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TRADE AND ECONOMIES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE*

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THE OBJECT OF this article is to examine the evidence for early trading relations between Southern Africa and the outside world and the impact of such relations on the communities in Southern Africa. The period to be surveyed begins at about AD 700, as it is from about this time that we begin to have evidence of contacts between the region and areas beyond the African continent, and ends at about the twelfth century AD when large-scale political systems (states) began to emerge. The period covered falls within what has been termed the Iron Age in Southern and Eastern Africa, a technological term which is generally used to describe a culture system characterized not only by the use of iron for various purposes but also by the building of semi-permanent villages, the making of similarly decorated ceramic vessels, at least before AD 1000, and an economic system based on agriculture and the herding of domestic animals. After about AD 700 a new element in the economy is seen in the form of participation in external trading networks. The evidence that has been accumulated over several years of research in Southern Africa strongly suggests that the Iron Age, with its establishment of settled farming communities in the region, dates from about the second century AD (Huffmann, 1970; Phillipson, 1976, 1977 and 1985; Soper, 1971 and 1982; Hall, 1987). Most researchers now accept that this new cultural system, which seems to be intrusive among the late Stone Age societies of the region, can be explained most convincingly in terms of population movements from further north (Soper, 1971 and 1982; Collett, 1982; Phillipson, 1977 and 1985; Huffmann, 1970; Maggs, 1984), although there still remains disagreement and uncertainty on the nature of the movements or indeed their area of origin. However, it is not the intention of this article to engage in the debate on the origins of the Iron Age cultures of Southern and Eastern Africa, but rather to note that from the time at which this culture system becomes evident in the archaeological record the communities associated with it underwent a number of social, economic, political and cultural changes; this article examines how these changes were related to changes in their economies.

It should be noted from the outset that due account must be taken of

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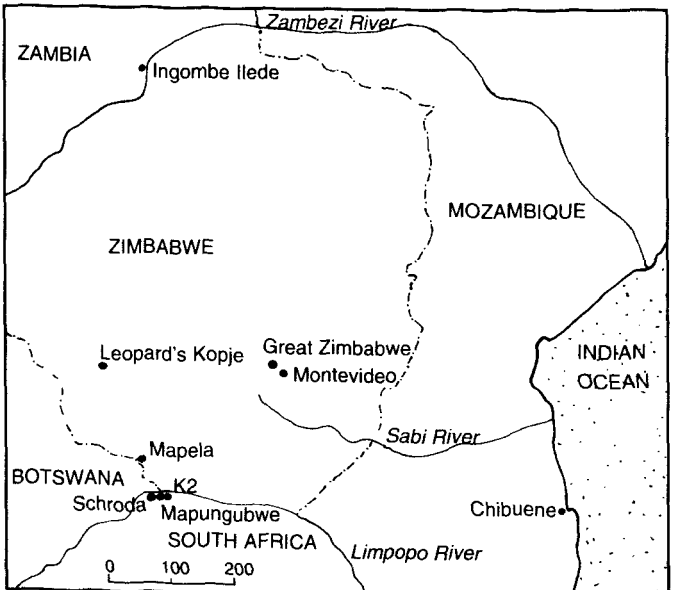
the limitations of the evidence available. Of importance is the uneven distribution of archaeological research in Southern Africa, both in time and space, a problem that confronts the researcher throughout the continent. At present most of the relevant evidence comes from the southern parts of the Zimbabwe plateau, the Limpopo valley in South Africa, the southern Mozambique coast and, to some extent, the southern parts of Zambia (see Fig. 1). It is not clear whether the limitation of the evidence in these areas should be seen as reflecting a genuine picture of what happened in prehistory or as simply a result of research coverage. In view of the large amount of research carried out in Zimbabwe and South Africa it is tempting to adopt the former assumption, but it is perhaps best for the moment to be cautious and take the latter. For one thing, far more archaeologists have worked in these areas than, for example, in Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, Angola and Namibia, although the research efforts of Fagan, Phillipson and Daniels (1969) in Zambia, and, more recently, Denbow (1984) in Botswana must be acknowledged. Meaningful research for the period under consideration has yet to be undertaken in Namibia and Angola.

Nevertheless, whatever the gaps in our knowledge both in spatial and

Figure 1: ARCHAELOGICAL SITES WHICH SHOW EVIDENCE OF EXTERNAL TRADE



chronological terms, there now exists in Southern Africa a sufficient body of archaeological evidence relating to this period to enable us to reconstruct something about the economies of these societies and the processes of change taking place in them during the first and second millennia. On the basis of the data available, the early village communities of Southern Africa appear to have been basically composed of subsistence farmers engaged in crop cultivation, mainly of millets and sorghum, and the herding of domestic stock. The initial emphasis was on small stock (sheep and goats) although cattle were also present. Over time, however, cattle began to increase in the faunal assemblages. Hunting also appears to have been important, although its importance and contribution to the diet seems to decrease with time (Voigt, 1981). Mining activities were largely limited to the production of iron ore for the manufacture of agricultural and hunting implements as well as some jewellery (Maggs, 1984; Phillipson, 1985). The amount of waste from iron processing suggests that production was mostly geared towards satisfying local village needs, although in later times there are indications in some areas that such production may have become more specialized to meet the needs of areas beyond the individual village (Maggs, 1984; Hall, 1987). Some archaeologists, such as Sinclair (1987), have suggested that these societies appear to have been at a relatively simple level of organization which means they would fit within the tribal level of organization as defined by Friedman and Rowlands (1977). The evidence for this is a deduction from, for example, the uniformity of residential structures within the villages, which lack the differences expected of stratified societies. Although comparatively little evidence on this is available, it has been suggested that burial data also point to this conclusion (Sinclair, 1987).

It is not possible at present to say much about the relationships between early farming-community villages, whether they were in contact with each other and, if so, the nature of such contact. Generally researchers have argued that each village was probably self-sufficient and clearly isolated from any contacts with the outside world. This appears to be the general picture up to about the seventh to eighth centuries, when a number of alterations observable in the archaeological record give sufficient indication that some major changes were in progress, changes which appear to be, in part, related to economic developments resulting from the introduction of external trading relations in the region.

The earliest evidence for trading relations between Southern Africa and the outside world has been recovered mostly in the form of glass beads of various types and colours which have been shown to have originated from sources outside Southern Africa. In later times, from about the thirteenth century onwards, ceramics of various types were imported into the region from outside. Dates for the appearance of glass beads as a new class of

material culture cluster around the seventh and eight centuries from a number of excavated sites in the region. Although this article is more concerned with the archaeological evidence, it is of interest and importance to note that, very broadly speaking, the archaeological dates for the appearance of this evidence correspond with some of the earliest written records of contacts between the east African coast and the Arab world. As will be shown later, such contacts seem to have extended further south along the Indian Ocean to the Mozambican coast. The most often cited of these records is the *Periplus of the Ethyrean Sea* (Huntingford, 1980), written in the first century of the Christian era. Much later are the writings of two Arabs, al Masudi and al Idrisi (see Phillipson, 1985), who compiled information on the East African coast and, which is relevant to this discussion, made reference to some of the products to be obtained there, for example, ivory and animal skins. Although it is not entirely certain which places they particularly refer to, it is clear that the coastal settlements through which imports entered the Southern African interior are included.

Returning to the archaeological evidence, we should note that the majority of the bead types that have been recovered from early and later archaeological sites in Southern Africa are of Indian and Persian origin and the same is true of the ceramics which, however, also include vessels from as far afield as China. When this evidence is linked with the admittedly insufficient and vague early written records referred to earlier, it would appear that the agents responsible for the appearance of these exotic goods in Southern Africa were Arab traders. Thus, the region's earliest direct trading contacts were with the Eastern world. It is not until much later, about the late fifteenth century, that Europeans, especially the Portuguese, appear on the scene. It may be that some products from Southern Africa eventually and indirectly found their way to the European world as, similarly, some items of European origin may also have found their way into Southern Africa. For these early years, however, the evidence for any form of contact between Europe and Southern Africa is non-existent. The possibility of European goods filtering down to the region via North Africa and the Mediterranean world has yet to be demonstrated archaeologically.

Having provided an outline of the channels of trade and contacts between the region and the outside world in the form of Arab traders, I would now like to turn to some of the important sites where the evidence has been recovered and to the nature of the evidence itself. The earliest types of imported glass beads that have been found in Southern Africa are believed to have been manufactured in India and Persia in the early centuries of the Christian era (Hall, 1987; Sinclair, 1982; Van der Sleen, 1955 and 1967). These include the blue, green and yellow segments of blown canes of glass, and, later, Indian red beads. These have been recovered from such sites as Makuru in southern Zimbabwe dating from

the seventh century (Huffmann, 1973) and Schroda in the Limpopo valley in South Africa with a date for the lower occupation horizons of AD 815 ± 50 (Hanisch, 1981). On the Mozambique coast, Sinclair's recent work has revealed similar evidence at the site of Chibuene where the lower level of occupation has been dated to the eighth century. Some of the sites have local ceramic vessels which fit within the basic Gokomere-Zhizo Tradition associated with the early iron-using farming communities in Southern Africa. Although detailed studies have not yet been undertaken, Sinclair (1987) has drawn attention to the similarity between the beads found at Chibuene and those from the sites of Makuru, Schroda and other Zhizo Tradition sites in the interior. The evidence has been used to support the suggestion that the coastal site of Chibuene may well have been the point of entry of exotic goods into the Southern African interior at this period.

By the tenth century, and a little later, more bead types had been introduced. Also, as is evident particularly at Chibuene, Islamic/Persian ceramic vessels had been introduced. These vessels include tin-glazed ware with splashed painted decoration and light-blue glazed 'Sassanian Islamic' ware. Both types are similar to imported ware from the early phases of the occupation of the major coastal-town site of Kilwa which dates from the ninth century. Other important sites in the region dating from the second millennium include the sites of Leopard Kopje and Mapela in Zimbabwe, the sites of K2 and, perhaps more important for this discussion, Mapungubwe in the Limpopo valley in South Africa. The quantities and types of imported beads at these sites, including some sites as far away as southern Zambia (Phillipson, 1977), show two things in connection with trading contacts between the region and Arab traders. Firstly, we see that by the end of the first millenium the Southern African coast and interior had become integrated into the Indian Ocean commercial network. Secondly, it also becomes clear that the quantity and spatial extent of the trade in the interior had widened considerably over time. It remains to show what the Southern African interior contributed towards this trading network by way of exports. The evidence here is not as clear as for imported goods. It is easier to demonstrate the durable imports because they are clearly not indigenous and in some cases can be sourced to their area of origin.

However, at a few sites, it has been possible to show that there was a shift in production activities from the basic subsistence-oriented economy to the additional production of commodities with exchange value on an external market. This is more clearly discernible from the evidence of ivory-working at sites like Schroda where slivers of ivory trimming have been recovered (Voigt, 1981). Although it is evident that some of the ivory was used locally to manufacture items of personal adornment, it is likely that most of it was destined for the outside market. It would also appear

from the archaeological evidence that skins of animals such as leopards were also exported (Voigt, 1981; Hall, 1987). Support for this interpretation of the bone remains from Schroda also comes from the Arab writings mentioned earlier which refer to elephant hunting and to ivory and animal skins from the East African coast as items of exchange. Somewhat later, shortly after the beginning of the second millennium, we also see the beginnings of gold-mining, especially on the Zimbabwe plateau, principally to satisfy the demand for this metal on the outside market. As with ivory, it is clear that, although some was for local use, most of the gold was destined for export to the Arab world and beyond.

Thus the general picture now discernible is one where, from about the seventh century, societies in Southern Africa both along the coast and in the interior began receiving goods from outside sources. To obtain these goods, the societies embarked on the exploitation of new products such as ivory and, later, gold which were in demand in the world outside Africa. The archaeological evidence clearly indicates that there was a gradual increase through time in the scale of participation in external trade. By the thirteenth century, especially with the emergence of centres such as Mapungubwe and, later, Great Zimbabwe, the region had become part of an important trading network around the Indian Ocean and beyond.

Having shown some of the archaeological evidence for the establishment of trading connections between Southern Africa and the outside world, I would now like to address the issue of how such trading connections affected societies in the region. The role of external trade has frequently been cited as one of the major stimuli to the growth of societies on the African continent in the pre-colonial period. Urbanism and state formation in particular have been seen in this light. In most cases, however, writers have cited external trade as being important without adequately explaining its possible effects or considering the possible local and indigenous factors which may have made a contribution to, and in some cases may have been more important in, the growth and development of these societies. What I wish to do here is to attempt to show that the establishment of external trade did affect African societies and look at the possible ways in which the growth of trade affected them. At the same time, however, it should be borne in mind that the African societies themselves were, perhaps, already growing prior to this new development.

It has already been noted that the economies of the early iron-using farming communities of Southern Africa were basically subsistence-oriented and production was probably at the local level for local needs. It has also been noted that the villages of these societies show little of the differentiation indicative of elaborate large-scale political organization; and it also appears that there is no evidence of social stratification, except probably by age and sex. However, from the time at which the evidence for external

trade becomes available, parts of the sub-region witnessed the growth of new economic, social and political organizations, and the coincidence between the two is quite striking. The relevant sites in this connection are Mapungubwe, K2, Mapela, Leopard's Kopje and, later, Great Zimbabwe. The evidence from these sites show that, although the basic agricultural economy remains unchanged qualitatively, there is increased participation in long-distance trade on the one hand, and the exploitation of gold and ivory on the other. Furthermore, at sites like K2, Mapungubwe, Leopard's Kopje and Great Zimbabwe, the growing importance of cattle as an economic resource can be seen in addition to their traditional cultural significance. This evidence is accompanied for the first time by evidence of social and probably economic differences in society. From Mapungubwe and Mapela, for example, it is noted that there are differences in residential structures, with some, presumably those belonging to people higher on the social scale, enclosed within stone walls and located on hilltops, while others are in open and lower locations. It has been argued recently that this differential residential pattern establishes the association between royalty and mountains or high places which has been characteristic of some southern Bantu societies (Huffmann, 1980 and 1986; Hall, 1987).

To demonstrate further that social, economic and political differences did exist in these societies, evidence can be cited from Mapungubwe where some burials have been discovered in association with gold objects. It is clear that Mapungubwe was a centre of some economic and, by inference, political importance, to such an extent that archaeologists now agree that it was the centre of the region's first state system, developing from the eleventh century and collapsing some time during the early part of the thirteenth century. It is also noted that evidence for craft specialization, sometimes cited as one of the criteria of state systems (Renfrew, 1972), is present at Mapungubwe in the form of spindle whorls used for spinning cotton. Furthermore, although it is not clearly demonstrated, it seems possible that the smaller site of Mapela, 85 km away and contemporary with Mapungubwe, falls within the hierarchical settlement patterning of the state structure. The development of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, its presumed successor (Huffmann, 1980; Hall, 1987; Maggs, 1984), can thus be used as case studies to show the development of early state systems in the region and how this relates to external trade. Mapungubwe as the centre of a state clearly developed from the indigenous farming communities, as there is no evidence of any new population movements into the area to initiate this development. This being so, the question to be asked is how such communities grew into such large settlements and political units. The answer seems to lie partly in the indigenous economies as well as in the new opportunities that the possession of exotic goods provided. The archaeological evidence has

shown that herds of cattle were of major importance among some of the societies of the Iron Age in Southern Africa. Faunal remains at major sites like Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe and elsewhere have shown how dominant cattle were (Barker, 1978; Brain, 1974; Garlake, 1978; Hall, 1987; Voigt, 1981; Thorp, 1984). It seems clear, therefore, that herds of cattle were a source of status and power and the ability to command a following in society was in part based on this. For example, the evidence at Great Zimbabwe, now generally agreed to have been the centre of one of Southern Africa's largest states in prehistory, suggests some kind of state or élite control of this resource. Thus the growth of social complexity and state formation in Southern Africa owed its origin to the increase in wealth in the form of cattle by some individuals. However, as has already been noted, there is a striking coincidence between the development of social complexity and the increase in the volume of external trade in the region, to the extent that a link between the two can be accepted. But to demonstrate the correlation between the transformation of some Southern African communities resulting from their participation in external trade and possession of imported goods is one thing and to explain how this new branch of production led to this social transformation is another.

A number of hypotheses have been put forward. Some archaeologists of Southern Africa (e.g. Hall, 1987; Huffmann, 1972 and 1980) have argued that the development of social complexity and the eventual emergence of state systems in the region could not have resulted simply from the increase of wealth through cattle. It has been argued that cattle are a 'democratic' resource which is renewable, whereas trade goods such as beads and ceramics are not. Under favourable conditions any individual with suitable breeding stock could accumulate herds of cattle (Hall, 1987). How, then, did the possession of trade goods translate into power and lead to a hierarchical society and statehood as it did in the case of Mapungubwe? The answer to this question is that the value of imported commodities lay in their rarity and that they provided an avenue to power because they represented a form of wealth that could be stored and distributed differently from cattle. The key to power and state formation lay in élite control of the products used in external trade. By controlling gold production, for example, the emergent élite then also controlled the acquisition of exotic goods which had prestige value and represented a new form of wealth. Such an élite could control the external trade through their possession of the wealth needed to sponsor the exploitation of the products for exchange. The differential distribution of the products of external trade then reinforced the hierarchical relations within the élite as well as the position of the élite in relation to their dependents. Such imported goods could then be used to reinforce power and command a following by redistribution. We can infer that such a situation existed from the

differential recovery of exotic items from such sites as Great Zimbabwe and contemporary sites such as the nearby site of Montevideo, which was obviously not a major centre. In the historically documented Mutapa state in northern Zimbabwe, for example, Portuguese records dating from the sixteenth century show us that the state rulers used herds of cattle to sponsor gold mining among their dependents and that the metal was then used to acquire exotic goods (Mudenge, 1988). From this, it becomes fairly clear that the new addition to the economy did represent a source of power in the hands of a few, who could use such power to command a following, hence the development of social differentiation and eventually state systems.

In order to appreciate the impact of external trade on Southern African societies, one should probably try to trace the prehistory of the region from the establishment of iron-using farming communities up to the first few centuries of the second millennium. Taking such an approach, four stages can be identified. In the first stage, the farming communities are characterized by communities living in scattered villages which show no evidence of outside connections or of a hierarchically organized society. The second stage, which can be dated from about the seventh century, coincides with the introduction of external trade when we see a shift in production towards goods with exchange value. The third stage, from about the tenth century, sees an increase in the volume of trade and is characterized by villages which begin to show evidence of social differentiation. The fourth and last stage then sees the establishment of state structures such as Mapungubwe and social stratification evident from residence structures. These developments reach a climax with the establishment of the Zimbabwe state which was centred at the major site of Great Zimbabwe which is believed to have succeeded Mapungubwe. A further illustration of the relationship between external trade and the development of state systems can be seen in the coincidence between the demise of Mapungubwe and the rise of the Zimbabwe state. The two have been seen as related events linked to the growing importance of gold in the Indian Ocean trade, the shift in the centre of power from Mapungubwe to Great Zimbabwe being explainable in terms of the more abundant gold fields on the Zimbabwe plateau than in the Limpopo valley. Furthermore, another coincidence between the rise of the coastal city of Kilwa and Great Zimbabwe has also been noted. It is now generally accepted that the two benefited from each other, Kilwa being the entry point of goods destined for Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe being the interior supply centre. Thus the development of Great Zimbabwe not only as a major urban centre but also as a state centre must have been linked to the coastal trade. Similarly the collapse of Great Zimbabwe in the latter half of the fifteenth century seems related to a similar development at Kilwa.

However, while the role of external trade in the transformation of

Southern Africa is quite clear, it should be noted that the addition of this new element in the economy was not the only factor in the process. Such developments in the Southern African interior should not be seen merely as responses to external trade. The process of growth was also internally stimulated. The Toutswe state in Eastern Botswana, as the work of Denbow (1984) has shown, developed without a significant external trade input but through local wealth such as cattle. The importance of cattle at Great Zimbabwe has also been demonstrated (Garlake, 1978, 1982 and 1983). Thus, it may be assumed that Southern African communities were already in a process of growth which was then accelerated by their participation in external trade.

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