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Hide and meat among Boreda hideworkers: Ethnoarchaeozoology of consumption and craft practices in Gamo (southwest Ethiopia)

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ABSTRACT

The Omotic-speaking Gamo represent one of the southern Ethiopia societies that are organized in a widely recognized caste system. The history of this society and the development of its caste organization are still largely unknown. Between 2006 and 2012, we organized a collaborative project with people of the Gamo district of Boreda in an effort to combine their oral traditions and life histories with archaeological investigations regarding the history of their present-day caste system. Elders claimed nine mountain-top landscapes as the original locations for Boreda settlement. One of these settlements, Garu, is an abandoned historic village site of about 60 hectares that was occupied during the 18th–19th century CE. Archaeozoological results from Garu suggest some continuity in the practices of leatherworkers particularly in their access to specific animal parts for consumption and processing. From a methodological point of view, this study illustrates how atypical data can be used to understand the diversity of animal use and provide original leads in the interpretation of prehistoric sites elsewhere. Importantly, cattle remains from Garu indicate the earliest evidence of Zebu cattle from southern Ethiopia dating to the mid-18th century.

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1. Introduction

In southern Ethiopia, Omotic, Cushitic, and Semitic speaking societies segregate their population into occupational groups differentiated by wealth, diet, settlement location, and ritual practices, which is widely recognized as a caste system (Cassiers, 1975; Cerulli, 1956; Haberland, 1984; Hallpike, 1968; Lewis, 1970; Shack, 1964; Todd, 1978). Although there has long been ethnographic and historical speculation concerning the development of caste societies in Ethiopia, this is the first archaeological and ethnographic research project to research the development of an Ethiopian caste system (Cerulli, 1956; Haberland, 1984; Shack, 1964; Levine, 1974; Todd, 1977, 1978). The Omotic-speaking Gamo with a population exceeding a million people represents one of these southern Ethiopian caste societies. We began a collaborative archaeological project among the Gamo in the Boreda district to secure a material and written history of their present-day caste system (Arthur et al., 2009, 2010, 2017). In 2006, Boreda elders

pointed out the historic site of Garu, occupied between the 18th to 19th centuries, which they identify as one of nine original highland settlements (Fig. 1). According to the elders, farmer households and sacred forests were located on the mountaintop, whereas craft specialists such as potters and leatherworkers lived on the edge of the escarpment.

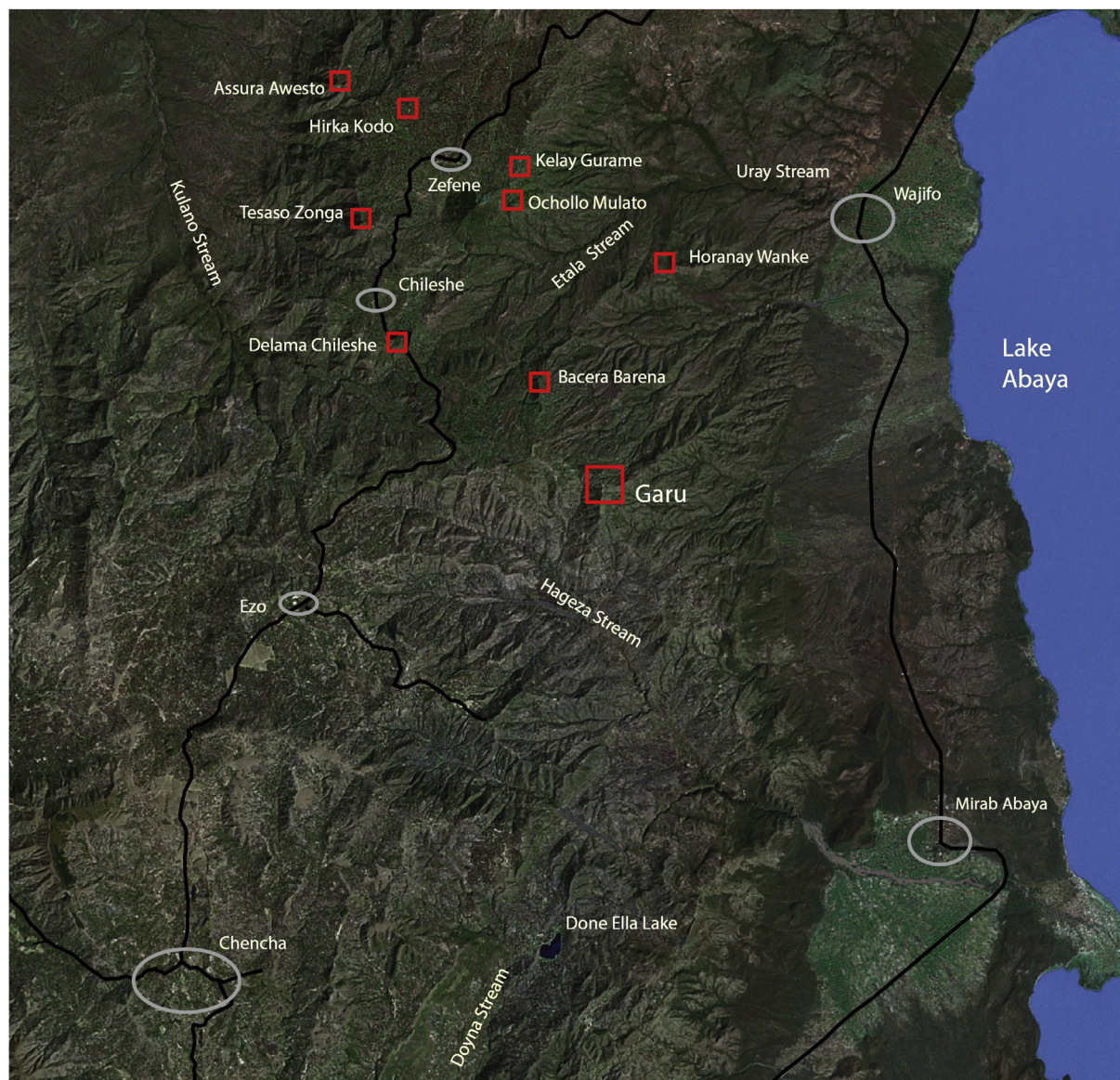
In this paper, we present the results of the faunal analysis from our survey and excavations at Garu, which suggest the presence of a leatherworking household with limited access to choice meat parts indicating a lower economic status in society. The results of this analysis are compared to a previous study undertaken in Konso, Ethiopia focusing on the archaeozoological analyses from two abandoned leatherworker households (Brandt and Weedman, 2002a, b; Lesur-Gebremariam, 2008). Importantly, the faunal remains from this 200–300 year old historic site in the Gamo highlands provides the first direct evidence of zebu or hybrid zebu-taurus cattle in southern Ethiopia.

2. Garu

Garu is an abandoned historic village site approximately 60 ha

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Legend

- 0 5 Kilometers
-  Garu Archaeological Site Location
 Other Historic Archaeological Village Site
 Modern Town Center
 Major Road



Fig. 1. Regional map showing Garu and other historic village sites.

in size located on an expansive ridge overlooking the Hageza stream valley 12.5 km west of Lake Abaya (Arthur et al., 2009, 2010, Fig. 1). Oral traditions and radiocarbon dates suggest that Garu was first occupied at least 300 years ago by a community of farmers and artisans, including leatherworkers, and is recorded in local Boreda

histories as one of the original nine Boreda-Gamo Bayira *deres* (ancestral landscapes). Interviews with Boreda-Gamo elders, archaeological survey, mapping, ground penetrating radar, and excavation have revealed several areas with significant archaeological deposits. Gamo elders identified a small terrace on the

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