

■ GUINEA

Seeking the “Illegal” Slave Trade on the Guinea Coast: Archaeological Work on the Rio Pongo

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Introduction

The abolition of the slave trade by Denmark, Britain, and the United States in 1807-8 shifted the now “illegal” slave trade to less visible regions, such as the Rivers region of present-day Guinea, where

tidal rivers provide access to interior trade routes. European and American traders became integrated into local societies, often through marriage to daughters of local elites, courtesy of the “landlord-stranger relationship” (Brooks 1993; Mouser 1975) and founded a series of trading centers at the termini of established routes from the Futa Jallon highlands to the east, where large numbers of captives were held. Despite the abolition of the slave trade, demand remained high for captive Africans, particularly for the Spanish possessions of Cuba and Puerto Rico, following the upheavals of the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) (Blackburn 1988, 1997).

A number of traders, each allied with a local polity, became established in the Bangalan Basin in the upper reaches of the Rio Pongo. An ideal trading place, the tidal river in this area was passable to ocean-going slave ships, yet 40km inland and invisible to coastal anti-slave trade patrols. An archaeological project was organized to investigate the consequences of this trade in the Rio Pongo region, developed from a preliminary visit by Kelly (2006) that identified a number of sites and established connections with local residents and officials. In 2013, Kelly’s Rio Pongo Archaeological Project teamed with co-director Elhadj Fall and his Mémoire de Farenya project (Ministère de la Culture 2011) to investigate a series of archaeological components in the Bangalan Basin. All fieldwork was undertaken with the express consent and approval of the Ministère de la Culture et du Patrimoine, local authorities, and village leaders. Building on Kelly’s initial observations (Kelly 2006, 2011), the three month field season (January-April 2013) explored sites associated with the present-day villages of Bangalan, Farenya and Sanya Paulia, to document archaeological resources relating to 19th century slave trade activities through surface surveys, mapping, and preliminary excavations with the aim of understanding how local manifestations of the slave trade were materialized and how local societies were impacted (Figure 1). A key aspect of the project was to train Guinean university students and museum employees in archaeological field and lab methods, as no universities in the region offer any archaeology training, and as well-intentioned, although misguided, attempts by

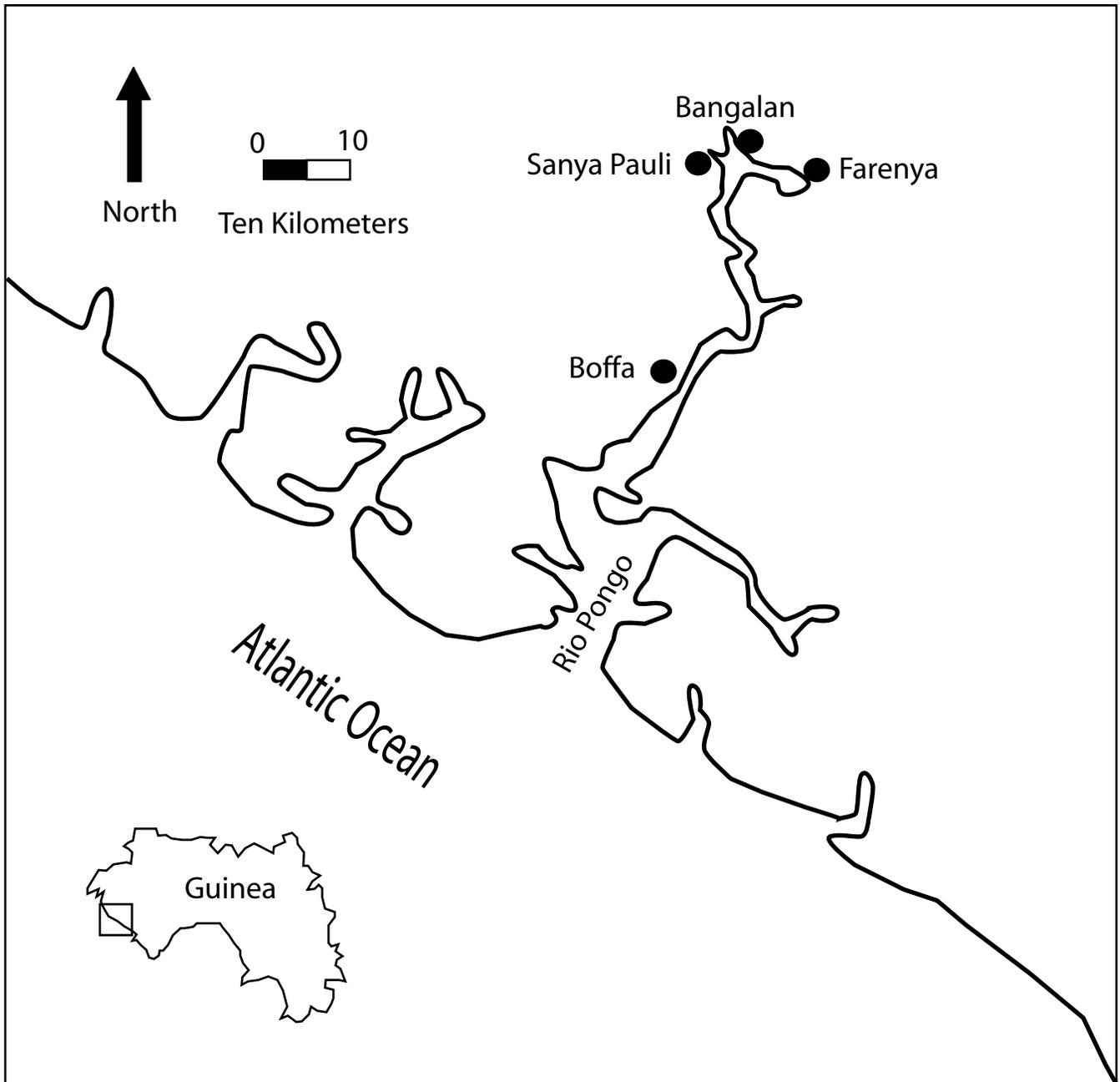


Figure 1: Rio Pongo region.

local authorities and museums pose ongoing threats to archaeological sites.

Bangalan

Bangalan was an important trading post from at least the beginning of the 19th century. The well-known account of Theodore Canot describes his time there working for John Ormond, Jr., a local slave trader (Mayer 1968). The distance of the site from the present-day village has minimized modern disturbances. Our goals for Bangalan included documenting the trade center, and investigating the adjacent 19th century village. In 2006, Kelly observed several earthen mounds and a heavily overgrown paved path leading to the water's edge (Figure 2). With the vegetation cleared, it was obvious that the mounds were part of a much larger lodge complex and that the paved path was the surface of a substantial masonry causeway/ramp connecting the lodge with a port. It extends ~80m from the river, climbs more than 10m in elevation, and meets a continuous parapet parallel to the river bank, continuing 80m to the lodge complex (Figure 3). Along the parapet there are remains of at least one masonry structure (storeroom or warehouse).

Excavations of the two largest mounds in the lodge area revealed a number of archaeological indications of trading activities, including an open courtyard space (with extant iron cannon); structures with thick exterior walls of sun-dried brick, probably two-stories tall, multiple rooms with interior walls; and a series of compacted floor deposit lenses overlaid with layers of charcoal due to repeated fires (Figure 4). There was limited artifact recovery, which suggests frequent sweeping consistent with trade lodges or residences, as well as evidence in one of the mounds of an earlier underlying building oriented differently showing repeated and intensive occupation of the lodge area. All the artifacts were consistent with early-mid 19th century components. Excavations of the warehouse area above the parapet revealed deep, stratified deposits, that included white salt-glazed stoneware (*ca.* 1740-1765) at the lowest levels, suggesting an earlier occupation than that ac-

counted for through documentary records.

Along the waterfront we surveyed to the east and west of the causeway and recovered various 19th century European-produced ceramics and glass, indicating that this location was a transfer point for goods (and no doubt people). The paved stone platform 40m west of the end of the causeway, exposed at low tide, was probably used for loading/unloading small boats, predates the causeway, and was possibly abandoned following its construction as there is no clearly defined access to the causeway or parapet.

Our work outside the presumed trade center revealed a dense surface deposit of archaeological materials (local and imported) to the east, west, and north of the trade center, likely associated with the village adjacent to the trading lodge. Surface collection, mapping, metal detection, and test excavation yielded imported materials, particularly ceramics and bottle glass, in all areas of the village, along with locally produced ceramics. Excavation generally revealed a 40-50cm depth of undifferentiated archaeological materials due to seasonal hand cultivation of crops. In one location below 50cm, an intact trash feature contained early 19th century bottle glass, imported and local ceramics, and preserved sheep/goat and cattle bone.

Farenya

Farenya, presently the best known of the sites investigated, is associated with historical figure Nyara Beli (Elizabeth Baily Gomez Lightbourn) and with Henrietta Conté, who claimed descent from Nyara Beli and was the second wife of former president Lansana Conté. Nyara Beli, a powerful trader and suspected sorceress, married South Carolinian trader Stiles Lightbourn. Through these associations Farenya has received disproportionate attention: a popular novel, several Guinean theses from the 1960s to the present, and the political influence formerly wielded by Conakry residents from Farenya (Baldé n.d.; Diallo 1970; Montgomery 1999, 2006; Sidibé 2010; Sorry 1975). Farenya was an important 19th century Rio Pongo trade site, and in 2006 the need

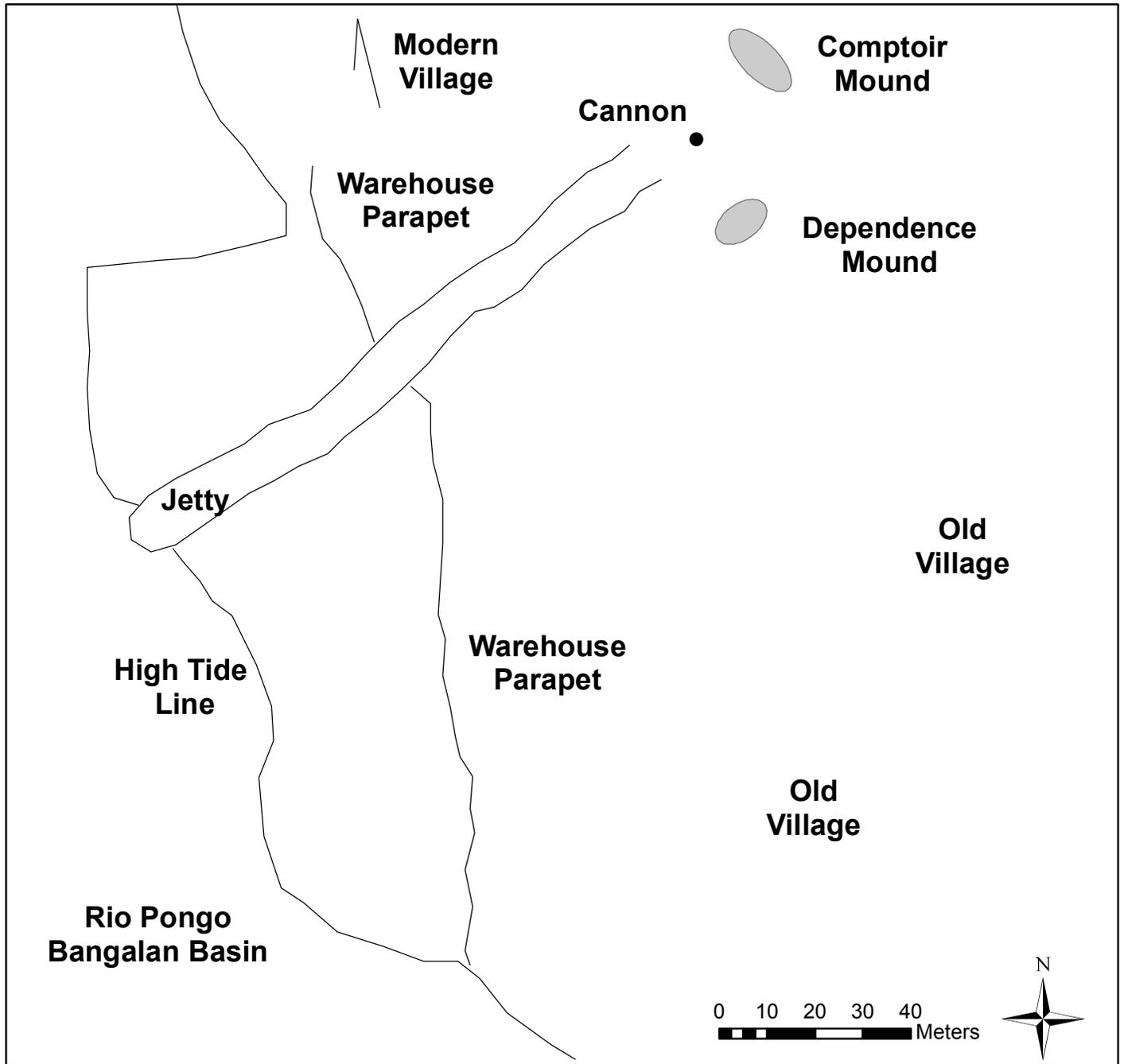


Figure 2: Map of Bangalan site complex.



Figure 3: Photo of paved causeway/ramp leading from warehouse parapet to water's edge (K. Kelly).



Figure 4: Photo of excavations within trading lodge at Bangalan (K. Kelly).

for documentation was reinforced when Kelly witnessed attempts to “restore” the alleged site of Nyara Beli’s “palace”, which was largely destroyed in the construction of a two-story concrete block structure, purportedly a “restoration” or recreation of the palace. The uncompleted structure is now a ruin on top of a ruin. In 2006, Kelly identified other remains in Farenya and the immediate area. Research goals at Farenya included: verifying the archaeological integrity of the “palace” site; developing an accurate map of historical resources in the port area; mapping and archaeologically investigating the nearby church site, possibly the earliest Anglican church in the region; recording the sites of Betia and Yenya; and recording associated archaeological features along the south bank of the Rio Pongo (Figure 5).

“Palace” site excavations demonstrated that the site is severely compromised, with any remains of the mound buried beneath a concrete slab. The historic core area of Farenya displayed some historic features, possibly contemporaneous with the “palace”, including a small cemetery, the ruins of several cannon batteries, a structure referred to by residents as the *poudrière*, or powder magazine, and a structure identified as the trading lodge of the Curtis family, rivals of the Nyara Beli/Lightbourn clan (Maladho Siddy Baldé, personal communication 2013). These sites are currently threatened by development and reuse of the village core.

Survey between Farenya and Yenya and Betia revealed the presence of an extensive, continuous surface scatter of 19th century material, primarily imported ceramics, corresponding to an earlier iteration of Farenya along the south bank of the river. The foreshore here contains extensive remains of several wharfs, where at low tide we found 19th century bottle glass and imported ceramics not present elsewhere along the river, suggesting that these jetties were used for loading and unloading small craft. It is unlikely that larger vessels moored in this uppermost stretch of the Rio Pongo, which is virtually dry at low tide.

The site of the St. Paul’s Anglican church, founded at least by 1881 (Barrow 1900: 123), ap-

proximately 500m south of the palace site is demarcated by a rectangular alignment of fist-sized stones and apparently unchanged since Kelly’s 2006 visit (Figure 6). Our test excavations cross-cut the exterior wall on the west, east, and south sides, and transit mapping surveyed the immediate area, recording several graves in a grove to the east of the ruin. Excavations showed that the surface alignments of stones match church dimensions but are not associated with its construction. Beneath 10-15cm of sterile sand was the base of a wall constructed with large rectangular laterite stones two to four courses deep. At the east end of the structure, 1m west of the end wall, the cut stone wall met an interior mud brick wall (perhaps an altar or relating to an earlier version of the church).

West of the church site sit two imposing dwellings, Yenya (~700m west) and Betia (~1050m west) on promontories overlooking the river, associated with Elizabeth and Jennifer, daughters of Nyara Beli and Lightbourn. At Yenya we cleared the house site overlooking upper Bangalan Basin and identified a 100m long, paved stone causeway between the house and river, leading to the riverbank 25m below. Structural remains at Yenya include: a single platform, 6x12m, and 1m above ground surface consisting of a mud brick retaining wall with largely sterile interior fill (the fill probably pre-dates surrounding significant refuse deposits). Artifacts adjacent to the platform are consistent with the mid-19th century domestic occupation of a structure built on top of the platform. At Betia we cleared the mound for mapping and testing, but the surrounding ground surface and adjacent features were obscured by dense vegetation. The Betia mound, though smaller in area, is significantly taller than at Yenya, and is a much more complex construction (Figure 7). Both sites commanded views over the upper reaches of the Bangalan Basin and the Rio Pongo, and the jetties on the river below suggest cargo handling. Local residents identified other archaeological features, including graves, alleged church and cemetery locations, and suggested that other features were hidden by the vegetation. On the ridge summit, overlooking the south side of the Bangalan Basin, we found significant distribution of 19th century glass and ceramics,

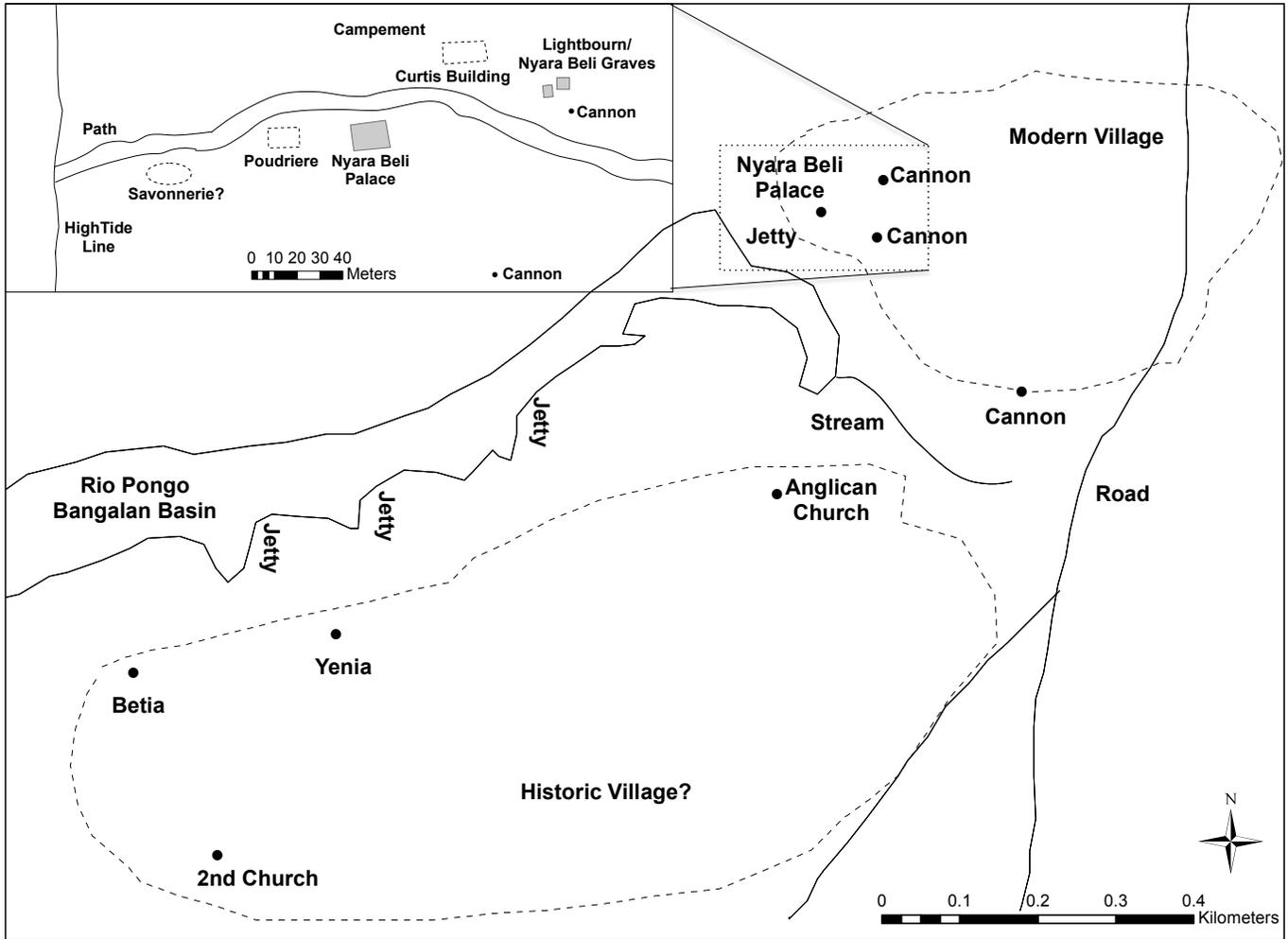


Figure 5: Map of Farenya site complex.



Figure 6: Photo of excavations along church walls (K. Kelly).



Figure 7: Photo of excavations at Betia mound (K. Kelly).

indicating a substantial population, with more zones of goods transfer than associated with the residence of Nyara Beli and present-day Farenya.

Sanya Paulia

Sanya Paulia is named after founding trader, Paul Faber (from the early 19th century). Local residents suggested that the village grew up around Faber's concession granted by the chief of Sakhabele. Sanya Paulia lies closer to the entrance of the Bangalan Basin, with deeper year-round water. In aerial images Sanya Paulia appears as an island of denser vegetation (and deeper soils) than surrounding areas of sparse vegetation and exposed bedrock. Documentary and oral accounts indicate that other traders, particularly the Curtis family, were present and retain ties to the village. In 2006, Kelly recorded a series of archaeological features, including mounds possibly associated with trading lodges, port structures, cannon emplacements, the 19th century village area, and just outside the modern village, the remains of an early church complex (Figure 8). Our goals for 2013 included: testing the two largest mounds associated with the Faber family; mapping the extent of 19th century materials; excavating in the 19th century village area; and documenting other nearby historic sites.

We conducted limited excavation in the two 4m tall mounds, where our trenches showed mud brick retaining walls filled to create an elevated platform. The first mound (closer to the port) is said to be Faber's lodge, and had a raised and paved forecourt, possibly for trading activities. The summit revealed no obvious structural remains, and the limited artifacts are from an early-mid-19th century occupation. The second mound, approximately 25m north of the port (said to be Paul Faber's wife's residence) is an elevated platform mound, with a more complex construction sequence; includes evidence of destruction, with collapsed or fallen mud brick wall sections in slope fill; and yielded artifacts (culinary ceramics, bottle glass, etc.) that suggest a residential structure. Other excavations included two mounds in an old mango grove where topographic indications and sur-

face artifacts suggested the earlier village was located. These mounds yielded architectural indications of mud brick houses. Artifacts suggest prolonged occupations, from early/mid-19th century, through the late 19th/early 20th centuries.

Other results in the Sanya area included a pedestrian survey that determined the size of the historic occupation of Sanya, recording cannon batteries, port facilities, the site of the Curtis concession, and artifact distributions. The area east of the present-day village revealed a high density of 19th century artifacts associated with village life, but no features similar to the mounds to the west were identified. The elevated bedrock ridges crosscutting this area showed 19th century artifacts in crevices and hollows as much as 2m above the current surface, suggesting that while the village may have once extended over this area, the ground surface has deflated, leaving artifacts in place.

The ruins of a structural complex outside of Sanya consist of highly visible masonry remains of a church and an associated two-story structure adjacent to a small graveyard with five visible tombs, and a stone circle rumored to be the remains of the first church built here. No excavations were conducted at this location. Also in the environs of Sanya, the village Imam showed us a rock shelter several hundred meters from the village where, according to legend, villagers would take refuge when threatened. The shelter had about 1m of vertical space and an area sufficient to fit several dozen people. There was a small scatter of 19th century imported ceramics, all from a single vessel, and a very silty, loose soil matrix. With a view to understanding local ceramic sequence, we established a 1m² test unit, revealing a dense deposit of locally manufactured ceramics and fine-grained mud- or siltstone, quartz and other lithics. Excavation was halted at nearly 180cm below the surface, due to safety concerns. Although ceramics dramatically declined in frequency (and were distinct from those recovered in the 19th century contexts of the village), lithics continued to be recovered at great depth. The complete lack of any imported ceramics or glass with the presence of flaked stone materials strongly suggests that the occupation of

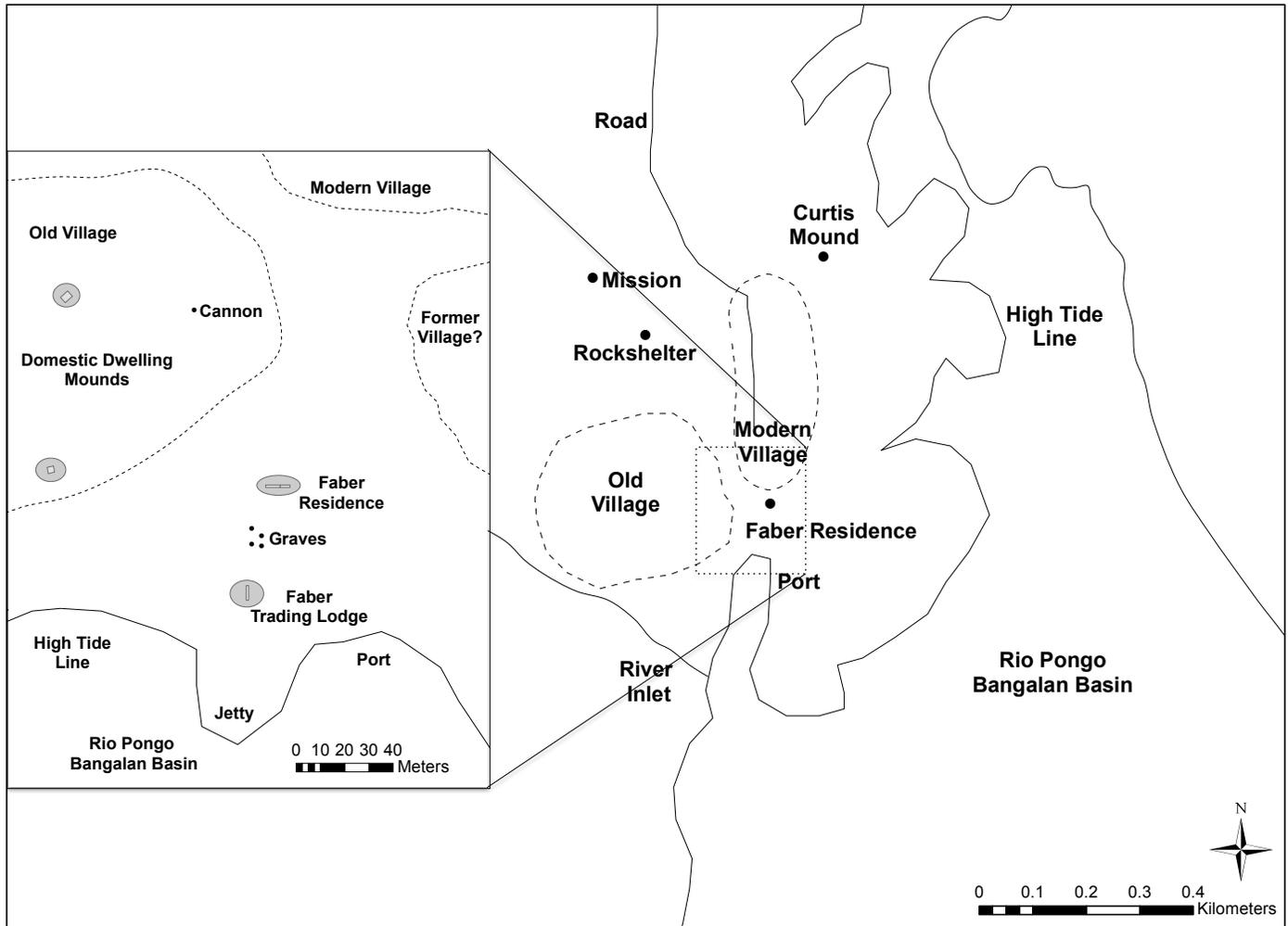


Figure 8: Map of Sanya Paulia site complex.

this rock shelter predates the historic period. These important results from the first rock shelter excavated in coastal Guinea will significantly contribute to understanding the earlier occupations of the region.

In Sanya, local colleagues identified additional historic resources, including a complex of trading structures at Bakoro and a large stone jetty at Gambia. Bakoro was a very important trade center in the 20th century, eclipsing the trade at Bangalan, Sanya, and possibly Farenya. Several major French West African trade companies maintained outposts here, where they traded local agricultural products for imported materials. Today, the historic center of the village consists of a mosque and a former trading lodge/house, with the rest of the trading establish-

ments in ruin. Although lying at the tidal head of a branch of the Bangalan Basin and accessible only at high tide even by small boats, which limited its use for the “illegal” slave trade, Bakoro is at the juncture of several land-based routes to the north and the interior.

At Gambia there was little visible archaeological material, apart from a well-constructed, substantial wharf extending into the river, with about three meters of draught at high tide, enabling access by fairly large boats. Gambia was the location of the trading establishment owned by Edward Joseph (Mayer 1968) and run by Theodore Canot in the late 1820s, though local residents had no recollection of the name Gambia being associated with Canot, but

rather explained that the name came from transient Gambian fishermen. We conducted a pedestrian survey and GPS mapping of mounds, stone alignments and other features, the results of which suggest a substantial occupation. The few artifacts visible on the surface dated to the middle third of the 19th century. Test excavations at Gambia were not possible but a dozen archaeological features were recorded, demonstrating the importance of this locality. This site will be the focus of future archaeological inquiry.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of the first significant archaeological project on the Rio Pongo demonstrate the presence of intact archaeological sites and features of a wide range of 19th century activities, which can be successfully investigated with archaeological and anthropological methods. These archaeological features provide details of the architectural choices and strategies employed by foreign traders, local people, and the “Atlantic Creoles” who expressed their identities through their built environment. Archaeological assemblages of local and imported artifacts describe the range of items traded in the Rio Pongo region, and how new materials may have impacted local material culture. Through ongoing analyses of architecture, landscape, and portable material culture, we can begin to explore the ways in which Africans, Europeans, and Americans became entangled in webs of commerce, blood, and slavery during the period of the 19th century “illegal” slave trade.

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