The Archaeology of the medieval trade networks in Western Somaliland

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Résumé

During the middle ages and well into the 16th century, Western Somaliland was part of a series of Muslim kingdoms which thrived thanks to the trade networks which connected the Red Sea with the interior of the Horn of Africa. The most powerful of these polities, the Sultanate of Adal, evolved into a regional power until its collapse due to the combination of military defeats and the Portuguese disturbance of the trade routes with the Indian Ocean. During the last five years, a team from the Spanish National research Council (Incipit-CSIC) has developed an archaeological project aimed to understand the characteristics of the international trade in Somaliland and its impact in the local communities which occupied the territory. The Incipit-CSIC research has unravelled a complex work of coastal meeting points, trade routes and urban sites which structured a sophisticated framework for trade, from the Antiquity to the 19th century. This paper will present an analysis of the trade context during the 13th to the 16th centuries, a period where foreign traders, nomad communities and urban dwellers collaborated to establish and maintain a manifold network of exchanges and interactions extremely poorly known. This network allowed and boosted the emergence of powerful state structures in the region, visible in the building of caravan stations and fortresses and the development of urban centres along the trade routes. The presentation will also pay attention to some specificities of the Somali model, as the lack of coastal cities to conduct trade, or the general collaborative attitude between nomads and urban dwellers.