

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE SIKALONGO AREA,
CHOMA DISTRICT, ZAMBIA.

F.B. MUSONDA, National Museums of Zambia, P.O. Box 60498, Livingstone, Zambia

Introduction

The archaeological research in the Sikalongo area was undertaken in February 1987 and was designed to be interdisciplinary in character. Archaeology was the main source of data and the pictures had to be filled out with the application of oral traditions and ethnography to make it a living reality. Meaningful reconstructions of prehistoric events requires establishing links with present populations. Ethnoarchaeology is particularly important in that it enables us to study processes of human discard.

The research attempted to link past material remains to the human behaviour from which they resulted as well as to demonstrate archaeological relationships between Iron Age and historical communities. To achieve this, ceramics technological complexity settlement patterns and subsistence activities were considered. Physical features and ecological factors in the area were studied as well as constraints that these impose on settlement patterns.

Fieldwork

The research in the Sikalongo area (figure 1) began as a result of an accidental find of remains of a human skeleton in May 1986, during the digging of a rubbish pit. Preliminary investigations by this writer revealed a partial human skeleton buried in a flexed position at a depth of 1.5 metres with the head facing east. Accompanying burial items included potsherds, two clay vessels and a smoking pipe. The digging had cut through the burial resulting in the destruction and damage of two thirds of the skeleton.

The presence of burial items in what appeared to be an archaeological context stimulated our interest to undertake further archaeological investigations in the area. At the same time, we were informed that earlier excavations of house and water pipe foundations at the site had yielded copper crosses, human skeletons and lots of pottery.

Our primary concern was to undertake material culture-behaviour studies that would be cross-checked independently. Archaeological investigations into the early settlement of the area by communities that practised food production and the evidence relating to the social, religious, and political activities were carried out. We also obtained environmental data that would help determine how well the prehistoric inhabitants of the area adapted to their environment. The research emphasised location of archaeological sites within a well-circumscribed region as part of a prehistoric settlement pattern study without recourse to excavation.

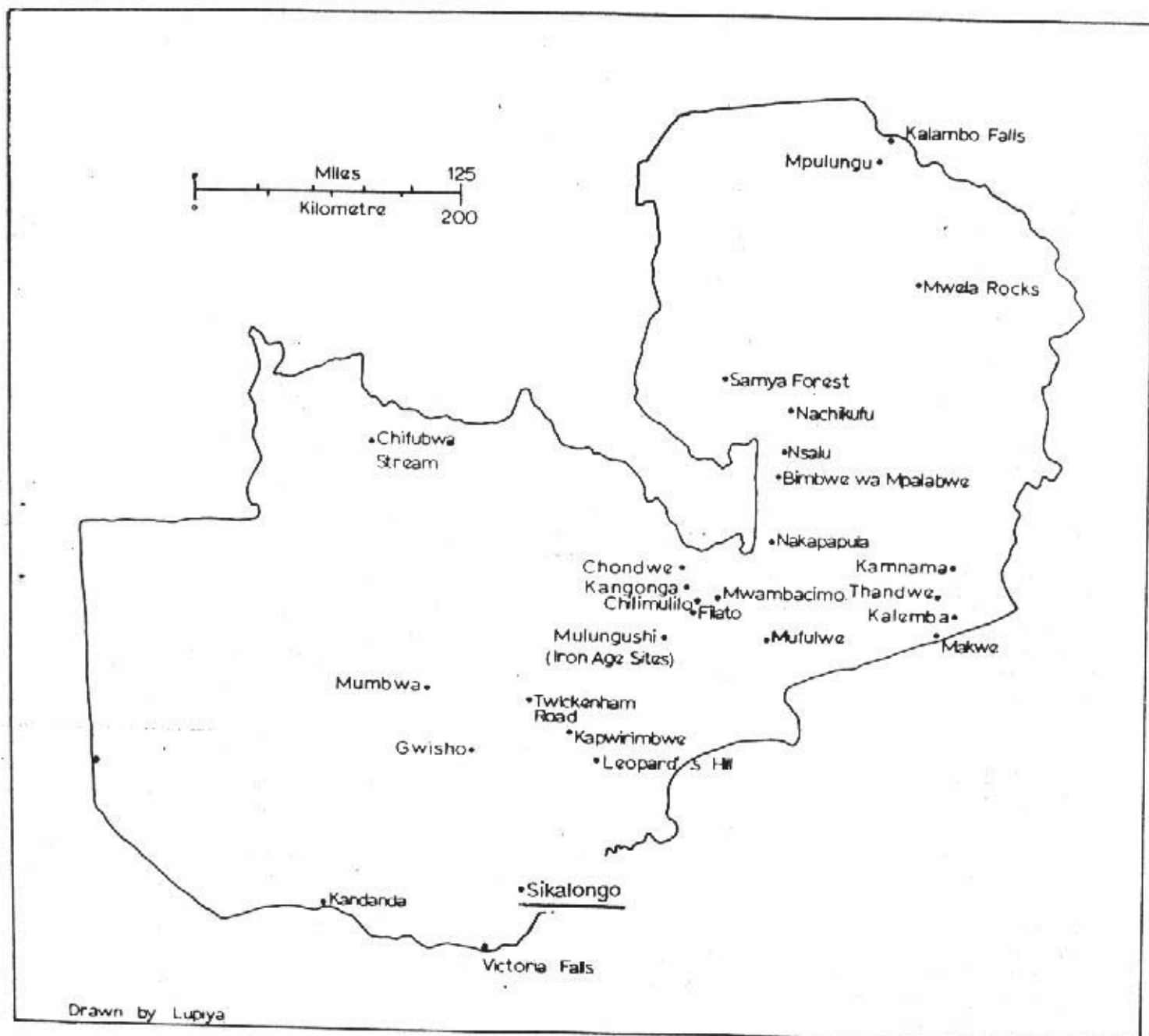


FIG. 1 MAP SHOWING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN ZAMBIA

Results of Investigations

The present research in the Sikalongo area provides so far the only known evidence for Early Iron Age over the whole area of Choma district and presents the first systematic study of the relationships in ceramics, burial patterns, settlement structures, and subsistence activities between prehistoric and contemporary societies.

The human bones recovered from the Sikalongo site largely consisted of broken ribs, vertebrae, femora, humeri, pelvis, skull, fibula, patella, footbones, several unidentifiable pieces, and a premolar. Although the majority of bones were very fragmentary probably as a result of disturbance during digging operations, they appeared to be in good condition.

The fusion of the femur and humerus and the toothwear pattern (although this may also depend on diet and tooth structure) suggest that the Sikalongo individual was an adult. The position of the long bones in respect to the rest of the body suggests that the individual was buried in a flexed position with the knees drawn up to the chin. Sexual diagnosis is determined from two fragmentary innominate (pelvic) bones which no doubt suggest that the skeleton is that of an adult female. The size and length of the long bones without epiphase and their lack of massive muscle attachments lead us to suggest that the skeleton which is gracile in form represents a relatively tall female individual.

The significance of pottery and the clay smoking pipe found in association with the human bones becomes more evident in estimating the age of the burial. In the absence of Carbon-14 dates, these cultural items provide us with some clue as to the relative age of the burial. The decorative motifs on pots and broken up sherds, the temper, burnish and the general character of the vessels suggest that they are of Later Iron Age, that is, dating to between the 11th and 18th centuries a.d.

Archaeological surveys in the Sikalongo area revealed that the settlement typology of Iron Age people consisted of hilltop settlements near water sources and valley bottom settlements. The most spectacular archaeological site discovered was on top of Simulombwa Hill in a mountaineous area east of Sikalongo. This area is devoid of natural incentives to enable its inhabitants to specialise in neither farming or herding of animals. There are relatively small stretches of bottomland plain and few sources of flowing water.

The Simulombwa site consists of a group of six huts arranged in a circular pattern (figure 2). The distances between them ranges between 3.5 and 15.3 metres. The circumference measurements of the huts range between 11.8 and 15.5 metres. the smallest hut was found located near the largest house on the east side of the site. Apart from hut remains such as daub and wattle and a burnt pole used as building materials, there are cooking pillars made out of clay (some of them with circular depressions on their apex). The latter were found in the centre of the 'village' and inside three of the six huts.

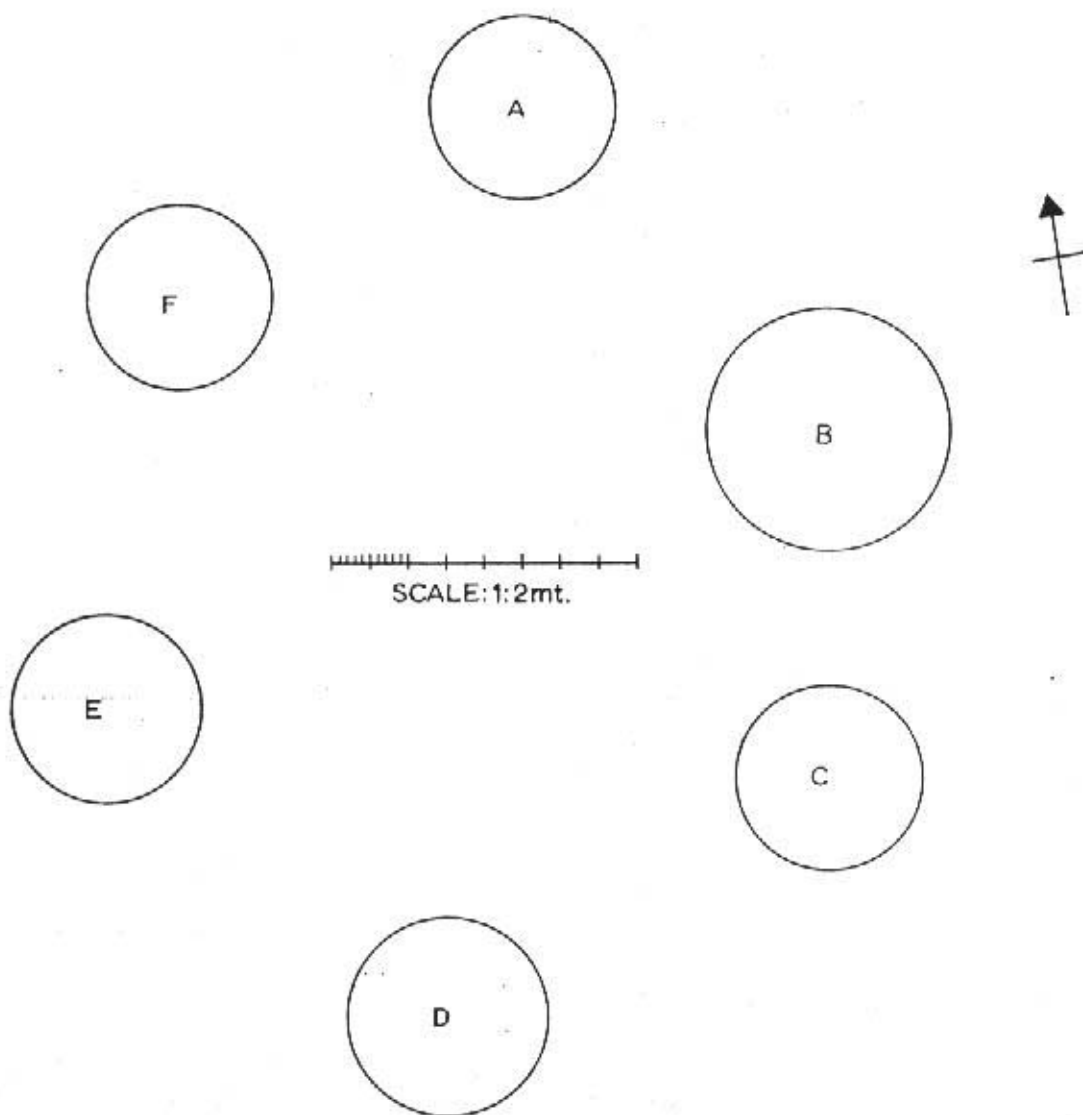


FIG.2 SIMULOMBWA HILL VILLAGE SETTLEMENT SITE

M.Ngoma

Interpretation

The archaeological data from Sikalongo area have revealed regularities and patterns of human behaviour that are very similar to ethnographic observations. These observations demand a more complex interpretation of archaeologically observed material. Oral traditions and ethnographic data collected by my research colleagues, Messrs Sibanyama Mudenda and Richard Luhila respectively, suggest that the Iron Age lifestyle, subsistence economy, and technology continued more or less in the same way even within the modern populations.

The burial pattern of the Sikalongo skeleton has raised some interesting traditional practices. The position of the body in an east-west direction is a traditional burial practice which is widespread in Zambia with females and males being buried facing east and west respectively. The significance of this tradition largely lies in the social roles that females and males play in societies. The estimation that the skeleton represents a female adult is supported by associated artefacts. According to the Tonga oral tradition, females were usually buried with material objects that they are often associated with in life. Females are often associated with cooking and storage equipment such as the ones found buried with the Sikalongo skeleton.

It is interesting to note that some of the finds reported from the Sikalongo site which include copper crosses, copper and metal artefacts, and richly decorated human burials parallel finds from Ingombe Ilede site about 160 kilometres to the east. The latter site has been dated to the 14th and 15th centuries a.d. (FAGAN, e.a., 1969).

The Simulombwa hill site has yielded evidence that supports the conclusion that prehistoric inhabitants of the area were probably some of the early agricultural communities who built semi-permanent and flimsy architecture of wattle and daub and provided themselves with facilities to make their lives comfortable. Because of abundant land and minimal investment in their living structures, it is possible that these early communities may have been characterized by constant shifting of land use.

Conclusion

The present research results are preliminary and no direct cultural continuity has yet been traced from the Iron Age continuum to the present peoples of the area. However, reasonable inferences have been made that the makers of pottery, clay cooking pillars and hut structures left behind at Simulombwa Hill, were people whose descendants are found in the area today and that their lifestyle was distinctly similar to that of their descendants.

Reference cited

Fagan (B.M.), Phillipson(D.W.), and Daniels(S.G.H.) 1969,
Iron Age Cultures in Zambia, II. London.