

MIGRANT KINGDOM:

MZILIKAZI'S NDEBELE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

By R. Kent Rasmussen.

(Rex Collings, London, David Philip, Cape Town, 1978. R16,50)

Reviewed by P. J. Colenbrander

Mzilikazi is — as he was in his own day, though for different reasons — an exceptional figure. For despite the all too prevalent ignorance of many white South Africans about the historical achievements and experiences of their black compatriots, the exploits of Mzilikazi kaMoshobane have been celebrated in several works and are, in consequence, fairly well known. His legacy is also discernible in the current troubles besetting Zimbabwe which attract so much of our attention.

Born into the Khumalo lineage group during the twilight years of the eighteenth century, Mzilikazi became the vassal firstly of the Ndwandwe leader Zwide, and later of the Zulu king Shaka. In 1821 he and about 300 of his followers fled from Zululand after defying the Zulu authorities over the allocation of cattle seized during a raid. Thereafter the Ndebele, as they came to be known, settled in a sequence of localities in the Transvaal before moving north across the Limpopo in 1939 after meeting with defeat at the hands of the encroaching Voortrekkers. Their migrations were characterised by a high level of violence and disruption as they sought land, livestock, man — and indeed womanpower, and security from aggression. It is with the Transvaal phase of the Ndebele saga that this book chiefly concerns itself.

All this is familiar enough so why, one may ask, has another work been written on the subject? Rasmussen himself provides the answers. Firstly because of the importance of the Transvaal migrations especially as so many other people were affected, and because they left their imprint on subsequent Ndebele history. Secondly because existing accounts are so studded with error and inaccuracy as to be worthless.

And so, by means of careful analysis and reconstruction the author has set about refining and complementing our stock of knowledge of the relevant dates, events, places and personages. In the process the historian is reminded of how vital it is to submit evidence, and particularly the oral evidence derived from a highly unsettled and fluid society, to close investigation. Nor is *Migrant Kingdom* simply a chronicle.

The discussion of Mzilikazi's fateful underestimation of firearms is one of several interesting interpretative arguments put forward.

All this is very commendable not least because errors of fact have in the past led to serious errors in interpretation about such important matters as the size, military potential and growth rate of the Ndebele state itself. And yet one comes away somewhat disappointed. Relatively little emerges about Mzilikazi and more attention should have been paid to ecological factors. The most fundamental weakness is Rasmussen's relative neglect of the underlying political and socioeconomic structures and forces in the emergent Ndebele state. Admittedly his manuscript was apparently completed several years ago and, in part, its shortcomings highlight the dilemma of the writer of a major work of synthesis in a field as rapidly changing as African history. The foregoing criticisms also stem from the scarcity and very nature of the available evidence, though it is appropriate to observe here that the enormous resources of the Killie Campbell Library should perhaps have been consulted. Not unexpectedly, the evidence at Rasmussen's disposal lays greater emphasis on memorable and extraordinary occurrences such as war and migration — which in all probability consumed less time and energy than did agricultural, domestic, commercial and governmental pursuits — and so gives rise to an unbalanced historical picture. Despite the author's awareness of this methodological problem, his narrow conceptual framework and excessively cautious approach to the historical material serve only to perpetuate these distortions. A more imaginative use of evidence and of anthropological works on Nguni and other pre-capitalist societies would not only have enabled him to arrive at a more profound understanding of the Ndebele social formation, but also of the very wars and migrations which it is his stated purpose to set in clearer and more accurate perspective.

Nonetheless this is a useful work providing as it does much of the detailed information required for further research into the history of the Ndebele and indeed the Mfecane. □

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