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Excavations and Surveys in the Tongo Hills, Upper East Region, and Birifor, Upper West Region, Ghana. March-April 2008. A Preliminary Fieldwork Report

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### Introduction

This report describes the preliminary results of a five-week season of excavations and surveys completed in the Upper East and Upper West regions of Ghana in March and April 2008. The research was completed under Ghana Museums and Monuments Board permit number GMMB/0425/Vol.5/226. The fieldwork forms the fourth season of a project started in 2004, 'the Archaeology of Ritual, Shrines, and Sacrifice among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana' (Insoll et al. 2004, 2005, 2007a), which has now been extended to include a reconnaissance survey in the Birifor area of Upper West region for comparative purposes. The aims of the project have been described elsewhere (Insoll et al. ibid; Insoll 2006) and need not be repeated, though it should be noted that the emphasis within the 2008 season was shifted away from assessing the archaeology of Tallensi indigenous religion to reconstructing occupation sequences and settlement patterns in the Tongo Hills. The research was undertaken in partnership with Dr Benjamin Kankpeyeng, Lecturer in Archaeology, University of Ghana, Legon, but who because of teaching commitments could not participate in the full field season this year, and Dr Rachel MacLean

also of the University of Manchester. As in previous years, the staff members of the Upper East Regional Museum were involved in the fieldwork throughout its duration. Besides the formal research clearance and co-operation gained from the official research agencies and their representatives, the research was made possible through the permission granted by the local communities in the Tongo Hills. Similarly, where necessary, negotiation was also completed with the shrines and their custodians, primarily via the agency of sacrifice.

## Survey

The results of sacrifice and consultation with the local communities dictated the areas in which fieldwork could be undertaken. These were auspicious in allowing work to proceed in the Tamboog section, at the northeastern end of the Tongo Hills. This had been subject to reconnaissance survey previously in 2004 (Insoll et al. 2004:25), but was intensively surveyed in the 2008 season. A variety of sites were recorded including the Yelwom shrine (N10°41.059' W000°41.059'), which can only be visited by people from Tamboog, the Kusanaab shrine (N10°40.796' W000°48.076') that is the focus of visits by external clients, and a third smaller shrine, Gaaraugnaab (N10°41.093' W000°48.157'). Surveying the Kusanaab shrine was significant as this is the shrine previously thought to have been linked with an area surveyed in 2006 which contained an abandoned settlement and a couple of standing stones (Insoll, Kankpeyeng, and MacLean 2006: 44-45, in press). In fact the Kusanaab association can now be seen to be with Tamboog and not the Gundaat section where the latter sites were located.

Besides shrines, various other sites were also recorded during the survey in Tamboog. These included areas of abandoned settlement at Gaaraug and Touwang. Two abandoned compounds were surveyed at Gaaraug, one of which had been inhabited by one of the project's Tallensi research assistants, Francis Yin, and hence was recent in date, at least as regards its latter occupation (N10°41.066' W000°48.206'). Some standing remains and two middens were recorded. Interestingly, the shrines which would have been associated with the houses were apparently moved when the compound was abandoned, in contrast to another abandoned compound recorded near Kpatari section where the

shrines had been left in situ possibly because of their liminal status as the relevant lineage was extinguished on the male line (Insoll, in press a).

The compound at Gaaraug through its connection with the living is actualised in history, whereas other abandoned settlement sites recorded in Tamboog are not, as these links have been severed, and an example of the latter is provided by the extensive site at Touwang where a baobab tree that had been used for refuge purposes was previously noted (Insoll et al. 2007a:45). However, the differences in archaeological visibility evident in the dry season in 2008, as opposed to the wet seasons in which fieldwork had been completed in 2004, 2005, and 2006, meant that many other associated features previously unrecorded, were visible in Touwang. These included a large complex of abandoned compounds, a small standing stone, a shrine formed of another standing stone and schist slabs under a rock overhang (N10°40.919' W000°48.255'), as well as a feature formed of numerous pot sherds inserted into a rock cleft. Besides these settlement sites and associated features, further 'refuge' complexes were also recorded on a rock outcrop adjacent to the Yelwom shrine known as Nuongre (N10°41.056' W000°48.367'), where various sherds were found in galleries in the rock, and also overlooking Touwang at Yenzee or Red Cave (N10°40.846' W000°48.225').

The results of the survey completed in Tamboog provided material complementing that already recorded, for example at Tambiha (Insoll et al. 2004, 2005), with a similar picture of settlement abandonment and retrenchment toward the southern and central part of the Tongo Hills evident. Equally, similarities exist in the extensive complexes of (undated) refuge caves found in both areas, as well as in the Gundaat section (Insoll et al. 2007a:45). The abundance of these refuge caves and rock shelters would seem to concur with the historical narratives of disruption and insecurity associated with the slave raiding, warfare, and colonial military actions against the Hills discussed by, for example, Allman and Parker (2005:63-65) for the period from the late nineteenth through to the early twentieth centuries.

Survey was also extended down the southeast-

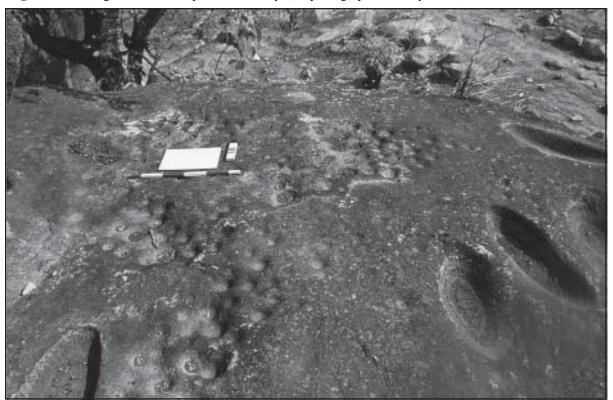


Figure 1. Grinding hollows and cup marks, Zandoya (all photographs Timothy Insoll).

ern flank of the Tongo Hills in the direction of Yinduri. This was done so as to get a better understanding of settlement away from the plateau of the hills and its immediately surrounding rim. Primary attention was paid to the site previously referred to as "Old Yinduri" (Insoll et al. 2005:16), the correct name for which should be Zandoya, meaning "take your throwing stick", i.e. a reference to preparation for war (Elvis Aboluah pers. comm. 27/3/08). This is a large and important abandoned settlement site with an associated oral history which states that the Zandoya people were different in ancestry from those of the contemporary settlement of Yinduri and were the first to settle on the site (Kwabena Zogwanayiri and Solomon Yinzee pers. comm.). "Yenkpirig" or "narrow cave" would also seem to be another name given to Zandoya, although the more specific reference is apparently to a cave on the western side of the settlement (ibid) which has not yet been visited.

The Zandoya site comprises various elements that in total represent a complete abandoned village with associated industrial areas and a cemetery. The features recorded included several stone circles composed of stone slabs and boulders arranged in a circular shape and probably the remains of seating places situated adjacent to or immediately outside house entrances; large concentrations of complete pottery vessels eroding out of the surface (e.g. N10°39.795' W000°49.159'); an active shrine formed of a complete pot covered with stone slabs; a mound of white quartz flakes demarcated with stone boulders (N10°39.839' W000°49.157'); and a further mound of slag at the opposite, southern end of the site (N10°39.772' W000°49.162'); a cemetery described as predating memory (Elvis Aboluah, personal communication); and an extensive surface scatter of quartz (N10°39.790' W000°49.178' to N10°39.797' W000°49.186'). EDM survey indicated that, as with Touwang in Tamboog, these site elements were contextualised within their overall setting by large numbers of grinding hollows, and at Zandoya, cup marks on surrounding rock outcrops (Figure 1).

Reconnaissance survey was also completed in the Birifor (Birifu) area of the Upper West Region. This was undertaken to provide comparative material to that gathered from the Tongo Hills on the possible archaeological manifestations of indigenous religion. Birifor is inhabited by the Lobi and as with the Tallensi and the writings of Meyer Fortes (1945, 1949), was made anthropologically famous by the work of another Cambridge anthropologist, Jack Goody (1962). In the 2008 season only preliminary observations were made of ancestral and personal shrines, but further potential was noted and the research will hopefully be expanded in the future to encompass this region through the agency of Ghanaian graduate student research projects.

### **Excavations**

Excavations, largely of a trial nature, were completed at various sites in Tamboog and Zandoya. The results obtained compliment those from excavations in Tambiha and the Nyoo shrine completed previously (Insoll et al. 2005, 2006; Insoll 2007a, 2007b).

TOU 08 (A). A 4 x 3 m unit was excavated in the abandoned settlement area in Touwang where a concentration of bone was seen eroding from the surface (N10°40.949' W000°48.235'). It would seem that what was recorded was part of a collapsed earthen house, with a seating place just outside the house, and the remains of a putative ancestor shrine (according to the local workmen), represented inside the house by a small complete pot. The architecture was difficult to delimit clearly, though the interior of the house was filled with hard daub deposits, which once broken through gave way to a more friable 'natural' grit filled matrix beneath. The depth of the archaeological deposits varied between 5 cm outside to 45 cm at the base of a test pit in the interior of the house. A single inhumation was found in the entrance to the compound that would seem to be contemporary with the structure though a distinct grave cut was very difficult to discern (Figure 2). As with all the sites discussed here, thermoluminescence dates are in progress in the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art at the University of Oxford, so no indication of age is as yet available.

No grave goods were associated with the burial, but flecks of red ochre were noted behind the skull, under the jaw, and at the top of the thigh, and two flakes of white quartz, almost certainly natural inclusions, were found in the pelvis. The skeleton was crouched with the face to the east. Although a root had grown around and through the skull destroying part of the face, dental indications are that the individual represented is a young adult as no wisdom teeth were present. The wear on the teeth was also not significant, which in a region where a coarse diet

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Figure 2. Crouched burial, TOU 08 (A).



Figure 3. Detail of the 'medicinal pot' feature, TOU 08 (C).



Figure 4. Umbilical cord pots in situ, GAA 08 (B).

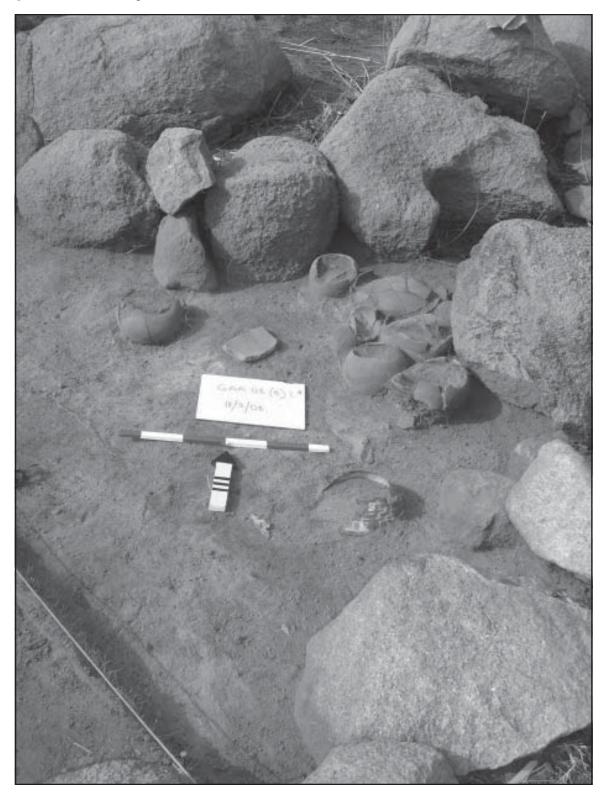


Figure 5. Quartz mound at Zandoya, ZAN 08 (A).



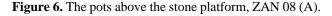
might be expected, would also concur with a suggested younger age. Equally, there was no sign of gum disease present (Dr Peter Burrows pers. comm. 17/6/08). The sex of the individual is not yet known, but the orientation of the face to the east; based upon contemporary Tallensi practices (which might not be meaningful) would suggest a male burial (Roger Naatoam, personal communication, 19/3/08). Following local requests the skeleton was not removed but cleaned and photographed in-situ. A fowl was provided for the appropriate rituals to be completed after the skeleton was re-covered with earth and a stone cairn.

TOU 08 (C). The unit TOU 08 (B), although marked out on the ground, was not actually excavated as it was deemed unnecessary, hence its absence in the site code sequence. The code TOU 08 (C) was assigned to a unit of c. 1.5 m x 50 cm which was excavated so as to expose and clean a feature recorded in a rock cleft. This was composed of a dense concentration of layered potsherds forced in underneath the rock (Figure 3). Another similar, apparently more modern pot feature was recorded un-

derneath a boulder to the south of the Touwang site complex. This was described as a means of disposing of medicine pots, vessels that you did not want people to necessarily see (Kobina Tendaan, personal communication, 19/3/08). Based on analogy with the latter feature it is feasible that the pottery in TOU 08 (C) represents a similar, possibly ritually deposited, hoard of broken medicine pots. A thermoluminescence date from the base of this feature is awaited.

TOU 08 (D). A unit of 2 m x 2 m was opened to investigate a small standing stone that was recorded during survey (N10°40.921' W000°48.247'). This feature was excavated to assess if it was similar to standing stones previously recorded and excavated in the Nyoo shrine (Insoll, Kankpeyeng, and MacLean 2007a), and the Gundaat area (Insoll et al., in press). The centre of the unit was divided by a row of stone boulders, possibly formerly part of an agricultural terrace similar to those still used in the Sakpee section. The archaeological deposits were again shallow and between 16 and 22 cm in depth.

The material arrangement associated with this





standing stone; a large piece of pottery broken into smaller pieces and three grinding stones differed significantly from the artifact arrangements found with the Nyoo monoliths in lacking complete 'ritual' pots and associated metalwork such as iron rings or bracelets (Insoll et al. 2007b). Equally, the density of pottery recorded was much less than that associated with the monolith excavated in Gundaat (Insoll et al., in press). This suggests that an interpretation proposed to account for the presence of this particular monolith by two Tallensi research assistants is plausible. Specifically, that the stone might have functioned as a marker of a place where something of value was buried in time of war or when something needed to be hidden (Kinsley Tendaan and Francis Yin, personal communication, 20/3/08). This interpretation is of interest in its utilitarian emphasis, as opposed to the ritual interpretations applied previously to the Nyoo and Gundaat monoliths (Insoll et al., in press; Insoll 2007a).

**GAA 08 (A).** A 1 m x 1 m test pit was placed within the Gaaraugnaab shrine to obtain an idea of chronology, and as this was a shrine, prior to

beginning excavation a sheep and a fowl were sacrificed in order to allow excavation to proceed (Insoll, in press b). Very little archaeological material (a few sherds of pottery and a small piece of slag) was recovered from this unit. The deposits of light brownish grey silty sand gave way after only 10-15 cm depth to large tree roots and the underlying granite bedrock. Gaaraugnaab was described as a shrine only for Tamboog section (Francis Yin, personal communication, 22/3/08), and it would not appear, based upon the archaeology, to be, or to ever have been, particularly important.

**GAA 08** (B). A unit of 2 m x 2 m was laid out over part of a midden adjacent to the compound which had been abandoned by the family of one of the projects Tallensi research assistants, Francis Yin, as already noted. The midden, which was roughly oval in shape, was bounded by large granite boulders (Figure 4) some of which bore traces of their having been used for the grinding and sharpening of implements in the form of small shallow polished indentations on their surfaces.





The midden, which was half sectioned, was composed of light grey and brownish grey ashy deposits containing recent material such as scraps of clothing, a battery, and a one Pesewa coin dating from 1967. The ashy midden deposits began to yield after c. 11 cm to the natural granite bedrock. A cluster of complete pots and one enamel vessel were also recorded in the eastern corner of the midden (Figure 4). These were described as pots used as containers for the umbilical cord after a birth, pots which are then covered and buried as the umbilical cord is viewed as waste material (Kinsley Tendaan and Francis Yin, personal communication, 18/3/08). Although the compound was described as being abandoned in the 1980s because of a lack of water (Francis Yin, personal communication, 19/3/08) and hence is recent in date, the link between the pots and personal identity and personhood is of interest, and will be further explored as research proceeds.

**RED 08** (A). The final unit excavated in Tamboog section was a test pit in Yenzee or Red cave. This was completed in a very restricted space

at the back of a cave. Some sherds, seemingly of comparatively recent date, were recovered. A recent date for this material is supported by the associated oral tradition that this was a cave used by the Tallensi as a place of refuge in the early nineteenth century, and also by the Kusasi ethno-linguistic group at an unspecified date (Kinsley Tendaan, personal communication, 22/3/08). The deposits removed were again shallow, at 10-15cm depth, before the granite floor of the cave was encountered.

**ZAN 08 (A).** Three units were excavated at the abandoned settlement site of Zandoya. The first unit of 2 m x 2 m was placed on the southern side of the quartz mound at the northern end of the site (N10°39.387' W000°49.155') (Figure 5). On commencing excavation it was apparent that the quartz flakes were not only a surface deposit covering the mound but continued down into the deposits beneath. Quartz flakes were abundant (and hence were 25% sampled) until the fifth layer removed (ZAN 08 [A] 5; c.21-30cm from surface) when they dropped to 20% density of that previously recorded.

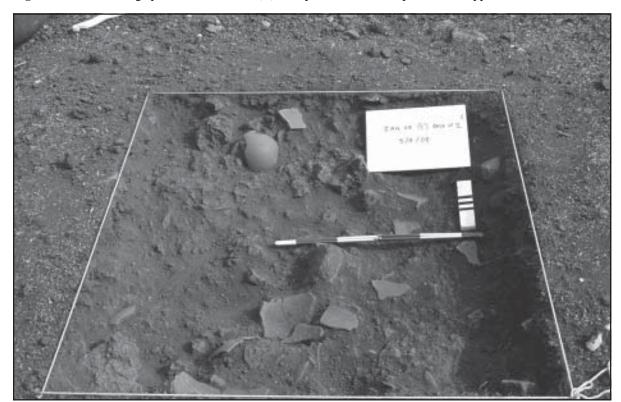


Figure 8. Cluster of large pot sherds, ZAN 08 (C). The putative medicine pot is in the upper left corner.

The deposition of the quartz flakes would appear to have been deliberate but for what purpose is unclear, though it might have been because of the importance of their colour - white. Colour patterning was previously suggested as a factor of potential importance in explaining the arrangement of stones in the Nyoo shrine to reflect the red, white, black, triumvirate (Insoll et al., in press). Red and black were also represented in the mound in levels 2 and 3 by black slag, and red ochre and red potsherds. Hence the triumvirate of red, white, black might again, potentially, be of significance considering its sub-Saharan African relevance (see Turner 1966 and Jacobsen-Widding 1979).

However, possibly of greater importance than an in-site colour patterning at Zandoya is an intrasite colour statement which is perhaps manifest in the white mound at one end, and the black mound (of slag) at the other. This is of course conjecture, but it is pertinent to note that the quartz from ZAN 08 (A) differs from that recorded in another unit excavated, ZAN 08 (B), in that the material from the latter is much more what would be expected of natural quartz,

in being coarser and lacking the dominance of flat flakes found in the mound (Derek Watson, personal communication, 28/4/08).

Besides the quartz, the grey ashy deposits were also filled with pot sherds (which were 50% nonprejudicially sampled because of their quantity), fragments of ochre, slag, an iron bracelet fragment, and several large pot sherds and complete pots that had been crushed and broken in-situ. The latter had been broken on top of a stone platform, part of which was exposed during the excavations. Below the platform (ZAN 08 [A] 5), as noted, the density of pottery, quartz and other materials declined, and natural gravel was encountered. Hence the mound was constructed on natural gravel, topped with a stone or rubble platform, and covered with a densely packed deposit of quartz, slag, potsherds, and other materials. The whole was surrounded or edged with, on the surface, large boulders, with below this a tightly compressed mass of rock and sherds forming almost a dry stone wall (Figure 6).

All the archaeological materials ended, and only the natural gravel was present, at a depth of

between 40-15 cm from the surface of the mound, obviously allowing for its original slope. An immediate overall interpretation to account for the mound is that it was a midden. This can be discounted as although stone edgings can demarcate middens, as seen in Tamboog, the mound was deliberately constructed with its stone platform, edging, and fill, perhaps for ritual purposes.

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ZAN 08 (B). A 2 m x 2 m unit was excavated in an area of Zandoya traversed by a path where a cluster of large pots was eroding from the ground (N10°39.795' W000°49.159'). As with all the units the excavation was completed using arbitrary levels of 5cm or 10cm unless the stratigraphy dictated otherwise. The deposits were comparatively shallow reaching a maximum depth of 40-50 cm from surface level before the natural orange gravel and granite bedrock were encountered. The feature exposed would seem to have been an abandoned domestic kitchen area. This interpretation can be suggested on the basis of the presence of the cluster of large pots, and an associated grinding stone and spherical stone pounder (Figure 7). It is possible that this kitchen area was sheltered within a structure, perhaps a wall. This was suggested by collapsed building material, specifically daub that was found in the fill of the larger central pots in the cluster.

The presence of a floor was also suggested by a compacted surface damaged by root action and also by some of the roots having been burnt in-situ, probably by bush fires. This floor had the grinding stone set within it. The pots recorded included a kpolung pot, a vessel used for straining or steaming in processing dawadawa pods. This was found upside down. Other pots recovered included collar neck jars of various sizes, and a spherical bowl with an out-turned rim. Whether the presence of the collar necked jars indicates the storage of pito or millet beer as was suggested by one of the projects Tallensi research assistants (Kinsley Tendaan, personal communication, 30/3/08) is unclear. Interestingly, the domestic nature of the site was also reinforced by the recovery of two ground quartz points that seem to be lip plugs (Derek Watson pers. comm. 28/4/08). Davies (1970: 157) also refers to quartz lip-plugs from Tongo, north-east of Zandova, and notes that he also found on a hillside north-west of Tongo a grooved sandstone with very narrow grooves that "may have been for polishing lip-plugs" (ibid: 158).

**ZAN 08 (C).** The third test pit of 1 m x 1 m excavated in Zandoya (N10°39.773' W000°49.164') added to the ritual (ZAN 08 [A]) and domestic (ZAN 08 [B]) elements investigated, by adding a technological dimension via the dominant material present, slag. This was because the unit was placed on the slag mound at the southern end of the site. The deposits were initially composed of a solid layer of slag with some pot sherds therein, presumably as all soil deposits had been washed out leaving the compacted slag and sherd crust. Owing to the quantity of slag only selected examples for analytical purposes were kept. A layer containing greater quantities of smaller pot sherds was then recorded within a grey dusty matrix but with large lumps of slag still present. At c.9 cm-15 cm from the surface a cluster of large pot sherds was encountered. These included a small pot of a type now used for storing herbs for ritual purposes (Elvis Aboluah, personal communication, 1/4/08) (Figure 8).

And here it is relevant to note that the pottery from ZAN 08 (C) and from all the units described is allowing the refinement and revision of the ceramics classification and typology begun in 2006 (Ashley 2006; Insoll et al. 2007:52). The mixture of slag and pot sherds continued until a pit was found containing some fragments of bone, charcoal, an iron ring, slag, and pot sherds. The natural granite bed rock was encountered at a depth of 38-44 cm from the surface and the test pit was closed. Based upon the results of the excavation, the term 'slag midden' is not wholly correct. For although very large quantities of slag were present, other materials were found as well, but not quartz, beyond a background scatter. Hence the differentiation of quartz and slag was evident across the site and manifest in the two mounds, possibly strengthening a ritual or colour based interpretation for this division. This will be further considered as research progresses.

# **Conclusions**

The results of this field season were various and have added new dimensions to the research project. These can be summarised thus -

• **Settlement.** The evidence from both Tamboog and Zandoya indicates that settlement patterns have changed with a retraction of settlement on the Tongo Hills seemingly to the south and center,

and a movement of settlement below the Hills from Zandoya to Yinduri.

- Occupation and Architecture. Emphasis had previously been placed upon the archaeology of ritual and indigenous religion through concentrating upon shrines. Occupation evidence in the form of the house at Touwang and the kitchen at Zandoya adds considerably to the occupation and architectural data already recovered from Tambiha (Insoll et al. 2005).
- Burial. No evidence for burial had previously been encountered, so the significance of the burial is self-explanatory.
- Technology. The existence of blacksmiths in the Sakpee section of the Tongo Hills has been commented upon by various observers ranging from Fortes (1936) to Eyifa (2007), however, the emphasis is placed upon blacksmithing and not upon iron smelting probably because the latter is no longer undertaken. As Eyifa (2007:87) notes, "the elders have no idea of smelting in the past and at present apart from blacksmithing which has and continues to be done at Sakpie (sic)". Thus, because of the disappearance of iron smelting both from the Tallensi technological repertoire and from historical memory, the results from Zandoya assume great significance and samples of slag etc. are currently undergoing analysis.
- Ritual. Although an often misused term (Insoll 2004), 'ritual' would appear appropriate to apply to the quartz mound at Zandoya and perhaps to the possible juxtaposition of this feature with the slag mound at the other end of the same site. But even if a 'ritual' interpretation is not relevant, interesting reflections on concepts of materiality are perhaps evident.

In conclusion, the 2008 season of excavations and surveys in the Tongo Hills has added considerably to our understanding of the 'prehistory' of the region in many ways. The next phase of archaeological research will take place in July-August 2009.

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