

Archaeology as Part of the Swedish Support to Developing Countries

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Archaeology can play an important part in foreign aid programs as a factor of enhancing cultural identity. Many of the Third World countries have until quite recently been under the rule of some colonial power. Having regained independence, questions concerning the indigenous historical "roots" soon come into focus. The archaeological remains reach far beyond all other more or less biased sources. They are certainly open to various interpretations but are still of a totally neutral character. This article deals with the activities and results of Swedish support to archaeological research in some Third World countries, financed by the Swedish Agency for Research in Developing Countries (SAREC) with the involvement of the Swedish Central Board of National Antiquities.

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When talking of support to developing countries, one normally thinks of improving living conditions for the peoples involved and principal needs like food, housing, health care, employment, etc.

Very few would think of archaeology in this context. Yet, archaeology can play an important part in foreign aid programs as a factor of enhancing cultural identity.

Many of the Third World countries have, until quite recently, been under the rule of some colonial power. Having regained independence, questions concerning the historical "roots" of the population soon come into focus when, for instance schoolbooks are being revised. Not long ago the schoolchildren of Mozambique learned more about the history of Portugal than that of their native country. One problem, then, which immediately arises in a new nation of this kind, is the lack of reliable information on cultural development before the colonial period.

There may be accounts written by foreigners and outsiders, for instance by traders

or missionaries who visited the country in the past, but these are often biased by their own cultural background and language problems. Another possibility could be oral traditions, which may give valuable information on social and cultural conditions within a framework of myths and tales, but less important as historical source material.

Finally, there are the archaeological remains reaching far beyond all other sources certainly open to various interpretations but of a totally neutral character.

In some countries, especially those where the archaeological heritage also includes striking monuments, some of the archaeological activities were conducted during colonial times. Depending on who did them and for what purpose, the results of these activities can be useful when writing the history of the new nation. It is obvious that the various colonial powers developed different attitudes towards their colonies and the local culture. There are examples of colonial administrators who took a sincere interest in the local

history of the country where they worked (and not only in the monuments left by their predecessors), and whose research results are of a valuable and lasting character.

However, in some countries the colonial archaeology as well as the "expedition archaeology" had created an atmosphere of suspicion. In the late 1970s, soon after liberation, the government of Moçambique applied to the Swedish authorities for help with a plan for developing a domestic archaeology in the country. This was the starting point for the Swedish support to the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo.

In 1980 the Swedish Central Board of National Antiquities became engaged in these activities as an archaeological expert institution by SAREC (Swedish Agency for Research Co-operation with Developing Countries) whose business it is to fund such activities. This was the starting point for an engagement which has been going on ever since. At the time, projects in Third World countries were a completely new undertaking by the Central Board.

Consequently several problems and questions arose, scientific and practical and ethical, which had to be handled from the very beginning. There was little knowledge of African archaeology and almost no experience of working in a tropical climate.

However, this turned out to be of less importance. What could be offered were field methodology and general archaeological "understanding" as well as improving capacity in various ways. The African colleagues could bridge the cultural gaps and provide the necessary knowledge of the local archaeological remains as well as experiences and scientific ideas, new to their Swedish colleagues.

A series of decisions were taken in the beginning of the co-operation, which have been the general guide-lines for the work ever after. It was decided that all co-operation should take place between official insti-

tutions in full agreement with the proper authorities. This meant in most cases that the institutions, as their part of the project could contribute with practical and administrative efforts, in principle everything that did not have to be paid in foreign currencies. Everybody working or being trained within the project should preferably be employed by an institution in his or her native country. Swedish archaeologists working abroad should be aiming at supporting and training the colleagues, with the general goal to make them and their institutions self-supporting in the long run. They could also contribute to scientific works in various ways, for instance by assisting with surveys and other basic research activities.

This meant that only trained archaeologists with considerable experience from field-work could be considered to take part in this co-operation from the Swedish side. All research material brought forward by the project belonged to the country where it was found and should be worked and published by domestic researchers, unless an agreement was made stating otherwise. Publishing should take place in the country where the field-work was done, whenever possible.

The first years were characterized by optimism and plans were drawn up for various activities, among others a new national museum for archaeology in Maputo. However, after a few years these plans were frustrated by a cruel and devastating civil war. Today, now that the peace has returned, it might be possible to start the discussion again although the financial situation has changed.

Not very long after the beginning of the work in Moçambique, a similar request came to Sweden from the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts and a small-scale co-operation also started with Somalia. This was carried out for some years with varying intensity until also these contacts were broken by a civil war, which is still raging.

The co-operation with Moçambique and Somalia and the observable cultural contacts



The participants in the meeting of the project "Urban Origins in Eastern Africa" in Madagascar 1989. Photo: G. Trozig.

between these countries in the past, which still survive in the Swahili culture, brought to the fore the scientific problems of the medieval towns and townsites along the East African coast. Inspired by the British and Swedish medieval town projects, the Central Board took an initiative in 1986, sponsored by SAREC, to invite colleagues from the countries along the East African coast, including Madagascar and the Comores Islands as well as Zimbabwe, to discuss the possibilities for a regional research program on the coastal towns. As a result, the project "Urban Origins in Eastern Africa" was launched in 1987 and formally concluded in 1993.

As this project is the most comprehensive of its kind within the Swedish aid program, some information will be given here. The aims of the project were formulated in the following way:

- To strengthen existing East African regional archaeological and anthropological research capacities and to contribute theoretically, methodologically and empirically to scientific knowledge through a joint program on urban origins in East Africa.
- To stimulate regional co-operation through the training of a new generation of researchers and by establishing practical working contacts among anthropologists, archaeologists and other colleagues in Sweden and East Africa.
- To aim at the development of relevant regional standards for scientific interchange through the use of modern techniques.
- To explore the relevance of multidisciplinary solutions to applied ethnoarchaeological research problems in the field of urban origins.

- To strengthen technical facilities for research, curation and dissemination of information on the archaeological heritage of East Africa in relation to resource management programs.

A general working hypothesis for the project was that the importance of foreign influence has been overestimated in the theories of how, by whom and why the coastal towns were founded, the domestic factors being less spectacular and more laborious than stone buildings and imported goods in the archaeological record.

The research program consequently involved archaeologists and anthropologists from Moçambique, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Kenya, Somalia, the Comores Islands, and Madagascar. Later on researchers from Botswana and Namibia were also attached to the project. Among them were university teachers, museum curators and heritage managers. The number of countries and researchers involved called for a very simple and pragmatic organisation. Each country had a national project committee with a chairman who was also a member of the steering committee for the project. The research problems and academic educational matters were taken care of by a scientific coordinator. The administration was handled by the Central Board, who also recruited the Swedish participants in the project.

The work was performed within four themes:

- Survey and dating of early town sites in the region and studies of settlement types.
- Intersite studies of towns in relation to natural resources and the hinterland as well as trade relations.
- Intrasite studies of the inner structures of the towns, settlement patterns, trade specialisation, etc.
- Multidisciplinary studies of towns in a socio-political and ethnical context.

As a starting point, all the engaged insti-

tutions had to be updated as far as equipment was concerned. In most cases there was a crying need for almost everything that we regard as normal prerequisites for archaeological work, from paper, pencils and plastic bags to computers and vehicles, in some cases even boats.

The project had annual gatherings and specialist meetings in the various countries and the representatives from the participating countries gave papers concerning the work that had been done during the period. These reports have been published in a series of working papers.

It was soon realized that there was also need for academic education, and the archaeological department at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, opened its doors to the African students. A considerable number of academic theses, both licentiate and doctoral, have been presented as a result of the project, and there are more to come within the next few years.

The project was concluded in 1993 and SAREC had an international expert, Professor Fekri Hassan, evaluate it. It seems appropriate to end this part with a short extract of his printed report, where he also suggests some future activities.

"The Urban Origins in Eastern Africa project is a model for archaeological investigations in developing nations. It has broken new ground and has provided a new vision of collaboration between Western industrial nations and countries that have suffered the ravages of colonization and economic deprivation. Developing countries have been placed 'out of history' and have been marginalized. Their indigenous cultures have been devaluated and condemned. The project is noted for its recognition of archaeology in shaping a sense of self-worth and destiny, and to the role of archaeology in instilling a sense of dignity to the peoples whose beliefs and world views have been systematically undermined. This domain of archaeology must be strengthened and given a prominent

place in the next stage of the project." The latter part has still to be developed.

The Swedish archaeological research co-operation does not only concern countries in Africa. Since 1988 a comprehensive project is being carried out in Sri Lanka where the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology in Colombo is the counterpart. In this case all administration is managed locally and the Central Board has only contributed by recruiting experts. Two other projects should also be mentioned, although they do not belong to "research". Consequently they are not supported by SAREC, but by SIDA, which is the governmental agency responsible for the main and more substantial part of the Swedish aid to developing countries. One project implies support to museums in Nicaragua, and the other involves co-operation between museums in Sweden and Africa on an exchange basis, SAMP. Following the administrative system of the Swedish foreign aid, the two latter projects are placed under the heading "Cultural Co-operation" and have nothing to do with research.

On the other hand, research only peripherally includes heritage management, so this is an area that falls between the "chairs". It is obvious that the programs within this field have been successful. The reason for this is, among other things, that there is a direct contact between colleagues and a minimum of expensive administration, i. e. no "pockets" between the donors and the proper receivers. The main support to developing countries, from Sweden as well as from other contributors, besides the too often occurring emergencies, normally goes to more substantial activities for long-term benefit such as developing infrastructure and agriculture. Heritage management is not often thought of.

Whenever the ambiguous word "development" is used in discussions concerning the "developing countries", it is given a posi-

tive implication, a promise of improvement in living conditions and a prosperous future. When thinking of our European situation, the word development also means increasing land use and a more or less harmful impact on natural and cultural resources. The archaeological heritage is always affected in some way when the "development" concerns areas which have been inhabited and used for a long period of time. In most Western countries, however, there are various legal and financial means of coping with the situation. In the Third World the problems are the same, although they seem to be less observed. Under tropical conditions the ground surface is often extremely sensitive to environmental disturbances, and the impact in some areas may be especially threatening where forest devastation, exaggerated grazing and heavy rainfall aggravate the damage to archaeological remains. However, this is not only an archaeological problem. The cultural heritage at large is threatened by extensive land use, as part of the development. This is a well-known problem to be dealt with by the large international organisations like UNESCO, ICOMOS and WAC.

In the meantime, however, I believe that whatever these organisations can achieve, the most important thing is to work for a future where the planners and the heritage managers co-operate in the same way as in many Western countries. Even though officials from foreign aid agencies may not feel like interfering with the cultural matters in the countries where they are working, nothing should prevent them from pointing out the possibilities of adding some percentage to the total cost of a project, for the benefit of the culture heritage.

In fact, I still believe that supporting countries have a moral obligation in these matters.

English revised by Laura Wrang.

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