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An Archaeology of West African Atlanticization: Regional Analysis of the Huedan Palace Districts and Countryside (Bénin), 1650-1727

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Dissertation Abstract
An Archaeology of West African Atlanticization: Regional Analysis of the
Huedan Palace Districts and Countryside (Bénin), 1650-1727

By Neil L. Norman



Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, 2008. Recipient of the Society for Historical Archaeology's 2009 Dissertation Prize for "an outstanding contribution to historical archaeology."

This study explores the urban past of coastal West Africa, describing the cultural and historical dynamics between palace centers, surrounding towns, and rural countrysides. It provides new data relating to the earliest arrangements of densely populated settlements in the region of coastal Bénin and traces how residents of these centers channeled the political and economic forces of the Atlantic world through their own local networks. In so doing, it builds on recent scholarship that attempts to recast settlement centers within the regional systems in which they operated. In this project, the principal case study is Savi, the palatial capital of the Hueda Kingdom (circa 1650-1727) and its relation to contemporary settlements found within 5 (kilometers) km. It offers empirical evaluation of the premise that Savi served as a social, political, economic, and religious center to those people living in the surrounding area. By focusing on the area beyond the palace, it adds another dimension to a narrative history that heretofore has focused more specifically on royal Huedan palace dwellers and the Europeans traders who lived at Savi and traded under their auspices. In this dissertation, it is argued that the Hueda polity is best described as a fragile political network encompassing the conflicting interests of Huedan kings, local community leaders, and rural people and that blockages in systems of ritualized reciprocity contributed to the dissolution and fiery collapse of the polity in 1727, when many Huedans living in the countryside abandoned the area rather than mounting a defense against invading troops from the nearby kingdom of Dahomey. In support of this thesis, this dissertation draws on documentary material, spoken sources, and archaeological data. The fieldwork behind this project represents over two years of oral history interviews, archaeological survey, and archaeological test excavation.