

■ GAMBIA

A View Outside the Center: Preliminary Findings from Berefet, The Gambia

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Introduction

Interest in West Africa's Atlantic past by archaeologists has steadily increased over the last two decades (e.g., Croff 2008; DeCorse 2001a; Horlings 2011; Kelly 1997; Monroe 2010; Ogundiran 2002; Richard 2010; Swanenpoel 2009). A key facet of these studies is the emphasis on the impact of new socio-economic interactions and the resulting material manifestations along the coast (DeCorse 2001b; Gijanto 2010; Norman 2009) as well as in more interior regions (Monroe 2007; Ogundiran 2009; Stahl 2007). Additionally many have focused on major commercial centers (DeCorse 2001b; Kelly 2010); but recently many archaeologists have begun to focus on the impact of the Atlantic trade in the hinterland, and commercial frontiers (Gokee 2011; Norman 2009; Ogundiran 2007; Stahl 2007). As a further contribution to these studies, archaeological investigations were carried out at the former British out factory and associated village of Berefet, the Gambia in 2010.

Archaeological investigations in the Gambia have largely been conducted on the north bank of the Gambia River (Gijanto 2010; Hill 1987; Lawson 2003a). While some of this work has concentrated on pre-Atlantic period sites (Lawson 2001, 2003b), the Atlantic period has become the focus of most archaeological investigations along the river (DeCorse *et al.* 2010; Gijanto 2010; Hill 1987). This project is the first investigation of a south

bank site in a region with direct ties to the southern rivers network including the Casamance (Curtin 1975: 97, 107). This paper presents a description of preliminary archaeological work completed to date at Berefet and the initial findings from artifact analysis with particular attention given to the locally produced earthenware ceramics. A secondary aim of this early fieldwork was to collect a comparative local ceramic dataset from sites excavated in Niimi.

The Gambia River and Atlantic Interactions

The polities along the Gambia River and in the broader Senegambian region were amongst the first incorporated into the emerging Atlantic world in the mid-15th century (Crone 1937). By the early 17th century the former kingdom of Niimi emerged as the prime trading partner with the British and French on the Gambia River due to its strategic position controlling the river's entrance (see Gijanto 2010). Archaeological investigations in Niimi have concentrated on the central trading village of Juffure, the Luso-African and later Royal African Company filling station at San Domingo, and the outlying village of Lamin Conco (Gijanto 2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Limited investigations including preservation efforts have been carried out at James Island in conjunction with the Gambian National Center for Arts and Culture (Bugarin 2007; Gijanto 2009). Excavations within the former commercial center have unearthed a substantial material assemblage demonstrative of the impact of involvement in commerce on the local communities, particularly the transformation of European goods into local expressions of wealth and status (Gijanto 2011b). What was less clear, however, was the local experience of the Atlantic trade in lesser outposts settled outside of the commercial center. Additionally, the Niimi center fell into rapid decline following the official movement of British military and commercial operations to the new colonial capital of Bathurst on the south bank (Lupton 1979: 46; NA CO 714/56; GNA CSO1/1). With the settlement of Bathurst, direct commercial exchange was removed from the north bank and repositioned in the south. Amongst the new ports supported by the British was Berefet that became the capital of the Foni district. At

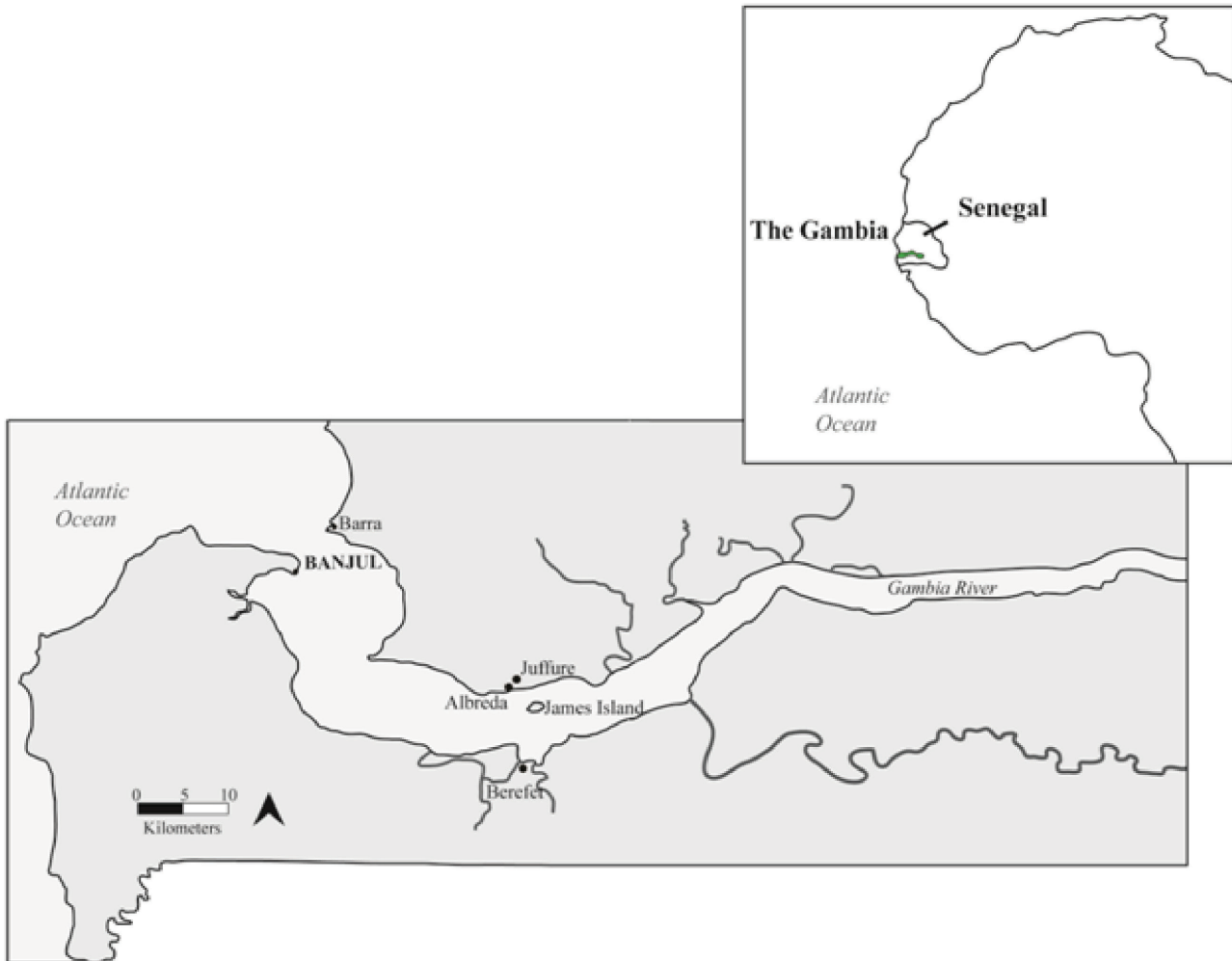


Figure 1: Map of The Gambia River showing Berefet in relation to sites in the Niumi commercial center (by Gijanto).

this point it is unclear what the socio-economic impact was at the former Atlantic trading posts that remained involved in commerce during the colonial period, and how this situation differed from their Atlantic experience. Berefet, located on the south bank opposite Juffure and the British fort on James Island, provides an opportunity to investigate this transition. Not only did it serve as a British out factory while James Fort was maintained, but it also became a key trading port during the colonial era.

Berefet. The village of Berefet lies within the former Foni polity. Foni is located on the Gambia River’s south bank, directly opposite Niumi, though not possessing coastal territory (Figure 1). The available oral sources suggest that Berefet is an old village. According to informants, its occupation spans 800 years and four locations

including the current village site just off the south bank road (Figure 2). The Jarjus are generally acknowledged to be the founding family (Kolli personal communication). The first settlement is said to be on an island just offshore that is overgrown and inaccessible today. Sometime before the arrival of the Portuguese on the river in the mid-15th century, the settlement site under investigation as part of this study was established by the Jarjus and Mannehs (Sanyang personal communication). The earliest known reference to Berefet is from the Luso-African merchant Donelha’s general account of commerce on the Gambia River. In 1625, Donelha described the village’s location as a couple leagues up the river from the coast with its own harbor where traders would anchor (Donelha 1977: 141). Berefet continued to serve as key trading point on the river’s southern bank with a British out

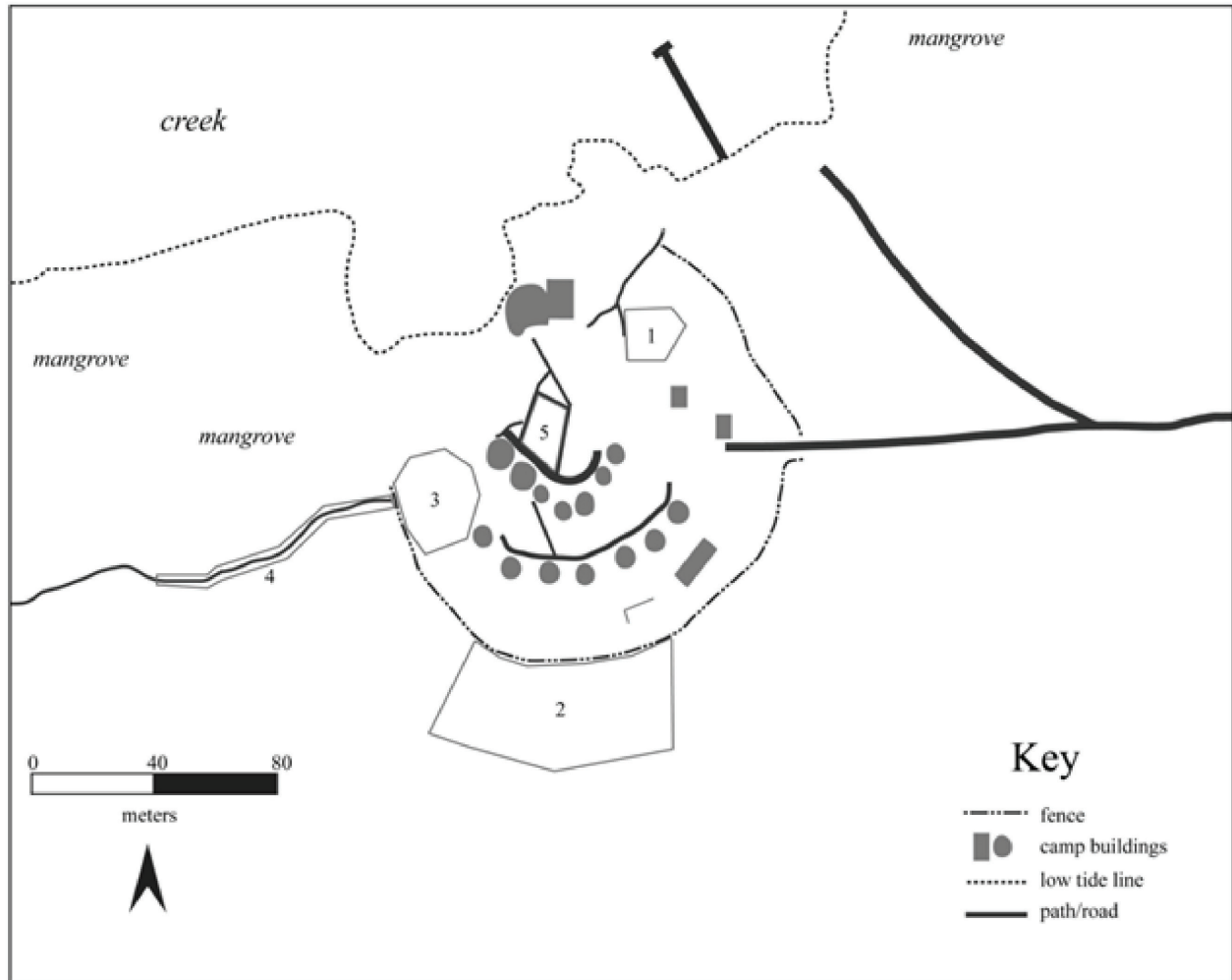


Figure 2: Map of Berefet archaeological investigation loci (1-4) and current ecotourist camp (by Gijanto).

factory established in 1664 (NA T70/827). Though the factory is listed in Royal African Company logs into the late 1660s (NA T70/545; NA T70/829), its initial settlement appears to have been short lived. A company correspondence from June 1691, suggests that a successful attempt to resettle the factory was made; the correspondence states that several persons associated with the company were "... to reside at *Barrafett* which is the nearest place of security near the island and which upon occasion or alarm from the island they are all ready to comeover...for the defense of the castle and the country is unknown ... for want of white men living there" (NA T70/17). Future entries in the company log books reveal that a factory did continue at Berefet well into the 1720s (NA T70/551) and was plundered by the French in 1724 as part of a campaign against British holdings on the river (NA

T70/7). The factory, however, was reestablished once again by 1728 and remained until the 1740s (NA T70/551). Similar to Juffure, slaves were often sent from James Island to Berefet to be cured (NA T70/554). At this time, it is not known when the factory was dissolved, though the Royal African Company was dismantled in 1750 (Gailey 1965: 30).

In the mid to late 1860s as part of the Marabout wars (Archer 1967: 66-77; Curtin 1975: 58; Quinn 1972: 133), the final founding family arrived and subdued the village. The Sanyangs took control of, and remain the current holders of, the *alkaloship* (Kolli personal communication). At this time the village moved from the Atlantic period settlement to the third site away from the river bank (Figure 3). The final movement of the village to its current location occurred in the 1950s as part of colonial sanitation efforts (Kolli personal communication).



Figure 3: Known locations of Berefet: 1) Atlantic era site; 2) mid-19th century to 1950 site; and 3) current settlement (adapted from Google Earth October 2, 2011).

Archaeological Investigations at Berefet

In June 2004 an initial survey of Berefet was conducted and the two former mainland locales identified (Gijanto 2005). Currently, the site is occupied by a cooperative eco-tourism camp, which is managed by the residents of Berefet (Figure 4a and b). In partnership with the Gambian National Centre for Arts and Culture (NCAC) preliminary archaeological investigations at the second village site were begun. Between late May and mid-July 2010, five loci were targeted for investigation. The methods employed included a combination of surface collection, shovel testing, and excavation units. The aim of these initial endeavors was to determine the period of occupation for the site, the location of the village associated with the British out factory, and the site’s physical size.

Locus 1 is comprised of an exposed oyster shell midden spread along a slight gradient and overlying the ruins of the former British trading factory and within the bounds of the current tourist

camp (see Figure 2 and Figure 5). Dates garnered from European trade items reveal the deposit was formed during the early 19th century and continued to accumulate into the mid-19th century. It overlies the ruins of the former factory providing an abandonment, and possible destruction date, of the structure before the early 19th century. Locus 2 is located outside the tourist camp directly to the south. The area was cleared using machetes and controlled fire before surface collection and shovel testing was carried out. The deposits identified during preliminary investigations indicate that this area was part of the 18th century village of Berefet. A second area tested that contained 18th century deposits was Locus 3. The two units and limited surface collection revealed both 18th and 19th century deposits. Currently, dates for Locus 4 and 5 cannot be ascertained. Surface collection in Locus 4 targeted an eroding deposit located to the west of the camp, while excavations in Locus 5 were carried out in order to test the former cemetery area located during the camp’s construction. At this time, only one burial has been found.



Figures 4a and 4b: Excavation areas within the boundaries of the ecotourist camp at Berefet (Photos by Gijanto).



Figure 5: Locus 1 deposit excavations (taken from east) and the ruins of a former factory building (Photo by Gijanto).



Figure 6: Surface collection in Locus 4 (Photo by Gijanto).

Surface Collection. Surface collections targeted deposits in Loci 2, 3, and 4 (see Figure 2). Significant exposed deposits of local ceramics and imported items, such as bottle glass and gunflints, were present in these locales. By far, the most numerous artifact class recovered was locally produced earthenware ceramics. Surface collections in Locus 2 and 3 were divided into twenty-five 5m x 5m squares. All artifacts were mapped by hand prior to collection. Locus 4 was particularly targeted due to erosion tied to the rainy season (Figure 6). This area follows the footpath along the mangrove heading west from the current ecotourist camp. A 70m area tied to the footpath was collected in 10m continuous increments. The start and finish of each was recording using a handheld GPS. All material collected were displaced by the rain and soil erosion.

Shovel Tests. Shovel testing was restricted to Locus 2 and targeted the portion of the site where the densest surface deposits were encountered as well as probable 18th century artifacts. A total of 16 shovel tests were excavated and all contained artifacts. Of the nine locally produced tobacco pipe fragments recovered during the 2010 field season, three came from shovel tests. A number of 18th century middens were located based on the presence of European glass and ceramics that will be tested further during the upcoming 2012 field season.

Excavation Units. Excavation units were dug in Loci 1, 3, and 5. A total of 11 units were completed. Six were in locus 1, two in Locus 3, and three in Locus 5. As stated above, the targeted deposit in Locus 1 was an exposed shell midden partially eroding and overlying the ruins of a former

factory building. Those in Locus 3 were stopped around 1 to 1.3m in depth due to unstable walls. These two were placed in different portions of an exposed deposit identified by a high concentration of glass and locally produced ceramics on the surface. The deposit is an elevated area located along a small stream attached to the river. It was over 90% oyster shell with a range of faunal, ceramic, and trade materials including gunflints, glass and beads. A small cache of carved fish spines and a number of pierced oyster shells were also recovered. Those units in Locus 5 contained a limited amount of material as expected from a cemetery. However, the locally produced ceramics recovered are unlike those present in other areas of the site. As previously mentioned, only one burial was uncovered late in the last day of the project.

Preliminary Findings and Artifact Analysis

Artifact analysis is ongoing, though some trends are readily apparent. The majority of the deposits excavated are characterized as oyster shell midden. The two deposits tested in Locus 1 and 3 contained 90% oyster shell with locally produced ceramics forming the next largest artifact class. Conversely, European trade imports were not present in large numbers. The total artifact assemblage includes shell, locally produced ceramic, faunal remains, trade beads, bottle glass, various metals, nails, as well as European ceramics, cowries, and tobacco pipes (locally produced and European) forming a significantly smaller portion of the collection. Of this, glass, beads, gunflints, and metal items were the most numerous. Despite the presence of these items in excavated and surface deposits, the majority was not diagnostic beyond providing relative dates to either the 18th or mid- and late 19th centuries. Analysis has concentrated primarily on the locally produced ceramics.

Local Ceramics. Analysis of the Berefet ceramic collection is still preliminary, yet several trends have been identified. Analysis was conducted following the procedures developed by Gijanto (2010: 553-572) for the Niumi collection, and largely overseen by Platt. Sherds were analyzed for specific attributes and types. A total of 17 attributes were recorded for each sherd. At this time roughly

364 body and 20 rim sherds have been analyzed. This represents one-third of the overall collection from all loci, though the majority of those examined are from datable deposits (excavation units in loci 1 and 3). The examination of the collection was guided by two goals. First, analysis was done using the typology developed from the Niumi collection in order to determine if any types from Niumi were present. And second, to determine ceramic changes on the south bank. Analysis of the Niumi collection revealed that the use of specific tempering agents changed throughout the course of the Atlantic trade from predominantly sand and organic tempers, to crushed oyster shell, and then to grog (Gijanto 2011a, 2011c). Of interest here is whether similar manufacturing choices related to temper, decoration and slip at Niumi were made by contemporary potters at Berefet.

Overall, the collection exhibited a predominance of buff, light orange/red, and light brown wares, grog tempers, and reduced firing patterns. However the most apparent trend in the preliminary analysis of the ceramics excavated at Berefet is the overwhelming majority of those associated with group 24, a type designation present in the Niumi ceramics. In the Niumi collection group 24, ceramics are generally associated with later contexts during the decline of the Atlantic trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Gijanto 2011a: 39). Examples in the Niumi collection were most commonly found at the Juffure village and factory sites (Gijanto 2011a: 39). The ware group is characterized by refined ceramics with pale paste colors, the use of grog tempers and predominance of interior and exterior slips almost all of orange/red color (Gijanto 2011a: 39). Organic tempering agents are almost entirely absent (Gijanto 2011a: 39).

Of the presently analyzed body sherds, 160 fall within the parameters of types comprising Group 24. A number of variations upon the basic attributes of Group 24 have tentatively been identified in the form of seven new type designations. A notable departure from the Niumi ceramics is the presence of laterite used as a tempering agent in conjunction with grog. Otherwise the new types predominantly represent slight variations in firing and color, though still following the trends of refined ceramics with pale pastes, grog tempers,

and red to orange/red interior and exterior slips.

The two ware-groups most represented in the collection thus far besides Group 24, were Group 25 and Group 19 with each comprising 9% of the total analyzed sherds. Group 25 is characterized by grog, or a mix of grog and quartz sand tempers, gray, buff, brown, and light red paste colors, as well as oxidized and irregularly oxidized firing patterns. Six new types were identified based on variation in manufacture (primarily firing) that fell within the parameters of Group 25. The ware type-designation known as Group 19, share the same exterior aesthetic qualities with variation present in the profile. Group 19 is represented by light browns to reddish grays in color and reduced firing patterns; however temper is dependent upon type with both shell and grog exhibited. Within the Berefet ceramics, the majority of Group 19 ceramics have grog temper. Only one new type was developed for Group 19 for a variation in tempering combination.

Conclusions

Investigations at Berefet are in the preliminary stages with excavations continuing through the summer of 2012. The aim of this research project is to provide a comparative dataset of the Atlantic experience for Gambia River communities; in particular, those living within and outside of the commercial center. Secondly, the ceramic assemblage at Berefet has brought about new questions regarding the development of this industry along the river. The similarity between those wares present throughout Berefet in 18th and 19th century deposits, but only within 19th century assemblages at Juffure, San Domingo, and Lamin Conco (Gijanto 2011a: 38-39), suggest two possibilities that need to be explored further. Currently, there are two distinct ceramic traditions along the river, one in the north bank province of Wuuli, and the other in Foni where Berefet is located. Moreover, these wares were also found in 19th century deposits in Banjul. The assemblages from Niumi and Berefet suggest this may have developed as soon as the early 19th century whereby ceramics produced on the south bank were sold or traded to communities on the north bank. The other possibility is that potters consciously choose to streamline ceramics

to meet shrinking consumer demand as metal containers became more readily available during the colonial period on the river. At this juncture, it is not possible to determine which occurred without further investigation including sourcing.

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