

■ NIGERIA

Fortifications in the Northern Periphery of Oyo: A report of 1994-95 archaeological research in North Central Yorubaland, Nigeria

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Although fortifications, especially enclosing walls, are common features in large Yoruba political centers and have been widely studied (Soper and Darling 1980:61-81; Ozanne 1969), little of this has been carried out in the periphery of Yoruba states. Generally, both historical and archaeological researches in Yorubaland have tended to neglect the frontier communities, especially those in the north central Yorubaland. This neglect could be because the north central sub-ethnic group of Yoruba and others in the northeastern Yoruba were often thought as non-participant in the complex Yoruba constitutional system as represented by the Oyo empire. Except maybe this area was where the Oyo raided for slaves (Morton-Williams 1964).

Recent archaeological investigations conducted in Igbomina area of north central Yorubaland have resulted in the discovery of pre-19th century fortifications. This research is part of a general archaeological inquiry into the prehistory of a northern Yoruba, the Igbomina. The Igbomina refers to the people and the land they occupy. The area stretches from the southern part of Ilorin in the northwest to portions of Ekiti in the northeast. The Igbomina are made up of many sub-units or village-groups, some of which are the Ila, the Ipo, Aran, Iyangba, Isin, Oro, Irese, Esisa, Ile-Ire, Oke-Ode, and Share (Dada 1985) (Figure 1). All the Igbomina apart from the Ila sub-unit, are presently located in Kwara State of Nigeria.

This paper is a report of some of the results of the 1994/95 archaeological field work in Igbomina supported by a Wenner-Gren Foundation predoctoral grant. Enclosing walls have been found at two sites, Gbagede and Iyara, located within the Ipo sub-unit of Igbomina. Since little research has

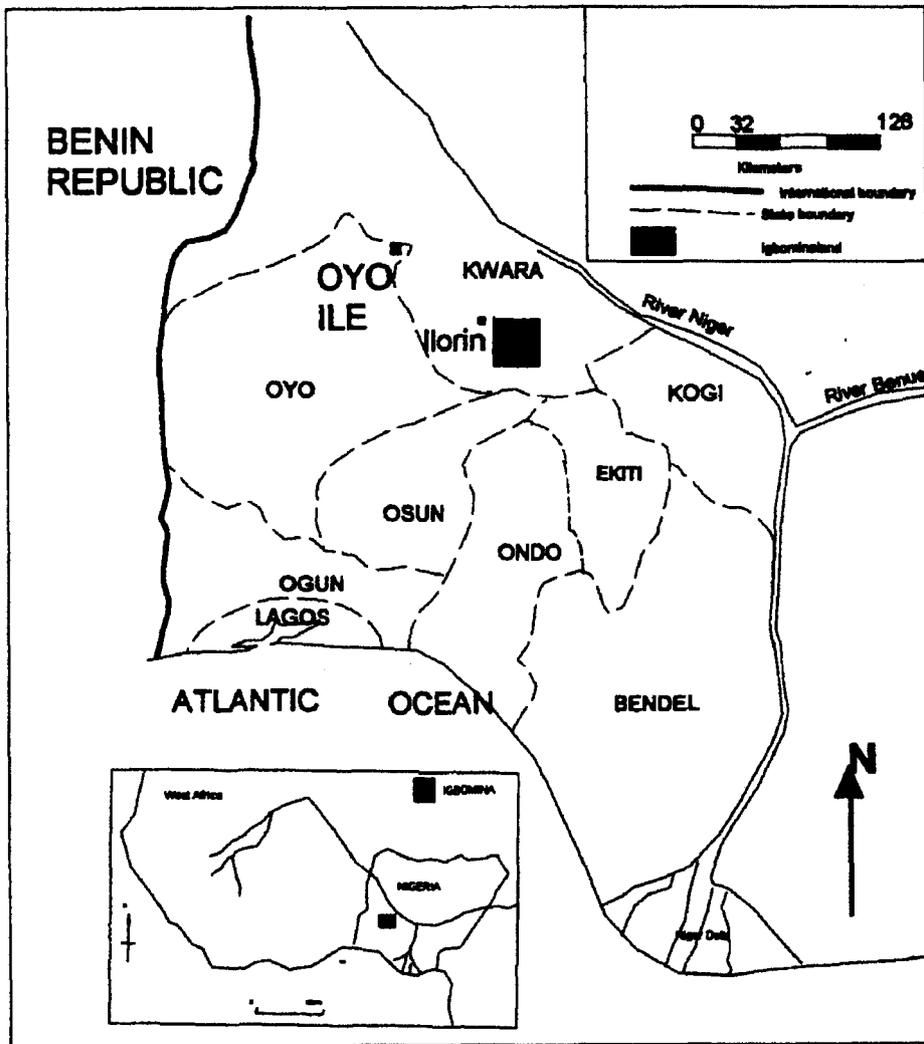
focused on site enclosures in this part of Yorubaland, the intent of this paper is twofold. The first is to provide a survey description of the walls, and the second is to explore the functional interpretations of the walls. The study of fortification in this part of Yorubaland will provide an understanding of the nature of Old Oyo northern frontier and the pre-historic social relations in the area, especially between Oyo-Igbomina, and the Nupe.

The Survey

The Gbagede site is located about 3.2 km northeast of Ajasepo town in Kwara State of Nigeria. It is situated on relatively flat land bounded to the west by the Osin river which flows to Omupo town, and on the east by river Egui (Figure 2). The vegetation is of derived savanna type. Along the river banks are heavy forests with spreading canopies. They are riparian forests commonly found along river banks in the savanna. Gbagede is an enclosed habitation site. The site, 'Gbagede' (or enclosure), took its name from this characteristic wall system. The wall, or earthen ramparts (Connah 1972, 1975), with an interior ditch, may have been constructed for defense.

The survey of the site was carried out between January 10 and 13, 1995, with the purpose of determining the characteristics of the wall as well as the limit of surface cultural remains at the site. The survey of the wall involved measuring between points along the wall using tapes, ranging poles, and a prismatic compass. The distances between one point and the next was 30 m except at corners and near gates. In measuring the ditches and other features we used the method of offset and tie lines. The survey of the wall was not easy as we had to cope with the problem of poor ground visibility in some areas of the wall, especially with thick, fire-resistant vegetation. The width of the site wall varies between 4-6 m while the wall height from one section of the site to the next ranged from a low bank of rarely more than 1 m high to as much as 3 m high. Inspection of the southern and eastern walls revealed stones and potsherds eroding out of the wall. These may have been incorporated into the wall during construction. Close to the interior side of the wall are non-linear depressions or ditches of between 20-40 m long and 3-6 m wide. The function of these features is not clear, and appear to have

Figure 2. Map of Igbominaland showing some villages and archaeological sites.

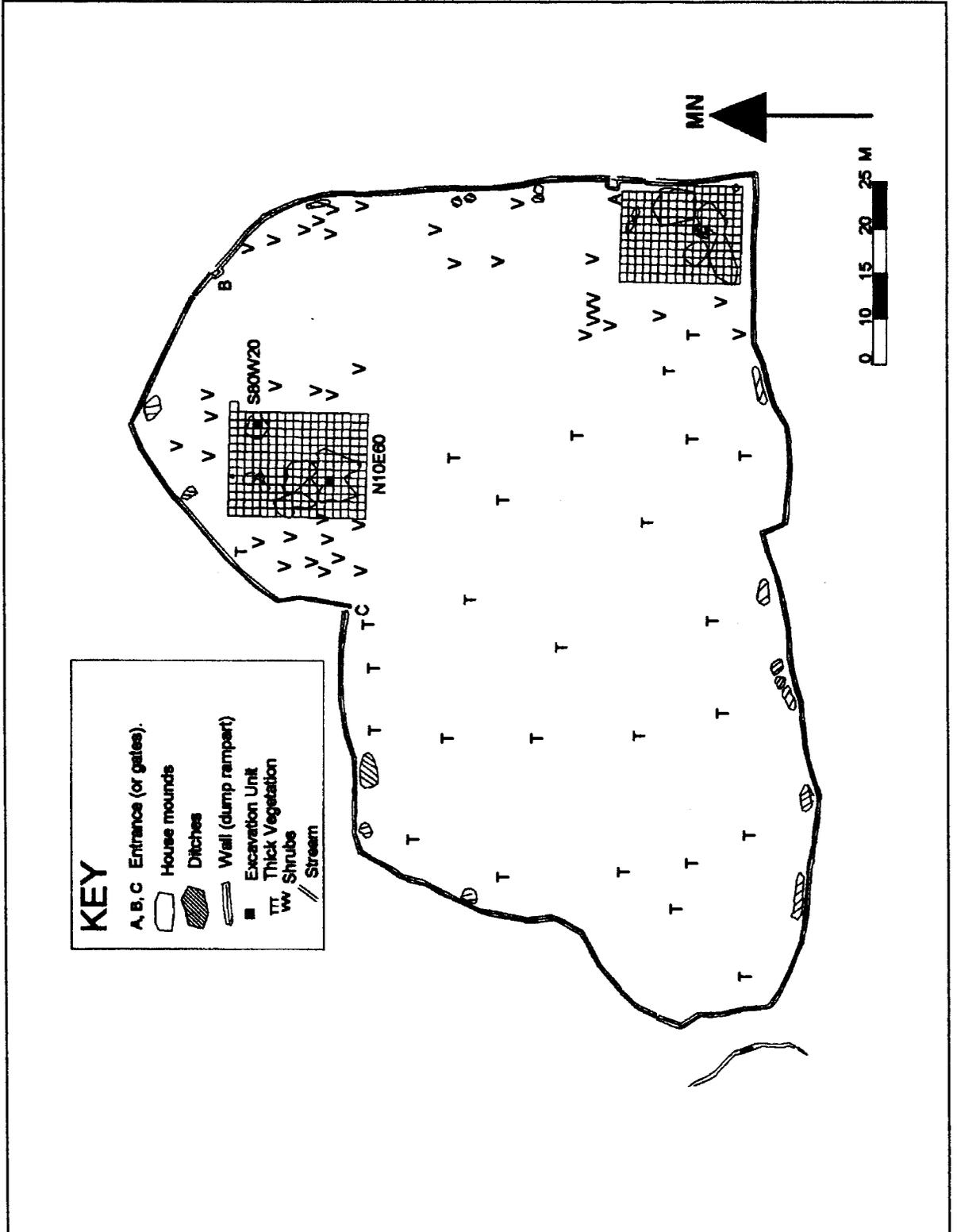


been too shallow for a defensive use. These ditches or depressions may have been created during excavation of the soil used for the wall.

Two major gates and probably some minor ones were associated with the wall. A major gate, designated gate A, is on the southwestern wall about 171.1 m north of the datum point (SE end of the wall). The gate which was probably recessed has a north, east and south wall, measuring 10.13 m, 11.3 m and 9.5 m long respectively; while the width of the gate entrance, parallel to the west wall was 13.4 m. About 32.2 m further along the wall from gate A is a small opening about 3.6 m wide, probably created by erosion, or perhaps the remnant of a minor entrance to the site. Since such small open-

ings were common on the wall and mostly found close to major gates, there is the possibility that they might have functioned as minor entrances to the site. The second major gate, B, is located almost on the northwest wall about 512.3 m from gate A and 700 m to the datum. Gate B is of similar shape as A, although it is much smaller. The entrance was about 8.30 m wide, while the north and south wall of the gate were 5.50 m and 5.30 m long respectively. At a distance of about 33 m north of gate B is a small opening of about 2.7 m wide, which may have served similar functions like those associated with gate A. In the northeast of gate B, about 620 m away, is another opening. By the nature of this opening, the construction of the wall may have been

Figure 3. Map of Gbagede wall and excavation areas.



temporarily terminated here to give way to a small opening or entrance. Although not designed like gate A or B, it was probably more of an entrance than an opening created when the construction of the wall had been completed. This feature is therefore designated as gate C. It is a northeast-southeast oriented wall. Two other openings situated near each other were in the eastern wall. They were about 2.50 m and 3.50 m wide respectively. Finally, about 50 m from the eastern wall is the Igui river which runs almost parallel to the wall.

The survey indicated a single wall system with a circumference of about 3.4 km, while the site area was estimated at approximately 612,360 m² (Figure 3). Charcoal recovered from the excavation of Gbagede has produced radiocarbon dates of A.D. 1450-1670, and A.D. 1780-1795 (Usman 1998). By these dates it seems that the charcoal also represents some of the debris (i.e., construction material, or hearth) from an early stage in the town's development until probably in the 16th century when the enclosing wall was built.

Iyara is another walled site located about 2.2 km northeast of Ajasepo town, about 1 km southeast of the site of Gbagede (Figure 2). The site is situated on a relatively flat terrain with derived savanna type vegetation. The small Igbina River enters the site from the southeast and flows toward the northwest where it escapes through the wall toward the direction of Gbagede site. The vegetation along the river bed is dense and includes palm trees, bamboos, and various other riparian species found in the savanna. The survey of the site was carried out between March 1 and 3, 1995. The survey procedure employed was similar to that of Gbagede as described above.

Due to the varying degree of surface visibility of the wall, the survey was conducted in three phases with about 98% coverage of the wall. We commenced the survey of the wall from the opening (gate B) in the western wall until the point where the Igbina stream entered the site in the southeast. Generally, ground visibility of the wall in this area was good except near the stream, and in the vicinity of gate C. Here, machetes were employed to cut down vegetation that obstructed tapes and compass sightings. The second phase of the survey commenced from the datum point (gate B) towards the north. The survey had not gone far when we ran into

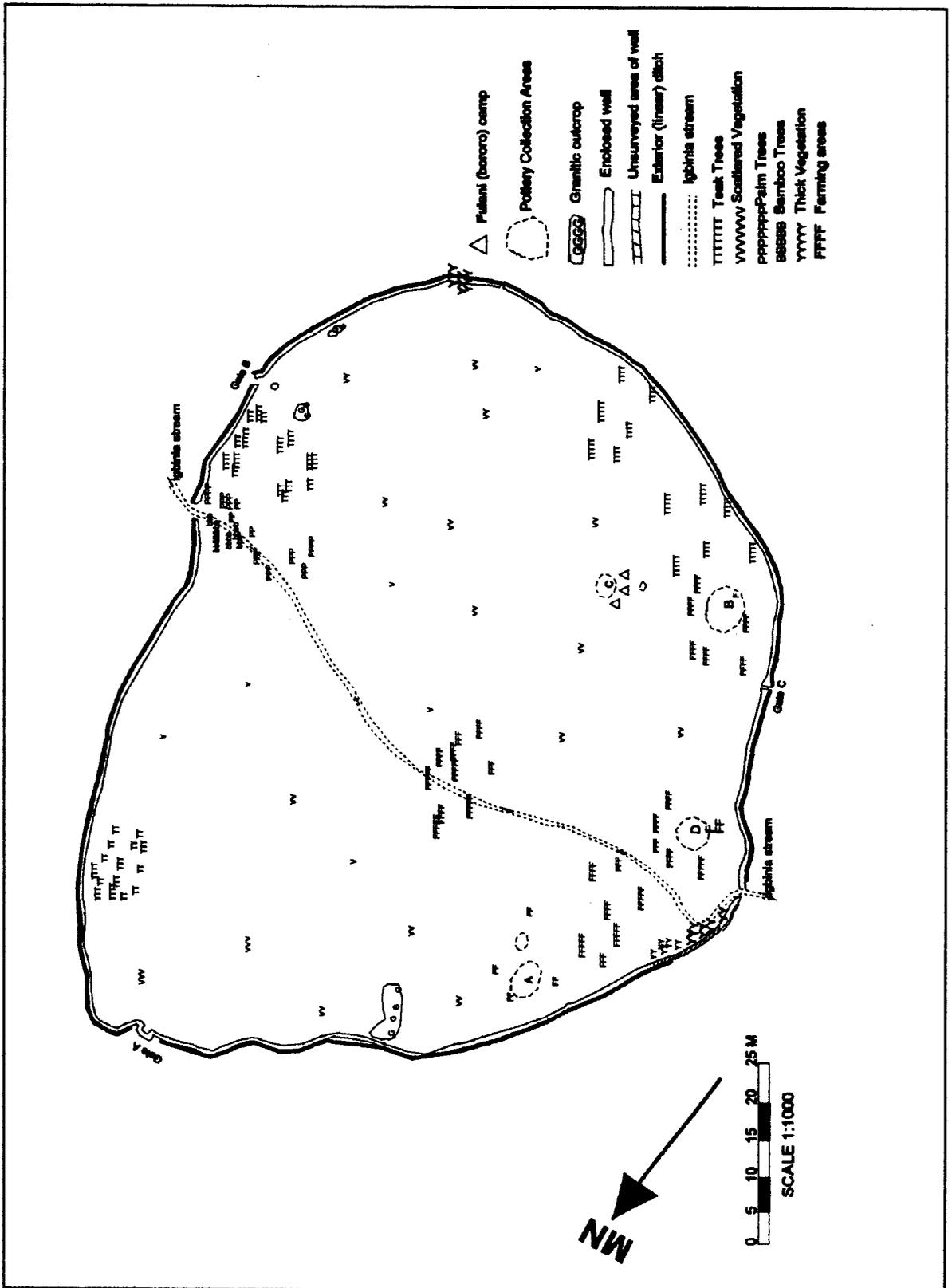
very thick overgrowth. This was a thorn thicket of fire resistant type. At first, we tried to cut them down but immediately realized the futility of such effort. Our last survey peg before encountering this obstacle was F2. From here, we decided to take an off-set measurement (to avoid the area with zero ground visibility). Using ranging poles, tapes and compass, an approximate off-set length of 350.2 m was measure to a location in the northern wall with some ground visibility. This location was peg #ad, and it was here that the third and final phase of the survey started. This took us back to the stream in the southeastern part of the wall where the first survey phase terminated.

The wall appears to have had three main gates. The first, Gate A, was about 6.8 m wide and located near the northeast corner of the wall. The second gate, Gate B, is in the southwest wall. This gate has an opening of about 4.30 m wide, a gate-wall thickness of between 9.40 m and 8.80 m, and a height of 1.70 m to 1.90 m. The third main gate, Gate C, was almost in the southeast wall with an entrance of about 6 m wide. This gate is about 127 m to the point where the Igbina stream enters the site. Also, a small opening of about 3 m wide on the south wall may have been used as minor entrance to the site. Generally, the wall height ranges between 1.2 m to 2.0 m, while the width was between 4.3 m to 5.5 m.

The survey of the wall also included examination of features close to or associated with the wall. The most important of these is the exterior ditch. An exterior linear ditch of about 1 m wide and 1.3 m deep in most places surrounded the wall. When measured from the ditch, the wall height sometimes increased to about 3.3 m. Although the ditch may have been created during excavation of soil for the construction of the wall, it may have also served as a defensive function to complement the high wall. Unlike the ditch at Gbagede site described above, the Iyara ditch was much deeper, linear, situated outside the wall, and appeared unbroken except by the gates and at the point where the Igbina stream enters the site.

The Iyara is a single walled settlement with a wall circumference of 2.05 km. The limit of the site which is thought to be within the wall, was approximately 385,720 m² (Figure 4). Two versions of oral tradition from the area have provided some infor-

Figure 4. Map of Iyara wall and pottery collection areas.



mation on the Iyara enclosure. One version suggests that the site was a war camp founded by one Balogun Adelani, a warrior who migrated from Old Oyo. Wars that were fought by this founder and his successors are given as Erinmope, Adamu, Adunbi, and Agannigan (where men perforated their ears). It is however not known when these wars were fought, though some of them appear to refer to the Yoruba civil wars of the early 19th century, following the fall of the Oyo empire. The second version of oral tradition suggest that the site was originally inhabited by the Nupe, and abandoned when the Oyo immigrants arrived in the area. However, there are no excavation material yet to confirm or dispute these two assertions, or one that would help provide knowledge of the prehistoric relationships between the site and the surrounding settlements.

Sociopolitical Relations

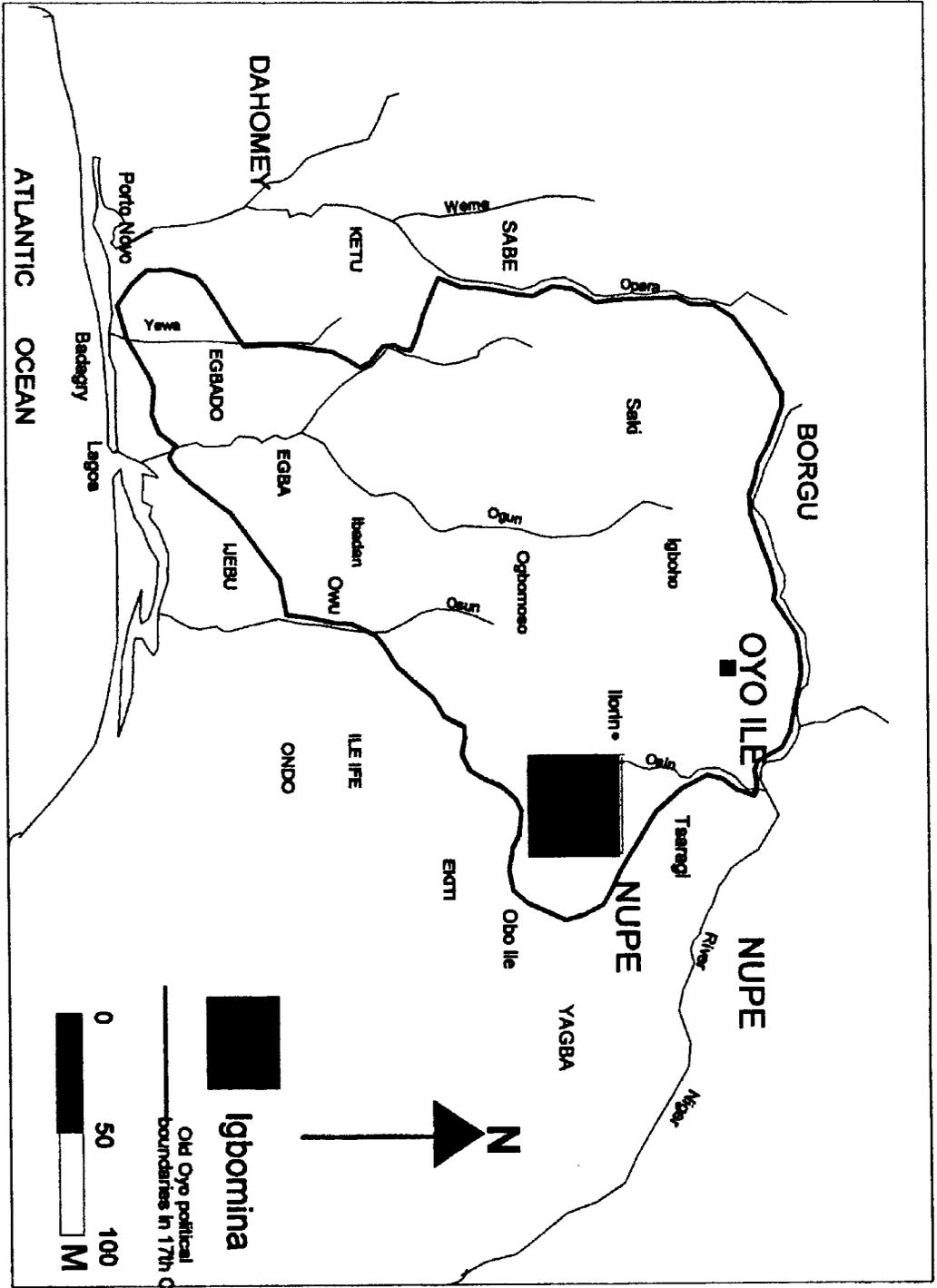
The sociopolitical circumstances which necessitated the construction of enclosed walls in northcentral Yorubaland involve the consideration of two forms of social relationships in the region. First, that of the Oyo and Igbomina, and second, that of the Yoruba and Nupe. States who instituted formal ties with the periphery were able to back it up with political power (Chazan and Abitbol 1988). The rise of Old Oyo was related to the formation of such links with periphery groups. The establishment of such links usually came as a reaction to some external or internal threat which necessitated the demonstration of particular unity in the area. For Old Oyo, such a circumstance arose with the Nupe invasion. These ties were formalized after the exile of the Oyo from their capital in the 15th century and institutionalized through the transition from a primogeniture to a circulatory method of succession to the Alafinate (Smith 1965). The expansion of Yoruba (Oyo) was an outgrowth of the formation of alliances between the Old Oyo and the Yoruba-speaking groups whose thrusts into outlying areas of northern Yorubaland were most penetrating when the tension between the state and the Nupe in the conquest areas was high.

The strategic importance of Igbomina to Old Oyo in terms of political or military purposes, appear to have constituted an important basis for alliances. Igbomina was a frontier area occupied

during a geographical expansion of the Old Oyo in the 16th century, an expansion which furthered the political and military interest of the state. The Igbomina Yoruba was located near the Nupe ethnic group, who lived both on the right bank of the Niger downstream of Jebba and to the north of the River Niger (Figure 5). The Nupe located along the northern frontier of the Old Oyo, appear to have exerted a great deal of political pressure on Oyo. The Igbomina society, located between the Nupe and Old Oyo had the strategic advantage of protecting Oyo's northern frontier. It seems likely therefore that the formation of alliances by Oyo with Yoruba settlements located in the area of the Nupe must have been greatly stimulated by the need to unite to face this pressure, which persisted until the end of the Old Oyo suzerainty.

The Nupe ethnic group who was earlier divided into several small chieftaincies and later united in a single kingdom (Elphinstone 1921; Law 1977), lived to the north of the River Niger. But there was also a Nupe province, centered on the town of Ogudu, on the right bank of the Niger downstream of Jebba close to the Igbomina. While it may be very difficult to understand the events of this period, it has been suggested that the Igbomina area was inhabited earlier on by the Nupe; that they were subsequently dislodged and partially absorbed by successive waves of Yoruba immigrants first from Ile-Ife and then from Oyo-Yoruba speaking areas. This claim as noted by Adepegba (1982) would seem to be supported by the soapstone figures found in Igbomina areas which exhibited both Nupe and Yoruba culture traits (Stevens 1978; Usman 1997). It appears that both culture (Yoruba and Nupe) may have co-existed until certain time, probably by the 16th century when the Nupe were displaced by the expansion of Old Oyo (Kenyo 1959; Obayemi 1976), and inter-group violence with the Nupe began to pose an ever-present threat to the well-being of the people and the survival of Oyo northern frontier. Oral traditions, dating as far back as the 16th century, provide historical evidence of military invasions of Yoruba by the Nupe. Nupe influence began to grow in the area when attempt by Old Oyo to build a military outpost in Igbomina failed to check Nupe incursions (Law 1977). It is also probable that the Nupe intensified their raids in northcentral Yorubaland as from the mid-18th century when the constitutional crisis in Old Oyo

Figure 5. The Yoruba sub-groups and their northern neighbors.



began to pre-occupy the aristocracy and thus reduced Oyo's control in the north (Law 1977).

Functional Interpretations of Walls

The study of site enclosures reveals how an architectural feature might have functioned in regard to prehistoric social relations. Here, I will explore the applicability of one of the most commonly applied functional labels, that of defensive function, to north central Yorubaland. Warfare was a major unpredictable variable in Igbomina. A good example of preventive action taken by the people was the construction of fortifications. Important towns, and even some larger villages in Yorubaland, were surrounded by a roughly concentric wall of dumped earth or, less often, by a stockade (Smith 1973). As well as providing defense in depth, wall and ditches offered protection to an army forming up for attack between the walls. In Igbomina, because of frequency of attacks, fortifications are therefore more permanent, built of durable materials, such as dump earth.

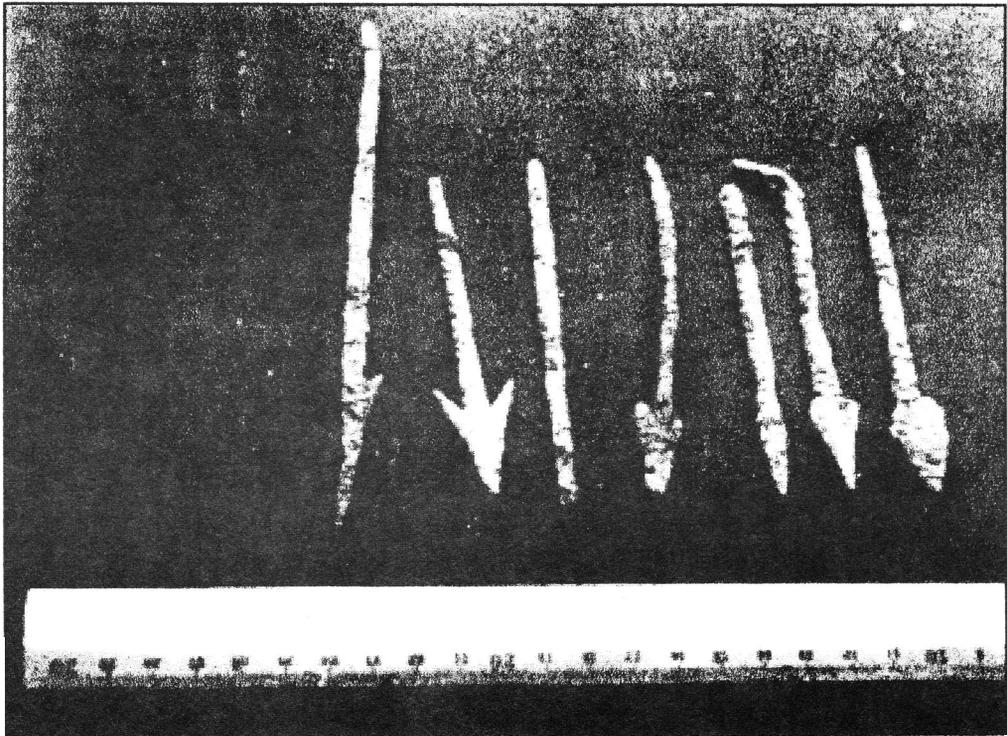
Oral-ethnohistoric data has provided information on Nupe ravages of north central Yoruba. This includes information on wars fought, and destruction and abandonment of settlements which are well remembered by elders. The Nupe raids of the mid- 18th century became particularly noticeable under three notable Nupe kings: Etsu Jubrilu (1744-1759), Majiya II (1769-1777), and Mu'azu (1779-1795) (Elphinstone 1921). Under Etsu Jubrilu, the people of Oba were dislodged from their settlement at Oba. Igbo Ora, Oke Ode, and Oro Ago were conquered and reduced to tributary status. Majiya's wars were, however, said to be the most intensive and most severe. With immense force of cavalry fighters, Majiya razed through north central Yorubaland, destroying towns and villages. He stormed the Olusin's town of Igbole, ravaged the whole town and set it on fire (Biscoe 1916:28, 40). In another raid by Etsu Mutazu (1779-1795), the large and defended political center of Olupo, Gbagede, described earlier on in this paper, was attacked. The king, Olupo Dalla II was killed in this raid, while his capital town, Gbagede was destroyed and a greater percentage of its inhabitants carried into slavery (Biscoe 1916:2-3; Elphinstone 1921). The radiocarbon date from a charcoal sample recovered from the site provided a

late date of A.D. 1795, which may correspond to the above episode. Although these Nupe raids can be described as 'smash and grab' operation with little consideration for long-term exploitation, they continued well into the 19th century when the Fulani conquest or rule was superimposed on the north central Yoruba.

Further support for the defense interpretation of the enclosure wall is provided by excavated iron arrowheads from some Igbomina sites, and which may have been utilized in war. The iron arrowheads vary in length between 6.6 cm and 17.7 cm. They are between 0.3 cm and 0.6 cm wide. The body is either round with coiled design or a squared shape with no design. Head shape varies considerably, either with long barb-edge or simple triangle edge (Figure 6). Until well into the 19th century, the bow and arrow were an important item in the armament of the Yoruba armies (Smith 1967). Oral tradition in northern Yorubaland refers to the use of bows and arrows by the Borgu, nearby neighbors of the Oyo, in the time of Alafin Ofinran, who probably reigned at Oyo around the middle of the 16th century (Smith 1967). The excavated iron arrowhead from Olufefon site has been dated to between 14th and 16th centuries A.D. (Usman 1998), and appear to suggest that the weapons must almost certainly have been used by the Yoruba-speaking people in the area by the 16th century.

While the defensive consideration for construction of enclosed walls in Igbomina appear to be overwhelming, one should not overlook other equally important purposes, however secondary these may appear to be. For example, enclosing walls may act as spatial demarcation, social regulation, as well as privacy of the political elites (Ozanne 1969). The Gbagede settlement was regarded as a former capital or head town of Ipo polity where the king, Olupo who was connected to Old Oyo royalty through the matriline, resided (Elphinstone 1921). The position of Olupo as the principal chief of Igbomina under the Old Oyo is acknowledged (Biscoe 1916; Burnett 1912; Dada 1985; Elphinstone 1921; Temple 1965). Thus, the enclosure wall at Gbagede, like some Yoruba and non-Yoruba political centers (Aremu 1984:34; Soper and Darling 1980:61-81) may have been constructed to enhance the security as well as for political prestige of the town, and attracted people from the surrounding villages.

Figure 6. Excavated iron arrowheads from Igbomina.



Conclusion

Two major forces have defined the history of the area. First, the establishment of Old Oyo authority in the area in the early 16th century following the defeat of the Nupe. The location of Igbomina in the northern extreme of Yorubaland was seen as a strategic importance to the defense and security of Oyo against powerful neighbors like the Nupe. Second, the Oyo expansion in north central Yorubaland, and on what had previously been Nupe territory (Kenyo 1959:51; Law 1977:91) intensified Nupe hostilities with greater consequences on the Yoruba-speaking population in the area. The geopolitical situation in north central Yorubaland, the encircling nature of walls, ditches, settlement abandonment, and excavated weapons of war have helped in suggesting a climate of hostility. It is possible that warfare, exemplified by the wall systems, suggests the collapse of a system of balanced but competing Yoruba and Nupe polities. Given the above, it is plausible to conclude that enclosing walls were built by the Igbomina as a response to Nupe aggressions. However, this factor must also be understood in relation to other factors, such as ordering social relations, spatial markers, and

enhancement of sociopolitical prestige among small-scale societies of northern Yorubaland.

Acknowledgments

The research work reported here is part of the Igbomina dissertation research funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Balantine Fund (1994/95). I am highly indebted to the following people who assisted in various aspects of the research: Drs Philip Oyelaran, Jonathan Aleru, Raphael Alabi of the University of Ibadan, and Yekeen Jimoh of the Federal Ministry of Works, Damaturu. My thanks to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, for providing me with a research permit.

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