

More forgotten tells of Mali: an archaeologist's journey from here to Timbuktu¹

Kevin C. MacDonald

The use of the word "tell" to describe a settlement mound is so intimately associated with western Asia that its transfer to West Africa may seem inappropriate. But the mounds of Mali are true tells, and their excavation is beginning to reveal a hitherto unsuspected history of pre-Islamic urban development in the Middle Niger Valley

When I was a child, my mother used to warn me that I was driving her "from here to Timbuktu". I believe this was her own colourful way of saying that I was driving her "round the bend". Little did I suspect, as a boy of nine, how much of my life would ultimately be spent in proximity to this quasi-mythical locality.

Two hundred kilometres due south of Timbuktu lies the Malian town of Douentza, a polyglot mudbrick settlement founded by the Bambara and Dogon peoples, who were in turn later joined by the Songhai, Fulani and Tuareg. Douentza lies in a crucial gap between the towering Bandiagara and Dyoundé escarpments, which provide a castellated backdrop to the *Acacia*-dotted plains surrounding the town. Today, Tuareg camel and donkey caravans from Timbuktu still carry blocks of salt from the Sahara on a weekly trek through this pass on their way to trade for millet at Douentza and Bankass. The dirt road between the two towns also remains the principal overland route to the fabled city of Timbuktu. Beside this road, just north of Douentza, is the ancient settlement mound of Tongo Maaré Diabal ("the Ju-Jube tree-covered dune"), a 9ha "tell" in the Near Eastern sense. A strange twist of fate caused me to spend two long field seasons excavating that site, and mired me deep in current research on the forgotten tells of Mali.

Exploring Malian prehistory

In 1993, during the final phases of my doctoral research, I undertook a programme of survey and excavation in the region of Douentza. Since 1989, with my Malian colleagues, Téréba Togola and Boubacar Diaby, I had surveyed zones surrounding the modern Inland Niger Delta for traces of the first agriculturists and last hunter-gatherers of Mali. Our search was in general successful, and four seasons of field research had begun to supply an increasingly coherent picture of the economic prehistory of the Upper and Middle Niger.²

Douentza was the final link in a counter-clockwise path that had taken us from the Méma, to the Vallée du Serpent, to the Haute Vallée (Fig. 1).³ However, it must be

admitted that this progression was not part of some grand design. It was in fact provoked by the protracted and highly mobile period of instability in Mali (1991–95), which consisted principally of armed conflict between Malian government forces and the Tuareg. We were thus moving from "safe zone" to "safe zone" over time, and quite unwittingly gathering a better database than if we had stayed put in an already known region.

So, as we surveyed the terra incognita of Douentza, finding and test-excavating many Late Stone Age or "Néolithique" settlements, we decided it would also be a good idea to test one of the more recent settlement mounds we had encountered. In this first exploratory season we were well spread out over the landscape – with the excavation teams of Téréba Togola, myself, Cecilia Capezza, and my wife, Rachel Hutton MacDonald, often labouring several kilometres away from each other in the shimmering Sahelian heat haze. After three

months in and around Douentza, we returned to Britain and began laboratory work. We found that there were many reasons to continue our fieldwork in the region. The early hunter-gatherer and agropastoral sites dated to the second millennium BC and had excellent organic preservation (including in the latter case some potential domestic cereals). There were also tumuli dating to the first millennium BC. But another interesting outcome was a single radiocarbon date for a test pit put into the settlement mound of Tongo Maaré Diabal. We had only excavated about 1 m into this 4 m deep mound, in order to obtain an idea of its age relative to other Middle Niger tell sites. We were surprised to get a date of c. AD 200–600 from these upper deposits, which seemed very early. It was: the date later turned out to be aberrant. But it led us to undertake more substantial excavations at the site in our next season, in hopes of finding earlier deposits beneath. Thus began a new obsession with the excavation of mud-brick settlements.

Urban archaeology in Mali

Since Roderick and Susan McIntosh began excavating the ancient city of Jenné-Jeno in 1977, archaeologists have become aware that urbanism along the Middle Niger predated the coming of Islam and extended back to the early part of the first millennium AD.⁴ This discovery was surprising. Before the 1970s the hundreds of tells dotting the Inland Niger Delta were thought to be comparatively recent, perhaps even tumuli rather than settlements,

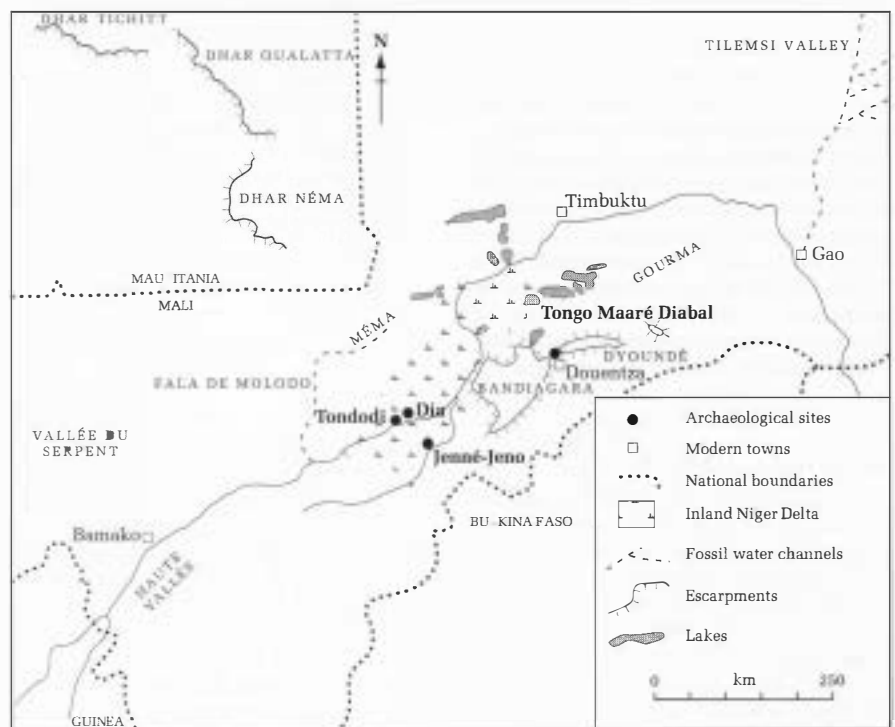


Figure 1 Mali: location of the main archaeological sites mentioned in the text.



Figure 2 Téréba Togola supervising excavation at Tongo Maaré Diabal in 1995.

and certainly dating to the second, rather than the first, millennium AD. Thus, an ancient civilization had languished almost unknown to archaeology, although keenly remembered in oral traditions.

When Téréba Togola and I began to direct more substantial excavations at Tongo Maaré Diabal in 1995 (Fig. 2), we were amazed by the quality of architectural preservation at the site. Past experience gleaned from excavations at the tell of Akumbu in the Méma, and from the McIntosh's work at Jenné-Jeno, had shown that walls were usually almost levelled during rebuilding, leaving only foundation stumps two to three bricks high. But at Tongo Maaré Diabal excavated

walls often stood to almost 1 m in height, consisting of up to 12 perfect ranks of loaf-shaped bricks. Our excavations into the site's 4 m of deposits ultimately exposed 22 buildings that pertained to five distinct horizons of rebuilding and spanned approximately a thousand years of occupation from c. AD 200 to c. AD 1200 (based on nine calibrated radiocarbon determinations; Fig. 3).

Although analysis of our findings from the three excavation seasons at the site are still in progress, it is possible to indicate some salient points about the site and their relevance within the "big picture" of Middle Niger archaeology. The site was founded on top of a levee at the extreme



Figure 3 The main exposure at Tongo Maaré Diabal mid-way through the 1995 season.

eastern edge of the ancient Inland Niger Delta. The initial settlers of Tongo Maaré Diabal appear to have been agropastoralists, with domesticated pearl millet (*Pennisetum typhoides*, identified by Cecilia Capezza), cattle, sheep, goats and dogs present in the earliest layers. Iron working was also certainly practised at the time of the site's first settlement, as is indicated by the excavation of a "blacksmith's workshop" (complete with tuyères, crucibles, and iron-working debris), and by a nearby furnace site at Boata that dates to c. AD 200–400.⁵ Among the remarkable finds are the earliest known textile remains from Sub-Saharan Africa, directly dated to AD 680–860, and an equestrian terracotta statuette, dated on associated charcoal to AD 820–1020, which is one of only two equestrian representations known from first millennium AD West Africa (Fig. 4).

But the architectural sequence from the site remains its most provocative and important contribution. Excavating mudbrick architecture is of course not easy, as the bricks themselves consist of the same raw material as much of the collapse that surrounds them. But, through trial and error we have found that the wetting of excavated exposures, and arduous scraping after the removal of each stratigraphic horizon, expose sufficient differences in colour and texture to allow us to discern individual bricks, ashy room floors, and sandy yard areas. Such a procedure was aided at Tongo Maaré Diabal by good preservation of wall and surface features such as hearths and stone features, as well as intact pots, of which nearly 30 were recovered (Fig. 5).



Figure 4 The early horse-and-rider statuette from Horizon 4 at Tongo Maaré Diabal, height 15 cm; conserved by Bethan Baresi at the Institute of Archaeology.

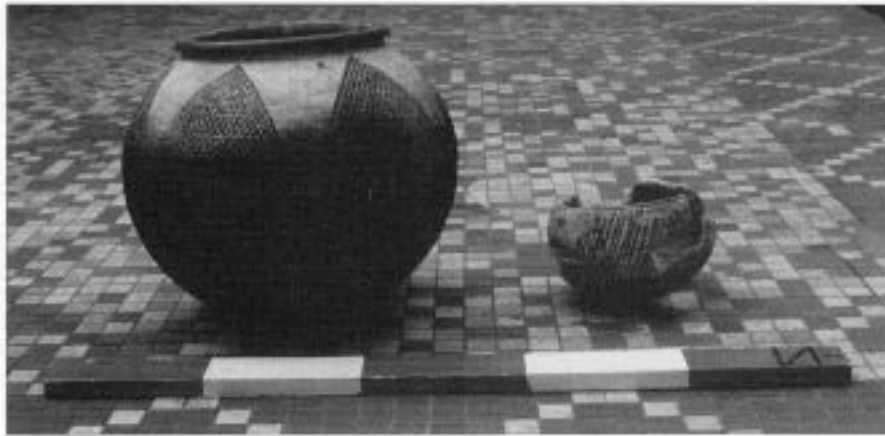


Figure 5 Two intact polychrome painted pots (white, black and red) from a Horizon 3 living floor at Tongo Maaré Diabal.

Permanent structures at Tongo Maaré Diabal consist of four types: curvilinear and rectilinear tauf or pisé buildings, and curvilinear and rectilinear rectangular mudbrick buildings. Beginning from the earliest occupation (Horizon 1, AD 300–450) there are remains of curvilinear tauf houses, which are the earliest dated permanent domestic structures yet known in Mali. In the next two centuries (Horizon 2, AD 450–650) rectilinear tauf and mudbrick structures appear, with some curvilinear structures continuing throughout the sequence. Interestingly, mudbrick replaces tauf almost completely from Horizon 3 (AD 650–850) onwards.

The Tongo Maaré Diabal architectural sample is the largest yet recovered from the tells of Mali, and it differs greatly from that of Jenné-Jeno, where permanent architecture, in the form of curvilinear tauf structures, is not recorded until “Phase 3” (AD 450–850). Indeed, linearmudbrick structures (using round mudbrick) are not present there until “late Phase 4” (c. AD 1200–1400), almost 800 years after those of Tongo Maaré Diabal, and were originally thought to indicate “Arabic influence” during that time in the site’s history.⁶ Why this great discrepancy between the two building sequences? Ethnic and cultural differences may ultimately explain this variance in house form, although I doubt that North African influence had anything to do with choices made in the early to mid-first millennium AD. Rather, it is likely that circular and round house forms existed in the early impermanent (grass) architecture of West Africa and were continued in a more permanent form in later building traditions, such as the second-millennium BC roundhouse of Windé Koroji, and the exactly contemporary rectilinear wattle and daub houses of Ntereso in Ghana.⁷ It should be remembered that the location of Jenné-Jeno at the centre of the Inland Delta floodplain may also have discouraged the building of permanent

mud structures at the site until the city wall, which afforded substantial flood protection, was built around the site sometime during “Phase 3” (AD 450–850).

So where does Tongo Maaré Diabal seem to fit in the “big picture”? It is a medium-size tell site (9ha) by Middle Niger standards, whereas sites tend to range between 1ha and 80ha in extent, with most being less than 5ha and very few exceeding 20ha. It also has no immediate hinterland, being almost 5km from its nearest neighbouring settlement. Tongo Maaré Diabal was neither a city nor a village, and is perhaps best described as a town. The reasons for its placement are probably linked to the geographical importance of the Dyoundé-Bandiagara pass – at the centre of which it stands – and to the immediate proximity of iron-ore deposits (of which the Inland Niger Delta has none). It is thus an interesting example of a peripheral tell site, poised at the edge of the first-millennium AD Middle Niger civilization and possibly serving as an iron-production centre and/or a trade conduit.

Continuing research into the tells of Mali

The excavations at Tongo Maaré Diabal have whetted my, and my students’, appetite for further enquiry into the diversity and origin of the permanent settlements of the Inland Niger Delta. To this end our team from the Institute of Archaeology has become involved in an international research consortium, coordinated by Rogier Bedaux of the Museum of Ethnography at Leiden in the Netherlands and the Ministries of Culture and Scientific Research in Mali. This extensive collaborative excavation programme (involving Malian, Dutch, French and British elements) will begin in December 1998 at the two tell sites of Dia (each c. 50ha in size) in the northern Delta. Initial indications are promising. According to oral traditions, Dia is the figurative

mother of Jenné, and thus may be even earlier in date. Additionally, early ceramics belonging to the Tichitt–Walata tradition (c. 1500–800 BC) have been identified from the basal deposits of the nearby tell of Tondodi (Fig. 1), indicating possible continuity with the primary tell deposits. Thus, settlement at Dia may potentially date to deep within the first millennium BC, which is an exciting prospect. We still have a great deal to learn from the tells of Mali.

Notes

1. With apologies to Roderick McIntosh, my first archaeological mentor, upon whose phrase “the forgotten tells of Mali” the title of this article is based.
2. K. C. MacDonald, *Socio-economic diversity and the origins of cultural complexity along the Middle Niger (2000 BC to AD 300)* (PhD thesis (University of Cambridge, Department of Archaeology, 1994).
3. See K. C. MacDonald & P. Allsworth-Jones, “A reconsideration of the West African macrolithic conundrum: new factory sites and an associated settlement in the Vallée du Serpent, Mali”, *African Archaeological Review* 12, 73–104, 1994; K. C. MacDonald & W. van Neer, “Specialized fishing peoples in the later Holocene of the Méma region (Mali)”, in *Fish exploitation in the past*, W. van Neer (ed.), 243–51 (Tervuren, Belgium: Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, 1994); K. C. MacDonald, “Tichitt–Walata and the Middle Niger: evidence for cultural contact in the second millennium BC”, in *Aspects of African archaeology: papers from the 10th Congress of the Pan-African Association for Prehistory and Related Studies*, G. Pwiti & R. Soper (eds), 429–40 (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1996); T. Togola, “Iron Age occupation in the Méma region, Mali”, *African Archaeological Review* 13, 91–110, 1996; and K. C. MacDonald, “Koroukorokale revisited: the Pays Mandé and the West African microlithic technocomplex”, *African Archaeological Review* 14, 161–200, 1997.
4. See S. K. McIntosh & R. J. McIntosh, *Prehistoric investigations in the region of Jenné, Mali* [2 vols] (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 1980); and S. K. McIntosh (ed.), *Excavations at Jenné-Jeno, Hambarketolo, and Kaniana (Inland Niger Delta, Mali), the 1981 season* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
5. All the archaeometallurgical work on the project was carried out in collaboration with James Woodhouse, a postgraduate student at the Institute of Archaeology.
6. S. K. McIntosh (ed.), *Excavations at Jenné-Jeno, Hambarketolo, and Kaniana (Inland Niger Delta, Mali), the 1981 season* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
7. K. C. MacDonald, “The Windé Koroji Complex: evidence for the peopling of the eastern Inland Niger Delta (2100–500 BC). *Préhistoire Anthropologie Méditerranéennes* 5, 147–65, 1996.