Archaeological survey in Mbeya Region, Southern Tanzania

In Azania XVII we included a paper by Thomas Wynn and Thomas Chadderdon on the distinctive LSA Kiwira Industry in Tukuyu District, between Rungwe Mountain and the northern tip of Lake Nyasa. The present note places that work in the context of a broader survey in that region by a team from the University of Illinois at Urbana. Sally McBrearty is completing her thesis at Urbana, Dr Waane is with the Tanzanian Antiquities, while Dr Wynn is on faculty at the University of Colorado.

While this volume of Azania was in press, we discovered that, as a result of some unexplained communication problem, another version of this paper had appeared in Tanzania Notes and Records, 88/89 (for 1982), pp. 15-32. At this late stage and in view of various editorial amendments and reduction agreed with the authors when the note was offered to Azania and accepted in good faith, we have decided not to delete it from our proofs. We are happy to have the agreement of the editors of TNR to this. Normally, however, we would not carry an article or note already published or accepted elsewhere.

The TNR version will be valuable to a number of readers for its illustration of stone artefacts.

In 1976 we undertook an archaeological survey of portions of Ileje, Kyela, Mbeya, Mbozi and Tukuyu Districts of Mbeya Region in southern Tanzania. As no formal archaeological reconnaissance of the region had previously been undertaken, our intention was to establish the general outlines of prehistoric occupation of the area. We concentrated our efforts on three geographical areas: the Southern Songwe River valley in Ileje District; the Kiwira River drainage of Tukuyu and Kyela Districts; and the middle reaches of the Northern Songwe River, which forms the border between Mbeya and Mbozi Districts. All sites encountered were given numerical designations according to the Standardised African Site Enumeration System (SASES), and samples representative of the range of artefact size, type, and raw material were collected. These artefacts are now housed with the National Museum of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam, where the sites' map coordinates are also on file.

The Southern Songwe valley

The Southern Songwe flows south from the humid Rungwe volcanic highlands into Lake Nyasa, forming the Tanzania-Malawi border for much of its length. In its middle reaches in situ Iron Age remains are abundant. Two sites, Iflu/2, a smelting site, and Iflu/3, an occupation site, were identified in the eroded banks of the Songwe near Isongole village. At the latter, charcoal, potsherds (one of which exhibits a dimple base), iron slag, tuyere fragments and a copper ring were recovered from a middeny soil.

Numerous furnace mounds littered with slag and fragments of tuyere were found scattered over the plateau in the vicinity of Itumba and Isongole. Two surface scatters of animal bone, potsherds and hut daga were identified as historic village sites. These are presently used as ancestral shrines. The site of Buswezi (Iflu/6) was recognised as protohistoric. Located on the Itumba River, it consists of a midden mound covering about fifty square metres upon which are scattered potsherds, grindstones and animal and human bone fragments. Local tradition associates this site with the Ngoni-Lambya wars of the mid-nineteenth century.

In general, the widespread occurrence of iron-smelting furnaces in the Southern Songwe valley indicates that iron-smelting techniques were shared with populations of the Fipa plateau to the west, rather than with the inhabitants of the Rungwe volcanic enclave to the north. The presence of copper at the site of Iflu/3 suggests more distant trade contact.
Our survey was concentrated along the middle reaches of the Kiwira River, which flows from the Rungwe volcanic highlands south into Lake Nyasa near Itungi. We concentrated primarily on the area in the vicinity of Ilima Colliery, where the river flows through a narrow floodplain flanked by terraces and high ridges, volcanic to the east, Basement Complex to the west.

The material observed is unusual both in the distribution of sites and in the nature of the artefact assemblages. Virtually no artefacts were found on the floodplain or terraces of the Kiwira River or on the banks of small streams dissecting these deposits. However a nearly continuous cover of scattered stone artefacts was discovered on the rocky terrain from 50 to 100 metres west of the river, with numerous dense scatters occurring on the ridge tops. Nearly all these dense patches were found on surfaces which had at most a thin covering of soil, but two, at Kala waterfall and at Busale, show a depth of deposit. Most of the artefacts at each
locality are untrimmed flakes. The only formal tools recovered from the surface are scrapers, which are few in number and present no consistency in extent or location of retouch. The range of manufacturing techniques and selection of raw materials are equally eclectic. Both Levallois and non-Levallois flakes in chert and quartz are common. Bipolar flakes in quartz and occasional chert blade fragments also occur. Disc cores are common, but few Levallois cores were recovered.

It would appear upon inspection that these surface scatters represent a mixture of assemblages; but in a small test excavation at the Kala waterfall site, located on a small tributary stream of the Kivala, disc and bipolar debitage were found in archaeological association. Within the small sample of artefacts recovered from this test excavation, the frequency of formal tools is low, and the only element of the Kala assemblage not noted in the surface occurrences consists of burins and a single outil écaillé. Though no Levallois cores were recovered, flakes with faceted platforms are numerous. Disc, bipolar and irregular cores are all present.

The artefactual aggregate from the Kivala industry does not resemble closely Later Stone Age assemblages from nearby regions. The low frequency of retouched pieces and the casual nature of retouch recall the Fingiran of the Malawi Nyika plateau (Sandelowsky, 1972) and the Kaposwa of Kalambo Falls on the Zambia-Tanzania border (Clark, 1974), but the Kivala lacks the microliths and backed pieces common to these industries and to the Nachikufan of northern Zambia (Miller, 1969). In their technical aspects the flakes from the Kivala resemble those from the Polungu industry at Kalambo Falls (Clark 1974); a further resemblance is seen in the absence of heavy-duty tools and in the low frequency of scrapers and burins. The Kivala material, however, lacks the blade element and the points of the Polungu industry. These similarities are inadequate to identify the Kivala material with any of these known industries, and its age is indeterminate. (For fuller treatment and discussion, see Wynn and Chadderdon, 1982.)

The Northern Songwe drainage

The Northern Songwe River drains the Poroto mountains and the eastern portion of the Mbeya volcanic highlands. Flowing north-northwest for most of its length, it empties into the southern end of Lake Rukwa not far from the village of Luika. In its middle reaches where it forms the boundary between Mbeya District to the east and Mbozi District to the west, the river cuts an impressive gorge. About 30 square kilometres within and around this gorge were examined, and the general sedimentary sequence of the area is as follows. The lowest observed deposits consist of a series of lithified lake sediments approximately 15 metres thick, ranging in colour from pink to deep red and exhibiting a varved structure at some localities. Overlying these beds is a series of white to buff coarse unreworked tuffs with a maximum observed thickness of 2.5 metres. These tuffs are capped by a basalt about 0.75 metre thick. Possibly these tuff and basalt members are the result of the same events which produced the Younger Extrusives of the Rungwe Volcanics, which were formed during Pleistocene times (Harkin, 1960, p. 31). Within the Songwe gorge a number of alluvial terraces were observed. Several rolled artefacts were recovered from the basal gravels of one of the lower terraces.

Artefactual material technologically and typologically attributable to the Middle Stone Age was recovered in stratigraphic context from four sites in this area, at Idlu/1, ldlu/3, ldlu/7, and ldlu/9. Untrimmed flakes, blades and fragments make up the bulk of the material observed at these sites, but disc cores, small bifaces, trimmed cobbles, technical burins and bifacially trimmed flakes were also collected. Most are executed in chert or quartz.

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Thin but extensive scatters of Middle Stone Age material are encountered nearly everywhere within the gorge and along its southern rim. Denser scatters were designated as sites, among them Idlu/1 and Idlu/4. Artefacts recovered from these sites, sometimes covering up to 200 square metres, include few formal tools, but disc cores, Levallois flakes, and casually retouched flakes and blades in a variety of raw materials are numerous.

Artefacts typologically attributable to the Later Stone Age were recovered in situ at Idlf/2 and Idlf/5. The assemblage from the former site includes a number of small untrimmed flakes and irregular cores, a unifacial point fragment and a burin. At the latter site, small flakes and bladelets of chert and quartz were found embedded within isolated boulders of fossiliferous breccia.

It must be noted that remains attributable to the Earlier Stone Age are conspicuously rare in the area of the Northern Songwe drainage surveyed. Isolated finds of redeposited Earlier Stone Age artefacts indicate the occupation of adjacent areas and/or sporadic occupation of the area at this time, but it is only with the advent of the Middle Stone Age that the area appears to have been intensively occupied. This observation is in accord with the finding of Clark et al. (1972, p. 530) who report that their work in nearby northern Malawi failed to bring to light any traces of hominid occupation prior to the later Pleistocene. The occurrence of numbers of surface scatters of Middle Stone Age material indicates that the present land surface, currently being dissected by Korongo formation, has been in existence at least since that time. From the impressive numbers of artefacts present and from their extensive distribution, it appears that during the Middle Stone Age this area of the Northern Songwe drainage supported a relatively large population, or that it was the scene of intermittent human habitation during a considerable period of the later Pleistocene.

Conclusions

The area of southern Tanzania investigated by this preliminary survey holds great potential for future archaeological research. In the Southern Songwe region large numbers of iron-smelting sites remain to be explored, and the trade contacts suggested by the presence of copper need to be clarified. A great deal of information regarding protohistoric and historic Tanzania could be gained by closer investigation of local shrines, burials and occupation sites attributed to the period of the Ngoni-Lambya wars.

Several interesting problems concerning Stone Age technology and settlement pattern presented themselves during our reconnaissance of the Kiwira drainage. The surface scatters on the rocky volcanic ridges overlooking the Kiwira and the apparent variety of stone-tool manufacturing techniques provide intriguing possibilities for continued investigation. The Northern Songwe area likewise deserves further close attention as it was the scene of dense or prolonged occupation during the later Pleistocene. Future research will provide us with details to render this outline more complete.

Acknowledgements

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A Kikuyu — Ingombe Ilede connection?

Dr Pierre de Maret, of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale at Tervuren, who is well known for his archaeological work in west-central Africa, offers us these interesting observations. We would welcome further informed comment, especially on whether the distinctive hafted hammers referred to here — and indeed the wire-drawing techniques and equipment employed both in the Zambezi region and in the Kenya highlands — should be regarded as 'indigenous' Bantu items or rather as resulting in some way from coastal and overseas contacts at different periods. For the Kenya highlands we believe that Jean Brown's unpublished doctoral thesis, 'Traditional blacksmiths and metalworking in Kenya: an ethno-archaeological approach' (Edinburgh, 1980), contains much relevant material.

The Ingombe Ilede burials have yielded an extremely interesting collection of smith tools (Fagan et al, 1969). Among them are six very unusual hammerheads. Nowhere in west-central Africa have perforated iron hammerheads been reported as a traditional smithing tool (Maquet, 1965, p. 91). Hammers with a haft hole are present in East Africa from the Kikuyu to the Fipa (Holy, 1958), but most of them seem to be quite recent and directly inspired by contact with European (Cline, 1937, p. 90; Gerharz, pers. comm.) or Arab craftsmen.

The four heavier specimens from Ingombe Ilede were made from a segment of iron bar with one end chisel-shaped, while the other is round. The hole is strengthened by a thickening of the head (Fagan et al, 1969, p. 95, fig. 38 a-b). An almost identical hammer was described by Smith and Dale (1920, p. 212 and photographs 211-213) among the Ila, only 240 km east of Ingombe Ilede. It is the main hammer of the smith, characteristically called inyundo (from the Proto-Bantu root *-jundo, Maret and Nsuka, 1977), a term usually used in Central Africa to indicate a hammer/anvil shaped like a large iron nail, but not mentioned here. One side of the head is blunt and is used for striking, the other end is chisel-shaped and used for cutting. According to Smith and Dale there is also a small hammer with two blunt ends. Although not illustrated, they are probably similar to the smaller hammerheads from Ingombe Ilede (Fagan et al, 1969, p. 95, fig. 38 c-d).