

SOMALIA

Bulhar: A Colonial Town in Somaliland. Report from the 2017 Excavations

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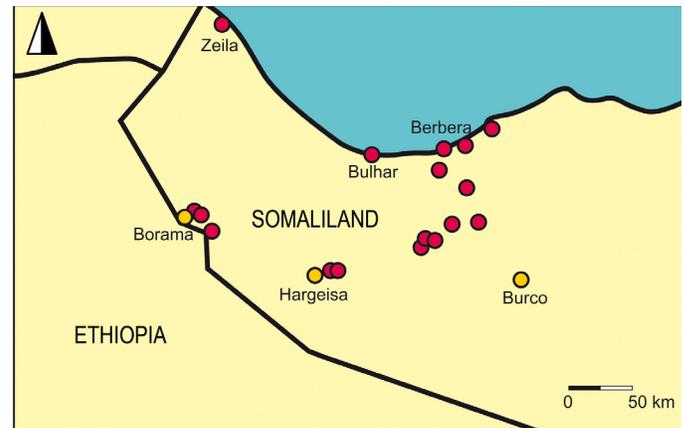


Figure 1: Location of Bulhar and the rest of main archaeological sites surveyed between 2015 and 2017.

cant sample of materials, mostly dated to the Turco-Egyptian and British periods (1870s-1930s), but also several imports dated to the 18th century and a few sherds that could be attributed to the medieval period. Assuming that this older occupation could be detected archaeologically under the present ruins, Bulhar seemed an excellent place to understand the evolution of a town on the Somaliland coast, especially during the obscure period comprised between the collapse of the Sultanate of Adal (late 16th century) and the Egyptian takeover in 1870.

The town of Bulhar

The site of Bulhar lies 50 km to the west of Berbera, occupying a fertile plain at the mouth of the Issutugan River, a strategic wadi which explains the growth of the city despite its vicinity to the major port of Berbera. The ruins cover an extension of about 15 hectares, mostly to the west of the wadi, although some of the most important buildings are scattered along its eastern side. The central area of the town, where a grid layout can be easily perceived, covers around 6 hectares. Many of the buildings are still totally or partially standing, with clear differences between the British concrete-bound buildings and the mortar and coral structures of the Turco-Egyptian and perhaps earlier occupations.

Although Bulhar has been traditionally considered one of the historic coastal towns of Somaliland, little is known of the town before the mid-19th century. The earliest references by foreign travellers are those of Cruttenden (1847) and Burton (1855), who explain the origin of the city by a clash between clans in Berbera. Burton (1894 [1]: 146), however, mentions that the Gada-

Introduction: The Spanish Archaeological Project in Somaliland

Since 2015, the Institute of Heritage Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council (Incipit-CSIC) has been conducting archaeological research in Somaliland to understand the role of the region in the Indian Ocean networks, paying particular attention to local cultural processes. Three field seasons have taken place so far (see Figure 1 and González-Ruibal et al. 2017), which have started to unveil a complex world of interactions between foreign traders, local sedentary communities and nomads.

The coastal town of Bulhar, briefly surveyed in 2016 (González-Ruibal et al. 2017), was selected for the 2017 excavation campaign. The prior survey recorded the most relevant buildings of the city and collected a signifi-



Figure 2: Series of arches in one of the houses of the centre of the city.

bursi clan had occupied Bulhar “300 years ago” (that is, mid-16th century). In 1855, Bulhar was occupied only seasonally (Burton 1894 [2]: 67), but only fifteen years later Bulhar and Berbera were occupied by the Egyptians (Turton 1970: 358) and were described by a German as “the greatest marketplace of the country” (Haggenmacher 1876: 36), a status maintained during the last decade of the 19th century (Nurse 1891: 663; Pankhurst 1965). The most accurate description of the town comes from Ralph E. Drake-Brockman, who visited Bulhar at the beginning of the 20th century and provided information about the origins of the city and the only known photographs preserved so far. According Drake-Brockman (1912: 40), the city was founded just fifty years before (that is, around 1850), coinciding with Burton’s date of 1847 (1894 [1]: 79). The origin of the town was a feud between the Rer Ahmed Nuh and Rer Yunis Nuh subclans, which forced the latter, along with some Arabs, to abandon Berbera and found a new town in Bulhar.

It seems that the new settlement remained a collection of huts until the arrival of the Egyptians in 1870 (Drake-Brockman 1912: 40), who built a lighthouse and several other official buildings, all of them but the lighthouse ruined when Drake-Brockman visited the place. According to Drake-Brockman, the rest of the buildings would have been Arab houses erected after the British occupation (1884). The buildings of the British government were built in the late 1880s or early 1890s (Drake-Brockman 1912: 41). During these decades the town had a troubled existence: it was razed to the ground three times between 1885 and 1892, and went through major epidemics of cholera (1892) and smallpox (1904) (Drake-Brockman 1912: 43). This dramatic story seems to have been recurrent for the town: Burton recorded a massacre in Bulhar in 1847, soon after the settlement of the Rer Yunis Nuh (1894 [2]: 75).



Figure 3: View of the bones scattering of Test Pit 1.

The architecture of the town

The use of a UAV has provided an exhaustive view of the urban layout of the city in those areas not yet collapsed and where the buildings are still identifiable. The centre of the town fits accurately in the description made by Drake-Brockman, with a broad street running east-west and smaller streets running parallel or perpendicular to create a grid pattern (Drake-Brockman 1912: 43). The buildings of this central area, although poorly preserved, give a fair idea of the aspect of Bulhar in the late 19th century. Each block has one or two big houses with a tripartite plan and the façade oriented to the north and the sea. The frontal sections of the big houses have wide coral arches configuring a roofed portico open to the street (Figure 2), probably a semi-public space, whereas the two other sections are closed to provide privacy to the household. This general division is always respected, with slight modifications in the distribution of interior spaces.

Probably the most striking feature is a wall with triangular niches which strongly recalls Swahili buildings.

The main material employed in house construction is coral stone bound with mortar whose brittle nature can explain much of the destruction of the city (Figure 4,4). Wooden planks were used to make window lintels and redistribute wall weight. Buildings have either two storeys or more often one storey with a terrace, plastered and whitewashed. Overall, the external appearance of these houses resembles very closely the architecture found in other cities of the Somaliland coast like Zeila or Berbera, where some examples of open porticos are still visible.

Surrounding the houses neatly organized in a grid pattern, several groups of other buildings can be seen. Some are recent, considering the use of cement and information provided by the oral tradition. In other cases,



Figure 4: Test Pit 2. 1 British low wall; 2 Collapse layer corresponding to the late nineteenth century wall; 3 Late nineteenth century wall; 4 Floor of the courtyard; 5 Older layer of the excavation; 6 Nineteenth century refusal pit.

however, construction techniques and materials are identical to those in the centre of the city and therefore should be considered contemporaneous. Only two buildings were identified with all certainty as belonging to the Egyptian period: the lighthouse to the west of the town, and a fortlet to the east. Some houses, however, were probably built before the British occupation. This is suggested by the existence of several additions and reconstructions, sometimes using different materials, which are obvious in the fabric of several structures.

The archaeological excavation

The archaeological intervention in Bulhar aimed to identify a pre-19th century occupation in the town. The importance of the place in later Somaliland's history, the references by Burton and Cruttenden, the archaeological materials collected during the 2016 survey and the presence of water all year around suggested that the place may include an older occupation. A second objective was to

document the material culture of the 19th century in the region and the characteristics of a little known colonial culture. Finally, the catastrophic state of preservation of many of the buildings made the recording of the standing structures urgent before they disappear. Three test pits were planned, in areas relatively cleared of rubble and sand, as the removal of the huge collapse heaps and dunes was unfeasible given our resources. Two of the test pits were located in a courtyard outside the central area of the town and close to the wadi, while the third one was conducted inside one of the houses at the centre.

Test Pit 1

The first test pit (2 x 2 meters) was placed in the interior of a courtyard defined by three buildings. Two of them show evidence of remodelling in the later British period, but most of the construction features are identical to those of the centre of the city. The stratigraphy in this test pit was simple: 1) below the surface layer, two

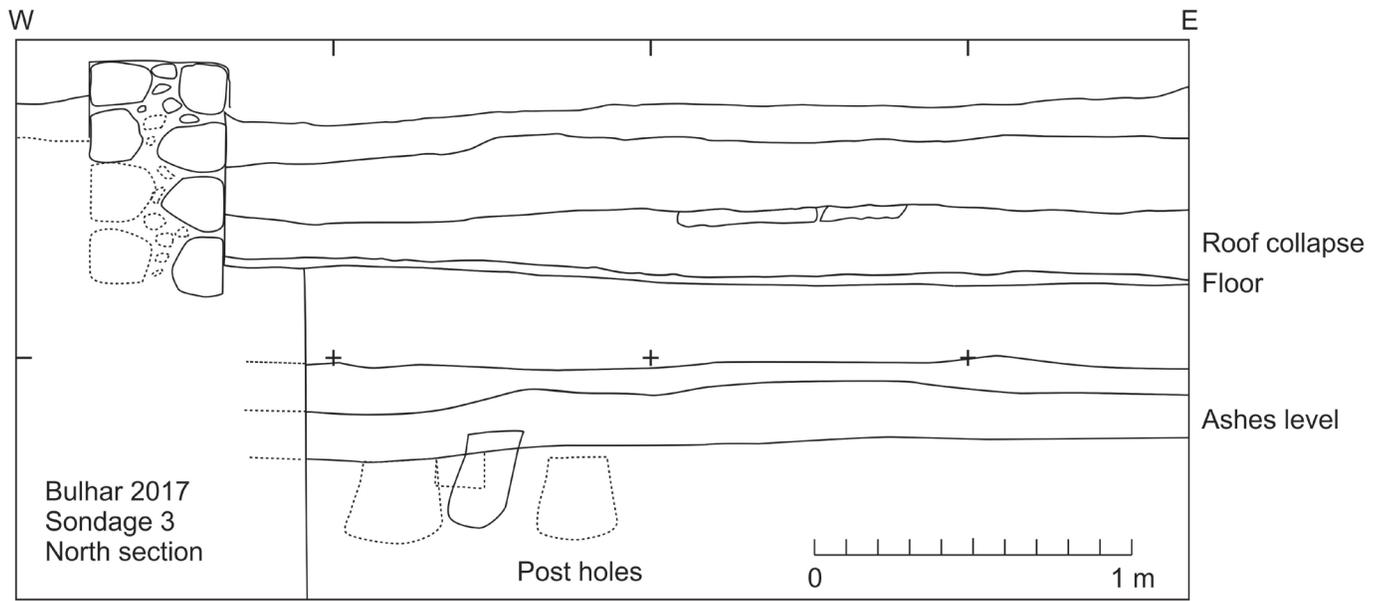


Figure 5: Section of Test Pit 3, where the different occupation periods can be seen.

almost disappeared mortar layers, corresponding to successive courtyard floors that can be related to the existing architecture; 2) below the lower floor two layers of sand, 0.6 meters deep, without archaeological materials.

After the removal of the sand, we found a 10 cm layer, composed of animal bones (Figure 3) concentrated on the west side of the test pit, piled together in successive layers and with evidences of processing. The bones -mostly sheep/goat, followed by cattle- were lying flat over a floor of grey packed sand and sometimes in anatomic connection, thus showing that this was a consumption area used during a brief time (perhaps a single event), rather than a dump. Unfortunately, we have little evidence for the chronology of this level. Pottery was scarce: the excavation of this unit yielded several shapeless, undecorated hand-made sherds and a few small fragments of white wares that may or may not come from the upper layers, as there were several roots in the middle of the test pit. The test excavation indicates that there was an occupation prior to the erection of the stone buildings and the associated floor, although it is difficult to ascertain a date, which might still fall within the 19th century.

Test Pit 2

The second test pit (2.40 x 2.60 meters) was placed in the south-western corner of the same courtyard as Test pit 1, leaning against a north-south wall, which delimited the courtyard. The stratigraphy of this test pit

provided a sequence parallel to that of Test pit 1 (Figure 4), revealing a late British-period occupation (early 20th century) in the form of a low (20 cm) east-west wall built on a major remodelling episode of previous, 19th century buildings (Figure 4, 1). The collapse of these buildings (Figure 4, 2) was levelled to construct the new wall. The late 19th century structures consisted of a wall 0.98 meters high and 0.2 meters wide, built with coral stones bound and coated with mortar (Figure 4, 3). Its foundations were small, protruding just 0.15 m out of the wall, and served as the base for a good-quality mortar pavement extending throughout the courtyard (Figure 4, 4) which probably corresponds to the later floor identified in Test pit 1. The floor was covered with diverse deposits that yielded a significant amount of archaeological materials, including glass, pottery, porcelain, bones and metal. These materials can be dated to the late 19th century, when the courtyard was built. Imported pottery includes abundant sponge ware and painted ware with crescent moons and stars made in Maastricht between the 1890s and 1910s. A piece of Asian ware dated from the mid-18th or early 19th century. Local pottery was abundant, consisting mostly of incense burners with angled handles and decorated with punctuated lines. The wheel-made kitchen ware was mostly plain but some with brown glaze, typical of the 19th-20th century in Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula. Other materials include fragments of glass bottles, monochrome glass bangles and cowries.

Under the floor we found a thick (0.85 m) layer of sand of natural origin. The northern part of the test pit was excavated deeper and a new, anthropogenic level was discovered (Figure 4, 5): a thin grey-black layer full of charcoal fragments and animal bones. To the northwest, this layer was cut by two refuse pits filled with heavily fragmented 19th-century materials which reached a depth of 90 cm (Figure 4, 6). The older anthropogenic layer did not yield diagnostic materials, although the pottery collected was similar to that of the Test pit 1 and probably belongs to the same period.

Test Pit 3

The last test pit (3 x 1.5 meters) was located in the interior of one of the houses in the central area of the city. Below the surface layer a collapsed layer with thick (20 cm) chunks of flat mortar was discovered and identified as part of the upper floor of the house. We located the floor of the house under this collapse, made of good quality mortar and slightly depressed towards the centre of the room. In the middle of the southern side of the test pit we partially recorded an oval, mortar layer of about 47 x 35 cm. This oval layer sealed well-made pit with the upper 25 cm plastered with mortar. The pit, which explains the depression of the floor, was excavated to a depth of about 80 cm before the excavation had to be terminated.

To identify possible older occupations a smaller trench of 1 x 1.5 meters was opened to the west of the test pit, where the floor had mostly disappeared. The removal of the floor and of an underlying layer of sand showed a complex series of alternate, horizontal layers of sand and ashes, usually no more than one centimetre thick. These layers were perforated by three postholes, two of them circular (10 and 12 cm of diameter) and one rectangular (20 x 15 cm) and filled with ashes. They defined a hut, the interior partially exposed in the excavated area, supporting the existence of a stable occupation in Bulhar before the late 19th century. The excavation of the rest of the test pit down to this level recorded several layers of ashes and charcoals, probably corresponding to episodes of generalized destruction, either by violence or accidental fire. This floor yielded a large amount of faunal remains, most of them consisting of very specific parts of sheep/goat—especially ribs. Few other materials were present and were very fragmented, not allowing for precise dating beyond a generic assessment of a 19th century date. Due to time constraints the excavation could not continue. However,



Figure 6: Nineteenth century archaeological materials from Bulhar. Left: Chinese porcelain. Middle: late celadon. Right: glass bangles.

we did excavate a small trench of 20 x 1.5 cm in the middle of the test pit area where a second, deeper series of ash-filled postholes was recorded, possibly evidencing another episode of destruction. It is likely that these layers precede the mid-19th century establishment of the town recorded in the written sources (Figure 5).

Surface survey

The survey of the town yielded numerous imports (Figure 6), including Chinese and Japanese porcelains dated to the 18th and 19th centuries, polychrome glass bangles and a 1878 British India quarter. A base of a late celadon (18th century) embedded in a fragment of lime mortar was also found. All earlier imports appeared in the part of the town closer to the beach.

Conclusion

The excavations in Bulhar have provided a first glimpse into a colonial town in Somaliland, confirming the descriptions made by 19th century travellers regarding its late development. Our excavations have also confirmed that before the construction of the 19th century houses, the site only had structures in perishable materials. The destruction of these huts could be the result of some of the clan conflicts attested in the area during the mid-19th century, but only open area excavations or more test pits, could clarify this question.

The depth of the stratigraphic sequences suggests that the settlement might have had a longer life than previously thought. The episode of meat consumption (Test pit 1), probably related to a feast and the short, repeated occupations seen in Test pit 3 suggest that Bulhar was

visited seasonally by nomads. The older levels, however, have yielded virtually no evidence of their involvement in long-distance trade. The earliest imported materials—Asian market wares from the 18th or early 19th century—have been found either on the surface or in mixed levels near the surface. While the absence of an earlier stone town might seem disappointing, it is coherent with what we know of other trading places along the Somaliland coast, which, unlike what happened in the Swahili area, never develop into stable towns and remained seasonally occupied settlements. This cultural distinctiveness deserves further scrutiny. From a different perspective, archaeological work in Bulhar has raised awareness about the state of preservation of the city, which is collapsing extremely fast considering that all the stone buildings were standing in the 1950s. The exhaustive recording of the remaining ruins, meetings with local authorities and the interest shown in the site by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Somaliland could hopefully evolve into a preservation plan for the ruins.

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