During July and August 1999 the Hueda Archaeological Project under the direction of Kenneth Kelly (University of South Carolina) completed a sixth season of excavation and mapping at the site of Savi, capital of the coastal Hueda kingdom, in Bénin, West Africa (Figure 1). The Hueda State and its principal town of Savi were important destinations during the Atlantic slave trade of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when the region was best known as Whydah. Since its inception in 1991, the project has: 1) surveyed the site to determine its dimensions, 2) excavated a series of locations believed to have been occupied by townsfolk, 3) discovered and mapped part of a large scale ditch system, and 4) since 1994 has concentrated on excavations within the elite district and palace complex delineated in part by the ditch system. These excavations were all geared towards better understanding how the indigenous Hueda elite and commoners negotiated and made sense of the impacts wrought through trade with European nations including the English, Dutch, French, and Portuguese, all of whom maintained permanent trading posts in Savi. The town was ultimately abandoned in 1727 after being sacked and burned during the Dahomean conquest of the Hueda. Today the region surrounding Savi is inhabited primarily by Fon, the ethnolinguistic group associated with Dahomey, and originating from the region near Abomey (de Medeiros 1984). Aspects of the work conducted through 1996 have been treated in publications including Kelly (1997a and 1997b).

Research in 1999 comprised several components, consisting primarily of 1) a search for clearly defined commoner settlement areas to supplement earlier research, 2) additional excavation and mapping of structures in the palace complex (Figure 2), and 3) an ethnoarchaeological study of ritual pottery used in the region today. The search for identifiable commoner residences was initially a key component of the research proposed for 1999. An initial archaeological reconnaissance of regions hypothesized to contain commoner habitations was conducted, but results of this survey indicated that surface visibility of archaeological materials and features was highly compromised by very dense vegetation. Given the time constraints of a six-week field season, the survey strategy was modified to focus on more visible areas, primarily those exposed by pathways or visible in cultivated fields.

Two highly promising locations were identified in this fashion. They were both exposed by the same trail, and lay about 50 m apart near the southwest portion of the ditch system. At one location, Locus 101, a large (60 cm diameter) locally-made pottery jar was visible on the margins of a path where it cut through an embankment. The second location, Locus 102, was also identified on the basis of exposed pottery, in this case a small, apparently complete vessel, as well as numerous potsherds, pipe fragments, and pieces of glass bottles datable to the early 18th century. Although the goal had been to identify habitation sites outside the ditch system defining the elite district, Locus 101 and 102 were within the ditch system, albeit in a different region from that previously investigated. These buildings were chosen for test excavation because of their locations and also because surface indications suggested that they were significantly different from the other structures previously identified at Savi.

The excavation efforts were well rewarded. Locus 101 yielded the entire large jar (diameter 60 cm), resting on a prepared floor surface, which was probably inside, or just outside, a building. The jar neck and rim were broken at a height of approximately 42 cm from the original ground surface and the broken sherds had fallen inside the jar (Figure 3). The rim and shoulder sherds were ornamented. When the rim sherds were removed from the interior of the jar, they were found to overly the highly fragmentary bones of part of at least one ovicaprine (an animal identifiable only as a sheep or goat). Cranial fragments, teeth, and several poorly preserved long bones were present (Figure 4). When local Béninois field assistants viewed this, it was their opinion that the pot had contained a "medicine" or "charm" which originally would have included various leaves and herbs in addition...
to the animal parts, and the jar filled with water. This decoction would then be used to ritually cleanse oneself, although related to what activity was not clear.

The second excavation conducted in this area, Locus 102, revealed an extremely dense deposit of artifacts. Primarily consisting of locally manufactured pottery, this assemblage also included locally manufactured smoking pipes and fragments of at least half a dozen hand blown case or "gin" bottles. Locus 102 yielded pottery possibly used for ritual activities. Several sherds from a two-pieced vessel, locally known as tohossou, were found. The bulbous basal pot would have been buried up to its rim, and the second piece, characterized by a broad, flat rim, would sit atop the base. The local Béninois field assistants explained that the tohossou is for "fetish" or ritual purposes.

Several undecorated pottery sherds exhibiting roughly executed perforation were retrieved from deeper levels at Locus 102. At first glance, these sherds are similar to those perforated vessels often used as colanders or for straining. However, upon closer inspection, it was clear that the roughly perforated interior would not facilitate drainage. When discussing this attribute with the Béninois field
Figure 2. Map of excavation and survey results within Palace district.
assistants, they offered the explanation the sherds were probably from a vessel called a yaoitcha pot. During certain vodun (the local term for a category of Fon rituals) ceremonies, hot coals are placed inside the yaoitcha. Next, a vodun initiate would dance about with the vessel. The perforated, yet rough, interior allows heat to escape but not hot embers. Interviewees from the modern, Fon village of Savi indicated that the contemporary uses for the vessel include divination rites and ceremonies that test the resolve of practitioners through handling red-hot coals.

Locally manufactured smoking pipes were a significant find at Locus 102. A large number of complete and fragmented pipes (over 15) were retrieved in the eastern and southern area of the unit. Previous excavation at other locations in Savi had not identified any other area with such a high density of local pipe. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that there were relatively few (56 in total) imported pipe fragments found in the unit. However, a large number of bottle glass shards was present at Locus 102 compared with other loci investigated this season. Case or "gin" bottle shards were the most common. Five thin blue glass shards of an unidentified vessel were recovered in this assemblage as well. Only three shards of wine bottles were recovered.

Another key element of the 1999 project was the continued investigation of the ditch system that
surrounds the elite palace district. This ditch system, originally identified in 1994 and further mapped in 1996, is one of the most interesting aspects of archaeology at Savi. Despite the rather extensive historical documentation of the town provided by traders' and travelers' accounts, there is no contemporary discussion of any ditch system. In spite of the dense vegetation at the site of Savi, the ditches are a most prominent feature, some as deep as eight meters and as wide as 30 meters. Given the lack of any historical data which might support a defensive purpose for the ditches, it was previously hypothesized that they served as socially symbolic landscape features demarcating the boundary between the elite district and the remainder of the town (Kelly 1997a). The 1999 season provided an excellent opportunity to further refine this interpretation of the ditches because of extensive vegetation clearing over a large portion of the site. The clearing completely exposed not only both sides and the bottom of a 70 m long segment, but also a feature that appeared to be a “causeway” or entrance ramp providing access to the interior of the elite precinct. In the middle of this causeway feature was a substantial double-lobed mound that appears to have served as a gatehouse or other structure restricting and regulating access to the inner district. This remarkable gatehouse feature, in conjunction with other previously excavated features including an elevated “watchtower”, lends strong support to the

Figure 4. Locus 101 jar with animal bones exposed on base.
previous interpretation of the symbolic and social meaning of the ditches. Archaeological survey also identified additional branches of the ditch complex encompassing adjacent areas, suggesting that some sections of the system may have served other purposes as well or that access to some precincts may have been controlled by several barriers.

In addition to these activities the survey, mapping, and excavation were continued in the core area of the palace complex. Here, again due to fortuitous circumstances, areas of the site that had been obscured by dense undergrowth during previous field seasons had been cleared for cultivation exposing an extensive complex of mounds. Based on previous experience at Savi, it was clear that these mounds represented the remains of large-scale buildings. The earthen mounds, ranging from one to four meters tall, were formed when the mud or earthen walled structures began to decay and melt after their roofs fell into disrepair. Previously excavated structures in this portion of the site were found to have lost their roofs to the fire associated with the Dahomean conquest of Savi in 1727, and this was expected to be the case this season as well.

Before excavation proceeded it was possible to separate the structural remains into two main categories: linear mounds and quadrangle compounds. The long, narrow, linear mounds, approximately 1-1.5 m high were similar to structures successfully excavated and identified as palace structures during the 1994 and 1996 field seasons. The second category of architectural feature consisted of a nearly square quadrangle, with one-room wide mounds on three sides, each about 1 meter tall, and on the remaining, east side, a mound between 3 and 4 meters in elevation. Furthermore, this eastern mound was characterized by a bi-lobed surface topography reminiscent of the gatehouse, suggesting the presence of a passageway or some other gap between the northern and southern sections. This type of feature was unexpected, and at least initially, was believed to be unique.

In light of the unprecedented character of this structure, recorded as Locus 731, an excavation program to determine the function of the building was initiated. Test excavations were begun in two areas of Locus 731. The first was situated at the north west corner, in the hope of intersecting at least one exterior wall and the interior of a room. This initial 2 m² excavation (unit 1) was expanded with the addition of unit 2, a 1.5 x 2 m unit. Elsewhere at Locus 731, unit 11 was excavated. This unit, also a 2 m², was placed on the summit of the southernmost lobe of the 3 meter tall eastern mound. This location was chosen so that the excavation would not lie entirely within thick structural walls, and to shed light on whether this taller eastern mound had been a multi-storied structure.

Both excavated areas in Locus 731 proved particularly interesting because the results were entirely unlike any previous excavations at Savi. Whereas excavations in other structures within the elite district have always yielded ample evidence of the conflagration associated with the Dahomean conquest of Savi, neither area of Locus 731 did so. Rather, the stratigraphic sequences present in each of the units suggest that these structures were spared the initial destruction sequence and allowed to deteriorate through natural processes. Archaeological investigation in units 1 and 2 revealed deeply stratified deposits, with excavations terminating at 320 and 380 cm below ground surface, respectively. Twelve distinct strata were discerned from unit 11, including the remains of a slumped exterior wall that was traced 250 cm below ground surface. The size of this wall suggests that the structure supported a second story.

Artifacts recovered from the initial excavations at unit 1 included a cowrie shell, a copper alloy sheath tip, and truncated terracotta cones. In subsequent levels, a series of basin shaped features was encountered at 235 and 260 cm below ground surface. The shallower feature was located along the eastern wall of the unit and measured 140 cm in diameter, while the deeper feature measured 160 cm in diameter and was centrally located within the unit. The pottery types recovered from these features, along with stratigraphic evidence suggest that these features may predate the construction of the Hueda palace and may represent some of the oldest features excavated at Savi to date.

In addition to the excavations at Locus 731, other structural remains within the elite district were identified and excavations undertaken at several, including Locus 710, Locus 720, and Locus 723. Locus 710 was a small structure, characterized by a 30-40 cm high mound that had been partially excavated during the 1996 field season. That
year several iron slave shackles were recovered from deposits only a few cm deep. This earlier work led to an interpretation that it had been a much smaller, less imposing structure than the surrounding palace buildings, and had probably served as a storage facility. This interpretation was strengthened by the presence of fragments of large pottery vessels such as might be used to store grains or liquids. The 1996 excavations had been unable to completely expose the room and given the threat of damage by cultivation to any remaining shallowly buried artifacts, an additional 1 x 2 m excavation was opened adjacent to the 1996 units (which were identifiable) and taken to the same depth as the room floor.

Excavations were also undertaken at Locus 720, approximately 20 m west of Locus 710. This long, linear structure was part of a complex of at least four buildings lying north of the previously investigated areas, and was tested to determine whether this northern section was used in similar ways to the central portion. Three 2 m² excavation units were situated to expose at least one exterior wall as well as the interior of a room. Archaeological evidence of the destructive fire associated with the Dahomean conquest of Savi was widespread, however these strata at Locus 720 were different from burned layers found in previously excavated structures. The most striking difference from other excavations was the vast quantity of imported pipe bowls, pipe stems and locally manufactured pottery (over 690 ceramic sherds and over 3,200 pipe fragments) present in deposits associated with the collapsed, burned ceiling.

This stratum of burned earth, charcoal and artifacts was mostly uniform throughout the excavation units and the absence of the charcoal indicated the location of walls. Directly below the burned layer, very few artifacts (55 ceramic sherds and 11 pipe fragments) were recovered from the earthen floor. Thus it is likely that the majority of imported pipe fragments and pottery sherds were mixed within the ceiling material of the structure. This evidence suggests the possible reuse of artifacts for architectural purposes, perhaps as decoration in a variation of the potsherd pavements known...
from other West African sites (Aguigah 1992). The low density of artifacts and the lack of any complete or refittable artifacts from the floor context at Locus 720 suggests that some or all of the rooms in this building were empty or were looted at the time of the Dahomean conquest.

Excavation conducted in Locus 723 focused on the excavation of a single 2 m² unit near the western edge of the T-shaped complex, to locate the transitional area between the interior of the structure and the courtyard and then expanding the unit as field conditions warranted. Unfortunately, no transitional zone was discernable and the unit was terminated at 130 cm below ground surface. Artifact distributions from this unit were undistinguished except for a high concentration of 4,976 sherds of local ceramics in level 2 and an intact poorly-fired earthenware vessel unearthed near the northern wall of unit (Figure 5). One of the Béninois students suggested that size, form, and consistency of the paste from this vessel was consistent with vessels used today by Fon to bury the placenta associated with the birth of children.

Ethnoarchaeological Component

The ethnoarchaeological portion of this summer’s research project focused on members of the Fon ethnolinguistic group, who live near the modern village of Savi and town of Ouidah in southern Bénin. The project was formulated to identify the functional, ideological, and contextual signifiers that distinguish contemporary Fon ritual pottery from other forms of hand-built, low-fired earthenwares. It is hoped that once identified, these signifiers can then be used to create more holistic interpretations of material recovered archaeologically from Savi. This being said, it is not assumed that direct correlations can be drawn between contemporary forms, contexts of use, ideological characteristics, etc. and those of archaeological material, but rather that these signifiers are likely to be culturally conservative and may span generations. In order to determine the extent of cultural transformation that has occurred in these categories of vessels, the archaeological and ethnoarchaeologically derived data will be critically juxtaposed against historic, ethnohistoric, economic, and primary documentation.

First of all it was necessary to establish the “folk classification” (Kempton 1981) for pottery forms in the region. This was achieved through “fetish” market surveys that recorded all vessels that the vendors asserted were appropriate for ritual use. This information was checked against data collected from semi-structured interviews with vodun practitioners who purchase and use the pottery. Twenty-three categories of ritual ceramics were identified, based on the form, potential/realized function and decoration of the vessels. Out of the eight vendors and 21 practitioners interviewed, there was only one disagreement on terminology for vessel forms.

Once the nomenclature was established, the project shifted to shrine and compound surveys to establish the context of use. Ritual ceramics were mapped and recorded based on their relative position to other items in the shrine and/or architectural features from the compound. Through these surveys and related interviews, patterns emerged that suggest a highly standardized correlation between individual members of the vodun pantheon and particular groups of artifacts. To test the validity of these groupings, a componential analysis focused on Fon féticheurs, or individuals with highly specialized knowledge of shrine construction and maintenance was undertaken. These individuals were asked to place the pottery in clusters that would be appropriate for particular vodun deities. This was complemented by one of the highlights of the pottery study, an opportunity to film a ceremony to “recharge” a shrine for the deity Sakpata in the village of Savi. The ceremony provided information regarding the material offerings, dance, song and incantations, necessary to maintain a proper balance between the Fon spiritual and physical realms.

Although data analysis is still in the preliminary stages for this portion of the study, some interesting comparisons can be made at this point. Two of the categories of ritual ceramics identified during the study, hohozin or twin-vessel and adjralazin of perforated pottery, were mentioned by Sir Richard Burton in his travel accounts from West Africa in the early 1860s. He notes the twin vessel as a “Hoho-zen” but does not give the Fon term for the perforated piece. Burton encountered these vessels as he was attempting to record the Fon pantheon
and associated material culture near the present-day city of Abomey (Newbury 1966).

A final aspect of the Hueda archaeological project has been its inclusion of graduate and undergraduate students from the Université National du Bénin. Since its inception, the project has endeavored to provide a source of hands-on field training for graduate and undergraduate archaeology students from the Université National du Bénin. Two Béninois students participated this year, bringing the total number of African university students who have participated on the project to sixteen.

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