Investigating the transition from the Stone Age to the Iron Age in the Southwestern Chad Basin

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In the last ten years the Joint Archaeological Research Project between the University of Frankfurt, Germany, and the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, has yielded extensive data on the later prehistory of the southwestern and southern Chad Basin. The main aims of research have been the investigation of the settlement and economic history of the earliest inhabitants of this region and the establishment of a chronological framework based on ceramic sequences. Survey works conducted by our team in the last years have discovered or re-discovered several settlement sites of different ages in the environmental zones of the sand and clay plains east of Bama Ridge (see map), some of which have been excavated.

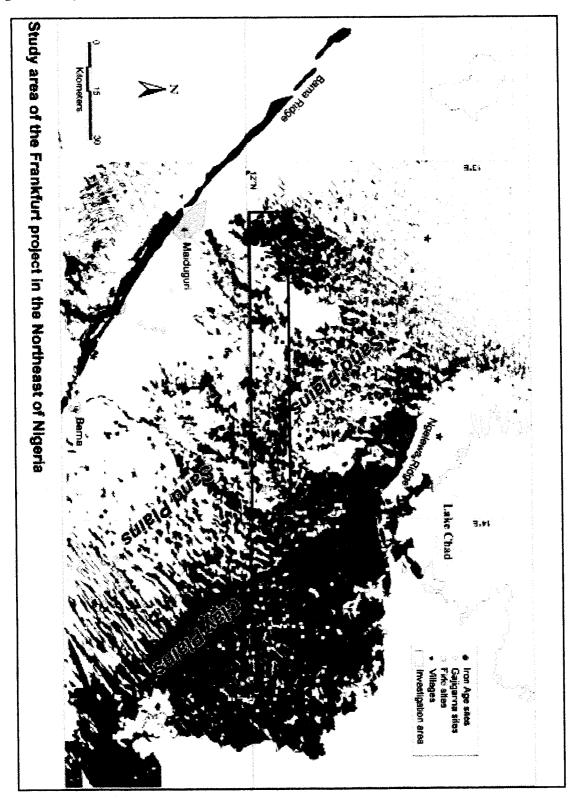
The first results concerning the earliest colonization of the sand plains indicate a final late stone age population of pastoralists and later on agropastoralists, bearing a material culture comparable with that of south-central saharan sites (Breunig and Neumann in press; Breunig et al. 1999). Since similar patterns of settlement, economy and material culture can be found within a restricted spatial and temporal distribution, this entity is regarded as an archaeological complex called "Gajiganna" (Breunig 1999). It lasted from 1800 till 800 cal. Increasing climatic deterioration starting 3300 years ago has been seen as the central cause of the events involving the apparent disappearance of the Gajiganna Complex from the sand plains at the onset of the last millenium B.C. and the almost simultaneous colonization of the clay plains in the east. Although a similar agropastoral component has been described for the earliest occupation of this later area in around 1000 cal BC (Gronenborn 1996; Neumann et al. 1996), comparisons between ceramics of the same age do not seem to indicate a relationship of descent between the clay plains inhabitants and the Gajiganna people (pers. comm. Breunig). However, while the ecological stability of the clay plains has provided a milieu suitable for long-term settlements, periods of extensive aridity in the sand plains seem to have led to their occasionally abandonment. Our current knowledge on the settlement history of the sand plains ceases after the supposed disappearance of the Gajiganna Complex, but later archaeological remains reveal the re-colonization of this area.

The surveys conducted in the sand plains detected several sites with pottery decorated by rouletting, a technique virtually unknown in the Gajiganna ceramics. In some tested sites the material is stratified above the former tradition. It may represent the re-occupation of the sand plains by iron age populations, since the predominant use of roulettes in the neighboring clay plains is notoriously linked to this period. Considering the above mentioned aims of the project and the many questions arising from the situation described, the last phase of the archaeological project in Nigeria will concentrate on the history of the sand plains iron age settlement and economy with particular emphasis on the transition Stone Age-Iron Age. Some of the problems to be solved, such as the date of introduction of roulette decorations and iron objects, are of interregional interest. Others, like the fate of the Gajiganna Culture and the duration of the presumed settlement gap, are specific subjects, which will help to complement our view on the prehistory of the region.

The first field trip is planned for February to April 2000. A second will be carried out during the dry-season of 2000/2001. Excavations will be conducted on selected sites in a west-east stripe ranging from the area around the north group of the Gajiganna sites in the sand plains to the border of the clay plains (Figure 1). Since these neighboring ecozones are thought to have been simultaneously inhabited by peoples of different origins and cultures, we hope to recognize patterns of increasing similarities in the material culture of sites close to the boundaries of both areas. The investigations and results on the subject will be part of a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Frankfurt.

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Figure 1. Study area of the Frankfurt project in the northeast of Nigeria.



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