

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS ALONG THE LOANGO COAST, CONGO

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INTRODUCTION

The massive distribution of Bantu languages south of the Cameroons remains as a testament to one of the major developments in Africa's past : the settlement of a subcontinent by farmers. Theories to account for the expansion of Bantu-speaking peoples southward through the tropical forests of Central Africa, however, have been based almost exclusively on historical linguistics (Vansina 1984); relatively few archaeological sites have been discovered or excavated in Equatorial Africa between the Atlantic coast and the Great Lakes of East Africa (Van Noten 1982; de Maret 1986; Clist 1987a and b; Eggert 1984). South of the forest, Phillipson (1977, 1985) has proposed a division of the Early Iron Age into distinct eastern and western facies, each with its own ontogeny and history. Archaeological work over the past fifteen years has made possible a reasonably coherent account of the expansion of the eastern facies of the Early Iron Age. Essentially nothing is known of the western facies of this expansion and most of what has been written to date is informed conjecture (Phillipson 1977; Huffman 1980; Denbow and Wilmsen 1986). Archaeological investigations in the western portions of Central Africa thus have the potential to become pivotal to our understanding of the economic and social development of a major part of precolonial central and southern Africa. In November 1987 preliminary archaeological excavations were carried out at two sites (Tchissanga and Madingo-Kayes) recently located along the Congo coast approximately 45 km north of Pointe Noire (Fig.1). These excavations form the first phase of a joint archaeological project involving faculty and students from the University of Marien Ngouabi in the Congo and the University of Texas-Austin in the United States. This report describes the results of these preliminary investigations; more extensive work is planned during the summer of 1988.

Test excavations at Tchissanga and Madingo-Kayes

Tchissanga. The Tchissanga site is situated at the mouth of the Kouilou River on a high terrace overlooking Ntombo marsh to the north and the Atlantic ocean to the west. Our preliminary excavations indicate the site covers an area of at least 20,000 square metres, with two and possibly three ceramic components being represented. Two 1x1 metre units excavated along the western side of the site (Tchissanga-west) uncovered a concentration of coarsely tempered, channel decorated pottery associated with both quartzite and chert lithic debris (including a backed segment) at a depth of 28 to 37 cm below the present surface. Charcoal recovered from this level is dated to 2880 +/- 90 BP (Tx-5956), confirming two other 1st millennium B.C. dates obtained by Conoco, Inc. from charcoal and ceramics collected in a bulldozer trench nearby (2270 +/- 400 BP and 2525 +/- 800 BP [UGa-lab numbers unavailable]). Pieces of mica-schist, including one grindstone fragment, attest to the existence of ex-

1 UGa
5688

AA UGa
5720

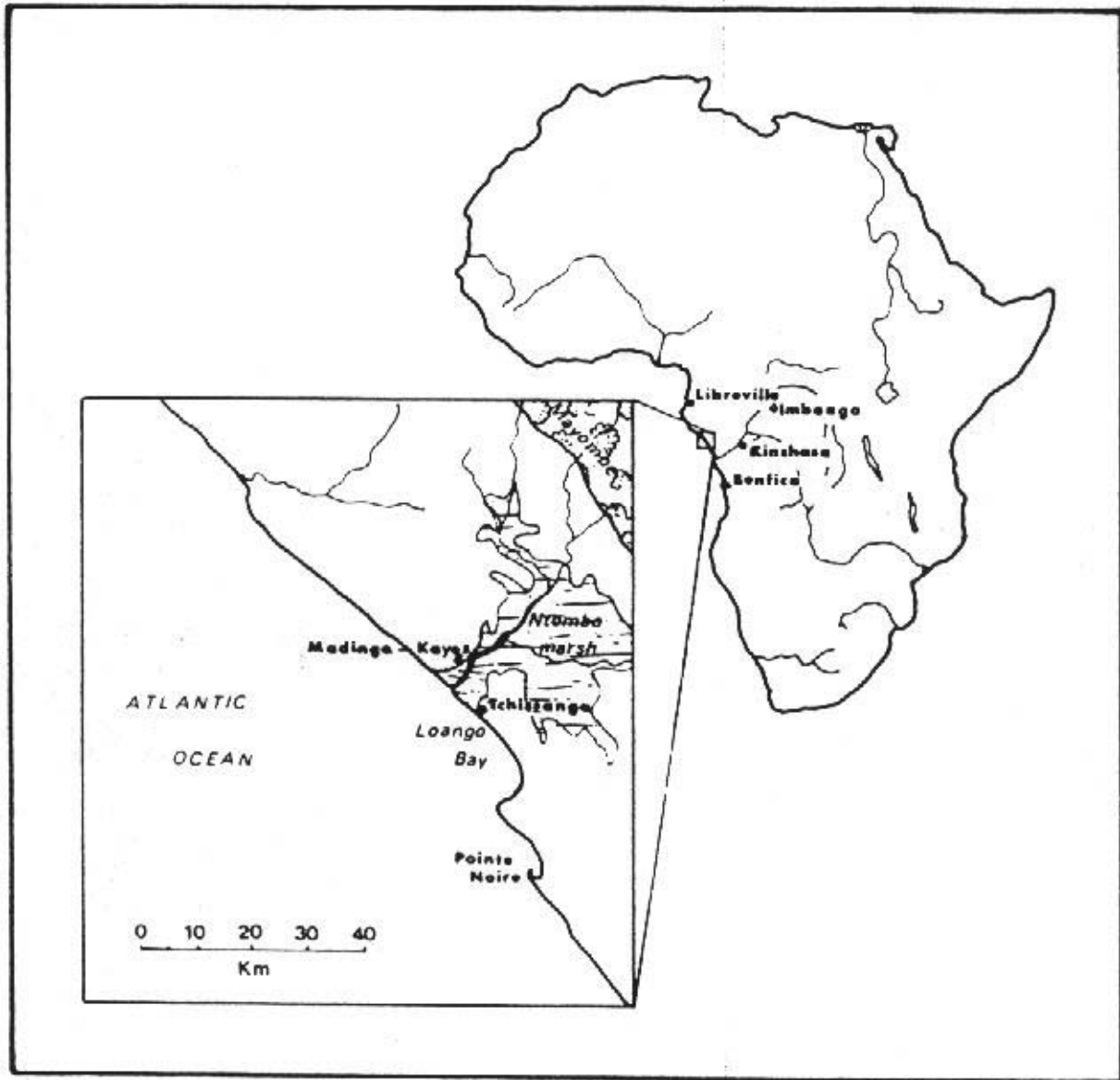


Fig.1: Location map of excavated sites north of Pointe-Noire.

change networks between the coast and the source of this material in the Mayombe Mountains 60 kilometres inland.

The paste of the ceramics from Tchissanga-west contains very coarse inclusions of quartzite and haematite, the later occurring in a natural, geological horizon at the base of the hill. The sherds are generally a uniform grey colour throughout suggesting they were fired at low temperatures. Pots are globular in shape with relatively thick walls (12-17 mm at the shoulder) for their size; necks are either straight or slightly concave and decorated with grooved horizontal bands, pendant loops or cross-hatching. Below the incised neck/shoulder decoration, a few vessels also have vertical panels of rocker stamping which extend toward the base of the pot. Vessel lips are generally flattened and are often decorated along the top with a single line of broad line incision. Pendant loops of parallel incised lines are the most common motif found on bowls.

Excavations on the eastern side of the site (Tchissanga east) uncovered a distinct soil horizon containing ceramics and small quantities of carbonized oil palm nuts between 25 and 40 cm below surface. The ceramics from the eastern excavation are somewhat different from those recovered from Tchissanga west. The fabric and temper are much finer and the decoration motifs, while still exclusively incised, are finer and more varied. Applied bosses are a feature of these ceramics. As these units have yet to be dated, it is uncertain whether they are contemporary with Tchissanga west or represent a later development from it.

A third unit located on the south side of the site produced remains of iron bloom in association with incised pottery similar to that from the eastern excavations. Unfortunately, termite disturbance in this unit precludes definite association of this material with the early ceramics at this time. It is possible that subsequent excavations will find that the iron remains are associated with a third, and still later, occupation of the site.

Madingo-Kayes. The site of Madingo-Kayes is situated on the north terrace of the Kouilou River approximately 15 km north of Tchissanga. This site also covers an area of at least 20,000 square metres. Two 1x1 metre test excavations uncovered ceramics and carbonized oil palm nuts in a very distinct buried soil horizon 35 to 45 cm below the present ground surface. Despite similarities in depth, the ceramics from Madingo-Kayes are completely different from those of Tchissanga, a difference confirmed by radiocarbon dates in the 2nd and 3rd centuries a.d. : 1810 +/- 60 BP [Tx-5958] and 1720 +/- 80 BP [Tx-5957].

While the pottery from Tchissanga was decorated exclusively with broad lines of incision, combstamped herringbone motifs predominate at Madingo-Kayes. Spherical pots with flattened bases -- some with dimple-like indentations -- are characteristic of the Madingo-Kayes ceramics. Necks are generally slightly concave and are most commonly decorated with multiple rows of combstamped or incised zig-zag and herringbone motifs. Alternating bands of combstamped and incised hatching also occur on some necked pots and are common on open bowls. No lithics were recovered in the two small test pits; fragments of iron and copper bloom found on the surface suggest that metal working may have taken place.

Discussion

The ceramics from Tchissanga appear to be related, at least in a general way, to the earliest occurrences of ceramics further inland at sites in Zaire [note of the editors : also in Congo see Lanfranchi and Pinçon, this issue]. In Lower Zaire between Kinshassa and Matadi similar incised ceramics have been found in association with ground stone tools at sites dated to the last two centuries B.C. In at least one site, Sakuzi, these remains were found along with carbonized oil palm nuts, leading to the suggestion that pre-Iron Age food producers (or arboriculturalist) were occupying the southwestern fringes of the tropical forest during the last few centuries B.C. (de Maret 1986). Further east at Imbonga on the Ruki tributary of the Zaire or Congo River, Egger (1984; 1987) uncovered pottery decorated with incised motifs, channeled rims, rocker-stamped bodies and flattened bases dating to the middle of the last millennium B.C.

Along the coast near Libreville, Gabon hill-top sites containing ceramics decorated with rocking combstamps, along with grindstones and lithic debitage, have also produced dates in the middle of the last millennium B.C. (Clist 1987a; 1987b). Likewise at Benfica on the Angolan coast south of Luanda, incised ceramics and lithic debris have been recovered from shell middens dated to the 2nd century a.d. (Everdosa 1980). More extensive excavations are required, however, before one can begin to assess the potential relationship between these coastal sites and those now known in the Congo.

Whether all these sites relate to the first expansion of Bantu-speakers into the region, or instead represent the adoption of new technologies by autochthonic peoples, remains open at this point. While features such as broadline incision, rocker-stamped bodies, flattened or indented bases and other decorative elements lead one to postulate a general cultural relationship between them, regional differences in the expression of these motifs suggest that if they stem from a common source, this is sufficiently distant in time to have allowed regional diversification to take place. Several authors have postulated that the earliest expansion of Bantu speakers south of the Equator occurred along the inland waterways of the Congo River and its tributaries (Vansina 1984; Ndinga-Mbo 1984). The fact that the dates for sites along the Gabonese and Congolese coasts are at least as early, if not earlier, than those from sites further inland, however, suggests one should not rule out the possibility of an early movement southward along the coast, perhaps with a subsequent expansion eastward along the river systems into the interior.

The ceramics from Madingo-Kayes form a complete contrast with those from Tchissanga. Vessels are not only thinner and better fired, but also more elaborately decorated, often combining a variety of techniques including fine incision and combstamping in alternating bands. Until more detailed regional investigations are carried out, we cannot be certain whether the stylistic differences that separate Madingo-Kayes and Tchissanga simply represent normal change through time within the same tradition or, alternatively, the movement of a new population into the coastal plain west of the Mayombe, perhaps bringing with it knowledge of metal working and smelting.

While the sites of Tchissanga and Madingo-Kayes are important in their own right, spanning as they do the period during which we expect ceramics, food production and metal working to have spread south of the Equator, their investigation also forms an important first step towards understanding later developments in this same area. Bwali, the first recorded capital of the Loango Kingdom, lies only a few kilometres south of the sites described here. Ethnohistorical and oral traditional evidence indicate this was a town of considerable size and complexity at the end of the 15th century (Martin 1972; Ndinga-Mbo 1984). Unfortunately, we know virtually nothing about the economic, social and political transformations that preceded the formation of this Kingdom. A regional investigation of the coastal plain west of the Mayombe will allow us to develop a more dynamic historical perspective on the formation of this and other centralized societies in Central Africa.

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