

THE MAZVIKADEI DAM RESCUE EXCAVATIONS : A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Introduction

Southern Africa, like the rest of the African continent particularly south of the Sahara, has been facing problems of rainfall unreliability since time immemorial. This ecological problem is being solved in Zimbabwe by the construction of large dams. For example, the new Mazvikadei dam north of the town of Banket will be Zimbabwe's third largest internal dam. The dam is being built on the Mukwadzi river, a tributary of the Manyame. The flood area of the new dam was surveyed for archaeological sites in mid-1986 and small-scale excavations were also carried out. In November of 1986, the engineers at the dam construction site reported to the Queen Victoria Museum, Harare, a possible burial in the saddle dam construction zone. A visit to the site by museum archaeologists was made and excavation started in late November to early December, 1986.

The Burial Site

The site, which has now been completely destroyed, was located on a termite mound approximately 25 metres north of the saddle dam construction zone. This point, which is 17°14'56"S and 30°23'50"E is about 1, 154 metres above sea level.

The peripheral areas of the mound on which the burials were located had been cut by earthmoving equipment in the process of saddle dam construction. This left a core area approximately 6 metres long by 5 metres wide. Within this area was a pile of stones, referred to as Burial A, as it was this pile of stones that had led to the reports about a possible burial site.

The Excavation

The construction of the saddle dam around the burial site had been stopped from the time the site was located. Because of this, the archaeological investigation had to be carried out quickly. Therefore, the research team was split into two, with the first group concentrating on the area immediately surrounding the pile of stones, or Burial A, and the second group working its way to the middle of the mound starting from the southern boundary of the mound cut. Preliminary investigations had not revealed any cultural material around the southern tip of the mound thus the volume of sterile earth that had to be removed was enormous. A bulldozer was therefore used in cutting off thin vertical sections of earth. It was observed that the earth contained no cultural material at any level. The sterile earth was subsequently pushed away to clear the site. After sectioning about 3 metres of the mound, a skull was partially exposed after which all work around the burial was carried out using more careful methods of archaeological excavation. This burial is referred to as Burial B.

Results of the Excavations

Burial A

The pile of stones which marked Burial A was removed after it had been photographed and a 3 x 3 metres grid system was set up. The area that had been under the pile of stones occupied the central square metre of the grid. Excavations of this central square revealed that the grave shaft had also been filled in with stones. A few pottery sherds were found among the stones in the grave shaft but they became more abundant and larger with increasing depth. At about 70 cm below ground level, it became apparent that pots had been broken prior to interment and some of the sherds had been intentionally placed one inside the other. A small complete and decorated pot had been placed upright in one of the larger sherds. All these sherds and the small pot had been placed on a prepared layer of stones at about 80 cm below ground level. At the same level but to the south of the zone with pottery was the inhumation. The corpse had been buried in a sitting position with the knees drawn up to just below the mandible. Both arms had also been folded thus the hands rested on both clavicles. Apparently the corpse had slumped to the right after deposition and the skull moved forwards but faced downwards. The orientation of the inhumation prior to post-depositional processes had been north-east.

Analysis of the skeletal material showed that the burial was that of an adult female whose upper incisors had been removed before death. Apart from the pottery sherds and a single bone bead that were associated with the burial, there were also three snail shells which had been placed in the neck region behind the skull. Reconstruction of the pottery from the sherds found in the burial resulted in three almost complete pots, suggesting that the pots had been broken intentionally at burial presumably to satisfy some ritual requirements. The four pots from the burial (the three reconstructed ones and the small complete pot found in one of the larger sherds) form only a part of a normal household assemblage and smoke blackening on all these pots shows that this excavated assemblage had been used, perhaps like any other domestic pottery, before burial.

Burial B

Burial B was partially exposed during the sectioning of the core area of the mound using a bulldozer. This burial was located under the highest point of the mound and was less than 2 metres from Burial A. The inhumation which was not associated with any cultural material other than a total of 21 bone beads was, like Burial A, in a seated position. The burial, the orientation of which was north-east, was of an adult male whose upper incisors had been removed before his decease.

Discussion

The Mazvikadei site has been dated to between 850 and 1050 A.D. on the basis of the Early Iron Age pottery tradition, Maxton, found in Burial A. Only a few burials of this nature (seated, with evidence of teeth mutilation) have been studied although Theal (1910, 222) makes a very broad but unsubstantiated generalisation about the Bantu and their burial practices. He wrote that the Bantu abandoned the corpses of common persons to beasts of prey whilst chiefs and great men were placed in dug out graves in a sitting posture. A lot of re-

search has since demonstrated that burial studies do not benefit anything from such blanket statements since variability in burial ritual cannot be explained in the context of Bantu or non-Bantu (MAHACHI, 1986).

A number of burials that are broadly analogous to the Mazvikadei burials have been excavated in north-western Zimbabwe as well as in an area adjacent to the Zambezi valley. These burials have been found relevant in the explanation of the Mazvikadei site for a number of reasons. Firstly, like the Mazvikadei burials, the Isamu Pati (Zambia), NaBa and Lanlory (Zimbabwe) burials have evidence of seated positions in corpse deposition. Secondly, the skeletal evidence from most of these burials shows the practice of teeth mutilation and thirdly, the geographical location of these sites, both north and south of the Zambezi, is an area known to have been inhabited by a number of Tonga speaking people, some of whom practice teeth mutilation. Elizabeth Colson (1960, p. 18) noted that the valley Tonga have customs of removing the upper incisors and canine teeth and that this distinguishes them from other people. In some parts of southern Zambia, teeth mutilation was in the form of teeth filing as was reported by the explorer, David Livingstone, when he encountered some Lunda and Chokwe men whose teeth had been filed to a point (SCHAPERLA, 1936, p. 36).

The Tonga of the Gwembe valley, Zambezi river in Zimbabwe, knocked out the upper incisors and canines and this exercise was carried out in early puberty. The dentist is always a man and his only tool is a wedge like an axe blade made and kept especially for the purpose. The edge of the blade is placed between the front of the two teeth, and a sharp blow administered. The teeth are forced apart and loosened (REYNOLDS 1968, p. 197). Evidence of teeth mutilation has been found in the Early Iron Age of Zimbabwe. The two sites of NaBa and Lanlory, both belonging to the Sinoia Pottery Tradition have been dated to between A.D. 600 and A.D. 950. At NaBa a village site located 29°40'32"E, 16°52'18"S, six human burials were uncovered. Of the four adults represented, the upper incisors of one had been filed to points whilst the upper incisors of another adult and the lower incisors of two adults had been extracted during their lifetime (HUFFMAN, 1972, p. 12). At Lanlory, which is 29°28'15"E; 16°45'37"S, three skeletons were found, an adult and two children. The adult skeleton was that of an elderly woman whose middle, upper and lower incisors had been removed apparently during her lifetime (HUFFMAN 1972, p. 15). Some of the skeletal remains at Isamu Pati, Zambia, also had evidence of teeth mutilation in the form of knocked out incisors as well as filed teeth (FAGAN, 1967). What is difficult to determine is whether the knocking out or filing of teeth was a privilege granted to only a few or an optional practice as is the custom of teeth filing among the Lozi of Zambia in recent times. It is also difficult to determine whether variability in burial position was a result of variability in social status.

The three snail shells found in Burial A are also difficult to explain. However, a snail shell is known as Homba in the Shona language. Homba also means a girl of advanced marriageable age who has not yet become engaged (HANNAN, 1984, p. 224). It will be remembered that Burial A is that of an adult female and the Homba evidence might suggest that the woman died before she had got married. Perhaps the few pots that were buried with her, being a small fraction of a normal household pottery assemblage might be indicative of the woman's social position. Perhaps she was not a mother and therefore had no need for a large amount of pottery for cooking purposes. Alternatively and perhaps complementary to the above, the pottery associated with the burial

could have been used by the deceased during her period of medication and, as happens among the Shona people, the items used by the deceased immediately before death have to be broken and either buried with the victim or merely placed on the grave.

Conclusion

It has to be realised that the preceding discussion on the burials is only preliminary since the data on which the discussion is based is only from a single site. It is hoped that other Maxton Tradition burials will be located and investigated so that possible patterns in burial practice in this period are identified and explained. As is apparent in the discussion, the Tonga people who are occupying north-western Zimbabwe have been portrayed as the possible connection between the archaeological site and the ethnographic present. This assumption will have to be tested in future studies pertaining to burials, settlement patterns, ceramics and many other socio-cultural aspects in this part of Zimbabwe because teeth mutilation and geographical location alone are not satisfactory threads of connection between the Tonga people of today and the Mazvikadei burial site. Therefore, it is hoped that more work will be carried out to complement present findings both at the dam construction site and in this part of Zimbabwe.

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