Chapter 8

Manifestations of Urbanisation in Senegambia: Situation Report

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In a recent study on the ancient cities of West Africa, S.K. and R.J. McIntosh (1984) present an interesting viewpoint on the state of research relating to urbanisation in West Africa. The in-depth study treats problems of methodology as well as those linked with archaeological manifestations.

Nevertheless, compared with previous works carried out on ancient cities in this region (R. Mauny, 1961) it does not treat the Senegambia in the strict sense of the term, that is the region between Rivers Senegal and Gambia where relics abound.

The objective of this presentation therefore, is to synthesize available information on the manifestations of urbanisation in this region at the extreme end of West Africa which has often been isolated from other major archaeological regions and where hardly any previous search for archaeological evidence of urbanisation existed.

Actually, the study of urbanisation in Senegambia is yet to become a subject for indepth and systematic research. The limitations which are due mainly to problems of methodology can be explained in two ways.

(i) The first reason is subsumed in the long standing theory which holds that urbanisation in sub-saharan West Africa came as a result of contact with the Arab world. Thus research concerning urbanisation often consisted of attempts at ackowledging the toponyms marked in Arab geography in relation to Trans Saharan trades[1]. Meanwhile compared with other trade routes, Senegambia which is situated on the bed of River Senegal was in a very remote location. It therefore attracted very little interest in researchers who turned their efforts more on such

[1] See S.K. and R.J. McIntosh (1984) for an Indepth assessment of this point of view. There are other papers also by these authors on the subject of urbanisation in West Africa.

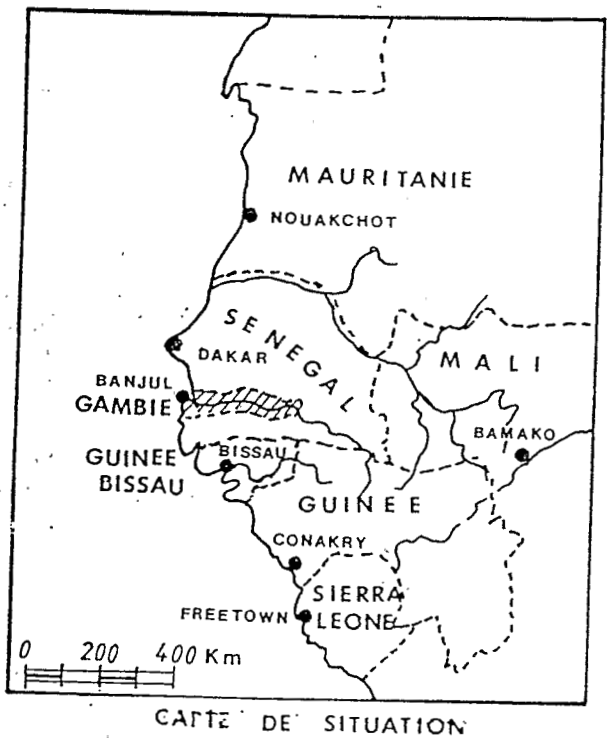

Fig. 8.1: Map of the region

popular towns like Gao, Timbuctu, Kumbi Saleh, Tegdaoust, Niani, Agadez.

(ii) The second reason adduced deals with the research method used in the Senegambia whch initially encouraged the archaeology of monuments, particularly burial, in deriment of settlement sites. Though this metho led to the acquisition of some specific chronological sequences (which were of great importance to historians and archaeologists in the region), it was unoperational in the final analysis. However this constitutes the essence of the settlement sites which appear "as the totality of events in a considerable temporal space" (Moberg, 1976:56).

With the development of research recently in the middle valley of River Senegal and the publication of first findings, new research directions treating more systematically the urban dimension have been developed. Today, it is possible to identify some manifestations sof the urban phenomenon in Senegambia when such findings are combined with the results of archaeological prospection with the facts available from the different oral and written sources.

The Problem of Definition

The problem of an acceptable definition for urbanisation is a very complex one. There is need to consider the available options than hold on rigidly to one definition. To this end, a number of political, economic and socio-cultural explanations can be advanced for urbanisation thus making the town a multifunctional environment.

1.1 The Political Viewpoint

The concept of ancient urban organisations is associated with the advent of complex societies where it was crucial to have production centres and thus regulate socio-political and ideological activities.

In this regard, the Senegambia, particularly the Senegal valley has produced varied evidence for the beginnings of complex and heirarchical societies. In the present state of research the Senegal Valley was the headquarters of the State of Takrur which was founded as far back as the 4th Century. This state which was in existence for a long time is mentioned by major Arab geographers in the region (See J. Cuoq. 1975). It is not considered exclusively as a state but also a capital (a power centre) and a town. Some other towns located in the valley and equally mentioned by the Arab geographers are Silla, Kalambu, Golombo, Giarou, Iresni (Levtzion,

1973; Fall, 1982 a and b, Seck, 1984, 34, Fig 9.2: Ghana and Mali. Senegambia and West African Empires).

Thus, as in the past and recent times, today there is a relativvely consistent growth in favour of the existence of power and political centres in Senegambia.

1.2 The Geo-Economic Perspective

As C. Coquery – Vidrovitch (1988:31) observed in relation to ancient towns and particularly the emergence of the urban phenomenon, "there can be villages without towns but there can never be towns without villages" and village here is taken in a broad sense. It rather means the hinterlands, since an urban society is an open society whose dynamism and survival depend primarily on the intensity of its exchanges with the outside world. At this level and particularly for the ancient periods, the collection of geographical data can be decisive in dealing with the urban phenomenon because it can ensure the delimitation of coherent units of analysis as had been established in the interior Delta of the Niger (Mali) (R. and S. Mcintosh, 1982, 1983, 1984) and by Poncet *et al* (1983) in the Agadez Basin Area (Niger).

In conclusion, one finds that the vagueness of definitions explains the complexity of the matter as well as the inappropriateness of the methodology. However, facts are available which support the ancient existence of the urban contexts in Senegambia.

The Urban Contexts in Senegambia

The urban manifestations in Senegambia as seen in archaeology, oral and written traditions can be classified in two forms, namely direct and indirect manifestations.

The direct manifestations are those whose basic attributes would be used as classification for urban remains. The indirect manifestations refer to those remains whose formation suggests the existence of ancient urban concentrations, even if traces of these have disappeared or are yet to be recognised. Under this second category are the great necropolis and the ancient refuse dumps (known in Wollof as "siind" and as "jinde" in Pulaar).

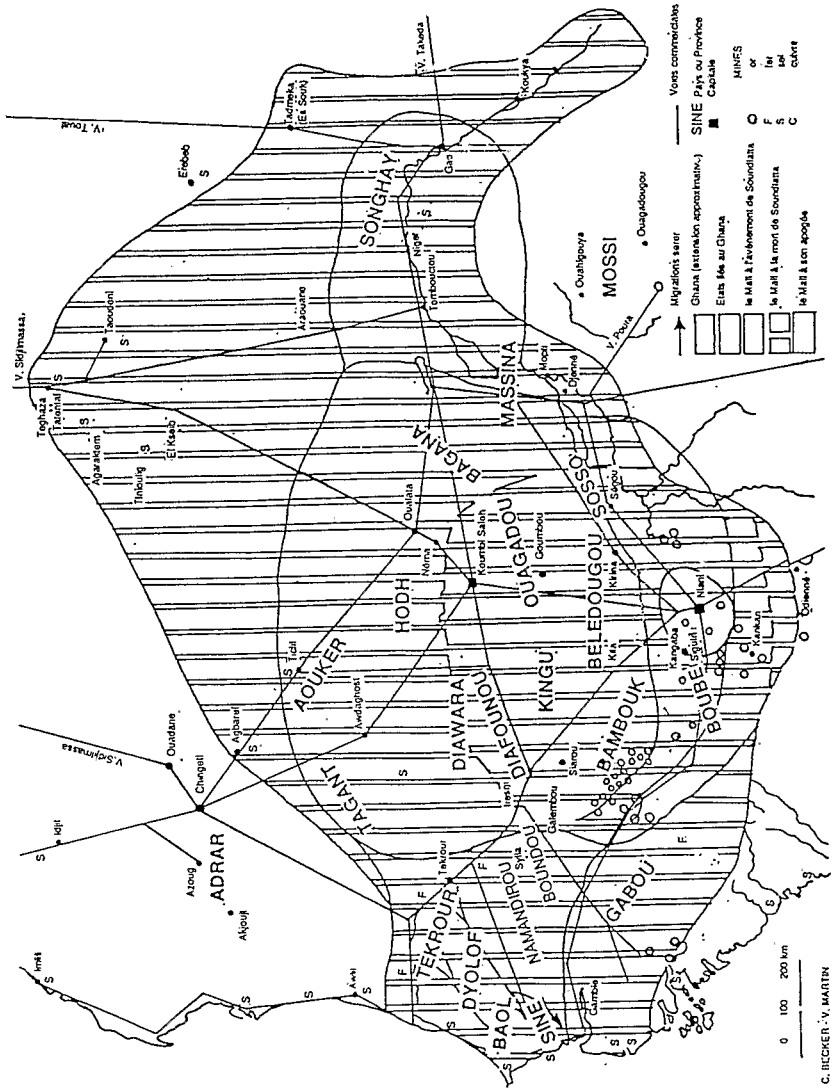

Fig. 8.2: Ghana and Mali: the Senegambia and the West African Empires.

The Direct Manifestations

The Case of the Senegal Valley

Following the distribution proposed by V. Martin and C. Becker (1974), among the four recognised protohistoric provinces, only that of ancient remains of villages permits the recognition of direct manifestations of urban phenomenon. (Map 3 and 4 Ancient settlement sites. South Bank of the Senegal Valley).

The valley of the Senegal river, particularly the middle portion, where very extensive sites abound, seems to have been a real urban network. In Table 3, the breakdown deals primarily with the south bank, emphasizing the importance of the three provinces of Toro, Lao and Nuguena, where the proportion of the big sites is high.

TABLE 3

Distribution Per Category of Sites in the Valley Area and in Ferlo: Percentage per Category and Area.

Valley Area	Small	%	Medium	%	Large	%	Total	%
Dimar	16	57	10	36	2	7	28	8.8
Toro	63	67	24	26	7	7	94	29.5
Lao	42	69	10	16	9	15	61	19.1
Yrlabe	9	56	5	31	2	13	16	5.0
Bossea	11	85	2	15	—	—	13	4.1
Nguenar	15	44	11	32	8	24	34	10.7
TOTAL	156	63.4	62	25.2	28	11.4	246	77.1
FERLO								
Galodjina	6	35	5	45	—	—	11	3.4
Ferlo N.	29	94	2	6	—	—	31	9.7
Longuere	22	79	2	7	4	14	28	8.8
Loumbol	2	67	1	33	—	—	3	0.9
TOTAL	59	81	10	14	4	5	73	22.9
GRAND TOTAL	215	67.4	72	22.6	32	10.0	319	100

This high concentration has been favoured by exceptional bio-climatic conditions. Located between two less favoured bio-climatic zones, semi-desert in the north and south (Ferlo), the middle valley looks like a blooming oasis which had much earlier attracted populations in an osmosis movement of very great amplitude (Bocoum 1986:227).

[2] Prospections by V. Martin and C. Becker only dealt with the left bank. But according to M. Sognane (1983) and B. Tandia (1983), generally, the same relics also exist in large numbers on the right bank though there has never been any excavation there.

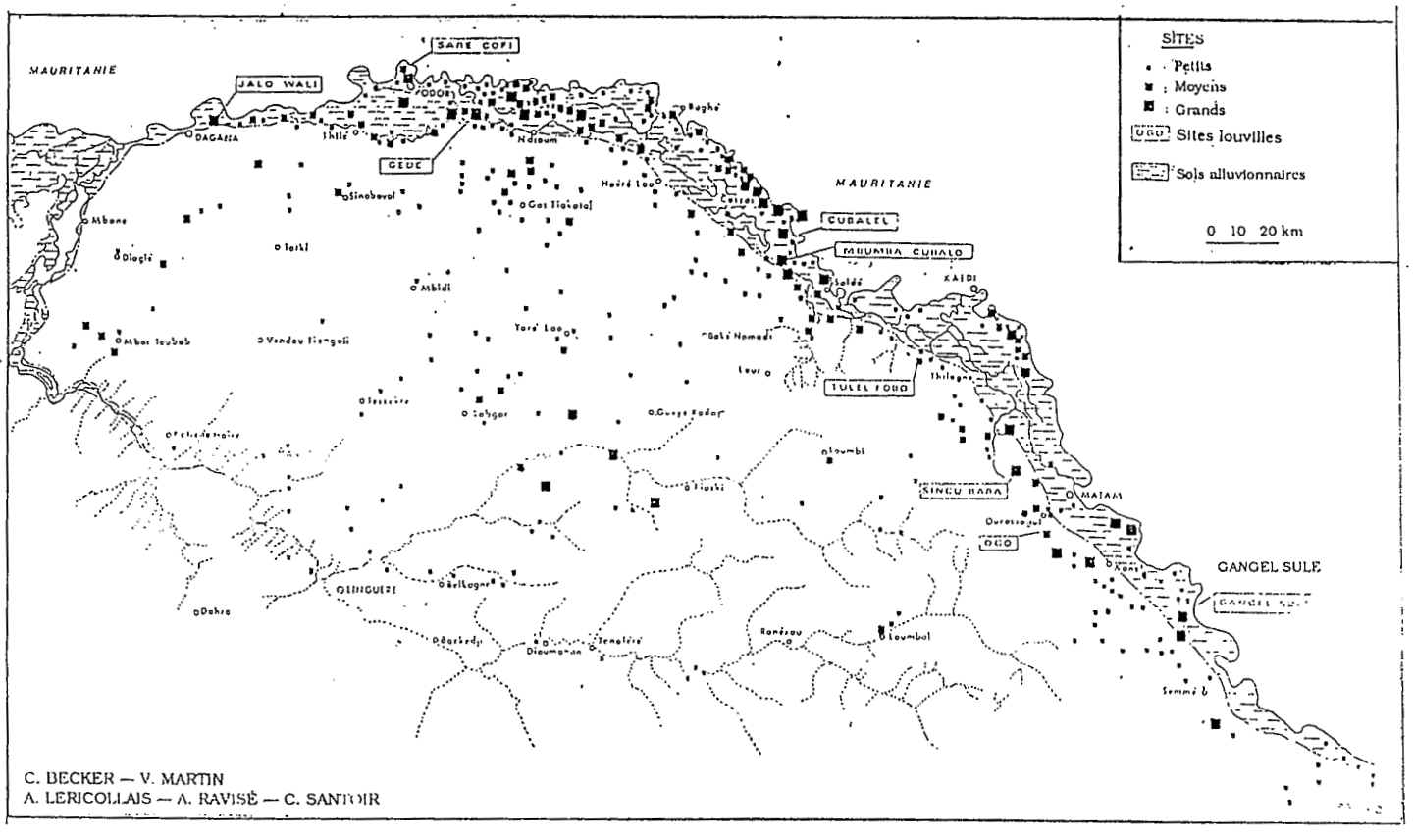

Fig. 8.3: Ancient settlement sites, southern bank of the Senegal valley

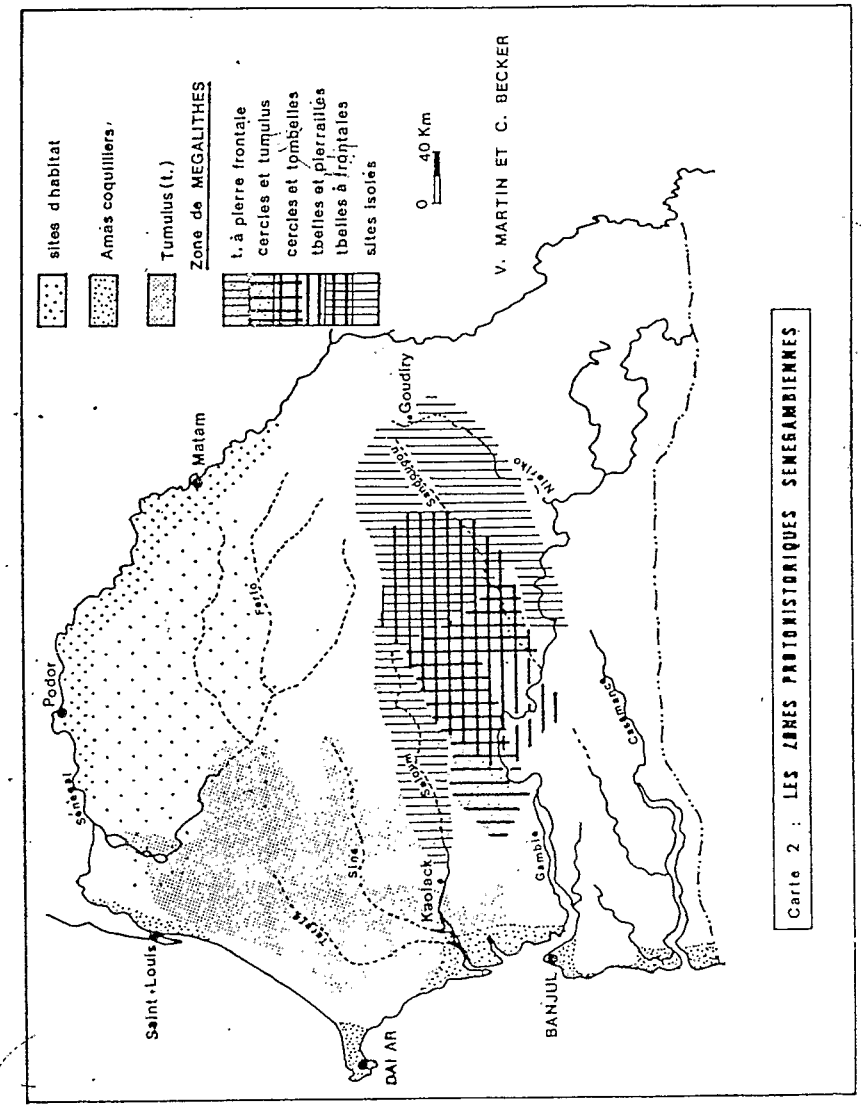

Fig. 8.4: The Senegambian Protohistoric Zones

The populations, chased by the southwards migration of the isohyete 400mm and those forced to move because of the dryness of the Ferlo and the effects of the ecological disaster within the environs in BP(3)* all converged in the "territory of abundance".

Also because of the immense possibilities offered by agriculture fishing, hunting, the valley became an incomparable channel of communication, exchange crossroad and a contact zone for numerous people of the Senegambia who seemed to have resided there or been there in transit.

But, despite their limitations, the excavations conducted from 1972 revealed some urban features. So even if relevant data is still unavailable, the evidences unearthed at Sincu Bara, Ogo, Gangel Sule, Tulel Fobo, ensure the proper categorisation of the major inferences made about urban centres.

Space and Time

In archaeological parlance, a settlement is an area with any accumulation of relics which testifies to human habitation without a determined duration.

Available data show that the spatial growth of the river banks did not allow for continuous settlement: Sincu Bara (4th–10th centuries) Ogo (9th – 11th centuries) Tulel Fobo (4th – 9th centuries).

Along with this temporal criterion is the spatial dimension with about thirty sites whose spatial development surpasses 250,000m². Sincu Bara for example spread over 67 hectares. On the contrary, Jenne Jeno spreads over 33 hectares. The conclusion therefore is that to some extent river bank sites have considerable spatial and temporal space and the urban feature is underscored by the different production activities undertaken in each site.

Obviously the surface is not always a determining factor but as will soon be manifested, several relics recovered from major sites show some relationship between commerce and diversity in activities.

Architecture

The excavation methods used then (extensive sample surveys) discouraged regular horizontal reviews at each identified level of settlement. But according to chronostratigraphic reports, management of space and architectural measurements are inadequate. Nevertheless, information relating to architecture was available on

3 Due to bad weather conditions, in 2000 BP Ferlo became the focal point of a saline invasion which stretched about 150km and lasted at least five years. (cf. Monteillet et al. 1984:214) See original work by J. Devisse (1982).

most of the sites.

So at Ogo, B. Chavane (1985:87) used as evidence, stone allignments that reflected the foundations of actual storehouses.

At Sincu Bara (Thilmans and Ravise, 1983) where excavations were carried out extensively (153m²) facts discovered reveal the existence of round huts with wall partitions built with mud and raffia. These huts whose diameter is beetween 4m and 5m usually had roofs with woodden panellings. It is important to note that these huts had native flooring and detachable structures which served as storehouses. At Tulel Fobo (Bocoum, 1986) bits of dry clay were dug up during excavations and the circular bases of huts were observed on the surface of the site.

Although limited, previous reports show a communal architectural concept in the north Sahelian belt where mud and straw constitute the basic architectural materials. Accurate reporting of structural remains is therefore very tricky.

Multi-purpose Features, Industrial and Commercial Activities

The multi-purpose features and development of commerce sometimes over long distances, seem to be the most significant characteristic of river bank sites. Artisanry and basic production methods flourished in several areas there.

Metallurgy is early and diversified with an important iron metallurgy under its two aspects: extractive and transformative metallurgy. An estimation of the output on both banks of the river and on each site reflects a surplus in production which led to export [4].

The development of a commercial network over long distances is explained by the availability of non-ferrous metals like copper and silver on river bank sites like Sincu Bara, Ogo, Cubalel. Copper in particular seems to have played a big role. Originating from afar, it was used to strengthen ornaments and to make harnesses for horses which complexity and diversity attest to a high level of technology.

Considering their relative standardisation, other copper objects like hoops found in large numbers in a deposit at Sincu Bara (7,500 hoops) and also found in Podor may well have a monetary function or by default, be part of a system of hoarding money.

In this category, one could also classify the copper rings found in Podor (Chavane, 1976, Thilmas, 1977) whose function as money is established by Arab sources especially by El-Bekri as early as the 11th Century.

[4] If we agree with Robert-Chaleix, Dand M. Sognane (1983:53) that a reduction exercise brought 45kg of iron to half its size, then total output in Sincu Bara was 2.52 tonnes, 6.03 tonnes at Rindiaw-Sylla (the river bank on the right) and 1800 tonnes on the totality of sites discovered on the right river bank in 1983 (Bocoum, 1988:74). *See also* Fall 1982 in relation to the Mauritanean site of Rindiaw-Sylla.

Agriculture, animal husbandry, and fishing are in differing degrees well established activities. Animal husbandry and fishing were prominent at Sincu Bara (Thilmans and Ravise, 1983) and at Toulel Fobo (Bocoum, 1986: Wim and Bocoum 1989, forthcoming) where supply seemed partially dependent on commercial activities.

It is more difficult to ascertain the impact of agriculture even with millet growing all over. Cotton was also available at Ogo (Chavane, 1985). Conclusions can be drawn therefore, not only from the agricultural capacity of the alluvial valley and the later accounts of Arab travellers, but also from the relics available from excavations.

Apart from metallurgy, the boom in trade is demonstrated by the presence of a specific product in the coastal areas. Thus "*Anadara Senilers*" was found on many sites in the middle valley as it flowed to the mouth of the river (See G. Thilmans and A. Ravise, 1983:47 – 49, 80). In the same way also one notes the existence of rooks and silkworms whose outcroppings are unknown in Senegambia (ibid: 81–82).

In short, if all the river bank sites cannot be considered as urban centres, some of them can still be classified as towns, given their multipurpose features and their attachment to the Takrur myth. In this regard therefore it is pertinent to recall the intriguing accounts of Arab travellers who from the 11th Century refer to such industrous cities as Takrur, Sylla, Galombo (Guoq, 1975).

Indirect Manifestations

These manifestations are seen in the three proto-historic provinces which have tomb monuments. Prospection was carried out in these areas by V. Martin and C. Becker (1974, 1984). Information provinces is not as significant as that gathered in the middle valley of River Senegal. The analyses done below have a very definitive purpose.

The Refuse Dumps and Shell Tombs

This involves a contrasted zone with a predominant type of relic — heaps of empty shells — but where the ages, sizes and densites are highly varied. The major provinces are located at the mouth of Rivers Senegal, Saloum, Gambia, and Cassamance and close to Cape Vert.

As for the major focus, on the Saloum Delta, it took long periods of time for the sites to accumulate. Inventories by G. Thilmans and C. Descamps (1982) show 93 sites 18 of which have shell tombs (903

inventories) with multiple burials. According to our inventory (Martin and Becker 1979; 1984:236—241) 138 sites were located and a dozen others reported. 14 of them have tombs (Fig 8.5).

These structures are still only known as necropolis and refuse dumps. They are coastal remains associated principally with the exploitation of two molluscs; '*Andara senilis* (arche) and Grassostrea gasar' (mangrove Oysters).

Established chronological sequences (Thilmans and Descamps 1982:31) permit situating the development of the refuse dumps between the 4th and 14th centuries and the erection of tombs between 8th and 14th centuries.

The evidence concerning the existence of urban agglomerations are not archaeologically established. They are demographic in nature. G. Thilmans and C. Descamps (1982: 50) put the number of people buried in the 903 tombs that were counted in the Saloum Delta at 18.000.

According to H. Gravrand (1983:137) the formation of the Faboura rubbish dump estimated at 500.000m³ took twenty (20) million working days.

Oral history and accounts by the early European authors have it that it was essentially intensive farming that sustained territories located in the hinterlands, especially the megalithic zone which the western phase seems to have been subjected to by Faboura influence (Thilmans *et al* 1981).

Similarly the presence of copper, gold and iron objeects in the area with shell heaps confirms the existence of commercial activities among the Senegambians who would have been thus in the same economic venture.

Earth Tombs or 'Mbanar'

The tumulus zone covers all the northern and western parts of Senegal; they were also found in the megalithic zones where assorted monuments combining the ideas of megalithic and tomb structures exist. The sites sometimes had some very important necropolis.

The size of the sites was a useful factor in deciding the importance of the necropolis. As shown in Table 4 that the sections with the greatest concentration of tombs were near the Senegal Valley (Walo and Jolloi) and the rivers Saloum and Sine also.

The numerical importance of the sand tombs in the interior of the megalithic zone cannot be overlooked: 454 sites out of a total of 1965

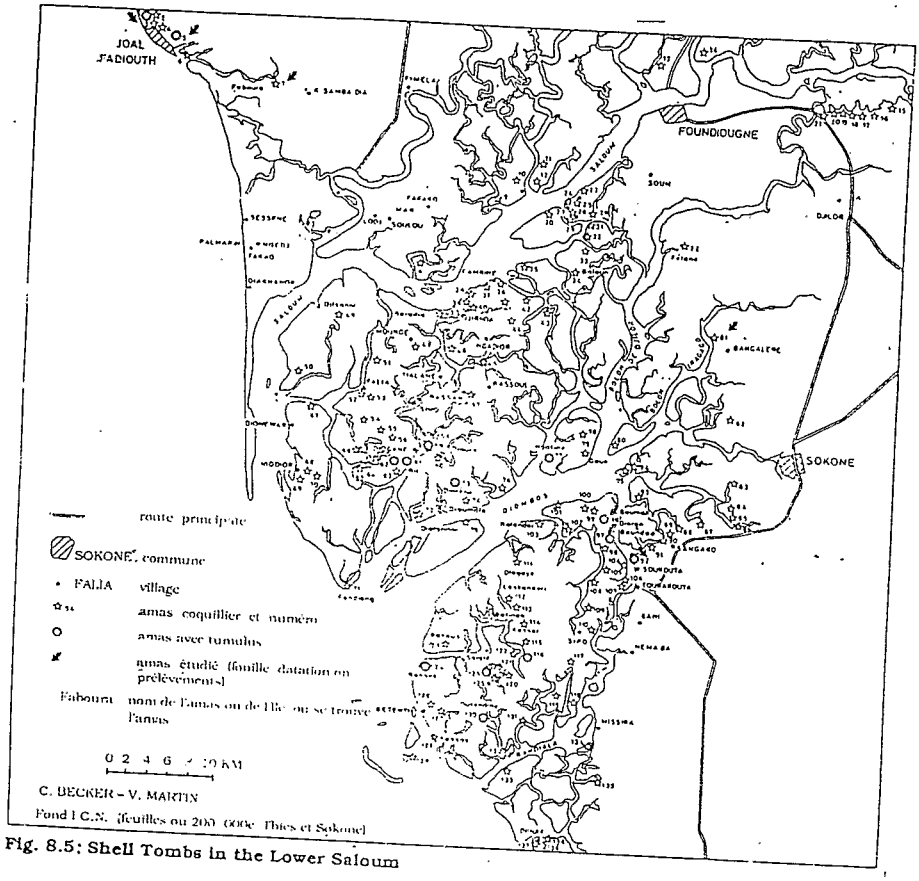

Fig. 8.5: Shell Tombs in the Lower Saloum

of which 316 comprise only tombs. The sand tombs indexed on these sites are 3,448 in number and 670 of these possess a frontal megalithic feature.

Research carried out in this area had not yet shown any important agglomerations. But the imposing refuse dumps (siind) oftentimes located in the area, are reflective of large human populations. Also, the recognition of the Soose waste (agglomeration of ruins attributed to the Soose peeople) opens up new areas for research on urbaninsation in this sector, (Diop, 1985).

A recent prospection[5] led to the discovery of several settlement sites. But in their seeming totality they are only a weak anthropic accumulation. The weakness of the anthropic evidence at the level of the settlement could eventually find its justification in the choice of architectural props.

In effect if, as one may suppose, the basic construction material was from plant then the absence of structures like occupation mound could be justified and refuse dumps would in this case be considered the best evidence of urban set up where relevant settlement/necropolis associations are lacking.

[5]This prospection was organised from 15th December 1988 to 5th January 1989 by the Dept. of Proto/Prehistory of IFAN Ch-Anta Diop and the American team of the Univ. of Rice (Texas) led by Prof. R.J. McIntosh.

TABLE 4
Tumulus Zone: Distribution of sites by Measurements and Sectors

SITES WITH TUMULUS						
	1 Tum	2—4 Tum	5 — 9 Tum	10 — 19 Tum	+20 Tum	Total
Walo No	18	14	9	8	3	52
%	34,6	26,9	17,3	15,4	5,8	100
Kayor No	107	49	13	4	1	174
%	61,5	28,1	7,5	2,3	0,6	100
Jolof No	56	43	42	12	14	167
%	33,5	25,7	25,2	7,2	8,4	100
Tarare No	75	129	59	14	5	282
%	26,6	45,7	20,9	5,0	1,8	100
Mouth of the Saloum No	12	24	15	9	3	63
%	19,0	38,1	23,8	14,3	4,8	100
Sine No	120	161	70	28	11	390
%	30,8	41,3	17,9	7,2	2,8	100
Saloum No	120	141	49	11	5	316
%	34,8	44,6	15,5	3,5	1,6	100
Total No	498	561	257	86	42	1444
%	34,5	38,8	17,8	6,0	2,9	100

Nevertheless, the earth-tombs whose chronological extension (8th—14th centuries) is partially synchronous with the shell mounds, and the river bank sites seem to be linked to the same, economic regime. The presence of copper, iron, and gold objects — the famous Rao[6] breast-plates — underscores a great diversity in trade as well as a clear mastery in the techniques of production.

On the other hand, burials in sepulchral structures depict very complex and heirarchical societies because their erection requires a serious pooling together of human and material resources of which

6 This is a golden disc measuring about 191 grams and discovered by J. Joire in 1942.

only the families occupying privileged positions in the society are capable. This opinion is supported by the existence of human sacrifices by the sides of major burials.

Moreover, the import of this is unequivocally confirmed in the accounts told by Arabs with special reference to the tomb of the king of Ghana (El Bekri, In J. Cuoq. 1975: 100) and by European accounts concerning burials among the Manding people (V. Fernandes in Becker and Martin, 1982, 263).

In summary, burials in tomb structures reveal complex societies which are relatively opened to subregional commercial circuits. However, direct evidence has not yet been established even if the existence of refuse dumps and numerous races, whose chronology is yet to be made precise, constitute good indications.

The Megalithic Zone

This area comprises 1,965 sites and a diversity of notable monuments. The total number of monuments is estimated at 16,790 with an average of 8,5 per site. Table 3 shows the unevven distribution of the sites according to size. A proper analysis would reveal the sections where the average number of monuments per site exceeds ten (Middle Saloum, Kayenior, Pakala, Kountouata, Gambia Upstream of Koussaner). Equally, sites with more than 50 monuments can be classified as urban settlements or ancient capital towns. As in the preceding zones, research in this section placed great emphasis on funeral monuments. The only reference to settlements was the one made by A. Gallay (Gallay *et al*, 1982:252). But prospections embarked upon there recently reveal the existence of important settlement sites associated with megalithic ceramic in relation to the hydrographic system and most of the monuments. The study of these sites would reveal important information about the settlement.

At the level of interpretation, observation made concerning the *mbanar* zone can be repeated even if extrinsic information (traditional narratives and Arab accounts) are entirely lacking in this sector. As a matter of fact the megalithic monuments are interpreted by the local peoples as young spouses petrified with the companions.

So, the size and the movement of the monoliths, some weighing about 2 tons, as well as the mass burials, of which some are evidently sacrifices (Thilmans *et al*, 1982) refer to heirarchical societies where

important individuals (such as Kings) were buried with sacrificed people.

Other Senegambian Sites

For the remaining part of Senegambia, prospections revealed varied and numerous sites. In the three distinctive sectors in their reports (Martin and Becker 1984: 250 — 263) are noted:

(1) 192 sites on the Ferlo, between Ferlo and Senegal — Faleme and 39 to the North–east of the megalithic zone.
(2) 73 sites to the South-east of Senegal
(3) 96 sites in Cassamance.

In spite of the problems with dating, one notes the presence of big sites with diverse relics whose origin is not always local, as well as the frequency of metallurgical relics. Nevertheless, more work on prospecting is required to discover the factors contributing to ancient urbanisation and to get proof of links with other ancient cultural, economic and political zones in all these parts of the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, archaeological evidence related to urban manifestations is still very rare and barely organised in Senegambia, where in the current state of research, the valley of the River Senegal produces the most significant relics.

But this information is relative in the sense that direct and indirect evidence to do with monumental constructions, and information concerning the development of commercial networks, confirm the existence of important centres that archaeology is obliged to research further.

Table 5
Distribution of Sites According to the Number of Monuments

Sectoral Grouping	Monuments 1	2—4	5—9	10—19	20—49	50—99	+100	Total
SALOOM VALLEY								
Middle Valley	31	51	26	34	11	9	—	16
Upper Valley	50	52	24	24	9	—	—	15
Total	81	103	50	58	20	9	—	31
BAO BOLON VALLEY								
Lower Valley	46	51	33	36	20	1	2	18
Upper Valley	38	49	30	16	8	1	—	14
Total	84	100	63	52	28	2	2	32
NIANIJA BOLON VALLEY								
Lower Valley	41	63	33	21	6	3	—	16
Middle Valley	39	40	25	16	4	—	—	12
Upper Valley	40	28	21	11	4	1	—	10
Total	120	131	79	48	14	4	—	38
KOUNTATA AND GAMBIAN VALLEYS								
Gambia	23	29	26	12	6	—	—	9
Kountata	11	22	13	25	15	2	—	8
SANDOUGOU VALLEY								
Lower Valley	26	15	17	11	12	1	—	88
Middle Valley	39	27	13	6	2	2	—	8
Vemake Wok-Wok	28	29	25	27	28	8	1	14
Upper Valley	72	30	18	28	11	8	1	16
Total	165	101	73	72	53	19	2	46
GAMBIAN VALLEY								
Total	22	6	10	19	18	1	1	17
EAST GAMBIAN BAN								
TOTAL	49	55	44	12	11	1	1	17
OVERALL TOTAL	555	547	358	298	163	38	6	188

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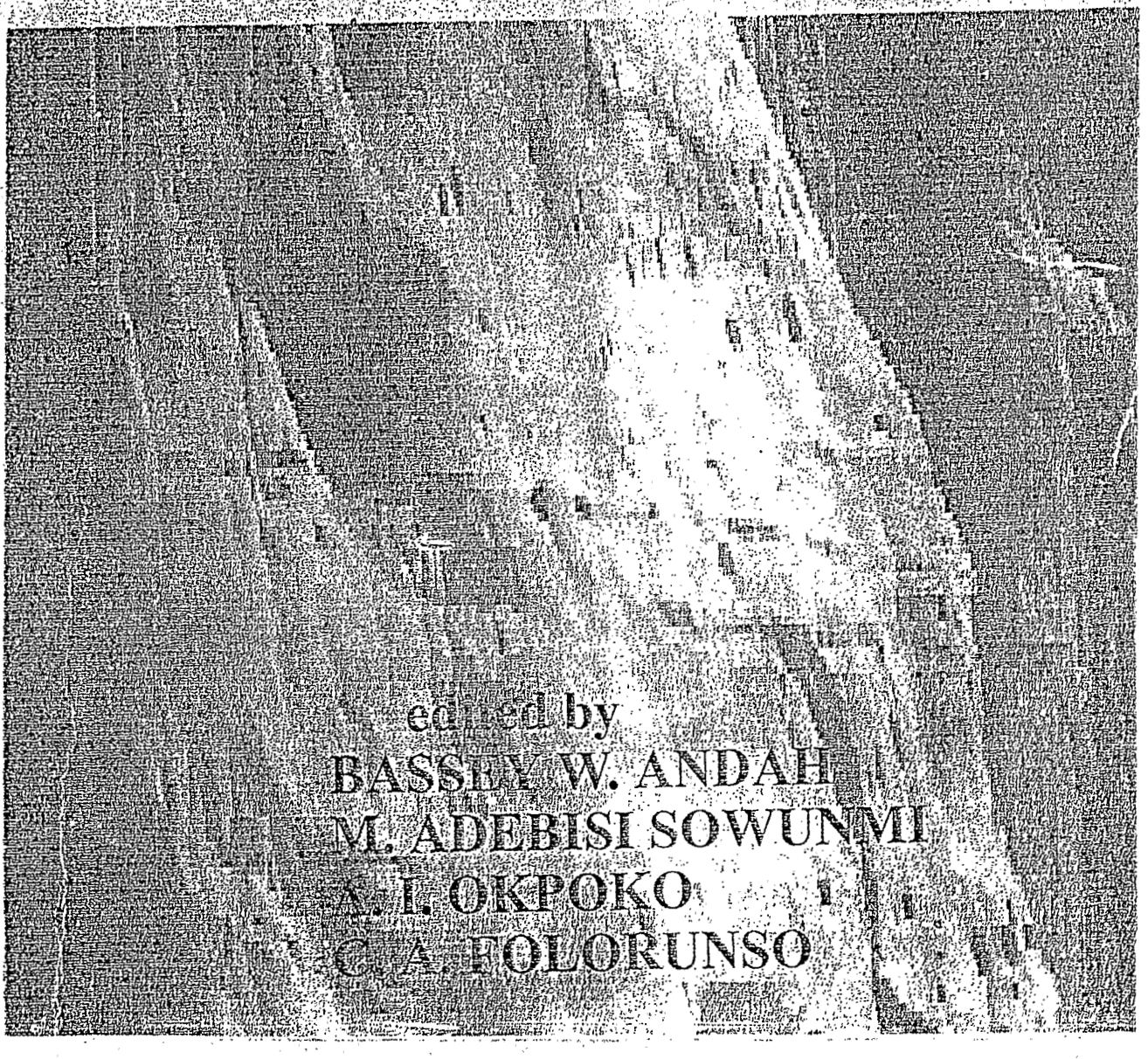

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The book, which is the third in a series arising from the conference, treats significant aspects of man's social and cultural stories in Africa within the quarternary/geographic contexts. It attempts, among other things, to give an idea of the wide range of substantive subjects, disciplines and approaches which African archaeology now embrace. Specific attention is devoted to the issue of which of the several approaches and perspectives used in African archaeology is most appropriate for identifying and reconstructing those facets of the cultural systems and resources salient for the development of African societies in various spheres of life.

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