

TANZANIA

Preliminary Report from Archaeological Survey on Tumbatu Island, Zanzibar Archipelago, Tanzania

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Introduction

The Tumbatu archaeological site is located on the south-eastern edge of the island of the same name in the Zanzibar Archipelago (Figure 1), and is separated from Unguja by a narrow channel. Mark Horton has dated it to the twelfth to fourteenth centuries AD (Horton & Clark 1985; Horton forthcoming), and a number of extant stone ruins and house mounds are still visible. As part of a broader research project that focuses on social inequality on the Swahili coast, I surveyed the site during August and September 2017 along with a small team of field assistants and the Director of Museums and Antiquities I Zanzibar, Mr Abdallah Khamis Ali. The survey consisted of shovel-test-pits (STPs) covering the full extent of the site, and a surface survey documenting the location of all visible structures. Preliminary results seem to indicate a wealthy trading settlement with few or no wattle-and-daub structures and with probable links with contemporary Mkoko-toni across the channel.

Research aims

The overall aim of the project is to investigate the archaeology and history of social inequality and slavery in pre-colonial Swahili societies, and the material expressions of social identity. The 2017 field season aimed to identify the extent of the archaeological site on Tumbatu, map the

approximate location of house remains, investigate the distribution of material and food remains, and explore areas for further excavation at a later date.

Previous research at the site

The only historical reference to the site comes from Yakut, a thirteenth century Arab traveller who referred to the area as Tumbat (Pearce 1920: 47). In the early 20th century, Tumbatu was described in detail by Francis B. Pearce (Pearce 1920), and later drawn by Peter Garlake (Garlake 1966). In 1984 and 1985, Mark Horton and Catherine Clark surveyed the site as part of their survey of the sites and monuments on Zanzibar and Pemba for the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Sports in Zanzibar (Clark & Horton 1985). In 1989-1990, the same researchers returned to excavate two house complexes, three mosques, and a well (Horton 2017 pers. com.). The site has not been researched since then, and a large area remains unexplored.

Methodology

The site as described by Horton (forthcoming) is approximately 20 hectares in size, and covered in low vegetation and loose coral rocks (Figure 2). The soil cover is thin compared to that of Unguja and Pemba and, in some areas, the coral bedrock can be observed on the surface. Today, half the site is used for cultivation while the other half is used by grazing cattle, making most of the site easily accessible by foot. Some areas are covered in heavy vegetation, as such of more difficult access, and may therefore cover structures not recorded during the survey.

I planned the shovel-test-pit survey grid based on drawings by Clark and Horton showing the rough outline of the site (Clark & Horton 1985: 64), but additional STPs were added during the field work. The team excavated 243 pits in total, arranged according to transects: pits on the north-south axis were 25 metres apart, while those running on an east-west axis were 50 metres apart. Most pits were excavated as close to the plotted coordinates as possible. Two additional transects ran at a right angle away from the site, in order to assess the scale of activity beyond the town proper. On average, we excavated each pit to bedrock or to 70-80 cm, as we could not reach deeper deposits without expanding the pit. All the soil was sieved using a 2 mm mesh, allowing for the recovery of very small beads and fish bones. We also collected twelve soil

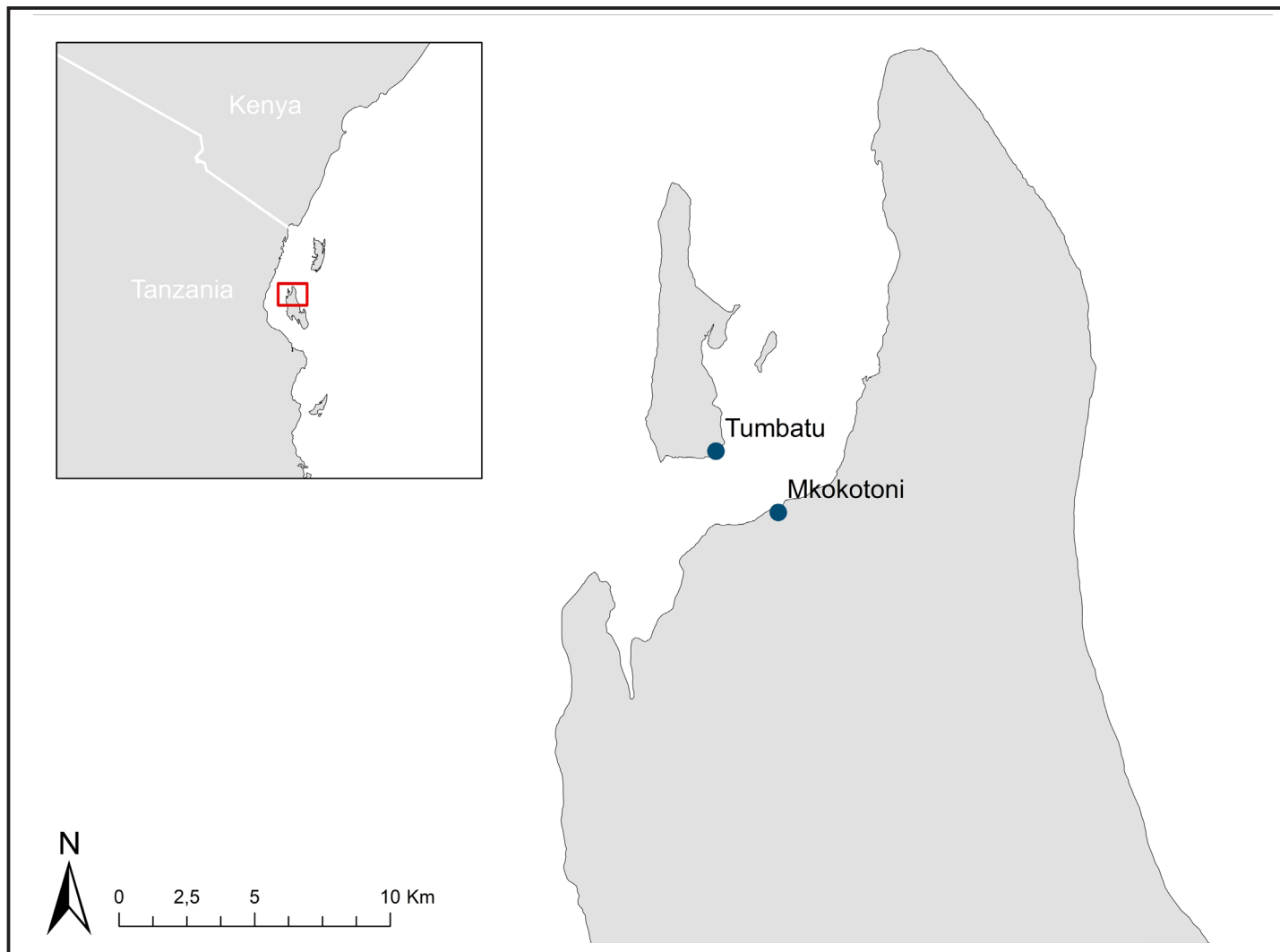


Figure 1: Northern Unguja (Zanzibar) and location of sites mentioned in text.

samples for flotation of macro-botanical remains. These samples were floated in the field using the bucket flotation method (Walshaw 2005: 84-85), and were analysed at the University of Dar es Salaam by Ms. Cecylia Mgombera.

During the survey, we recorded the location of house-mounds and ruins by investigating the area within a 25-metre radius around the pit. Due to the shallow deposits on Tumbatu, collapsed structures are visible on the surface. In total, we recorded 152 such structures (Figure 3). However, some structures may not represent individual houses but may in fact be house complexes. In those instances where only the mound was visible, it was difficult to distinguish between individual structures. We also recorded the visible walls, building material, and surface scatters for each mound or ruin, but time constraints prevented us



Figure 2: Eastern side of the site, facing Unguja.

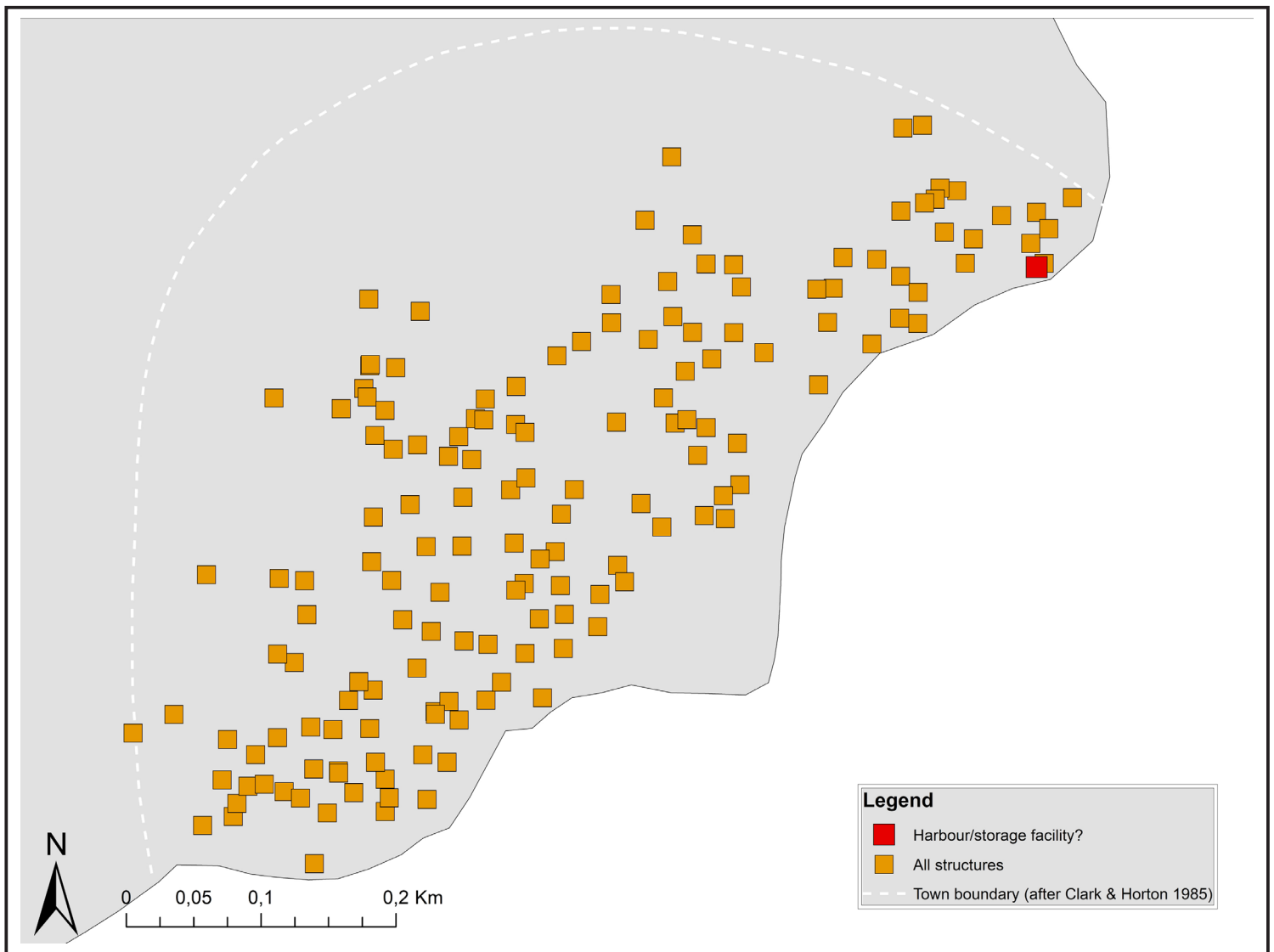


Figure 3: Distribution of structures and mounds on Tumbatu.

from taking measurements for individual buildings. Six mounds were identified as potential daub houses based on the texture and colour of the soil and the lack of coral rock on the surface; however, when further investigated they turned out to be coral houses and a midden.

Results

In addition to more than 3800 sherds of local ceramics, the most common finds were glass beads, with 3775 beads recovered from the whole site. Most of these were small (<3.5 mm) drawn type, and the most common colours were red and black (Figure 4). Other beads included carnelian, shell, and quartz (Figure 5). We also recovered 139 cowrie shells, and a small number of these were pierced

or otherwise modified. Imported ceramics included sgraffiato, Chinese celadon, Islamic monochromes, black-on-yellow, and gudulia, all within the date range proposed by Clark and Horton (1985). Twelve copper coins were recovered, including one surface find, most of which were worn and with no legible inscription. Another 9 pieces of copper have been recorded as possible coins. Other materials include glass shards, pieces of ambergris, metal objects and flakes, and lamp fragments. There was very little evidence of production activity at Tumbatu, with only two spindle whorls, 260 grams of slag, some haematite, and two glass rods. All types of finds apart from the local ceramics clustered in the built-up area of the site, and no house remains were located beyond the town boundary

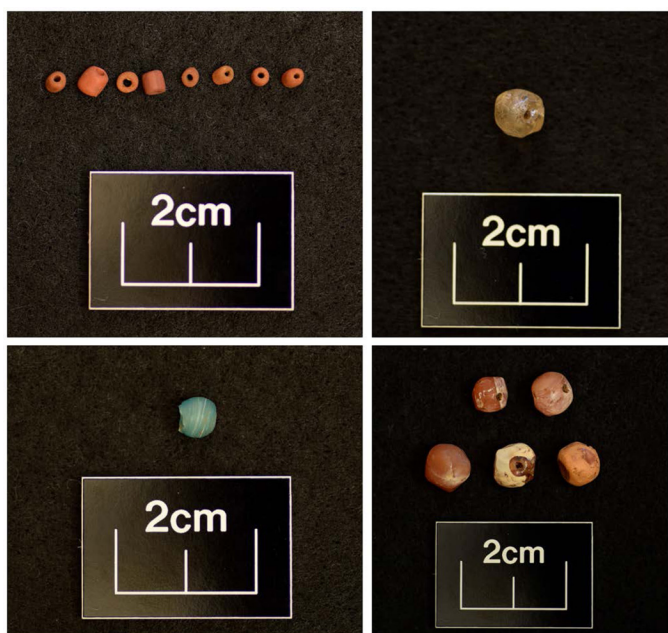


Figure 4: From top left: small drawn glass bead; quartz bead; wound glass bead; carnelian beads.

drawn by Clark and Horton (1985). Faunal remains include a large number of both marine and terrestrial animals, while macrobotanical results included rice, millet, and legumes (Mgombere 2018, pers. com.). Only a few fragments of possible burnt daub were recovered, and all recorded house mounds were of coral rock.

One of the buildings located along the eastern shore (Figure 3) displays a layout very different from other known Swahili structures, including a deep narrow chamber or cellar with no doors. The nearby coral rock outcrop has been carved into a hole (Figure 6), possibly to allow for boat ropes. This area has tentatively been interpreted as a port area with a storage facility, but we need further research for a clear identification of these buildings.

Discussion

The substantial number of stone houses and absence of wattle-and-daub houses indicate that Tumbatu was planned as a stone town from the start, and inhabited by relatively wealthy residents. This is also reflected in the rich material culture, which includes imports from the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, China, and India, as well as from the interior of East Africa. The relatively high proportion of terrestrial animals among the faunal remains is also indicative of an affluent population, as

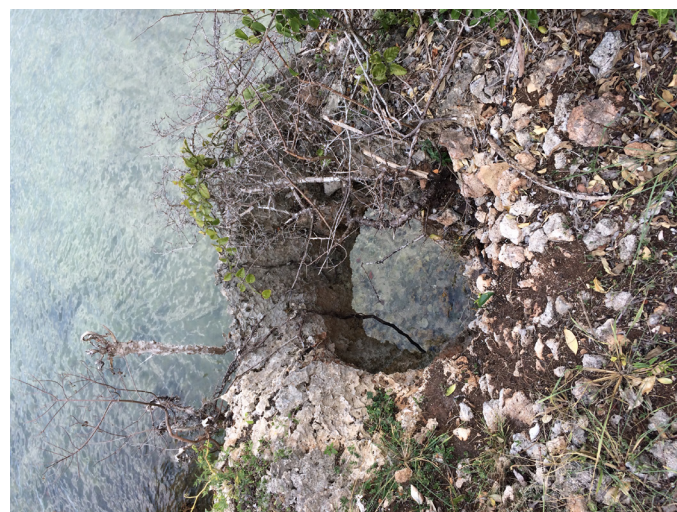


Figure 5 : Hole in coral rock outcrop

higher proportions of domesticated livestock versus marine resources is viewed as a result of urbanisation and increased wealth and social stratification (Morales & Horton 2014; Morales 2013: 116; Walshaw 2005: 78, 217-218). The distribution of food and artefacts and the location of houses do not indicate any clear neighbourhoods or socio-economic division of space, suggesting that Tumbatu was hierarchically uniform. All artefacts apart from local ceramics were recovered from the built-up area of the town, suggesting limited movement and activity beyond the town. All production materials were likewise found in relation to buildings, suggesting small-scale household production.

The small amount of production waste indicates that Tumbatu may have relied on local, regional, and long-distance trade, and that the livelihood of its inhabitants was largely based on a mercantile economy. Despite the recovery of thousands of glass beads, there was no significant evidence of bead production (apart from the two glass rods, which may represent very limited household production of beads); during excavations at Mkokotoni, however, Horton (forthcoming) also uncovered thousands of glass beads in addition to waste material, suggesting glass bead production at this site. Mkokotoni was roughly contemporaneous with Tumbatu and sits opposite it, across the channel, suggesting a link between the two sites. In addition, the soil on Tumbatu is poorly suited for growing food crops, and may not have been able to supply the entire town. Historical texts from later centuries describe relationships of reciprocity between Swahili towns and their hinterland communities, which

would supply the towns with agricultural products and labour (Vernet 2017). It is possible that Mkokotoni would have functioned as a practical hinterland for the town on Tumbatu, and the two sites should be viewed in relation to each other. This would in turn mean that Mkokotoni contained the socially and economically complex population that seems to be absent on Tumbatu. To answer such questions further fieldwork with targeted excavations is planned for 2018/2019, aimed at investigating household assemblages from both Mkokotoni and Tumbatu.

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