC. Yet resources are plenty in the country. The land is fertile, resources are many and the people intelligent. Ghana needn't be dependant upon imperialist nations for their livelihood. However, that mentality is a holdover from the days of slavery. The actions of the government are reflected in the people. The trading mentality has resulted in the constant buying and selling of any type of good or service.

Even the education system reflects colonial influence. The first schools in Ghana were products of the castle system. Today, great emphasis is placed upon a “westernized” or “developed” education which would lead to a developed society. And so, traditional languages are generally shelved in favour of English. Even “western” medicine is favoured over traditional remedies.

In conclusion, the historic sites of Ghana involved in the slave trade are many. This is not only Ghanaian history or African history but a history that involved the entire world. The sites speak, cry to be heard. Their stories are critical. The resistance of all involved is essential and inspirational to the effects of slavery. We must understand this portion of history that has determined current political policies and constructed racial and cultural hierarchies. This is our collective past and it needs to be reconciled and remembered.

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<sup>19</sup> Information provided by tour guide during visit to the village of Ganvie

FIG. 1

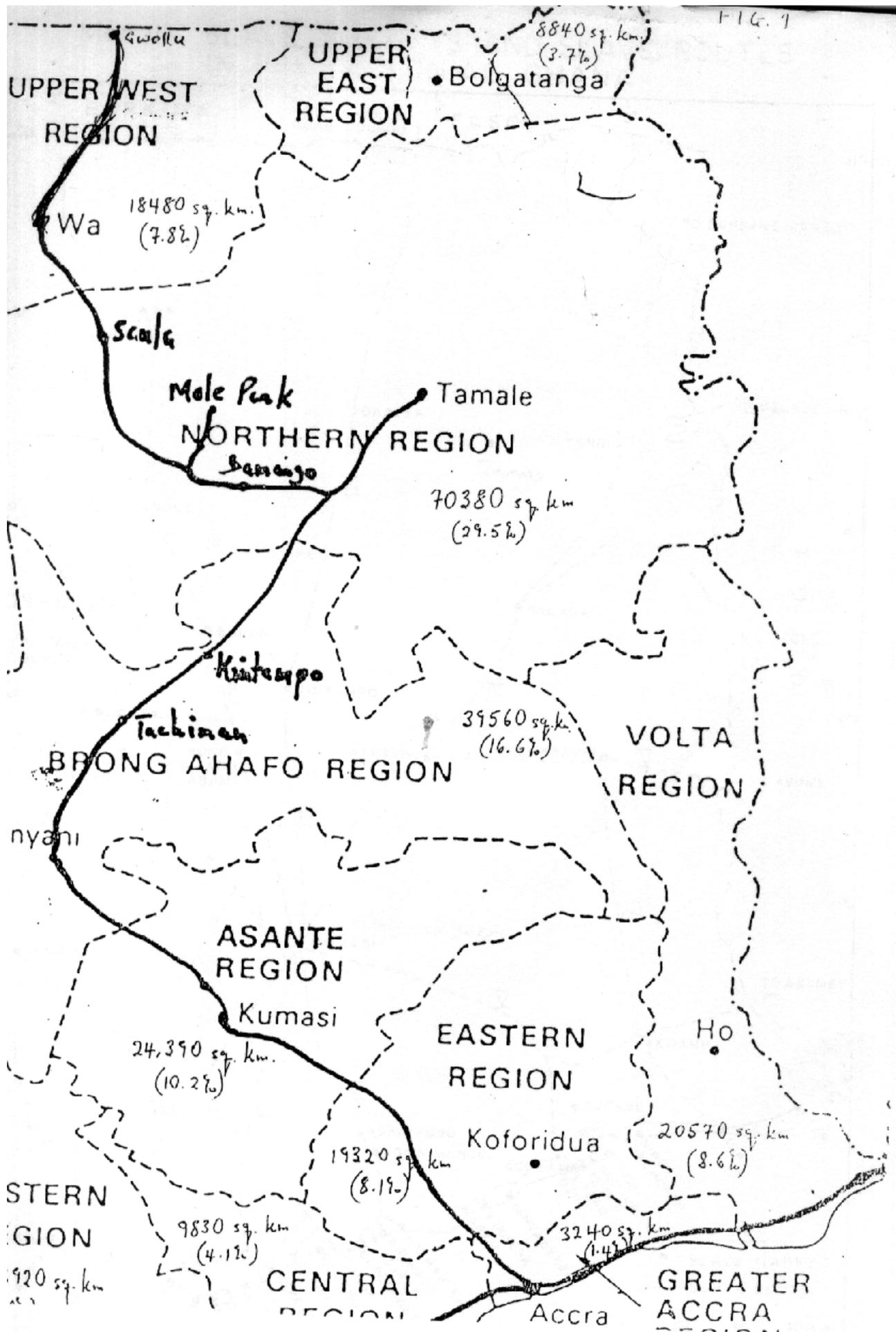








Fig. 3: Second cave at Gwollu



Fig. 4: Area used for the grinding of gunpowder



Fig 5: Richter Site – rubble is the result of bombardment

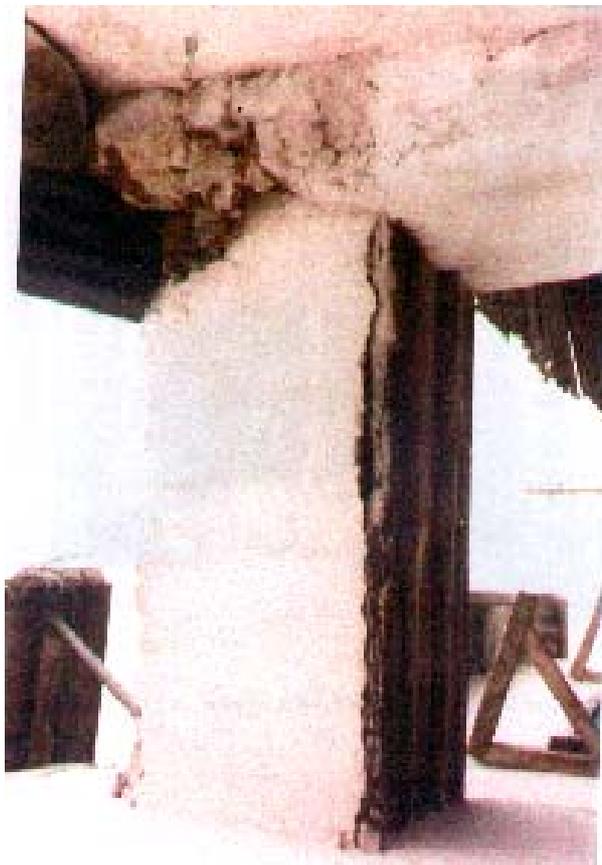


Fig. 6: Detail of construction at Richter



Fig. 7: Traditional Archway looking into slave holding area Richter Site



Fig. 8: Traditional Dutch architecture – Franklin House



Fig. 9: Franklin House – hole in the wall through which slaves were fed.



Fig. 10: Looking through the hole.



Fig. 11: Daily life at Franklin House



Fig. 12: Original irons on the windows, Franklin House.



Fig. 13: Statues at La Case de Zomai along the Route des Esclaves, Quidah, Benin



Fig. 14: Houses on stilts, Ganvie, Benin

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## Observations

Sites visited during March and April 2003. All notes in possession of author.

## Photographs

Figure 1 & 2: Gwollu, Ghana. March 2003

Figure 2 & 3: Sankana, Ghana. March 2003

Figure 4, 5, 6: Richter Site, Accra, Ghana. April 2003

Figure 7 – 11: Franklin House, Accra, Ghana. April 2003

Figure 13: Route des Esclaves, Quidah, Benin. March 2003

Figure 14: Ganvie, Benin. March 2003

## Maps

Sites Visited. Credit: SIT handbook

Trade Routes. Credit: Akosua Perbi, History Department, University of Ghana, Legon