



## ARTICLES

**CAMEROON**
**Continuing Research at Shum Laka rock shelter, Cameroon (1993-1994 field season)**

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Shum Laka rock shelter is located on the side of a volcano in the North Western Province of Cameroon, in an area considered by many to be the cradle of Bantu languages. On the basis of preliminary research carried out between 1978 and 1982 (de Maret et al. 1987; Asombang 1988), two large scale excavations were conducted for six months in 1991-92 and 1993-94 (Asombang et al. 1992; de Maret et al. 1993), by a joint team of the Universities of Yaoundé I and Brussels, and the Museum of Tervuren. This was made possible thanks to generous grants from the Belgian Lottery through the National Fund for Scientific Research as well as the L.S.B. Leakey Foundation.

In 1991-92 we focused on the excavation of a 50 cm thick layer of grey ash in a large area of 49 m<sup>2</sup> in order to study the spatial distribution of this deposit that accumulated probably during the last two millennia B.C. A large number of basalt, quartz and silica artifacts were recovered, together with fauna and some pottery as well as hearth structures and clusters of lithic material. Preliminary analyses were conducted on 8 m<sup>2</sup> to test several working hypotheses, the results of which will be published in detail elsewhere. Radiocarbon dating of an unidentified animal bone found near a cluster of lithic material, yields an age of 3810 ± 60 B.P. (OxA 4538) for the base of the grey ash. In one area of the grey ash deposits the mixed remains of at least 7 young individuals were found. A C14 date of 3140 ± 80 B.P. (Beta-51834)

was obtained for this assemblage (Asombang et al. 1992; de Maret et al. 1993).

Below the ash layer, in the top of the underlying orange layer, other human skeletons were uncovered. In the case of one individual, only the long bones were buried. These bones were dated to 6870 ± 80 B.P. (OxA 4539), comparable to the 7040 ± 80 B.P. (OxA 1362) date obtained from the skeleton that Raymond Asombang found in 1982 in a similar stratigraphic position (Asombang 1988). The step trench dug in 1992 at the entrance of the rock shelter revealed two more meters of deposit containing artifacts. The new excavations, started in December 1993, focused on the vertical exploration of these underlying sediments down to the bedrock. This implied opening new squares, creating at the same time an opportunity of finding additional adult human skeletons. An area of 34 m<sup>2</sup> was opened and was excavated to the bedrock, reached at 30 cm in the back of the rock shelter, and at 330 cm at the entrance. Another four human skeletons were discovered in two areas which bring the total to 15 individuals. All four skeletons were found in anatomical connection. Two of them probably belong to individuals that died at the age of 20-25 and over 50 years respectively. Their stature is between 1.45 and 1.60 m. The two other burials contained the remains of children. Judging from their stratigraphic position in the top of the orange ash layers that underlie the grey ash deposits, they may date to 7000 B.P., the same period as the previously unearthed skeletons.

To summarize, two depositional units can be distinguished below a surface layer of dust. The upper member, which probably accumulated during the last two millennia B.C., contains grey yellow and white ash. In this unit a macrolithic industry on basalt is found, together with pottery, abundant faunal material and a mixed assemblage of human bones. Below this ash member, an orange horizon occurs, baked in some places, showing some whitish-greyish ash laminations. An age of ±7000 yrs B.P. is suggested. Basalt artifacts become rare and are replaced by an indeterminate quartz industry. A second assemblage of human skeletons in funeral structures appears. The lower member is 180 cm thick at the entrance of the shelter. It contains massive rockfall stone-lines, embedded in sandy-loamy red-brown alteration products of volcanic breccia and welded

tuffs. These lower sediments have been dated to at least 30,000 yrs B.P. (OxA-4944-5). The very preliminary analyses out in the field reveal a sequence of at least three quartz microlithic industries in this 180 cm thick unit. Faunal material becomes extremely scarce and more weathered with depth. In order to reconstruct the landscape evolution throughout the whole Shum Laka sequence, a new column of samples for pollen and phytoliths was taken from these 3 m thick deposits. As a control, a new testpit was dug at the foot of the volcano where a Japanese team (J. Maley, personal communication) successfully identified a column of pollen. Complementary information will come from the identification of charcoal which was found throughout the entire sequence. Already, the analysis of charcoal found at the deepest levels revealed the presence of Proteaceae and of *Syzygium*, (identification by Hugues Doutrelepon of the Prehistory Section of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren (B)) both indicative of a savanna environment.

Shum Laka now offers the opportunity of studying a sequence of at least four occupation phases spanning probably over 30,000 years, with the possibility of correlating them to environmental changes through analyses of sediments, fauna, pollen, phytoliths and charcoal. The new human skeletal material, apparently dating from the same period as some of the previously excavated burials, will be analysed in detail. This should give us an idea of the physical characteristics of the early inhabitants of this key area, along with information about their subsistence strategy. We will also try to do some DNA analysis.

These excavations are among the largest ever undertaken in West Central Africa. In the coming years, detailed analyses of the data gathered should provide us with the first evidence of the transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene as well as about the change from Later Stone Age to food producing communities in West Central Africa.

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