
Section II : Tribute and Warfare

ANIMALS AS WEALTH IN THE AFRICAN IRON AGE : THE ORIGINS OF STATUS ?

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Summary

Amongst the zimbabwe societies of central southern Africa, between c. AD 800 and 1500, stock - especially cattle - were a critical means of "signifying social relationships between communities and power over people" (Hall). Archaeozoology shows that cattle provided meat and perhaps secondary products for the zimbabwe elites, with prime meat reserved for the most powerful members of the community. Archaeozoological and other archaeological data also indicate flows of cattle as tribute to the elites not only from within their polities but also from Kalahari pastoralist societies on the periphery of the zimbabwe states. Moreover, there is evidence amongst both the zimbabwe communities and the pastoralist societies that control of stock and "patronage on the hoof", as well as being critical for the maintenance of clientship, may also have been a primary stimulus in the development of social stratification in the first place. These findings may well have relevance to the debate on the development and maintenance of social stratification in prehistoric Europe.

Key Words

Zimbabwe, Africa, Cattle, Tribute, Social Stratification

Introduction

Between about AD 800 and 1500, a series of polities flourished on the central plateau of southern Africa, a region now divided between the modern states of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and South Africa (fig. 1). The principal archaeological monuments they have left behind are the stone enclosures which were their regional political centres, the *zimbabwes* of which Great Zimbabwe is the best known and most elaborate

Résumé

L'animal en tant que richesse durant l'Age du Fer en Afrique : les origines d'une structuration sociale ?

Parmi les sociétés zimbabwe du centre de l'Afrique australe, entre environ 800 et 1500 après J.-C., les troupeaux (en particuliers ceux de bovins) constituaient des supports particulièrement importants pour "la manifestation des relations sociales entre les communautés et le pouvoir" (Hall). L'archéozoologie montre que les bovins fournissaient la viande et peut-être des produits secondaires pour l'élite zimbabwe, la viande de première qualité étant réservée aux membres les plus puissants de la communauté. Associées à d'autres données archéologiques, elles montrent aussi que le flux des bovins donnés comme tribut aux élites ne venait pas seulement de la région contrôlée par ces dernières, mais aussi des sociétés pastorales du Kalahari situées à la périphérie des états zimbabwe. De plus, pour les communautés zimbabwe comme pour les sociétés de pasteurs, il semble que le contrôle des troupeaux et "le droit sur les têtes", ait aussi joué un rôle majeur dans le développement de la stratification sociale, en même temps qu'ils étaient des moyens importants pour entretenir une clientèle. Ces observations pourraient bien être transposables au problème du développement et du maintien de la stratification sociale durant la Préhistoire en Europe.

Mots clés

Zimbabwe, Afrique, Bovins, Tribut, Stratification sociale

(GARLAKE, 1973). The largest centres may have housed populations of several thousands, with the king and his court of high officials and retainers living within the enclosures and the commoners living in densely clustered huts outside. Religious and secular authority appears to have been intermeshed : the enclosures acted as "national spiritual centres" (HUFFMAN, 1981, 1984) where the elites and their spirit mediums mediated between their societies and the hostile natural world, particularly for the procurement of rain.

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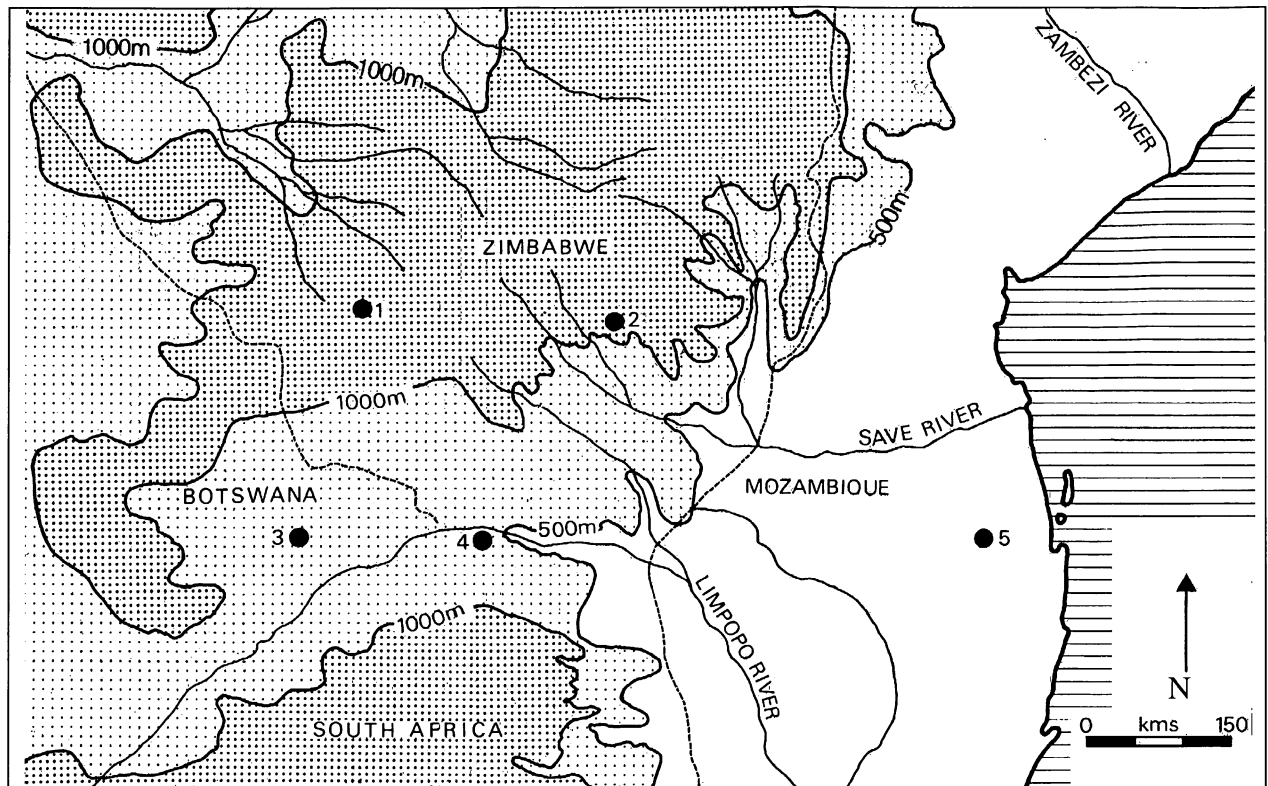


Fig. 1 : Southern Africa between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers, showing the principal sites mentioned in the text.
 1. Khami ; 2. Great Zimbabwe ; 3. Toutswe ; 4. Mapungubwe Hill complex ; 5. Manekweni.

Although the *zimbabwe* state system lasted for several centuries without significant change in structure, its history was characterized by repeated shifts in political control. The focus of power was first in the Limpopo valley, where it was held in turn by three sites between *c.* AD 800 and 1150 (Schroda, K2 and Mapungubwe Hill), then moved north to Great Zimbabwe on the central plateau (AD 1150-1550) and in turn westwards to Khami in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (fig. 1). In its heyday Great Zimbabwe was linked in trade networks with east coast emporia, receiving luxury goods including Persian and Chinese glazed pottery, Near Eastern glass, Cowrie shells, and innumerable glass beads. In return, the *zimbabwe* elites probably sent ivory, cloth, skins, salt, copper and gold (BARKER, 1988).

The basis of subsistence for the *zimbabwe* societies was the cultivation of crops such as millet and sorghum in systems of shifting cultivation and bush fallow much as today. One detailed survey near Harare found that the village sites of the *zimbabwe* period were regularly spaced about two kilometres apart, mainly on isolated

patches of alluvium. The conclusion was that, within the territory of a typical *zimbabwe*, the cultivable land was fully utilized and supported the highest density of subsistence farmers possible on these soils (PRENDERGAST, 1979).

However, stock, and cattle in particular, were a major source of wealth for the *zimbabwe* elites. Cattle bones dominate most *zimbabwe* faunal samples. At Great Zimbabwe itself, for example, the initial analysis of fauna, Brain's study of material from the royal Acropolis (BRAIN, 1974), found that over 98 per cent of the identified bones were of cattle. A more recent analysis of further material from Great Zimbabwe (from four "commoner" areas, a satellite "elite" enclosure, and a midden below the Acropolis) found that all the samples were cattle-dominated with low proportions of small stock (sheep and goats) and game (THORP, 1984a). Similar results were found in material from the Harleigh Farm enclosure and from Khami studied by THORP (1984b) and at Manekweni, a *zimbabwe* on the coastal plain of Mozambique (BARKER, 1978 ; fig. 1).

Thorp has calculated the age of slaughter of these animals using the rates of tooth eruption of unimproved breeds of African cattle today. This study indicates that, at most sites, about a third of the cattle were under 30 months at death and the remainder mature. However, of the cattle represented in the Acropolis midden at Great Zimbabwe, at least 75 per cent were under 30 months at death. At Khami, too, the number of young cattle represented in the midden from the royal quarters was extremely high. At Manekweni, there was further evidence for a clear link between diet and status : cattle made up at least half and probably two thirds of the meat supply in the midden by the central enclosure, whereas sheep/goat and game had increasingly higher frequencies and cattle increasingly lower frequencies in the peripheral middens (BARKER, 1978). It seems likely that the king dined on prime beef, his followers on his offcuts as well as on sheep, goat, and antelope, whereas the commoners living on the edge of the enclosure had to make do on more or less what they could gather by hunting and gathering from the surrounding countryside.

Cattle-keeping and tribute systems

All the samples discussed above are from higher order prestige sites. Faunal assemblages from lower order sites are few, but those that have been studied do not have any preponderance of immature cattle. The very young cattle at Great Zimbabwe and Manekweni cannot represent breeding populations and are presumably animals selected from normal breeding herds for consumption by the elites. As SINCLAIR (1984 : 51) has commented, the clear inference of the disparity between the faunal material from the royal enclosures and the lower order settlements is that the juvenile-dominated samples of cattle from the *zimbabwes* were “the result of appropriation from the rural peasant communities”. Cattle, like gold, was almost certainly a critical item of tribute from the villages to the centres.

GARLAKE (1978) has shown that the plateau ruins can be divided into ten main centres (either single large enclosures or clusters of small enclosures). The division of the plateau into ten territories using Thiessen polygons resulted in a remarkably regular pattern, with each territory having a radius of 65 kilometres (fig. 2). Furthermore, these postulated territories are very similar in terms of the resources they contained : the enclosures themselves are spaced out on the middle veld, with territories reaching above to the high veld and below to

the low veld. A nearest neighbour analysis of all the enclosures by SINCLAIR (1987) indicated an almost identical set of territorial clusterings. Garlake argued that the high and low veld in each territory would have been used as cattle grazing on a seasonal basis. The normal upper limit of tsetse fly infestation is the plateau edge, but seasonal use of the low veld by cattle herders would have been possible (as practised in the last century, for example).

In the Manekweni region of coastal Mozambique, too, in the last century and the recent past cattle had to be moved between the Manekweni area and the well-watered coast in the dry season, and were driven inland in the wet season to avoid tsetse. Manekweni has been convincingly identified by its excavator, Garlake, as the Tonge *zimbabwe* of chief Gambe, who was visited by the Portuguese missionaries Fernandez and Silveira in 1560 (GARLAKE, 1976). They wrote after their visit that the subsistence of the people was based on cultivation : “no man, whatsoever his condition, sets his hand to tilling the fields. The women are the farmers and supply the needs of the household” (DOCUMENTOS, 1971). Around the enclosure there were “many fat cows, but not many goats or sheep”. Most intriguing of all, however, is their comment on Gambe’s cattle : “here there are none because they say there is grass that kills them” (perhaps literally poisonous grass, or poor dry season grazing, or

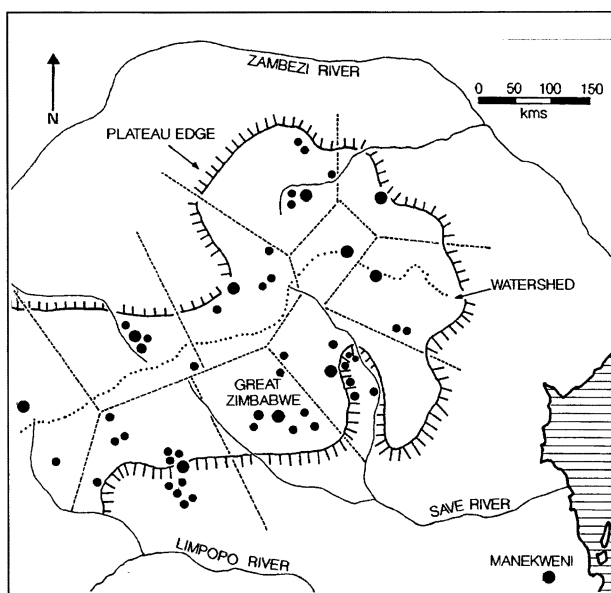


Fig. 2 : The central plateau of Zimbabwe, showing the distribution of zimbabwe enclosures. The large circles mark the ten main centres, and the light dashed lines their territories (Thiessen polygons) (after GARLAKE, 1978).

even tsetse, “*but they are brought here*” (my italics). These comments correlate strikingly with the archaeozoological evidence for the consumption of immature cattle by the elites, which I have interpreted as evidence of cattle being brought as tribute to the *zimbabwe* elites from herds kept elsewhere, and with the hypothesis of shifting systems of pastoralism within each *zimbabwe* territory suggested by the locational studies. Cattle, military service, gold and other forms of tribute flowed inwards to the centres, whilst beads, cloth and other prestige goods moved outwards to regional centres and local chiefs.

The development of the *zimbabwe* system had profound effects on the pastoralist societies of the Kalahari fringe of eastern Botswana (DENBOW, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984 ; fig. 1). Archaeological survey on the ground and air photography have located hundreds of settlement sites here contemporary with the *zimbabwes* (fig. 3). Excavations have found thick silicified dung deposits and faunal samples are dominated by cattle. The indications are of a substantial pastoralist population, with large herds of stock. The sites divide into a settlement hierarchy. In the lowest rank were the majority of sites, each consisting of a shallow kraal or enclosure surrounded by a ring of pole-and-*daga* huts, with adult male burials inside the kraal. In the middle were local centres, ten times larger than the small sites, and at the top were regional centres such as Toutswe

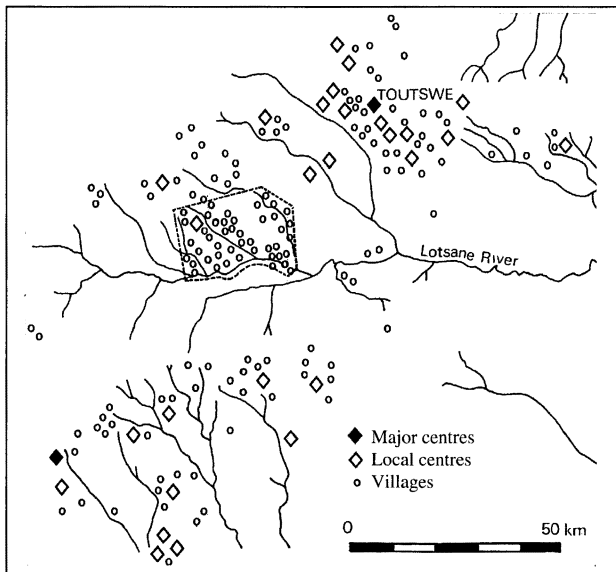


Fig. 3 : “Toutswe Tradition” sites in eastern Botswana. The enclosed area was intensively surveyed, increasing site density (after DENBOW, 1984).

100 kilometres apart with enormous middens ten times the size of those of the local centres. Denbow argues that the small sites were temporary camps for pastoralists who were linked in some kind of tribute relationship to the local centres, and that the large centres were occupied by ruling elites, their followers, and their cattle. Moreover, the Kalahari elites received glass beads, Cowrie shells and cone shells from outside the area. HALL (1987) concludes that the Kalahari elites were probably linked in prestige exchange with the *zimbabwe* elites : “by trading surplus cattle” (to the *zimbabwe* state) “those in power...could ensure a flow of agricultural produce and other essential resources that were difficult to produce in the dry grasslands”.

Pastoralism and the development of social complexity

In addition to maintaining wealth disparities and social hierarchies amongst the complex societies of the African Iron Age, stock - particularly cattle - may well have been a significant factor in creating them in the first place. Early agricultural societies in southern Africa were restricted mainly to forested enclaves best suited to their system of farming, which relied more on crops than animals (HALL, 1987). These societies were linked in systems of balanced reciprocity, so the distribution of resources would have been much as amongst hunter-gatherer societies, with limited opportunities for the accumulation of wealth by particular communities or individuals. During the first millennium AD, however, agricultural settlement expanded to more open ecosystems, a process that led inevitably to the increased importance of stock in the subsistence system.

GIDDENS (1984) has drawn a distinction between “allocative resources” (goods) and “authoritative resources” (power over people) amongst traditional African societies. HALL (1987) suggests that in the process of settlement expansion in the later first millennium AD domestic animals came to represent both “allocative” and “authoritative” resources : “animals rather than ceramics” (came to be used) “as the principal mode of signifying social relationships between communities and power over people”. Thus in the case of the Kalahari, Denbow argues that the rapid colonization of the region by pastoralists c. AD 800 created wealth disparities in herd size, so that the possession of cattle became a primary stimulus to the development of social stratification. In the Limpopo valley, where Mapungubwe Hill developed as the first major *zimbabwe* c.AD 850, the

percentage of domestic animals in the preceding settlements was variable but uniformly low, but after 850 the percentage rose first to 65-75 per cent and then to 80-90 per cent (VOIGT, 1984). At Manekweni, game outnumbered stock in a pre-enclosure deposit, but stock then made up 60-80 per cent of the fauna in the main *zimbabwe* phase. The changing importance of stock in the process of settlement expansion that heralded the development of the complex societies of the *zimbabwes* and their neighbours seems to have been a significant stimulus towards the creation of social relations characterized by unequal reciprocity and the differential accumulation of wealth on the hoof.

The relationship between the development of pastoralism and of social complexity in the African Iron Age may well have relevance to prehistoric Europe. The debate in Europe on the origins of social stratification has tended to focus on the development of the control of material wealth as the primary stimulus. Different models have isolated prestige goods, commodities and, more recently, land or capital investment in land (GILMAN, 1981 ; RENFREW and SHENNAN, 1982). African societies are normally seen as significantly different from European societies (past and present) in the different role of labour in agriculture. In African systems of shifting cultivation and pastoralism, labour rather than technology or land is the critical constraint, whereas in European farming investment in, and control of, land and agricultural technology are critical.

In a recent paper, however, WEBSTER (1990) argues that the control of labour may have been the primary stimulus to stratification in prehistoric Europe. He cites the rich ethnographic evidence in Africa for the link between clientship and power, and suggests that patron-client relationships developed in neolithic Europe, especially in certain high-risk but productive environments, before the development of the differential

control of material wealth : "elites may have emerged as *majorities*, with privilege becoming a perquisite of an elite *minority* only later, when numerical superiority had been replaced by technical, organizational or economic supervision" (WEBSTER, 1990 : 346). A critical factor in the ethnographic African societies cited by Webster in support of his model, but not emphasised explicitly by him, is the link between clientship and animals, especially cattle. Strategies of labour control consisted of expanding the familial labour force and binding the non-kin clientele, but the principal mechanism for this was especially the size of herds - as KUPER (1982 : 10) commented on these societies, "cattle beget children".

In neolithic Britain, one of the societies discussed by Webster, there is increasing evidence for the link between cattle, ritual, and, probably, emergent social status (BARKER, 1985 : 200-1). Cattle were selected to accompany, and sometimes replace, the dead in long barrows. Dumps of cattle bones in the ditches of causewayed enclosures, where frequently there are also human remains, are consistent with other evidence that these sites were centres of community ritual. Size differences in cattle metapodials indicate that most of the animals killed at the enclosures were females, and mortality data show that these animals can only have been a portion of the breeding population, brought for slaughter and consumption at the enclosures from herds kept elsewhere. As Webster argues, the development of clientship in expanded kin groups in neolithic societies may well have preceded major differences in access to prestige goods, ownership of land, and control of technology. However, it also seems increasingly likely that the development of differential access to stock, and the use of stock as both "allocative" and "authoritative" resources to signify changing social relations, may have been amongst the earliest features of stratification in Europe, just as it was in Africa.

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