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THE SO-CALLED 'GALLA GRAVES' OF NORTHERN SOMALILAND *

by

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132 For more than a hundred years there has been discussion of the significance and purpose of the stone cairns which are distributed all over Somaliland and which are so striking a feature of the landscape, especially in otherwise arid and desolate areas.¹ In this article, in which I discuss some former Somali burial practices and report the results of the excavation of three cairns in the British Protectorate, I argue that some at least of these tumuli are of fairly recent construction and contain Somali remains.²

The cairns, which are mounds of stones, vary considerably in height from about six to 18 feet and in diameter from 12 to 60 feet. There are two main series.³ The first, which I refer to as Series *A* and which is the most common, consists of small rough cairns usually not more than eight feet in height. In these graves the outer walls form a circular chamber which contains the corpse and which is roofed over with wood and branches and finally covered with the stones which form the top of the mound (fig. 4). The larger Series *B* mounds are more carefully and elaborately constructed and appear to consist entirely of stones without internal wooden supports.

The Series *A* mounds are seen all over the British Protectorate; they occur also in French Somaliland⁴ and in Harar Province of Ethiopia,⁵ and are especially common in the Mijertein Province of Northern Somalia.⁶ They are also found in central Somalia and more sparsely distributed in Southern Somalia,⁷ and they become extremely common again in the Northern Province of Kenya.⁸ The Series *B* large mounds are also widely distributed but are less frequent and more widely spaced. In the British Protectorate perhaps the most striking group is that in Erigavo District lying along the coast near Mait and extending some distance inland up the escarpment road towards Erigavo (fig. 1). Other similar Series *B* cairns have been reported from Bandar Ziyada in Mijerteinia⁹ and occur elsewhere in Somalia. Further south there is a particularly striking cluster near Wajir in the Northern Province of Kenya where they are generally ascribed by the local Somali and Galla to the Madanle, an unspecified people of high stature.¹⁰ Curle has described the excavation of two of these large tumuli at Mandera and Wajir, finding traces of skeletal remains which crumbled at his touch, earthenware sherds, and a copper ring.¹¹ Baxter has opened other Series *B* cairns in the Marsabit region but found no remains or artifacts.¹²

In Northern Somaliland both series, and especially the smaller tumuli, have generally been ascribed to the Galla¹³ of whose previous occupation of this Somali area there is now considerable evidence.¹⁴ More tentatively, Puccioni

has suggested a possible connexion between the cairns and the various Somaliland Stone Age industries.¹⁵ In most cases, however, the connexion proposed between the mounds and the Galla appears to be the result of a linguistic misunderstanding. It is true that contemporary Somali in Northern Somaliland often loosely refer the cairns to *gaalo* (sg. *gaal*), a word which means primarily pagans or non-Muslims and is often applied derogatorily to Europeans. This term, however, is linguistically, at least in modern Northern Somali, quite distinct from the name *Gaalla* (or



FIG. 1. SERIES 'B' CAIRN NEAR MAIT

Mait is on the coast of Erigavo District in the British Somaliland Protectorate. The encircling apron of stones can be seen in the foreground. Photographs: I. M. Lewis, 1957

less commonly *Gaallaawi*) by which the Somali refer to the Galla peoples whom, since many are Muslim, they do not regard as pagans (*gaalo*).¹⁶ Thus while Somali today consider both series of tumuli to be non-Muslim or pre-Islamic, since they differ markedly in construction from Somali burials today (see figs. 2 and 3), this is not evidence that they are Galla graves. Indeed, in general Somali vaguely attribute them to the distant past, to the 'people who were before' (*dadki hore*): and they are most widely referred to as *talo* (mounds) or *habaal maguur* (lit. graves that do not move).¹⁷

The problem of discovering who the cairn-makers were can most profitably be approached after a brief consideration of some Northern Somali burial customs. Today Northern Somali funeral rites are similar to those practised in most Muslim countries and the graves, in which the deceased is buried with his head turned towards Mecca, are marked by two upright stones, one set at each end of the grave which lies in an east-west direction (see figs. 2 and 3). I was told, however, that formerly when a member of a small party was killed or died in a stony region he was often

* With four text figures and a table

simply placed on the ground and covered with a mound of stones. I was also told by 'Iise and Gadabuursi elders in the west of the Protectorate that formerly if a person died

Muslim *jum'ê*) he was not buried in the earth but simply covered with a pile of stones. This was because it was believed that if a corpse were interred in the earth on a Friday his clan and lineage would also perish.¹⁸



FIG. 2. CONTEMPORARY-STYLE SOMALI GRAVES NEAR SHEIKH
These lie in desolate country and are protected by a brush fence or zariba.

These unorthodox burial customs which are said to have been followed in the past and which were discussed somewhat shamefacedly may still persist in some isolated areas, although I have never seen them. They do however suggest that some of the stone tumuli are in fact Somali burials. This conclusion is supported by the results of two excavations which Mr. J. M. Watson, O.B.E., formerly Director of Agriculture, and I made in 1957 in the Protectorate near Gaan Libah (9°52'; 44°48'). Both the mounds examined were of the smaller Series A type and situated on high ground fairly close to the Agricultural Department hill station at Gaan Libah. The first was a rough cairn about five feet in height and 14 feet in diameter which had collapsed a little at the top revealing some of the internal wooden cross-beams which are a feature of these tumuli (see fig. 4). We cleared the top and sufficient of the stone



FIG. 3. SOMALI GRAVES NEAR SHEIKH ISAAQ'S TOMB AT MAIT
Some of these graves have the name, date, and often camel brand of the occupant incised on stones placed at the ends of the grave as shown. Many of these typical Somali Muslim graves are 200 years old.

in the season called *daalallo* (a short wet cold spell during the dry winter (*jiilaal*) months) it was customary to bury him in the same manner. Again, more generally, it is said that in the past when a person died on a Friday (the



FIG. 4. PARTLY EXCAVATED SERIES 'A' 'GALLA GRAVE' NEAR
GAAN LIBAH

Wooden supports and skeletal remains are visible.

walls to allow us access to the centre of the mound where at ground level we found the skeletal remains of two individuals. The bodies were lying side by side in a flexed position with the tops of the skulls uppermost. We found no other remains in the tumulus. The mound itself was encircled by an 'apron' of stones at a radius of 12 feet from the centre. This again is a common feature of both Series

TABLE I. MEASUREMENTS OF SKELETAL REMAINS FROM SOMALILAND GRAVES COMPARED WITH THOSE OF SOMALI AND GALLA SKELETONS

CRANIA	Graves			Somali		Galla	
	Mean	No.	S.D.	Mean	No.	Mean	No.
Maximum length	180.7	6	7.7	186.2*	5	177.4*	13
Maximum breadth	131.1	7	4.3	137.8	4	134.2	13
Frontal arc	124.1	7	6.0				
Parietal arc	125.2	6	10.2				
Occipital arc	116.2	5	7.8				
Frontal chord	106.3	7	6.2				
Parietal chord	111.0	6	6.5				
Occipital chord	95.8	5	3.1				
Minimum frontal breadth	94.4	5	3.6	92.8	5	95.4	13
Basi-bregmatic height	129.5	4	5.4	135.8	5	129.4	10
Basi-alveolar length	98.0	1	—	97.6	5	94.0	6
Basi-nasal length	99.5	4	5.1	99.2	5	97.3	10
Foraminal length	36.5	4	2.9	37.2	5	35.5	10
Foraminal breadth	29.1	4	3.3	31.0*		28.7*	10
Upper facial height	72.5	2	16.3				
Nasal height	55.5	2	17.7	48.2	5	48.2	7
Nasal breadth	25.7	2	1.5	24.8	5	25.2	7
Palatal length	43.5	2	0.7	48.5	4		
Palatal breadth	36.0	1	—	33.8	4		
Cephalic index	73.1	6	2.1	73.0	17	74.3	23
Frontal index	71.6	5	3.6	71.0	16	70.5	16
Nasal index	47.8	2	11.4	50.9	17	50.9	20
MANDIBLES							
Bigonial breadth	85.3*	3	3.5	98.0*	2		
Coronial breadth	83.7	3	5.0	96.0	2		
Bicondylar breadth	115.0	2	2.8	112.5	2		
Condylar length	19.3	3	0.6				
Minimum rameal breadth	39.3	3	3.5	31.5	2		
Bimental breadth	43.6	4	2.8				
LONG BONES							
Femur, maximum length	461	2	4.2				
„ oblique length	456	2	7.1				
„ shaft girth	79	4	7.6				
Tibia, maximum length							
(excluding spine)	384	3	24.0				
„ maximum length	390	3	23.0				
„ oblique length	382	3	22.5				
„ shaft girth	72	5	3.5				
Humerus, maximum length	322	2	4.9				
„ oblique length	320	2	4.9				
„ shaft girth	53	2	2.1				
Ulna, maximum length	268	2	6.3				
„ shaft girth	34	2	3.5				
Radius shaft girth	34	1	—				

* These pairs of means differ significantly.

A and Series B cairns and is also found round some contemporary Somali graves especially amongst the 'Iise and Gadabuursi of the west of the Protectorate.¹⁹

The second tumulus was similar in construction having a height of six feet and a diameter of 24. It yielded the skeletal remains of three individuals. Two were lying at ground level round the sides of the grave and facing each

other and had their legs flexed. Some eight inches under the topsoil was the third skeleton lying directly under one of the previous bodies. Again there were no other remains.

These skeletal remains and those of two other individuals from a third grave in the west of the Protectorate were submitted to Dr. D. F. Roberts of the Department of Human Anatomy, Oxford, who very kindly examined and

classified them. All the remains were found to be those of males, three elderly, two middle-aged, and two young adults. Several of the crania, mandibles and long bones were sufficiently well preserved to permit measurements to be taken, the technique employed being that defined by Morant, Munter, and Trevor.²⁰ The girths of the long bones were obtained and measured on the femur and tibia at the mid point as determined from the maximum length, and on the humerus, ulna, and radius at the point of least circumference. The metrical results from the three graves are shown in the table where they are compared with Somali and Galla skeletal characters. Unfortunately the information on both Somali and Galla skeletal characters is very limited²¹ and not even entirely satisfactory since in some cases Somali and Galla skeletons may have been confused. However, on the basis of the available material in only two of the measurements obtainable on the remains (cranial length and foramina breadth) do the Galla differ significantly from the Somali. In both of these the means of the graves series occupy an intermediate position, so that it is not possible from the available evidence to decide with which of these two peoples the affinities of the graves series lie (see Table I).

In an effort to gain some idea of the age of the Gaan Libah burials samples of wood from the internal supports of the two cairns were sent to the Research Laboratory at the British Museum for radio-carbon analysis. Only one sample was tested, and for this an age of 100 ± 150 years was obtained. This result means that if the wooden supports and burials are contemporaneous the Gaan Libah graves cannot be older than 250 years. Since, moreover, there is no reason to suppose that there were Galla in this area at so late a date it seems legitimate to assume that the skeletons are those of Somali.²²

These results taken with what has been said above of former Somali burial customs suggest that some, if not many, of the Series A cairns in Northern Somaliland are comparatively recent and contain Somali remains. If this is generally the case the term 'Galla graves' is a misnomer. This is not of course to suggest that all the small tumuli are of precisely the same period, or that those of other Somali areas will yield similar results. What is now required is a more extensive examination of these burials and a systematic investigation of the larger Series B mounds, which may well be considerably older.

Notes

¹ See Speke's diary in R. F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, Everyman edition, London, 1943, p. 315; F. Joussemaume, 'Reflexions anthropologiques à propos des tumules et silex taillés des Çomalis et des Danakiis,' *L'Anthropologie*, Vol. VI, 1895, pp. 393-413.

² This paper is based on research carried out in the Somalilands between 1955 and 1957 under the auspices of the Colonial Social

Science Research Council, London, whose generosity I acknowledge with gratitude. In addition to Mr. J. M. Watson with whom I excavated the cairns discussed in this paper and to Dr. D. F. Roberts, I am extremely grateful to Mr. I. E. S. Edwards and the Radio-Carbon Dating Advisory Screening Committee of the British Museum for accepting samples from the graves for radio-carbon analysis. For criticism and comments and information on cairns elsewhere in Somaliland I am grateful to Dr. P. T. W. Baxter, Dr. G. Benardelli, and Dr. J. C. Trevor.

³ Cf. E. Cerulli, 'Tradizioni storiche e monumenti della Miguri-tinia,' *Africa Italiana*, Vol. IV, 1931, pp. 153-69; N. Puccioni, *Antropologia e etnografia delle genti della Somalia*, Vol. III, Bologna, 1936, pp. 121-7.

⁴ Joussemaume, *loc. cit.*

⁵ P. Azais and R. Chambard, *Cinq années de recherche archéologique en Éthiopie*, Paris, 1931.

⁶ Cerulli, *loc. cit.*

⁷ N. Puccioni, *op. cit.*, and personal information from Dr. G. Benardelli.

⁸ A. T. Curle, 'Prehistoric graves in the Northern Frontier Province of Kenya Colony,' *MAN*, 1933, 102; also personal communication from Dr. P. T. W. Baxter.

⁹ Cerulli, *loc. cit.*, p. 161.

¹⁰ The Madanle (or Madinle) are a group traditionally allied to the Somali Ajuuraan who occupied the area between the Shebelle and Isha Baidoa in southern Somalia in the fifteenth century. See M. Colucci, *Principi di diritto consuetudinario della Somalia Italiana meridionale*, Florence, 1924, pp. 158-61.

¹¹ Curle, *loc. cit.*

¹² Baxter, personal communication.

¹³ See N. Puccioni, *op. cit.*, p. 121; G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia*, London, 1955, p. 19.

¹⁴ See Cerulli, *loc. cit.*; M. Pirone, 'Leggende e tradizioni storiche dei Somali Ogaden' and 'Le popolazioni dell' Ogaden'; *Archivio per l'Antropologia e la Etnologia*, Vol. LXXXIV, 1954, pp. 119-43; I. M. Lewis, 'The Galla in Northern Somaliland,' *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Vol. XV (1959), pp. 21-38.

¹⁵ Puccioni, *loc. cit.*, p. 127. See also J. D. Clark, *The Prehistoric Cultures of the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge, 1954, p. 252.

¹⁶ See Lewis, *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ The word *talo* is also applied to small piles of stones which are not graves but cairns commemorating a legendary queen called Arawailo who is said to have ruled the Somali country at some time in the unspecified past and is chiefly remembered for her efforts to exterminate the male population by ordering the castration of all male infants. Such Arawailo cairns are sometimes seen at the side of a road or track, especially in the east of the Protectorate, but this belief and the custom of erecting cairns in memory of Arawailo seems to be dying out today. Cf. R. E. Drake-Brockman, *British Somaliland*, London, 1912, pp. 169-72.

¹⁸ This belief may be connected with the common view in Northern Somaliland, that Friday is the day of repetition. A gift received on a Friday indicates that more may be received: but a loss suffered on a Friday is likely to lead to further losses.

¹⁹ Cf. Drake-Brockman, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-4.

²⁰ G. M. Morant, 'A Biometric Study of the Human Mandible,' *Biometrika*, Vol. XXVIII, 1936, p. 84; A. H. Munter, 'A Study of the Lengths of the Long Bones,' *Biometrika*, Vol. XXVIII, 1936, p. 258; J. C. Trevor, 'Anthropometry,' in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, 1950 edition.

²¹ P. Lester, 'Étude anthropologique des populations de l'Éthiopie,' *L'Anthropologie*, Vol. XXXVIII, 1928, pp. 289ff.; 'Contribution à l'anthropologie des Somalis,' *Bull. Mém. Soc. Anth. Paris*, Vol. VIII, 1927, pp. 175ff.

²² See Lewis, *loc. cit.*