New Discoveries at Old Sites: The Legacy of J. Desmond Clark in Karonga, Malawi

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Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s J.D. Clark and his students located several significant archaeological sites in Malawi, including an entire landscape of Middle Stone Age (MSA) materials in the northeastern district of Karonga. One of these, reported by Clark as Damanshi IA, yielded an assemblage of nearly 25,000 stone artefacts and several specimens of worked ochre from an air-dry deposit. However, the site has never been absolutely dated, the ochre and stone artefact assemblages have not been thoroughly analysed, and in the years since Clark’s excavations, its exact location has been lost. In 2012 a site named Bruce was discovered in Karonga that had several outstanding qualities: (1) more than 100 pieces of red pigment were found on the modern buried surface, with nearly half of the assemblage displaying clear human modification; (2) the raw material diversity shows a high proportion of less common stone types, such as silcrete and chert, in addition to the quartz and quartzite that typically define the MSA; and (3) Levallois technology dominates the surface assemblage and artefacts are often to be heavily reduced, despite immediate abundance of raw materials. Historical research and local informants from Karonga suggest that Bruce is actually the same site as Damanshi IA. Considering the importance of ochre in recent MSA research and the large quantity of artefacts recovered by Clark from an air-dry deposit at Damanshi IA, finding the site again has strong historical and scientific significance. The site shows potential, extensive MSA occupation of a floodplain environment in which a range of raw materials and lithic reduction strategies were used. This new update works Clark’s legacy in Karonga, integrating it into a larger picture of the human adaptation during the MSA in northern Africa.

Chaminade IA

The Chaminade IA site was excavated in 1985 by Van Eggers and published by J Desmond Clark as part of a series of papers on the Karonga area of northern Malawi (Clark et al. 1987). Quaternary 13: 305-356 (Figure 1). The excavations went on in some cases as deep as 5.7m, the majority of artefacts were recovered from the uppermost ca. 15m of “Chitima sands.”

Clark reported the recovery of 24,551 artefacts and several ochre pieces from three “concentrations” in a 42 m2 excavation at Ch-I-A (Figure 3; Figure 4).

Bruce

During 2012 survey by the Malawi Earlier-Middle Stone Age Project (MENASP) a site near a spring was located and nicknamed “Bruce.” The surface exhibited a depression suggestive of a previous excavation, with mounds that could represent spoil heaps from the 1980s (Figure 5) and very large numbers of surface artefacts (Figure 6).

Surface Finds

In spite of no available cobbles within several hundred metres of the site, the surface was strewn with thousands of stone artefacts (Figure 7) on a diversity of raw materials (e.g. quartz, quartzite, silcrete, and fossil wood). A 5 x 15m area was searched for all surface finds, and produced 3888 artefacts. A random sample of quartzite artefacts showed that most were fine-grained. 93% were in a very fresh or fresh state, and there was a low proportion of cortical flakes relative to excavated assemblages in the areas. Levallois and blade technology was represented better than in other parts of the Karonga landscape. These factors suggest the site was visited repeatedly and reduction of stone tools from potentially disparate sources took place.

Excavations

Three 1 x 2 m Areas were excavated by natural stratigraphy or 5cm spots (Figure 12), and water-sieved. Two Test Pits were excavated in 2012 in 20cm and dry-sieved. Laterite pits newly dug for a nearby house were also mopped and sampled (Figure 14).

Beauchapronography

Four luminescence samples were analysed from the section of a natural erosion feature in the southern part of the site (Figure 6). Although all samples pre-date the surface finds, the geomorphic context suggests recent deflation onto a surface dating to at least 100 ka (Figure 17).

Discussion

Given the absence of local cobble and the presence of worked ochre it seems unlikely that Bruce was simply another retreating location in a raw material-rich landscape, but was rather a particular repeated locus of human activity potentially centred on the spring. If Bruce is Ch-I-A, then it has suffered much from both archaeologists and development since its relatively recent exposure and increasing development is a threat. Future work will include:

• Deepening existing excavations to explore the strong possibility of stratification and obtain more samples.

• Renewed outreach and conservation efforts to prevent further site damage.

• Lithic and ochre analysis, including geochronological.

• Revisiting the large archeological Ch-I-A assemblage at the Stone Age Institute.

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