

Holocene Saharans: An Anthropological Perspective (New Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology)

The early Swahili trade village of Tumbe, Pemba Island, Tanzania, AD 600–950

Jeffrey Fleisher¹ & Adria LaViolette²



Indian Ocean maritime networks have become a special focus of research in recent years, with emphasis not only on the economics of trade but also the movement of domesticated plants and animals (see Fuller et al. in *Antiquity* 2011: 544–58). But did such contacts inevitably lead to radical social change? Excavations at Tumbe reveal a settlement of the late first millennium AD that was heavily engaged in the traffic in exotic materials and may have been producing shell beads for export. This activity seems to have flourished within a domestic context in a village setting, however, and does not seem to have stimulated pronounced social stratification nor to have led inexorably towards urbanisation. These results demonstrate that some communities were able to establish a stable balance between the demands of the domestic economy and long-distance trade that could persist for several centuries. Activities at Tumbe should hence be viewed in their own right, not as precursors to the formation of the Swahili trading towns of the later medieval period.

Keywords: Tanzania, Pemba Island, Tumbe, AD 600–950, Swahili, trade, settlement, copper, glass, shell beads

Introduction

The archaeological site of Tumbe in north-eastern Pemba Island, Tanzania, has provided new evidence to broaden the discussion of eastern African settlements and their participation in Indian Ocean trade from the mid first to mid second millennia AD (Figure 1). Tumbe was a sprawling settlement inhabited from the seventh to early tenth centuries that has

¹ Department of Anthropology, Rice University, Houston, TX 77251-1892, USA (Email: jfleisher@rice.edu)
² Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4120, USA (Email: laviolette@virginia.edu)

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