

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 10
Issue 2 June 2007

Article 4

6-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Norman, Neil L. (2007) "A Preliminary Report on Survey, Ethnohistory, and Excavation in the Savi Townscape and Hinterland," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol10/iss2/4>

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June 2007 Newsletter

A Preliminary Report on Survey, Ethnohistory, and Excavation in the Savi Townscape and Hinterland

By Neil L. Norman¹

The following is a brief report on recent research in the region surrounding the Huedan palace complex at Savi, the ruins of which are located in the western corner of the modern Republic of Bénin, West Africa. A major trading destination along the Atlantic coast, scholars often cite the kingdom of Hueda as an example of early exchange and contact between West Africans and Western Europeans.² European traders regularly traveled from the coast northward approximately 9 km to negotiate at Savi (Figure 1). In turn, approximately one million Africans were taken from the area to be shipped across the Atlantic from the coastal landing at Ouidah (Law 2004: 1-7). From around 1670 to 1727 Hueda reigned as a regional trading power, and European writers living at Savi described the slave trade as well as the political transformation and conflict experienced by the Hueda. Yet, their knowledge of the broader Hueda world was often fragmented and superficial (see, for example, Astley 1745-7: 9). My research addresses this lacuna by exploring the town and countryside surrounding Savi, and using data from these locales to further contextualize the development of palace settlement systems as well as the impact of Atlantic trade on such systems.

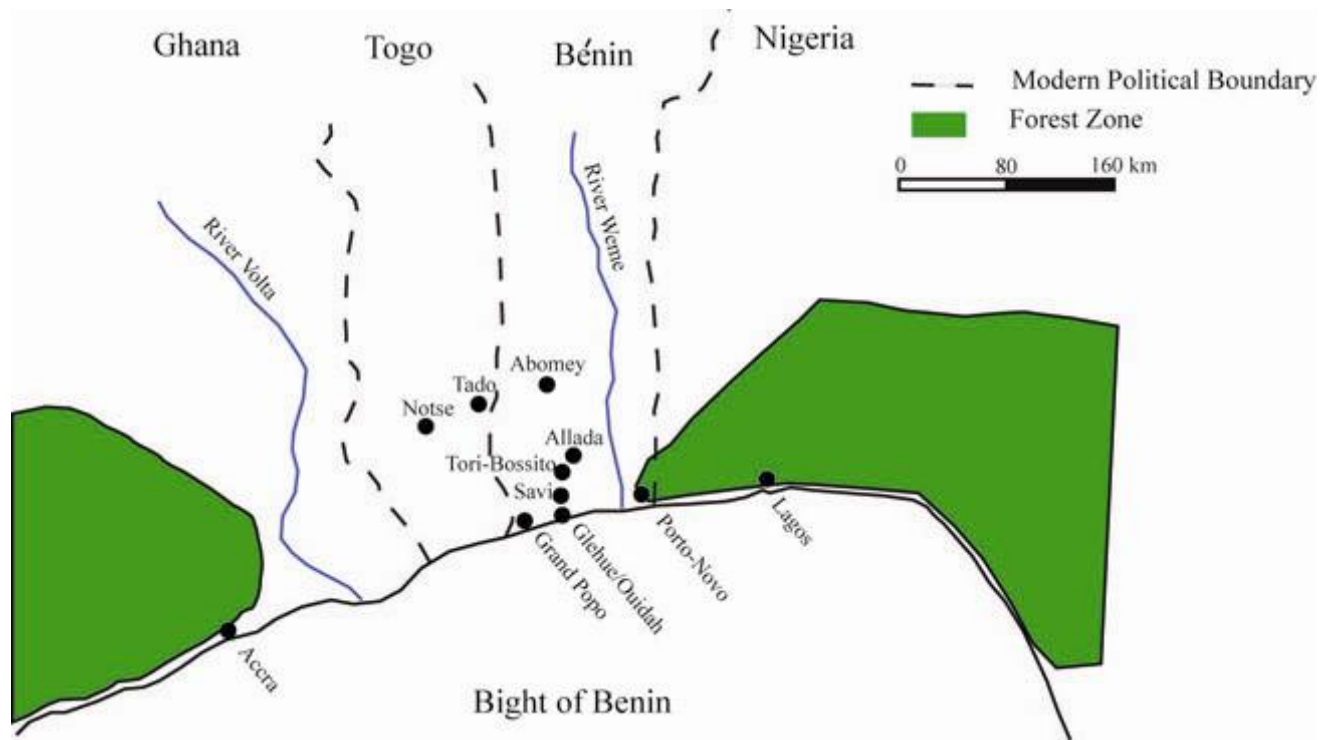


Figure 1. Sites mentioned in text and major cities.

Oral History and Systematic Survey

During an initial summer research effort in 2003, project members³ collected oral histories from Huedan and Dahomean residents of the Savi region. In fifty-three interviews with farmers, market vendors, ritual specialists, and regional administrators little background information was gleaned on the Huedan period of occupation. Local residents related some collapsed structures, sacred forests, and religious shrines to “Huedan Kings” or “of Huedan construction.” However, the vast majority of our collaborators suggested that their families entered the area after Dahomean conquest of Savi in 1727 and thus they had little background information relating to the earlier Hueda period.⁴ Residents of the Savi area suggested that project members conduct interviews at the royal courts of Allada and Tori-Bossito and also with the remnants of the Huedan royal line now residing in Ouidah and Grand Popo.

Subsequent interviews in these courts produced fascinating background data on the settlement of Savi ca. 1630 by groups from modern-day Togo and Nigeria, accounts of the mass flight of tens-of-thousands from the Savi region in response to Dahomean invasion and attempts to reestablish the Huedan royal line. Nevertheless, these results were similar to those in the Savi countryside in the sense that little specific information could be acquired describing the immediate region beyond Savi for the period 1670 to 1727. The vagaries of these findings required other techniques to identify sites surrounding the palace.

For a month during the summer of 2004 and two months in early 2005, project members conducted archaeological survey involving systematically placed transects. Survey methodology included six-meter-diameter surface collections at 100 m intervals along transects.⁵ In total the project team conducted 54 survey transects covering 35 km and containing 407 surface collection tests. The survey efforts represent 2.6% coverage of the entire survey universe. Three hundred and seventeen (78 %) of the tests contained at least one artifact. The survey universe was so densely scattered with artifacts, particularly locally produced ceramics, that it proved impossible to distinguish “sites” using cruciforms or other techniques. However, it was possible to record deflated architectural features (e.g., courtyards with surrounding sleeping and storage structures and boundary ditches) and bracket off loci of larger architectural features. These loci were initially classified (e.g., agricultural village, smelting center, secondary administrative center) based on the size of the architectural elements, the density and richness of artifacts, and evidence of productive activity. Within the survey universe, the heaviest concentration of architectural loci forms two major axes: a very dense concentration along the modern road between Abomey and the sea and an east/west trending area which surrounds the banks of Lake Toho.



Figure 2. Sample excavation unit.

Archaeological Testing

Seven loci with temporal affiliation to Savi were chosen for excavation and further exploration. Between May and December 2005, fifty excavation units were placed throughout loci to explore architectural zones (e.g., ditches, rooms, courtyards) and spaces between structures (Figure 2). The earliest strata recorded at five loci exhibited friable coarse local ceramics and associated local stone tools (e.g., quartz, silex) distinct from and overlain by later Savi-era deposits (Figure 3). Radio carbon dates are pending, but most likely these earliest deposits represent Late Stone Age (LSA) occupation followed by iron age material and it is possible that the relation of these strata represents the shift, perhaps transition, between LSA and iron-using groups. When viewed in terms of a regional settlement pattern, the heavy concentrations of presumably LSA material near Lake Toho and the relative absence of LSA near the main North/South road⁶ coupled with the density of Savi era material along this corridor

suggests a shifting settlement pattern in the early Atlantic era away from aquatic resources and towards international trade. When comparing the two assemblages, there is a vast increase in the diversity and frequency of material between LSA assemblages and those for Savi-era material. Among locally produced ceramics, the ware types and vessel forms recorded in the Savi countryside are remarkably similar to those recorded by Kelly (1995: 139-57) within the palace. Likewise, distinctive local coarse earthenware ceramic decoration such as rouletting, stamping, incising, perforating, and composites of these four recovered in the palace were also recorded in the countryside sites (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Quartz core and reduction flake.



Figure 4. Perforated ceramic sherd.

A Window into Huedan Town and Countryside

Although analysis of survey and testing material is continuing, some tentative results can be offered. In the early 18th century, Savi was encircled by numerous secondary administrative centers. Both the palace and administrative centers were surrounded by agricultural villages creating a tightly nucleated settlement system.⁷ The resulting mosaic countryside with the palace at its center is similar to Yoruba urban arrangements and compound layout (cf. Bascom 1944, Krapf-Askari 1969). Secondary administrative centers with immense architecture are comparable to those recorded by Kelly at Savi and suggest that outlying Huedan elites managed labor on a massive scale. Stylistic similarities of artifacts recovered in the Savi countryside and those recovered by Kelly in the palace speak to the economic and social connections between the palace, town, and countryside. Similarly, the presence of European manufactured goods in the countryside suggests that items passing through Savi found their way to the hinterland through

trade, sale, or gifting. Access to European-manufactured trade items was not equal, however: Dutch trade pipes, Italian beads, hollow ware and glass items were dramatically less densely concentrated in countryside sites than those contexts recorded by Kelly in the palace (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Dutch trade pipe recovered on an 18th century living surface.

Excavations revealed that three of the loci experienced catastrophic burning and all loci experienced some burning in the early 18th century, which suggests that Dahomean troops who are historically known to have razed the palace at Savi in early 1727 also burned a large portion of the Savi countryside. Although this moment of unmitigated Hueadan destruction (with the displacement of tens-of-thousands, thousands more killed in the war or sacrificed at Abomey, and still thousands more sold across the Atlantic) is well known to West African historians, heretofore the extent of the destruction at a local level has been unknown. Yet the wake of destruction and subsequent light resettlement present a snap-shot of Huedan material culture and

social practices during the early 18th century. The excavated remains of a short locally produced metal spear head reflect martial practices (Figure 6). Likewise, at three loci, disarticulated skulls



Figure 6. Spear fragment.

recovered in large clay vessels suggest war trophies collected during military expeditions were placed in religious contexts near residential structures (Figure 7).⁸ Excavations within, or nearby,



Figure 7. Jar containing fragmentary skull.

these possible religious contexts revealed non-utilitarian locally produced ceramic vessels (Figure 8) that bear a remarkable resemblance in form, decoration, and construction technique to ritual ceramics used in modern shrines in the region today (Norman 2000, Kelly and Norman 2006).



Figure 8.

At a more mundane level, grinding and pecking stones suggest the processing of maize, local grains, and oil palm nuts. The virtual absence of hollow ceramic forms indicates that meals prepared from these staples were eaten communally from cooking vessels or served in organic containers. However, one plate fragment and one mug handle crafted from local coarse earthenware suggests that these forms were known to local potters. Nonetheless, the recovery of a bowl with the carbonized remains of a prepared meal found inside a burned structure speaks to the sudden end of household activities in the Savi countryside (Figure 9). Much work remains to

expand and support these findings by refining local ceramic chronologies and broadening excavations at small-scale sites in the Savi hinterland. Though through such research, the lives of those Huedans residing outside of palaces are coming into tighter focus. With this emerging clarity, we are broadening the historic narrative to include an under-explored group that was intimately and at times forcibly drawn into the Atlantic world.



Figure 9. Decorated cooking vessel.

Museum Presentation and Supporting agencies

In the final phase of the project (January 2006-May 2006), project members conducted intensive laboratory analysis and prepared a retrospective museum exhibit. The exhibit *The Lost Communities of the Hueda Kingdom* presents findings of the 2003-6 seasons and can be visited at the Ouidah Museum of History through September 2007 (Figures 10 and 11). Both the museum exhibit and the associated website: <http://www.museeouidah.org/xweda> were made possible by a special grant from the Embassy of the Netherlands to Bénin. Research efforts were

supported by the University of Virginia (UVa) Center for Academic Excellence, UVa Department of Anthropology, UVa Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Explorers Club Washington Group, the National Science Foundation, and a Fulbright-Hays (DDRA) fellowship. This project⁹ would not have been possible without the generous support, encouragement, and participation by residents of Savi and Ouidah.



Figure 10. Artist Alphonse Yemadje sewing appliqué for the museum exhibit.



Figure 11. HRH of Tori-Bossito, Kinidégbé Gbezèkpa Gbènan at the opening of the exhibit.

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1. Neil Norman is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia (UVa).
 2. For recent reviews of the historiography of the region see (Law 1991) and chapters in Mann and Bay (2001). Kenneth Kelly was the first to use archaeological and ethno-historic techniques to investigate Savi. For a review of previous archaeology in the Hueda region see (Kelly 2001).
 3. Field and laboratory efforts were directed by the author and supported by three field schools coordinated with the University of Abomey-Calavi, 2 visiting archaeologists from the UVa, as well as 12 field technicians, 1 laboratory manager, 1 laboratory technician, and 1 translator engaged locally.
 4. This finding contrast with Monroe's (2003) successful use of oral histories in the Cana and Abomey areas as a means of identifying and exploring sites in the region. A majority of Monroe's data was drawn from kings and courtly historians; however, the destruction of Savi in 1727 appears to have severed the curation of Huedan institutional histories.
 5. This methodology was based on efforts by Kelly (1995: 97-101) to define the palace zone.
 6. Oral history from the Savi region suggest that the modern dirt road connecting the market area in Ouidah to a junction of paved roads near Allada is the same route known from 17th-19th century historic accounts as a major trade route for captives and goods.
 7. This finding supports Bosman (1705: 339) record that in the late 17th century the Savi area is so filled with towns and villages that "some are not above a Musket-shot from each other."
 8. It is equally likely that these crania were from patriarchal and matriarchal figures. For a discussion of the Huedan and Dahomean practices of taking of skulls as war trophies and veneration of skulls of ancestral figures see (Law 1989).
 9. My project was inspired by the research of Adria LaViolette and Jeff Fleisher. Kenneth Kelly first introduced me to the archaeology of the Hueda and continues to offer guidance and support in my current research. Jerome Handler offered insightful comments on this report.

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