

Local ceramics from Songo Mnara, Tanzania

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Structure of the paper

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Introduction

- Songo Mnara offers great potential in the study of urban space and practice
- Chittick's excavation in the 1960s
- This analysis will allow us to compare this assemblage to that of Kilwa



This paper will examine locally-produced ceramics from the site of Songo Mnara, a Swahili town on the southern Tanzanian coast that dates from the 14th to 16th centuries AD. As discussed in other papers in this session, the site boasts remarkably well-preserved ruins, and offers great potential in the study of urban space and practice. Songo Mnara is located on an island just to the south of Kilwa Kisiwani, the renowned urban center excavated extensively by Chittick in the 1960s. Although Chittick's excavations at Kilwa are well-published, and his description of local ceramics quite extensive, we still know very little about local ceramics from other sites that date from the 15th to 16th centuries. Thus, an analysis of ceramics from Songo Mnara will allow us to compare this assemblage to that of Kilwa and other coastal locations, in an effort to construct a more detailed understanding of local pottery from these centuries.

This paper will first present a summary of the ceramic assemblage at Songo Mnara based on a rim sherd analysis, focusing on form, decoration and production. Next, we will explore similarities between the Songo Mnara assemblage and that from Kilwa, and discuss similarities and differences. Finally, we will compare two assemblages from Songo Mnara, one from a domestic context and the other a ritual one, to explore possible distinctions between ceramic use in these contexts.

Analysis procedure

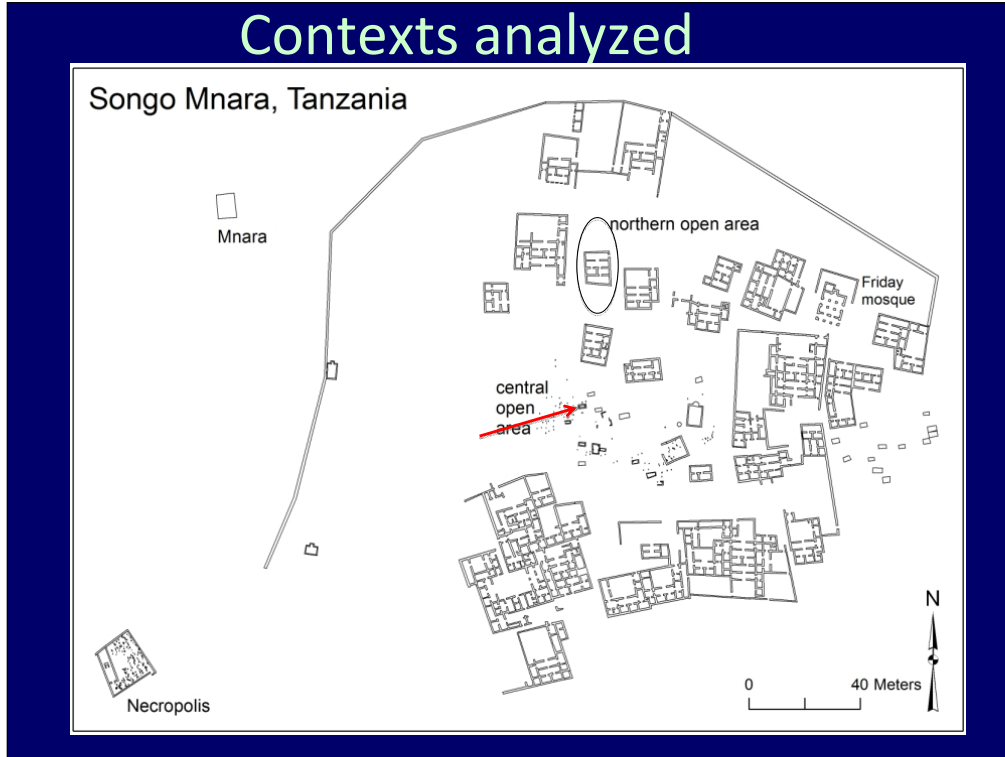
- Four attributes were considered essential for this study:
 - Vessel form
 - Surface finish/treatment
 - Decoration motifs
 - Production technique

Analysis Procedures and Assemblage Overview

Procedures

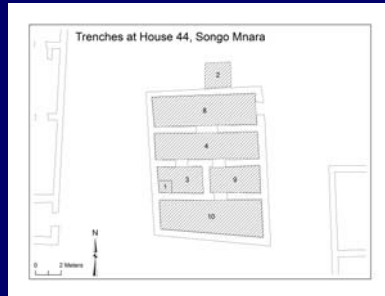
Four attributes were considered essential for this study: vessel, surface, decoration, and production attributes. Each of these attributes was further divided into “essential variables” significant to this study (Rice 2005: 276). For the vessel attribute, we recorded measurable variables such as rim diameter, rim percentage, rim thickness, rim form, vessel form, and vessel mouth among others. For the other attribute categories, surface, decoration, and production, we recorded more qualitative variables including exterior and interior surface finish and slip; plastic and paint decoration motifs; and past color, core, discoloration, and non-plastic inclusions (temper). These variables are essential to determine space-time relationships and functional aspects of the pottery assemblage (S. McIntosh 1995: 131).

Contexts analyzed



Material for the analysis came from two trenches: one within a small stone house in the northern part of the site, and another that encircled a tomb.

House 44



The house trench, SM010, measuring 8.5 X 2.5 meters and located in the back of the house, was one of six excavated within the structure. This trench comprised the greatest density of materials of all trenches excavated in 2009, and thus offers the best representation of ceramic material. Although the trench (SM010) yielded 36 contexts, the analysis discussed here will focus on four of the most productive contexts. These four contexts represent three midden layers, one located directly below a collapsed wall, two that are related to the sandy floor of the room, and one that appears to be a midden that just predates the structure. All of these contexts were rich with local and imported ceramics, glass and shell beads, copper coins, spindle whorls and faunal material. These four contexts contained 7,195 sherds, more than half of the total (12,261) sherds from SM010 and thus offer the possibility of understanding ceramic variability and changes at the site.

SM012



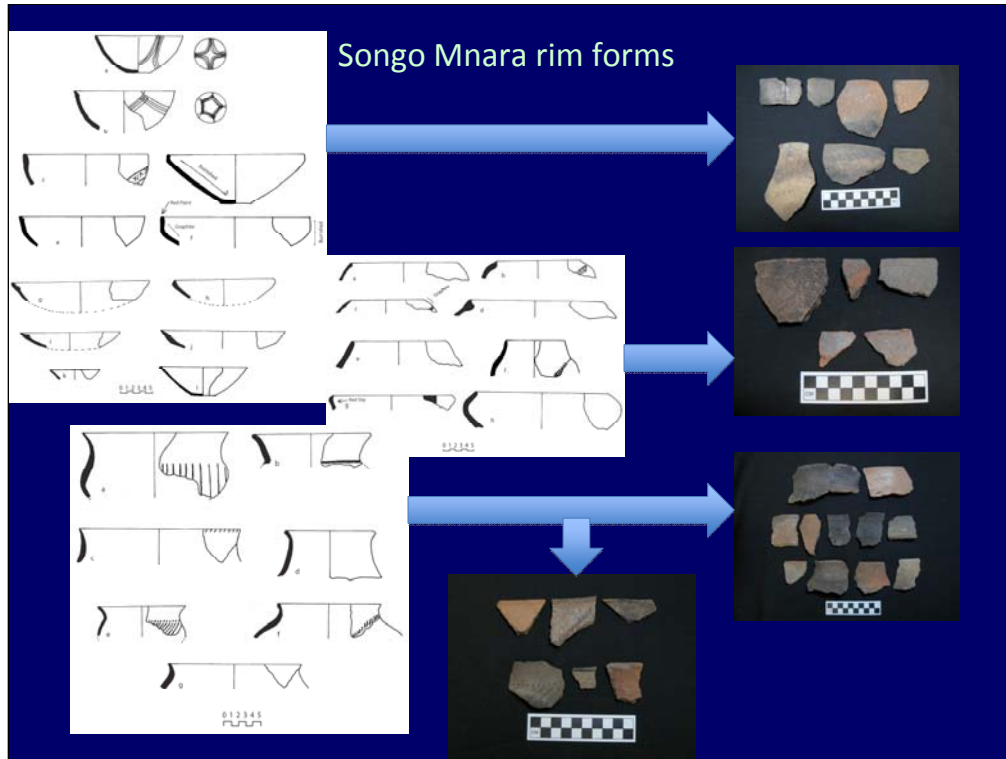
The trench surrounding one of the numerous tombs at the site was designated SM012. A pottery scatter was found on the surface, with sherds on and around the stepped tomb, which indicates offerings at the tomb that post-date the occupation of the site. In addition to this surface context, eleven others were recorded. These contexts included imported and local pottery, copper coins, beads, and small amounts of glass, iron and copper. The total number of local ceramic located was 2,808. The deposits suggest that the area was not in use prior to the construction of the tomb, and all materials appear to relate to the life of the tomb itself.

Assemblage overview

- Most of the ceramics analyzed have a sandy paste
- Grog was a common non-plastic inclusion
- Most bowls and plates were fully oxidized
- The assemblages are generally undecorated
- There were three general rim forms:
 - Simple open
 - Simple close
 - Everted

Assemblage Overview

Let me begin with a brief overview of the fabric, forms and decoration of the ceramics. I will then provide a brief description of the types identified in the assemblage. Most of ceramics analyzed have a sandy paste – either as a temper or as a natural property of the clay. Grog was also a common non-plastic inclusion, found frequently in bowls and jars. In terms of production, most bowls and plates were fully oxidized, while jars and bowls commonly had gray or black pastes, which may point to low firing conditions. Songo Mnara ceramics are generally undecorated; only 20% of the rims had painted, incised, or raised decorations.



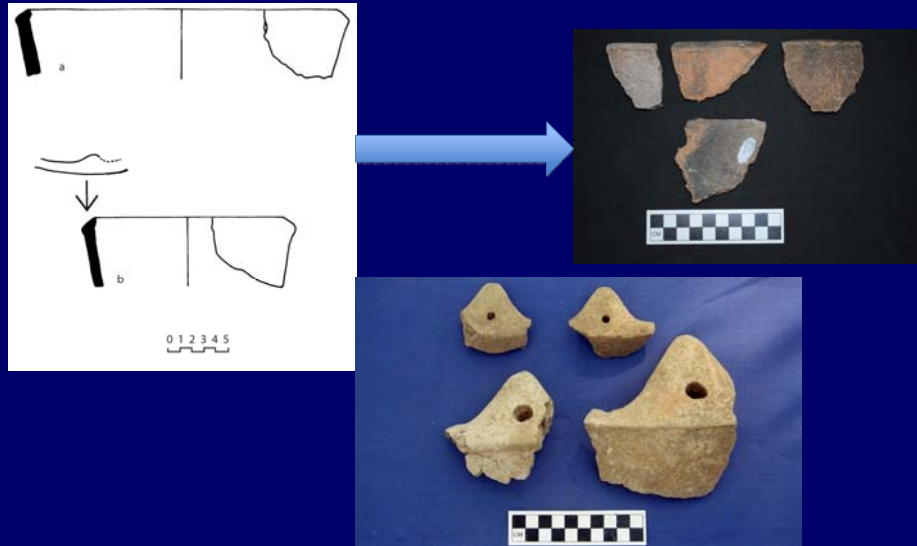
The analyzed rims indicate three general rim forms: simple open, simple closed and everted. Open vessels with simple rim forms were the most common in the assemblage, representing xx%, while closed vessels with simple rims were also present in significant numbers. Necked vessels with everted rims were present in smaller quantities.

Open vessels or bowls consisted of a number of different variations, including shallow and more hemispherical forms. Most were burnished or smoothed, and when decorated, these vessels were painted or burnished with graphite on the interior.

Simple closed vessels consisted of a number of forms, including globular and carinated examples, as well as those with more vertical rim orientation. Only a few of these vessels have plastic or painted decorations.

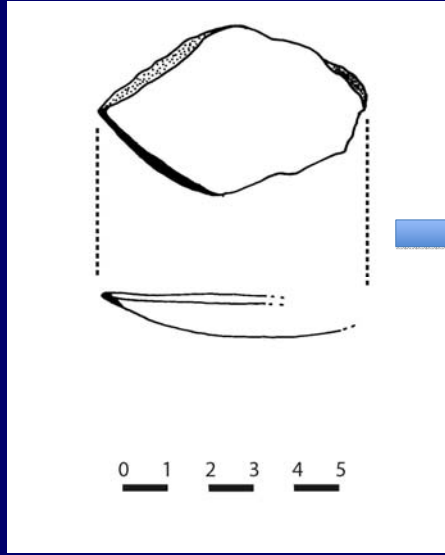
Restricted vessels with everted or out turned rims included long and short necked examples. These vessels were most commonly decorated with plastic and incised motifs.

Clay stove (*majiko*)



Two other rare forms were also present in the assemblage, clay stoves and lamps. Lamps were shallow-circular or tear-drop shaped. Fragments of portable clay stoves, called *majiko*, were also found. Two types of stoves were located. The first, identified by Chittick at Kilwa (1974: 331) has straight vertical walls and apparently a flat base. Three in-turned horns, each with a hole, rise above the rim. The second is simpler, without horns, but includes a raised area on the interior of the rim.

Lamp



Comparison with Kilwa and other coastal assemblages

- Red paint ware
- Wealed ware
- Husuni model ware
- Incised ware



Comparison with Kilwa and other coastal assemblages

The ceramics from Songo Mnara are similar to those found at Kilwa Kisiwani in both form and decoration. In particular, two vessel types from Kilwa have direct correlates at Songo Mnara, including what Chittick called 'red painted ware' and 'Wealed ware.'



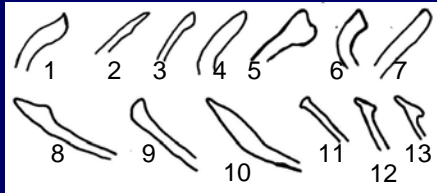
Plastic decorations were the most common in the Songo Mnara assemblage, and of these most were raised decorations that Chittick calls 'Wealed ware' (1974:327-8). This decoration includes a series of closely-spaced, parallel ridges or 'weals,' on restricted, necked vessels. Chittick called these vessels "extremely common" and "characteristic" of his Period IIIb, c. 1400-1500. While rims of this type were common among decorated rims, there were only seven clear examples were identified in the assemblage. By including decorated sherds, this number increases.



Painted and graphited bowls from Songo Mnara also have parallels with material from Kilwa. Examples of what Chittick called “red painted ware” (1974:325-6) are present in the Songo Mnara assemblage. These are hemispherical, simple open vessels with a flat or pedestal base. At Songo Mnara, these bowls are decorated with stripes and geometric designs in red paint with penciled and graphited motifs. Although there are more variants of paint decoration at Kilwa than Songo Mnara, the decorations from Songo Mnara are very similar to those from Kilwa, which are associated with the 15th – 17th century A.D.

Comparison with Kilwa and other coastal assemblages (cont.)

- Some differences exist between Songo Mnara and Kilwa ceramics:
 - Rim form, vessel form, decoration
- Songo Mnara and Kilwa ceramics are dissimilar to those from other East African coastal cities



Despite these similarities between ceramics at Kilwa and Songo Mnara, some possible differences exist. For example, there seem to be many more varieties of simple closed vessels at Songo Mnara than at Kilwa, although this may be a function of Chittick's reporting. Also, there appear to be more shallow bowls in the Songo Mnara assemblage, and fewer decorated vessels overall, than at Kilwa. These comparisons are tentative however, since Chittick does not report any sherd counts or type frequencies, and appears to over-emphasize decorated sherds over undecorated ones. Finally, there are some decorative motifs present in the Songo Mnara collection not present at Kilwa, including 'X' banded incisions found commonly on simple open bowls.

Despite these differences, the assemblage from Songo Mnara is clearly linked to ceramic forms and styles at Kilwa, and thus the Kilwa archipelago might be understood as having a particular regional ceramic tradition, one that differs from other 15th-16th-century coastal regions. During these centuries, ceramic styles were particularly regional (Fleisher 2004). In comparison, research in the Lamu archipelago (Horton 1996) and Pemba Island (Fleisher 2003), has recovered ceramic traditions that are distinct from those at Kilwa. This pattern of ceramic regionalization represents a significant shift from earlier centuries in which ceramic forms and decorations were much similar along the coastal corridor (Chami 1998).

Comparison between ceramics of House 44 and Trench 12 (tomb)

- A range of materials was found in both contexts
- Domestic finds were more in the house deposit
- Materials of ritual practices were associated with the tomb



Comparison between ceramics of House 44 and Trench 12 (tomb)

I now turn to a comparison of ceramics from contexts within the site, specifically, those from the domestic context of House 44, and the trench encircling a tomb. The tomb is located 32 meters south of House 44. A wide range of materials was found in both contexts, including local and imported pottery, glass, spindle whorls, beads, iron, copper, and coins (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones, 2010). Unsurprisingly, domestic finds were much more common in the house deposits, in which dozens of spindle whorls, hundreds of beads, and many copper and iron fragments were located.

Two other artifact classes associated with the tomb may suggest ritual deposits there: copper coins and rounded quartz pebbles. Both of these artifact types are known as offerings left at tombs, and can be seen on the ground surface in another cemetery at Songo Mnara. When Burton visited the east African coast in 19th century, he described the process of leaving pebbles at on tombs: “small stones are washed, perfumed, and sun-dried; finally they are strewn with prayers upon the tomb” (Burton 1872:359) Coins are also historically known as tomb offerings, and the presence of seven coins at the tomb very likely represents this act.

In light of these data, we were interested to know if it were possible to distinguish the local ceramics from the tomb deposits from those of House 44, with the idea that these ceramics represented offerings left at the tomb, or perhaps the evidence of graveside feasts. Both of these activities are attested to in historic and ethnographic accounts. In general, the ceramic assemblage from the tomb was not significantly different from that of the domestic context. However, some differences did exist in vessel forms and decoration. In the tomb assemblage, there were more sherds from restricted vessels in comparison to the domestic context. Although open bowls were the most common vessel form, as in the domestic context, there was a higher frequency of restricted vessels. The tomb deposits also contained almost no examples of wheel ware or painted bowls, and there were many more incised decorations in the tomb assemblage.

Although these differences are subtle, they represent differences of degree not kind. This suggests that ritual offerings at Swahili tombs were not made in special purpose vessels, but rather those in common use at the site, unlike ritual contexts in other African societies. Like coins, these would have been material items taken out of daily use and deposited at the tombs edge. The prosaic nature of these items, in fact, may have been part of what gave them ritual import, serving as ritual offerings to ancestors and other spirits.

Conclusion

- Songo Mnara ceramics are similar to those from Kilwa
- The slight differences between them suggest potters present in both towns
- Local pottery are given little attention at Songo Mnara – lack of standardization
- No special pots were used in ritual offering

Conclusion

This preliminary analysis of local ceramics Songo Mnara helps to situate the site within the 15th-16th century coastal world, in a region dominated by Kilwa Kisiwani. As discussed, the ceramics from Songo Mnara are similar in form and decoration as those from Kilwa, suggesting a set of well-recognized regional pottery styles. The differences between the pottery of Songo Mnara and Kilwa, however slight, suggest that there may have been potters present in both communities. This provides a measure of insight about Kilwa itself, in that such a dominant settlement, which seemingly defined a regional ceramic style, was not the exclusive producer of those goods. This hypothesis will need to be evaluated further. Also noteworthy, is the relative lack of attention to local pottery traditions at Songo Mnara; many pots were poorly finished or fired and there was a general lack of standardization in the assemblage. The fact that these pots were ones then taken out of circulation and placed as offering vessels around tombs, indicates that the vessels themselves—and the forms they took—were not an important part of the offering process. As more research is undertaken at Songo Mnara, focusing especially on the nature of ritual deposits, we will continue to investigate how and why particular objects became part of ritual offerings, providing greater insight into the use of local ceramics.