

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF A STONE AGE CULTURE FROM A ROCKSHELTER OF MOUNT ELGON.

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1. INTRODUCTION.

It is with some hesitation that an amateur archaeologist enters the field of the pre-historian in East Africa. The expert is naturally rather horrified at the thought of an amateur attempting to explore a pre-historic site because valuable information which might be obtained in the course of excavation may be irretrievably lost by lack of knowledge and failure to take essential notes at the time.

To forestall criticism therefore, a word or two of explanation becomes necessary.

The object of these notes is to have a more permanent record of the excavation and finds which may be of value to students of East African archaeology in connecting up the various industries and cultures which may still lie hidden.

Apart from legend and speculation little is known of the pre-history or archaeology of the Elgon country. The visits of trained field workers are a rare occurrence in the district. I availed myself of the presence of Dr. A. Galloway, of the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, who was in East Africa as scientist and advance member to the del Grande Expedition among Pygmy and Gorilla. This paper is in the nature of a preliminary report of the more exhaustive analysis which he is preparing. It is submitted in the hope that it may stimulate local fieldwork in archaeology which is at present overshadowed by the work of the number of cultural anthropologists in East Africa. Throughout the paper I have drawn extensively on the field notes of Dr. Galloway and from his letters and interim reports discussing the various aspects, stone implements, ceramics, etc.

I am much indebted to Dr. Davies, of the Uganda Geological Survey, for his advice and notes on the geology of the area.

By the above acknowledgements I am almost secure from criticism, but as regards the interpretation of the stratigraphy and certain tentative conclusions, for which I am entirely responsible, these are more open to attack.

2. EXCAVATION OF ORCHARD CAVE, EQUAT FARM, S.W. ELGON.

Fig. 1 is a sketch of the area surrounding the excavation. The site lies about twelve miles S.W. of Kitale on the foothills of Mount Elgon. Briefly the geology of the area is as follows:

The country marks the edge of the Elgon volcanic series, which lies on a base of ancient (Basement Complex) quartzites intruded by granite. Very little lava occurs in the vicinity and certainly none around the cave, which was hollowed out partially at any rate by differential weathering along bands of agglomerate of differing degrees of grain. At some quiescent period during the volcano's history, fine ashy silts were laid down in pools which lay on the badly drained surface of the agglomeration. These layers seem to be particularly suited to cave formation especially when they are up against softer layers of tuff.

The rock shelter lies in a small valley and has been hollowed out at the base of a cliff. The ground falls steeply to a small stream about twenty-five yards from the cave entrance. The stream has been rejuvenated and has cut back on a base level over 20 feet lower than that previous, to a point just below the shelter. Thus the old 25 foot terrace deposits have had a chance of preservation above that spot.

For purposes of reference each area of the shelter was given a capital letter.

Fig. 2 shows (a) the vertical section of the cave from the cliff to the stream, (b) plan of the cave and platform, showing the areas excavated.

Area A.

The first part excavated was the western side of the cave. The agglomerate floor of the cave sloped from the centre to the walls. This fact was overlooked and horizontal layers instead of wedge shaped were excavated. This did not materially affect the finds or the stratification.

The upper layer of A (A1), 2 ft. in thickness, was composed of animal manure, ash from the numerous fires which had been lit in this

corner and aeolian dust. Numerous bones, some charred, were found. Crescent shaped bone ornaments, pottery and stone implements appeared amongst the many flakes. There was no apparent difference in the stratigraphy so that an arbitrary definition of layers was made on cultural finds, especially ceramics. A1 gradually merged into A2. About the 3 ft. level however the soil type of A2 finalised itself into a dark soil with an ash admixture. Pottery, stone implements and flakes of obsidian and quartz were found. Animal bones and teeth were prolific, especially near the walls of the shelter. Human bones—lower end of femur, head of femur, head of humerus, and 5th metatarsal bone of the foot were found. These isolated fragments appear to have been deliberately fractured and show no evidence of gnawing by rodents. In the material used for implements there was an equal proportion of obsidian and quartz.

Area B.

This area is at the mouth of the shelter at the west end of the fallen rock which here masks the entrance. Hillwash has accumulated against the fallen rock and has penetrated into the cave at this spot. The first $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet formed a consistent layer of loam which contained several large boulders. Crude pottery showing a variety of design was found, also a number of chips but few finished implements. Everything was of crude craftsmanship.

This loamy soil changed to a fine rubble in a matrix of red earth. This was rich in a quartz microlithic industry of superior execution showing a greater variety of types than were found in B1. No animal teeth were found but the crown of a human 3rd molar. The depth of the rubble layer of B2 was $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 feet; it lay directly on the rock bottom and was implementiferous throughout.

Area C.

In the anticipation that the area between the shelter and the stream might be a midden, an exploratory trench was run through this area. It was 20 yards long.

No midden was discovered, but the stratification is of interest. Starting from the fallen rock at the cave mouth and proceeding down to the stream the layers were as follows:—

First 6 feet.

(1) 1 ft. 8 in. Black loam containing a few quartz flakes at the base.

(2) 1 ft. 4 in. Coarse rubble. This is unrolled and consists of pieces varying from 1—3 inches in length. The material consists of agglomerate, micro-shist and quartzite in nearly equal proportions.

The layer also contains rounded pebbles some of which are broken and all show signs of use. The rubble contains many quartz chippings and occasional pieces of bone.

The whole of this coarse rubble layer appears to be cave debris.

(3) 1 ft. Fine rubble which lies on the rock. This appears to be the same type as that appearing in B2 but is sterile at this point.

From the 6 to the 16 ft. mark.

The rock bottom falls away and the trench is now 6 ft. deep. The three layers continue. Large boulders rest on the rock, the space between them is ravined by the fine rubble which here contains scattered quartz chips.

From the 16 ft. to the 30 ft. mark.

The black loam deepens and varies from 3 to 4 feet in depth. The coarse rubble is now mixed with a fined rubble and is rich in quartz flakes. An ash layer appears in the black loam but it produced no artefacts. At this point the layers are as follows:—

1 ft. black loam (sterile).

1 ft. ash (sterile).

1 ft. black loam (pottery, quartz, and obsidian chips).

2 ft. mixture of coarse and fine rubble (quartz chips).

1 ft. fine rubble.

From the 30 ft. mark to the stream (30 ft.).

At the 30 ft. mark the rubble layers taper to a point and from here onwards the black soil lies on the rock which is found at a depth of 8 to 9 feet.

3. DESCRIPTION OF CULTURAL OBJECTS.

(1) IMPLEMENTS.

For this description I am taking as my authority Dr. Leakey's book "The Stone Age Cultures of Kenya Colony."

The industry from all parts appears similar, the only difference being in the proportion of obsidian to other materials (quartz, quartzite, and chert). Obsidian is most frequent in the upper layers and becomes more progressively scarce the lower the strata. At the base of the deposit it was altogether absent.

The principal types found are backed blades and scrapers. The blades include gravette points, typical lunates, and trapezoids. In addition to these there are a large number of unconventionalised

FIG. 1.

Rough Sketch of country surrounding Orchard Cave
Approximate scale 2 inches : 1 mile

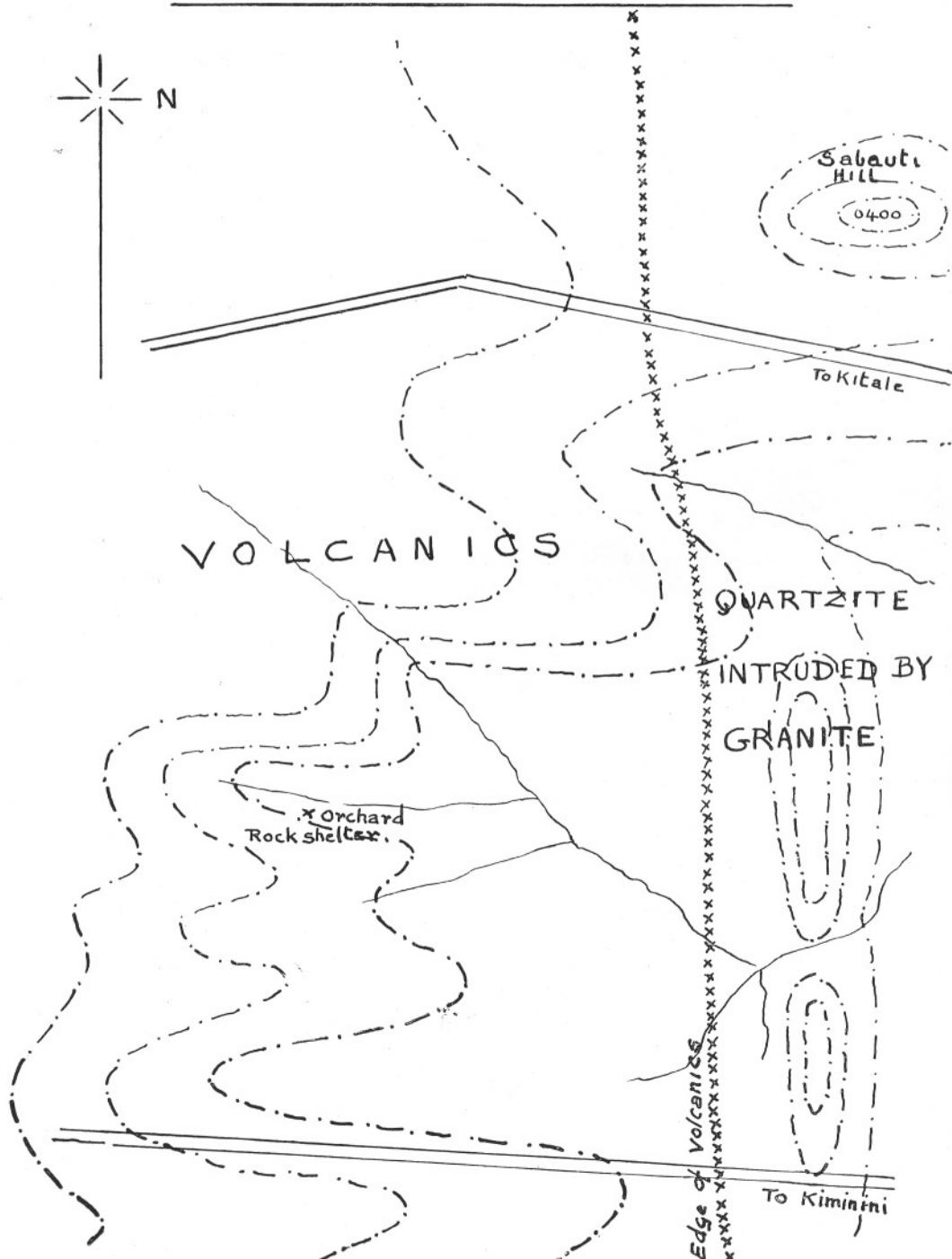


FIG. 2 (a).

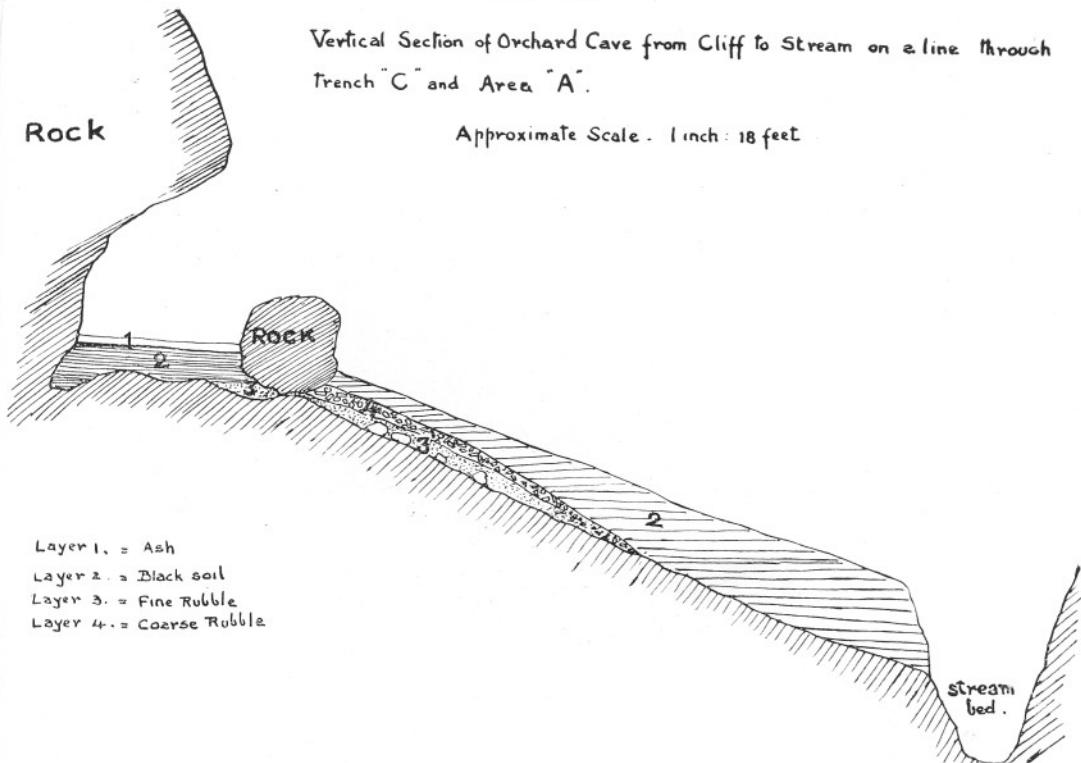
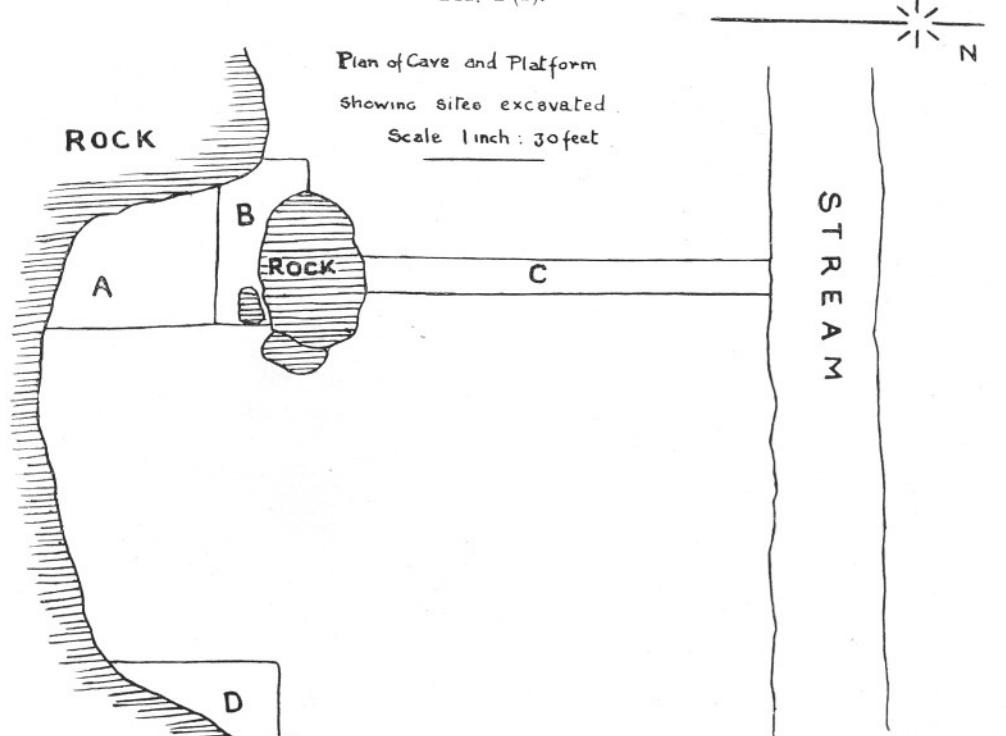


FIG. 2 (b).



points and blades and a couple of small borers or "pseudo Tardenoisian burins." No typical or large blades were found. The only non-microlithic implements found are rough flakes, cores and fabricators.

An outstanding feature of the industry is the consistently small size of the conventionalised implements. The average size of the backed blades is that of the smallest specimens figured by Dr. Leakey and the scrapers are smaller than any illustrated by him. It is an ultra-microlithic culture. Technically some of the blades and scrapers resemble closely those of Gumban B; others approach the Kenya Wilton types. On the character of the implements alone one would be inclined to refer this material to the dwarfed forms of the Kenya Wilton.

Large perforated spheroidal stones were found. Dr. Leakey does not mention this type of artefact in connection with cultures he describes. The stones are identical with those which abound in the late stone age horizon of South Africa and which are conventionally regarded as weights for digging sticks. An implement that may have been used for boring these stones was also found. It is of hard lava, cylindrical in shape, 4 inches in length, and 1 inch in diameter. One end has been brought to a point, which is worn down by use.

A curved knife, $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, made of lava, was found in the same area. Triangular in section the blade is 1 inch in depth and is pointed at one end. The cutting edge has been chipped throughout the length of the blade but with the material used it could never have been very sharp and I cannot think for what purpose it was used.

Round pebbles which generally show signs of use as hammers or as grinding stones were found in large numbers. Sixty of these were taken from the rubble layer in a small area outside the cave. These vary in size and material from small ones of quartz of 1 inch diameter to large balls of lava $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches across. The association of these stones with a late stone age industry is not recorded by Dr. Leakey.

In his book "The Stone Age Culture of Kenya," Dr. Leakey writes as follows: "The earliest deposits in which the Kenya Wilton is known to occur are the silts and muds which belong to the very close of the Makalian wet phase. Branches of this culture probably persisted until much later times, and it seems likely that the Gumban cultures are the result of a development of a Kenya Wilton under outside influence."

(2) ORNAMENTS.

Cowrie shells and a perforated boar's tusk were found in area A1. A few blue import beads appeared in the surface ash of area D.

(3) IRON OBJECTS.

Iron rings were found in A2 and in the trench C at a depth of about 8 ft. near the stream.

A piece of iron shaped like a spearhead but blunt and thick was found at a depth of 2 ft. near area D. It was probably used for digging.

(4) CERAMICS.

A preliminary survey of this material has been given by Mr. G. H. Wells, a co-worker of Dr. Galloway's, in a paper on "South African Native Ceramics" read before the Portuguese Colonial Anthropological Congress, 1934. He states that in Dr. Galloway's collection of ceramics from the excavation "At least three groups of pottery are represented. The oldest is a coarse ware, often heavily decorated with incised and impressed patterns. These are closely similar to those of Leakey's Gumban pottery, but the peculiar internal incisions are not present. With these sherds are associated externally applied lugs quite similar to those seen in Hottentot pottery, and also well-shaped semicircular handles. The form is simple and has a slightly inverted lip."

"A second and later class of Elgon pottery consists of thin shapely wares, black or brown, and often with a rich burnish. The moulded base is a common feature of this group. The ornament incised or impressed, is disposed in narrow zones surrounding the rim, belly, and base of the vessel. Drilled repair holes are sometimes present. The general aspect of this pottery strongly suggests a foreign prototype."

"The most recent class consists of large, globular, vertical-necked jars in a coarse grey ware, often lavishly decorated with impressed patterns. This is closely similar to that of modern East African tribes such as the Masai."

This classification may be correlated with the stratigraphy of the cave. The first group as classified by Wells is largely confined to C2, extending to some extent into C1 and B2. His second group is found almost entirely in A1 and A2, while the third occurs in stratum 1 in all areas, but is not found at depth.

In addition to the comparisons with Gumban and Hottentot types, Wells points out resemblances between the first group of Elgon pottery and Neolithic material from the southern Sahara and the French Sudan. These comparisons unite in suggesting a recent prehistoric date for this material.

4. FAUNA.

The types identified in comparison with Hopwood's notes on the Makalian fauna are as follows :—

- Baboon. In A2 only.
- Warthog. Throughout all the deposits.
- Bushpig. In A2 only.
- Viverrid carnivore not accurately identified. In A2.
- Several small antelopes not identified. In A1, A2, B2, C1.
- Bovine (*Bos* sp.). In all layers.

Numerous teeth found throughout the deposit clearly belong to an ox type, not a buffalo. It cannot be determined if this type were domesticated or not. Hopwood (p. 272-3 in Leakey's Stone Age Cultures of Kenya) identifies a small bovine, the female of which appears to have been hornless, in the Makalian fauna. He points out that no recent African wild cattle with such features are known. The possibility of domestication is not referred to. In the Makalian period (before 2500 B.C. Brooks, p. 270 of Leakey) it is doubtful whether a domesticated form should be expected. If the cave deposits are Nakuran, however, there is more likelihood of domestic cattle being found.

5. INTERPRETATION OF THE DEPOSITS.

I had hoped that a rough date could be given to the deposits of artefacts, etc., from the position in which they lay in the loam and rubble layers of the cave and trench. Dr. Davies, of the Uganda Geological Survey, assures me, however, that nothing conclusive can be proved from the lie of the deposits either inside or outside the cave, unless the aeolian nature of the lowest layer can be substantiated. This is too difficult a problem for me to attempt so that the interpretation depends only on probabilities.

It seems likely that the red rubble deposit was laid down during a dry period and that the black loam which lies above it is the result of hillwash formed during a wet period. If we can accept this assumption, which yet remains to be proved, the problem as to the period in which the cave was occupied is practically solved.

The black loam shows no difference in texture or signs of stratification until it reaches the rubble layer. If it has been laid down during a wet period, then that period has continued up to the present time without intervening dry periods of any extent.

The presence of similar industries in the loam and rubble layers, with only a difference in material and with no intervening sterile layer, leads me to believe that the site was continuously occupied by a people who arrived during a period of dessication and continued to inhabit the cave until well into the last wet phase.

6. DISCUSSION.

The stratigraphy suggests a dry period followed by a wet period which has been continuous up to historic times. The wet period is therefore the Nakuran and the dry period, the post Makalian.

An analysis of the cultural finds shows evidence for such an interpretation. The stone implements are ultra-microlithic in character and must be descended from the Kenya Wilton type, not related to but developing parallel with the Gumban. In date it is post Kenya Wilton and in its later phases may be contemporaneous with Gumban. The origins of this culture may be assigned to the post Makalian, since Leakey places the Kenya Wilton in the closing stages of the Makalian.

The evidence of the iron objects can only be taken as corroborative since there is the probability of their being intrusive. If they are not intrusive and if the bovine teeth are those of domestic cattle then the period of occupation extends down to a time much later than Gumban B, partly if not entirely bridging the gap between Gumban B and historic times in East Africa. The preliminary study of the Ceramics hints at this possibility.

7. CONCLUSIONS.

- (1) A cave on Mount Elgon was excavated with a view to finding out something of the prehistory of the Elgon region.
- (2) The stratigraphy showed a red rubble deposit overlying the volcanic rock superimposed upon which was a layer of black loam. The former must have been laid down during a dry period and the latter during a wet one.
- (3) The stone implements are ultra microlithic and are descended from the Kenya Wilton type. They are therefore post Kenya Wilton in date. They are not related to the Gumban industry but developed parallel with it.
- (4) The ceramics are classified in three groups; A a group allied to the Gumban A pottery and showing Hottentot affinities; B a group of sherds of high craftsmanship suggestive of foreign influence; C sherds similar to modern native types.
- (5) From the stone implements, the earliest date at which the makers could have occupied this cave is the post Makalian dry period. The continuity of culture from lowest to most superficial layers implies that the cave was in occupation down almost to historic times.