Clientage, debt, and the integrative orientation of non-elites on the East African Swahili coast

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A B S T R A C T

Ceramic trends on Unguja Island in Zanzibar, Tanzania provide insights into non-elite political strategies on the East African Swahili Coast. Synthesizing imported ceramic data from two seasons of systematic field survey across rural Unguja with historical, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence from coastal East Africa, this paper argues that an integrative orientation toward power characterized bottom-up action on the Swahili Coast over the second millennium CE. While theories of bottom-up action have emphasized commoner autonomy and resistance to clientage, debt, and social inequality, evidence from the Swahili Coast attests to efforts by non-elites to seek entrance into cycles of reciprocal obligation as a means for recognition and social mobility—a specifically non-egalitarian orientation toward power. In response, elites competed with one another to accumulate wealth-in-people, resulting in a competitive patron-client system that prevented political consolidation. Elucidating these dynamics contributes to an understanding of how non-elite political strategies have shaped sociopolitical systems globally.

1. Introduction

This paper considers how bottom-up non-elite political strategies shaped sociopolitical transformations on the East African Swahili Coast. Archaeologists have broadly begun to consider political economy from the bottom up, emphasizing the ways that communities have rejected social inequality and developed collective leveling mechanisms to limit elite power. Bottom-up action refers to activities by non-elites, who may be socially diverse but are united by their structural position within a political-economic hierarchy.

In a recent paper, Furholt et al. (2020) have argued that bottom-up and top-down activities have dialectically structured the long-term sociopolitical development of societies around the world, from island Southeast Asia to Neolithic Europe to the Pacific Northwest coast. They draw on anarchist theories of collective action and social change like those of Clastres (1989 [1974]), Scott (2009, 2014, 2017) and Graeber (2004, 2011). In the Pacific Northwest, the authors argue that decentralization played a role in constraining the power of aspiring elites (Furholt et al., 2020: 165–169). In Neolithic southeast Europe and in Island Southeast Asia, the authors emphasize mobility as a means of resistance, showing how commoners sought to distance themselves from nascent social hierarchies (Furholt et al. 2020: 169-183). Other case studies across different contexts have also drawn on anarchist theory and bottom-up conceptualizations of political agency to reinterpret assumptions about the relationship between centralized power, hierarchy, and social complexity (Angelbeck 2016; Borake 2019; Currás and Sastre 2019; Crumley 2022; DeMarrais and Earle 2017; Fargher and Espinoza

2016; Fernandez-Götz and Thurston 2021; Graeber and Wengrow 2021; Flexner 2018, 2020; Hodder 2022; Jennings et al. 2021; Sanger 2023; Ribeiro 2022; Wilkinson 2021; Yoffee 2016). Many of these studies emphasize the autonomous and egalitarian orientations of non-elites, charting how commoners sought to limit or escape from concentrations of social power. Undertheorized, in contrast, are integrative orientations and strategies, wherein non-elites sought inclusion, access, and social mobility within emergent hierarchies.

A motivation for this paper was the observation that rural non-elites on the East African Swahili Coast do not appear to have always acted in accordance with widely discussed models of autonomy, egalitarianism, and resistance to elite formation. Conversely, in some cases they seemed to have pursued integrative strategies, aimed at laying claim to status from the bottom up by seeking integration within networks of power through debt, reciprocity, and clientage. Inclusionary and extraverted political networking have long been seen as hallmarks of African entanglements with the world (Bayart 2000; Stahl 2014). Framing these activities as strategies from the bottom up, this paper describes an integrative orientation toward power that characterized non-elite participation in sociopolitical systems on the East African Swahili coast.

The following section outlines political and economic systems in coastal East Africa. The next section describes trends in imported ceramics from sites on Unguja Island over the second millennium CE. Data show that rural village communities acquired imported fine eating vessels at similar rates as their elite neighbors in settlements with monumental stone architecture, reflecting a shared concern around proper presentation within the cultural logics of Islam and indigenous

civilizational discourses of the western Indian Ocean. Subsequent sections frame the integrative orientation of non-elites on the Swahili Coast over the last millennium, synthesizing available research on patron-client systems and their possible impacts on political centralization. While integrative non-elite strategies were not based on an egalitarian ideology of resistance, they nevertheless constrained elite political consolidation.

2. Background: The political economy of the East African Swahili coast

The African continent has been a key arena for research that continues to overturn old evolutionary models equating centralization and hierarchy with social complexity, and case studies from this region may continue to shed light on bottom-up political strategies. Ethnographic and historical evidence shows that large-scale societies on the continent did not conform to Oceanic models of hierarchical chiefdoms upon which classical anthropological theorizations of power and the state were based (McIntosh 1999a). Where power and inequality did develop, relationship building may have been a more consequential factor than demographic pressure in the low-density landscapes that characterized much of the African continent in past centuries (Klehm 2017: 621). But African case studies have also demonstrated the possibility for social complexity, craft specialization, ritual power, and long-distance trade without top-down political centralization, state formation, or a hierarchy of elites (Chirikure 2020; Dueppen 2012, 2015, 2019; Dueppen and Gallagher 2023; González-Ruibal 2014, 2021). These studies have emphasized the role of local and non-elite communities in either limiting or enabling elite power, and in producing decentralized political systems that were nevertheless complex, specialized, and capable of collective action at a large scale.

The archaeology of the East African Swahili Coast is suited for contributing to global anthropological understandings of bottom-up social dynamics. The Swahili are an East African people, who presently live among other coastal groups across the coastal regions from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique. Historical linguistics and archaeology attest that a sphere of cultural interaction formed around the 7th century CE, when agro-pastoral, iron-working communities across nearly 3000 km of coast began speaking similar languages (Nurse and Spear 1985; Walsh 2018), making pots in similar ways (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2011), and engaging in similar marine subsistence foodways as they founded village communities on the direct East African littoral and on off-shore islands, like Unguja, Pemba, and Mafia (Crowther et al. 2016). Around 1000 CE there was a significant shift in Swahili societies, as the broad regional similarities between the East African coast and hinterland of the late first millennium transformed into regionally specific zones with unique trajectories of social development (Brielle et al. 2023; Fleisher et al. 2015; Quintana Morales et al. 2022; Wynne-Jones 2016). This was the result of multiple entangled factors like the arrival and spread of Islam, the initiation of social stratification, urbanism, the intensification of western Indian Ocean trade networks, and the spread and diversification of new subsistence strategies related to rice cultivation and deep-water fishing. Archaeologists have shown how non-elite Swahili communities played a role in early town formation (LaViolette et al. 2023; Fleisher 2010; Pawlowicz 2019; Wynne-Jones 2018a), structured long-distance trading systems and coast-hinterland relationships (Kusimba et al. 2013; Pawlowicz 2017; Walz 2018) and produced anthropogenic landscapes (Quintana Morales et al. 2022; Walshaw and Stoetzel 2018).

Well-developed social hierarchies are most associated with the later Swahili period from 1300 to 1500 CE—the high point of independent Swahili wealth in the elite centers of towns like Kilwa, Songo Mnara, Gede, Shanga, and Chwaka (Fleisher et al. 2015; Horton 1996; Horton et al. 2022; LaViolette et al. 2023; Pawlowicz 2019; Wynne-Jones 2018a). Nevertheless, as political "states", the towns and cities of the late Swahili period were fragile and characterized by a diverse mix of hierarchical and heterarchical power structures (Robertshaw 2019). LaViolette and Fleisher (2005) outlined a model differentiating the political structures of northern and southern Swahili towns during the apex of Swahili urbanism. Northern towns like Pate, Lamu, Shanga and Gede had large numbers of stone houses, suggesting a horizontally differentiated heterarchy of competitive religious, political, and merchant elites vying to be first among equals. In contrast, southern towns like Chwaka and Kilwa had a small number of centrally located stone houses alongside mosques and tombs surrounded by large neighborhoods of earth and thatch dwellings. This suggests a small-scale hierarchical ruler, though likely constrained by the consent of commoners (LaViolette and Fleisher 2005: 340). The causes for these different trajectories of social organization are still not well understood but may relate to varying levels of engagement with the western Indian Ocean trading system, and differences in the internal methods for legitimating authority (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010).

Both models reflect weak forms of political control, which coexisted with resilient networks for wealth accumulation. Elites accumulated wealth though their management of trade between the East African mainland and the Indian Ocean world, a networked economic system that existed for centuries without the presence of an overarching political system (Beaujard 2018). The built environments of Swahili towns came to reflect the social stratification of society into classes, including enslaved people, subsistence farmers, artisans, ritual specialists, merchants, and in some cases, a patrician elite and a ruler (Fleisher 2013, 2014; Jervis et al. 2021; Pawlowicz 2019; Rødland et al. 2020; Wynne-Jones 2013; 2018b). Elites in Swahili towns were cosmopolitan in outlook (LaViolette 2008; Meier 2016), and oriented toward maritime cultures of the Indian Ocean as a way to distinguish themselves from their neighbors (Fleisher et al. 2015, though see Pawlowicz 2017).

Swahili communities were composed of groups with a variety of social, economic, and ritual identities that cross-cut material distinctions and did not map neatly onto a schema of "haves" and "have-nots" (Wynne-Jones 2018b; Pawlowicz 2019). Nevertheless, political-economic considerations of Swahili society may warrant this reduction since it enables a consideration of the fundamental dynamics of class inequality. Class difference is visible archaeologically, particularly from 1300 to 1500 CE and onward into the colonial era. Within coastal East African society, some people had access to stone buildings, ocean-going boats, fine porcelain, silk cloth, precious metals and stones, books, weaponry, incense, currency, and imported foodstuffs in large quantities, while others did not. Perhaps most significantly, some had access to the labor of others, either through slavery or forms of social dependency, while others served in these dependent roles (Rødland et al. 2020). Despite complex social identities and the constitution of Islamic ritual communities with universalist egalitarian precepts, material distinctions in wealth are evidence for the emergence of socioeconomic classes in the Swahili world.

To some extent, upper class members of Swahili society were also the political rulers of towns on the coast; however, there is little archaeological and historical evidence to support the existence of territorial states until the 19th century when the Omani Busaids exerted political control from Zanzibar. For instance, the urban site of Kilwa from the 8th-14th centuries CE appears to have had little impact on the development of rural villages in its hinterland, despite the fact that hereditary sultans held power within the town (Wynne-Jones 2007: 374). A city-state model where elites dominated and taxed territorial hinterlands may apply on some parts of the Kenyan coast (Kusimba 1999), but other parts of the Swahili world show evidence for the relative autonomy of rural places, and alternative, non-territorial strategies to accumulate wealth-in-people. For instance, in Pemba, the formation of towns does not appear to have entailed political control over production in rural areas; rather, towns developed as ritual centers which drew in rural villagers who desired to participate in the materiality of Islamic practice (LaViolette and Fleisher 2018; LaViolette et al. 2023; Fleisher 2010; 2018).

Instead of political centralization and territorial power, the

accumulation of material and social wealth within the autonomous economic systems of the Indian Ocean was a means for social advancement. Large Swahili cities and towns like Mogadishu, Pate, Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Zanzibar Stone Town, and Kilwa had diverse sociopolitical systems that rarely permitted the exercise of power beyond urban centers, but each Swahili polity nevertheless fostered a class of merchant elites who built increasingly monumental stone houses, tombs, and mosques between the 11th-15th centuries, and who engaged in maritime trade (Beaujard 2018; Fleisher et al. 2015). These elites competed with one another through the hosting of elaborate communal performances, events, and feasts, which enabled them to convert foreign material wealth into localized wealth-in-people as they accumulated social dependents (Fleisher 2010, 2019; Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010). Swahili elites also sponsored the construction of monumental Islamic architecture and provided venues for the proper practice of Islamic rituals, gaining themselves followers in the process (LaViolette et al. 2023). Cities did not exercise territorial power, and even within polities, political power was heterarchical and crosscut by other social divisions that strongly limited political centralization, like the division of the elite patrician class into moieties that took turns ruling in Lamu (Robertshaw 2019: 152).

This political system of autonomous towns changed in the colonial era when Portuguese and then Omani colonizers attempted to rule over the economic networks of East Africa. While the Portuguese failed to establish a territorial empire north of Mozambique (LaViolette and Norman 2023; Prestholdt 2018), the Omanis achieved this to a limited extent during the 19th century when they captured most major towns on the East African coast (Bishara 2017; Rabi 2011; Vernet 2017). Many Swahili towns took the opportunities presented by foreign intrusion as a chance to overcome their rival neighbors. For instance, the Sultan of Malindi allied with the Portuguese, and used their intervention as an opportunity to sack Mombasa (Pearson 1998). Similarly, in the late 19th century, the Sultan of Witu on the Kenyan coast used German interventions to assert independence from the Busaid rulers in Zanzibar (Ylvisaker 1978). Though politically fragile, the resilient systems of wealth accumulation created by the Swahili endured through the colonial period, and Swahili cities like Mombasa, Malindi, Pate, Lamu, and Zanzibar Stone Town expanded in wealth during this time (Prestholdt 2018).

Sociopolitical complexity on the Swahili Coast did not entangle urbanism, class stratification, and political centralization (see Jennings et al. 2021). Some theorizations of the state, conversely, have demonstrated the co-occurrence of all three processes, for instance in Mesopotamia (Yoffee 2005). Other models show that non-elite efforts to resist power and political centralization often *also* limited the development of intense class hierarchies. For instance, recent archaeological research has theorized about leveling mechanisms that flattened both political power and social status in the village of Kirikongo in Burkina Faso (Dueppen 2012), in the city-state of Tlaxcallan in Mexico (Fargher et al. 2022), or in Indus society (Green 2021). A third option is a situation where political power was limited but elites could accumulate wealth in ways that produced class inequality. The Swahili Coast is one place where social stratification and political centralization were disentangled in this way for centuries. LaViolette and Fleisher (2005: 344) compared Swahili polities to Mayan city-states, where supra-local relationships defined regional interaction spheres despite the autonomy of each polity. Yet the classic Mayan city-states appear to have maintained territorial distinctions to some extent, with elites managing the flow of resources from rural areas (Golden and Scherer 2013; Halperin et al. 2020; Helmke and Awe 2012; Iannone 2006). In contrast, this type of territoriality does not seem to have occurred on the Swahili Coast, where urban political authority was constrained to the coastal fringe and a highly diverse mosaic of autonomous cultural and linguistic groups occupied the immediate hinterland. Swahili societies may have been unique in the extent to which social hierarchies were maintained while territorial power was not permitted. Towns functioned far less like

territorial polities and more like nodes for wealth accumulation, alongside their ritual functions. This social-political-economic arrangement makes the Swahili Coast a vital region for global anthropological understandings of power.

What produced these dynamics on the Swahili Coast, starting in the early second millennium CE? How did commoners and elites act to shape a society that permitted wealth accumulation while simultaneously disincentivizing political centralization? This paper addresses these questions and posits that this may have occurred because low-status people in East African coastal societies pursued strategies to seek social mobility, integration, and access to wealth and power. As a result, elites, whose power was based on accumulating wealth-in-people, were forced to continually compete with one another as patrons for the support of commoners who continually demanded access to the ritual and economic systems that elites controlled, and who were able to destabilize elite patrons who failed in their responsibilities.

Imported ceramic distributions, as objects related to status in coastal society, may help inform understandings of sociopolitical organization. Using settlement data from two seasons of systematic field survey, this paper compares imported ceramic distributions across different sites on Unguja Island in Zanzibar, Tanzania from the early second millennium CE to the 19th century. For the precolonial period (11th-15th c. CE) and early colonial period (16th-18th c. CE), imported ceramic ratios from some of the smallest and most rural Swahili sites ever recorded on the East African coast show similar ratios of local to imported luxury ceramics when compared to large elite stone towns elsewhere. Starting in the 19th century, imported ceramic availability massively increased due to industrial production, but imported ceramics still remained evenly distributed across sites representing occupations from different social classes as defined by the presence or absence of stone architecture. These results suggest that non-elites were linked into trade networks and sought to emulate the material culture of their elite counterparts across the second millennium. The paper considers different models for how non-elites acquired these imported goods. From a synthesis of evidence, the most likely model is that commoners consistently sought to enter into debt and clientage by accepting and redistributing imported ceramics from elites, who gifted these objects as a way to out-compete rival patrons. Wealth-in-people was not something that elites could accumulate on their own; commoners also pursued debt and clientage in order to achieve their own ends. Imported ceramic trends from Unguja are material evidence for the integrative orientation of commoners, who sought to assert their personhood through the acceptance of gifts and through the consumption of fine luxury ceramics meant to signify their status as well-to-do members of coastal society. These findings are compared alongside broader archaeological and historical findings from coastal East Africa.

3. Imported ceramics distributions

Early models of political economy on the Swahili Coast viewed the presence of imported ceramic vessels as material signatures of social status, since it was thought that elites controlled foreign trade networks and that luxury items circulated exclusively within elite households. This view was based on a historical model of Swahili urban elites as mercantile middlemen, and an archaeological association between elite stone architectural features and imported ceramics at sites like Gede (Kirkman 1954), Kilwa (Chittick 1974), or Manda (Chittick 1984). Increasingly, archaeologists in coastal East Africa have investigated non-elite and rural contexts, revealing the extent to which non-elite communities from the 7th-15th centuries also participated in local, regional, and interregional Indian Ocean trade (e.g., Kusimba et al. 2013; LaViolette and Fleisher 2018; Moffett and Walz 2023). In precolonial northern Pemba, while merchant elites may have initially procured luxury ceramics through restricted networks, these objects were nonetheless obtainable by a range of different communities from varying social classes (LaViolette and Fleisher 2018: 391). At the stone-built site

of Gede as well, all residents appear to have had access to imported ceramics (Pawlowicz 2019: 224). Furthermore, archaeologists in East Africa have questioned the extent to which imported ceramics were straightforward markers of social status; rather, an evolving view argues that elites transformed imported trade goods like glazed ceramics and glass beads into wealth-in-people and ritual power (see Guyer & Belinga 1995; McIntosh 1999a). This occurred through gift-giving, feasting and patronage in the towns of northern Pemba (Fleisher 2010; Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010; LaViolette 2008). In southern Africa, Klehm (2017) has demonstrated the role of imported glass beads as a medium for negotiation between elites at Bosutswe and rural communities at the small site of Khubu la Dintša. Chirikure (2020) has also described how different groups at Great Zimbabwe "domesticated" (see Prestholdt 2008) foreign trade goods, alongside local commodities like cattle, to fit them within existing local systems of valuation. Moffett and Walz (2023) have described how inland societies in eastern and southern Africa repurposed and transformed foreign objects for local use.

These models have implications for the relationship between imported ceramics and elite power on the Swahili Coast. It is clear that the distribution of imported ceramics is not simply a reflection of where elites existed. What remains undertheorized is how imported ceramics ended up in their current spatial distributions across the region. If elites used imported goods as a means to accumulate wealth-in-people, the archaeological distribution of imported ceramics could be viewed as a snapshot of a system of elite and non-elite social dynamics. In this configuration, aspiring elites maneuvered to disperse imported ceramics to potential non-elite clients, who would have also had the choice to accept or reject imported objects based on their own desires to either support, reject, integrate within, or remain autonomous from, attempts by certain individuals to achieve elite status. As such, imported ceramic distributions in the archaeological record might not just be evidence for elite strategies, but also evidence for an integrative orientation of non-elites as they accepted imported ceramics and other luxury trade goods. Conversely, the absence of imported goods in rural and non-elite contexts does not necessarily mean the absence of aspiring elites in a social system; rather, it may reflect the fact that commoners pursued autonomous or evasive activities, refusing to accept imported goods as they refused to support attempts by elites to gain followers.

One way to test this idea is to compare imported ceramic distributions across sites that can be categorized in ways that reflect low or high status. This requires marking the presence or absence of monumental stone architecture. Stone architecture is generally associated with elite status in the Swahili world, since it was costlier to produce compared to earth-and-thatch structures. Sites can additionally be categorized by size, which is less indicative of elite status, but which may reflect some distinctions in complexity and the presence of multiple social classes. Size and the presence or absence of stone architecture alone are incomplete and problematic indicators of social status, since research elsewhere has shown that within stone-built sites, a variety of social classes may exist (Pawlowicz 2019; Wynne-Jones 2018b). However, the combination of site size and presence or absence of stone architecture together makes for a more robust proxy of social status. For instance, small sites around 1 ha or less without stone architecture were likely field houses or hamlets and probably related to the subsistence economies of non-elites.

Field surveys in 2019 (Alders 2023) and 2023 have produced systematic evidence for imported ceramic distributions on Unguja Island in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Unguja is the largest coastal island in East Africa north of Madagascar, with a history of Iron Age Swahili occupations from the 6th century onward (Crowther et al. 2016; Fitton 2018; Shipton et al. 2016). Tumbatu, a stone-built precolonial Swahili elite center, was founded and abandoned between the 11th-15th centuries (Rødland 2021). Meanwhile, Zanzibar Stone Town also developed as a precolonial urban center from the 11th-15th centuries (Power et al. 2020) and then grew into the wealthiest mercantile trading center on the coast by the 19th century (Sheriff 2018). The island's deep history of Swahili social

development makes it an ideal context for investigating imported ceramic distributions and their relationship to the bottom-up activities of non-elites on the East African coast. Islands have long been viewed as model systems for investigating social processes, due to their natural oceanic boundaries (Kirch 2007). Furthermore, Mitchell (2022) has argued that African islands more specifically have much to contribute to archaeological understandings of connectivity, human-environment interactions, and political economy.

To this end, the author initiated systematic archaeological field surveys on Unguja to recover a full range of archaeological sites on the island, and to acquire samples of imported and locally made ceramics in order to theorize about ceramic production, trade, and consumption. Methods included systematic walking transects, GNSS mapping, shovel-test pit grids and surface collections to record and delineate site sizes and to recover diagnostic ceramics for dating and analysis, a well-established method elsewhere in East Africa (e.g., Fleisher 2003; Horton 1996; Pawlowicz 2017). Surveys revealed complex rural settlement systems, with 98 new sites recorded spanning the 8th-19th centuries CE (Fig. 1).

Of the 98 sites recorded, 25 were either architectural localities without significant ceramic deposits, or were of an unknown date, so they were excluded from analysis. Of the remaining sites, two date from the 8th to 10th century, eight from the 11th-15th centuries, five from the 16th-18th centuries, and 58 from the 19th century. All these sites were found in rural areas of central and northern Unguja, varied in size between less than one hectare to three hectares, and had no evidence for stone architectural features. Three of the 11th-15th century sites were located in the northeastern region of the island and are likely ephemeral, impermanent campsites by mobile agriculturalists (see Alders 2022: 118-126); the rest of the sites were likely small villages or hamlets occupied permanently by agriculturalists. Extensive shell remains at sites directly on the coast attest to marine resources as central to diets at these sites, a pattern common across the Swahili world (Quintana Morales et al. 2022). However, most inland sites have very little to no evidence for shell or fish faunal remains, and inland residents likely relied on agriculture, animal husbandry, and hunting for subsistence instead.

The two sites of the 8th-10th century are excluded from this analysis given the differences in sociopolitical organization and trade networks of the late first millennium compared to the second millennium CE. But ceramic data shed light on imported ceramic distributions at some of the smallest and most rural settlements recorded on the Swahili Coast from the 11th-19th centuries. Imported ceramics at the 11th-15th century sites largely consisted of late sgraffiato and glazed monochrome open bowls, sites of the 16th-18th century had imports consisting of glazed monochrome bowls and Chinese blue and white porcelain. See Horton (1996: 274-310), Chittick (1974: 302-316) and Fleisher (2003: 265-281) for detailed descriptions of these imported wares.

Sites of the 19th century produced large quantities of Chinese blue and white porcelain, European glazed earthenware, Indian earthenware, and late Middle Eastern wares like Bahlā ware (Alders 2023; Croucher 2014). Chinese and East Asian wares were export wares produced in Fujian and Guangdong, which were coarse blue and white export porcelains that reached the Arabian/Persian Gulf (e.g., Carter 2011; Grey 2011; Mansor et al. 2021; Naranjo-Santana and Carter 2010; Power 2015; González-Ruibal et al. 2021), southeast Asia (Willets and Lim 1981), and parts of western North America (Thompson 2002) during the 18th-20th centuries (see Alders 2022: 360-366). European wares were primarily glazed whiteware with edged, dipped, transfer-printed, hand-painted, and sponge-decorated designs (Alders 2022: 366-371). Middle Eastern wares were glazed earthenwares called Khunj or Bahlā ware, lumped together by Kennet (2004: 54) but disaggregated by Power (2015) and Živković et al. (2019). Indian wares were relatively homogenous thin-walled, red-painted unglazed earthenware in the form of large water pots. Indian vessels of similar water jar forms occur as far back as the 17th century at Fort Jesus (Kirkman 1974a: 275-277).

Comparing import ratios (the number of imported ceramics per 100 local ceramics (Wright 1993: 664) can shed light on the relative
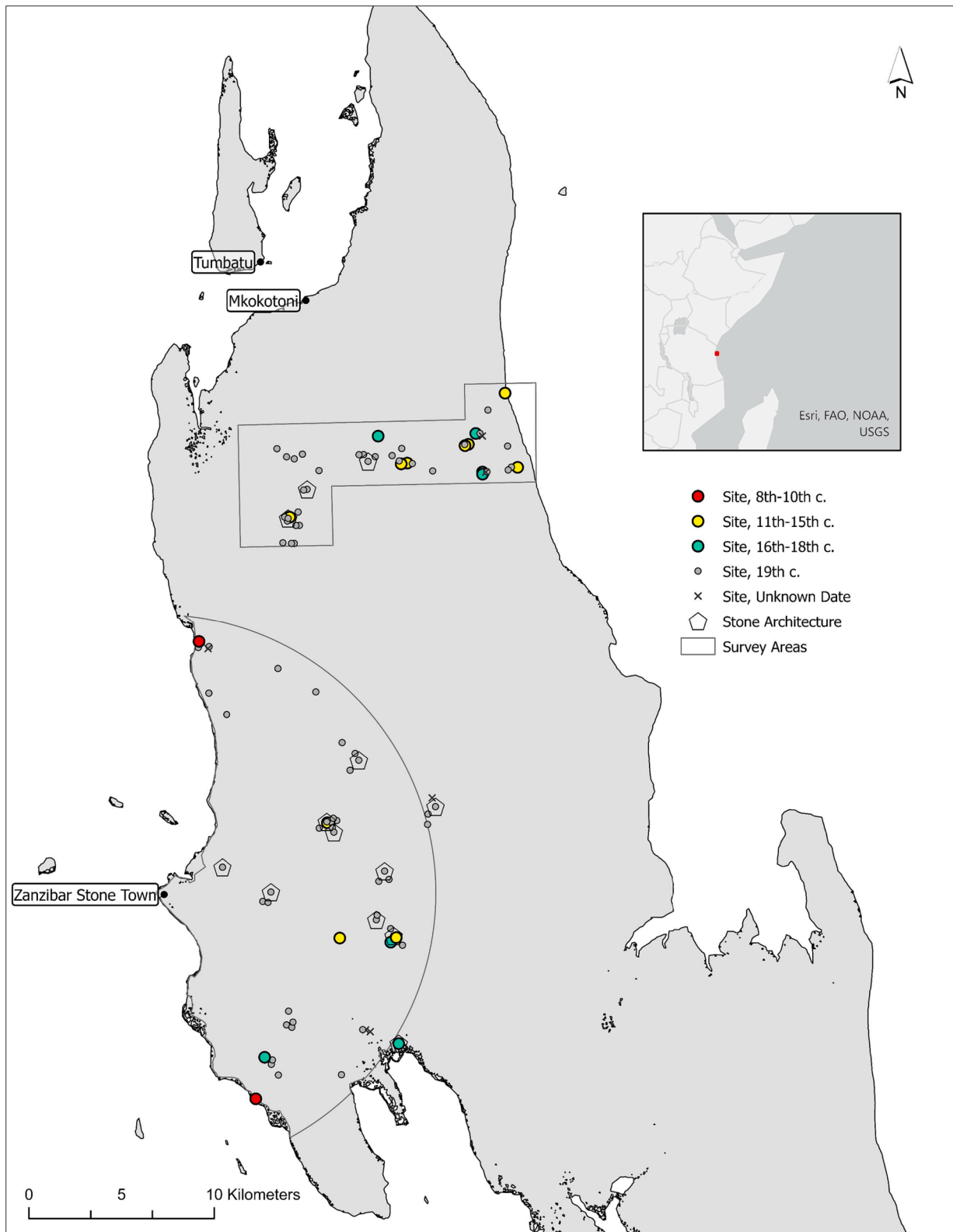
Fig. 1. Sites recovered during field surveys on Unguja Island. The island outline is from a 30 m SRTM DEM, acquired from USGS.

distribution of imported ceramics across different site types in coastal East Africa. Table 1 shows import ratios across large early-mid second millennium sites on the Swahili Coast, indicating the contexts, dates, and published datasets from which the data was assembled. Fig. 2 shows a box plot comparing these import ratios to 13 s-millennium sites from the Unguja survey from 2019 to 2023.

These results are limited because of differences in collection methods across the 23 different sites included in the analysis. However, some broad patterns still emerge. Stone-built sites have slightly higher import ratio mean values than published data from earth and thatch villages and from the sites recorded on Unguja, but these small rural sites still fall well within the general range of import ratios common to the largest

Table 1

Import ratios of second millennium sites on the Swahili Coast, prior to the 19th century.

Site Name	Average Import Ratio	Contexts and Dates	Sources
Manda	5.0	Periods II-IV, 11th-15th c. CE	Chittick 1984: 65
Shanga	6.2	Phases 13–21, 11th-15th c. CE	Horton 1996: 244, 395
Pate	1.0	Periods III-IV, 11th-17th c. CE	Wilson and Omar 1997: 38, 43–48
Gede	1.5	Trenches A-K, 12th-17th c. CE	Pawlowicz 2019: 227
Chwaka	2.0	Average of multiple house contexts, 11th-15th c. CE	LaViolette and Fleisher 2018: 390
Tumbatu	3.7	Combined trenches and STP surveys, 11th-15th c. CE	Rødland 2021: 130
Kilwa	2.0	Combined trenches dating to the 11th-13th c. CE	Chittick 1974: 302; Wright 1993: 666
Songo Mnara	0.5	Multiple trenches within houses, 14th-16th c. CE	Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2010: 7
Kaliwa	0.8	STPs and test units, 14th-15th c. CE	LaViolette and Fleisher 2018: 388
Mkokotoni	2.9	Combined trenches and STP surveys, 11th-15th c. CE	Rødland 2021: 130

elite sites. Data recovered from sites 16th-18th c. sites shows that import ratios remained similar or slightly increased relative to stone-built towns of the precolonial period. The results suggest that imported wares remained a small but consistent feature of ceramic assemblages across both elite and non-elite coastal sites over the second millennium, and that rural non-elites participated in acquiring luxury ceramics at nearly the same rate as their urban counterparts.

Starting in the 19th century, industrialization and global trade patterns intensified, dramatically reshaping the societies of the western Indian Ocean and significantly increasing the accessibility of imported ceramics on Zanzibar (Alders 2023; Croucher 2014). Because of the wide variety of sites recorded on Unguja during surveys by the author and the overall lack of published data on import ratios for the 19th century elsewhere on the Swahili Coast, the following analysis compares non-elite and elite contexts on Unguja alone. Sites fell into four categories: (1) small field scatters in rocky limestone agricultural fields that represent ephemeral camps related to agricultural activities (n = 7), (2) small earth and thatch field houses or hamlets, <1 ha (n = 29), 3.) earth and thatch hamlets or small villages, 1–3 ha (n = 9), (3) the large dispersed village site of Chaani, reaching almost 60 ha (n = 1), and (4) sites with stone architecture, ranging between 0.1 and 3 ha (n = 12). Fig. 3 shows imported ceramic distributions from 19th-century sites recorded during survey in Unguja from 2019 to 2023.

Stark differences in imported ceramic distributions across sites representing different social classes would suggest multiple autonomous and exclusionary social networks across which little exchange occurred. However, a widespread and even distribution of both local and imported ceramics across all site types would support the presence of integrative social dynamics across class lines, since this would imply networks of exchange between people of different social status.

Results present an emergent picture of imported ceramic distributions in 19th-century Unguja, from the most elite central places with monumental stone architecture to small rural villages, hamlets, and field houses. In general, import ratios are far higher than in previous centuries, suggesting that imported ceramics became widely available during this time. Like data from the early second millennium, sites with stone architecture in the 19th century have slightly higher import ratios than sites without stone architecture, affirming some association between imported ceramic objects and elite status; however, outliers in both categories attest to significant overlap in ratio amounts with non-elite sites. Imported ceramics were also widely distributed across all

19th-century site types, and even appeared in small ephemeral camps related to agricultural labor. The widespread distribution of imported ceramics across 19th-century Unguja might relate to networks of reciprocal exchange and gift-giving between elites and non-elites during this period (Croucher 2014: 199-203). This would indicate that not only did elites freely give away ceramics as a means to legitimate status, but that commoners accepted ceramics as gifts and entered into the social debt of the giver.

One other possibility, however, is that while imported ceramics were available to people of all social classes in the 19th century, certain imported ceramic classes were associated with different site types. Fig. 4 shows how different imported ceramic types were distributed. The most common ware in field houses is Indian earthenware, which makes sense since Indian wares of this period were often large water jars. Laborers camping in fields far from settlements and streams may have relied on water carried in large jugs like these.

For other sites and types, however, it is unclear whether these differences relate to the relative value of wares, or to chronological changes in the availability of wares across the 19th century. Croucher used Chinese blue and white porcelain to date plantation sites to the earlier half of the 19th century, since the ware may have been replaced by European whitewares by the late 19th (Croucher 2014: 71, citing Klose and Malan 2000). The largest proportions of Chinese blue and white at stone-built and larger sites from the Unguja survey might reflect the fact that these sites were occupied for longer periods during the 19th century. Since Chinese porcelain is most common in elite sites with stone architecture and least common in field houses, its presence may also correlate to elite status. Historically, Chinese export porcelain was considered finer and more expensive than European whiteware, especially for serving food and eating (Madsen and White 2009).

Whether Chinese blue and white porcelain was expensive to acquire or simply rarer as the 19th century went on, it does seem to have embodied an aesthetic style that was highly sought after by people of all social classes. The most common imports at all sites were European whitewares, which likely postdate 1840 (Power 2015). Many of these European glazed whitewares were specifically painted, printed, or sponge-dabbed to resemble the white and blue patterns of Chinese wares (see Power 2015; Samford and Miller 2012). European glazed whitewares occur in higher percentages at small earth-and-thatch sites than at sites with stone-built architecture, suggesting that non-elite people in rural places substituted them for Chinese vessels. In previous centuries, locally made red burnished bowls for feasting in Pemba, constructed to emulate finer imported Persian bowls (Fleisher 2010: 207), may have functioned similarly as a less costly alternative to the real thing. English and Dutch pottery manufacturers explicitly copied some motifs on Chinese blue and white porcelain like the conch pattern or the rectangular bar shape, like examples show in Fig. 5 (see also Power 2015: 14; Samford and Miller 2012). These vessels at least attest to a continuity in aesthetic styles over the 19th century. They also possibly relate to the way that commoners participated within the same social and aesthetic frames of valuation as their wealthier neighbors. Rather than rejecting these norms in favor of social autonomy, non-elites sought integration within commodity networks that enabled access to fine blue and white ceramics. Along with the relative evenness of import ratios across both elite and non-elite site types, the distribution of all imported types across all site classes in the 19th century and the presence of blue and white European glazed whitewares that emulated finer Chinese types attest to maneuvering by non-elites to maintain appearances while they participated within the same aesthetic networks of value as their elite neighbors.

The old model associating imported ceramics with elites can be definitively rejected. Another model that can be excluded is one positing commoner autonomy from trade networks; if non-elite people sought to distance themselves from the cultural sphere of elites and seek autonomy, one might also expect to find few to no imported goods in non-elite sites. One site, Kiwani Vee, a small 16th-18th century site to the south of
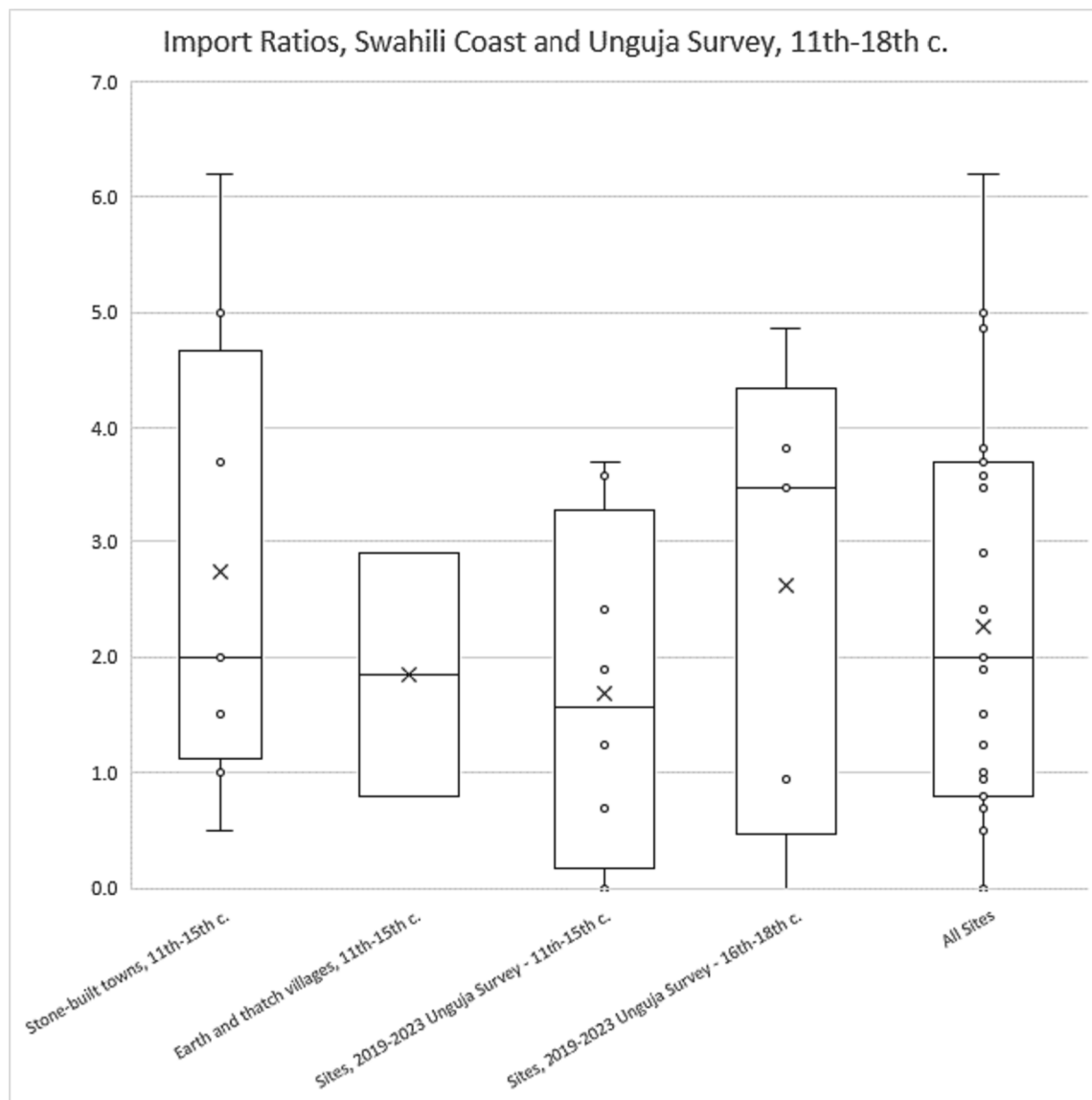
Fig. 2. Import ratios of second millennium sites across the Swahili Coast, compared with results from 2019 to 2023 on Unguja from sites prior to the 19th century.

Zanzibar Stone Town with only a single imported sherd recovered, may have had a community that withdrew from trade networks at the start of the early colonial period and sought autonomy in this fashion. However, the widespread distribution of imported ceramics across non-elite sites suggests that most low and high-status people in the Swahili world were equally enmeshed in the ideological systems of valuation related to possessing, displaying, and distributing luxury ceramics.

4. The broader context of integrative action on the Swahili coast

This section outlines integrative action more generally at different scales and time periods across the second millennium on the Swahili Coast, discussing competitive feasting, patron-client systems, and the elaboration of Swahili identity in the 19th century.

The origin of integrative strategies in coastal East Africa may be found in the public contexts of competitive feasting in the late first and early second millennium, a topic that has united historical, linguistic, and archaeological research (Bresnahan 2020; Fleisher 2010; 2019; Glassman 1995). Glassman (1995) first described feasting events on the 19th century Swahili Coast, which elites hosted in order to outdo their rivals and gain followers from among the attendees. Fleisher (2010)

drew on this model to explain town formation and a shift to large quantities of open bowls at sites in northern Pemba during the precolonial period, which he interpreted as evidence for competitive feasting related to the arrival of Islam, a conversion to rice (Walshaw 2010) and nascent social stratification. In rural northern Unguja, social demand for agricultural products related to nascent feasting contexts from the 11th-14th century CE also drew certain Swahili residents inland to farm in the fertile agricultural zones (Alders 2023).

The development of a Swahili vocabulary for criticizing and demanding things from elites during feasts and public events may have developed as early as the 8th century CE (Fleisher 2019). A direct example of a Swahili commoner demanding something from an elite is an episode recorded by Ibn Batutta in 1331 CE in Kilwa, when a beggar outside a mosque demanded the Sultan of Kilwa's clothing (Freeman-Grenville 1975: 32). Fleisher (2019: 82) and Bresnahan (2020: 368-369) discuss this event in terms of how gift-giving was a way for elites to constitute power. The instance can equally be interpreted as an integrative demand by the commoner. The text from Ibn Battuta reads,

> "I found myself [the Sultan] near him one Friday as he was coming away from prayer and returning to his house. A faqir from Yemen stopped him and said: 'O Abu al-Mawahib.' He replied: 'Here I am,
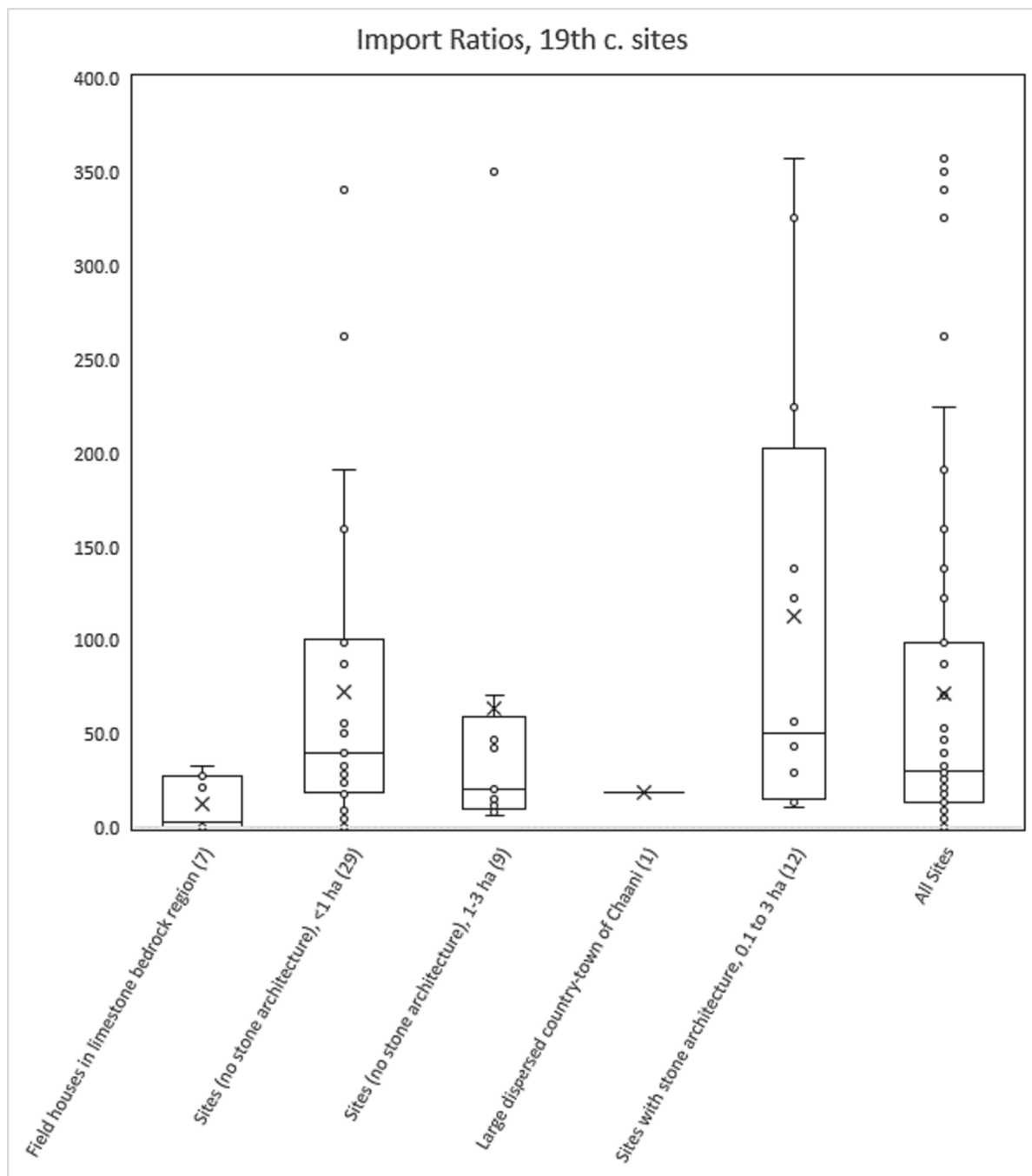
Fig. 3. Ratio of local to imported ceramics across 19th-century sites, divided by site type.

beggar! What do you want?' 'Give me the clothes you are wearing!' And he said: 'Certainly you can have them.' 'At once?' he asked. 'Yes, immediately!' (Freeman-Grenville 1975: 32).

As the Sultan was able to gain prestige by bestowing a gift, the beggar was able to gain recognition, mobility, and wealth by making an integrative demand, and entering the Sultan's network of dependents. The social debt that the beggar incurred was a means for advancement, even if it simultaneously entangled the beggar into the obligations of clientage.

Competitive feasts in towns may have been a localized expression of a more widespread trend in second-millennium coastal East Africa of far-reaching systems of patronage and clientage. These were negotiated agreements between urban elites and rural people, often belonging to non-Swahili cultural groups in the hinterland. Evidence for patron-client systems in the precolonial Swahili world is scant, but the very first glimpses provided by 16th century Portuguese accounts attest to an already well-developed system of alliances between towns and hinterland groups across the coast, like the relationship between Malindi and the Segeju (Baker 1949; Kusimba 1999). This implies that these relationships likely developed earlier than the 16th century and may have begun with the onset of urbanism from the 11th-15th centuries CE. As Swahili towns grew, elites may have sought to increase their base of followers beyond local contexts to encompass rural hinterland and non-Swahili communities. Furthermore, increased maritime trade after 1000 CE would have meant an increased demand to secure the provisioning of products that hinterland communities controlled, like forest products including ivory (Beaujard 2018; Fleisher et al. 2015; Kusimba et al.
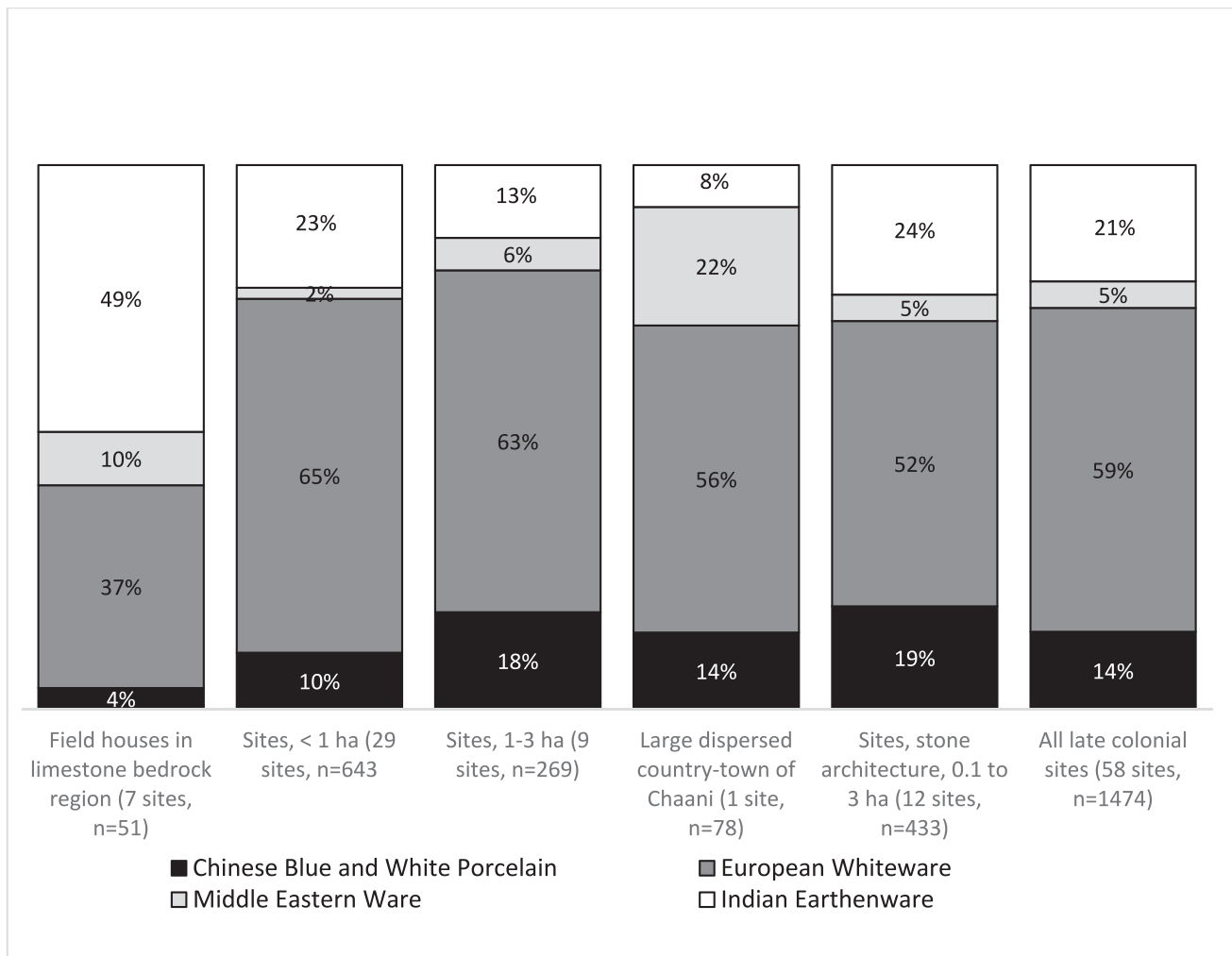
Fig. 4. Distribution of different imported wares across 19th-century site types.

2013). To the extent that Swahili merchants functioned as brokers be-
tween East Africa and the Indian Ocean, they relied on negotiated re-
lationships with hinterland communities who supplied products to East
African coastal towns. It may have been this very access to foreign trade
goods from the East African interior and the western Indian Ocean world
that enabled elites to host competitive feasts in the first place.

The specific dynamics of how patronage and clientage systems were
negotiated is poorly understood, owing in part to a lack of knowledge
about the sociopolitical organization of non-Swahili East African hin-
terland groups. But what is known is that many large non-Swahili East
African inland communities participated in patron-client systems as a
way to access elite wealth within urban centers over the second mil-
lennium (Abungu and Mutoro 1993). Historians have outlined some
large-scale patron-client systems, like Willis' (1993) discussion of Miji-
kenda clients and their elite patrons in Mombasa over multiple cen-
turies. Prestholdt (2008) has described how hinterland consumer desires
for specific types of cloth, beads, and other manufactured goods shaped
global trade networks in the 19th century. Vernet (2017) also discusses
the patron-client systems that compelled the Mazrui rulers of Mombasa
to attempt to intensify rice production in Pemba during the 18th and
early 19th century. The Mazrui were pressured to secure grain supplies
in order to appease their large numbers of inland clients, who included
the Mijikenda as well as other pastoralists groups.

In exchange for access to commodities like cloth and grain, non-
Swahili communities inland permitted access to East African trade
goods like ivory, forest products, and enslaved people captured in war.

Inland communities also served as mercenaries and soldiers, to decisive
effect: Baker (1949) narrates how 3000 Segeju allies of Malindi saved
the town from Zimba invaders in 1589. Kusimba (1999: 143) argues that
by the end of the 15th century, all large Swahili towns had created
patron-client alliances with hinterland groups, who included the Somali,
Oromo, Sanye, Pokomo, Elwana, Jibana, Giriama, Chonyi, Kauma,
Rabai, Digo, Duruma, and Segeju. In the highly diverse cultural and
linguistic mosaics of coastal East Africa, negotiation and clientage be-
tween rural hinterland groups and urban centers seems to have been the
norm. Later in the colonial period, specific hinterland client groups were
likely instrumental in helping Omani and Swahili caravan traders ac-
quire large numbers of enslaved captives for sale to the Middle East and
for accumulation on plantations in Zanzibar (Biginagwa and Lane 2021;
McDow 2018). The extent to which precolonial patron-client dynamics
produced the contours of the more totalizing system of East African
slavery that developed during the 19th century is yet unclear and re-
quires further research. However, the initial accumulation of enslaved
people on Unguja prior to clove farming may have related more to the
desire of Omani settlers to assemble large retinues of clients as a way to
secure social status, than to any productive need for agricultural labor
(Vernet 2017).

Clientage theoretically subordinated non-elite groups to patrons
from urban centers, but these arrangements were fragile, fraught with
the threat of violence, and not so lopsided as the term "patron-client"
might suggest. Kusimba (1999: 168) cites Gray (1947: 12) who
recounted how Pedro Barette de Rezende claimed in 1634 that the

Fig. 5. A surface collection of 19th century imported ceramic sherds. Arrows point to examples of European whiteware sherds painted in patterns that specifically emulate patterns on Chinese blue and white porcelain. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

people of Mombasa were prisoners to their clients the Mijikenda and needed to pay large quantities of cloth to them in order to live in security. Sometimes this violence was actualized—the possible destruction of coastal Swahili towns by the Zimba and Oromo (Kirkman 1974b) may be dramatic examples of negotiations between urban dwellers and rural hinterland clients breaking down.

The spatial segregation of some precolonial elite centers on offshore islands may relate to the dangers of patron-client relationships. Some of the largest and most long-lasting urban centers on the Swahili Coast lie on offshore islands, like Mombasa, Tumbatu, Kilwa, Songo Mnara, Lamu, Takwa, Shanga, and Pate. In some cases, small communities of the first millennium CE developed on offshore islands which grew into larger elite centers, like Shanga on the northern Kenyan coast (Horton 1996). In other cases, elites may have intentionally founded towns directly offshore, like at Tumbatu on Unguja (Rødland 2021) or at Songo Mnara in southern Tanzania (Wynne-Jones 2018a). Swahili sites founded during the height of precolonial social stratification from 1300 to 1500 favored island locations more than sites from any other time period (Wilson 1982: 215). Wilson (1982) ascribes this to increased maritime trade and the desire for favorable anchorage. Concurrently, urban centers at the height of precolonial Swahili wealth may have developed on islands because these places spatially segregated elites from hinterland clients and rural communities, limiting their ability to assert integrative demands. Spatial segregation, along with control over ports, would have enabled patrons to negotiate with land-bound clients on more favorable terms. Off-shore island locations would have enabled Swahili elites to maintain a distance from rural communities on the East African mainland and may have allowed them to control the flow of people and goods

in and out of town. However, spatial seclusion would have also made it more difficult for any aspiration Swahili urban polity to project territorial power to the mainland.

Though boat-based transport deeply intertwined the societies of the East African coast, the necessity for boats to dock in prescribed places meant that merchants, rulers, and other elites could more easily manage the arrival of guests. For instance, Ibn Battuta's entrance to Mogadishu in 1331 attests to a process where young men in small boats would paddle out to direct its voyagers to hosts of households in town (Freeman-Grenville 1975: 28). This process was accompanied by an initial exchange of gifts of food, and likely provided an opportunity for the representatives of town leaders to assess the intentions of visitors. Ibn Battuta was welcomed but it is likely that not everyone always was. The scene Battuta described in the harbor at Mogadishu calls to mind Mauss's (1990 [1950]) theorization of a gift exchange between strangers as a prerequisite for the establishment of social relationships, such as ones between patrons and clients. Gift exchanges in these contexts were unstable and could also "fail" just as often as they succeeded, ending in violence between the parties (Levi-Strauss (1969 [1949]: 60); Mauss 1990 [1950]: 105). As González-Ruibal (2014: 115) argues, the political orientation of locals to outsiders would have been an important factor in cultural integration, more so than just contact and proximity alone. While Swahili ports were nodes of interconnection, Battuta's landing in Mogadishu shows that exchange did not occur in spaces free from political contestation.

Elites at towns like Malindi or Gede, without convenient islands, may have had to offer more favorable agreements with inland client groups since their ability to evade integrative demands was geographically

more limited. In the case of Gede, negotiations may have failed—the town was sacked and destroyed by Oromo pastoralists in the 16th century (Kirkman 1974b; Pawlowicz 2019). At Malindi, though, negotiations with hinterland communities seem to have enabled elite residents to take advantage of the turbulence of the early colonial period. Unlike their offshore island neighbors, Malindi elites used their alliances with the Portuguese and the hinterland Segeju to successfully repel Zimba marauders, and to attack Mombasa and place their own ruler on the throne there in 1589 (Kusimba 1999; Gray 1962).

Elite responses to the danger of patron-client relations may have also manifested in the spatial layouts of towns themselves. Wall-building in stone towns coincides with social stratification on the coast starting around 1000 CE. At the site of Gede, two coralline limestone rag walls encircle the site. The inner wall spatially segregated the inner cluster of houses from the outer cluster, and the outer wall segregated the stone-built houses from earth and thatch neighborhoods beyond the wall (Pawlowicz 2019). Songo Mnara, Pate, Takwa, and other Swahili stone towns have town walls as well (LaViolette and Fleisher 2005: 340; Pawlowicz et al. 2021). While stone architecture began as a means to monumentalize religious structures, elites recognized its pragmatic ability to spatially segregate the wealth of towns from commoners and outsiders, and to socially demarcate autonomous Islamic communities (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2014). But Swahili town walls are not particularly imposing and would not have offered significant protection against a military threat. As Pawlowicz et al. (2021) show, activity areas at Songo Mnara extend beyond the town wall, and it did not fully encompass the town. Town walls may have rather been spatial checkpoints– liminal spaces where commoners, non-elites, rural people, and socially diverse hinterland clients could be apprehended and negotiated with, prior to their entry into the neighborhoods of Swahili stone towns. Like in modern gated communities, walls functioned not as military defenses, but as boundaries that limited the movement of less-than-violent interlopers, but interlopers nevertheless: non-elite people seeking entrance into social networks and access to the cosmopolitan materiality of Swahili towns. Elites may have built town walls as places to check commoners seeking integration and to negotiate more favorable terms for their access.

As patron-client systems developed alongside East African slavery in the 19th century, many people from historical client groups sought to directly assimilate within Swahili society, usually in the context of manumission following the abolition of slavery in the latter part of the century. Formerly enslaved people from hinterland client societies broadly adopted Swahili identity during this period, joining a broader imagined community through the adoption of specific types of material culture, dress, language, and ritual activity (Croucher 2014; Glassman 1995). Local pottery, too, seems to have reflected integrative orientations in the 19th century— Wynne-Jones and Mapunda demonstrated that on Mafia Island, mainland East African potters abandoned their mainland pottery styles and produced wares for Swahili markets (Wynne-Jones and Mapunda 2008). Bishara (2017) describes how the ability to accrue debt was fundamental to the social mobility of formerly enslaved people in 19th-century Zanzibar, and to one's recognition as a full-fledged person with accompanying social rights. Western Indian Ocean Islamic legal personhood, or *dhimma*, was the basis by which one could legally acquire the credit necessary to finance caravan expeditions, purchase plantation land, or otherwise participate in civil society, since it signified the ontological capacity to enter networks of obligation (Bishara 2017: 75). The broader aim was participation within civil society and social mobility; debt-seeking was an intermediate step to gain acceptance in circuits of reciprocal obligation. This historical example evinces a non-anarchist orientation toward debt (Graeber 2011); rather than avoiding debt through a rejection of Swahili social norms, formerly enslaved people on the coast may have sought it out as a means for recognition. Claiming Swahili identity and converting to Islam enabled commoners to participate in circuits of wealth and power. The conversion to Islam more generally across the long-term history of the Swahili

Coast may similarly relate to the integrative orientations of all classes in Swahili society, as Islam enabled a shared cultural experience that tied coastal East Africans to the broader cosmopolitan worlds of the Indian Ocean, India, and the Middle East (Horton 2004; LaViolette et al. 2023).

Hinterland clientage to Swahili towns can be interpreted as a broad structural form of integrative activity in coastal East Africa. Though it bound these inland communities into a system of obligations, it was also a way to impress obligations onto elites in cities and coerce them into sharing wealth. Initially, hinterland groups do not appear to have been forced into clientage by Swahili elites, who did not have militaristic power on their own. Rather, clientage was something that hinterland groups negotiated for their own benefit, and the term "patron-client" may not fully capture the power dynamics at play. Historical sources describing patron-client systems are circumstantial and don't rule out other strategies that non-elites may have used to acquire trade items like imported ceramics. But they suggest that clientage, debt-seeking, and gift-receiving were key mechanisms by which non-elites acquired trade goods like imported ceramics, which are found in relatively similar amounts from the smallest rural hamlets to the largest trading centers on the coast. More broadly, these lines of evidence together attest to a broadly integrative orientation toward power.

5. Discussion

Integrative bottom-up dynamics appear in coastal East Africa at multiple scales, from small-scale ceramic exchange networks in rural Unguja, to the large-scale maintenance of patron-client relations between hinterland clients and urban Swahili people. Rural communities entangled themselves in systems of obligation as a means for social mobility and as a way to assert their claim to status in coastal society. Negotiated relationships between patrons and clients at the scale of the community, town, or city were a structuring feature of urban–rural dynamics in coastal East African society from at least the 11th century onward. These relationships remain undertheorized archaeologically and historically, but this paper has attempted to consider how these dynamics might have shaped the sociopolitical systems of the Swahili world.

Swahili elites across the coast during the second millennium had differing objectives, so it is simplistic to assert that all of them desired to centralize power, develop governmental institutions, or even increase their wealth and influence. In certain places like Kilwa, this did seem to be the case—the minting of coins (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2012), and the construction of a large elite palace (Wynne-Jones 2018a) in the 14th century do attest to efforts by Kilwa's ruling families to centralize power and develop a system of governance. In other places like northern Pemba, elite power was more modest and was likely based on ritual authority (LaViolette et al. 2023). On Unguja itself, the elite towns of Zanzibar Stone Town and Tumbatu may have also developed as ritual centers, though Zanzibar Stone Town became the central mercantile entrepot for the East African coast in the 18th and 19th centuries. Overall, elite strategies on the East African coast were diverse, and not reducible to a single model for power. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to explore the reasons why centralized territorial states never formed in East Africa society before their imposition in the colonial era, despite the fact that A.) Swahili societies were urban, socially stratified, and economically specialized, and B.) Swahili elites were well aware of the potential of centralized power, having contact with agents of centralized states in their trade relationships with both the western Indian Ocean and the African interior.

The integrative orientation of non-elites in Swahili society may have especially intensified patron-client networks, giving nascent elites bountiful opportunities to compete with one another for dependents at a variety of scales. Patron-client relationships were built around reciprocal obligation. Out of this relationship, elites accrued wealth-in-people, while dependent non-elites were able to use their clientage to access the material wealth of Indian Ocean trade networks. Never-

ending opportunities for patronage may have encouraged elite competition and decentralization across the coast, limiting the ability of any one group to establish a centralized political system. Furthermore, the consistent ability of client groups, whether hinterland communities or rural Swahili commoners, to assert demands against elite patrons, may have disrupted power consolidation by any one elite formation. In an environment where patrons were plentiful, clients could choose to reject or support different elites at different moments, a phenomenon observed historically and archaeologically in the contexts of competitive feasts in the precolonial and later colonial periods (Fleisher 2010; Glassman 1995).

In evaluating the role of competitive patronage in limiting centralization, it is instructive to consider the single polity which did in fact manage to gain centralized control over the East African coast for a brief time: the Omani Sultanate, which ruled much of the coast from the late 18th century to 1856 before splitting upon the death of the ruler Seyyid Said bin Sultan. New technologies and far-flung sociopolitical networks enabled the Busaid Omanis to be more effective than any of their predecessors at negating the integrative demands of commoners on the coast. Secluded in Muscat and in Zanzibar, they did not have to contend with large populations of hinterland clients who demanded access to urban goods in exchange for security. Unlike the Mazrui who ruled from Mombasa or the Nabahani who ruled from Pate, the Busaids in Zanzibar could effectively withdraw from the complex and onerous task of patron-client negotiations, which often put their competitors in taxing situations (Willis 1993; Vernet 2017). Furthermore, the Busaids could mobilize networks that extended well beyond the reach of integrative demands by commoners in coastal East Africa. As Bishara (2017: 26) argues, they were among the first to draw on networks of Indian creditors from Bombay and Gujarat to finance caravan trading and military activities. Furthermore, instead of relying on locally raised mercenaries from among inland groups like the Mazrui in Mombasa, Busaid rulers brought mercenaries to the East African coast from Circassia in the northern Caucasus region. Both the Indian creditors and Circassian mercenaries would have been relatively isolated in Zanzibar, and unable to draw support from local sociopolitical networks. This would have made them less effective at negotiating strong terms of clientage with their Busaid patrons.

These factors combined enabled the Busaids to bring nearly all Swahili towns under centralized rule for the first time in East African history. The Busaids controlled nearly all of the mercantile activity on the Swahili Coast north of Mozambique by the 1860s (Rabi 2011; Vernet 2017), but it does not appear that they were able to exercise territorial power like a modern state. This is likely because integrative pressure from a complex mosaic of urban and rural East African coastal communities still constrained their attempts to territorialize their authority. When British and German military incursions began in the late 19th century, the Busaids were unable to mobilize coastal residents for any kind of unified resistance. Instead, the most organized anti-colonial fighters were those belonging to historical client communities, like the groups involved in the Maji Maji Rebellion (Iliffe 1967).

Unlike the Busaids, Swahili rulers throughout the second millennium had to contend extensively with the integrative demands of non-elites Swahili people and hinterland groups. These groups did not just want material goods like imported ceramics, they also likely wanted entrance into ritual Islamic communities that required things like mosques, ablution facilities, and public spaces for religious practice (Fleisher 2013; LaViolette et al. 2023). Initial access to foreign trade and to these aspects of Islamic material culture is likely what enabled elites to gain status in the first place, but maintaining status would have meant competitively accumulating followers. The ability of non-elite people to selectively withdraw from or accept clientage to a number of unaligned, competing elites may have been one of the primary reasons that Swahili polities never centralized or consolidated, despite their urban, class-based character.

If competition between patrons for non-elite dependents was

inversely related to political consolidation, then this might explain why the Kilwa Sultanate in southern Tanzania came closer to centralized power than Swahili polities on the northern coast, like Lamu or Pate. Though these northern centers may have been equally wealthy, their dense stone-built neighborhoods suggest the presence of a top-heavy heterarchy of horizontally differentiated elites (LaViolette and Fleisher 2005: 340), all of whom likely vied with one another for clients. Furthermore, each northern Swahili town was not far from neighboring polities, which would have added an additional competitive factor. In contrast, Kilwa does not show evidence for extensive stone-built neighborhoods, and it was relatively isolated from other Swahili urban centers in the far south of the Tanzanian coast. From the 11th to 15th centuries, Kilwa produced a series of hereditary sultans, who minted coins and built the most impressive monumental palace on the East African coast, Husuni Kubwa, in the 14th century (Chittick 1974; Horton et al. 2022; Wynne-Jones 2018a). Perhaps at Kilwa, the combination of trade wealth and isolation from competitive patronage produced a political system that approached something like a centralized city-state in the precolonial period. Elites at Kilwa, able to tax and control gold from the Zimbabwe plateau, may have been less reliant on needing to compete for wealth-in-people in the first place compared to their northern peers. Integrative activities would have certainly still come into play during interactions between the town residents and hinterland groups, and survey in the hinterland around the town revealed no evidence for political consolidation beyond the town limits (Wynne-Jones 2007). However, non-elites within the polity itself may have had less integrative leverage than in a northern Swahili town with a top-heavy heterarchy, where multiple groups could be played off one another.

A related question is the extent to which integrative activities in coastal East Africa constituted a form of resistance to power. The answer depends on how resistance is defined. One trend in historical archaeology has been to consider how desires for assimilation within dominant economic systems could have been a strategy for resistance and for affirming one's humanity, especially in enslaved contexts where no other forms of resistance were possible (Croucher 2014; Goode 2021; Marshall 2019). Integrative activities in coastal East Africa may fall within the purview of "consumption as resistance" in some cases, like in the contexts of 19th-century plantation slavery. However, other examples from African archaeology present alternative examples of autonomous strategies that entailed outright rejections of outsider material culture in ways that directly reshaped hierarchical power. For instance, in the border regions of northern Ethiopia and southern Sudan, González-Ruibal describes how the Gumuz people explicitly rejected all products and goods of their neighbors, preferring autonomy to assimilation (González-Ruibal 2014: 112-115). In southern Tanzania, Pawlowicz's (2017) case study of Mikindani Bay demonstrated that communities explicitly rejected western Indian Ocean trade networks during the height of precolonial trade from the 11th-15th centuries CE and turned toward connections with the African interior. In the Voltaic regions of Burkina Faso, village societies explicitly subverted hierarchical power to create a horizontally organized egalitarian society (Dueppen 2012). Large-scale complex societies in the Inner Niger Delta more broadly seem to have developed complex social institutions without permitting elites to construct monumental architecture or centralize power any significant degree (McIntosh 1999b).

From the Unguja survey data, one community may have rejected the consumption patterns of the dominant network: Kiwani Vee. This small rural community with a stone mosque and cemetery dating from the 16th-18th centuries only produced a single imported ceramic sherd from shovel-test pits and surface collections. Settled in a coastal bay to the south of Zanzibar Stone Town, this community may have turned away from western Indian Ocean networks at the onset of colonialism, though results from this site are preliminary. In contrast, the majority of non-elites on Unguja seem to have extensively participated in the dominant economic system, acquiring imported ceramics at similar rates as their elite counter parts from at least the 11th century CE and onward,

even in small rural communities. Compared to the autonomous strategies of Gumuz people in northeast Africa (González-Ruibal 2014), for instance, it is hard to see how these activities could be construed as a form of resistance to power.

Rather, the activities of Swahili non-elites on Unguja and in coastal East Africa might be examples of a more applicable phenomenon in stratified societies globally—an integrative orientation toward power that demanded inclusion rather than autonomy. Broadly, this dynamic relates to the "relational quality of power associated with processes of extraversion and composition that often brought novelty into conversion with the familiar" (Stahl 2014: 24). As entanglements developed between African societies and the world, rural communities and non-elites transformed sociopolitical organization as they accepted, integrated, and domesticated materials related to wealth and status (Chirikure 2020; Klehm 2017; Ogundiran 2009).

An integrative orientation toward power fits more readily into a world like our own where dominant commoner ideologies legitimate social inequality, and where demands for social mobility supersede demands for egalitarian social conditions. In modern capitalist ideologies of consumerism, power similarly does not always call on subjects to sacrifice themselves or do their duty, but to consume, enjoy, belong, and be fulfilled (Žižek 1989). Alongside enslavement and other authoritarian power relations within the elite centers, power in the Swahili world may have also functioned in a more mundane, invisible way, *through* individual desires for social mobility, prestige, and belonging, entangling people within cycles of reciprocity. Debt and clientage were, paradoxically, components of social mobility, but this mobility occurred on terms that people did not choose for themselves from a menu of all possible social options. Integrative actions provided material benefits, but an orientation toward social mobility also brought coastal East Africans in relations of dependency, culminating in the East African slave trade and exploitative systems of production during the rise of global capitalism in the 19th century. An orientation toward integration did not mean that non-elites were liberated by their participation in systems beyond their control.

This case study has highlighted the way that archaeology might shed light on the relationship between social complexity and consumer desires for valuable products in contexts like the East African Swahili Coast. The integrative orientation in coastal East Africa makes an understanding of the region extremely consequential for the present moment: the Swahili Coast is a place where integrative dynamics played out for centuries, and where it might be possible to chart the adaptations and responses of specific groups to these conditions. Outlining integrative or autonomous actions and elite responses is not an end in itself; rather, it prompts new questions: What structural and ideological conditions compelled people to favor integration over autonomy? The answer likely resides in a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up forms of action (Furholt et al. 2020), something this paper has attempted to chart. Future historical, anthropological, and archaeological research may further explicate the pathways that produced either integrative or autonomous social action in East Africa and in various global contexts.

6. Conclusion

This paper has synthesized ceramic and settlement data from Unguja Island, Zanzibar with broader historical and archaeological trends to trace bottom-up integrative dynamics on the East African Swahili Coast at multiple scales. The results inform an understanding of bottom-up and top-down strategies. Rather than autonomy, some non-elite communities on the East African coast sought integration within circuits of power and wealth, from small-scale daily practices that entangled rural people into cycles of obligation, to large scale military and sociopolitical alliances between hinterland groups and urban centers across the Swahili Coast. The proliferation of competitive patronage networks may have limited political consolidation, as elites were drawn into competing with one another for followers. From a long-term perspective, this

dynamic may have shaped sociopolitical systems in the region.

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