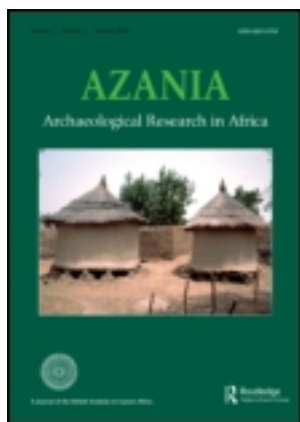


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### Linking up East Africa: East Africa in the Indian Ocean World II, Oxford, 22-23 March 2012

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## CONFERENCE REPORT

### **Linking up East Africa: East Africa in the Indian Ocean World II, Oxford, 22–23 March 2012**

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While different parts of the African continent have engaged differently and to varying degrees with other regions of the world over the last few thousand years, the past two decades have witnessed a reinvigoration of efforts to understand the links between East Africa, in particular, and other parts of the wider Indian Ocean world. Such links extend far beyond what is perhaps their best known and most intensively studied manifestation, the international commerce in which the Swahili city states of the East African coast participated for much of the second millennium AD. As well as the longstanding conundrum of when and how the island of Madagascar was settled, there is the perplexing fact that for several crops of African origin (sorghum, finger millet and – until recently – pearl millet too, for example) the oldest archaeobotanical evidence of their domestication comes not from Africa but from the Indian subcontinent (Fuller 2003). Add to that the continuing debate over the antiquity of bananas and plantains in Africa (e.g. Mbida *et al.* 2006; Neumann and Hildebrand 2009) and emerging evidence for a much older than previously thought human presence on offshore islands such as Unguja and Mafia (Chami 2000; Sinclair 2007) that includes claims for Southeast Asian domesticates or South Asian pottery (e.g. Chami 2001) and it is clear that East Africa's intercontinental connections are of considerable contemporary interest.

It was to pursue that interest and to enhance our knowledge of those connections that the Sealinks Project (2012) was launched in 2008 led by Nicole Boivin and funded by the European Research Council. Initial results of its fieldwork on the coast of Kenya were published in the last issue of this journal (Helm *et al.* 2012) and major statements summarising what is currently known about crop transfers between Africa and South and Southeast Asia have also appeared (e.g. Fuller and Boivin 2009; Fuller *et al.* 2011). The workshop on East Africa in the Indian Ocean World II held in Oxford in March this year brought together a variety of scholars from several different disciplines to report on and exchange findings of recent and current research within this general field. The activities of the Sealinks Project were self-evidently a major component of the meeting's presentations, but commendably — and in the open, collaborative spirit that has animated the project since its beginning — so too were those of colleagues working on other projects or as independent scholars.

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Thus, over the course of the two-day meeting 23 papers were given (plus one poster), ten of them by one or more Sealinks Project members, researchers or students.

In some ways this second Sealinks workshop (the first was held in York in November 2008) functioned as a stock-take, reporting on, discussing and assessing work completed thus far, but it was also avowedly an opportunity to look to the future, a chance to shape the remaining years of the present phase of the project and to consider how it might be developed further beyond them. Boivin and her colleagues were rightly congratulated by several of those speaking on their willingness to place themselves on the line here. Would, perhaps, that more of us had the same degree of courage in seeking out critique – however friendly – from some two dozen or more colleagues all at the same time!

Several themes stood out from the papers presented, one of them the way in which discussions of crop movements and translocations are gradually, but inexorably, being placed on a much firmer empirical footing. Far from being difficult to recover in tropical contexts as often thought (e.g. Young and Thompson 1999), the challenge lies rather in archaeologists systematically applying the relevant recovery techniques: ‘seek and ye shall find’ thus seemed an appropriate motto for papers in this vein by Dorian Fuller (University College London) and Alison Crowther (University of Oxford), among others. Genetic evidence has increasingly emerged as a major source of new information in this area and its relevance was explored here not just for bananas (by a Franco-Belgian team led by Edmond De Langhe *et al.*), but also for another crop of ultimately Southeast Asian origin, taro (Ilaria Grimaldi; University of Oxford). Several papers used recent and/or ancient DNA studies to explore other topics, including the spread of zebu cattle into Africa from South Asia (the work of a Portuguese team led by Albano Beja-Pereira (University of Porto)) and the colonisation of many of the smaller islands of the Indian Ocean. Here, both Anthony Cheke and Alexandra Trinks (University of Durham) discussed the value of the Asian house gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*), a human commensal, for tracing human migration patterns, while Ophélie Lebrasseur (also University of Durham) reported on work by her and her colleagues on unravelling the origins of various large mammals introduced to Mauritius by the Dutch in the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries. The role of small mammal commensals, such as the black rat (*Rattus rattus*) as proxies for long-distance movements and contacts was also emphasised (Heidi Eager, University of Oxford); recent work using Pacific rats to confirm a late thirteenth century date for the colonisation of New Zealand emphasises how important such approaches can be (Wilmhurst *et al.* 2008).

Interaction among the societies of the East African Coast and between them and people living on the Indian Ocean’s Asian rim also featured heavily. A recurrent note was the importance of Marilee Wood’s recently completed doctoral thesis on identifying and tracing the origins of the glass beads found at so many East African sites (Wood 2012). At the meeting, Tom Fenn (Catholic University of Leuven) presented a crystal clear review of current thinking on changes in preference for different glass bead series, how these are chemically identifiable and what they might mean in relation to wider geopolitical changes in the Islamic and Asian worlds. A second paper, by Ed Wilmsen (University of the Witwatersrand), elegantly synthesised decades of work in the Kalahari, drawing not just on glass beads, but also on the movements of imported shell jewellery as well as of locally produced specularite, to discuss the links between Botswana’s Tsodilo Hills and the Indian Ocean trade.

New fieldwork also featured heavily, including reports of the Sealinks Project's own work in Kenya (Helm *et al.* 2012) and Tanzania (re-excavation of Unguja Ukuu and Fukuchani on Zanzibar), as well as the work of Atholl Anderson and colleagues at the Australian National University on Christmas Island, Diego Garcia and Seychelles which has combined palaeoenvironmental research and test excavation to seek evidence for pre-European human presence; results of their work reassessing claims for early settlement on another island, Madagascar, that rest upon what have been identified as cut-marked animal bones were a highlight of the meeting. Equally novel was the recently published study by Jeff Fleisher and Stephanie Wynne-Jones (2011) questioning the homogeneity of the Early Tana Tradition (Triangular Incised Ware) found in the basal, late first millennium AD levels of Swahili coastal towns but also at other sites inland, while Mark Horton (University of Bristol) drew attention back to the potential value of Greco-Roman texts for understanding East Africa in the very last centuries BC/first centuries AD.

Summing up, if there was one overarching theme connecting the papers presented it was the value – indeed, the necessity – of interdisciplinary studies of East Africa's part in the Indian Ocean world: as shown here, archaeological studies of material culture and botanical and faunal remains, the genetics of domesticated and commensal species, historical linguistics, textual sources, comparative ethnography all have roles to play. So too, importantly, does palaeoenvironmental research, amply demonstrated by the work of Paramita Punwong and colleagues from the University of York examining sea-level change and coastal mangrove dynamics through the Holocene of Zanzibar. Identifying what they described as cultural-environmental-ecosystem interactions seems set to play a major part in future research in the region.

Where to go from here? A line of enquiry stressed by several of the participants was the virtue of deconstructing our ideas of largescale agricultural 'packages' (whether African, South Asian or Indonesian) in favour of emphasising, in the first instance, the study of the spread and take-up of individual crops but *within* broader systems of agricultural knowledge and practice. A related concern was the importance of investigating not just which plants (or, indeed, animals) moved where when, but of researching the practices of consumption and use, the foodways — and, in some cases, technologies — that they permitted, facilitated and required. Given that anthropologists now have, for the most part, rather different priorities, it seems incumbent on archaeologists — including their students — to seek out and acquire relevant indigenous knowledge and samples for genetic analysis. Working out guidelines for doing just this will hopefully be among the immediate practical consequences of the Oxford meeting, while the paper by Kelly Smith (Oxford) and Michèle Wollstonecroft (UCL) on bananas was an excellent example of the synergy that comes from marrying different disciplines, in this case archaeobotany (specifically phytoliths) with ethnography.

Also stressed was the value of providing open access to important new datasets such as Fleisher and Wynne-Jones' (2011) aforementioned Tana Tradition project or Ashley Coutu's (2012) database of isotopic results for modern and historic elephants acquired as part of a project to map the East African ivory trade. Datasets such as these require much detailed, local work before they can generate meaningful *regional* results. This too was a point that came out strongly in discussion, as well as in several of the papers presented. While keeping an eye always open to the long distant, the

international and the intercontinental, many of the movements and interactions considered here probably involved communities and actors operating at much smaller scales, both of distance and — perhaps — of social complexity, a point stressed by Nicole Boivin in particular. Resonances with the idea of *cabotage* discussed in a Mediterranean context by Horden and Purcell (2000) are obvious and merit exploration.

In short, this was a highly productive as well as a convivial workshop, conducted in an open and interdisciplinary spirit that augurs well for further research on the topics it considered. That so few non-UK based scholars could attend in no way gainsays this, although one regrets that issues of timing precluded the absence of African, Indian and Indonesian colleagues. Hopefully when the Sealinks Project has its next conference that issue will have been successfully resolved, but certainly we can expect that by then much more new light will have been cast on the topics considered here. Boivin and her team thoroughly deserved the congratulations that they received at the workshop's end, both for organising the event and for bringing together such a diverse set of scholars in their shared endeavour.

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