



Seminar

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*Objects and Interactions:
Exploring Indian Ocean Connections
on the Swahili Coast of East Africa*

Thursday, 8 October, 4:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
www.swedishcollegium.se

S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT STEPHANIE WYNNE-JONES

Stephanie Wynne-Jones studied archaeology at the universities of Bristol and Cambridge. She was awarded a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge in 2006 for the thesis *Urbanisation at Kilwa, Tanzania, A.D. 800-1400*, a landscape study of settlement change during the growth of an important Swahili town on the coast of southern Tanzania. She has worked as Assistant Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Research Fellow at the University of Bristol and Lecturer at the University of York.

Wynne-Jones is currently Director (with Jeffrey Fleisher, Rice University) of the 'Swahili Urban Landscapes' project, based on excavations at Songo Mnara in Tanzania. She has also conducted archaeological investigations at Vumba, Kenya, along the central caravan route in Tanzania, and at Unguja Ukuu, Zanzibar. She has published widely on the themes of Swahili archaeology and historiography, particularly specialising in material culture. Her monograph *A Material Culture: Consumption and Practice on the Pre-colonial Coast of East Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2014) brings together many of these projects as part of a discussion of the ancient Swahili relationship with objects and wealth. The edited collection *Theory in Africa: Africa in Theory* (Routledge, 2015, with J. Fleisher) explores another of Wynne-Jones' research interests: the place of Africa in academic thought.

During her time at SCAS, Wynne-Jones will be working on an edited volume on *The Swahili World*, commissioned as part of the Routledge Worlds series. She will also be developing a major new research project exploring local production for trade on the pre-colonial East African coast. This will be the first attempt to explore local production and priorities in the region's engagement with Indian Ocean trade.

ABSTRACT

Ancient Swahili towns, on the east coast of Africa, are known as trading centres, deeply interconnected with a wider Indian Ocean world. From the 7th century AD we can chart through archaeology the development of complex townscapes from earlier villages. Cosmopolitanism is indicated for these centres throughout their existence, in their rich record of imported objects, as well as in the ways that the 'stonetowns' developed with coral-built houses and mosques evoking styles from overseas. Archaeology on this coast has explored the trading links of these societies, charting their changing connections, initially with the Persian Gulf and later with the Red Sea and as far afield as China.

This paper suggests an alternative means of exploring this world, through the social contexts and practices that are recoverable through archaeologies of daily life. The ability to look at objects contextually, and to think about the ways they were used in East Africa, can lead us to a different model, viewing objects as traces of connections and shared practices rather than as quantifiable indicators of trade. The paper takes a tour through three sites – Shanga, Kenya; Sharma, Yemen; and Songo Mnara, Tanzania – to build a picture of African coastal inhabitants at home and abroad. The case studies span the period from the 7th to 15th centuries, and give an insight into how we might view Swahili engagement with the Indian Ocean world. This history will be put into the context of large-scale models of Indian Ocean trade, which traditionally put the Arab world at the centre of our understandings. We will discuss how the micro-histories of Swahili places can complement and challenge these models, creating a richer understanding of a complex and dynamic region.