

Change and continuity in the Holocene lithics use in the Nyanza Province, Kenya: a general overview

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In the last ten years there has been relatively lot of archaeological activity in the Nyanza Province, Kenya, on the north-eastern shore of Victoria Nyanza. Field studies have been carried out in both South and North Nyanza by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) and the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA), and several single and multi-period sites dating to the Holocene have been excavated.

Here I present very briefly the lithic assemblages analysed by the author from four recently studied sites: Wadh Lang'o, Haa, and Usenge 1 and 3 (fig. 1; table 1) (Ashley 2005; Lane et al. 2007; Onjala et al. 1999). Based on these a general summary of the Holocene lithics use sequence in the Nyanza Province is presented. Comprehensive discussions of e.g. the techno-typological details connected to the various cultural contexts will be published later.

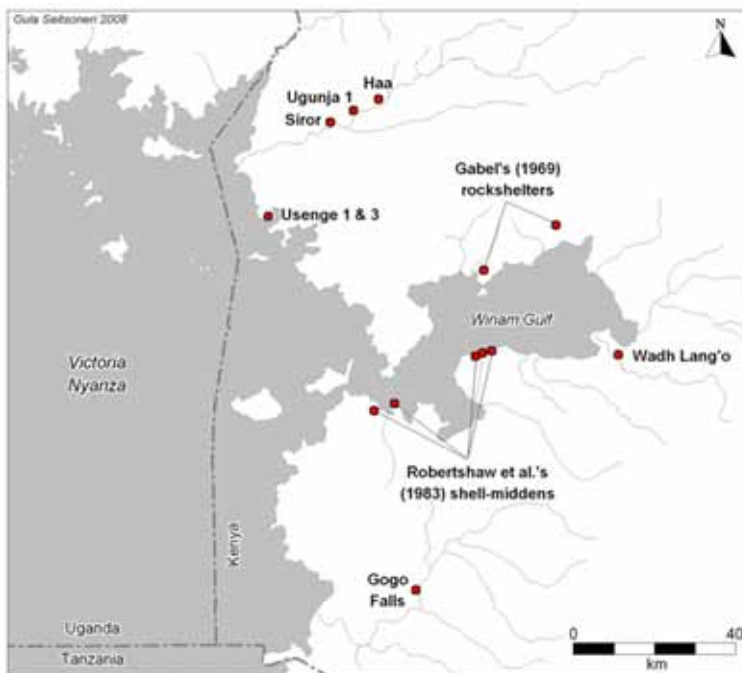


Fig. 1. Locations of the studied sites and some other mentioned localities (map: O. Seitsonen).

Site	Region	Site type	Cultural context
Wadh Lang'o	South Nyanza	Riverine open site	Preceramic LSA?, Kansyore, Elmenteitan, Urewe, Luo
Haa	North Nyanza	Riverine open site	Preceramic LSA?, Kansyore, Urewe
Usenge 1	North Nyanza	Lakeshore shell-midden	Preceramic LSA, (Early?) Kansyore, Luo
Usenge 3	North Nyanza	Lakeshore shell-midden	(Late?) Kansyore, contact-Urewe, Luo

Table 1. Analysed assemblages (based on Ashley 2005; Lane et al. 2006; 2007).

Earliest assemblage from the studied sites, dating to the preceramic LSA, was found at Usenge 1, Unit 4. This dating is currently based on the techno-typological characters of the lithics, since no radiocarbon dates exist from this context. Preceramic collection differs notably from the overlying quartz-dominated Kansyore material: the leading raw material is fine chert, and formalised blade and microlith production dominate the technology (fig. 2a-e). Collection reminds the known Pleistocene-Holocene boundary assemblages in the larger area (cf. van Noten 1971).

Probably also the lowermost deposits at the multiperiod sites of Wadh Lang'o, Haa, and Gogo Falls include preceramic levels, but at most places this still needs to be confirmed with radiometric dating (but see Robertshaw 1991). The six rockshelters studied by Gabel (1969) in North Nyanza might also be connected to either or both the preceramic LSA and the Kansyore. Lithics from Gabel's sites remind throughout the deposits the typical Kansyore stone artefacts – however, the contextual information from these excavations is relatively robust.

At the sites with a clear continuity from the preceramic to Kansyore bearing layers, the lithics use continues in a similar form even after the introduction of ceramics. Based on the few well described sites, such as the Chole Rockshelter in Mwanza, Tanzania (Soper & Golden 1969), the Kansyore ceramics seem to have been adopted by the indigenous preceramic population around 6000 BC (all the dates in calibrated years BC/AD) (e.g. Lane et al. 2006; Robertshaw 1991).

Both the Kansyore shell-middens and riverine open sites – and possibly also rockshelters (Gabel 1969) – are typified by the characteristic quartz-based assemblages (fig. 2f-k). These have often been considered as “generally nondescript” (Robertshaw 1991; Robertshaw et al. 1983), and in fact outwardly unsystematic bipolar knapping (fig. 2j-k) has been an important reduction method (as is common for quartz-dominated lithic technology around the world (see Hood 2008, for Arctic Canada)). Still some analyses suggest a degree of standardisation even in the Kansyore lithic reduction (e.g. Lane et al. 2007; Soper & Golden 1969). A more detailed discussion of the Kansyore lithic technology at the studied sites will be published in the future.

In South Nyanza, at Gogo Falls and Wadh Lang'o, the Kansyore levels are overlain by Pastoral Neolithic Elmenteitan levels, from the first centuries AD onwards. The appearance of Elmenteitan material seems intrusive for the preceding indigenous preceramic–Kansyore sequence. Lithics use in these levels reminds closely the blade-dominated technology familiar from the “Elmenteitan heartlands”, and even the main raw material, greenish obsidian, originates probably from the Mt. Eburru sources (fig. 2l-p) (Lane et al. 2007; Robertshaw 1991). It seems unlikely that the quartz-accustomed Kansyore inhabitants would have abandoned their established quartz-based lithic technology, and adopted somewhat abruptly the Elmenteitan lithic expertise. Thus the entry of the Elmenteitan ceramic and lithic tradition seems to mirror an actual migration, probably from an eastern or south-eastern direction (cf. Robertshaw 1991).

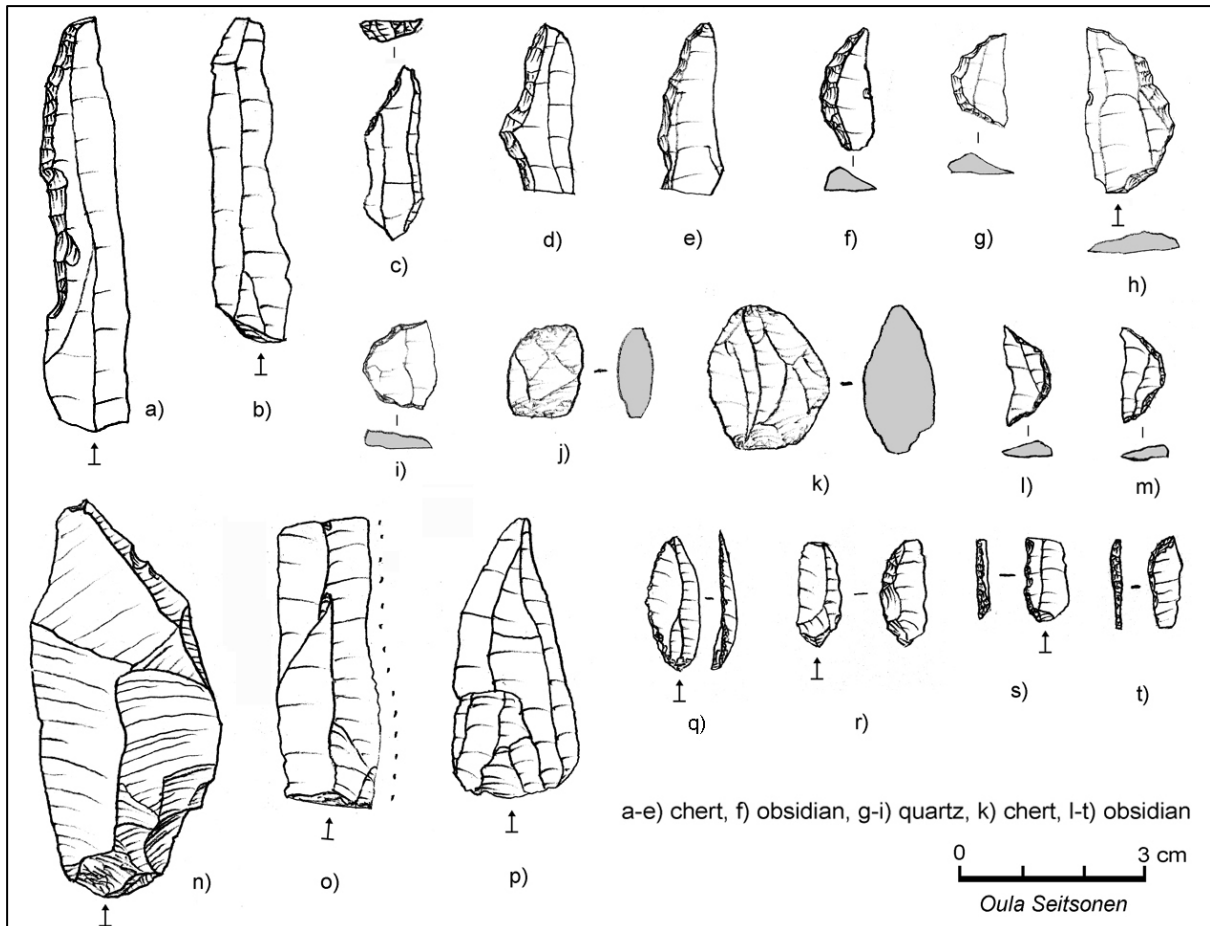


Fig. 2. Lithics from the analysed sites: Preceramic levels, Usenge 1: a-b) blades, c-e) microlithics; Kansuore levels, Haa: f-i) microliths, j-k) bipolar cores; Elmenteitan levels, Wadh Lang'o: l-m) microliths , n-p) large "Elmenteitan blades"; Urewe Levels, Wadh Lang'o: q-t) microliths (drawing: O. Seitsonen).

At the same sites in South Nyanza, Gogo Falls and Wadh Lang'o, the Elmenteitan levels are followed by Urewe bearing putative Iron Age deposits – however, at least at Wadh Lang'o the Elmenteitan and Urewe ceramics coexisted for some time (ca. AD 280–400) (Lane et al. 2007). At both of these sites the lithics use continues from the Elmenteitan levels, albeit in a somewhat “degenerated” form, indicative of the introduction of iron tools into the area (fig. 2q-t).

In North Nyanza the sequence is different. There is no indication of the Elmenteitan presence, and at Usenge 3 a local, creolised version of the Urewe ceramics (so-called contact-Urewe), dating to the mid-first Millennium AD, was located (Ashley 2005; Lane et al. 2007). Of special interest from the lithics viewpoint is that the contact-Urewe levels contain a lithic assemblage which suggests continuity from the preceding Kansuore levels.

On the whole, the lithic evidence proposes for most of the Holocene a gradual culture-historical sequence devoid of abrupt changes, the Elmenteitan spread into the South Nyanza being the major intrusion into this. The long continuity in the lithics use seems especially striking in North Nyanza,

although also there were felt the effects of new influences (and immigrant populations?) in the larger area. Still, despite e.g. the new ceramic trends, the quartz-based lithics use of the indigenous hunter-gatherer-fisherers seems to have evolved within the same basic lines for some six Millennia. In the future more attention should be paid on identifying spatio-temporal trends within the lithic tradition over this lengthy period (cf. Dale et al. 2004). Also, in order to revise the origins of Kanyore ceramics, there is a need to locate and study more preceramic sites, as these are still too few and far apart.

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