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New Excavations at Lújúmò Compound, Ilé-Ifè

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Africa

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New Excavations at Lújùmò Compound, Ilé-Ife (submitted by Léa Roth, doctoral candidate, Università degli Studi di Pavia and Université de Paris, lea.roth@gmail.com)

Abstract: This note presents the preliminary results of the excavation of the Lújùmò Compound site in Ilé-Ife in southwestern Nigeria, fieldwork conducted as part of my Ph.D. research. Among the most significant discoveries of the 2022 archaeological season was a succession of three distinct levels of potsherd pavements that opens up promising perspectives for the study of the evolution of the Ife urban landscape. The preservation of 12th- to 13th-century medieval levels by the deposits of a modern house, in a particularly eroded area, illustrates the challenges of archaeology in the humid tropical zone.

Resumen: Este breve artículo presenta los resultados preliminares de la excavación del sitio Lújùmò Compound en Ilé-Ife, en el sudoeste de Nigeria, cuyo trabajo de campo se realizó como parte de mi investigación de doctorado. Uno de los descubrimientos más significativos hechos durante este campo arqueológico de 2022 fue una sucesión de tres niveles distintos de pavimentos de tiestos cerámicos abre perspectivas prometedoras para el estudio de la evolución del paisaje urbano de Ife. La conservación de los niveles medievales del siglo XII-XIII por los depósitos de una casa moderna, en una zona especialmente erosionada, ilustra los desafíos de la arqueología en los trópicos húmedos.

Résumé : Cette note présente les premiers résultats de la fouille du site de Lújùmò Compound à Ilé-Ife au sud-ouest du Nigeria, dont les travaux de terrain ont été mené dans le cadre de mes recherches doctorales. Parmi les découvertes les plus notables de la saison archéologique 2022, une succession de trois niveaux distincts de pavements de tessons de céramique ouvre des perspectives prometteuses pour l'étude de l'évolution du paysage urbain d'Ife. La conservation de niveaux médiévaux des XIIIe-XIIIe siècles par les dépôts d'une maison moderne, dans une zone particulièrement érodée, fournit une illustration des défis de l'archéologie en zone tropicale humide.

Pavements as markers of the ancient urban space

Ilé-Ife, known mainly for its brass and terracotta heads, has, since the beginning of the 20th century, seen the identification of many archaeological sites that testify to its influence and its political and cultural value during the medieval period. The contrast between the number of archaeological excavations and the lack of published reports has already been pointed out in several publications (Roth et al. 2021:77–114; Chouin 2021:23–45). Among the topics of which the understanding is still very limited, ancient architecture and the organization of urban space are as yet quite under-researched. It must be said that the footprints of earthen walls can be difficult to recognize in the stratigraphy in a humid tropical context and the drastic erosion of the landscape, combined with modern urbanization and the lack of a conservation policy, adds challenges to the research. However, the omnipresence of certain features in the archaeological landscape, notably pits and potsherds and stone pavements, suggests that significant urban engineering was undertaken during the first periods of occupation of the city.

These pavements formed mosaics scattered throughout the city that due to erosion are now often exposed on the surface. What is visible today are the remains of spaces generally considered to have been outside, and thus constitute, “in negative,” one of the most accessible traces of the ancient architecture. The diversity of their patterns and quality of manufacture undoubtedly reflects a multiplicity of functions (water drainage; strategy against erosion; hygiene; artistic expression; family, social, political, and religious differentiation of spaces, etc.) and perhaps even sometimes unintentional ones (use as a sacred space, geographical reference area, etc.) associated with them (Aguigah 2018:111–133). However, these pavements were undoubtedly a sustainable solution for the development of surfaces at risk from erosion caused by tropical rains and anthropic pressure on the soil. The most common account of the history of Ife's pavements (Ife here refers to the medieval Ilé-Ife and the historical object in the 'longue durée') is that they are the legacy of Queen Lúwò, who is still celebrated at an annual festival in Ilé-Ife. According to tradition, Lúwò was the first and last queen of Ife who is said to have forced the people of Ife to build pavements to protect the streets during the rainy season (Ogunfolakan 1987:87–88).

In Ilé-Ife, excavations at sites such as Ìta Yemòó, Woyè Àsírí, Ọbalàra Land, Láfógido, Ọdùduwà College, and now Lújùmò Compound have revealed pavements in archaeological context and located them between the 12th and the 14th century (Willett 1971:366; Garlake 1974:111–148, 1977:57–95; Eyo 1974:99–109; Chouin 2018:287–309; Roth et al. 2017). Unfortu-

nately, most of the known pavements remain visible on the surface and thus are amputated from their stratigraphic context for the contemporary and previous periods. With this in mind, we planned new excavations to focus on these vestiges in an attempt to better understand their place in the stratigraphy of Ife.

Preliminary research and the archaeological potential of Lújùmò Compound

In 2021, we carried out new work to evaluate the archaeological potential at a site in the center of the city, in the Lújùmò Compound. These are the ruins of a collapsed house along which pieces of potsherd pavement were visible (Figure 1). This abandoned site is the former house of the Ogunfolakan family, probably built at the end of the 19th century. The site had never been excavated before this study, but a ceramic pot containing 13 cowrie shells and animal bones used in Ifá divination was found in the vicinity of the house and described (Ogunfolakan 2002:113). Adisa Ogunfolakan first observed portions of the pavement along his family house in the 1990s before it collapsed around 2010 (Adisa Ogunfolakan 2022, pers. comm.).



FIGURE 1. General view of the Lújùmò Compound, Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Left: view of the ruins of the house with the pavements visible below the modern cement-floor level; right: neighboring rammed-earth house with pavements appearing at the foundation level. (Photos courtesy of Léa Roth, 2021.)

The interest in working at the Lújùmò complex was two-fold, archaeological and heuristic. Firstly, the presence of pavements under the levels of the family house indicated the presence of architectural levels predating the construction of the modern house. In general, recent urbanization work has had the effect of destroying archaeological remains and pavements in particular. However, the Lújùmò Compound offers an interesting exception of a modern building that partly protected the underlying archaeological levels from erosion. The area around the ruins of the house has been completely eroded down to the bedrock and thus

pavements that once littered the area have gradually disappeared (Olatundun Ogunfolakan 2022, pers. comm.). The house and then its ruins thus acted as a protective surface for the older levels in the same way as was observed with the 19th-century embankments that preserved medieval layers from erosion, especially at the sites of Ìta Yemòó and Òkè Àtàn (Chouin 2022:36). Furthermore, the research at Lújùmò Compound opens up the possibility of developing a long-term history of the site. Without giving in to the illusion of a continuous history without any gaps, the possibility of situating the study in recent memory by gathering oral accounts and family photographic archives improves the perspectives of research.

During the first season in 2021, the preliminary work consisted of the cleaning of two profiles along the southern façade of the collapsed house, on either side of the staircase that originally led into the house. This enabled us to identify a total of four pavements at different depths (with no more than 35 cm of space between two pavements) and several ancient pits. Radiocarbon dating analysis indicated that the layer under the pavements dated from the 12th–13th centuries (Roth 2022). In one of the profiles, two pavements overlapped, a similar stratigraphic condition that has already been noted in the archaeology of Ife. Frank Willett, for example, observed the overlapping of a potsherd pavement and a stone pavement in 1962–1963 at Itá Yemòó (Roth et al. 2021:99). However, to our knowledge, such a stratigraphic feature has rarely been documented.

August 2022 archaeological season

In August 2022, the excavation focused on the southern part of the interior of the collapsed modern house. An area of 9.5 x 3.5 m was excavated down to the cement-floor level, which corresponds to the living level of the Ogunfolakan family house. After removing this cement layer, a grid was laid and a total of five units were partially excavated: A (1 x 2 m), B (1 x 2 m), C (1 x 2 m), D (1 x 1.5 m), and E (1 x 2.5 m) (Figure 2). Units A–D were initially excavated simultaneously. The first levels (20–30 cm under the cement floor) contained the densest and most diverse distribution of material, including cow-

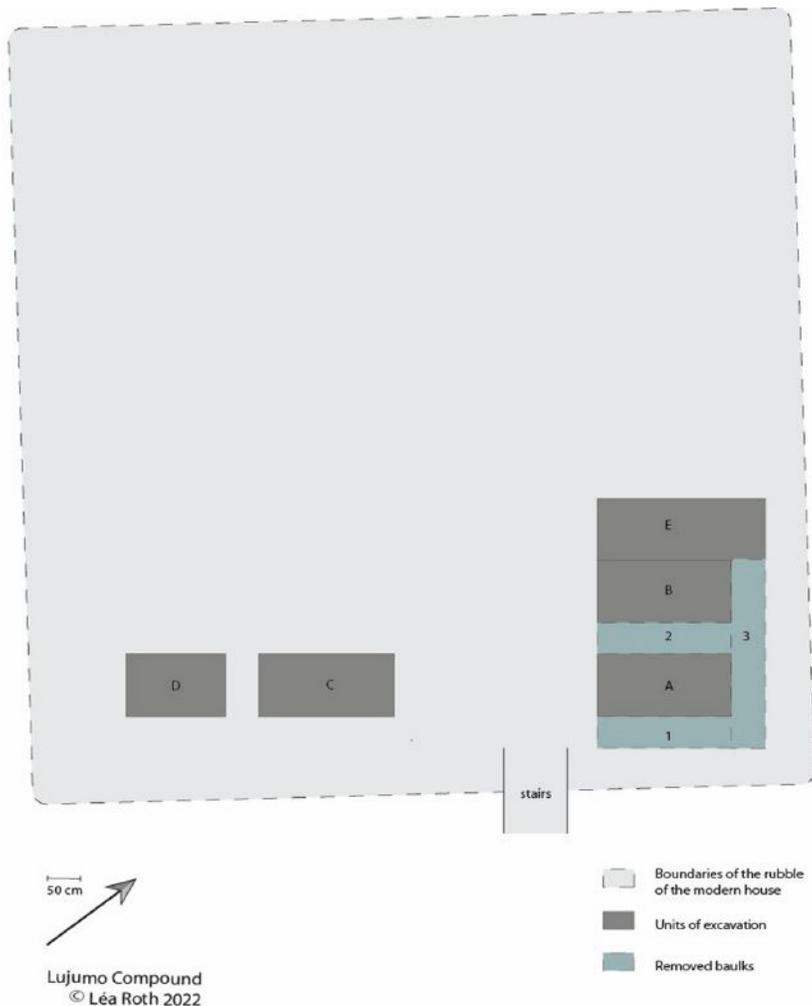


FIGURE 2. Location of excavation units, Lújúmò Compound, Ilé-Iḡè. (Map by Léa Roth, 2022.)

the late 19th century (Roth 2022). In unit B, another pavement with a remarkable cambered surface was found about 60 cm below the cement floor, the continuation of pavement no. 1 (Figures 4–6).

The extension of the area of units A and B by the removal of baulks 1, 2, and 3 (Figure 1) facilitated a better understanding of the succession of the different paved levels. We observed a total of three layers of pavements in herringbone pattern: pavement no. 1, pavement no. 2, and the remains of pavement no. 3. Pavement no. 1 with its convex shape seemed to be the most regularly laid. It was covered by

rie shells, potsherds, glass beads, a button, metal, faunal remains, snail shells, and palm and *Plukenetia conophora* nuts (“Nigerian walnut”). These deposits also contained coins from 1953 and 1973, an imported kaolin pipe bowl, porcelain sherds, and fragments of glass bottles, characteristic of the period of introduction of imported goods into the Yoruba hinterland by the British colonial economy in the early 20th century (Ogundiran et al. 2017:77–103) (Figure 3).

Units C and D were opened to survey the south-western side of the house, where pieces of pavement had been seen in section in 2021. In unit C, a pavement appeared about 12 cm under the cement floor of the modern house. It has an intriguing shape with an arc-shaped side delimited by a row of raised sherds. In unit D, a small piece of pavement appeared almost on the surface under the cement floor that had been removed. The early levels of units C and D present much evidence of disturbances related to recent domestic activities on the site (Roth 2022). Due to time restrictions, we then concentrated on units A and B.

In unit A, a pavement appeared about 50 cm below the cement floor level (pavement no. 2). Above this pavement were pieces of another pavement from which only isolated potsherds remained, corresponding to the remnants of the second pavement visible in the profile cleaned in 2021 (pavement no. 3). To the east of unit A, the pavement was cut by a very loose and wet fill that appeared to be a burial, which we have not been able to excavate yet. It is probably a relatively modern grave, possibly from

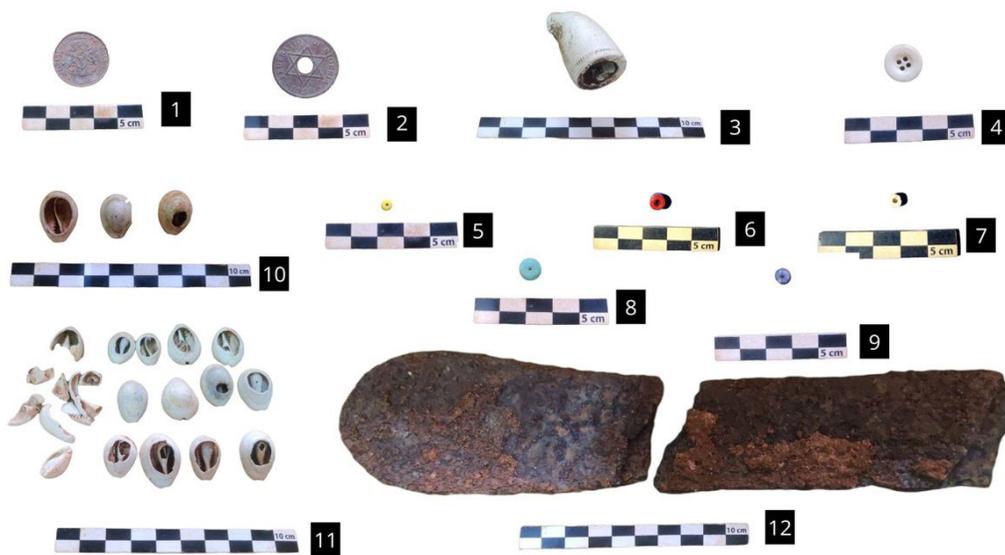


FIGURE 3. Selection of artifacts from the first four levels of units A, B, C, and E, Lújúmò Compound, Ilé-Iḡè: (1) kobo coin (1973), (2) British colonial-period coin (1959), (3) pipe bowl, kaolin, roulette decoration–British production pre 1915 (?), (4) possible porcelain button, (5)–(9) glass beads, (10)–(11) cowrie shells cut, with a hole or intact, (12) knife. (Photos courtesy of Léa Roth, 2022.)

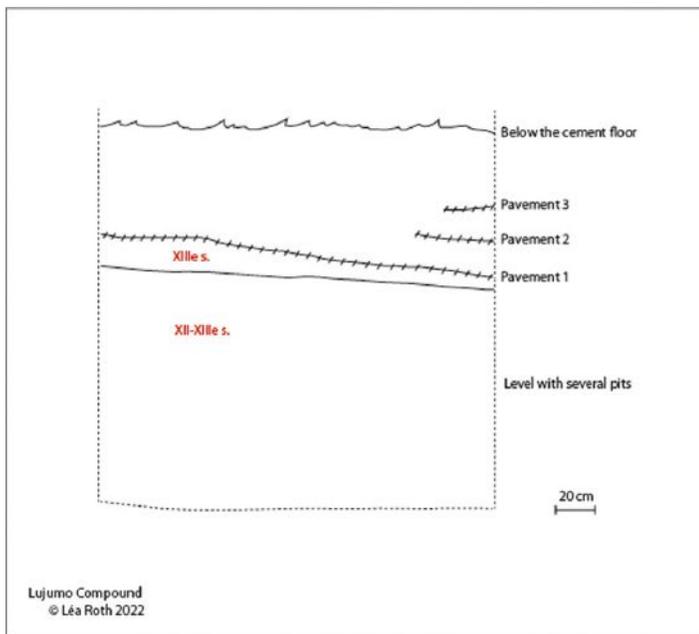


FIGURE 4. Sketch view of the stratigraphy, Lújúmò Compound, Ilé-Ifé. (Figure by Léa Roth, 2022.)



FIGURE 5. Three levels of overlapping potsherd pavements, Lújúmò Compound, Ilé-Ifé. (Photo courtesy of Léa Roth, 2022.)

pavement no. 2, which was a little rougher and partially cut by the later digging of a grave. Finally, above pavement no. 2 the remains of another pavement (no. 3) were still visible in a few patches. It seemed clear that this last pavement was the less well-preserved one, as it was the one that was first exposed to modern construction work and even to erosion before the house was built (Figures 4–7).

Unit E was excavated to explore the medieval levels protected by the pavements, to get an initial cross-sectional view of the levels below the convex pavement no. 1, and to expose a stratigraphic column below pavement no. 3. Unit E was placed in one of the few areas where it was not necessary to remove a pavement to access the lower levels. This unit revealed three pits that we excavated separately. Pits PII and PIII were located where pavement no. 1 was curved downward, which may explain

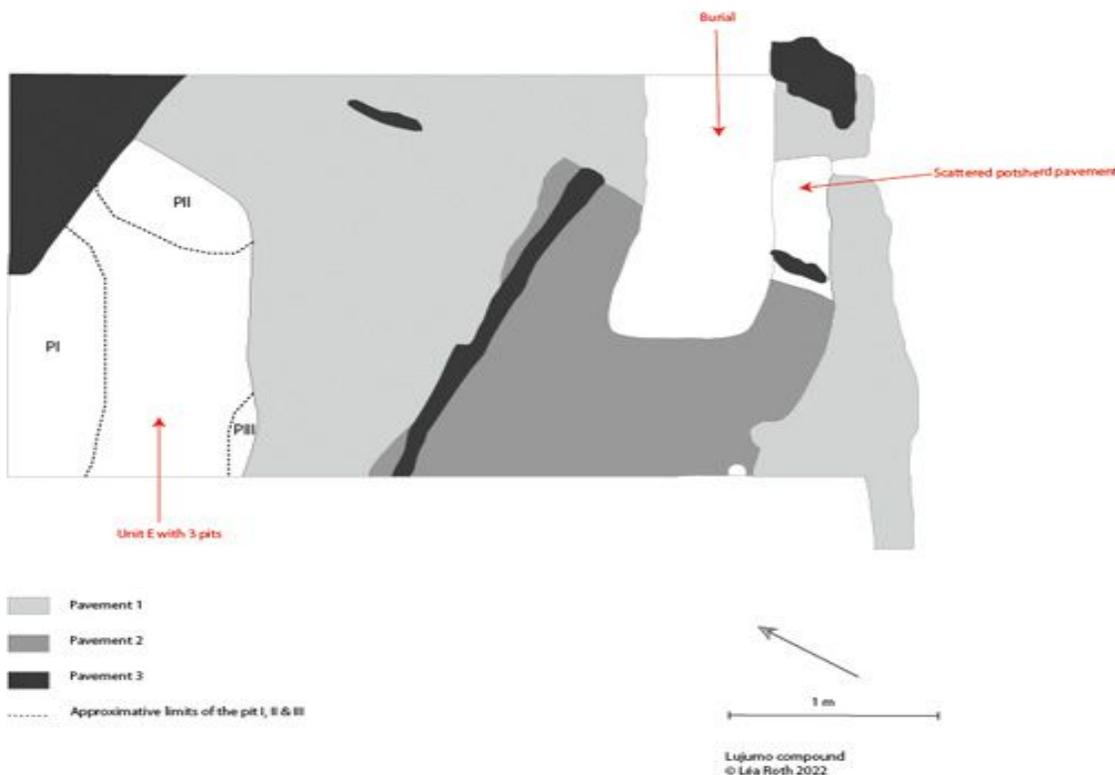


FIGURE 6. Map of the excavation area showing the distribution of the three pavement levels and the location of unit E with the three pits, Lújúmò Compound, Ilé-Ifé. (Map by Léa Roth, 2022.)

the intriguing shape. A third pit, PI, which we could not finish excavating this season, had a loose and charred fill, an impressive concentration of medium-size stones, a large number of potsherds, and some lithic material (including probably a grinding stone). The three pits were separated by very compact red clay soil with no anthropogenic material, which could correspond to a sterile layer and be a marker of the beginning of the bedrock into which the pits were dug.

Conclusion

This excavation of barely more than 10 m² led to the unique discovery of three levels of pavements, opening up per-

spectives on the understanding of the urban landscape of medieval Ife and its evolution. While this is not the first time that overlapping pavements have been observed in Ife, it is perhaps the first time that so many successive levels have been excavated with a clear view of their stratification (Figures 6–7). Overall, in addition to the modern material already listed above, the excavation yielded some 7,300 potsherds and lithic material that will require further study. Charcoal samples are currently undergoing radiocarbon dating analysis and will help to clarify the chronology of the site and in particular the different levels of pavements. The burial and the PI pit should also be the object of a new excavation campaign. Future fieldwork could extend the excavation to the whole area of the collapsed house.



FIGURE 7. General view of the excavation at the end of the 2022 season, Lújùmò Compound, Ilé-Ife. (Photo courtesy of Léa Roth, 2022.)

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Togo

Gestion de l'Héritage Colonial Allemand au Togo : Le Cas de Tchatchaminadè 1897–2015/Management of the German Colonial Heritage in Togo: The Case of Tchatchaminadè 1897–2015/El Gestión del Patrimonio Colonial Alemán en Togo: El Caso de Tchatchaminadè 1897–2015/Umgang mit dem Deutschen Kolonialen Erbe in Togo: Der Fall Tchatchaminadè 1897–2015 (submitted by Aka Adjo Bebewou, Docteur en Mémoire et Patrimoine au Département d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de l'Université de Lomé, Togo, +228.91.92.58.73, akabebewou@gmail.com)

Résumé : Les chercheurs africains ont un rôle à jouer dans une prise de conscience sur la question de l'archéologie historique, en particulier ce qui concerne l'héritage colonial. En effet, l'archéologie historique prend en compte les sites historiques ou lieux de mémoires. Notre réflexion se situe autour d'un élément controversé : l'héritage colonial allemand de Tchatchaminadè au Togo. Nombreuses sont les opinions fâcheuses qui sont avancées sur cette période. Ce qui laisse inaperçu les efforts consentis par nos ancêtres en tant que ouvriers au cours de ces périodes.

Abstract: African researchers have a part to play in raising awareness of the issue of historical archaeology, particularly as it relates to the colonial legacy. Indeed, historical archaeology considers historical sites or places of memory. Our reflection focuses on a controversial element: the German colonial heritage of Tchatchaminadè in Togo. Many unfortunate opinions are put forward about this period. This renders unnoticed the efforts made by our ancestors as workers during these periods.

Resumen: Los investigadores africanos tienen un papel que desempeñar en la concienciación de la cuestión de la arqueología histórica, especialmente en lo que se refiere al legado colonial. En efecto, la arqueología histórica tiene en cuenta los lugares históricos o de memoria. Nuestra reflexión se basa en un elemento controvertido: la herencia colonial alemana de Tchatchaminadè en Togo. Sobre este periodo se han vertido muchas opiniones desafortunadas. Esto hace que pasen desapercibidos los esfuerzos realizados por nuestros antepasados como trabajadores durante estos periodos.