

■ ETHIOPIA

Historical Archaeology in the Highlands of Southern Ethiopia: Preliminary Findings

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Introduction

Today craft specialists in Ethiopia exist as at least one endogamous group in virtually every Ethiopian Cushitic, Omotic, and Semitic speaking society (Cassiers 1975; Cerulli 1956; Haberland 1984; Hallpike 1968; Lewis 1962, 1970;

Shack 1964; Todd 1978). Early theorists suggested that either Ethiopian craft groups formed by conquest of “remnant” hunter-gatherers by early Semitic, Omotic, and Cushitic peoples (Cerulli 1956; Jensen 1959; Shack 1964; Straube 1963) or by craft specialists who chose to settle among host/agricultural groups (Hallpike 1968; Levine 1974). Others offered that internal developments related to the usurpation of craft specialists, who were once nobility, led to the formation of endogamous groups (Lewis 1962, 1970; Todd 1977, 1978).

While many researchers provide theories surrounding the origins of the caste-like artisan strata in Ethiopia, there is no historical or archaeological research to investigate and demonstrate their theories. In 2005, we began historical studies among the Omotic-speaking Gamo peoples in southern Ethiopia based on our earlier ethnoarchaeological studies of Gamo potters (Arthur 2002, 2003, 2006, 2009) and hideworkers (K. Arthur 2008; Shott and Weedman 2006; Weedman 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2006). The patrilineal Gamo divide themselves into three endogamous-hereditary strata determined by patrilineal descent and occupation to include: *mala* (farmers and weavers); *tsoma chinasha* (potters and ironsmiths) and *tsoma degala* (hideworkers). Our early studies suggested that Gamo artisans had little access to positions of prestige and power; and there appeared to be potential for archaeological visibility of the different socio-economic strata relating to different types of household materials and household spatial arrangements.

In 2005, we decided to begin a study focused on uncovering the transformations in Gamo endogamous groups by involving elders in recounting their oral histories to help us locate and interpret historic sites. We believed that it was critical to incorporate the Gamo people in the interpretation of their own past and therefore we collected oral traditions and life histories, as well as conducted ethnoarchaeological and archaeological studies. This paper presents our preliminary research between 2005 and 2008.

Methods

We began our studies by collecting oral traditions, which enabled us to connect the Gamo people to their own histories. John Arthur, Matthew Curtis, and Bizayehu Lakew began our research in 2005,

Figure 1: Map of the Borada region indicating the location of ethnographic communities and archaeological sites discussed in the text.

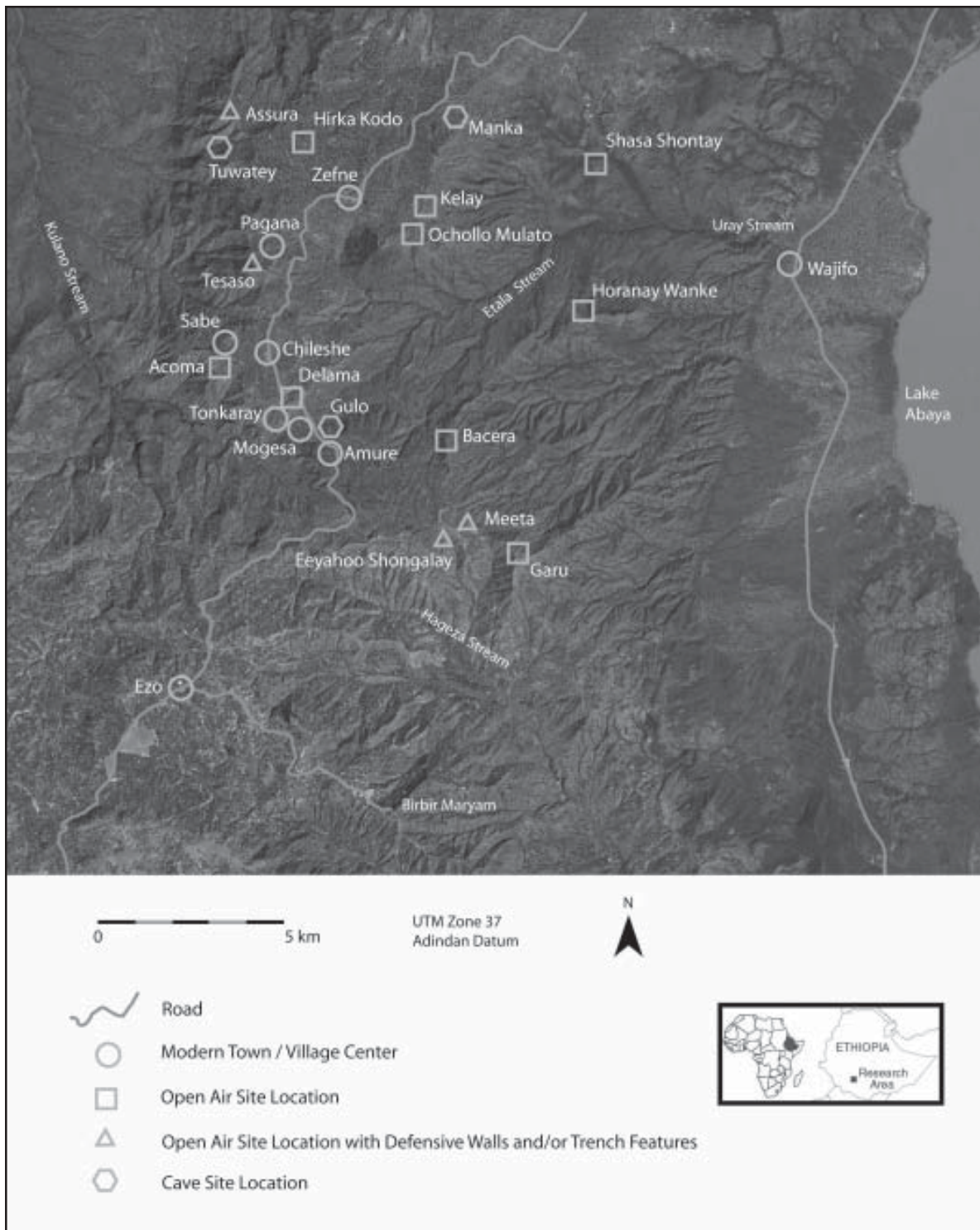


Figure 2: Photograph of Ochollo Mulato mound, identified as the first settlement in Borada oral tradition dates from 13th to 19th century.



with funding from the University of South Florida. They interviewed elders in the Chenchä and Borada districts of the Gamo region and located 22 abandoned households, 2 market sites, and several cave/shelter sites in the Chenchä district. However, we were looking for large settlement sites, where we could conduct broad-scale excavation to examine social stratification through time. It was only in the Borada district, where elders identified the history and location of several large settlement sites, including Mulato Ochollo, believed to be the oldest site in Borada (Figures 1 and 2). We then received National Science Foundation (2006) and National Endowment for the Humanities funding (2007 and 2008) to begin our archaeological and ethnoarchaeological search into the history of the Borada people.

Between 2006 and 2008, Kathryn Arthur conducted the oral tradition, ethnoarchaeology, and life history research with a passive understanding of the local language and with the assistance of Yohannes Ethiopia, a native speaker (Figure 3). Oral traditions and life histories focused on consenting elder men

and women representing the various Borada social strata. Kathryn tape-recorded over 80 hours of in-depth interviews that Yohannes Ethiopia transcribed. These interviews focused on settlement history, warfare, hunting activities, social groups such as work parties and neighborhood associations, and religion, ritual, and ritual-political positions. In particular, we were interested in how changes in status, economy, and religion have affected public, ritual, and household spaces and material culture.

For our ethnoarchaeological study, we selected 60 households in five Borada communities including: Mogesa Shongalay, Amure Dembe Chileshe, Tonkary Dembe Chileshe, Sabe Chileshe Alo, and Pagana Zonga (Figure 1). Kathryn Arthur relied on her previous knowledge and relationships with individuals from her 1996-1998 research to select communities in which artisans live, as potters, hideworkers, and ironsmiths are not present in every community. In Amure and Sabe, we mapped and photographed the location of every household and public space and recorded for each household the number

Figure 3: Photograph of Kathy Arthur and Yohannes Ethiopia interviewing Borada elders.



of residents, social strata, occupations, and the clan and age of the male and female head of the households. In Amuru and Sabe, we studied a stratified sample of 20 *mala* farmer and weaver households, 15 *tsoma degala* hideworker households, and nine *tsoma chinasha* potter households. The Borada people highly value pottery and iron from the communities of Pagana and Tonkaray and Kathryn Arthur decided to study all the *tsoma chinasha* households in these communities (numbering 11). Finally, Kathryn Arthur also worked in five *tsoma degala* hideworking households in Mogesa, where she had built close relationships with individuals during her 1996 research. At each household, we inventoried households and public use areas; recorded household demography, status, kinship, diet; and observed ritual-political, social, and economic practices. The latter provided us with a rich database concerning the daily practices of Borada people and their material and spatial signatures, including indigenous typologies.

Ethnoarchaeology provided us with a rich but static picture of community and household materi-

als, demographics, and use of space. Transformations in ideology, materials and use of space were only accessible through collecting life histories. For example, the life histories of the elder men and women revealed that during the last century, the Marxist-Leninist national government and Protestant leaders forced the Borada people to leave their indigenous practices and religion, invoked equality between artisans and farmers, eroded female ritual-political roles, and redistributed land. By combining ethnoarchaeology with oral tradition and life histories, we will be able to create a very dynamic understanding of changes in Borada worldview.

John Arthur, Matthew Curtis, and Bizayehu Lakew conducted archaeological surveys and excavations of nine open-air historic sites and three historic/prehistoric cave sites. In addition, Matthew Curtis created topographic maps of three of the open-air sites: Ochollo Mulato, Garu, and Bacera. Initially we surveyed, photographed, recorded GPS data, and collected artifacts from these 12 locations that elders identified as historic habitation and ritual sites. We

Figure 4: Possible House foundation at Ochollo Mulato mound site.



then excavated 4 of the historic open air sites (two 2 m by 2 m units at Ochollo Mulato (Figure 4) and one 1 m by 1 m unit each at Kelay Gera Gurame, Assura Awesto, and Bacera Zala Barena) and 1 historic-pre-historic cave site (two 1 m by 1 m units at Tuwatey Zonga Cave) (Figure 1). We excavated each unit in 25 cm by 25 cm quads until reaching bedrock and sieved the material through 5 mm and 1 mm mesh screening. We also collected soil samples for future botanical and faunal studies.

However, since many of the sites are so expansive, some measuring over 40 hectares, we set out to conduct a series of shovel tests ($n=47$) on all sites, to pinpoint households and cultural features. Once again, we excavated until reaching bedrock and sieved the material through 5 mm and 1 mm mesh screening. Our goal was to understand the depth of the sites, attempt to locate specific features, and collect samples for radiocarbon dating. We placed shovel tests in areas with dense surface artifacts and in areas where Gamo elders stated there had been a household and in areas settled by the first inhabitants of the site. Furthermore, because the historic sites do

not often contain ground surface features, we enlisted the expertise of Lawrence Conyers, who worked at five sites (Ochollo Mulato, Assura Awesto, Bacera Zala Barena, Garu Shongalay, and Tuwatey Zonga) using ground penetrating radar with a 400 MHz antenna (Conyers 2008). For all the profiles, except for Assura Awesto, we collected within established grids and grid corners and we tied other important location points to our site datum points.

Discovering Prestige, Dignity, and History

Recalled through oral tradition, male elders declare that the Borada derive their name from a man named Borchay, who traveled from Geregedda, an area now inhabited by the Guji Oromo, Sidama, and Koyera peoples. Through collecting life histories and information about ritual practices and songs, we learned that prestige and dignity are central concepts to the Borada worldview. Today, the Borada revere the Sidama, Oromo, and Koyera for their strength, dignity, and prestige in warfare and hunting. Thus, the

Figure 5: Photograph of Awesto Assura illustrating rock walls that surround house foundations dating from 15th to 19th centuries.



Borchay tradition appropriates the reputation of other Ethiopian societies to strengthen the prestige and dignity of Borada history.

Borchay traveled across a forested area, which is now the location of Lake Abaya, and settled in the lowland location of Shasha Shontay Mulato (Figure 1). Shasha Shontay is located on a ridge at 1561 +/-9 m asl in elevation and on the surface there are many LSA stone tools and ceramics. A nearby river flooded after we discovered the site and we have not yet been able to return to test the site for more accurate dating. The Borada elders also revealed to us the location of nine large settlement sites located on mountaintops that represent to them the places where Borchay first settled in the highlands. Borada elders remember the order of the settlement of these sites through the order in which the Borada communities set their New Year's Day (*Meskal*) fires. The nine open-air settlement sites date from the 13th to the 19th centuries and include: Ochollo Mulato, Bacera Barena, Assura Awesto, Delama Chileshe Alo, Hirka

Dabo Kodo Moko, Tesaso Zonga, Horanay Wanke, Kelay Gera Gurame, and Garu Shongalay (Figure 1). Each of these settlements is located near a spring on a mountaintop overlooking either the Lake Abaya basin or the Omo River basin. Each site also contains a burial ground and sacred forests. Life histories revealed that in the past prestigious men and women used forest areas to conduct barley and small animal sacrifices for ancestral spirits and the natural world of spirit forms of *Tsalahay*, living in water and trees, stones, etc. These communities range in size from less than two to over 40 hectares. Because of their immense size and the relative lack of architectural features visible on the surface, as stated above, we enlisted the expertise of Lawrence Conyers, whose radar data indicate the possible presence of hearths, circular and angular wall structures, and compact floors at several of the sites. Test excavations and shovel tests at these open-air historic settlements revealed that cattle are the dominant faunal species in association with earthenware ceramics, iron, glass beads, and chert and obsidian debitage.

Figure 6: Entrance to Tuwatey Cave Zonga dating from 6400 to 3360 cal BP.



The four historic sites (Ochollo Mulato, Kelay Gera Gurame, Assura Awesto, and Bacera Zala Barena, Figures 1 and 4) we excavated indicate the presence of households with different strata and social prestige. In the past Borada, people obtained prestige and dignity through completion of rites of passage associated with birth, puberty, marriage, ritual-political leadership, hunting leadership, and death. However, *tsoma* artisans only complete the entire rite for birth and marriage and thus do not obtain the high status conferred on *mala* farmers. Borada religion served to preserve and consolidate dignity and prestige particularly for *mala* men. There were strict rules forbidding marriage, sharing food, etc. between *mala* and *tsoma* artisans, which ancestral and *Tsalahay* spirits reinforced through favor or punishment. These concepts of status and prestige are reflected in the material world specifically in the ways in which village space is allocated for public and private use. In the past, *tsoma* artisan households were located on poorer agricultural soils with steep slopes on the edges of villages and contained the burials of their

deceased. Non-artisan households did not contain material culture in the different stages of their lifecycle, as the *mala* would consider this as polluting. Archaeologically we discerned artisan households as located on the edges of mountaintops with poor soil stability and fertility, including a probable ironworking household (through the presence of slag) and several hideworking households containing scraper-manufacturing debris.

Oral tradition also suggests the presence of a market area at Ochollo Mulato and two defensive sites that have visible walls, Assura Awesto and Tesaso Zonga (Figures 1 and 5). Prior to the Derg Marxist-Leninist government (1977-1991), the Borada engaged in warfare with Gamo neighbors and with the Wolayta. Warfare created an avenue for individual men to gain dignity and prestige. These wars also are marked on the landscape through the presence of defensive walls at the Meeta and Eeyahoo Shongalay site areas (Figure 1), open grassland battlefields, and cave sites that were used for protection.

The elders identified three cave sites, Gulo, Manka, and Tuwatey (Figures 1 and 6). Prior to the introduction of Christianity, Borada people used caves for animal sacrifices associated with rites of passage for newborns. Some origin stories state that *Tsalahay* made the Borada people out of clay and that they came out of the earth through caves. In these protective wombs, people also hide during times of warfare. We shovel-tested Gulo Dembe Chileshe and test excavated Tuwatey Zonga, which date from 6280-1920 cal BP and 6400-3360 cal BP respectively. At Tuwatey, we recovered earthenware ceramics, a clay bead, ochre, heat-treated chert and obsidian debitage and modified flakes, as well as faunal remains including five bovid fragments, one bushpig, and one terrestrial crab fragment. A Bovid sacrum and illum in lower levels are too fragmentary to identify clearly to species. At Gulo, the remains include earthenware ceramics, one large bovid rib, and chert and obsidian flakes.

Furthermore, oral tradition revealed that in addition to prestige gained through relationship to a community's founding settler and participation in warfare, hunting offered men opportunities in prestige and dignity. Men hunt in the lowlands and songs relating prestige and strength focus on analogies with the Koyera peoples, who once occupied the region of the Nechisar National Park, located between Lakes Abaya and Chamo in the lowlands. In 2006 and 2007, we observed the presence of several cave sites and open-air sites with LSA lithic debris and ceramics in this region. Joséphine Lesur-Gebremariam will survey and excavate these cave sites in 2009.

Conclusion

Our preliminary research and collaboration with the Borada peoples of the southern Ethiopian Highlands enabled us to locate sites of significant historical importance to this indigenous community. Our hope is to gain further funding to deepen our understanding of Borada prehistory, history and culture in a regional and environmental context. Our plan is to conduct more ethnographic research, environmental studies, broad-scale excavations of settlement and ritual sites in the highlands, and expand our project through surveying and testing of open-air and cave sites in the lowlands. We believe that the "breach" between ethnoarchaeology and archaeology could

be narrowed if theoretical and methodological questions could be pursued that search for the transformations between the present and the past record through incorporation of indigenous worldviews. By combining ethnoarchaeology with oral tradition and life histories, we can provide a richer understanding of the link between the Borada worldview in the memory of living elders and the archaeological messages of the past.

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