

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE MWANZA-NENO AREA, MALAWI : A PRELIMINARY REPORT

YUSUF M. JUWAYEYI, Department of Antiquities, P.O. Box 264, Lilongwe, Malawi

INTRODUCTION

This brief preliminary report is based on the first archaeological research ever undertaken in the Mwanza-Neno area. The area is located west of the Shire River in southern Malawi. We carried out archaeological site survey from the crest of the Kirk Range mountains which is also the boundary between Malawi and Mozambique on the west to the 34° 45'E longitude line and between 15° 15'S and 15° 33'S latitude. Much of the work concentrated on the slopes of the Kirk Range mountains and in the adjacent low lands. The Kirk Range is a chain of medium height mountains which fall gradually in a north-south direction from 1,676 meters above sea level near Dedza in the north to 427 meters in the south where it gives way to the lower Shire-Zambezi low lands (Pike and Rimmington, 1965:46).

Knowledge of previous research in adjacent areas such as the Linthipe-Changoni area in central Malawi and in eastern Zambia was crucial in formulating our research strategy. Our primary concern was four fold:-

a) To document the pattern of site location and Later Stone Age (LSA) technology in order to establish the basis for comparison with known LSA industries such as the Fingira in northern and central Malawi, the Wilton in South Africa and Zambia and the Nachikufan and Makwe also in Zambia.

b) To make a systematic comparison of archaeological occurrences in terms of compositions, frequency and use of raw materials between those of high altitude areas of the Kirk Range mountains and those of the plains and river valley areas in order to determine possible technological differences in those environmental areas.

c) To evaluate LSA hunter-gatherer assemblages and current ethnographic data/observation in order to establish a basis for constructing a model for settlement patterns and subsistence strategies during the Holocene.

d) to determine the nature and to date the introduction of domesticated animals and plants in the area.

In order to achieve our objectives, there was need to have a very clear idea of the nature and general distribution of archaeological sites in the area. A well organised site survey of the area was thus undertaken. This was followed by systematic excavations of a few selected sites. But a site catchment analysis study whose main objective was to predict the resource base and resource procurement strategies of the prehistoric inhabitants of the area has yet to be undertaken.

Research Techniques and Results

Equipped with aerial photographs, the 1:50,000 Map of the area, a compass and water bottles, the research team embarked on a site survey of the entire 650 Sq.Km. area. The pedestrian method of site survey - that is the systematic inspection of the land surface by literally walking all over it in an organised manner - and the scanning method - whereby one goes to scan a specific topographic feature such as an isolated hill - were used. Both methods are known to maximize site location. In all, the entire area yielded 21 Later Stone Age rockshelter sites and six Iron Age open sites (fig 1). Seventeen of the rockshelter sites contain rock paintings of which roughly 99% are geometric and done in red. Although it was expected that rock paintings would be found in the area, their occurrence, appearing at 81% of the rockshelter sites was rather surprising particularly since the rest of the southern Malawi highlands are not known to be as rich in rock art as the Changoni-Linthipe area in central Malawi, for instance.

Five of the rockshelter sites, all with rock paintings were selected for excavations. Owing to the topography of the research area and the location of most sites, selection of sites for excavation did not depend just on likelihood of producing desired results after positive test pitting, but also on accessibility. It was not just possible to get to some sites with all the equipment that the average excavation team carries. So far, analysis of flaked stones from only one site (Ngala B site) has progressed to a level whereby one is just about able to discern what activities took place at the site.

The stratigraphy of the site is shown in Fig 2; and a classification of flaked stone artefacts is as shown in table 1. Although not much can be said about the stratigraphy at this stage, it is worth mentioning that this site yielded very few potsherds and nearly all of them were recovered from levels 1 and 2. A number of features were also observed. These included three distinct plastered floors associated with post holes in level 2, and a large ash lens in level 3. Besides these observations, the site has not undergone much disturbance neither by humans nor by burrowing animals and other agents.

A total of 117,802 flaked stone artefacts were recovered from Ngala B rockshelter. The terminology used in analysing them is the one currently in use in the eastern-central African region (Miller, 1969; Clark, 1974; Phillipson, 1977). The dominant raw material used in the production of flaked stone artefacts was vein quartz which formed 94.1% of total flaked stone artefacts. Other types of raw material infrequently used were crystalline quartz 3.7%, dolerite 2.1% and very rarely chert.

Only 0.07% of the 117,802 flaked stones were retouched. This proportion of retouched stones is less than that observed at sites such as Makwe in eastern Zambia and Fingira in northern Malawi where retouched stones amounted to 1.3% and 0.3% of total flaked stones respectively (Phillipson, 1976:74; Sandelowsky, 1972:68). This rate of occurrence is significantly less than that of most sites on the Shire Highlands also in southern Malawi. At Malowa and Midima for instance, retouched stones formed 4% and 6% of all flaked stones respectively (Juwayeyi, 1981:176, 133).

The occurrence of whole flakes and cores is similarly low. Cores formed 1.1% of total flaked stones. Whole flakes on the other hand formed 3.0%, giving a core/flake ratio of 1:3. This rate of occurrence particularly of cores is within the same range as that of Makwe and Fingira where cores formed 1.2% and 0.9% of total flaked stones respectively. This again, contrasts very significantly with the rate of occurrence of artefacts at Malowa and Midima rockshelters where cores formed 4% and 9% while flakes formed 25% and 10% of total flaked stones respectively.

Discussion

Although very preliminary, these results represent the only known evidence for Later Stone Age occupation of the Mwanza-Neno area. The result of our site survey has shown that the occurrence of sites in the area is lower than in other equally well researched highlands of Malawi such as the Mikolongwe-Malowa area on the Shire Highlands in southern Malawi and in the Linthipe-Chongoni area in central Malawi. Current analysis of stone and other cultural remains from Ngala B rockshelter and observations made during the excavation of four other sites in the area indicate that it was the Ngala B site which was frequently occupied by the Later Stone Age hunting and gathering communities. A combination of all flaked stone artefacts recovered from all the other sites still make less than 3% of the flaked stone artefacts recovered at Ngala B alone. This evidence perhaps suggests that this area had fewer resources to attract large numbers of hunting and gathering communities than the Mikolongwe-Malowa area for instance.

The flaked stone artefacts from Ngala B appears similar to those of Makwe in eastern Zambia and those that have been termed as the Fingira Industry from northern and central Malawi. Geographically, the Kirk Range can be described as being in the same region as the Linthipe-Changoni area where many Fingira sites have been located. The similarity is therefore not surprising. Significant differences exist however, between these stone artefacts and those of Malowa and Midima rockshelters on the Shire Highlands where dolerite was the most common raw material used. These differences will be highlighted when the analysis of retouched stones from Ngala B and the other sites is completed.

CONCLUSION

The present results are very preliminary as they are based on site survey and a partial analysis of flaked stone artefacts from one major site only. It is hoped that all cultural material from this and other sites in the area will be fully analysed within the next two years, to provide us with enough data with which to make meaningful comparisons with what we already know of other sites in the central African region. This will give us a comprehensive picture of life in the Mwanza-Neno area during the Later Stone Age and Iron Age periods.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the Louis Leakey Foundation of Pasadena, California in the United States of America for supporting this project. I also wish to thank Mr. Felix Msamba and Mr. Henry Malunda - former students at the University of Malawi Chancellor College - for proving themselves valuable research assistants, Mr. W. Michala of the Malawi Department of Antiquities for directing the site survey and Mr. M. Zalinga and Mr. A. Topeka also of the Malawi Department of Antiquities for the diagrams and valuable laboratory analysis work respectively. The Government of the Republic of Malawi is appreciated greatly for its continued support of research into Malawi's past.

REFERENCES

- Clark, J.D. 1974.- *Kalambo Falls prehistoric site, Vol.II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Juwayeyi, Y.M. 1981.- *The Later Prehistory of Southern Malawi : A contribution to the study of Technology and Economy During the Later Stone Age and Iron Age Periods*. University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor.
- Mgomezulu, G.G.Y. 1978.- *Food Production : Its beginnings In The Linthipe/Changoni Area of Dedza District, Malawi*. University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor.
- Miller, S.F. 1969.- *The Nachikufan Industries of the Late Stone Age in Zambia*. Unpublished doctoral thesis in Anthropology. University of California, Berkeley.
- Phillipson, D.W. 1976.- *The Prehistory of eastern Zambia*, British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi.
- 1977.- *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*. Heinemann, London.
- Pike, J.G. and Rimmington J.T. 1965.- *Malawi : A Geographical study*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Sandelowsky, B.H. 1972.- *Later Stone Age Lithic Assemblages from Malawi and their Technologies*. Unpublished doctoral thesis in Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.