

KENYA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

Case Study – Thimlich Ohinga

Thimlich is an important historical monument in Kenya. It is a stone walled structural complex built in the 14th century on a small hill now covered partially by Savannah bush-land. The complex, which consists of six skilfully joined enclosures, is a symbol of the first settlements, unique stone-walling tradition, and a community with a central power system in the Lake Victoria region of Kenya. Its unique architecture is seen in the well-set stone walls, which show neither dressing nor use of mortar to join the blocks. The walls range from 1.2 to 3.0m in height to 1.0 to 3.0m in width.

The architecture is a real masterpiece of creative genius that led to a tradition which remains unrivalled in the entire East African region. It was gazetted as a National Monument in 1981 in an attempt to preserve it from destruction. It remains protected as a prehistoric site and is currently regarded as one of the year 2000 *List of 100 Most Endangered Sites* by the World Monuments Watch.

Description of Threats

Several portions of the wall have fallen while other sections are facing imminent disintegration. The enclosure, for example, measuring about 140 m in diameter has several parts that have fallen, while the gates, with the exception of one, are blocked. Other parts of the complex, apart from having slowly crumbling walls, are overgrown by distinctively destructive Savannah vegetation. The entire site also remains an open area with no fencing, making it difficult to control entry and movement within the site.

The Government gazetted the site as a National Monument and went on to employ members of staff who man the site constantly. The local community was informed about the significance of the site and the need to preserve it. However, with only a skeleton staff on site, and the absence of a perimeter fence, coupled with policing and legislation that is both bureaucratic

and unclear on site maintenance and education of the local inhabitants, the site continues to deteriorate due to both natural and human factors.

The overall action necessary to conserve the site

The site needs major repair work on its walls and a mechanism needs to be in place for regular inspection and maintenance of the walls. An adequate and appropriate number of staff needs to be stationed at the site. There should also be a perimeter fence and an interpretative centre from which information about the site can be obtained and subsequently disseminated to the local inhabitants.

The intervention of the international community and the inclusion of the site amongst Heritage @ Risk! will help in the continued maintenance required for the conservation of the site. The Government of Kenya will be encouraged to enforce the law and carry out the implementation of policies that are conservation-driven.

Thimlich represents a unique artistic achievement, a masterpiece of creative genius well above other stone walled structures of its type found elsewhere in Africa. The current project seeks the recognition of Thimlich as one of the heritage places at risk of deterioration. Current work on the site involves control of and, in special circumstances, halting or reversing of the deterioration process through major repairs at the site.

Repair work on the walls, gates and the general site lay-out will bring back the original form of the complex presenting the uniqueness of the whole site and making it more attractive. Fencing of the site will halt grazing and other human activities, such as uncontrolled walking (trespass) and collecting firewood or stones at the site. These have proved destructive in the past. Lastly an interpretation centre will provide adequate information to both local and other visitors about the site and the cultural need for conservation.

Web Site: <http://www.museums.or.ke>

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