

Report on Habilitation Dissertation

Archaeology of the built environment and urban space on the East African coast (11th – 19th century CE)

by

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Opponent's Report

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I am very grateful for the opportunity to evaluate the work of Dr Baumanová. It has been a genuine pleasure to explore her innovative and insightful examination of the Swahili coast, an archaeology that I have previously found to be rather uninspired, despite the obvious potential.

Dr Baumanová's study of the East African coast is notable for the distinct and independent trajectory that it has taken. It has avoided the pitfalls that have often trapped this archaeology in the past, most obviously the focus on origins, in the same way that origins have obsessed and befuddled many strands of archaeology. Initial interpretations of the Swahili coast were framed in terms of outside, usually Arabic, colonisation and domination. Subsequently there was a reaction to such Eurocentric perspectives, emphasising the African origins of Swahili culture. What neither emphasis really manage is to consider ways in which to explore the significant changes which took place within and through cultural places and space after the initial establishment of coastal culture. Thus, the overwhelming focus on origins in the initial phases of the establishment of Swahili culture have masked significant innovations and transformations which took place over time at different locations along the length of the coastline.

Dr Baumanová's work manages to explore these internal innovations and transformations by addressing the issue of social organisation and in particular the use of space. She makes excellent use of new technology and new techniques to revisit some of the core components of Swahili use of space. These new techniques applied to relatively standard archaeological data allow her to reconsider the use of space within settlements and facilitate her detailed investigation of Swahili Stone town sites which enable her to develop new and important understandings. Her work is also informed by a thorough and up-to-date reading of theoretical perspectives on the use of space and on other dynamics derived from studies, such as phenomenology, including sightlines and auditory perspectives.

One of the more important facets of her work is that she revisits the insights generated by the investigation of Swahili house power by Donley-Reid. This early interpretative work had largely been sidelined because of its reliance on analysing the ethnography of lived space by post colonial inhabitants of Lamu. Baumanová acknowledges the problems created by the nature of the source material, but at the same time is able to identify that there are still elements of the organisation of space that can be applied to the broader archaeology of the coast. This, alongside the use of techniques such as

accessibility analyses, enables her to recognise that the organisation of “the palace” at Gede is at its core an embellished house, rather than a distinct and novel political structure. Alongside her consideration of the mercantile associations and pretensions of leading members of Swahili society, this places political leadership at the apex of trading associations. She is then able to successfully extend these investigations to the consideration of other proposed palaces at Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara. This has a profound impact on the way in which we consider the construction of power and space on the Swahili coast. Crucially she also draws in other sensory dynamics, such as the location of mosques, tombs, and public spaces, as well as streets and lines of communication, to consider a complex web of overlapping stimuli that would have overlain the bare bones of stone features and which would have animated the activities and actions of its inhabitants and visitors. Hence, pillar tombs placed in prominent locations within settlements, locate ancestral mercantile spirits at the heart of communities, alongside mosques. Thus, African and Islamic belief systems are woven into the structuring and experience of settlements. One of the great successes of this research is that it helps to embody Swahili archaeology and provide it with a clear means of engagement that resonates with local communities today, allowing fresh engagements with pasts from which they have been historically marginalised by colonial practice and by post-Independence fortress conservation strategies. Rather than focusing on dry walling, she concentrates on the spaces created by walled structures and how people would negotiate and pass through such spaces, responding in various ways to the different stimuli encountered in the settlement.

A fundamental theoretical concept that she capably demonstrates is that of the syntax of space in these urban environments. Crucially her perspective is not that these are absolute and immutable, but rather that they should be regarded as fluid and as being open to manipulation and change by different actors. As a consequence, these cold, silent coral rag walls become enlivened spaces of cultural engagement, spaces in which the lives of their occupants became enriched and full of meaning. They are animated as Dr Baumanová points out by intangible elements such as conversation, calls to prayer and hanging textiles. These are truly perspectives that can help inform other archaeological studies of early urban environments.

An excellent example of the innovation in her approach is provided by her consideration of soundscapes and synaesthesia within the urban environment. Returning to her original work at Jumbo la Mtwana and Mnarani, neither of which are in any way the biggest and grandest of Swahili sites, she is able to explore acoustic lived experiences within the settlements and she is able to demonstrate how such soundscapes may have shaped the organisation of space. Alongside her innovative use of techniques such as access analysis, communication network analysis and visibility analysis we now have a much better and more informed understanding of the urban form on the East African coast. What I find most exciting is that there is plenty of scope for Dr Baumanová to expand and develop her research, be that along the coast, in other parts of Africa, or in other parts of the world. For instance, I can see how her work could inform new approaches to work I have done on Tswana towns in southern Africa or to the incipient urban forms that emerged in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

The quality of Dr Baumanová’s scholarship shines through all of these collected papers. She has made herself extremely well-informed through an extensive and balanced reading of a great range of sources relating to the region and to archaeological practice more generally. It is her willingness to explore and to acknowledge many different strands of archaeological thought, analysis and investigation that really empowers and drives her work. Moreover, she is keen to draw insights from other disciplines in order to develop and inform her own studies. As a result, her papers provide us not only with a cutting-edge understanding of Swahili society but they also provide us with a much more generally relevant understanding of how to explore urban landscapes in archaeology. She is quite clearly cognisant of these abilities and is happy to explore new areas outside of her immediate remit. Her work drawing in West African towns demonstrate this capability amply.

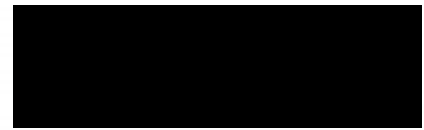
Thus, by drawing in important theoretical understandings, innovative approaches and new techniques she has made her work a shining example of how to explore urban environments using archaeology as a primary tool. Long forgotten or overlooked, the stone architecture on Swahili sites provide her with a rich field for analysis, one which, as she notes and demonstrates, has huge potential for future research. It will be very interesting to see the directions that she takes in the future, given the research potential that remains on the Swahili coast. It is also important to recognise that her work is non-destructive and adheres to the modern demands and realities of heritage institutions in the countries of the Swahili coast, which are generally constrained by very limited budgets. She is helping to generate interpretive materials that allow these institutions to present and market their resources, whilst she is not adding to the accumulation of archaeological assemblages which create continued storage problems, decades after their excavation – a storage challenge that has all sorts of undocumented elements in the intense humidity of this equatorial coastline. Her work is therefore highly innovative in its application and appropriate to the needs of its host countries. This also demonstrates her skills and independence as a researcher, as she has undertaken her work largely without support from corroborative research. What she has done virtually single-handedly, without assistance from other scholars of the region and also without the regional expertise within academic structures in the Czech Republic, has been to re-energise our understanding of these core elements of the Swahili urban landscape. Moreover, this understanding is recognised as having a broader significance for urban studies in other parts of the world and she has capably demonstrated how her insights provide us with the means to reach new forms of understanding.

It is essential to acknowledge that her work is not driven by political point scoring and does not claim to be revolutionary in its outcomes but rather the success of her work is to be able to marry this new data against earlier investigations. Indeed, if there was to be criticism of her work, one might suggest that a greater willingness to identify the faults in past research and the achievements of her own work would be desirable. For instance, she is heavily reliant on actors such as James Kirkman and Neville Chittick who have been the subject of recent and ongoing criticism as to their colonial methods of practice. There is nothing wrong with using the core data, such as recorded plans, but there does need to be a recognition that for these individuals, stone architecture was necessarily colonial and non-African. Not surprisingly, such perspectives are not retained today. There are other elements with which one could disagree or ask for further clarification. Although the paper itself very capably deals with the issue of water in a Swahili settlement, her discussion of water resources at Jumba la Mtwana probably need to provide a fuller discussion of salination. Whilst it would be correct to reject simplistic notions of salination as a cause for multiple water sources, there does need to be a more concerted effort to look at the complexity of water formation within wells, and in particular the existence of discrete freshwater and saltwater lenses within the water body of the well. It is also unclear why she has made so little use of the data from Shanga, particularly the extensive final phase plan of the surface of the site. This is one of the most complete 13th-16th century town plans on the coast. If it is considered that there are problems with the extant plans from Shanga, or with conducting further work in this remote location, then this really ought to be mentioned in the introductory text to the habilitation dissertation. That Shanga has not, thus far, received much attention in this work, also demonstrates how much potential Dr Baumanová's pioneering new approaches have for future investigation.

Given all the focus on space, it is also somewhat surprising that there is not a more formal focus on gender. Gender is clearly a very important structuring principle within Swahili communities. Whilst gendered space should not be regarded as immutable, it does have to be acknowledged and explored as another angle for investigation. Familiarity with Swahili communities today makes it abundantly clear that gender principles are not nearly as restrictive as they might at first appear and that female space and perspectives need to be considered to gain a more rounded understanding and to ensure

that we do not simply privilege male concepts of space, power and social organisation. Whilst gender is recognised in passing in this work, a more formal exploration and acknowledgement of gender would greatly help to develop the research and to present it to others.

On the basis of my reading of this habilitation dissertation, I am very happy to recommend the habilitation dissertation for further procedure. This work is clearly of a very high international quality that is pioneering and that pushes the discipline forward both in terms of our understanding of the Swahili Coast and in terms more generally of how archaeology can approach the issue of urbanism and colonialism. In producing this work Dr Baumanová has demonstrated that she is a scholar of the highest order capable of instigating and prosecuting innovative new research that develops and enhances our understandings of core archaeological elements. These factors lead me to conclude that she should be considered for habilitation.



Dr D.A.M. Reid

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