

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE FOR EVIDENCE OF EARLY MAN IN THE VICTORIA FALLS AREA, ZAMBIA

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Introduction

An idea to write up an Interpretative Guide to the Victoria Falls and its environs was mooted in 1987 by a Zambian-based International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Consultant (through the National Conservation Secretariat) and the National Monuments Commission of Zambia. The project known as the Victoria Falls Archaeological Research Project (VFARP) is an exercise to be undertaken on behalf of the Victoria Falls National Park Management. Once the project is completed, it is intended to serve visitors to the Victoria Falls, both zambian and foreign with at least secondary school education, in providing concise, readable, and factual material on the famous Victoria Falls.

The VFARP overseers emphasised that presentation of data should be highly attractive to the tourist and that written presentations should be interesting, relevant and factually correct. Besides archaeology, other scientific disciplines were proposed to be part of the Guide to make it more interesting. The following scientific disciplines are intended to form part of the Guide : Geology, Vegetation, Mammals, Reptiles, Birds, Insect, Fish. Study of modern humans and modern art and culture. The conclusion will include a look at the future and tourist attractions in the area. It has also been emphasised that discussion of these topics and themes should not be confined to Zambia alone but should be extended to Zimbabwe as well in order to achieve acknowledge the existence of tourist attractions on the Zimbabwean side of the Victoria Falls.

This writer was assigned with the topic dealing with early man in the Victoria Falls area starting from about 2.0 million years ago to the beginning of the Christian era.

Fieldwork

To be able to undertake the assignment of writing an Interpretative Guide to the Victoria Falls area, we had to first of all locate and investigate all archaeological sites in the area and study their surface contents and the nature of the landscape. Once such data become known, it would then become possible to determine how early man in the Victoria Falls area utilised and adapted to the local environment.

The fieldcrew employed a four-wheeled Land Rover to locate archaeological sites in an area more than twenty kilometres in diameter. It was not possible to locate all existing sites in the area above the Victoria Falls because of dense vegetation. However, we were able to visit two gravel sites earlier discovered by Professor J. Desmond Clark and staff of the National Monuments Commission. These sites contain distinct clusters of stone artefacts which largely include implements of Middle Stone Age.

Below the Victoria Falls, along the gorges, we found several sites located on river terraces. The Zambezi river terraces are covered with gravels

which contain large numbers of stone artefacts. The most notable sites that are most accessible to tourists are located at the present Falls (which has been in existence during the last 10,000 years), third, fourth and Songwe gorges. The Songwe Gorge archaeological site has been declared a national monument. The most characteristic tools at these sites are those of Middle Stone Age type.

Finds

J. Desmond Clark has provided a cultural sequence of Stone Age industries of the Victoria Falls area in his book "The Stone Age Cultures of Northern Rhodesia" published in 1950. His archaeological investigations in the area have provided us with a clear picture of early man's occupation of the Victoria Falls region. His small excavation at the Eastern Cataract of the present falls in the late 1940s provides the best example of a cultural sequence, and evidence of technological changes that took place during the long span of man's occupation of the area. The excavation provides a long cultural sequence spanning the last 1.5 million years and exposes evidence of the earliest stone tools made in Zambia which remain preserved in situ up to the present day. Because of the extra-ordinary beauty of the excavation and the associated finds, the Stone Age site which is located only about 50 metres away from the Victoria Falls presently serves as a Field Museum under the management of the National Monuments Commission.

The oldest stone tools found at the Victoria Falls site include handaxes, cleavers, picks and several types of flakes. Since the excavation did not reach bedrock, there is a good chance that further excavation would reveal even older tools that may be characteristic of the oldowan industry. Until we have been able to recover oldowan tools, we cannot be too sure of when early man at the falls became a tool maker. We can only speculate that tool making passed through several technological stages some of which may have involved use of tools by early man for an immediate purpose to those he made for a specific purpose. There is also a very strong possibility that he used tools that cannot be identified as such for a considerable period of time before they came to be identified as tools.

Early man in the Victoria Falls area used locally available stone which consist of chalcedony, basalt, lava and agate in the manufacture of stone tools. These rock types occur in large quantities in the area and must have been readily obtained to be used as raw material in the manufacture of a wide range of stone implements. Hand axes, cleavers, picks and other tool types were made on these rock types. These tools mark a cultural stage when early man specialised in the manufacture and use of large tools. The Acheulian industrial stage which marks this stage was succeeded by one with smaller and more pointed tools with a more complex and greater variety of stone artefacts. This decrease in tool size and refinement in tool-making continued to be practised through time up until stone age man disappeared from the area.

Discussion

The most interesting observation about the location of archaeological sites in the Victoria Falls area is that prehistoric man seems to have situated his camps by the edge of the retreating falls and the gorges. There are so far four well known sites that are located just a few metres away from either the existing Victoria Falls or the abandoned fall-lines. There is the Vic-

toria Falls Field Museum archaeological site and those at the third, fourth and Songwe gorges which were located in close proximity with water-falls. It is indeed obvious that prehistoric man enjoyed viewing the spectacular mist arising above the falls just in the same way as modern man does. Standing at the Field Museum today enables modern man a greater enhancement of the beauty of the falls in the same way prehistoric man did.

Future research

The Livingstone Museum is currently offering facilities for archaeological research to two Research Affiliates, Drs Nick Toth and Kathy Schick, of Indiana University, Bloomington, U.S.A. They are in Zambia (January - August 1988) to undertake collaborative research with the staff of the Livingstone Museum in Palaeolithic Archaeology. Among several research programmes that they wish to undertake while in Zambia is an excavation of a Palaeolithic site at the Victoria Falls, next to the existing Victoria Falls Field Museum. The main purpose of the excavation is to establish the cultural sequence, obtain samples for dating and pollen spores for reconstructing the local vegetation and to use the excavation for educating the public in the study of archaeology. Up until now, we do not know the age of the industries that have been identified in the area or the nature of environment in which prehistoric man lived.

The reexcavation of the Victoria falls archaeological site starts in April and should be completed in August. The principal investigators are Dr Musonda of the Livingstone Museum, and Drs Toth and Schick of Indiana University. Funding is to be provided by the two institutions. Excavated finds will be analysed and stored at the Livingstone Museum. Publication of results will be in the Zambia Museums Journal.