

ANNUAL REPORT: SENEGAL-BANDAFASSI 2016 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students conducting survey at the Bandafassi Plateau

During the 2016 field season, the Bandafassi Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP) began to address questions about long-term cultural interaction and social change along the upper Gambia River in southeastern Senegal. These questions are particularly important in this region where rural societies are often imagined to be stuck in timeless traditions and where oral histories rarely speak to events earlier than the late-19th century when a series of wars displaced many small village communities. This season we focused on documenting the archaeological evidence for the history of two of these societies—namely, the Bedik and the Malinke.

The Bedik today live on and around the Bandafassi Plateau where they fled for refuge during periods of war in the past. Looking to explore when and how people moved up to this highland escape, the BRAP field school undertook a survey to identify 99 previously unknown archaeological sites (i.e., scatters of stone tool debris, concentrations of pottery, hut foundations) over an area of nearly 8 km² surrounding the Bandafassi Plateau. Intrigued by our preliminary findings, one student developed a research project on the relation between our survey methods and the number and location of sites discovered by each of two survey teams (each including 5-6 people). Another student analyzed the pottery from six of these sites to identify differences in clay sources and decoration resulting from change through time and/or social distinctions among past potters. All in all, the initial results of our survey show that the history of the Bedik was much more complicated than a simple move from lowland plains to highland refuges in the 19th century—people likely moved back and forth multiple times over the past 1000 years.

Living some 20-30 km east of the Bandafassi Plateau, the Malinke occupy a number of villages along the Gambia River where they practice farming, herding, hunting, and gold mining; they also have a proud history of defending themselves from attack during times of war over the past few centuries. Due to concerns about survey in an active gold-mining region, the BRAP field

school approached the study of ancestral Malinke communities through research, including test excavations and surface mapping, at three village sites likely dating to the 16-19th centuries. Artifacts from these sites, such as pottery sherds, tobacco pipe fragments, and cowry shells, attest to histories of craft production and trade, while features, such as hut foundations and defensive walls, document social interactions within and between village communities. One student interested in warfare worked to map the wall surrounding the site of Yoro Moussou, while another student analyzed pottery from one excavation sequence to build a relative ceramic chronology at the site of Heramakonon. In contrast with our data from survey around the Bandafassi Plateau, the preliminary results of fieldwork in the Malinke region suggest that communities were less mobile and thus more committed to defending their territories during times of conflict over the past several centuries.