

Berichte und Kommentare

Graeco-Roman Trade Link and the Bantu Migration Theory

Felix A. Chami

Introduction

This paper synthesises two aspects of eastern and southern African later prehistoric scholarship which have, hitherto, been treated separately. The first is the spread of the Early Iron Working (EIW) cultural tradition. The second is the classical trade to East Africa (Azania). These two aspects occurred at the same time between 200 B.C. and A.D. 400.

The archaeological sites of early farming and iron using communities scattered over the eastern, central, and southern Africa have, hitherto, been recognised as of EIW Industrial Complex (Soper 1971; Phillipson 1976, 1993). The EIW people are also thought to have introduced iron technology and bevelled/fluted pottery to the general region (Phillipson 1993). One of the major preoccupation of the scholars dealing with the archaeology of EIW period was to try to explain how the tradition spread over the larger region of the sub-Saharan Africa.¹ Their explanation has been predicated on the theory of population movement.

The classical trade to Azania is documented in "Periplus Maris Erythraei" (A.D. 40–70) and in Ptolemy's "Geography" (A.D. 2nd–3rd centuries) (Freeman-Grenville 1975; Huntingford 1980; Casson 1989). Coins of classical times found in non-archaeological contexts have also been used as evidence of the ancient trade (Sheriff 1981; Chami and Msemwa 1997). Only recently has the first incontrovertible evidence from the archaeological context been recovered (Chami 1998; Chami and Msemwa 1997; Chami and Mapunda 1997).

It is puzzling that there has not been any attempt to relate the archaeology of the EIW communities

and the scholarship of the classical trade to Azania. The EIW communities have been seen as of hinterland Bantu speakers (Soper 1982; Phillipson 1993), more adapted to the wetter and forest areas (Vansina 1994–95), hence Mwitum tradition (see Schmidt 1988). The classical trade was conceptualised to belong to Cushitic speakers, people adapted to the drier zone of the Horn of Africa and the Rift Valley, and pastoral in nature (Horton 1990; Sutton 1994–95b). This dichotomy has rendered futile all attempts to understand the nature and the economy of the early farming and iron using communities of the region. This paper presents the first attempt to break away from this disjointed scholarship. The communities of Azania and those of the EIW tradition are seen as belonging to one and same people. Trade routes facilitated the spread of the EIW tradition. Before this synthesis is attempted, the two disjointed scholarships are summarised below.

EIW Bantu Migration Theory

It was recognised from the first half of this century that most of the people occupying the southern half of the African continent spoke similar languages that came to be labelled Bantu. A review of speculations and hypotheses developed from the 1940s onwards about the spread of Bantu speakers on the African subcontinent has been provided in several publications including Phillipson (1993) and Sutton (1994–95a).

A linguistic theory suggested the Congo-Niger region as the origin of Bantu speakers. From there they first occupied the Congo forest before spreading to the rest of the subcontinent. An establishment of the second nucleus zone at the Katanga copper belt area suggested that the movement had two stages, the early one being that of conquer-

1 Huffman 1970; Phillipson 1976; Collett 1982; Soper 1982.