

Towns in a sea of nomads: territory and trade in Central Somaliland during the Medieval period

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1. Introduction

In 1518 CE, a Portuguese fleet commanded by Antonio de Saldanha attacked and destroyed the coastal village of Berbera, in current central Somaliland. Although the Portuguese had some intelligence about the settlement and they knew that it was involved in intense trade with Persia and Arabia, when they arrived, they found it completely empty of people and goods. After resupplying, the fleet left for the Arabian coast. This brief reference included in the *Description of Africa* by Luis del Mármol Carvajal (1599) could be just one reference of the many raids that the Portuguese conducted along the Red Sea coasts in their struggle – ultimately unsuccessful – to control of the region. As we will see, this attack was one of the first of a series of episodes that provoked the demise of a dynamic and successful trade system that had connected the Horn of Africa with the rest of the world for centuries. The study of this trade system will be the focus of this paper.

The paper approaches the organization of trade in central Somaliland (Figure 1) from a dual perspective. On the one hand, it looks at the role that trade played organizing the territory. On the other hand, it explores the interactions between the local communities and the other actors participating in this activity. Between the 11th and the 16th centuries, the Somaliland region went through some deep transformations which included the arrival and expansion of Islam, a surge in the international trade, the emergence and consolidation of a network of permanent settlements inland and the increasing influence of Muslim states in the region. The result of these historical processes was the progressive modification of the social, cultural and economic fabric of the local groups that inhabited central Somaliland. From a relatively simple structure based on seasonal interactions along the coast between the nomadic groups and foreign traders, the trade system grew in complexity with the emergence of permanent settlements along the main trade routes, and the increasing influence among these activities of the Muslim sultanates of Ifat (1285-1415) and Adal (1415-1577). The spread of Islam inland from the 13th century onwards had also an impact upon the organization of the nomadic communities, as it can be attested from the disappearance or resignification of pre-Islamic meeting places which previously had helped in structuring the territory.

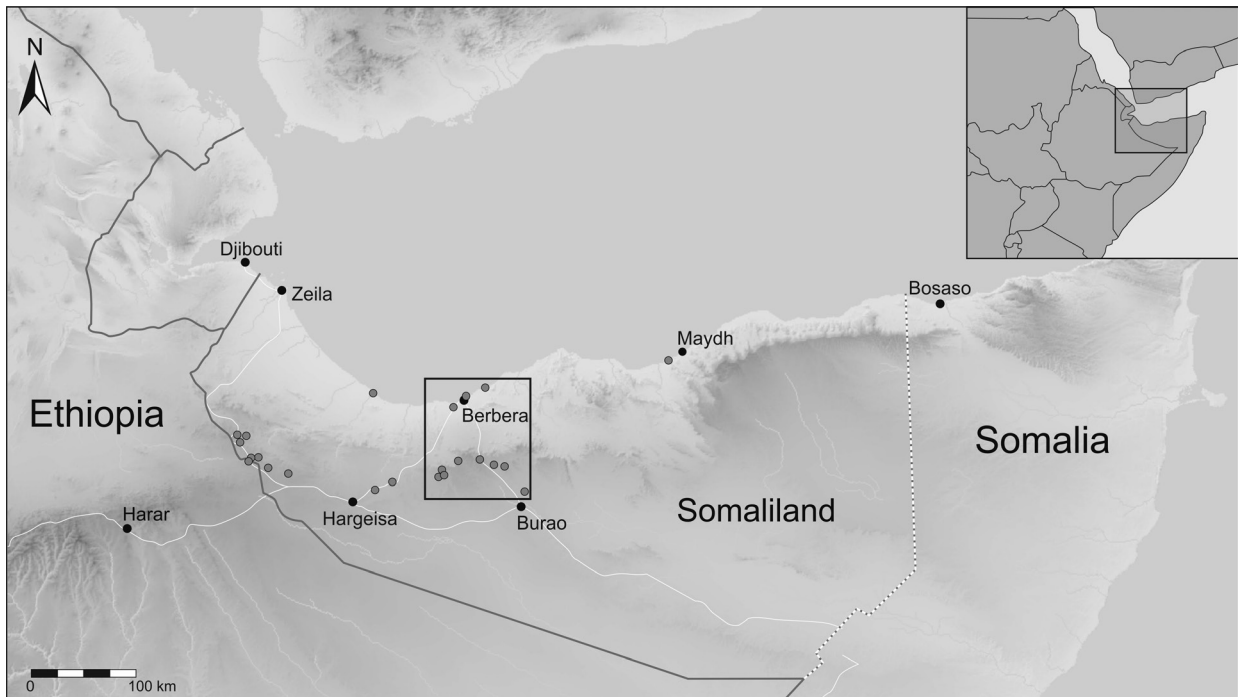


Figure 1. Map of Somaliland showing the area of study and the sites documented by the Spanish Archaeological project.

The paper presents data from eleven archaeological sites studied between 2015 and 2020. It examines the material evidence of the different communities that inhabited the region, as well as the archaeological record of their interactions and the changes they went through during the medieval period. The paper explores the ways these communities reacted and adapted to the expansion of trade, and how their interaction with the territory was affected by these changes. A major hypothesis of the study is that – somehow paradoxically – trade was at the same time a factor of change and the activity that helped to stabilize the region during a period of increasing complexity.

2. Trade in the Medieval Horn: the case of Central Somaliland

The integration of the Horn of Africa in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade networks during the medieval period has long been discussed in the historical literature (Pankhurst 1961). Yet, the materiality of this trade has only very recently begun to be studied (González-Ruibal et al. 2017; González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018; González-Ruibal et al. 2021). Contemporary European and Arab writers such as Thomas Pires (1944: 11) or Al-Idrisi (1866: 30-31) refer to different types of products being traded in the area and identify the town of Zeila as the main regional trade hub. Besides Zeila, only two other coastal settlements, Berbera and Mette (current Maydh), are cited in the Portuguese accounts (Barbosa 1865:

15). Besides these scant references, there is no precise information about the conditions under which trade was conducted, or about the organisation of trade beyond the shoreline and further inland. Such a lack of information is understandable in the case of Portuguese texts, as their interaction with the region was limited to occasional raids or resupply stops, but it is harder to understand in the case of the Arab writers who must have enjoyed a better access to the interior, and who described in detail the trade mechanisms in other areas of the Horn of Africa coast such as Mogadishu (Abderahman 1977: 152).

The geographical and climatic conditions that characterize the Horn of Africa are fundamental to understand the social and economic dynamics of Somaliland. The region is directly affected by the monsoon regime, which regulates both the seasonal movements of the nomads and the navigation in the Red Sea (Figure 2). The main rainy season starts in April, with rain falling mostly in the mountains and the interior plains (the Haud) and the nomad groups moving south to take advantage of the pastures there. During the summer the Guban or semi-desert coastal plain of Somaliland remains almost empty, suffering from very high temperatures and strong winds that render sailing difficult and make life very uncomfortable. As the grazing areas to the south get progressively dry and water becomes scarcer, the nomads begin their return to the north, putting pressure on those groups that had occupied the mountains. By September-October, most of the groups have returned to their original

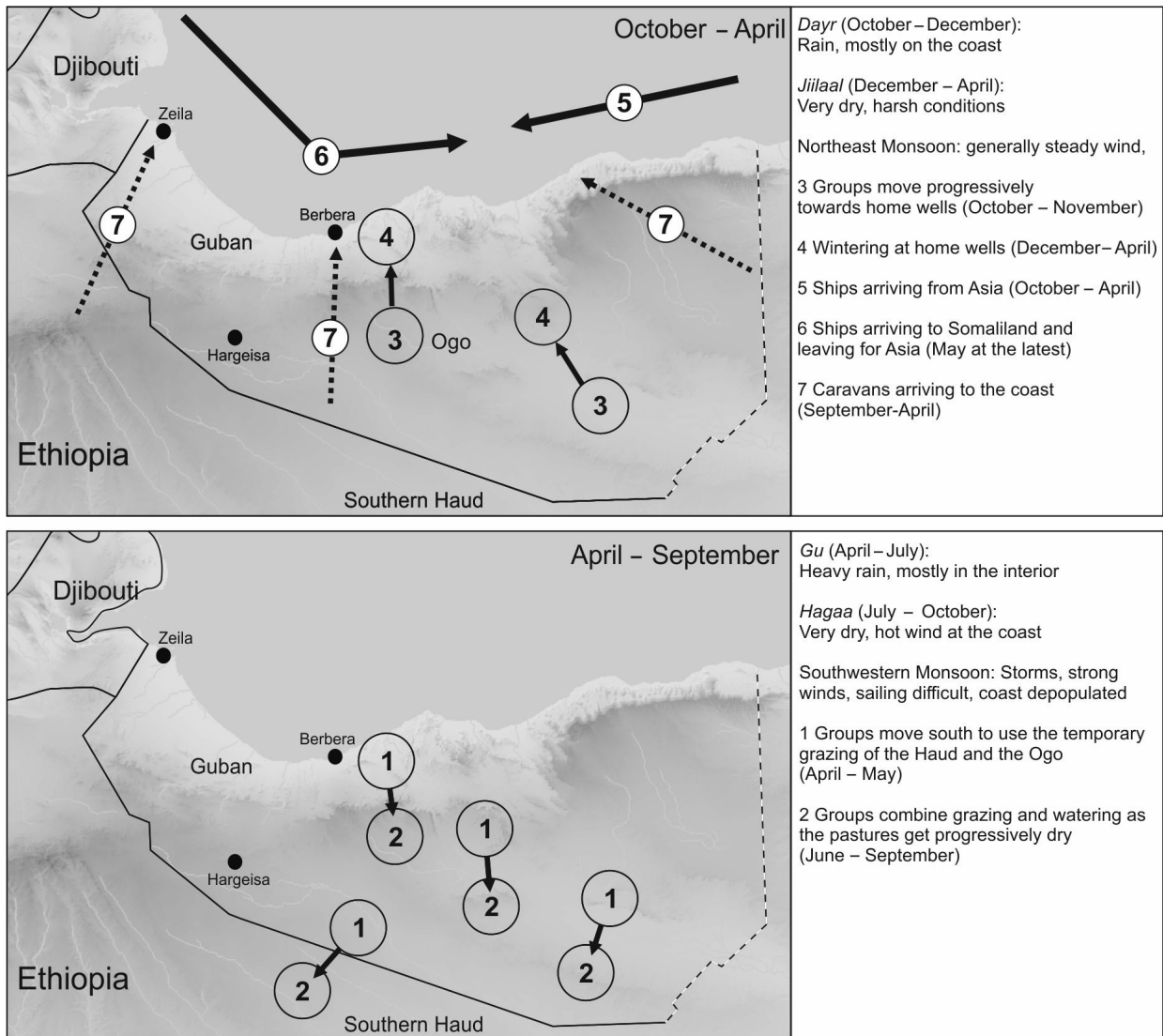


Figure 2. Seasonal movements of nomads and ships according to the monsoon regime.

territories and the coast is again populated around those few wells that have permanent water. During this season the winds change and the northeast monsoon allows an easy access to the coast.

This confluence of easier navigation and population concentrated in the coastal settlements has historically framed the trading season in Somaliland between October and April (Hornby 1907: 87). This situation has traditionally led to significant population shifts in the coastal trade hubs depending on the season, as described by early travelers like Burton (1894) or Cruttenden (1849); and such shifts may explain why a town like Berbera was completely empty during the Portuguese attack in 1518.

Thus, far from being just an economic activity, commerce in Somaliland was directly related to the management of the territory, through the integration

of commercial routes with the seasonal movements of the nomadic communities. Both activities were closely interrelated and often overlapped, and in many aspects, they contributed to structure the territory, combining the most efficient routes with the most reliable wells, pre-established coastal trading points and traditional nomadic meeting sites. Trading meetings were more than just spaces for economical exchanges: they acted as places for social and political interactions, and in many aspects helped to organize the temporality and spatiality of nomadic communities through their recurrence (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018). This pattern seems to have existed at least from the first centuries CE, as it has been recently documented during the excavations at the site of Xiis (Fernández et al. in press). However, in the medieval and early modern periods the previous model,

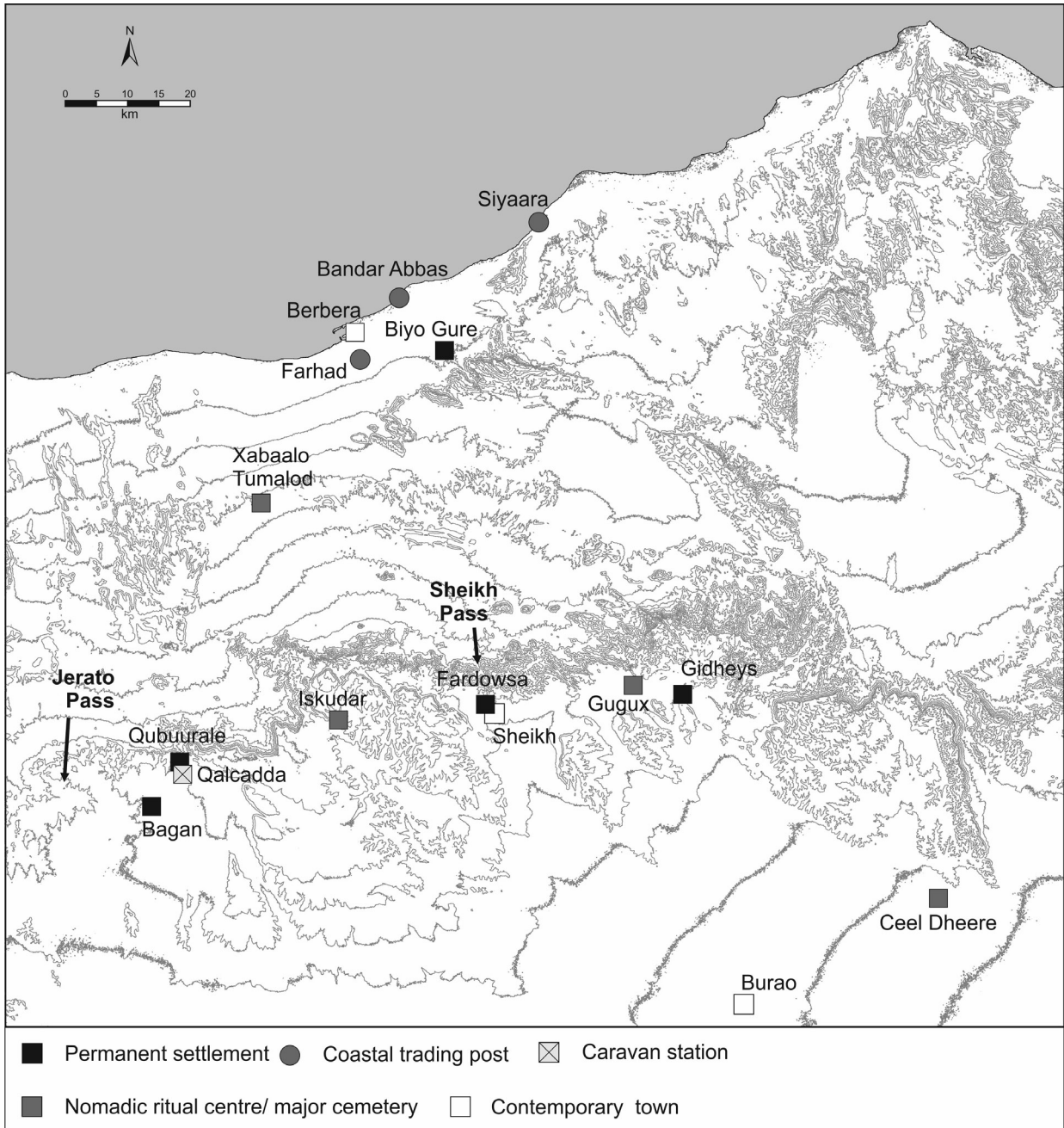


Figure 3. Medieval archaeological sites of central Somaliland.

based on direct exchanges between nomads and foreign traders, grew in complexity with the emergence of a network of permanent settlements throughout the region, some of them having developed into proper trading towns, and the increasing presence of states which vied for the control of the lucrative trade routes.

This increasing complexity has been particularly well-recorded for central Somaliland. Since 2015 and with the help of archaeological research, many of the different agents involved in trade activities have been identified

and a significant number of sites has been located. The current case study (Figure 3) focuses on the region around the axis defined by the towns of Berbera and Burao, with the village of Sheikh situated approximately in the middle. This territory covers the three main geographical regions of Somaliland (The Guban or desert-plain-coast, the Ogo mountains, and the Haud plains), and it includes two of the main mountain passes of central Somaliland (Jerato to the west and Sheikh to the east). The selection of such a large area allows to analyze the impact of both seasonal

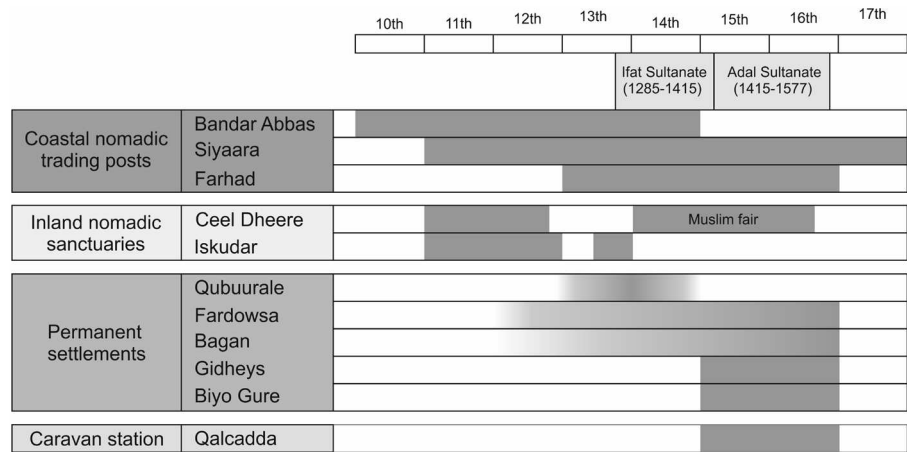


Figure 4. Chronologies of the medieval sites of central Somaliland.

movements and trade exchanges in different contexts, from the coastal trading hubs to the grazing plains to the south.

The region has been relatively well-surveyed in the last years, and as a result thirteen medieval sites have been documented with some detail and eleven of them have been dated with some accuracy (Figure 4). The area was briefly visited in 2015 and it was more extensively surveyed in 2016, when a group of sites were documented following the escarpment of the Ogo Mountains from the Jerato to the Sheikh passes (González-Ruibal et al. 2017). In the same year, several test pits were excavated at the sites of Qalcadda, Quuburale, Iskudar and Fardowsa. In 2017, the important sites of Siyaara and Farhad were documented (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018), and in 2020, a full excavation campaign was conducted in Fardowsa, near Sheikh (de Torres et al. 2020), combined with surveys in the coastal region around Berbera and short visits to the Burao area. These campaigns have been complemented with remote sensing surveys, which have so far identified 1904 cairns, clusters of cairns, and other structures throughout the region. Although far from comprehensive, this data makes the present case study the best-recorded region in Somaliland from an archaeological perspective. Moreover, the variety and importance of the documented sites allows to elaborate a first overview of the territorial dynamics that took place in the region during the medieval period.

The archaeological information compensates to some extent the silence of the historical record, which for the region under study is almost non-existent. The Portuguese chroniclers mention Berbera relatively often (de Barros 1777: 279, 298) and the Spaniard Luis de Mármol Carvajal (1599: 50) lists several towns in the interior, none of which have been identified archaeologically. Arab sources are even more elusive, since there has not been found yet a single text referring to this region. Therefore, the historical knowledge about this region is very scant. Thus, for instance, it cannot be established conclusively whether the region was populated uniquely by Somali

populations, by other ethnic groups or tribes, or by both of them at the same time. We do not know either whether the region was controlled by the medieval sultanates of Ifat and Adal, which ruled over most of southern Ethiopia and western Somaliland between the 13th and 16th centuries. However, there are some hints indicating that this region was under the influence, if not the control, of these states at least during the period of dominion of the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1577 CE): the targeting of Berbera as a military objective by the Portuguese, the existence of a network of permanent settlements, or the fact that the references to the 'land of the Somali' place it further away, in the region of Maydh, some 200 km to the east (Faqih 2003: 27-28).

There is a similar lack of information regarding the process by which the nomads inhabiting Somaliland became islamized, especially for the central and easternmost regions. Recent research would suggest that the consolidation of Islam in the Horn of Africa was a much longer process than it is generally assumed, and that this process occurred along a primary route that run north-southwards, from the Dahlak Islands (Eritrea) to Shoa (Ethiopia), following the escarpment of the Ethiopian Highlands (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011b: 39-40). Only in the 14th century did Islam progress into western Somaliland through the routes that connected the important cities of Zeila and Harar (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011b: 42). Further to the east, Islam seems to have been restricted to the coastal areas, although locals were considered only thinly islamized by the travellers who visited the region (Abderahman 1977: 118-120). From the 12th century onwards, there is evidence of proselytizing activities by Muslim missionaries in the coast of Somaliland. Some of these missionaries, such as Sheikh Ishaq ibn Ahmed and Sharif Yusuf Aw Barkhadle, will later become the great figures of the Somali Islam, and their resting places evolved into important pilgrimage centres up to the present (Abderahman 1977: 120-125).

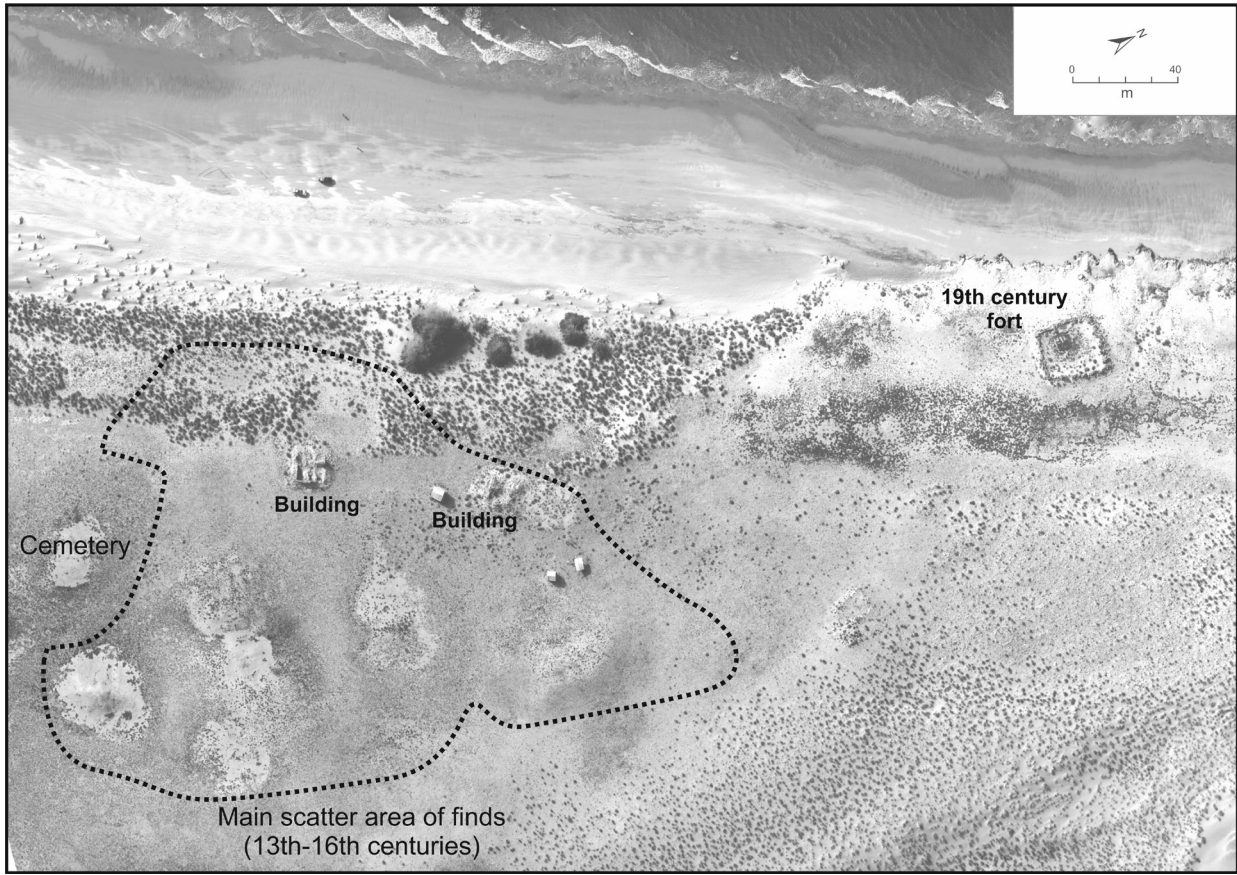


Figure 5. Orthophoto of the central area of Siyaara.

3. The archaeological evidence

3.1. Places for meeting: the nomadic archaeology of Somaliland

In a previous article (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018) we argued that the nomadic landscape in Somaliland was structured around nodes of contact in the form of gathering places where social, economic and political activities took place recurrently. This repeated activities in a permanent place helped to provide a spatial, temporal and social framework for the pastoral communities that moved throughout the territory. We called these nodes of contact interfaces and made a distinction between those that articulated relations between communities with the same cultural background (internal), and those that regulated interactions between nomads and other groups with different cultural parameters – interfaces of exteriority (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 24-25). These two types of interfaces have cultural but also natural expressions, being placed in liminal areas such as coasts or mountain passes that favor connections. The types of interactions conducted around them were manifold and often overlapped, merging economic, social and religious activities.

The most obvious interfaces of exteriority in the region were the coastal fairs where exchanges took place during the trading season. Activities in these sites represented a recurrent episode in the life of the nomads who met seasonally with foreign traders on agreed upon places, often over centuries. Two of these medieval coastal sites (Siyaara and Farhad) have been documented in the region, in places with poor harbouring qualities but with availability of water. A third coastal site – Bandar Abbas – seems to have combined a trading with a religious purpose.

Of the coastal sites identified in the region of Berbera, Siyaara is the one with a longest history spanning from the 11th to the 19th centuries. Documented in 2017 (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018) and visited again in 2020, the site (Figure 5) is located around 30 km east of Berbera, covering an area of around 8 ha and occupying a long, sandy plain next to the beach. The ground of Siyaara is densely covered by large concentrations of imported objects such as glass, pottery, stone and organic materials (charcoals, bones and ashes). However, there are few structures on the site: two square stone buildings, a score of cairns and several Muslim cemeteries with thousands of tombs. A detailed study of the concentrations and chronologies of



Figure 6. Imported materials from Siyaara. 1 and 2: Blue and White porcelain (16th century). 3: Sgraffiato (12th-13th centuries). 4: Yellow Yemeni ware (13th-14th century). 5: Tihama ware (13th-15th centuries). 6 and 8 probable Yemeni imitations of Blue and White porcelain (15th-16th centuries), 7: Yellow glaze ware 9: Green and blue underglaze painted 10: Green Monochrome glaze.

the materials has documented a progressive displacement of the site occupation from south to north between the early and middle second millennium CE (González-Ruibal et al. 2021). According to this study, the oldest period of trade in Siyaara seems to have taken place in a ritual context, given the accumulations of local incense burners, bones, and charcoal that have been found around a large cairn to the south. These materials were mixed with imported pottery dated in the 11th to the 13th centuries (Figure 6). Trade went through a clear expansion during the 15th and 16th centuries, which seems directly related to the heyday of the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1577 CE). Although the site seems to have declined sharply after the collapse of the Adal sultanate by the end of the 16th century, trade was still conducted in the site at least until the 19th century (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 6).

Located inland, 3.5 km south of Berbera, Farhad extends along the slope of a rocky hill and the immediate plain. The outcrop is very prominent in the landscape and it was probably a landmark for sailors and locals alike. The site consists of an area of 5 ha littered with thousands of scattered materials including imported wares, glass, stone vessels, animal bones, and seashells. The main concentration of materials is located on the slope of the hill and no structures were documented during the two campaigns carried out in 2017 (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 29-30) and 2020 (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 17). Imported wares are very abundant and their study suggests a chronology coincident with the Adal sultanate period (15th-16th centuries), although its use in previous

centuries is well attested by well-known types such as the Yemeni Yellow or the Molded wares (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 17). Farhad was probably one of the fairs that existed around Berbera during the medieval period. Unlike Siyaara, the occupation of the site does not seem to go beyond the 16th century, although it is difficult to know whether the abandonment was related to the end of the Sultanate of Adal, to the disturbance of the trade routes caused by the Portuguese, or, more simply, to the move of the activities to another nearby site.

The third coastal site is Bandar Abbas, located just 8 km east of Berbera, very close to the mouth of the Biyo Gure river and extending along a consolidated dune of approximately 2 ha. The site was surveyed in 2016, when a rectangular structure of stone and brick, later identified as a mosque, was found. The structure was surrounded by abundant imported pottery and remains of domestic animals. The site was then interpreted as a trading post used by foreign merchants (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 143-145), but research conducted in 2020 has revealed a far more complex picture. The 2,000 m² studied in 2020 (around 10% of the site) have yielded several hearths, scatterings of pottery, glass and bones, buried pots in stone-lined pits, and the remains of a rectangular structure made with camel bones. All were related to a small cairn in a prominent position (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 3). The study of the imported materials produced a chronology between the 11th and 14th centuries CE, although the main occupation of the site seems to have taken place during the 12th century (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 5).

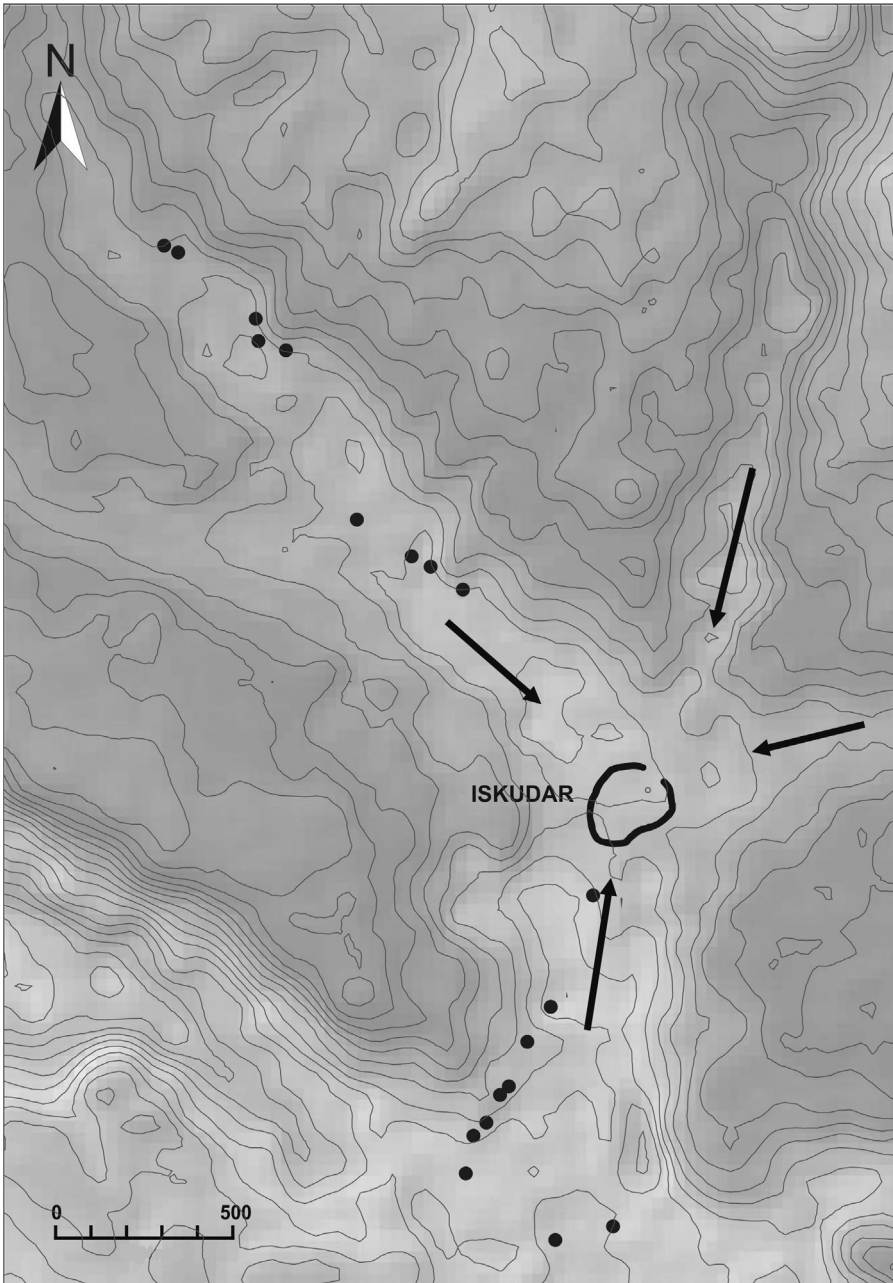


Figure 7. Location of Iskudar, showing the main accesses to the site.

Despite the presence of imported pottery, especially Yemeni and Indian wares but also Late Sgraffiatos, Celadon, and Martaban wares (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 4), there is evidence that Bender Abbas was not a trading site *stricto sensu*, but a meeting site associated to religious and intercultural celebrations. These celebrations included recurrent feasting as indicated by the high numbers of domestic animals slaughtered, the presence of abundant hearths and of common pottery. The presence of camel remains is especially remarkable, as it is an animal which was not consumed on a daily basis but was typically reserved for important occasions. The local nomads and

likely also people from Yemen –as suggested by the large amount of pottery from that region– would have used the site as a gathering place, to celebrate feasts and religious worship (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 5).

These religiously motivated cyclical meetings, usually connected with the veneration of Muslim saints, are deeply ingrained into the Sufi roots of Somali Islam and are still practiced today (Lewis 1956: 151), often following traditions that can be tracked back to the medieval period. Moreover, everything indicates that they are built on older, pre-Islamic traditions of ancestral worship, as it has been documented for the nearby non-Islamic groups such as the

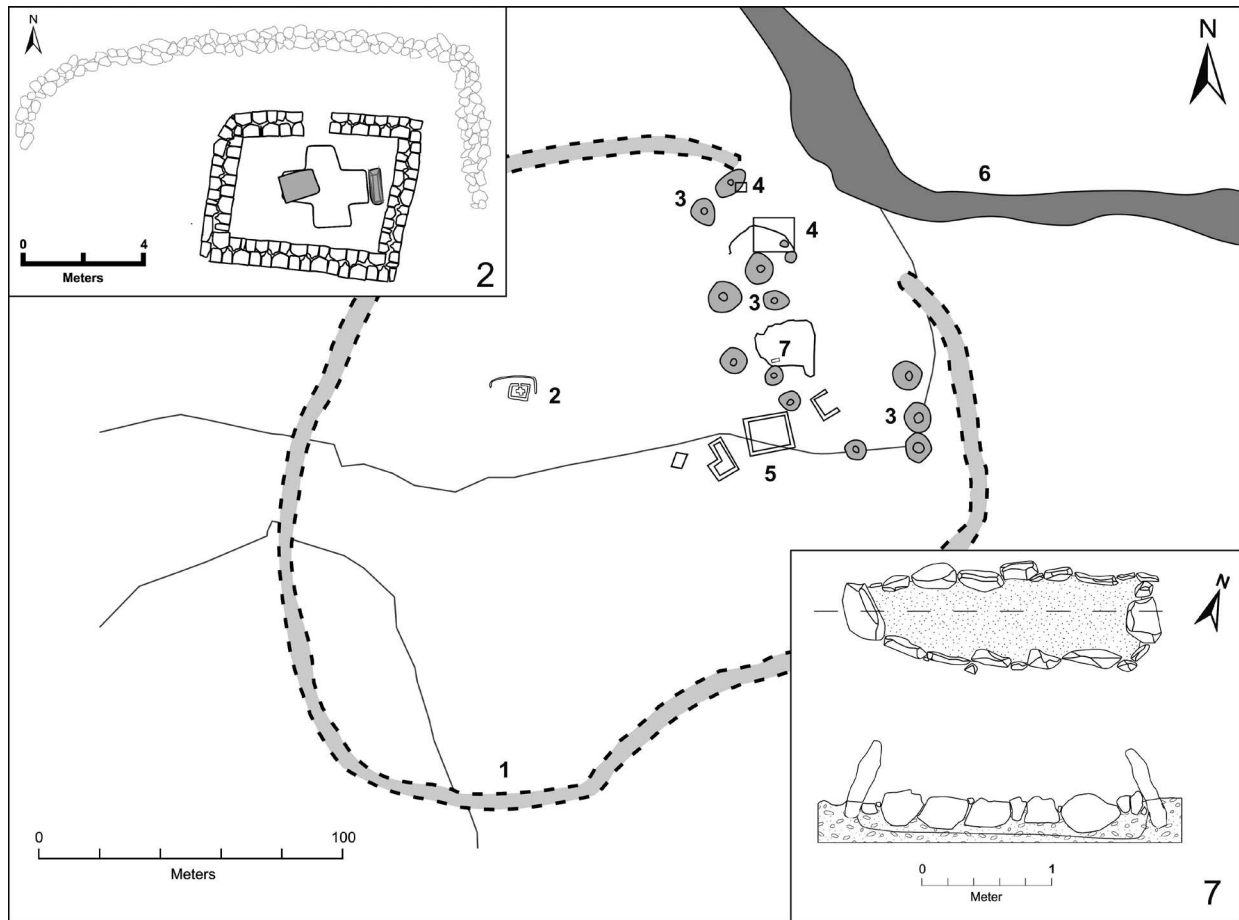


Figure 8: Plan of Iskudar. 1. Ritual fence; 2. Cruciform tomb; 3. Cairns surrounded by a ring of stones; 4. Excavation areas; 5. Buildings; 6. River; 7. Tomb.

Afar (Thesiger 1996: 74). In the case of the studied area in Somaliland, archaeological evidence for this pre-Islamic practice has been identified on sites such as Iskudar.

Iskudar was documented in 2016 by the Incipit archaeological team and it was interpreted as an aggregation centre for nomadic populations, as its name indicates: Iskudar in Somali means ‘aggregation’, ‘mixing’ or ‘combination’ (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 34). The site is located in the escarpment that marks the divide between the inner Ogo Mountains and the coastal plains, thus being a physical interface located at the crossroads of several mountain passes. The site stands at the junction of three streams, with two of its accesses flanked with cairns which can be interpreted as ceremonial markers (Figure 8). The main site is an enclosure of around 3 ha surrounded by a perimeter low wall made of parallel slabs stuck vertically. Inside the wall, which clearly had a symbolic purpose, a significant number of structures have been documented, including large cairns, stone rings with small cairns or cists inside, cruciform tombs, and clusters of cists. All of these features are probably pre-Islamic with

the exception of a group of 20th century tombs oriented following the Muslim precepts (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 35).

The excavation of several test pits in an area of cairns enclosed by stone rings exposed a layer of bones, charcoal, cowries, and some hand-made pottery sherds belonging to an incense burner (Figure 8). The latter were lying on an original floor of compacted sand. This evidence has been interpreted as the remains of feasting activities related to ancestors’ cults by groups of nomads who would meet recurrently at the site. Interestingly, the dating of two charcoal samples of these layers has provided two different chronologies of the mid-12th century and the late 14th century CE, proving not only the long persistence of these gatherings for several generations, but the reluctance to abandon pre-Islamic traditions in a period when Islam was rapidly spreading throughout Somaliland (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 36-37). The Sufi traditions that prevailed in East Africa were especially receptive to the incorporation of these practices into the new religious framework. The tombs of ancestors were substituted by



Figure 9. Pre-Islamic cairn at Ceel Dheere.

tombs linked with saints, and these became important pilgrimage sites, such as the well-known cases of Maydh and Aw-Barkhadle (Lewis 1998) and likely Bandar Abbas in our region.

Iskudar can be considered principally, if not fully, non-Islamic, although its people were undoubtedly in contact with Muslim communities (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 37). The site of Ceel Dheere, on the contrary, was also used after the Islamization process, probably as both a trading and religious place. Located 37 km northeast of the town of Burao, the site is situated in the Haud plains which are still used as a grazing area for the nomads. It consists of two different areas separated about one kilometre from each other. The first one is a cemetery of several stone rings with cairns and tombs made of slabs; some have stelae at their sides (Figure 9). Although the chronology of this site is uncertain, it is undoubtedly pre-Islamic, with the tombs marked with slabs maybe dating to the early second millennium CE based on parallels from Iskudar. The second site is situated 900 m to the northeast and consists of a mosque, a small Muslim cemetery and several square structures delimited by one row of stones. Two complete pots, buried in the floor, were found close to one of these structures, while on the surface a number of green glass shards from perfume bottles and Yemeni

White Cream pottery provide a tentative chronology between the 13th and 16th centuries. This second site has been interpreted as a meeting point for Muslim nomads which would also act as a fair and is a good example of how pre-Islamic meeting centres were resignified and adapted to the new religion.

Although fairs and sanctuaries were fundamental in the structuring of the nomadic lifestyle, they were by no means the only elements in the landscape. Throughout the territory, thousands of burial monuments (cairns and other kinds of tombs) dot the landscape either isolated, in small clusters or in extensive necropolis. They usually appear along the wadis that connect the interior with the coast, or at important natural crossroads such as mountain passes or fords. The variety of tombs that has been documented in Somaliland (Chittick 1992) has likely chronological and maybe also social, ethnic, or geographical readings, but unfortunately extensive research is still needed to understand their role in Somaliland's history. In our region, around 2,000 of these tombs have been documented so far through both field and remote sensing surveys. Most of the tombs appear isolated or clustered, but there are several major concentrations that seem to correspond to proper cemeteries, such as Xabaalo Tumulod (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 164) or Gugux. Unfortunately, studies in our

region are still very scarce (Mire 2015; Cros et al. 2017) and chronologies have not been established yet, although many of the tombs are evidently pre-Islamic (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 162-163). A proper classification and chronological ascription of the different types of nomadic funerary structures is still a pending task in the archaeology of Somaliland.

3.2. *The settlements*

So far, six permanent settlements have been located in our region, of which only Fardowsa can be considered a proper town while Biyo Gure, Gidheys, and Bagan are all villages of medium or small size. Of the two remaining sites, Qalcadda has been interpreted as a caravan station (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 149-152), while the last one, Qubuurale, has a much more complex interpretation (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 160-161). All of them present a very similar material culture and architectural style and were occupied during a similar period that spans from the 15th to the 16th centuries, with Fardowsa, the biggest one, probably reaching back into the 12th century. They share similar features such as the lack of protective walls and urban planning, the houses being square or rectangular structures built with flat stones and bound with mud. Although all the sites have yielded imported materials, only Fardowsa, Biyo Gure, and Qalcadda seem to have been involved in large-scale trading activities.

Fardowsa is the most important medieval site in the interior of central Somaliland. A major town covering around 35 ha, the city is located at the outskirts of the contemporary village of Sheikh, 60 km south of Berbera. The city is located in the proximity of the escarpment that divides the Ogo Mountains and the desert coastal plain, at the exit of one of the principal mountain passes connecting Berbera's hinterland and the Haud plains (Figure 3). The area has good availability of water and pastures, and the city most likely acted as a resupply stop for the caravans before or after facing the desert coastal plains. The site is covered by dense vegetation to the west and by contemporary constructions to the south, which have severely damaged many of its medieval buildings. The northern and eastern areas are better preserved, and throughout the site large heaps of stone mark the presence of the archaeological remains. Two graveyard areas have been located so far, one to the north and a second one to the south, although the southern one has almost disappeared under the recent urban sprawl of modern Sheikh. Both local and imported archaeological materials are very abundant throughout the site, providing a chronology in the 14th-16th centuries.

Unlike medieval cities in western Somaliland, which were studied as early as the 1930s (Curle 1937), Fardowsa appears in archaeological reports only since 2011, when the site was briefly visited by Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch (2011a: 41-42). In 2015, the Spanish Archaeological

Project did a preliminary survey of the site and, in 2016, it excavated two tests to the north and the south which documented stone structures and abundant layers of ashes and animal bones (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 157-159). In 2020, a much larger excavation was launched on the site, clearing around 600 m² and documenting two large, rectangular houses with an identical layout (Figure 10; de Torres et al. 2020). These two houses and another rectangular building defined a courtyard whose northwestern side was delimited by a fence. The whole area was interpreted as a compound for an extended, wealthy family. This interpretation is confirmed by the materials documented on the site which include numerous imported pottery and glass from China, Southeast Asia, Persia, Yemen, and Middle East. The quantity and quality of the pieces found so far suggest a close engagement of the owners of the houses in commerce, and also point to the existence of privileged groups in the settlements, something not documented before in the medieval archaeology of Somaliland (de Torres et al. 2020: 34). In the case of Fardowsa, this interpretation is supported not only by the imported objects (Figure 11), but by the large size of the houses (double than the average building on site) and the quantity of bones of camel – an expensive and economically valuable animal – found in refuse pits in the courtyard.

Although more research needs to be done in Fardowsa, the results of the 2016 and 2020 excavations point to the town having served as a trading hub, profiting from its strategic location to provide both supplies and rest for the caravans moving towards or from the coast. Unlike other major towns in Somaliland which have rendered surprisingly few imported materials and where trade just simply passed through (de Torres et al. 2018), Fardowsa seems to have actively participated in this trade, although its exact role has still to be determined. The recent publication of a workshop dedicated to the processing of cowries in Harla, Ethiopia (Insoll 2021), shows that not all the trade goods imported into the Horn of Africa were fully finished, and some products were prepared in intermediate stations. The strong connection between this site and the international trade networks might also explain why Fardowsa was abandoned towards the end of the 16th century, a time that witnessed the collapse of the Sultanate of Adal and the coming to the Red Sea of the Portuguese. Although some buildings continued to be used after the town was abandoned, the almost total lack of 17th-century imported materials seems to indicate beyond doubt that the international network which had existed for centuries was no longer active.

A more dramatic fate seems to have been endured by the village of Biyo Gure. The site was first documented in 1984 (Dualeh 1996: 39) and it was studied in some depth by the Incipit Archaeological project in 2020 (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 21-24). Biyo Gure is a permanent settlement



Figure 10. One of the two large houses excavated in Fardowsa in 2020.



Figure 11. Imported pottery from Fardowsa. 1, 7. Chinese celadon; 3, 4. Yellow Yemenite ware; 5. Blue and White Chinese porcelain; 6. Martaban; 8-10. Speckled ware.

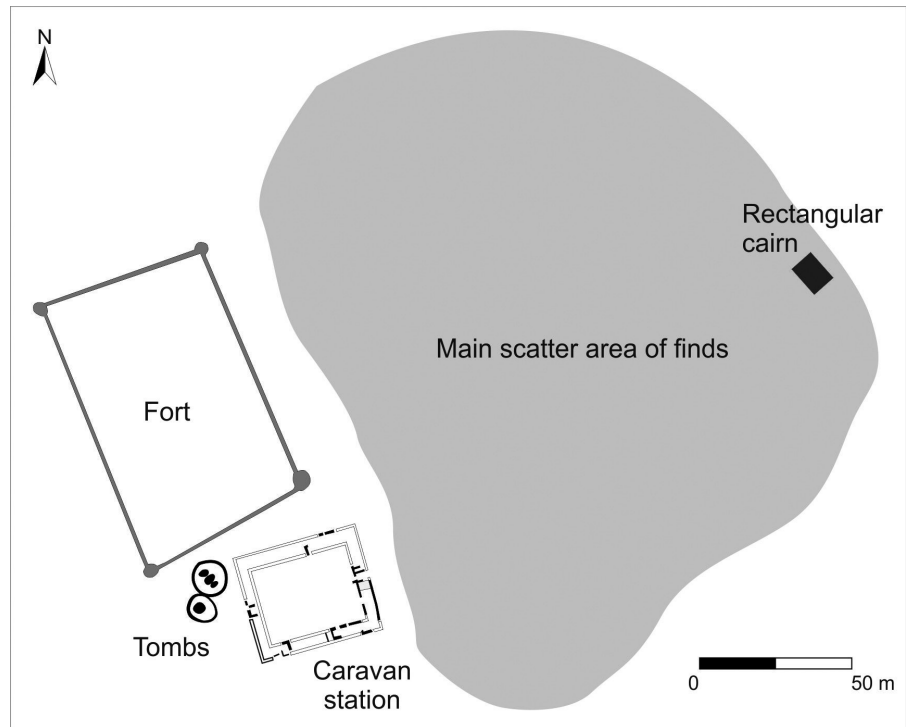


Figure 12. Plan of Qalcadda.

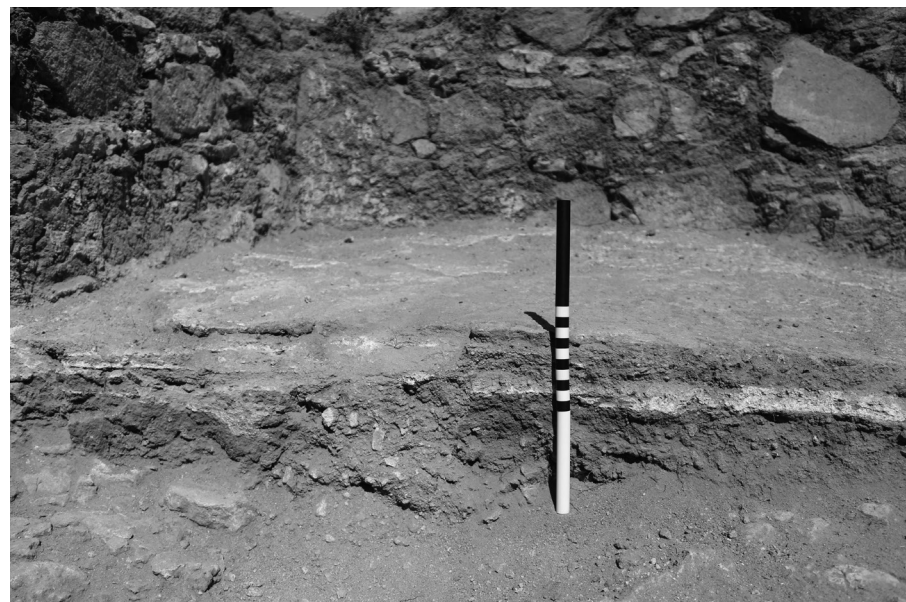


Figure 13. Photograph of test pit at Qalcadda, showing the different plaster floor levels.

composed of about 30 structures, located at a rocky spur on the left bank of the Biyo Gure wadi and in one of the natural routes to the Ogo mountains. It is the only hitherto known permanent settlement situated in the coastal desert plain; its proximity to a major course, it is to be noted, allowed access to drinkable water and some cultivation, which is practiced still today. The site is narrow, extending about 150 m on an east-west axis and covering an area of about 7,000 m². In contrast with its small size, imported materials were very abundant, consisting mainly of Chinese

porcelain and Southeast Asian Martaban and Celadon wares, Yemeni Tihama wares and Speckled glaze pottery, all of them offering a consistent chronology between the 15th and the 16th centuries CE (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 22-23). The number of imports (significantly superior to the other surveyed villages in the interior) suggests that the site combined agricultural with trading activities, using its privileged position to provide food and water for the caravans which headed to or from the coast (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 23). The abandonment of Biyo Gure can

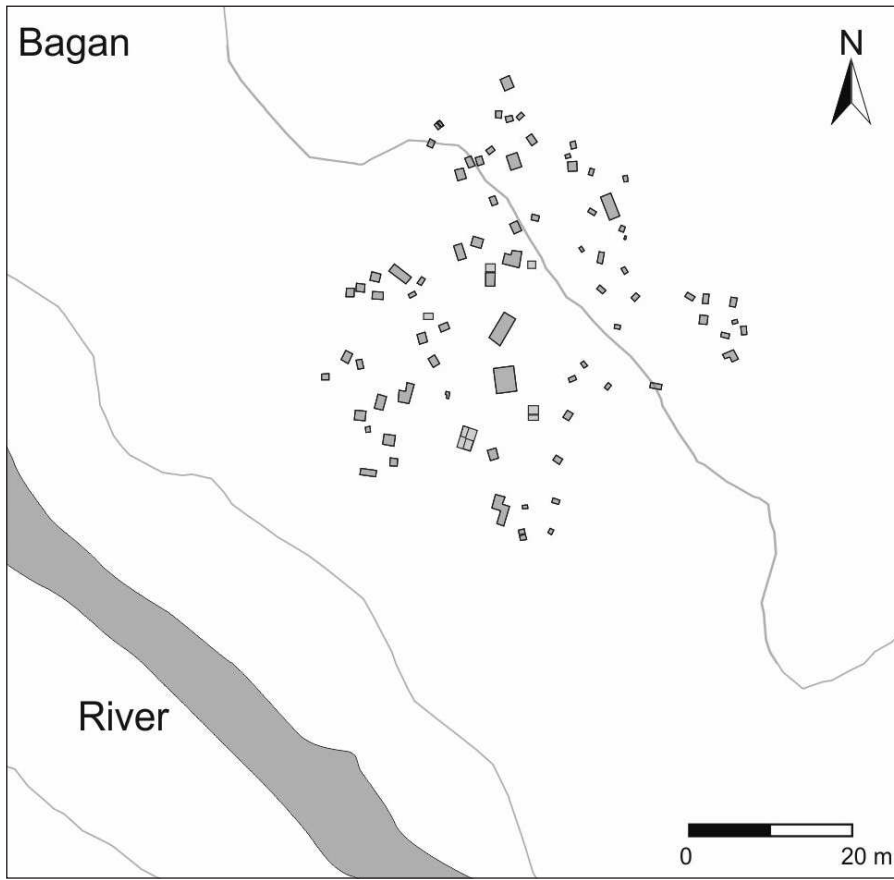


Figure 14. Plan of Bagan.

be inferred from the widespread evidence of destruction by fire in the structures which points to an attack, although the context in which it occurred, and its perpetrators (perhaps nomadic raids, Portuguese soldiers, or locals) are unknown. Whatever the case, the destruction of the village was another chapter in the process that saw the demise of the trade networks that flourished in the area during the 15th and 16th centuries.

The third trade-related site found in the region is Qalcadda, a caravanserai or caravan station. The site was located during the 2016 campaign close to the Ogo mountains escarpment and the Jerato Pass, the main route connecting Berbera and Hargeisa. Qalcadda (Figure 12) got its name (Qalāt is ‘fortified place’ in Arabic) from the rectangular fort with round bastions at the corners, which lies nearby, a large square building with a central courtyard and rooms distributed around it. As such, it follows the characteristic plan of a Middle East caravanserai. These caravan stations were particularly popular between the 12th and 16th centuries (Onge 2007; Tavernari 2009), offering their services to merchants who used the premises to pass the night and store their merchandises safely. The location of Qalcadda close to the escarpment was, as happened with Fardowsa, of strategic value: it was the first settlement in this region at

which a caravan would find shelter, pasture, and reliable sources of water after the hot coastal desert. To the east of these two buildings, an artefact scatter of around 0.8 ha has been interpreted as a trading area, where animals could be unloaded, and exchanges could take place. The survey yielded imports such as Chinese celadon and porcelain, Speckled and other glazed wares, tortoise shells and cowries, while local pottery consists mostly of jars and containers (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 151). These materials provide a chronology in line with the 15th-16th centuries and which corresponds to the heyday of the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1577 CE).

This chronology has been confirmed by radiocarbon dating at a test pit excavated in 2016 at the east side of the caravanserai, next to the entrance to the building. The same test pit documented the existence of four consecutive floors made of lime, each of them with an occupation layer (Figure 13). The penultimate of these occupation layers was dated to 318 ± 28 BP (D-AMS-015989, CAIS 24947; calibrated to 1486-1646 CE) placing the most likely use of the room around the 16th century. Besides this date, the evidence of recurrent repairs of the floor shows an investment of resources which indicates a well-maintained site. The effort that was required to construct and maintain the different buildings and to upkeep a garrison seems to rule

out that Qalcadda was simply a private enterprise. More probably, the caravan station emerged as a state initiative and should be seen as a manifestation of the increasing control that medieval states exerted over long-distance trade, especially during the period of the Adal Sultanate (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 152).

It must be noted that not all the sites in the region show evidence of trading activities. Bagan and Gidheys (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 154-156), for instance, are small or middle-sized villages characteristic of the 15th-16th centuries in Somaliland. These villages consist of small square or rectangular houses arranged in loose clusters, without any trace of urbanism. Bagan (Figure 14) is much bigger than Gidheys (6 ha against 2 ha) and it is organized in groups of houses that could be interpreted as compounds of extended families (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 154), while Gidheys is more packed. Otherwise, the material culture and general appearance of the sites are basically the same. Regarding the chronology, the lack of datable imports offers a sharp contrast with the materials found at Fardowsa, Biyo Gure, and Qalcadda. Only three imported objects were found at Bagan, offering a general chronology between the 12th and 16th centuries (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 155), while at Gidheys imports are even scantier and consisted of a fragment of a blue glass bracelet of the same wide chronological range. The same can be said for the site of Quuburale, although, in this case, it is not even clear if the place was a settlement. It consists of several groups of structures, some of them with monumental features, but others consist only in rectangular rooms forming long structures (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 160). Imported materials were also very scarce, consisting of a Yellow Yemenite ware sherd and one fragment of blue glass which suggest a chronology of the 13th-14th centuries. Although two test pits were excavated at the site, none of them helped in determining its function.

4. Discussion: territory, trade and identities in medieval Somaliland

The sites described in this paper attest of the richness and complexity of medieval life in central Somaliland, and the multiple facets of human interactions and landscape transformations that took place during a period of about half a millennium. However, this same variety can complicate our comprehension of the historical dynamics, their actors, rhythms, and strategies that took place in the region. In order to understand these historical processes and their material expressions we need to consider, on the one hand, the chronological changes in the territory and landscape that took place from the 11th to the 16th centuries, and on the other, the ways these changes were negotiated and implemented by the communities that occupied the region.

By the 11th century, central Somaliland was most probably a world of nomads (Figure 15, sites marked in red). Besides some recent data from the Berbera's hinterland (Gonzalez-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 25), our knowledge of the archaeology of the first millennium CE is scarce. Only Xiis, an extensive cairn field at the east Somaliland's coast has been systematically researched (de Torres et al. 2019; Fernández et al. in press). Its study attests to the existence of trade with Middle East, the Mediterranean Sea, and India between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. Therefore, medieval coastal trading places such as Siyaara should be considered later examples of a centuries-old tradition of commerce between nomads and foreign traders. Inland, sanctuaries such as Iskudar or Ceel Dheere would have played a similar role to that of the coastal fairs, helping the nomads to structure their spatiality and temporality, providing safe environments for interactions and facilitating relationships with other groups (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 24-25). Sanctuaries would also favour the connection between nomads and their ancestors, acting as 'contact' surface between this life and the afterworld. It is in this world where, at an undetermined moment during the early second millennium CE, the process of islamisation probably started.

Did Islam actually represent a radical and traumatic change for the nomads of the 13th and 14th centuries? Although more research is needed, it seems that the adoption of Sufism, the type of Islam practiced predominantly in Somaliland until today, eased significantly the tensions derived from religious change, and it was perfectly suitable for nomadic life. The importance given to saints and holy men, the role of pilgrimage sites, and the more individualistic practice of Islam, which are all Sufi traits, seem to have been key in the adoption of Islam by the nomadic societies. Yet, conversion might not have implied complete assimilation, as Sufism incorporated many pre-Islamic beliefs, traditions, and sites which are visible even today (Lewis 1956). As in many other historical cases, conversion involved a significant amount of negotiation, resistance, and syncretism. The fact that Iskudar endured as a pre-Islamic pilgrimage centre during the 13th century proves that Islamisation was not a univocal and welcomed process everywhere (González-Ruibal and de Torres 2018: 36-37).

This manifold situation is what we can find in the early medieval sites of Bandar Abbas, Siyaara, Iskudar, or Ceel Dheere that show the multiple ways in which Islam was negotiated and incorporated into the nomads' lives. Thus, the oldest medieval site we know so far (Bandar Abbas, 10th century) shows already Muslim influences, and has been interpreted as a gathering place for locals and Yemeni groups around an Islamic context which includes a mosque (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 6). However, this situation does not seem

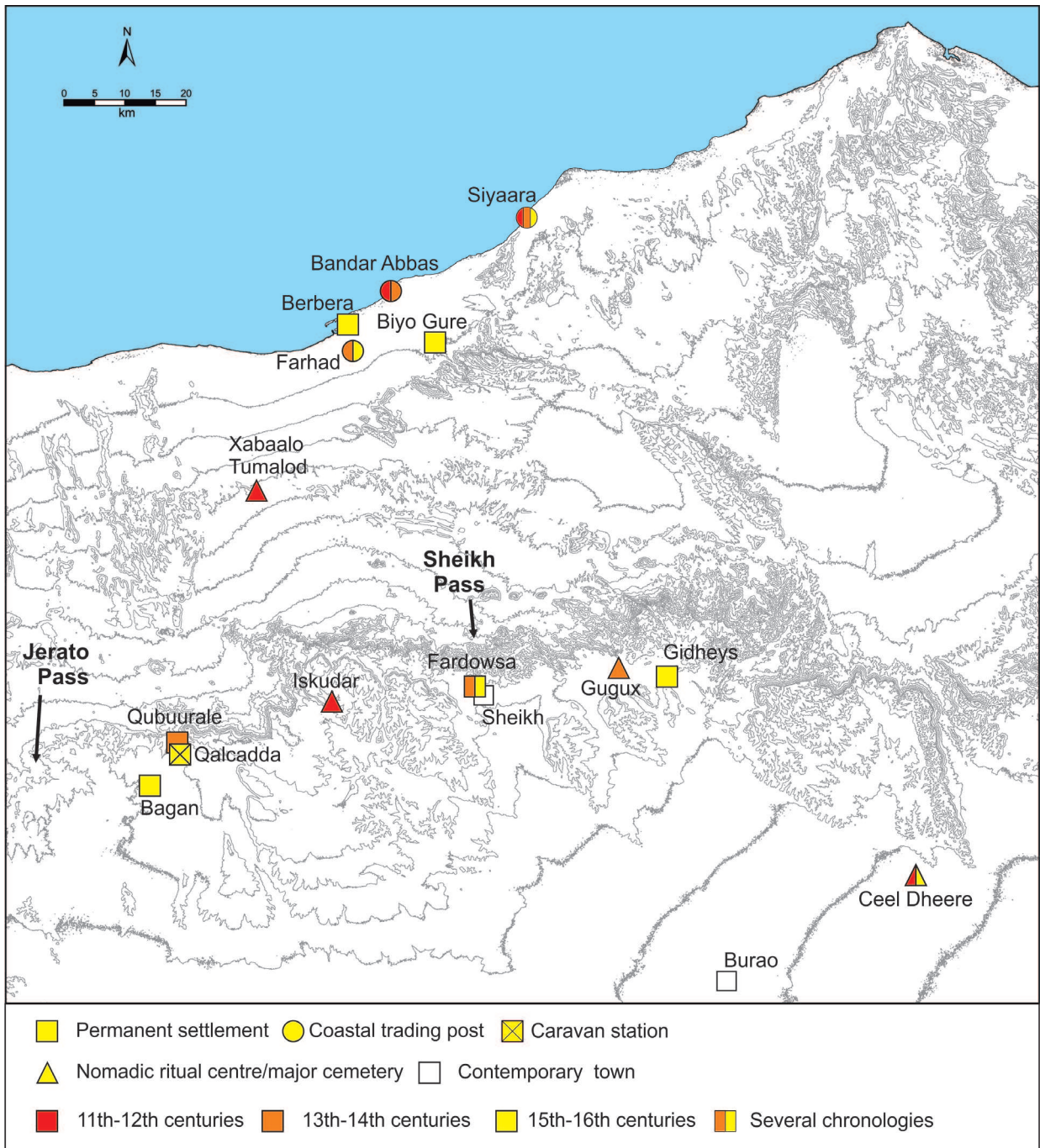


Figure 15. Sites in use in central Somaliland between the 10th to the 16th centuries.

widespread at all: the oldest occupation of Siyaara (11th-12th centuries) gravitated around a large cairn, with rituals undertaken in the traditional pre-Islamic mode. The shallow presence of Islamic influence is even more evident at inland sites like Iskudar or Ceel Dheere, where the occupation around the 11th-12th centuries does not show any evidence of Muslim presence. The territorial, social and identity parameters in the region

would be essentially the same as in the first millennium CE, with the main changes taking place around coastal trading posts.

The 13th-14th centuries, on the contrary, seems to have contemplated some deep changes in the region: the expansion of trade perceptible at the coast; the end of some local, indigenous sanctuaries, and the appearance of the first permanent settlements in the interior (Figure 15,

sites in orange). Regarding trade, Bandar Abbas continued acting as a gathering centre with a religious and to a less extent commercial role, while Siyaara seems to have evolved into a conventional fair (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 15), and the fair of Farhad started to function. The increase of commerce is visible in the quantitative growth of fairs and imports and in the increasingly diverse origin of the archaeological record, as well as in the appearance of imported materials in inland sites such as Iskudar (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 166). Although more evidence is still needed, trade may also have been behind the appearance of the first permanent settlements in the region. That is the case of Fardowsa, located at the most strategic position in the region, which could have been established during an earlier period (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 26). Despite of its difficult interpretation, Quuburale has provided materials from a 13th -14th century chronology (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: 160). The third relevant change is the abandonment of some nomadic ritual centres located in Iskudar and at the oldest phase at Ceel Dheere, which seem to have been abandoned towards the 13th century.

The reasons for these changes are still unclear, but they are probably related to the consolidation and expansion of the Sultanate of Ifat (1285-1415) and to the intense activity of Muslim missionaries which took place during the 13th and 14th centuries. Although it is unlikely that the Ifat Sultanate controlled central Somaliland, it probably played a beneficial role by creating the conditions for the development of stable trading activities, increasing the demand of imports, and, to some extent, favouring relations with other Muslim regions. Indeed, Islam could have created extremely useful conditions for trade: a shared feeling of belonging to the same community, improving safety during travel, and a common materiality expressed in religious structures such as mosques or cemeteries. Both features would enhance trust based on similar values and mindsets, facilitating agreements and deals.

By the beginning of the 15th century, the trends already observed in previous centuries seem to accelerate in central Somaliland (Figure 15, sites in yellow). The amounts of imports grow substantially, with some of the fairs who were active in previous periods now reaching their maximum expansion. Bandar Abbas, on the contrary, will be abandoned, maybe due to the growth of nearby Berbera which, at this moment, according to the historical record, becomes one of the most important ports in the Somaliland coast. Although no medieval materials have been found in Berbera, 16th-century documents and maps are consistent in qualifying that town as one of the three permanent sites along the Somali coast, hence being the target of Portuguese attacks. In the interior, fairs were established in previously used sites such as Ceel Dheere, where a trading area grew around a mosque and several

other buildings, just one kilometre away from the large tombs from the 11th-12th centuries.

The expansion of commerce had an impact not only upon the nomadic populations. Permanent settlements grew both in number and extension, and engaged actively in trade, usually providing supplies and safe spaces to rest and trade. Thus, Fardowsa reached its heyday as the most important inland town in central Somaliland, while other places like Biyo Gure are and Qalcadda were founded *ex novo*, most probably with the main purpose of supporting trade routes. However, it would be misleading or at least simplistic to explain the rise of permanent settlements just as consequence of the increase of trade. Some sites like Gidheys and Bagan have yielded extremely low rates of imported materials and seem to be oriented towards agriculture; a feature shared by other sites deeply involved in trade such as Biyo Gure. At the same time, some sites like Qalcadda seem to have been under the tutelage and protection of the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1573 CE) and served to keep peace and safety in what had become a key sector of its economy. Unfortunately, we have almost no information about the territory controlled by the Sultanate of Adal in what is now Somaliland. From the scarce references available, we can infer that western Somaliland was fully integrated in this kingdom, while the territory to the east was home to Somali tribes who only nominally obeyed the Sultans and who had to be military pressed into supporting the state (Faqih 2003: 28). Based on the above, it can be speculated that central Somaliland was somehow in a liminal position, somehow under the influence or the sparse control of the Sultanate of Adal, either directly or through proxies. The development of permanent settlements would parallel that of western Somaliland and Ethiopia, in which trade centres were combined with smaller peasant villages (de Torres et al. 2018).

For the first time, the implementation of a network of permanent settlements challenged the materiality and the landscape of central Somaliland. So far, changes had involved the transformation of pre-Islamic ancestors into Muslim holy men, the re-signification of pilgrimage sites, or a quantitative increase in commerce. Permanent settlements, on the contrary, represented a completely alternative approach to the control upon the territory, with very different economic bases and involving the construction of a radically different materiality. The existence of the permanent settlements was not only alien to the nomadic perception of the world: it also challenged the parameters of social and political equality that characterize Somali society even today. The wealthy households identified in Fardowsa show a radically different approach to prestige than could be expected from pastoralist groups, and they constitute another expression of the depth of the social changes that took place in the region during the 15th and the 16th centuries.

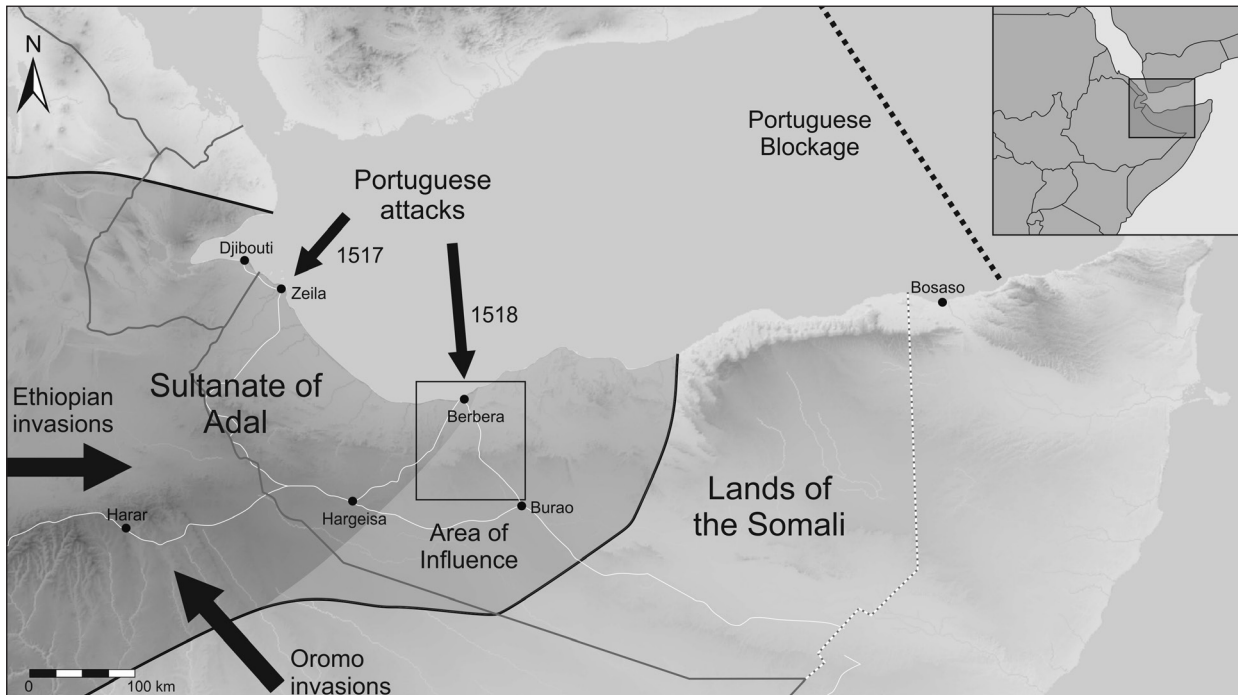


Figure 16: Political situation and the end of the trade networks in Somaliland in the 16th century.

Considering all these economical, religious, cultural, and political changes, it is difficult not to think about the possible social and political tensions or even open conflict that they might have provoked. Yet, there are many indications that suggest this was not the case. Although far from idyllic – the fort of Qalcadda shows that protection was sometimes necessary –, there is strong evidence that the region enjoyed remarkable stability during this period. Significantly, not a single settlement of central and western Somaliland was walled, contrary to what happened at the border region between the Sultanate of Adal and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011b: 33-34). There is no evidence of trade disturbance until the 16th century, and written texts do not make any references to unrest or conflict in the region. This apparent lack of conflict needs an explanation. In our opinion, conflict was avoided by the development of what we have called ‘spheres of interest’ (de Torres 2020: 188): key activities or endeavours around which communities with very different backgrounds could get involved in collaborative projects.

In the area studied, two of these ‘spheres’ were especially important during the medieval period. The first one was trade, the longest and widest collaborative project in Somaliland. The proper running of trade routes and fairs required a close coordination and collaboration between the different stakeholders involved. This coordination seems to have been kept for centuries while the trading system became more

complex, moving from simple direct exchanges between nomads and foreign merchants to an elaborate system that involved nomads, traders, permanent settlements and state-run caravan stations. In fact, it is likely that the involvement of nomadic societies in this activity increased through time, as they were the only dynamic agents which connected the geographically scattered nodes of the trade network, from coastal trading posts to towns and caravanserai. The second sphere of interest of relevance for central Somaliland was, as it was noted above, Islam, which provided a shared identity around which these groups could interact and collaborate. Moreover, Sufi Islam probably built a bridge between the nomadic pre-Islamic beliefs and the Muslim predominant world of the 15th and 16th centuries, thus facilitating a transition which was probably complex and contested. These and other spheres of interest (de Torres 2020: 183-187) helped to develop remarkable conditions of stability in the region that may have lasted for centuries.

Such a fluid but highly adaptive system started to be challenged towards the beginning of the 16th century (Figure 16), when the Portuguese presence in the Red Sea severely disturbed international trade. Some decades later, the Muslim defeats against the Ethiopians and the immediate Oromo invasions provoked the collapse of the Sultanate of Adal. The disappearance of trade and state structures had an immediate effect on the network of permanent settlements in central Somaliland: none of

the sites seems to have continued their activities beyond the 16th century and along the coast only Berbera and Siyaara seem to have endured, although 17th century imports in Siyaara are negligible (González-Ruibal et al. 2021: 15). Whilst more information is needed from archaeological and historical research on Somaliland during the 17th-19th centuries, the hitherto know evidence indicates that the settlement dwellers embraced nomadic life, and, although some trade still took place occasionally, pastoralism became the main way of life until today.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we argue that trade in central Somaliland represented not just an important economic activity, but it also played a paramount role in structuring large territories, and it became a fundamental tool to ease tensions between communities with very different cultural backgrounds, or between these communities and the state. Indeed, trade provided stability through processes of religious conversion, state building and territorial reorganization. Against the backdrop of these transformations, the nomads were not only able to endure but to thrive, adapting and incorporating new groups to the system in an increasingly sophisticated model that was to endure several centuries. The fact that this system finally disappeared, and that trade networks and permanent settlements were abandoned should not lead us to think of the history of trade in Somaliland as a collapse, or as an aborted process by which a society that was becoming more and more complex, returned to nomadism. That approach would not only be misleading, but it would also be inaccurate and deterministic, assuming that increasing complexity, statehood and urbanism are always logical and desirable. International trade disappeared, but the Somali society did not collapse: it adapted to the historical context as it had done many times before, and it did so with enduring efficiency, so much so that nomadic culture has ultimately been identified as the traditional lifestyle of the Somali people until today.

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