

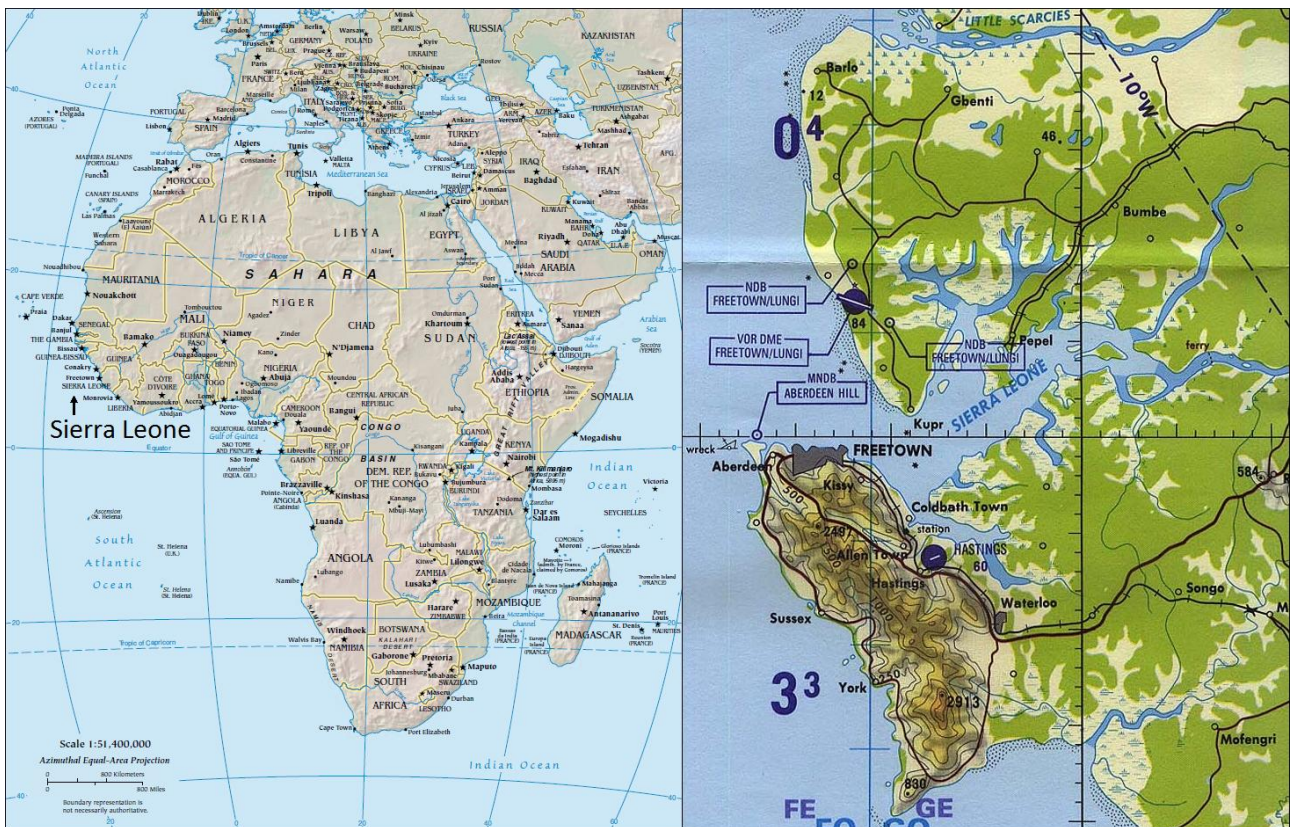
Empowering voices from fragile states

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Sierra Leone (Figure 1), 22nd May 2003. Torrential rain all night which finally eased off around 10am. We were up at six and, after a quick breakfast, packed our shelters into the back of the Land Rovers to continue a check of Sierra Leonean Army positions along the border with Liberia. There had been some activity around us during the night, while across the Mano River Liberia was in the depths of its own civil war. After a morning’s work on the forward positions we headed south to the coast and a remote platoon base at Mano-Kpende (Figure 2).



Figures 1 and 2 (L-R): Sierra Leone on the West African coast; Bunce Island 20 miles up the Sierra Leone estuary (Reproduced and modified with kind permission of the University of Texas Libraries)

I saw the cannon lying in the sand as we drove through a small clearing just short of Mano-Kpende (Figure 3). Some surprisingly ancient weaponry remains in service in the world’s trouble spots, but this was clearly a relic of a bygone era. I made a note to have a closer look later in the day.



Figure 3: *The Mano-Kpende cannon* (Image Copyright: Andrew Marriott)

Back then, I wasn't an archaeologist, but a military career regularly presents encounters with the past. Many are simply curious while others can present some cultural and ethical challenges. Amongst the four of us there was plenty of military speculation concerning how and why this piece had fetched up perhaps half a mile inland from the strategically important site where the wide and fast-flowing Mano enters the Atlantic Ocean. The best estimations were of early 18th century date and possibly of British or Portuguese origin. Was it a survivor of a shipwreck or did it mark part of a fortified settlement now lost to the tropical forest? Of course, to the archaeologist these are just commonplace conjectures stimulated by artefacts as we try to understand a lost past.

But there was a problem. What do you do with something like that in a country still coming out of a state of civil war? What institutions exist to deal with archaeology and do they have the capacity to manage something two full day's drive from the capital, Freetown? And what risks arise from drawing attention to an artefact and site of potential value in a country ranked almost at the bottom of the United Nation's Human Development Index and where most people exist on less than US\$1.25 per day (anon. 2011)?

While considering this problem, my mind was drawn to a more contemporary issue. In North-East Sierra Leone I had recently visited a building in the town of Kailahun, known locally as the 'Killing House' (Figure 4). Kailahun had been a rebel stronghold in the civil war. Amongst the damaged and abandoned houses on one road was an unprepossessing concrete structure of three or four rooms. The house had been used as an interrogation and execution centre and the locals asserted that the dark stains on the walls were from the blood of its many victims.



Figure 4: *Officer of the recently formed Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces examining the Killing House in Kailahun*
(Reproduced with kind permission of M. Russell)

The site was never investigated forensically and will have been destined to enter Sierra Leone's highly complex oral tradition. Should that house, and many other similar sites, not have been the subject of international police and archaeological investigation, as was the case following the acts of genocide conducted at Srebrenica in Bosnia in 1995 (Manning 2008)? There are strong arguments both for and against.

The cannon can probably wait, but what about the 'Killing House'? Current investigations of Nazi slave and extermination camps (Sturdy Colls 2013, 50-53) exemplify the essential corroboration that archaeology provides, not just of the chronology of violence but also in understanding how and why it is executed. But should Sierra Leone have to wait 70 years for archaeological investigation of its recent past, especially given the ephemeral nature of much of the evidence and its jungle environment?

An essential consideration of any archaeological intervention must be the effects that might arise in a country still delicately poised between conflict and reconciliation. The Mano-Kpende cannon might provide an uncontroversial and discrete subject of enquiry. However, the 'Killing House' sits in the context of a 10-year conflict which cost tens of thousands of lives and left a legacy of innumerable amputees and up to 300,000 refugees or displaced people.

Sierra Leone's 5.6 million population comprises eight major ethnic groupings across 20 native tribes as well as the Creole descendants of resettled freed slaves from North America, who share Muslim, Christian and indigenous beliefs. Other realities include a literacy rate below one third, and life expectancy varying from 37 to 48 years (anon. 2002; anon. 2012). Superimposed will be various residual affiliations from the conflict. Any interventions we make should ultimately be agents for reconciliation rather than retardants; or can we be entirely neutral and apolitical?

It would be an unambitious prospectus for any nation which precluded archaeology, were it available, as one of the instruments for investigating the recent past. However, as Gemma Smith (2013) recently argued in *The Post Hole*, archaeology in zones of current and recent conflict must be alert to risks of politicisation and academic compromise. It may be that even in 2013 the social, political and academic environments militate against any effective investigation and archaeological synthesis of the recent civil war. However, that does not necessarily preclude a role for archaeology in the longer-term reconstruction of Sierra Leone.

The title for this article reflects the theme of a conference recently held by the University of York's Post-conflict Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) in partnership with Columbia University. 'Voices from Fragile States' explored the role of education in areas of conflict and fragility. In the context of Sierra Leone there is indeed a strong case to be made for developing local capacity in the education sector, and that should encompass support to the country's main university. The University of Sierra Leone, founded in 2005 from the earlier Fourah Bay College (itself dating back to 1827), includes Faculties of Arts and Architecture and has some experience in peace and conflict studies.

However, successful archaeology does require experience in project management, the development of particular skills and, perhaps most importantly, an ability to synthesise data in an open academic environment. Are there options other than the Mano-Kpende cannon and the 'Killing House' that might provide a practical strategy, supporting both academic enquiry in a nascent university and a national recovery programme? The answer might rest in Bunce Island and its deserted slave fort.

Bunce Island lies on the Sierra Leone River about 20 miles upstream from Freetown at the uppermost point accessible to shipping. Narrow and less than a mile in length, it was the site of one of 40 major European forts on the West African coast and owned by a series of British firms from around 1670. Between 1756 and the Abolition of Slavery in 1807, large numbers of slaves were despatched from there to America, mostly to plantations in South Carolina and Georgia.

The present ruins (Figure 5) mark a series of six forts on the site. After the Abolition, the site continued as a saw mill and trading post until the island was finally abandoned in 1835. It was declared a national monument in 1948 and achieved World Heritage Tentative List Status on the 1st June 2012 (anon. n.d.c).



Figure 5: *Part of the outer wall and Merchant Dormitory of Bunce Slave Fort* (Image Copyright: Andrew Marriott)

Even in bright sunlight Bunce Island retains an oppressive atmosphere and in many respects a visit there can be almost as disturbing as considering the recent conflict itself (Figure 6). Yet it is perhaps more accessible both practically and academically. In 2005 the ruins of the fort still survived much of the jungle encroachment (Figure 7) but the external graveyard was heavily overgrown (Figure 8). Still scattered on the ground were remains of glass and clay pipes.



Figure 6: *Bunce Slave Fort southern fortifications* (Image Copyright: Andrew Marriott)



Figure 7: *Ruins of The Great House of Bunce Slave Fort* (Image Copyright: Andrew Marriott)



Figure 8: *Bunce Island Christian graveyard* (Image Copyright: Andrew Marriott)

Thankfully, under the auspices of the Bunce Island Coalition (US, SL, UK), fieldwork began in 2011 and was conducted by Professor Christopher DeCorse under the direction of Joseph Opala, with aims to stabilise, preserve and conserve the fort and eventually hand over the project to local control (Kamara 2011; DeCorse 2013).

Professor Opala, now teaching at James Madison University, lived for 17 years in Sierra Leone and maintains close connections with its university (anon. n.d.b). Bunce Island is of international importance, not only because of the unique level of its survival and preservation but also because of its pivotal place in African, American and British history. The Coalition's work is likely to become a vital component of Sierra Leone's heritage and tourist industries.

One fascinating aspect of this erstwhile humble site is that one of Bunce Island's former agents in Charles Town, South Carolina, was a member of the American contingent negotiating the Treaty of Paris to conclude the American War of Independence. The British team in Paris was led by Richard Oswald, the owner of Bunce Island (anon. n.d.a)!

It is encouraging to see both the investment in Bunce Island and the aspirations for long-term local involvement. However, the real potential for the project ultimately lies in local empowerment (Figure 9).

Bunce Island could be truly transformative for the country through education and specifically through archaeology. A local academic cadre, empowered by the empathy of recent national trauma, should be given the instruments through which they could synthesise the slave trade; a lens through which we might both complement and challenge European and North American approaches.

More importantly, perhaps, the next step might then be a confident and indigenous investigation into the 'Killing House' and all such similar sites. How much better would it be if we didn't have to wait for two or three generations? Arguably more than most nations, Sierra Leone needs to understand its past, both recent and ancient. Archaeology would be the enabler of a historical narrative and certainly not history's handmaiden.



Figure 9: An artillery piece turned into a symbol of peace, the 'War Don Don' Gun in Daru
(Reproduced with kind permission of M. Russell)

This short piece simply presents some personal observations but it does also seek to provoke some consideration and debate. Who does the archaeology and for whom; and what about agendas? Not just in Sierra Leone, but world-wide, there will be open, hidden, complementary and conflicting imperatives in investigating the past. Our discipline may have an exciting role in post-conflict reconstruction strategies around the world. Are we institutionally ready to make that contribution? I am also, in part, responding to a question posed by a former military colleague, albeit with some mischief: "So what's the point of archaeology?" Maybe if he had stubbed his toe on a half-buried cannon...?

The author served in the British Army, including duty in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and West Africa, before graduating from the University of York in Archaeology and embarking on a Masters degree in Medieval Archaeology

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