

■ GABON

Archaeological work in Gabon during 1993 and 1994

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Introduction

Little archaeological fieldwork was done in Gabon in 1993, but in 1994 various projects were initiated with funding from France, the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (ACCT), and the Amerada Hess oil company. This report describes the results of this research.

The Angondjé site

The Angondjé archaeological site was discovered during 1993 while completing a field survey of an area being developed as a housing complex near the headquarters of the Office des Postes et Télécommunications (OPT), 12 km northwest of Libreville. The site was checked out with James Denbow during a short visit he made to Gabon. Bulldozers had removed the forest cover and a team from the Cadastre de Libreville had surveyed the proposed area to be developed. Artifacts were discovered in and alongside erosional gullies which had formed on the site. Several components were identified during the 1993 survey which belong to the Later Stone Age, Neolithic and Iron Age.

Early in 1994 a second survey showed more erosion at work and led to the identification of about 200 m² of as yet undisturbed deposits. As the main Iron Age component found on the surface had not yet been studied anywhere along the estuary of Gabon, I decided to start a major excavation on this village site while at the same time carrying a rescue excavation. During two weeks in March and April 1994 a 104 m² area was excavated, funded by the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (ACCT). Two 2 m² test pits were initially excavated to check out the local

stratigraphy and to trace a black layer from which most of the potsherds were eroding. Then a 100 m² block was excavated, in order to fully study the Iron Age village layer. Trenches 5 and 10 were taken down to the laterite at a depth of 2.50 m to search for Stone Age layers. Four different components were identified:

1. A Middle Stone Age (MSA) component was found deeply buried a few cm from the laterite gravel, between 2.50 m and 2.30 m below the surface. Only flint débitage was found. All of the artifacts were heavily desilicified, brittle and therefore are similar to other artifacts which had been surface collected. This layer is pre-10,000 B.P. as a charcoal layer buried at only 0.80 m was dated to 10,030 ± 60 B.P. (Beta-74284). This agrees fully with similar data excavated from the Okala site which is only 1.8 km away to the southwest. There a c. 40,000 B.P. charcoal layer was found during excavations (Clist 1993). In between this layer and the laterite gravel an artifact layer was found. The charcoal layer at Okala is now dated by a second radiocarbon date of >40,000 B.P. (Gif-9378) following the Beta-46142 date reported in *Nyame Akuma* 39.
2. A Later Stone Age (LSA) component was found buried a few cm from the base of the Iron Age layer, at about 0.30 to 0.40 m below the surface. It consists only of flint débitage, along with a few quartz flakes. The main difference from the MSA artifacts is the fresh aspect of the flint. It is probable that surface collected flint artifacts which are brittle and desilicified belong to the MSA while the fresh ones are probably LSA.
3. A Neolithic component was found in the last few cm of the Iron Age layer, at a depth of around 0.30 m. This component was identified by ground axes made out of dolerite, basalt and schist. Of special interest is a schist axe found in three pieces: one on the surface of the site in an erosion gully, another in trench 13 at -0.10 m, the last one in square E3 in between trenches 11 and 13. The three pieces all conjoin to form an axe. No other evidence than these ground stone tools were found at the site. This is interpreted as a neolithic field where people tended palm

trees and other crops. The Okala late neolithic site is 1800 m away.

- An Iron Age component was found between the surface and a depth of 0.30 m. Excavation has shown all the artifacts in this layer relate to one Iron Age village dated by radiocarbon to the 12th century A.D. Two radiocarbon dates have been processed: Beta-74282, 740 ± 50 B.P. (A.D. 1260-1293) and Beta-74283, 930 ± 50 B.P. (A.D. 1025-1207). The spatial distribution of artifacts show a lot of small sherds in the village layer with larger sherds in the refuse pits. Two intact pots were found on the old village floor in squares A10 and A'10.

Three types of structures were found: refuse pits, post holes and trenches.

Seven refuse pits were studied on the site: five circular and two rectangular or oval pits. Pit 1 contained large fragments of reddish baked clay which are interpreted as pieces of the shaft of an iron smelting furnace. Iron slag and fragments of tuyeres were found in various trenches. All the pits are dug in the clay; their bases never reach the underlying laterite.

Twenty-six post holes were found. No pattern is visible, though the smaller post holes are clearly grouped together in squares D/E-10/11 and squares A/B-19/20. They are all round except for one in square A20 which is rectangular in shape. All the pits do not extend further down than 30 cm in the clay. Two trenches were excavated, which transverse squares E-6/8 and D/E-14/15. It is not yet clear if they are Iron Age or of a later date. The spatial distribution of the structures, though not leading to a hut plan, shows refuse pits to have been dug in the village itself. No clear pattern is visible, though the smaller post holes are clearly grouped together in squares D/E-10/11 and squares A/B-19/20. Post holes from the area extending from square A20 to square A15 are strongly suggestive of a hut corner. If so, using post holes from squares A20 and A15 as a guide, this hut would have been 4.50 m in width.

The material found in the 12th century A.D. layer consists of pottery of a very distinctive type, clay beads, decorated clay handles (probably from pottery covers), stone querns and grinders, iron slag, clay tuyeres, iron axes and iron blades. Pottery from square B10 at a depth of 30 cm con-

joins with pieces from pit II at 150 cm below the surface in square B7. Preliminary study of the pottery has shown it to be similar to that found during previous test excavations and surveys on other sites in the Estuaire province which are radiocarbon dated to the same period, such as Charbonnages, Okala 1, Nkol Ogoum, Kango 2, Remboué 15, and Awoungou. The sites extend from Libreville to Kango, 90 km to the southeast and on both banks of the estuary.

Pots have an everted flat rim, with an internal bevel, and a straight cylindrical neck on top a shoulder which is separated from the body by a carination. They have flat or convex bottoms. The decoration extends from the neck down to the body carination leaving the body and bottom free of any motifs. The decorative units usually consist of one peripheral band on the lower part of the neck, another on the shoulder. This type is found on both banks of the Gabon estuary; the nine radiocarbon dates associated with it lead me to suggest the existence of an Angondjé Tradition or Angondjé Group between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1500. The chronology is well bracketed by Beta-74282 (740 ± 50 b.p.) and Beta-74283 (930 ± 50 b.p.) from the Angondjé site, Hv-13432 (850 ± 60 b.p.) and Hv-13430 (565 ± 50 b.p.) from the Charbonnages site, Lv-1517 (800 ± 60 b.p.) from the Kango 2 site, Lv-1518 (710 ± 50 b.p.) from the Nkol Ogoum site, Beta-54221 (670 ± 50 bp) from the Remboué 15 site, Beta-20787 (560 ± 50 b.p.) and Gif-8152 (440 ± 50 b.p.) from the Okala 1 site.

Reports on this work were presented in a book published this year (Clist 1995). Due to its very good chronological and spatial overlap, I suggest that the Angondjé Tradition is a Mpongwé tradition, an off-shoot of the Myene language group. Archaeology has pinpointed the time frame for the development of what was known in the late 16th century as the Mpongwé in the first Portuguese and Dutch texts. The Mpongwé were established on both sides of the Gabon estuary as early as the 11th century A.D.

The Lowé river site

The Lowé river site is a hill top 1 km south of the river, 8 km southeast of Libreville. It consists of a small hill, 30 m high, which is part of a larger hill complex. The site and others in the same area

were discovered during a 1988 survey. At the time a Later Stone Age level and an Iron Age level were identified by surface collected artifacts. In 1993 and 1994 work was started there on a housing project by the Habitat, Cadastre and Urbanisme Ministry. In November 1994 it was decided to develop a rescue excavation on the Lowé river site before the building of the houses. In addition, it was decided to hold a field school for high school children following on the high interest shown by children during the "Archaeology in Gabon" exhibition (see below).

Two weekends were used for the rescue work cum field school. Twenty-six children and 4 history teachers participated. Four 4 m² trenches were opened on the west slope of the hill. Preliminary study of the stratigraphy and of the material excavated shows two Iron Age layers to be close together in the top 50 cm of the squares. The lower layer corresponds to an Angondjé Tradition village. The upper layer is a Group IV village (Clist 1995). Starting from the Angondjé Tradition level, refuse pits were dug deep into the clay. The fill in one of the pits shows the villagers of the Angondjé Tradition went to the nearby mangroves to collect shellfish (*Ostrea tulipa* and *Tympanotonus fuscatus radula*). Preliminary analysis of the Angondjé Tradition artifacts show them to be very similar to those found at other sites: distinctive pottery, clay beads, iron objects, and iron slag which shows that smelting was done locally.

The Iguela lagoon survey

In March and April of 1994 a three week survey north and south of the Iguela lagoon (Ogooué-Maritime Province) was made for the American Amerada Hess oil company. The Iguela lagoon lies half way between Port-Gentil and Mayumba on the coast. The survey was done to let know the oil company which logistical route was the cheapest and the most environmentally friendly to get their heavy drilling equipment on site for work in the southern part of the lagoon and in the eastern part of the Iguela natural reserve. Archaeology was thus included in the environmental study I directed for the Gabon Vert company, subcontracted by Amerada Hess.

The Iguela lagoon lies in an area of Gabon never before surveyed. Like the Remboué survey

carried out for the British Gas oil company in 1992 (Clist 1993), it was terra incognita from an archaeological standpoint. The survey identified 24 sites north of the lagoon, between the Fernan Vaz and Iguela lagoons, and 7 sites south of the Iguela lagoon. Twenty sites belong to the Stone Age, and eleven are multi-component sites. Of these, four were test-excavated (sites 3, 19, 21, 22) and two were radiocarbon dated. The latter show the presence of LSA hunter-collectors around the Iguela lagoon from at least 6,000 years ago (site 21: Beta-74285, 6300 ± 60 b.p.; site 22: Beta-74286, 3680 ± 60 b.p.). On top of the LSA level, site 22 has an historical layer buried between the surface and a depth of 30 cm. It is a very interesting layer including Gabonese pot sherds, European pottery, glass pieces, white clay tobacco pipes and above all bones from fish and mammals. It is the first time such a site with faunal remains has been discovered in Gabon. The only other such site in Gabon was studied on a large scale in 1991 at Oveng (Estuaire Province, near to Libreville) (Van Neer and Clist 1991). Site 19 shows a flint knapping layer at a depth of 50 cm in the sands of a coastal dune directly overlooking the Enamino rocks which consist of sub-horizontal flint and chert levels from where raw material was quarried by the Stone Age people.

The survey showed the importance of human occupation on the banks of the lagoon. This is very understandable as it lies at the boundary of different ecotones: primary forest, or forests, savannas, mangroves, lagoon and ocean. This is a very much more diversified and rich environment than the savannas in the central part of Gabon between Ndjolé and Booué. Preliminary work around the Fernan Vaz lagoon to the north also suggested this, but we need further fieldwork to verify it. It is possible to reject previous assumptions and to suggest instead that it was around lagoons in Gabon that the richest culture groups with the largest carrying capacity developed. Discussion is ongoing with World Bank representatives in Gabon to enable the start of large-scale excavation on the sites discovered *in situ* near to the Iguela lagoon.

The "Archaeology of Gabon" project

Early in 1994 it was suggested to the French Mission de Coopération et d'Action Culturelle in

Libreville that we update an archaeological exhibition I had originally organized for the König Museum in Bonn (Germany) in 1992. This was to be shown in Libreville in order to educate Gabonese about their ancient past. The exhibition project was rapidly approved and French funds were made available. A high school project was quickly added. Work started as a joint venture between CICIBA, the French Cultural Centre, the French Mission de Coopération, and the National Institute for Education of Gabon (branch of the Gabonese Education Ministry).

The "Archaeology of Gabon" high school project today consists of 15 posters with text and colour pictures. Printing of 250 sets of the posters was carried out in France. One hundred of these were given to the Ministry for Education for distribution to the 86 high schools of Gabon. A teacher's booklet was also produced and printed in Libreville, explaining for history teachers throughout Gabon how to use the posters in their 6th and 2nd grade classrooms (Clist and Fehr 1994). The exhibition itself, consisting of the posters and archaeological artifacts, was shown to the public between May and October 1994 at the French cultural centre of Libreville. Statistics have been kept concerning attendance. It was the first time ever that an archaeology exhibition attracted so many Africans and amongst them a good number of youngsters. About 90% of the public was Gabonese. In one month, nearly 5,000 people visited the exhibition. One has to consider the size of Libreville (418,616 inhabitants) to understand the success of the project. Anyone interested in getting one copy of either the booklet or the posters can contact me.

The "Gabon: 100,000 ans d'Histoire" book

In 1993 work was started on an archaeology book titled "Gabon: 100,000 years of History". It is a new volume in the "Découvertes du Gabon" series edited by the French Cultural Centre of Libreville, and has a length of 380 pages. The archaeology book is the first book of its kind giving a full synthesis of our knowledge of the Stone Age, the Neolithic, and the Iron Age of this country. A chapter is devoted to the history of the research undertaken since the late 1880s. Appendices will let students have the full bibliography on the archaeological papers and books

published on the archaeology of Gabon, the exhaustive list of radiocarbon dates (as of today, 195 dates), the full text of the new (1994) Gabonese law on the protection of the Cultural Heritage, and the eighth volume of the Société Préhistorique et Protohistorique du Gabon which, though ready for print back in 1968, was never published and was kept at Mr. Bernard Farine's home in France until to 1988 when I unearthed it.

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