

FIRST EXCAVATIONS AT KANSALA, LAST CAPITAL OF THE KAABU KINGDOM (GUINEA-BISSAU)

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Introduction

Over a decade ago, we conducted the first archaeological work on the Kingdom of Kaabu (Senegambia, 13th-19th centuries) (Canós-Donnay 2016; 2016b; 2017). Since then, and over multiple excavations of various Kaabu power centres (Payoungou, Korop, Paroumba) and various associated surveys (Canós-Donnay 2022; in press; Canós-Donnay & Baldé 2025), conversations with elders inevitably lead to one place: Kansala. Currently in Guinea-Bissau (Figure 1), Kansala was Kaabu's last and most famous capital, whose presence looms heavily on the collective memory across the region. Kansala's demise in the 1860s - known in griotic epics as *turuban*, in Mandinka meaning 'annihilation' or, more literally 'end of the seed' - marks the end of Kaabu, but also that of an era, as the resulting power vacuum was used by European powers to seize control of the region.

Despite its social and historical importance, Kansala had remained archaeologically unexplored until now, as the lack of active Bissau-Guinean archaeologists, the country's institutional fragility, and the difficulty of obtaining funds for a region without prior archaeological work delayed this much needed intervention. Finally, in 2022, we secured the funds and team, as well as the local support, to begin this important work. The Kansala Project is a collaboration between the Spanish CSIC (National Council for Scientific Research), Assane Seck University of Ziguinchor, and the Instituto Nacion-

al de Estudos e Pesquisa in Bissau (INEP), and includes members from other institutions such as Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar and The University of The Gambia. We present here the preliminary results from the first excavation season at the site.

Kansala: historical context

Kansala was the capital of Kaabu, a kingdom that from the thirteenth century until its collapse in the late nineteenth century dominated the southern Senegambia politically, economically and culturally (see Figure 1). Initially a province of the Mali Empire, then an independent state, Kaabu traded extensively with Europeans from its coastal and riverine outposts but jealously guarded its independence and secrets, including the location of its capital, which appears to have remained unknown to Europeans. The information available until now about Kansala thus came from oral traditions, including those collected during colonial times (Carreira 1947; Vellez Caroço 1948) as well as more recently (Leary 1972; Cissoko & Sambou 1974; Galloway 1980; Girard 1992; Giesing & Vydrin 2007; Giesing & Creisels 2017). Oral accounts tend to focus on *turuban*, Kansala's end in the 1860s when, following several decades of internal turmoil and a succession conflict, Kaabu's capital was attacked by the neighbouring Futa Jallon Sultanate. Deprived of its allies and provincial armies, and seeing Kansala's fall as imminent, its last king Janke Wali reputedly ordered the gunpowder

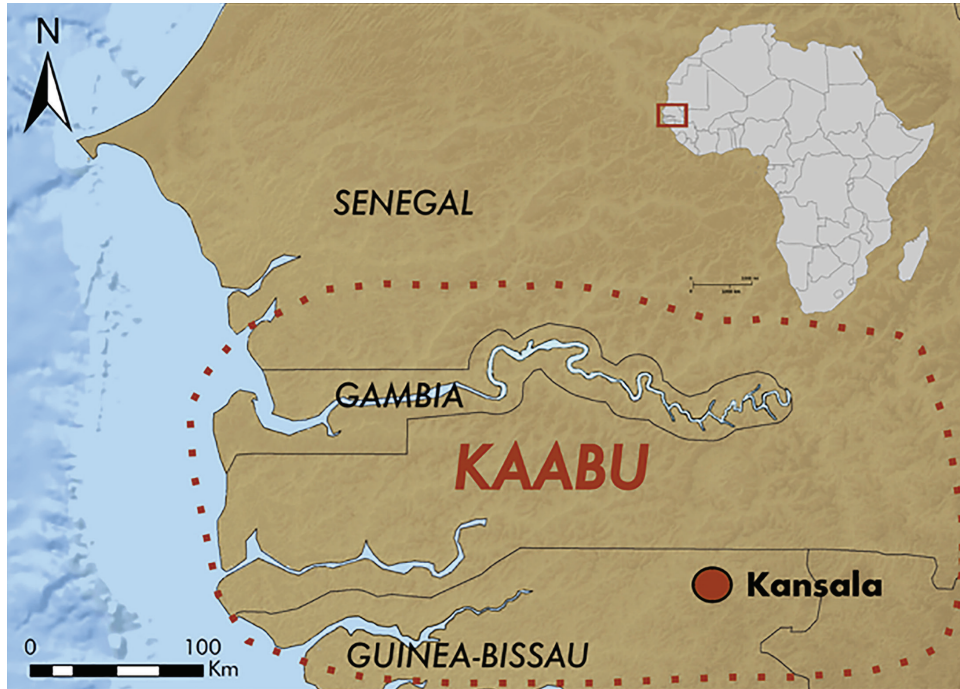


Figure 1. Kaabu's area of control/influence at its maximum extent. (Map by Sirio Canós-Donnay.)



Figure 2. Kansala site plan. (Map by Sirio Canós-Donnay, Álvaro Moreno-Jiménez, Papa Ibrahima Cissé.)

house to be set on fire and blow up the city to prevent its conquest. There are variations to this story, with regards to the number of gunpowder houses and whether the king himself dies, vanishes or escapes, but the core of the story is consistent and the explosion was confirmed by interviews of descendants of fighters in the battle (Canós-Donnay 2016a). The other aspect commonly mentioned by oral traditions is that Kansala had 'delegations' of its key provinces, in the form of *tàta* or fortresses (e.g. Sidibe 1972: 7; Girard 1992: 242-246).

General methodology

Following two prior visits to the site in 2022 and 2023 in which we recorded oral traditions and conducted an initial surface survey, excavations in Kansala took place over three weeks in January and February 2024, with a 20-person team including Bissau-Guinean, Gambian, and Senegalese archaeologists and students. Together, we excavated three units (1x9, 2x3, and 2x3 m, respectively) in Kansala's central area; conducted a programme of test pits across the site covering a total extent of 950 m; and mapped all the visible city walls and features across the site (Figure 2). This work was complemented with research at the INEP archives that confirmed what interviews had already indicated: the existence of a short-lived and very small-scale attempt at reoccupation of the site in the 1930s, that ended with the move of the few settlers back to the neighbouring village of Durubali.

Mapping and test pits

Kansala is covered in dense vegetation even at the peak of the dry season and hence it is complex to map on the base of surface evidence alone. We thus opted for a two-pronged approach: visible features (walls, wells, stone circles, carved stones, centenarian trees, *tumuli*) were identified through a combination of local knowledge and site inspection, and mapped using a total station. This was complemented with a programme of 30x30 cm test pits, dug at 15-meter intervals and divided into two transects (north-south and east-west), both starting in Kansala's royal area and covering a total extent of 550 and 400 m, respectively (see Figure 2). The aim of these was twofold: firstly, to determine the size of the archaeological site; secondly, to begin understanding the structure of the ancient city (which areas were inhabited, differences between materials found in each area, etc.). On the first front, we can confidently state that Kansala goes beyond the area covered by our test pit programme, as 51 of the 63 test pits had archaeological remains, and those which did not represent internal buffer areas between forts, as discussed below.

One test pit that deserves special mention is no. 51, located inside the royal fortress or *Muñinin*, which had to be expanded to 50x50 cm upon discovery of an intact ceramic pot, containing the remnants of two other pots inside (Figure 3). These were identified by local potters as a *dá* (cooking pot), a *ñintiun* or *bindi* (sieve/ couscoussiere), and a *hauló* or *bemba* (grain storage pot), suggesting the remains may be of a kitchen, perhaps abandoned suddenly during *turuban*.



Figure 3. Left: *dá* or cooking pot; middle: *bindi* or storage pot; right: *bemba* or sieve. (Photos by Sirio Canós-Donnay.)

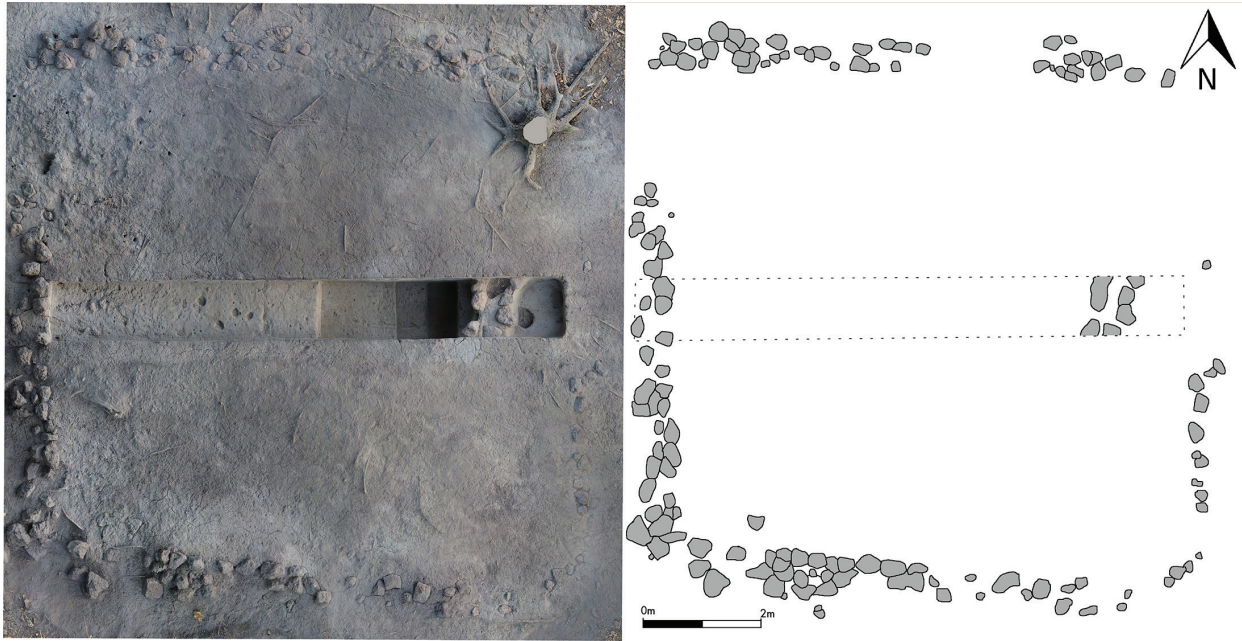


Figure 4. Aerial photograph and top plan of the Gunpowder House and Unit 1. (Photo and figure by Sirio Canós-Donnay.)

Excavation units

We opened three excavation units in areas that displayed promising surface materials and that were also identified as significant by oral traditions: the gunpowder house, a *ñancoo* (noble) fortress, and *Muñinin*, the royal fortress (see Figure 2). The largest of these units (1x9 m) was in the remnants of what the elders identified as Kansala's gunpowder house which, as previously discussed, is one of the most prominent elements in oral traditions, reputedly blown up by its last king to prevent the enemy's conquest. The surviving structure consists of a lateritic stone base, upon which rammed earth walls were constructed, some of which were still standing when the current Durubali elders were children. These outer walls were about 50 cm thick and formed a square measuring 9x9 m, with its sides aligned to the cardinal points. In addition to the walls exposed through surface cleaning, the excavation revealed part of the eastern wall, suggesting that the plan was not a perfectly regular square (Figure 4). We do not have enough information to determine the exact location of the entrance, but elders claim it was on the eastern side, facing the royal area. The excavation trench uncovered 60 cm of very hard wall-melt, corresponding to the rammed earth part of the walls, with wrought iron nails, CBM, and small fragments of glass and pottery scattered throughout. The CBM con-

sists mostly of roof-tiles of European -probably Portuguese- manufacture, which is very intriguing. Finds in this unit included eight unfinished lead bullets and one gunflint; and the compact clay floor at the base of the structure was very irregular and missing parts. The remains are thus consistent with the use of the building as an ammunition depot, as well as with a possible internal explosion.

The second unit was located in an area known to local elders as a *tàta* (fortress) belonging to one of Kaabu's three *ñancoo* (noble) provinces (either Pacaana or Jimara, depending on the version), adjacent to the royal *tàta*. The excavation uncovered part of a rubbish pit, whose materials (6.5 kg of animal bones, 22 European glass beads, 12.5 kg of pottery and various glass fragments) are consistent with the identification of the area as an elite fort with considerable access to long-distance imports.

The final unit was located in the north-western corner of the royal fortress or *Muñiniŋ* ('what are you doing here' in Mandinka), in a space located – according to the current elders – between the royal shrine or *jalaŋ* (see Canós Donnay in press) and the king's house. Excavations revealed that this was indeed a passing area, without any structures but more imported glass fragments than any of the other excavated units, perhaps libation containers connected to the shrine.

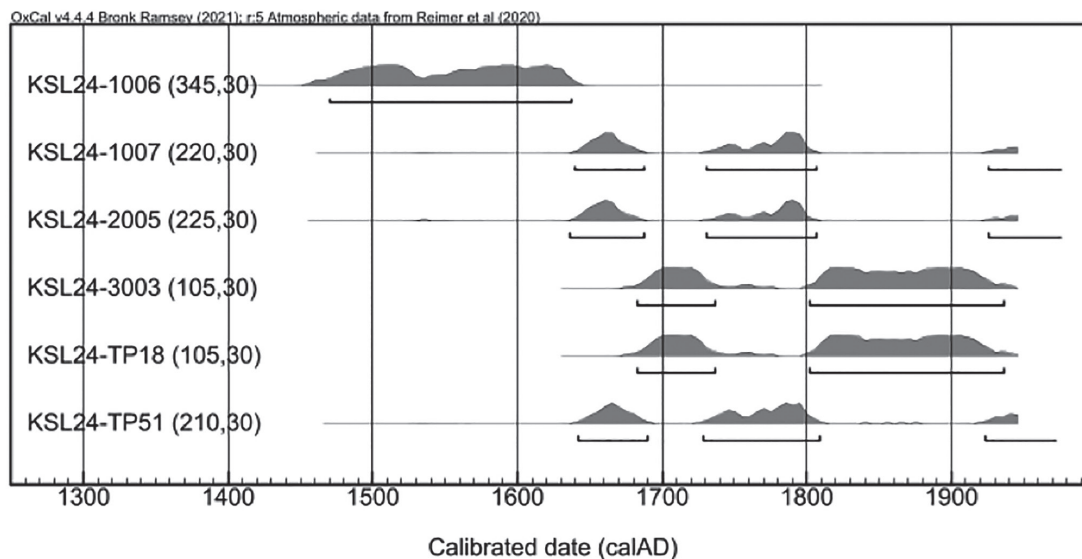


Figure 5. Calibrated radiocarbon dates from Kansala 2024. (Figure by Sirio Canós-Donnay.)

Dating

Kansala's abandonment is well-established in the 1860s from both oral traditions (e.g. Sidibé 1972; Cissé 1978) and colonial accounts written shortly after the event (Carreira 1947; Vellez Carçoço 1948). Additionally, from our interviews and archival work, we have established that there was a limited and short-lived attempt at re-occupation in the 1930s whose remains we actively avoided during excavation. Kansala's foundation, on the other hand, was until now unknown. Various authors have posited possible dates, from the sixteenth (Girard 1992: 224) to the nineteenth century (Galloway 1980: 35). In some versions – particularly those that advocate for an early date –, the foundation of (or at least the transfer of the capital to) Kansala is linked to the political reorganization following the disintegration of the Mali Empire and the establishment of *nancooya*, the system of rotational power in which three provinces took turns to rule (Lopes 1999: 179). While displaying the calibration uncertainty characteristic of the 17th-19th century period, six ^{14}C dates we obtained support a seventeenth century foundation, as well as further confirming the nineteenth century abandonment (Figure 5). A seventh aberrant date of 1875 ± 30 BP (Cal 130-208 CE) probably represents old wood, as it was found in a context (3003) that also yielded a 105 ± 30 BP date, but a much earlier pre-Kaabu occupation cannot be completely ruled out at this early stage of research.

Site structure

Oral traditions are consistent in describing Kansala as a site with multiple fortresses or *tàta*, representing the different territories of Kaabu. In some accounts, these *tàta* are multiple concentric rings of walls (Giesing & Creissels 2017: 170), in others they are described as separate forts (Kalisa 1979). On the ground, we encountered two still traceable, complete, and independent enclosures, identified by the local elders as the royal enclosure (which included internal sub-divisions) and the *tàta* of the Sama province; as well as remains of at least three other separate enclosures (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the test pit programme revealed a landscape characterized by areas of high find-density coinciding with the *tàta* areas identified by the elders, separated by empty zones of 10-20 m with almost no finds. This is consistent with oral traditions (Kalisa 1979) that explicitly mention a buffer zone around fortifications.

In terms of size, the site extends considerably beyond the area covered by the test pit programme (25 ha). Although the exact size cannot be established yet, surface remains can be encountered discontinuously (surface material is only visible in cultivated areas, but there might have been also some discontinuity in the archaeological occupation itself) in an area of over 600 ha southeast of the current village of Durubali, extending towards the villages of Sinthian Bothie and Mampurong.



Conclusions

Kansala is a large and complex site, whose study has only begun. While the results of this first excavation season are still preliminary, some important elements can already be discerned. Firstly, the elder identifications of the different parts of the site (gunpowder house, royal area, noble fort) appear to be correct and consistent with the archaeological evidence. Secondly, the site is much larger in size than any other Kaabu town studied so far. Thirdly, Kansala presents a very unusual form of urbanism, reminiscent in some ways of Jenne-Jeno's 'cluster city' (McIntosh 1999), but in a highly stratified state society. Kansala's centre (of power, if not necessarily its geographical one) was *Muñiniŋ*, the royal fortress, which was surrounded by other forts, each representing a different province, all separated by empty buffer areas. This physical separation of the different regional powers could be a reflection of Kaabu's federal structure, in which the provinces preserved a substantial degree of independence, and three of them took turns to rule. Finally, we don't know if this rotational system preceded the transfer of power to Kansala or whether it was established simultaneously as the new capital, but the site's structure documented so far suggests a planned establishment resulting from a conscious political act, rather than an organic gradual development.

While thanks to this project Kansala has finally left the land of myth and become a documented historical reality, our understanding of its past is still blurry. We hope the full analysis of this season's results as well as further future work will provide more certainties and details about this extraordinary site.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa (INEP) for the invaluable support and help; as well as the NGO Guiné Lanta and its president the Hon. António Queba Banjai, who provided us with key backing when it was most needed. We would also like to thank the Durubali community for hosting us, in particular Queba (Tombo) Sane and Bubacar Djau; and Dr. Ensa Touray from the University of the Gambia for enabling the participation of Gambian students in the project. We are also very grateful to the rest of the team (Amy Colle Wade, Jeam Sarr, Eric García-Moral, Issufy Balde, James Keirle, Khady Sarr, Mamadu Bai, Nafissatou A. Diouf, Pape Ibrahima Cisse, Omar Drame,

Ousmane Diallo, Mamadou Ousmane Diallo, Yaye Seynabou Wade, Lama Bari, and Mariama Baldé) for the hard work and camaraderie. This project was funded by a 2023 Leonardo Grant for Scientific Research and Cultural Creation, BBVA Foundation.

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