

Recent Archaeological Research on Gambian Iron Age Habitation

Amy Lawson Museum of Anthropology University of Michigan 1109 N. Geddes Ave. Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109, USA

Introduction

In 1998, 1999, and 2000 three seasons of archaeological reconnaissance, survey and excavation were undertaken by the author in the Niani region of The Gambia. The study area is located in the central region of the Senegambian "Megalith Zone." This zone is known for its high density of stone circle and tumulus monuments. Several of these stone circles and tumuli have been excavated. both in Senegal and Gambia (Thilmans et al. 1980; Ozanne 1965; Hill 1981). Most have been found to contain multiple human burials. Radiocarbon dates from these excavations span the first millennium AD and, in the case of certain tumuli, continue into the second millennium AD (Thilmans et al. 1980). Although archaeological work on stone circles and tumuli give us valuable information concerning Iron Age burial practices, they do not provide us with concrete evidence about habitation and settlement organization. Prior to 1998, little archaeological research had focused on habitation sites within the Megalith Zone. Limited surveys had been conducted by McIntosh and McIntosh (1993) and Gallay et al. (1982) in Senegal, but no in-depth work followed. A major goals of my field project was to locate and excavate Iron Age habitation sites in a small area of the Gambia Valley containing several stone circle and tumulus monuments. This paper presents preliminary results from that work.

Survey Results

The 1998 field season served mostly as a reconnaissance mission for both myself, and members of the National Museum of The Gambia, who were beginning an inventory of archaeological sites in the country. After the success of the first season, I returned to The Gambia in 1999 and 2000 to conduct more specialized research. The 1999 field season, which lasted from January to April, focused primarily on using systematic surface survey to locate and map all archaeological sites encountered within a c. 50 km² area. An additional 25 km² was surveyed during the 2000 season. Care was taken to place transects in different environmental zones including the flood plains of the Gambia river and associated bolongs, cleared agricultural land, lightly forested areas, and laterite ridges. All survey work was performed by myself and between two and four other Gambian workers. In most cases full coverage survey was achieved; in more forested areas full coverage survey was not possible because of vegetation cover.

The results of the survey are encouraging. In total, 273 sites were located. These include 153 stone circles or alignments, 48 tumuli, 50 habitation sites, 3 historic trading posts, and 19 iron working locales. Prior to the survey, I had hypothesized that at least some of the habitation sites encountered would take the form of tell sites, such as those found in other West African river valleys (i.e., the Niger, Senegal, Falemme) and on the Lake Chad flood plain (McIntosh 1995; Holl 1996; Connah 1976; Breunig et. al 1996; Togola 1996; Thiaw 1999). However, this expectation was not fulfilled. Instead, I found that habitation sites are generally located at least .5 km away from major rivers or bolongs, and thus out of the flood plain proper. In addition. Gambia Valley settlement sites do not appear to have been occupied continuously for several hundred years, as is the case with some West African tell sites. Rather, Gambian communities seem to have exhibited more mobility, perhaps due to problems of soil fertility. Thus, as I elaborate below, most settlement sites are shallow as settlement expanded horizontally rather than vertically.

Sub-Surface Probes

Settlement sites in the Gambia Valley are generally identifiable by the presence of extensive ceramic scatters and, in some cases, clusters of baobab trees. Site sizes range from one to 25 hectares. Village sites are generally flat, and ceramics do not cluster in a way that might suggest areas of housing and midden deposits. To gain a better idea of intra-site stratigraphy, I organized a system



Figure 1: Map of Gambia showing main study region.

of intensive shovel test units. The digging of both shovel test units and larger excavation units discussed below was the focus of the January to October 2000 field season. In arranging shovel test units, a 20 m² grid was placed over select village sites. At every intersection point, a 30 cm² test unit was excavated. All sediment from these test units was screened and items of material culture retained. In addition, information about sediment color and texture, as well as depth of cultural deposit, was recorded. Hundreds of shovel test units were dug at six main sites. The shovel tests revealed that while the depth of material culture over the majority of each site did not exceed 40 cm, it was possible to find midden deposits, which reached up to a meter in depth. These middens generally displayed a high density of cultural remains including ceramics and faunal remains, making them ideal areas for more extensive horizontal exposures. Middens were located close to, but not necessarily adjacent to housing areas which were characterized by very hard clayey sediment (from the collapse of mud brick houses) and little to no material culture.

Excavation Results

Based on the information gleaned from shovel test units, four larger excavation units were placed in midden areas at three different village sites. These excavation units ranged from 2 m^2 to 3 m by 4 m in area. All units were dug using natural stratigraphic levels. A sizeable quantity of cultural remains was recovered from these excavations. Ceramics were the most common artifact category, but a significant amount of faunal remains were also recovered at one site. Other items recovered included iron artifacts, (specifically spears, fish hooks, and jewelry), glass and ceramic beads, and, at one site, intricate ceramic pipes. As there is currently no ceramic chronology in the Gambia Valley, the ceramics recovered from these excavations will be crucial in developing the first chronology for this region. Though ceramic analysis is still in its preliminary stages, at least three distinct assemblages have been recovered. After the results of radiocarbon testing are received in the summer of 2001, I will have a much better idea of the time range spanned by these three assemblages.

Conclusions and Future Research

The survey and excavations conducted in the Niani region of Gambia have been extremely successful. With the help of my Gambian colleagues I was able to identify a large number of habitation sites as well as previously unrecorded megalithic monuments. The fact that I was able to record all of these sites using a handheld GPS will make it easy for future archaeologists to relocate them. It will also assist the Gambian National Council for Arts and Culture in compiling an inventory of known archaeological sites. The creation of a ceramic chronology, based on the materials collected in my excavations, will pave the way for a better understanding of both the relationship between settlements and monuments, and the changing sociopolitical relations amongst the settlements themselves. Data are being entered into a GIS (ArcView) to permit a spatial analysis which will consider the relationships between settlement sites, activity sites, monumental sites, and environmental features.

Among the most interesting kinds of sites recovered during archaeological survey in both 1999 and 2000 were a number of tatos or fortified village sites. Although tatos associated with 19th century European forts have been documented in the nearby Senegal and Falemme valleys (Thiaw 1999), many of the tatos I encountered appear to have been occupied before extensive European contact. Thus, they seem to indicate a certain degree of political unrest in the region in the mid 2nd millennium AD. This may well be related to the influx of Mande speaking peoples in the 14th century AD, and the subsequent construction of a number of Mandinka states along the Gambia Valley. These indigenous tatos constitute an exciting topic for future research.

Another intriguing theme of research relates to settlement strategies. As mentioned above, much of the archaeological research in West Africa has centered on tell sites. These sites are extremely useful for archaeologists because they have often been occupied for hundreds of years and thus, if well excavated, provide a clear ceramic chronology. Excavations at tell sites have been extremely important in gathering information about the length of settlement in a region, and in demonstrating the complexity of West African political systems thousands of years in the past. However, tell sites are only one kind of settlement. Based on my research in the Gambia Valley, I would argue that shorter term, shifting settlements may in fact be an even more wide-ranging settlement strategy in West Africa. Such settlements, however, are harder to identify in surface survey, and do not provide the chronological depth inherent in tell sites. Nonetheless, they are an important kind of habitation site, and we must learn how to better study them. My three major seasons of fieldwork in Gambia have provided some useful information about such sites, but much more work will be necessary to determine why such settlement strategies are adopted in some locale and not others.

The field seasons shed much light on the subject of Iron Age habitation in the Gambia Valley, but they are only the beginning. Much more work needs to be done both in Gambia and in adjacent regions of Senegal to understand the relationship between habitation and the construction of funerary monuments such as stone circles and tumuli. This is a promising and exciting are of research, and it is my hope that the initial work reported in this paper will lay the groundwork for future studies by myself and others in this fascinating and understudied region.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to all members of the Gambian National Council for Arts and Culture who issued me a research permit, gave me space to conduct laboratory research, and showed interest in all stages of my research. In particular I would like to thank Baba Ceesay, Mamadou Joof, Lamin Sanyang, Bala Saho, Morro Koma and Redmond Tobin. I would also like to thank the Drammeh familv of Wassu who housed and fed me in the field. Financial support for the 1998, 1999, and 2000 seasons was provided by grants from the Rackham Graduate School, the University of Michigan Department of Anthropology, the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, the Center for African and African-American Studies at the University of Michigan, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Fulbright Foundation.

References

Breunig, P., K. Neumann and W. Van Neer

1996 New research on the Holocene Settlement and Environment of the Chad Basin in Nigeria. African Archaeological Review 13: 111-146.

Connah, G.

1976 The Daima Sequence and the Prehistoric Chronology of the Lake Chad Region of Nigeria. Journal of African History 17:321-352.

Gallay, A., G. Pignant and P. Curdy

1982 Mbolop Tobé (Santhiou Kohel, Sénégal): Contribution à la connaissance du mégalithisme sénégambien. Archives Suisses d'Anthropologie Général 46:217-259.

Hill, M.

1981 The Senegambian Monument Complex: Current Status and Prospects for Research. In Megaliths to Medicine Wheels. Calgary: University of Calgary Archaeological Association, pp. 419-430.

Holl, A.

1996 Genesis of Central Chadic Polities. In G. Pwiti and R. Soper, editors, Aspects of African Archaeology. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, pp. 581-592.

McIntosh, S. K.

1995 Excavations at Jenne-jeno, Hambarketolo, and Kaniani: the 1981 season. Berkeley: University of California Monographs in Anthropology. Berkeley. McIntosh, S. and R. McIntosh

1993 Field Survey in the Tumulus Zone of Senegal. African Archaeological Review 11: 73-108.

Ozanne, P.

1965 The Anglo-Gambian Stone Circles Expedition. Research Review 2:32-36.

Quinn, C.

1972 Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Thiaw, 1.

1999 Archaeological Investigation of Long-Term Culture Change in the Lower Falemme(Upper Senegal Region), AD 500-1900. PhD dissertation, Rice University.

Thilmans, G., C. Descamps and B. Khayat

1980 Protohistoire du Sénégal: Les Sites Mégalithiques. Mémoires de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire 91. Dakar: IFAN.

Togola, T.

1996 Iron Age Occupation in the Mema Region, Mali. African Archaeological Review 13: 91-110.