



Prehistory Society of Zimbabwe

Newsletter 137

Editorial

The Prehistory Society of Zimbabwe turned 50 years young in May of this year. A celebratory lecture, entitled “Rivers of Gold” was given by historian and ethnographer, Henrik Ellert, and by all accounts, was a success. The next issue of the newsletter will carry a brief history of the Society and its activities as presented by John Ford, a long-standing member, who was also the first editor of the society’s journal.

The majority of articles in this edition of the newsletter are abstracts from the recent edition of the biennial conference of the Association of Southern African Professional Archaeologists (ASAPA). Your Editor was fortunate to attend this excellent edition of what has become a traditional pilgrimage for many archaeologists in the region and beyond. Briefly, sessions ran one after another, from the morning of Tuesday 25 to the afternoon of Friday 28 March 2008, including a half-day excursion to historical/archaeological sites in the Cape Town urban area. A fascinating and stimulating set of papers were presented, with a strong Zimbabwean contingent making themselves heard. The conference committee, chaired by Judith Sealy, are to be warmly congratulated on organising a successful and superb meeting, with nary a hitch to be seen.

Perhaps the most significant event of the conference was the adoption of a resolution centered on the concept of “transformation”. Focusing exclusively on South Africa (despite ASAPA being a regional organisation), “the Transformation Charter for Archaeology” is “aimed initially at transforming South African archaeology primarily in terms of creating and sustaining more archaeologists from underrepresented groups.” Among other things, the resolution aims to remove discrimination on any ground and promote diversity in archaeological practice, promote awareness of archaeological activities, and to encourage archaeologists to implement common archaeological training systems and common archaeological unit standards.

Papers presented at the conference, but not reproduced here, include “The cultural heritage of Nharira Hills Monument” by Godhi Bvocho (UZ), “Recent research and prospects of the archaeology of eastern Zimbabwe” by Ancila Nhamo and colleagues (UZ), “Challenges in preserving the intangible heritage of Zimbabwe” by Pascall Taruvunga (NMMZ), “An assessment of the rock art of Jahunda communal area, Gwanda, southern Zimbabwe” by Donald Zhou

(NMMZ) & Munyaradzi Manyanga (UZ), “Understanding the dynamics of human survival in the Shashi-Limpopo Valley” by Munyaradzi Manyanga (UZ), “Preliminary results of a survey in the Save Basin, eastern Zimbabwe” by Plan Shenjere (UD) and, finally, “an overview of the historical archaeology of the Gaza Nguni” by Tendai Musindo (NMMZ). I would like to sincerely thank those authors who did respond to my requests for permission to reproduce their conference abstracts. At the symposium it became clear to me that, in spite of our current and pervasive “challenges,” the study of the Zimbabwe’s past remains an important and active area of our lives. Long may it continue!

Dormance or Marginalisation: Archaeology in the era of transformation

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Periodization, the naming of a historical era, emerge as a result of discursive convention often after the term in question has been tossed about as a rhetorical commodity with dramatic shifts in value over time. Similarly, the development and practice of archaeology in South African may conveniently be placed in historical eras that can directly be related to political eras. The discipline developed and has been practiced under various colonial regimes up until 1994. From 1994, the country’s political landscape shifted to majority democracy. As would be expected, the discursive convention began to shift to what has come to be known as “Transformation”. The concept of “transformation” has been employed with increasing intensity in a national attempt to promote change in various socio-political mediums, disciplines and discourses, archaeology included. This paper contends that archaeology has not responded fast enough to engaging the confluence of discourse-formation concerning the new democracy and the associated “transformation”. At the core of this argument is the observation that, as a consequent, the role of archaeology in the national discourse is being eroded and the voice of archaeologists is being disregarded either because it is considered non responsive or un-transforming. This paper uses notable cases that vividly display what is imaging to be a systematic marginalization of a discipline in a quest for “transformation”.

Chronology of Early Farming Communities of northern Zimbabwe – a reappraisal

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This paper presents radiocarbon dates from the site of Kamukombe in the mid Zambezi valley in northern Zimbabwe and the implications of these dates in relation to our understanding of the archaeology of this area. The site of Kamukombe was excavated over two seasons for several reasons. Chief among them was to investigate the origins of the prehistoric Musengezi Later Farming Communities found in the area. The working hypothesis was that the Musengezi culture was a local development from the Early Farming Communities of the Kadzi tradition. The study involved ceramic analysis in order to situate the site within the regional sequence. The recent

dates from Kamukombe indicate that Early Farming Communities were present in the area much earlier than previously thought. One of the samples has a date of 780 BC which is almost a millennium earlier than the conventionally accepted appearance of farming communities in Southern Africa.

Preliminary chemical characterisation and technological investigations of copper-based objects from Northern Zimbabwe archaeological sites

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Decades of systematic and unsystematic archaeological excavations in northern Zimbabwe have resulted in the accumulation of a fairly large corpus of copper-based metal artefacts. This paper presents the chemical characterization of these copper-based metal artefacts, most of them being beads which are prevalent in Later Farming Community (AD 1000 to AD 1900) period sites in northern Zimbabwe. These artefacts were analysed in an attempt to illuminate on their source, fabrication and alloying techniques which were utilised by the metalworkers. To address these basic issues these artefacts were subjected to laboratory analyses to establish their chemical composition and method of manufacture. For compositional analyses ED-XRF and SEM-EDS were utilised. Results of the compositional analyses revealed that most of these artefacts were tin bronzes, with occasional occurrence of arsenical copper and unalloyed copper. The occurrence of these true tin bronzes in some early contexts in northern Zimbabwe further poses questions about the antiquity of tin metallurgy in the region. Chemical analyses of artefacts from sites post dating the 17th century AD suggested that brass, an alloy of copper and zinc, became the preferred alloy. This shift is explained in connection to the socio-economic dynamics which prevailed in northern Zimbabwe during the second millennium AD. To establish the fabrication methods the specimens were analysed with stereo microscopy and a few invasively by metallographic means. It was noted that the methods of manufacture were simple with folded beads outnumbering the cast forms. The fabrication technology reflects little outside influence and is in line with indigenous African metal smithing methods which have been established elsewhere in southern Africa. This investigation gives another dimension to the previous typological analyses of the metal bead assemblages from Zimbabwean archaeological sites.

What is a rock 'marking' and is the term useful to archaeological research?

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Southern Africa has, and continues to be, marked by people. These marks are the residue of activities and even indicators of people's attempts to re-make their world. We call these marks 'cupules', 'engravings', 'game boards' 'grinding hollows', 'paintings' and 'pecks' to name a few. Though inelegant and Euro-centric, these terms have done good service. But the increasing volume and sophistication of archaeological research, in which disciplinary boundaries are re-aligning and cultural connectivity's emphasised, has rendered these terms inadequate without an

overarching collective term. I propose we reconsider the term rock 'markings'. By no means new to archaeology using this term would encourage two actions.

First, that we re-think taken-for-granted terms and come up with better insights on how a particular mark came to be and was subsequently used. For example, 'spear sharpening grooves' and 'slash marks' are terms that ignore the abrasive, grinding action involved that is unsuited to a sharpening function. Part of this re-thinking would involve measuring the physical dimensions and contexts of rock markings to establish a reliable reference collection.

Second, the productively feral nature of some rock markings allows them to cross sub-disciplinary boundaries like 'Iron Age' and 'Rock Art' by recognising the multiple authorships and uses of many rock markings. This approach's theoretical foundation is not 'material culture as text' that frames the landscape as a marked and readable text. Instead, the notion of an artefact's social life explicitly recognises temporal flow and acknowledges marks' agency. I use case studies from Australia, South Africa's northern Limpopo Province and the Karoo to illustrate the utility of having 'rock marking' embedded in our nomenclature.

That the term is inelegant is intentional – as an artifice it acknowledges the provisional nature of our knowledge and will hopefully spur us never fully to be satisfied with our interpretations.

Antiquarians, Amateurs and Professionals: a history of archaeological practice in Zimbabwe, c.1870 to 2005

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Archaeology in Zimbabwe has been practiced in one form or another for over 120 years. Many aspects of the history of the discipline have been well documented, although they have tended to focus either on the main personalities involved or on the so-called "Zimbabwe Controversy", to the detriment of the creation of a more inclusive and wide-ranging history of archaeological practice.

This paper seeks to expose and discuss wider trends in the practice of Zimbabwean archaeology from 1870 to 2005, examining areas of research and the topics investigated based on the volume of academic publications produced in each decade. Each area of the country and the sites investigated in each are compared and contrasted, to reveal a changing focus in research and practice. Different eras of research are noted from the early antiquarian stage, to the beginnings of professional archaeology in the 1950s, through later colonial times and in post-independence practice. Similarities and differences between each period are revealed and explained with reference to the prevailing socio-political milieu at the time. Future prospects and anticipated developments are evaluated with regards to past practices and current events.

Search for heritage at mystical Mapungubwe

Edited and Summarised from Business Day, 15 May 2008.

Mapungubwe, the Limpopo hill that was home to the largest kingdom in sub-Saharan Africa before it was abandoned in the 1300s, has been swathed in controversy since its re-discovery by the University of Pretoria (UP) in 1933. That controversy seems set to continue. In the past the sophistication of Mapungubwe society was played down by white supremacists but now several communities from the area, near the Zimbabwean border, claim to be direct descendents of those who lived there when it was a bustling trading hub, exporting gold to Egypt, India and China. “The want, the need, to own is very human. A number of these communities have competing land claims and they will emphasise certain things to defend those claims, but none of them is necessarily directly descended from the Mapungubwe people. It’s more messy than that,” says Dr Alex Schoeman, senior researcher in UP’s anthropology and archaeology department.

Laying claim to Mapungubwe heritage has no practical use, because to make a legal land claim the community had to have been removed from the place they claim after June 1913 - but still the communities tell their stories when land ownership is brought into question, she says. When researchers from UP started digging at Mapungubwe in 1934 they were baffled by what they found. “They found rock art that was very well preserved, but they thought the San and farmer groups did not live in the same area and they did not think that there was intermarriage between the San and blacks. There was great fluidity in that society and that disturbed the researchers more than it made them happy. Their research didn’t yield much because they didn’t understand what they got,” she says.

The university has to deal with a history of poor science and ill-founded ideology that prevented SA, and the world, from knowing what was found at Mapungubwe. On the upside, the early researchers left careful records of what they had found (but failed to understand) and the university is now steadily working through these records. It is also gathering more data, and last month a team travelled to the area to speak to representatives of the Lemba, the Vhangona and the Leshiba communities, and the Tshivula royal family, to hear their traditional beliefs about Mapungubwe and their links to the area. Schoeman’s team will continue its work. They have yet to speak to the Machete, the community whose claim to the Mapungubwe land, according to University of the Witwatersrand historian Prof Philip Bonner, has most credence as they are known to have lived in the area 70- 80 years ago.

The stories collected do not always match the scientific evidence found at the Mapungubwe site, but it is surprising how much is known - the communities’ history is kept alive by praise poets who repeat almost verbatim what they have learnt from their elders, says Schoeman.

“The old history goes back to the 1600s. That’s mostly royal history, but the more recent oral history is about families and there are pockets of amazing oral history that are archived. This was collected by government ethnologists and there are reams of notes. They had an apartheid philosophy, but the data they recorded is incredibly valuable. There’s a lot of work for history students in that,” she says.

The university’s archaeology and anthropology department is comparing this oral history with objects found at Mapungubwe, and while there is clear evidence that the communities that claim to be descendents of the city’s residents were all in the area at some time, it is also probable that

no one will be able to make an exclusive claim to Mapungubwe heritage. Schoeman said it was good academically to compare oral history with scientific evidence, and to do so at Mapungubwe would help in the writing of a part of SA's history that had been under-researched. It was also important to give people a voice, especially those who lost out under apartheid.

Update on Volume 28 of *Zimbabwean Prehistory*

Editing of the papers for the next issue of the journal of the Prehistory Society is well underway. The issue will consist of a set of papers presented in honour and appreciation of Robert Soper, formerly Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Zimbabwe. All have been written by his ex-students, and, in part, reveal the extraordinary variety of Robert's interests and those he fostered in his students during his many years of teaching. Briefly, the articles will be:

1. Robert Soper - Personal Reminiscences on my career in Africa (working title).
2. Simon Makuvaza - An archaeological study of Bumbusi: A Dry Stone Iron Age Site in North Western Zimbabwe.
3. Jesmael Mataga & Farai Chabata - Preservation of Spiritual Heritage in Zimbabwe: the case of Gomba/ Mazowe landscape.
4. Godhi Bvocho - Heritage, Multimedia and Internet: an examination of the potential of multimedia and internet as tools for dissemination of heritage information.
5. Ashton Sinamai - The Harare Tradition and its relationship with other Late Farming Communities Traditions in Northern Zimbabwe.
6. Lesley Machiridza - Developing the Rozvi archaeological identity in southwestern Zimbabwe.
7. Paul Hubbard & Shadreck Chirikure - Scientific approaches to the archaeology of Zimbabwe: a review.

All things being equal, the journal should appear later in the year.

New Publications on Zimbabweanist Archaeology

Huffman, T.N. 2007. *Handbook to the Iron Age. The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

The book looks at the last 2 000 years in southern Africa and covers parts of eastern Botswana and most of South Africa and Swaziland southern Zimbabwe. There is a little more attention on places that people visit - like Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe and Khami. In this handbook Huffman covers history, artefacts and settlement patterns. The book is divided into three sections. The first covers method and background necessary to begin the study. The second is a detailed catalogue of ceramic traditions, useful for archaeologists in the field. Lastly, Huffman reviews the major interpretive debates in the field. Many color photographs and drawings, along with graphs, maps and charts are included. As Peter Mitchell, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Oxford said, "This long-awaited text will establish itself as the principal source on the matters with which it deals."

Huffman, T.N. 2007. Leokwe and K2: Ethnic stratification during the Middle Iron Age in southern Africa. *Journal of African Archaeology* (2).

Recent research in the Shashe-Limpopo basin advances our understanding of the development of social complexity at K2 and Mapungubwe. Calabrese shows that ethnic interaction between Leokwe and K2 peoples led to ethnic stratification. However, one aspect — that class distinction was first expressed at Leokwe Hill before Mapungubwe — is not supported by more recent data. Re-examination of ceramics, glass beads and radiocarbon

dates show that Leokwe Hill was not earlier, but contemporaneous with Mapungubwe, while structural remains show that the Leokwe deposit derived from ritual rather than residential activity.

Sadr, K. 2008. An ageless view of first millennium AD southern African ceramics. *Journal of African Archaeology* 6 (1).

In southern Africa, the Later Stone Age and the Early Iron Age are generally treated as separate archaeologies, as if they really were different periods. In fact, the entire Iron Age overlaps with the last part of the Later Stone Age, and it is argued here that at the sub-continental scale the archaeology of one 'Age' might be better understood with reference to the other. The point is illustrated by plotting the distribution of all first millennium ceramics on the same map, regardless of their 'Age.' This sheds new light on the history of interactions and perhaps population movements in the sub-continent during the first millennium AD.

Chirikure, S. 2008. Language and Archaeology in Southern Africa: The Search for Post-colonial Reality. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 4 (1): 182-185.

Issues to do with languages, particularly those of the former colonizers and the dominant have always been very emotive topics in post-colonial settings. Surely, such languages are living reminders of the bad associated with domination. Ironically, the same languages have emerged as mediums of communication in many post-colonies replete with ethnic groups who speak unrelated languages. For example, the thriving nature of English remarkably contrasts with the fast disappearance of many of the world's languages. However, as archaeologists and in view of the diversity of our languages, how do we communicate and understand each other? We may invent a neutral language or translate every other article into our many languages. But at what cost? Half the world is dying of hunger and disease as we argue over the need to make all languages important; research money is becoming difficult to access. Therefore, the need to communicate is probably more important than the need to perpetuate a victim mentality.

Late News: Congratulations to Lorraine Swan, a past Chairperson of the Society now living in Australia, on the attainment of her PHD at Uppsala University. It is a revision and expansion of her valuable work on various aspects of the metal-working, food-producing societies living on the Zimbabwean plateau in the last 2 000 years.

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