

■ GAMBIA

An Archaeological Appraisal of Early European Settlement in The Gambia

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Introduction

In 1967, Raymond Wood published an article titled "An Archaeological Appraisal of Early European Settlements in the Senegambia" in the *Journal of African History* in which he examined documentary references to early European outposts. Wood's aim was to lay the foundation for the eventual preservation and restoration of these sites (Wood 1967:39). Although Wood conducted no fieldwork, he underscored the potential of archaeology and a direct historical approach in utilizing well dated artifact chronologies from these sites in evaluating change and transformations within the associated African communities. This report reviews some of the assessments made by Wood in light of ongoing work initiated in 2004 by Syracuse University and St. Mary College, Maryland to examine early European outposts on the Gambia River, particularly African settlements associated with the English fort on James Island and the site of the English factory built by Francis Moore at Yamyamakunda in 1733.

The Archaeology of Early European Settlement in The Gambia

Wood's article was a plea for the examination and preservation of European sites. At the time, A.

W. Lawrence had published his comprehensive study of the structural histories of the European forts and castles of West Africa (Lawrence 1963) and preservation work on some of the European forts of coastal Ghana had been initiated. It was Wood's hope that similar efforts would be directed to the Senegambia. In reviewing information specifically on the Gambia River, Wood focused on sites described in European travel accounts and, in particular, Francis Moore's journal and the revised map by John Leach published in Moore's text. Wood urged the archaeological investigation of Yamyamacunda, the factory managed by Moore, for which he provides a detailed description.

Unfortunately, archaeological work and preservation efforts on historic period sites in The Gambia have been limited. Work has primarily focused on the earlier megalithic complex sites (e.g. Hill 1977, 1980; Lawson 2003; Parker 1923). Limited work had been undertaken at James Fort located on a small island approximately 20 miles up the Gambia River. This was the most substantial European outpost on the river. Founded by Baltic Germans in the mid-17th century and subsequently occupied by the Dutch, it was captured by the English in 1661 (see Lawrence 1963:250-261). The fort was surveyed by the colonial government in the 1940s and its structural history documented by A.W. Lawrence (1963:250-261) in the 1950s. In the 1990s stabilization efforts were carried out by the National Center for Arts and Culture (NCAC) on James Island, and were completed in 2000 in preparation for the 2003 UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. Its basic plan remains largely visible, although the surrounding out buildings has been heavily impacted by erosion. Artifacts have also been periodically removed by tourists. Recently, Flordilez Burgarin and Donald R. Tolley (2006, 2007) generated a three dimensional image of the island based on available plans.

Prior to current research, the archaeological investigation of African settlement sites dating to the period of the Atlantic world, have been extremely limited. The only reported test excavations were undertaken by Matthew Hill (1987, 1994) at the site of Cassan, a large trading settlement tied to the gold trade prior to the Atlantic Trade that became home to an associated Luso-African village by the close of the 16th century (Almada 1984:47-50; Kimble 1967:88-89; Moore 1738:113; Paris 2001:34).

Fieldwork by Syracuse University and St. Mary's College

Fieldwork undertaken by St. Mary's College, Maryland and Syracuse University has been aimed at investigating the archaeological potential of European sites indentified by Wood on the basis of documentary sources. In 2004, William Roberts of St. Mary's College, Maryland, with the support of the NCAC initiated the archaeological investigation of the African settlement sites of Juffure, Albreda and Sika associated with James Island under the direction of Amy Lawson (Gijanto 2005). These sites were part of the historically known Niimi Kingdom that controlled the Gambia River Trade in the late 17th and 18th century (Wright 2004:85). This project was the outgrowth of Robert's long term, ongoing cultural exchange program with The Gambia initiated in 1996 and his desire to promote an indigenous archaeological program.

As part of the St. Mary's Project, Liza Gijanto's doctoral work has focused on Juffure, Albreda and San Domingo. Test excavations were initiated at San Domingo and Albreda in 2004, and intensive excavations were carried out at Juffure and San Domingo in 2006 (Gijanto 2005, 2007). St. Mary's archaeological field schools were conducted at Juffure, Albreda, and San Domingo in July 2004 and between June and July 2006, while work in 2008 was conducted in the Half Die neighborhood of Banjul (Gijanto 2009a). With support from a Fulbright IIE, Gijanto was able to spend a total of 13 months in The Gambia and complete substantial excavations (Gijanto 2007, 2010). The villages of Juffure and San Domingo investigated by Gijanto formed a significant portion of the former Niimi commercial center. These central settlements such as Juffure, as well as lesser posts like San Domingo, led to the formation of a diverse community supported by and reliant on economic exchange.¹ The village of Juffure served as the major trading depot where merchants from the interior, north, south, and across the Atlantic would meet for trade (Wright 2004:235). Still within the fringes of this center, San Domingo began as a Luso-African trading village and was transformed into a British outpost by the mid-18th century (Moore 1738: 54; National Archives T70/550). Alternatively, Lamin Conco, the final site excavated, was settled by Muslim clerics rather than traders attesting to the community's overall lack of engagement in the Atlantic or inland trade.

At the invitation of the NCAC and United States Peace Corps volunteer Christopher Honeycutt, Gijanto again returned to The Gambia in April-May 2009 to monitor stabilization work on James Island (Gijanto 2009b). In an effort to stabilize the erosion of the island, and to stabilize the fort that had suffered significant damage since 2004, Christopher Honeycutt in partnership with the NCAC secured a United States Ambassadors' Fund Grant that provided the necessary funds to construct a sea wall defense and support archaeological work on James Island. This included mapping, surface collection, and detailed photographic documentation of the visible ruins prior to restoration and stabilization of the main fort building. The documentation and mapping of the late 19th century CFAO warehouse adjacent to the current settlement of Albreda was also completed.

In addition to work at the Juffure, Albreda, San Domingo, and Lamin Conco, Gijanto carried out a preliminary survey of sites along the Gambia River that had been identified by Wood (Figure 1). Two surveys were conducted to identify trading factories and villages associated with the Atlantic Trade along the Gambia River in 2004 and 2006. The sites visited included the two former settlements at Sika, the villages of Tancrowall, Bintang, Berefet, Colar, and Barra, and the abandoned settlement sites of Geregia and Fattatenda.

In July 2008, Christopher R. DeCorse, Liza Gijanto, William Roberts and Barkary Sanyang carried out further archaeological reconnaissance. The sites of James Island, Janjanbureh, Bintang, Fattatenda, Geregia, Geniere, Tendeba, Berefet, Kossemar and Sankulekunda were examined to assess their archaeological potential. Eighteenth and 19th century artifacts were noted at several sites with Geregia possessing the only visible 17th century European imported material. Many areas have been impacted by development and erosion (Figure 2). For example, portions of the historic Atlantic occupation areas of Albreda, Tancrowall, and Bintang are now occupied by fishery buildings, while a tourist camp is under construction at San Domingo. The 18th century settlement of Sika is partially impacted by a series of wells built to support banana cultivation, which since have been abandoned. A portion of the Juffure Factory site tested by Gijanto in 2006 has been reclaimed by the village as a collective farm for cashew and mango trees.

Figure 1: Map showing location of sites.

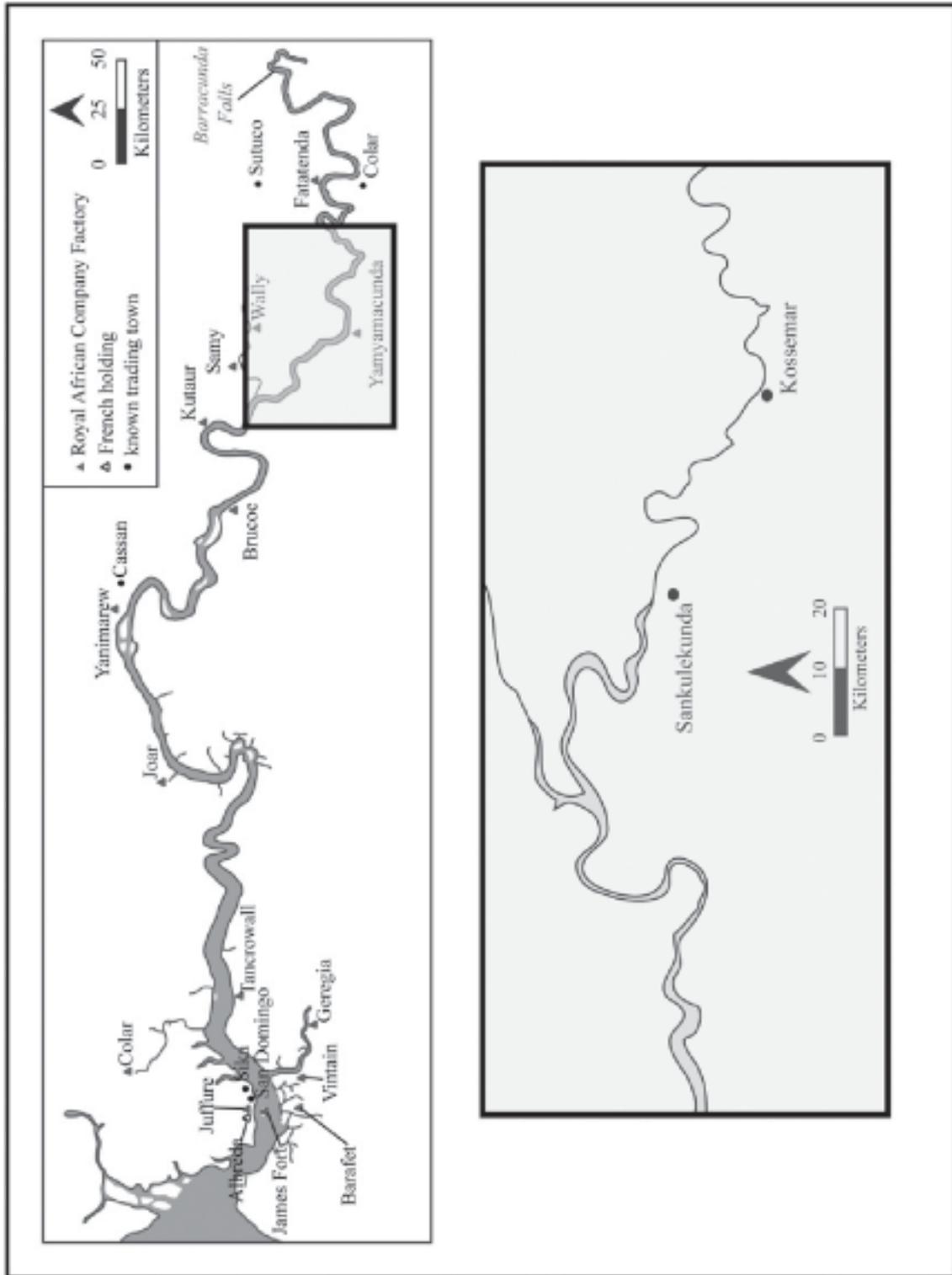


Figure 2: 19th century trash midden eroding into the Gambia River at Fattatenda (photo by L. Gijanto 2008).



Francis Moore at Yamyamacunda

The 2008 field work was principally directed toward locating the probable site of Yamyamacunda. The site, described in detail in Francis Moore's *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* (published in 1738) and discussed by Raymond Wood (1967:59-62), is of particular interest as Moore's report affords one of the most detailed descriptions available of one of the smaller lodges used by European traders in West Africa. These structures were established on many parts of the coast and, indeed, were more common than the larger forts and castles. However, small in size and often insubstantial in their construction, they generally were short lived and subsequently disappeared from the landscape. Consequently, it is the larger European outposts that have received the majority of the attention.

The earliest reference to British trade at Yamyamacunda dates to 1684 (National Archives T70/

546). However, there is no reference to a factory at the site until 1730 (National Archives T70/552; National Archives T70/553). Francis Moore spent three years on the Gambia River as a Royal African Company employee including serving as the factor at Yamyamacunda from late July of 1733 to early January 1734 (Moore 1738:171-181). On Sept 14, 1733 the Gambia River rose so much that the factory house (surrounded by a palisade) had to be abandoned and Moore moved to a hut in the center of Yamyamacunda, which he describes as the "highest spot of ground thereabouts" (Moore 1738:173). Moore was forced to relocate the factory and subsequently oversaw its rebuilding on a new site (Moore 1738:173). It was not until December 21st that Moore was able to rebuild the factory using *forkillas* (wooden posts and beams supporting a mud walled structure (Wood 1967:59)) cut from mangrove trees sent from James Fort (Moore 1738:176-7). This factory was constructed "upon rising ground" about 50

Figure 3: Plan of factory at Yamyamacunda (Moore 1738).

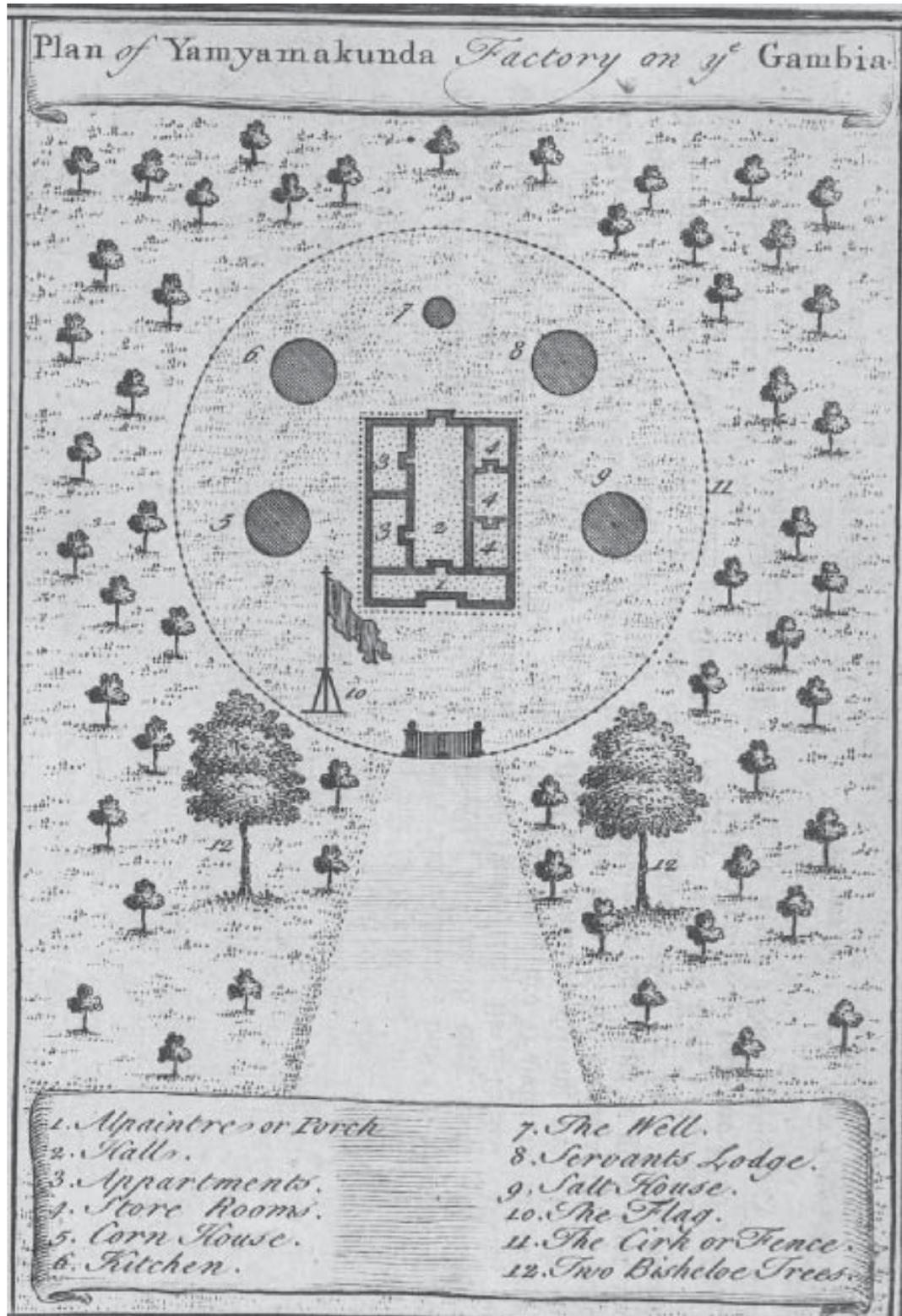


Figure 4: Hill at Sankulekunda (photo by L. Gijanto 2008).



yards from the river (Moore 1738:177). The factory house and four outbuildings were built “after the *Mundingo* fashion” (Moore 1738:180). According to Moore’s description, the frame of the factory house was built of wood with no nails, and the walls of clay. He points out how quickly and efficiently the locals could “...procure the conveniences of Life. Here is a house built with a hall 40 feet by 13, two lodging rooms 20 feet by 13, and 3 strong store houses, without any iron work, trowels, squares, or carpenters rules, and with the smallest expense to the company...” (Moore 1738:179). Wood supports Lawrence’s assertion that Moore’s detailed description, and obvious pride in the rebuilt factory was due to its superior construction (Lawrence 1963:85; Wood 1967:62). However, it was most likely pride in the speed in which he completed this task, and his choice of a more suitable site than his predecessor that Moore was expressing. In contrast to Yamyamacunda,

the visible remains of other Royal African Company factories on the Gambia River (e.g. Juffure, Berfet, Bintang, and Tancrowall) had at least some structures with stone walls or foundations.

In addition to the detailed description of the factory’s construction, Moore provided a plan of the factory house and associated structures within a wooden enclosure (Figure 3). The area enclosed was roughly an acre and housed gardens, livestock, and fowl, suggesting this was fairly level ground. Also from the plan and description he provides, the enclosed area was clear of trees while two large Bisola trees marked the entrance to the factory area. Moore remained at the factory until January 12, 1734 when he was relieved due to illness (Moore 1738:181). His new factory did not survive much beyond his departure: in correspondence dated May 19, 1737, the company shareholders in London expressed their regrets that the factory had burnt down (National Archives

Figure 5: Kossemar village showing the location of archaeological deposits near the riverbank (adapted from Google Earth, January 25, 2010).



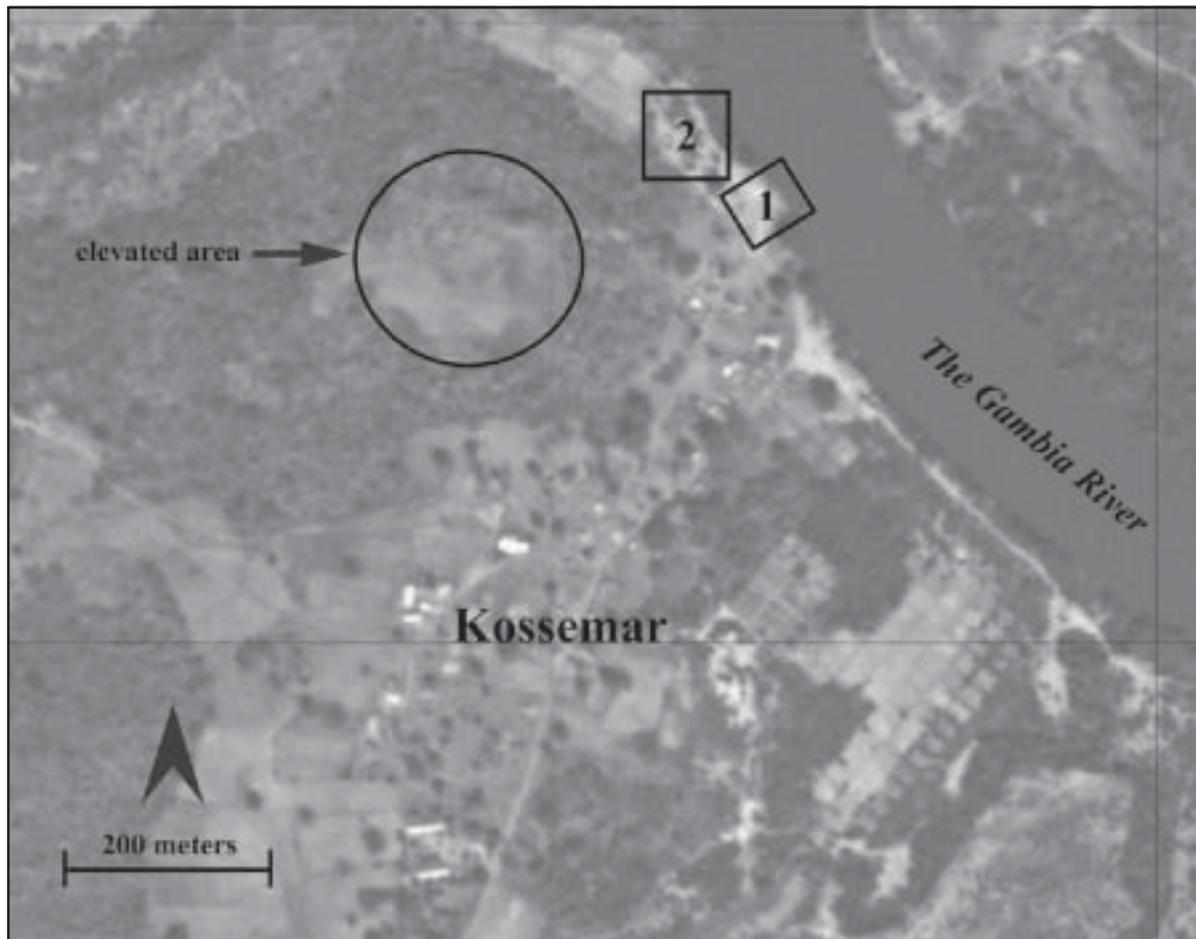
T70/55). Further entries for merchandise, particularly salt, sent to Yamyamacunda appear in the company logs through 1740 (National Archives T70 series).

Wood noted Moore's detailed description of the fort as well as his plan—not available for similar outposts—as justification for a determined effort to locate the site (Wood 1967:62). Documentary sources are, unfortunately, imprecise in the exact location of Yamyamacunda. The village and associated outpost are described as having been on the south bank of the Gambia River in the Tomany Kingdom (Wood 1967:59). Based on this brief description and a survey of topographic maps, Wood suggested that the likely location for the outpost was on a hill “about two miles northeast of Sankulekunda” (Wood 1967:59). In addition, the presence of an oxbow-like lake opposite the marked location of Yamyamacunda on Leach's 1732 map (a modified version included in Moore's journal) Wood argued was further support for his proposed location (1967:59). Although a logical possibility, this assessment was not evaluated until the 2008 fieldwork.

An archaeological field survey was conducted at Sankulekunda in 2008 (Figure 4). After meeting with the town's elders the field crew conducted a surface survey of the hill and adjacent areas to the west of the village. Examination of the hill top and surrounding areas indicates that it is unlikely that Sankulekunda is the site of the Yamyamacunda. Although the hill top does present a level area and commands a view of the river, it is farther away from the river than Moore's account suggests and access to the river would have been somewhat inconvenient. Surface survey revealed no evidence of cultural features. The hill top was largely barren with excellent surface visibility. The surface suggested lack of clearing or leveling for the construction, and no traces of cultural features or artifactual material were noted.

A reassessment of the documentary sources, and comparisons of modern and historic maps, suggested that an area further east, near the village of Kossemar, more closely fits with Moore's description (Figure 1). A low hill lies just west of the village. The river bank adjacent to the village was heavily

Figure 6: Site erosion and landing at Yamyamacunda (Kossemar) (photo by C.R. DeCorse 2008).



eroded offering a gradual slope to the water, affording a convenient landing place (Figure 5). The surface survey revealed an extensive scatter of possible 18th and 19th century trade materials on the hill's slope leading down to the water in two separate locales (Figure 6).

Conclusion

The 2008 field project provided a starting point for a detailed assessment of the Atlantic Trade sites along the Gambia River including the current threat of destruction. Using the map published in Francis Moore's journal and current maps of The Gambia, we determined that the former village and factory of Yamyamacunda was likely located at the present village of Kossemar. It was also possible to determine

the extent of the Geregia site which was only partially surveyed by Gijanto in 2004, the location of which was identified in a similar manner as Yamyamacunda.

In the future, investigations similar to those completed at Juffure and San Domingo will be conducted at as many sites as possible in order to provide a comparative dataset related to the various manifestations of the Atlantic Trade on the river, including local reactions, interaction, and socio-economic change. The site of Yamyamacunda, as well as others further upriver, is of particular interest due to its earlier connection to the interior trade prior to its incorporation into the Atlantic Trade. At this time, excavations at the former British trading factory and associated village of Berefet will be undertaken in the summer of 2010 as part of the St. Mary's College Gambia field program. This work will form the begin-

ning of comparative studies on the Gambia River's Atlantic Trade and is the first site on the south bank to be investigated.

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Footnotes

1 The site of Juffure is notable as the African settlement immortalized in Alex Haley's novel *Roots*.