

GHANA

Archaeological Fieldwork at Christiansborg Castle, Ghana

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Introduction

This short essay reports on archaeological fieldwork undertaken at Christiansborg Castle in Osu, Accra, Ghana. Christiansborg Castle is a seventeenth-century former trading post, Danish and British colonial seat of government and Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today, it is known in local parlance as ‘The Castle’ or ‘Osu Castle’. Fieldwork involved survey, excavations and salvage archaeology conducted under the auspices of the Christiansborg Archaeological Heritage Project (CAHP). Research objectives were to identify and establish a settlement chronology for the site’s pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, in particular, assess archaeological evidence for the Danish trans-Atlantic slave trade (Bredwa-Mensah 2004; Hernaes 1998; Svalesen 2000; Weiss 2015). This work forms part of my archaeological monograph, ‘Slavers in the Family: The Archaeology of the Slaver in the eighteenth-century Gold Coast’. This preliminary report provides a brief description of the research and a summary of the archaeological data.

Historical Background

Christiansborg Castle is strategically situated on the West African coast, formerly and notoriously known as the ‘Coast of Guinea’ and ‘White Man’s Grave’ (Figure 1). Built by the Swedes in 1652 as a lodge, it was appropriated by the Danes, who in turn lost it to the Dutch in 1660. In 1661, the Danes repossessed the site and constructed a stone fort, naming it Christiansborg (Chris-

tian’s Fortress), after the King of Denmark, Christian V. Later, converted into a castle, it contained a courtyard, cistern, chapel, ‘mulatto school’, storerooms and living quarters, and a gable containing a bell tower and twenty-eight cannon. In 1685, Christiansborg Castle became the Danish administrative headquarters, and along with nine other forts and lodges, Denmark acquired a near trade monopoly on the coast. Between 1694 and 1803, the Danes conducted trade with Africans at the castle, purchasing gold and enslaved Africans in exchange for guns, powder and bullets, liquor, cloth, iron knives and tools, brass bracelets and bowls, and glass beads. In fact, Christiansborg Castle was so vital to Denmark’s economy that between 1688 and 1747, Danish coinage bore its image and the word ‘Christiansborg’. The Danes occupied the castle apart from a few brief periods – for example, between 1679 and 1683, when it was sold and occupied by the Portuguese; 1685 and 1689, when it was remortgaged to the British; and 1693-1694, when Asameni, an Akwamu trader and chief gained possession of the castle through subterfuge, but later sold the castle back to the Danes. In 1849, Christiansborg Castle was sold to the British for £10,000 (Lawrence 1963; Van Dantzig and Priddy 1971).

In 1873, Christiansborg Castle became the British seat of colonial government on the Gold Coast, following structural reconstructions caused by damage from the 1862 earthquake, and from 1876 onwards, British colonial governors resided in the castle. It was temporarily abandoned between 1890 and 1901, when it functioned as a constabulary mess and lunatic asylum. But in 1902, the castle reverted to its role as the British colonial seat of government.

With Ghana’s 1957 independence, Christiansborg Castle was renamed Government House. From 1960 onwards, under President Kwame Nkrumah, it continued as seat of government and official presidential residence. President Ft. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings continued this arrangement. Still, in 2008, President John Agyekum Kufour moved the seat of government to Flagstaff House (today known as Jubilee House). Yet, in 2009, President John Atta Mills reversed this decision and moved back. Then once again, in 2013, President John Dramani Mahama returned to Flagstaff House. In 2017, President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo announced plans to convert the castle into a museum.

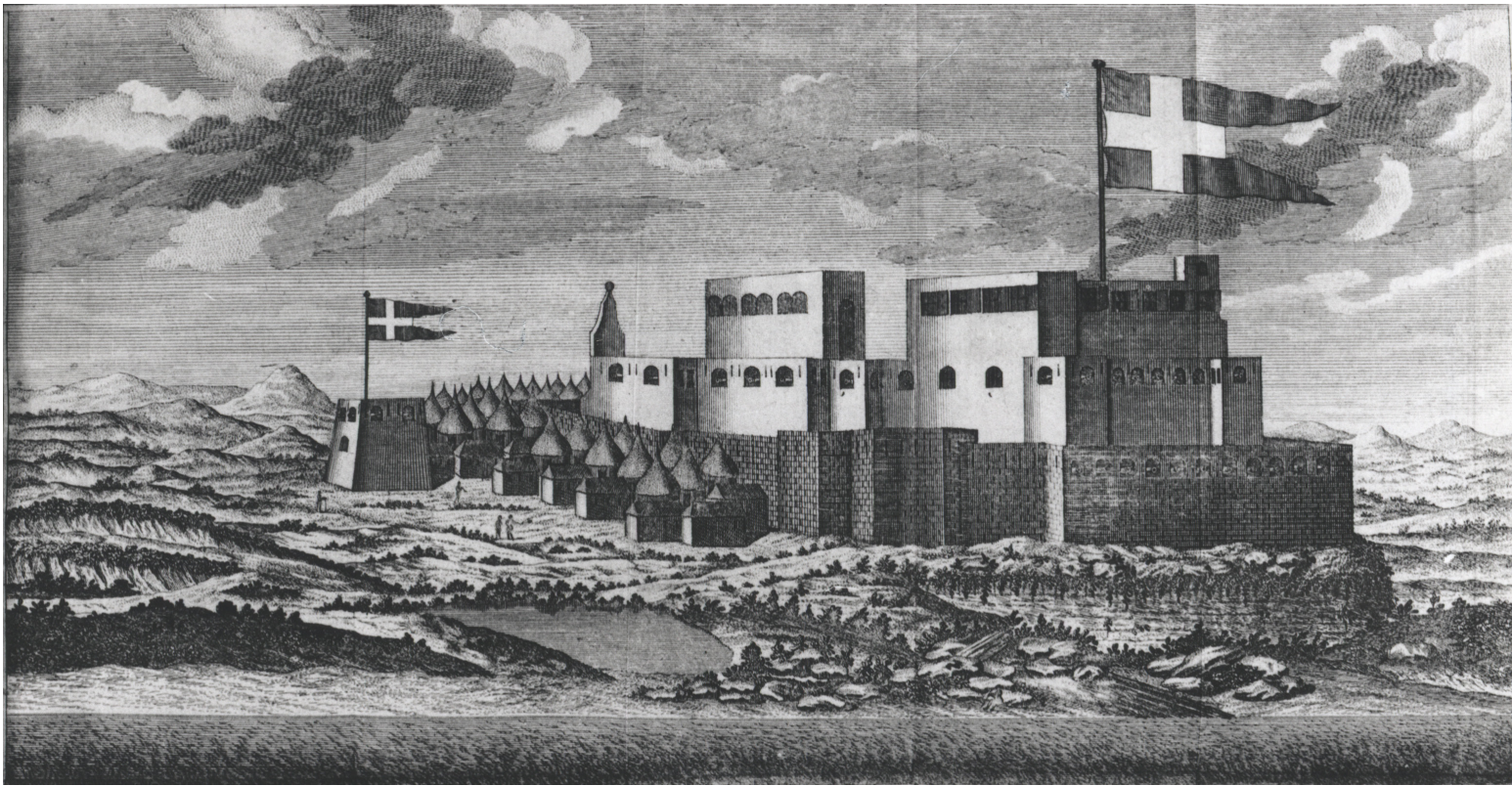
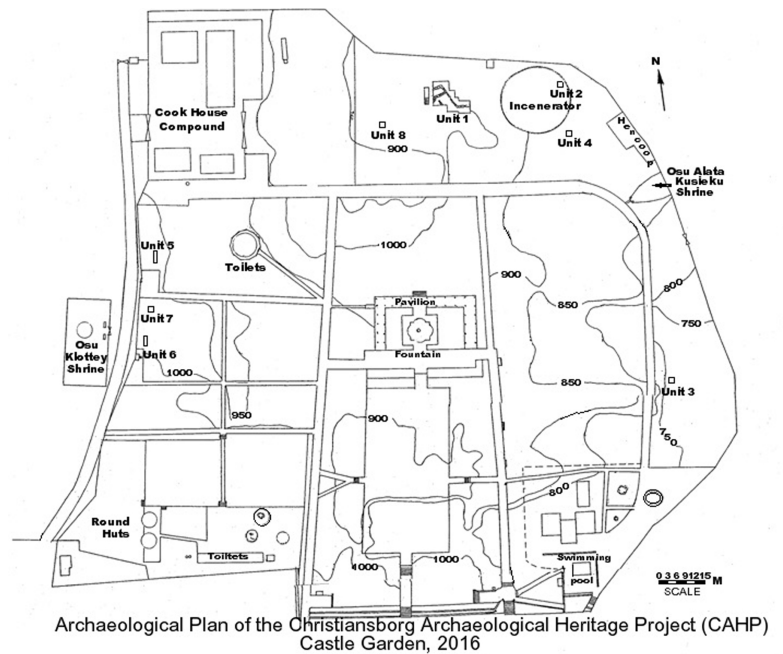


Figure 1: Christiansborg Castle, 1740. Courtesy of Danish Maritime Museum.

Archaeological Survey, Excavations and Materials

Christiansborg Castle remains under the mandates of The Office of the President of Ghana, in addition to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Creative Arts and Ghana Museums and Monuments Board. Ownership/custodianship is further complicated by the fact that it is situated on Osu Stool land (that is, on Chieftaincy land).

In 2005, I began discussions regarding research possibilities. Archival research followed. Archaeological work began with test pit excavations in 2014, and then further excavations in 2016 and 2017 (Figure 2). Hitherto, no archaeological work had been conducted. That said, in 1960, Public Works Department work recovered English and local smoking pipes, a gold-dust pot, a silver horn ornament, state swords, a groundnut, European knives as well as local and European bead necklaces. However, a report is not available. These findings are said to be in the Ghana National Museum, but thus far, efforts to locate this assemblage for analysis have proved unsuccessful.



Archaeological Plan of the Christiansborg Archaeological Heritage Project (CAHP) Castle Garden, 2016

Figure 2: Archaeological Plan.

As part of this project, digital photographs were taken as a means to record the data and descriptions noted in a field notebook. Select artifacts were illustrated on site. Documentary filming recorded archaeological fieldwork process. Team members, mostly from the local community were interviewed on film, in order to document their views on the work and interpretations of the findings.

Survey

In 2006, a reconnaissance survey was conducted to provide a better understanding of the site's nature, such as size, parameters and possible excavation areas. This survey was essential, since many areas are still in use. Similarly, it determined the site's structural layout, which was important for the archival work in Denmark and the United Kingdom, such as examining maps, architectural plans and so forth. In addition, it was vital for designing a fieldwork methodology that would produce effective results within the necessary time frame.

The surface survey in 2014 focused on the castle building and exterior area below the castle, comprising the bank down to the beach. The steep bank was first cleared with cutlasses. A winding stairway leading down to the beach was discovered. An abundance of materials was retrieved, largely glassware. For the most part, these date to the site's post-independence period. Currently, the castle has eight cannons on a five-step platform facing the sea. We observed two large cannons had fallen from the castle; the smaller cannon was only partially visible as it was mostly buried in sand. The smaller cannon was excavated. Local fishermen were recruited to assist the team moving the cannon to storage at the site (Figure 3). This was no small achievement. It was not possible to retrieve the second, larger cannon manually, and so it was left in situ, with the intention of acquiring motorized equipment to remove it in the near future. What was initially thought part of a stairway covered in aquatic moss was later identified as a cannon support, by examining the cannons still in place. A corroded square metal plate buried in the sand was also retrieved from the beach.

Within the castle walls, the survey focused on the entire area, excluding the castle building's offices since still in government use. The entrance to an underground tunnel on the west side of the castle, first noted in 2006, was also explored revealing it has been blocked. The residential area to the east side, including the swimming pool



Figure 3: Moving the cannon.

and gardens, was examined. The garden feature, which contains a water fountain, as well as President Rawlings' personal car and two armoured vehicles, were noted. Inside the castle, the dining hall, balcony, kitchen and pantry were examined. Objects associated with Ghana's presidency in a room formerly used to receive official guests were left in situ.

In 2016, a site survey was conducted using a GPS. Site analysis detailed the main archaeological features, castle, official residence and gardens, including the car park area, bird sanctuary, public toilet facilities and furnace. This survey gave us a better idea of the site's geology and geomorphology. Surface finds include faunal remains, namely, goat and cow, together with glazed European ceramics and glassware. On the east side, close to the castle wall, cow horns were found. An underground tunnel that debouched within the castle was discovered. Further research involved exploring the tunnel's connection to the Richter House, formerly owned by a family of successful Danish-Ga merchants. Filmed interviews with elders who inhabit the house were also conducted. Together, we discussed the possibilities for excavating the tunnel's entrance as part of future research.

Excavation

In 2014, specific areas in the garden were selected for archaeological testing, based upon the survey, archival maps, and oral narratives (Figure 4). On a practical level this selection involved minimal disturbance to those working at the castle. It was also critical to demonstrate that our fieldwork would not create a disruption, as I was



Figure 4: Excavations.

the first scholar granted access to conduct the first archaeological excavation at the site. Work continued in 2016 and 2017, after meetings between the Chiefs, Queen Mothers, elders, principal investigator and community to discuss the project, whereupon the Osu Traditional Authorities assigned ritual specialists to perform the necessary rituals to ensure project success. In total, archaeological work involved the excavation of eight units during the period of 2014-2017. Three units will be discussed here. Excavation followed 10 cm layer increments; to retrieve as much material as possible, soil was sieved with a 3mm wire mesh. All material was examined and soil and charcoal samples were collected. It is important to note that the area immediately next to the shrine was not excavated for ethical reasons.

A unit was set within a demarcated area assigned to undergo regular burning as it is where discarded gardening refuse is deposited. Beneath the contemporary organic matter, a vast quantity of artifacts was recovered.

Another unit was excavated revealing a cement pillar, initially proposed part of a Ga burial site, according to one of the local community members. Excavations were promptly stopped and the unit was sealed off with tape. The local community and castle employees were consulted. After much discussion, it was revealed this pillar was in fact not a burial, but a post installed during President Rawlings' era to demarcate the garden boundary. Shortly after the initial excavations, this unit filled with salt water, indicating an underground water source. This hypothesis was later supported by information from direct descendants living close to the site, who drew our

attention to the nearby lagoon outside the castle walls. Due to the inflow of water coming from an easterly direction that failed to drain away, even after several days, the unit was divided into two sections, and excavation continued in only half of the unit until reaching sterile layer.

Archaeological excavation has also unearthed what is tentatively interpreted as building walls of a settlement, dating to the Danish trans-Atlantic slave trade period. Initially, this unit measured one meter by one meter in dimension, but was later extended following the wall contours, in north, south, east and westerly directions so as to reveal and understand the layout of low walls that were divided into sections. These might possibly represent rooms. Thus far, the wall in the northern direction appears to extend beyond the current castle garden walls, into the living area inhabited by the Osu community. This northern direction wall will be left as is for now, for the obvious reason of matters of national security. Community and castle employees assert these walls extend directly to the castle entrance approximately fifty meters away, and date back to Danish occupation of the castle. A rubber coated electric wire runs through this unit. The wall structures are made of stone. Traces of white limestone are apparent. Some rooms have a low flat step integrated as part of the wall. It is possible this step forms part of room's entrance. One section contains three stones, in keeping with local cooking area design. Charcoal was removed from the unit in order to conduct dating analysis. This structure's date and function cannot be confirmed at present, though the idea that it represents a Danish structure is supported by observation and work at other Danish sites in Ghana, dating to the same time period. In the eighteenth century, Danish architectural design produced walls of a standardized thickness, and certainly, these walls conform to such measurements. Inside one of the suspected rooms, a large stone comprising a vertical stone with a horizontal stone placed atop was exposed. Its function is unclear. Stratigraphic integrity was good.

Diagnostic artifacts collected include local beads and pottery, European smoking pipes, glassware and glazed ceramics, and other small finds such as faunal remains, seeds, cowry and other shells, stone, daub, charcoal, plastic, plaster and metal fragments. It is interesting to note only three small beads have been retrieved from the entire site. Large quantities of un-burnished local pottery ranging from fine to coarse fabric were recorded. In general, most are plain in design. However,

some depict decorative designs. A few designs have not been seen elsewhere in Ghana. European clay smoking-pipe bowl and stem fragments, largely British, Dutch and Danish in origin were retrieved, plus European glazed ceramics made by Wedgwood and Royal Doulton. Most noteworthy, is a slate fragment, typically used in an educational context, suggesting a learning environment, and/or possibly the presence of children. We know a ‘mulatto school’ existed at the castle, and many Danish officials (like other Europeans at the time) established familial relationships with local women, producing mixed-race children; but currently there is no other evidence to support the hypothesis that this object has any connection with the castle school. A silver coin, inscribed with the Ghana black star dates to the immediate post-independence period.

Upon reaching sterile soil all units were back-filled. Flower cuttings, seedlings and grass were supplied for the Ghana Parks and Service organization so that the castle gardeners might return excavated areas to their original standing as much as possible. All recovered materials were washed, labeled and re-bagged on site.

Salvage Work

In addition to the archaeological survey and excavation, other factors contributed to the creation of the artifact collection. In 2014, a large collection of ‘Western style’ objects was salvaged from the kitchen, pantry and chef’s living quarters, notably: ceramic tea and coffee cups, saucers, plates and a cake serving dish; crystal glassware, including champagne flutes, brandy, wine and water glasses; and mostly, silver cutlery. Ceramics and glassware date to Ghana’s post-independence period, inscribed with the Ghana Coat of Arms, inside which Christiansborg castle, renamed ‘Osu Castle’ is depicted, and also bearing the national motto ‘freedom and justice’, designed by Ghanaian artist Amon Kotei. Ceramics date to the Nkrumah and Rawlings eras, encompassing a multicolored design and gold design (Figure 5). Other presidential ware is blue and gold in color. British manufacturers Wedgwood and Royal Doulton are predominantly featured. In 2016, a large teapot, teapot lid from another item, and soup tureen were retrieved. The latter, red, white and gold in color, was still in use, albeit not known by whom, but in all likelihood a castle employee. All these artifacts are similarly reflected in the excavated artifact collection.



Figure 5: Presidential Ceramics.

The castle collection also features artifacts derived from construction work carried out at the castle in 2016, including external glass and iron light fixtures and, most importantly, the original Danish doors at the front of the castle. In addition, a castle employee submitted a stone plaque that he accidentally stumbled upon whilst swimming at the beach, directly below the castle. These objects were recorded and added to the collection.

Conclusion and Future Work

Archaeological survey, excavation and salvage work at Christiansborg Castle recovered archaeological materials dating to the transatlantic slave trade, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Significant amounts of African and European artifacts have been retrieved, illustrating a large degree of assemblage variability. Findings require laboratory analysis before conclusions can be drawn. Analysis of the archaeological materials is underway. Several important findings will need to be analyzed outside Ghana due to local resource constraints. Clearly, Christiansborg Castle is an ideal site for further archaeological investigation. Fieldwork will continue in the upcoming years. At the principal investigators’ request, the collection remains stored inside the castle for national security reasons. The project’s community outreach project has begun. Excavated archaeological materials will contribute to the Ghana President, Ghana Government and Osu Traditional Council’s plans to convert the castle into a museum (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Osu Community and Team Members.

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For further information, please visit the Christiansborg Archaeological Heritage Project website (<http://christiansborgarchaeologicalheritageproject.org>). Information is available in English, Ga, and Twi.

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