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The public life of the Swahili stonehouse, 14th–15th centuries AD

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ABSTRACT

Houses are an important subject of archaeological research, normally explored through the households they contain. This has established a deliberately social agenda for the archaeology of houses, yet has had the unintended consequence of creating bounded worlds for study. Although household archaeologies explore the ways that households contributed to broader social and economic realms, it is rare to think through the public role of houses for non-residents and the larger population of the settlement. This paper seeks to explore this more public aspect of houses using the data from archaeology at Songo Mnara, a 14th–15th century Swahili town on the southern Tanzanian coast. This was a time when stone-built domestic architecture was first emerging in this region. The archaeology of the houses provides data for a series of ways that the house was at the heart of the economic and political life of the town, as well as demonstrating a spatial continuity between indoor and outdoor spaces. It is therefore suggested that the domestic and residential functions of the house for a particular household should be balanced with an appreciation of the broader world of the house itself.

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Introduction

Houses and the domestic world are intimately interwoven in archaeological reconstructions of past societies. Houses provide a setting for the household, a kinship or corporate group that live their daily lives within and around its walls. This link with a restricted group forefronts the domestic and residential role of houses – their private function – even while exploring the ways that this world intersects with the public sphere beyond the walls. Archaeologies have provided many complex and nuanced appreciations of the ways that strategies of social reproduction and cosmologies are played out at a household level, and how the domestic economy has contributed to broader trends. Houses and households provide bounded worlds, microcosms of the societies that we seek to understand, as valuable for their "extradomestic implications" (Pader, 1993, p. 132) as for their representations of private life.

Yet the value of studying these private spaces has often obscured the more public aspects of the house and its role in a broader social life. This paper explores the ways that political and economic life occurred in domestic spaces, with reference to the archaeology of 14th–15th century Swahili stonehouses at Songo Mnara, Tanzania (Fig. 1). Songo Mnara is a stonetown on the East African coast, and this was a moment when many such sites were being built or supplemented with coral and lime domestic architecture: a medium that had previously been used for mosque and tomb structures (Horton and Middleton, 2000; Kusimba, 1999; Wright, 1993). This period also coincides with a golden age of Indian Ocean trade conducted through these towns, and the two aspects are intertwined in our reconstructions of this mercantile society. The importance attributed to houses in economic, political and symbolic realms echoes understandings of the structure of coastal society. The stonehouses have long been linked to a merchant elite, known as *waungwana* and seen as the quintessential Swahili (Allen, 1974, 1979; Fleisher and LaViolette, 2007; Ghaidan, 1975; Horton, 1994). The stonetown layout, based around stonehouses, has been seen as indicative of an oligarchic social organisation (Allen, 1993; LaViolette and Fleisher, 2005). The results from Songo Mnara support this vision of Swahili society, but also demonstrate the reciprocal nature of the relationship between house and social structure; rather than reflecting mercantile success and elite status, the house was a key component in its creation.

The data from Songo Mnara show how the urban economy was structured through the houses, not as a parallel domestic economy but as the fundamental system of provisioning for trade. Similarly, the houses seem to have provided a primary setting for political and economic life. Houses are therefore discussed with reference to their public role, not as a denial of the private and residential aspects which were also a key part of their function, but rather as a way of integrating that with their important role as spaces in the public realm. The fact that household boundaries may not coincide with those of the house has been attested elsewhere (Allison, 1999;

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Fig. 1. Map of the East Coast of Africa, showing location of Songo Mnara.

Gillespie, 2000; Hendon, 1996; Robin, 2002; Robin and Rothschild, 2002). Yet, this paper suggests more than simply fuzzy boundaries between houses and exteriors, interrogating instead the role of house for groups other than the household, and the interactions between the residents and a wider public sphere (see also Bowser and Patton, 2004). In the Swahili context, the house needs to be re-thought, as the setting for multiple forms of public activity and as a crucial nexus for the political and social life of the town. This might also serve to reposition the important role of household archaeologies as fundamental ways of exploring public life.

On houses and households

The majority of archaeology that has dealt with activities within houses has fallen under the category of household archaeology.

The goals of this field are explicitly social in definition, subordinating the study of the physical 'house' to the social group or 'household' who occupy that space (Joyce and Gillespie, 2000, prefer the term 'houseful'). Wilk and Rathje (1982, p. 621), outline the four functions of the household that might reward study: production, distribution, transmission, and reproduction. These social characteristics are explored in a wide range of studies that have created nuanced understandings of the ways that different scales of production and interaction operated in past societies, offering an important corollary to archaeologies of institutionalised power and economy. Yet, the focus on household rather than house creates by definition a bounded understanding. It is perhaps this that has led to criticism of the ways that household archaeologists prioritise private life at the expense of public (Bowser and Patton, 2004). This paper responds to this critique, without losing sight

of the important insights offered by studies of household. Houses form the object of study, as spaces which would have had association with a particular residence group, but which also would have functioned as arenas for activities that included a broader public.

As such, this study benefits from many of the recent insights of household archaeologies, which have shown the ways that house-level groupings contributed to social and political life. These studies have also been particularly valuable in highlighting the role of women and the domestic sphere in the politico-economic realm from which they have often been assumed absent. In particular, archaeologies of household activity (Allison, 1999) and of household production and domestic labour (Hendon, 1996) have considered the household as a social microcosm, arguing for the inextricable inter-relation between domestic economy and macro-economy. Examples of this approach include Hastorf's (1991) consideration of the role of women in chicha production and hence in the political negotiations of the Inca state (see also Gero, 1992), or the complementary considerations given to the effects of Inca expansion on household textile production (Costin, 1991, 1998). Craft production thus offers one avenue to explore the articulation of household activity and broader social activity, demonstrating that "it is artificial to separate what occurs within and outside the household, or to treat specialized and domestic tasks in isolation from each other" (Hendon, 1996, p. 55). Likewise, Lucero (2004) has considered household ritual as the origin for the rituals of political life, with the techniques by which Mayan rulers of the Early Classic period gained and retained power having their roots in the domestic ritual of the Preclassic and the difference being one of scale and visibility.

Archaeologies have therefore considered different ways in which this private realm of activity contributes to a wider society. The whole character of household archaeology is informed by the exploration of the articulation of private and public worlds. Thus, the demonstration that domestic activity spills beyond the boundaries of the house (Robin, 2002) and is visible among the broader activities of the settlement represents an extension of this vision. Yet, an explicit consideration of the role of the house for a wider public remains rare. Ethnographic research suggests that houses were settings for some very public activities, and could even be the spaces in which public life was conducted. In particular, Vom Bruck (1997) has described how even in the very gendered society of contemporary Yemen, domestic and extradomestic worlds are not represented by enduring associations of public and private in the spaces of the house. Instead, categories of space come into being through practice, which is dynamic by nature. Thus, privacy is only created through particular activities, which need not correspond with indoor spaces. Indeed Vom Bruck argues that the boundaries between public and private are inherently unstable, linked to categories of people moving in space. Houses might be the settings for very public gatherings of either women or men, just as they might also represent sanctuary for particular groups at certain times (see also Robben, 1989).

These insights suggest that archaeology might revisit some of the starting assumptions of our attention to houses. Rather than exploring the house solely through its relationship with a household and their activities, this paper examines the Swahili house as a setting for both household and public activity. The ways that a kinship or corporate group asserted their claims to place within the houses are therefore contextualised, becoming even more important in a society for whom the houses were spaces used for a range of public activities. In this case, these claims are apparent in founding deposits and buried offerings. Archaeologists have been urged to "consider the domestic context as a place where public discourse and political decision-making may occur, along with the exercise of power inherent in those domains of action" (Bowser and Patton, 2004, p. 159), both as a means to explore

the ways that individual and gendered roles existed in the past, and to assess the role of households in past society. The Swahili coast of East Africa offers the opportunity for such a consideration, as a region in which the house and its household seem to have been the primary structures through which urban political and social life was conducted.

Swahili houses

Previous approaches to the Swahili house can also be characterised as falling between attention to house and to household. The household has been explored through ethnography and archaeology, with particular attention to the ways that social identities were structured by spatial objects and material settings (Allen, 1977, 1979; Donley-Reid, 1990a,b; Donley, 1982, 1987). The houses themselves have been considered rather as part of the urban fabric, in a series of studies aimed at exploring the economy of Swahili mercantile centres (Allen, 1974, 1979; Gensheimer, 1997; Horton, 1996; Kusimba, 1999). These currently offer unresolved models by which the 14th-century popularity of the stonehouse might be understood, yet are both important in a consideration of the full social role of the house.

Outside the Swahili world, the work of Donley-Reid (1990a,b; Donley, 1982, 1987) has been most influential, due to her elegant application of structuration theory to Swahili social identities. In a series of articles, Donley-Reid presented the results of ethnographic interviews with 40 households of stonehouse occupants, and 37 households living in wattle and daub architecture in the Lamu archipelago. Based on the results, she outlined a set of spatial understandings and underlying principles by which the inhabitants of Lamu's houses are defined, and according to which they structure their daily routine. Through recourse to the concept of structuration, these particularities were then used to generate a more universal model of the ways that practice might create society, elegantly accounting for the reciprocal relationship between house and identity through an emphasis on the private self-constitution of the family group. As such, the contemporary Swahili stonehouse forms a case study of meaning derived through practice that has been widely cited elsewhere.

Donley-Reid's model is based on the 'intimacy gradient' that has elsewhere been identified in Swahili houses (Allen, 1974, 1977, 1979; Ghaidan, 1971, 1974, 1975; Steyn, 2002; Steyn and Holm, 2001). Essentially, the rooms of the contemporary Swahili stonehouse are seen to fit along a scale of increasing privacy – or intimacy – with distance from the entrance (Fig. 2). The organisation of Lamu's stonehouses, a series of narrow rooms that are often only obliquely intervisible, embodies this: each interior space must be reached through the last as one travels deeper into the house. The back room, or ndani, is thus the most interior space, into which only intimate family members are allowed. It is also the room most closely associated with women, and with female seclusion. Donley-Reid's work took this structural pattern and linked it to social values, demonstrating how different spaces were associated with certain categories of individuals. The ethnographies she recorded consistently accounted for the need to control and contain potential polluting or defiling activities within the houses, and linked those activities with the female spaces of the house and with the purity of the female members of the household. Privacy was therefore jealously maintained, linked as it was to status and to the enactment of particular identities.

The Swahili house model was also particularly effective through the ways that structuration allowed a link between material settings, objects, and the ongoing construction of identities. As well as the house itself, and the social roles created by differential access to its various spaces, Donley-Reid explored the ways that
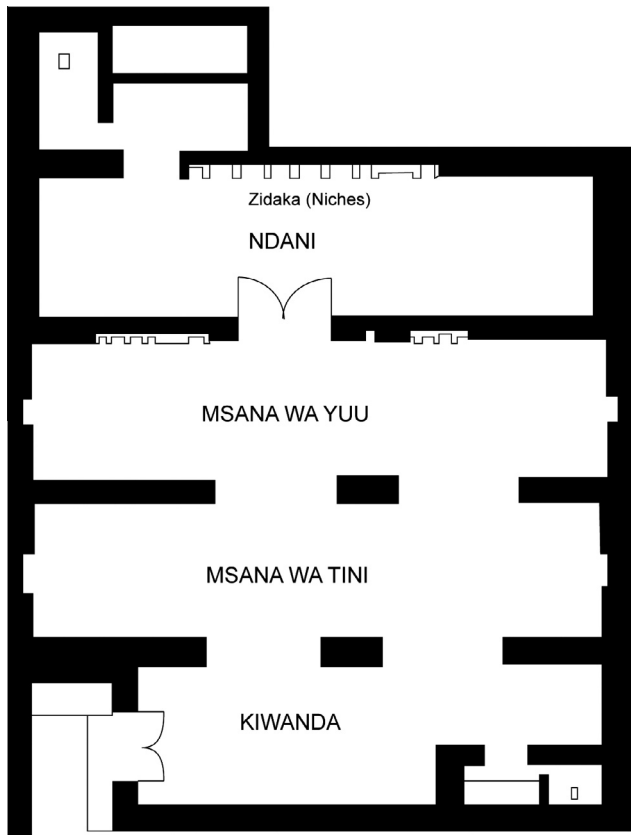
Fig. 2. Idealised layout of the Swahili stonehouse, after Donley-Reid (1990b).

Fig. 3. Zidaka in a house in Pate.

certain types of artefacts were implicated in these roles and positioned in these spaces. In particular, imported goods were seen as important in their capacity to ward off pollution and the evil eye (Donley-Reid, 1990a). Thus, the most interior spaces of the house were those linked to the most impressive ornamentation (Donley, 1982, p. 70), with the *zidaka* – systems of niches used for the display of objects or lamps – focused in these areas (Fig. 3). Likewise, certain offerings buried beneath the floors of the *ndani* were designed to ward off malevolent influences, contributing to the overall project of avoiding pollution in these most private spaces (Donley, 1987, p. 187). This aspect was also recoverable archaeologically, and three excavations in the back rooms of 18th- to 19th-century Swahili houses in Lamu and Pate recovered many of the aspects that were predicted by this model. In the two houses excavated in Lamu town, the *ufuko* (a pit used to drain polluted water from the washing of corpses) was located along with multiple buried offerings, and burials of infants too young to receive a full Islamic treatment (Donley, 1987, pp. 186–189). The offerings included goat and chicken remains, human hair and iron nails, all linked by informants to the control of women's sexuality. In addition, sherds of imported ceramics were found, confirming the association of these spaces with decoration by these objects.

This work presents a compelling link between contemporary knowledge and practice over the last two centuries. It focuses on the household, and on the bounded world in which social life is seen to be played out. That bounding is emphasised by the ethnographies, which speak of the private world of women and of Swahili family life, into which outsiders cannot stray. Houses are said to be ritually 'closed', through the offerings made in the interior spaces, and through Koran-inscribed coconut shells hung in the doorways to keep out bad luck and external pollution (Donley, 1987, p. 186). The model is said to account for all the spaces of the town, in which

the stonehouses mediate between Indian Ocean and local contexts, but the houses form distinct and discrete worlds, chosen because they are home to the entire range of Swahili society, unlike the male spaces of the mosque or cemetery (Donley, 1982, p. 63). Thus although the stonehouse is acknowledged as linked to permanence, mercantile success, and status in wider society, the ways that interaction occurred between these bounded spaces and the wider society remain unanalysed.

This model accounts neatly for the social world of late second millennium Swahili urban identities, yet it assumes a series of unchanging relationships over several centuries. The role of women and their seclusion in the interior spaces of the house seems likely to have been a result of a growing restriction on female roles during the Omani period from the 18th century (Askew, 1999; Fair, 2001; Strobel, 1979). Certainly, it cannot be projected into the earlier Swahili centuries with much certainty (Spencer-Wood, 1999). Yet Donley-Reid (1990b, p. 122) argues that the meaning of the Swahili stonehouse can be assumed constant from its earliest manifestation in the 14th century, due to similarities in material form. The universalising nature of the structuration approach also means that the rhythms of the contemporary Lamu stonehouse come to stand for an idealised version of Swahili life that turns an extremely dynamic model into a more static idealised understanding of the links between people, places, and objects. This seems especially troublesome in this society, defined by its extraversion and cosmopolitan nature from earliest times (LaViolette, 2008), rather than by an inward-looking bounded world as the primary means of self-identification.

That cosmopolitan world is seen in the alternative model of the Swahili house, derived from historical sources as well as from the architecture of the earliest houses. According to this explanation, the houses have a more functional role in the world of Indian Ocean trade. They are seen to symbolise permanence and creditworthiness, thereby providing an advantage for the occupants in their involvement in foreign trade (Allen, 1979). As well as this symbolic role, the stonehouse is also interpreted as having been linked to the practice of trade, through the provision of a guest room or *sabule* for visiting merchants. Thus, traders could be housed with particular merchants in the Swahili town, and conduct their trade through them, with the Swahili householder acting

as middleman in commercial negotiations and gaining a monopoly on exchange with this trader. The way that this might work is hinted at by Ibn Battuta's description of the system in 14th-century Mogadishu:

> "…when a ship comes into port, it is boarded from *sanbuq*, that is to say, little boats. Each *sanbuq* carries a crowd of young men, each carrying a covered dish, containing food. Each one of them presents his dish to a merchant on board, and calls out: "This man is my guest." And his fellows do the same. Not one of the merchants disembarks except to go to the house of his host among the young men…when a merchant has settled in his host's house, the latter sells for him what he has brought and makes his purchases for him. Buying anything from a merchant below its market price or selling him anything except in his host's presence is disapproved of by the people of Mogadishu" (Freeman-Grenville, 1962, pp. 27–28)

This link to trade, and the possibility of the houses as settings for commerce, is taken up in some archaeological reconstructions. At Shanga, Horton (1994) has argued for the development of stone architecture in order to provide for this form of patronage, as part of a broader argument about strategies of spatial control within the stonetown. In fact, Donley-Reid also subscribes to this view, pointing to the *sabule* as an extension of the exterior world, a guest room for a trader who is never allowed into the internal spaces. Yet these two models are imperfectly reconciled: they do not suggest simply exterior and interior activities, but a fundamentally different way of viewing the house as part of broader society, and a differing scale of activity for the social world of the town. Considerations of the archaeological data that relate to the earliest stonehouses (Fleisher and LaViolette, 2007) have suggested that there might be a chronological element to these differences, as well as a variety of forms and activities in the different stonetowns of the coast. Clearly, investigation of 14th–15th century stonehouses is required, to explore the extent to which either model might be recognised archaeologically. Further to this, the second way of understanding Swahili houses suggests that privacy might not have been a primary concern, and introduces the somewhat opposite emphasis on hospitality. An archaeological exploration therefore questions the exclusive association of house and household, suggesting instead that they need to be viewed in the context of larger social relationships and scales.

Songo Mnara

The stonetown of Songo Mnara is an extremely apposite location for this reassessment of stonehouse spaces. The site is located in the Kilwa archipelago, on the southern Tanzanian coast, and was built during the late 14th century as an offshoot of the longer-lived town of Kilwa Kisiwani (Fig. 4). The two sites occupy adjacent islands, and the precise relationship between them remains a mystery. Nonetheless, Songo Mnara was first occupied during a period of energetic building of coral domestic architecture in the archipelago (Chittick, 1974; Garlake, 1966, 2002; Pradines and Blanchard, 2005; Sutton, 1998). At Kilwa, this was seen in the construction of several grand houses still visible above ground, and possibly in a much denser town plan of which only traces remain (Fleisher et al., 2012). The most significant investment in domestic architecture was, however, made at Songo Mnara, where a short period of building activity resulted in over forty coral-built houses and compounds and five mosques, contained within a coral-built town wall (Fig. 5). The scale of this construction programme, along with the elegance of the houses themselves, has led to the site being regarded as the prototype and model for the coastal architectural tradition (Garlake, 1966). Chronologically, this is problematic,

as the site post-dates stonehouse construction at sites elsewhere on the coast. Songo Mnara is not the first site to be elaborated with stonehouses and nor is it particularly typical of coastal towns, with a number of esoteric features to the overall town plan. Yet it is a site at which a considerable effort was made to construct a series of stonehouses, no doubt at great expense and with a notable investment in labour. Even today, a story told on the island tells of how the building of Songo Mnara mined so much coral from the reef between this and Kilwa Island that the channel separating them was formed across what had previously been a traversable surface.

Archaeological exploration of the houses here has been part of a broader project exploring the townscape and the ways that both interior and exterior spaces were used by the townspeople (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher, 2010, 2011). It is hoped that the townscape can be explored as a palimpsest of the plans, spatial priorities and recurring activities of the inhabitants. Excavations inside the houses are thus geared towards spatial recording of deposits and artefacts as a guide to the activities in different rooms. The understandings of household space gained from this are complemented by explorations of the exterior spaces of the town, including both activity in the courtyards and around the external walls of the houses, and survey and excavation in the broader open areas. The ability both to explore and to contextualise house-based activity for 14th–15th century structures provides a wonderful opportunity to reassess the differing theories of the Swahili house. In addition, the investment in houses at Songo Mnara and the obvious emphasis put on dwelling in stone suggests that the lifestyles recovered are of primary importance in understanding the life of this Swahili town.

At Songo Mnara, coral and lime was used for a variety of architectural choices, from relatively simple room blocks such as those found on the northern side of the site (Fig. 5) to the more complex structures located along the southern edge. The largest of these, in the southwestern corner of the town, is known as the 'palace' due to the scale and elegance of its architecture. Yet with the exception of Husuni Kubwa, a structure found at neighbouring Kilwa Kisiwani, the structures dubbed palaces at Swahili sites tend to be more complex versions of the surrounding architecture (Gensheimer, 1997, p. 213). Such is the case at Songo Mnara, and various of the other houses rival the palace in size and grandeur – notably the house to the south of the Great Mosque on the eastern side of the site. All are variations on a theme, with all but the smallest houses being based around a stepped courtyard. These are a particular feature of the architecture of Songo Mnara, and are the focus of significant decorative attention. The court of the 'palace', which has been substantially restored by a recent World Bank-funded project, gives an idea of the grandeur of these spaces, with a vaulted cloister along the side and *porites* niches next to the doorways (Fig. 6). The use of *porites* coral is another distinctive feature of Songo Mnara's houses. This coral is cut from the reef while alive, or is washed up on the shore, and is carved while still soft. This means that it is possible to cut very clean edges, and to carve the coral for decorative purposes. At Songo Mnara, doorways and niches are all faced with *porites*, allowing for elaboration into arches and stepped jambs. In the mosques, *porites* is also used around the *mihrab*, as is common at Swahili sites, to allow decoration such as the herringbone carving uncovered in the central mosque, or the niched *mihrab* in the Great Mosque (Fig. 7). The walls of houses and mosques were constructed of coral rag, which is a much rougher type of block and would have been coated with lime plaster to present a smooth face.

As well as the decoration afforded by the use of *porites*, it seems that the houses would also have been the settings for the display of objects. As at Kilwa, glazed bowls are inset into the architecture at points around the site, notably in the barrel vault of house 17,
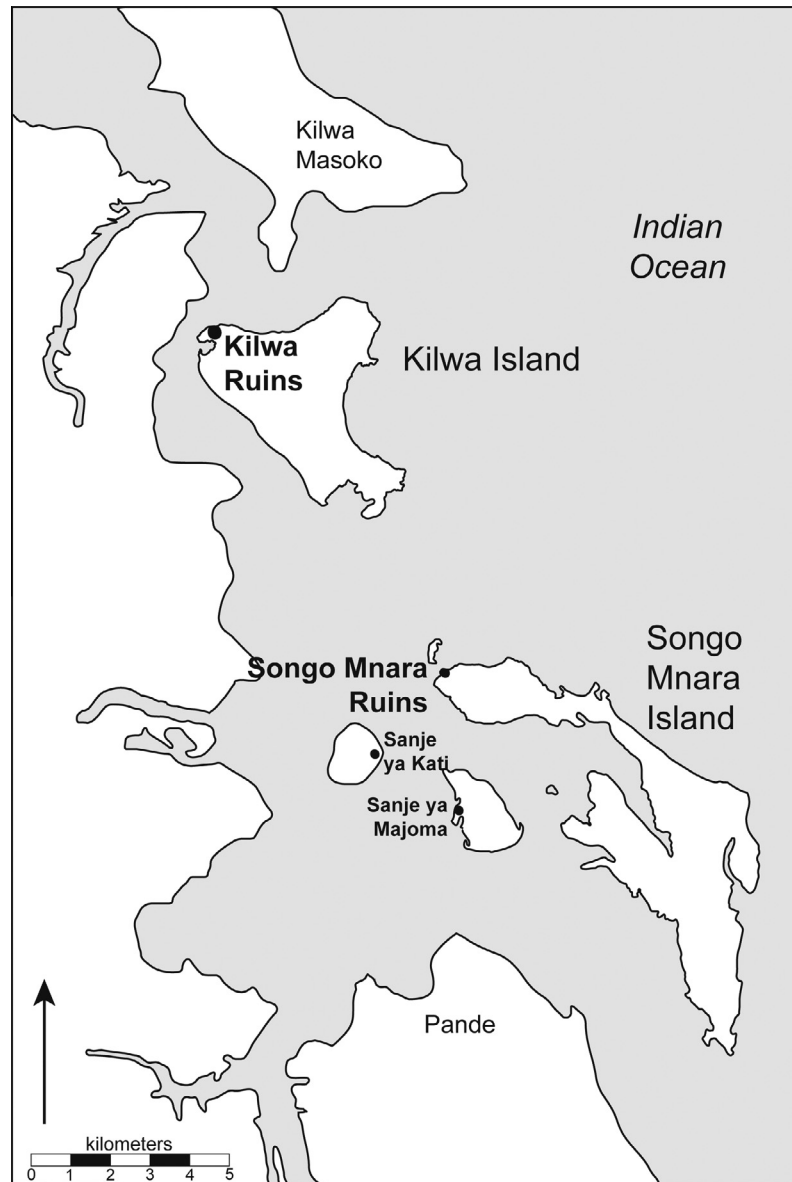
Fig. 4. The Kilwa archipelago, showing sites of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara.

where glazed imported bowls are set into the plaster (Fig. 8). The niches found in most houses were also likely for the display of objects such as imported ceramics and glasswork, Koranic inscriptions and ritual items, or sometimes for lamps. These niches are the siblings of the display walls or *zidaka* seen elsewhere and given prominence in household ethnographies (Allen, 1974; Donley-Reid, 1990a; Meier, 2009). In this earlier period, they are spaced more variously around the houses. In addition, many rooms contain holes in lines across the walls. These seem comparable to those at Shanga which Horton (1996) suggested might have been peg holes for the display of textiles; it is possible that at Songo Mnara the holes are the traces of similar decoration of this type.

The houses of Songo Mnara are thus particularly decorative, as a complement to their size and the elegance of their architecture. The majority are raised above the exterior ground surface, often on significant quantities of under-floor fill of either sand or packed earth. This allows for the sunken courts in this environment where the coral bedrock is close to the surface, as well as elevating the houses themselves and allowing them to be approached via grand

staircases. Exterior courtyards and open air spaces are enclosed by walls which also form the town wall in several places, notably on the southern edge of the site.

The excavations

Excavations at Songo Mnara are ongoing; currently thirteen excavation units have been completed on domestic structures at the site, reflecting two field seasons in 2009 and 2011 (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones, 2010, 2012a; Wynne-Jones and Fleisher, 2010, 2011). Thus far, one complete structure (House 44,[1] see map) has been excavated, along with a sample of different types of room in five other buildings.

As mentioned, Songo Mnara was occupied for only a short period of time. After the intensive construction of the late 14th and

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[1] House numbers follow Garlake (1966), while excavation unit numbers – often coinciding with rooms – were assigned by the current project.
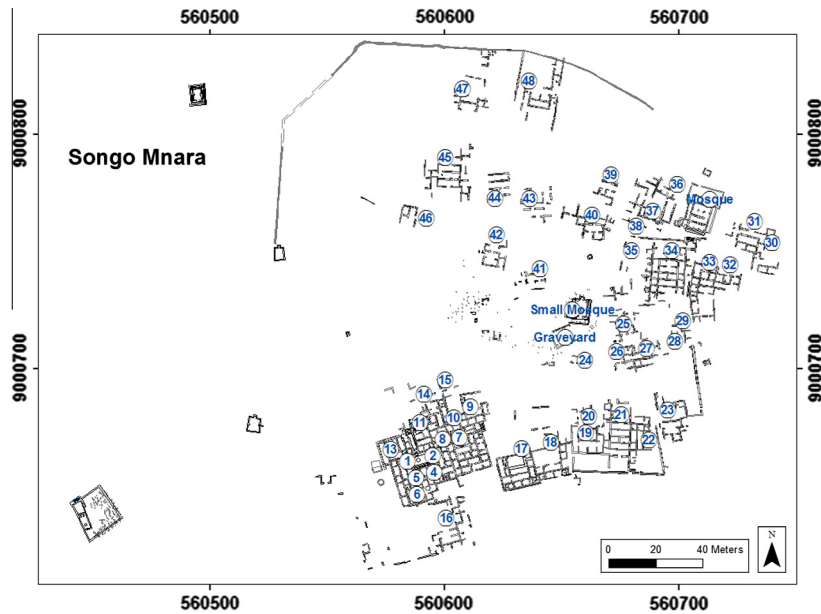
Fig. 5. Plan of Songo Mnara, showing standing architecture (house numbers follow Garlake, 1966).

Fig. 6. Stepped court in the 'Palace' at Songo Mnara.

Fig. 7. The mihrab of the Great Mosque, Songo Mnara.

Fig. 8. Inset bowls, House No. 17, Songo Mnara.

early 15th centuries, the site was completely abandoned in the early 16th. This coincides with the arrival of the Portuguese in the region, and a downturn in Kilwa's fortunes more generally, but is a more abrupt process at Songo Mnara than at Kilwa where

16th-century activities were recovered in many of the buildings (Chittick, 1974). This abandonment means that archaeology here is exploring final occupation deposits on the floors and across the spaces of the site, not evidence for post-occupation activity. Only in one example (SM018) was post-occupation disturbance of the deposits recognised: in this case it occurred during conservation work conducted in the 1950s. All other artefacts and remains relate to the 15th-century period of habitation, with no evidence for re-occupation or re-use after that time (cf. Garlake, 1966). The

remains can therefore be seen as a palimpsest of the activities conducted in the rooms over a hundred-year period. This is particularly true of the microscopic remains, which build up without as much human interference; macroscopic remains are likely to have been cleared periodically during occupation even if not afterwards. Yet the house floor remains are comparable with those from the middens, even though the latter were allowed to accumulate into much deeper stratified deposits.

As well as demonstrating the existence of intact deposits, excavations have shown that the houses were very busy spaces during the centuries of occupation, with a range of activities that make generalisation between them difficult. Here, the archaeology of House 44 is discussed as the most completely excavated structure allowing a glimpse of the relationship between rooms. These results are subsequently compared with other rooms excavated across the site, demonstrating the rich variety of activities recovered in these different spaces.

House 44

House 44 is one of the simpler structures at Songo Mnara, consisting of a series of rooms extending southwards from the entrance; the style is somewhat akin to the 'ideal' stonehouse model discussed above (Fig. 9). The house is part of a northern row of stonehouses at the site that are on a smaller and simpler scale than those to the south, representing atomised versions of the roomblocks that make up the larger compounds. The structure itself is a fairly plain coral and lime house, with plaster floors throughout all but the back room, and use of *porites* coral around the door frames. The whole is raised above the surrounding ground surface on a foundation of white sand, presumably brought from the ocean. Each room was excavated as a separate unit, and given a trench number (Fig. 9). Excavations were then conducted by archaeological context, with each layer and feature excavated separately. Samples for ICP-AES multi-element soil chemistry were taken on each deposit, and soils were also floated for plant macrofossils and processed for phytolith remains. Overall, the stratigraphic sequence was simple, with a thick rubble-filled layer covering the house and representing the fallen walls. Beneath this, circumscribed deposits were recorded atop the plaster floor, each apparently representing a small activity area within the rooms.

As can be seen in Fig. 9, each room had a small midden-like area to the west of the northern entrance, associated with a concentration of artefacts such as ceramics and bones, and with a denser organic sediment. Despite this apparent similarity between the rooms, each feature had a different character, often most clearly obvious after later geochemical characterisation. During excavation, the most significant difference observed was with the back room, SM010. This space, which had an earthen floor and seems likely to have been roofed with a *makuti* thatch roof rather than the coral and plaster roofs of the rest of the house, was the site of considerable domestic activity. Here a substantial midden had built up during the life of the house, to a depth of approximately 70 cm. Successive phases could be identified in the midden, most notably a moment at which the whole had been covered with a fresh layer of sand and started over again. A latrine in the south western corner of the room seems to have been in-filled at the same time. Although used over a substantial period, however, the artefacts from SM010 show very little variation over time, reflecting a general continuity of style and substance from the late 14th to 15th centuries on the coast. This makes it difficult to break down the chronology in any more detail.

The entrance room to House 44 was a relatively clean space, the plaster floor mainly devoid of artefactual remains. The only notable aspect of the above-floor archaeology here was a high quantity of
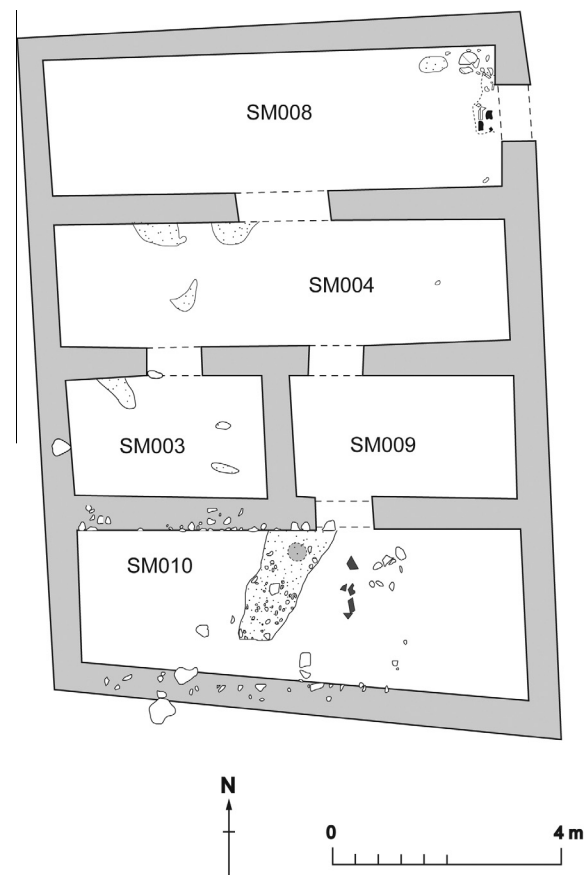

Fig. 9. Plan of House 44, with unit numbers for each room and main depositional contexts.

palm phytoliths among the sample from this space. Interestingly, the phytolith signatures for the interior spaces were quite different from those for the external areas in this regard. Across the site as a whole, grass phytoliths predominated. To the north of the site, much woodier vegetation seems to have been present but with almost no evidence for palm trees amongst the types of wood represented (Sulas and Madella, 2012). Inside the house, in contrast, palm phytoliths were present in significant numbers in all rooms and this front room had a particularly high count (28%). This might perhaps relate to the use of palm fronds, and a speculative suggestion could be that palm matting was used on the plaster floors here.

Moving into the house, the remaining rooms were quite well-used spaces. It also seems that each was home to a different type of activity. The artefact concentration in SM004, for example (context #4009) was mainly made up of local ceramics. Only 7 g of fish bone suggested that it might have been linked to food preparation or consumption, although the sediment had a high ash content and visible micro-charcoal. ICP-AES analysis of the sediment confirmed a link with burning, with high readings of phosphorus, as well as higher calcium, iron, sulphur and strontium values. All indicate the *in situ* decomposition of organic material. Yet through examination of the deposit in thin-section it became clear that the burning was not typical of the signature linked to food preparation (Sulas and Madella, 2012, p. 157) due to a low content of organic remains. Instead, significant numbers of phytoliths linked to non-food plants, mainly grasses, were recovered from this deposit, suggesting the burning of non-food plantstuffs here. In contrast, the midden in SM003 had a much more 'typical' food preparation signature with similarly high levels of calcium, sulphur and strontium in the sediment, combined with abundant bone and plant tissue

remains observed in thin section. Here also, the phytoliths were mainly of grass types, with both panicoid and pooid types represented.

The most significant evidence for food preparation, not surprisingly, came from the midden in SM010. Here the chemical signatures of burning and organic debris – calcium, phosphorus, strontium and manganese – were combined with macro remains identifying this as a food preparation area. The only ceramic stove fragments found at the site (Fig. 10) were in this deposit, along with large amounts of fish and mammal bone, and large quantities of broken ceramic vessels. The ashy deposits, particularly in the lower levels of the midden, are full of non-grass phytoliths suggesting the burning of wood in this room, possibly in the form of charcoal. In general, the indications are all that this was the primary food preparation area for the house. The increased quantities of woody phytoliths in the lower layers might also suggest that the fuel used for this might have changed through the life of the settlement, with the clearing of primary woodland on the island during the early years of occupation.

Yet the differences between the activities going on in the rooms of House 44 are just one part of the story. The artefactual record also suggests that this domestic routine was combined with involvement in the economic activity of the town. In particular, the record of spindle whorls found in the different rooms is instructive (Fig. 11) in that it is clear that cotton thread was being produced across the spaces of the house. Spindle whorls, mainly of terracotta, are frequently characteristic of Swahili stonetown assemblages; they are common at Kilwa Kisiwani from the 11th century onwards (Chittick, 1974) and found on sites across the Kilwa hinterland (Wynne-Jones, 2007a,b). It has been assumed that cotton manufacture was an important local industry in Kilwa region, and this extends to Songo Mnara, where spindle whorls are a common type of artefact. Whorl finds within the houses are spread across the different spaces: in House 44 they were found in every room but were particularly common in SM010. This is a slightly skewed picture, in that the quantities of all artefacts from the midden were much higher than in the (no doubt frequently cleared) rooms. The comparative figures with the other spaces should thus not perhaps be thought of as indicative of intensity of activity. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the manufacture of thread, a key commodity in Kilwa and Songo Mnara's economic life, was occurring in the house, and in the very same spaces associated with cooking and with 'domestic' life: the most interior room of the house. This artefact class thus begins to paint a picture of economic and domestic life as fundamentally intertwined at Songo Mnara – a picture that is augmented by comparison with other houses and different artefact types.

Fig. 11. Spindle whorls from House 44.

Other rooms

Excavations in other rooms of houses elsewhere on the site have confirmed some of the themes observed in House 44. The eclectic and busy nature of the interior spaces can be seen in multiple locations. In addition, this notion of the houses as wound into the economic life of the town is seen in the continuing association of rooms with cotton production, but also with evidence for crop processing inside the houses and through the surprising evidence of the stepped courts as maintained spaces. It is also clear from the comparative data that not only were the rooms all used to different purpose within a single structure, but the houses were also extremely individual.

Room SM016 (Fig. 12), for instance, is the entrance room of House 31, and is remarkably different from SM008 in House 44. Where SM008 was kept clear and free from most artefactual remains, SM016 was one of the richest units excavated at Songo Mnara. The quantity of locally-produced ceramics (44.1 kg) recovered from this room was second only to the midden deposit already discussed, often in contexts with quantities of bone. This represents two different periods: a series of ashy pits and small middens were excavated beneath the plaster floor of the house, suggesting that the sandy fills brought in were then used as a platform for occupation or simply cooking during construction. Then, the above-floor deposits suggest the consumption of food in this front room, with 20 kg of ceramics and significant quantities of bone, but without the cooking debris and ash. There is no evidence that the contents of this room were any later in date than the remains found in the rest of the house, although the spread in this room is perhaps surprising. It remains a possibility either that the room went out of use and was used for rubbish disposal, or that the layers here have been confused by substantial destruction of the plaster floor and that foundation-level artefacts have become combined with those from above the floor. Nonetheless, the artefacts occurred in discrete concentrations rather than as a general spread above the floor level. In addition, they are of comparable type and date to the finds in other rooms. It is therefore tentatively suggested here that at least some of the consumption activity represented by the ceramic and bone remains occurred during the occupation and use of the house.

The central room of House 23, SM015, is also very different to that in House 44. This is a grander structure, on the southern side of the town, occupying the southeastern corner (Fig. 13). The house was entered via one of the grand staircases associated with the southern side of the site and had a stepped court behind which a series of rooms extended southwards. Those rooms are more elaborate than in House 44, with the use of *porites* for decorative niches as well as for the doorways and lintels. SM015 was excavated in
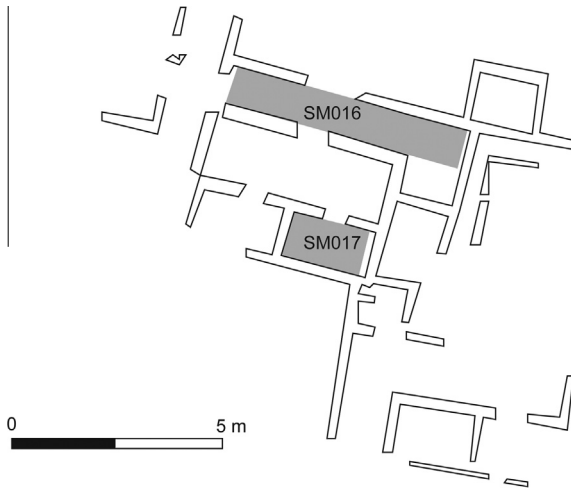

Fig. 10. Jiko fragments from SM010.

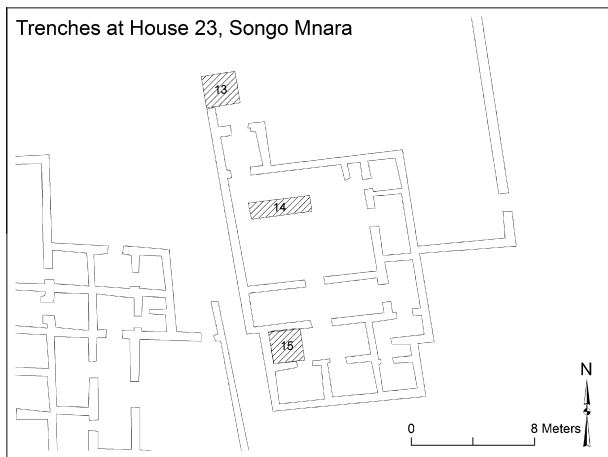**Fig. 12.** Plan of House 31, showing SM016 and SM017.

Fig. 13. Plan of House 23, showing SM014 and SM015.

Fig. 14. Decorative niche above SM015.

the central room, immediately beneath one of these ornamental niches (Fig. 14). Surprisingly, despite the grander nature of the architecture, this room did not have a plaster floor and instead a packed earth floor was encountered beneath a substantial layer of fallen rubble. The elevation of House 23 also seems to have been achieved using packed earth foundations, rather than the sand used for House 44. Into the floor surface, a small pit had been excavated, and was used for burning – the interior was full of an ashy residue with significant quantities of charcoal, and woody phytoliths. The geochemical signature is quite different from that associated with the midden and food-related burning in House 44. Instead, a peak in manganese is seen, together with barium, chromium and zinc. Calcium and strontium, both good indicators of the *in situ* decomposition of organic waste, are low in this room, suggesting a different type of burning. The phytolith assemblage from SM015 is even more interesting, with high quantities of grass phytoliths, and a significant component of large leaf epidermis fragments. This points towards the use of this room for crop processing and/or storage, although the initial stages of crop processing, including the removal of the inflorescence, seems to have occurred off-site at Songo Mnara (Sulas and Madella, 2012). Perhaps significantly, the peak in manganese seen in these sediments is mirrored in a comparative sample from a contemporary millet field.

The artefacts at Songo Mnara also hint at the variety of activity found between the different rooms and houses. The midden excavated in SM010 held the largest quantities of all artefact types (Fig. 15), yet the rooms excavated in other structures had differing patterns of use. The imported ceramics in general follow the pattern of the locally-produced ceramics, although the numbers are much lower, with often only one or two sherds in any excavation unit. The concentrations of these objects are thus in the rooms most associated with food consumption: the entrance room SM016, the midden SM010 and an excavation in the back courtyard of House 47 to the north of the site, SM020. This parallel patterning of the imported and local ceramics suggests that rather than being separate from the domestic realm, with imports serving ritualised functions or being solely for display, they were to some extent incorporated into the food culture of Songo Mnara.

Coins and beads were found across the site, and their numbers are fairly steady. The coin figures are skewed by a buried deposit beneath the floor of the room in SM017 (see below), but otherwise they cluster along the same lines as other artefact groups. This likely means that coins were used as currency at Songo Mnara, spread across the site and incorporated into the middens by the people that were using them, as well as being called into service as offerings in certain circumstances (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher, 2012). What is certainly clear is that they were not restricted to any particular part of the town, area of the house, or portion of the population; the richest collections besides the hoard were in two back rooms: SM023 and the midden of SM010, suggesting that coinage was very much part of domestic life and that women, if they might be associated with this part of the house, were participants in the cash economy of the town.
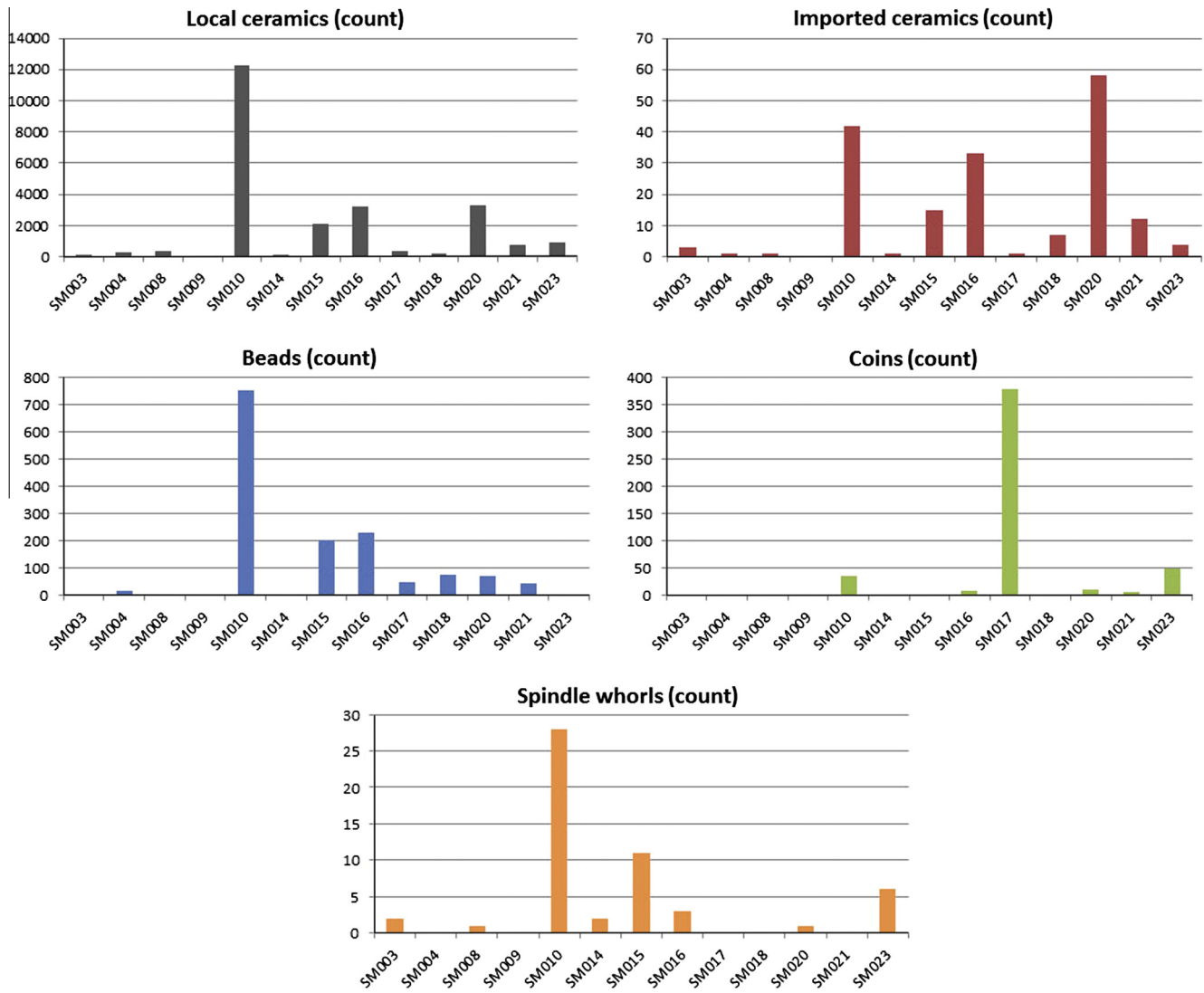
Fig. 15. Charts showing artefact frequencies across the excavation units at Songo Mnara.

Spindle whorls, already discussed, do cluster in certain spaces, but not in particular types of space. The entrance room, SM016 was one particularly rich context for these, as was the decorative central room, SM015, described above in relation to possible crop processing. Significant quantities were also found in the courtyards and back rooms of houses (Fig. 15). As discussed for the midden assemblage, this testifies to the spread of economic activity into the spaces of the houses, with cotton processing occurring in both interior and more public spaces of the structures, such as the outdoor courtyards. Together with the other excavation evidence, this all points towards the fluidity of boundaries between the economic life of the town and the private life of the house, and to the broad spread of activity within a very busy town. Although not the focus of this paper, this movement of economic/public life into the houses of Songo Mnara is also mirrored in a spilling of the activities seen in the houses beyond the limits of their walls (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones, 2012b). Excavations and testing across the open spaces have recovered evidence for a range of mundane and ritualised activities occurring in the various spaces. In particular, excavations in the spaces outside doors and between houses have demonstrated that the boundaries of the houses were more porous than might be imagined, with an extension of domestic activities

and a comparable range of artefacts to the inside spaces. Thus, as well as the practice of urban life within the spaces of the house, manifest in the work of crop processing, storage, and the production of cloth, we can view the ways that domestic work moved beyond the walls of the buildings and into the more public arenas of the open spaces of the town (Hutson et al., 2007; Robin, 2002).

The only exception to the general spread of activity was in House 23, where a trench was opened across the steps in the ornamental court near the entrance to the building (Fig. 13), intended to explore activity conducted in these internal outdoor spaces. Ethnographic parallels suggest that the internal courtyards of Swahili stonehouses were areas of great domestic activity (Allen, 1979). Kusimba (1999, p. 149) terms these courtyards *kiwanda*, and suggests that they were places for cooking and laundry (see also Kirkman, 1956). Yet excavations in the court of House 23 demonstrated that this space was kept remarkably clean. This was true at a macro level, with very small numbers of artefacts: less than 1 kg of ceramics, a single bead, and two spindle whorls came from this 4 × 1 m excavation unit. At a microscopic level, low concentrations of phosphorus and strontium in the geochemical signature from this space also suggests that activities involving the use of plant and animal resources were not practiced in the courtyard or, if

so, this open space was kept extremely clean. This puts it at odds with all other spaces at the site, both internal and external, and an explanation for the cleanliness of the court must be considered. Perhaps one route for thinking about this might be to consider the courts as outwards-looking rather than private space, a setting provided in an elite residence for entertaining visitors and local groups. The court of the 'palace' provides the most compelling lens through which to view these: it is the space first encountered on entering the building, through a doorway that faces directly onto the likely entrance into the town through the encircling wall. The space is extremely elaborate, provided with niches for display, extensive use of carved *porites*, and a domed and vaulted walkway around the edges. It seems likely that this was an area into which to welcome visitors upon their arrival. If others of Songo Mnara's courts had a similar purpose, as a space for hospitality, this would help to explain their position at the front entrances of the houses, as well as the decorative investment made in these spaces. They might also be better compared with the 'audience court' of Husuni Kubwa, Kilwa (Fig. 16), than with the domestic courtyards of contemporary houses.

In the 18th–19th century models of the Swahili stonehouse, display is most associated with the private spaces of the houses. This seems likely to have been a later phenomenon: in the earliest houses niches and ornamental stonework were as likely to occur in the outer rooms of the houses, and echoed the much more public displays on mosques and tombs of this and earlier periods (Fleisher and LaViolette, 2007). Yet the courts are not completely 'public' spaces either, they are exclusive to the householder and to the guests invited into them and thus remain associated with particular individuals or households. Again, this mimics tombs where inset bowls and display niches would directly refer to the individual associated with the tomb. At both Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara, some of the most decorative displays are linked to public, but exclusive, spaces such as the Small Domed Mosque or House of the Mosque at Kilwa, or the courtyard of the 'palace' or vaulted ceiling of the southwestern funerary mosque at Songo Mnara. The possibility that this might be part of the practice of hospitality is returned to below.

Inscribing space

This evidence for economic lives inside the houses should not suggest that spaces were not also linked to more symbolic practices and understandings. In particular, excavations recovered a series of buried deposits in the foundations of several rooms, sug-

gestive of place-making and the ritual founding of those houses. Both front rooms (SM008 and SM016), despite their very different characters above the floor, were home to a *fingo* pot. These ceramic vessels are known both ethnographically and archaeologically, buried beneath the floors of Swahili houses in liminal positions such as doorways and corners (Allen, 1993; LaViolette, 2004). They are thought to offer protection at these gateways, helping to delineate the spaces of the home. The burial of *mafingo* is a practice that ties Swahili groups to hinterland populations, such as the Mijikenda of Kenya who also participate in this practice (Muturo, 1987, 1994/5). The pots often contain objects as offerings which are then placed in the foundations of doorways. In the case of Songo Mnara, the pots were broken up, but were associated with small deposits of shell (SM008) and bone (SM016) which might once have been inside the vessels.

In addition, two back rooms contained buried offerings beneath the plaster floors. In SM017, a coin hoard was discovered. Three hundred and sixty Kilwa coins were found in one small area of the foundational fill of the room. These may once have been contained in a bag or degradable container, and spread into the sandy fill when this rotted. In association with these coins, several beads were recovered, including a string of carnelian beads that must have held considerable value (Fig. 17). As mentioned, Kilwa coins seem to have been used for daily exchange within the town, but were also sometimes taken out of circulation and worn as pendants, or placed as offerings on tombs (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher, 2012). This deposit therefore had a monetary value, but the removal of these coins from circulation also had a ritual precedent, as coins could have embodied value in a number of different ways. This seems especially pertinent in the context of the other buried offering, in SM023. Here, a small pit dug into the foundations of the back room contained 8 aragonite 'spindle whorls', and a piece of unworked aragonite (Fig. 18). Aragonite is sourced from the shell of the Giant Clam, and is often highly valued for its beauty and difficulty of procurement. These objects, which mimic the shape of the spindle whorls but are too large to have functioned as such, are not of a type known from other Swahili contexts, but must have

Fig. 16. The 'audience court' at Husuni Kubwa, Kilwa Kisiwani.

Fig. 17. Coin hoard and carnelian necklace in SM017.

Fig. 18. Buried deposit of aragonite 'spindle whorls', SM023.

been of value at Songo Mnara. Their positioning, in the same type of context as the coin hoard, suggests that both might have served a similar ritual purpose, inscribing value into the very foundations of the houses.

Thus, the houses may not have been private spaces in the ways described for more recent Swahili towns, but they were very much 'places'. These had been delineated through the effort of construction, and the implication of value via offerings in their foundations. This no doubt created a set of associations for the house, which was in turn linked to particular families, individuals, or corporate groups. This differs from Donley-Reid's analysis, in that her offerings were fundamentally part of the daily practice of the household, inscribing their life events into the house. Here, the lifecycle of the house itself seems to have been linked to a particular act of place-making, but the place then provided the setting for activities not directly related to that meaning. Once again, this speaks to a distinction between private and exclusive, the latter being reflected in the materiality of the house, as well as in the ways that the residents were able to control access.

An element of ritual must therefore be retained in our understandings of the Swahili house of the 14th–15th centuries. In its daily occupancy, it was home to a very domestic and practical suite of activities that were nonetheless central to the broader economy and life of the town. Yet in its incarnation, and through the ways that the houses enabled claims to place, and then the provision of hospitality in exclusive surroundings, the houses were able to transcend these daily lives. By positioning the ritual of place-making in the lifecycle of the house, rather than its inhabitants, it also becomes clear that this investment was linked to more than the self-constitution of the actors within in their daily practice, but also about the creation of a setting that structured their ongoing engagement with a broader world (Bradley, 2005). This suggests that it may have been the ritual associations of the houses that made them appropriate containers for the 20th-century rituals encountered by more recent ethnographies, with their specific identifications changing over time. Rather than a specific association of spaces with categories of person, the blend of mundane and sacred in the early Swahili house gives it a more enduring importance in coastal settlements. The ritual investment in the lifecycle of the houses suggests a link to corporate or family groups, and their investment in a particular place, recalling the use of in Swahili tombs and suggesting memory practices in the construction of place (per Mills and Walker, 2008). The houses may have been indexical of the value invested within them, both for the residents and for society more generally, as symbolic of particular external relationships as well as the internal dynamics of the household.

Public life

At Songo Mnara, then, the value implicated into the foundations of houses might be viewed in a similar light to other claims to place at the site. In keeping with other stonetowns, significant investment was also made in the mosque architecture of the town and in coral-built tombs. While the mosques might sometimes have been related to specific donors or patrons (as at Chwaka on Pemba, see LaViolette and Fleisher, 2009) the tombs most certainly are; not only do they site the ancestors squarely within the spaces of the town, but they offer spaces for their continuing memorialisation. Likewise, the houses represent a material claim to space for a particular household, corporate group, or individual, and the offerings in the foundations can be seen as a process of imbuing those places with value. Despite the invisible nature of the ritual deposits, these are coupled with the much more tangible houses themselves and the valuable goods displayed in their niches and mortared into the ceilings. Elsewhere, houses have been seen as powerful claims to history, through their positioning and relationship to previous structures (Tringham, 2000), and in the ways that they provide settings for heirlooms and life histories (Hendon, 2000). Here at Songo Mnara, the houses seem to index the wealth and historicity of their inhabitants, providing an exclusive setting imbued with value at all levels.

Yet that exclusivity need not be equated with privacy or seclusion. The activities conducted in these houses made them important nodes in the broader network of town life. The economic world of the Swahili was played out in these interior spaces, as well as extending beyond their material boundaries into the open areas that surrounded them. As locations for crop processing and craft production the houses did not offer spaces for 'household production' as supplements to the economic realm beyond the walls. Instead, this *was* the economic realm, providing the setting for the main forms of industry in a mercantile society. The site, in common with other towns of the Swahili coast, does not have evidence for workshops or industrial areas. Some processes happened in the open spaces, such as iron-working and perhaps bead production (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher, 2010, 2011), while others occurred within the houses. This fits a pattern observed elsewhere, with production occurring in a diffuse way across the spaces of Swahili towns rather than being focused on specific social groups or spatial districts (Fleisher, 2010a; Flexner et al., 2008; Horton, 1994; Kusimba, 1996; Mapunda, 2002; Walshaw, 2010; Wynne-Jones, 2012). This might suggest that political life was also more dispersed through the settlement, with the houses functioning as nodes in the social world of 15th-century Songo Mnara.

Likewise, Swahili towns did not have distinct market areas as seen at ports like Siraf (Whitehouse, 2009), or as predicted by models of the Islamic town (AlSayyad, 1991). Instead, external trade seems to have been channelled through the houses, and the patronage system described for Mogadishu might give some suggestion as to how this could have worked. Some of the patterning recovered through excavation might speak also to this, with the stepped courts in the entrance areas of houses serving a purpose for visitors and perhaps for the exercise of hospitality. They would thus have had an important role in the ways that the householders lived their public roles, instead of being simply part of the private realm of the house. The display aspect of the courtyards hints at the ways that wealth was put into use and of links to Indian Ocean trade, but would likely have had local functions and meanings as well. It has been suggested, for example, that the display of ceramics might have had local power through its association with consumption and particularly with feasting or overt generosity (Fleisher, 2010b); this might suggest that hospitality was woven into local practice as well as linked to conduct of trade.

Songo Mnara also allows an integration of the different ways that the Swahili stonehouse has been conceived, bringing the trade model into the world of the household and linking it with some of the more ritualised activities that created places here. Rather than a specific model of spatial associations that holds true throughout the centuries, the importance of the house is reiterated as a setting for different activities in different historical periods. Perhaps the important social role suggested by the archaeology of houses here might explain why the house became such a key setting for the performance of 19th and 20th-century social and religious values, and the increasingly conservative Islamic society of those centuries that resulted in a much more secluded social world for women in particular. It suggests why the house was so powerful in this regard. Some of the ritual logics seen in the later ethnographies have a longer history, such as the use of heirlooms/objects to inscribe spaces and to locate value in the houses, yet need not always have been linked to very private self-constitutions of gendered identities. By reconsidering the public role of houses in the Swahili world, these findings also fit well with recent considerations of cosmopolitanism and extraversion as important aspects of coastal sites, with an emphasis on hospitality rather than on closed houses and privacy.

The 14th–15th century stonehouse thus provides an important case study for the integration of domestic and extra-domestic space in ways that complicate notions of public and private in this world. The spaces of the house were imbued with value through ritual offerings, and were places in which much more overt displays of wealth could be made. As such, they provided both settings for particular ways of living and symbols for the wider community and for visitors from further afield as to the status of the inhabitants. Yet the activities conducted within the houses blurred some of these lines, as the complete incorporation of the houses into the economic realm, their existence as the primary nodes of production in this society, make them much more outward-looking in character than is traditionally supposed, and also speak to the public nature of these enclosed spaces. In addition, the spread of artefacts through the settlement, especially currencies like Kilwa coins and glass beads, demonstrates the fact that people circulated between indoor and outdoor realms of activity as part of their daily round, rather than being restricted to one or other arena. Finally, the possibility that houses deliberately incorporated spaces for hospitality might be a beginning in understanding how exclusivity and the very public nature of house life might have intersected. Following Vom Bruck (1997), it is possible to envisage how public and private were not categories of space, but qualities of interaction; the evidence of Songo Mnara suggests that we might consider this as a challenge to household archaeology more generally and to the ways that houses are conceived for past societies.

Acknowledgments

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