

The Iron Age communities in the Zambezi river basin: excavations in Mozambique

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Introduction

The 2650-kilometer Zambezi River cuts across five African countries, stretching from Angola on Africa's west coast to Mozambique on the east. Archaeological excavations of the river basin's important empires, such as the Mutapa State and Great Zimbabwe, have revealed that the Zambezi has long supported hunting, farming and fishing, and for centuries served as a main trade and communication route linking interior zones of Africa with the coast. The coastal trade points along the lower parts of the Zambezi, however, have until now not been integrated into this regional picture. I deliver the results of my excavations at Iron Age sites at Chinde, Marromeu and Sena. This research is fundamental to developing a regional approach to southern African archaeology, determining the origins of farming in the river basin, integrating the archaeology of kingdom centers and trade points, and recognizing the breadth of pre-European African trade routes.

This preliminary report presents the results of archaeological research carried out on the Zambezi Valley basin from 8 – 18 of May, 2006. The project *The Zambezi Valley: Identities and the Handling of Space* 2001-2003 resulted from the systematized collection of surface materials in the Zambezi Valley, where different archaeological sites, from Chinde to Sena, were identified. The survey aroused major interest in the Lumbe site on the banks of the Lumbe lagoon, on the kinglet of Nyamula. Surface-collected material on the site presents evidences of Matola and Gokomere Ziwa traditions. This is where the 2006 excavations took place, funded by SIDA/SAREC and integrated in the African Environmental Archaeology Network.

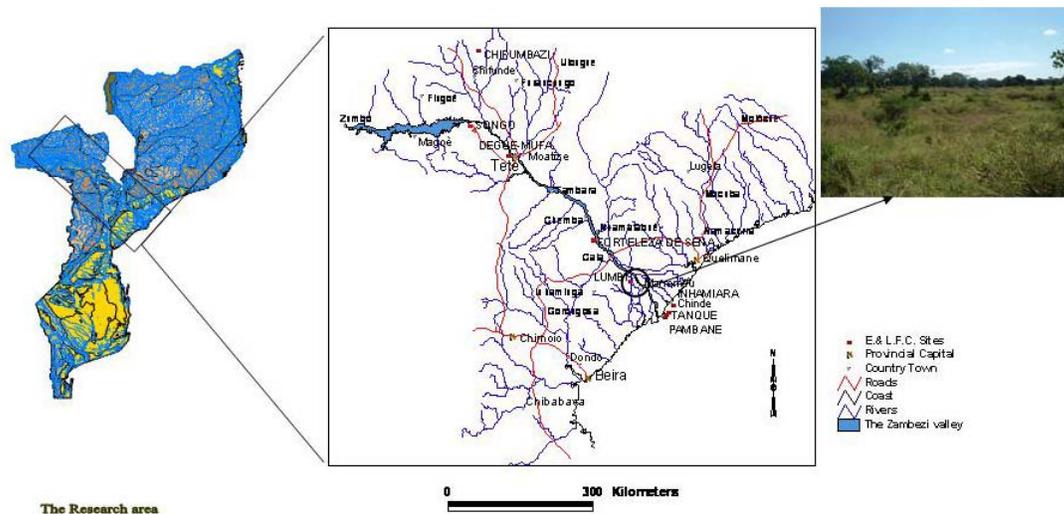


Fig. 1. Research area in Zambezi River Basin. Location of Lumbe site

Objectives

The goal of this research was aimed at analyzing the extent to which the archaeological record in the delta area of the Zambezi River reflects the socio-economic and political changes which took place along the Zambezi River (with a focus on the deltaic area), seeking to understand the social construction of the landscape, based both on written, oral and archaeological sources.

The present work also aimed at evaluating the archaeological site of Lumbi in terms of material and size, in order to organize the future multidisciplinary research work, as mentioned earlier, to include different fields of knowledge with the help of colleagues from Zimbabwe and Sweden. To achieve this objective, and with support from Dr. Christian Isendahl from Uppsala University, Sweden, an expedition to the Lumbi site was organized and 2 trenches measuring 2X2m were excavated, and a considerable diversity of material was collected. I would like to first discuss the methodologies used, and then share with you some of the preliminary findings.

Methodology

Four different methodologies were used to carry out this study:

- *Archival Research* - The research activities carried out before the June excavations were centered on archival research (mapping, evaluation of environmental setting of the area and bibliography);
- *Interview* – Interviews with the local population took place after displaying material on the surface and aimed at finding out whether they had come across such material somewhere in the area of study and how they use the landscape. The dry area where they grow crops is usually flooded during the rainy season;
- *Continuous prospecting* – Prospecting around the site was done on foot, aiming at collecting more material on the surface and better identification in terms of size and diversity of material found on the surface;
- *Excavation* – The main objective of the excavations was to study and analyze the stratigraphy and use of material from the excavation in order to understand the different activities carried out by the communities that lived in this area in the past.

Excavations

As mentioned at the beginning, the main objective of the excavation was to use the material evidence to understand the basic economy of the communities, their housing, daily activities and social organization, as well as the age of the site. Before excavations was necessary traditional ceremony.

The Lumbi site on the Nyamula Kinglet region

At Lumbi there are evidences of occupation by late stone-age communities and farming communities in the past.



Fig. 2. General View of Lumbi Site; Marromeu District (Sofala Province)

The two trenches 2X2m were excavated as deep as 150cm and different layers of occupation were identified in the trenches:

Trench I

- The first layer is characterized by dark sand, with a depth varying from 0-80cm. It displays a great concentration of material, particularly pot sherds, iron slag, and some bones. There were no evidences of buildings. It was in this layer that funeral pot were found;
- The second layer is transitional, being 20 to 30cm thick, also displaying dark light sand with low concentration of material, mainly pottery fragments, some bones, and no iron slag;
- The third layer is composed of reddish-brown sand, with depth varying from 100cm deep. Pottery fragments and iron slag are almost inexistent. However, it was at this level that microliths artifacts were found.

Trench II

- The first layer is composed of dark sand with a depth varying from 0-80cm and great concentration of material, particularly sherds, iron slag, and some bones. No evidences of buildings were found;
- The second layer is transitional, with a thickness of 20 to 30cm, it is also of dark light sand, with low concentration of material, particularly pottery fragments, some bones, but no iron slag;
- The third layer is composed of reddish-brown sand with a depth varying from 100-150cm deep. Pottery fragments and iron slag are almost inexistent. However, here were found some microliths artifacts..

Description of the material

Surface collections and excavations produced diverse and interesting material and rich information which can help us interpreting the Lumbi site. Various microliths artifacts, pottery fragments, iron slag, animal bones and funeral pot help to identify the economy and religious beliefs of the communities which lived there in the past.

Late Stone Age Communities

Stone artifacts

Overall and in terms of archaeological records, excavations of trench 1 and trench 2 carried out in the Lumbi site has evidenced the presence of microliths artefacts. These are clear evidences that the site was occupied by the Late Stone communities; these could have been Neolithic communities.



Fig. 3. Later Stone Age Quartz Microliths

Iron Age Communities

Surface collection and excavation on the Lumbi site, in the Nyamula Kinglet region, have evidenced two different iron using communities: early iron using communities and late iron using communities. It should be pointed out that all distinctions were done comparing evidences with those found in the region, because the material was not dated.

Early Iron Age Communities

Pottery

The material recovered from the lower and middle levels of excavations belong to the Matola tradition, characterized by one line incised below the rim and fluting decoration (Sinclair et al 1987, pp. 40-52), and Gokomere/Ziwa tradition, characterized by broad lines of incision on necks and shoulders (Pwiti 1994-1995, pp. 202-208; Macamo & Madiquida 2004, pp.102-115).



Fig. 4. Fluted Ceramics (“Matola” Tradition) and Iron Slag

Funeral Pot

A funeral pot was recovered from the excavations of trench 1, at a depth of approximately 1m. This pot belongs to early iron using communities and is decorated with double broad lines from the neck to the body, a clear evidence of the presence of the Gokomere/Ziwa tradition (Pwiti 1994-1995, pp. 202-208; Mitchell 2002, pp.264-267). This tradition was first found in the enclosure of Manyikeni in Inhambane province, in southern Mozambique.

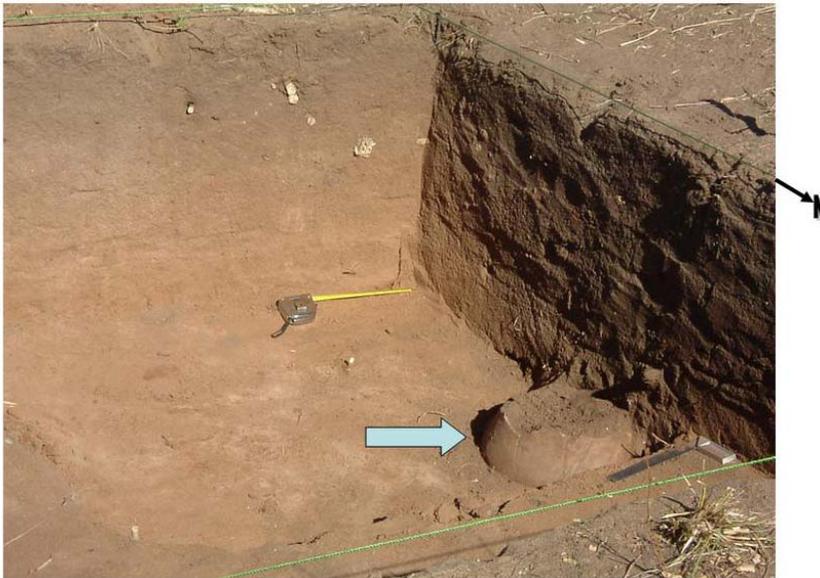


Fig. 5. Funerary Pot from trench one

Late Iron Age Communities

Pottery

Pottery of late iron using communities occurs mainly at the upper level of excavations and on the surface, being characterized by decorations with shell stamping and crisscross hatching, fine lines and well-elaborated designs, incisions traced with lines, and diagonal cross hatching and dotted stamped lines, common on the Mozambican coast, which Sinclair calls the Lumbo tradition (Sinclair 1983). Pottery appears in the form of bowls, water and cooking pots. (Adamowicz 1987, p.60; Duarte 1993, p.68).

Daga

Small fragments of burnt clay material were found in the first excavated trench, where considerable iron slag could also be found. But no evidences of furnace were found in the excavations or on the surface.

Organic material

The excavations also revealed animal bones likely to have been those of wild animals, taking into account that the area where the Lumbo site is located is a game reserve with high diversity of wild animals.

Iron slag

The first 2x2m trench was located in an area with high concentration of pottery fragments on the surface. This material came from an eroded surface. It was in this trench that we were able to recover iron slag, daga at the first level, and the above-described funeral pot. However, no charcoal was found in these two trenches.

Despite not having found an iron-smelting furnace, the iron slag led us to the conclusion that the communities of the area were metal workers.

Conclusion

Analyzing information here exposed, will be easy to conclude that the Archaeology of lower Zambezi is far to give all information about early farming communities settled here on the past.

As it was afore-mentioned the result of research here presented comes from small and preliminary excavations. The important challenge to the future works is how this study will contribute to knowledge of Archaeology of the delta area of Zambezi River Basin and integrate in the regional studies.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to SAFA commission, especially Diane Lyons and Nic David in creating the conditions making my participation in this conference possible. I am deeply grateful to Prof. Julio Mercader to give me necessary support and accommodation and help in the organization of slides and Arianna Fogelman for her support, reading comments, correction of the text and help in the organization of slides.

Special thanks are due to SIDA/SAREC (Swedish International Development Agency/The Swedish Agency for Research cooperation with developing countries) for their support and funding this research.

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