

■ Nigeria

Pottery, Trade and Diet in the Archaeology of Surame: A Preliminary Report

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This report details an archaeological survey carried out at the abandoned settlement of Surame in present-day Sokoto State, northwest-Nigeria between 28 April and 6 May 2019. Surame was declared a national monument in 1964 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. After a careful study on the state of its preservation, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in 2009 decided to prepare it for enlistment on the UNESCO World Heritage List. My aim here is to briefly describe the site's geographic extent and report on the preliminary archaeological work as well as plans for future excavation. This is the first attempt towards a wholistic archaeological study of the entire Surame cultural landscape.

The lower half of the Niger River (Figure 1), especially along its confluence with the Rima river, has been mentioned as the original home of the Songhay people from which they spread northwards up the River Niger and the Dendi region (Bovill 1926; Palmer 1931). In the late fifteenth century Songhay populations located around Gao came under the leadership of Sunni Ali (1464 AD-1492 AD), and eventually extended their territory throughout the Niger River valley including the Surame area (Van Dyke 2005). Until the decline of the Songhay around 1591 AD, often referred to as the 'final great medieval empire of West Africa' (Insoll 2011: 29),

not much in terms of early cultural achievements is mentioned in the historical record regarding its neighbours such as the Kebbi polity with its early capital, Surame (see also Groeneborn 2011: 41; Haour 2011: 67). When they are mentioned in historical writings (e.g Palmer 1916; Arnett 1920; Alkali 1969; Augi 1984), the authors emphasize political rivalries amongst various northern Nigeria polities. This is because Songhay's decline made space for lesser polities such as the hitherto dependent kings of northern Nigeria to gain influence (Augi 1976; Abubakar 1981). Hence, these military struggles were seen as arising out of the competing interests to control external commerce such as the trans-Saharan trade of the area (Alkali 1969; Augi 1984).

Their location in the Central Sahel of West Africa where the greatest concentration of the most fertile land is around river valleys and the political conflicts emanating from these may have also contributed to these military conflicts (Augi 1976). Moreover, another reason for this bias is the lack of primary source material due to perpetual wars, raids, and destruction that lasted for centuries, until the early nineteenth century following the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. The Sokoto Jihad laid the foundation for the emergence of a much larger political entity than had previously existed in the area, and was itself a response to the political and socio-economic problems created by the seemingly endless and indecisive wars among northern Nigerian polities (Augi 1976). Thus, some historians (e.g Usman 1981: 6; Augi 1984: 270; Last 1985: 175) have argued that these traditions (of military supremacy) form part of a definite historical outlook in the Central Sahel region and any attempt to reconstruct its history must come to terms with them.

Background

Surame is located at 04°54'05"06' East and 13°05'14"07' North in present Sokoto state, Nigeria. It is a site protected by dry moats and walls, and one of the 14 northern Nigerian Hausa states where early kings of Kebbi are supposed to have resided (Obayemi 1977). Hunwick (1971: 575) notes that:

[N]othing definite is known about polities in the Surame area before the rise of the first Kanta, Kuta, who rose from being an insignificant local chief to become a vassal and military support of the Songhay empire, and in 1517 AD established himself as an independent ruler of the state of Kebbi at the eastern edges of the Songhay empire.

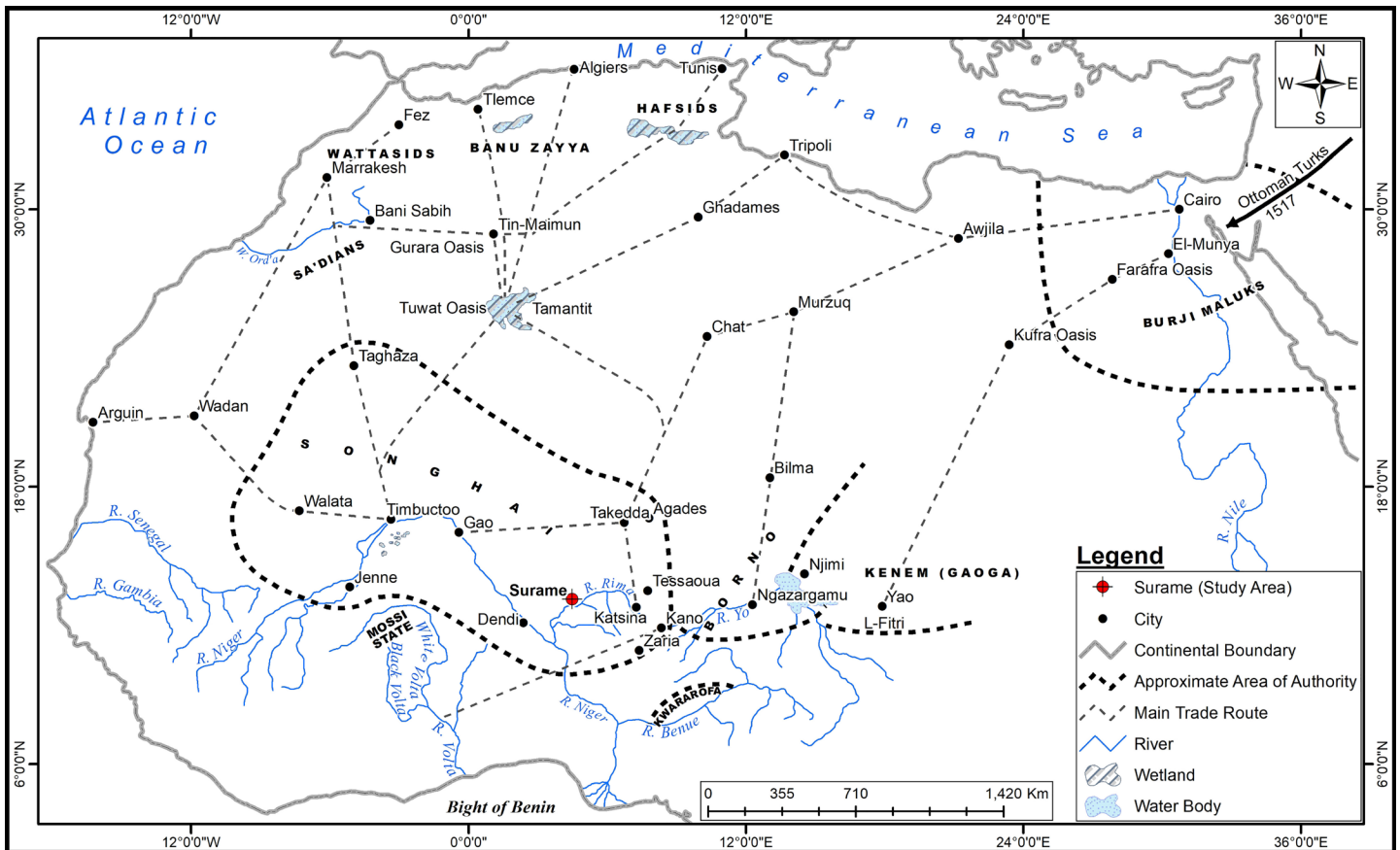


Figure 1: Pre-1516 map of West Africa (modified from Hunwick 1971: 267).

Thus, the overconcentration of Surame on historical information alone leaves serious questions of the comparability of Surame to other ancient towns in the region.

Mapping of Surame

Despite having been known for decades with good preservation potential to provide information concerning its archaeology, there has been only minimal archaeological research at Surame, with the settlement walls gaining most of the archaeological attention. For instance, archaeological research started in Surame as part of a project on dynastic history and structural change in Northwestern Nigeria (1991-1993) by Dr. Gerhard Liesegang. However, the project was suddenly terminated due to lack of funds (Opadeji 2010). Opadeji (2010) and Opadeji *et al.* (2012) carried out mapping and test excavation on the settlement walls in order to identify the construction techniques as well as the phases of construction, without examining the relationship of the walls to the other settlement features. Consequently, the archaeological survey of Surame re-

ported here focuses on the abandoned settlement within the walls and was carried out using a hand-held GPS receiver for tracking in order to map the entire Surame cultural landscape.

Before examining the settlement, the extent and height of the settlement wall was documented. The outer and inner circumference of the settlement walls were traversed and results showed regular courses of masonry in places reaching 40 metres, in height, with several areas exceeding this measure (Figure 2). Further variation in height resulting from poor preservation were noted in areas that ranged from 5 to 20 metres. In total, the outer wall surrounding the site encompasses 8,099 metres in length, while the inner wall is 6,073 metres in length. The best-preserved portion of the wall is around the eastern gate called the ‘Heavenly Bridge’ which historical sources suggest was the location where evildoers or those who committed offence were tried and punished (Umaru Zarumi pers. comm.). There, the wall thickness measured about 2.6 metres in its top-most section and 6.5 metres at its base.



Figure 2: An outside view of Surame's wall from one of the most preserved sections. Author's photo 2019.



Figure 3: The main entrance gate viewed from outside the Surame settlement. Author's photo 2019.

Ditches were dug and thorns were planted alongside the wall so as to make it difficult for an invading army to gain entrance. Historical sources mentioned that there were initially 14 gates at different sections of the settlement wall (Amma Bunkari pers. comm.). Today, additional passages have resulted from animal grazing. The original gates were comprised of seven great gates and seven smaller gates. The great gates connected Surame with the outside world, while the seven smaller gates connected different sections of the settlement (Amma Bunkari pers. comm.). Stone-piles were found around all the bigger gates such as the main entrance into the site (Figure 3). Potential security posts and narrow paths leading into the settlement were recorded in these areas.

Secondly, mapping of stone ruins within the settlement wall including the circular and rectangular house, granary foundations, and wells was also carried out using GPS and hand tapes. To accomplish this, the whole site was divided into three sections for ease in carrying out the survey: north and south, according to a footpath almost at the centre of the settlement, and the space in-between the two settlement walls. In total, 321 circular and 54 rectangular foundations were mapped on the site (Figure 4). Measurements of the diameter and central point of each circular foundation were recorded. For rectangular foundations, readings of the four corners were recorded and measurement of both length and breadth were taken. On average, the circular foundations are between 2 and 5 metres in diameter. It is proposed here that the rectangular foundations were likely compound structures enclosing groups of circular stone foundations (Figure 5). This is

because they were found grouped together in most cases, and formed an extensive enclosure. The rectangular foundation is averaged 15-20 metres in length and 10 to 15 metres in breadth. Most of these compounds also appear to have a tripartite stone boulder located at strategic places, such as the middle, in what appears to be a kitchen.

In the northern part of the site, a rectangular 'citadel' (named in local folklore) or subdivided central palace with a mosque and living quarters appears to have been repeatedly rebuilt, with a well observed in the front. These are highly visible because the stone used to construct them is not as easily eroded as the clay used in other structures. The depth of the well could not be ascertained due to in-filled sediments from erosion. It is choked with stones by its sides and averaged 2 to 3 metres diameter. About 10 metres to the north, another rectangular foundation was identified using oral sources as the palace's horse stable (Umaru Zarumi pers. comm.). It is square-shaped on a flat surface, about 56 square metres. A fence was constructed around the stable with some remnants of circular houses scattered in the vicinity. These circular stone foundations found within the palace and stable areas were likely habitation structures. The southern half of the site contains the ruins of the prison as well as clusters of house foundations (Umaru Zarumi pers. comm.). Unfortunately, most evidence of settlement in terms of structures in this area has been destroyed by animal grazing thereby making it difficult to identify suitable excavation areas using surface remains. Each discernable circular foundation was mapped using the hand-held GPS unit. Measurements of the diameter and a central point of each

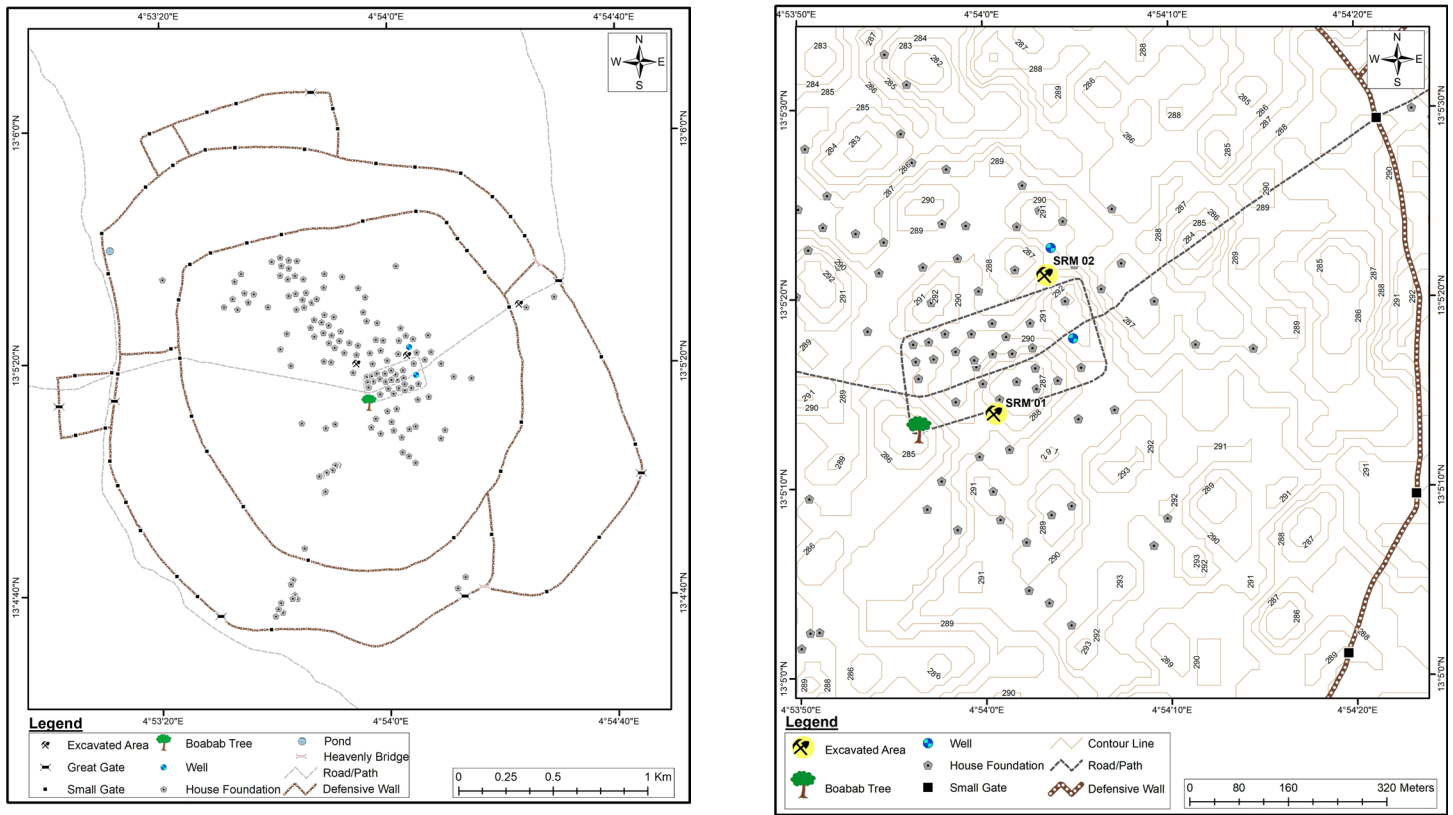


Figure 4: Contour (left) and site map (right) of Surame abandoned settlement. Auhor’s photo 2019



Figure 5: Remains of a circular house foundation within a compound wall at the rear (left) & an abandoned well (right). Author’s photo 2019.



Figure 6: Stone grinders and fragment of smoking pipe (left) and Pottery (right) recovered from the surface and shovel test pits at Surame. Author’s Photo 2019.



was recorded. For rectangular foundations, readings of the four corners were recorded and measurement of both length and breadth were taken.

The final area of note is located in between the two settlement walls. It is surmised that this is where the military was housed. Isolated and circular house foundations were found in this area that is especially close to the gates of the outer settlement wall, perhaps used as security outposts.

Surface Collection and Shovel Testing

Since the target of excavation at Surame was geared towards the recovery of archaeological sequence that would represent occupation as fully as possible, the most viable area for excavation and distribution of sub-surface finds was sought through a shovel test survey. A total of 13 shovel test pits (STP) were excavated. However, only three STPs (0.75 square metres) yielded cultural materials (Table 1), and subsequent excavations planned will target the area in and around these STPs. These were paired with limited surface collection. Surface finds and pottery collected from shovel tests in the northern part of the site are highly burnished, while some have eroded surfaces (Figure 6). A fragment of smoking pipe was also found.

Table 1: Depths and number of finds recovered from shovel test pits across Surame

STP No.	Depth reached (cm)	Depth of artefact recovery (cm)	Material retrieved
2	60	10-20	Pottery (1), stone grinder (242 g)
3	40	20-30	Pottery (1), charcoal (17.34 g), stone flint (565 g)
8	50	0-10	Pottery (6), stone flint (11.10 g)

N.B. Figures in parentheses indicate number of artefacts, while stone grinders were measured in grams.

Conclusions

For some time now, dearth and disconnect had characterized the archaeological and historical research on the ancient settlements in northwest Nigeria. For the work that was done, the focus tended to be placed on the military landscape such as the settlement walls, without much synthesis with other aspects of the cultural landscape. However, this is gradually changing and included the reported work at Surame. This recent effort to map as well as the excavation of STPs with the aim of identifying areas for detailed excavation reveals the archaeological potential of the site.

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Oral Interviews

1. Malam Amma Bunkari. Age: 62 years. Date: 28/4/2019. Place: Bunkari village, Silame L.G.A. Sokoto State, Nigeria.

2. Umaru Zarumi. Age: 69 years. Date: 29/4/2019. Place: Darkana village, Silame L.G.A. Sokoto State, Nigeria.