Somalia

Medieval Archaeology in Somaliland: the 2018 Field Season of the Incipit-CSIC Project

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Introduction

The Incipit-CSIC Archaeological Mission in Somaliland was launched in 2015 to study the role of trade networks that connected the Horn of Africa with the broader world, and how these economic and cultural interactions led to the development of complex societies and states which were key factors in the history of the Horn from Antiquity to the 19th century. Directed by the Institute of Heritage Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council (Incipit-CSIC) and in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism of Somaliland, the Incipit-CSIC Archaeological Mission has visited and studied about 30 relevant archaeological and historical sites in western, central and northeast Somaliland, and has documented hundreds of minor places – mostly cairns – throughout the country since its beginning (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2017, González-Ruibal *et al.* forthcoming, Torres *et al.* 2017) . The 2018 campaign has focused on the area to the north of Borama in the Awdal region, where a number of medieval sites,the so-called Sultanate of Adal, (15th-16th centuries) have been documented.

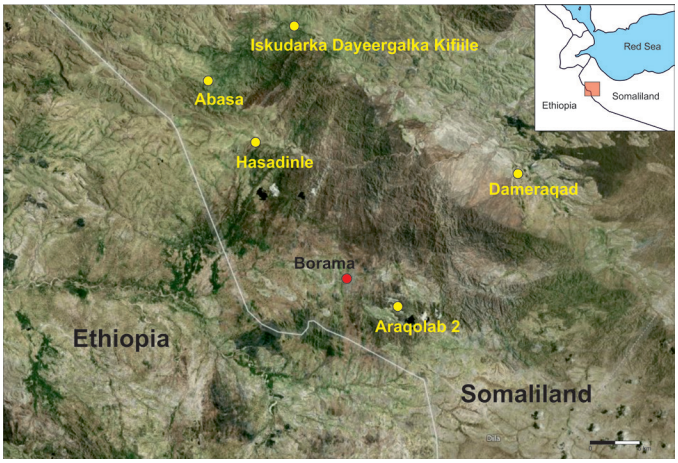

Figure 1: Location of the medieval sites surveyed during the 2018 field season

The existence of medieval sites in western Somaliland was first discovered in the mid-19th century, when Richard Burton described some ruined settlements on his way to Harar (Burton 1894 [1854]: 139, 146). Some of these sites have been revisited and described since the 1930s (Curle 1937, Huntingford 1978, Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2011a). Yet published information is still scarce, consisting of brief descriptions of the sites and collected materials. At the time of the 2018 campaign, 5 of these medieval sites had been documented. Three were published by Alexander Curle (1937) and Neville Chittick (1976), while another was analyzed by the members of the Department of Archaeology of Somaliland but remained unpublished. The fifth was completely unknown before this survey. The CSIC-Incipit work consisted of surveys used to map the sites through drone flights and GPS references, the collection of archaeological materials and the photographing of the most relevant structures in each place. Only in Abasa, the largest site studied during this campaign, was a test pit made in the main mosque of the town to elucidate the existence of previous mosques under the building.

Of the five sites documented during the 2018 field season, four can be classified as towns or villages while the fifth one (Dameraqad) has been interpreted as a religious centre with several mosques and graveyards scattered around one kilometer. The sizes of the settlements (see Figure 2) vary, from around 150 houses in

Name	Extension	Number of houses (aprox.)	Mosques documented	Cemeteries documented	Comments	References
Abasa	43 Ha	150+	2	2	Large building (stronghold?) to the west	(Curle 1937, Chittick 1979, Fauvelle-Aymar 2011a)
Hasandile	10 Ha	50-60	1	No located		Curle 1937
Iskudarka Dayeergalka Kifiile	0,3 Ha	10-15	1	No located	Also known as Abasa 2	Unpublished
Araqolab 2	0,4 Ha	6-8	1	1	Named "2" to differentiate it from another Araqolab found by Alexander Curle in the 1930's	Unpublished
Dameraqad	12 Ha	10-15	6	1	Religious centre, cluster of buildings surrounded by a cemetery and scattered tombs and mosques	(Curle 1937)

Figure 2: Summary of information for the sites surveyed during the 2018 campaign.

Abasa to 6-8 in Aroqolab 2. Regardless of these differences in size, all the sites present remarkable similarities in their physical emplacement, building appearance and material culture. With the exception of Dameraqad, all the sites are located close to a wadi but not immediately by the bank of the river. This location close to alluvial plains, often abandoned meanders which still retain enough humidity to be cultivated, could point to the pre-eminence of agriculture in these sites, against the widespread interpretation of all medieval towns in Somaliland as trade centres. The houses are generally located on the slopes of small hills and surrounded by ravines or small wadis, which could be a protective measure, especially considering the almost permanent state of aggression between the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia and the Sultanate of Adal.

A great uniformity is evident through the appearance of the sites, which have an identical system of construction. Only minor differences can be observed in the size of houses, the type of stones used and the care given to the construction of buildings

With the exception of the Iskudarka Dayeergalka Kifiile site, many lack traces of urbanism; the houses are often scattered along the landscape. This, however, does not imply a lack of spatial ordering: mosques, cemeteries and the topographic position of the sites probably organized the space, and some of the empty spaces between houses were presumably public areas – market places, or squares. Houses are rectangular or square, between 20 to 40 square meters and feature clear partition walls, illustrating two or three rooms per house. The walls are made of well-laid flat stones of medium size, bound with mud. The state of preservation of the structures is variable, with some of them in pristine condition and still standing more than two meters tall while others are much more eroded with just about 50 cm of the walls remaining. There are no significant differences in the size and quality of the houses among the different sites, with the buildings of small settlements on Aroqolab 2 being as carefully built as those of big towns such as Abasa. Only Iskudarka Dayeergalka Kifiile shows an evidently poorer construction technique, although this could also be explained by the lack of stone quality in the area.

Mosques are the most significant buildings on all the settlements, where the larger sites often feature more than one mosque. They are built using the same construction technique as the rest of the buildings, square or rectangular in shape, featuring square mirhabs and in some cases perimeter walls surrounding the building. Larger mosques such as those of Abasa and Hasadinle possess circular, square or cruciform pillars, which were used to support the presumably flat roof. Neither minarets nor minbars have been documented in any of the mosques, indicating a difference with the examples from the Somaliland coasts as the 16th century mosques of Zeila have

this feature. In fact, the mosques documented in the Adwal region seem to have more direct parallels with the Harar region (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011b: 35, 37), which is logical considering both regions were closely linked and were part of the core of the Adal Sultanate. In the largest surveyed site, Abassa – the only settlement that could be considered a proper town – two mosques were identified. The biggest one, measuring 18 x 17 meters, featured twelve cruciform or circular columns and an arched mirhab described by Burton in 1854 (1894 [1854]: 146) and photographed by Curle in the 1930s (1937: plate III). This is considered the main mosque of the settlement although its position is peripheral, at the eastern outskirts of the site. A small – 2 x 2 meters –test pit dug in the centre of the mosque showed that the mosque was built ex novo on a purposely levelled rock floor, probably implying that it was built in a latter period in the history of the town, when the central area was already full of buildings and the new mosque had to be erected in a peripheral position. During the 2018 campaign a second, smaller mosque was documented. It is located at the easternmost area of the town, with a slightly different architectural style. The existence of this second building could be related to the existence of neighbourhood mosques common in Islamic settlements, or could give service to a community following a specific Islamic tradition or school.

Figure 3: View of the main mosque of Abasa, featuring circular and cruciform pillars

Aside from the mosques, there is no further evidence of other public, non-domestic buildings in the sites. The only exception has been documented in Abasa, where a big building built with big boulders was documented to the westernmost side of the settlement, placed on a rocky outcrop. The building had dimensions of 15 x 4 meters and a rectangular shape oriented east-west, with two adjacent rooms protruding to the north.

The entrance is to the east side of the building, accented by a long, slightly curved alley running north-south built with big flat boulders that present a certain monumentality. It is difficult to interpret the functionality of this building. The size, the construction technique, the big boulders used for the walls and gate and the distribution of the rooms suggest that this building was a common house. Yet the monumentality of the building could point to a military use. However, this interpretation does not consider the site's isolation as it is separated by the river and in a flat area. This building could have been a civil administration, either the house of a local sheikh, a trade control post or a prison, or maybe a mix of all these different functions.

Figure 4: Entrance to the large building of unknown function in Abasa

Graveyards were located in three of the settlements, and it is evident that they also existed in the other two although they could not be located due to lack of time. Surprisingly, cemeteries show less uniformity than houses, although the most widespread type of grave corresponds to square or rectangular cists defined by plain slabs (sometimes two of them lying parallel), which have been found in all the sites where graveyards were documented. In some occasions these cist structures have two or three small stelae marking the grave. Other types of burials have also been documented: two simple stelae at both sides of the grave; a line of slabs defining one of the sides of the tomb; or even small cairns with stelae on the

top; all of them follow Muslim burial conventions. Without excavations it is problematic to determine if these differences can be explained by changes through time or if they are related to various Muslim traditions or ethnic groups. That could be the case of some cairns – a typical nomad burial –found in Abasa or Dameraqad, which could be explained by the presence of people from these communities in or around the settlements.

Figure 5: Cist graves arranged in rows at Aroqolab 2

Material culture

Cultural uniformity is also evident in the material culture found, especially the local pottery which shows high standardization in terms of technique, shapes and decorations. Three main types seem recurrent: open bowls with the rim slightly thickened, globular vessels with a short straight neck and spherical-like pieces with an almost horizontal, flat rim. Handles are abundant and diverse, featuring either horizontal, curved handles with oval sections or smaller vertical handles with circular sections. The bases found are all ringed. Decoration is usually scarce and limited to the neck or the upper part of the rim. It usually consists of incised simple designs (series of parallel horizontal or oblique lines). Only in very few cases were other types of decorations present, as nail incisions or clay appliqués. Unlike other areas of the Horn of Africa as the 16th century kingdom of Abyssinia (Torres 2017), there is no distinction between fine wares and coarse wares. As is common in the medieval settlements in Somaliland, steatite objects appear in a wide range of types: fragments of plates, beads and round stones which could be interpreted as game pieces. Other types of lithic tools are less frequent; with the exception of Hasadinle where a sample of flint pieces have been collected, including an arrowhead and several scrapers evidencing a high level of knapping skills. Rotatory querns and hand stones have been found in all the sites.

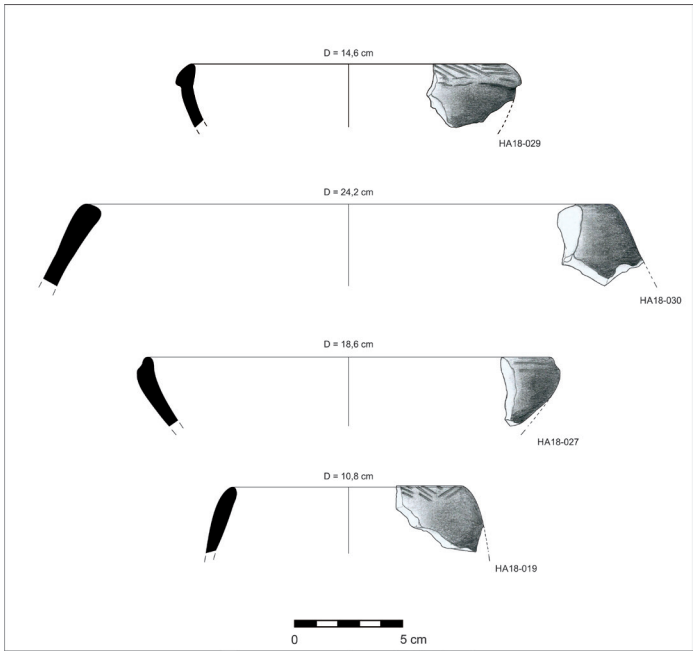

Figure 6: Local medieval pottery found at Hasadinle

Quite surprisingly, imported materials are very scarce in all the settlements, contrary to other sites surveyed in previous campaigns. In Abasa only five pieces of imported pottery were collected, consisting of two small pieces of celadon, a fragment of blue and white glazed pottery and two unglazed, wheel-made fragments with a characteristic whitish paste and incised and punctuated decoration. Leaving aside the celadon pieces, all the other fragments point to a Persian origin, with a generic chronology between the 15th and the 17th centuries. In the rest of the sites, the evidence of trade is even scantier: in those which yielded this type of materials they consisted of very small and eroded fragments of celadon or green glazed Specke pottery, or non-diagnostic wheel-made pottery which in this period always has a foreign origin. In Hasadinle, two fragments of polished pottery from northern Ethiopia have been collected, a type of ceramic so far very scarce in the archaeological record, although its presence shouldn't be a surprise considering the proximity and long relationship between the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the Sultanate of Adal, and the numerous raids conducted by both parties in rival territory. The

sample of trade-related pieces is completed with cowries which are abundant in all the places and two small fragments of glass found in Abasa and Dameraqad.

Conclusions

The sites documented in 2018 and those studied in previous years show a high level of homogeneity that illustrate shared cultural identity. At this stage of research it is difficult to discern if this homogeneity corresponds to a specific group. The study of the material culture of the Sultanate of Adal is still in its early stages, as is the relationship of these urban dwellers with the nomads that occupied wide areas of the region during the medieval period. Regarding the chronology, all the studied sites seem to be abandoned by the late 16th–early 17th centuries, with no post-17th century materials found in any of them. This widespread abandonment is likely explained by the collapse of the Sultanate of Adal in the late 16th century, which seems to have caused a general dismantling of the urban network that allowed the development of the trade routes and the redistribution of goods and commodities. The sites are unlikely older than the 13th–14th centuries, the moment in which the first written references describing the Muslim principalities appear.

Agriculture seems to have been the main activity of the sites surveyed during 2018. The position of the settlements close to cultivation fields but slightly away from the main routes, the scarcity of imported materials, the abundance of querns and other implements such as bored stones used as weights for digging sticks reinforce this interpretation. The agricultural orientation of many medieval sites enriches the vision of the economy of the Sultanate of Adal and helps to explain the military expansion of the kingdom, difficult to understand without a densely populated territory which provided levies, food and implements for the armies of the sultanate. It also introduces an interesting factor of territorial analysis, as a clear hierarchy of settlements arise, explaining the position of many sites in the region.

The relatively short life of these medieval sites does not necessarily imply statism. Although the surveys have been necessarily brief, some data point to the expansion of these settlements through time, probably due to a progressive increase in their population. This can be hinted at in places like Hasadinle or Iskudarka Dayeergalka Kifiile, where there is a core area of densely occupied space – usually around the mosque – and more scattered houses in the outskirts of the village, possibly built later as the population grew and the central area was full of buildings. The same can be said about the main mosque at Abasa, whose peripheral position could be explained by the lack of space in the central area of the town as it increased its size. A similar interpretation could be given to the existence of two cemeteries in Abasa, maybe related to the growth of the population. As with the temporal span of the sites, this urban evolution can only be confirmed or rebutted by systematic excavations in several of these sites.

One of the most interesting finds of the 2018 campaign has been documentation of Dameraqad as a religious centre. Although such religious centres are relatively common in the Islamic world and deeply rooted into the religious beliefs of the Somali (Lewis 1998), Dameraqad is currently the only one documented archaeologically whose occupation ended shortly after the collapse of the Adal sultanate and therefore has not been disturbed by current religious activities. The gathering of mosques and burials mark this place as a pilgrimage hub, maybe related to the Arab missionary activities among the Somali that took place from the 13th century onwards. The existence of nomadic structures in the site – including an elaborate mosque – could indicate this process of conversion and would explain the position of Dameraqad in a pass, an unusual place for a medieval site as we have seen before.

The 2018 campaign in western Somaliland confirms the importance of the occupation in this region during the medieval period; but also shows how incomplete our knowledge of its characteristics is. The focus on a small area has allowed a new insight about aspects such as settlement hierarchies, economical activities and spatial organization within the sites, enriching our understanding of the social and cultural patterns upon which the Sultanate of Adal was built. The increasing variety of sites discovered in recent years – religious centres, fortresses, caravan stations – is untangling the complexity of a state whose control of the territory and the different communities living in it seems to have been much more sophisticated than commonly assumed.

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