

# The Mainland Creeks of Southern Somalia: an Archaeological Appraisal

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*Roma*

This paper continues to discuss the coastal survey work carried out in southern Somalia during a period of three years from 1981 to 1984. This would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the Somali National Academy and the help and encouragement of the director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, the late Dr. Neville Chittick. I am particularly indebted to Janet Haymen who took the photographs at Kudai and also to Dr. Antonello Angelucci who has given me invaluable geological advice.

Very little attention has been paid to the coastal sites and only passing reference has been made by travellers to the sites along the mainland creeks. These creeks, of which there are three, are located south of Kisimayu and are known as the Chovai creek, the Anole creek and the Meno wa Hori creek at Bur Gavo. They originate in the vast marshy region that extends westwards and form drainage channels to the sea. All three penetrate the interior to a considerable length and subsidiary channels branch off the main creeks, especially near the marshy sources. The impact of the tides extends many kilometres inland, exposing the claw-like roots of the mangrove trees at low tide. When the creeks meet the open sea, the mouths are wide, but after several kilometres of navigation, the area takes on a forbidding air with little sign of life and the banks become monotonous with the thick lining of the mangrove trees. Because of these trees, landings are difficult and wells infrequent.

The prosperity of the coastal settlements depended on the rarities that came from the interior, such as animal skins, aromatic woods and ivory and a lively trade followed the rhythm of the monsoons. It is also important to remember that a much older economic and commercial system, dealing with subsistence items (significantly salt in this area) had already been in existence for generations.

The inlets were, and still are, frequently navigated by small, flat bottomed boats which have no difficulty negotiating the shallow waters. Two previous travellers in this area (Brenner 1868 and Elliot 1926) have left a bewildering and often confusing account of various sites in the vicinity of the inlets and Brenner also suggested that further ruins exist along the banks of the Anole Creek of which, now, there are no signs.

It would seem unlikely that there are major sites at any great distance from the sea, despite, in the area of Bur Gavo, the existence of the most fertile land

of the area. Although the banks of these creeks supply wood for house and boat building and a variety of crops including maize, millet and sorghum, until recently wild animals presented a continual threat. In fact, part of the destruction of the tombs has been hastened by elephants rubbing themselves against the corners.

The three creeks occur where there are habitable islands close-by. This had a considerable bearing on the use of the creeks as certain crops could not be grown on the exposed and poor top soil of the islands. Today, many of the former inhabitants of Ngumi, Ciula and Chovai have moved to the mainland and benefit from the more profitable life which it offers. A sparse population of old people remain on the islands but are visited regularly by their relations from across the narrow strip of sea.

The general picture that emerges from the survey of the creeks is of a society, not overly prosperous but using the resources available to the best of their ability and congregating towards the mouths of the creeks where trade was lively and transportation easier. With the exception of the exquisite little mosque at Rasini, possibly the finest on the East African coast, the mosques situated along the creeks and on the coast are very uniform in size and decoration, being approximately  $8 \times 12$  metres, with either two or three doors at the side, ablution facilities outside on the eastern wall and sometimes one or two tombs attached to the northern wall. Again the mihrabs, for the most part, seem cast from a similar mould, being usually recessed two metres and often with vertical stonework ribbing. One exception is the mihrab of the mosque at Rasini which is surrounded by a quotation from the Koran written in cufic form. Above the mihrab is a curious leaf decoration which occurs in mosques on the Kenya coast. In Somalia, only two other examples are known: on a tomb at Ras Kiambone and on Koyama island where Elliot calls it « mtambu ». The absence of impressive buildings may be explained by the fact that these settlements derived from a largely subsistence economy as they do today. The only unique features that does stand out amongst the buildings along the coast is the size and individuality in decoration and height of the pillar tombs.

### **Archaeological Sites on the Mainland Creeks of Southern Somalia**

*Chovai Creek*, which rises out of the drainages known as the Mcho ya Yamani, is the most northerly of the three inlets. A small modern settlement, known as Stanboul, has grown up on the northern bank and boats of limited size can approach close to a small landing littered with cowrie shells. Some two kilometres inland, towards the northwest, are the remains of several step-ended tombs of no great age and possibly dating from the 19th century. As to the ruins near the hamlet of Baghdad on the southern bank, I could find no trace of the ruined mosque and other funerary objects noted by Brenner (1868: 362) and Elliot (1926: 258-59). All that remains is scattered stones, presumably from the ruins although, if this is so, it is the first instance I have seen funerary material removed for other purposes.

The inhospitable terrain has not encouraged settlement although the mangrove trees lining the banks of the creek were used by the people of Chovai (the island opposite the mouth of the inlet) for the building of *mitepe* in the past. The small modern village of Yamani is the only other sign of habitation and a certain amount of activity results from the salt deposits found close-by.

Sailing south, *Anole Creek* flows into the sea opposite the southern end of Chula Island and several days were spent here in April 1983 drawing, photographing and measuring the sites. A prosperous village has grown up around the mouth of the creek, thanks to the presence of a fishing project set up by the Food and Agriculture Organisation at Kudai. Judging from the remains of stone buildings, funerary monuments and a fine mosque located on the northern bank of the creek, these sites once enjoyed considerable trade and prosperity. It should be noted that Chula island was considered of sufficient importance by the Portuguese that in 1686 a ship was sent there from Goa and this was followed by a fleet in 1696. This suggests that Kudai must also have enjoyed the benefits of trade as a port of some importance in the 17th century. One of the navigational drawbacks along most of the Somali coast is lack of good anchorage for larger vessels, as only boats with a very shallow draught can proceed upstream, 40 kilometres being the limit and eight kilometres being the usual navigational possibility.

On the southern bank of the Anole creek is a small pillar tomb with depressions for three bowls on the eastern wall. The southern wall has a small, stepped tombstone. Vegetation, growing inside, has badly damaged the walls. Close-by, to the south, are the remains of a solidly built, rectangular building, divided into two parts. It has been suggested that this might be the ruins of a mosque as traces of an ablution cistern are found near by; however, the foundations are unlike any other mosque observed along the southern coast.

Another small stone structure, possibly a tomb, is adjacent and the area is covered with scattered stones and presumably formed part of a small funerary complex.

On the northern bank of the creek, there are the ruins of what must once have been a fine mosque known today as Kwa Adi, although Elliot (1926: 348-49) refers to it as « the well-preserved mosque of Borali bin Bwana ». Corresponding to the dimensions of coastal mosques, being 10 × 8 metres, only the north and south walls now remain standing. What is of particular interest is that pieces of the fallen roof are carved in patterns of recessed squares, identical to the remains of the collapsed roof of the Rasini mosque, although the mihrab shows none of the delicate carving. Brenner wrote that it was built at the end of the 18th century when people of Chula began to cultivate the area, only to retreat to the island again because of Orma raids.

Basing the date of the construction of the Rasini mosque on the list of headmen from Chula collected by Elliot (1926: 340), Sherif Omari, who is presumed to have built the mosque, would have constructed it around the middle of the 18th century. Chittick gives an earlier date but sherds found both at the Kwa Adi and Rasini mosques throw no further light on a more exact date. As in the case of most mosques along the coast, the roof was not destined for a long life, being constructed of a lime concrete ceiling, supported on mangrove poles which were placed on square or octagonal timbers.

A tomb with triangular ends is adjacent. To the seaward side are the remains of a sizeable house, 12 metres long with 12 small rectangular holes appearing near the top, presumably for timbers to support the roof. This whole area consists of scattered stones, ruins of houses and step ended tombs. One ruined house shows remains of finely carved door posts. The step ended tombs are scattered over a wide area where the local people are now growing maize. One very dilapidated tomb has a fallen pillar lying hidden amongst the undergrowth, the pillar measur-

ing 1 metre 60 cm and with the usual depression for a bowl. The logical access to this settlement is by sea and a small cove serves as a beaching area for local craft.

It is at this point in their journeys along the southern Somali coast and up the creeks that a certain amount of supposition and confusion creeps into the writings of our normally reliable friends, Elliot and Brenner. Pillar tombs and tombs are mentioned by Brenner and more specifically placed by Elliot (but not visited by him) some three to four miles up the Anole Creek. Then we have the mysterious Osterun (Elliot), more appropriately re-named Stirikani by Dr. Wilson, which is rumoured to lie somewhere in the interior between the Chovai and Anole creeks. The only recent information obtained on any undiscovered sites in this area was given to me by Mansoor Obo who was born at Kudai and claimed to be 90 years old. He remembered hunting for cheetahs with his father as a small boy and recalls that in the bush on the other side of Simba Hill, there were scattered stones and remains of a wall some 10 metres long and half a metre high. Due to the thick vegetation, I also was unable to locate this site.

The last, and possibly best known of these mainland creeks is the Meno wa Hori at *Bur Gavo*. (Properly Buur Gaab). This is a « drowned » river like the other creeks, a peculiarity to the southern Somali coast. The people of the Bur Gavo area maintain that during the rainy season, the surface water becomes somewhat « sweet ».

Bur Gavo has arguably the finest anchorage after Hafun along the entire Somali coast and as the water is deep, craft can navigate the 25 kilometres to Bushbushi at all times of the year to collect water where there is a well. Flat, small bottomed craft can even proceed another 20 kilometres further up the inlet. The site of Bur Gavo has been well documented by several people, notably Elliot, Grottanelli and Chittick who show that this was a port of considerable importance as early as the 17th century. No signs of stone buildings were found at any great distance from Bur Gavo, despite hectares of fertile land along the banks near Wayore.

Judging from the existence of wells at Bur Gavo (now dried up), the site afforded everything that the inhabitants needed and it was not practical to settle further up the creek with its difficult landings.

Of the sherds collected from the banks and mouths of all three creeks, the major part were undecorated pottery, as well as Islamic monochrome and a few pieces of celadon. As would be expected, most of the sherds were found where the creeks join the sea and in these places, blue and white Chinese ware were very prolific. Water containers now tend to be of plastic, but until recently the sherds indicated that they came from hard baked, well made utility articles in use as water and storage jars or eating bowls. The only difference between sherds found in these areas and sites further south is that the latter sherds tend to be more prolifically decorated with imaginative vertical and horizontal lines. Nothing found pre-dated the mid 16th century.

From the survey of these creeks, it would appear that they follow the same general settlement pattern as those of other sites stretching from Kisimayu to Ras Kiambone to the south. They seem, from the rather sparse archaeological evidence to hand, to have been inhabited not much earlier than the last quarter of the 18th century and probably resulted from a secondary population dispersal. The sites on the Bajuni islands must be presumed to have a greater age, but the more fertile banks of the creeks certainly attracted the islanders to the mainland and

incursions up the creeks themselves would have resulted in contact with people from the interior bent on trading their animal skins and ivory.

These coastal surveys prove yet again that more serious archaeological work is needed before many of these sites disappear or become even harder to place.

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