

CERAMICS, CULTURES AND LANDSCAPES: RETHINKING POTTERY IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the discussion raised in an article entitled 'Taking Southern African Ceramic Studies into the 21st Century: a Zimbabwean Perspective' (Pikirayi 1999). The work urged Iron Age archaeologists to broaden the scope of ceramic studies to address social issues. Southern African pottery studies have since the beginning of the 20th century contributed substantially towards an understanding of archaeological developments in the region, especially through typology, the study of vessel form and decoration. Typology became the cornerstone of cultural definition and, using ceramic style (which is the general appearance, form or design of the pottery regardless of the function), constituted the method to study culture change. However, because of the limited scope in which typology was used, many archaeologists became dissatisfied with ceramic studies, as these failed to address topical issues such as group identity, socio-political organisation and interaction with the immediate physical environment (see for example Hall 1984). This disquiet has gradually resulted in a change in focus and emphasis from the 1980s as seen in the works of Hall (1984), Huffman (1986, 1989, 1998) and Lindahl and Matenga (1995).

I first examine the growing dissatisfaction with the use of ceramics as archaeological evidence. I then present the current evidence for Iron Age settlement in northern Zimbabwe, prior to the development of monumental architecture associated with the Zimbabwe Tradition in the early second millennium. This case study is followed by a brief discussion of ceramics in relation to settlement and the physical environment.

Finally, I attempt a re-evaluation of settlement dynamics of the first millennium AD on the entire Zimbabwe Plateau. Ultimately, while acknowledging that migrations are a useful model in trying to understand Iron Age origins, we should not ignore the local context in our quest to understand how the natural landscape was transformed in the past, and how past communities interacted with it. Ceramics can contribute meaningfully to the discussion of social issues revolving around settlements and their physical surroundings.

LIMITS OF CURRENT CERAMIC STUDIES

Archaeological ceramic studies in southern Africa have largely remained parochial, generally concerned with chronology, culture definition and tracing migrations. Their use in archaeology has failed to address pertinent social issues due to a lack of, or bias against, theory