

## THE ILA.

The Ila (otherwise known as Baila) are a cattle-herding tribe inhabiting the valley of the Kafue River, a northern tributary of the Zambezi, in what is now Zambia. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were better known to whites as "Mashukulumbwe" or "Bashukulompo", but this was a term used by their Barotse enemies, and it was regarded as an insult. In fact the Ila were a touchy lot who regarded just about everything as an insult: their own name for themselves is believed to mean something like "taboo" or "set apart". They seldom got a good press from the old explorers: Colonel St. Hill Gibbons, who passed through the area in 1895 - 96, rather unkindly called them "quite the most hopeless savages it is possible to conceive", despite the fact that they lived in "the finest country in Africa". The Ila grew some crops, but their lifestyle was based mainly on herding cattle. The floodplain of the Kafue provided excellent pasture, so they were able to raise very large herds - more cattle per head than any other tribe in southern Africa according to some.

This, however, was not such a good thing as it seems, because they were surrounded by some very formidable warrior tribes - including the Barotse, Ngoni, Bemba and Matabele - who regarded them as a convenient source of cattle which could be stolen to replace their own losses. The missionary F. Coillard described how the Barotse never learned to look after their own livestock properly, but slaughtered and ate them faster than they could breed. So when famine threatened, "Then as always the cry arose, 'to the Mashukulumbwe!'" But the Ila were not helpless victims. They were very tough customers with a reputation for quarrelsomeness, both among themselves and in their relations with outsiders. They were tall, strong men who could travel 50 or 60 miles a day on foot, and they were exceptionally deadly spear-fighters. Robert Baden Powell wrote of an old chief who had killed a lion single handed, armed only with a spear - a feat even more impressive in view of the fact that the Ila never carried shields.

Unfortunately their disunity prevented them raising armies large enough to confront the raiders successfully, and they lost huge numbers of cattle over the years, though the herds never seemed to run out. In 1886, not long after a Barotse raid had netted a staggering

40,000 head, the explorer Emil Holub wrote of the "great herds" that still remained. No doubt the Ila were able to hide many of their beasts in the extensive stands of tall grass which covered the plain while the warriors fought delaying actions against the invaders, and we also know that they mounted counter raids in which many stolen animals were retrieved. During one campaign in the 1880s a Barotse army was isolated and wiped out at the Battle of Mbeba. A pile of skulls, erected by the victorious warriors as a trophy, was to be seen on the site for many years afterwards.

### The Ila and the Explorers.

Livingstone met some Ila in the 1850s, but they were otherwise virtually unknown to Europeans until the late 1880s. Not surprisingly in view of their experiences at the hands of their neighbours, they regarded all outsiders with suspicion and usually killed them on sight. The first explorers to reach the country were probably Portuguese, but none of their accounts have survived. According to a 20<sup>th</sup> century study of the Ila, "it is certain that in more recent years travellers entered the country and left no record, for the simple reason that they never emerged alive." In Livingstone's day it seems that one way of getting rid of nosy visitors to the region was to provide them with a guide with secret instructions to lead them into the country of the Ila, who could then be relied on to do the dirty work. Coillard, writing in 1888, listed several explorers and traders who had disappeared and were believed to have been killed by the Ila. However in the 1880s a couple of their intended victims managed to get away to tell the tale. The first of these was the Bohemian explorer Dr. Emil Holub, who arrived in the country in 1886 with his wife and a colleague named Oswald Sollner. The couple were saved from an Ila war party by an amazing display of shooting by Mrs. Holub, but Sollner was speared to death and the survivors fled from the country. Then in 1888 the famous elephant hunter F. C. Selous arrived in Ila territory - apparently by mistake, as he knew all about the Holubs' experience and had sensibly intended to avoid the area. One evening, while he was encamped outside the village of a chief named Minenga, he was on the receiving end of a shower of spears, the prelude to the inevitable rush. He managed to escape into a patch of tall grass but had to leave his rifle behind. Despite this record of violence the Ila received

a visit soon afterwards by some brave Methodist missionaries, and proved surprisingly welcoming. By 1900 they had all meekly accepted British rule. It is likely that after the attentions of their predatory neighbours they were well aware of the benefits of the "Pax Britannica".

## Ila Warfare.

Ila warriors were particularly expert with their favourite weapon, the throwing spear. They did not use shields, but instead would carry an elephant's tail, or a bunch of feathers on the end of stick, which could be twirled to distract an enemy's aim. (Some ideas for figure conversions there. They were keen head hunters, so it would also be appropriate to add a few severed heads to the tips of their spears.) Men who wished to show their contempt for an enemy spearman whose throw had missed would ostentatiously sweep the ground in front of them, a display of coolness which was much admired by their comrades. Otherwise they relied entirely on speed and mobility for protection against missiles. In the colonial era the Ila continued to perform dances which resembled mock battles, in which the warriors could practice their spear throwing and dodging skills. Even the young boys were said to be able to throw their spears accurately up to 50 yards, while the longest throw recorded was an incredible 75 yards.

They produced a variety of spear types, designed for different tasks in hunting and warfare. These included the spike-headed "mumba", which was the first to be thrown in an engagement and was presumably optimised for long range; the short, broad-headed "impengula", which resembled a Zulu "iklwa" and was similarly used for thrusting at close quarters; and the viciously barbed "lukona", a specialised war spear. In internal Ila battles the warriors relied on retrieving spears thrown by their opponents, and this sort of exchange could continue for many hours, but against enemies like the Matabele and Barotse, who tended to discharge a few volleys and then close for hand-to-hand fighting, the Ila were at a disadvantage because they quickly ran out of missiles. The recollections of veterans of the Barotse wars suggest that the Ila were not well prepared for hand-to-hand combat, and were all too often knocked on the head with knobkerries while looking

around for something to throw. But as mentioned above they did have spears which were obviously designed for stabbing at close quarters, so they can hardly have been completely helpless.

### Painting the Ila.

The most distinctive feature of Ila warriors was the extraordinary hair cone or "isusu", which was allegedly designed to allow the members of hunting or war parties to see each other over the tall grass of the Kafue floodplain. It consisted of a short ponytail at the back, wrapped with cloth, and a circlet of small feathers surrounding a tall pointed cone made from plaited hair stiffened with a sliver of antelope horn. Unlike the hairstyles of some other African tribes the "isusu" was not permanent, but was usually worn for two or three months before being shaved off. Feathers might also be worn in the hair; black cock feathers or the long grey plumes of the crane were popular for decoration, but others were marks of skill or courage. Blue jay feathers were the sign of a particularly brave man, while one who had killed an enemy warrior or a lion or leopard was entitled to wear the metallic green, blue or yellow tail feathers of the touraco.

A shell ornament, known as an "impande", was worn either on the front of the head or on the chest. Apparently most Ila men originally went naked, but hide loincloths and cloth blankets were coming into widespread use by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chiefs would substitute lion or leopard skins for the normal brown cow hide, and might add a ruff around the neck made from the mane of a lion or the greyish coloured hair of a baboon, and smaller black and white striped zebra-mane ruffs on the arms. Warriors painted their faces and bodies white for war, often in varied patterns of lines and dots. The most popular colour for trade beads was also white, and ivory or copper bangles could be worn around the wrists and ankles.

An Ila Army for "Death in the Dark Continent".

The Ila are covered in Army List number 16, "The Warrior Herdsmen", which means that they are all basically Skirmishers armed with spears. However because of their fighting reputation they are allowed to upgrade any or all of these to Elite, which makes them a very different proposition from the ordinary villager type. Most usefully, Elite Skirmishers can initiate a charge into hand-to-hand combat, and as long as they keep the initiative they are fairly effective in that role. They should be able to sweep away ordinary Skirmishers and even give a good account of themselves against Soldiers as long as they can avoid getting shot on the way in. To do that, of course, they need to take maximum advantage of cover, but as their home terrain is Grassland and their aggression factor is 0 (which means that most games will take place in their own territory) they should get plenty of tall grass etc. to conceal their movements. Against Warriors like the Matabele and Ngoni the Ila will have to try and keep at a distance and rely on missiles, but they will be more mobile than their opponents, especially in difficult terrain.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that this is an army which can be completed with a relatively small number of figures. At 8 points per base for Elite Skirmishers, and 2 men to a base, you can do a 300 point army with less than 70 figures - especially if you do what I do and include some bases mounting a single figure and a lot of vegetation, to represent men hidden in ambush. Above all it should be a fun army to use if you like manoeuvre and dirty tricks rather than brute force and firepower - perfect for ambushing unwary explorers - and I am looking forward to getting mine into action.