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IRON METALLURGY ALONG THE TANZANIAN COAST

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INTRODUCTION

Compared with pottery, metallurgy has received less attention in the archaeology of the East African coast. There are several reasons for this. First, metals have a poor survival rate in the archaeological record. Second, until very recently it was assumed that there was no indigenous metallurgy along the coast, particularly in the first millennium AD. This interpretation owed much to the report of the anonymous Greek author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* who listed metals as the main imports of the East African Coast; implying that local production was non-existent. Third, the number of archaeo-metallurgist working in East Africa is relatively small.¹

Nevertheless, brief reports and discussions of metals and metallurgical relics by historians, historical linguists and archaeologists have been presented in almost every study conducted along the coast. With the exception of those conducted by Kusimba and his colleagues on the Kenya coast where attempts were made to synthesize data from various researches in order to make sense of them (Kusimba 1993; Kusimba *et al.* 1994), many of these studies have been treated

separately, making it difficult to harness fully the potential of archeo-metallurgy as a record of past human experience.

Evidently, this error has been realized and positive steps have been taken. In the past two years three syntheses have been produced. These include Klein-Arendt's (2000) metallurgical review based on historical semantics; Mapunda's (forthcoming) book on indigenous iron working in East Africa in which the coast has been treated as a separate eco-zone; and Mapunda (this volume).

The aim of this chapter is to synthesize information about iron metallurgy along the Tanzania coast, to identify techno-cultural patterns and account for their occurrence in the past two millennia in order to establish the contribution of archaeo-metallurgy in understanding our past. This is the first archaeo-metallurgical review to cover the entire Tanzanian coast. Previous studies have been parochial, focusing on specific sites (see Schmidt *et al.* 1992; Chami and Mapunda 1998; Chami 2001) and thematically confined to the role of iron in trade (LaViolette *et al.* 1989; Chami 1994; 1999a). Although these studies have revealed invaluable ferro-metallurgical information about the Tanzanian coast, several very crucial questions have remained unanswered. For example, while

¹ The list includes Peter Schmidt, Terry Childs, Chapuruka Kusimba, David Killick, Herman Kiriamia, Reinhard Klein-Arendt and Bertram Mapunda.