

Nigeria's ancient Ilorin city: Archaeologist uncovers more than 1,000 years of history

March 11 2024, by Bolaji Owoseni



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Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, is a Nigerian city with a long and rich history. However, much of its distant past is not well known. Archaeology is now uncovering more of this history and the relationships of Ilorin to other ancient parts of the Yoruba world.

Situated in north-central Nigeria and predominantly Yoruba-speaking, Ilorin [gained prominence](#) in the late 1700s. It was a significant northern province of the Oyo empire, which was active [between the 1500s and early 1800s](#).

Thanks to its strategic location between savannah and forest regions of present-day Nigeria and its connection to the Oyo empire, Ilorin [evolved](#) into a center of inter-regional trade networks, craft production and cultural exchanges by the 1800s. The city was renowned for trade in horses, agricultural produce, and crafts such as lantana stone beads, textiles and [pottery](#) within the Yoruba-Edo worlds and across west Africa. Ilorin also served as a [trading hub for enslaved people](#).

In addition, in the 1800s, Ilorin [became integrated into the Islamic emirate system](#) under the Sokoto caliphate. This integration resulted in significant socio-political changes and contributed to the expansion of the city.

While oral traditions and written sources have preserved much of Ilorin's history, the longer-term occupation of the city before the 1800s remained largely unknown until recent archaeological research. This contrasts with the situation in Ilorin's surrounding communities like [Igbominaland](#), Ede and [Osogbo](#), where [archaeological studies](#) have provided insights into their settlement histories.

My [doctoral research on Ilorin archaeology](#) sheds new light on this

period. It uncovers more than 1,000 years of human occupation in the city before the 1800s. This research started the process of unraveling the city's previously unknown settlement history and its connections to wider Yoruba worlds. The material evidence from this research takes various forms, including material technology, settlement patterns, architecture, rituals and food.

My research investigated 10 units of various sizes, seven of which were excavated. It documented a diverse suite of material culture, including abundant potsherds of various types, potsherd pavements, rock-based or stone tools, animal remains, shell and metal. I compared these findings from Ilorin with those from the wider Yorubaland, focusing particularly on the major centers of Ile-Ife and Oyo.

Ile-Ife [occupies](#) a central place in Yoruba history and civilization. Claimed to be [the harbinger of Yoruba civilization](#), it is [associated with important material evidence](#), including terracotta, early glass making and potsherd pavements. Oyo [served](#) as the capital of the Oyo empire, which collapsed in the early 1800s.

Potsherds and potsherd pavements

My research on early Ilorin centered mainly on potsherds. In archaeology, potsherds tell us a lot about the characteristics of past societies and how they interacted with their environment.

[Potsherd pavements](#) stand out as an ancient architectural feature linked to the social complexities of west Africa. Potsherds are broken pieces of ceramic materials and potsherd pavements are paved ways, floors or courtyards made of potsherds. They are sometimes combined with stones, pebbles or cobbles. They can be laid flat or on edge in a pattern. Potsherds and potsherd pavements provide [insights](#) into past technology, innovation, economy, social identity, architecture and rituals. They can

also expand understanding of social interactions on a regional scale.

Ilorin potsherd pavements present an ideal case study of regional interactions.

The Oyo empire's capital was about 60km north-west of Ilorin. Despite their connections, the two societies had different kinds of potsherd pavements. The Oyo kingdom featured flat-laid potsherd pavements while Ilorin's were edge-laid in herringbone patterns. This could strongly indicate a disconnection between the two centers during prehistoric times.

The varied patterns observed in potsherd pavements suggest variations in technological choices among the artisans responsible for crafting these architectural structures. Patterns may also be determined by the culture responsible for the innovation. Ilorin's edge-laid patterns are similar to those found widely in the Ile-Ife area, about 235km to the south-west. Evidence in Ilorin of buried pot remains, potentially used for ritual purposes, is also suggestive of finds at Ile-Ife and some of its surrounding towns.

My findings

My research used archaeology as its prime source of data to investigate the development of the Ilorin cultural landscape, focusing on Okesuna, one of the city's early quarters. I chose Okesuna because of the concentration of archaeological remains there, particularly potsherds and potsherd pavements.

The excavations also yielded rock-based or stone tools, animal remains, shell and metal objects. A combination of radiocarbon dates and potsherds analysis from Ilorin produced chronological information spanning from the mid-sixth to the pre-16th centuries AD. This covered

around 1,000 years of human occupation in the area before the west Africa Atlantic contact.

The research in Ilorin is the first to document a first millennium AD pottery assemblage outside significant known centralized polities of Yorubaland such as Old Oyo, Ile-Ife and Benin. It is the first record of people living in the area such a long time ago.

The dates also suggest that the early Ilorin area was more developed than previously believed. It must have served as a significant socio-political unit at the same time as or even earlier than some important Yorubaland centers, including Ile-Ife and Old Oyo.

Early Ilorin may have been a center of innovation which facilitated free-flowing interactions across regional borders, uninhibited by pressure from major centers.

Ancient politics

My research demonstrates how archaeological evidence continually reshapes our understanding of the ancient politics in areas situated on the borders of major centers.

It shows that the settlement patterns of modern societies are an inadequate yardstick for defining pre-modern societies. This highlights the fluid and transient nature of culture. It also underscores the complexity and significance of these areas as contact zones of social interactions and cultural exchanges.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Nigeria's ancient Ilorin city: Archaeologist uncovers more than 1,000 years of history (2024, March 11) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-nigeria-ancient-ilorin-city-archaeologist.html>

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