Landscape Transformations and the Archaeology of Impact: Social Disruption and State Formation in Southern Africa

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Perry and Epperson: Landscape Transformations and the Archaeology of Impact: Social D

Terrence W. Epperson

Perry provides an excellent example of how historical archaeology can be used to test, and ultimately refute, a widely accepted historiographic model, in this case one that, for over a century, has served the interests of European colonists and their allies in southern Africa. Landscape Transformations and the Archaeology of Impact is based upon extensive fieldwork in Swaziland (a nominally independent country almost totally surrounded by South Africa) and synthesis of previous archaeological, documentary, and oral historical work conducted in neighboring South Africa and Mozambique. Appreciation of this work will be enhanced by reading it in conjunction with the author's personal account of the sociopolitical context within which he conducted his Swaziland fieldwork in 1984, 1985, and 1987 (Perry 1998).

The object of Perry's analysis is what he calls the "Settler Model" of the Mfecane/Difaqane, the early decades of the nineteenth century that were characterized by the reign of Shaka Zulu (c. 1790-1828), the rise of the Zulu state, and a period of cataclysmic internecine warfare and widespread famine and population displacement. Mfecane is thought to be a Xhosa term meaning "the crushing" and Difaqane is a Sotho-Tswana cognate meaning "the scattering." According to Perry, the Settler Model is predicated upon three fundamental assumptions: First, the near genocidal warfare, cattle raiding, starvation, and forced migrations that characterized the early nineteenth century were internally generated. Second, European involvement in, and responsibility for, these conflicts was minimal. Finally, the black-on-black violence resulted in the depopulation of large areas and the concomitant formation of refugee communities forced to seek asylum with nearby European settlers. Settler Model theorists differ regarding the fundamental causes of these events (e.g. demographic pressure, environmental degradation, ivory trade), but concur in their minimization of European involvement and attribution of responsibility primarily to the rise of the Zulu state. The image of benevolent white settlers providing refuge to terrorized, displaced black refugees and subsequently occupying an "empty" landscape had, and continues to have, obvious ideological utility for European colonists and allied European-sanctioned African elites. In fact, this Settler Model served as a cornerstone of the historical rationale for apartheid in South Africa.

Perry begins by examining three fundamental, often unstated, underlying assumptions of the Settler Model: First, "African society was composed of a series of relatively discrete ethnic groups that had their origin in the past and persisted into
relatively recent times." Second, "these ethnic groups were poorly articulated one to
the other, little systematic interaction between the groups can be used to understand
cultural transformation." Finally, "These social relations were disrupted in the early
nineteenth century by the Mfecane/Difaqane when local conditions led the pre-Zulu
ethnic group to become a predatory state." (pp. 21-22). In his most important and
innovative move, Perry then operationalizes the Settler Model, treating it as a
hypothesis to be tested archaeologically. He develops region specific, quantifiable
archaeological correlates for the model, including such factors as: military
fortifications, residential settlements, cattle enclosures, cattle culling patterns (as
reflected in the age and sex profiles evident in archaeological assemblages), grain
storage facilities, royal tombs and settlements, and presence of European trade goods.
In a rigorous statistical analysis, the Settler Model is then tested against the results of
Perry's fieldwork in Swaziland and his synthesis of the archaeological literature.

Not surprisingly, Perry finds "that the Settler Model of the Mfecane/Difaqane is
wrong: it has the wrong people in the wrong places with the wrong political
organization, and it incorrectly assumes a lack of political/economic ties between
regions." (p. 139). Noting that archaeologists need to be more attentive to issues of
power, Perry concludes with specific suggestions and hypotheses for future research.
He states that the scale of analysis must be expanded to include the influence of
European penetration and to account for tensions and contradictions arising from the
articulation of disparate modes of production. Making a careful differentiation
between European "racial commodity slavery" and the various African forms of
incorporation that also produced coerced labor, Perry urges careful consideration of
the illegal (and hence largely undocumented) trade in African captives for the internal
European market.

I have two minor quibbles, neither of which affects the validity of the research
design, the author's findings, or the hypotheses for future research. The first involves
Perry’s characterization of the Settler Model of the Mfecane/Difaqane. Perry concurs
with Cobbing's (1988) critique of the work of Omer-Cooper (1969) and others, stating
that their characterization of the Mfecane/Difaqane provides an "alibi" for the actions
of the European settlers. Although Perry briefly discusses how some African and
African Diaspora scholars have developed vindicationist analyses of the
Mfecane/Difaqane by stressing Shaka's military accomplishments and the importance
of Zulu agency in resisting European penetration (pp. 13-14), the main thrust of his
argument unequivocally holds that the "Zulucentric" model "vilifies the Zulu" (p.
141). However, this analysis elides both the historiographic complexities of the
Mfecane/Difaqane model and the continuing power of images of Zulu military
prowess in the South African political struggles. Historian Joseph C. Miller has noted
the connection between the Mfecane/Difaqane model and the "nationalist-era vision
of African history of the 1960s.” Miller states that Omer-Cooper ”drew the term 'Mfecane' from a large body of earlier historical writing but infused it with new significance as a time of revolutionary African state building and accorded it major importance as a source of pride and independence of spirit, in the historical consciousness of the African communities wholater came under white rule.” (Miller 1997:154). Perry's analysis would have been enhanced by fully embracing these historiographic contradictions, by realizing that the settler model's efficacy as an ideological construct derives in part from that fact that the alibi for European invasion also simultaneously vilifies and glorifies the role of the Zulu in the history of southeastern Africa.

The second quibble involves the production values of the volume. In a work of this brevity and expense (high cost-per-page ratio) one is disappointed to find low quality, dot matrix graphics (particularly Figure 1.2). In addition, the location map should reflect the political subdivisions of post-apartheid South Africa (i.e. Mpumalanga rather than Eastern Transval, KwaZulu-Natal instead of Zululand). Finally, the discussion of landscape diversity would have been enhanced by an interpretative topographic map.

These minor objections notwithstanding, *Landscape Transformations and the Archaeology of Impact* remains a masterful work that will be of interest to scholars working throughout the African Diaspora.

**References Cited**

Cobbing, Julian

Miller, Joseph C.

Omer-Cooper, John

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