

# Understanding Households – A Few Thoughts

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“The domestic unit is inseparable from its home-  
stead, and the ‘house’, at once a physical place and a  
social unit, is often also a unit of production and con-  
sumption, a cult group, and even a political faction.”  
in **About the House** (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995)

## Introduction

Clearly the multivariate role that a house plays in soci-  
ety is very difficult, if not impossible, to identify from the  
archaeological context, and yet many attempts have been  
made, with quite a bit of success (Beck 2007; Düring and  
Marciniak 2005; Foster and Parker 2012). The main prob-  
lem is the fact that archaeology, in nearly all cases, deals  
with the presence of a part of material culture, but with  
the absence of living proponents who enliven these ob-  
jects with traditions. This ‘broken tradition’ means that as  
archaeologists we have developed a series of tools to iden-  
tify and understand as best we can those aspects lost to us  
through the lack of living members of a culture.

One of these tools is the use of ethnographic analogy:  
since we do not have living proponents of the culture in  
the archaeological record, another unrelated context with  
both material culture and living actors is brought in as a  
comparison.<sup>1</sup> Any conclusions drawn from such a com-  
parison clearly need to be predicated by the fact that such  
a comparison is made across cultures, and as such lacks  
much of the surety present in conclusions drawn purely  
from the same cultural context as the archaeological ma-  
terial; the pros and cons of such comparisons have been  
widely discussed in our field (Gillespie 2007; Watson and  
Gould 1982; Wylie 1982).

Nevertheless, such conclusions can help us shed light on  
the past in cases where other, internal, comparisons fail  
(Tilley 1999, 36–37, 79–80), especially where the research  
question is broadened to include aspects such as those pro-  
posed in the quote from Janet Carsten above.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly there are also a lot of parallels drawn to current traditions in  
the local setting, for example Kamp’s study based on a modern Syrian  
village (Kamp 1993); however, a case can be made that the cultural  
‘distance’ between less related settings can highlight areas for research  
more clearly because of that gap.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent overview, see Allison’s Introduction in her edited  
volume on the **Archaeology of Household Activities** (Allison 2002)  
or Souvatzi’s overview of the definitions of ‘household’ in different  
scholarly traditions (Souvatzi 2008, 1–45).

One very interesting analysis of the use of ethnographic  
analogy is that of Flannery, who ‘revisits’ his own arti-  
cle in the influential **Man, Settlement and Urbanism**  
volume (Flannery 1972), refining aspects of his analysis,  
in particular the parallels he drew to ethnographic ma-  
terial (Flannery 2002); this revisiting, after 30 years, shows  
the strength of such an argument, as well as some of its  
limitations. Others stress the ability of such analogies to  
compare one particular dataset to another particular data-  
set, without passing through generalizing patterns. Such  
an approach has advantages, and is championed by those  
wanting to break with processualist or normative traditions  
of research (Barile and Brandon 2004). The same meth-  
od is also called upon, however, to create ‘middle range  
theories’, as in the case of Arnold’s study of ceramic craft  
specialization (Arnold 1991); such disparate uses of the  
method shows its flexibility as a tool within scholarly dis-  
course.

Pfälzner has used ethnoarchaeological comparisons both  
in the same region, comparing house types with the eco-  
nomic system in which the dwellers participated (Pfälzner  
2001a, 71–91), as well as a comparison with a culture in a  
different geographic context (also West Africa) in order to  
explore ancestor cults (Pfälzner 2001b).

## Ethnographic Analogy – Fortress of the Elephant Hunter

One ethnographic example which strikes me as particu-  
larly relevant for the study of households is the ‘Burg des  
Elefantenjaeger’ or ‘Fortress of the Elephant Hunter’ in  
Burkina Faso (Schneider 1991).<sup>3</sup> Construction began in  
1941 and continued until about 1987, when the *pater fa-*  
*miliās*, Bindoute’ Da, passed away. Initially built for his  
father, his wives and his children, it grew over the years to  
include a large extended family of over 130 persons.

The method of construction used (traditional for the Lobi,  
the ethnic group to which Bindoute’ Da belonged) is very  
similar to what one finds in archaeological contexts in the

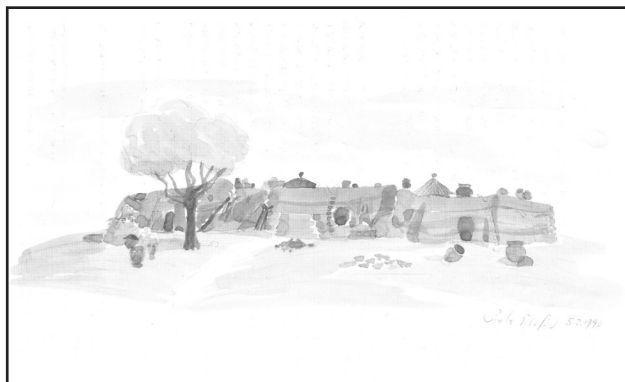
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<sup>3</sup> This paper, and the volume in which it can be found, represents an  
example of the interdisciplinary approach of the Research Training  
Group “Value and Equivalence” at the Universities of Frankfurt (Main)  
and Darmstadt, which brings together archaeologists and anthropologists.  
It is through this dialog that I came upon the publication of the Fortress  
of the Elephant Hunter, which I would most likely never have read  
otherwise.

Ancient Near East: mudbrick and pisé walls, flat roofs made of wood, reeds, straw and mud, few windows and few doors to the outside. Other aspects of material culture also share similarities, primarily the use of ceramics for cooking and storage.

The fortress was studied between 1984 and 1990 by cultural anthropologists from the University of Frankfurt (Main) within the SFB-268-A1.<sup>4</sup> The publication of their results forms a very useful example for comparison for material from the Ancient Near East, as it includes an excellent documentation of the aspects of material culture present in the structure, as well as the traditions tied to their use. Photographic documentation is supplemented by a series of watercolor reconstructions (see Fig. 1) which often tie those aspects of material culture with the activities associated with them.<sup>5</sup>

Several aspects of this structure lend themselves to ethnographic analogy: construction practices, building phases, function and context, the use of rooftops, the relationship with the surrounding gardens and farmland, as well as the traditions tied to mortuary practices and the ancestor cult.



**Fig. 1** Watercolor of the Fortress of the Elephant Hunter (Schneider 1991 p.4).

### Fortress of the Elephant Hunter – Construction Practices

The Fortress of the Elephant Hunter was built primarily of earth: pisé and mudbrick walls with flat roofs made of mud, with a supporting structure of wood and straw (see Fig. 2). Such techniques are very close to the methods that archaeologists reconstruct for ancient settlements



**Fig. 2** Construction area with pisé and mudbrick wall (Schneider 1991 Photo 6).

(Aurenche 1981; Buccellati forthcoming; Heinrich 1934; Pfälzner 2001a, 112–138). By comparing the structures found in the archaeological record with such structures one can suggest hypotheses that go beyond the physical elements found to consider the actors involved in the construction. Some possible paths of enquiry relate to questions of manpower, skills and organization.

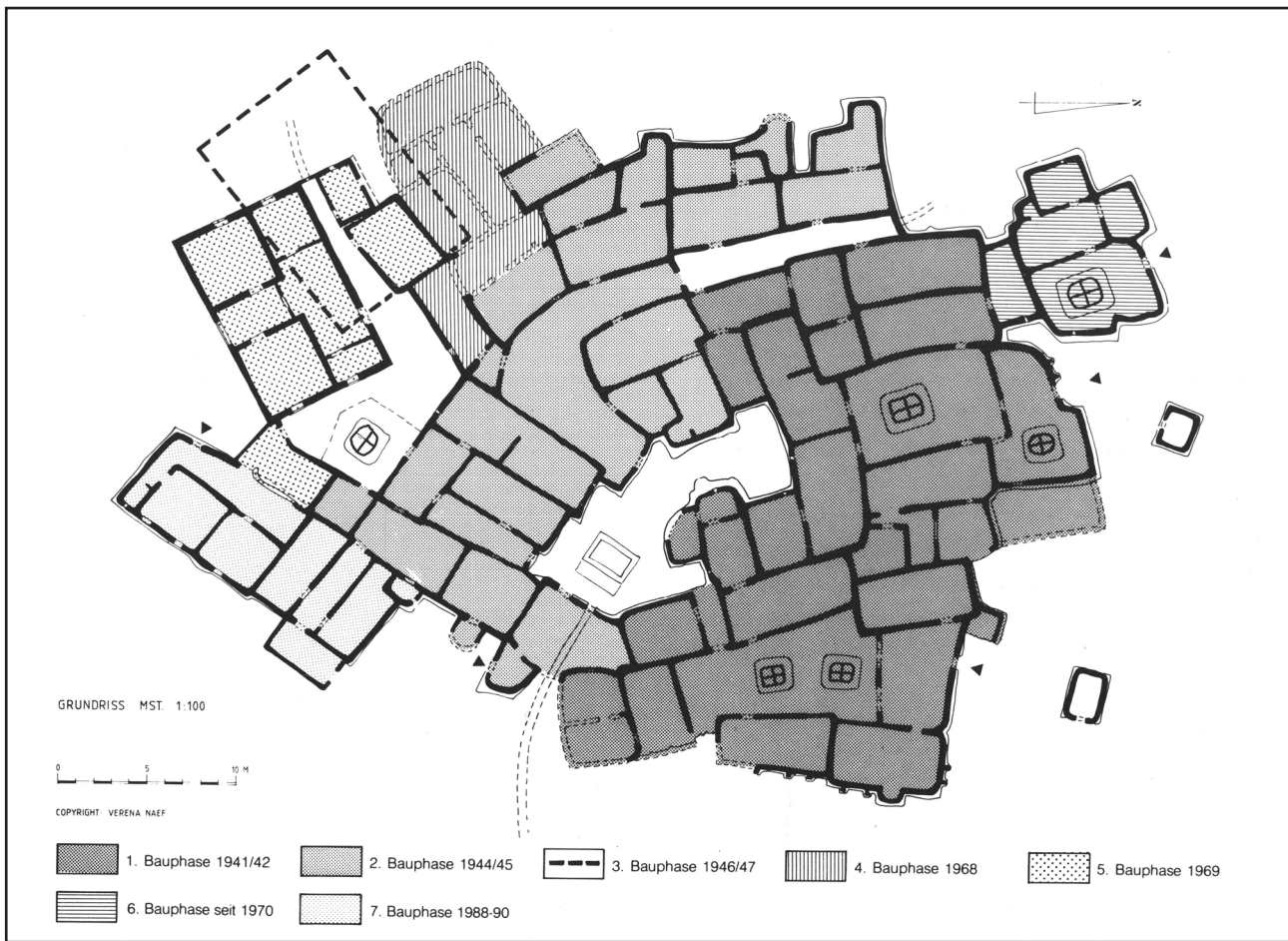
In terms of manpower, such an ethnographic analogy can help understand the number of people involved in the construction of such a wall. A minimum number of people are needed, one to carry bricks, one to provide mortar and one to lay the bricks. The next question relates to the added efficiency which more workers bring – how much faster does the work go if two people are added, for example to carry bricks? At what point do more workers cease to increase the speed of construction?

There is also a series of skills needed in such a construction, from the identification of appropriate raw materials, to the processing of those materials for the construction, to the actual construction work itself. Thus the location of an appropriate area for mudbrick production is a decision made by a skilled worker, with the distance to worksite, availability of water and chaff nearby, quality of soil being some of the considerations that they take into account. Then the making of mudbricks themselves requires further skills, involving questions relating to the brickform to use, brick size, or the mixture of soil/water/straw. Finally, the construction of the walls themselves requires a further skillset, considering for example wall thickness, terrain suitability and room plan.

A further path of enquiry which can benefit from an ethnographic analogy is a study of the organization of the work. This involves the previous two points, manpower and skills, but goes beyond in that it interweaves the two in a series of steps over time, and includes the whole scope of the project. Thus the architect, the woodcutter, the city planner, the construction site manager are just some of the

<sup>4</sup> SFB-268-A1 refers to a group within a 'Sonderforschungsbereich' or Special Research Group funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. This SFB was entitled: "Cultural Development and Linguistic History in the Nature Zone of the West African Savanna".

<sup>5</sup> Schneider 1991 notes that the use of watercolors reconstruction has "gone out of style" ("und dann allmählich völlig 'aus der Mode' kam" p.2) in the field of cultural anthropology. This is unfortunate, as such reconstructions, when presented together with narrative and photographic documentation, aid the readers understanding of context and tradition which might otherwise be less clear.



**Fig. 3** Fortress of the Elephant Hunter depicting seven building phases (Schneider 1991 p.65).

skills which play a role in the organizational structure of a large-scale building project.

One might ask why I suggest an example from West Africa when the tradition of building in mudbrick is still alive in many areas of the Middle East. I am not suggesting that this example of the Lobi Fortress be used instead of other examples, just that it be used in parallel. The advantage of using such a distant example is that it might highlight differences which might not arise when considering only a tradition tied to local conditions. For example, the presence of streams or canals which provide water are still prevalent in the West African context, while in the Middle East water pumps have become the main source of water; thus the West African example, when considering the source for water for making mudbricks, may be closer to the ancient situation than the modern Middle Eastern one.

#### **Fortress of the Elephant Hunter – Building Phases**

Another example of the value of an ethnographic analogy like the Fortress is the ties which can be made between

building phases and the social structure of those who live in the spaces. Figure 3 shows the building phases of the Fortress, much in the way that one might depict the building phases from an archaeological context. What the ethnographic analogy adds is the reasons such additions were necessary, and the decisions which went into size and location of the new additions. The building phases were often tied to the growth of the family, with new areas added to house nuclear families within the larger clan of Bindoute' Da.<sup>6</sup> The tie between these nuclear families and the building construction can be clearly made in the case of the Fortress, as the anthropological study traced the lineage of the family back to before Bindoute' Da. Clearly such a detailed tie between lineage and construction is impossible in archaeological contexts, but aspects of that tie as seen in the anthropological study may help archaeologists understand the growth patterns of similar architectural phenomena. Furthermore, theories in the diffusion of ceramic styles might be tested in such a context, where lineage and social space are known quantities.

<sup>6</sup> These relationships have been studied in-depth by Schneider (Schneider 1991, p.62-63)

### Fortress of the Elephant Hunter – Function and Context

The example of the Fortress allows one to examine function and context over time, and at different moments of activity. Through such a study, changes in the context during a specific activity can be observed, and may shed light on different yet similar contexts as uncovered in the archaeological record.<sup>7</sup> Kent's affirmation that the use of space influences architecture more than architecture influences the use of space may underline the importance of focusing on function as a driving force in architectural design (Kent 1990, 2); such ethnographic parallels help focus on the functional use of space as separate, by means of the analogy, from the architecture.

The use of pots for storage on the roof of the Fortress is an interesting example of such a context: Figure 6 shows the distribution of storage pots and collection areas for 8 different types of cereals. The drawing shows their relationship to one another, as well as to access ladders, the spaces dedicated to specific nuclear families, and cooking areas below. With the input of the residents, anthropologists are able to gather different kinds of information as to the activities involved. A further example is the presence of a beer-production area in one courtyard of the house – this is the only food production area which is shared by the different nuclear families, which otherwise have independent kitchens (Schneider 1991, 41). A more detailed look into the reasons for this shared space as well as its location within the Fortress may help archaeologists formulate hypotheses regarding similar installations or the presence/absence of communal facilities in other contexts.

Beyond the practical aspects, dialog with the residents can also highlight some of the connotations of the objects with which they interact, as shown by the drawing of an assemblage of objects done Bindoute' Da's 9-year old son (Fig. 5). It is unlikely that an understanding of such connotations can play a meaningful role in understanding aspects of the archaeological record, at least for broken traditions, but in rare cases it might.

Returning to the practical side of the analogy, in the Fortress one sees storage pots stacked and leaning against a wall in Figure 4. Such a system of storage might, for example, be used to form a hypothesis regarding the lack of jar-tops in the archaeological record.<sup>8</sup> As previously stated, such a parallel is *not* proof in and of itself, as it merely helps to form a hypothesis. On the basis of such a hypothesis, however, one might look for wear patterns on medium-sized storage pot around the base where such a jar might have been in contact with the mouth of the jar pot below it; such wear patterns would then suggest that the hypothesis holds true.

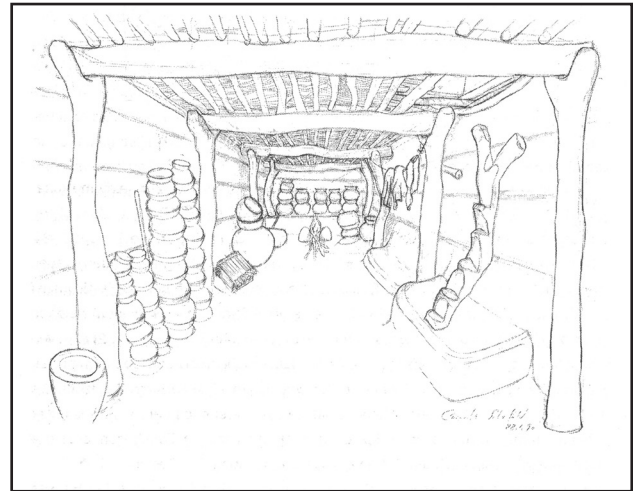


Fig. 4 Room interior (Schneider 1991 p.36).

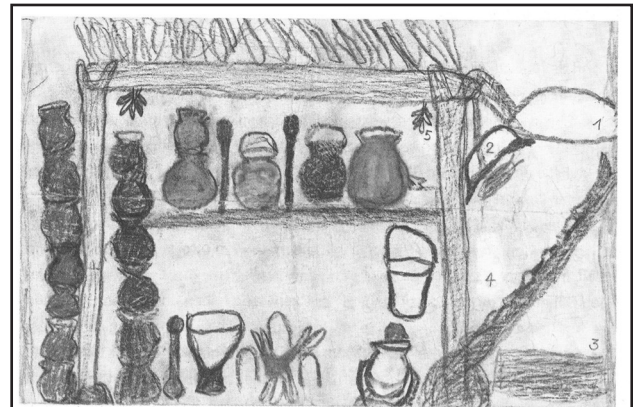


Abb. 20: Zeichnung von: Da Sié Moussa (neun Jahre), Sohn des Bindouté und der Miéhourora

Er beschreibt seine Zeichnung:

- "1. Das Ausstiegsloch
2. Der Pfeil und Bogen meines Vaters
3. Hier schlafe ich
4. Hier schläft meine Mutter
5. Der Mais

Mein Vater ist tot. Es ist Bindouté."

Fig. 5 Drawing of the 9-year-old son of Bindoute' Da describing the objects in the house (Schneider 1991 p.58).

In general, the Fortress as an example leads one to consider the vertical dimension – not in terms of stratigraphy, but in terms of the organization of social space. What things were stacked? What was hung? What raised surfaces (tables, benches, niches, windowsills) could be used in various household activities? Seeing contexts where objects are present above the floor might help archaeologists look for the appropriate evidence in the archaeological record. It is by seeing such a context 'in action', as it were, and then reexamining the archaeological record that the pres-

<sup>7</sup> See also Pfälzners treatment of function and space (Pfälzner 2001a, 139–179).

<sup>8</sup> For a very nice parallel, see Pfälzners comparison between Tiebele, Burkina Faso and Tell Bderi (Pfälzner 2001a, 189).



Fig. 6 Roof use (Schneider 1991 p.71).

ence or absence of evidence suggesting similar patterns might be more easily identified and explored.<sup>9</sup>

### Fortress of the Elephant Hunter – Rooftops

Rooftops are one of the least represented social spaces in the archaeological record, despite the fact that archaeologists assume that these areas were a fundamental part of the social space created by architecture, be it public or private. Ethnographic examples can aid in understanding how roof spaces were accessed and used, giving archaeologists parallels with which to form hypotheses explaining aspects of the archaeological record.

The Fortress gives two examples which can aid in understanding the archaeological record: the use of ladders and the installations on the roof. The residents of the Fortress used wooden trunks cut with steps as ladders, which were moveable and did not require any particular installation to use (see Fig. 4 and 9). Thus the absence of staircases in the building clearly does not mean that the roofs were not part

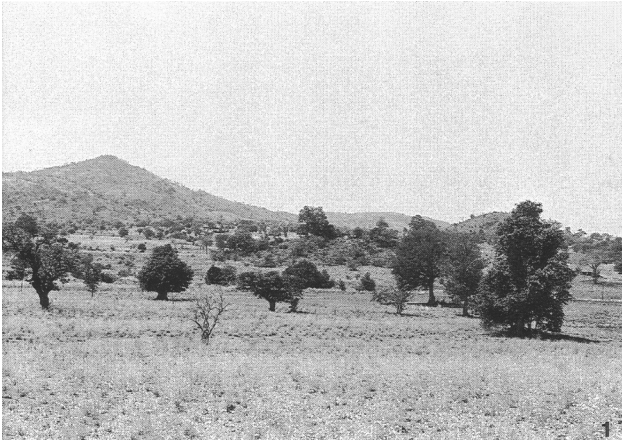
of the social space of the house. Inside the rooms, such ladders were sometimes placed in fireplaces and gave access to the roof through the roof opening left for smoke to exit. Ladders in the exterior were set against the roof edge and gave access to different parts of the roof space from the courtyards.

Roof installations are present in large quantity at the Fortress, and show a wide range of functions taking place in this area: sleeping, food storage, altars, firewood storage, food drying and preparation, and material for roof maintenance (see Fig. 6). In particular the altars are of interest, as there are also altars at ground level (see Fig. 10). Unfortunately the publication of the Fortress (Schneider 1991) did not discuss the differences between the two in terms of use. The multivariate installations found on the roofs shows both a wide range of activities taking place, as well as distinct areas for these activities.

### Fortress of the Elephant Hunter – Gardens and Farmland

Looking beyond the immediate architecture of the Fortress, the relationship to the cultivated area immediately surrounding the Fortress (see Fig. 7) can also help shine a light on the archaeological record. Here a series of smaller gardens and fields were found, which served directly specific nuclear families living in the Fortress (see Fig. 8).

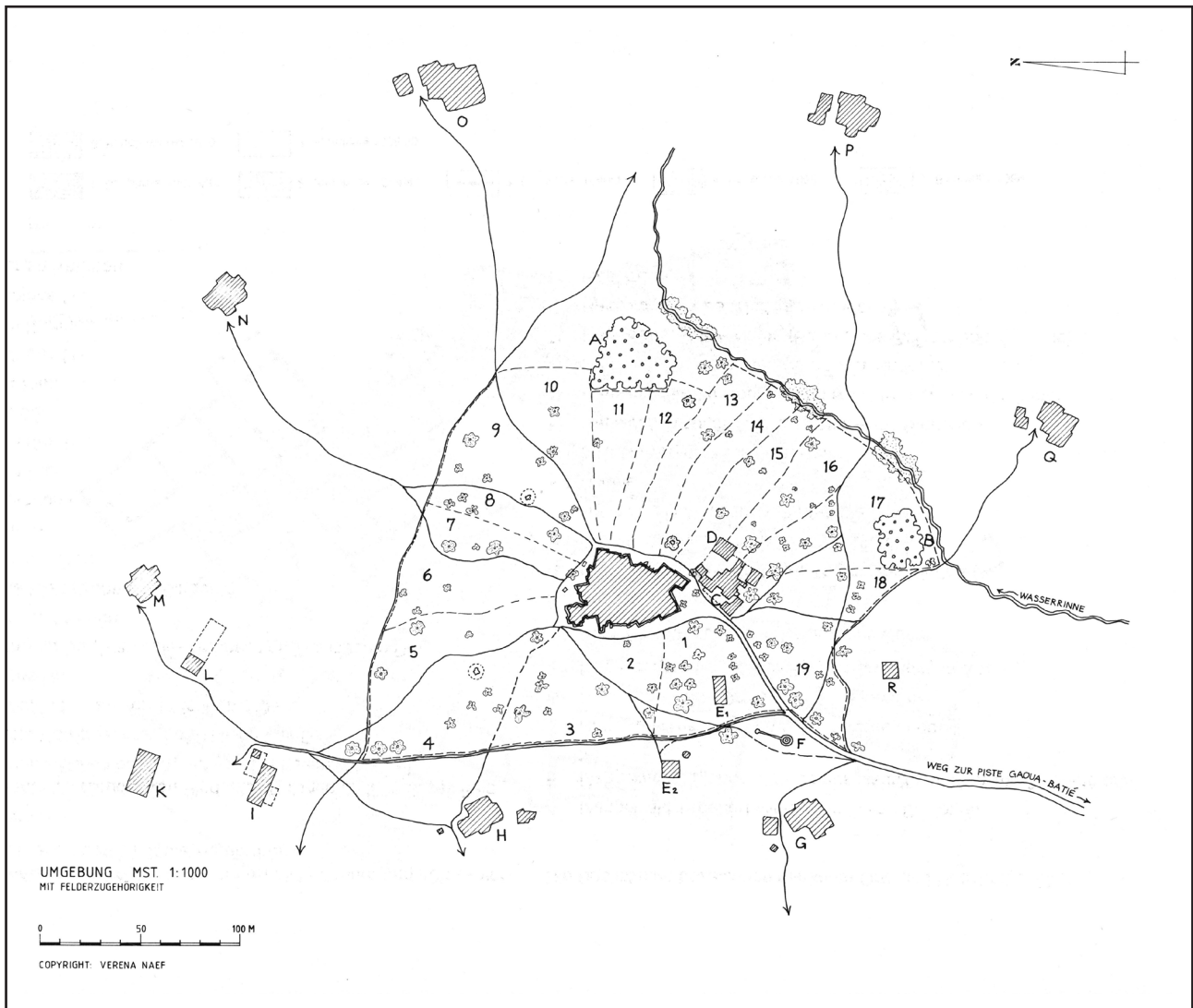
<sup>9</sup> Such an approach is supported, I think, by an argument based in phenomenology; while a discussion of this philosophical aspect is beyond the scope of this article, I'd like to point to Heidegger's discussion of Presence-to-hand vs. Readiness-to-hand, or the presence of an object vs. its need as a tool – in Heidegger's example a hammer (Heidegger 1962, 15:98, 16:103, 68:406; Wheeler 2013).



**Fig. 7** Landscape near area around the Fortress (Schneider 1991 Photo 1).

Some of these fields were used as gardens, and almost all of those belonged to the women of the community (these are the numbered fields directly surrounding the Fortress). The long and narrow shape of the plots was determined by the access from the Fortress on one side and access to the water from a nearby stream on the other. Other, more distant areas, belonged to other members, or the community as a whole. Here too one sees the architectural space as a physical expression of the social relationships: the outlying houses are for members who are not part of the clan, for example a house for the teachers at the school (marked with the letter I on Fig. 8).

Current studies focused on the relationship between urban and rural spaces, such as those of M. Liverani (Liverani 1996) are based on textual sources; ethnographic examples such as the Fortress can help underline the specific relationship between houses and fields in the archaeological



**Fig. 8** Drawing of Gardens and Farmland immediately around the fortress of Bindoute Da (Schneider 1991 p.66).

record. A part of Landscape Archaeology focuses on the rural side of this equation, but often lacks the corresponding urban aspect.

### Fortress of the Elephant Hunter – Graves and Altars

A final aspect of the Fortress which bears a closer look is the presence and use of graves and altars.<sup>10</sup> Schneider goes into particular detail regarding the presence of altars (for one example see Fig. 10) within the Fortress (Schneider 1991, 45–56); these altars are linked to *thil*, the deities which safeguard the nuclear families. These altars contain objects which are the physical manifestation of the *thil*, and are also the place where sacrifices and omnia are performed. A pot with water is always present, so that the *thil* has water to drink. The altars are tied to one specific nuclear family, but larger altar-rooms are also present in which more than one nuclear family participate.

Clearly the specifics relating to the *thil* or the rites required are of little use to archaeologists formulating hypotheses in other contexts; and yet the rules relating to the presence or absence of specific objects at the altars, or the tools needed (and solely dedicated to) for sacrifice or omnia may aid the archaeologist in looking for different yet linked patterns in the material culture associated with similar installations. The necessity of water in a pot, for example, shows that here water must be present but the form of the pot is not of importance. The fact that the *thil* manifest themselves to someone from the house through an object found in the countryside means that the altars contain a wide collection of disparate objects, but for the families these different objects can all be manifestations of the same *thil*.

The grave of Bindoute' Da (Fig. 9) is of particular interest because of the mix of traditions which it represents (Schneider 1991, 41). It is placed within the Fortress and marked with ivory tusks recalling the fame of Bindoute' Da as an elephant hunter, and as such fits into the tradition of ancestor worship. On the other hand, the tomb itself is covered in modern tiles, has a collection of knives and forks between the tusks, and follows the Christian grave tradition. Such a mix represents, with its disparate elements, the changing times in which Bindoute' Da lived and his active participation in the different traditions to which he was exposed.

### Conclusions

The ethnographic study of the Fortress of the Elephant Hunter in Burkina Faso presents archaeologists with an

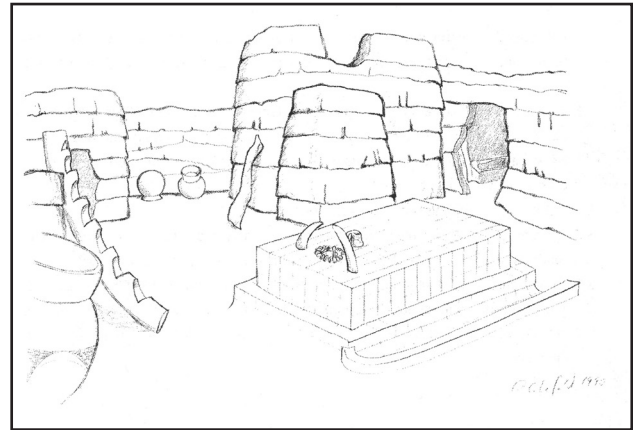


Fig. 9 Tomb of Bindoute' Da in one of the courtyards in the fortress (Schneider 1991 p.41).

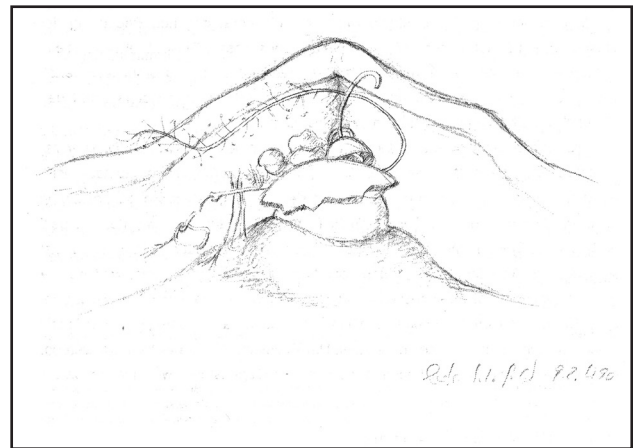


Fig. 10 Roof altar (Schneider 1991 p.44).

interesting study of the relationships between people and material culture. Clearly the results of the study, in their specifics, cannot in any way be applied directly to archaeological material from any region, nor can the hypotheses presented in the study be carried over as such to archaeological material. However, the analysis of the Fortress presents a series of detailed case studies into the relationship between people and objects which can aid archaeologists in forming their own hypotheses regarding material coming from the archaeological record. The examples highlighted here focus on the construction practices, building phases, function and context, rooftops, gardens, and altars; but these examples are those which I identified as interesting from my own archaeological background – another archaeologist might find inspiration in other portions of this or other similar studies.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Pfälzner's examination of ancestor cults in West Africa in comparison to the ancient Near East (Pfälzner 2001b).

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