

The archaeology of Mozambique Island

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Geographic and geological setting

Mozambique Island is situated in the northern part of Mozambique about 15° south latitude. This is a small island, some 3 km long by 200–500 m wide. The climate is warm and humid, with low precipitation, averaging 700 mm per year. Geologically speaking, the Island is formed by a coral platform covered by sandy deposits.

Mozambique Island dominates the Lunga bay. This bay, with its shallow waters, mangroves, sandy banks and coral reefs had, in the past, a rich potential in marine species, today almost entirely exhausted. The access to the Lunga bay is possible by only two channels, one to the north and the other to the south. Only the northern, deep but narrow channel allows entry to deep sea vessels. A modern bridge about 3 km long, built in the late 1960s, links the Island with the mainland.

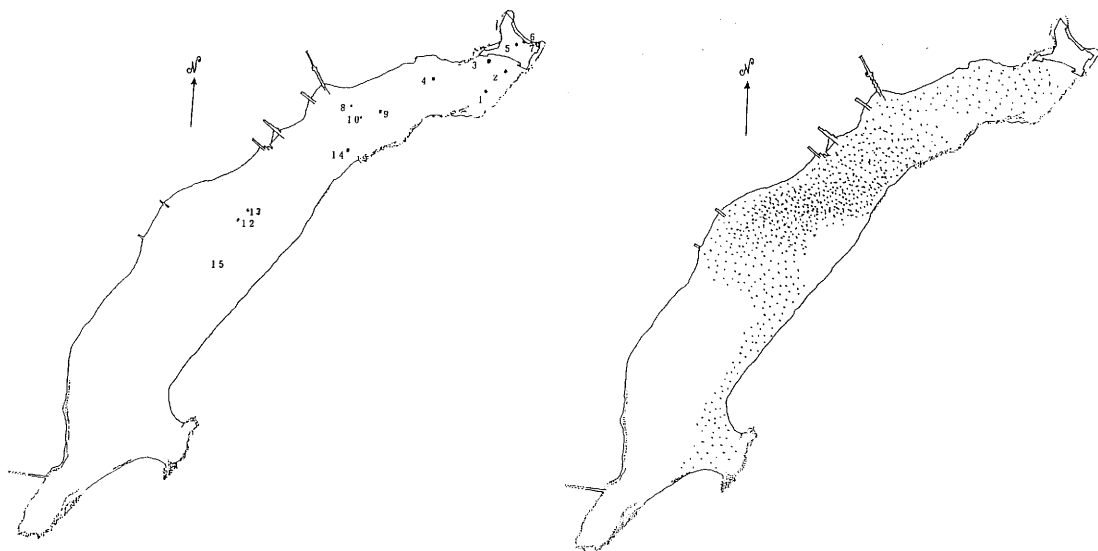
The archaeological context of the region

The earliest farming communities in northern Mozambique are dated from the first millennium AD. (Adamowicz 1987), a time that also witnesses the beginning of extensive settlement of both the interior and coastal areas.

The development of the first urban centers in the littoral area took place in the 9th to 10th centuries AD. The Somaná ruins (near Nacala), located some 100 km north of Mozambique Island, was the most prosperous pre-colonial trading center in northern Mozambique. The archaeological remains found there date to between the 11th and 15th centuries (Duarte 1993). The few surviving remains of this urban settlement clearly illustrate the impressive nature of this place. Somaná still retains some parts of the protecting stone walls and coral stone buildings that exhibit carved porites. The use of this technique demonstrates a genuine East African tradition of architecture; its pinnacle occurred during the 12th to 13th centuries.

In the same context, Kilwa, established in southern Tanzania close to the mouth of the Rovuma river, was one of the most prosperous and important entrepôts. The rise of Kilwa, from the 12th century led to the rise of Somaná during the 14th century as a leading political and economic center, whose influence extended to Mozambique Island (Duarte 1993).

Figure 1 and 2 Mozambique Island Test-pits 1994 and distribution of archaeological remains collected from test pits and water trenches.



Pottery traditions

Recent archaeological studies in northern Mozambique (Sinclair 1985; Adamowicz 1987; Duarte 1993) have produced important results. This research has contributed to the development of a framework that allows the classification, cultural identification and temporal organization of sites in this area. A key feature in this process is the identification of the pottery traditions.

As mentioned above, from the 9th to 10th centuries with the increase of trade connections, the first urban centers were established in the northern coastal area of Mozambique. The cultural links among the inhabitants may be traced through a careful study of the pottery, characterized as the "Lumbo tradition" (Sinclair 1985; Duarte 1993). Lumbo tradition pottery has been found in the northern Mozambique coastal and interior zone, from Mozambique Island to the Quirimbas archipelago (Duarte 1993). Chronologically, this pottery is dated between the 9th and 15th centuries. This tradition is followed by the "Sancul tradition" (Sinclair 1985; Duarte 1983), usually dated between the 14th and 18th centuries.

Mozambique Island was settled by Europeans in the 16th century, becoming an important inter-ocean trade center. Besides the Portuguese, other people, such as the Arabs, Indians and Swahili merchants were established on this island, although the Portuguese colonization led to a removal of this region from the main Indian Ocean trade system. The Portuguese established the foundations of a mercantile economy, but a parallel economic system nevertheless continued. This latter system was based on the redistributive exchange of products, embedded in a kinship network, and was in certain aspects incompatible with the first capitalistic economic structure (Duarte 1993).

It is crucial to link the history of this region with the general historic framework of the East African coast as well as the Indian Ocean. This linkage requires a deep understanding of the coastal societies, primarily Swahili society. The Swahili are a group with a common historical background and homogeneous cultural characteristics, spread over the east African coast from northern Mozambique to Somalia (Nurse and Spear, 1985). The "Naharra" is the dialect spoken on Mozambique Island. This dialect together with the "Ki-mwani" (spoken at Ibo - Quirimbas archipelago) represents some of the Swahili dialects spoken in this area (Prata 1981; Nurse and Spear 1985). The presence of Swahili speaking people at Mozambique Island justifies the inclusion of this region in the so-called "Swahili World".

Although Swahili is predominately known as a linguistic group (of Bantu origin), other aspects make possible the identification of this cultural group. Among these is their architecture.

Excavations and archaeological finds

During the field campaign in 1994, 15 test pits were excavated (Fig. 1). Simultaneously, samples were collected from several trenches dug throughout the Island for a water supply programme.

In most cases the test-pits were dug down to the coral base-rock, usually at a depth of 1,5 m or less. The only exception was found in the water-pipe trenches in the gardens of the Hospital where archaeological material reached a depth of 2 m. In the future, archaeological work should concentrate here.

In general, two main stratigraphic levels can be identified in the test pits and water-pipe trenches:

- a first stratum of sand mixed with stones, resulting probably from previous road-building activities. This stratum, whose depth reaches in some case up to 1 m, yielded archaeological material out of context and belonging to different periods;
- a second stratum of sandy deposits, averaging between 10 and 50 cm depth, contained *in situ* archaeological material. Two samples of charcoal were collected for dating.

Samples of decorated pottery and porcelain were carefully gathered from the water-pipe trenches and whenever possible, their stratigraphic location was noted. Also, some samples of charcoal from strata apparently *in situ* were collected for dating.

The brief description clearly illustrates the archaeological richness of Mozambique Island.

The archaeological finds and their distribution

The excavations assembled an important collection of locally made pottery, imported pottery (principally porcelain), bones and charcoal. This collection is now kept in the Archaeology and Anthropology Department at Eduardo Mondlane University.

Most of the pottery can be ascribed to the “Sancul tradition”. Up to now, the earlier Lumbo tradition has not been found on Mozambique Island. However, it should be pointed out that the “Sancul tradition” is not well studied, and Mozambique Island therefore represents a privileged place for a more profound study of this tradition, both spatially and chronologically. In this context the presence may be noted of an example of the well known “wealed ware” on the Island. At Kilwa, this pottery style is dated to the 13th and 14th centuries assigned to period IIIbIV (Chittick 1974:327).

In relation to the porcelain and imported ceramics, most of the examples are of European or Chinese origin, being of the 18th to 19th centuries. A more detailed study of these collections is in progress:

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The presence of wealed ware pottery illustrates two important aspects:

- first, that the initial occupation of the Island might have occurred sometime around the 14th century;
- second, it confirms the existence of connections between Mozambique Island and Kilwa, the leading entrepôt during the 13th to 14th centuries.

The absence of the Lumbo tradition seems to indicate that the Island was not settled by local people before the 14th century. The ¹⁴C dating of the charcoal samples should contribute to the clarification of this question.

The type-site of Lumbo tradition pottery is on the mainland opposite the Island (Sinclair 1985). The presence of earlier settlement there was due to the presence of abundant drinking water. In contrast, Mozambique Island lacks good water sources, a situation that probably posed the main restriction to pre-colonial settlement.

The concentration of Sancul tradition sites in the northern part of the Island (today almost entirely occupied by masonry houses), illustrates the intense settlement by local populations that took place after the Portuguese arrived (Fig. 2).

The intensity of local settlement indicates that the Portuguese had built few houses. This point is confirmed by early charts of the Island. Indeed, these maps show just a few constructions, probably masonry houses with large back yards, sheltering a few inhabitants. Only at the end of the 19th century did the Island become urbanized, especially in its northern part. The local population was then relocated to the stone quarry area, nowadays known as “Ponta da Ilha”.

Conclusion

Archaeological work on Mozambique Island has just started. Nevertheless, the data obtained constitute an important framework for further research in the area. This research has to be linked to the regional framework in order to deepen our knowledge of the broader social and economic relation-

ships. It necessarily includes a cultural component, already perceived by the anthropological, archaeological and historic studies performed in the area. This holistic approach is crucial in further studies of the region.

Acknowledgments

This study was made possible by funding granted through SAREC (Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation) and EC (European Community). We would like also to thank the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Mozambique for its support.

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