

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SURVEY OF IKOT ABASI SLAVE TRADE ARENA, AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The archaeology of Akwa Ibom is an area of study that remains largely undocumented, holding a wealth of unexplored histories waiting to be discovered. In our pursuit of archaeological findings, we aimed to investigate the potential of the sites available and to uncover the unique histories and heritage of the local people. Among these sites, the Ikot Abasi slave trade site was selected for examination. This paper reports on the archaeological relics identified at the site, which shed light on the accounts and activities associated with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Ikot Abasi. To achieve this, written records were consulted, oral traditions engaged with, and an archaeological survey was conducted. Our findings include various relics: a bridge, a slave fort, a bunker, a branding rod, iron chain, a branding furnace, a furnace outlet, hooks, and manila, all of which were documented. As a result of this groundbreaking research, we have identified and documented these relics and cultural materials. Additionally, the historical activities related to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the area have been highlighted, thereby enhancing our understanding of the history of Akwa Ibom State within the broader context of the archaeology of the Lower Cross River Region.

Keywords

Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena, Enslaved Persons, Archaeological Relics and History

Received: April 2, 2025 / 1st Revision: June 12, 2025 / Accepted: June 25, 2025

Akpan, Otobong Enefiok - Udo, Emem Michael (2025). An Archaeological and Historical Survey of Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Hungarian Journal of African Studies [Afrika Tanulmányok], 19(1), 59-80x.

1. Introduction

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and associated slave activities are aspects of Akwa Ibom's history that are largely unknown to the current generation. As oral traditions fades, there is a risk that this important information may be lost if not recorded. Ikot Abasi is one of the ancient towns that contain valuable remnants of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Unfortunately, the accounts of these activities in the Akwa Ibom region have received little attention and recognition in the broader context of Atlantic history. Research on the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade site has been informed through citations by various scholars, such as Abasiattai et al (1997) on the slave trade activities along the Bight of Biafra between the 16th and 19th centuries. These citations indicate the existence of archaeological relics within this vicinity that needed to be salvaged and documented. Consequently, interest in the choice of the site was geared based on its economic contribution and relevance in the history of Akwa Ibom area during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which was both beneficial for the European buyers, their nations, and the African middlemen who enriched themselves from the proceeds of the trade, as this exchange fueled the mercantilist system during this period. Additionally, Ikot Abasi was a strategic location that served as an entry port for the Europeans and an exit port for the enslaved Africans, hence the construction of the "Bridge of No Return." More so, with the material evidence and relics of slave trade activities identified, such as the bridge, slave fort, bunker, branding rod, iron chain, branding furnace, furnace outlet, hook, and manila, the site was determined to be archaeologically viable for research.

Furthermore, the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade site is presently undergoing rapid deterioration, which indicates an obvious threat to the existing archaeological relics, therefore necessitating the urgent need for action in documenting, salvaging, and preserving these relics to avoid further dilapidation or total loss of our historical past. Searching through the written sources, we observed that the available records on Ikot Abasi Slave Trade activities are scanty, except for those stored in the memory of a few indigenous persons, transmitted as oral information, which is limited to the origin/migration of the area and the slave trade activities within the vicinity of the slave fort. Additionally, there are no previous archaeological records regarding this group and the slave trade activities in the area. This research is the first archaeological work to be executed within the Ikot Abasi area. This research, therefore, aimed at documenting the available archaeological data as tangible evidence of the slave trade activities within the Ikot Abasi area. Its objectives were to: identify and document in detail the archaeological evidence on the sites, document the history of the slave trade activities in the Ikot Abasi area from oral sources, and highlight the deteriorating state of the archaeological relics within the study site.

2. Geographical Background of the Ikot Abasi Area

The Ikot Abasi Local Government Area is situated in the southwestern corner of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It is bordered to the north by the Oruk Anam Local Government Area, and to the east by Mkpatt Enin and Eastern Obolo Local Govern-

ment Areas. To the south, it is adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean, while the Imo River forms the natural western boundary, separating it from Rivers State (see Figures 1 and 2) (Abasiattai et al., 1997). The activities of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade took place in and around the Ikot Abasi village and its surroundings (see Fig. 3). It is located at $4^{\circ}34'20''$ N latitude, and $7^{\circ}32'48''$ E longitude within the Ikot Abasi Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The terrain of Ikot Abasi is flat and low-lying, characterized by three main physiographic units: the alluvial plains, which include mangrove swamps and freshwater floodplains; the beach ridge sands that extend from the mangrove mudflats toward the shoreline; and the rolling sandy plains found in the upland areas, where the topography is undulating (Abasiattai et al., 1997). The area is drained by the Imo River and its tributaries, primarily the Essene Creek, along with numerous streams and rivulets (Abasiattai et al., 1997). The soil in this region is acidic, well-drained, and strongly weathered. Although acidic in nature, it can be made fertile and productive if adequate soil management practices are adopted. The climate of the area is humid tropical with a high temperature lying between 26°C and 28°C . The rainfall is heavy (between 2000- 4,000mm), occurring almost throughout the year (April- November). Ikot Abasi Local Government Area falls within the tropical forest zone, with three types, namely: mangrove forest along the coast and river estuaries, freshwater swamp forest, and rainforest proper. This vegetation type allows for the existence of different species of trees and fertile soil for cultivation during the farming season (Abasiattai et al., 1997).

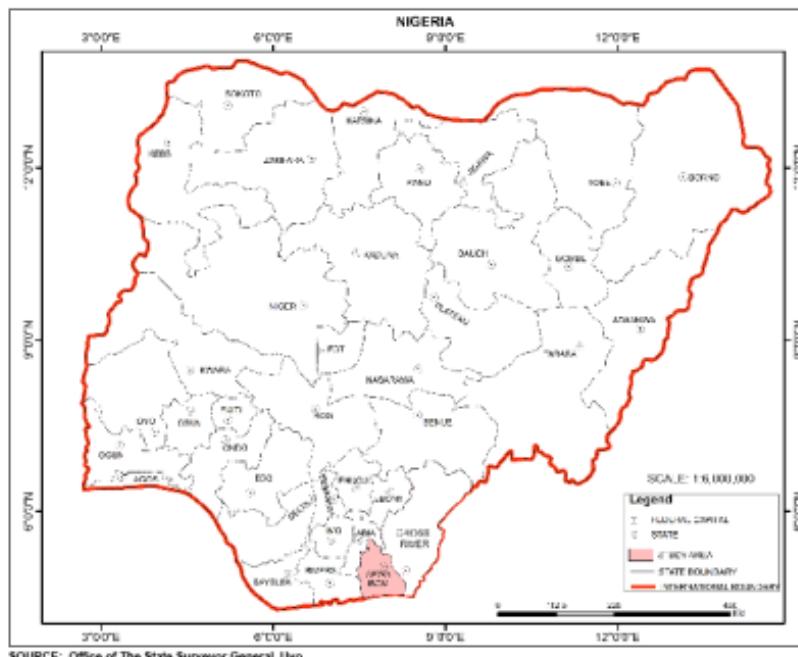
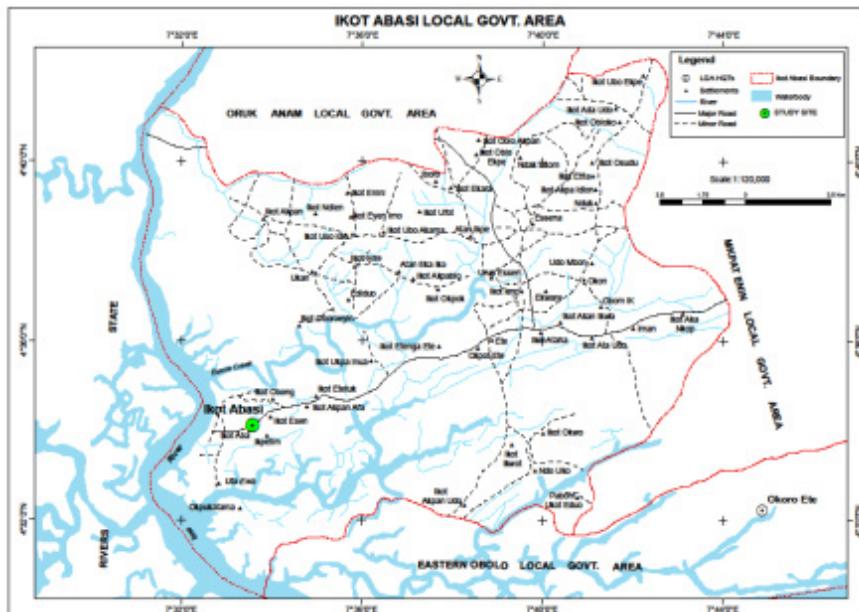


Figure 1: Nigeria Showing Akwa Ibom State. Source: Office of the State Surveyor General, Uyo.



▲ Figure 2: Akwa Ibom State Showing Ikot Abasi Local Government Area.
Source: Office of the State Surveyor General, Uyo.



▲ Figure 3: Ikot Abasi Local Govt. Area Showing the Study Site.
Source: Office of the State Surveyor General, Uyo.

3. Methodology

The basic methods employed in this research were: consultation of written records, oral tradition, and archaeological survey. Written sources from the libraries, online books, and articles about the history of the Ikot Abasi and the slave trade activities were consulted. Oral tradition, “the testimony transmitted orally from one generation to another by the individuals who either experienced or witnessed the events,” was employed (Vansina, 1981). This was collected from about six informants identified by the Local Government tourism supervisor, who were considered to have information on the history of the people and the slave trade activities. Archaeological survey was achieved with the assistance of a tour guide who had intimate knowledge of the slave trade site. It involved systematically walking across the site, directly observing the ground’s surface and recording the surviving relics identified, using Global Positioning System (GPS), a ranging pole, a photography scale, and a 5.5m measuring tape. Photographs were also taken in order to document the relics in situ.

4. Historical Background of the Slave Trade in Ikot Abasi

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was an extensive trade involving the buying and selling of human cargo, mainly from West and Central Africa to be carted to Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America for work on large plantations. It lasted for more than four hundred years from the late 15th to the 19th century. Extensive explorations carried out in the 15th century, most of which were spearheaded by Prince Henry, the Navigator of Portugal, led to many discoveries of multiple islands along the coasts of Africa and beyond. However, the sponsorship of the voyage of Christopher Columbus by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain led to the ground-breaking discovery of the Americas in 1492 that forever changed the world’s demographic, geographic, political, and socio-economic construct. The acquisition of free labour from the African continent was borne out of the necessity to build colonies in the newly discovered American continent. The thirst for power, prestige, and glory drove Western European powers to plunder African countries for free labour from people who were exploited for generations without compensation. In contrast, the revenue generated from slave labour was used to expand European economies. Eric Williams states that the reasons for slavery, according to Gibbon Wakefield, “are not moral, but economic circumstances; they relate not to vice and virtue but to production (Williams, 1744).

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, involved three voyages through three continents across the Atlantic Ocean;

- Europe to Africa: Europe was the starting point of the trade. Goods were taken from Europe and then exchanged for slaves in Africa. Examples of goods include: textile, iron bar, beads, horses, umbrella, guns, gun powder, rum, etc.
- Africa to the Americas: This is also known as the Middle Passage, and at this point, the newly purchased enslaved persons were then transported to the Americas through inhumane and treacherous circumstances using the Atlantic Ocean.

It usually lasted between six to eight weeks or more, depending on the destination and conditions at sea.

- Americas to Europe: This trip was the last voyage that completed the triangle. Here, the agricultural produce cultivated and some enslaved persons were taken back to Europe, and the triangle ended.

Many coastal and inland communities in West and Central Africa participated in the slave trade, with the coasts often serving as the primary points of departure. The area known as Ikot Abasi in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, contains physical relics that illustrate the extent of slave trade activities that occurred there. The first Europeans to make contact with the people of Ikot Abasi were the Portuguese, who encountered the Andoni people in 1472 (Abasiattai et al., 1997). According to Abasiattai, the Andoni became the first middlemen in the trade between the people of Ikot Abasi and the Europeans. Over time, they were eventually replaced by the Bonny and Aro, who became the dominant players in the slave trade in the region. Various means were employed to capture enslaved individuals, including targeting breakers of taboos, debtors, prisoners of war, society misfits, and criminals. As the demand for slaves grew, the capturers began to kidnap strangers within their communities and invade neighboring areas to acquire more individuals to meet the escalating demand for slaves.

This increase in demand precipitated the establishment of slave markets at Ibekwe, Essene, Ukam, Uruakwak, Ubium, and Ndio in the Ibibio countryside. After being bought from these markets, these enslaved persons were then closely guarded and escorted through footpaths, creeks, and rivers to Egwanga and particularly Essene (Abasiattai et al., 1997). In exchange for these enslaved persons and other farm products (such as rubber, gum, palm oil and ivory), commodities of the manufactured variety were traded and these include: coral beads, smoking pipes, gun powder, knives, textiles, umbrellas, guns, iron pots, brass bugles, along with other forms of exchanges like the manila (there were different types and patterns of manila, see image 30 for the type discovered at the site by researchers) (Abasiattai et al., 1997). Isichei explains that the Black traders from Bonny and Calabar designated Thursday or Friday as their trading days. Every two weeks, they arrived with 20 to 30 canoes, each carrying 20 to 30 enslaved individuals. The enslaved were tied with their arms behind their backs, and the more resistant and stronger individuals were additionally secured above the knees for extra restraint. They were placed at the bottom of the canoe and often covered with water. Upon reaching the coast, these individuals were taken to the Traders' Houses, where they were fed, oiled, and kept in optimal condition for sale at the market (Abasiattai et al., 1997).

However, with the construction of the slave fort and the 'Bridge of No Return' in 1795, they were likely taken to the forts after capture. According to oral source, after making the long treks and trips along the creeks and rivers, the enslaved persons made their way through the footpath into the slave forts where they were kept and chained, awaiting the arrival of the Europeans. The stubborn ones who

are perceived as capable of attempting an insurrection were stored in the bunkers, which were connected to the bridge with very minimal ventilation. This was done to break their will and spirit. Many were kept in the forts in deplorable conditions until the Europeans reached the Ikot Abasi shores, where the transactions occurred. The European merchants made selections based on the physique and general health of the enslaved persons. After which, the enslaved persons were weighed on the scale to determine their worth and then exchanged for any of the items mentioned earlier. Using a branding iron, the enslaved persons were given identity marks on their bare skin showing the initials of the European merchant who had purchased them. The act of branding identified the specific owner of the enslaved persons by the European merchants (Akpan and Udo, pers. com. 2024). From the analysis of the relics inside the forts, one can assert that slave auctions most probably took place inside the Ikot Abasi slave fort.

After the transactions were made, the enslaved individuals made their way to the 'Bridge of No Return,' where they were mentally and physically forced to say farewell to their homeland. They then embarked on the horrific journey known as the Middle Passage, navigating the Imo River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean. They were sent to various destinations in the Americas and some parts of Europe, never to return. As a result, they and their descendants were forced to migrate involuntarily and assimilate into cultures completely alien to them thereby forever altering their socio-cultural identity.

5. Archaeological Survey of Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena

An archaeological survey within the slave trade site at Ikot Abasi Local Government Area was undertaken in two phases; the first was between 12th to 14th and the second phase took place from 19th to 21st, all within the month of April 2024. Being an important historical site, it was quite accessible, although barricades exist, enforced by the marine police force as a form of site protection by the Local Government Council. The site presents material evidence and relics of slave trade activities, such as the bridge, slave fort, bunker, branding rod, iron chain, branding furnace, furnace outlet, hook, and manila were all documented. To determine the extent of the slave trade sites, a judgmental strategy was employed. Due to the absence of delineating structures to show the extent of the sites, the terminating point of the surviving relics was adopted as the extent of the site. Global Positioning System (GPS) readings were taken for this purpose. To facilitate the production of the site map and show the spatial distribution of the archaeological relics, coordinates were taken and recorded using a GPS device. The site map shows the entire Ikot Abasi Slave Trade arena, which covers an area of about 5,028. 98 square meters and irregular in shape (see Fig. 4).

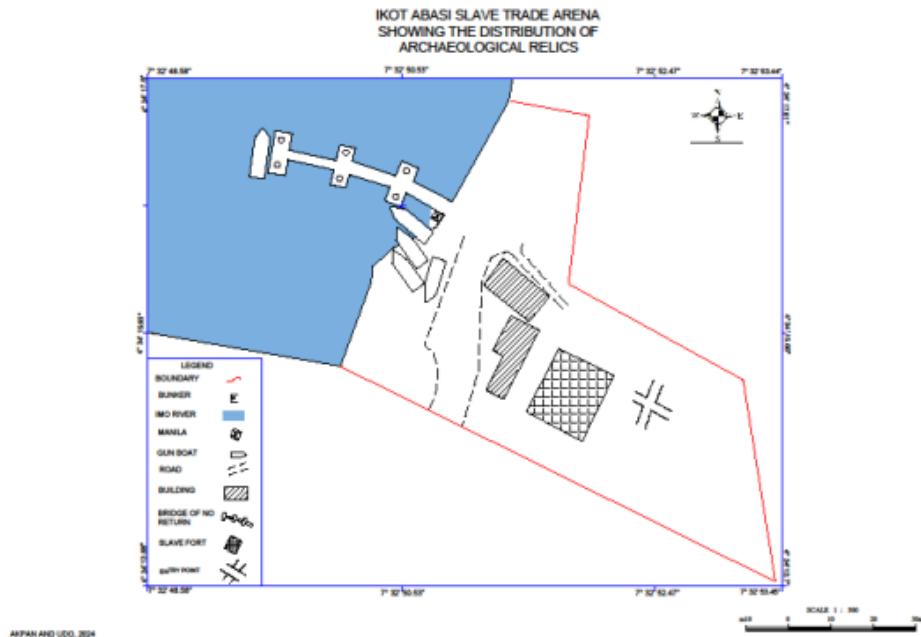


Figure 4: Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena Showing the Distribution of Archaeological Relics.
Source: AKPAN and UDO, 2024.

Below are the archaeological relics identified;

The Slave Fort Entry Point: This passage is situated adjacent to the footpath where the slaves were brought in from their various points of capture, leading straight into the slave fort (see image 1). According to oral source, after making the long marches and trips through creeks and rivers, the enslaved persons made their way through the footpath into the slave forts where they were kept chained, awaiting the arrival of the Europeans (Akpan and Udo 2024 pers. comm.).



Image 1: Slave Fort Entry Point

The Slave Fort: This feature was identified within the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade vicinity and said to have been a solitary confinement where the slaves from different locations were kept. The slave fort was built using burnt clay bricks, iron rods, wood, and aluminum sheets. Based on the period of the slave trading activities, the materials used in building the slave fort were most likely imported from Europe. Although the slave fort is still in use as a make-shift shelter for the marine police force guarding the bridge, its original state has been altered by the introduction of smaller concrete rooms within the fort. Not only has the structure been altered, but it is presently undergoing adverse deterioration, for instance, the posterior walls have fallen, leaving it exposed (see images 2, 3, 4, and 5).



▲ *Image 2: Front view of the Slave Fort*



▲ *Image 3: Side view of the Slave Fort*



▲ *Image 4: Back view of the Slave Fort*



▲ *Image 5: Internal Wall of the Slave Fort*

Iron Chain: This is an iron chain identified within the slave fort and said to have been used to bind the slave's neck, hands, and feet. It was obviously of a metal origin, rusted, and about 190cm long (see image 6).



Image 6: The Iron Chain

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The Weighing Point

The weighing point consisted of a hook and scale, both located within the slave fort. Although the scale is currently not present, oral history states that this was where slaves were weighed before being branded for identification by merchants. The weight of the slaves determined the type of exchange that would take place. For example, exchanged items included beads, mirrors, textiles, bar iron, hardware, arms, gunpowder, liquor, basins, knives, locks, belts, swords, clocks, paintings, beer, copper rods, manillas, brass, wires, cowries, and clothing accessories such as hats, umbrellas, and walking sticks.

The Hook: The hook is connected to an iron bar and is said to have held the scale in suspension. The hook is obviously of metal origin and has rusted over time (see image 7).



Image 7: The Hook

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The Branding Point- The branding point has two components as described below.

The Branding Rod: This arrow-shaped rod was identified within the slave fort and said to have been an instrument used for branding or placing identity marks on the bodies of the enslaved by the merchants. The arrow-shaped rod was heated in the branding furnace and used to place identity marks on the enslaved persons. The markings were basically the initials of the European merchants used as a form of identification. These identity marks may have been written by the African middle-

men, possibly partially literate, or by the European merchants. The arrow-shaped rod was obviously of metal origin, rusted, and about 110cm long (see image 8).

Branding Furnace: This feature was identified within the slave fort and said to be where fire was set. The furnace frame has a length of 197cm and a width of 123cm, while the furnace cover has a length of 172cm and a width of 103cm. More so, the furnace place had a heat outlet where the branding rod was heated and used to apply identity body marks on the slaves by the merchants. The outer circle diameter of the furnace outlet is about 26cm, while the inner circle diameter is about 12cm. The branding furnace was built using metal and has rusted over time (see images 9 and 10).



▲ *Image 8: The Branding Rod*



▲ *Image 9: Branding Furnace*



◀ *Image 10: Close view of the Furnace Outlet*

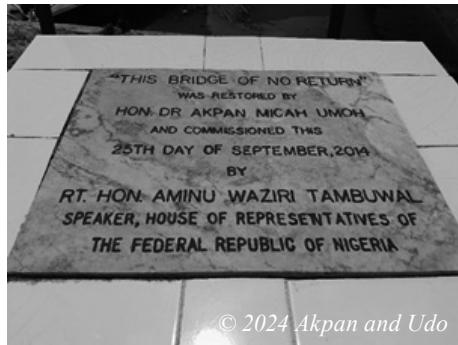
The Bridge Signage

The bridge signage was restored by Hon. Dr. Akpan Micah Umoh and commissioned on the 25th of September, 2014, by Rt. Hon. Aminu Waziri Tambuwal, Speaker, House of Representatives of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The signage is crested “this jetty was first built in 1795 by the Europeans for the purpose of conveying slaves into waiting ships; it is a floating jetty and has three major underground holding compartments which were used in storing very stubborn slaves.” The bridge signage

was obviously of metal origin, and an epitaph was built and inscribed in front of it (see images 11 and 12).



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▲ *Image 11: The Bridge Signage*

▲ *Image 12: Close view of the Signage Inscription*

The Bridge of No Return

According to the bridge signage, this feature, called “the Bridge of No Return,” was built in 1795, possibly by the British who were actively involved in the slave trade in this region. It was the passage taken by the slaves that led to the slave ships waiting to embark on the Middle Passage (which is the second voyage in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, from Africa to the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean). According to the signage, this feature was nicknamed “Bridge of No Return” because once a slave stepped on it; they were not allowed to look back and never returned. The length of the bridge is about 1440cm, and its width is about 168cm. The bridge’s height from ground level is about 137cm, while the height of the bridge railings is about 125cm. The length of the steps is about 176cm, while the width of the entrance steps is about 286cm. The pillars and walkway of the bridge were built using iron, and due to the wear and tear of time, the bridge is undergoing adverse deterioration. These deterioration include: rusting, some sections of the bridge floor are caving in, tilting, and are being patched using aluminum pans. Additionally, the bridge’s pillars has over time lost its strength due to age and lack of maintenance (see images 13, 14, and 15).



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▲ *Image 13: The Bridge Entrance*



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▲ *Image 14: Eastern view of the Bridge*



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◀ *Image 15: Western view of the Bridge*

Bridge Anchor

The bridge anchor, also known as the floater, functioned over time in dual capacity, where it held the bridge in position and also connected the floor of the bridge with the bunker. It is of metal origin and is also deteriorating. The bridge anchor has a width of about 144cm and its height from the surface of the bunker is about 148cm (see images 16 and 17).



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▲ *Image 16: Bridge Anchor*



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▲ *Image 17: Bridge Anchor*

The Bunker: Three bunkers are connected to the bridge and said to have been underground compartments for storing very stubborn slaves. According to the bridge signage, the bunker has a capacity for 30 slaves, but about 150 slaves were stored there at any given time. This gives the study an idea of the estimated number of enslaved persons that were kept in the forts at a particular time, which is speculated to have been about a thousand or fewer. The bunker has the following features: the bunker cover, the metal steps, the inner walls, and the air vent. The entire length of the external part of the bunker is about 1148cm and 409cm wide.

- **The Bunker Cover:** The bunker has three metal covers, which has a diameter of 82cm, used in enclosing the opening that gives access to the bunker. The opening, on the other hand, has a diameter of 77cm and is used to access the bunker (see images 18 and 19).
- **The Metal Steps:** The metal steps has a height of 170cm and were used in descending and ascending the bunker. It was observed to be deteriorating as the last step has fallen off (see images 20 and 21).
- **The Interior of the Bunker:** The interior of the bunker has a height of 220cm, a width of 400cm, and a length of 360cm. It was the compartment that harbored the stubborn slaves. The bunker was obviously built using concrete and iron rods, and having lasted for over two centuries, the wear and tear of time has led to its adverse deterioration. The inner walls and floor of the bunker are observed to undergo rusting of the inner rods and other leaching effects (see images 22 and 23). Moreover, since the bunker is situated within water, another concern is that water currently seeps into the bunker (see image 24).
- **The Bunker Air Vent:** The bunker has four air vents with a diameter of 18cm. According to oral sources, when briefly opened, the vent allows air into the bunker for the enslaved occupants (Akpan and Udo, 2024 pers. comm.). The distance between the two air vents, internally and externally, is 173cm (see images 25, 26, 27, and 28).



▲ Image 18: The Closed Bunker



▲ Image 19: An Opened Bunker



▲ *Image 20: Iron Steps within the Bunker*



▲ *Image 21: The Broken part of the Iron Steps*



▲ *Image 22: Water seeped within the Bunker*



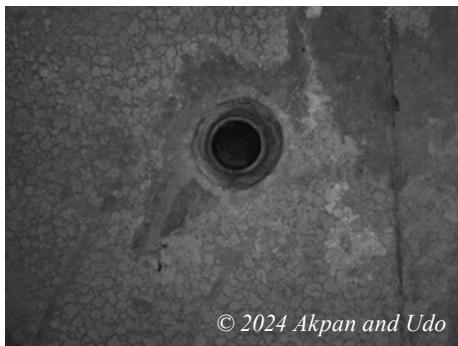
▲ *Image 23: Rusted Inner walls of the Bunker*



▲ *Image 24: Deteriorated Walls within the Bunker*

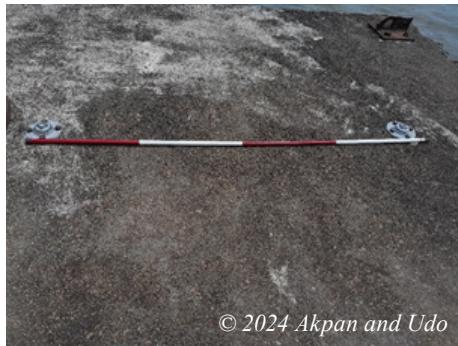


▲ *Image 25: Air vent within the Bunker*



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▲ *Image 26: Air Vent within the Bunker*



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▲ *Image 27: External view of the Bunker Air Vent*



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< *Image 28: Close view of the closed Air Vent*

Manila

Manila was an ancient form of money or barter coinage in the form of a metal bracelet or amulet made of bronze, copper, or brass (Edward, 2013). A rusty metal manila was identified close to the entrance step of the bridge. The diameter of the manila is 13cm, and according to Edward, manilas were first noted at Calabar in West Africa, thus its universal name, *Okpoko*, meaning “money” (Edward, 2013). Different types of manilas were regularly used as a means of exchange in West Africa, especially along the coast of modern-day Nigeria from the 15th Century to the mid-20th Century. While they were used for everyday purchases at the markets, primarily local agricultural and luxury goods, they also became the central currency of the transatlantic slave trade. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British slave traders carried them to the interior of West Africa to procure slaves (Ecoma and Ecoma, 2013). Evidence of manila at the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena did not only suggest its use as a currency for transactions with Europeans, but reflects the type that was likely used during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.



< *Image 29: Manila*

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Administrative Office for Trading

This feature was identified in close proximity to the Bridge of No Return. According to oral source, this structure was the meeting point for the middlemen, possibly an administrative office for trading slaves (Akpan and Udo, 2024, pers. comm.). Although the structure is said to be as old as the fort, it is no longer in its original state, having included features of recent building technology such as concrete blocks. On the one hand, the roof and parts of the structure were obviously old, supporting the claim that it was as old as the fort (see image 30).



< *Image 30: Administrative Office*

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6. Challenges of Fieldwork

In an attempt to carry out an investigation of this magnitude within the study area, the researchers encountered some challenges enlisted below;

- Insufficient funds: For easy implementation of the field plan involving logistics, consultation of state authorized agencies and local community, the unavailability of funds proved to be one of the major challenges of this research. Howbeit, this investigation was fully funded by the limited resources generated solely by the researchers.
- Dearth of Scholarly Research- Due to the paucity of historical and most especially archaeological research within Akwa Ibom State, very limited knowledge exists among the people of the community on the significance of the relics. By

implication, this greatly affected the collection of adequate data within the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena.

- Lack of Awareness- As a result of the aforementioned factor, a severe lack of historical consciousness has hindered the people's inability to preserve the heritage within the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena. This colossal setback has further accelerated the rapid deterioration of the relics resulting in the loss of both immaterial and material evidence such as the scale, chains and other artifacts. For instance, the only chain that exists in the fort was deliberately preserved by the tour guide which otherwise would have been completely lost if the deliberate intervention did not occur. It is necessary to point out that during the peak of the trade, as earlier discussed, about 20 to 30 canoes every two weeks carrying 20 to 30 enslaved persons were brought to the area prior to the construction of the fort. As a result of the number of enslaved persons that departed from the fort, the latter likely housed many chains which must have been used to hold down a great number of the enslaved. However, only one chain exists at the site (see image 6).
- Natural Factors- In line with the human factors discussed above, natural causes from the Imo River being a tributary of the Atlantic Ocean with its high tides along with the extended passage of time has substantially catalyzed the wears and tears of the relics. In addition to this, the lack of maintenance culture by the appropriate authorities has contributed immensely to the site's present predicament.

7. A Discourse on the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena

The history of the slave trade in Ikot Abasi, as previously discussed, indicates that significant slave trading activities occurred in the area during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade period. While scholars such as Uya (2012) and Abasiattai (1990) have extensively documented the history of the Lower Cross River Basin and Old Calabar with regards to slave trading activities in those regions, there are few written records discussing the relics identified within the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena. These relics, which include the fort, the Bridge of No Return, bunkers, and other internal artifacts, are all key components of the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade site. The entry signage clearly states that the Bridge of No Return was built in 1795. Although it is uncertain whether other relics, such as the fort, were constructed in the same year, it can be speculated that they were all built around the same period.

Regarding raw materials, one can speculate that the different relics were not built using indigenous materials but rather from hardware imported by the Europeans. This speculation is built around the evaluation of the materials in comparison with locally indigenous ones, as those employed in the construction of the arena are intrinsic to the Europeans. More so, the manpower used to erect the various components of the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena could have plausibly been indigenous, albeit with European supervision.

The signage indicates that the Europeans carried out the construction, though this information was presented without disclosing the builder's nationality. This

inadequate information is due to the dearth of research carried out on the Arena. However, based on written evidence regarding slave trading activities in the area, this study asserts that the British slavers were likely the builders of the architectural features and relics evident in the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena. The interpretations largely inform this assertion of the written sources, which support the extensive trade between the British and Old Calabar.

Although other Europeans, such as the Portuguese, Spanish, and French, occasionally traded in this region, British slave merchants dominated the slave trade in Old Calabar. Latham suggests that by the 17th century, the British had already begun trading humans in Old Calabar, as evidenced by John Watts, an English sailor, who sailed there in 1668. Latham also indicated that trade in the area had existed for some time before 1668, and by 1672, many British ships were leaving Old Calabar (Latham, 1973). Lovejoy and Richardson support this by noting that much of the evidence regarding credit arrangements in the Old Calabar slave trade comes from British sources, particularly between 1760 and 1807. During the 18th century, as shipments at the ports peaked, the trade relations between the British and Africans became increasingly sophisticated (Lovejoy and Richardson, 1997).

To further strengthen this argument, Kenneth Morgan states that Britain dominated the trade from the Bight of Biafra and, by a considerable margin, was the most important region in West Africa for British slave merchants as their imperium in that region was unmatched elsewhere in Atlantic Africa. They accounted for more than two-thirds of the slave trade from the region between 1525 and 1859 (Morgan, 2016). Philip Curtin postulates that, from 1690 to 1807, about 776,400 slave ships departed the Bight of Biafra for England (Curtin, 1969).

The British were the primary trading partners of the Efik, who were slave traders from Old Calabar. It is important to note that the English were astute capitalists and bourgeoisies, who only often invest their resources in areas where profits were significant and beneficial to their merchants, financial corporations, and the broader British imperial economy. This study argues that other European powers would unlikely invest in constructing the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena, especially if the profits from human cargo were minimal for them. Competition among European slave traders was extremely high during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the national interests of each trading nation were fundamental principles that they held sacrosanct. Thus, the surplus and the tides of trade in Old Calabar were financially rewarding to the British, which must have led to the construction of the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena by the English. The British built a great presence in Old Calabar which was unrivalled by any other European nation, having a far reaching impact which eventually led to the cultural diffusion of Efik norms and lifestyle with the British culture. In addition, the trade between the British and the Efik during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade aided in no small measure in the establishment of powerful Efik City states in Old Calabar such as Creek Town, Old Town, New Town, Archibong Town, Cobham Town, Henshaw Town and Eyamba Town during this period.

These Efik towns were established by a strong syndicate of slave trading families who dominated the trade in the area for centuries, they include: the Robin Johns, Eyambas, Dukes, Henshaws, Honestys, Ebros, Ephraims, Ecricocks, Tom Egbos, Ambos, and the Cobhams (Behrendt, Latham and Nortrup, 2010). The Efik's expansive interaction with the British led to the smooth transition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade into legitimate trade, which ultimately paved the way for the British occupation of the Lower Cross River region of Nigeria.

Future archaeological research on the lands and waters in and around the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena would provide more insight into the slave trading activities, especially those that occurred in the Akwa-Ibom area. It is important to point out that relics such as the Slave fort found in Ikot Abasi are currently not found anywhere along the coasts of the Old South-Eastern region of Nigeria, except for similar ones in Badagry, Lagos state, which is geographically situated in the Bight of Benin in Western Nigeria. Although former slave depots existed along the Bonny, Calabar, and Opobo coastal communities, however, the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena stands as the only Slave fort of its kind along the coasts of the Lower Cross River area.

8. Conclusion

This research has documented a significant amount of information regarding the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade activities in the Ikot Abasi area. The material evidence found along the coast of Ikot Abasi confirms that these extensive activities persisted for centuries. The survey result has not only helped establish the extent of the slave trade in this region but has also contributed to creating a site map that reflects the spatial distribution of archaeological relics related to the slave trade. Moreover, the study highlights the obvious threats these relics face from natural and human activities, emphasizing the urgent need for conservation strategies to prevent further deterioration or loss. As this is a pioneering study in the area, its archaeological and historical significance to Atlantic scholarship has been revealed, advocating for further investigation to address chronological and socio-cultural questions that may provide useful insight into the people of Ikot Abasi. Ultimately, this study has placed the Ikot Abasi Slave Trade Arena on the global archaeological map and serves as a foundation heralding the need for further research into the archaeology of the Akwa Ibom area as a whole. ☀

Notes

The Ikot Abasi area is located in the Bight of Biafra along with the latter's other prominent cities such as Bonny and Old Calabar. It is important to note that the Efik, Aro, and Bonny peoples were all traders in this region. The term "Old Calabar" can be ambiguous and used in different contexts. Geographically, it refers to the Efik city-states, while in British pre-colonial terminology, it denotes the specific areas from which enslaved individuals were captured. Additionally, it is also used to refer to the Efik people themselves.

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List of Informants

S/No	NAME	Age	Gender	Occupation	Type of Information	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
1	Hon. Abraham Usen	57	Male	An Elder and Politician	Settlement History and Slave Trade History	Ikot Abasi	2024
2	Hon. Okon Mayen	64	Male	Tourism Supervisor at Local Government	Slave Trade History	Ikot Abasi	2024
3	Mr. Udeme Ukpe Ukpe	36	Male	Civil Servant/ Field Guide	Slave Trade History and General History	Ikot Abasi	2024
4	Mrs. Cyrilla Effiong Bassey	45	Female	Volunteer Staff of the Local Government and Tour Guide	Slave Trade History	Ikot Abasi	2024
5	Ms. Favour Frank Enoidem	28	Female	Field Guide	General History	Ikot Abasi	2024
6	Mr. Aniekan Livingstone Malvin	31	Male	Hotel Manager	Settlement History/ Slave Trade History	Ikot Abasi	2024