

# HOW TO DO ARCHAEOLOGY IN A COUNTRY THAT DOES NOT EXIST? RESEARCH CHALLENGES IN SOMALILAND

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**Resumen:** Cuando mencionamos el Cuerno de África, y Somalia en particular, las primeras imágenes que afloran en nuestra mente están relacionadas con violencia generalizada, piratería, hambrunas y pobreza, imágenes cargadas de prejuicios, pero difundidas hasta la saciedad por los medios de comunicación occidentales. Sin embargo, la realidad no es, ni fue siempre tan extrema. En el extremo oriental del Cuerno de África existe una joven nación, Somalilandia; este antiguo protectorado británico, comenzó su andadura en 1960 tras independizarse de Gran Bretaña y, tras años de unión con Somalia, retomó su camino en solitario desde 1991. Este país del Cuerno de África tiene la particularidad de ser una nación totalmente soberana con su propio parlamento, constitución, ejército, fronteras y pasaporte, pero que, por otro lado, no lo encontraremos representado en ningún mapa elaborado en Europa, ni tampoco en los visores de imágenes satelitales o instituciones internacionales como la ONU. Trabajar en Somalilandia implica retos importantes: por un lado, administrativos, inherentes a su falta de reconocimiento internacional. Por otra parte, el país es grande, con una geografía complicada y algunas zonas no son visitables debido a la actual situación de conflicto. Partiendo de esta base; el presente texto pretende exponer las estrategias seguidas a la hora de trabajar con el patrimonio cultural de Somalilandia y cómo la teledetección se está convirtiendo en una herramienta sumamente útil a la hora de registrar yacimientos arqueológicos. Así se puede obtener una visión de conjunto del potencial patrimonial y arqueológico del país, permitiendo realizar análisis del paisaje a gran escala que nos permitan comprender mejor un patrimonio sumamente rico pero amenazado.

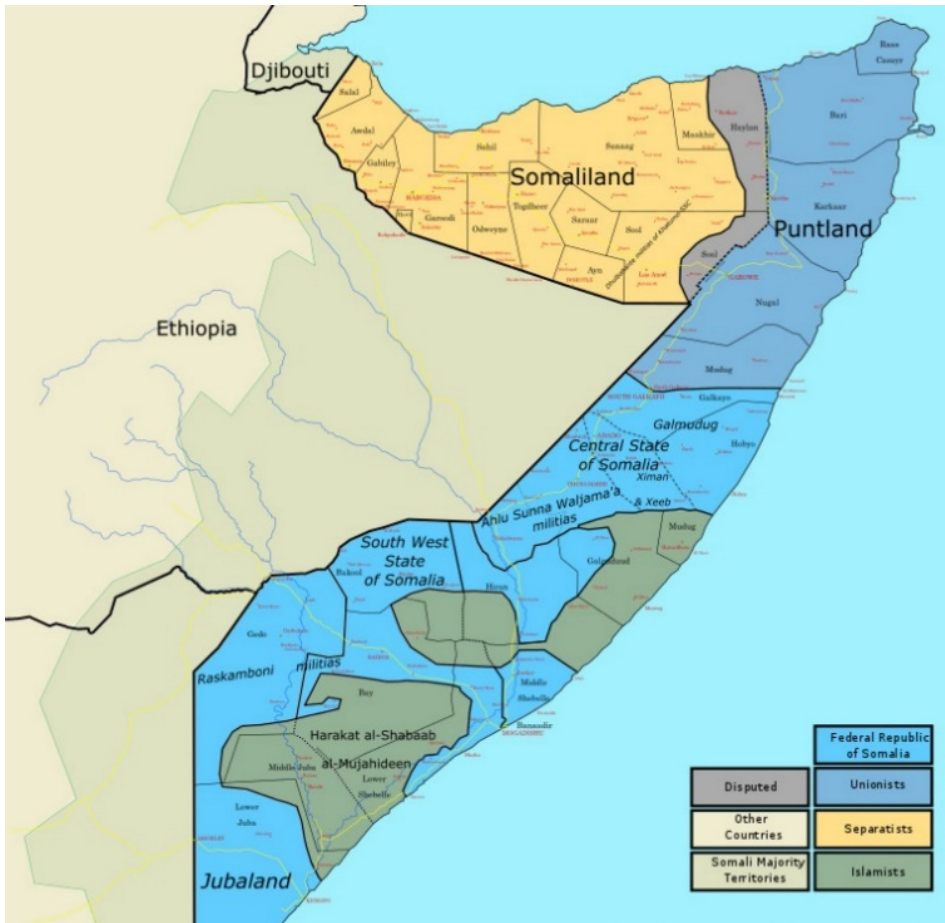
**Palabras clave:** Cuerno de África; Somaliland; gestión de proyectos; patrimonio arqueológico; teledetección.

## 1. SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

Located on the northern coast of the Horn of Africa, the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland (*Jamhuuriyadda Soomaaliland*) began its journey on May 18, 1991; when members of the Somali National Movement, along with the elders from

northern clans, called for an end to the violence. Before that, Somaliland had already achieved its independence from Great Britain in June 1960, joining the former territories of Italian Somalia. The union began to break down after the Ogaden war (1977-1978) Somalia's catastrophic defeat. Thereafter, the Siad Barre regime turned its gaze to the inside enemies. Persecution, guerrilla warfare, clan conflicts and genocide marked the 1980s. As Somalia plunged into civil war, a difficult reconciliation began in the north, in which representatives of the clans alluded to the concept of *halaydhalay*, demanding termination of the personal quarrels (Forti, 2011, p. 18); make clean sweep at, start over. After the disarmament of the militias and the transfer of powers to the civilian government, on 2001 May 31, Somaliland conducted a referendum for the approval of its constitution. Today, Somaliland is a well-established democracy based on a bicameral legislative system, a presidency, and a judiciary; all the elections have taken place relatively calmly. The country agglutinates three major clans Isaaq, Darod and Dir and is divided into 6 regions: Marodijeh, Awdal, Sahil, Togdheer, Sool and Sanaag, the last two affected by a border conflict with the autonomous state of Puntland (part of Somalia) and the presence of *Al-Shabab* cells.

Despite huge progress, Somaliland faces a difficult situation marked by uncertainty surrounding its recognition as an independent state. Amongst the nations that show most support for the recognition of its independence, the United Kingdom stands out, as a form of backup for its former protectorate, which claims the old colonial borders. But also, Sweden and Denmark, places that received many refugees from the civil war in the well-known diaspora, and, above all, Ethiopia, motivated by the dual interest of a commercial partner with access to the sea and keeping the dream of a 'Greater Somalia' that can dispute its hegemony at bay. Among the most reluctant to this recognition is, in addition to Somalia, the African Union, fearing that Somaliland recognition could trigger a whole wave of secessionist movements on the continent (Mesfin, 2009, p. 8). Others, such as the European Union, maintain a more ambivalent stance, avoiding pronouncements, but collaborating *de facto* with development initiatives such as the expansion of Berbera's port (Forti, 2011, p. 23). All this prevents the country from being part of international organizations, such as the United Nations, and benefiting from international support with the investment of development funds. However, Somaliland has achieved great economic growth motivated by relations with the Arabian Peninsula and remittances sent by the members of the diaspora.



**Figure 1.** Political situation of Somaliland, Somalia and Puntland in 2017, remarkably similar to the one in 2021. Source: Nicolay Sidorov (Wikimedia Commons).

In this extent, a parallel process is taking place in this area, the centre of which is the cultural heritage and its role in the construction of Somaliland. Understanding heritage as ‘the set of assets that a nation has accumulated over the centuries that due to their meaning are subject to special protection by legislation’ (González-Ruibal & Ayán, 2018, p. 438). Two milestones mark the government’s interest in heritage, especially archaeology. The first, was the discovery of the Laas Geel archaeological site (Gutherz, 2003), characterized by one of the most impressive sets of rock art on the continent, approximately 5000 years old. The second is related to the work of the archaeologist Sada Mire whose publications, especially Mapping Archaeology of Somaliland (Mire, 2015), drew attention to the destruction and need to registration of heritage in Somaliland and Somalia. Mire has stood out for its indigenous and post-

colonial approaches, claiming alternative visions of heritage and the importance of raising awareness for its protection from governments and the importance of local communities in this process (Mire, 2007, 2011). The government of Somaliland has been gradually becoming aware of the importance of protecting, studying, preserving and publicizing cultural heritage, using it as a tool in its claims for international recognition and the construction of identity. This, led to the constitution of the Department of Archaeology in 2018, the musealization of Laas Geel and the ongoing construction of the National Museum in the capital, Hargeisa.

When we think about Somalia and Somaliland it is not difficult to fall into prejudices, topics repeated *ad nauseam*, hunger, drought, piracy, war and terrorism, mere metaphors of barbarism in front of our aseptic and orderly reality. Who does remember the images of U.S marines on the streets of Mogadishu and who knows the polychrome depictions of Laas Geel? Somaliland's cultural heritage is one of the richest in the entire Horn of Africa with large fields of cairns like Xiis; medieval cities such as Fardowsa focused on trading, caravan stations such as Qalcadda, coastal fairs such as Bender Abbas and Siyara, with materials that testify the existence of an international trade with regions as distant as Persia, India, Myanmar and Thailand (Ruibal et al. 2018; 2021). Sites in which the Incipit-CSIC team of archaeologists has been working since 2015. A region whose inhabitants maintained relations with extremely remote lands around the shores of the Indian Ocean.



**Figure 2.** Representation of a bovid and herder in Laas Geel. Source: author's photograph.

This revolution or ‘boom’ in Somali heritage is not exactly new. Since the British colonization and the independence period, numerous works have been carried out (Torres, 2018), highlighting researchers as Clark (1954) and Chittick (1976). On the other hand, these foreign missions had little effect on the diffusion of archaeological heritage in Somalia (Mire, 2011, p. 78). The onset of the civil war ushered in a time of crisis for Somali heritage with the systematic desecration of sites and museums by warlords in order to secure funding. To this, we must add the destruction of pre-Islamic tombs and Sufi sanctuaries by radical Islamist groups (Mire, 2011, p. 74-80), repeating scenes like those that occurred in Timbuktu in 2012, but without the least international media coverage.

Today, the situation in Somaliland has improved. Protection and awareness measures have had some positive effects, but there is still a long way to go, and the difficulties in carrying out research projects are numerous:

- Logistical difficulties derived from the political context. Somaliland, the condition of being an unrecognized country means few consular offices, to this must be added the large number of flights with a stopover in Addis Ababa or the United Arab Emirates until reaching Hargeisa. Once there, transportation must be carried out in vehicles provided by the ministry and researcher must always be accompanied by armed escort. All entail an increase in costs that reduce the amount of time that researchers can stay on the field.
- Existence of a pendular climate between two dry and two rainy seasons marked by the arrival of monsoons, tsunamis, torrential rains the existence of *Al-Shabab* cells and conflicts in the border with Puntland, causing that most of the eastern provinces are not open to visitors.
- Heritage management. There is a lack of institutionalization, often having to deal with personalities, conflicts of interest and *ad hoc* regulations, the result of a clientelist system derived from unclear laws and poorly paid employees without great interest in management.
- The uncertainty that involves doing field work. The lack of awareness at the local level and the lack of state representatives with clear roles and authority make it not always possible to dig or survey.
- Lack of Heritage legislation. Currently a draft of an Antiquities, Monuments.
- The Museums bill is under revision in the Somaliland Parliament, with no specific date for its approval.
- Increasing looting to which archaeological sites are subjected, especially pre-Islamic.

In summary, the image that is drawn before our eyes is vibrant, rich, full of opportunities in a favourable context and in a country concerned about safeguarding its heritage but plagued by uncertainties when it comes to working and a significant lack of awareness at a local level.

## 2. STRATEGIES TO APPROACH SOMALILAND'S HERITAGE

In an environment full of challenges, uncertainties and opportunities, the elaboration of a proper project management strategies is of utmost importance, especially if we consider that the work that archaeologists carry out have immediate repercussions, not only among the communities where the sites are located, but also in a process, the formation of Somaliland as a nation. Next, we will address a series of strategies and alternatives grouped into four main questions: 1) Field work. 2) Digital tools. 3) Safeguarding the archaeological heritage. 4) Public archaeology-political archaeology.

### 2. 1. Field work

We have already pointed out some vicissitudes related to field work, starting with obtaining visas and work permits, public servants with tasks that are not well defined and recognized. Moreover, we must add the little time available on the field, which requires meticulous, but flexible, prior planning; trying to get the greater number of results in the shortest time possible.

The archaeological work that we carry out in the field is made up of two main activities, surveying and excavation; the basic difference being the first and the second implies the opening of the soil and the destruction of strata to obtain information. Most of the archaeological work that the team has carried out has been surveying and, additionally, some test-pits in necropolis, burial mounds and structures in forts and towns. It was not until 2020 that large scale excavations began systematically in the medieval city of Fardowsa (15th-17th centuries), covering a block of houses associated with merchants (Torres et al. 2020). The nature of the climate and geology of Somaliland, characterized by limited erosion, means that most of the sites are in an excellent state of preservation. A great advantage, being able to 'walk around' and collect a huge number of sherds, lithic tools and even bone materials that allow us to get an idea of the type of site (e.g., fair, *tariqa*, place of worship, caravan station, fortress, etc.) and obtain a rough chronology. This is the case of the Bender Abbas and Siyara sites, fairs located on the coast where nomadic shepherds and merchants would meet to trade (Ruibal and Torres, 2018; Ruibal et al. 2021). In them, traces of banquets and a large quantity of ceramic imports from Southeast Asia have been perfectly preserved.



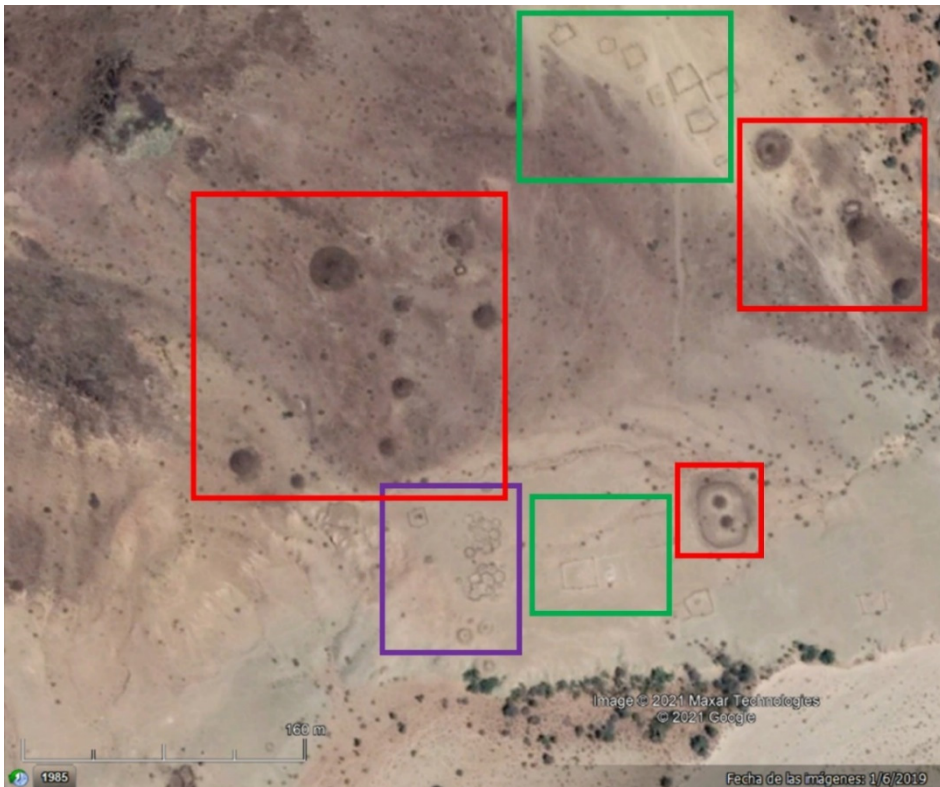
**Figure 3.** Documentation of an Islamic monumental tomb during a survey.  
Source: Courtesy of Candela Martínez Barrio

In that way, with a small team, a vehicle and basic recording tools (e.g., drone, cameras, total station) it is possible to quickly document a large number of sites throughout the country; obtaining a general picture of the history of entire regions; which is especially convenient in a conforming nation. On the contrary, the range of the excavation is much more limited, by restricting the mobility of the team to a single site, from which we learn more information. For example, we know that, after its abandonment, the ruins of Fardowsa were successively occupied. Excavation might be a source of problems with the community, not everyone understands the usefulness of ‘drilling holes’ to collect sherds and there is the possibility of vandalization; during the excavations, the site was vandalized twice, if at a limited scale. We can establish an inversely proportional relationship between scientific profitability and excavation. However, it is only the excavation that allows the teams to get more in contact with the local communities, being an opportunity to carry out public archaeology in a myriad of ways, such as, being a source of work and economic opportunities for locals, we will come back to this point at the end.

## 2. 2. Digital tools

Previously, in the introductory section, we referred to the uncertainty of field work, but also to the opportunities offered by strategies such as surveying. Next, I will return to these ideas to present a working methodology related to the use of new technologies that are being used by the Incipit-CSIC team in the northeast part of the Horn of Africa. First, it is worth emphasizing that in Europe, unlike Somaliland, we

have public tools, such as archaeological databases, which allow us to get a complete idea of the sites within a region, their chronology, location, etc. In addition, the availability of quality data makes it possible to work through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and, using LiDAR, to ‘eliminate’ vegetation and locate sites efficiently. Although we do not have these tools during our work, we already have indicated the excellent conservation of the archaeological sites and how slight sedimentation processes make it possible to obtain an important sample of materials on the surface that permit us to better understand the sites. This same characteristic can be extrapolated at a macro level, on the satellite images. Since most of the archaeological sites in Somaliland can be distinguished through viewers such as Google Earth, all thanks to its good preservation, the absence of large masses of vegetation and chromatic contrasts (e.g., many of the burial mounds and mosques were made using stones of different colours, such as basalt, to make them distinguishable).



**Figure 4.** Satellite image of a site in Awdal (Somaliland) showing pre-Islamic burial mounds (red), Islamic tombs (purple) and mosques (green). Source: from Google Earth.



During 2020 and 2021, after the experience gathered at ground level with respect to the characteristics of the sites, we tried to locate sites in the satellite images, observing that they were perfectly distinguishable, see Figure 4. From there until today, we began a mapping of sites process through photointerpretation or remote sensing with a long-term perspective; not only including pre-Islamic, burial, or medieval sites, but also trenches, colonial forts, recent depopulated villages, etc. For this, the applied methodology involves the selection of an area, the setting an appropriate scale and images but also the creation of codenames and generic typologies of sites. Subsequently, the data obtained will be checked in the field and studied with techniques using GIS (e.g., analysis of visibility, optimal paths, etc.) and statistics (e.g., analysis of principal components).

### **2. 3. Safeguarding the Archaeological heritage**

While it is true that most of Somaliland's archaeological heritage is well preserved, it is also seriously threatened by rampant growth and looting. Mire (2007, p. 54) draws the attention to the systematic looting aimed to obtain objects destined for international markets. These looting are mainly perpetrated in rural areas, immersed in a process of crisis caused by the drastic change in livelihoods with the disappearance of nomadism, progressive deterioration of the climate, rural exodus and dreams of easy money. Typically, looters do not have precise knowledge of what they expect to find. During a visit to the Gugux cairn field, the team of archaeologists witnessed several individuals digging on one of the cairns. Their goal was not to find archaeological materials, but rather minerals. In Hargeisa, it is common to receive visits from people who had obtained minerals in archaeological sites, trying to inquire about their value.

The second greatest threat to the Somaliland's heritage is the result of its recent history and economic growth, uncontrolled urban development which is at the head of the greatest threat to heritage (Torres, 2018, p. 299). The most visible example is the expansion of the port of Berbera, where the new port facilities have destroyed part of the old necropolis. In addition, the old town with its buildings from the Ottoman period are suffering an accelerated deterioration, running the risk of disappearing, although some have been restored, in the same path of deterioration is the historic city of Zeila. But the most dramatic case is that of the medieval city of Amud (Torres, 2021), one of the first and best-preserved urban settlements in the Horn of Africa, which, in a paradoxical twist, was destroyed by to prepare the ground for new constructions, amongst them, the university that receives its name from the now obliterated city.



**Figure 5.** Looting excavation of a burial mound in Gugux.  
Source: author's photograph.

As a counterpoint to this unflattering reality, there is a growing awareness on the part of the Somaliland government about the importance of cultural heritage. But what is the reason why some Somalis, especially in rural areas, are not so much concerned about the conservation and defence of their heritage? Obviously, *patrimony* is a western concept, but the matter is more complex. For Mire, the fundamental reason lies in the fact that Somalis are not affected by the destruction of materials and some archaeological sites because the important thing is not so much the objects, but the knowledge, this has come to be known as the 'Knowledge-Centred approach' (Mire, 2007, 2011, p. 71). This approximation is based on the preservation of memory and abilities to produce objects, rather than the object itself, and it is considered a result of mindset inheritance from nomadic life, in which objects are perishable, mobile and replaceable (Mire, 2017, p. 152). This approach is extremely interesting insofar as it emphasizes the fundamental objective of archaeology; revealing the memory which is intrinsic into materiality (Olivier, 2011). However, her perspective is focused on ethnographic materials, being difficult to apply to archaeological objects, which in most cases have nothing to do with nomadic materiality. How to convince a person that preserving and displaying a 14th century Chinese pottery in a museum is important? Or what is the same, why is it important to preserve archaeological remains?

The answer is anything but easy, and it certainly involves recognizing that memory and materiality are inseparable; with objects, landscape and even architecture acting as 'mnemonic devices' (Olsen, 2010). Without the object, there is no memory and vice versa. In the case of the celadon, it is not possible for anyone

today to be able to strictly remember anything from it. Our job as archaeologists is bringing to light the memory of the objects, of the landscape, to tell their memory. Because the objects that have been found, the deposits that we find and the landscapes that we analyse tell us a highly dynamic story, in which the region that currently Somaliland occupies was immersed in highly active commercial circuits from the 1st century BC to the 17th century, and even later. A context of development of state formations and urban planning, but also of resistance; of changes with the arrival of Islam and the preservation of previous beliefs and survival of transhumant ways of life. It is this story that can be told through archaeological objects and sites, a story that destroys the prejudices associated with barbarism due to this region, that could attract and allow its inhabitants to shape their identity, feel pride and greater bound to their land and what lay on and below it. This is something that may not be as tangible, at first, like a road, but in the long run it is more significant. Moving beyond the discourse and the purpose, we must not forget that the most prevailing need, due to the prevalence of looting and the damage that is being caused by urban development, lies in the effective protection of cultural and archaeological heritage. For this reason, it is important to make progress on three main issues.

- Creation of a professional and permanent body of Somaliland archaeologists, in charge of studying and making the population aware of the immediate importance of heritage preservation. This would encourage the third question.
- Generation of a legislative corpus with international advice that guarantees the protection of deposits and penalizes the crimes that are perpetrated.
- Recognition of the need for a management archaeology. By this, I mean the management of the sites, but also the existence of a preventive archaeology to prepare, anticipate and supervise ongoing urban growth. This should involve the identification of archaeological sites, assessment of their potential and excavation prior to any urban planning and specifying the need to have archaeologists present during the works.

## **2. 4. Public archaeology-political archaeology**

One issue that must continuously be addressed is the public side of our work. This not only means producing speeches that can be consulted by the public, but also the direct involvement of the population in the places where we work. In this sense, the training of personnel is vital for the creation of a base of local archaeologists who can start their own projects. At present, except for some courses and conferences, the University of Hargeisa lacks specialized careers and personnel in Humanities. However, the immediate creation of the National Museum represents an opportunity to attract and train people interested in the cultural heritage of Somaliland, a task in which the CSIC team must participate.

A greater awareness of the population is necessary, especially in rural areas, in order to disseminate the importance of preserving heritage in the present and for the future. Teach about the history of sites, integrating local memories in speeches and involving communities in the preservation and exploitation of their heritage. During the last archaeological campaign in Somaliland, the team placed special emphasis on the local community, conducting guided visits to the students of the different schools in the town of Sheikh, where the site of Fardowsa is located, informal visits to walkers and onlookers, meetings with local elders, to which was essential to have the support of Dualeh Jama, first Somali archaeologist, who acted as a nexus between the team and the inhabitants, explaining our objectives and the importance of our work, not only as a source of immediate income working in the digs, but also the importance of the history of their settlement.

At the same time, we cannot deny the political importance of archaeology. It is undeniable that our speeches transcend the academic circles, more so in a country in full conformation. We must be aware of this, being our discipline a tool that can potentially be used in the struggle for recognition progress in the recognition of Somaliland and its incorporation into organizations such as the United Nations. In this sense, promoting the recognition of Laas Geel as World Heritage site is a work in progress and will be a first step in the recognition. Furthermore, we must always consider the political facet of our speeches. This is especially important in a context where the different regional states use the past and heritage as a form of legitimation, not always in the most appropriate way. An interesting case is that of Puntland, whose name refers to the 'land of Punt', an umbrella term with which the Egyptians called the lands distributed in the Horn of Africa and southern Arabia, but which has recently been appropriated in an exercise of grandiloquence in claiming affiliation with Pharaonic Egypt. In other cases, the ethnographic and archaeological heritage is being used in a more positive way, as it appears in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Two uses of heritage. Left. Sheikh Veterinary School logo, with a representation of Laas Geel. Right. Puntland coat of arms with a dhil, a milk container made of wood and used by nomadic herders. Source: Uchimedia and Wikimedia Commons.

### 3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Based on the strategies proposed in the previous section, we can affirm that a correct archaeological practice in Somaliland involves an appropriate balance between surveying and the excavation work that allows obtaining the greatest amount of data in a territory, but also involves local communities. During the 2020 campaign in Fardowsa, the Incipit-CSIC team combined both strategies. Allowing a better understanding of the characteristics and occupation sequence of the medieval settlement and surveying ten archaeological sites that have made possible to understand the evolution of trade from the 3rd century AD to the 19th century in central Somaliland (González-Ruibal et al. 2021), reaffirming the idea that Somaliland was one of the most interconnected regions of the world and involving the people of Sheikh in the excavations, through the creation of job as workers and by doing planned and improvised guided tours.

On the other hand, the systematic application of remote sensing through satellite images has made in visors like Google Earth has made possible to obtain a collection of data, like a general typology of sites applied to the northeast Horn, that is helping the researchers planning future campaigns, by knowing better globally what types of deposits exist; but also when it comes to understanding landscapes, nomad movements during the past, processes of Islamization, etc., being able to extrapolate this methodology to other contexts of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Using satellite images, we have managed to document more than 75,000 sites assemblages in the northeast of the Horn of Africa in a transnational study, covering all of Somaliland and Puntland, parts of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia (Gutiérrez de León, 2021). Moreover, the information collected is being used in the preparation of the first archaeological databases of Somaliland, which will be published and delivered to the different national and regional governments so that they can use it in the control and preservation of their own archaeological heritage.

Regarding the Somali archaeological heritage, at an international level, the work carried out to date is having a positive impact on institutions such as the European Research Council, guaranteeing their support by funding the State Horn project, the financing of the Palarq foundation and the *Plan Nacional* project of the Spanish Government, but also on the visit of the ambassador of the European Union in Somalia to the 2020 excavations. Internally, the greatest advance is the creation of the Somaliland National Museum, an initiative launched in 2019, whose opening is planned the year 2022. The museum's staff is aware of the need for a greater number of archaeological projects to increase the collection stored and displayed, but also how imperative it is to train personnel interested in the study and dissemination of the cultural heritage. This interest was more than patent amongst a significant number of researchers, as we were able to attest in the celebration of the international congress of the Association for Somali Studies held in Jigjiga on first and fourth of July 2021. Also in social networks, where an increasing number of young Somalis, especially

from the diaspora, show a nostalgic interest for the nomadic ways of life and their material culture (Schwere & Musa, 2020, p. 8). That can help in the protection of traditions at a time when the looming ‘modernity’ threatens to devour them.

#### 4. SO, HOW TO DO ARCHAEOLOGY IN A COUNTRY THAT ‘DOES NOT EXIST’?

It can be said that the only way to do archaeology in Somaliland is by combining a variety of strategies, starting with proper planning before moving to the field. In this sense, the mapping using satellite images, which is in its culmination, will help researchers and authorities, not only in Somaliland, to precisely know the location of most of the archaeological sites, saving time and resources in travel and search for deposits. On the ground, a correct conjugation of surveying work is appropriate, especially useful to get an idea of the different types of archaeological sites and their chronologies, but without neglecting the excavation work for longer periods of time, to understand better the evolution of archaeological deposits, especially urban ones, over time and to establish relationships with rural communities.



**Figure 7.** The director of the excavation, Alfredo González-Ruibal, conducting a guided visit to the students from a school in Sheikh. Source: Courtesy of Álvaro Minguito.

All tasks must have a social impact. In the case of mapping, it is important to train people in charge of heritage management and students in the use of GIS and the utilities of remote sensing through satellite images; cost-effective ways that

ultimately help to democratize and decolonize archaeological practice. On the other hand, survey and excavation should serve as opportunities for training future archaeologists and raising the awareness about the protection of heritage. This will have repercussions not only economic, like touristic exploitation and work in the excavation, but, furthermore, as a mean to claim identity and promote values that counteract prejudices and the history of barbarism associated with the region. In this regard, supporting archaeological projects that bring out the rich heritage of Somaliland and the northeast Horn is extremely important; constituting an opportunity to build bridges between countries and universities, acting as training centres for future local archaeologists. Turning around a famous phrase by Gordon Willey, archaeology is public archaeology, or it is nothing.

Additionally, it is vitally important to reclaim the role of women in this process. Paradoxically, although it has been women who have, traditionally, been in charge of the transmission of skills and knowledge linked to material culture (Mire, 2007, p. 61), they are absolutely poorly represented in any government initiative regarding heritage, which is extensible to national policy. Our work not only has to be focused on decolonizing archaeological practice itself, but also promoting gender equality by favouring the participation of female students in projects; heritage can act as means of empowerment.

There so, doing archaeology in a country that 'does not exist' implies always keeping in mind, not only the way in which we work, but also that our speeches have an impact. We are in a context in which heritage is increasingly configured as a first level tool in identity build up and one of the bases on which the recognition of Somaliland will rest. This will allow their integration into UNESCO and the corresponding funding for heritage protection, facilitating access to grants and scholarships for students and projects. But we must try to go beyond the limits of the old British protectorate. Thanks to ethnography and archaeology, we are being able to appreciate an archaeological record with great similarities in the macro-region that is the northeast of the Horn of Africa. Remarkably similar nomadic life forms, material culture, and monumental architecture, like stylistic similarities in pre-Islamic cairns and Islamic tombs, existed in Puntland, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea. This is important when generating stories that transgress national, ethnic and clan boundaries, with heritage being a banner for cordial relations between countries, especially those in conflict, such as Somaliland and Puntland. The mapping of large areas has allowed us to understand the landscape of the Horn as a great palimpsest in which Islamic cities and necropolises coincide with previous centres of worship, integrating the previous practices in the new religion. This can serve as a reference to counteract the influence of radical Islamists groups and promote respect of the heritage.

## 5. AS A KIND OF CONCLUSION

Doing archaeology in Somaliland shows us, ‘on air’, the great impact of the work we do; from the methodology we apply on the field, our relationship with the communities, through the manners in which we create discourses and the way to divulge the heritage. Everything influences, everything has results, in one way or another, even more so in a country under construction after years of conflict in which heritage is on the way to become one of the fundamental cornerstones of identity formation and a tool in the recognition of its *de facto* existence. As archaeologists, we must be aware of our great responsibility in this process, as one more piece of the society, who is ready to consume, accept, deny, interpret and use our literature in every way imaginable. Taking a quote from Chimamanda Adichie (2018, p. 28) ‘Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity’.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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