Now McIntosh has been joined by assistant professor of anthropology Jeffrey Fleisher, whose research along the east coast of Africa complements McIntosh’s focus on western Africa. “Rice has established a significant reputation in African archaeology,” McIntosh said. “A decision was made to build on our strengths in the field, with a special focus on complex societies.”

The complex societies McIntosh and Fleisher study differ significantly. For one thing, the earliest finds at Jenne-jeno date back farther than the city-states along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts; Jenne-jeno is the earliest documented example of urbanism in sub-Saharan Africa. Still, it and the Kenyan and Tanzanian city-states were indigenous African urban societies that thrived for centuries and that now offer a wealth of information for scholars and researchers about how those societies were organized and how they interacted with other societies through trade and other activities.

One problem for archaeologists trying to reconstruct the African past is the ongoing destruction of archaeological heritage due to development projects, such as dams, and the looting of sites for art objects. In Mali, where terracotta statuettes were fashioned in antiquity, this is a particular problem. Site destruction doesn’t affect just archaeologists. Because archaeological sites are cultural resources that can serve as a focus for tourism, their destruction also affects local communities that suffer a loss of economic opportunity.

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“Susan and I are committed to the archaeological of Africa, but we’re also worried about the cultural heritage.”
—Jeffrey Fleisher

The Rice Archaeological Field School continues to take small groups of U.S. students to Senegal every summer for excavation work. According to McIntosh, plans call for alternating between Gorée Island and Pemba Island. The program, which offers up to six credit hours, is open to both graduate students and undergraduates with prior course work in African history or archaeology.

Fleisher said the anthropology department’s commitment to African archaeology does not just amount to research for research’s sake. “We want our research to document a past that is important to the present,” he said, “but we also want the results to have a local impact by training African students to become good custodians of their cultural resources.”

—Franz Brotzen