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Connecting the Dots: Ceramics and the Creation of Foundational Narratives in East African Archaeology

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In the 1979 edition of *Azania*, a brief note by David Phillipson reports “some Iron Age sites in the lower Tana Valley” in Kenya. The survey covered by this paper occupies a line in his autobiographical account, in which he refers to sites in the Tana Valley, including Wenje, which contained a type of ceramics referred to by the author as “Wenje ware.” These ceramics came to be known as Early Tana Tradition, Triangular-Incised Ware, or some combination thereof (ETT/TIW; see Horton & Chami, 2018). This type of ceramic is well known by those who work on the East African coast and connected sites of the mainland. It is diagnostic of the later first millennium AD across the region and provides an important and fascinating point of commonality between sites of very different types and sizes. My own work has explored ETT/TIW in various contexts, establishing patterns of manufacturing and use for these ceramics as a means of understanding regional connectivity and chronology (e.g., Fleisher & Wynne-Jones, 2011).

It is typical of Phillipson’s approach to the archaeological record that he was the first to draw attention to similarities between ceramics at Wenje and

those found elsewhere in the region. In conversation many years later, as we discussed the nature and meaning of ETT/TIW ceramics, Phillipson also expressed amusement at the fact he is often cited as the first to discover this ceramic group. This response—acknowledging the achievement while being amused that it became significant—is also typical of the narrative we see emerging through Phillipson’s autobiographical account. It relates to a period in the archaeology of Africa when activity was focused on the creation of foundational chronologies and culture histories and speaks of a scholar whose own meticulous approach made an enormous contribution to that endeavor. Yet he often seems surprised that this was so.

The study of ceramics does not loom large in the story that Phillipson presents in this volume. I suspect he has never thought of himself as a ceramics expert. In this autobiographical account, he does not list ceramic technologies in his set of interests in the Early Iron Age, which includes “the first appearance of crop cultivation and the herding of domestic animals, as well as metallurgy”. Yet in much of the work that he completed, particularly during his time in Zambia and at the BIEA in Kenya, the study of ceramics was crucial to the research for which he became known. His book *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*, which formed the basis for the award of his Ph.D., also provided one of the first syntheses of the establishment and nature of the Iron Age (Phillipson, 1977). Ceramic types and

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traditions were central to the ways that past groups were tracked within and across the landscape.

What is notable about Phillipson's books is the way that he has sought to develop a narrative, often drawing on fragmentary and uneven information. The story of his career presented in this volume is varied and wide-ranging, but perhaps not entirely unusual for his generation of Africanist archaeologists. What is unique is the way that he took those experiences and wound them—and the emerging archaeological data on the continent—into an overarching story, attempting to provide a structure through which the African past could be understood. This is seen most completely in the various editions of the comprehensive *African Archaeology* (Phillipson, 2005) but was present in his work throughout.

In *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*, Phillipson tasks the prehistorian with creating a composite picture of the human past, suggesting that data now allow the creation of a “coherent narrative” for this region (p. 21). For the Iron Age, that coherent narrative is produced largely through the comparative analysis of ceramics. Through typological distinctions, he constructs a survey of different Early Iron Age groups and tracks their chronology and regional variations. This model-building tendency is less common in contemporary archaeology, where detailed local and regional studies have replaced the larger constructs, yet we all work within the frame created by Phillipson and his contemporaries as they mapped the contours of the Early and Later Iron Age.

Although Phillipson was often required to work with ceramics as the main evidence for cultural groups, he has always attempted to think of them as part of a broader cultural complex. In several places in his 1977 work, he regrets the lack of much cultural context. He attempts to outline the social aspects of the ceramics groupings also, with subheadings relating to social and political structure, food-producing economy, technology, etc. He tries to move beyond the simplistic equation of ceramics with cultures/peoples, even while he is beholden to ceramic styles for the recognition of groups, streams, and complexes. For example, in describing the transition from Early to Later Iron Age ceramics, he points to a distinctive break in ceramic types, suggesting a significant transition. Rather than necessarily suggesting migration or population

replacement as a mechanism, he suggests instead the possibility of a shift in gendered labor, with pottery production moving from being a male-dominated to a female-dominated craft.

It is therefore not surprising that David Phillipson would have been the first to point out similarities between inland and coastal ceramics of the ninth century—the Wenje ware with which we began this piece. His encyclopedic knowledge of ceramics from across eastern Africa was—and is—difficult to match. He was also a well-practiced synthesizer, adept in drawing connections and patterns across the African past using ceramics as his dataset. In many ways, the study of ETT/TIW ceramics has moved on immensely. They have been recognized in the early levels of multiple sites along the East African coast and far into the hinterland (see overview in Horton & Chami, 2018). Comparative analysis shows that they were being independently produced and used in many locations across a vast area, from Somalia to Mozambique. The focus of my research on these objects is in trying to think about why that might have been the case. An exploration of production and consumption practices in which these ceramics were implicated has much to tell us about the ways that people of the eighth and ninth centuries built communities across large areas in eastern Africa. When Jeff Fleisher and I conducted a study of ETT/TIW ceramics, I sent a draft to Phillipson, who responded with customary insight after careful reading. The work of figuring out the “coherent narrative” that draws new findings and studies together remains an ongoing task for him. Those of us who follow are lucky that this is the case, for we have all benefited from the associations he drew and the framework he supplied by which we could position our own research.

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