

# *The character of urbanism in inter-lacustrine eastern Africa*

by  
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## **Introduction**

Urbanism is a phenomenon associated with a relation to, and a distinct use and control of, space. Urbanism also infers relations of power which are frequently represented spatially, either within a society or between settlements. Spatial relationships are particularly useful as they can be examined in the archaeological record. In attempting to investigate urbanism, archaeologists have consequently recognised the importance of establishing a settlement's relationship with its surroundings. Other factors of importance in the study of urbanism include longevity of settlement, socio-political structure and trade. These factors are however generally derived from examples of urbanism which are culture specific. It is pertinent to examine whether or not such factors hold good for all parts of the world.

These characteristics of urbanism will be examined here whilst considering the region of Africa between Lakes Victoria-Nyanza, Kyoga, Albert and Kivu. The importance of this region in global perspective has been established by Connah (1987, Ch. 9), who very validly showed that the political and social developments of central Africa were not the result of outside contact. However, rather than casting the net wide for any evidence of cities or kingdoms, the present study seeks to review the urban nature of settlement within a confined region and within a (reasonably) related and well-defined socio-political area. This region saw a number of kingdoms emerge by the nineteenth century AD. It has generally been considered that these states were the result of political changes which occurred in the previous 1000 years. Before this it is assumed that communities were non-complex and kin-based, and that settlements were essentially rural and non-specialised. This conclusion is born more out of a lack of information than through considered evidence. For instance the density and nature of iron-working settlements in locations such as Buhaya (Schmidt 1978) would argue against this traditional archaeological viewpoint. Nevertheless, in the absence of any data on economic and social organisation and settlement structure for this earlier period, we shall confine ourselves here to the second millennium AD.

This study focuses on certain examples which characterise large scale settlement in the region, and it is not an exhaustive study of the available evidence. The examples chosen here, derived from a variety of sources (history, oral traditions and archaeology), attempts to cover the diversity of political systems and eco-zones present in the region. It will be seen that these settlements quite clearly took on some characteristics of urbanism from early in the second millennium.

This discussion is largely confined to three settlements: Rubaga, Bweyore and Ntusi. The first two are known from history and oral traditions to be capitals of local kingdoms and were occupied between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries AD. Bweyore has also been subject of archaeological investigation. Our knowledge of Ntusi is completely confined to archaeology. As Ntusi was apparently occupied

between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries AD., the discussions will move back in time. This however is not implying a linear evolution of urbanism but is an attempt to summarise the diverse evidence for urbanism in the region during the second millennium.

In selecting these sites a number of other sites have been ignored. It was felt that these latter sites either replicate the information presented here or are not as thoroughly described by sources. Ryamurari, the eighteenth century capital of Mpororo (Ndorwa) is very similar in structure to Bweyore, but has not been subject to such thorough treatment (Tshihiluka 1983; Tshihiluka 1991). The information on capitals of the Bunyoro kingdom provided by Roscoe (1923a) establishes them as sites very different in form from either the Buganda or Nkore capitals, but the available information is less complete and there are no examples discussed by archaeologists or geographers in more recent literature. Finally, there is considerable evidence for urbanism in the Karagwe kingdom, where the capital Bweranyange and its regional centres appear to have been long-term settlements. Karagwe also contains two important Arab/Wanyamwezi trading entrepôts of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately the historical information available on all these Karagwe sites is scant and the archaeological remains are unrevealing (Reid n.d.).

## Rubaga<sup>1</sup>

That Rubaga was a town, or even a city, there can be little doubt about. We know from historical sources how this and other capital sites of the Kingdom of Buganda operated. Yet, in spite of this incontrovertible evidence for its presence only 100 years ago, archaeologically there is almost no evidence for its existence. Rubaga was the site of the capital of the Buganda kingdom during the reign of Mutesa I (mid-late nineteenth century). The site, or at least the surrounding area, was subsequently maintained by his successors and then by the British colonialism so much of present-day Kampala is structured by the original settlement of Rubaga.

Buganda was a complex kingdom with a huge bureaucracy. Central to the state was the king (or *kabaka*) himself. It was around the position of the king that the whole state pivoted. The king was responsible for the religious and ritual well-being of the state and emanating from him was a huge bureaucratic network which administered political control. With such a centralised system it is only to be expected that wherever the *kabaka* stayed would be the focal point of the whole state.

The accounts of Speke, Grant, Stanley and the other early European explorers who visited this and other Buganda capitals are full of glowing descriptions of the settlement. Even if taking into consideration the journalistic license of this writing, a fairly clear picture emerges. The settlement was laid out on a well defined system of roads. These roads were up to 20 m wide and ultimately extended more than 100 km to the various corners of the kingdom, to allow rapid movement of messengers and/or soldiers. Buildings were constructed out of timber, reed and thatch. These buildings were round, the largest of which would have a diameter of between 20 and 30 metres.

As we have mentioned the capital was the apex of the state. It was the centre of an administrative settlement hierarchy. District chiefs had their headquarters on the border of their district nearest to the capital and connected to it directly by road. Sub-chiefs had their centres beyond this and a lower order of chiefs controlled local centres

throughout the district. All were connected by roads and each chief was responsible for the upkeep of the road leading to his superior. It is not clear whether or not these settlements would also have been stratified in terms of area covered. Indeed, many rural populations lived in dispersed units each within their own plantation. A more meaningful statistic may therefore have been population density, since the number of dependent people a chief could maintain declined as one descended the political scale.

Rubaga was also a centre of commerce, being both the location to which tribute or tax for the *kabaka* was brought and the base from which the *kabaka* conducted and controlled trade. By the time of Mutesa, Buganda was an important source of slaves and ivory. These were traded in, to Arabs and Wanyamwezi based in Karagwe, for cloth, beads, guns and various other exotic goods. The *kabaka* also levied tax from market produce. In particular this brought in revenue from the extensive trade conducted between the various states and peoples of the region (e.g. Uzoigwe 1976).

Some idea of the scale of the capital can be gained from a plan which was given to Roscoe by Baganda elders of the early capital of Mutesa (Roscoe 1911, plan no.1). Although not drawn to scale, the inclusion of known hills allows us to estimate that the settlement was around 5 km long and 2 km across. Besides the royal enclosure which contained several hundred buildings, there were nine shrines and some 280 enclosures recorded, each of which can be ascribed to the control of a particular individual. The biggest of these enclosures were those of the twelve leading chiefs, the King's Mother and the King's Sister – all of whom maintained hundreds of people. These figures not only indicate the scale of the population, but also the level of planning of the settlement.

According to Roscoe's (1911) informants the capital was always constructed on the same plan. Certainly the few plans of capitals which have survived from the late nineteenth century appear to confirm this. A regular plan was adhered to, particularly within the royal enclosure, in part because the construction of specific buildings was a recognised duty of a chief or of a clan. Therefore, on relocating the capital, each chief and clan were already familiar with the tasks that confronted them and with the resources they required to successfully complete the task.

Rubaga was dominated by the royal enclosure on a prominent hilltop which Roscoe suggests may have extended for a mile or more. At the centre of this enclosure was the *kabaka's* court and other buildings relating to state functions or housing his vast entourage (wives, servants, etc.). Behind these important state buildings were located the numerous huts of the king's pages and retainers. The royal enclosure overlooked the huts of the various officers of the state: dignitaries of the royal family, district and sub-district chiefs which lay to its north. To the south were a few plantations of members of the royal household. This absence of enclosures was created according to informants so that the king had a clear escape route to the lake in time of conflict. The fact that the king always controlled the access to the lake may have been symbolically important.

Beyond the royal enclosure there were several other lesser enclosures for the principal minister (*katekiro*), the district chiefs and other officers of the state, each one based largely on the same layout as the royal enclosure. The district and sub-district chiefs were kept in regional groups so that all the people from one region were to live in one particular part of the capital and were under the control of their respective district chiefs. Furthermore each regional unit was organised so that it maintained its own banana plantations. So the settlement was divided up into regional quarters and these were located within sizeable and spacious plots. Hence one visitor described the

settlement as 'less a town, than a huge garden' (Leclerq quoted in Gutkind 1963, p. 12).

The capital could even be said to have extended beyond these limits, including plantations and lesser habitation covering an area of as much as 20 square miles (Gutkind 1963, p. 14). These areas were no doubt vital to the supply of food to the large population at the centre of the settlement. The population of the entire settlement is very difficult to estimate. Gutkind (1963, p. 15) mentions 11 estimates – which range between 3000 and 77,000 – of the population of the capital from the period 1850–1915. The problem lies in defining the limits of the capital and in determining the resident population. Many of the inhabitants of the capital were only temporarily resident, having gone to perform some duty or labour for their chief or to petition him before returning to the country. Nevertheless a population estimate of at least several thousand would seem to be accurate.

All this information points quite reasonably to the existence of an urban form. A large population was present and engaged in many varying activities. Yet, archaeologically, Rubaga is almost completely invisible. It appears that there was no marked longevity of settlement. Gutkind (1963, p. 10) notes that between 1856 and 1890 the location of the capital was changed at least ten times. Furthermore, although the architecture was extensive and impressive, it was entirely constructed of biodegradable materials and the structures were not intended to last. The only remaining example of the huge structures which the king and officials of the state occupied is the tomb of Mutesa at Kasubi. This was built around 1880, but only remains standing today because its foundations have been shored in concrete and because continual renovation has been carried out on the super-structure. Immense as these buildings were, they would clearly not leave any traces of their existence above the surface of the ground. If archaeologists are to find such structures it seems that they must resort to traditional sources.

The extensive labour requirements that the regular relocation of such a large settlement and such structures would entail bears testimony to the power of the Buganda state to mobilise labour. But this mobility was obviously a great restricting factor to urbanisation. Kiwanuka (1971, pp. 190-1) discusses the regular rebuilding of capitals and suggests that a number of different factors could lead to relocation. Defense and a means of escape were possible factors but they would not demand the frequent movement documented by traditions: once the ideal site had been found the site would have been permanently occupied. Another element which Kiwanuka suggests was the threat of illness to the king, which was occasionally identified by his diviners. Capitals were said to have become polluted and, being a danger to the *kabaka*, had to be abandoned. Of course there was also the personal whim of the king himself who had the power to decide whatever he wanted.

None of these factors really touch on the process of urbanisation in Buganda. Despite being the centre of the state there appears to have been control and limitation of the population of the capital. This is a factor which needs more examination. Although to have stayed in the capital increased one's status amongst the rural community, it seems that few people wished to stay there for long periods. Many people only visited the capital as part of a work levy raised to carry out some task demanded of their chief by the king (e.g. road/fence repair or building construction). As soon as the task was completed the labourer could return to his village. Whilst in the capital these labourers ran the risk of being caught and slaughtered as sacrificial victims on the orders of the *kabaka*. An intensive study of the role of fear in the

Buganda kingdom suggests that large scale slaughter was an important element in the maintenance of the authority of the *kabaka* (Sagan 1985). So whilst many people were required to visit the capital, few wished to stay longer than was absolutely necessary. Victims appear to have been required daily to satisfy the needs of the state. Those of low rank had no effective means of preventing their own slaughter (by finding replacement victims or by proposing a financial alternative).

Furthermore, because the capital was regularly moved few people (other than those who controlled large labour reserves) could afford to continually rebuild their houses and compounds and to abandon plantations. The only people who could afford to do so were those in office who had the power to exploit resources in order to rebuild. Several authors have suggested that the *kabakas* were constantly shifting their capital out of fear of attack. By the nineteenth century the military strength and the extent of the Buganda state was such that its core was not exposed to attack nor could it have been taken by surprise. Rather it would seem that the constant relocation may have been more related to the conspicuous exploitation of labour, which served to highlight and maintain the divisions of power within the state. Before living in the capital permanently, it was necessary to prove that one could follow the movements of the king wherever he might go.

Finally it is relevant to note that Baganda life was generally mobile in character. Children were separated from their parents at an early age and brought up by relatives or in the service of people of status. Clansfolk often tended to follow their kinsmen who were chiefs as they moved from one appointment to another (Roscoe 1911; Sagan 1985). It may be that there was no cultural desire or tradition of permanent residence in Buganda society and that therefore mobility was not perceived as unusual.

## **Bweyore**

Buganda was orientated towards agricultural produce and the control of land and labour. Elsewhere in the region the ownership, control and exploitation of cattle played a much more significant role in determining socio-political relations. One of the most obvious and best studied such cases was the Kingdom of Nkore. Nkore was dominated by the concern for its vast herds, the provision and maintenance of pasturage and water resources and the celebration of the cattle culture practised by its Bahima pastoralists (e.g. Karugire 1971). Agriculture was practised within the state by the Bairu people who were regarded as an inferior class and who, by their lack of cattle, lacked any political authority.

Nkore was also a centralised state, the focus of which was the king (or *omugabe*). Although its resources, in terms of cattle, were formidable, the Nkore state was very much smaller than Buganda – both in terms of area dominated and people subjugated. Furthermore the *omugabe* could not afford to be as tyrannical as the *kabaka*. Cows, the principal economic component of the state, were a mobile resource and therefore could be removed to neighbouring kingdoms by discontented owners. Particularly in dealing with pastoralists, the king therefore tended to govern by consensus rather than by personal whim. The capital was the focal point of an administrative hierarchy which descended through regional chiefs to local chiefs. These chiefs were invariably pastoralists and predominantly concerned themselves with disputes relating to cows (ownership of animals, access to water and pasturage, etc.).

Their regional centres would have been akin to ordinary kraals, although their herds are likely to have been large given the advantages of their political position.

As with Buganda, the capital of Nkore was the focal point of the state. It served as the political, religious and economic centre. The most important affairs of the state were carried out at the court of the king. The religious and political symbolism of the state was centred within the royal capital. *Bagyendanwa*, the drum without which no man could claim to be a king, was provided with its own house, its own attendants and even its own herd. The king was required to carry out religious ceremonies at the capital in order to satisfy ancestors and spirits. The king also attended to the most serious of judicial cases and required his regional officers to be regularly present in order to advise him on matters of state. The capital also served as an educational centre. Young boys were sent here to be trained as courtiers and to be taught the manners and customs of the state before joining the state's military units.

The capital appears to have been constructed along a regularised pattern (Roscoe 1923b; Karugire 1971). At its centre was situated the royal enclosure which was occupied by the king, his wives and many attendants. This enclosure was, according to Roscoe, a quarter of a mile in diameter and contained more than a hundred huts. Construction of the royal enclosure was the task of the chiefs and clans who were each responsible for constructing a specific building. Behind the enclosure were located various artisans including brewers, wood-cutters and water-drawers. Around the sides of the Royal enclosure were the enclosures of the military commanders of the state. These were not members of the royal clan (Bahinda) and, having no claim to the throne, consequently dependent on the king for their own advancement. Beyond the military commanders were the enclosures of the Bahinda and of foreign representatives at the capital.

The style of building and the materials used in the Nkore capital was broadly similar to that in Buganda. Well thatched large huts were enclosed by fences of intricately intertwined cane. The population of the capital was considerably smaller for a number of reasons. Nkore was a much smaller state than Buganda. With a smaller area and population, fewer officers were needed by the state. Being a pastoralist orientated state, it was also necessary to provide residents in the royal enclosure with the pastoralist produce (principally milk) to which they were accustomed. Powerful ideological considerations prevented people of high rank from regularly consuming agricultural produce (grains and vegetables). Therefore the numbers of people in the capital would have been limited by the ability of the surrounding herds to supply the capital with milk.

Bweyore is said to have been occupied at least twice, once in the seventeenth century and again in the nineteenth century. It is only one of a corpus of sites which are said to have been occupied during the history of the Nkore state (Morris 1956; Oliver 1959). However, from an archaeological perspective Bweyore is quite unique in the size and extent of its remains (Reid & Robertshaw 1987).<sup>2</sup>

Bweyore was subjected to archaeological investigation in 1958 (Posnansky 1968). These excavations allow us to make some general conclusion on the nature of this capital site. More general information on the functioning of Nkore capitals is drawn from historical sources.

The site of Bweyore covers some 500 m of a low hillside on the Masha plain, which is excellent cattle country. The site itself comprises a collection of low elliptical banks. These banks consist of a loose, light and friable soil which has been taken variously to be dung and/or ash. These low banks serve to form the lower end of

roughly circular enclosures. Unfortunately, because of the several phases of occupation at the site, some of these enclosures are superimposed so that it is not possible to determine the exact layout of the site during any of its occupations. Nevertheless there is a pattern to the settlement which allows us to make some important statements.

The dung constituent in the banks is interesting in that it implies the presence of cattle at the capital itself. According to Roscoe (1923b, p. 37) the royal herd was not kept at the capital, but the cows of the kings' wives were kept inside the royal enclosure. This explains the contradictory statement of Karugire (1971, p. 58) that the herd supplying the capital with milk and presumably meat was kept in a kraal, or kraals nearby, but not in the capital itself. The significance to this study of whether cows were kept in the capital or not is that if they were kept in the capital this would considerably decrease the length of occupation possible at the site. In the present day pastoralists with herds of over 100 animals rarely occupy one site for more than 5 years and certainly in no case more than 10 years. The constant presence of cattle in the enclosure turns it into a mud bath and encourages the occurrence and spread of diseases which weakens the condition of the herd. It is also rare that local pasture and water supplies remain intact for a period of 10 years without requiring the movement of herds to new sources. Whether or not there was cattle kept at Bweyore itself, the impression created by the banks is that of a cattle kraal. This would have been an important ideological statement within the context of the kingdom.

It might be possible to suggest that the occupation at Bweyore was much smaller than we have imagined, and that the enclosures gradually shifted along the slope as they became unoccupiable. However, there are visible discrepancies in the sizes of the various enclosures present. Posnansky's interpretation of a major enclosure surrounded by lesser ones would appear to remain the most likely scenario. The possibility that the site was occupied on two or even three separate occasions only serves to confuse the issue still further.

The Nkore capital therefore appears to have been occupied only for short periods of time. This would have been partly due to the constraints of relying on cattle produce. The changing location of capital sites over time however suggests that there was also a long-term historical change at work (Oliver 1959; Reid 1991). Gradually, as the Nkore kingdom expanded and became able to defend itself militarily, the capital sites moved northwards out of the safety of the Isingiro hills and onto the broad Masha plain. Even in the nineteenth century, however, the emphasis was still on mobility and the ability to change location rapidly in response to political and environmental stimuli.

## **Ntusi**

Finally there remains the archaeological site of Ntusi to consider. Ntusi was first reported in 1934 and was the subject of periodic, unpublished excavations during the colonial era. Since 1987 four seasons of excavation and a regional survey have been undertaken (Sutton 1987; Reid 1990; Reid 1991).

There is no indication in oral traditions of either the identity of the occupants of Ntusi or the nature of their occupation. Furthermore, the position of Ntusi and the surrounding Mawogola region is unclear during the period of the historical kingdoms. It is not possible to trace definitive links between Ntusi and any of the later kingdoms.

It is therefore only possible to draw comparisons on a very general level (in terms of broad social organisation or economic trends).

Of the three sites discussed here, Ntusi would appear to have by far the best archaeological evidence for urbanism, in terms of size, longevity of settlement and visible material culture remains. A sequence of radiocarbon dates indicates that the site was occupied between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries AD. Caution should be used in interpreting these radiocarbon dates. Any sample of 16 radiocarbon dates from a single occupation site might be expected to produce such a range of 300–400 years, owing to the vagaries of radiocarbon decay and the potential inconsistencies of charcoal. So this suggested longevity of settlement is hardly proven. Furthermore, the abundant archaeological remains are encountered over an area in excess of 100 hectares. With no sensitive cultural chronological indicators available in the archaeological debris on the surface it is impossible to determine how much of the site was occupied at any one time. Radiocarbon evidence from excavations suggests that the settlement reached its greatest extent around the fourteenth/fifteenth century AD.

From the little evidence that is so far available it would appear that the settlement comprised of dispersed habitation. The only evidence for housing yet encountered are shallow circular ditches, 3–5 m in diameter, cut into the subsoil. These are interpreted as foundations for a cane superstructure. Some ditches overlap and may indicate rebuilding of structures using the same site. These features have been found in association with what appear to be livestock enclosures. The spatial coverage of these excavations is not yet of sufficient size to draw further conclusions on the inter-relationship of such structures, nor of the degree of economic specialisation present. There is evidence at the site of both intensive cattle keeping and of crop (sorghum and finger millet) preparation.

It is not clear to what extent distinct social classes had by this time developed. The differentiation of pastoralists and agriculturalists was a major structuring element of later kingdoms in the region such as Nkore. At Ntusi there are signs that cattle keeping and crop production may have been conducted within the same household. It is quite likely that the exclusive form of pastoralism, with its heavy reliance on milk, which characterised much of the region by the nineteenth century, had not yet fully emerged.

The political organisation at Ntusi is still harder to define. In the past the great earthworks (the *dams*) at Ntusi and the ditch systems at other sites such as Bigo bya Mugenyi were seen as being great feats of organised labour that could only have been produced by complex societies (e.g. Gray 1935, p. 228). This kind of argument does not have the same appeal now as it once had. There are however several factors which indirectly suggest a degree of political complexity.

Firstly archaeological survey of Mawogola has encountered a significant concentration of small cattle enclosures. In terms of size there is a very obvious 2-tier settlement hierarchy which distinguishes Ntusi from the surrounding small enclosures. Although it has not yet been possible to establish that these sites are contemporaneous, the outlying sites observe a spatial relationship with Ntusi where no site lies within a 5 km radius of the main site. Such an exclusion zone would have been vital for the maintenance of pasture and water resources essential for the Ntusi herds. Ntusi is also located at the centre of this distribution of enclosures. This distribution, the distinct pattern of exploitation of cattle at Ntusi and the presence there of ivory-working and items such as glass beads and cowrie shells further suggests the importance of Ntusi as a political and economic centre.

The other evidence for social complexity is in the construction of the two large mounds which have been the main focus of attention for archaeologists. These mounds are around 40 m in diameter and more than 4 m in depth. They have been found to contain large quantities of cultural debris. This has led to them being termed middens. However, elsewhere at Ntusi there is abundant evidence for the casual disposal of rubbish. The creation of mounds out of, or incorporating, rubbish is therefore an unusual and specialised practise within the context of the entire site. The mounds are very obvious and very visible displays of accumulated discard. Furthermore they are each located at prominent points at the head of their own separate valley. It can be suggested therefore that these mounds are artefacts of social display related to political interests within the settlement. What these interests were we as yet have no evidence for, but it would be logical to assume that they were concerned with the exploitation of the vast cattle resources which appear to have characterised the site and the region at this time.

## **Conclusion**

In the above examples it has been clearly demonstrated that by the time of the historical kingdoms in the Inter-lacustrine region there were coherent urban forms present. The capitals of the Buganda and Nkore states demonstrate that settlement structure was carefully planned and organised around recognisable patterns. Power within the state was focused on these settlements. Within the settlements themselves the royal enclosure was the most dominant structure to which only certain people had access.

One of the most characteristic features was the short-term nature of these settlements. It is certainly the case that both Baganda and Banyankore society was essentially mobile, but this need not explain why the capitals were regularly shifted. Furthermore, we need not view this short term settlement as being regressive or in some way negative. Rather than devoting the vast resources of the state to consolidating a particular site and building permanent structures, the same resources were fully exploited in regularly relocating and rebuilding the capital in its entirety. In the case of Buganda moving the capital also entailed redirecting the roads which came from the districts. Although such short-term occupation of a site would not correspond with Euro-centric notions of urbanism, it has been amply proved that these short-term capitals were a legitimate and significant urban form.

The origins of these short-term urban forms are not directly to be found in the earlier settlement of Ntusi. Ntusi does however display the kind of exploitative cattle economy which was to become the cornerstone of many of the states of the region. It also has intriguing evidence of early political organisation and centralisation within a polity. The evidence from Ntusi is not sufficient to show a planned settlement, but suggests a longevity of settlement and therefore urbanisation of a different character to that of the later kingdoms.

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## Footnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> The name Rubaga is used here to refer to capitals of the mid-late nineteenth century located in what is now Kampala. Rubaga was in fact one of only several hills made use of, including Lubiri and Kasubi. The latter became the site of the tomb of Mutesa and his successors, and the plan of the settlement is discussed later. Despite the inaccuracy, it seemed less confusing to use the name Rubaga than the luganda term for capital, *kibuga*.

<sup>2</sup> There is a degree of uncertainty as to the legitimacy of the claim that Bweyorere was occupied by a king. However the excavation of the capital site at Ryamurari (Tshihiluka 1983; Tshihiluka 1991) in the neighbouring and closely related kingdom of Mpororo (Ndorwa) supports the idea that Bweyorere is indeed a capital site.