

■ GUINEA

Preliminary Archaeological Reconnaissance of Sites Related to the Slave Trade Era along the Upper Rio Pongo, Guinea

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In January 2006, a preliminary archaeological reconnaissance was conducted by Kenneth G. Kelly at a series of sites along the upper Rio Pongo, approximately 120 km north of Conakry, Guinea (Figure 1). The project was conducted in cooperation with faculty of the Université Lansana Conté de Sonfonia de Conakry, the Guinea Ministry of Tourism, FONDIS, and the Musée Nationale in Conakry. The goals of this preliminary project were to assess the archaeological potential of the Rio Pongo region for the investigation of the impacts and consequences of the slave trade in the late 18th and 19th century. Located in the Upper Guinea Coast, this region was an important source of captive Africans during the 18th century. However, the Rio Pongo became increasingly important during the 19th century, when a number of European, American, and African traders developed a sophisticated trade in slaves and other goods (Mouser 1971). This 19th century trade is particularly interesting as it was “illegal”, since it took place after the 1807-08 abolition of the slave trade north of the equator. It was aided by the presence of sand bars at the river mouth that prevented entrance of the large vessels of the British Anti-Slave Trading squadron. In addition, some European and American traders entered into political and sexual liaisons with elite women in the region, founding trading families that continued to be active in the slave trade until the late 19th century. One such trader, an American from Charleston, South Carolina named Stiles Lightbourn, married a local “queen” known as Niara Bely (the daughter of a local Luso-African chief

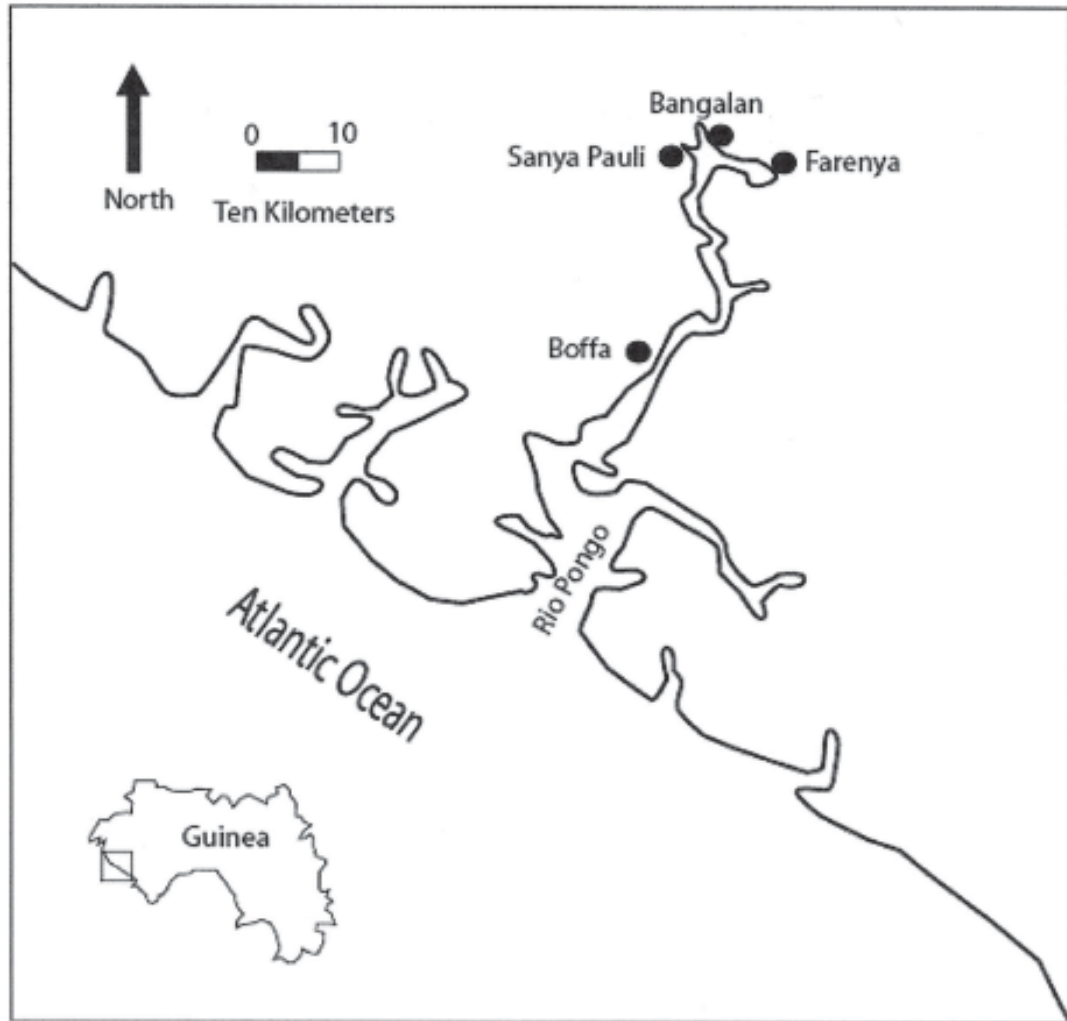
named Emmanuel Gomez Jr.) and she maintained a trading establishment at Farenya, at the head of navigation on the tidal Rio Pongo (Montgomery 2006) (Figure 2).

Farenya

An archaeological reconnaissance was conducted with the assistance of Farenya residents. It involved visiting a series of loci within and adjacent to the present-day village of Farenya. A number of archaeological sites were identified associated with a wide range of activities, including an earthen mound representing the remains of the “palace” and trading establishment of Niara Bely, the ruins of a masonry defensive battery or platform complete with cannon, the site of the slave “barracoon” or holding pen at Balandougou just outside Farenya, and a probable domestic habitation near the ruins of the first Anglican church at Farenya. The archaeological sites in and around Farenya vary in degree of preservation and integrity. Some, such as the gun platform, have been eroded due to natural causes, but are still identifiable as being constructed of mud bricks. The ruins of the “palace” attributed to Niara Bely are in fairly poor condition due to activities such as the mining of soil for mud brick manufacture, and more recent attempts at “improving” the site. The ruins themselves, an imposing earthen mound over 2 meters in height, probably correspond to a two storey mud brick building. Artifacts including pipe stems, local ceramics, imported whiteware ceramics and glass, nails, and lead shot are present in the soil of the mound itself and on the surrounding ground surface (Figure 3). Unfortunately, a recent local initiative to promote tourism at Farenya involved an attempt to produce a concrete block “reconstruction” of the “palace” structure. In addition to building the concrete block shell of a building atop the ruins, a basement was excavated into the mound, destroying between one third and one half of the archaeological deposit. Between the reconstruction and the basement excavation, little of the “palace” archaeological deposits remain which are in good context or accessible to archaeological research, although it is possible that deposits associated with outbuildings remain in the area surrounding the mound.

Other aspects of the archaeological survey at Farenya proved more promising, however. The lo-

Figure 1: Upper Rio Pongo site locations.



cation of the ruins of the first church at Farenya, founded in the early 1880s and dedicated on January 2, 1882 (Barrow 1969:154; Montgomery 1999:18), are, contrary to Diallo’s observations in 1969 (Diallo 1970:52-53), still extant, with the stone foundations of the small (7.5 x 12.5 m) church remaining visible today. A very brief reconnaissance of the surrounding exposed area identified a concentration of archaeological material about 50 meters distant. (Dense brush cover obscured ground visibility in many areas at Farenya and elsewhere). These artifacts, local ceramics, imported ceramics including whitewares and a French faience ointment pot, glass bottle fragments, imported smoking pipe, and shellfish remains,

as well as several rock alignments and probable wall foundation segments, likely correspond to one or more domestic habitations. The artifacts present date to the late nineteenth century, and given their proximity to the church ruins may well be associated with the first church at Farenya, and may be also related to the presbytery or school known to have been present (Diallo 1970:52-53).

The site of the “barracoon” at Balandougou is also quite interesting. This area, approximately 600 meters from the river and the “palace” of Niara Bely, is beyond the limits of the present day village, and according to village residents, Farenya never ex-

Figure 2: Upper Rio Pongo.



tended that far from the river. Therefore it is unlikely that any artifacts would be associated with village activities. Although no remains of structures were visible here, an extensive scatter of local pottery was present on the surface. This pottery could correspond to the activities of feeding captives prior to their embarkment on slave ships. The local ceramics present appear to be the same type that was found at both the church site and the “palace site,” suggesting contemporaneity with these 19th century sites. The lack of visible architectural remains is not surprising, given that a slave holding area would be unlikely to consist of more than lightly built or temporary shelters of wood and thatch.

Further afield from Farenya, on the south bank of the Rio Pongo about 1 km downstream, is Gnanya, the port associated with the region called “Mullataria”

where the offspring of Lightbourn and Niara Bely established their homes. Local tradition states that these two storey homes were quite impressive. Although it was not possible to visit the area where the houses of the Lightbourn/Bely descendants were located due to dense brush cover, a reconnaissance of the river bank at the port revealed the presence of 19th century bottle glass and whiteware ceramics consistent with the attribution of the site. Also noted, but not explored, were the locations of an early 20th century Lebanese trading establishment, and Colonial-era ruins in Farenya. All of the archaeological sites in and around Farenya were characterized by mid 19th century artifacts, principally bottle glass of French and British origin, and a variety of British whitewares. Curiously, almost no pearlware, and no creamware, was found at Farenya, suggesting that

Figure 3: Selected artifacts identified at Farenya.



Figure 4: Lightbourn house mound, Bangalan.



Figure 5: Lightbourn house and cannon.



Figure 6: Faber house mound.



Figure 7: Surface artifacts at Sanya Pauli.

the intensity of occupation and trade during the 1810s and 1820s was substantially less than later in the 19th century. Local ceramics were present at all sites as well, and based on visual inspection, were apparently all of the same type suggesting that the sites are roughly contemporaneous. The lack of earlier materials affirms local traditions that state that Farenya was established as a village after Niara Bely's trading establishment was founded.

Bangalan

As the Rio Pongo trading region consisted of more than the trading establishment at Farenya, an archaeological reconnaissance was also completed at two other site complexes in the upper Rio Pongo, adjacent to the present day villages of Sanya Pauli and Bangalan (see Figure 1 for locations). Bangalan was the location of a trading establishment associated with Niara Bely and Lightbourn, as well as other

traders, and as it was the terminus of trade routes coming from the Futa Jallon in the interior, it was an important trade center from at least the 1790s. The site of the trading complex is located at some distance from the present-day village of Bangalan, and includes a large earthen mound about 1.2 meters high and 15 meters long that local tradition asserts was the home of Lightbourn and Niara Bely before they relocated to Farenya in 1809 (Figure 4). However, it is worth noting that when Diallo visited this site in 1969, local residents told him this ruin was the house of John Ormond, another trader active in the area (Diallo 1970:25). A reconnaissance of the surrounding area revealed a cannon as well as indications that other low mounds may be present in the adjacent bush, and they may possibly be the remains of warehouses and other buildings associated with the trading enterprise (Figure 5). The ground surface surrounding the Lightbourn house was littered with artifacts including creamwares, pearlwares and

Figure 8: Sanya Pauli port.

whitewares, bottle glass as well as a gunflint. The presence of creamware and pearlware ceramics at Bangalan, and not at Farenaya, clearly indicates that trading activities began earlier at Bangalan than at Farenaya, or for that matter, Sanya Pauli. Stretching over 100 meters between the Lightbourn house and the port, a substantial paved masonry ramp and road is still present. Further inland from the Lightbourn house is a large area with imported glass and ceramics as well as considerable quantities of locally manufactured pottery. Additionally, a single blue bead was found during the reconnaissance. Although no structural remains are visible in this area, the nature of the archaeological materials suggests that this area is very likely the site of the contemporary village associated with the trading post.

Sanya Pauli

The archaeological reconnaissance also investigated the sites in and around the village of Sanya Pauli, originally established as Freeport by the Sierra Leone Company in 1795, and home to several traders before Paul Faber established his trading center (Montgomery 2006). According to local traditions, the visible ruins were associated with Paul Faber (for whom the village was named), a rival trader to Lightbourn, and consist of a large earthen mound local history says is his house, several concentrations of French roofing tiles probably associated with storage facilities or warehouses, and the port area where cargos were loaded and unloaded. The house mound is quite substantial, over 2 meters in height, which suggests that it is the remains of a two storey mud brick structure (Figure 6). It is ideally suited, over-

looking the port area less than 100 meters to the south. Just north of the Faber house, in dense bush, is at least one rock-covered grave. Although current oral tradition does not attribute it to any particular person, it could well be the grave of Paul Faber who died in Guinea. However it should be noted that there is some uncertainty about the date of death of Paul Faber, as Mouser argues that the foreign-born Faber was crucial politically after 1835 (Mouser 1971:183), and Enoch Ware, a New England merchant active in the region in 1842-43 mentions a person who appears to the same Paul Faber (Bennett and Brooks 1965:310). The attribution of life span to Faber is further complicated by the fact that his Euro-African son was also named Paul Faber. Whitewares abound at Sanya Pauli, although there are some pearlwares present. Large quantities of bottle fragments, both cylindrical "wine" bottles and case bottles suggest a considerable trade in liquor occurred at Sanya Pauli (Figure 7). The presence of the French roofing tiles marked "Marseilles" probably dating to the late 19th or 20th century attests to the continued role Sanya Pauli played in the Rio Pongo trade. West of the house is a large pit from which earth was dug for construction of houses, and beyond that further to the west along a slight ridge is a concentration of 19th century artifacts and locally manufactured pottery that extends for over 200 meters along the ridge. The domestic characteristic of the artifacts and their location on a slight rise suggests that this deposit probably indicates the location of the local village that was contemporary with the trading establishment. At the south end of this ridge there is a cannon that still lying within the ruins of a mud brick masonry battery or fortification overlooking the port area (Figure 8). Northwest of the present-day village of Sanya Pauli is the site of an early Anglican church and school. Near the church are four graves, one of which is said to belong to Paul Faber and the others are said to be those of priests. Given that this church was founded in 1856 when the Euro-African Paul Faber requested the presence of West Indian Church Missionary Reverend Hamble A. Leacock in late April of that year (Barrow 1969:55-56), and Paul Faber appears to have died before that, the attribution of the grave to the foreign-born Faber is probably erroneous. It may, however, be the grave of his son, Paul Faber.

Conclusions

The results of this archaeological reconnaissance were the identification, documentation, and recording of the presence and location of significant archaeological sites associated with the slave trade of the late 18th and 19th century along the Rio Pongo. The archaeological remains are important and will be able to contribute significantly to our understanding of the social and historical dynamics of the Rio Pongo region during the period of the "illegal" slave trade during the 19th century. At the conclusion of the fieldwork, a one-day public conference at the just-renamed Université Lansana Conté de Sonfonia de Conakry presented the results of this work to students, faculty, and other interested individuals. The initial work reported here is expected to be the first stage in a long-term project investigating the Rio Pongo region, a project that will also provide training opportunities for Guinean students of history and archaeology, and partnerships with the National Museum and National Library as well as the Université Lansana Conté de Sonfonia de Conakry.

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