

Pathways through the forest? Reflecting on the archaeology of early farming communities in Great Lakes Africa

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The Great Lakes region of eastern Africa was the crucible of early archaeological studies of the Bantu Migration Hypothesis, forging an archaeology that came to be known as the Early Iron Age. Intensive research activity in the 1960s laid the foundations for larger discussions around the spread of Bantu language speakers across eastern and southern Africa, locating the Great Lakes at the head of these dispersal maps. Archaeology was never alone in these endeavours, and inter-disciplinary conversation between linguists and historians flourished. Over the subsequent decades research activity has ebbed and flowed in response to changing fashions in the types of research questions being asked, as well as shifting dynamics between disciplinary foci. In recent decades however, there has been a marked upswing in research on the Bantu Migration Hypothesis, particularly in linguistics and genetics. Archaeology has followed in some areas – notably in central and south central Africa - however, the Great Lakes region has fallen a little behind. In this paper, I will reflect on the EIA archaeology of the Great Lakes, and how it articulates with the new research findings from cognate disciplines and neighbouring regions, particularly in regard to the idea that Eastern Bantu predecessors reached the Great Lakes from the south, and not through the forests (Grollemund et al 2015). Following this theme of connections and mobility, I will end with a discussion of how EIA communities of the Great Lakes may have maintained their social networks in the period post-arrival, reflecting on the well-known presence of a single type of ceramics – Urewe ware – from the mid 1st millennium BC to late first millennium AD.