

Somaliland

The 2020 field season at the medieval settlement of Fardowsa (Somaliland)

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Introduction

The medieval city of Fardowsa (also named as Ferdusa or Fedowsa) is located at the outskirts of the modern village of Sheikh, about 60 km south of Berbera, in a plateau immediately after the mountain pass that connects Berbera with the interior, a strategic position which undoubtedly was fundamental for its development and growth (Figure 1). Until the 1930s, the only settlement in the area was a small religious community – *tariqa* – which gave the name to the current village of Sheikh, which has progressively expanded, affecting the southern part of the site and destroying many of the structures in the periphery of the site. Although there are several references to the existence of ruins in the area by nineteenth century British travelers who used this pass on their way to the south of Somaliland (Swayne 1903: 23, Herbert 1908:

292), the site was only archaeologically identified in 2001 by Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* (2011: 41-42), who visited it briefly and documented its general characteristics. The materials collected – an Arab coin, glass bangles, pottery sherds including Chinese porcelain – made them propose a chronology of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries for the site, suggesting a height of occupation between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. The site was also briefly surveyed in 2015 by the Incipit-CSIC team, and in 2016 two test pits were conducted in Fardowsa to the northeast and the southwest of the site (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2017: 157-159). The first one documented a square structure with at least two rooms and several pots still in their original position. Under the foundations of the structure, numerous layers were documented alternating ashes and soil, which yielded a significant amount of animal bones and hand-made coarse pottery. The second test pit was conducted in a two-room building and provided information about the use and abandonment of what has been interpreted as an average house in the town.



Figure 1: Location of Fardowsa (Sheikh).

In 2020, the availability of resources and time allowed a more ambitious plan of excavation that included a new, bigger area of excavation to the east of the site. The selected area presented two rectangular concentrations of rubble corresponding to buildings (some parts of walls were still visible), coded as Contexts 3000 and 4000 and delimiting a rough L shape, and a lower area in front of them which was considered an open space (C-6000) (Figure 2). The area, of approximately 700 sq. m, was not as covered by vegetation and rubble as other parts of the site, allowing a fast clearing of the upper part of the collapse and the documentation of the structures underneath. This process allowed us to document a large area without

necessarily excavating all the structures in one field season. In addition, the existence of differentiated spaces has allowed us to analyze the relationships between complementary areas – houses and courtyards, for example – and to compare the differences in stratigraphy and materials assemblages. The study of the space interpreted as a courtyard was regarded as especially important, as an area where older phases of the site could be recorded and where a number of chemical and pollen analyses could be conducted.

The excavation

The excavation combined three different approaches to collect the maximum amount of information about the structures and open spaces in the area of study. Firstly, both accumulations of rubble were cleared of stones and vegetation in order to get basic information about the layout of the buildings. Secondly, one of these accumulations was partially excavated to collect information about

its chronology, history and use. Finally, some test pits were conducted to address important issues related to the interpretation of the area, or to collect specific data such as pollen or geochemical samples.

The clearing and partial removal of the upper collapse level has documented two large rectangular buildings (C-3000 and C-4100) and a smaller rectangular building (C-4300), all of them oriented North-South and delimitating an “L” shaped space with a short street running between buildings C-4100 and C-4300 (Figure 2). The larger buildings have very similar internal distributions, consisting of three rooms to the west and one long room to the east, with access to the building and the different rooms placed to the east. The first one (C-3000) has dimensions of 14 m by 7.4 m and an area of 100 sq. m; while the second one (C-4100) has dimensions of 12 m by 7 m and a total area of 85 sq. m. The smaller room, with dimensions of 8 m by 4 m, occupies an area of 31 sq. m.



Figure 2: General view of the site, with C-3000 to the left, C-4000 to the bottom right and C-6000 (courtyard) to the right front.



Figure 3: General view of C-3000.

The constructive technique of all the buildings is similar and consisted of the disposition of medium and large-sized stones in irregular rows, bound with earth and placing the stones with flatter, dressed faces to the exterior. From time to time, rows of small flat stones were laid horizontally; probably to help maintain horizontal levels during the construction of the building (Figure 3). There are some slight differences depending on the areas, and in some cases bigger stones used as irregular ashlar were used at the lower part of the walls, the corners and the jambs of the doors. There are also significant differences in the quality of the houses, with the smaller building showing a poorer quality of construction technique than the two main buildings. It has been possible to determine the constructive system: the perimeter wall was erected first and the partitions added at a later stage, untied to the main walls. Regarding the doors, two types of entrances have been located: some had a trapezoidal plan with the wider side to the east, and others a simpler rectangular plan. Only one of the thresholds could be excavated, but

no elements to fix a wooden door were found. This suggests that the entrance may have been covered by cloths. No windows have been documented in the building, although given that the maximum preserved height was only 1.40 m it is impossible to know if they never existed or if they are currently lost.

Our analysis of the data has revealed several instances of remodeling in the larger buildings, including rebuilt walls with slightly different orientations and construction techniques such as the presence of postholes representing posts that were probably introduced after the abandonment of the site. This data is consistent with the information gathered during the excavation of two rooms at C-3000, which shows the existence of several occupation phases for the building, the last one a squat-like occupation that took place when the building had lost its original use (Figure 4). Although the excavation of C-3000 could not be completed due to a lack of time, the analysis of the material culture collected in the different spaces of the house shows a radical distinction between



Figure 4: View of the north site of C-3000 showing an occupation floor.

the western smaller rooms and the long room to the east. The former has yielded a remarkable amount of imported materials including glazed pottery, porcelain, hand-made fine wares, glass vessels and bangles and different objects of metal, together with local hand-made pottery and numerous bones. To the west, in comparison, the amount of archaeological materials is significantly smaller and imported materials are scarcer. To the south of the longer room two medium sized, hand-made containers have been identified in their original position, slightly buried on the floor, a feature also documented in other excavation areas of Fardowsa.

These differences in the distribution of the amounts and types of archaeological evidences led us to think that the smaller, western rooms could have been roofed areas used as living rooms, stores or bedrooms, while the long spaces to the east with direct access from the exterior could correspond to open areas where productive activities took place. The upper levels of occupation, on the contrary, have evidence of fires and with bones inside

the west rooms, a type of evidence that would fit better with a sporadic occupation of the building after the abandonment of the town. This hypothesis will be checked in future campaigns, when the building C-3000 is fully excavated and the different occupation phases are recorded.

The open space to the west and northwest of the buildings was named C-6000 and has been identified as a courtyard delimited by a low wall – probably a fence with stone foundations – with some evidence of small rooms (pens?) attached to it. Although the outline of the fence could not be established, it surrounds the whole area occupied by the excavation area. Two test pits provided additional information about this area. The first one was a 3 m by 1.5 m located to the north of C-4100, which was set to document the preserved height of that building (about 1.1 m to the north). In addition, this test pit included part of a refuse heap which appears to be part of the courtyard and contained local hand-made pottery and an astonishing amount of bones (about 60 kg of faunal remains in an area of just 1.4 sq. meters and a depth of 80 cm). Most



Figure 5: View of a Chinese celadon bowl. A potter mark can be appreciated on its base.

of these bones are identified as camels and caprines, although other species (including gazelles) have also been documented. The presence of camel is especially relevant as it is a prestigious animal used as a beast of burden as well as for milk production, but whose consumption is reserved for special occasions. Its abundant presence in the test pit reinforces the idea of the large houses as wealthy households, a theory further supported by the numerous imported materials found during the excavation.

The second test pit (2 m by 1 m) was excavated in the middle of the courtyard with two objectives: 1) to identify the floor of the courtyard and the depth of the archaeological deposits in this area; and 2) to collect a soil column in order to provide information about the past uses of this open space. The excavation documented two occupation floors, the first at 35 cm of depth and the second one at 50 cm, both of which were made of packed earth. Archaeological materials were scarce and consisted of bones and hand-made local pottery.

The material culture

The material culture recovered in the 2020 excavation shows significant variety and at the same time a great coherence in terms of chronology. All of the collapse layers are undisturbed and therefore the material assemblages have been properly sealed. Of course, the state of preservation depends on the post-depositional processes that occurred in the different spaces: in some areas that were reoccupied, materials are very fragmented, while in other areas whole pieces were recovered. There were also noteworthy differences in the material assemblages of different rooms and spaces related to their different functions.

The amount of imported materials in the sample is remarkable, especially in some rooms of C-3000 where tens of pieces have been documented. Celadon fragments are relatively common, along with blue and white porcelain, while Martaban stoneware and Indian Red Slip Ware (IRSW) pieces are present, but scarce in the sample (Figure 5). Celadon pieces include some with flower/wavy



Figure 6: Materials documented during the excavation 1. Yemenite Cream Ware (white cream); 2. Thin Grey Ware; 3, 9. Speckled ware; 4-5. Blue and white porcelain; 6. Martaban; 7. Yemeni Mustard ware; 8. Green glazed and painted ware; 10. Rim of glass bottle; 11. Glass bangles; 12. fragments of glass bottles.

rims and two well-preserved bowl bases, one of them with potter marks. Speckled glazed pottery is also present in most of the rooms and spaces, while other types of glazed wares are less common. and include Persian green glazed and painted pottery as well as Yemenite Mustard wares Unglazed imported pottery is very abundant and includes two main types: 1) Yemenite white cream wares characterized by incisions and punctuations and 2) Thin Grey Ware fragments, a type of pottery decorated with incisions in floral, wavy and grid-like designs. Most of these types of potteries are widely documented throughout the Red Sea and Indian Ocean assemblages (Priestman 2013).

Along with pottery, glass is very abundant, usually corresponding to small perfume bottles and glass bangles of which about 50 have been found. The glass fragments are mostly green while the bangles correspond

to three main types: 1) black or dark blue bangles with fingernail impressions, 2) bangles combining colors and 3) spiral-like bangles combining wires. All these types are common in medieval and modern sites in Somaliland (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2017: 140). Other imported materials include cowries, which were numerous in some rooms, and metal objects which were recorded in C-3000 – a buckle, an earring, a *taweez* (cylindrical metal amulet to keep verses of the Quran) and a wire skein, all probably made of tin or bronze (iron pieces were very scarce and fragmented). These metal objects are exceptional in the archaeological record of Somaliland, where metal objects are very scarce. Other remarkable objects – although not all of them are imported – consist of a number of coral and agate (rock crystal) beads, ostrich eggshells, and a stone token.

Local pottery is numerous throughout the site and similar to the samples recovered in other sites dating to the medieval era (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2017, Torres *et al.* 2019). It mostly consists of hand-made vessels of medium size, corresponding to four main types: 1) semi globular containers with spouts, 2) globular pieces with inward flat rims, 3) bowls with the upper part of the rim slightly engrossed and 4) censers. In general, all have a good firing quality. Decorative patterns are highly standardized and are comprised of a series of parallel incised lines, although punctuations, grooves, finger or fingernails impressions of clay appliqués have also been documented. The decorations are usually located in the upper portion of the vessels, close to the neck. In the case of the inward globular pieces, the decorations are on the upper flat portion of the rim. Additionally, handles are very abundant and correspond to two main types: horizontal and slightly curved handles with triangular sections; and short vertical handles with circular sections. Finally, knobs are relatively common although some of them seem to have been just decorative elements.

The sample sets a chronological framework of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century and is an excellent summary of the different objects and wares that were available and widely distributed during the period of the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1577 AD). However, some of the imported types such as the Yemenite Mustard have an older chronology (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), whereas examples of celadon found during the survey could date to the seventeenth century. Both dates are reasonable, as the strategic position of Fardowsa makes it logical to place the occupation prior to the fifteenth century. Regardless, all the evidence that we have shows a progressive abandonment of the site throughout the sixteenth century that could perfectly match with a marginal occupation during the seventeenth century.

Preliminary conclusions

The 2020 campaign in Fardowsa has provided a large amount of data regarding the urbanistic, architectural, economic, social and chronological context of the town. The quantity and quality of this information has been to some extent unexpected, as previous excavations in Fardowsa only revealed a maximum height of 50 cm of preserved archaeological remains. In the area excavated this year, this height reached 1.40 m in some areas of C-3000 and C-4000, which along with undisturbed and well-

sealed archaeological levels, provides an excellent context to understand the historical and material framework of Fardowsa during the medieval period. The amount, quality and state of preservation of the archaeological materials is also remarkable, offering an important set of well-contextualized assemblages which will be invaluable to establish the chronology of Fardowsa and its different stages of occupation.

One of the most relevant discoveries is the similarity between the layouts of C-3000 and C-4100, following the same constructive pattern that, with minor differences, points to a well-established design in the planning and use of these large houses. Obviously, these buildings do not correspond to the average house size and should be considered prestigious or wealthy households. In that way, the organization of the three buildings in an L shape and surrounded by a fence makes it very explicit that there existed a predetermined and conscious organization of space, including open areas which are usually considered just empty spaces and which have proved to be very relevant for our understanding of medieval settlements. Although this organization cannot be properly called urbanization, it nevertheless challenges the prior, simpler definitions of medieval settlements as a cluster of disseminated, individualized houses. Even though our analysis is still in progress, the identification of different functional areas is starting to shed some light on the spatial organization of these communities, with interesting social and economic implications.

The material culture recovered during the excavation of Fardowsa is especially relevant because it comes from a well-sealed context and offers a very coherent chronology with a main occupation period around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The quality and variety of materials found in this season's excavation show the sophistication and wealth of Fardowsa during the Sultanate of Adal period. Obviously, the characteristics of the buildings excavated during the 2020 field season do not seem to be the norm, and point to the existence of a privileged and wealthy group within Fardowsa that had access to imported materials and regularly consumed expensive animals such as camels. This information, which will be expanded in future field seasons, will balance the data we have so far for Somaliland, mostly focused on the western region (Curle 1937), and will provide a more accurate overview of the social and economic parameters during this period in central Somaliland.

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