

Review of the Stone Age Archaeology in Southwestern Angola

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The role of Archaeology in the Portuguese colonial agenda

Portugal was not estranged from other European nations scrambling for Africa during the last half of the XIX century, in which the reaffirmation of the imperial sovereignty and its national history of overseas expansion had become of intrinsic value in face of external threats from the English crown (Martins, 2008). In April 1883, the Cartography Commission (*Comissão de Cartografia*), was created to follow the project for recognition and scientific occupation of Southern Africa (1877-79) of the Permanent Central Commission of Geography (1876), further absorbed by the Geographical Society of Lisbon (1880). The Geographic Missions aimed to establish an “effective occupation” as a way to legitimate an African territory, the “3rd Overseas Empire” (Lobato, 2010), a project that crossed political regimes, from the Monarchy to the Dictatorship of the ‘New State’ (1936-1974), even guiding these political and institutional recasts (AA.VV., 1983). In 1936 with establishment of the New State the Commission was transformed in National Board for Geographical Missions and Colonial Research. This was briefly after renamed as Overseas Research Board (1951), after a renovation in the ideological agenda of the dictatorial government and the constitutional revision that changed the term “colony” to “overseas province”, following the premise of a pluricontinental Nation (Martins, 2010a). This meant that academic institutions and research departments should hold offices at the capital of each province and develop active research for the empire’s welfare. A cost-effective exploitation of the African resources dictated in the plan of *Scientific Occupation of Portuguese Overseas* (1945) focused the research scope on soil, animals and plant species. At the same time this occupation demanded a better understanding on the cultural and ethnic diversity of local communities. In spite of the number of reports and memoirs on the ethnographic collections very few assemblages were actually studied at the time due to a general lack of interest of the government for archaeological heritage, not very taken upon identity issues and territorial borders like other African countries (Martins, 2010a).

Even though archaeological research was not a priority in the agenda of the Portuguese scientific missions in Africa, the persistence of some political and intellectual personalities succeeded in introducing Physical Anthropology in the colonial program, sometimes unconscious or informally, assuming itself as archaeology for the construction of national identity and imperial cohesion. The fieldwork conducted in a series of Anthropology Missions included survey and excavation of prehistoric sites and rock art in the interest of anthropological and ethnographic characterization of the local populations.

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The first specific mission on this theme was in Mozambique and the aim of the mission was to identify ethnic groups, record customs and traditions and collect biological data and material cultural, most especially archaeological artefacts that could illustrate geographical origins and common ancestry. Moreover the Missions, not only in Mozambique but also in Angola, intended to draw the Portuguese archaeological research closer to the development of the discipline of the 'Stone Age' in neighbouring countries such as the once-called South African Union and South Rhodesia, with new academic institutions, museums and archaeological findings (Martins, 2010b). The growing interest on the issue of the emergence of humankind led to the 1st Pan African Conference of Prehistory and Archaeology at Nairobi in 1947 where delegates from 26 countries, including Portugal, discussed new discoveries in palaeontology, quaternary geology and climate change, as well as the cultural sequence of the Stone of Africa, but also strengthened a network of international cooperation for the preservation of archaeological heritage.

Fieldwork in Southwest Angola

The geological survey of the country pushed by the growing demand on the land's mining resources (Carvalho, 1929) provided the first discoveries in the early 1920's (Borges & Mouta 1926). Fernando Mouta as headchief of the geological survey team in Angola was the first to publish a paper on the prehistory of Malange after the enlargement of the railway to east. Even though his primary activity was in the geological survey Mouta pioneered in the fields of prehistoric archaeology and ethnography of Angola having published a photographic album and the first map with the lithic findings known or published in Angola (Mouta, 1934a e 1934b). He also participated in the international debates as delegate of the Geology and Mine Services of Angola. The archaeological potential of Angola and the need for more research was stated in the 4th article of the meeting's final resolutions by the president, Abbé Henri Breuil (Mouta, 1948; Leakey, 1952). Soon after the conference both Leakey and Breuil visited Angola. The international recommendations strongly influenced the efforts in discovering more paleontological remains and motivated cooperation between the Portuguese in Angola and their international peers.

The geological features of the Southwestern region were thoroughly recorded by the survey team of the Geological Mission of Angola for the publication of the geological map (Mouta, 1954). During that work in Lubango, around 1940, the team came across a collection of three endocrania from fossil primates that led them to the cavities of Leba to find more paleontological remains, adding a series of new Stone Age sites along the limestones. These first findings were presented by Fernando Mouta at the First Pan-African Congress on Prehistory in 1947, organized by Louis Leakey in Nairobi. In the southwest Mouta found new deposits of fossil fauna in the rifts and sent them to Camille Arambourg at the Museum of Natural History of Paris who correlated those remains with the baboon species of *Dinopithecus ingens* broom found in Schurserberg (South Africa) in association with bones of *Australopithecus* (Dart, 1950; Mouta, 1953 e 1955; Arambourg & Mouta, 1955).

In 1950 José Camarate França was assigned to take over the fieldwork in the region of Huíla, under the Anthropobiological Mission of Angola headed by António de Almeida. Camarate França had a bachelor in High Colonial Studies and a large experience in prehistoric archaeology at the Geological Services of Portugal (Teixeira, 1965). During the 1950's he was responsible for most of the Stone Age research in Angola, with survey and excavation of sites of paleontological and archaeological interest from north to south (Almeida & Camarate França, 1964 e 1965; Camarate França, 1952; 1953a; 1953b; 1960; 1964a; 1964b; 1964c e 1964d). Also granted by the National Board of Colonial Research In 1960 he completed his

degree in Geological Sciences at the University of Lisbon about the Jurassic massifs in Portugal. He was still working with António de Almeida because all of the artifacts from the anthropological mission in Southwestern Angola were brought to Portugal to be studied at the offices of the Board. However the early passing of Camarate França in 1963 left most of his work to be finished. After his death some notes were published in his memory, the most important one about the excavation of the Middle Stone Age deposits of a cave in Leba around 1951 (Camarate França, 1964a). A first map of the prehistoric sites found during the Anthropobiological Mission of Angola was also published by A. Almeida and H. Breuil (1964) with an inventory of more than two hundred Stone Age sites discovered during the campaigns.

Leba Cave is located in the middle of the northwestern cliff of the Humpata highlands, in the left margin of the river Leba. Due to tectonic movements these greyish-blue dolomites in horizontal and sub-horizontal bedplates that form the plateau present a variety of subterranean morphologies allowing underground water flow (Vale & Gonçalves, 1968; do Amaral, 1973), which revealed preservation of Pleistocene deposits (Mouta, 1953; Camarate França, 1964a). One of the test-pits inside the cave showed a sequence of archaeological horizons embracing Early, Middle and Late Stone Age lithic artifacts and faunal remains that were studied and published only decades after (Gautier, 1994; Matos, 2013).

In 1965 another geologist took over the prehistory section of the Board. Miguel Ramos was mentored by André Leroi-Gourhan at the University of Paris and was directed by António de Almeida (Rodrigues, 1992). His research project called “Paleolithic of Southwestern Angola” was created by the “Mission of Archaeological Studies of Southwestern Angola” (MEASA) and had been requested by the Scientific Research Institute of Angola between 1966 and 1967 (Ramos, 1967). This mission aimed for a rigorous mapping of the stone sites already discovered on previous missions but also surveying of other areas. New archaeological sites with Early and Middle Stone Age occupations were found and excavated: Campangombe-Santo António (355-11), Santo António – Caconge (355-10), Campangombe Velho (355-7). The fieldwork was interrupted and more than a hundred thousand artifacts were brought to Portugal to be studied by Ramos for his doctorate. He died in 1991 having published very little data from his research on the prehistory of southwestern Angola (Ramos, 1970; 1974; 1980; 1982 e 1984).

The collections of the Portuguese Scientific Missions

Until 2015 the Tropical Research Institute (IICT) held the important legacy of the Board which remains today the most important archive on the Stone Age of the country, now under the management of the University of Lisbon. The Archaeology collection is divided in four sub-collections formed by ethnographic pieces and archaeological artifacts from the anthropological missions in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea and Timor. These materials represent all of the work managed by Antonio de Almeida since 1948 as coordinator of the campaigns and director of the Center of Anthropobiology Studies of the National Board for Colonial Studies (JIU), and the work of Miguel Ramos until 1992. Over the past few years, this collection has undergone systematic intervention, including cataloguing, conservation and electronic processing.

The Angola Collection gathers lithics, pottery and ethnographic materials brought from the survey campaigns of the Anthropobiological Mission in Angola from 1948 to 1955, including materials from the excavations of José Camarate França between 1950 and 1951 at Serra da Leba. Also in the archive the assemblages from the sites of Santo António and Campangombe Velho excavated by Miguel Ramos during the Mission of Archaeological

Studies of Southwestern Angola (MEASA) between 1966 and 1967 and other work by the board in 1970 and 1972 by the Pedology Mission of Angola and Mozambique (M.P.A.M.) (Coelho *et al.*, 2014). This sums in a total of 170 174 artefacts from 341 sites from all Angola, from which 284 locations are archaeological sites with Early and Middle Stone Age materials in the southwest region.

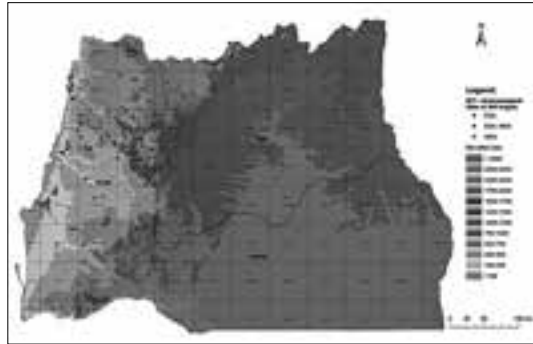


Figura 001 – Prehistoric sites of Southwest Angola.

Final remarks

Current investigation poses the origins of humankind in the Middle to Late Stone Age sequences of the eastern coast of Southern Africa (Lombard, 2012) because until today the most abundant information comes from the eastern corridor from Ethiopia to Tanzania and then South Africa, with Mozambique representing a huge gap on the record about the Middle and Late Pleistocene. It seems that such stall in Paleolithic research resulted of the combination of various factors, mostly political and institutional such as a notorious disinvestment of the Portuguese New State policy in the overseas province, the colonial war, and after the independence, the civil war and a dictatorship fobia that persisted long after. The study of collections from territories such Angola are of most importance to understand human evolution because these regions are very close to other territories that not only retrieved many of the oldest archaeological and paleoanthropological data on early hominines, but also from where have been recurrent gatherings of the oldest data for anatomically modern humans fossils and the oldest modern human behavior repertoire. An increment of a state of the art research within a 21st century democratic spirit will allow to integrate the data from the prehistoric record of the Portuguese-speaking countries and relevance for the understanding of human evolution and also highlight the role of the Portuguese Scientific Missions on such research.

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