



ARTICLES

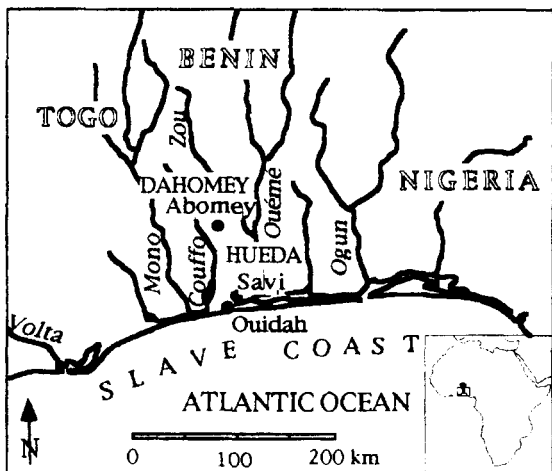
BENIN

**Report on the 1996 Field Season:
Savi, Republic of Benin**

*Kenneth G. Kelly
Department of Anthropology
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, Arizona
USA, 86011
e-mail: Kenneth.Kelly@nau.edu*

Following a two year hiatus, archaeological research resumed with the 1996 research season at Savi, located 7 km north of the town of Ouidah, in coastal Republic of Benin (Figure 1). The Hueda Archaeological Project, inaugurated in 1991, seeks to understand the effects of systematic and continued interaction between European and African trading partners during the late 17th and early 18th century (Kelly 1994, in press). In contrast to archaeological research carried out at Elmina, Ghana (DeCorse 1992), excavations at Savi have been conducted in an African town that played host to a multi-nation European trading presence, and not an African town that grew outside the walls of a European fort. A principal goal of the project was

Figure 1: Project location: modern states in bold, historic states in capitals, towns and sites in lower case.



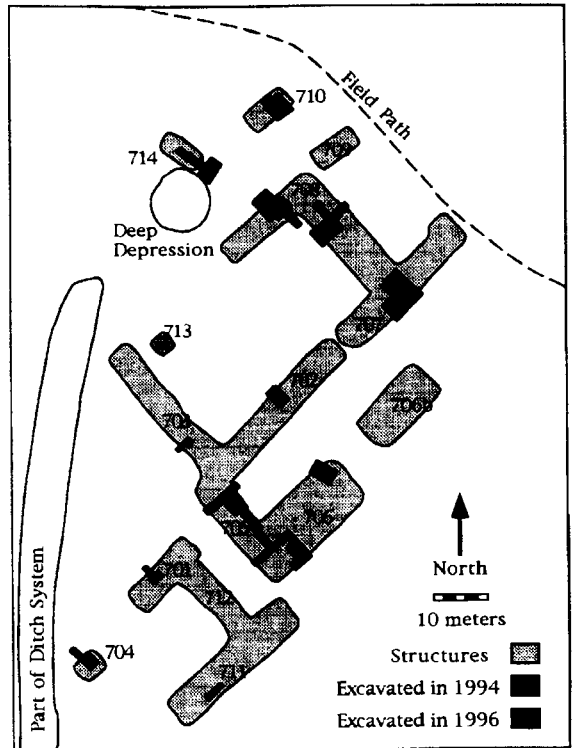
to continue excavations begun during 1994 at the site of the palace of the Hueda kings, itself located in 1993. In addition, continued correspondence between the author and Albert Hounkpevi, Conservateur Adjoint of the Musée d'Histoire de Ouidah proposed the installation of a permanent exhibit documenting the archaeological research conducted at Savi. Attainment of this objective was assured through the close cooperation and support of Mme Rachida de Souza, Directrice du Patrimoine Culturel. A further goal of the research was to continue the ongoing cooperative effort whereby students from the Université National du Bénin were able to participate with the American and British students and volunteers. This important aspect of the project provided intensive hands-on experience of many aspects of research for Archaeology students from the UNB.

The archaeological research conducted in 1996 built upon the very successful fieldwork season of 1994. During the 1994 season, a series of mounds located within a ditch system were identified, cleared of vegetation, mapped, and partially excavated. Excavation within the mound complex exposed a number of rooms floored with European bricks which were imported by ships participating in the slave trade. Within these rooms were found imported artifacts such as Chinese and European ceramics, tobacco pipes, bottle and glass fragments, metal artifacts, and beads. Also found were considerable numbers of artifacts of local manufacture, dominated by local earthenwares, but also including locally manufactured tobacco pipes of several varieties. Portions of the complex without brick flooring were investigated in 1994. Based upon the artifacts found within, these rooms were used as kitchen and storage rooms. The 1994 season confirmed that the palace complex was burned before being sacked during the 1727 conquest of the Hueda kingdom by Dahomey (Kelly 1995). This destruction fortuitously preserved substantial portions of the palace complex. Burning thatch roofs and their mud ceilings, collapsed into the rooms, covering the contents of the rooms, and preserving them *in situ* and undisturbed. These sealed deposits demonstrate that the palace rooms were not looted before being destroyed, and thus had the potential to answer many questions about the social and economic organization of the town of Savi.

The excavation procedure for 1996 was to test portions of the mound complex that had not been investigated during the previous season, in an effort to get a more complete picture of the functions of the various portions of the complex. To this end, excavations were conducted in Structures 702, 706, 708, 710, and in the newly recorded Structure 714 (Figure 2). Of these, only Structure 706 had been previously investigated, and those excavations had been confined to the other end of the building. The excavation at Structure 702 consisted of a single 2x4 meter unit excavated through "wall melt" and collapsed roof material to the floor of the structure. Artifacts recovered at this location consisted primarily of imported smoking pipes, presumed to be of Dutch origin. Definitive determination was not possible due to the deposition conditions specific to that location. The marked pipe heels that were recovered were all uniformly too moist and friable to preserve the maker's marks that would otherwise have been identifiable. The pipes are presumed to be of Dutch origin since the overwhelming majority of pipes found both in the palace complex excavations of 1994, and elsewhere throughout Savi were Dutch. The functional determination of the structure as a storeroom was based upon several lines of evidence. Artifacts found within were almost exclusively imported pipe, in a layer as deep as 3-4 cm in places. Had the room been used for dumping trash, it is unlikely the deposit would have been as uniform. Additionally, conforming to the pattern identified in 1994, this room was not floored with brick, but had a simple, traditional, packed earth floor such as was found in other storage contexts in the palace complex.

Excavation of a 2 x 4 meter unit at the north eastern end of Structure 706 exposed a portion of a room floored with square terra cotta tiles measuring approximately 20 cm on each side. Very few artifacts were found within this room, again confirming the pattern identified for public rooms in 1994. Additional brick floors were exposed during excavations in Structure 708. These rooms were only a few meters from the earth floored storeroom containing imported and locally manufactured articles, including over 50 wine bottles, that was excavated in 1994. This pattern of brick floored public rooms interspersed with storage rooms indicates that the palace complex was a diverse area, mixing storage and other private rooms with pub-

Figure 2: Excavations within palace complex



lic rooms. Additionally, of the portions of four adjacent brick floored rooms exposed in this structure, all were apparently linked by internal doorways. This configuration suggests the presence of "apartments" or series of rooms that allowed the palace elite to move about unobserved. Artifacts of local manufacture were present here, as were fragments of at least five Chinese porcelain plates, cups, and saucers. In one room an iron lance tip and an ax blade were found. Other weapons-related material recovered during the course of excavation include lead musket shot, both unfired and fired. These artifacts are mute witness to the violent destruction of the palace complex, and the town of Savi, at the hands of the invading Dahomean army in 1727 (Snelgrave 1734).

Structure 710, a low mound slightly west of Structures 708 and 709, differed from the other mounds recorded in the palace complex. Excavations here were undertaken to determine what differences, if any, might characterize slight mounds in contrast to substantial mounds. Initially a 2 x 4 meter excavation unit was established, and excavations began. Within 10-15 cm of the surface,

artifacts and fallen roof material were encountered. This contrasted with the substantial mounds, where the room floors and fallen roofs were buried by nearly one meter of overburden derived from melted earthen walls. This indicates that the less substantial mounds were qualitatively distinct from the others, deriving from the collapse of less impressively constructed buildings, and exhibiting much less investment in architecture. As artifacts were exposed and left *in situ*, we were astounded to find not only several large storage jars, but a large, multi-linked bar chain with ankle shackles for the confinement of slaves (Figure 3). Adjacent to this slave chain we recovered a U-shaped neck restraint also used in the securing of slaves. These slave shackles are believed to be the first ever recovered archaeologically in West Africa, and a stark reminder of the purpose guiding European and African interaction at Savi.

Expanding the initial 2 x 4 meter unit exposed a portion of a gun barrel. Unfortunately, the abbreviated field season of 1996 prohibited the complete

excavation of this structure. Nonetheless, in addition to the remarkable find of the slave chain, excavation at this structure demonstrated the vulnerability of the less deeply buried portions of the site. Had the field in which this structure lay been cultivated deeply, without a doubt the farmer would have encountered, and possibly removed or destroyed the chain and other archaeological evidence.

The remaining excavations were conducted at Structure 714. This mound, which lay next to a very deep (4-5 meter) pit recorded in 1994, had escaped notice during the previous season, due to very dense vegetation. Structure 714, exposed by clearing the vegetation from the north side of the pit, was much taller than all other mounds investigated at Savi, with the exception of the hypothesized "watchtower" (Structure 704) investigated in 1994. Unfortunately, time constraints prohibited the excavation of anything more than a 2 x 4 unit adjacent to the mound, and a 1 x 5 meter trench cutting to the center of the mound. This trench proved both interesting and enigmatic, as the profiles exposed in the sidewalls in-

Figure 3: Chain and shackles for the confinement of slaves.



licated that it had at one point been excavated to a depth of at least 3 meters below the summit of the mound, and approximately 1.5 meters below the ground surface. Imported artifacts were recovered throughout the excavation, indicating that the deepest strata had been excavated and deposited during the period of the Slave Trade. The unusual stratigraphy and form of this mound have precluded a determination of its function at this time, and would make this structure a top priority for any additional excavation.

In addition to excavation and other field tasks, a re-cataloguing project was undertaken at the Musée to improve researcher access to the collections, by storing all materials of a similar nature together, instead of storing artifacts by year excavated. This project was facilitated by the commitment of the Musée in Ouidah to provide adequate storage facilities for the artifacts, where previously materials had suffered from a lack of dedicated storage space. One of the most positive outcomes of the 1996 field season was the organization and mounting of an exhibit in six display cases contributed by the Musée. This permanent display discusses the local material culture and economy of the Hueda kingdom and Savi, demonstrates the importance and variety of traded materials, and depicts the process of slavery and warfare. Additionally, one case provides a re-creation of what the palace structures looked like upon excavation, by displaying a section of brick floor with assorted artifacts and roofing materials arrayed on the bricks. This exhibit was opened at an official inauguration where the Conservateur, the Directrice de Patrimoine Culturel, and I all spoke, emphasizing the importance of preserving and protecting the cultural patrimony of Benin. Invited guests who visited the exhibit on the opening day included Dagbo Hounon, the traditional Chef de Voudon, members of the Association des Amis du Musée d'Histoire de Ouidah (ASAMHO), the president of the Association pour le Développement de la Commune de Savi, and members of local and governmental bureaus concerned with cultural heritage protection.

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