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Preliminary Results of excavations and surveys at Gao and Timbuktu, October and November 1996

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A second season of excavations and survey was conducted within the vicinity of the city of Gao, and a first season of survey within the city of Timbuktu in October and November 1996. This season was a continuation of research started in 1993, and has as its aim the archaeological investigation of the origins and development of Gao, and now Timbuktu, an assessment of the impact of the introduction of Islam to the region, and the development and significance of both inter-regional and trans-Saharan trade (Insoll 1993a, 1994, 1995, 1996a).

Four archaeological excavations of different sizes were completed in different areas of the city of Gao and its surrounding area, two in Gao Ancien (MM 96 B and MM 96 C), the former mercantile trade center, one in the neighbouring quarter of Gadei (GAD 96 A), possibly the site of the original settlement within the urban area (Insoll 1996b), and one on the opposite Gourma bank of the Niger at Koima (KO 96 A) (Figure 1). Survey of the area surrounding Gao was also continued, and the first survey within the actual limits of the city of Timbuktu was conducted (excluding the standing monuments which have already been extensively studied). The results are briefly described, but it should be noted that the following discussion, is by necessity, preliminary in nature.

Gao Ancien

MM 96 (B): A 6 m² trench was excavated and a large dry-stone wall found which appears to have formed part of the outer wall enclosing a central citadel of fired-brick buildings, one of which was excavated in 1993. The part of the wall uncovered appears to have been an entrance-way or gate-

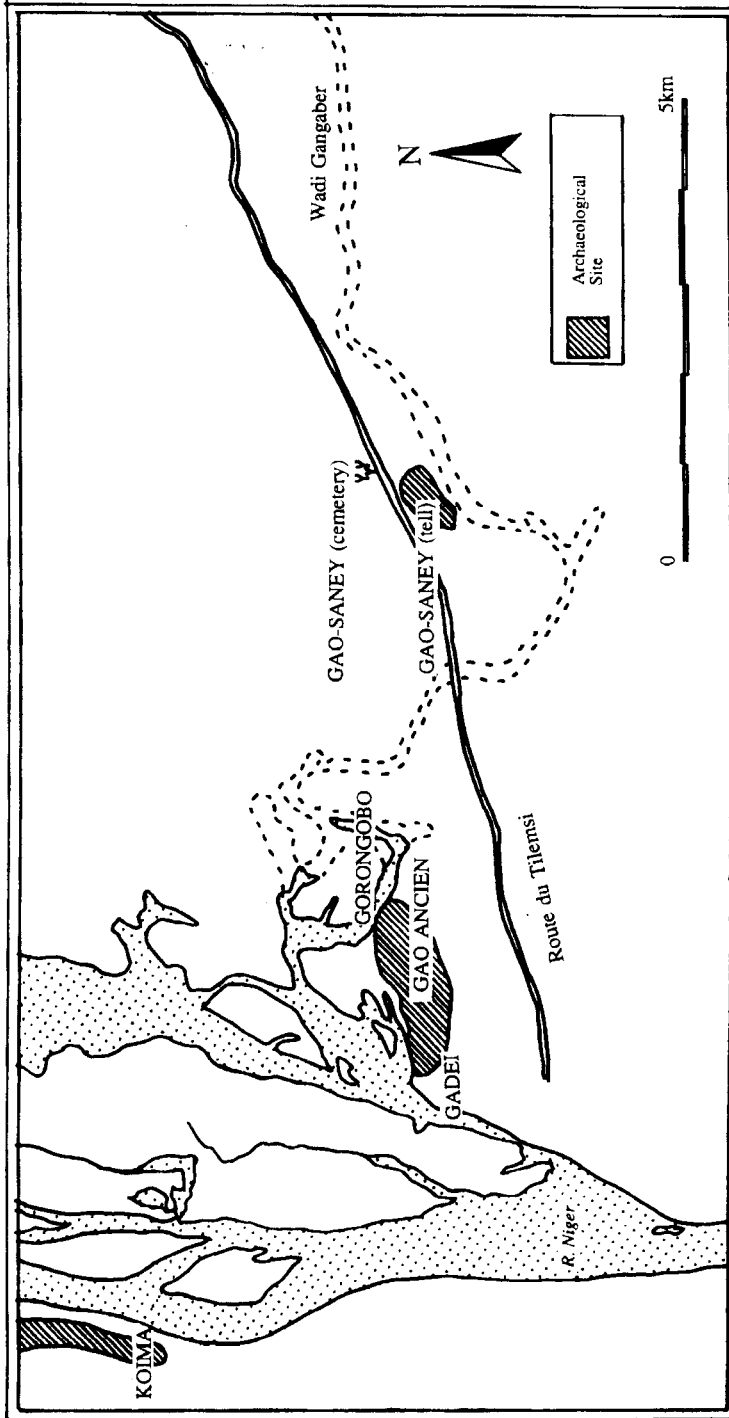
house, giving access to the mercantile or royal quarter which it served to protect. Within the stone wall, and predating it, a deep well had been dug, which had been filled with a variety of rubbish providing both artifactual dating evidence (imported North African ceramics and glass) and C14 samples, all of which are at present being processed and analysed. The date of these structures and features is, as yet, unknown. However, based upon the 1993 sequence, a date somewhere between the 11th - early 14th centuries AD can be suggested for the dry-stone wall (all dates are AD).

MM 96 (C): The wide range of architectural techniques encountered in the 1993 season in Gao Ancien was thus added to by the discoveries in MM 96 (B), and further reflected in the 6 x 4 m trench designated MM 96 (C). Here, another part of the fired-brick citadel was investigated. It seems to be contemporary with the 1993 fired-brick building, and thus probably of 12th-13th century date. The 1996 structure had an identical fired-brick floor, well laid upon a cement base and where necessary employing two layers of flooring-slabs for extra strength. This floor was then finished with a coat of red plaster, whilst the walls, built of banco or liquid mud, were finished with a rendering of white plaster. The use of colour to such an extent for architectural decoration had not previously been known, and alters our perceptions of what previously had been thought to be solely monochrome buildings. The function of the 1996 building is not certain but it might have been part of a mosque, as the area excavated resembles, in its north-south orientation, and its width (ca. 3 m), the aisle of such a building. The 1993 structure was previously interpreted as a component of a palace or rich merchant's house. A smaller test pit was dug under the floor to assess the depth of the deposits. A banco brick pillar was found and below this further layers of ash and rubble. The basal deposits at present remain undated.

Gadei

GAD 96 A: Building upon hypotheses developed after the 1993 season, excavation was also undertaken in Gadei quarter, closer to the River Niger and opposite Gao Ancien. This area, it was suggested, was the first settlement within Gao proper, which had been founded at an as yet unknown date by the Sorko or proto-Songhai, the dominant ethnic

Figure 1: The archaeological landscape in the Gao area.



group in Gao today (Insoll 1996a). To investigate this issue, a 4 m² trench was opened on a low mound situated next to a narrow seasonal water channel which runs from the River Niger for several km up the Tilemsi Valley (Figure 1). It was immediately apparent how much Gadei differed from Gao Ancien. Monumental architecture in stone or fired-brick was absent both on the surface of this large site but also in the excavation sequence, where the only architecture found was in banco. Furthermore, the banco structure encountered was a roundhouse, whereas all the Gao Ancien structures recorded so far, both primary and squatter occupation, employed right angles.

An absence of trade related evidence in Gadei was also very apparent compared to Gao Ancien. Imported glazed pottery was absent and glass rare, copper ingots were of the "local" as compared to the imported North African types, and only glass beads were well-represented. The beads were here found in a domestic context, where they could have been used for adornment, rather than representing trade goods as they do in Gao Ancien, where the vast range of types encountered could be interpreted as indicating a "wholesaler" type function. Instead, the bulk of the evidence from Gadei indicated the domestic nature of the site. The banco roundhouse, large quantities of faunal remains (comparatively few at Gao Ancien), personal items such as a pot of woman's makeup of yellow clay (still used today), numerous other "makeup sticks", jewellery (including a gold bead, the first from the region), needles, stones used for washing the body (used today), firestones and a wooden prayer bead from a Muslim rosary.

Dates for the Gadei sequence have not yet been obtained, but it appears from the local pottery to have been at least partly contemporary with Gao Ancien, possibly between the 9th-14th centuries. This remains at present only a supposition. Excavation was finished at a depth of 2.5 m.

Koima

KO 96 A: On the opposite side of the river from Gao (Figure 1), a 1 m² test pit was dug to obtain a ceramic sequence. Koima has been proposed as the first proto-Songhai settlement in the vicinity of Gao, predating settlement in Gadei (Insoll 1996). Survey in 1993 at Koima provided

local pottery, dated elsewhere in the region to the 5th-6th centuries and thus apparently earlier than the base of the Gao Ancien 1993 sequence (7th century). Unfortunately, no dating evidence was obtained from the Koima test pit, where all organic material had been destroyed and the deposits were surprisingly shallow (50 cm). However, a useful collection of local ceramics was obtained, many types again differing from the ones obtained from Gao Ancien and Gadei.

Survey in Gao

The survey program in Gao was continued. First, the whole of the central area of Gao Ancien was mapped. Now all surface structures and features have been accurately mapped, allowing the boundaries of the central citadel to be established firmly. Second, further mapping of the areas surrounding Gao Ancien was undertaken. The eastern edge of Gao Ancien was delimited, and several new Arabic inscriptions were recorded in a cemetery located in the Mouth of the Tilemsi Valley at Gorongobo (Figure 1). These are being interpreted and transcribed by Dr. Paulo Farias of the Centre of West African Studies, the University of Birmingham, with whom the author has a collaborative agreement regarding epigraphic materials. A further surface collection was also made at the tell site of Gao-Saney, 7 km east of Gao (Insoll 1996a). A sizeable assemblage of datable imported glass and glazed pottery was recovered, but unfortunately, this important site is now almost completely destroyed by looters looking for antiquities to sell to the tourist and art markets (Insoll 1993b).

Survey in Timbuktu

The situation in Timbuktu as regards archaeological research is very different from that in Gao. Very little archaeological research has been conducted within the city prior to that completed in 1996, the sum total being a largely conjectural map of the development of Timbuktu produced in the 1920s (Pefontan 1922), and a brief survey, predominantly of standing monuments undertaken in the early 1950s (Mauny 1952). However, the surrounding region has been partly surveyed (McIntosh and McIntosh 1986). Thus it was decided to conduct a preliminary survey within the city limits to begin the process of placing the origins and development

of Timbuktu upon a sound basis provided by archaeological evidence, utilised in conjunction with a re-evaluation of the existing historical sources, thereby employing the same methodology which was used in Gao.

Two categories of material were looked at: standing monuments about which a fair amount is known already, and archaeological sites, about which absolutely nothing is known. The results achieved were very interesting. Two areas of archaeological material were recorded, one in the northeast of the city around the Sankore mosque and the other west of the Djinguereber mosque. Dating is far from certain, but a sherd of southern Chinese Celadon dated to the late 11th-early 12th centuries was found in the vicinity of Djinguereber, and a piece of an imported (Egyptian, Southern Arabian?) glass bracelet of possible 14th century date close to the Sankore mosque. Both finds indicating relatively early occupation in the two areas. This might be representative of a dual town phenomena, one Muslim, one non-Muslim, common elsewhere in the Western Sudan at the beginning of the current millennium (Insoll 1996c). Furthermore, besides the fragment of glass bracelet already referred to, fragments of tobacco pipe were found close to the Sankore mosque, which cannot be earlier than 1591 (McIntosh and McIntosh 1986:310), along with monochrome glass seed beads of either Venetian or Indian origin. The recent discovery of a large cache of cowry shells was also reported in the same area, along with the presence of house foundations (Kante pers. comm.). It is possible this zone continued in use as the area in which the Moroccan soldiers were quartered following their occupation of Timbuktu in the early 17th century. A hypothesis apparently lent support by the reports of local people, as the area is known as the *Casbah Marocaine*.

Conclusions

The results of the 1996 season surpassed expectations. The results from Gao, once fully analysed, will greatly increase our understanding of "medieval" (Iron Age) Gao, its origins, and development. It is now also possible to begin to delimit the different quarters or *quartiers* of "medieval" Gao, and to base interpretation and reconstruction upon a firm base of archaeological evidence, re-

placing the sole reliance (until five years ago) upon a limited corpus of external Arabic written historical sources and local oral ones. At Timbuktu, the first tentative stage has been completed in reconstructing the settlement history and development of the city with the aid of archaeological evidence. Of course, a considerable amount of work remains to be done, less so in Gao, which is now more of a "known" quantity, but at Timbuktu research is only just beginning. The next season of excavations in both cities is provisionally scheduled for late 1998.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Dr. Sanogo and Dr. Dembele of the Institut des Sciences Humaines, Dr. Iam of the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique, Mr. Kante of Direction Jeunesse in Timbuktu, and Mr. Toure of Direction Jeunesse in Gao, for allowing me to conduct research. My warmest thanks also go to all the members of the team, Dr. Rachel MacLean, and Messrs. Nafogo Coulibaly, Massa Diarra, and Jo Lee, and the fourteen workmen, who must remain nameless. Funding for this research was kindly provided by the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy, the D.M. McDonald Research and Fieldwork Fund, the Crowther-Beynon Fund, the United Africa Company of Nigeria Fund, and St John's College, Cambridge.

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