Book Review


As the title suggests, this is a study of the historical archaeology of northern Zimbabwe, notably that of the kingdom of Mutapa. As defined by Pikirayi, the historical period in this region extends from the late fifteenth century to the present, a period largely covered by written sources and oral tradition. As a contribution to historical archaeology, the study of sites is interpreted with the aid of historical evidence and sites are dated mostly by imported artifacts. From the start, Pikirayi notes the difficulty of reconciling archaeological data with written and other sources, something that he demonstrates in the later part of the book.

This work, as Pikirayi strongly puts it, was necessitated by the need to address an area of study and a period in time that has long been neglected by most scholars. As he correctly states in his introduction, southern Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, is rich in an archaeological heritage of diversified nature and location, yet since the turn of the century there has been a tendency to concentrate research in the middle and the southern part of the country, particularly on the Great Zimbabwe tradition sites and, especially, on the site of Great Zimbabwe itself. So far, the northern part of the country and the historical period have attracted less, and intermittent, attention. It is clear that until recently, many archaeologists regarded historical events as so recent that archaeology was not thought of as the most appropriate means of understanding them. One of Pikirayi's primary goals is to disprove this belief and to show that historical archaeology can be effectively used in reconstructing events in historical periods. In tackling such a subject there is no better case than that of the kingdom of Mutapa, whose authority, extent, and contacts (especially trade), first with the Swahili and later the Portuguese, are widely documented.
Pikirayi's grasp of the problem at hand is beyond doubt, and his ability to handle enormous amounts of artifactual evidence, written sources, oral tradition, both local and imported goods, and other chronological information is commendable. Combining, among other things, physiographical, archaeological, and historical data, he is able to come up with useful information on state developments in northern Zimbabwe, and the origins, development, and subsequent collapse of the kingdom of Mutapa form the core of the investigation.

Pikirayi identifies a number of problems that make it difficult to place the kingdom of Mutapa in a historical and geographical framework using the information previously available. Cited among these problems is the information provided by early cartographers and chroniclers, which tended to exaggerate the territorial extent of the Mutapa state. This problem is clearly reflected in Pikirayi's book, which provides detailed Portuguese cartographic data, although its tangible use seems limited to deducing the location of some sites dated to the historical period. This information, together with the historical background provided (especially on wars in the Zambezi basin), tends to be monotonous and confusing and has dates which are not in any systematic order. A better option might have been to place the historical events in chronological order and reduce any unnecessary detail.

Pikirayi notes the lack of historical data on the Mutapa state despite some work by researchers, like Garlake (1973), Summers (1967, 1971), and Mudenge (1974, 1988), and the tendency of earlier studies to concentrate more on Mutapa's relations with the Portuguese, which, in many cases, has led to a misunderstanding of how this kingdom operated in the interior. The tendency to overstress aspects such as Portuguese trade is shown to have created biases whereby some researchers even saw the origins of inland states such as Mutapa as being reliant on external trade. According to Pikirayi, this view led earlier researchers to concentrate on locating imagined Portuguese trading centers rather than taking a more holistic approach. It is therefore notable that although the author provides good background information early in the book (based on, among other things, earlier anthropological, ethnographical, and archaeological work in the research area), it is clear that available archaeological information was scarce before the present work and that the information which did exist had little or no bearing on the Mutapa state. Apart from the reasons given above for the lack of available information, it is also noted that this area suffered much during the Zimbabwean war of independence, leading to a dearth of archaeological research. In view of these limitations and the subsequent research carried out, Pikirayi's work should be seen as imperative, as it is one of the very few studies, if not the pioneer study, to address these issues using historical archaeology.