

A cowrie workshop in the royal palaces of Abomey, Republic of Benin

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Introduction

The kingdom of Danxomè (Dahomey) is well known as one of the powerful precolonial entities of West Africa. As well as its role in warfare, territorial expansion and slave-raiding it is also recognised as having had a well-organised currency system underpinned by cowries: mostly *monetaria moneta* and *monetaria annulus*, originating from the Indian Ocean. Cowrie shells have – perhaps more than has gold, suggests Iroko (1987: 80-88), who wrote a definitive study of their cultural uses in West Africa – been the subject of a range of myths and popular beliefs. Their trade from the Indian Ocean to West Africa, via Europe, and to the Americas, has been well described by economists and historians. Gregory (1996) has explored the historical tensions between elite discourses and popular discourses on the origin and meaning of cowries in the Kingdom of Dahomey, following on from Karl Polanyi's (1966) classic work on cowries as 'primitive currency' with Dahomey as a case study. Valuable archaeological work around the heartland of Dahomey has advanced knowledge on the use of cowries in the past three or four centuries (Merkyte and Randsborg 2009, Monroe 2014, Heath 2017, Haour & Christie 2109). However, many questions persist. Work on the appropriation of this external resource over the long term by the elites of Dahomey, and on the currents of dissemination and modes of use of these shells, of the kind of work carried out by archaeologist Akin Ogundiran (2002, 2020) for the Yoruba world, remains to be done. The

operational chain of their modification, and especially the various techniques used to pierce them so that they could be strung, are beginning to be better known; at least four have been identified on archaeological materials (Christie et al. 2019).

This paper offers a first step in this direction by providing a brief account of test excavations carried out at Abomey, capital of Dahomey, in May 2022, within the courtyard of the Palace of King Guezo (reigned 1818-1859, and remembered for saying he preferred cowries to gold as they could not be counterfeited – Hogendorn & Johnson 1986: 6). Surveys carried out on the site at different times since 2019 by two of the authors (Haour and N'Dah) had revealed the presence of several concentrations of cowrie fragments which appeared to have been places at which the shells were pierced (backed). This provides an important opportunity to offer an archaeological perspective of what we are told by historical sources, for example by Scottish slave trader Archibald Dalziel in the late eighteenth century, who reports that cowries were strung at the king's palace by women, with strings 3-6 cowries short of the nominal 40 as a tax (Johnson 1970a: 45). A century later, entomologist Skertchly (1874: 28) was to claim the cowries given by the king were 'strung by the Amazons'.

The cowrie scatter was chosen because it remains one of the most visible and least disturbed on the site. This intervention represents the first archaeological examination of a cowrie cutting workshop (but for the Horn of Africa, see Insoll 2021, and Gunter Basset and Christie, forthcoming). The objectives were to explore the spatial organisation and stratigraphy of this area of cowrie processing, and to identify other processing areas within the courtyards of the royal palaces (today a UNESCO World Heritage site). Several of these are disappearing due to anthropic and natural factors such as footfall, sweeping, rain and erosion.

The area to be investigated lies to the northwest of the outer courtyard of King Ghezo, close to the *logodo* building controlling access to the courtyard. After cleaning of surface vegetation

and fallen leaves and fruit, a grid measuring 20 x 10 m was laid out and mapped (Figure 1, 2). Several areas of concentration of archaeological remains were identified; this material was often found embedded in compact soil, hypothesised to be the remains of walling. Artefacts mainly consisted of cowrie backs, potsherds, lithics, and fragments of glass. A systematic surface collection was carried out and a test pit placed at across the densest concentration of cowrie fragments.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

The test pit (1m x 1m) was excavated in arbitrary spits in two phases – first the northern 40 cm (bags labelled 1-40) then the southern 60 cm (bags labelled 1-60). All sediment was sieved at a 0.5cm mesh. The final stratigraphy, showing the north-facing section, is shown in Figure 3. Cowrie backs were largely limited to the uppermost layer, which was compact and dark red; below it were a sandy compact dark reddish brown layer with rootlets, and two layers that were heavily disrupted by rootlets and in which artefacts were scarce. Once the test pit completed, surface materials were collected from the entire area.

Figure 3.

Preliminary analysis itemised 11570 cowrie shell fragments. This comprised 3096 dorsa and 136 ventral fragments from the northern 40cm (1-40), and 8038 dorsa and 300 ventral fragments from the southern 60cm (1-60) (Table 1). Most of the remains from both test pits were excavated from the first 10cm spit (88%, n=2858 from 1-40; and 99%, n=8230 from 1-60). The proportion of dorsa to ventral fragments is similar across the assemblage,

representing between 2% and 5% of the remains from each context. Generally speaking, the ventral remains are broken medially, with the columellar or labium intact; it is likely these shells would have been broken during the modification process and been discarded. This suggests the workers modifying the shells had a fairly high success rate. Initial observations suggest that while *Monetaria annulus* predominates, *Monetaria moneta* shells were also present, as well as at least one ventral fragment of *Naria helvola helvola* (*Eurosaria helvola*) – all are Indian Ocean species.

Spit and volume	Pottery	Bone	Cowries (Dorsa)	Cowries (Ventral)	Glass	Pipe fragments		Baked earth	Glazed wares	Slag	Lithics	Charcoal	Total
						Local	Imported						
1-40 RS	4		800	49		1	1				1		7
1-40 0-5 0.02m ³	0		1598	62								1	1
1-40 5-10 0.02m ³	7		335	14								1	7
1-40 10-15 0.02m ³	3		5	2								1	4
1-40 15-20 0.02m ³	0		77	2									0
1-40 20-30 0.04m ³	29		89	2									29
1-40 30-50 0.08m ³	35		192	5		1							36
1-60 RS	0		1806	67									0
1-60 0-10 0.06m ³	8		6128	229							1		9
1-60 10-40 0.18m ³	37		85	3		1			1	1	1	1	41
1-60 40-50 0.06m ³	63	8	19	1	1								72
Total	186	8	11134	436	1	3	1	0	0	1	4	4	206

Table 1. The finds. Table by Andréa Ismène Koudakpo, Honoré Mawutin Adokin, Camarou Houéssou and Annalisa Christie

Further analysis of the assemblage is underway and will involve the full study of modification techniques. While the ventral fragments will be recorded following the strategies outlined in Christie et al. (2019), the dorsa will be assessed following a new method, originally devised to

analyse a smaller assemblage from Djibouti, excavated by Madeleine Gunter Basset. Specifically, the remains will be classified by size range (>5mm = extra small, 5-10mm = small, 10-15mm = medium, 15-20mm = large, <20mm = extra-large) and each dorsum examined to identify patterning that might indicate species. Two common forms of modification involve an initial perforation of the dorsum by Popping the Cap – Posterior (PTC-P) and Popping the Cap Anterior (PTC-A) (See Christie et al. 2019: 495); these processes can leave a corresponding notch in the posterior or anterior edge of the dorsa. Where observed, this will be recorded as AN – Anterior Notch, or PN – Posterior Notch, using the curve of the fragment to determine orientation. Dorsa without any notches will be recorded as R – Regular, whereas dorsa with jagged rather than smoothed edges will be coded as I – Irregular. Incomplete dorsa will be recorded as Fr- Fragmented (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Conclusion

The initial results from this pilot study demonstrate the potential for future study of cowrie assemblages and, more specifically, of this rare instance of a cowrie-processing area from one of the best-known cowrie-using polities of West Africa. Cowries were a dominant import to the Bight of Benin during the period AD 1650–1880 and were widely established locally for commercial and social payments (Ogundiran 2002, 2020). Ouidah was probably the greatest importer of cowries at the peak of the trade, in the eighteenth century (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986: 113). Up to that point, it is likely that the shells concerned were of the *Monetaria moneta* species, but by the early nineteenth century cowries in heavy demand at coastal settlements such as Ouidah, from where they were sent to Dahomey and ‘into the very heart of North Africa’ (John Adams cited in Hogendorn and Johnson 1986: 107–108).

Historical sources advance that an experimental introduction to Ouidah of *Monetaria annulus* cowries from the East African coast was attempted by European traders in 1845 and that this species eventually proved acceptable to local traders (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986: 74). The fluctuations in value of these shells have been amply discussed and Johnson (1970b: 339) suggests that in 1871, 6900 cowries went to the silver dollar in Abomey, as compared with 10,000 on the coast. Skertchley (1874) describes frequent ceremonies at which King Glele handed out cowries to his subjects: one such ceremony lasted four hours.

Figure 5

The finds described here consist of the by-product of cowrie processing, and others exist within the palace courtyards (Figure 5). Recovery of hoards of cowries themselves is routinely reported in the Abomey region but few have been made available to researchers; exceptions are a group of 213 cowries recovered from a grave near the palaces at Abomey (Merkyte and Randsborg 2009), and a cache of 303 cowries from the site of Saclo (Monroe n.d.), thought to date respectively to the seventeenth/eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Haour & Christie (2019: 312-313) have also discussed material from a series of sites lying within 300 kilometres of one another, thought to date to between the late seventeenth and early twentieth centuries and connected to the history of Dahomey and Oyo. While one might have expected consistency between these sites they are instead marked by variability. The Abomey cowries will be added to this ongoing work, shedding light on the changing involvement in Atlantic trade networks of West Africa's major cosmopolitan polities through the lens of cowries, that played a key role in the lived experience of the communities receiving them.

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