

# *Urban origins in central Africa: the case of Kongo*

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## **Introduction**

Kongo is among the most famous kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa. When the leader of the first Portuguese expedition, the navigator Diogo Cao, landed in 1483 in the Zaire estuary, he was astonished to discover the existence of a centralised political state, an African replica of the Portuguese kingdom (Vansina 1966; Randles 1968; Ekholm 1972). The Portuguese first dealt with this kingdom accordingly, on a more or less equal basis, exchanging ambassadors. The king of Kongo was baptised in 1491 by the Portuguese who gave him the name of their king, Joao. Under his successor, Afonso, Christianity spread even further throughout the kingdom. However, instead of becoming a religion of the masses, it was adopted by a small ruling elite who made it a royal cult, reinforcing their political authority. One of Afonso's sons was even ordained a bishop as early as 1518, the first black bishop ever. The missionaries, who were mainly Jesuits and Capucins, the traders and officials, left behind a vivid description of the development of the kingdom which permitted a detailed reconstruction of the daily lives of its inhabitants at a time when their civilization was at its peak (Balandier 1965). Their highly centralized political structure allowed them to rule over an area of 150,000 km<sup>2</sup>, almost the size of Uganda, stretching south of the Zaire estuary. They acquired a mastery of metallurgy, law, weaving and textiles. The art of the Kongo remains, even today, one of the most elaborate in Africa, making use of wood, cloth, terra cotta and even stones. Kongo not only survived contact with the Portuguese but continued expansion and development into a centralized state until the start of the civil wars in the late seventeenth century (Thorton 1979; Thorton 1983; Hilton 1985). The memory of this magnificent kingdom (Fig. 1) which proclaimed very early the achievements of black men, is still present in the minds of many intellectuals and leaders of Africa today.

## **The geographic context**

The coastal zone of the kingdom was sparsely populated with a concentration of settlements in the river valleys to the south where rainfall was poor and irregular, and on the hills near the Zaire river where the best water and also the most productive part of that zone was to be found. The zone incorporated the provinces of Sonyo near the estuary and of Mbamba further south.

About 100 km inland to the east is a more hospitable hilly area, rising to a ridge over 1000 m high and with an annual rainfall above 1000 mm. Most of the soils were relatively fertile, temperatures moderate, the vegetation being a mixture of savannahs and woodlands. This zone was densely populated, especially in the north eastern part which contained the provinces of Nsundi, Mpangu and Mbata. The provinces of Mpemba, Wembo and Wandu were also located in this zone. Further east, stretches the vast Kalahari sands plateau, infertile and very sparsely populated, which was drawn into the kingdom in the sixteenth century (Hilton 1985, pp. 1–5).

Hilton (1985, pp. 7–8) gives a good summary of the settlement pattern:

The people's primary economic activities – long fallow agriculture and arboriculture supplemented by animal husbandry, hunting, and collecting – determined that settlement was normally dispersed. The village, *libata*, which were descent based, were very small, probably counting no more than thirty houses. There were also innumerable dispersed hamlets called *ki-belo*, a term which indicated that a lineage segment had established a settlement or worked a field. The towns, called *mbanza*, which evolved as a result of trade, refugee settlement or concentrations of power, were essentially areas of denser settlement on the same pattern with small settlements interspersed with cultivated fields.

The overall population density was probably not high – perhaps fewer than four persons per square kilometre in the mid-seventeenth century and the land teemed with wild and often dangerous animals.

Each province of the kingdom had a capital named after it, thus Mbanza Sundi for the province of Sundi. According to Hilton (1985, p. 34):

The governors established their capitals in the most fertile parts of the provinces. Mbanza Sonyo, for example, was located in the Zaïre estuary in the northwest. This was the best watered and the most populous part of a generally arid province. Mbanza Mbamba, which governed an even less hospitable region, was located in the wetter, northern part of the province in a fertile region south of the River Mbrije. The capital of the central province of Mpemba was strategically located away from Mbanza Kongo at its southern extremity in a fertile region on the River Loje. The eastern capitals, Mbanzas, Nsundi, Mpangu and Mbata were all located in the fertile Nkisi Valley near the eastern frontier of the kingdom.

One should note that the name 'Mbanza' derives from a proto-Bantu root, *banja*, which probably originally meant 'ground made ready for building', which evolved into courtyard,

building site and in the Bantu linguistic zone H, among the Kongo, ‘important village where the chief lives’, ‘main village’, ‘town’, or even ‘cemetery’ (Grégoire 1976).

## **The origins of the kingdom**

Prior to the late fifteenth century we do not know much about the history and the origin of the Kongo kingdom. Traditions collected in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attribute the foundation of the kingdom to a mythical hero Lukeni who, coming from the north, crossed the Zaïre river and conquered the area south of it. Although this theme of a mythical ‘first king’ crossing a river is a recurrent myth in central Africa it has been, as well as the smith’s myth also present here (de Maret 1985) combined by historians to assume, quite literally, that the origin of the Kongo kingdom was to be sought in a new political organization arising north of the Zaïre River and connected with the Mindouli-Boko Songo copper deposits.

Hilton (1985, pp. 32–3), for example, writes:

The political device evolved north of the Zaïre probably passed south of the river in the early fifteenth century. It seems likely that the success of the copper controlling chiefdom or chiefdoms, possibly called Vungu, further stimulated the copper trade across the Zaïre. This trade route from Vungu to the Nkisi valley chiefdom and perhaps to the southern mountains too, crossed an older trade route from the salt and shell producing coastal strip to the Nkisi valley. It was in this central region, where the two routes crossed, that the kingdom of Kongo arose. There are at least two possible hypotheses concerning this development. The one which is most congruent with the traditions is that Vungu became so powerful that it was able to impose governors upon neighbouring Kanda (matrilineal descent group) and especially upon the Kanda which controlled the principal Zaïre crossing. The Zaïre governor used his control of the copper trade to intervene in the coastal Nkisi valley trade, seceded from Vungu and established an independent capital on the mountain of the later Mbanza Kongo (Sao Salvador), in the region of the trade route intersection ... A second hypothesis less congruent with the traditions, is that the kanda of the central region developed a device similar to that of Vungu in order to maximize the benefits of the trade which passed through their lands.

It seems much safer to admit that the traditions are more mythical than historical and thus that we know nothing about the causes and the circumstances of the foundation of the kingdom. According to the author of the *Historia do Reino de Congo* (1655) six kings succeeded each other between Lukeni and Joao I, the first christian king who was baptised in 1491 and died in 1506.

According to him, the kingdom was created around the beginning of the fourteenth century (Felner 1933, p. 378). But a text from 1624 says that Joao I was the grandson of the founding king (Brasio 1958, Vol. VII, p. 291). For Bernardo da Gallo (1700) two kings succeeded each other between Lukeni and Joao I (Jadin 1961, p. 469). The foundation of the kingdom is thus usually dated between 1300 and 1400 AD. I think that once again we are dealing with myths and that it would be safer not to propose any date of foundation, as it is not unlikely that the origin of the kingdom could be several centuries older.

## **Archaeological research**

As it is likely that no further tradition will shed light on the origin of the Kongo kingdom, our best chance to know more is through a systematic archaeological study of the area, and especially of the capital Mbanza Kongo. So far this has not been possible, even if research carried out in Lower Zaïre demonstrated the high density of prehistoric occupations, the presence of a likely neolithic settlement (de Maret 1986) with pottery, polished tools and probably villages around 500 BC. There is a vacuum in the archaeological record in Congo (Denbow 1990) as well as in Lower Zaïre from AD 250 to 1000. After that, numerous pottery traditions have been collected through the area, their distribution testifying to the exchange network in Lower Zaïre (de Maret 1982; Clist 1991).

Obvious places to excavate if we want to trace back the origin of the Kongo kingdom are the Mbanzas. In Zaïre, some excavations were carried out in 1938 at Mbanza Mbata. They were undertaken in the cemetery and ruins of a church in order to find the tomb of a Capuchin, Joris Van Geel, who was killed there in 1652. The aim of this excavation was to collect information on his martyrdom with a view to pressing for his canonization. Thirty-five tombs were excavated producing various European objects (Vandenhoute 1972–73; de Maret 1982). More recently, Mbanza Soyo graveyard was excavated by an Angolan archaeologist. He uncovered remains similar to those from Mbanza Mbata (Abranches 1992). I visited on several occasions the area of Mbanza Nsundi, but was never granted permission to excavate by the chiefs of the various clans who claim property on the graveyard and the surrounding areas.

Several attempts I made over the last twenty years to go to the capital Mbanza Kongo have not been more successful, although Angolan authorities demonstrated a strong interest which prompted them to launch a major research project on the kingdom of Kongo. The modern city of Sao Salvador, the former Mbanza Kongo has even been put, at their request, on the World Heritage List of UNESCO. At the Premier Séminaire International des Archéologues du Monde Bantu, held in Libreville in 1989, a researcher from Angola, Emmanuel Esteves (1989) presented a paper entitled 'Mbanza Kongo, ville archéologique' where he depicted a very bleak situation.

From 1966 to 1970, new urbanization has begun to unearth walls, skeletons and various artefacts such as terracotta pipes, necklaces and armbands. Based on those discoveries, it was agreed between local archaeologists and historians and the City Council to designate two archaeological zones: one where all new constructions will be forbidden, and a larger one where any urban developments will be monitored by an archaeologist. Unfortunately, in 1970, the City Council decided not to take this agreement into account anymore, opening new streets and asphaltting them, sometimes at night! One can only hope that as soon as the political situation improves, it will be possible to go there and assess the opportunity for systematic excavations.

### **The spatial organization of Mbanza Kongo**

Mbanza Kongo is situated on a rocky hill which rises 559 meters, overlooking the surroundings, the summit being a plateau seven km. in length. From the top, one has a sweeping view. Because of its location, the Portuguese called it *Outeiro*, which means 'height'. But the inhabitants called it Mbanza Kongo, the city of Kongo, *Mbanza Kongo dia Ntotelo*, the Kongo city of the king; *Kongo dia Wene*, Kongo of the founder or Kongo of authority; *Kongo dia Ngunga*, Kongo of the bell, which referred to the many churches built in the royal city.

The founder chose this location because it offered the dual advantage of an almost central position in the kingdom and a natural defence against enemy attack. Furthermore, on the plateau, according to Pigafetta (1591, Vol. I, p. 39), is the soil 'fertile, the air fresh, healthy and pure; there are many springs of drinkable water which never hurts one's health, in any season'. The abundance, the exceptional purity of the water and the fertility of the land also struck a German traveller, Bastian (1859, pp. 123–5), in the nineteenth century. In O. Dapper's book (1668), there is an etching drawn from memory which shows the capital erected on top of a cliff overlooking the Lunda river and the narrow valley (Fig. 2).

Early in the eighteenth century, Laurent de Lucques again recognized the quality of the city: 'This city occupies the best location in the kingdom, on very beautiful hills. Thanks to its altitude, the air is mild ... The population lived in opulence because this was the metropolis of the vast kingdom where the riches of the provinces were flowing' (Cuvelier 1953, p. 257).

When the first Portuguese ambassador reached Mbanza Kongo in 1491, 7 years before reaching Mombasa, the city was already quite spread out, according to Cuvelier (1946, pp. 72–4) who gives us a detailed description:

The streets were not aligned, nor the houses in the ancient Kongo kingdom, no avenues lined with palms nor ornamental trees. Narrow paths were running in all directions through the tall grass. The living quarters of the most important people were located close to the king's quarters. Spread out, according to their taste or their

fancy, they occupied sometimes quite a considerable space. The houses were made of straw without any ornaments, except inside, where there would be a palm cloth hanging on the wall, representing an antelope or an other animal. The houses of the important people could be distinguished from those of the simple ones, because they were larger and had more painted palm cloths. The houses were surrounded by a fence made from very strong trees: the *mingienge* with juicy fruits like prunes, *mpese-mpese*, African poplars, cactus (*diiza*) with a sap which could poison spearheads and war knives. Toward the north, the mountain was crowned with dark woods, a sacred place where the noise of a hatchet was never heard. Palms, baobabs and many trees stood there and this was where the ancient kings were buried. The founder of the kingdom of Ntinu Wene was buried there. To the south, there was a large courtyard called *Mbazi* ou *Mbazi Nkanu*, the court of justice, because there, under a huge wild fig tree ... which shaded a corner of the place, the kings used to administer justice. It was a large open space where crowds would gather to receive the king's blessing, to watch dances and triumphal parades.

Not far from this public place was the king's residence or enclosure, which was called *lumbu* by the natives. This enclosure was more than one thousand meters in circumference and was made of pales tied together with lianas ...

At the gates, *mavitu* were standing the royal guards and some horn blowers. Inside the fence, there was a courtyard; then one could see another fence, in the middle of which was the king's house. One could only reach it through a labyrinth. The only difference between this and the other houses, was that this one was more spacious. Inside the royal enclosure, the queen had her residence surrounded by huts with her followers who accompanied her when she left the enclosure.

This description shows well that this urban centre resembled many big villages in central Africa with living quarters spread out and surrounded by hedges and gardens. The layout of the capital was probably not very different from the provincial centre, the clustering of the population resulting essentially from the presence of the king or an important chief. The *mbanza* political centers exist only in relation to the holder of power and their evolution is linked. Built of earth, wood, straw and palms, these cities were fragile and their rise and fall was linked to the person who exercised the power. As elsewhere in central Africa, this type of centre gravitates around the king's or the governor's compound with their households, the courtyard and the sacred woods often used as a cemetery for the ancestors' graves. Those different elements put into space the sacred king, a sort of symbolic mechanism which mediates between nature and culture. From this

symbolic nucleus, the urban centre spreads and stretches following the evocative image of Balandier (1965, p. 141). The resulting settlement is a city, if one considers the number of people and a village, even if out of proportion, if one considers its aspect and structure.

At the end of the sixteenth century, using information provided by Duarte Lopez, Pigafetta (1591, Vol. II, p. 40) described Mbanza Kongo, as it was modified by the Portuguese influence.

The town is erected in the corner of this summit, facing south. Dom Afonso, the first christian king surrounded it by walls. He assigned to the Portuguese a distinct area also surrounded by walls. He also enclosed his palace and the royal house, leaving in between those two enclosures a large open space where the principal church was erected. In front of it is a square. The doors, both of the nobles' residences and of the Portuguese houses, opened on the church side. At the entrance of the main square, some noblemen from the court have their household. Behind the church, the square leads to a narrow street with a door. If one exits through it one finds many houses on the east side. Outside the walls which surround the king's household and the Portuguese city, many constructions belonging to various noblemen each one occupying, without any order, the place he likes, so as to live close to the court. So it is not possible to estimate the size of this city outside of the two enclosures, as all the countryside is scattered with rural houses and palaces. Each nobleman, in his compound, is walled in like a village. The perimeter of the Portuguese city measures almost a mile, the one of the royal quarters almost the same. The walls are very thick. At night, the gates are not closed and not even guarded.

According to another testimony from the end of the sixteenth century: 'In the capital San Salvador, there is more than one hundred Portuguese merchants and more than a thousand others born in Portugal. Their houses are in an area of the city separated from the blacks.' (Cuvelier & Jadin 1954, p. 137)

So, as early as the end of the sixteenth century, Mbanza Kongo had the look of a colonial city, with two cities co-existing: the European city, built to last, commercial, with six or seven churches, an Episcopalian see, students and the indigenous city, a sort of fragile 'village-city' which had grown like a giant village much in the same way the African suburbs around modern African towns.

Even if there is a correlation between the development of the Kongo political organization and the birth of elementary urban civilization as noted by Balandier (1965, p. 140), one must admit that we do not have here an urban tradition similar to those of the old West African cities, probably due to the materials used for building and to the lack of a monumental architectural

tradition. In 1687, Dapper (1668, p. 343) published a reconstructed view of Mbanza Kongo and described the city:

The summit of the mountain is occupied by houses built close to each other. The persons of quality own most of them and erect walled-in buildings which resemble a little city. The houses of the ordinary people are lined up following various streets. They are rather big but their walls are made only of straw except for some of them which are made by the Portuguese in beaten earth with a thatched roof. The king's palace is as big as an ordinary city.

It is enclosed by four walls, one overlooking the Portuguese quarter, is made of lime and stone; the others are made of straw, but very neatly done. The walls of the interior rooms are decorated with woven straw tapestries. In the interior enclosure of the Palace, there are gardens and groves with beautiful bowers and pavilions, exquisite for this country, although in fact it is not very much. There are ten or twelve churches, the Cathedral, seven chapels in the city and three churches in the Prince's palace. There is also a Jesuit convent where three or four of these fathers teach catechism every day to the people, and schools where Latin and Portuguese are taught. There are two fountains, one in Saint James street and another in the Palace courtyard, which give an abundance of fresh water, even without having to re-do or maintain the aqueducts. Furthermore, there is a branch of the Lelunde river, called Vefe which exits at the bottom of the mountain east of the city; its water is very good, the people draw from it and use it to water and fertilize the surrounding countryside. There are pigs and goats, but few sheep and cows; the animals are closed up at night in pens which are inside the city near the houses.

Estimates of the population of Mbanza Kongo given by various authors vary. At the end of the sixteenth century, Pigafetta (1591, Vol. II, § 1) said that more than 100,000 people lived there and this is probably exaggerated. An anonymous text dated 1595 talks about 10,000 fires (Brasio 1954, Vol. III, pp. 500–4). At the same period, Carmelite missionaries mentioned 30,000 inhabitants in the capital. Around 1604, the dean of the cathedral counted 2000 households. (Balandier 1965, p. 140). Later, in the second half of the seventeenth century, Dapper (1668, p. 343) estimated the population at 40,000 inhabitants. At the same period, Cavazzi (1687) stated that the capital could hold 60,000 people during peace time. (Labat 1732, Vol. I, p. 212 after Cavazzi 1687).

Outside of the Kongo Kingdom, north of the Zaire River, Dapper (1668, pp. 320-1) visited the city of Loango. He left us with a remarkable illustration of this seventeenth century city, also called Mbanza Louangiri or Bwali, now in the Congo Republic (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1973, p. 69). According to him: 'this city was almost the same size as Rouen, but the buildings did not touch each other'.

## **The symbolic dimension cities in west central Africa**

Like many cities, the location of the major cities in west-central Africa can easily be explained by a favorable ecological context and their origin could be related to the development of long-distance trade and the production of certain commodities. Their development is also connected to the rise of a complex and highly centralized society. And yet, one feels that before the arrival of the Europeans, the major urban centres did not differ significantly from the smaller villages, except for the number of inhabitants. The layout was one of open, scattered garden-cities or villages with a ceremonial and symbolic centre, as in many major tropical urban centres on other continents.

It seems to me that one should look much more into the symbolic nature of those centres than into rather obvious material explanations. The origin of the town is directly linked to the chief or king figure and the whole layout is a symbolic map of the essential function of the sacred kingship. The power and prestige of the king and of his city was such that long after the collapse of the kingdom, Mbanza Kongo remained the locus of power, authority and legitimacy, the place where all the matrilineal descent groups lived together with the king. In the eighteenth century, the region of the ruined capital was called 'Mpemba' which referred to the 'white' of the other world, the ancestors, the dead (Hilton 1985, pp. 216–17).

If one wants to know more about those very ancient and fascinating African garden-cities, one should hope that it will soon become possible to carry out systematic archaeological research and that much more attention will be given from an anthropological point of view to rituals and tradition in relation to the sacred kingship. As de Heusch (1981) has shown, in many central African societies, power must be understood in the first place in ritual terms. One must look first to the symbolic order and distinguish it from the political forms that it takes in various times and places.

The state structure and the sacralization of power should not be confused. Three major elements are almost always present in the process of sacralization in Bantu Africa at least, if not at a Niger-Congo level: usually at the enthronement, the new king transgresses the rules of culture, by committing incest. He is subject to many taboos and is usually put to death (de Heusch 1972; de Heusch 1981; de Heusch 1982). The sacred king is a man detached from kinship on whom extraordinary powers over nature are bestowed. It is only when this radical change has occurred that a state like organization is possible. However, Muller (1980) has showed that despite the absence of state, in the Rukuba village in Nigeria, chiefly power was based on the same elements of sacralization. Even from the symbolic point of view it will be quite difficult to draw a precise line between villages of various size and cities in central Africa. Being small village or regal cities, those centres are above all symbolic spaces and ritual areas which differ more by size than by function.

## Conclusions

In summary, I think that if one looks at the data and to what has been presented so far by Bassey Andah (Ch. X, this volume) and Andrew Reid (Ch. X, this volume), there seems to be a common and rather original pattern in urban settlement throughout most of Bantu Africa, and perhaps in an even larger area.

- 1) We often deal with very large urban concentration, but these are probably less towns than a large village settlement, keeping a garden. Even the linguistic evidence testifies to the continuity from villages to cities (also in French).
- 2) Settlements, apart perhaps from their cores, are usually not long lasting.
- 3) Settlements are characterized by a symbolic core with the chiefly or royal enclosure, a large open place, and often a sacred forest and a cemetery.
- 4) What is striking today is the continuity of urban layout, considering the modern cities with their presidential enclosure and their shanty towns built with light materials and with many gardens.
- 5) Much more attention should be paid to the link between the king and the city, and thus to the symbolic nature of the ruler power, as it is probably this that is at the origin of the large concentration of people (Doumas, Ch. X, this volume; Niiro, Ch. X, this volume; McIntosh, Ch. X, this volume).

Sacred kingship is a remarkable symbolic device, but the symbolic nature of its power should not be confused with its various political manifestations. Here also, the continuity from the power of the village chief to the one of sacred king at the centre of a large human concentration is striking. Regarding the symbolic nature of power, a large area of Africa should be included, so Bantu Africa, and a large part of wooded area of west Africa, as Bassey Andah and Mike Rowland have illustrated (Andah, Ch. X, this volume). Considering urban origins in eastern Africa, we should keep these elements in mind as this was also part of the Bantu world. This is especially true for the interior and it is also relevant for the coast, before the development of the Arabo/Swahili tradition blurred the picture. Excavation strategies should be planned accordingly.

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## **Captions for illustrations**

Fig. 1. Map localising Mbanza Kongo. (After Hilton 1985)

Fig. 2. Etching drawn from memory which shows the capital erected on top of a cliff overlooking  
the Lunda river and the narrow valley. (Dapper 1668)

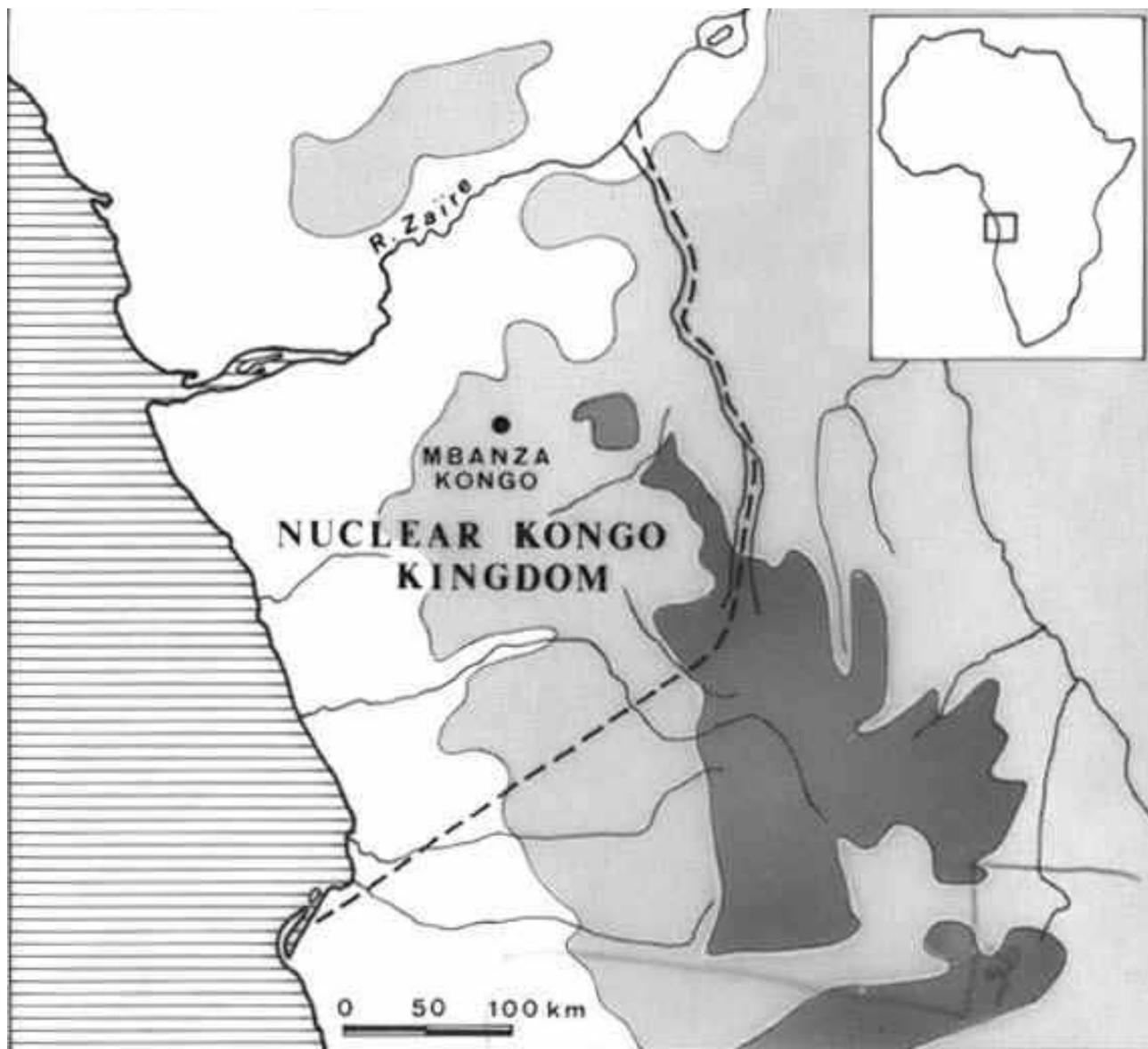


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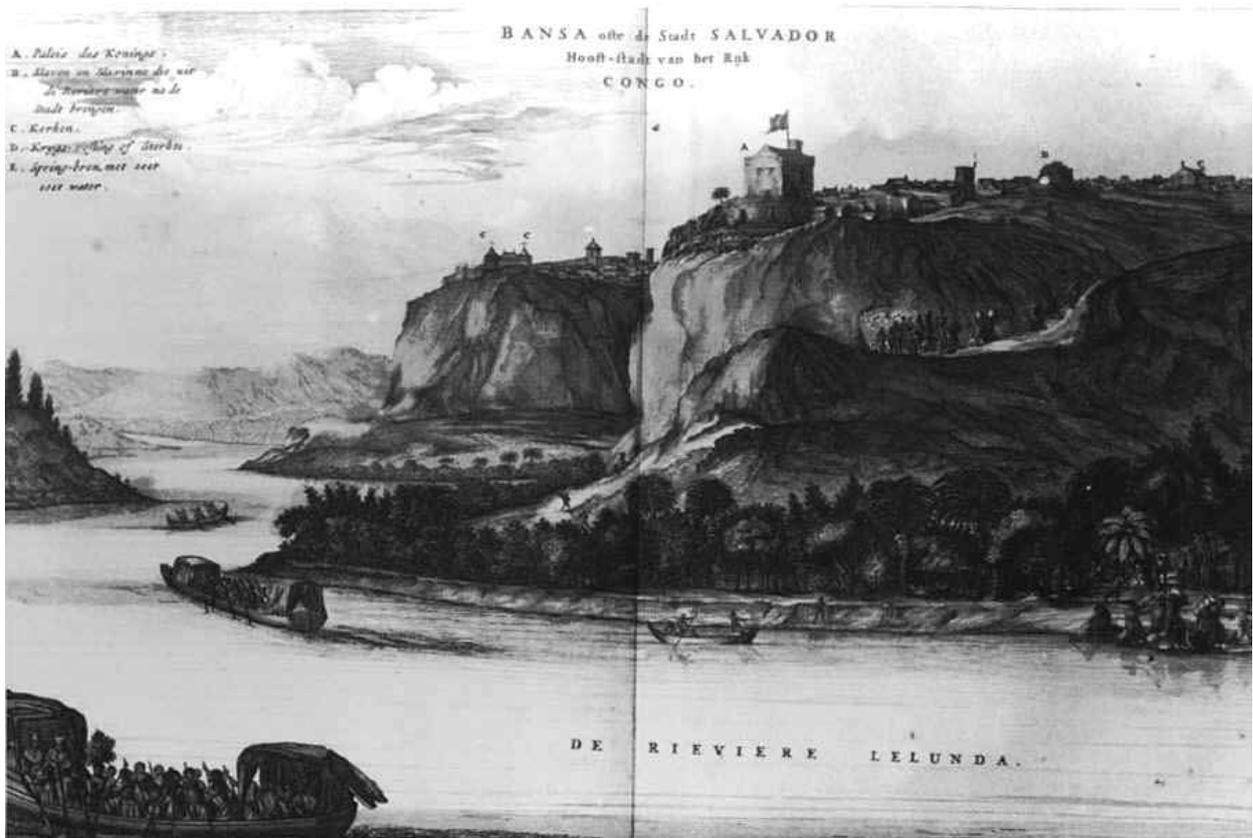


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