KONGOKING Report Summary

Project ID: 284126
Funded under: FP7-IDEAS-ERC
Country: Belgium

Final Report Summary - KONGOKING (Political centralization, economic integration and language evolution in Central Africa: An interdisciplinary approach to the early history of the Kongo kingdom.)

‘KongoKing’ was a cross-disciplinary research project that combined archaeology, historical linguistics and history to examine the origins and development of the Kongo kingdom. It united researchers from Ghent University, Université libre de Bruxelles and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren as well as from several partner institutions in Africa, Europe and the USA.

The Kongo kingdom, which arose in what is today northern Angola and the south-western Democratic Republic of the Congo, is an emblem of Africa’s past and an important cultural landmark for Africans and the African Diaspora. For more than a century, the kingdom’s past had been almost exclusively dealt with by historians who could rely on the rich body of historical documents available from AD 1482 onwards thanks to the region’s early involvement in the trans-Atlantic trade and its early introduction to literacy. The cross-disciplinary KongoKing research shed new light on several crucial issues of Kongo history.

Thanks to the historical linguistic research of the KongoKing project it could be established that the Lower Congo Region was colonized by Bantu speech communities that migrated from their inland homeland in the wider vicinity of the present-day capitals of Kinshasa and Brazzaville towards the Atlantic Coast from about 2500 years ago onwards. This is definitely more than one millennium before the assumed emergence of the kingdom. Subsequent to a long local development, this shared linguistic and cultural fundament gradually fell apart giving rise to several subgroups, in one of which the Kongo kingdom arose. It is likely that the kingdom and its founders originated from the South-Kikongo subgroup, i.e. from the region of its capital Mbanza Kongo in current-day Angola, and not from regions further North or East in the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo as suggested by oral traditions written down by European missionaries from the 16th century onwards.

Although the archaeological research of the KongoKing project mainly focused on the Later Iron Age, more specifically the period between ca. AD 1200 and AD 1800, new data were also collected on the Early Iron Age in an attempt to bridge the considerable documentation gap that exists between the Early and Late Iron Ages. Although it was expected to recover Early Iron Age assemblages from the very same hilltops where the historically attested former provincial capital sites of the Kongo Kingdom were situated, the Early and Late Iron Age sites turned out to be spatially separated in the Lower Congo region. As for the Early Iron Age, it could be shown that – very much in line with the linguistic findings – the initial cultural uniformity of the region’s first village communities around the beginning of our common era gradually gave away to more regional diversity. However, from the final centuries of the first millennium AD onwards, archaeological data become very scarce to become gradually more numerous again during the 14th century AD. The reasons for this documentation gap remain unclear and require more dedicated research.

The KongoKing project succeeded in examining a number of settlements which pre-date the arrival of the first Europeans in the region, i.e. 1482, but most new archaeological data obtained pertain to the 16th-18th centuries, especially at the project’s two main sites, i.e. Kindoki and Ngongo Mbata in the Kongo-Central Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While Kindoki once hosted the capital of the kingdom’s Nsundi Province, Ngongo Mbata was in the 17th century the most important
The new linguistic and archaeological data obtained through the KongoKing research complete, from the 16th century onwards, the available historical data and show, especially for the kingdom’s northern provinces, how the kingdom’s elite instrumentalized European material culture and Christianity. Imported ceramics, beads, weapons, crucifixes, medals, etc. became important status symbols on which provincial elites relied to reinforce their power. Weapons and religious objects are imitated and reproduced locally and continue to be manipulated as objects of prestige until the late 19th century, and in certain cases, even until today.