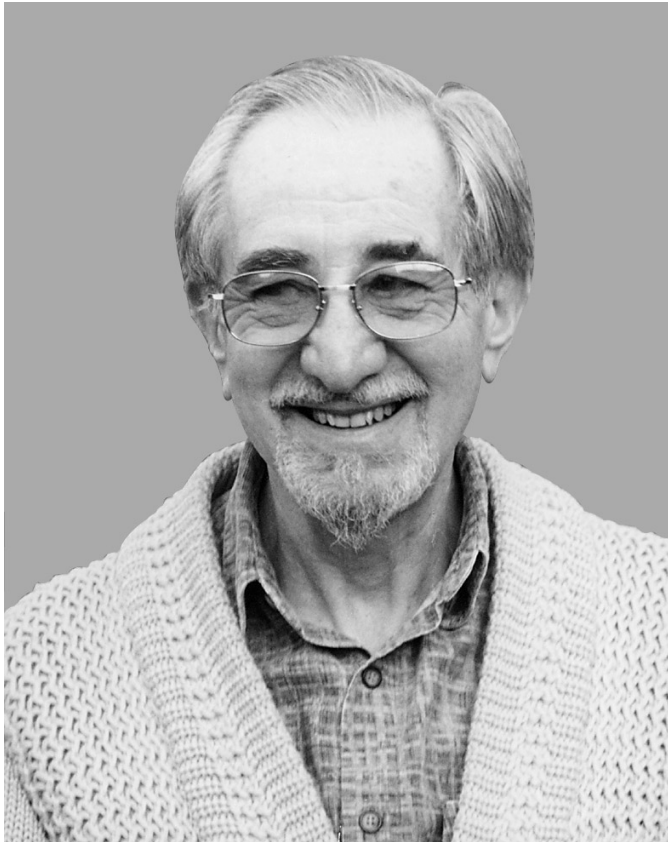


## J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology



Merrick Posnansky 2003

Merrick Posnansky is the quintessential Africanist, having conducted research on Stone Age, Iron Age, and Historic period sites over much of the continent and provided both context and critical appraisal for researchers studying the African Diaspora. He has published almost 200 monographs, articles, book chapters, and reviews, and trained a generation of African and Africanist archaeologists. Merrick's work in developing museums and academic programs in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and the United States marks him as one of the leading scholars of his generation. As a mentor, he is both a model and an inspiration to his students. In recognition of his work in historical archaeology and for his continuing role in teaching a new generation of scholars, it is appropriate that we honor him with the J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology.

Despite his contributions to Africa and historical archaeology, Merrick's training and his initial research focused on British prehistoric archaeology. The tenth of 11 children, Merrick became interested in the study of the past as a child. At one point, inspired by a lecture by a curator from the British Museum, he decided he would study numismatics. Fortunately, the lecturer told him there was only one job available—and it was taken. But he also suggested that Merrick look at broader fields like archaeology and museum studies. These fields were to remain central to Merrick's career.

Although he was interested in archaeology, it was not offered at the University of Nottingham, and Merrick's undergraduate degree was in history and geography. He did, however, have his first taste of archaeology, working at several excavations beginning with a Mesolithic site in 1948. It

was also during this period that he participated, accidentally, in his first historical archaeological project—digging a 2-ton stone out of a hillside near Burnley, Lancashire, which was believed to be part of a Bronze Age cemetery. In fact, the feature proved to be associated with 19th-century potato storage pits. Interestingly, the project was directed by Frank Willett who later also became well known as an Africanist.

More successful, was Merrick's work on the medieval tile works of Lenton Priory, which was located on the University of Nottingham campus. This was done by the University of Nottingham, Students' Archaeological Society, which Merrick had formed in autumn 1951. Merrick also worked on the analysis of the material, which was subsequently published (Swinerton, Chalmers, and Posnansky 1956).

Notably, one of the first lectures sponsored by the new Students' Archaeological Society was by Grahame Clark, a driving force in the increasingly prominent archaeology program at Cambridge. Following graduation from Nottingham, Merrick completed a postgraduate diploma in prehistoric archaeology at Peterhouse, Cambridge, at that time, the only postgraduate program aside from the PhD that was offered. His year at Cambridge was important in introducing him to Africa through the teaching of Miles Burkitt, whose pioneering research in Southern Africa was a stimulus to many other Africanist archaeologists, including J. Desmond Clark and Brian Fagan. Burkitt's ability to inspire excitement about the study of the past (Fagan 2001:15–16) can be seen in Merrick's own career. At Cambridge, Merrick was also taught by Charles McBurney and Grahame Clark. He maintained these Cambridge contacts, and they proved of primary importance in his decision to work in Africa.

Merrick returned to the University of Nottingham for his PhD, which he completed under the supervision of H. H. Swinerton (who was actually a geologist). Merrick's research dealt with the Pleistocene chronology and prehistoric archaeology of the English East Midlands. While his dissertation covered some of the archaeology of more recent periods, the subsequent publications primarily focused on the Paleolithic (Posnansky 1963).

In 1955, Merrick conducted a salvage excavation of the Lamport Post Mill in Northamptonshire (Posnansky 1956). Initial investigation suggested that the site was Bronze Age barrow, but excavation revealed the footings of two post mills—one medieval (late-13th to early-15th centuries) and the other, 17th century. The dating of the site was aided by the innovative use of clay tobacco pipes, which were then being studied by Adrian Oswald, the son of Felix Oswald who had established the archaeological museum where Merrick worked as a volunteer at Nottingham university. Although not dating to the Bronze Age, the mill was the first of its kind excavated, and the site was noted as one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the year in the *London Times*. The report continues to be cited in reviews of postmedieval British archaeology (Crossley 1990).

As a new PhD, Merrick received a letter from Grahame Clark asking if he would be interested in working as a warden for the Royal National Parks of Kenya, an opportunity Merrick was delighted to seize. He arrived in Africa in 1956, where he worked closely with Louis Leakey (Posnansky 2002a: 432). Although this was the colonial era, it would be erroneous to collectively view Merrick's work and that of all of his contemporaries as colonialist. To do so would be to simplify their objectives and research concerns (Robertshaw 1990:78). Like much of sub-Saharan Africa, East Africa was still very poorly known archaeologically in the mid-20th century. The early hominid discoveries at Olduvai Gorge were still several years in the future. Nevertheless, much of the work in eastern Africa focused on human origins and the Stone Age. Merrick published the first excavation report on the classic early-Stone Age site of Olorgesailie, later excavated by the late Glynn Isaac (Posnansky 1959a, 1959b; Morell 1995:275). However, Merrick also worked on more recent Iron Age sites (Posnansky 1967a) and Masai burial mounds (Posnansky 1968a), and he visited many of the coastal Swahili sites, which were then being excavated by James Kirkman and Neville Chittick. These were Historic period sites, known from Arabic sources dating back to the early second millennium A.D. Merrick's exposure to this diversity of sites contributed to the broad perspective that characterizes his writing.

Merrick moved to Uganda in 1958 as curator of the Uganda Museum (Posnansky 2002a:432). There he brought the Uganda Antiquities Service under the museum, excavated the 19th-century forts of Emin Pasha and Samuel Baker, and put Ugandan rock art on the map (Posnansky and Nelson 1968). He transferred to the newly established British Institute of History and Archaeology in Eastern Africa (later the British Institute of Eastern Africa) in 1962, and he ran the Kampala Office for two years. Notably, from the onset, the institute's research orientation was on the Iron Age and later prehistoric period (Robertshaw 1990:87–88). With the institute's move to a central office in Nairobi, Merrick chose to join the University College of East Africa at Makerere where he had already been offering the first archaeology courses in East or Central Africa, beginning in 1962. He also helped draw up planning documents for university archaeology courses in Kenya, Tanganyika (later Tanzania), and Ethiopia.

Merrick's archaeological research in Uganda is characterized by an increasing focus on the more recent African past. His work at Bigo (Posnansky 1969a) and Bweyore (Posnansky 1968b) dealt with the archaeology of the settlements but also dealt with the methodological concerns of reconciling oral traditions with information gleaned from excavation (Posnansky 1966, 1967b; Schmidt 1990). Recognizing the important contribution of African oral traditions, Merrick referred to this work as historical archaeology (Posnansky 1959a, 1959b). Significantly, this was before the widespread acceptance of the value of oral sources in African historical studies. Indeed, in the late 1950s some scholars still disparaged the idea of African history as worthy of study or saw the archaeological record as largely unconnected to modern African societies (Posnansky 1998). The view that oral sources as well as written records define the discipline of historical archaeology continues to typify the perspective of the majority of African and Africanist scholars.

While in Uganda, Merrick met and married Eunice Lubega, the first African woman to graduate with a university degree in East or Central Africa. Given the social climate of the time, the marriage was unusual. Eunice accompanied Merrick on innumerable trips to archaeological sites, museum collections, and meetings, including a two- or three-week trip to look at sites in Kenya, Tanganyika, and northern and southern Rhodesia that passed as a honeymoon. Merrick acknowledges her tolerance with appreciation. Merrick and Eunice have three daughters Sheba, Tessa, and Helen, all of whom have vivid memories of family trips to archaeological sites.

In 1967, Merrick moved to Ghana as a professor and chair of the Archaeology Department at the University of Ghana, Legon, where he remained for nine years. In Ghana, he developed both undergraduate and graduate curricula, making Legon the largest archaeological program in sub-Saharan Africa with six fulltime faculty. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Legon was a focal point of African studies and many historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists visited or taught in the various programs on the campus.

In Ghana, Merrick's research dealt with sites of the second millennium A.D. known through oral traditions. He initiated the West African Trade Project, an umbrella for a number of projects aimed at examining regional trade patterns (Posnansky 1973). Merrick's principal field research was on the archaeology and ethnoarchaeology of Begho in central Ghana. Begho, which reached its peak between the 15th and the 18th centuries, typifies the African trading communities of the forest-savanna ecotone. It was divided into four quarters, the names of which were recalled in the oral traditions of the modern village of Hani. Merrick continued to conduct ethnoarchaeological work at Hani for almost three decades, making this one of the longest running projects of its kind (Posnansky n.d.).

Merrick also stimulated work on the coastal Ghanaian sites associated with the European trade. The numerous forts and castles had been the focus of previous work. Indeed, A. W. Lawrence, first professor of archaeology at the University College of Achimota (later to become the University of Ghana), had focused on the European trade posts of Ghana and West Africa (Kense 1990; Lawrence 1963). However, unlike previous researchers, Merrick's interest was on the transformations in African societies during the era of the Atlantic trade, not the architectural histories of the European monuments. With Merrick's inspiration, the *Coastal Survey of 1969* examined all of the African settlements located adjacent to European trade posts (Golden 1969; Posnansky 1969b, 2002b:

47). He participated in excavations at Sekondi in 1970 and in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle in 1973 (Simmonds 1973). Although limited, the latter still provides the only direct archaeological information on enslaved Africans from an African context.

In late 1975 and early 1976, Merrick, in collaboration with the late Albert Van Dantzig, uncovered traces of ill-fated Fort Ruycaver (Posnansky and Van Dantzig 1976). Founded by the Dutch in 1654, 87 km up the Ankobra River, this small lodge was intended to expand trade into the interior gold producing regions. It stands as one of the few attempts made by the Europeans to establish an outpost in the African hinterland. Though initially successful, the venture ended in 1658 when the Dutch West India Company commander blew himself up in a conflict with the local African chief. Archaeological research confirmed the location of the fort and provided some indication of the building's size and construction. The publication calls attention to the potential for historical archaeological research in Ghana, including African sites such as Elmina.

Merrick moved to the Department of History at UCLA as a full professor in 1977, where he remained until he accepted early retirement in 1994. His appointment in a department of history reflects the historically close disciplinary connections between history and archaeology in African studies. In addition to his teaching responsibilities in history and anthropology, Merrick served as chair of the Archaeology Interdepartmental Program (1979–1981), director of the Institute of Archaeology (1984–1987), and director of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center (1988–1992).

At UCLA, Merrick introduced the first undergraduate class in historical archaeology, a course that became one of the largest undergraduate courses of its kind in the country. He continued to teach this course, with excellent enrollment, five years after retirement. Merrick also trained many history and archaeology graduate students, including many who went on to complete dissertations on the historical archaeology of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.

Merrick's research, rooted in the pragmatics of developing culture historical sequences for poorly known regions of Africa can be characterized by what some historians of archaeology have called traditional or normative archaeology. In general, the New Archaeology of the 1960s made limited inroads in African archaeology. This was, perhaps, in part because of the limited data available for much of the continent and, as a result, a focus on site identification and chronology building. However, it is equally significant that the majority of the American and British archaeologists that worked in Africa, including Merrick, were either trained by or greatly influenced by the work of J. Desmond Clark and not the purveyors of the New Archaeology (see Posnansky 2002a:432–434; Robertshaw 1990:86).

Merrick's methodological reliance on nonarchaeological source material and ethnoarchaeological research, coupled with an appreciation of the cultural context in which social systems operated, prefigured the thrust of many post-processual analyses of the 1980s and 1990s. For graduate students at UCLA, Merrick thus made an appealing counterpoint to Jim Hill—who often taught the archaeological research methods course and who espoused a rigidly Hempelian, scientific, processual approach to archaeology. It is not surprising that many Americanist historical archaeologists, as well as Africanists, selected Merrick as an advisor.

Merrick's own research interests widened as he looked at historical archaeology in an increasingly broad perspective, including the material record of diasporic African populations. His review of historical archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa, presented at the 1984 Historical Archaeology conference and subsequently published in *Historical Archaeology*, surveyed the majority archaeological research then undertaken on sites where context was provided by documentary sources, including the settlements of the west African savanna and east African coast recorded in Arabic sources, as well as post 15th-century European coastal sites (Posnansky and DeCorse 1986). The article is notable in that Merrick had conducted research on or visited many of the sites discussed.

In terms of studies of the African Diaspora, Merrick's article "Towards an Archaeology of the African Diaspora," published in 1984, outlines both the potential and methodological pitfalls faced in making trans-Atlantic connections. His calls for the integrated study of both sides of the Atlantic and for greater collaboration between American researchers and scholars working in Africa are equally pertinent today (Posnansky 2002b).

Merrick has also maintained his long-standing interest in museums, beginning with his curatorship of the Uganda Museum in 1958. His recognition of the value of contemporary African art, concern for the training of African museum curators, and interest in the preservation of Africa's cultural resources continues today (Posnansky 1996, 1998). Apart from the countries where he himself worked, Merrick trained and influenced museum professionals over much of the continent. In recognition of his contributions, he was awarded the Leadership Award of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (Posnansky 1998).

Merrick's ability to make connections and facilitate his students' work is a pervasive aspect of his career. The preliminary contacts, academic relations, and personal connections he made throughout the world facilitated research by a host of graduate students. Many students Merrick trained went on to play important roles in developing other programs in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Merrick was a mentor to many of the first-generation African archaeologists who, in turn, have been important in establishing archaeology and museum programs in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Zambia, as well as Jamaica. Reflecting on African archaeology, it is indeed possible for Merrick to say "African archaeology has come of age" (Posnansky 1982). A consequence of these wide-ranging connections is that Merrick's students constitute the core of a still-small group of historical archaeologists who have done substantive work on both sides of the Atlantic. Merrick has consistently viewed his role as educator and mentor as more important than his career as an archaeologist. Our collective appreciation for Merrick's efforts is reflected in the festschrift volume (11) of the *African Archaeological Review*, published by his students in 1993.

And so, Merrick, we honor you with the J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology for professional contributions but also in recognition of your role as a mentor, colleague, and friend.

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Christopher R. DeCorse