

## **CSI: Oursi hu-beero, Burkina Faso**

Lucas Petit, Maya von Czerniewicz and Christoph Pelzer

### **Introduction**

If you would turn on the television this evening, chances are pretty high to drop into one of the many CSI series. Crime scenes are brought straight into your living room, blurring the borders between fiction and reality. This recent familiarity with aggressive societies has somewhat overshadowed the fact that crimes have occurred since the very early beginnings. Investigations on ancient bones have illuminated several, mostly isolated cases of intentional crime. The cause and manner of death could often be evaluated, however information concerning the actual crime-scene is very rare. The main reason for this omission is that the ancient human remains are not often discovered at the place of murder.

During the excavation work of Oursi hu-beero, a site situated in the north of Burkina Faso, an archaeological crime scene was discovered, where the victims were still located at the place of their unexpected death. The whole scene was found with hardly any signs of post-depositional disturbances. The ideal situation for forensic researchers except for the fact that the crime happened some 1000 years ago. Excavations at the site were conducted by the Universities of Frankfurt and Ouagadougou in 2000 and 2001. A large part of the burned complex was uncovered revealing interesting details and numerous objects that gave a good idea about West African daily life around 1100 AD (Hallier & Petit 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Petit & Hallier 2000; Czerniewicz *et al.* 2005).

### **Crime discovery**

On the 13th of February 2001 fragments of a skull appeared from under the roof debris. Speculations started immediately among our team members about the manner and cause of death. Twelve days later a second individual was discovered, damaged but still sitting in an upright position. However, the most complete skeleton appeared on the 27th of February 2001. Our idea of an intentional crime became more plausible after intensive research of the bones some 6 month later.

### **Crime scene**

Oursi hu-beero is situated in the middle of a group of settlement mounds, north of a chain of dunes and the modern village of Oursi (Fig. 1). Fertile plains, abundant wild life and drinking water supply humans and their livestock with excellent environmental conditions now and also in the past. In the time Oursi hu-beero was inhabited, several dispersed complexes were standing in the vicinity, housing approximately 200 people.

The plan of Oursi hu-beero shows circular and irregular rooms (Fig. 2). After years of intensive research we have a good idea of the different functions of these spaces, from which most were roofed. Stratigraphical analysis suggest that the roof was also used for daily activities and holding numerous vessels, grinding stones and other equipment. The inhabitants were engaged in agriculture, animal herding, hunting, fishing and trading.

### **Crime victims (Fig. 3)**

In the middle of the complex, between two large rectangular pillars the bones of a male adult, probably in his 30s, were discovered. He had fallen on his back with the bent legs placed over roof debris. The skull was completely shattered, and fragments were found some 40cm away from the original location. Also other bones reveal evidence of the weight of the roof that had finally buried him. One of his legs was resting on roof debris, indicating that part of the roof had collapsed before he fell. This fact seems essential for the reconstruction of the circumstances of his death; it suggests that the individual was situated on the roof during the last moments of his life. Assuming that it took a while before the fire had destroyed the building, this individual must have been unconscious or dead before part of the roof broke down.

Smaller bones were discovered in the eastern part of the house, directly behind a pillar. It was a somewhat spooky discovery scene, in which the bones of this 5-6 years old child were still in an upright position. It was clear from the excavation results that the child had hidden itself behind the pillar in a dark corner of the house. The skull reveals a fracture, most probably caused by fallen roof material, however at this moment it remains obscure if this was the final cause of death.

The third individual was discovered in a passage in the western part of the complex. The bones belong to an approximately 30 year old female, with an indicative height of  $153 \pm 4$ cm. Without knowing anything about the real parental relationships between the victims, this person makes the hypothetical family, so to say, complete. More important for the purpose of this paper, however, are the clear signs of a head injury this individual bears. On the right side of the skull the ear bone was cut off by a sharp blade. The blow came from behind, suggesting the woman was moving away from her attacker. The complete removal of this bone assumes the cut continued downwards and had injured also part of her neck. Before she passed away, her fingers contracted into the loose sandy cover of the floor.

### **Crime reconstruction**

It is not very difficult to imagine the last moments of these unlucky inhabitants. Males were most likely the prior target for aggressors, and we propose here that the man on the second floor was killed first. In the meantime the child and probably the woman were trying to escape or hide, without much success as

we find out some 1000 years later. Even though the women ran away, the attacker gave her the fatal blow in the passage, not too far from the house entrance.

### **Crime time**

Can we get closer to the actual time of murder? Three C14 dates have been analyzed, which give unfortunately space for some discussions. A short-living organic sample from the debris resulted in a calibrated date of 895-992 AD, while two charred wood samples taken from building material brought in a much later date, namely between 1024 till 1152 AD. More dates are necessary to solve this question, however until new results are available we consider the latest two samples as more reliable. Pottery and other finds confirm a date around 1100 AD.

During what season and day time were the inhabitants murdered? The following information derived from work of Alexa Höhn and Stefanie Kahlheber from the university of Frankfurt, to whom we are most grateful. The storage bins were filled with botanic remains, assuming some kind of stocking. But they also contained traces of insects that will normally appear after the products had stood there quite a long time, possibly at the end of the dry season. The content of some of the coprolites state this result, although not conclusively. A third argument to assume the house was set on fire at the end of the dry season was the discovery of *Guiera senegalensis*. These trees stay in full leaf in the dry season and were possibly used as animal fodder at Oursi hu-beero. Secondary evidence that the house was not destroyed during the rainy season was a large number of pottery vessels on the collapsed roof.

Today most inhabitants of West Africa sleep on the roof during the dry season and it may be suggested that this was also the case in the past. The Oursi inhabitants were not killed in their sleep. The child in the eastern room, for example, had fled for the attackers into a dark corner and seems not to have been on the roof at that particular moment. Hardly any animals were in the house, suggesting they were looking for food outside. Even though this is all secondary evidence, we suggest the attackers came by day light, maybe in the early morning or late afternoon, to avoid the intensive midday heat.

### **Crime extent**

More architectural complexes were standing at Oursi. The remains were all burned, and reveal identical mudbrick shapes and pillars as were discovered at Oursi hu-beero. Additionally, these buildings form in all cases one of the latest occupation phases of the site. At this point we propose that the whole village was burned down and most inhabitants killed. The re-burying of the death, as is a regular phenomenon if relatives and friends had survived, did not occur here.

### **Crime suspects**

Compared to CSI New York, Navy CSI and other similar broadcastings we are clearly at a disadvantage. Nobody to interrogate and no fingerprints on murder weapons. The only prints we got came from ceramic vessels and on the building elements – and these are of course not likely to be from the aggressors. What do we have? From the injuries of the women, we know that she was killed by a person, taller than 1.53m and right handed. This includes most of world's population.

Let us exclude some of the possibilities with simple common sense. These are not facts; they are interpretation and speculations waiting for comments and adjustments. The whole village was set on fire, making an internal local dispute not very likely. The people seem to have been completely surprised, which hints at a fast attack, probably by horsemen. The main actors were not looking for items or slaves while most, if not everything was left in the house, including possible future slaves. Supposing an entirely rational and economic approach, this excludes bandits or slave raiders as possible suspects. The attack seems an act of politically and strategically violence.

Can we connect these archaeological discoveries to a historical process or event? In the latter half of the 11th century AD the Almoravids had strongly intervened in the affairs of the Ghana empire (Kea 2004: 790). Maybe the latter had not really captured the area, but influences of this Berber dynasty were seen further into the Middle Niger region, to the evenly strong kingdom of Gao (Insoll 1996, 2000). Most of the historical sources report fights and attacks during this period (e.g. al-Bakri), and it is possible that some disputes took place at the borders or hinterlands of these empires, like the area around Oursi hu-beero.

Are we thus able to attribute the destruction of Oursi to the clashes between the Ghana empire and the Almoravids in the 11th century AD? No, the historical sources available do not enable us to write such a detailed history of events. But we know of an event that happened for sure: the destruction of Oursi hu-beero. And we also know of the fact that Ghana had an army of 200,000 men from which many were horse warriors, so that attacks like the one that destroyed Oursi were clearly a possibility (Levtzion & Hopkins 2001: 81; Kea 2004: 746). Given that the Middle Niger was experiencing major political upheaval at that time, possible repercussions of it, maybe only in the form of a general upsurge of violence on as a consequence of political instability, would not seem to be out of the reasonable scope of historical imagination here.

### **Closing words**

Oursi hu-beero helps us bridging the gap between long term processes of change in archaeology and events that we might in the future combine to write history. For now, this site gives an excellent view of African daily life in the 11th or early 12th century AD, completely frozen by a sudden and brutal destruction, which tragically caused the death of at least three people.

## References

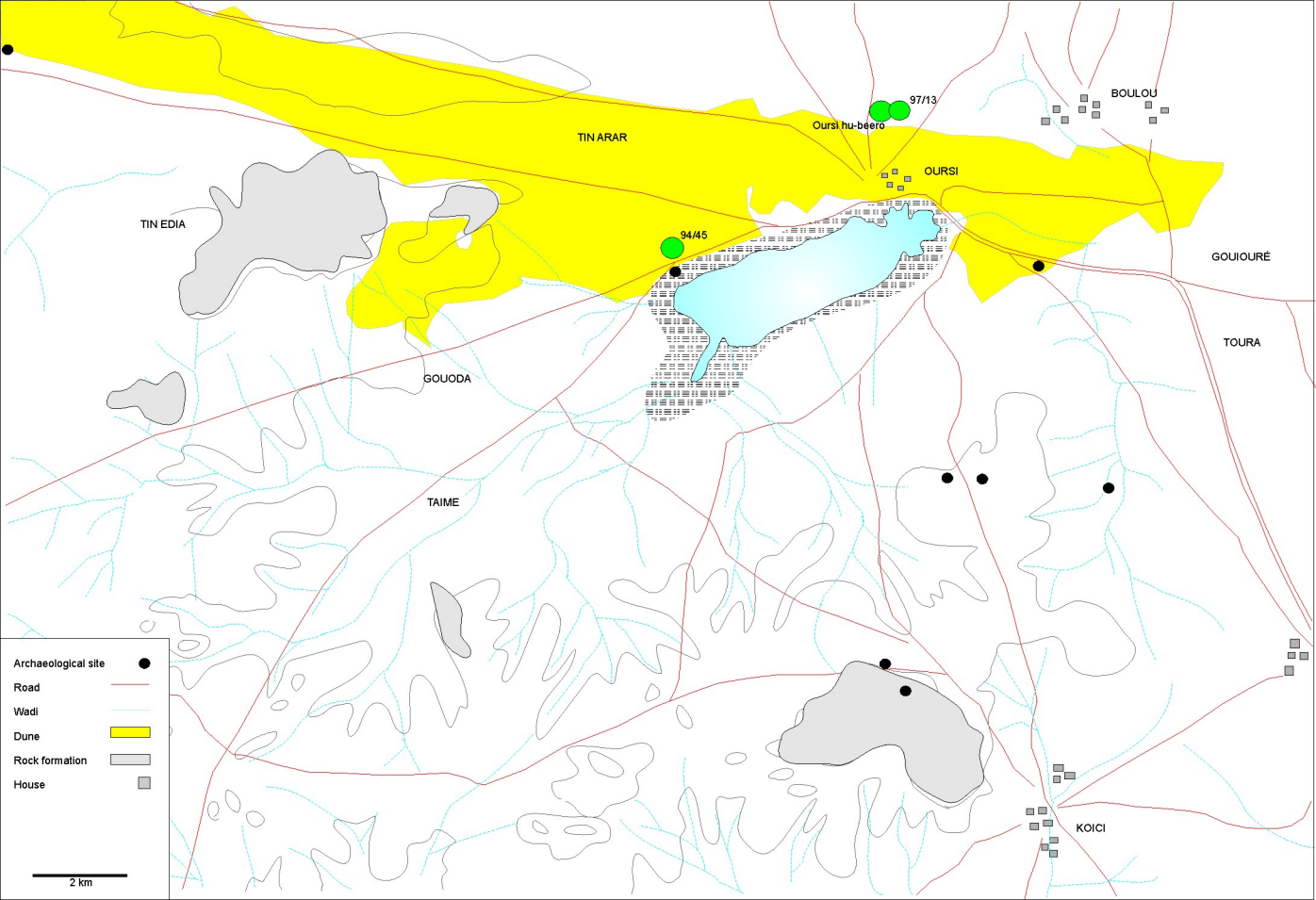
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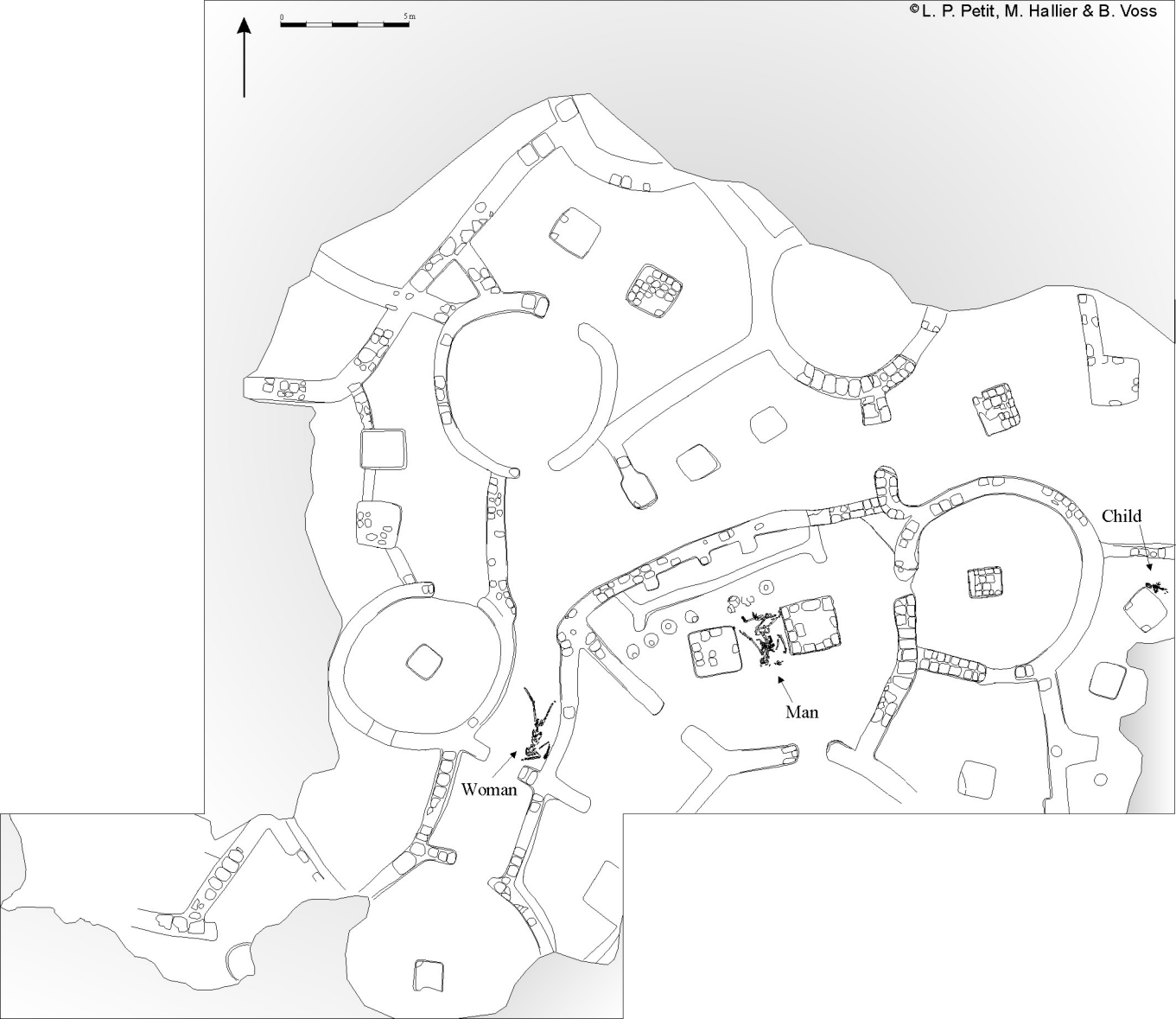
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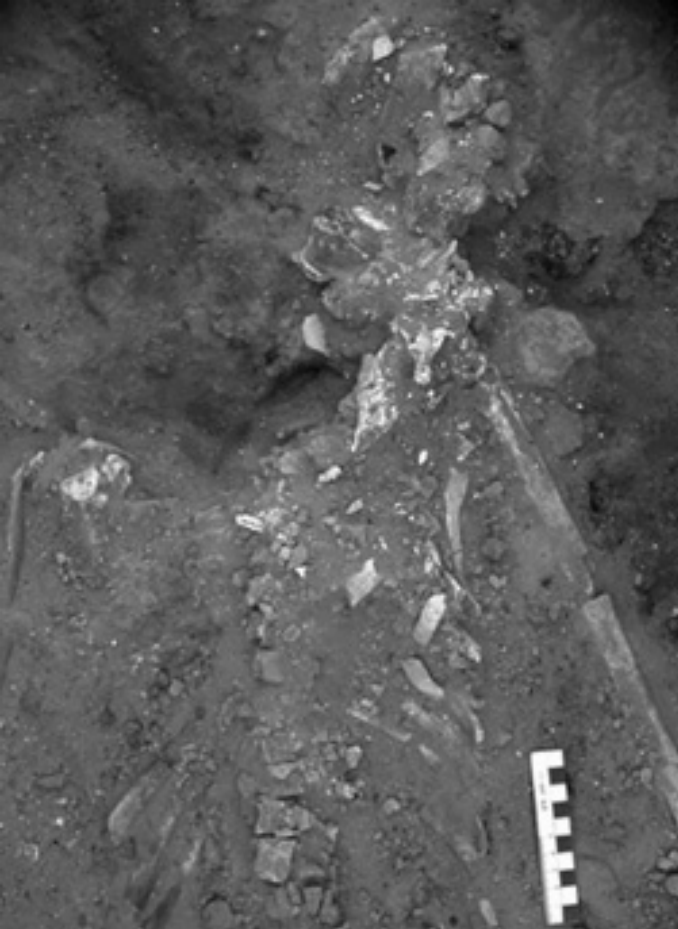
Fig. 1. Map of *Mare d'Oursi* and the location of Oursi hu-beero

Fig. 2. Plan of Oursi hu-beero

Fig. 3. Skeletal remains (left - male, middle - child, right - female)







**Man**



**Child**



**Woman**