When it comes to digging up the dirt on humankind's past, nothing beats hands-on experience.

BY CHRISTOPHER DOW
This is Songa Mnara, located on an island off the coast of southern Tanzania, and, last summer, its quiet repose was finally disturbed. But the tramp of feet and excited voices that drifted down a path flanked by lush tropical growth did not herald the arrival of scavengers or looters. They were the sounds of the students of the Rice Archaeological Field School, a six-week intensive training exercise in the techniques of archaeological excavation and the intellectual challenges of making sense of objects and remains from departed civilizations that often left no written clues to the complexities of their cultures.

The team of young archaeologists were in Songa Mnara with Rice Assistant Professor of Anthropology Jeffrey Fleisher, who studies the Swahili, a group of people who today are scattered among many African countries. From the ninth to the 16th centuries, however, the Swahili dominated East African trade, acting as brokers between merchants who sailed the Indian Ocean and traders who bore goods to the coast from the interior of Africa. In the process, the Swahili grew wealthy, developed a rich culture and left their language as the lingua franca of East Africa.

"The Swahili built a number of very elaborate, urbane, sophisticated towns, including Songa Mnara," Fleisher said. "By the 12th century, the East African coast was a very interesting place, grounded in an African past but emerging as a cosmopolitan Muslim world. The towns were built of local materials but in styles that were very common around the rim of the Indian Ocean."

Two factors make Songa Mnara particularly interesting. The first is its condition. "The ruins of many Swahili towns can be found elsewhere on the coast," Fleisher said, "but people either live on them or take the stones to construct other buildings. Others have been well studied. But Songa Mnara is so isolated that it's been relatively untouched, even by archaeologists. Most of the rubble from the buildings remains, and walls stand all over the site. It's a remarkable time capsule."

The second exciting factor about Songa Mnara is that it dates to the last century or so before the Portuguese assumed dominance over Indian Ocean trade. "Songa Mnara may not be as interesting regarding the long-term transformation of Swahili culture, but it gives us a focused view of the 15th and 16th centuries," Fleisher said. "Also, if you dig sites that have long histories, then you have to go down three or four meters. That's a lot of digging. At Songa Mnara, the deposits are mostly in the first meter."

**Beginnings**

Although this is the first year that the Rice Archaeological Field School has visited Songa Mnara and the first time that Fleisher has led the group, it's not the first time the field school has visited Africa, and it's no accident that Africa is its focus. The field school had its inception in the work of Rice Professor of Anthropology Susan Keech McIntosh, renowned for her co-discovery of Jenne-jeno in Mali, the oldest-known and most sophisticated African city south of the Sahara.

Since then, McIntosh has continued her research into Africa's past, both in Mali and in Senegal. "In Mali, I've excavated a tell site — a mound that people built above the flood plain over many centuries," she said. "At the very top are structures from the French colonial period, and we've gone down about seven meters — really deep — to the 14th century. Other parts of the site probably go back to the 12th century. Another mound three kilometers away was a precursor settlement, and that goes down another seven meters to 200 B.C. So we have a whole sequence that is greater than 2,000 years long."

Because of McIntosh's expertise in African archaeology, study and preservation of the continent's many archaeological sites and treasures became a focus of the Rice archaeology program.

"We've trained people who are in the countries where we do our work because we collaborate with these folks in the field," McIntosh said. "They're either in the universities or they're employed in the government service that oversees archaeology, and they often become influential in the management of archaeological resources and heritage in their home countries."

A case in point is Ibrahima Thiaw '99, who earned his Ph.D. at Rice and is an associate professor of archaeology at the Institut
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Fondamental d’Afrique Noire, Université Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, Senegal. For several years, Thiaw has been digging on Gorée Island, Senegal, which was one of the centers of the Atlantic slave trade. “Ibrahima is studying the diversity of the population living on Gorée at different points in time and learning about the interaction between the native peoples and the Europeans who built houses there and married Senegalese,” McIntosh said. “The most important people in that society were the wives and their offspring. These women arranged for the provisioning of slave ships and were slave owners themselves, so this was a very complicated setting in terms of the ethnicity of people.”

McIntosh thought that working with Thiaw would be a great opportunity for her students, and in 2005, the Rice Archaeological Field School was born.

**Hands-On Experience**

Participating in a real excavation teaches students how archaeologists use material culture to fashion a perspective on the past. That perspective, McIntosh said, can be different from a historian’s. “When we deal with historical sites, you have several kinds of evidence,” she said. “There are written documents such as ledgers, decrees and other things that have mercantile and political purposes. And there are oral histories. People always have a self-interest in what they remember and why they remember it. Then there is material culture — the stuff that archaeologists find interesting — which consists of those things that people have thrown away — the things they have not chosen to remember.”

Archaeology looks at these castoffs and asks how they add dimension to the picture that we have from written and oral sources. Sometimes it forms a different picture, and sometimes it will even contradict other sources. Archaeology, then, serves as an independent test of the narratives that we have fashioned about the past, and it also allows us a view of a deep past before written narratives defined human histories.

Rice students with an interest in archaeology are introduced to excavation techniques in class. They then participate in ongoing work for the Yates Community Archaeological Project, a program sponsored by the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum in Houston’s Fourth Ward, formerly known as Freedman’s Town.

“Freedman’s Town is the only precinct in America where the descendants of freed slaves who settled it still live, so it has huge historic importance,” McIntosh said. “Working there is exciting because of the parallels with what we’ve tried to do in Africa, which is to examine standard histories in which certain topics are overlooked or not represented.”

After taking the excavation class, students can then opt to participate in the field school. “Our students come to the field school well trained,” Fleisher said. “Because of that, even undergraduates have an opportunity to run an excavation unit and really get a sense of what it’s like to do field work.”

Field schools in both Songa Mnara and Gorée have affiliated faculty and researchers who come in to do specialized studies, which give the students a chance to gain practical experience in a wide range of archaeological techniques and analyses. On the Gorée dig, for example, students worked with an archaeobotanist to learn how to collect, sort and analyze botanic material. And one of the students worked with a lab to do isotopic testing of teeth from individuals discovered in a grave site. “Most of the people in the graves showed the isotopic signature of people from Gorée,” McIntosh said, “but one adult male was clearly from somewhere else. The student produced an honors thesis out of that work.”

Fleisher’s group was fortunate in being accompanied by a diverse international team that included Chester Cain ’92, an honorary research scientist at Washington University in St. Louis, who lent his expertise in analyzing animal bones; a geophysical survey team; a geochronologist who studied soils and sediments; and a historical linguist.

Learning the basics of doing archaeology allows students to market themselves as experienced field workers and can lead to the next step in their careers.
market themselves as experienced field workers and can lead to the next step in their careers. That might be in academia, but there also is a world of private archaeology in the United States, such as companies that do clearance and mitigation work for construction and development. “Any one of our students could start working for one of these firms as a field technician,” Fleisher said.

On Site

On Gorée, which is a small island with a large population, students live in a school, but they also stay for a week in the homes of local families. The experience gives them a chance to immerse themselves in a very different culture. “One of our Muslim students, for example, lived with a family who were Muslim religious leaders on Gorée, and she got to see how Islam is practiced in that part of world,” McIntosh said. “One of our Christian students lived with that same family, and it gave him a whole different view into a world where people live in very large families and where privacy is not a value that anybody holds. That’s very illuminating for Americans.”

On Songa Mnara, which remains remote, there is a fishing village of about 500 people some distance from the dig site, but there is no fresh water, electricity or transportation. The students there learned that solving logistics problems and living in primitive circumstances often are as much a part of an archaeological dig as are excavation techniques. Everyone slept in tents, and all the water and other supplies had to be carried in.

“It’s very intense for students,” Fleisher said. “But living in a different cultural milieu might be the most important thing they take away from the project. They are exposed not only to a dramatically different way of living, but also to people who are engaged in the global world in a different way than they are. It teaches them a lot about themselves as well as about other cultures.”

Continuing Excavations

For the near future, the two archaeologists plan to trade off every other year, moving back and forth between East and West Africa. Fleisher will return to Songa Mnara in 2011, but McIntosh is looking at sites other than Gorée Island for next year. “Ibrahima Thiaw led the excavations on Gorée,” McIntosh said, “but he recently was named director of the national museum in Senegal, so he’s become a very busy guy. We’re investigating other possibilities in West Africa or up on the north coast. It will be someplace interesting.”

That’s a promise McIntosh and Fleisher have kept so far. The sites in Mali, Gorée and Songa Mnara are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the area surrounding the Yates Museum is a National Historic District. “We’ve had the enormous privilege of being among the pioneers in investigating these sites that are deemed to be instructive and exemplary for the history of all humanity,” McIntosh said. “For students, it’s really exciting because everything that comes up is something that no one else has seen, and that leads to interpretations that no one else has advanced.”

The archaeologists also feel fortunate to be able to actively research African and African-American history not only on both sides of Africa, but also on both sides of the Atlantic. “Having our American students working in Africa and our African students interacting with the African-American community in Freedman’s Town provides such interesting opportunities for examining assumptions each group holds about the other,” McIntosh said. “I don’t think there’s anyplace else in the United States that has that set of perspectives.”