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Before the Flood: The Golden Volta Basin

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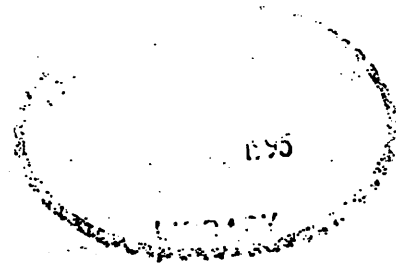
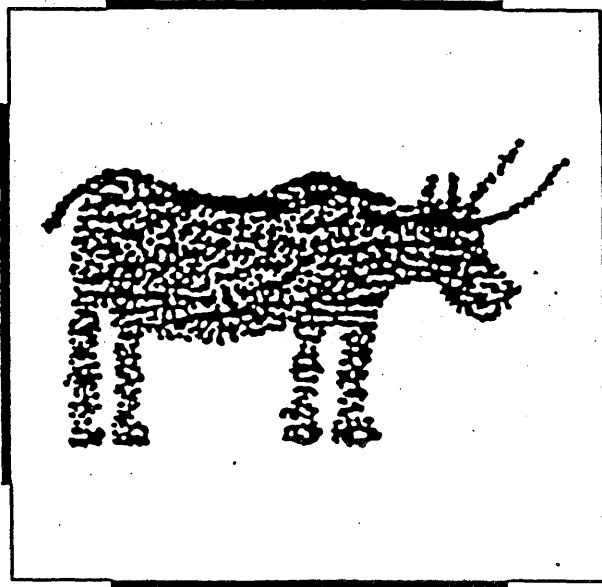
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NIYAME AKUMA

BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY OF AFRICANIST ARCHAEOLOGISTS



NUMBER 41

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CONTENTS

Editorial	1
Benin	
Recent Excavations at Savi: An Eighteenth-Century West African Trade Town <i>Kenneth G. Kelly</i>	2
Cameroon	
An Ethnoarchaeological Approach to Understanding Archaeological Ceramic Assemblages from Gréa, Northern Cameroon <i>Claire Bourges</i>	8
Histoire des Peuplements et de la Transformation des Paysages: État des Recherches Archéologiques dans la Province du Sud (Cameroun Méridional) <i>J. Paul OSSAH Mvondo</i>	11
Ethiopia	
The B.L.E.A. Aksum Excavations, 1993 <i>David W. Phillipson</i>	15
Ghana	
Before the Flood: The Golden Volta Basin <i>E. Kofi Agorsah</i>	25
Lesotho	
First Results of the Survey of a Hunter-Gatherer Landscape in the Lesotho Highlands <i>Peter J. Mitchell</i>	36
Madagascar	
Finding Fenoarivo: Fieldwork in Central Androy <i>Mike Parker Pearson, Karen Godden, Ramilisonina, Retsihisatsa, and Jean-Luc Schwenninger</i>	41
Mali	
Preliminary Results of Excavations at Gao, September and October 1993 <i>Timothy Insoll</i>	45
Nigeria	
Preliminary Results of Research by the Projet Maya-Wandala, Nigeria, 1993 <i>Scott MacEachern and Abbakar Garba</i>	48
South Africa	
Recent Archaeological XRF Research in Southern Africa <i>L. Jacobson, W. A. van der Westhuizen, and H. de Bruijn</i>	55
Sudan	
Archaeological Mission of the University of Geneva at Kerma (Sudan): Report on the 1992-1993 Campaign <i>Charles Bonnet</i>	61
Discovery of Middle Stone Age Sites near El Ghaddar <i>Michal Kobusiewicz</i>	63
Preliminary Results of CeRDO's Research in the Nubian Desert <i>Karim Sadr</i>	66
Tanzania	
Archaeological Research in Karagwe District <i>Andrew Reid and J. E. K. Njau</i>	68
Forum	74
Publications	75
Meetings	79

Tomb of the Brick Arches must clearly await the completion of further research.

Reconnaissance

Three areas of ancient quarrying were noted on Gobedra Hill, 3-4 km west of Aksum. Preliminary photographic recording was undertaken, but much more remains to be done when the vegetation can be cleared.

Preliminary reconnaissance was also conducted to locate areas suitable for the investigation of Aksumite domestic occupation, planned for 1994.

Monument Conservation

At the conclusion of the 1993 excavations, all areas investigated were left securely protected, the details being agreed in advance with officials from the Ministry of Culture. The intention is that these measures can, if it is decided at some future date when excavation has been completed to open the monuments to public view, be incorporated into a long-term conservation strategy. The entrances both to the Mausoleum and to the East Tomb were consolidated with retaining walls built in traditional Aksumite style, and roofed in such a way as not to impede general views of the area. The adit to the Tomb of the Brick Arches was likewise consolidated and roofed, its entrance and that of the tomb itself being securely sealed.

Acknowledgements

The research was supported at every stage, both in Addis Ababa and in Tigray by the Centre for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (CRCCH) in the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Sports. The interest, cooperation and assistance of very many people is warmly acknowledged. Among these are: H. E. The Regional President of Tigray, Ato Gebru Asrat; H. E. The Minister for Culture and Sports Affairs, Ato Leule Selassie Temamo; His Holiness The Patriarch; Her Britannic Majesty's Ambassador to Ethiopia, James Glaze Esq., CMG; Ato Masele Zeleke, Head of Culture and Sports Bureau, Makelle; Dr. Kassaye Begashaw, Head of CRCCH; the Director,

British Council, Addis Ababa, Michael Sargent Esq.; Ato Mabratu, Culture and Sports Bureau, Aksum; Dr. Merid Aregay, Addis Ababa University; Professor Tadesse Tamrat, Addis Ababa University; Dr. Bahru Zewde, Director, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University; and numerous other people, from all walks of life, in Aksum, Makelle, and Addis Ababa. Their contributions will be fully acknowledged in future publications.

■ GHANA

Before the Flood: The Golden Volta Basin

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The Northern Volta basin has engaged the attention of major research projects in the last ten years with greater intensity than has been known in the history of research in the area (Agorsah 1983, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1990; Kense 1983, 1985; Stahl 1983, 1989). Explanation of the cultural development as well as connections or relationships between ethnic groups, their geographical distribution and settlement patterning, and the nature and mechanism of functional adaptation in the area are issues that appear to have been the main foci of investigation.

Between 1981 and 1985 the Volta Basin Archaeological Research Project (VBARP) has focused investigations on the geographical area currently inhabited by the eastern Gonja, Nawuri, Nchumuru, and the Krachi-speaking people. The initial focus, during the period, was on the Nchumuru settlements. Conclusions based on the data available emphasized the northern Volta Basin as an important area for the development of early cultural traditions in that part of West Africa. It was also

generalized that ecological, historical, and cultural variables of the study indicate two waves of human movements: a north-south one occurring several thousand years ago in the stone age; and a more recent and influential one in the opposite direction beginning in the second millennium A.D. These and other generalizations continue to require supporting evidence from other parts of the basin.

Several field trips undertaken between 1985 and 1990 to examine the location, distribution, and patterning of settlements as well as traditional building construction and their related decay patterns in the Krachi area are discussed in this presentation, in an attempt to give further support to some of the generalizations made in the earlier phase of the research of the VBARP and to continue the study of mud wall decay patterns in the southern section of the northern Volta basin and among a different ethnic group.

The 1985-90 period of study, therefore, shifted from the Nchumuru ethnic group area occupying the basin of the Volta and the Daka rivers to the basins of the Oti, Sene, and the Volta rivers inhabited solely by the Krachi who are one of the major Guang-speaking groups in the basin. Dadiase, Krenkuase Yabin, Kadengben, Ahinkro, Akroso Beposo, Aworoso (Aweresi), Gharee, Banka, and Begyamso are some of the well-known sites in the areas around Krachi. Unfortunately these and many other sites are now inundated by the expanding artificially built Volta Lake. More recently the VBARP has located the sites of Abokono, Akwankwakwae, Old Kajaji, Old Mokraye, Kononketakpan (Kononaye), Kumpo, and Takragya among others. As indicated in an earlier report of the survey, many of these sites appear to have developed in valleys, flood plains, fans, confluences, and pediments, with the soils that are periodically revived by alluvial and colluvial deposits. The streams, springs, and seepage or groundwater provided water for those located in areas where rainfall was inconsistent and river water was not readily available.

The main excavation was conducted at the site of Kononketakpan (Kononaye)

located on the western bank of the Volta Lake opposite the village of Boafri (Fig. 1). To the north, east, and west of the village of Bubuakro, also referred to as Tokuenya by immigrant fishermen, is located the site of Kononaye, which forms part of the vast open land that gently rises from the valley of the Volta Lake for some 10 m to just about 100 m above sea level. Its northeast and south boundaries are marked by the big meander of the marshlands of the Volta Lake. Although there are slight elevation differences here and there, the topography is generally uniform. Large mounds with lots of pottery, stone circles, and termite mounds are some of the main features of the site, which appears to extend over 3 km along the banks and over 500 m inland. Shea butter and baobab trees are most common although there are several other plants that are of medicinal and other uses to the inhabitants of Bubuakro.

Ethnography Study

Two aspects of ethnographic data collection were very important for the excavation conducted at the Kononaye site but can be only briefly discussed.

The Krachi

Unlike the Nchumuru who only recently introduced the paramount chief system, the Krachi have since ancient times been centrally controlled by a paramount chief who must come from one of three clans, and the Krachi Dente (an oracle that had both spiritual as well as political powers). While the paramount chief controlled the stool which, as is known, is the embodiment of the ancestral and other powers of state, Krachi Dente through the Dente Bosomfuo controls the land. The implication of this system for patterning and spatial behavior within Krachi settlements has not yet been clearly identified but observations so far indicate that locational behavior patterns are only controlled by clan affiliations based on social relationships similar to what has been observed to operate among the Nchumuru. However, it appears from the study of a typical Krachi village so far that the locational or distribution pattern of

KONONKETAKPON (KONONAYE)

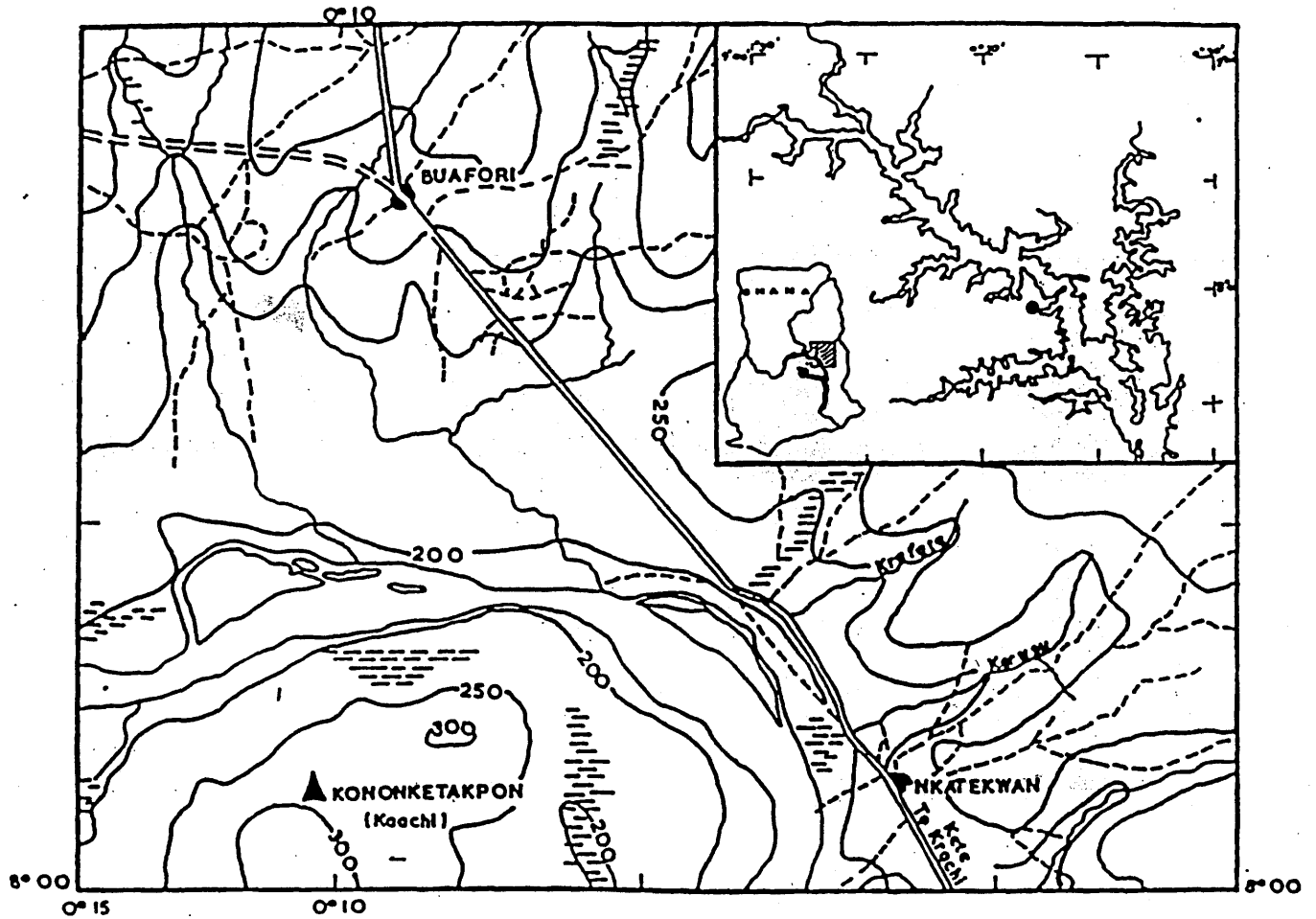


Fig. 1. Kononketakpon (Kononaye).

households is not physically the same as among the Nchumuru. It is also clear that although the local rule (LR) model applied to Nchumuru settlements (Agorsah 1983, 1986, 1990) does not generate the same pattern, the trend of locational decision-making among the Krachi follows the same rule.

House Construction and Decay Patterns among the Krachi

Two basic structural systems of house construction are observed among the people of Bubuakro: wattle and daub in which the load of the roof and the floor are carried by a framework until they were redistributed after the spaces in the frame have been filled with earth, and secondly the mass construction in which the weight of the roof is carried completely by an earth wall. Only the latter is observed among the Nchumuru and the decay and collapse patterns of such buildings differ from those using an initial framework. In both types of construction, however, stability is not usually a serious problem as the buildings are small and short or low. The lining of the bases of walls appears to be a common precaution to avoid erosion from rain splash. The collapse of walls by outward buckling as noted at Wiae in the Nchumuru area also appears to be common with the mass earth construction at Bubuakro. The wattle and daub house appears to collapse in a haphazard manner although sometimes outward and its life is more easily threatened by termite attack.

A general observation was that the strength of a building in Bubuakro depends on the number, size, and proportions of windows or openings. This appears to have been the reason why such openings are kept at a minimum. As was noted at Old Wiae of the Nchumuru, there appears to be a shift from circular buildings to rectangular because the floor areas of houses observed at the archaeological site of Kononaye are predominantly circular while in the modern village very few circular buildings are observed. An issue that is being examined is the origins and distribution of termite hills in the Bubuakro area. Can it be assumed that the location of termite hills represent the past location of collapsed houses or do they

indicate the location of a particular type of trees or plants or rubbish dumps or burials or an area of a specific activity of some kind? The termite hills are of economic use to Bubuakro as they are a source of feed for fowls and the clay obtained from them is very good for making fish-smoking ovens, hearths, and similar structures.

Archeological Evidence

An eight-week excavation of the site of Kononaye, was conducted with the support of Earthwatch (Center for Field Research) volunteers, graduate and undergraduate student volunteers from the University of Ghana, High and Secondary school and Training College students.

On the basis of results of soil chemical analysis and surface distribution of structural features and artifacts, the site was divided into five areas named KY1 (Kononaye 1), KY2, KY3, KY4, and KY5 (Fig. 2), indicating the sequence in which they are to be investigated, but by no means representing the order in which they are most threatened by inundation of the Volta Lake. KY1 was selected as the first to be investigated because it was the most threatened of the five divisions at the time.

KY1 marks the northern-most part of the Kononaye site and consists of a series of mounds overlooking the lake, one of which was completely, and two others partially, excavated during the eight-week season. From the seven 1.5 to 2.0 x 6 m trenches and four 1 x 2 m test pits, approximately 30,000 potsherds and over 200 other artifacts (mainly small finds) were recovered.

Stratigraphy

Generally, all the trenches reached level 1 at a depth of 7 m on average, but three of those which were closer to the lake touched water table at that level. The other four trenches farther away from the lake reached level five, about 2.8 m on the average at bedrock. Levels 2, 3, and 4 were the main cultural level, level 4 probably of a late stone age tradition indicated by polished stone axes (Fig. 3), a stone and bone beads, as well as the fewer, thicker, cruder, and undecorated potsherds.

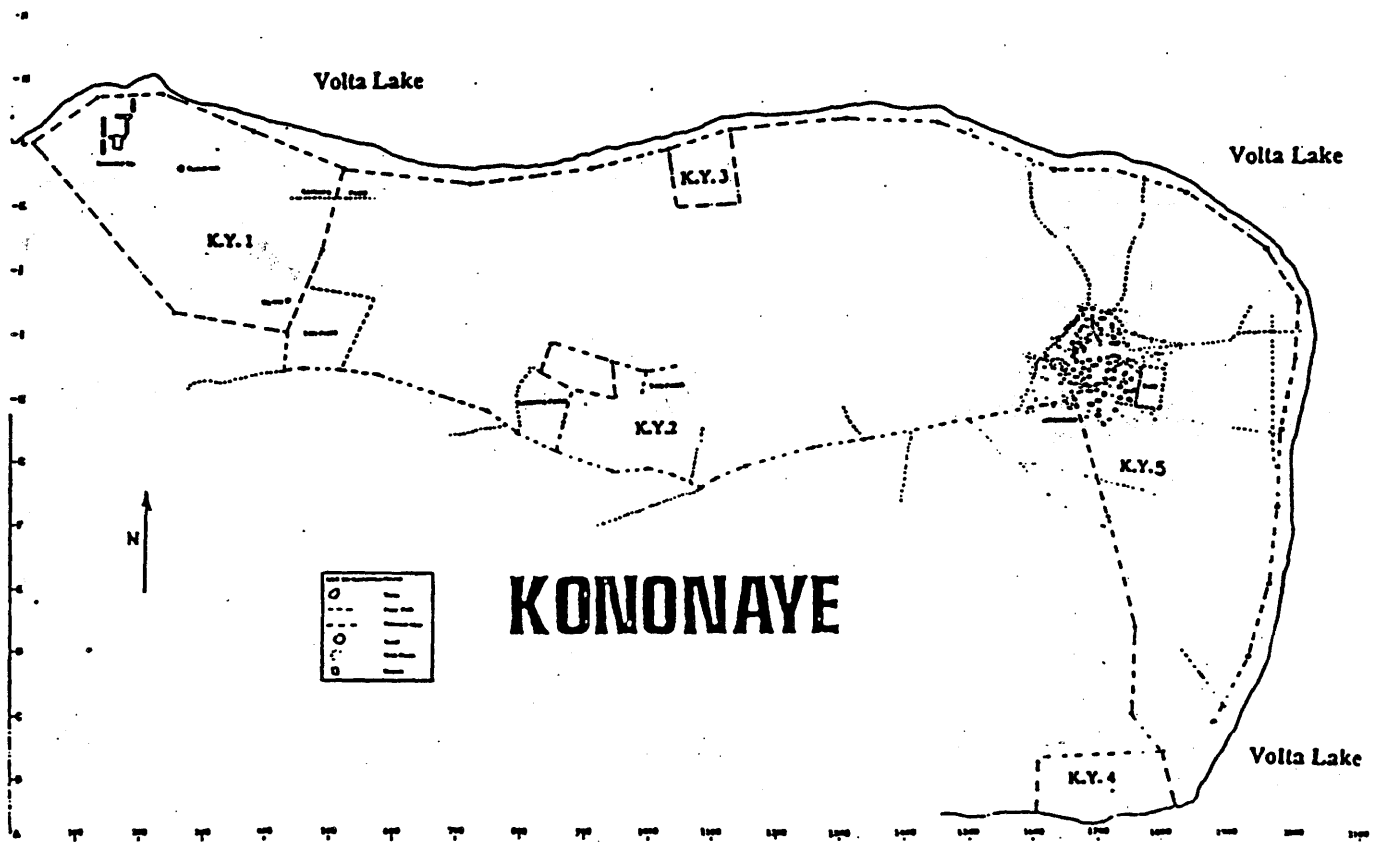


Fig. 2. Kononaye.

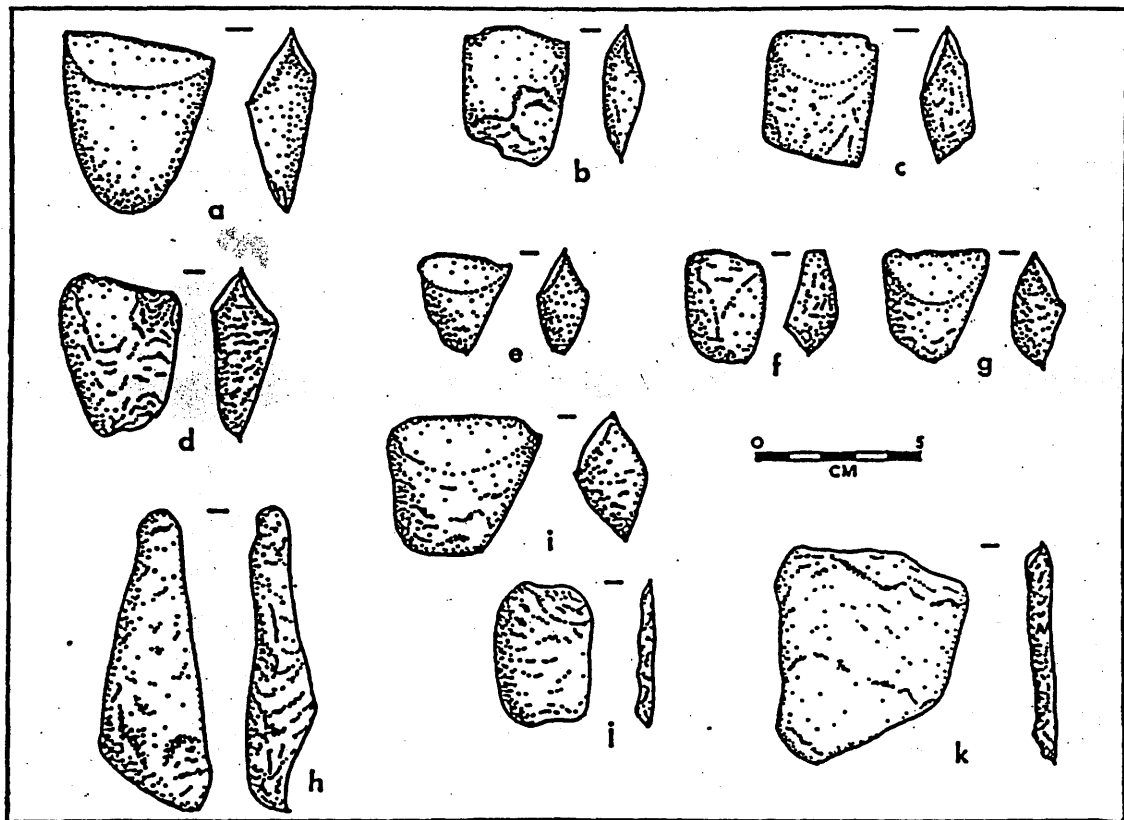


Fig. 3.

Thin, and in some cases very thick, lenses of shell signalled the appearance of a new level. The stratigraphy seems to indicate that there was a fairly long break between levels 3 and 2, a break that probably supports the view that the site may have been temporarily abandoned. When this break would have occurred is not yet certainly known. Could this have been the time of the first movement of the Krachi people southward as generalized from the Nchumuru material? How much do we tell from the C14 dates so far obtained?

Stone Circles

An important feature of levels 1 to 3 consists of circles of stone of approximately 1.5 to 2 m in diameter placed around one very large stone. The smallness of the size of the circles clearly suggest that they did not mark the bases of houses. Their location in relation to two house floors identified at KY1 points to some other use: bath houses? or bases of fish-smoking ovens? or storage facilities? Circular fish-smoking ovens of the same diameter are still used in the modern village of Bubukro and appear to represent a continuity from previous practice at Kononaye.

Pottery

Preliminary study of potsherds suggests predominance of large pots such as water storage pots in levels 4 and 5, while in the top three levels the main vessels are bowls and cooking pots. There is some kind of uniformity in the quantity, types, and decoration of pottery material throughout the first three levels, although slight differences have been noted. Pottery manufacture continues to be a practice in the modern village of Bubukro where it is claimed to be an ancient tradition that produced pots of various forms and with different decorations (Fig. 4).

Other Finds

Other finds include several local ceramic smoking pipes mainly from levels 1, none from levels 3 and 4 (Fig. 5); spindle whorls mainly from level 2 (Fig. 6i.), ceramic game

pieces, measuring approximately 2.5 cm diameter with thicknesses varying between .5 and 1.3 cm; an ivory pendant from level 2, which is conical and grooved around toward both ends containing a hole at the wider end, which is approximately 5.1 cm long (Fig. 6a); bone awls or needles generally 4.5 cm long, level 2 (Fig. 6 b, c); one stone and one bone bead from level 4 (Fig. 6f, g); a few glass beads from surface and level 3; one piece of a "Kintampo" cigar (surface collected by a local farmer near KY 2, Fig. 6h); what appears to be a bone fish mending needle (Fig. 6e); and a fragment of an ivory bracelet (Fig. 6d).

A large quantity of shell was collected from the three top levels, clearly indicating a considerable reliance on shellfish as food resources of the River Volta.

Some Observations

The Kononaye site coincides geographically with the area of the greatest concentration of stone age sites, material of which type has been observed at the site. The site is in the center of the area observed to have the greatest diversity of Guang languages, a criterion linguists associate with the location of the ancestral language of the Guang. It is difficult to associate the various movements from and into the Kononaye area with any period of the split within the Guang linguistic group. Evidence is clear from Kononaye that the site was abandoned, even if briefly, and that would be considered as the period of some kind of movement out of the area. Radiocarbon dates obtained so far are as follows:

1. Beta-59895 (KY1/90/T2/L2) 140 ± 50 BP for the most recent level when the site was temporarily abandoned by the Krachi until it was resettled in the mid-1960s; (mid nineteenth century)
2. Beta-59896 (KY1/90/T2/L3), 480 ± 50 BP for the earliest occupation of the site by the Krachi. This date could extend half or one century earlier as level 3 overlay an earlier cultural level consisting mainly of Late Stone Age/Iron Age tradition, which in

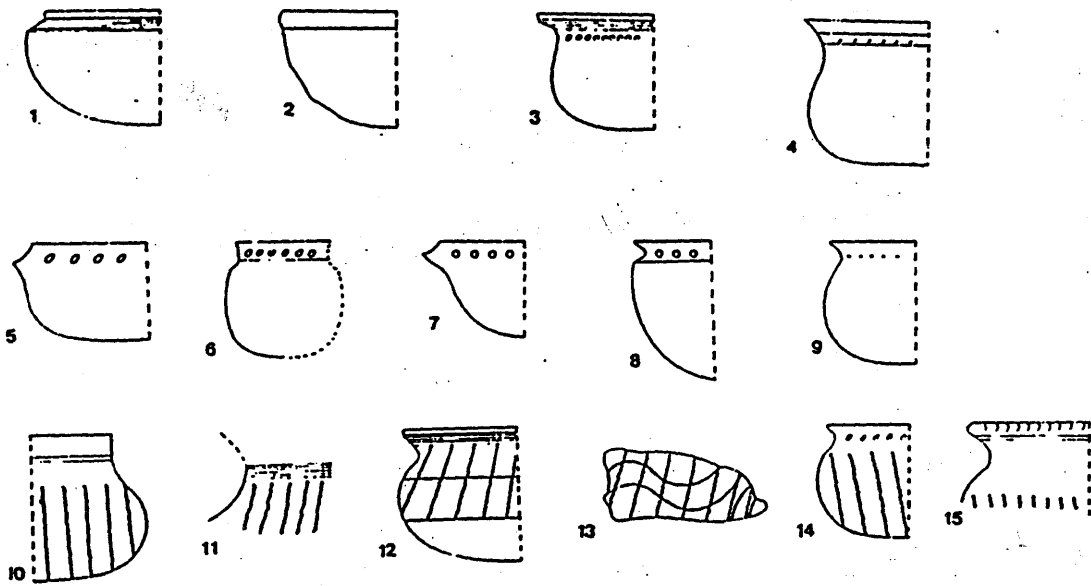


Fig. 4.

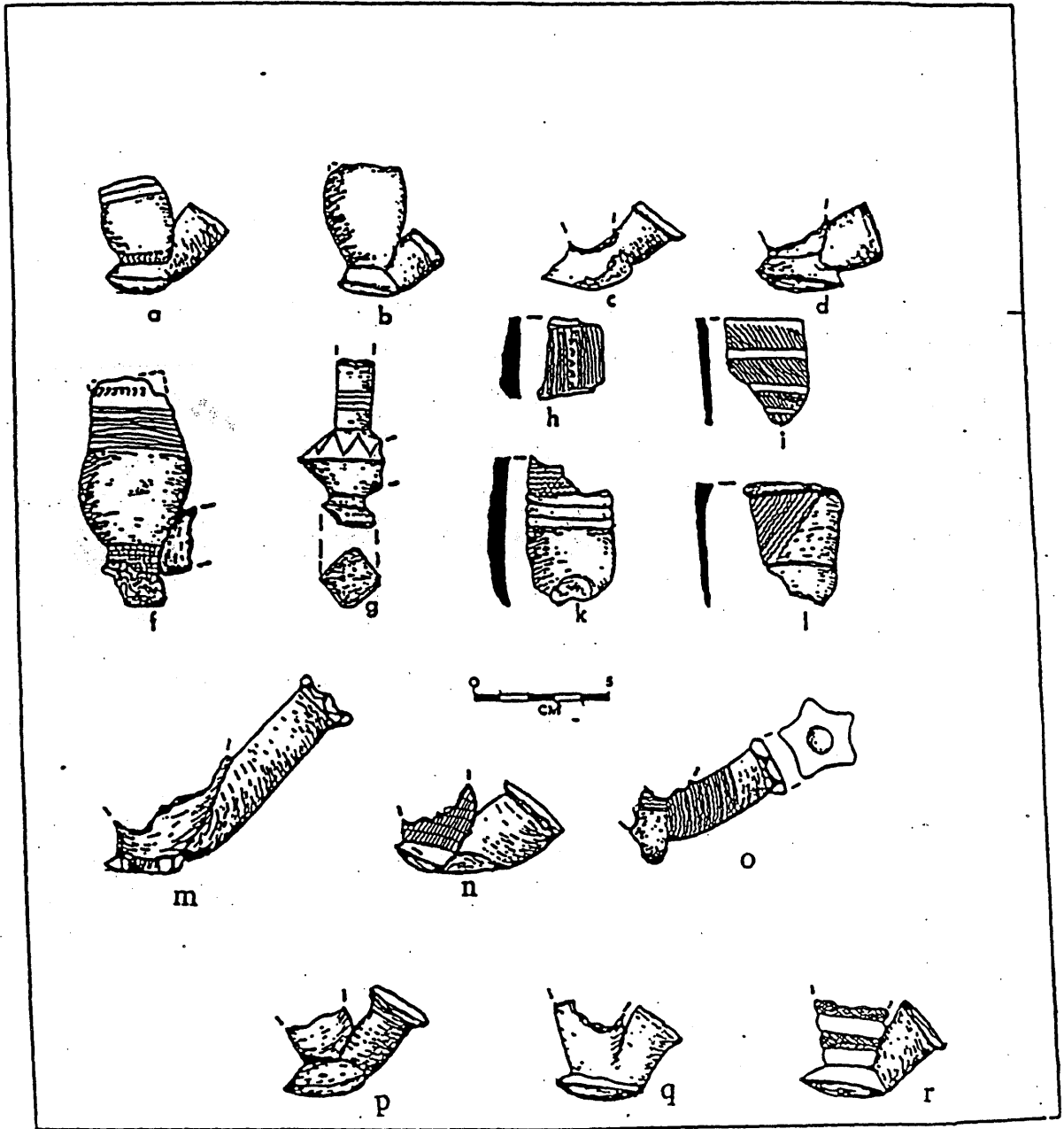


Fig. 5.

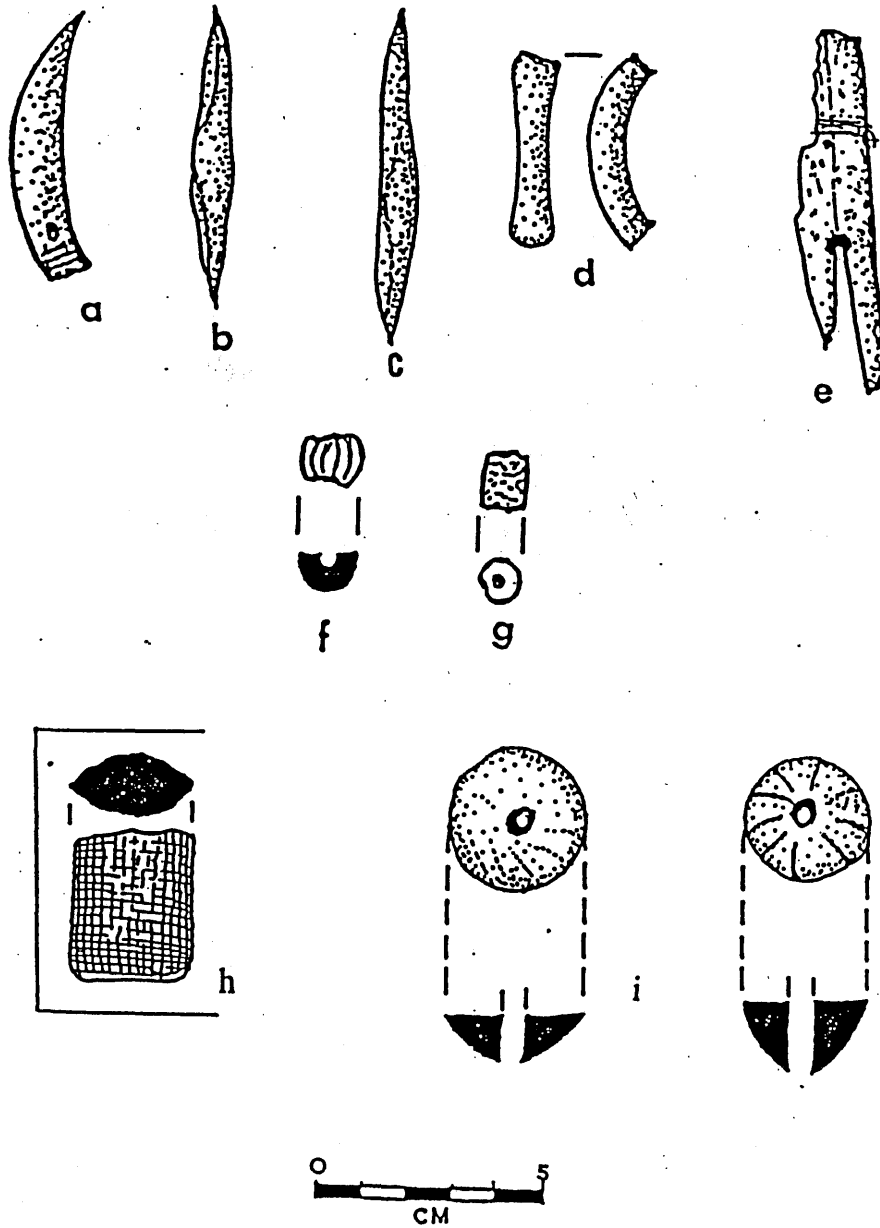


Fig. 6.

the general Ghana area dates to the ninth century A.D. at New Buiepe.

These dates appear to support the speculation that the Krachi ethnic group had moved into that part of the basin and established viable traditional political groupings consisting of family groups or clans possibly as early as the early part of the fifteenth century. The dates also indicate, if we are to assume that they represent the true picture of the period of occupation of the basin by the two main groups in that portion of the basin, that the Krachi were in the basin more than a century before the Nchumuru on the basis of mid seventeenth century dates from the site of Old Wiae, and almost a century before the earliest Europeans set foot on the coast of Ghana. Of course these suggestions take the dates over its widest range A.D. 1470 ± 50 BP and 1810 ± 50. New dates may require the revision of this conclusion and at this point it is unlikely that this conclusion can be used for any serious generalizations on the sequence of occupation of the basin. It is necessary to obtain many more dates not only for the two ethnic groups, but for as many other groups as share the basin today. The Volta basin undoubtedly is an area that needs to be much more closely examined to determine the colonization of much of what is Ghana and adjoining areas. This research is only one of several, and it is hoped that the analysis, when completed, will enable more concrete generalizations to be made for a better understanding of the relationships between settlements of the Krachi and other ethnic groups who shared the Volta basin and its resources.

Acknowledgments

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■ LESOTHO

First Results of the Survey of a Hunter-Gatherer Landscape in the Lesotho Highlands

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Sehonghong rock-shelter in the eastern highlands of Lesotho has a long sequence of Middle and Later Stone Age deposits, associated with good quality preservation of organics, that extend back well into the Upper Pleistocene (Carter and Vogel 1974, Carter et al. 1988). Excavations here were renewed in 1992 as part of a long-term investigation of late Quaternary hunter-gatherer adaptations in this part of southern Africa. As previously reported, (Mitchell 1993, 1994a; Mitchell & Vogel in press), these have already shown that the occupation history of the Sehonghong site is much more complex than previously suspected. Single sites, no matter how rich their archaeology, do not, however, exist on their own, although they may well, at times, have been the focal points of regional settlement systems. Consequently, an additional part of work at Sehonghong is field-survey of the surrounding area. I report here on

preliminary results of the surveys carried out in 1992 and 1993.

Survey Procedure

The initial focus of survey work at Sehonghong is the area within a two-hour walk of the main site. This contour is chosen as there is reason to think that the bulk of the plant resources exploited from Sehonghong, as well as some of the animal resources, will have fallen within it, but I do not expect it to have acted as a leash to which people were inflexibly tethered; resources lying outside it will also have been exploited. Geology is an important variable in affecting the local archaeology and rock-shelters are almost entirely restricted to the lower-lying Clarens sandstone. Within Sehonghong's two-hour site territory some 80-90% of the Clarens Formation has now been inspected. Above and on top of it, survey coverage is not as complete and has taken the form of linear transects. We have attempted to space these approximately 1 km apart and to keep them straight, but the location of villages, fields, and some topographic features (e.g., steep cliff-faces) acts as a constraint on our ability to do this. So far our coverage is more complete to the north of the Sehonghong River than to its south, but there is no indication in the local ecology or topography to indicate that the two areas should exhibit any differences in the kind or number of sites present. For the moment, we have not yet analysed assemblages in the field, and we have also refrained from collecting them.

Results

In less than three weeks of work we have located 54 new Stone Age sites within our survey area. Together with sites previously recorded by P. Carter (1978) and P. Vinnicombe (1976) in the 1970s and by Smit's (1973) ARAL Project in 1985, some of which we have relocated; this brings the total of sites known in the area to 91. Two of these can be attributed to the Early Stone Age (ESA), 30 to the Middle Stone Age (MSA) and 24 to the Later Stone Age (LSA). Five sites have evidence of both MSA and LSA occupation, five have undiagnostic