

# Culture Runs Deep at Hora Mountain

By Dr Jessica Thompson

**H**ora Mountain rises like a beacon from the flat Kasitu Valley in the Mzimba District or Northern Region of Malawi, offering a landmark that is visible for many kilometres. Today, it is best known for the annual Umthetho Festival held each August at its base. This celebration of Ngoni culture honours Paramount Chief M'mbelwa V and other royalty who attend the festival from across the entire southern African region. However, the history of Hora Mountain runs much deeper than the arrival of the Ngoni in the mid-1800s. People have been coming to the Kasitu Valley for thousands of years, drawn by the fertile soil, the dramatic landscape, and a river that runs all year. Now the valley attracts a new kind of visitor: the archaeologist.

In 1950, a young scholar named J. Desmond Clark from the Livingstone Museum in Zambia travelled to Malawi to see the rocks and small caves in Malawi where ancient people used natural paint to create red and white designs on the walls. Seeing the wealth of cultural history buried in Malawi, this archaeologist called the country, "The Cinderella of African Prehistory". During that visit in 1950, he visited a small rock shelter at the base of Hora Mountain. On the surface of the ground there was evidence for traditional iron-working, which first came to Malawi sometime within the last 2000 years. Digging deeper into the soft earth and ashes of ancient fires, he discovered stones that had been shaped into sharp tools by people long before they had iron, resting alongside the fossilized remains of the animals they ate: bush pig, zebra, antelope, and rabbit.

There were also two ancient human burials – a man and a woman. These must have been the people who left the stone tools, the small-statured hunters and gatherers who lived in the Kasitu Valley before iron-working, and known from oral his-

tory as the *Akafula*. But in 1950, there was no reliable way to know how old these burials were. That mystery would have to wait another 67 years to be solved, when my team returned to Hora Mountain to find out more. In 2016 we first travelled to the Mzimba District, in collaboration with the Malawi Government, to apply modern archaeological and scientific methods to important sites like Hora Mountain. We were treated to a rugged landscape inhabited by friendly people, and a sort of archaeological paradise. We discovered many places where people had once lived in the shelter of boulders and overhangs in stony outcrops bordering the Valley. In our ongoing research at Hora Mountain, we were finally able to discover that the two burials are about 8,000 years old. And right next to them we found an enormous pile of ash surrounding a third set of human remains; at 9,500 years old, this is the oldest known cremation in Africa.

Some sites in the Kasitu Valley are truly ancient, dating back to the last Ice Age that ended 12,000 years ago, well before the time preserved in oral histories. One site even goes back to 28,000 years ago, when the Kasitu Valley was a much different place than it is today. At that time, ostriches still roamed the area, and people made their eggs into beads and drinking cups. Ostriches prefer arid country, so we know was less rainfall back then, but the hunters and gatherers found a way to thrive – and they their rich cultural history for us to find. Their time in the Valley came to an end when new groups of people using iron and

planting crops began to move into the region. Using state-of-the-art scientific techniques to extract ancient DNA from the two 8,000-year-old burials at Hora Mountain, we found that these ancestors of the *Akafula* were not related to people living in Malawi today. So what can we say about these vanished people? As we continue to dig deeper, one thing is clear. Hora Mountain was a very important place for people over many thousands of years, and it continues to be a thriving cultural centre for Malawians today.

