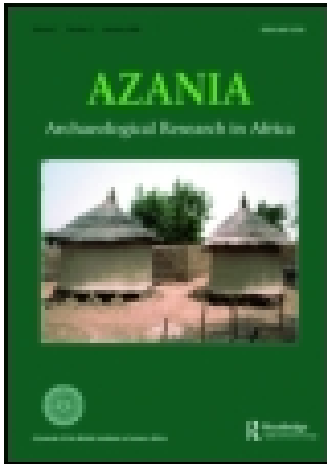


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Settlement history and chronology in the Savè area of central Bénin

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Settlement history and chronology in the Savè area of central Bénin

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This article presents the results of recent archaeological research investigating changes and continuity in site patterning and material culture in the Savè area of the Republic of Bénin. Our research indicates that by AD 1000 the area was inhabited by iron-using agriculturalists. The establishment of the Shabe kingdom in the seventeenth century is associated with multiple changes in the area: increased settlement size, a dispersed settlement pattern and a greater variety of pottery decoration practices. Non-local artefacts demonstrate connections between the Savè area and the broader region, as well as participation in global economic networks. Instability in the nineteenth century led to a settlement pattern centred on fortified sites. Though many settlements were destroyed and/or abandoned during this period, the Shabe kingdom incorporated other refugee groups into its political system and increased its presence in the Yoruba-Edo region.

Keywords: Shabe; Yoruba-Edo region; Oyo Empire; oral history

Cet article présente les résultats de la recherche archéologique récente sur le sujet des changements et continuités dans la structuration de sites et la culture matérielle dans la zone de Savè de la République du Bénin. Notre recherche indique que par l'an 1000, la zone était habitée par les agriculteurs qui ont utilisé le fer. L'établissement du royaume Shabe au dix-septième siècle est associé à plusieurs changements dans la zone: la taille accrue des villages, une configuration d'habitation dispersée, et une plus grande variété de décorations de poterie. Artéfacts non-locaux démontrent connexions entre la zone de Savè et la région, ainsi que sa participation à l'économie mondiale. L'instabilité dans le dix-neuvième siècle a conduit à une configuration d'habitation centrée sur sites fortifiés. Alors que de nombreux villages ont été détruits et / ou abandonnés au cours de cette période, le royaume Shabe devenu plus important dans le paysage politique de la région Yoruba-Edo.

Introduction

The Shabe kingdom was one of the many precolonial polities in the Yoruba-Edo region of West Africa that claimed its authority through descent from the founding kings of Ile-Ife, the prominent political and religious centre in present-day Nigeria. Shabe was the most northwesterly of these polities, with its capital at Shabe-Idadu, now the city of Savè in Bénin, and its central axis along the Okpara River that separates Bénin and Nigeria (Figure 1). Shabe

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oral histories vividly detail narratives of migration, settlement foundation, alliance-building, ritual practice and conflict, many of which link developments in the Savè area to broader trends in the Yoruba-Edo region. Archaeological research has explored these trends through investigations of settlement histories, political economies and forms of regional interaction. Early research targeted major urban centres of polities that interacted with early European explorers and traders, including Ile-Ife (Willett 1960a; Garlake 1974, 1977; Lankton *et al.* 2006), Benin (Connah 1975; Andah 1982; Darling 1984), and Old Oyo (Willett 1960b; Soper and Darling 1980; Agbaje-Williams 1990). These investigations aimed to establish the antiquity and extent of these centres' political hegemony, the origins of their urbanisation and their potential interaction with polities in the Sahel and northern Africa (Okpoko 1998; Ogundiran 2005). More recent research in the region has focused on the smaller sites that existed between these centres, ranging from minor kingdoms to temporary refuges (Oyelaran 1998; Alabi 2000; Ogundiran 2002a, 2012, 2014; Usman 2004; Aleru 2006; Ogundele and Odunbaku 2006; Ogunfolakan *et al.* 2006). In addition, site-based studies are being supplemented by landscape perspectives that have greatly enhanced our understanding of how variable settlement could be in the Yoruba-Edo region specifically and in West Africa more generally (Monroe and Ogundiran 2012). This variability stems, in part, from the myriad forms of regional interaction that connected societies of varying scales across the continent (Stahl 2004; Monroe 2013). For example, settlement in the Igbomina area in the northern part

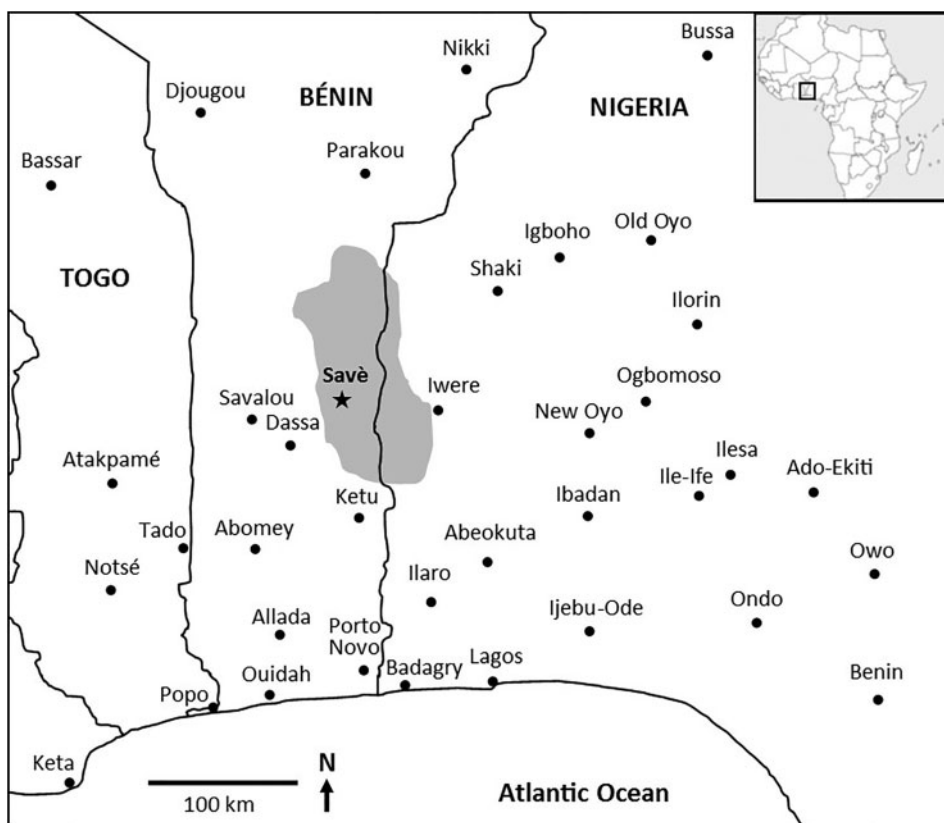


Figure 1. Political centres, *c.* AD 1600-1900, in the Yoruba-Edo region of West Africa. The grey area represents the maximum extent of the Shabe kingdom's territory.

of the Yoruba-Edo region was marked by a steady stream of Yoruba migration and continuity in social organisation over centuries, despite the fact that the area was ruled by successive foreign polities (Usman 2012: 192). This contrasts with developments in the Upper Osun area in the centre of the Yoruba-Edo region, where diverse migrants from many neighbouring areas settled in waves, each contributing elements to a new syncretic identity (Ogundiran 2009: 48–49). Though both of these areas can be characterised as frontiers (*sensu* Kopytoff 1987), their differences underscore the difficulty in attempting to discern a typical Yoruba-Edo settlement pattern. Settlement histories in the region are contingent on the interplay between broadly distributed social institutions, idiosyncratic landscape features and the negotiation of power among political factions.

For many parts of the Yoruba-Edo region, oral history has played an important role in framing chronology (Ogundiran 2003). Narratives of migration, violence and political upheaval can provide key events with which conceptually to map out temporal and geographic relationships. Fortunately, oral histories of the Shabe kingdom have been recorded, compared and analysed by many researchers over the past century (Parrinder 1947; Mouléro 1964; Schiltz 1985; Palau Martí 1992a, 1992b, 1993; Adediran 1994; Ali Babio 1994; Adam *et al.* 1996; Flynn 1997; Igué 2005). However, little archaeological research has been conducted in the Savè area that can productively combine oral history and material remains. Indeed, there has been no systematic archaeological research conducted in the western part of the Yoruba-Edo region, contrasting with the important contributions that have been made in its central, southern and northern parts. This is unfortunate, given archaeology's potential to explain the social processes behind the events recorded in oral history (Robertshaw 2000). Furthermore, archaeology can attend to the gaps in history and the dissonance that arises between competing narratives (Stahl 2001: 33–34; Schmidt and Walz 2007). In the Savè area, archaeological research provides an important supplemental source to address lingering questions about the integration of autochthons and migrants in the formation of the kingdom, the relationship between Shabe élites and their counterparts in Ile-Ife and Old Oyo and the extent of destruction during the wars of the nineteenth century.

This paper presents the results of archaeological survey and excavations conducted in the Savè area of Bénin in 2012 and 2013. It is the first systematic archaeological research conducted in the western part of the Yoruba-Edo region and so constitutes a necessary, through admittedly preliminary, starting point for future investigations of the area. Our research focused on two aspects of the area's archaeology and history: 1) its occupation sequence, with particular attention paid to the early Shabe kingdom and the period prior to its foundation; and 2) its diverse material cultures and architectural traditions. These foci allow us to describe the Savè area's settlement history with respect to connections to the wider region. This includes not only the rest of the Yoruba-Edo region, but also Borgu to the north and the Abomey Plateau and Atlantic littoral to the southwest. Our aims are aided considerably by the strong tradition of archaeological research already conducted in northern (Petit 2005; N'dah 2009; Haour *et al.* 2011; Haour 2013) and southern Bénin (Adande and Adagba 1988; Bagodo 1993; Kelly 2001; Monroe 2005, 2014; Randsborg and Merkyte 2009; Norman 2012).

Unfortunately, relatively little archaeological research has been conducted in the Savè area. Oliver Davies visited the area in the 1950s and noted several archaeological sites, but did not conduct excavations nor collect artefacts (Adagba 1987). Gleave (1963) described abandoned hilltop settlements in western Nigeria, including part of the Shabe kingdom. Gleave's focus, however, was only on the most recent occupation of these settlements — those linked to warfare and instability during the nineteenth century — and their

abandonment during the colonial period (Gleave 1963: 351). He did not investigate contemporary non-refuge sites, nor earlier forms of settlement. In the course of her ethnographic and oral historical research, Palau Martí (1992a, 1992b, 1993) collected coarse earthenware sherds from a hilltop site for the Musée Historique d'Abomey. Her goal was simply to demonstrate that sites known from oral histories still existed. The first archaeological excavations in the area were conducted near Ouèssè, northwest of Savè, but these were focused on obtaining contextual information for stone sculptures discovered accidentally (Adande 1987). More substantial archaeological research was later conducted by students of the University of Abomey-Calavi. This research identified two-dozen sites throughout the Shabe kingdom's traditional territory (Labiya 2008). It also demonstrated that oral histories preserved key information about the location and features of archaeological sites in the area. The research did not, however, attempt to place sites in a chronological framework or investigate relationships between sites or the broader region. A systematic investigation of the archaeological landscape is necessary to understand the area's dynamic settlement history.

Research methods

Our research included three complementary components of fieldwork to collect archaeological data at multiple scales. Two survey components investigated site patterning in a context of regional interaction, while an excavation component targeted individual features of sites. Research was conducted between June and August 2012 and between February and August 2013. The primary study area covers the central portion of the Shabe kingdom surrounding the capital of Shabe-Idadu, now known as Savè. This area of approximately 1640 km² extends from the Ouémé River in the west to the Okpara River in the east and from Kaboua in the north to Djabata in the south (Figure 2). Kaboua and Djabata were chosen to be included in the study area due to their importance in the Shabe monarchy's present-day installation rites (Palau Martí 1992a). Several archaeological sites outside of the study area that were documented by Labiya (2008) were also visited by the research team.

Oral history provided the overarching chronological framework for our research. Shabe histories cover many different kinds of narratives, from the exploits of ancient kings to the origins of food prohibitions for individual lineages. Most importantly for our research, however, are the narratives that describe major shifts in the settlement history of the area. We identified four such narratives: the initial migration of Shabe groups into the area around AD 1600; the subsequent foundation of the kingship institution around 1700; a series of wars fought in the area following the dissolution of the Oyo Empire around 1830; and finally the imposition of French colonial rule in 1894. These four narratives divide settlement history in the Savè area into Early Shabe, Middle Shabe, Late Shabe and Colonial periods, respectively. The dates of the events described in the first three narratives are derived from Adedirán (1994), who used regency lengths, comparison with other king lists in the region and relationships to global events to estimate dates. Understanding settlement history in the colonial period is aided by the wealth of maps and other documents generated by the colonial administration. Though Colonial period sites were documented in the study area, they are not the emphasis of the present research. Instead, we focus on the earlier periods that lack written texts. Fortunately for archaeology, each period-defining narrative is associated with a specific place on the landscape — the initial migration with the site of Atenro; the founding of the kingdom with the capital of Shabe-Idadu; and the wars of the nineteenth century with the fortified refuge of Fiditi. Each site serves as a reference point that can be used to assign other sites

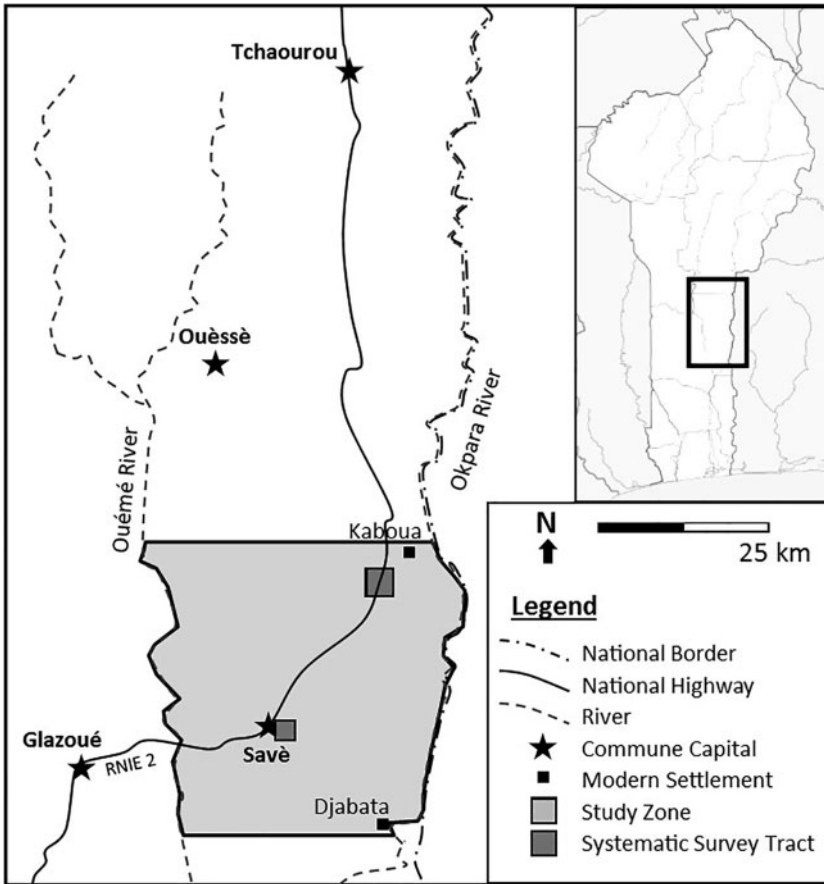


Figure 2. The study area within the Republic of Bénin.

in the study area to Early, Middle or Late periods. In addition, some sites were claimed to have been already abandoned by the time of the initial Shabe migration and so were assigned to a pre-Shabe period. Sites that lacked any mention in oral history were not assigned to a period.

Through reconnaissance survey, the research team located archaeological sites with the help of community participants. Our research brought together the archaeological knowledge of 26 modern Savè hills area communities into a comprehensive inventory of 59 archaeological sites (Figure 3). Each site's location was recorded with a Garmin 62S handheld GPS receiver, its features mapped and photographed, surface artefacts sampled and associated oral histories recorded. At sites with large surface artefact scatters (>1 ha), the research team collected artefacts in 2 x 2 m sample units from different areas in order to estimate surface artefact densities across the site. The team also opportunistically collected diagnostic artefacts, such as coarse earthenware rim sherds, decorated body sherds, pipe fragments, beads and European-manufactured objects. At smaller sites (<1 ha), surface collecting was limited to the opportunistic collection of diagnostic artefacts. For each site, community participants were asked if any of the three reference sites described above were contemporary with the site's occupation or use, or if the site had been occupied during the colonial period. Through this method, all but six sites could

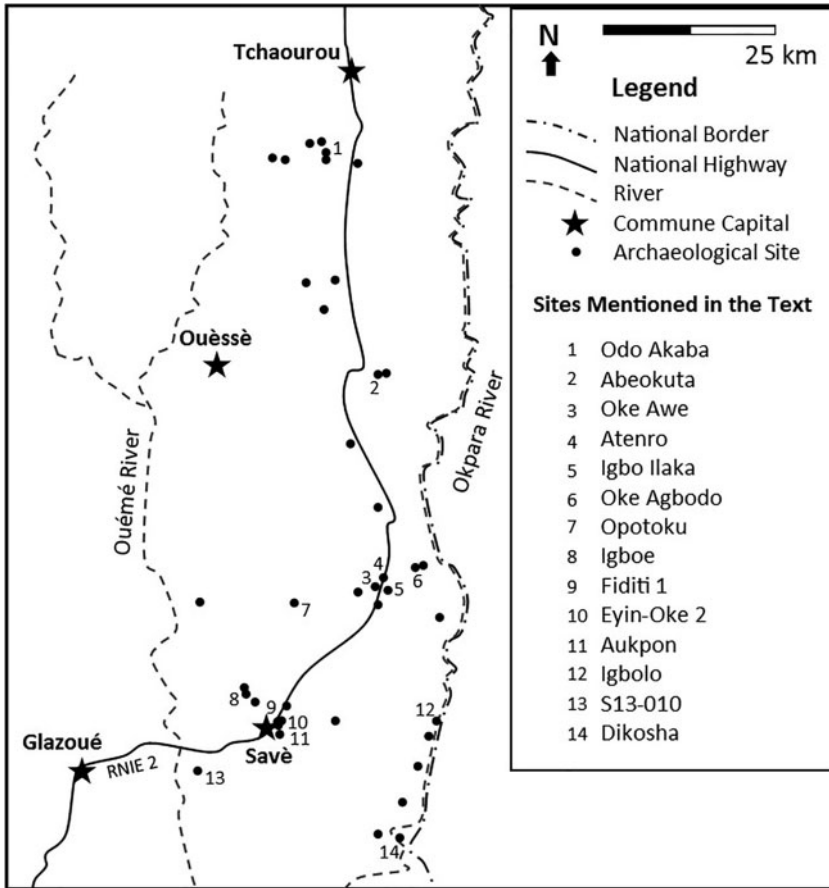


Figure 3. Archaeological sites recorded during the reconnaissance survey.

be assigned to one or more periods (Table 1). Of the six that could not be assigned, four were rockshelter sites that were part of modern ritual practice.

Systematic intensive survey was conducted in two tracts — a 2 x 2 km area surrounding the Late Shabe period site of Fiditi and adjacent to the capital Shabe-Idadu founded in the Middle Shabe period and a 3 x 3 km area surrounding the Early Shabe period site of Atenro. Prior to the start of the survey, multi-spectrum imagery of the Atenro tract was obtained from the WorldView-2 satellite in order to identify potential features and differences in groundcover that might affect survey results. Although tall grass made survey cumbersome in some parts of the tract, archaeological features were identified in all types of groundcover. Within each tract the research team walked parallel north-south transects spaced 10 m apart and recorded sites, features and surface artefacts as described for the reconnaissance survey above. The close spacing of the transects effectively allowed full coverage surface survey of each tract. Transect walking was not possible in parts of the Fiditi tract where steep hills hindered survey. Where the hills were passable, survey was conducted along their contours. In addition, the locations of all mature baobab, iroko and kapok trees in the systematic survey tracts were recorded. As noted for other parts of the Yoruba-Edo region and southern Bénin, these trees are often associated with archaeological sites (Darling 2008; Norman 2009: 396; Ogundiran 2012:

Table 1. Sites from the reconnaissance survey as associated with oral historical periods.

Oral historical period	Date	Number of sites
Pre-Shabe	Before AD 1600	2
Early	AD 1600–1700	5
Early to Middle		2
Middle	AD 1700–1830	16
Middle to Late		7
Middle to Colonial		2
Late	AD 1830–1894	12
Late to Colonial		4
Colonial	AD 1894–1960	3
Unassigned		6

235–236). This association was confirmed in the Savè area during the reconnaissance survey, which found that these tree species were integral to modern landscape management and ritual practices (Gurstelle 2013). All the trees recorded in the two systematic survey tracts were associated with other archaeological features, such as surface artefact scatters. A total of 28 sites not recorded during the reconnaissance survey were documented in the two tracts. One site was reported to be a Fulani camp recently abandoned around the year 2000. No other sites had associated oral histories and so remained unassigned to a period.

Excavations were conducted at nine sites that spanned the range of periods derived from oral history. Sites were chosen that have large surface artefacts scatters (>1 ha) with mature baobab, iroko or kapok trees growing nearby, features indicative of village sites. Two additional sites that met the size and tree criteria but could not be assigned a period through oral history were also included, giving a total of 11 sampled sites (Table 2). Our excavations had two goals: obtaining datable artefacts in reliable stratigraphic contexts and documenting the range of material cultures and architectural traditions present in the Savè area. At each site, 1 x 2 m or 2 x 2 m units were excavated according to natural stratigraphy and architectural features, sub-divided, where necessary, into arbitrary 10 cm levels. Coarse earthenware sherds were the most ubiquitous artefact class, although ground stone, flaked stone, iron, glass and refined earthenware artefacts were also recovered. Faunal remains were also recovered from most units. Five litre soil samples from each stratigraphic context were floated to recover archaeobotanical remains. Wood charcoal and charred seeds were recovered *in situ* whenever possible for AMS radiocarbon dating. Fifteen samples from nine sites were submitted for dating to the NOSAMS Laboratory at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in order to anchor the relative chronology derived from oral history to absolute dates (Table 3). Coarse earthenware body sherds and ground stone artefacts were coded, counted, weighed and photographed in the field. Other artefact classes, including diagnostic sherds such as rims, necks, handles, etc., were brought back to archaeological laboratories at the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Michigan for additional analyses.

The Shabe frontier: the Pre-Shabe and Early Shabe periods

Shabe oral histories claim that the kingdom formed following a migration of Oyo and Boko lineages from Nikki in northern Bénin (Palau Martí 1992a: 115; Adediran 1994:

Table 2. Summary of excavated sites and artefact assemblages.

Site	Oral historical period	Calibrated ¹⁴ C dates	Surface scatter area (ha)	Artefact classes present in excavation										
				C. earthenware	Ground Stone	Iron	Glass Bead	Pipe	Cowrie	Stone bead	Clay bead	Bottle glass	Ref. earthenware	
Dikosha	Pre-Shabe	AD 1036–1160, AD 1170–1263	1.3	X	X									
Odo Akaba	Pre-Shabe	AD 1293–1399, AD 1311–1434	2.3	X	X	X	X							
Igbo Ilaka	Early	AD 1031–1157, AD 1668–1946	3.6	X	X	X								
Eyin-Oke 2	Early	AD 1298–1410	4.5	X	X	X								
Atenro (I)	Early	AD 1529– modern, AD 1668–1946	8.0	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Aukpon	Early to Middle	AD 1529– modern, AD 1640– modern	2.8	X	X	X		X	X			X		
Opotoku	Middle	–	4.3	X										
Igboe	Middle to Late	AD 1668–1946	3.3	X		X		X	X	X	X		X	
Fiditi 1	Late	–	12.1	X	X	X		X	X				X	X
Atenro (II)	Late	–	–	X		X	X	X	X				X	X
S13-010	Unassigned	AD 1681–1938	1.2	X	X	X			X		X			
Oke Awe	Unassigned	Modern	1.2	X										

Table 3. AMS radiocarbon dates from sites in the Savè area, Bénin, performed at the NOSAMS Laboratory, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Dates are calibrated with the OxCal v4.2 programme using the IntCal 13 calibration curve.

Site	Context	Laboratory number	Date BP	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$	Calibrated range cal. AD (2σ)
Dikosha	Midden	OS-109257	820 ± 25	-24.91	1170–1263
Dikosha	Shell midden	OS-109256	925 ± 20	-25.41	1036–1160
Odo Akaba	Midden	OS-109258	620 ± 25	-26.6	1293–1399
Odo Akaba	Floor	OS-109259	550 ± 30	-23.6	1311–1434
Igbo Ilaka	Floor	OS-109282	145 ± 25	-24.74	1668–1946
Igbo Ilaka	Subfloor	OS-109283	935 ± 25	-25.86	1031–1157
Eyin-Oke	Architecture	OS-109284	595 ± 30	-26.68	1298–1410
Atenro	Midden	OS-109260	145 ± 25	-26.66	1668–1946
Atenro	Midden	OS-109261	240 ± 25	-25.57	1529–modern
Atenro	Subfloor	OS-109262	1910 ± 25	-25.69	23–138
Aukpon	Midden	OS-109263	225 ± 30	-24.98	1640–modern
Aukpon	Midden	OS-109264	240 ± 25	-24.7	1529–modern
Igboe	Midden	OS-109286	145 ± 25	-25.46	1668–1946
S13-010	Midden	OS-109285	100 ± 35	-25.29	1681–1938
Oke Awe	Midden	OS-109265	Modern	-27.5	Modern

91). When they left, the Oyo elements in the group were still recent transplants to Nikki, having sought refuge there following the Nupe sacking of the Oyo capital around AD 1535 (Smith 1965: 74). The group settled briefly at several locations near present-day Tchaourou and Kilibo as they migrated southward. Eventually, they settled permanently at a village that would become known as Atenro, near the present-day village of Alafia, marking the beginning of the Shabe period in the area's settlement history. However, the Savè area was already inhabited. The incoming Shabe groups were met by communities that maintained, and still maintain, their own identities based on knowledge of the landscape, including knowledge of groups that existed prior to them. Though the chronological framework used by this research draws from a Shabe point of view going back to the mid-second millennium AD, it is important to note that Shabe histories acknowledge that the area's settlement history extends farther back than what is recorded.

The Savè area lies within the geographic feature known as the 'Dahomey Gap', an extension of the savannah mosaic into the more heavily forested West African coast (Salzmann and Hoelzmann 2005). Although definitive Later Stone Age (LSA) sites have not been found in the Savè area, microliths and other LSA artefacts have been found in other parts of the Dahomey Gap (de Barros 2001; N'dah 2009). A possible explanation for the lack of LSA sites in the Savè area is that rockshelters that elsewhere have yielded such material have an extensive history of Iron Age reoccupation. Indeed, many rockshelters identified in the study area are still in use by local communities as pilgrimage sites and hunting camps. The absence of sites does not necessarily mean that the area was devoid of an LSA occupation. During our research, we were shown three doughnut-shaped quartz objects found by a resident of Savè (Figure 4). These objects came from a nearby quarry, found approximately two metres below the surface. Similar perforated stones have often been interpreted as digging stick weights (Ellis 1980: 126), but they are also found in later re-use contexts, particularly shrines (Wolff and Warren 1998: 49; Insoll 2013: 149). Though lacking a clear temporal context, it is possible that these artefacts are remnants of a yet to be discovered LSA occupation in the area.



Figure 4. Possible Later Stone Age artefacts discovered near Savè.

After about 2200 BC, farming and ceramic technologies diffused throughout the savanna mosaic, and potentially into the Dahomey Gap as well (Orijemie and Sowunmi 2013; Ozainne *et al.* 2014). Certainly by the time that Atenro was founded, agriculture and ceramics were already present in the Savè area. The earliest evidence for ceramic technologies is at Dikosha. This site is protected as a sacred forest by the residents of Djabata and recognised as a former village site already abandoned by the time Atenro was founded. Due to lack of cultivation and subsequent thick vegetation, the true area of the site is likely to be larger than what could be estimated from the distribution of surface artefacts. A 1 x 2 m excavation unit was placed on a low mound, partially cut by a pathway that had allowed potsherds to erode out of it. The unit was excavated to a depth of 90 cm and cultural material, primarily consisting of coarse earthenware sherds and faunal remains, was recovered from all strata and levels. Sheep/goat bones were the only domesticated animal component identified in the assemblages, although fish, snake and rodent bones were also recovered. The lowest stratum of the excavation contained a large amount of bivalve shell. The shells were deposited in a mound, which continued into the eastern profile of the excavation unit. Placed on the western edge of this shell deposit was a complete, over-turned ceramic vessel ringed by several unmodified stones. The conspicuous placement of these objects could indicate an intentional marking of the shell midden, possibly its closure. Unfortunately, time constraints forced us to close the excavation before we reached a culturally sterile stratum. Wood charcoal was recovered from the shell deposit, as well as the overlying stratum above. These fragments were dated to cal. AD 1036–1160 (925 ± 20 BP; OS-109256) and cal. AD 1170–1263 (820 ± 25 BP; OS-109257) respectively at two standard deviations.

The site of Ekudi Oke Odo Akaba, or Odo Akaba, consists of a large surface artefact scatter and multiple associated mounds. Like Dikosha, oral histories state that the site was already abandoned by the time Atenro was founded. A 2 x 2 m excavation unit was positioned at the centre of the site's largest mound and excavated to a depth of 180 cm. As at Dikosha, potsherds, ground stone artefacts and faunal remains were recovered. Iron tools and fragmentary debris were also present, although slag and furnace remains were not. Several glass beads were recovered from the surface of the site, as well as from the

stratified excavation deposits. Three cylindrical, opaque blue beads were found on the surface of the site and in the topsoil. However, a single cylindrical, semi-transparent dichroic light blue bead was found at a depth of 140 cm, 20 cm below a fragment of wood charcoal dated to cal. AD 1311-1434 (550 ± 30 BP; OS-109259). The date for this bead precludes the possibility of an Atlantic origin. Instead, the dichroic bead may be of the *segi* type manufactured at Ile-Ife (Ogundiran 2002b). Other evidence for regional interaction comes from the lowest stratum containing cultural materials, which revealed an intact flat-laid potsherd pavement on top of and adjacent to a packed earthen floor (Figure 5). Wood charcoal embedded in the floor was dated to cal. AD 1293-1399 (620 ± 25 BP; OS-109258). Potsherd pavements are found throughout the region, but their specific configurations are associated with different fields of interaction. Edge-laid pavements are associated with architectural traditions found in the Yoruba-Edo region, with some of the earliest and best known examples at Ile-Ife, whereas flat-laid pavements are predominantly found in the savanna region (Ige *et al.* 2009; Haour 2013). Although no other diagnostic architectural features were identified at pre-Shabe period sites, the pavement may indicate a shared architectural tradition with areas further north.

Dikosha and Odo Akaba were already abandoned by the time that the Shabe migrants settled at Atenro. However, the migrants encountered active communities too. The Igbo Ilaka site is tentatively assigned to the Early Shabe period. There are no present-day lineages or communities that claim Igbo Ilaka as an ancestral village, but the residents of nearby Alafia maintain that the site was occupied by non-Shabe autochthons at the same time as Atenro. A 2 x 2 m excavation unit was placed near a large baobab tree in the centre of the surface artefact scatter. Although no architectural elements were visible on the surface, the excavation revealed a series of three packed earthen floors. Each floor



Figure 5. Excavation at Ekudi Oke Odo Akaba showing the flat-laid potsherd pavement (below sign) in association with a hard-packed surface (arrow).

was separated by a thin layer of gravel and crushed potsherds, perhaps added to smooth the surface in preparation for the next floor. Wood charcoal embedded in the middle floor was dated to cal. AD 1668-1946 (145 ± 25 BP; OS-109286). A second piece of charcoal from the stratum below the lowest floor dated significantly earlier to cal. AD 1031-1157 (935 ± 25 BP; OS-109283). This date may indicate a lengthy settlement at Igbo Ilaka. However, although the stratum contained cultural material, ancient charcoal may have been accidentally mixed with later artefacts during floor construction.

The Eyin-Oke 2 site is just north of the Oke Shabe hills near Savè. It is claimed as an ancestral village by the Eyin-Oke lineage that has autochthonous status in the titling and ranking system of the Shabe kingdom (Palau Martí 1992b: 191-192). A 1 x 2 m unit was excavated to a culturally sterile stratum at a depth of 102 cm. Excavations recovered potsherds, ground stone tools and fragmentary iron debris. A small amount of hardened, packed clay was found that might be the remnant of collapsed architecture. An AMS date on a piece of charcoal embedded in the clay gave a range of cal. AD 1298-1410 (595 ± 30 BP; OS-109284).

The Aukpon site is situated on the south side of the Oke Shabe hills. Similar to Eyin-Oke 2, Aukpon is claimed by an autochthonous lineage. Unlike Eyin-Oke, however, Aukpon continued to be occupied into the Middle Shabe period. Two 2 x 2 m and one 1 x 2 m units were positioned on a large mound and excavated to the underlying granite bedrock, the deepest to a depth of about 120 cm. Although the mound is stratified, each stratum yielded similarly dense deposits of coarse earthenware sherds, faunal remains and charcoal, suggesting that the mound was consistently used as a midden. An adult male skeleton was found interred in the mound. The skeleton was extended, supine and relatively intact, suggesting a primary burial context. No grave goods were found specifically associated with the skeleton, although the surrounding stratum contained the same kinds and quantities of artefacts as other mound strata. Artefacts from the Aukpon mound include several types not present at other sites from the Early Shabe and pre-Shabe periods: smoking pipe fragments, cowrie shells and a clay bead. The pipe fragments and cowrie shells support an occupation date after the rise of the Atlantic trade (Philips 1983; Ogundiran 2002b). This is supported by two AMS dates of cal. AD 1529-modern (240 ± 25 BP; OS-109264) and cal. AD 1640-modern (225 ± 30 BP; OS-109263) respectively. In addition to their chronological significance, these artefacts show that the area was incorporated into regional networks participating in the Atlantic trade.

Shabe oral histories claim that the sites described above were all occupied before, and in some cases contemporaneously with, Atenro. The founding of Atenro, however, brought dramatic changes to the settlement history of the Savè area. Systematic survey surrounding the Atenro site has revealed a large distribution of surface artefacts covering an area of 8.0 ha. In addition, 47 baobab trees grow on the site, the greatest number encountered anywhere in the study area. Combined with the surface artefact scatter, the area of Atenro covers about 12.5 ha. By comparison, the next largest site of the period, Eyin-Oke 2, covers only 4.5 ha. Four 2 x 2 m and three 1 x 2 m excavation units were placed throughout the Atenro site to investigate the usage and contemporaneity of different areas. The stratigraphy of the central area revealed two distinct occupation levels with different artefact assemblages. Of note is the fact that the assemblage of the most recent occupation level contained glass and refined earthenware sherds that were absent from the earlier occupation. According to residents of the nearby village of Alafia, Atenro was reoccupied in the nineteenth century when local people used the site as a refuge. They suggested that this occupation was confined to the central area of the site near the largest baobab trees, explaining why units outside of the central area had only one

occupation level. A radiocarbon date (240 ± 25 BP; OS-109261) from the largest midden mound at Atenro gives a range for the first occupation of cal. AD 1529 to the modern period, but this range obscures a trimodal probabilistic distribution. The earliest range of cal. AD 1635 to 1675 comports well with Adediran's (1994: 93) calculation, based on regency lengths, that Atenro was abandoned around AD 1700. Another radiocarbon date (1910 ± 25 BP; OS-109262) gives a very early range of cal. AD 23-138, but this is unlikely to reflect the occupation of the site, as the dated wood charcoal was collected from a stratum below a hard-packed earthen surface with no associated cultural material.

The range of artefact classes recovered from Atenro is similar to those from Aukpon, but with additional stone and glass beads. The additional bead types may indicate different forms of social differentiation that Shabe groups had, but could also be a product of the small excavation sizes and general rarity of single beads deposited in midden contexts. However, the more numerous pottery assemblages from Atenro and other Early Shabe period sites do reveal important differences. There are two main differences between assemblages from Early Shabe and pre-Shabe sites. The first is that the variety of decorative techniques greatly increases during the Early Shabe period (Figure 6). The most common decorative techniques from pre-Shabe sites are wrapped cord roulette and twisted cord roulette. Carved wooden roulettes are absent or only present in very low numbers. Early Shabe period techniques include more kinds of carved wooden roulettes that are also present in higher proportions, particularly a square grid motif that is ubiquitous at Atenro and Aukpon, but absent at other Early Shabe and pre-Shabe sites.

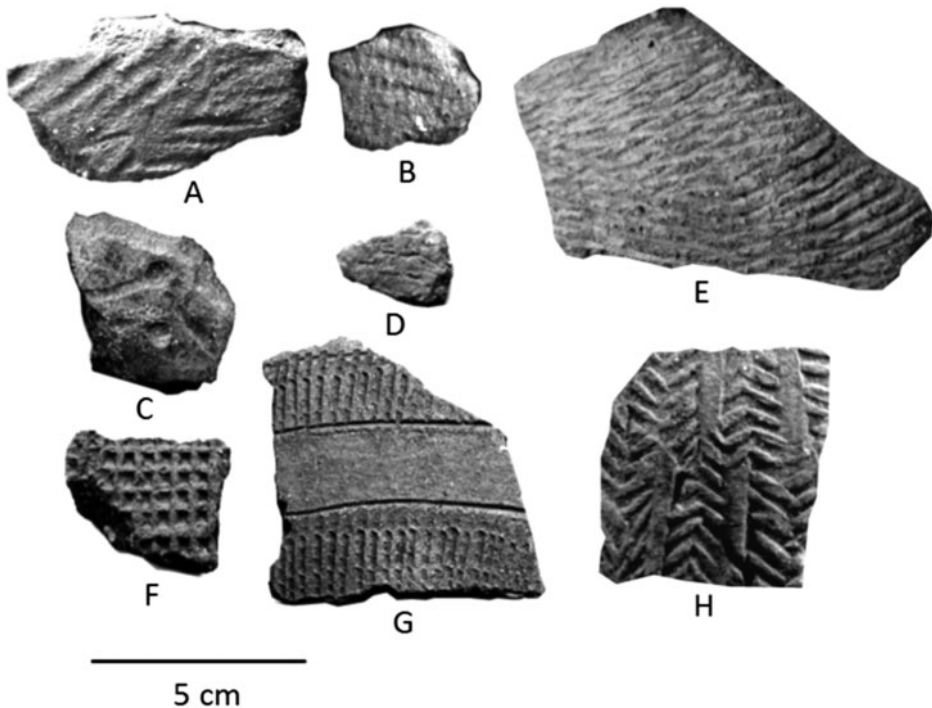


Figure 6. Common pottery decorations in the Savè area. A wrapped cord roulette; B twisted cord roulette; C snail shell apex impression; D snail shell lip impression; E comb/linear carved wooden roulette; F square (grid) carved wooden roulette; G dentate carved wooden roulette; H chevron (herringbone) carved wooden roulette.

Finally, Early Shabe period pottery decorations include snail shell impressions, utilising both the shell apex and lip, which are absent at earlier sites. The variety of carved roulettes is common to many ceramic complexes in the Yoruba-Edo region (Allsworth-Jones 1996; Wesler 1999; Ogundiran 2001; Mercader *et al.* 2006; Ogundiran and Saunders 2011). Snail shell impressions, however, are associated with the Oyo ceramic complex (Usman 2003). This similarity in pottery decoration practices may indicate a greater level of pottery transmission between Shabe and the Oyo Empire than with other parts of the Yoruba-Edo region. This is unsurprising, as Oyo was a major regional political power throughout the Early and Middle Shabe periods, as well as one of Shabe's closest neighbours. The overall similarity in pottery decoration also supports assertions in Shabe oral history that the early migrants had come from the Oyo area. The second important difference is that the paste colours of Early Shabe period ceramics are typically dark grey or brown, whereas earlier ceramics tend to be reddish brown or yellowish red. This could indicate the exploitation of new clay beds or new clay preparation methods during the Early Shabe period, or the use of new firing techniques and technologies.

The growth of a kingdom: the Middle Shabe period

Even more than its foundation, oral histories detail the succession struggles that led to Atenro's abandonment. Sometime around AD 1700, its inhabitants split to establish the villages of Kaboua and Shabe-Idadu (Savè) at the foot of nearby granite inselbergs. Autochthonous villages existed at both Kaboua and Shabe-Idadu prior to the arrival of the Shabe groups. Oral histories from Kaboua lineages suggest a peaceful integration of the two groups (Palau Martí 1992a: 137). The autochthons retained 'first-comer' status and important ritual functions, while the larger Shabe group was granted usufruct rights to land and control of higher order political titles, a scenario seen in many West African societies (Kopytoff 1987). The history of Shabe-Idadu is quite different, as here the Shabe groups forcibly expelled many of the original inhabitants and relegated those who stayed to a lesser status (Palau Martí 1992a: 125). At both Kaboua and Shabe-Idadu, élites ceded ritual authority surrounding installation rites to titleholders in Djabata, a village occupied during the Early Shabe period and continuously since. Djabata is the location of a shrine to Oduduwa, the ancestral divine king of Ile-Ife, through which the Shabe monarchy claims political authority. The location of the shrine in a peripheral but autochthonous community, rather than the political centres of Shabe-Idadu or Kaboua, suggests it predates the AD 1700 dispersal from Atenro. In addition, Djabata residents claim Dikosha as one of their ancestral village sites, described above as the earliest known settlement in the Savè area, supporting an early date for the area's integration into the Ile-Ife political mosaic.

The foundation of Shabe-Idadu co-occurred with the abandonment of Eyin-Oke 2. Histories from the dominant Shabe lineages, as well as the Eyin-Oke lineage record, conflict between the Shabe founders and the pre-existing inhabitants around the Oke Shabe hills. At the present site of Shabe-Idadu, autochthonous inhabitants were expelled and replaced by a cluster of separate lineage-based settlements (Palau Martí 1992a: 125). Although not expelled, the occupants of Eyin-Oke 2 were compelled to move closer to this new settlement, presumably so that the dominant Shabe groups could monitor them. A king was chosen from the most politically powerful Shabe lineage, the Amushu, who in turn delegated lesser offices and titles to other lineages. Shortly thereafter, Aukpon was re-centred slightly south around shrines established by the Amushu and their allies. Although settlements were forcibly relocated in both the Eyin-Oke 2 and Aukpon cases, at least one lineage from Aukpon benefited from its relocation. They were ceded the high



Figure 7. The Ogu Tani monolith in Aensin. Offerings are made on the small stone at left.

ranking office of Olu Osin, or ‘Lord of the Left,’ and control over several important shrines. One of these shrines, Ogu Tani, is a granite monolith similar in form, though smaller in scale, to the Opa Oraniyan monolith in Ile-Ife (Figure 7). Ogu Tani is used in renewal rites of the monarchy’s power, specifically power over the spirits of the surrounding landscape. In Shabe cosmology, it performs similar work to sacred trees by capturing spiritual energy, or *ashe*. However, it is seen as more durable, permanent and, as a consequence, more potent. It is also tied to land, in that the *ashe* does not flow from a specific lineage or ancestor, but from the immediate landscape itself. This has an important effect of legitimising the monarchy’s claims to territorial authority and ownership of the land’s products, as well as the Olu Osin’s ceremonial status as a ‘first comer.’ The two positions were mutually beneficial, as one of the rights of the Olu Osin was to act as a tax collector on behalf of the monarchy (Palau Martí 1993: 32). The position of Olu Osin may not have been invented in Shabe, but borrowed from the analogous and similarly titled Osi Iwefa, or ‘Eunuch of the Left,’ in the Oyo Empire (Law 1977: 68). The role of ritual and landscape in integrating autochthons and migrants is again consistent with Kopytoff’s (1987) internal frontier model.

Other aspects of settlement reorientation during the Middle Shabe period are evidenced by monumental constructions near Shabe-Idadu. Large earthen berms were constructed after the relocation of Eyin-Oke and Aukpon that emphasise the centrality of Shabe-Idadu in the Oke Shabe landscape. Oral histories from the Omo Agbara Sen Modo, Jalumon and Ilako lineages link the construction and maintenance of these berms to centralised tax collection. Farmers and traders going to Shabe-Idadu’s markets were forced through gates in the berms, where their goods could be taxed to support the monarchy. The first palace at Shabe-Idadu was also constructed during the Middle Shabe period. This palace was called the Afin, the same word used for the palace of the Oyo monarchy. The form of the earliest palace architecture is largely unknown due to centuries of occupation at the site. However, a more recent palace was razed to the ground by the French colonial government in 1933. Based on oral history, surviving foundations and architectural elements, and the stratigraphy visible in road and sewer cuts, the palace’s footprint was at least 2 ha, similar in size to royal palaces in nearby Dahomey (Monroe 2007). The palace was also differentiated in its style of architecture.

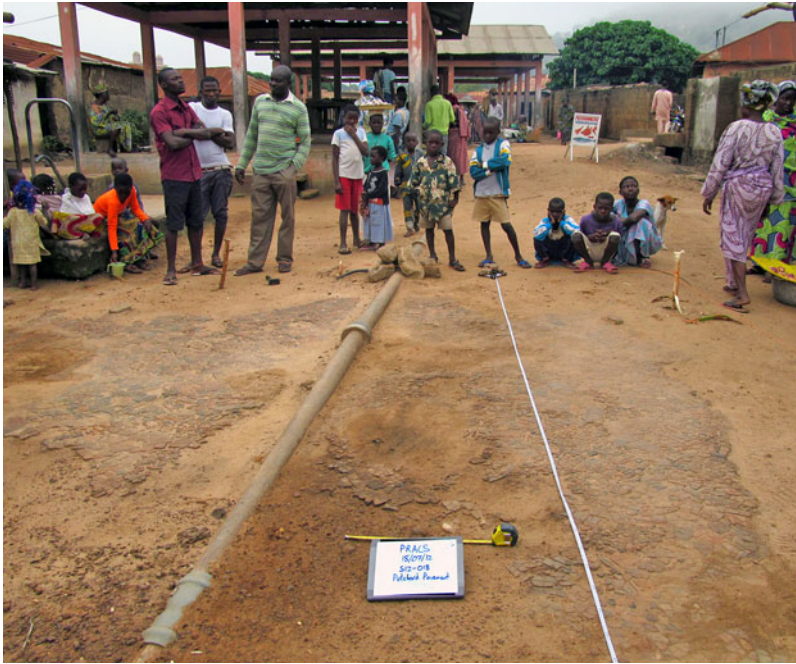


Figure 8. A flat-laid potsherd pavement in central Shabe-Idadu, near the Idi-Iyoko market. The pavement is at the site of the *afin* palace, razed by the French in 1933.

The remains of a flat-laid potsherd pavement are visible at the palace's former site, now a busy marketplace (Figure 8). This pavement uses the same construction technique as the one found at the pre-Shabe period site of Odo Akaba, suggesting long-term continuity in architectural practices rather than a shift toward the edge-laid pavement style found at Ile-Ife. This is an interesting continuity, as the present-day Shabe monarchy employs many other symbols of authority derived from political practices centred at Ile-Ife. At the very least then, Shabe political symbols were derived from both autochthonous and regional influences. It may even be that the appeal to Ile-Ife is a recent orientation, as Shabe does not appear as an official descendant lineage in the earliest recorded king lists of Ile-Ife. Like other distant polities, it is not attested to in Ile-Ife's transcribed oral histories until the late nineteenth century (Palau Martí 1992a: 61).

The Middle Shabe period has 27 sites associated with it, the most for any period. This countered our expectation that the Late Shabe period would have the most associated sites, as it is the most recent in historical memory. One explanation for this is that the Middle Shabe period was a time of peak population growth throughout the Savè area. New political systems, social institutions and economic practices introduced during the Early Shabe period may have encouraged demographic expansion and the foundation of new settlements in the Middle Shabe period. The decline in sites during the Late Shabe period could be the result of warfare and subsequent out-migration. Alternatively, it may be that many sites attributed to the Middle Shabe period were actually occupied earlier or later, and that oral histories have been modified to show historical association with the Shabe kingdom for political gain in the present. Excavations covering an area of 1 x 2 m were conducted to obtain absolute dates at two Middle Shabe sites: Opotoku and Igboe. While dateable material was unfortunately not obtained from Opotoku, wood charcoal at Igboe yielded a date with a range of cal. AD 1668-1946 (145 ± 25 BP; OS-109286),

consistent with other Middle and Late Shabe period sites. In addition, bottle glass sherds were found at Igboe that only occur in Late Shabe contexts, again supporting the attribution given by oral history.

Between Oyo and Dahomey: the Late Shabe period

In the course of the nineteenth century, the entire region was destabilised by the collapse of the Oyo Empire (Ajayi and Smith 1971; Law 1977). This may have had intensified consequences for Shabe, where élite dynastic traditions claim direct descent from Oyo. Indeed, following Oyo's collapse there was an interregnum period when a suitable successor could not be named, perhaps due to a lack of confirmation from Oyo (Palau Martí 1992a: 193). Shabe's economy was disrupted too, as by this time Shabe merchants used Oyo-controlled trade routes to the coast to participate in the trans-Atlantic trade (Adediran 1994: 194). In addition, Shabe communities relied on Oyo for protection. With the buffer of the Oyo military gone, the Savè area was periodically raided by other polities in the Yoruba-Edo region, as well as by Fulani groups from the north. Another concern for Shabe was the growing power of Dahomey as it sought to expand east into the vacuum left by Oyo (Monroe 2014: 71).

Dahomey launched a protracted campaign against Shabe beginning around 1835 and razed many settlements (Adediran 1994: 198; Palau Martí 1992a: 199). The response to this was a new settlement pattern centred on fortified hilltop refuges. The largest of these refuges was Fiditi in the Oke Shabe Hills adjacent to Shabe-Idadu. Fiditi is actually a cluster of four discrete settlements: one large settlement in the area enclosed by the hills' contours and three more on various hilltops. These settlements were further protected by nearly 1 km of stone walls. Three 1 x 2 m excavations were conducted at the largest settlement, Fiditi 1, in order to investigate possible architectural features. These excavations revealed that the stone walls were complemented by a large earthen berm, as well as by a possible gatehouse structure. Material culture recovered from these excavations included bottle glass and refined earthenware sherds. Although these refuges were ostensibly occupied during periods of hardship, Savè area residents continued to engage with Atlantic trade networks.

Three other hilltop sites are assigned to the Late Shabe period: Oke Igboe, Oke Agbodo, and Abeokuta. Like Fiditi, each of these sites is fortified with stone walls that reinforce the natural contours of the hill. Although all the walls are uncoursed, there is variability in the size of stones and in the presence of additional features, such as merlons and coursed earth extensions (Figure 9). Analogous to the way in which Fiditi was sited



Figure 9. Stone defensive structures with merlons (left) and coursed earth extensions (right).

just outside the capital Shabe-Idadu, Oke Igboe and Oke Agbodo were also in close proximity to contemporary villages. There was no village near Abeokuta, however, and oral history states that it was occupied by refugees from several villages throughout the central Shabe kingdom area. A fifth hilltop site was documented in the study area, but is assigned to the Early and Middle Shabe periods and is not fortified. Stone fortifications may therefore be linked to an increased need for defence in the nineteenth century. A second explanation is that the large, hierarchically organised Shabe kingdom of the Late Shabe was able to mobilise the labour necessary to construct large-scale works, whereas earlier communities may not have been.

Other communities sought refuge in small camps hidden in the bush. This was the case for the reoccupation of Atenro, discussed above. It may also be the case for the unassigned site of Oke Awe. This site is very near to the present-day village of Alafia, although it does not have an associated oral history. However, an AMS date (OS-109265) from Oke Awe came back as being modern, suggesting a very recent occupation. This mismatch between a recent occupation and lack of recollection underscores the instability of the nineteenth century and its effects on historical memory. A similar story may explain the other unassigned site, S13-010. This site consists of a large scatter of potsherds, ground stone tools and daub, as well as multiple large sacred tree species. It is also one of the few sites near the Ouémé River, said to be the area most affected by the war with Dahomey. A 1 x 2 m excavation unit was placed on a low mound and excavated to a depth of 80 cm. The lowest cultural levels revealed rammed earth foundations, consistent with building techniques still employed in the area. Artefacts include cowries and a stone bead reminiscent of Atenro and Middle and Late Shabe period sites. Pottery assemblages from S13-010 are also similar to Middle and Late Shabe sites in the variety of roulette techniques employed. In addition, maize cob impressed sherds were found at S13-010, which were only found at Late Shabe period sites. This suggests that S13-010 was one of the many villages razed during the nineteenth century.

Destruction in the Savè area was countered by new growth. Oral histories record that Fulani, Hausa, Mahi, Idaisha and other Yoruba groups settled in the area during the Late Shabe period. These people brought with them connections to their homes, contributing to new kinds of regional interaction in the Savè area. For example, 51 refined earthenware sherds were recovered from surface scatter at the Igbolo site (Figure 10). This is a significant number, as only eight sherds were recovered from all the other sites combined. The modern village of Oké-Owo claims Igbolo as its former location. Importantly, the founders of Oké-Owo and Igbolo are not historically Shabe, but Mahi refugees that fled from the south after 1810. Interestingly, many of the styles present in the assemblage post-date their arrival: hand-painted chrome colours and brown transfer-print (Miller 1991; Samford 1997: 20). It appears that in addition to maintaining a distinct identity through language and history, the residents of Igbolo maintained access to imported European material culture. That nearby Shabe settlements — some wealthier and more influential — did not have the same quantity and range of European goods may indicate not that they were unobtainable in the area, but that they were not particularly sought after by the Shabe. Instead, the material culture at many Late Shabe period sites has the same range of goods as in earlier periods, an indication of continuity.

Conclusions

The Savè area was occupied by the early second millennium AD, although the beginning of its settlement history is likely to be much earlier than that. These pre-Shabe societies lived



Figure 10. Select European-manufactured ceramics from Igbolo demonstrating the range of decoration techniques (annular banding, hand-painting, stencilling and transfer printing) and colouring agents (cobalt, metallic oxides and chrome).

in small villages practising agro-pastoralism and consuming wild resources and employing ceramic, lithic and iron technologies. Their architecture and material culture was similar to other areas further north, particularly the use of cord roulettes in pottery decoration and the creation of face-laid potsherd pavements. Sometime after the Nupe sacking of Oyo around AD 1535, the autochthonous groups of the area were joined by Oyo and Boko groups from the east and north. This led to a significant increase and diversification of the area's population in the Early Shabe period, as well as the formation of hierarchical political institutions. However, other institutions existed continuously, such as the ritual maintenance of sacred tree species at current and former villages. During the Middle Shabe period new settlements formed and interaction between the Savè area and the region increased, introducing new forms of material culture. During the Late Shabe period these trends continued as regional instability brought even more people into the area.

In general, there is a large amount of agreement between the absolute dates obtained from radiocarbon dating and the relative periods derived from oral history. Our research corroborates Labiyi's (2008) initial observation that oral history has preserved a great deal of information about the archaeological landscape of the Savè area. Artefact assemblages from excavated sites show increased diversity of material culture through time. The pre-Shabe and autochthonous Early Shabe sites are restricted to coarse earthenware ceramics, ground stone tools, iron tools and/or debris and glass beads. Atenro and Middle Shabe sites have a larger range of artefact classes: pipe fragments and cowries indicative of entanglement in the Atlantic economy and a greater diversity in bead styles perhaps indicating increased social differentiation. Late Shabe sites have refined earthenware sherds and bottle glass, evidence for increased participation in the Atlantic economy, or at least increased ubiquity of its products.

Ongoing research is directed at refining the ceramic typology of the area to anchor site chronologies better, as well as to identify specific regional connections. Studies of vessel form are also underway to examine what kinds of consumption and production were taking place at different sites. This is complemented by the ongoing analysis of faunal and botanical remains recovered from excavated contexts. Of particular interest is how wild and domesticated species were exploited in different periods and at different sizes of sites. Our current research has documented settlement and interaction in the Savè area and future work seeks to clarify its place in the mosaic of the Atlantic societies in West Africa.

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