

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE IN CAMEROON AND A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE SITE OF NASSARAO I.

by Nicholas C. David

In 1967, I made a brief archaeological reconnaissance in Cameroon, guided by M. Eldridge Mohamadou of the Federal Linguistic and Cultural Centre¹. Our purpose was to find stratified sites, and of the problems of the development of food production and of the introduction of iron technology, which may have facilitated the expansion of the early Bantu-speaking peoples into Central and Southern Africa from a homeland, postulated on linguistic grounds to lie within this general area.

The Adamawa plateau, the first region visited, from Bamenda in the west via N'gaoundéré to Yarmbang, near the border of the Central African Republic, offers little hope of rapid discoveries. Caves of any size or permanence are not formed in its Pre-Cambrian and igneous rocks, and, where they do exist, as at Galim, 35 km. SSE of Tignère, they are rather rock shelters and between huge granite boulders, similar to others previously described from West Africa. The Galim site, an inaccessible village clinging to the rocky sides of a mountain, shows no evidence of occupation before the 19th century A.D. No caves were found or reported to have any depth of deposit. The Mbum, Baya and other agricultural peoples of the region practice shifting cultivation, and move their villages usually sited on the valley slopes, at varying but short intervals. This pattern of settlement is likely to be as old as agriculture in the region. Villages abandoned only a few decades ago are only

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unrecognizable from bush by the presence of mangoes and other unshaded trees. Two years after its desertion, little is visible of a village beyond low grassy ridges marking collapsed mud walls, terraces and a few potsherds. The rest of the material equipment has either been moved to the new site, has decayed, or has been washed away by the rains. The plateau is subject to rapid erosion, apparently on the increase as the result of over-grazing. Archaeological remains of earlier periods are likely to be found only in secondary position in the thick bodies of alluvium in the valley bottoms, except in special cases where erosion is naturally inhibited, as in small internal drainage basins, like that of Lake Dang, 10 km. north of N'gaoundéré, which would repay detailed survey.

From the Adamawa, the Benue and Faro rivers and their tributaries flow northwards through Cretaceous sandstones. East and west of Garoua, there are Quarternary alluvial deposits 10 km. and more in width. The present Benue flood plain is here about 4 km. wide. Minor roads were already becoming impassable by mid-July, and we were forced to concentrate on the valleys of the Benue and Mayo Kébi, to the east of Garoua. Along 35 km. of river bank, we identified no less than ten mounds, varying in size from Bé, 1 km. long, 500 m wide and about 9 m. in height, to small mounds, 100 m. in maximum dimension. Many others are reported to exist in the Bibémi area further up the Mayo Kébi, and they very probably also occur downstream of Garoua. It is not known how far they extend up the Benue, though there are none near Rey Boubou, 100 km. SE of the Benue—Mayo Kébi confluence. Some mounds are under millet and cotton cultivation, others are still occupied; all are liberally scattered with potsherds. Rather than attempt, under adverse circumstances, to cover a larger area, we decided to test one mound, in order to determine whether it was artificial. The site chosen, named Nassarao I, (13°27' E. Long, 9°21' N. Lat.) after a near-by village, is one of a cluster of five mounds in the Benue flood plain, located 8 km. northeast of Garoua, to the south of the main Garoua—Maroua road. It is shaped like a saddle, measuring about 220 m. E-W, 60 m. N-S, and rises some 5 m. above the level of the plain. A small test pit, dug at the highest point of the mound, revealed 3 m. of horizontally stratified floors and occupation debris, resting upon a base of sterile, compacted, sandy clay, perhaps a fragment of an old *levée*, upon which the first inhabitants established themselves above the level of the floods. Excavation was by arbitrary (20 cm.) units except where there were well defined floors. The levels labelled 1-21 from top to

bottom. Structural features included three pavements of polished (laid flat, not on end as at Daima (Anonymous, 1967) in levels 2, 4 and 7, two fragmentary floors of small chert concretions (level 5) and many floors of beaten earth from levels 8-17. There was a pit and part of a hearth with a raised clay surround. Faunal remains were well preserved and included freshwater mussel and oyster shells, large snails, tortoise, fish vertebrae, and mammal bones as yet unidentified. Iron objects were recovered from several levels down to 17; their absence below this is probably not significant. Beads and other fragments are now being restored. There are no axes, adzes or hoes, but ground stone appears in the form of a fragment of an oval lava quern, lava grindstones, crescentic in shape in the upper levels and narrower below, and sub-spherical, multifaceted rubbers of basalt and quartz, which appear from top to bottom of the site. Flakes of quartz and rare flaked tools, including a pebble pick and a sleep end-scraper on a flake occur in and below level 3. Pottery is abundant down to level 14, less frequent below. Preliminary study suggests no breaks in the sequence. The pottery is tempered with coarse grit, and is a well fired, light buff ware with matte surfaces, varying in thickness from about 3 mm. to 2 cm. Local variations in firing, or smothering at a late stage of the firing, may produce blackening, and some pieces were fired under reducing conditions. Many sherds are slipped or washed with colors ranging from pink to dark red-brown; a considerable number of these are burnished, especially on or near the rim. Forms include the common "storage or cooking pot" with everted rim and rounded base, and bowls with simple or near-curved rims, the forms of the lip showing greater variation in the upper levels. Both classes cover a wide size range. There are also shallow platters, up to an estimated 40 cm. in maximum diameter, and occasional bottles. Applied features include vertical handles, tabs and lugs, and disc bases; surface finds suggest that footed vessels were also made. Large pots may have a raised cordon pinnate. There is a wide variety of decorative motifs, of which cord-marking is the most common. It is usually applied by roulette in bands around the rim, neck or shoulder of the pot, the bands sometimes being delimited by shallow grooves, and a little incision. Impressions include a fine chevron pattern, which appears only above level 10. There are fine punctate designs, and a little incision. Many sherds are decorated along the top of the rim with impressions of punctations or a shallow groove. Decoration is often incrustated with

white pigment. The plain sherds, which are in the large majority, have not yet been studied. Surface material from Bé, the large mound, 30 km. east of Garoua, mentioned above, is virtually identical to this characteristic pottery, for which I know no parallels, and which differs both in its forms and decoration from that of the Sao, in the vicinity of Lake Chad (Lebeuf, 1962). Perhaps there are similarities to assemblages from Daima? Informants did not recognize these wares as being made in the region today.

Upon arrival of the material in the United States, I discovered to my horror that the trunk had been rifled and the charcoal samples collected from levels 14 and 20, the lowest occupation level destroyed. Thermoluminescence dates will be run; but until these become available, the site can only be attributed in general terms to the local Iron Age, though it should be noted that no trade goods or pipes were found, neither are quartz tools or iron beads known to have been manufactured recently.

The apparently continuing tradition of pottery manufacture suggests cultural continuity in the region at an unknown date, but for a period which, by analogy with sedimentation rates at Daima, might be estimated at over 500 years. This impression is supported by the settlement pattern of which the mounds are evidence. The sites are unfortified—since there is little wood, fortifications would of necessity have been of stone or clay—and very few compounds of the size usual today could have been established on the smaller mounds. Such continuity, confirmed by further work, is unexpected in a region characterised historically by population movements and lying at a cross-roads of internal African lines of communication, where two major linguistic groups, Chadic and the Adamawa Eastern branch of Niger-Congo, come into contact. The most recent major intrusion took place in the first decades of the 19th century when the Fulani drove out or conquered the Fali and other inhabitants. A date of 1810 may perhaps be taken as a terminus ante quem for the abandonment of the mound. According to Lebeuf and Masson Detourbet (1950:35) there is evidence from oral tradition that Bé was occupied in the early 18th century by Sao descending from the north, as the site's alternative name "Jiddere Sao" the mound of the Sao, implies. If this is so, it is not apparent from the pottery we collected. In summary, although the absence of fortifications, and, it would seem, of large concentrations of population, cannot by itself be taken to indicate peaceful or stable conditions, the evidence I have presented may be read

to suggest a period of cultural stability, probably antedating historic immigrations into the Benue basin. During this period the region may have been remote enough to have been little affected by the powerful kingdoms to the west, north and east, or was sufficiently strong to resist them.

This question will be among those investigated by research planned for 1968-1970, when further excavations designed to establish the regional chronology will be made at Bé and other sites. We wish to pay particular attention to the recovery of botanical remains by use of the flotation technique developed by Stuart Streuver and his colleagues in the *New World* (*Masca Newsletter*, 1 (1965), no. 2: 6), and to the collection of other environmental data. The excavations will be complemented by studies of material culture, which will aid in the interpretation of the proto- and prehistoric developments in the region, and will help us to bridge the gap between artifacts and basic social units, such as the household and "people", upon which reconstruction of past societies depend.

ANONYMOUS

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