Rethinking Ingombe Ilede and its hinterland

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The late fifteenth- to early seventeenth-century dates reported by Susan McIntosh and Brian Fagan (above) for the richest burials at Ingombe Ilede challenge well-known narratives concerning trade and politics in greater Zambezia. For example, as the authors indicate, Ingombe Ilede now seems more an *outcome* of the destabilised politics of Great Zimbabwe than a *cause* of its demise. The role that the inhabitants of Ingombe Ilede played in the shifting competitions and alliances that characterised political and economic life in sixteenth-century Zambezia must now be addressed.

By considering common political emblems and jewellery styles, the authors position Ingombe Ilede in a world oriented to the east, north and south of the site. In the future, sourcing copper, gold, iron, shell, ivory and ceramic artefacts will allow an incorporation of Ingombe Ilede into histories of *specific* sixteenth-century networks. There are already tantalising clues that raise questions concerning the role of Ingombe Ilede in such particularistic histories of greater Zambezia. Although not mentioned by McIntosh and Fagan in their tab. 1, burial 3 also contained two wooden ornaments described as resembling Islamic amulet holders. This suggests ties between Ingombe Ilede and coastal traders (Fagan *et al*. 1969: 73, 138). Competition between Swahili and Portuguese traders increased during the sixteenth century, as the Portuguese tried to break the Swahili monopoly on trade in southern Zambezia by alternately invading and forging alliances with the Mutapa state. Ingombe Ilede seems not to have been known to the Portuguese, raising interesting questions about its role in the region's history. Was Ingombe Ilede an outpost allied with Swahili networks and established to circumvent new Portuguese markets (*feiras*) and routes monitored by the Mwene Mutapa? Swahili traders, of course, also competed with each other, as did Africans of the interior. How did Ingombe Ilede's probable specialisation in ivory, salt, copper and perhaps iron and gold articulate with other changes in regional markets, such as the dramatic sixteenth- and seventeenth-century increase in copper production in the Copperbelt (Bisson 1976: 429), or increasing wealth in cattle herds along the middle Kafue? Similarly, coastal trading houses faced great uncertainty in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as some towns were abandoned and others were established. If tied to Swahili networks, how did trade with Ingombe Ilede function within the strategies of coastal people facing shifting geographies of wealth and precarity?

Although the central African political emblems, specialist tools and coastal goods of the Ingombe Ilede burials tend to attract the most attention, the distribution of the

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jewellery forms recovered in the burials calls our attention to additional places in Ingombe Ilede's socio-cultural sphere. Rich Ingombe Ilede men and women wore drawn-wire copper bangles in multiples to create ankle and wrist cuffs, as did men and women in the Upemba Depression (although in iron, rather than copper). This style of wound-copper bangle has a long history in south-central Africa, as the authors note, but the shift from hammered copper ribbon and foil strips to drawn copper wire marks a technological innovation. Fagan's other excavation reports show that the earliest evidence for this new style was recovered from the burial of a 40–60-year-old woman at Isamu Pati, a mound site on the Batoka Plateau, and dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century—these dates should, however, be regarded with great care (Fagan 1967: 123, 175). Although it later became famous for its ties to the Upemba, the Zimbabwe Plateau and the Indian Ocean, Ingombe Ilede was first studied in a more local context during the 1960s and 1970s: a golden age in Zambian archaeology. How does Ingombe Ilede fit into the sixteenth-century history of its western hinterland (the middle Kafue, Batoka Plateau and Victoria Falls region)? This was an area with a long-standing history of expertise in iron and copper smelting and ivory and metal bangle production, which tied the region, as early as the late first millennium, to even wider networks than those of sixteenth-century Igombe Ilede (de Luna 2016).

It was recently argued (de Luna 2016: 209–11) that the emergence of Ingombe Ilede as a trade *entrepôt* in the fourteenth or fifteenth century cut off communities of its western hinterland from coastal trade networks; west of Ingombe Ilede, these centuries correspond with a period of poorer burials and fewer glass beads, coastal shells and other evidence of connection to Indian Ocean trade. McIntosh and Fagan's new dates challenge the timing of this argument, but, interestingly, the end of the new date range for the Ingombe Ilede burials overlaps with the beginning of a period of wealth and connectivity in the middle Kafue, Victoria Falls and Batoka regions. This period of wealth to the west of Ingombe Ilede peaked in the seventeenth-century, suggesting that Ingombe Ilede may well have monopolised trade in the sixteenth century, cutting off areas to the west. As civil wars and Portuguese interference undermined the Mwene Mutapa's control over trade in the first half of the seventeenth century, however, Ingombe Ilede's influence declined. Populations to the west seem to have circumvented Ingombe Ilede, perhaps contributing to its decline, as they sought out opportunities to trade with autonomous back-country traders working on the fringes of the Mwene Mutapa's authority, and with the increasingly powerful Portuguese (ties are documented for the eighteenth century with respect to Zumba; see Sutherland-Harris 1970).

The new Ingombe Ilede dates present new avenues for research because the site's ties to the Hurungwe District and its position on the fringe of better-known polities offer ways to add nuance to monolithic accounts concerning the spread of competing coastal trade networks and political authority in greater Zambezia. Such detail is welcome and highlights the need for renewed archaeological research north of the Zambezi. While these new dates are used to incorporate Ingombe Ilede into the history of sixteenth-century Zambezia, we should not focus the story only on connections to the well-known history of coastal traders or highland politicians. For as Fagan's years of meticulous archaeology in central Zambia suggest, the actions of communities of the western hinterland also shaped and were shaped

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by the technological knowledge, wealth and connections exemplified in the newly re-dated burials of Ingombe Ilede.

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