## ■ UGANDA

Archaeological Research in Bunyoro-Kitara: Preliminary Results

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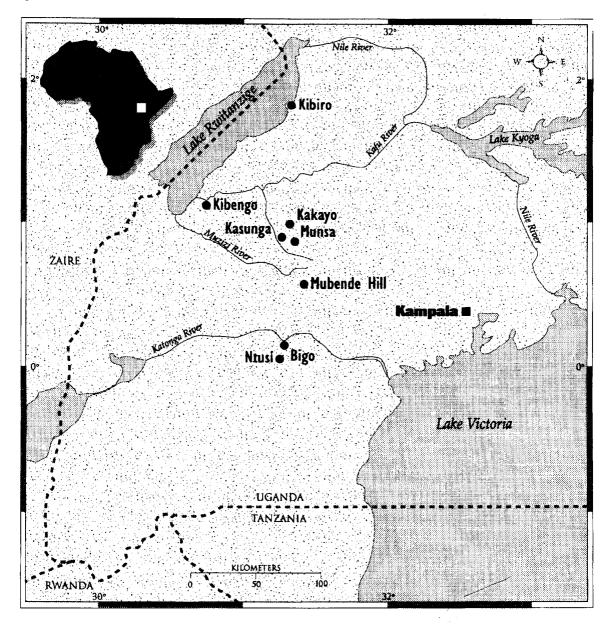
#### Introduction

Since 1994, we have undertaken three seasons of fieldwork in western Uganda (Figure 1). The goal of our project is to understand the process of state formation in this part of Africa. In the context of this ambitious goal, we are investigating some of the well-known earthworks found in the region, as well as some of the sites that served as shrines to individual Cwezi spirits. The project is directed by Peter Robertshaw,. E.R.Kamuhangire is the associate director and project historian; Andrew Reid is the faunal analyst, Ruth Young the archaeobotanist, S.T. Childs the archaeometallurgist, and Nick Pearson, the surveyor.

The first European visitors to Bunyoro in the mid-nineteenth century encountered a state-level society whose king (omakama), Kamurasi, gathered tribute and services from his people through chiefly intermediaries while he also embodied the health of the nation (Beattie 1960). Kamurasi's successor, Kabarega, led a fierce, but ultimately unsuccessful, guerrilla campaign against the imposition of British colonialism a century ago. Oral traditions collected primarily at the royal court indicated that Kabarega was a member of the third dynasty to rule Bunyoro. These three successive dynasties were the Batembuzi, the Bacwezi, and the Babito. While historians have commonly relegated many, if not all, of the Batembuzi to the realms of myth, the Bacwezi have been the focus of much debate. One end of the interpretive spectrum views them as the rulers of a short-lived but geographically extensive state or loose confederation of states dating to about the fourteenth century A.D. (e.g. Nyakatura 1973). The other end of the spectrum sees them as entirely spiritual beings, who took (and take) an interest in the affairs of men when approached via the supplications of spirit-mediums initiated into the Cwezi cults (Wrigley 1958). While some Cwezi spirit-mediums were itinerant, others resided at well-known shrine sites, such as Mubende Hill, where archaeological excavations were conducted and reported in Nyame Akama 30 (1988). Thus, confusingly, the term "Bacwezi" may refer to historical rulers or to spirits or to the mediums of the Cwezi cult or, indeed, to some combination of these.

Various historians seeking to bolster their interpretations of the Cwezi phenomenon have attempted to find support from archaeological re-

Figure 1: Sites mentioned in the text.



search. In this regard the extensive systems of ditches (earthworks) at Bigo garnered the lion's share of attention (Posnansky 1966, 1969), since their construction has been justifiably assumed to have required considerable inputs of labour. Such labour investment is suggestive of a state-level societal organization. However, the scarcity, if not absence, of recorded oral traditions linking the earthworks with the Bacwezi has led researchers to beware the circularity of an argument that explains

the earthworks as the capital sites of a Cwezi state while simultaneously citing the earthworks as proof of the existence of a Cwezi state.

These and other concerns have prompted archaeologists to investigate a range of sites, both "Cwezi" and non-Cwezi, once internal stability in Uganda permitted a resumption of fieldwork in the late 1980s after a twenty-year hiatus. Various excavations, many of them under the aegis of the Brit-

ish Institute in Eastern Africa, have been undertaken in the last decade. John Sutton and Andrew Reid have investigated the mounds and other features at Ntusi, whose construction seems to date earlier than any proposed chronologies for the Cwezi state, while Graham Connah and Ephraim Kamuhangire have studied the Kibiro saltworks with the aims of recovering information on an important centre of economic production for the Nyoro state and of establishing a ceramic sequence for the second millennium A.D. (Connah 1996). In 1987 Peter Robertshaw (PR), with the assistance of two of the coauthors of this paper (ERK and AR), excavated the Cwezi shrine site at Mubende Hill. This site is also mentioned in traditions as a capital site of the Cwezi state. Excavations there revealed what seems to have been a small village of the late thirteenth or fourteenth century A.D. whose inhabitants had a mixed farming subsistence economy. Moreover, the site lacked any obvious indications of material wealth and a centralized political system. It is possible that the site was already a ritual centre by the thirteenth century. The Mubende excavations served to cast further doubt on the concept of a Cwezi state, while the work at Ntusi demonstrated that the process of political centralization got under way early in the millennium in the more southerly grasslands.

In 1991 PR and ERK carried out archaeological surveys in Bunyoro-Kitara in order to acquire evidence of changing settlement patterns over the last millennium. Another goal was to place the earthwork sites within a regional archaeological framework (Robertshaw 1991), since a similar study of Ntusi's hinterland had already proved successful (Reid 1996). On the basis of the surveys, associated ceramic analysis, and the results of the earlier excavations at Mubende Hill and test excavations at the Munsa Earthworks in 1988, a model of the settlement and political history of Bunyoro-Kitara was proposed (Robertshaw 1994). The fieldwork described in the present paper was designed to test, refine and add to that model in several ways.

## The 1994 Season

Two of us (PR, ERK) directed the first season of fieldwork which involved (1) small-scale excavations at a couple of earthwork sites and at several sites located during earlier surveys, and (2)

visits to other earthworks and to shrine sites. The aims of the excavations were to acquire samples for AMS radiocarbo and thermoluminescence (TL) dating in order to ascertain the age of the earthworks and to refine the relative chronology of sites found during earlier surveys that was established on the basis of ceramic analysis. The aims of the visits to other sites were to collect oral histories and to investigate the potential of these sites for large-scale archaeological excavations. We were particularly keen to identify sites with good faunal and floral preservation. In addition, one of us (STC) spent several weeks interviewing former iron smelters and blacksmiths in order to glean information on all aspects of precolonial ironworking in the region.

We undertook small-scale excavations at ten sites and obtained dates that deepen our knowledge of the history of settlement in the region. They also indicated that the ceramic sequence published previously requires some revision. These results include the discovery that rouletted pottery dates as early as the tenth century A.D. within the Munsa Earthworks. Also, archaeological materials found within the area enclosed by the extensive earthworks at Kibengo date between the late thirteenth and mid seventeenth centuries A.D. In terms of methods, we were pleased to discover that the AMS and TL dating methods yielded similar results for particular archaeological contexts. Indeed, in one case we dated a sherd by TL and the organics adhering to the same sherd by AMS. TL gave a date of A.D.  $1000 \pm 125$  years while the AMS result, calibrated at one sigma, was A.D. 1156 - 1280. Other AMS and TL results from samples from the same contexts often overlapped when calibrated at one sigma.

The lack of a motorable track to Kibengo and its remote location from markets and a source of supplies indicated that large-scale excavations of this site would not be feasible at present. However, further testexcavations at Munsa revealed stratified archaeological deposits on the hill known as Bikegete located at the centre of the earthworks. Thus, Munsa was chosen for excavation in the 1995 season.

Visits to other sites were also productive in various ways. For example, a trip to Bigo led to the discovery that a shrine to the Cwezi and other spirits had recently been established on one of the mounds at the centre of the site where both Peter

Shinnie and Merrick Posnansky had excavated. Information gathered at this shrine was the source of several insights on the relationships between past and present, and between archaeology and politics in Africa (Robertshaw and Kamuhangire 1996). We also visited several ancient Cwezi shrines, the locations of which had not been clearly recorded previously. These included the shrine dedicated to Mulindwa at Rutoma Hill. We recorded historical information at these shrines and also attempted to assess their potential for archaeological information, a task sometimes rendered difficult by ubiquitous, 3 m tall, elephant grass.

STC was fortunate to be able to spend several weeks interviewing Nathan Ndunga, a man with an encyclopedic knowledge of the technology, rituals and other details of ironworking in the western part of Bunyoro-Kitara, now called Toro. Shorter interviews with several other informants in both 1994 and 1995 confirmed many of the details provided by Ndunga. Preliminary reports of this work have already been presented at three conferences (Childs in press a, b, c).

## The 1995 Season

This season was dedicated to excavations at Munsa Earthworks with a team of about thirty professionals, students and locally hired labourers. The earthworks at Munsa and Kibengo are about equally extensive, and they are the largest known earthworks except for Bigo. Since little was known about these sites, which are clearly integral to any understanding of state formation in the region, Munsa with its stratified deposits and relatively easy access was chosen for investigation. Our excavations focused on the hill at the centre of the earthworks. Many 2 x 2 m units were excavated, some of which were then enlarged to investigate particular features. In total, we excavated about 150 m<sup>2</sup> on the hill and discovered domestic refuse, burials, an ironsmelting furnace, numerous storage pits and other features. Finds included potsherds, iron artifacts and slag, and, in the burials, glass beads and iron and copper ornaments. The faunal remains were dominated by cattle bones and teeth. There was a surprising dearth of carbonised seeds despite intensive efforts at their recovery by means of flotation. However, charcoal was abundant and RY is using SEM analysis of thin-sections to identify the various species of wood. On the slopes of the hill, we also excavated inside one of the small rockshelters. The deposits here were shallow and of apparently recent date since they included numerous fragments of smoking pipes as well as a variety of glass beads.

We excavated archaeological trenches across the two inner ditches of the earthworks. These excavations revealed that both ditches were four meters deep when originally dug, though the innermost ditch seems to have been used for the deposition of refuse shortly after its construction. AMS and TL dates that we obtained reveal that both ditches were constructed between the late fifteenth and the early seventeenth century A.D. Similar dating results were obtained for some of the large (grainy.) storage pits found on the hill. However, many of the other features on the hill were older. The earliest dates, associated with domestic refuse, including rouletted pottery, fall around the tenth and eleventh centuries. Charcoal from two burials containing glass beads gave results between the tenth and twelfth centuries, showing that this region was linked to long-distance exchange networks earlier than had previously been documented. Charcoal from the furnace gave a dating result indicating use of this feature sometime around the fourteenth century A.D.

This evidence suggests that Bikegete was used for a variety of activities, including craft production and burial of the dead, for several centuries prior to the construction of the earthworks (digging of the ditches). Munsa was probably an important economic, ritual and perhaps political centre before the fifteenth century. The construction of the earthworks served both to protect the core of the settlement against outsiders and to draw attention to the power concentrated upon the Bikegete hill. A preliminary report of the excavations at Munsa will appear shortly in Azania (Robertshaw in press).

In 1997 NP spent three weeks at Munsa making a contour map of Bikegete and undertaking as accurate a survey as possible, given the luxuriant forest and elephant grass, of those parts of the ditch system that are still visible. This was the first accurate survey of the earthworks since Eric Lanning (1955) produced a map in 1954. NP's new survey, using an EDM/Total Station indicates that Lanning's map was remarkably accurate given the

technology available at the time and the logistical difficulties caused by the vegetation.

## The 1997 Season

No fieldwork was undertaken in 1996. Instead, PR sorted pottery and other finds from Munsa and other sites that had been stored at the Uganda Museum in Kampala. Fieldwork resumed in 1997. After some deliberation, we decided to focus our energies on excavations at the site of Kasunga. This site, located approximately 12 km west of Munsa, was recorded during the 1991 surveys. It is a low hill capped by outcropping granite that served, according to informants, as a Cwezi shrine until a few years ago. This shrine is dedicated to Nyinamwiru, the supposed mother of the first Cwezi ruler, Ndahura. It is here, legend recounts, that Ndahura was born. After seizing the throne, Ndabura is said to have moved his capital to Mubende Hill. Thus Kasunga and the adjacent area, known as Kisengwe, is central to the traditions that tell of the rise to power of the Bacwezi. These traditions, particularly those relating to Kisengwe, have been discussed at length elsewhere (Tantala 1989). Thus, excavations at Kasunga appeared to offer several opportunities: (1) to examine a Cwezi shrine to see whether the artefacts, ecofacts and dating evidence were similar to those of the shrine site previously excavated at Mu~aende Hill; (2) to investigate the relationships between local oral history, oral tradition and archaeology at Kaslmga; and (3) to obtain comparative data from a much smaller site, lacking earthworks, in the vicinity of Munsa. In sum, Kasunga, in conjunction with Mubende Hill, held the promise of reconstructing an archaeology of the Bacwezi.

After assembling a team similar in size and composition to that which excavated Munsa, we followed a similar excavation strategy of exploratory 2 x 2m units followed by more extensive excavations in promising areas. While Kasunga lacks any system of ditches, clearing of the elephant grass that blanketed the site prior to excavation revealed numerous intriguing ridges and hollows, which have been contour mapped by NP. However, excavation served to demonstrate that many of these ridges were natural granitic spurs. Nevertheless, there was one major archaeological mound on the site and several smaller ones. The recognition of these features and of their height was complicated

by the undulating surface of the bedrock whose contours could only be discerned at the bottom of our excavations.

Excavation on the major mound revealed a three-meter-eep stratigraphy incorporating midden and other sediments. Elsewhere on the site archaeological deposits were of varied depth. Besides middens, we found numerous pits. Many of these appear to have been used for grain storage. Indeed, they often contained large numbers of grindstones, as well as potsherds and occasional iron artefacts. Most pits had narrow openings but much larger chambers beneath. In some cases these chambers had been excavated laterally into the comparatively soft bedrock. Such pits were described to us as storage pits for finger millet by local residents who had not visited our excavations. However, one pit, which was a vertical shaft about 2.5m deep and 1.5m in diameter, contained three human skeletons at the bottom. They were all lying in different positions and with their limbs intertwined, indicating that they were probably buried at the same time. Above these three bodies were several large and many smaller potsherds and grindstones and then two more adult human skeletons; these skeletons also appear to have been buried together. The remainder of the pit contained numerous grindstones and occasional sherds. Indeed, grindstones were found in many areas of the site, including one where several had apparently been deliberately placed to create an uneven surface resembling a floor.

Artifacts and ecofacts were very abundant at Kasunga. We excavated more than 100,000 potsherds, almost 30,000 animal bone fragments, numerous iron artifacts, and a few beads made of glass, cowrie shells and bone. Carbonised seeds and other plant remains were also recovered by the use of flotation. Thus, the artifact and ecofact densities at Kasunga were much greater than those of Munsa. We also collected charcoal samples for dating, but no results are yet available. However, some dating evidence is provided by the presence of ceramic smoking pipes, which were found in most parts of the site, even in some of the deeper layers of the major mound. At Kibiro, smoking pipes seem to date no earlier than around the beginning of the eighteenth century. If this is also true of Kasunga, then the site is remarkably late fir one that is apparently associated with traditions of the Bacwezi. Nor, it seems, is it contemporary with the other Cwezi site of Mubende Hill.

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Analysis of the materials excavated at Kasunga is only in the early stages, but a few preliminary observations can be made. As at other sites in the region, the pottery is characterized by the use of roulette decoration, but the vessel forms, as well as the variety and frequency of other decorative techniques, show differences from the pottery assemblages from both Munsa and Mubende Hill. The beads are also rather different from those of other sites. In contrast to Munsa, the bones from Kasunga come from a greater variety of species, though cattle are still the most common animal. Sheep and goat are frequent in the upper levels at Kasunga, which supports local opinion claiming that these species were preferred as offerings to the Cwezi spirits at this site.

In addition to the Kasunga excavations, ERK and students collected oral historical accounts of precolonial trade and markets in the region centered on Kasunga. One outcome of this work was the location of an abandoned market site, Kakayo, about a dozen km northeast of Kasunga that was said to have been founded in the precolonial era. Indeed slaves are said to have been sold at this market. We visited the site, which had been abandoned during the unrest of the early 1980s. We excavated three 2 x 2m units in different parts of the site. Two of these excavations unearthed only shallow archaeological deposits but the third held deeper deposits. Pottery, other artefacts and a few bones were recovered as well as charcoal samples, one of which has been submitted for radiocarbon dating. In addition to our excavations, we noted extensive surface scatters of artifacts, induding considerable iron slag in one part of the site. Also, there was a human skull associated with ceramics eroding from a track; we did not excavate this skull, however, since it was very badly damaged by the passage of vehicles. Subsequently an informant told us that the market at Kakayo had been founded in Kabarega's reign, though the surface artifacts suggest a greater antiquity.

#### **Discussion**

Three seasons of archaeological fieldwork in western Uganda have produced large quantities of data, the implications of which are only beginning to emerge as analyses of the various types of artefacts and ecofacts are completed. Therefore, we venture only a few preliminary remarks here on the results of our work. Investigation of the earthworks

at Munsa and Kibengo has shown that these features were probably constructed about the sixteenth century A.D., an age that would seem to correlate in broad terms with the available dates for the earthworks at Bigo. If the earthworks at different sites are coeval, then one may ask whether they are the product of a single polity or perhaps the centres of three peer polities. Although the evidence is far from conclusive, the latter interpretation looks more likely because there is considerable variation in the artefacts, faunal remains and features found at each site. While all the sites are characterized by rouletted pottery and may well belong to a single ceramic tradition, there exists variation in the use of other decorative techniques and in the frequency of different motifs and vessel shapes that indicates some differences between sites. Metalworking, including smelting, is evident at Munsa but not at Kibengo and Bigo where slag was almost nonexistent. The Munsa faunal remains are dominated by cattle, but there is more variation at Kibengo, including abundant fish bones. Pits and burials were found at Munsa, but not at Bigo, where there were mounds. A pit was also found at Kibengo, but excavations at this site were not extensive enough to allow comment on the presence or absence of features. Thus, it is possible that Munsa, Kibengo and Bigo may have been peer polities in the period before the establishment of the Bito dynasty. However, to make any linkage to the Bacwezi would be purely speculative based on current evidence. At Munsa at least, the site had a long history of occupation prior to the construction of the earthworks. The Munsa ditches may have served several overlapping functions including defense against enemies and prestige, as well as perhaps, in the case of the outermost and longest ditch, the protection of crops against hungry wildlife, particularly elephants.

Our excavations at Kasunga and our work at other Cwezi shrine sites indicate that the archaeology of the Bacwezi is as complex a phenomenon as are the Bacwezi themselves. While the shrine sites at both Kasunga and Mubende Hill contain numerous (grain?) storage pits, the ubiquity of smoking pipes at Kasunga suggests that these two sites are not contemporary. Moreover, there are marked differences between the two sites in their pottery, and other artefacts and features. Thus, there would not seem to be a single Cwezi period or a unified Cwezi archaeological tradition in the archaeological record of western Uganda. It is pos-

sible that the identification of some archaeological sites with the Bacwezi represents an application of what Vansina (1985:10) has called the "Pope Johanna premise" wherein the presence of an ancient settlement is explained in local tradition by reference to whatever suitable historical referent can be invoked, in this case the Bacwezi. However, the oral histories relating to Mubende Hill and Kasunga are so rich that it seems unlikely that such a premise could apply in either of these cases. Therefore, more perceptive interpretations of the archaeology and oral traditions of the Bacwezi are required. At the very least, our archaeological endeayours have shown that the simple model of three successive dynasties in Bunyoro-Kitara cannot be sustained Investigation of the rich archaeological record of western Uganda has begun to clarify our understanding of state formation and history in this region of tropical Africa.

#### **Footnote**

1. On Site Archaeology is based in York in the north of England. Impact assessments, evaluation work and mitigation strategies are devised for those involved in the planning process. The company has much recent expertise in dealing with the effects of linear schemes on the archaeological landscape. On-Site Archaeology has also worked in Africa where surveys have been carried out, quickly and efficiently and to the highest of professional standards, in remote and inhospitable regions in Botswana and Uganda. The company uses a Swiss built Leica Total Station Theodolite (or Electronic Distance Measurer) linked to three dimensional terrain modelling software. Output can be made available in the field via a laptop computer and portable printer. On-Site Archaeology is also in a position to undertake geophysical surveys in similar hostile environments.

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