

PRELIMINARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY IN SÃO TOMÉ

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Introduction

São Tomé is an African island in the Atlantic Ocean, located in the Gulf of Guinea, about 300 km west of Gabon. Along with the island of Príncipe, São Tomé is the main island of the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe. Spanning 850 km², the island of São Tomé is larger than the island of Príncipe, which is 142 km² in size. Like the Equatorial Guinean islands of Annobon and Bioko, São Tomé and Príncipe are volcanic islands that line up southwest to northeast along the oceanic rift known as the Cameroon Line (Figure 1). According to Peter Mitchell (2004: 235) and Samuel Lunn-Rockliffe (Mitchell & Lunn-Rockliffe 2022: 255), São Tomé and Príncipe is probably the only country in the world, or at least in Africa, where no archaeological excavation has ever been carried out so far. This assertion was undoubtedly based on the absence of publication regarding surveys or archaeological excavations on São Tomé and Príncipe islands. The potential of archaeological research on these islands is untapped. To better assess this potential and to set up a research program that will explore different research avenues on the islands, a team composed of David Wheat and Gabriel de Avilez Rocha, historians, and Jacques Aymeric-Nsangou, archaeologist, carried out a preliminary mission to São Tomé from 17 to 22 October 2022. This report briefly states the activities carried out during this short mission.

Initial inquiries and lines of investigation

Before undertaking investigations on the island of São Tomé, the team mentioned above established scientific contact with colleagues of the Universidade de São Tomé e Príncipe. To this end, we met with Dr. Maria Nazaré de Ceita, Vice-rector in charge of Cooperation and Coordinator of the Departamento das Ciências Sociais e Humanas, and Dr. Lucio Lima Viegas Pinto,

President of the Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologias. During this informal meeting, discussions addressed opportunities for cooperation and exchange in research, education, and training.

After this initial contact, the team briefly surveyed the São Tomean field, together but each following the methods of his discipline. Initial work was carried out in the Arquivo Histórico de São Tomé e Príncipe, including the consultation of maps and other cartographic materials dating from the late nineteenth century, many of them offering precious clues about the changing nature of toponyms and physical infrastructure of plantations (*roças*) that remain to this day. Other archival materials consulted included records of economic trade and administration of local government and *roças* on São Tomé and Príncipe. The archive's holdings tended toward the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with rich and detailed possibilities for groundlevel historical reconstruction of the labor regimes and lived experiences of people who lived and worked in specific *roças* across discrete historical periods. Administrative records also offer an understanding of the colonial Portuguese structures that oversaw the transportation and arrangements that contracted individuals from São Tomé and other African locations such as Cabo Verde, Angola, and Moçambique to work on certain *roças* for extended periods, often under brutal conditions (see Contreiras & Keese 2021). Although more work remains to be done to fully take stock of the holdings and learn from other scholars and archivists who have significant expertise with the collection, it is clear that there is likely to be ample archival material for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to complement potential archaeological fieldwork.

The research directions are potentially wide-ranging, and the question of the island's settlement



Figure 1. São Tomé and Príncipe Islands location. (Open Street map, modified with QGIS 3.12, © J. Aymeric-Nsanguou.)

is one of the main ones that has attracted the team's attention. The commonly accepted history indicates a 'discovery' of the group of islands formed by São Tomé and Príncipe by the Portuguese navigators João de Santarém and Pedro Escobar (Massing 2009: 339-340). Were the islands uninhabited at the time of their 'discovery' circa 1470? The question is still up for debate (Seibert 2004: 43-64). Other islands like Bioko (Equatorial Guinea) had ancient occupations dated at least to the seventh century CE (Martin 1960, 1965). Indeed, the distance between the mainland and São Tomé and Príncipe islands is more than Bioko Island and the mainland; only the archaeological excavations can help in this discussion. Following the Portuguese settlement, slavery was established. In 1595, a formerly enslaved person named Amador led a slave liberation movement and managed to control the entire island of São Tomé before being arrested in 1596. While this event is documented, archaeological resources have not

been investigated. Of this episode in the history of São Tomé and Príncipe, the only data available are those in the Portuguese archives. We know they probably have a biased character because they were written to glorify the Portuguese occupation. Archaeology is well suited to investigate this period as well as other aspects of life on the island, such as the daily life of *Angolares* and all other self-freed enslaved people (not to say fugitives) who continued to live in various settlements, some of them in the vicinity of Portuguese occupation.

Thus, the team carried out a preliminary archaeological survey focused on the occupation of the southeast of the island of São Tomé by the *Angolares*. According to the generally used narrative, the *Angolares* are a population of descendants of formerly enslaved people whose ancestors' boat, coming from Angola and heading for the Americas, would have run aground south of the island of São Tomé around 1540-1550 (Seibert 2004, Cunha Matos [1842] 1916,

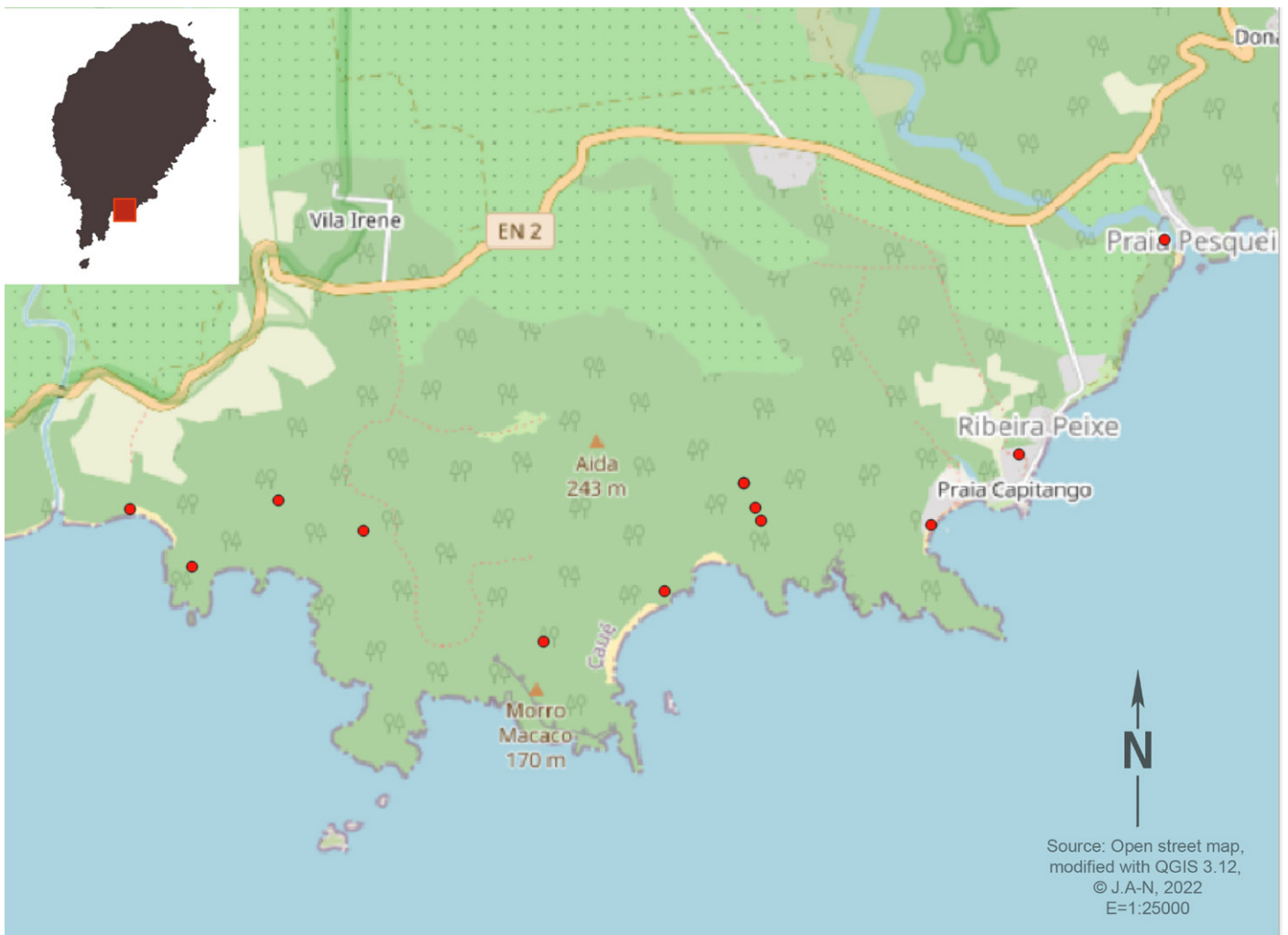


Figure 2. Archaeological sites identified between Ribeira Peixe and Novo Brazil. (Data from the survey of October 2022, Open Street map, modified with QGIS 3.12, © J. Aymeric-Nsangou.)

Negreiros 1895, Ferraz 1974). Although this narrative is widespread, there is no historical or material evidence to support it, except for the writings of the Portuguese. These texts may have been biased to give preponderance to Portuguese imperialism (Seibert 2006). The question of the southern occupation of São Tomé, and even the first human occupation of the island in general, is still pending.

Archaeological survey

Despite the lush vegetation of the south of the island, we undertook a pedestrian survey in the southeast for two days, starting from the village of Ribeira Peixe towards Novo Brazil (which we did not reach). The rugged nature of the land between Ribeira Peixe and Novo Brazil did not allow for extensive surveying, so we were reduced to following a winding path, straying

from it occasionally to take a closer look at what we thought were anomalies that might indicate an ancient human presence. With reduced visibility due to the rubblestrewn ground, the forest, the canopy, and the rain that fell most of the day, we identified 12 archaeological sites (Figure 2). These sites are probably former settlements of the *Angolares*. Some of them have been identified based on oral tradition and thanks to the precious help of Júlio José (Eusébio) da Costa, a resident of Ribeira Peixe who accompanied us. Although the remains of habitat structures are challenging to discover, some material clues, such as ceramic sherds or a corroded iron bar (Figure 3), suggest the presence of an occupation whose age remains undetermined. According to our guide, some of these sites were known as ‘Cavalete’, refuge sites where *Angolares* withdrew in case of threats.



In São Tomé, it is not easy to move from one place to another without encountering at least one architectural vestige reminiscent of the Portuguese occupation (Figure 4). Thus, in addition to the survey of the *Angolares* settlements, we visited sites mainly related to the Portuguese occupation of the island. Among these structures, the best known are the *roças* which are extensive plantations established by the Portuguese for the monoculture of cocoa and coffee beans. *Roça* also refers to the agricultural production system resulting from these plantations. Besides the cultivation areas, the *roças* had several other structures such as hospital, church, storehouses, courtyard, workers' and owners' houses. In the *roças*, roads and railways had been built to move crops quickly from the plantations to processing, storage and shipment to different ports of the island. After São Tomé's independence in 1975, the *roças* were abandoned and the structures that were there are now mostly falling into ruin. In Ribeira Peixe, for instance, we visited the old hospital of the *roça* Perseverança (Figure 5). According to the testimonies of people living there, it was one of the biggest hospitals in the country. It is currently in ruins, and many families occupy some areas of the main building. Near São Joao dos Angolares, one person in charge of exploiting a contemporaneous palm plantation told us he had seen many railways remains and abandoned buildings in the palm groves. Although most of the *roças* are deserted, some have been partially restored and are now tourist sites that can be visited. This is the case of the *roça* São João dos Angolares in the southeast and of the *roça* Rio do Ouro, renamed *roça* Agostinho Neto after the name of the founding father of Angola, in the north. The Ministry of Culture of Sao Tome has currently included the *roças* of Monte Café, Água-Izé and Sundry on its tentative list for inclusion in the World Heritage List.¹

As the time allowed for this mission was very short, we were only able to visit and photograph the above-mentioned *roças*. In the historical archives of São Tomé and Príncipe, the cartographic funds we consulted allowed us to see that most of the buildings found in the *roças* had been mapped in 1958 by a cartographic mission of the Portuguese Overseas



Figure 3. Iron bar and ceramic sherd. (Photo and © J. Aymeric-Nsangou.)



Figure 4. Piece of tile with the inscription 'Lisboa'. (Photo and © J. Aymeric-Nsangou.)



Figure 5. Abandoned hospital in the *roça* Perseverança at Ribeira Peixe (Photo and © J. Aymeric-Nsangou.)

¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/st> (consulted on 4 April 2023)

Ministry. A good cartographic base of these *roças* therefore already exists, and future work can update and complete it if necessary. Finally, it should be noted that contemporary plantations are still being exploited, particularly for palm oil production. Some of these plantations are located on land once used by the *roças*.

Conclusion

The objectives of this short mission were to establish contact with the researchers at the Universidade de São Tomé e Príncipe and with the Saotomeen field. Both objectives were achieved, and a dozen sites were identified during the survey. There are many perspectives because, from a historical point of view, most of the data presented so far come from Portuguese colonial archives. A history of São Tomé and Príncipe, written from non-Portuguese data, is yet to be done. Regarding archaeology, São Tomé and Príncipe are still unexplored territories (Mitchell & Lunn-Rockliffe 2021). However, the interest of archaeologists for these two islands begins to grow; as proof, as our exploratory report goes to press, we learn that another article focusing on the sugar mills of São Tomé has just been published, and another is announced in the coming months (Cruz 2022; 2023). Thus, our mission is part of a broader dynamic and the sites we recorded during our exploration are the first of a more extensive series that future missions will discover. Archaeological surveys will therefore continue this summer 2023 and, depending on the results, excavations will be scheduled as part of an archaeological research project on the history of the settlement of São Tomé and Príncipe, with the active collaboration of the researchers and students of the Universidade de São Tomé e Príncipe.

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