

■ GHANA

**Preliminary Report on an Excavation Conducted at Bonoso in the Wenchi Traditional Area, Brong-Ahafo Region, Ghana**

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**Background Information**

Research in the Wenchi Traditional Area was initiated by the writer in 1974 with the collection of oral traditions on origins, settlements and chronology of the Wenchi State, as well as on food items, trade, and local industries such as metal working, weaving and potting. The aim of the research was to ascertain what contribution archaeology could make to the history of the ancient Wenchi State. To this end, excavations were conducted in 1975 at Bonoso (7° 37'N, 2° 05 'W) and Ahwene Koko (7° 29'N, 2° 12'W), two ancient settlements of the indigenous inhabitants of the Wenchi Traditional Area (Boachie-Ansah 1976: 27-31, 1985: 41-72, 1986a, 1986b: 53-70).

The Wenchi people claim that their ancestors came out of a hole in the ground at Bonoso near the source of the Ayasu stream, about 14km south of Wenchi metropolis. The *Akyeamehene* (Chief royal spokesman) is said to have led the way with his ancient staff. Their leader was the Queen-mother called Asase-ba-ode-nsee which literally translated means “child of Mother Earth whose origins date to the beginning”. Traditions maintain that the ancestors of the Wenchi people had been in the earth from time immemorial until the *wankyie* or

*panta*, a pig-like quadruped, burrowed down and unearthed them. From this time they were named after the animal *wankyie*, now corrupted to Wankyi or Wenchi. Another etymology of Wankyi is that it means *waan akyi* meaning “beyond brightness.” This is a reference to their abode in the hole which was beyond the realm of light or brightness, that is to say they lived in darkness.

The Paramount Chief, who should have accompanied his people, retreated into the hole because he was annoyed at the shout of a man called Nkrumah, a ninth born son of his mother. The Queen-Mother, Asase-ba-ode-nsee therefore ruled without a Paramount Chief. The traditions are silent about the ethnicity of Nkrumah.

Apart from the Queen-Mother’s clan, six other clans are said to have emerged from the hole. These were the Akyease, Awerempe (Nyinase or Atomfoo), Akwandu, Sisirease, Abaaba (Konton) and Twemma clans. The leaders of these six clans were also the sub-chiefs of the state. All the clans which claim ancestry from the hole are called *Yefri* meaning “we come from” (the hole).

Wenchi traditions also claim that the ancestors of the Wenchi people first settled at Bonoso before moving to Ahwene Koko, which later became the capital of the state. The excavations at Bonoso produced pottery, iron slag, animal bones and grinding stones. Two radiocarbon dates of AD 710 ± 95 and AD 980 ± 85 were obtained for Bonoso. These dates appear to be significant. Goody (1965:1) has interpreted the tradition of “coming out of a hole” to mean claims of “autochthonous status.” The two early dates for Bonoso, together with the fact that smoking pipes and European imported goods were completely absent in the excavations, seemed to support the oral traditional claim that Bonoso was occupied in the pre-Atlantic contact period and that the Wenchi people have been settled in their area for quite a long time. However, it is unwise to place much reliance on two dates for which there is always the chance that they are aberrant. Besides, the two dates were

inverted in terms of their stratigraphic positions, and therefore need to be clarified by more dates. This prompted the writer to conduct further excavations at Bonoso in August 1999 (Boachie-Ansah 2000a: 27-49, 2000b: 1-54). Unfortunately, the charcoal found in the excavations was not sufficient to make up samples for radiocarbon testing.

A single radiocarbon date of AD 1585 ± 80 was obtained for Ahwene Koko, which has also produced pottery similar in decoration, vessel forms and paste characteristics to the pottery from Bonoso. Therefore, there is a wide gap between the dates of the two sites. The ceramic similarity, despite the wide gap between the dates of the two sites, is a possible indication of continuity in the pottery tradition from Bonoso to Ahwene Koko, and perhaps of a common origin of the occupants of the two sites. If this is accepted, then the “missing link” is yet to be found in unexcavated areas of Bonoso, Ahwene Koko or some other sites.

The pottery from the two sites also bears close resemblance to pottery from other Akan sites. This is significant in view of the fact that Meyerowitz, one of the most controversial writers on the Akan, claims that the ancestors of the Wenchi people were Dyula-Wangara who migrated from the Middle Niger (Meyerowitz 1974:62). The pottery from Bonoso and Ahwene Koko bears more resemblance to Akan sites in southern Ghana than to the pottery of the Middle Niger. That the present day indigenous Wenchi people are Akan is beyond dispute; and that their ancestors were Akan is perhaps supported by the fact that their early settlements such as Bonoso (meaning “the place of the hole”), Ahwene Koko (meaning “red beads”), Adwadie (meaning “a market place”) and Twemma (meaning “a place filled with women”) bear Akan names. It is not by coincidence then that Bonoso and Ahwene Koko pottery bear more decorative resemblance to pottery from the Akan sites of Mampondin, Twifu Heman and Bono Manso than to those of non-Akan sites like New Buipe and Yendi Dabari in the north.

While archaeology has made a positive contribution to the history of the Wenchi area, it must be conceded that a lot remains to be known. The dating of Bonoso, for example, must be clarified by more dates if we are to resolve the uncertainties on the chronology of the ancient Wenchi State. It is mainly for this reason that an excavation was conducted at Bonoso in January 2010 with the assistance of 11 undergraduate students of the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies of the University of Ghana.

### Excavation

Between January 3-15, 2010, a field school involving 11 undergraduate students was organized at Bonoso (7° 37' 22" N, 2° 5' 38.7" W), and a trench measuring 2 x 8m was opened on a 20m long mound located about 60m south-east of the “hole of origin”. The levels with cultural materials attained a depth of 80cm. Two levels with cultural materials were identified. The first level, consisting of black humus soil with rootlets reached down to a depth of 28cm at its deepest. Finds from the first level consisted of pottery, fragments of upper and lower grindstones, well over a hundred pieces of iron slag, a corroded piece of iron and palm kernels,

The first level was succeeded at an average depth of 18cm by the second level, which consisted of a brown loamy soil with gravels. Finds from the second level consisted of pottery, several pieces of iron slag, a corroded iron object, an iron arrowhead, a fragment of a polished stone axe and a few palm kernels. The second level was underlain by a sterile, orange sub-soil at an average depth of about 76cm.

Carbon samples in the form of charcoal, collected at the depths of 51, 54 and 71cm, were sent to the Laboratory for Dating and Isotope Research and Development, Christian-Albrechts University, Kiel, Germany, and have produced respectively 2-sigma dates of AD 680-776, AD 663-774 and AD 663-774.

### Finds from the Excavation

Finds consisted predominantly of pottery. The pottery recovered in the 2010 excavation is identical to the pottery retrieved from the excavations in 1975 and 1999. However, unlike in the previous excavations, in which four main wares were identified, five wares were identified in the 2010 excavations. The first ware, labelled Bonoso Ware I (see Boachie-Ansah 1985: 43-49, 1986a: 94-116, 2000a: 31-32, 2000b: 7-11), consists of sherds with glittering specks of mica in the fabric and outer surface. The numerous mica specks suggest that the mica was not intentionally applied as a decorative material but was rather derived from the clay from which vessels of the ware were made. The clays and soils in and around Bonoso abound in mica. Therefore, the ware probably was produced locally. Lateritic concretions and quartz fragments also occur in the fabric. Generally, surface colour ranges from grey to brown or black. Sherds of the ware are predominantly unburnished and decoration consists of single and multiple horizontal grooves, multiple and single incisions, comb stamps, triangular stamps, and short linear stabs usually sandwiched between a pair of horizontal grooves. In a few cases, grooves are combined with triangular or sub-triangular stamps, comb stamps or short linear stabs. Red-slipping was unpopular and not one single red-slipped sherd was found among the sherds that were analysed.

The bulk of the vessels of the ware are jars with spherical bodies and everted rims. Bowl forms include hemispherical neckless open vessels with rounded or tapered rim lips and with rim diameter wider than body diameter, and hemispherical vessels with incurved rims.

The second ware, named Bonoso Ware II (see Boachie-Ansah 2000a: 32, 2000b: 11-13), is similar in all respects to Bonoso Ware I except that sherds of the ware do not have conspicuous mica on the outer surface. Many of the sherds are heavily weathered and reveal mica, lateritic nodules and quartz fragments in their inner fabric when broken.

As is the case with Bonoso Ware I, no red-slipped sherds were identified among the sherds of this ware. Sherds of this ware are characteristically unburnished. Decoration is similar to those found on Bonoso Ware I and include single and multiple horizontal grooves on the neck, body and rim; single and multiple incisions aligned horizontally on rim and neck; cross-hatched incisions on the body; triangular stamps on the body; comb stamps in the form of square furrows; short linear stabs on the neck and body and rim-lip notches. Multiple decorations consist of a combination of triangular stamps and grooves on the neck; grooves and short linear stabs on the neck; half-moon stamps with multiple grooves on the neck; multiple grooves and dot stamps on the body; multiple grooves and comb stamps on the neck; and triangular stamps and multiple incisions on the neck.

Vessels of Bonoso Ware II are characterized by flowing profiles. The most popular vessel form, as is the case with Ware I, is the ubiquitous jar with everted rims used in many parts of Africa as cooking and storage vessels. Open hemispherical bowls with flared mouths or incurved rims are also represented.

The next category of sherds, classified as Bonoso Ware III (see Boachie-Ansah 2000a: 32, 2000b: 13-14), but formerly named as Bonoso Ware II (Boachie-Ansah 1985: 49, 1986: 116-121) has a poorly fired fabric and consists of a finely textured clay which occasionally contains minute grains of quartz and laterite. The sherds are buff or grey in colour and are easily breakable due to their extreme lightness which distinguishes it from the other wares. The ware is similar in fabric to Crossland's (1989: 35) Light Weight Buff Ware – now called Bono Ware – from Begho. Sherds are characteristically unburnished and none is red-slipped. Decoration consists of multiple circumferential grooves on the neck and body and short linear stabs on the neck. Vessel forms consist of jars with everted rims and globular bodies.

The fourth ware, formerly named Bonoso

Ware III (Boachie-Ansah 1985: 49-50, 1986a: 121-127), is the best fired ware and has the hardest fabric among the Bonoso wares. The fabric is concrete-like and identical to Effah-Gyamfi's (1978: 282-299) Concrete-textured Ware from Bono Manso and Boachie-Ansah's (2005: 66-68) Ware 3 from Ohene Ameyaw Anim near the Techiman Secondary School. Dark lateritic concretions and quartz grains are found in the fabric. Some of the sherds of this ware are burnished. Decoration consists of multiple horizontal grooves on the body, and a combination of comb stamps and multiple or single circumferential grooves on the neck or body. A few of the sherds are painted, particularly on the neck. Vessel forms consist of jars with everted rims and globular bodies.

Other finds include non-diagnostic fragments of bones, palm kernels, lower grindstones made of sandstone, upper grindstones of quartz and granite, and several pieces of iron slag.

## Discussion

The excavations have produced similar pottery as that found in all the previous excavations. The pottery from Bonoso bears close resemblance to pottery from other areas of north-west Brong-Ahafo. For example, the buff-coloured or grey ware from Bonoso is similar to the Light Weight Buff Ware (now called Bono Ware) of Begho (see Crossland 1989: 35); the ware with hard concrete-like fabric is similar to the Concrete-textured Ware from Bono Manso (see Effah-Gyamfi 1978: 282-299); the ware with glittering specks of mica in the inner and outer fabric has also been found at the Techiman Secondary school site by Anquandah (1965: 113-114, 116-117) and two other nearby sites, and at Tanoboasi, a few kilometers to Techiman on the Techiman-Manso road, and by Effah-Gyamfi (1974: 240-249, 1985: 130-140) at Bono Manso. The author also found a similar ware at Ohene Ameyaw Anim near the Techiman Secondary School (Boachie-Ansah 2005: 66-68). Similar micaceous pottery has also been found at

Ahwene Koko (Boachie-Ansah 1985: 56, 1986a: 94-116, 172-186, 2000a: 31-32, 2000b: 7-11). The claim that the ware is peculiar to the Bono State of Techiman (Effah-Gyamfi 1974: 241) must therefore be abandoned. On the basis of visual identification, it can be said that there are several similarities in the pottery of several sites from north-west Brong-Ahafo. This is partly due to the virtual uniformity of the geology of the area as well as to the intensive interaction of the inhabitants of the area over several centuries.

Iron slag has been found in all the three seasons of excavations at Bonoso. This suggests that the inhabitants of the site were engaged in iron smelting. During reconnaissance undertaken prior to the 2010 excavation a mound littered with thousands of iron slag was found about 200m to the south-west of the excavated area. The mound is certainly a smelting site and it is hoped that it would be excavated in the future to provide valuable information on iron technology in ancient Wenchi. Traditions claim that there was a sub-chief (*Awerempehene*) specifically in charge of iron smelting. Iron technology seems to have been very important to the Wenchi state and must have contributed to development of the state.

Painted pottery is rare in Akan sites. The pottery is common in northern Ghana particularly in the areas occupied by the Gonja (see Davies 1964, 1967: 315-316) and has been found in places such as New Buipe (Davies 1964: 4; York 1973: 121) and the Krachi area (Davies 1967: 316; Mathewson 1968: 25). In the Brong-Ahafo Region, painted pottery has been reported at Begho (Crossland 1989) and Bono Manso (Effah-Gyamfi 1985: 149-164). Painted pottery appeared late in the Accra Plains and has been found in 19<sup>th</sup> century contexts at Frederiksgave (Bredwa-Mensah 2002: 244) and in 19<sup>th</sup> century contexts at Adjikpo-Yokunya in the Eastern Region (Boachie-Ansah 2007: 87-106). In contrast to southern Ghana, painted pottery appears in very early contexts in northern Ghana. At New Buipe for example, the pottery was found in Phase II (dated by radiocarbon to 780 ± 100 AD and 790

± 100AD) and Phase III (with radiocarbon dates ranging from 1495 ± 95 AD to 1640 ± 90 AD) (York 1973: 20, Table II, 131, Table XXVII). At Bono Manso, painted pottery is concentrated in Phase I dated to the period from AD 1250 to 1450 (Effah-Gyamfi 1985: 27, 160). This means painted pottery is also earlier in the Brong-Ahafo Region than in southern Ghana. Although the painting on the Bonoso pottery does not exhibit the complex designs characteristic of northern Ghana, the site may be considered as one of the sites with early evidence of painting on ceramics.

Although there are clues that Bonoso was re-occupied in the 19th century (see Boachie-Ansah (2000a, 2000b) the main period of occupation seems to have been in the pre-Atlantic contact period. The absence of European imported goods in the excavation seems to support this view. Wenchi traditions trace the beginnings of the state to Bonoso. It is at Bonoso where traditions claim the *Wenchiene* (the paramount chief) of Wenchi emerged from a hole. While this tradition cannot be taken literally, it certainly provides clues to the beginnings of the Wenchi state. It is common in Akan tradition to refer to the death of chiefs in euphemisms and figurative language. For example, when a chief dies, it is said that “he has gone to the village”, and when a chief dies a tragic death, he is said to have “disappeared into the ground”. The claim that the *Wenchiene* disappeared into the “hole of origin” at the shout of a ninth male son is likely to be an allusion to regicide by the ninth born at Bonoso. To this day, it is a taboo for a ninth male son to be installed as *Wenchiene*. It is also a taboo for a member of the royal lineage to give birth to a ninth male son. In the past, all ninth male sons of the royal lineage were killed. The three radiocarbon dates of AD 680-776, AD 663-774 and AD 663-774 clearly testify that Bonoso is quite an early site and that the Akan-speaking natives of Wenchi are autochthonous to the Wenchi area and have lived there for a long time. It may also mean that centralization of authority or power in Wenchi area dates back to quite an early time.

## Conclusion

Much research work needs to be done if we are to understand the archaeology of the Wenchi area. As already indicated, the wide chronological gap between Bonoso and Ahwene Koko (the two sites claimed by traditions to be the earliest settlements of the Wenchi people) suggests that much needs to be done in the two sites and other related sites to bridge the chronological gap and to obtain relevant data on the early history of the Wenchi people. It is hoped that more excavations would be conducted on the two sites as well as other sites relevant to the early history of the Wenchi people.

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