**Wealth and things: the view from the coast**

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Complex interaction networks characterize the southern African Iron Age, with rich and powerful centres managing long-distance connections. This paper gives a wonderful insight into the diversity and scale of this connected world. Trade with Swahili towns of the Indian Ocean coast is indicated by the glass beads and – later – ceramics that were brought to sites of the interior. In both places, this contact has been seen as crucial to the process of elite distinction, as control over trade inside and outside Africa has been strongly emphasized as a mechanism for social advancement. Klehm makes this connection in her opening sentences.

Yet, the process of elite advancement and its connection to material goods was not straightforward, either on the coast or in the southern African interior. Like many Africanists, Klehm finds inspiration for understanding local power strategies in the notion of composition (Guyer and Belinga 1995; see Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010), the gathering-together of knowledge and skills by leaders and would-be leaders. This is often known as wealth-in-people, or more precisely wealth-in-knowledge (bringing together a pool of competencies) and contrasted with the idea of wealth-in-things, or material accumulation.

The paradox for archaeologists is that it is precisely through things that we know about past societies and peoples, and through which we might recognize strategies of composition in the past. Here I want to pick up on the theme of material patterning by introducing some of the ways that objects have been analysed on the Swahili coast. Africa’s eastern coastline is undoubtedly the conduit through which beads and objects of Middle Eastern and Asian origin reached southern Africa, and the towns of that coast were deeply connected to the world of Islamic trade (Wynne-Jones and LaViolette 2017). Yet it would be wrong to assume that people’s relationships with material wealth and commodity trade somehow became complex as those goods moved inland; Swahili societies valued and managed trade in some very particular ways as well. In recent years archaeologists of the coast have stressed similar themes to those raised by Klehm, understanding that foreign objects were not simply valuable in and of themselves. Instead, Swahili people were active consumers, demanding particular goods for particular purposes and manipulating both internal and external markets based on their own priorities. One route to exploring this is through a focus on the ways objects were *used*, how they were bound up into certain practices, and thus how they can inform on the ways that social relations – including power relations – were enacted (Wynne-Jones 2016).

Perhaps the most obvious category of objects through which to think about use and consumption is the rich record of ceramics. There is no mention in Klehm’s paper of what Toutswe or Lose ceramics were used for, and whether these functions might hold a clue to their differing distributions. In eastern Africa, for example, reconsideration of ceramic traditions has pointed to shared and exclusive practices as part of community and elite strategies. The earliest levels of coastal towns are characterized by a shared ceramic tradition which is also common on contemporary sites inland; it is known variously as Early Tana Tradition (Horton 1996) or Triangular-Incised Ware (Chami 1994). Recent reanalysis of these ceramics linked regional patterning to practices of group consumption within coastal and hinterland communities, which might have served to cement social relationships, possibly through the drinking of beer (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2011). A contemporary tradition of burnished bowls was found only in the coastal assemblages, and this suggests more individualized modes of serving food among coastal groups even from this early date, prefiguring a form of specialized consumption that became important in negotiating elite status in later centuries (Wynne-Jones 2016: 150-1).

By the second millennium CE, coastal sites contained distinctive traditions of decorated bowls. Forms of individual consumption seem then to have been important to coastal society and identity. Smaller assemblages of these bowls found at hinterland sites might represent strategic and occasional participation in these forms of consumption by groups outside the town, possibly as part of the ways urban-rural relationships were formed. Finds of ‘Husuni Modelled Ware’, a high-status ceramic linked to the grand houses of Kilwa Kisiwani, were made at a modest site of the near hinterland, and interpreted in this way (Wynne-Jones 2007). Assemblages of Toutswe and Lose ceramics discussed in Klehm’s paper are confusing if interpreted as linked to ethnicity or identity. Perhaps thinking through the ways they might have been used, and how and why those practices might be shared with particular partners, might offer some avenues to exploring both their differential distribution and their coexistence in mingled deposits.

Imported goods, too, might be considered via their uses within society. On the coast, imported glazed ceramics seem to have been bound up into activities of feasting and display (Fleisher 2010), practices which brought social capital. Imported ceramics were thus not simply acquired by existing elite groups, but their acquisition was part of a strategy that led to elite status. Cloth and beads, items more commonly passed on to the sites of the interior, might also be viewed as part of the practices by which status was negotiated. They were obviously valued as objects of exchange and as powerful gifts for redistribution, indexical of connections to foreign worlds. Yet these objects too might have been valued because they fitted into existing practices of display.

In this, the material discussed by Klehm is more persuasive than the coastal record. On the Indian Ocean coast, imported glass beads overshadowed production of local shell beads by the end of the first millennium CE. Yet in Klehm’s assemblages, glass beads exist alongside those of shell and – particularly – of metal, evocative of their role as simply one part of the repertoire by which past groups displayed their wealth. Imported beads might have been attractive precisely because they contributed to these practices. Imported ceramics were less important in this context. As with other types of object, practices of display involving beads might have contributed to the formation of elites, rather than simply signaling their presence, as suggested by Sinclair et el. (2012) from the evidence at Chibuene, where the channeling of large quantities of glass beads into the southern African interior seems to have preceded significant evidence for the presence of hierarchy.

This paper evokes a world of trade and social connection in the southern African Iron Age that we are only beginning to understand. Overlapping material patterns of locally-produced and imported materials are used by Klehm to point to a polycentric world of sites and people, united through specific and strategic links in particular and non-exclusive ways. This world complicates the notion that elite status was centralized, static, or linked to particular objects. Instead, we see a network of people using objects and settings to negotiate status at different times and places. From the perspective of Swahili archaeology, the ways that imported goods can be seen so clearly to mesh into value systems alongside regional products such as metals, is wonderful for thinking through the ways that value was assigned. The coastal experience, exploring why particular material forms were produced or procured, and how they were used, might in turn contribute to understanding this wealth of things across the southern African interior.

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