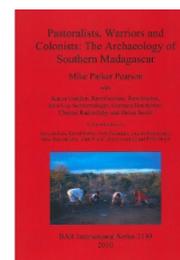

BOOK REVIEW



Pastoralists, Warriors and Colonists: The Archaeology of Southern Madagascar. By Mike Parker Pearson with Karen Godden, Ramilisonina, Retsihisatse, Jean-Luc Schwenninger, Georges Heurtebize, Chantal Radimilahy and Helen Smith with contributions by Irene de Luis, David Baker, Seth Priestman, Lucien Rakotozafy, Bako Rasoarifetra, Alan Vince, Zoë Crossland and Brian Boyd. BAR International Series 2139, Archaeopress, 2010, 725 pp. ISBN 978-1-4073-0608-3. £ 95.00.

In terms of African archaeology southern Madagascar is virtually a blank — or has been until now. It is as near *terra incognita* to archaeologists as anywhere gets, off-shore, beyond the reaches of the trade winds which otherwise connect up the western Indian Ocean with the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf, India and wider oceanic economic and demographic contacts. The island itself was not even properly colonised until the mid to late first century AD, seemingly very late for a landmass of that size, particularly given its location just over the horizon from the African coast. A full survey of northern Madagascar by Pierre VÉRIN (1986) has significantly contributed to knowledge of the interactions taking place right at the southern edge of the Indian Ocean monsoonal wind system with all its maritime implications. Central Madagascar is also well-recorded. Southern Madagascar, by contrast, has attracted very little in the way of systematic archaeology. And it might have seemed that there it would remain.

Yet the book now produced by Mike Parker Pearson and his team is a positive doorstep of a volume, a whopper of some 725 double-column pages. Though its implications are wider, the region covered is in fact largely that of Androy rather than southern Madagascar as a whole. Even so, it covers a large area of semi-desert occupied by pastoralists tending cattle, sheep and goats, a region similar to that described for eastern African by Peter Robertshaw (1990) in terms of topic and the challenging degrees of difficulty in conducting modern archaeology and rigorous survey — an example of what the authors of this volume aptly describe as a version of “extreme archaeology”. However, an immediate question imposes itself: what is its justification? If

archaeologists are unlikely to stream into southern Madagascar to follow up its insights or pour over a volume of this scale for every recondite detail, is it really much more than an abuse of trees? In a world of more perfunctory made-for-purpose REF-writing, where systematic study with all the richness it can inspire is unfashionable, I would argue a volume on this scale — and with this quality of content — is none the less entirely admirable.

To those familiar with at least some aspects of the known archaeology of southern Madagascar it might have seemed as if this was going to be a volume about the increasing impact across the centuries of globalisation on one of the remoter occupied places in the world. After all, reports of finds of Islamic *sgraffiato* and Chinese celadon wares already indicate significant levels of long-distance contacts in the first parts of the second millennium AD (as reported in the past by long-time resident of the region Georges Heurtebize amongst others). Salvage from not infrequent shipwrecks added to the exotic goods, and guns found their way into the region during the sixteenth century and continued to be important into the twentieth century. Today the most prominent feature of the landscape is without doubt the massive tombs of stone and richly-painted imported concrete which stand out on the arid plains. Yet, as the volume convincingly demonstrates, impressions can be deceptive. The truth would seem to be exactly the opposite of the fashionable model of globalisation; so much so, indeed, that the underlying question is an entirely contrary one: why has this region been so resistant to external influence, fiercely isolationist until well into the twentieth century, and even now asserting a strongly

independent position in the face of post-colonial attempts to establish a national level of identity?

The Androy project dates back to the early 1990s and was carried out over a decade of work across seven field seasons. 750 sites have been identified and surveyed, a number of which were also excavated, and a further 70 known sites reinvestigated. Some of the story has already been evident in Parker Pearson's and his collaborators' reports from the 1990s onwards and in the book co-authored with Godden, which gives a lively popular account of the circumstances in which parts of the work here were conducted (PARKER PEARSON & GODDEN 2002).

The objectives of the work have shifted, been refined and added to as the research has continued. However — and despite being described in the volume as a 'shopping list' of topics — they remain succinct and coherent focussing on different periods of the story and each essentially with a chapter to itself.

These chapters are arranged not in terms of the succession of fieldwork seasons or of materials analysed but reconfigured into chapters on each of the relevant periods. Three introductory synoptic sections consider, in order: climate, geology, geomorphology, flora, and fauna; the present occupants of the region; and the project's objectives and methodology. Thereafter the order of chapters is chronological. Chapter four, therefore, concerns the question of the extinctions of some of Madagascar's famous mega-fauna, especially the renowned *Aepyornis* and the *Mullerornis*, both giant ratites. They were extinct by AD 1200 but their ultimate demise was already inevitable when the shores of the south of the island began to be explored by humans. Early coastal exploration seems to date to the end of the first millennium BC from the evidence of cut marks on animal bones, with coastal settlements established apparently from East Africa (to judge by the presence of so-called East Africa Incised Triangular Wares at coastal sites) only after about AD 500. A Swahili presence is implied, at least after the Swahili had become identifiable as such. The assumption of a potential East African settlement in the south of the island contrasts with the Malayo-Polynesian occupation otherwise proposed for the northern and central parts of Madagascar. The format of this chapter sets the style for the analytical sequence of chapters to follow: an introductory discussion, detailed reports on each relevant site investigated with copious diagrammatic and photographic illustration, and, where appropriate, incorporating into the chapter specialist finds reports by the contributors, Malagasy and European, listed. A conclusion to each chapter gives a summary of the emergent state of knowledge of each period covered within the region and sets it in a wider regional context.

Chapter five takes the reader into the tenth to thirteenth centuries. This is when the first concerted exploration of the interior of the south began, associated with a movement towards what appears to be the beginnings of urbanism at riverine sites inland with the development of stone enclosures (*manda*: intriguingly, as the authors remark, the Swahili name for the island in the Lamu archipelago off the coast in Kenya). Links with the wider Indian Ocean are evidenced in Persian Gulf and Chinese ceramics but, if a Swahili link is suspected, the absence of mosques is clearly an anomaly in need of explanation — as it is for other so-called 'Islamised' groups in south-eastern Madagascar who write Malagasy in the Arabic script but are not otherwise Islamic, nor do they speak the Arabic language. A further puzzle ensues with a dramatic slump in population after the fourteenth century from which no further move towards nucleated urban settlement patterns re-emerged until the colonial era. The appearance of bubonic plague is canvassed by the authors in their explanation of demographic implosion. The coastline itself at this time was largely unoccupied implying the isolation which led to external relations being conducted largely through intermediaries, notably the Tanosy in the region of Fort Dauphin from whom Tandroy received guns during the sixteenth century.

A succeeding chapter looks at issues of defence and decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A regional pottery style emerged known as Rezoky ware from a site which was first identified by Vérin but is in fact at the very northern extremities of the area. At sites investigated by the research team these ceramics were found in association with Chinese celadon pottery showing continuing contact with wider trading networks. There is no use of classifications such as 'Iron Age' in the volume. However, this is the period when the exploitation of iron ore took off with further notable escalations in iron working in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as already examined by Chantal RADIMILAHY (1988).

Written sources, albeit partial, date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notably those of Etienne de Flacourt from 1661 and Robert Drury's account of his years as a captured shipwreck sailor of 1729 (usually thought to have been ghost-written by Daniel Defoe, but nonetheless with notable accuracy). During this period a Tandroy kingdom developed. Drury was held in slavery for six years at two adjacent royal villages both of which have now been excavated by the research team yielding local products and significant quantities of trade goods. To this period belongs the occupation and exploitation of the arid regions of the south requiring huge expenditure of labour in fetching water from distant sources and surviving on the liquids from fruits and cooked food which the authors identify as a remarkable