

Book Review

Ditswa Mmung: The Archaeology of Botswana, edited by Paul Lane, Andrew Reid & Alinah Segobye. Gaborone: Pula Press & the Botswana Society, 1999. 264pp + 16pp colour section + fold-out map. Hardcover P80. ISBN 99912-60-39-0 (Botswana Society), 99912-61-58-3 (Pula Press).

Everyone knows the bird sculptures of Great Zimbabwe. One of them is on the Zimbabwe flag. The original sculptures were taken away to Cape Town by Cecil Rhodes, but have now been returned home. But how many have heard of the bird sculptures of Vukwe in Botswana? There were three clay birds, painted in red and black, which were dug up by the archaeologist H.A. Wieschoff at Vukwe, 50 km north of Francistown, in 1929. The Vukwe birds could date back as far as the year 1430. Wieschoff took the Vukwe birds off to Germany, where they have disappeared—possibly victims of Allied bombing in the Second World War. A priceless part of Botswana's heritage is almost certainly lost for ever.

At last, we have a good book which collects together, for the first time, the archaeology that has been done in Botswana. We can now see a picture of the three Vukwe birds' heads on page 34. They were about the same size as a dove or pigeon, and one of the three certainly looks like a dove. Another seems to be the head of a multi-coloured duck.

Ditswa Mmung means "things which come out of the ground". The book, which was produced with Norwegian aid and University of Botswana publication fund assistance, was compiled and edited by the Archaeology Unit at UB—Paul Lane, Andrew Reid, and Alinah Segobye.

The book runs through the whole gamut of Botswana's archaeology, from the history of excavation and evidence of the Early Stone Age, to the archaeology of recent times, rock paintings and engravings, national monuments and museums, and current and recent research. Each chapter is written by an expert, sometimes by three experts. However the editors have done everything they can to guide general readers through the text with headings and illustrations. The maps are okay, but there could have been even more with more useful details (such as river courses etc.) printed in grey rather than in black. The fold-out map at the end is hardly detailed enough to be worthwhile printing and inserting.

Chapter 1, by Alec Campbell, reminds us how far archaeology has come since Wieschoff in 1929, particularly since the work of Jim Wayland in the 1950s and Jim Denbow in the 1970s. Botswana is no longer almost a blank on maps of world prehistory. It can now be seen as a centre of prehistoric innovations which affected the whole of southern Africa.

Exactly how is shown in the next seven chapters, which are the real red meat of the book. These chapters present the archaeological evidence which revises our view of Botswana's past from earliest times up to as recently as the Second World War.

Chapters 2 and 3 take us through the Stone Ages—reminding us that the lime caves and gulleys of Botswana may yet provide evidence of the earliest humans to match discoveries in Olduvai, Omo or Gauteng. We also begin to see how people have adapted to different climates. Just a few thousand years ago the Okavango and Makgadikgadi formed one vast lake before they dried up into marshes and pans.

Chapter 4 starts to tackle the thorny problems of how hunting and gathering became mixed up with herding and gardening two millennia ago—out of which developed not only Bantu-speaking societies but also Khoesan-speaking societies, as far as the Cape of Good Hope. (How many people know that the Khoekhoe language spoken by Africans at the Cape in 1652 originated in the Northern Kalahari?) This chapter is very important because of its discussion of the Later Stone Age. It updates our knowledge of Bambata ware, a strange early type of clay pottery found along the Boteti and around Lake Ngami. More remarkably the chapter suggests a second sequence of Khoe migration from the (probably Southern) Kalahari to the Cape roughly around or by 1100 AD. This idea has profound implications for the whole of southern Africa,

notably to help explain why Early Iron Age cultures gave way to Later Iron Age cultures at about the same time. It raises questions about how deep into the interior new trade routes (serving Muslim sea traders on the southern Mozambique coast) and new chiefdoms were spreading.

Chapter 5 picks up the tangled evidence of Early Iron Age farming societies, and their links with makers of pottery styles to the north-west, north, north-east, east, and south-east. It suggests fruitful future research with archaeologists in Angola and Namibia, as well as in Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and even Mozambique (which is only 200 km from the Tuli Block). A list of comparable radio-carbon dates of Early Iron Age sites, in Botswana and these other countries, would have been a useful addition to this chapter.

Chapter 6 summarises the evidence of Later Iron Age chiefdoms and states in the area of Botswana (with a very useful appendix of radio-carbon dates for the sites). This chapter includes valuable descriptions and details of recent archaeological research, especially that done for "impact assessments" of development projects such as roads and dams built in the 1980s-90s. Overall, the chapter shows how more research and discussion is needed before Khalagari, Tswana, "Pedi" and Kalanga early history in Botswana, up to 1800, can match the level of knowledge of early Shona history in Zimbabwe.

Chapter 7 covers the "historical archaeology" of Botswana. This essentially means the archaeology of modern ethnic groups still identifiable today, say from about 200 years ago. Here "things which come out of the ground" can reveal what is missing in conventional histories, which are concerned almost wholly with the political and military antics of rulers. Archaeology can show how common people were living and eating. It can study the remains of social and economic institutions, as varied as the camps of traditional initiation schools and the lines of telegraph poles put up by early colonialists. In particular it can reveal the changing patterns of village settlement and the varied architecture of houses and walling.

The last four chapters of the book are of more specialist interest for archaeologists, artists and museologists, but lay paths forward for future understanding of Botswana's deep past.

The publication of "Dintswa Mmung" is complemented by the separate publication of a full and annotated list of books and articles and papers on Botswana prehistory and archaeology, compiled by Catrien van Waarden, as No.1 in the Botswana Society's series of Bibliographies. There will now be no excuse for outsiders to come to Botswana, as did one Cambridge "ethno-archaeologist" a mere seven years ago, and write about our past as if no one had ever attempted to do so before. As Paul Lane points out on pages 199-200, that person should have read at least four, and probably more like 24, previous studies, before putting her gross ignorance to paper.

This book has a section of splendid colour illustrations, many of them full page, as well as numerous black and white figures. Produced entirely in Botswana, the book is a tribute to the energy, devotion and good judgement of the UB Archaeology Unit. *Dintswa Mmung: the Archaeology of Botswana*, with sound scholarship stitched between colourful hard covers, will demonstrate not only to the world but also to the people of Botswana just how much the ground beneath our feet can tell out about our country's past. The publication of this book marks an important moment, and an achievement of maturity, in the intellectual development of Botswana.

Neil Parsons

*Department of History
University of Botswana*