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Recent Archaeological Investigation along the Sonde Miriu River, Kenya

**Isaya Onjala, Mzalendo Kibunja,
Frederick Odede, and Gilbert Oteyo**

Introduction

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to a number of discoveries along the Sondu Miriu River, made during a recent Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) conducted by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), with assistance from the British Institute in Eastern Africa. The AIA formed part of a wider, ongoing programme of Cultural Resource Management and environmental assessment of the areas likely to be affected by the construction of a 60Mw hydro-electric dam, headrace tunnel, power station and other associated works between the Odino Falls and the foot of Nyakach Hills (fig. 1). The construction project is being undertaken by Nippon Koei Consulting Engineers and Konoike on behalf of the Kenya Electricity Generating Company (KenGen). As part of the broader Environmental Impact Assessment, the contract to undertake the work reported here was awarded by the developers KenGen to the NMK in 1999. This forms the first major example of 'developer funded' archaeology to have been undertaken in Kenya.

Environmental setting

The site of the proposed dam and associated works is situated in Lower Nyakach, Nyanza Province along the Sondu Miriu river. The latter rises in the hills around Kericho, from whence it flows west across the Kipsigis–Nandi highlands to the Nyabondo Plateau and adjacent Nyakach Hills, where it has incised a deep, steeply sided course that cuts through the superficial deposits of lateritic ironstone into the underlying weathered granodiorite that forms part of the pre-Cambrian basement sequence. Much of the area, except the alluvial plains bordering Victoria Nyanza, is characterised by steep, hilly terrain rising to between 1220 m and 2270 m above sea level. Rainfall increases with altitude, from around 700–800 mm p.a. around Victoria Nyanza, to c. 1400–1500 mm on the Nyabondo Plateau to the east. There are two marked rainy seasons: the long rains from March to July, and the short rains from October to December. There is also seasonal variation in mean daily temperature, from 14–18° C during July and August, to 30–34° in January at the hottest and driest time of the year. Vegetation also varies with altitude. *Acacia* and *Euphorbia* bush, as well as pockets of grassland and papyrus reed swamp form the principal natural vegetation of the lower, alluvial plains around the margins of Victoria Nyanza, while mixed broad-leafed savanna species, dominated by *Combretum*, occur across the higher areas.

Survey and test-excavation

A brief preliminary survey of the area was undertaken in 1998, during which artefacts were observed on the surface at a number of localities likely to be directly affected by the planned construction work. On the basis of this initial visit, a more systematic programme of survey and test-excavation was devised with the principle objectives of establishing the overall distribution of archaeological materials, their relative age and quality of preservation. In August 1999, two weeks were spent conducting systematic foot-survey of the relevant areas. This led to the discovery of four concentrations of surface material. These were designated Sites 1-4. Surface collections were made at each of these, and a sizable quantity of both ceramic and lithic material of Iron Age, Later Stone Age (LSA) and Middle Stone Age (MSA) date was recovered as a result.

In early October, two weeks were spent conducting test-excavations at Sites 1-3, all of which were located in the area upstream of the proposed dam and are likely to

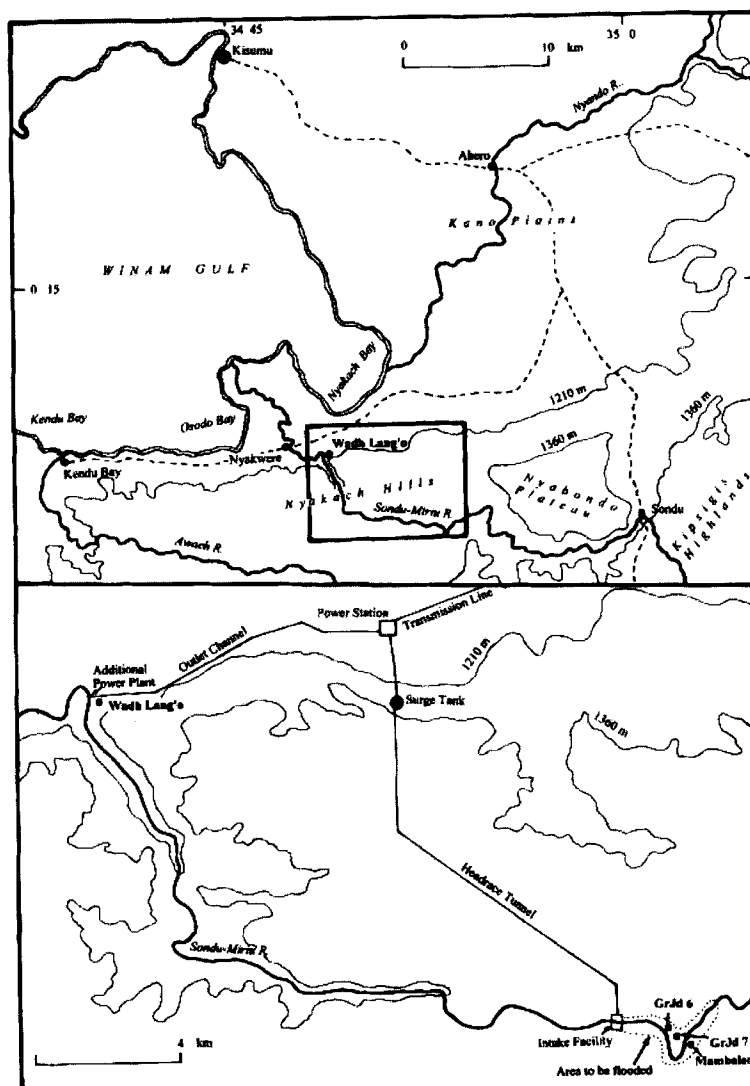


Fig. 1. Location map of threatened area and excavated sites.

become submerged once the dam is in operation. Subsequently, a further two weeks were spent at Site 4 conducting survey and test-excavation. Details of the work conducted at each site and the principle results are summarised below.

Site 1: Magazine II – GrJd6

Located within the area to be inundated and only 50m from the riverbank, this was the first site to be excavated. It is situated on gently sloping land that ends in a low, but near vertical cliff above the river. The site had very few surface materials, which made it difficult to assess its extent, although our estimates suggest that it covers at least 100m². A single 1m² test-pit was excavated by hand in 10cm spits near the north-eastern edge of the scatter, close to the river. Weathered bedrock was reached at around the 20cm mark in all but the southern quadrant, which was excavated to a maximum depth of 60cm below ground level. A total of seven pieces of worked stone and one sherd of undiagnostic pottery was recovered from this test-pit, all of which being derived from the uppermost layer, c. 20cm thick, of brownish sandy clay. Below this was a c. 30cm thick deposit of reddish yellow laterite. In addition, a 10m² area around the test-pit was gridded into 5m squares and surface collected leading to the recovery of a further 18 pieces of worked stone. These comprised mostly flakes of either chert or obsidian, although a few microliths and scrapers were also recovered. In view of the limited size of these assemblages, it is likely that this material has been washed down slope from its primary context higher up, where denser scatters of material are exposed in the sides of various erosion channels running towards the river.

Site 2: Magazine II – GrJd7

As with Site 1, this site falls within the area to be covered by the flood waters above the dam. It is located 600m southeast of GrJd6, on a major bend in the river. Three 1m² test-pits were excavated at this locality, in all cases close to erosion surfaces on which numerous pieces of worked quartzite, rhyolite, chalcedony and obsidian were scattered. In addition, gridded surface collection by 1m squares was conducted over an area of 25m² in the vicinity of each test-pit. In each test-pit, the natural subsoil was reached at around 30cm below ground surface. The stratigraphy was identical to that observed at Site 1. A total of 298 pieces of worked stone were recovered from these excavations. A further 254 lithic artefacts were recovered during surface collection across the site.

Site 3: Mamboleo – GrJd8

Located on gently sloping land south of the river, the site was marked by a dense concentration of surface material close to a deep erosion gully. Surface finds made during the initial survey included quartzite pebble cores as well as a chopper and a biface, suggesting an MSA or even ESA date. Other types included blades and scrapers more characteristic of MSA forms. An area across the main concentration measuring 350m² was surface collected by 5m squares. This led to the recovery of 1889 pieces of worked stone. After completion of the surface collection, a 15m² area was gridded into

1m squares. This was hand-excavated in 10cm spits, in most cases to a depth of 30cm below ground surface, at which point sterile, weathered bedrock was reached. A total of 1297 artefacts, mainly lithics, were recovered from this excavation unit.

Site 4: Wadh Lang'o – GrJd9

This was test-excavated three months after Mamboleo. The site is situated at the foot of the Nyakach Hills at an altitude of c. 1200m. The river here drops through a steep gorge, before making a pronounced bend from whence it meanders across the alluvial and colluvial deposits that fringe Victoria Nyanza, eventually entering the lake close to the peninsula separating Osodo Bay and Nyakach Bay on the south side of the Winam Gulf. The site lies on an area of level flood plain between the river and the hills to the east. It measures approximately 350 by 200 m, with the long axis running north-south more or less parallel with the river. Pottery, worked stone, and faunal remains litter the

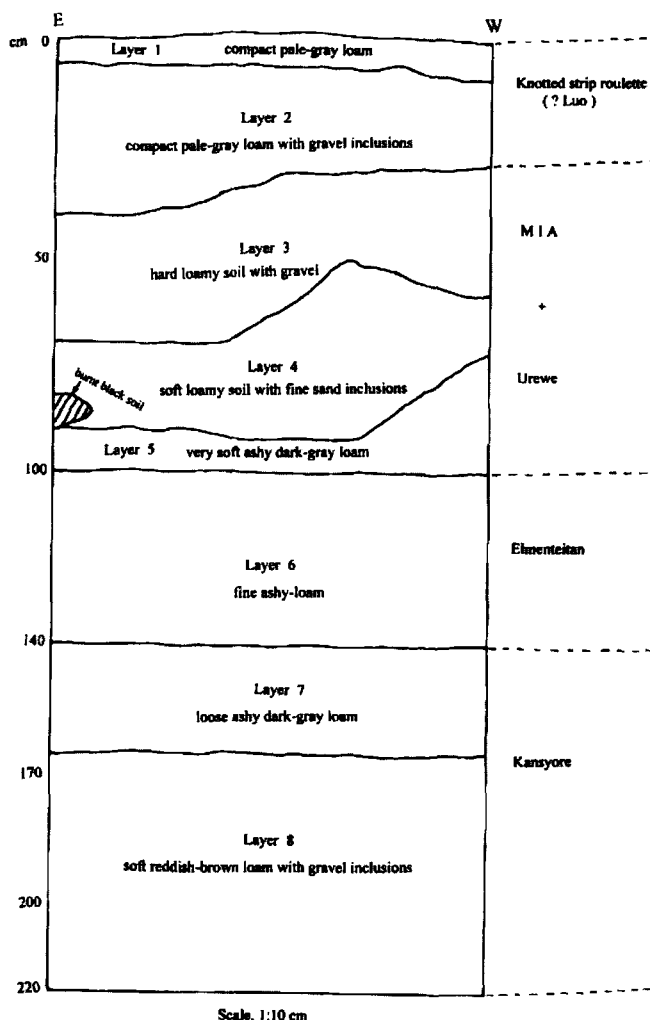


Fig 2. Trench 5, South facing section.

surface, and in many places distinct patches of ashy deposits are also visible. An erosion gully, of recent origin, has cut through some of the deposits, especially at the northern end. There are also several modern cultivation terraces and recently abandoned homesteads, the construction of which appears to have truncated the upper horizons in a number of places.

In the two weeks that were available for the work, eight test-pits (all initially 1 m square) were excavated at various points across the site, so as to test the depth of deposits and quality of preservation. Trenches 1, 2, 3 and 5 yielded a large quantity of well-preserved, stratified material. This included a range of stone tools, including blades, scrapers and microliths, mostly of quartzite or obsidian, as well as examples of Kansyore, Elmenteitan, Urewe, Middle Iron Age and recent Luo pottery, and copious quantities of faunal remains. The latter were principally those of fish, but also included the remains of a range of common wild and domesticated mammals. Trench 5, excavated to 220cm below ground surface and located in a part of the site that had suffered less disturbance, revealed a continuous cultural sequence spanning the LSA through to the historic era (fig. 2). The quantity and diversity of material recovered from this particular test-pit and depth of deposits, also bear testimony to the richness of the site and its research potential.

Discussion

The discovery of several sites along the Sondu Miriu river indicates the potential of river basins, particularly the rivers that flow into Victoria Nyanza, to yield sites important for understanding the prehistory of the lake region. Moreover, there is little doubt that the Sondu Miriu river basin in particular could yield more sites if a wider and more detailed survey were to be conducted. The surveys conducted thus far have been confined to the area immediately under threat as a consequence of the construction of the hydro-electric plant. Survey beyond this area was not possible, as it required separate arrangements. Nevertheless, the Mamboleo site (GrJd8), for example, clearly extended beyond the boundaries of the area investigated, and as discussed above, it seems probable that the surface materials at both GrJd6 and GrJd7 derived originally from further up-slope. Similarly, at Wadh Lang'o (GrJd9), a simple walk over adjacent areas on the opposite bank resulted in the discovery of three additional artefact concentrations. These have been named Kobuya I, II and III. Materials from these areas include palaeontological remains, thereby adding to the significance of the area, as well as additional traces of Middle Iron Age settlement activity.

The materials recovered from the archaeological investigation, either through excavation or surface collection at the sites, have important implications for future research work in the Victoria Nyanza basin. The understanding of MSA occurrences within the lake basin, for instance, will be enhanced following analysis of the materials found at Mamboleo, especially since the closest known MSA site in the area is at Muguruk (McBrearty 1988), some 30 km from Kisumu and about 100 km north, as the crow flies, from Mamboleo. Equally, the discovery of LSA material at three of sites would seem to imply considerable potential for future survey work. It is also interesting to note the presence of obsidian at all of these, which brings to mind the probable links with known obsidian sources, particularly those in the Central Rift Valley.

Clearly, the site of Wadh Lang'o has great potential to yield information on various aspects of the prehistory of the lake region. The ceramics, for example, span four

distinct cultural traditions. The most recent of these was mostly confined to the topsoil and was characterised by various forms decorated with knotted strip roulette motifs, closely similar to those on modern Luo wares. In Trench 5, where the longest stratigraphic sequence was obtained, a significant quantity of pottery decorated on the rim with vertical parallel linear grooves (fig. 3 a) occurred immediately below this 'Luo' horizon. In terms of mode of decoration and range of motifs, this material is similar to that from Gogo Falls which Robertshaw terms 'Middle Iron Age' (MIA) (1991), although the sample from Wadh Lang'o is probably larger. In the lower levels of this cultural horizon, several sherds with both MIA and Urewe attributes were recovered. These could well reflect a transition period hitherto unidentified in the region, although this will need further investigation. Classic Urewe forms, with bevelled and fluted rims, cross-hatching incisions and parallel linear grooves or channels on the body (fig. 3 b-c), occur immediately below this level in Trench 5, as well as towards the top of the sequence

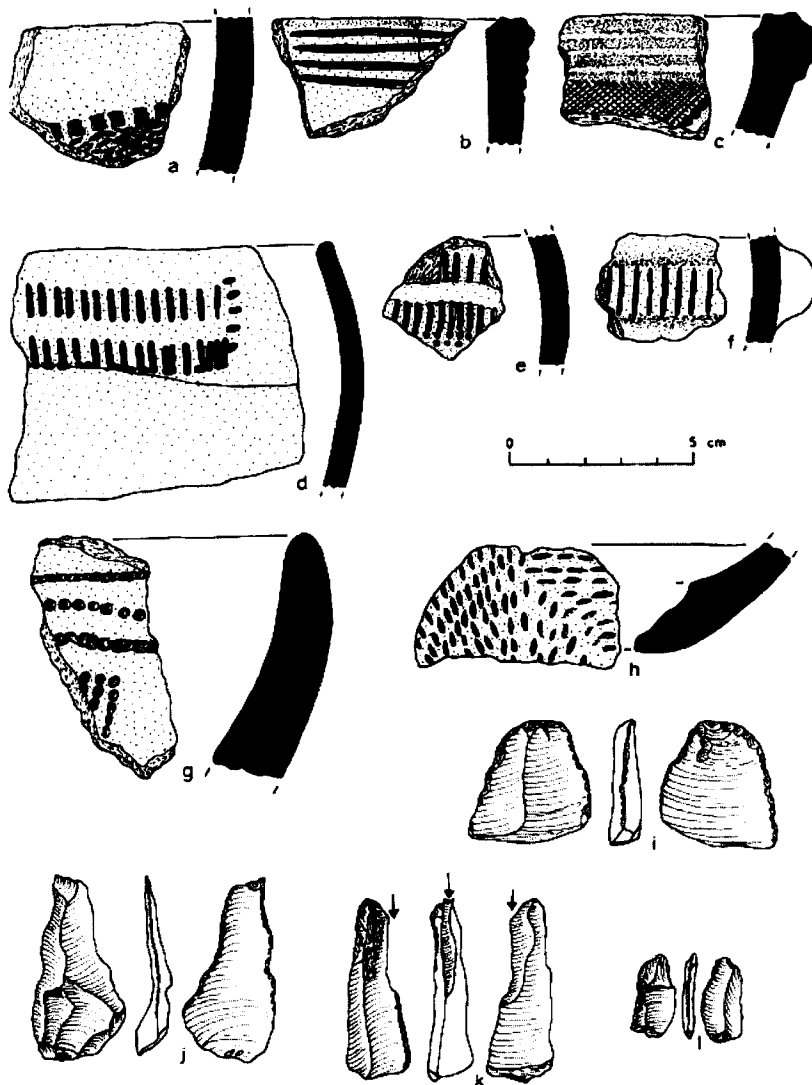


Fig. 3. Examples of pottery and lithics recovered from Wadh Lang'o.

in a number of the other test-pits excavated. In all cases where such associations occur, thin, well-burnished sherds of Elmenteitan pottery (fig. 3 d-f) were recovered from levels immediately below those containing Urewe ware. Finally, the basal levels in Trenches 1-5 all contained a number of highly decorated, although thick and poorly made, sherds of Kanyore (Oltome) pottery (fig. 3 g-h).

The pottery sequence at Wadh Lang'o is thus similar to that recorded at sites around the eastern shores of Victoria Nyanza, particularly Gogo Falls (Collett and Robertshaw 1980, Robertshaw 1991), but also at the Kanam shell middens (Robertshaw *et al.* 1985), and possibly at Ugunja (Mosley and Davison 1992) although no Elmenteitan or MIA has been recorded as yet from this latter site. To judge from the radiocarbon dates obtained from Gogo Falls, the occupation of Wadh Lang'o must have spanned several millennia. However, compared with these other sites, the site at Wadh Lang'o is almost certainly better preserved, and probably contains more substantial evidence associated with the Middle Iron Age than has been encountered thus far in western Kenya. The large number of pieces of worked stone (fig. 3 i-l), mostly on chert or obsidian, and the well preserved assemblages of faunal remains (especially fish) from most levels, further underline the importance of the site for enhancing current understanding of later Holocene subsistence strategies, regional exchange systems and fundamental aspects of local artefact typology and chrono-stratigraphic sequences. More survey outside the current project area is likely also to yield more sites, as already demonstrated by the discovery of the Kobuya sites I, II and III immediately across the river in Rachuonyo District. On all these counts, further extensive excavations at the site before it is destroyed must be considered a priority.

Acknowledgments

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