

Monday, 4th March 2024

at 16:15 Studer Auditorium, 2 OG

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“Medieval softstone exploitation in Madagascar: Insights from Geoarchaeology”

Sitting 300 km off the coast of Mozambique, Madagascar is a unique microcosm of various cultural influences. Despite its proximity to the African continent, its modern language and traditions are predominantly of Indonesian origin, mingled with other nuances from the Indian Ocean realm. Astonishingly, the oldest undisputed archaeological evidence for human presence on the world’s fourth largest island only dates to the 6th to 7th century CE, making it the last large landmass to be permanently settled. However, the dynamics of the settlement history and Madagascar’s heritage in the extensive pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade network remain notoriously understudied.

Modern Madagascar is among the ten poorest countries in the world, caught in a storm of global crises, corrupt governments and market fluctuations. Fieldwork and scientific collaborations are therefore both delicate and challenging. With the help of a small mobile team, we managed to conduct six missions focusing on the spectacular remains of softstone quarries in the northeast of the island. The quarries served mainly for the production of lathe-turned cooking vessels that were both used in Madagascar and exported far up the East African coast. The petrological study and comparison between quarry samples and excavated artefacts has proven to be a crucial tool for archaeological prospection and permitted valuable new insights into the spatial and chronological development of this long-forgotten tradition.