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# **■**Tanzania

Hunters, pastoralists and hill-furrow farmers – Archaeological studies in the Sonjo Land, northern Tanzania

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Introduction

The "Cultural ecology of the East African savanna environment in a long-term historical perspective" project of the Department of Archaeology, University of Helsinki studied preliminarily the archaeology of Sonjo Land in 2003-2004 (Laulumaa et al. 2003; Laulumaa and Seitsonen 2004; Seitsonen and Laulumaa 2004). Sonjo Land is situated on the arduously reachable, isolated highlands west of Lake Natron, just south of the present-day Kenyan-Tanzanian border (Adams et al. 1994; Gray 1963; Sutton 1990, 2000) (Figure 1). The Sonjo (or Batemi, as they call themselves) are an isolated Bantu tribe, described by Fosbrooke (1938) as "an island of agricultural Bantu in a sea of nomadic Masai" (Adams et al. 1994).

The main emphasis of our project is the vast Late Iron Age (LIA) Engaruka complex, dated ca. AD 1400-1800 (Laulumaa 2006; Robertshaw 1986; Sassoon 1967; Stump 2006; Sutton 1990, 2000). The Sonjo people live in terraced hillside villages and practise irrigation agriculture, which is highly reminiscent of the archaeological remains encountered at the sites of Engaruka complex. Thus a potential connection between modern Sonjo and the inhabitants

of Ancient Engaruka has often been proposed (Adams et al. 1994; Fosbrooke 1938; Nurse and Rottland 1993; Sutton 1990, 2000). However, these suggestions had not previously been tried out by archaeological excavations. This goal in mind, it was of interest for us to survey and excavate the old, abandoned Sonjo village sites to study the possible connection between the Sonjo and the Ancient Engaruka complex.

# Archaeological fieldwork in 2003-2004

Prior to our surveys in 2003-2004, the only known archaeological sites in the area were a few abandoned Sonjo village sites roughly known to prehistorians by their name and approximate location (Sutton 1990, 2000; Adams et al. 1994). These sites were checked with local guides in 2003-2004 and excavations were conducted in 2004 at two of these village sites: Yasi and Buri (the Sonjo villages are commonly known by their Maasai names which are also used in the topographic maps. Thus, where applicable, the Maasai names are used and Sonjo names showed in parentheses the first time the locations are mentioned; if there is no name in parentheses then the place has a commonly used Sonjo name). The abandoned villages known to our informants were surveyed, sketch mapped and surface collected.

Figure 1 shows the core of our research area in the Sonjo Land. Also a few locations situated outside this area were checked, namely the abandoned villages of Sale (Orokhota) and Tinaga, as well as the still inhabited village of Oldonyo Sambu (Kura) (Adams et al. 1994; Ojalammi 2005). There is also an abandoned village at Oldonyo Sambu but it was not surveyed this time. Besides the Middle Stone Age (MSA) component observed at the abandoned Buri village site and described elsewhere (Seitsonen 2005, this volume), we located also a number of other archaeological sites attributed to different prehistoric periods in the Sonjo Land. These are briefly described in the following discussion (based on Laulumaa and Seitsonen 2004; Seitsonen and Laulumaa 2004).

# **Stone Age sites**

As the conducted surveys were unsystematic judgemental surveys (Lavento 2000) aimed at areas with the most potential for LIA / historical Sonjo occupations, Stone Age sites were located as a by-

NYAME AKUMA No. 67 JUNE 2007

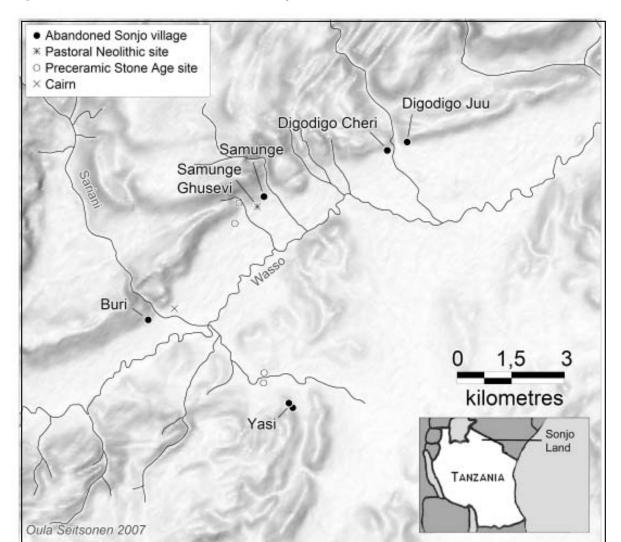


Figure 1. Main research area in the heart of the Sonjo Land.

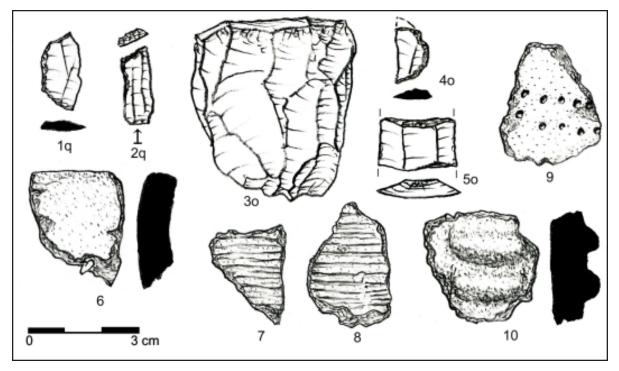
product of our main work. However, they give a good idea of the wide temporal and cultural range of the sites waiting for future research. In the abandoned Buri village we located the oldest site known in the Sonjo Land up to date: a small, probably late, Middle Stone Age (MSA) artefact scatter, which was also test excavated. The results are discussed elsewhere in detail (Seitsonen 2005a, this volume).

All the other Stone Age sites have typical Late Stone Age (LSA) characteristics, namely microlithic stone industry. Most of these are small and relatively dense lithic scatters situated on the banks of the perennial rivers running through the area (Figure 1).

Quartz is the dominant raw material, but chert is also present. Generally these sites seem to be connected to the preceramic Stone Age, suggested by both the techno-typological characteristics of lithics and the lack of pottery (Figure 2.1-2). However, the latter might as well be connected to the activity facies the sites present (Ambrose 2002; Mehlman 1977, 1979, 1989; Robertshaw et al. 1990; Seitsonen 2006).

Two of the located sites seem to belong to the Pastoral Neolithic (PN) traditions. This is suggested by the abundant presence of obsidian raw material, as well as the technology and typology of the obsidian artefacts (Figure 2.3-5). At the other site, Samunge

**Figure 2.** Finds from the Sonjo Land (place of origin in parenthesis). 1: quartz crescent (Kisangiro river crossing), 2: truncated and backed quartz microlith (Samunge river junction), 3: obsidian platform core, 4: obsidian crescent (3-4 from Samunge Ghusevi), 5: segmented obsidian blade (Tinaga lower) 6-10: ceramics (6, 9-10 Sale village, 7-8 Yasi village).



Ghusevi, also possible PN ceramics were present, and an observed human lower jaw hints the presence of underground burials. The other find location with PN characteristics is situated just outside the abandoned Sonjo village of Tinaga. Obsidian lithics, e.g. scrapers and microlith fragments, were collected on a relatively even slope below the village site, among them a large fragmented obsidian blade reminiscent of Elmenteitan lithic assemblages (Figure 2.5) (Robertshaw 1990).

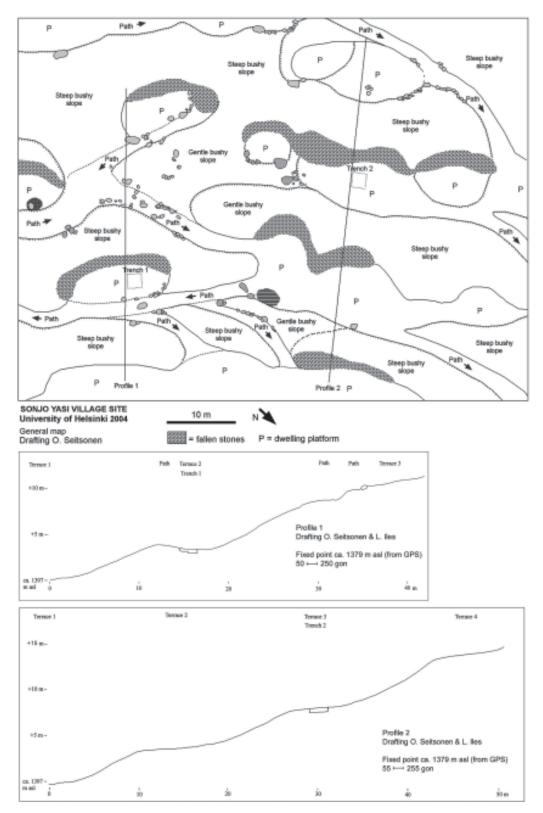
Locating Pastoral Neolithic remains in the area is not at all surprising, since sites of PN traditions are known abundantly from the Loita-Mara and Narosura area situated immediately to the north, from the Serengeti Plains, Ngorongoro Crater and Engaruka area, and possibly also from the northern end of Lake Manyara (However, the last mentioned evidence needs further research for confirmation of the observed archaeological occurrences) (Ambrose 2002; Bower 1973; Bower and Chadderdon 1986; Cable 1990; Leakey 1966; Leakey et al. 1972; Merrick et al. 1994;

Odner 1972; Robertshaw 1990; Robertshaw et al. 1990; Sassoon 1968; Siiriäinen 1990; Seitsonen 2005a-b, 2006).

# Sonjo village sites

There is a number of abandoned Sonjo village sites known by the local people and researchers (Adams et al.; Sutton 1990, 2000). These old villages remind closely the present Sonjo village sites: they are found on the foot slopes of hills, and characterized by the terraced dwelling platforms and vicinity of irrigated fields (Gray 1963; Ojalammi 2005; Sutton 1990). Terraced dwelling platforms are generally built in a similar way in all the villages, and differences in the construction of platforms correlate with the rockiness of the ground: if stones were present they were used to support the dwelling platforms, and if not, the platforms were simply dug into the slope (Laulumaa and Seitsonen 2004).

Figure 3. General map of the lower section of Yasi Village.



## Survey of the abandoned villages

During our first visit to Sonjo Land in 2003 a couple of the old village sites mentioned by earlier researchers (Gray 1963; Sutton 1990, 2000; Adams et al. 1994) were inspected. In 2004 the survey of other abandoned sites was continued with the help of our local workmen, who made our task much easier with their high knowledge of the terrain of their home country.

The surveyed sites in our core research area were Yasi, Buri, Samunge (Soyeta), Kisangiro (Rokhari) and Digidigo Juu (Figure 1), and also the outer lying villages of Sale, Tinaga and Oldonyo Sambu were briefly visited. Of these visited sites Samunge and Digidigo Juu were abandoned only ca. 30 years ago during the "Ujamaa" villagization program, as people were forced to move away from their old villages and the structures demolished. It is likely that also these two villages had been in use for long times before the Ujamaa. (pers.comm. Simon Sereni; Potkanski and Adams 1998.)

Oldonyo Sambu is the only contemporary Sonjo village which was not much influenced by the Ujamaa policy, probably due to its remote location. Thus there has been much less forced movement of houses to the level ground below the old secure hill slope village sites at Oldonyo Sambu, than in the other villages (pers.obs. 2004; Potkanski and Adams 1998). However, a slow creep of the occupation towards the old village sites above the modern Ujamaa ones can also be observed at other villages, such as at Samunge (personal observation, 2004).

Although Sale and Tinaga are also names of two currently inhabited villages, also abandoned sites with the same name exist in the vicinity of these two. These villages are especially interesting thinking of the main goals of our project: Sale is the only village which has oral tradition concerning Engaruka and Tinaga is traditionally known as the first site where the Sonjo originally settled down and from where they occupied the other sites (Gray 1963; Nurse et al. 1993).

Oral tradition places Sonjo origin to Nguruman Escarpment on the Kenyan side of the modern border and was often mentioned in the discussions with the local elders. Also linguistic evidence supports this, showing that the closest relatives to Sonjo language are to be found in Kenya (Nurse et al. 1993;

Sutton 1993). In the future it would be of interest to survey and collect oral tradition in Nguruman area to see if there would be any links to Sonjo Land.

Small surface collections were made at each of the surveyed sites. Collected finds were predominantly mica-tempered undecorated pottery (Figure 2.6) and faunal remains. In few cases the sherds were decorated with horizontal incisions (Figure 2.7-8) or with rows of small pits (Figure 2.9). Lugs and handles are also present, sometimes in pairs (Figure 2.10). Decoration has some general resemblance with the mica-tempered pottery found at Engaruka. However, much more investigations are needed before any far reaching conclusions can be made of their relations.

# **Excavations at Yasi village**

Yasi village is situated ca. 5 km south of the mosque of Samunge, on the north slope of a hill densely covered with thorn bushes. Numerous dwelling platforms, reminiscent of the modern Sonjo dwelling platforms, have been excavated into the slope (mapped section presented in Figure 3). Three trenches were opened on the dwelling platforms: trenches 1 and 2 (both 2m<sup>2</sup>) in the lower part of the village (Figure 3) and trench 3 higher up. Stratigraphy in all the trenches was generally similar, with 20-50 cm thick dark grey, ashy cultural layer, underlain by a reddish-brown gravely, micaeous bottom soil. No features were observed in the trenches 1-2, but in the trench 3 was uncovered a stone-lined fireplace and right next to it at least one whole broken vessel. Radiocarbon dates of  $160 \pm 30$  BP (Hela-1004) and  $255 \pm$ 30 BP (Hela-1005) were obtained from the trenches 2 and 3. Finds from all the trenches consist of micatempered undecorated pottery, faunal remains (including one worked and perforated bone fragment), iron ring, slag, one chert and one obsidian flake. A few potsherds were decorated with vertical incisions (Figure 2.7-8) and one had a fragmented lug/handle.

### **Excavations at Buri village**

The general location and the excavation of the trenches 1 and 2 at the Buri village is described more closely elsewhere (Seitsonen, this volume) and thus we concentrate here on the trench 3, which was a 2 x 1 m pit excavated on a dwelling platform (Seitsonen, this volume: Figure 1).

Stratigraphy of the trench was simple: a thin humic overburden was followed by a 50-55 cm thick layer of fine humic grevish-brown sand. It seems to represent a rubbish dump, which has probably been next to the house situated on the platform, as suggested by modern Sonjo examples (personal observation 2004). Under this was reddish-brown micaeous, gravelly deposit comparable with the trenches 1 and 2 at Buri and the Yasi excavation trenches. Radiocarbon dates from this dump,  $425 \pm 30$  BP (Hela-1006) and  $465 \pm 30$  BP (Hela-1007), confirm the local oral tradition that Buri was occupied longer time ago than Yasi (Simon Sereni, personal communication). Finds were mica-tempered ceramics, faunal remains and a few chert and quartz lithics. Almost all the ceramics were undecorated; only one body sherd had vertical incisions on it.

### Conclusion

The preliminary surveys and excavations in the Sonjo Land show the high potential of the area for future studies. The whole archaeological sequence known from the nearby areas seems to be presented. However, much more fieldwork is needed to construct a better picture of the history of the Sonjo Land.

The MSA and preceramic LSA observations are interesting, since the immediate adjoining areas largely lack any comparable material. However, these areas are also otherwise poorly known archaeologically. PN sites are worth further studies as good comparative collections exist from the Loita-Mara area and Serengeti (Bower and Gogan-Porter 1981; Odner 1972; Robertshaw 1990; Robertshaw and Cable 1990). Lately information of the more southern stretches of PN habitation within the Rift Valley has been gathered between Lake Natron and Lake Manyara (Seitsonen 2005a-b, 2006). The studies of old Sonjo villages show that they were inhabited same at the same time as Engaruka. However, it must be remembered that our four radiocarbon samples only show that Sonjo country was inhabited by villagers practising hill-furrow irrigation simultaneously with Engaruka, and we still lack any firm evidence of social or cultural connections between them. More research is needed for resolving these questions.

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