

Buganda: unearthing an African kingdom

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Buganda was the foremost kingdom of the Great Lakes region of Africa by the time European explorers encountered it in the late nineteenth century, but little is known of its archaeological past. Since 2000 a team from the Institute, working with colleagues in Uganda, have been carrying out a programme of archaeological survey and excavation to investigate Buganda's past and have communicated their findings locally by means of museum displays and a travelling exhibition.

When the British explorers Speke and Stanley first reached Buganda (Fig. 1),¹ it was already a highly centralized state, with a king based in a frequently shifting capital of great size, and with regional governors extending his authority over an extensive territory and large population. More importantly, Buganda was expanding. Its armies harassed marginal areas that failed to acknowledge the king's power, and its navies controlled trade on Nalubaale (Lake Victoria). In 1894 the British imposed a protectorate, which was established and maintained throughout Uganda largely by expanding Buganda's influence. As a result of the dominance of Buganda, historians assiduously recorded royal oral traditions that promoted its legitimacy, but they did not examine critically how the history of the kingdom was constructed. The oral traditions suggested that the kingdom originated in the mid-second millennium AD and had been founded when a stranger called Kintu appeared and declared himself king.² It was not until the eighteenth century that the kingdom began to expand dramatically.

The little archaeological work done in the past in Buganda was largely accidental, often carried out in response to material unearthed by construction work or by interested amateurs at weekends. It was very limited in scope, had no access to radiocarbon dating and could not effectively define the cultural associations of the material found. In Uganda today, the popular notion of the archaeology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Buganda focuses on a single location, the Kasubi tombs, on the outskirts of Kampala, where the last four kings of Buganda were buried.³ The immense central structure (Fig. 2) gives an impression of the appearance of the royal capital, which would have contained hundreds of such structures. However, by focusing on the twentieth-century royal tombs, the origins and development of the kingdom as a whole are ignored, and the unwitting equation of archaeology with royalty and elites alienates people from their own local archaeology.

Developing a new research strategy

In an attempt to develop archaeology in Buganda, a new project was begun in 2000.⁴ Its main aims were to achieve a broader understanding of Buganda's past by exploring its archaeology more systematically, and to make the new information acquired accessible within Uganda. The first requirement was for a programme of archaeological survey. However, surveying is not an easy task. The northwestern shores of Lake Victoria straddle the equator and are extremely wet. Average annual rainfall exceeds 2 m and are dominated by

rainforest – a combination that promotes rapid soil formation and, when trees are uprooted, the mixing of soil horizons. Nevertheless, in eight surveys across the region we have recorded over 330 archaeological find spots. Unfortunately, most of them consist of only a few pieces of pottery and are in actively cultivated areas, so their archaeological potential is low. More recently we have searched for places where exposures of soil sections (in road cuts, erosion gullies or areas of sand mining) may reveal undisturbed deposits. This has confirmed the inadequacy of surface survey alone as a method of site detection. The low density of the archaeological materials encountered also suggests that human habitation in the region has always been dispersed and shortlived. However, despite these difficulties, we have gained new insights into several facets of Buganda's archaeological record, which have enabled us to re-evaluate how the kingdom emerged and to improve on the known oral histories. These new insights are developed in the rest of this article in relation to various aspects of material culture.



Figure 1 Buganda, showing the location of towns and archaeological sites mentioned in the text.



Figure 2 The main structure at Kasubi containing the tombs of the last four kings of Buganda.

Ceramics and early settlement

Although we recorded many find spots, preservation of archaeological materials was poor. Sites generally contain only pottery and occasionally waste from iron smelting. Iron objects seldom survive, bone is not preserved, and there is no evidence of structural features. Consequently, much of the discussion of the earlier farming societies focused on the nature and significance of ceramics. We found the ceramic type known as Urewe pottery in almost all the areas we surveyed. It had previously been found throughout the Great Lakes region and is associated with the earliest farmers of the area, whose settlements date to between about 500 BC and AD 1000.⁵ The presence of Urewe pottery throughout Buganda, albeit in small quantities, implies that agricultural systems developed gradually over a long period. This led ultimately to the characteristic banana-plantation agriculture on which Buganda's economy was based. Bananas became the staple food of the entire society, and their transformation from a minor non-indigenous fruit, grown on the margins of agricultural plots, into a staple crop must have been a gradual process.⁶

Towards the end of the first millennium AD several new varieties of pottery began to be produced. Urewe pottery was very carefully made and extremely neat in its finish, but pottery found at sites such as Sanzi and Lutoboka (Fig. 1) is much less carefully finished and often more simply decorated. These pottery assemblages are related to Urewe, with some decorative themes persisting but also with new themes developing. There are also some similarities between this material and Entebbe pottery, a ceramic type defined only very poorly in 1960.⁷ Then, the great time depth of later African archaeology was not recognized and Entebbe pottery was believed to be only 200 years old. Our research has shown it to be at least 600 years old, and probably older, which effectively moves it from the time of the kingdoms into the period before their emergence. Entebbe pottery is particularly significant because it incorporates both roulette decoration – produced by knotted or twisted fibre, or carved wood, being rolled over a pot's surface – and decorative motifs from Urewe pottery, and thus suggests a bridge between the two seemingly unrelated traditions.

Social transformation and Lake Victoria

These various ceramic traditions are important to the history of Buganda because they signify cultural transformations that were taking place in the period immediately prior to the emergence of the kingdom. Moreover, these types of pottery are found only on the islands and shores of Lake Victoria (no farther than 5 km from the lake edge). This suggests that the lake was an extremely important medium for

cultural interaction, and not the barrier it has been assumed to be since the formation of national territories in the twentieth century. Indeed, Ceri Ashley, who is studying the pottery as part of her doctoral research at the Institute of Archaeology, has now found Entebbe pottery from near Kisumu among the collections of the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi. This shows that such pottery spread around the northern shores and islands of the lake and is to be found in an area stretching from Kisumu in the east to Masaka in the west. These sites appear to have been part of a broader trading system. At Malanga-Lweru on Bugala Island (Fig. 1), four glass beads were recovered in excavations. They probably came from trading communities on the coast of the Indian Ocean, but they can be more immediately linked to similar material found at large sites excavated in the grasslands of western Uganda.⁸ The presence of glass beads at Malanga-Lweru suggests that the lake was not peripheral to, but an integral part of, the economic and political transformations that took place in the region from the late first millennium AD onwards. They represent an important period in which fishing (as a source of protein) and other activities on the lake became intertwined with inland agricultural (carbohydrate-rich) production in a successful combination that was one of the key features of the resultant kingdom of Buganda.

An insight into the sociopolitical transformation that led to the emergence of the kingdom comes from our discovery that the ceramics found at such sites as Sanzi and Lutoboka are related to those found associated with two enigmatic items of art previously believed to be about 200 years old: the Luzira head and the Entebbe figurine. The former (Fig. 3) is one of several terracotta figurine fragments recovered by colonial prison labourers in 1929 and handed to the British Museum in 1931.⁹ These figures are culturally distinct and highly stylized. The Entebbe figurine, which was recovered during building work at the headquarters of the Uganda Geological Survey in 1964, appears to embody both male and female sexuality.¹⁰ We have been able to show that these figures date to the later part of the first millennium AD, which suggests that new value systems were being promoted within society. The figurines coincide with a possible decline in the symbolic significance of pottery. These changes take place as new forms of personal power over wealth and health begin to characterize political leadership, with a shift in emphasis to individuals and parts of the body.¹¹

In addition to the importance of activities on the lake, more local use of the landscape is suggested by rock carvings. They are pecked into smooth exposures of rock on the grassy tops and upper slopes of hills (Fig. 4). They take various forms: short rows of shallow cup-shape hollows (which



Figure 3 *The Luzira head, one of several terracotta figurine fragments found at the Luzira prison near Kampala in 1929, now in the British Museum; museum accession number AF 1931, 0105.0014.*

functioned as gaming boards), deeper holes, grinding hollows, ground grooves and very occasionally incised abstract images. Dating these carvings is very difficult, but in a huge expanse of grass-covered hillside at Sanzi the grinding hollows are all concentrated near the late first-millennium AD archaeological site, in the forest immediately below the grassland, suggesting that the inhabitants of the site carried out the grinding operations. This in turn raises intriguing questions about the local economy, because, if agricultural products were being ground, it is likely that grain crops such as finger millet and sorghum, rather than bananas, were being cultivated.



Figure 4 *Cleaning engraved gaming boards at Namagolola, Ssi-Bukunja Sub-County, August 2002.*



Figure 5 Recording a large iron-slag cluster at Kinanisi, July 2003.

In contrast to the grinding hollows in the forest, the gaming boards at Sanzi are spread across the grass-covered hillside. They were almost certainly used to play *omweso*, a tactical counting game that is also played on wooden boards, and may well have been made by herdsmen. The grass-covered hills were (and still are) an important source of pasture that allowed livestock to stay clear of the unhealthy tsetse-infested forest during the day. In our excavations at Sanzi the only animal remains recovered were a few cattle teeth. They were dated by the radiocarbon method to the late first millennium AD and provide the earliest evidence for cattle on the northwestern shores of the lake. The hilltops are also sources of iron ore, which often occurs in rock outcrops just below the plateau edge.

Technology, mining and the kingdom

Although we encountered a small amount of metallurgical (mainly iron) waste at early sites such as Sanzi, iron-smelting waste forms the largest category of evidence for the kingdom itself in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is surprising, because until recently historians had either assumed that Buganda acquired iron through trade and did not produce it, or they simply ignored the issue. But, it is obvious that in order to support large military expeditions, to protect territory gained, and to provide the iron tools needed for clearing agricultural land and for pruning banana plants, large quantities of iron would have been needed.¹² It is not surprising, therefore, that a primary goal of territorial expansion in the eighteenth century was the control of iron production.

Our archaeological surveys found much evidence of iron production both east and west of the core area of the kingdom (which

lay immediately west of present-day Kampala). In some places there are huge concentrations of waste. At one site, Kinanisi (Fig. 1), large blocks of slag, some weighing almost 200 kg, are distributed across a hillside (Fig. 5). Each block would have been produced by a single smelting operation, and the fact that we found several hundred at Kinanisi shows that iron was produced intensively there. Furthermore, the blocks of slag, each of which would have formed in a pit below a furnace, are in pronounced clusters, which may imply that production was organized around the compounds of important individuals. In 2003 we began to investigate iron production by obtaining samples from the blocks to study both the chemical composition of the slag and evidence of plants used in the production process. Each block bears impressions that can reveal the kinds of plants that were used to fill the pit and to support the processes taking place above in the active furnace. When slag dripped into the pit, it moulded itself around some of the plant material before burning off the remainder and cooling, and subsequent intrusions of slag penetrated into cavities left by the burnt plants. In this way, both negative and positive plant impressions were formed. Preliminary inspection of casts of the impressions reveals a preference for papyrus in the western smelting areas and for various other kinds of reed to the east. In a few exceptional cases there is evidence of banana pseudostems having been used. Although little more than a hundred years old, this is the earliest archaeological evidence of bananas so far discovered in the region.

We also found evidence of mine shafts, two sets of which, consisting in total of several hundred shafts, are currently known, at Tanda and Kako (Fig. 1). Early colonial mineral prospectation at Tanda had found that the shafts are up to 10 m deep and were

dug to exploit kaolinite, known locally as *enoni*. At Tanda the shafts have become important shrines to Walumbe, the death spirit. Investigations in 2003 confirmed that the shafts at Kako were also used to exploit kaolinite. Both sets of shafts imply labour-intensive production of the mineral on a large scale. Their use may date from the eighteenth century when Buganda expanded into these western areas. However, it is unclear what the kaolinite was used for. Kingdoms farther west used it as a source of white pigment for painting walls and other surfaces, but there is no tradition of this practice in Buganda. The only present-day use of kaolinite in Buganda is as a medicine that soothes, calms and quietens. It is occasionally used to counter indigestion, and is also said to have been given to people awaiting execution, to calm their subsequently released spirits and prevent the spirits attacking the king.

Archaeology of the colonial period

The archaeological record revealed by our surveys continues into the twentieth century. In eastern areas near the lake we found pottery of a distinctive type, characterized by thin-walled vessels with pronounced horizontal rims and a dimple decoration on the walls made by impressing two pointed stones held between the thumb and forefinger (Fig. 6). Previous ethnographic work, and meetings with potters still living in the area today, indicate that this pottery is typical of the Bavuma, the inhabitants of the Buvuma islands near the mouth of the Nile (Fig. 1).¹³ The Bavuma were semi-autonomous during the nineteenth century and even disrupted Buganda's control of trade on the lake. However, in the early twentieth century all the islands and shorelines of the lake were forcibly abandoned, at the behest of British



Figure 6 The stone-impressed decorative technique demonstrated by Mzee Yosefu Wassawa Mutunda, Ngogwe Sub-County, August 2000.



Figure 7 Rosette Mulinde with children from Luka Primary School, near Kinanisi.

colonial authorities, to counter an epidemic of sleeping sickness. Bavuma families were forcibly settled in the Bukunja interior, particularly around Kinanisi, and this movement is evident from the recovery of the stone-impressed pottery. But there was some resistance to this resettlement. At Namusenyu (Fig. 1) a secluded rockshelter very close to the lake edge has extensive deposits that contain stone-impressed pottery, fishbones and fragments of fishing nets. Of particular note is a piece of obsidian, possibly a scraper tool. The nearest sources of obsidian are in the central rift valley in Kenya and in the western rift in southwestern Uganda. There is at present no evidence for the exploitation of the latter source, whereas obsidian from the former spread as far west as the Kenyan shores of Lake Victoria.¹⁴ The presence at Namusenyu of a single piece of obsidian in a twentieth-century context suggests that Bavuma sailors maintained direct contact with distant parts of the lake, enabling such novel material to be collected or obtained through trade.

It is also important to emphasize the potential contribution that archaeology can make to the investigation of historical structures, such as the hilltop residences of chiefs, the layout of which enforced their authority and included features such as elevated verandas from which they could address their underlings. Europeans also used the construction of space to define control of the land. At Dekanyiza, north-east of Masaka (Fig. 1), we recorded the house of a tea-estate owner with its carefully laid-out gardens, which still contain some of the original exotic, introduced plants. These gardens, with their hilltop view extending over the plains eastwards to Lake Victoria, create powerful images of the control and domestication of the African landscape that were central to colonial notions of authority.

Bringing archaeology to the public

Our project has demonstrated a range of archaeological studies that can lead to a deeper understanding of the long-term history of Buganda, despite the problems of poor preservation and threats to the survival of primary archaeological data from construction work, especially in and around Kampala. There is also an acute need to develop effective heritage-management strategies¹⁵ and to disseminate the results of archaeological research. This last need has led us to present our results from successive seasons in temporary displays in the Uganda Museum. A central attraction there has been a 150kg block of slag from Kinanisi, known affectionately as the "Mother of all Slags". As the museum hosts hundreds of schoolchildren every week, this is an effective means of communication. However, we have worked in some very remote places where schools do not have the resources to visit Kampala. So, in 2003 we created a travelling exhibition, with texts in English and Luganda. Schools and members of the public visited the display and were conducted around by our Luganda-speaking Ugandan students (Fig. 7). In these rural areas, with almost no educational resources, the exhibition was tremendously popular and it demonstrated that bringing archaeology to the public in this way can have great relevance for a developing nation such as Uganda.

Notes

1. John Hanning Speke reached Buganda in 1862 while searching for the source of the Nile, and Henry Morton Stanley stayed at the court of the king in 1875 during his circumnavigation of Lake Victoria.
2. See pp. 94–6 in M. S. M. Kiwanuka, *A history of Buganda* (London: Longman, 1971).
3. In 2001 the Kasubi tombs became Uganda's first cultural World Heritage Site (and see Henry Cleere's article on pp. 48–52 in this issue of *AI*).

4. The project has been run in conjunction with the British Institute in Eastern Africa and the Uganda Department of Antiquities and Museums. It incorporates students from UCL, other British institutions and Kyambogo University. Funding for the project has come from the British Institute in Eastern Africa and the British Academy.
5. M-C. Van Grunderbeek: "Essai d'étude typologique de céramique Urewe de la région des collines au Burundi et Rwanda", *Azania* 23, 11–55, 1988; "Chronologie de l'âge du fer ancien au Burundi, au Rwanda et dans la région des Grands Lacs", *Azania* 27, 53–80, 1992.
6. See D. L. Schoenbrun, "Cattle herds and banana gardens: the historical geography of the western Great Lakes region c. AD 800–1500", *African Archaeological Review* 11, 39–72, 1993.
7. R. M. Brachi, "Excavation of a rock shelter at Hippo Bay cave", *Uganda Journal* 26, 62–71, 1960.
8. P. T. Robertshaw, "Munsa earthworks: a preliminary report on recent excavations", *Azania* 32, 1–20, 1997; A. Reid, "Ntusi and the development of social complexity in southern Uganda", in *Aspects of African archaeology*, G. Pwiti & R. Soper (eds), 621–8 (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Press, 1996).
9. E. J. Wayland, M. C. Burkitt, H. J. Braunschultz, "Archaeological discoveries at Luzira", *Man* 33, 29–47, 1933.
10. M. Posnansky & J. H. Chaplin, "Terracotta figurines from Entebbe, Uganda", *Man* 3, 644–50, 1968.
11. See pp. 176–206 in D. L. Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place: a social history of the Great Lakes region, earliest times to the 15th century* (London: Heinemann, 1998).
12. See pp. 77–9 in R. Reid, *Political power in pre-colonial Buganda* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).
13. See E. Benjamin, "Ethnoarchaeological study of pottery in Buganda, Uganda", BA research essay, Institute of Archaeology, University College London, 2001; A. Joyce, "A characterization of the pottery repertoire from the rock shelter site of Namusenyu, Lake Victoria, Uganda and its regional implications", BA research essay, Institute of Archaeology, University College London, 2003; J. Jensen, "Topperei und Topperwaren auf Buvuma (Uganda)", *Baessler-Archiv* 17, 53–81, 1969.
14. P. T. Robertshaw, D. Collett, D. Gifford, N. B. Mbae, "Shell middens on the shores of Lake Victoria", *Azania* 18, 1–44, 1983.
15. A. Reid, "Recent archaeological research in Buganda and its implications for heritage management policies", *Uganda Journal* 48, 87–102, 2002.