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978-0-521-29118-7 - Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa

Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan

Excerpt

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## **Introduction: Exploding cities in poverty-stricken countries**

The Europeans came and assumed command of African history; and the solutions they found were solutions for themselves, not for Africans.

Basil Davidson (1974, p. 17)

The two foremost characteristics of the countries of West Africa<sup>1</sup> are the attributes that they share with many other countries on the continent and beyond: They were under colonial rule until recently, and they are extremely poor. Except for Liberia, each was part of the British, the French, or the Portuguese colonial empire. Ghana gained Independence in 1957, and the other countries followed in quick succession. By 1965, all West Africa was independent except for Guinea-Bissau, where it took more than a decade of armed struggle to achieve Independence from Portugal. Today, these young nations experience various degrees of economic, political, and cultural dependency on outside powers, and they have only very limited resources at their command to meet the aspirations of their peoples. By one conventional measure, gross national product (GNP) per capita, some West African countries are among the world's poorest, and most rank among the poorer of what are euphemistically called "developing countries."<sup>2</sup> The highest GNP per capita recorded for any country in the region amounts to about one-eighth of the comparable figure for Great Britain and about one-fourteenth of that for the United States.

### **The political and economic contexts of urbanization**

West Africa is not only one of the poorest regions of the world but also one of the least urbanized.<sup>3</sup> Four out of five West Africans continue to live in rural areas, deriving their livelihood from various forms of agriculture that range all the way from subsistence farming to concentration on the production of a single crop for the world market. Despite this, urban patterns are long established in several parts of West Africa, a feature that distinguishes the region from much of the remainder of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Some of the old West African urban centers expanded, others withered away with the growth of maritime trade and the imposition of colonial rule. But this new epoch found its most dramatic expression in the many cities that were created. Rapid urban development occurred in many parts of the region, especially along the coast. At the same time, there has been a measure of continuity with earlier patterns of urbanization in one fundamental aspect. That

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 *Urbanization and social change in West Africa*

is, the primary functions of West African cities continue to be administration, commerce, and transshipment; no industrial city has yet emerged, and only a few of the less populous centers are focused on mining. But the fortunes of West African cities were now shaped by foreigners who came to impose the will of European powers and by world markets controlled by overseas economic interests. Today, administration and commerce in most West African countries are concentrated in seaports that double as capital cities, and the urban systems of many West African countries are characterized by the absence of towns of intermediate size.

In spite of a lack of commensurate industrial growth, West Africa experienced the most rapid rate of urban population growth of any region in the world between 1950 and 1970. Widespread unemployment and underemployment indicate that its cities have outstripped their economic foundations. Although urban employment has become difficult to secure for all but the best-trained, urban growth continues unabated, fed by both a high rate of population growth and substantial rural–urban migration that has its source in rural poverty.

To the extent that anyone designed and controlled the new cities and the extensions of the old, that was done by Europeans. The impact of Western culture in general was strong, especially through the missions and their schools. Residence and access to certain public facilities tended to be racially segregated *de facto*, if not *de jure*. But the climate of West Africa, for all its diversity, appeared sufficiently inhospitable to the intruders to preclude the establishment of substantial settler communities. This is in contrast with other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where white settlers established themselves and influenced colonial policy (if they did not gain control over the polity, as in South Africa).<sup>4</sup> West Africans acquired rights to urban land and built their own houses; they traded freely in the markets and in the streets; they moved without restrictions between rural and urban areas. Opportunities for the growing of cash crops for foreign markets developed and were taken up, giving a new impetus to commerce. Today, the reputation of West Africa's traders carries across the entire continent.

### **The social concomitants of urbanization**

Rapid growth in the twentieth century was based on rural–urban migration. It brought together people of diverse origins, preponderantly young men. The new cities and the new extensions to the old stood in marked contrast with the old cities, which were characterized by balanced age structures and a preponderance of women.<sup>5</sup> The population of the old cities had stabilized; the elderly ascended to their secure place in extended families, and women were drawn from the countryside into the polygamous households of the more affluent. But the political and economic order of the new centers attracted pri-

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Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Exploding cities in poverty-stricken countries* 3

marily young men, who were more likely than either their elders or their sisters to be hired because of their physical strength or their education. All were confronted by an economic regime that cared little about supporting them, once their productive capability had been exhausted.<sup>6</sup> Not only short-term labor migrants but also many of those who spent a working life in town had, of necessity, to maintain links with their extended families and their village communities which offered them a measure of security and eventually welcomed them back. Except in the old cities, relatively few families have been permanently established in the urban environment for several generations.<sup>7</sup>

The new political and economic order was and is characterized by stark socioeconomic differentiation. In colonial days, attention focused on the contrast in standard of living between the small group of Europeans and the mass of Africans. With the approach of Independence, Africans moved into the positions formerly monopolized by the foreigners and assumed the privileges they had enjoyed. Today, competition is sharp, whether the goal is to reach an elite position or to make the jump from unemployment or underemployment into a secure job. In economic competition and political conflict in the urban arena, ethnic identities frequently become salient. These are new identities shaped out of an interaction of the factors of recognized common origin, the pursuit of efforts to advance the region of origin to which most urban dwellers anticipate returning eventually, and the perception of economic and political interests within the urban context. Tensions can reach the flash point where political power and/or economic privilege are perceived to be monopolized by one ethnic group.

West Africa shares a heavy burden with the remainder of Black Africa. The prejudice against Africans that was nourished in the days of the slave trade and cultivated under colonial rule sometimes appears impossible to overcome. General statements about "Africa" or "Africans" need to be predicated with the recognition that the real picture is so heterogeneous that there is often no typical or average case. On the other hand, many current generalizations about Africans apply, in fact, to all human beings. The particular fallacy of comparing actual norms of behavior in Africa with ideal norms of behavior in the West is still perpetrated all too frequently. Where genuine differences do exist between Black Africa and the West, there is typically a double failure: the neglect to explore which is the peculiar case and which is the near-universal pattern—and the tendency to fantasize about the so-called African mind instead of inquiring into structural constraints. We hope to contribute to a better understanding of present-day West Africa as we proceed to explore in depth the multifaceted process of urbanization there.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1 Empires and trade

It is particularly important to call attention to the danger of confusing urbanism with industrialism and modern capitalism . . . Different as the cities of earlier epochs may have been by virtue of their development in a preindustrial and pre-capitalistic order from the great cities of today, they were, nevertheless, cities.

Louis Wirth (1938, pp. 7f.)

The view that European history constitutes the mainstream of human history has often obscured or caused us to ignore important episodes of history played out in other areas of the world. During Europe's Dark Ages and Renaissance, the Western Sudan below the Sahara was the scene of rivalries among empires that at times surpassed in wealth and strength the European counterparts to which they were linked indirectly by a web of trade in gold.

Actually, there were a number of West African civilizations that flourished long before European contact. The origin of the earliest known of these, the empire of Ghana, remains shrouded; but by the eighth century its fame had reached as far as Bagdad, where it was mentioned by the Arab geographer al-Fazārī (Levtzion 1973, p. 3). Ancient Ghana's emergence was the result of several factors, but chief among them was the gold trade, with routes across the Sahara radiating from territories under its control. And with the beginning of Ghana's decline during the Muslim crusades of the eleventh century, the gold trade attracted a succession of new black states with ever expanding frontiers, foremost among them Mali, then Songhay.

In considering the question of why an urban civilization emerged at this time and in this place – the far reaches of West Africa, farthest across the Sudan from Egypt, and far to the south across the Sahara from North Africa – one is struck first by the sheer presence of the great desert. It apparently existed in the middle of the first millennium A.D. much as it does now, but its desiccation is a relatively recent (as these things go) and continuing event. Until about the fourth millennium B.C., the Sahara was humid and well watered; rock engravings dating from that period depict elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes, hippopotamuses, crocodiles, and fish. Then, first the aquatic, and later the big wild animals disappear from more recent rock paintings, their places taken by the tended herds of the pastoralists. By the fifth century B.C., Herodotus was describing the Sahara that is familiar to us today (Levtzion 1973, p. 5). Thus, we know that although the Sahara was recently fertile, even lush, by the time ancient Ghana emerged, it did so on the borders of the desert.

Cambridge University Press

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Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 *Urbanization and social change in West Africa*

The part played by the desert in determining the location of early West African population centers is very similar to that of the ocean in the location in modern times of the largest West African cities, most of which are found along the coast. It has been argued that Africa has, in fact, two natural northern borders, the Sahara and the Mediterranean. The early towns were actually desert ports at the termini of trade routes that crossed the desert from north to south. Located in the Sahel (*sāhil* is the Arabic word for “shore”) on the habitable edge of the desert, these towns grew up as commercial centers at the points where different means of transport (the camel of the Sahara and the donkeys and porters of the Sudan) met, and goods from the North and the South changed hands.

The journey across the desert was apparently at least as treacherous as any ocean crossing. A widely traveled Arab scholar, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, described the desert passage in these terms:

The *takshīf* is the name given to every man of the Massūfa who is hired by the people of the caravan to go ahead to Walata with the letters of the people to their friends there, so as to rent houses for them and to come out to meet them with water a distance of four days. He who has no friend in Walata writes to a person who is known among the merchants of Walata for his generosity and he enters into a partnership with him. If perhaps the *takshīf* perishes in this desert, then the people of Walata do not know about the caravan, so its people, or most of them, perish. That desert has many devils, and if the *takshīf* be alone, they play with him and lure him on until he loses his way and perishes since there is no way which is clear there and no tracks. There is only sand blown by the wind. You see mountains of sand in a place, then you see they have moved to another. [(1355) 1975, p. 25]

Despite the rigors of the journey, the desert was traversed before 1000 B.C. Saharan rock paintings of that era record the passage of war or hunting chariots, and other archaeological evidence shows that two main routes crossed the desert by this date. Roman and Carthaginian trade with the Sub-Saharan region is also documented. Bullocks and horses apparently were the early beasts of burden, but it was the camel, introduced to the Saharan trade sometime in the early centuries A.D., that provided a vast improvement in desert transport and sustained commercial contact. Among the camel's remarkable attributes are its capacity to withstand great heat, its renowned ability to store energy, and its capacity to consume over fifty gallons of water at a time. Insofar as ancient West African urbanization was spawned by trade and trade is dependent upon transportation, history is bound to acknowledge the camel's unique contribution in early urban development in the region.

If these facts are properly taken into account, the “why” of the early West African towns has a classic answer. To the north and south were producers and markets separated by a magnificently hostile terrain. Along the edge of the desert, trading centers grew up, far-flung termini attracting diverse products and fulfilling the critical function of the middleman in extensive and large-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Empires and trade* 7

scale networks of trade. The camel provided an efficient means of transport, the promise of wealth supplied the basis for ambition and entrepreneurship, and the spread of Islam, with its firm codes of behavior afforded the necessary unity and trust for long-distance transactions.<sup>1</sup> The early West African population centers emerged from the rich trans-Saharan trade; they were transformed into flourishing cities by the might of empire.

**Three empires: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay**

The properly cautious conscience of the group of scholars concerned with the early history of West Africa, Raymond A. Mauny, has made the point that “all that can be said of the history of Ghana before the coming of the Arabs in the eighth century must, in the present state of our knowledge of West Africa, be merely speculation” (1954, p. 207).<sup>2</sup> The origins of Ghana may forever remain mysterious. We can only surmise that the ruler of a trading center came to establish control over a network of such towns and to enforce security on the trading routes. Some written records do exist from the more prosperous later years, but there are enough contradictions, vague references, and exaggerations in these documents to warrant extreme caution in interpretation.<sup>3</sup> When Ghana was first mentioned toward the end of the eighth century by al-Fazārī, he referred to it as the “Gold Country.” In the first half of the tenth century, Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, a southern Arabian scholar, reviewed the gold sources that replenished the Muslim treasuries and mints and concluded that the most productive gold mine in the world was that of Ghana. At that time, gold from the Sudan was minted in Sijilmāsa at the northern end of the Sahara. The geographer Ibn Ḥawqal, who visited Sijilmāsa in 951, was impressed by the volume of trade with the Sudan. He was shown a bill certifying that an Awdaghust trader, a native of Sijilmāsa, owed 42,000 dinars, a level of credit unheard of anywhere in the Muslim world at that time (Levtzion 1968).

A network of trade routes across the Sahara linked Ghana not only with the Maghrib but also with Egypt. Lured by the promise of gold, merchants braved the hazards of the desert. The main commodity they brought in exchange was salt extracted from deposits in the Sahara.<sup>4</sup> On its way south, salt became an increasingly valuable commodity. It is said to have sometimes been exchanged in equal amounts for gold. The prosperous trade diversified. Slaves, skins, gum, and spices were sent to the North; horses, copper, silver, tin, lead, and beads arrived in the South. European and Arab textiles were imported to the Sudan; at the same time, locally woven cloth was sent to the Sahara and the Maghrib.

The *Kaya Magha* (“Gold King”) controlled an aggregate of tributary kingdoms, each with its own ruler. Allegiance to the king was ensured in part by the practice of keeping the sons of rulers of vassal states in the king’s court as

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Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 *Urbanization and social change in West Africa*

hostages to continued fidelity. At its peak, in the eleventh century, the king's authority reached as far north as Awdaghust. At that time, the empire of Ghana seems to have covered a roughly circular territory resting in the cradle of the Senegal and Niger rivers along its southern borders, with an average radius of about 250 miles.

The king and the state appear to have acquired revenue in two main ways. Ghana controlled the varied trade generated by the existence of the gold fields lying to the south, rather than directly managing the extraction of the gold.<sup>5</sup> A tax was levied on all products entering and leaving the country, with the apparent exception of gold. The king's share of the gold trade consisted of his right to all nuggets weighing more than one ounce in their natural state; the remainder was for the market.

By the year 1000, Ghana was attaining the peak of its power and influence. al-Bakrī [(1068) 1975, p. 102], one of the great geographers of Western Islam, claimed that the king could field a force of 200,000 warriors on short notice. Although that figure may be something of an overestimate, there is little doubt that the military might of Ghana was exceptional for that time, certainly by European standards.<sup>6</sup> But Ghana fell victim to the waves of a religious war that washed around its economic foundations, eroding them and finally causing the collapse of the empire.

Ghana did not actually fall, in the sense of a dramatic defeat. Rather, it withered and dwindled in a process that took approximately two centuries. In the middle of the eleventh century the Almoravids, a zealous sect of Islam that was gaining wide success in its religious war to the north, descended on Ghana's borders. The Almoravid jihad (Islamic holy war) was undertaken to teach the "true" faith of Islam to wavering Muslims and to gain converts among the heathen. Islam had ordered and strengthened commerce by providing a common bond of identity and a code of ethics for traders. But now Ghana – and its ruler, who remained traditional in his beliefs and continued to proclaim his own divinity as leader of his people – became an ideal target of the Islamic crusade, its wealth providing added incentive for conquest and control. With its trade disrupted and its territories in revolt, the people of Ghana's capital received the stern lesson from the Almoravids in 1076 or 1077, when the city fell and was sacked.

Ghana rose again within a few years and drove out its quarreling conquerors. Yet it never quite regained its former prosperity. The trade had been disrupted, and with it, the centralizing strength of the state. Eventually, the state broke up into its component parts. What was left of Ghana was finally overthrown early in the thirteenth century by the Soso kingdom, a former vassal state. Within a few years the Soso kingdom was incorporated by the expanding empire of Mali.

Ghana proved to be the prototype for successively larger empires in the Western Sudan. During the period of its greatest expansion, in the fourteenth

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Empires and trade* 9

century, Mali extended from the Atlantic eastward past the great bend of the Niger River. It engulfed the former territory of Ghana in its northern limits, incorporating the gold-producing area of Bambuk, to which Ghana had merely controlled access, and bulged well below the arching Niger and Gambia rivers on the southern border.

Mali had evolved over generations from a small Malinke kingdom to a condition of moderate strength that allowed it to fill the trading vacuum left by Ghana's decline. The forceful leadership of Sundjata is remembered in an epic that is told far and wide among Malinke to this day. The political center of the Sudan thus shifted south, most likely to Niani, below the Niger River, far beyond the former southernmost reaches of Ghana.<sup>7</sup> This location gave close control over Bure, on the upper Niger, which had become the principal source of gold in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. And the more hospitable savannah belt here provided richer agricultural support for trading activity. As Mali expanded north, it integrated the savannah with the Sahel. During the reigns of Mansā Mūsā (1312–37) and Mansā Sulaymān (circa 1340–60), embassies and gifts were exchanged with the Moroccan sultan.

The rulers of Mali are said to have been Muslim from before the days of Sundjata. A number of them made the pilgrimage to Mecca and visited the Mamluk sultan of Egypt on their way. The pilgrimage of Mansā Mūsā in 1324–5 brought universal fame to the empire. His visit to Cairo was recorded in Egyptian chronicles as one of the principal events of the year. Different accounts mention between 8,000 and 60,000 followers accompanying him. When he approached Cairo he sent a present of 50,000 dinars to the sultan of Egypt. Again, estimates of the amount of gold Mansā Mūsā brought along vary, but several sources agree that so much gold was distributed as presents and spent in the markets that the value of gold decreased considerably in Cairo.

What Mansā Mūsā brought back to Mali had a more lasting effect than that which he had left in the East. On his pilgrimage, he resolved to strengthen Islam and to complement the prosperity of his country with suitable cultural achievements. To this end, he persuaded the Spanish poet and architect Abū Ishāq al-Saḥīlī, the Ismaili missionary al-Mu'ammar Abū'Abdallāh ibn Khadija al-Kūmī, and four shurafā' (i.e., descendants of the Prophet) to return with him to Mali. After his return, he ordered mosques built and sent Sudanese ulama (Muslim scholars) to study in Fès, Morocco.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited Mali in 1352–3, several years after Mansā Mūsā's death and during the reign of Mansā Sulaymān, remarked upon the justice and security that prevailed there. His report said of the people of Mali:

Amongst their good qualities is the small amount of injustice amongst them, for of all people they are the furthest from it. Their sultan does not forgive anyone in any matter to do with injustice. Among these qualities there is also the prevalence of peace in their country, the traveller is not afraid in it nor is he who lives there in



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 *Urbanization and social change in West Africa*

fear of the thief or of the robber by violence. They do not interfere with the property of the white man who dies in their country, even though it may consist of great wealth, but rather they entrust it to the hand of someone dependable among the white men until it is taken by the rightful claimant. [(1355) 1975, p. 47]

Yet, for all its outward signs of order and soundness, the empire was already in trouble during Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's visit; he remarked, in fact, that Mansā Sulaymān was unpopular among his people, who remembered the generosity of Mansā Mūsā. However, it was not lack of popular support that mortally weakened Mali but the turbulence and intrigue that characterized much of the history of the rule of Mali. Over the course of the next few centuries, Mali's territories were slowly whittled away on all sides by invasion and secession.<sup>8</sup> Like Ghana, it withered and faded; but in Mali's case, internal weaknesses and division seem to have played a greater part.

Mali was succeeded by Songhay, an old kingdom based in Gao that had been active in the trans-Saharan trade since the eighth century. Songhay had come to be controlled by Mali; with the decline of Mali, it expanded into the last and greatest of the Sudanic empires. From beginning to end, the brief record of Songhay's hegemony is the most violent of the ancient period. Songhay grew to prominence under Sonni 'Alī the Great (1464–92), who began his reign with a campaign of expansion. One year after Sonni 'Alī's death, the throne was seized from his successor by Askīyā Muḥammad (1493–1528). Numerous expeditions took him as far west as the northwestern provinces of Mali beyond the upper Senegal and as far east as Agadès and Katsina. The power of the empire was based on the institution of a large standing army, a system of market inspection to ensure honest dealings, and the creation of a decentralized administration in which chief officeholders were either from or married into the royal family.

As was the case with Mali, Songhay suffered from internal intrigues; but when it was defeated in 1591, at the Battle of Tindibi, it was apparently at the peak of its power. Its end came when the sultan of Morocco commissioned an expedition in the eternal quest, the search for the city of gold. Moors, Italians, Greeks, French, English, and Spanish made up the force, equipped with harquebuses and cannons, that set out to conquer Songhay. Those who survived the arduous journey across the desert succeeded only in the destruction of the last Sudanic empire. They found no "city of gold" in their easy victories (mainly the result of their introduction of the man-made plague, the firearm, to the Western Sudan), but they did disrupt the order that had provided the necessary security for trade. As al-Sa'dī recorded:

The Moroccan army found the Sudan one of God's most favoured countries in prosperity and fertility. Peace and security reigned in all provinces . . . Then all that changed: security gave place to danger; prosperity made way for misery; tranquility was succeeded by trouble, calamities and violence. Over the length and breadth of the land people devoured one another; raids and war destroyed the people's wealth, subjugated them into slavery, took their lives. Disorder spread and intensified until it became universal. [(1655) 1900, pp. 222f.]

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29118-7 - Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa

Josef Gugler and William G. Flanagan

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Centers of trade and seats of empire**

The ancient West African cities grew out of the interaction between the lucrative trans-Saharan trade and the fortunes of empires. If they had their origin in trade, they gained prominence when, and for as long as, they could draw on the resources of far-flung empires. The cities, in turn, were necessary organizational units for the intersection and coordination of state activity. The cities were thus both the product and the producers of sociocultural change; they reflected it and were the points from which it emanated. Then as now, the city received most of the wealth generated by trade and was the arena for the exchange of ideas and new materials carried there from distant places by traders, travelers, scholars, and specialists. From the chronicles of visitors and inhabitants and from archaeological evidence, more is being learned of what these places were like.

Writing in distant Córdoba, al-Bakrī gives this account of the capital of Ghana:

The city of Ghana consists of two towns in a plain. One of these towns is inhabited by Muslims. It has a dozen mosques in one of which they assemble for the Friday prayer. The mosques have all their imams, their muezzins, and their readers of the Koran. Lawyers and learned men live in the town. Close by are wells of sweet water from which they drink and near which they cultivate vegetables. The royal town, called al-Ghāba ["the grove"], is six miles away from the Muslim town, and the area between the two towns is covered with dwellings. Their houses are made of stone and acacia wood. The king has a palace and huts with conical roofs, surrounded by a wall-like enclosure. In the king's town, not far from the hall for royal audiences, is a mosque where pray the Muslims who come there on business. [(1068) 1975, p. 99]

Koumbi-Saleh has been identified as the likely site of the Muslim section of the capital of Ghana, but the royal city, presumably of more poorly constructed or less durable buildings, has proved impossible to locate. Excavations at Koumbi-Saleh have revealed a large town consisting of two parts. One, about 800 by 800 yards, was constructed in stone; the second, about 550 by 800 yards, was entirely inhabited but shows only isolated ruins of stone houses. The city, with narrow lanes except for a single great avenue that was about 40 feet wide as it passed the mosque, appears to have been densely populated. Mauny (1961, pp. 481f.) estimates, from the archaeological evidence at Koumbi-Saleh, that what is thought to have been the Muslim section of the capital of Ghana had a population of 15,000 to 20,000. That this was an important city over a long period of time is attested to by two cemeteries that are even larger than the residential areas. Stone was used extensively in construction, for floors as well as for walls. Mauny describes the finds:

The houses had upper storeys, and when these subsided they filled in the ground-floor rooms which when uncovered were found to be magnificently preserved under a mass of rubble averaging 12 feet in thickness. . . . P. Thomassey . . . lived on the