They erected huge mounds of boulders and cobbles challenging genuine hills in size, built enormous stone rings and dug deep wells into the desert that are still used today. The Somalis call these mysterious people the Madanle and the Boran speak of the Wardai. European writers have called these descendants – the fierce warriors of the deserts of northern Kenya. A few years later I had some ideas.

Many years ago I set off to northern Kenya to dig into the mystery of who these ancient people are. Many years later I had some ideas. My fieldwork was with the Giao-Kenya, Peoples of the Ethiopian Sea, written in the 1st–2nd century CE and a 4th century CE section of Psokley’s Geography. Azania was the coast from Somalia to Mozambique.

In his Races of Africa, published in 1930, C.G. Seligman stated that ‘The civilisations of Africa are the civilisations of the Hamites’. These ‘Hamites’ supposedly the descendants of the biblical Ham, were thought to have originated in the land of Noah, Western Asia. They then purportedly migrated into northern Africa and later further south beginning several thousand years ago. Seligman said that these people were a dark variety of the Caucasian race. Some of these Hamites mixed with the Black African inhabitants living further south to create what he called ‘Nilo-Hamites’, who today are the Maasai, Samburu and Rendille, who live in northern Kenya or near the Rift Valley.

G.W.B. Huntingford, a British East African colonial administrator turned cultural historian, theorised in 1933 that an Azanian Civilisation existed in Kenya and northern Tanzania between the Stone Age and the early Islamic period. Huntingford proposed that the Azanians, as described in the early writings of the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, were Seligman’s Hamites. He thought that they had been forced south from Ethiopia and Somalia by Muslim invaders in the 8th century, finally to disappear in Kenya and Tanzania in the 14th or 15th century, leaving behind their influences on the Nilo-Hamitic tribes.

In 1959 the story was carried further by the American anthropologist George Murdock. He created the term ‘Megalithic Cushites’ to refer to ancient giants of the East African interior who constructed the colossal stone monuments. In the 1950s linguists created the term ‘Cushitic’ to describe a language family that included most of these present-day peoples previously called Hamites.

Murdock proposed that some Megalithic Cushites migrated to the coast, where they traded with maritime Greeks–Romans, Arabs, Persians and Indians, becoming the Azanians. He noted that there were stone mound graves and stone phalli along the Somali coast like those seen further inland. Murdock goes on to suggest that these Cushites were eventually absorbed by the Bantu and Islamic immigrants who started settling along the Azanian coast from around the 9th century. These three diverse sources gave rise to the Swahili urban civilisation, which has left town, tomb and mosque ruins from Mogadishu to Mozambique. He thought that the famous Swahili pillar tombs, some obviously phallic in shape, were a Cushitic influence on coastal Islamic architecture.

This style of tomb is seen nowhere else in the world and James Kirkman, the pioneer of Kenya coast archaeology, believed the pillar tombs to be the most fascinating architectural feature of the East African coast.

I started my work around the fringes of the remote Chalbi Desert in Marsabit District. Logistics were difficult but, with the help of University of Nairobi staff and student assistants, we managed to collect information. We eventually excavated ten stone cairn graves near Kalacha and four early pastoral sites in sand dunes near North Horr. The results offered proof that more than one ethnic group made up the Megalithic Cushites, the ancestors of the Azanians.

There is a barren, rocky hill just outside of the Brah village of Kalacha, located along the eastern margin of the Chalbi...
4. The burial in this prehistoric ring cairn was dated to about 650 years ago. The person buried in it was a giant measuring 1.9 metres tall. Was he a Wardai, a member of the Wardai pastoralists? The cairn, with a diameter of 18 metres, is called Kokurmatakore by the local Gabbra inhabitants.

5. One of the platform cairns dated to 3,460 years before the present (c. 1000 B.C.). This cairn was found near the border between Somalia and Ethiopia, to Kenya as far south as the Laikipia Plateau. It is unlikely that any Nilotic speakers ever occupied this range. No Nilotic graves were found here.

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It looks like a huge longitudinal mound of volcanic rubble and is called Kokurmatakore by the local Gabbra inhabitants. The person buried in it was a giant measuring 1.9 metres tall. Was he a Wardai, a member of the Wardai pastoralists? The cairn, with a diameter of 18 metres, is called Kokurmatakore by the local Gabbra inhabitants.

The 1,010 year-old (~990 A.D.) platform cairn was found near the border between Somalia and Ethiopia, to Kenya as far south as the Laikipia Plateau. It is unlikely that any Nilotic speakers ever occupied this range. No Nilotic graves were found here.

The Azanian Civilisation Revisited

Bernd Heine studied the languages of many of the living Cushitic, but he was unable to determine how they originated. He could note compare the archaeological dates with the hypothesised Cushitic migrations of the Cushitic and Nilotic speakers of the Horn of Africa. The Azanian Civilisation of the 1st to 4th century A.D. has been dated by the carbon-14 method. One of the mound cairns dated to 3,460 years before the present, the oldest known in East Africa, one platform dated to 980 years ago, and three rings dated to 385, 510, and 125 years ago. The ring cairns are the most intriguing. While travelling across hundreds of the large rings, invariably associated with mound cairns, we usually found near present or former water sources. The heights of three of the ring cairn skeletons were 190cm (6’4”) for two of them, and 167cm (5’6”) for one. It is possible that this finding was the result of the ring cairn burials being missing from two to four of their lower incisors. The removal of incisors is a Nilotic initiation custom. None of the burials in the mound or platform cairns had incisors removed. This finding is puzzling because the ring-style cairn is a uniquely Cushitic tradition.

Stone ring graves run from Somalia, through Ethiopia, to Kenya as far south as the Laikipia Plateau. It is unlikely that any Nilotic speakers ever occupied this range.

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One of the two platforms I excavated contained a skeleton in good enough condition to measure. The individual was 185cm (6’1”) tall, again well above the average height seen today in the area, or anywhere else, for that matter, 1,000 years ago. Could this person, almost certainly male, have been a leader of the legendary Wardai? Today there are Wardais or Wardaa living amongst the Orma pastoralists who live along the lower Tana River near the coast. They all speak the Boran language.

The ring cairns are the most intriguing. While travelling over much of Marsabit District by land and air I came across hundreds of the large rings, invariably associated with mound cairns. They are usually found near present or former water sources. The heights of three of the ring cairn skeletons were 190cm (6’4”) for two of them, and 167cm (5’6”) for one.

The most puzzling finding was the fact that all four of the ring cairn burials were missing from two to four of their lower incisors. The removal of incisors is a Nilotic initiation custom. None of the burials in the mound or platform cairns had incisors removed. This finding is puzzling because the ring-style cairn is a uniquely Cushitic tradition.

Stone ring graves run from Somalia, through Ethiopia, to Kenya as far south as the Laikipia Plateau. It is unlikely that any Nilotic speakers ever occupied this range. No Nilotic graves were found here. And no ring-cairns are seen to the west of Lake Turkana, where the Turkana and Pokot Nilotes live today. So who made these mysterious rings?

I think the most likely ring-makers were ancestral Rendille, who have close cultural ties with Nilotic neighbours, plausibly Maasai. Today the Nilotic Samburu and Cushitic Rendille have close interrelations. They both extract incisors. None of the burials in the mound or platform cairns had incisors removed. This finding is puzzling because the ring-style cairn is a uniquely Cushitic tradition.

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