Introduction

This is a preliminary report on research at archaeological sites around Aissa Hardé, located in the Extreme-Nord Province of Cameroon, and particularly on the very large site of Aissa Dugje (PMW 642). This site is located approximately 18 km from the town of Mora, in the plains to the east of the Mandara Mountains (Figure 1). Members of the Projet Maya-Wandala first examined Aissa Dugje in the course of a survey in northern Cameroon in 1992 (MacEachern 1993). The site was quite well-known to locals, situated as it is on the edge of the modern village of Aissa Hardé, and we were led to the site in part because oral histories in the region located the village of Aissa Hardé as a center of local resistance to the gradual takeover of the plains north of the massif by the expansionistic Wandala state between the 16th and the 19th centuries A.D. The chief focus of this resistance is said to have been the Maya population of Aissa Hardé. The Maya were a population indigenous to this area, but superseded by the Wandala. The historicity of the Maya is rather difficult to determine, because they are currently identified as a social and cultural unit by the fact of being plains-dwelling, but non-Wandala, non-Muslim and non-slaving-raiding. They are, in a sense, the cultural others that the Wandala succeeded.

Nonetheless, the idea of a center of resistance to an Islamic state only seven kilometers away from the capital of that state at Doulo was sufficiently interesting to warrant examination. We were told when we arrived at Aissa Hardé that the present village had indeed been occupied by the Maya and that relations between that village and the Wandala at Doulo had sometimes been tense in pre-colonial times. But the very large archaeological site of Aissa Dujge (in the Wandala language, literally ‘the garbage mounds of Aissa’) northeast of the village was said not to have been occupied by the Maya but rather by the Sao, that race of giants that is supposed to have preceded all other known peoples in occupation of the southern Lake Chad Basin. Further work would emphasize the importance of that distinction.

Description of the site

Aissa Dujgé is a large habitation site spread over an area of about 18 hectares between two small inselbergs at the edge of Aissa Hardé. Such settlement at the base of inselbergs is a very common feature of recent habitation in this area, and indeed a number of the inselbergs to the north of the massif are virtually encircled by sites dating to the last 2000 years. The inselbergs at Aissa Hardé are however too small to provide viable defensive positions or significant resources, except stone for grindstone production. We should note, however, that even these small hills have entrapped a relict, probably terminal Pleistocene, dune feature between them and to their northeast and the combination of well-drained sandy soils and some organic materials added through run-off from the inselberg may encourage habitation. The Mayo Sava, an important local seasonal river, lies about 250 m to the west of Aissa Dujgé, while wet-season water accumulation and pending occur in the area to the east and southeast of the site, to the extent that bichir have sometimes been caught in the course of particularly wet years.

The most noticeable feature of the site is the approximately 30 circular mounds, between ca. 1 m
Figure 1. Map of main sites excavated by Projet Maya-Wandala field crews 1992-1996. Aissa Dugjé is in the NE part of the survey area.
and 8 m in height, that dominate its center (Figure 2). The site is now a part of Aissa Hardé’s field system, and the mounds are planted in sorghum, cotton and peanuts during a growing season that begins in June. This complicates our access to the mounds considerably. There is no visible evidence of architecture in either stone or mud-brick on the site, in contrast to a number of other sites that we have examined in this region, and it especially lacks the peripheral wall systems noted at other mountain-edge settlements, including Manawatchi-Gréa, Doulo and Garrvi Guza Pulke (MacEachern 1993, 1994). As on these other sites, surface artifact densities are very high, especially on the shoulders and slopes of the mounds, where such densities can reach between 25 and 50 artifacts/m². This material is almost entirely comprised of broken potsherds, with much smaller percentages (between 1% and 5%) of other artifacts, including fragments of granite grindstones, iron slag and very fragmentary faunal material.

Although the mounds are the most obvious feature of the site, we have undertaken excavation at a distance of up to ca. 150 m from the central mound area and in areas that appeared to be peripheral, with low surface artifact densities (1 - 10/m²), digging has revealed between 1.5 and 2 m of cultural deposits. Excavations between the mounds have produced more variable results, with depths of cultural deposits of between 0.5 m and 2 m. The entire central area of the site lies on top of the terminal Pleistocene relict dune already mentioned, with an maximum elevation of 3 - 4 m above the level of the plains surrounding the inselberg, and the appearance of bright red sand from that dune at the bottom of our excavations usually signaled that sterile levels had been reached, although pits, including burial pits, had in the past been dug into the upper levels of the dune in a number of cases. The depositional context of inter-mound materials is complex. Material is being eroded from the mounds themselves and deposited in the lower areas between them, while these areas between the mounds also serve as water-channels during the often violent rains that occur between June and September. This water flow moves materials away from the elevated central area of the site toward the peripheries. There has also been significant flows

Figure 2. The central area of the Aissa Dugjé sites, with Trenches 1 (right) and 2 (left) open. The light-coloured areas are ash scatters on mound tops.
of colluvium from the small inselbergs themselves into the central area of the site. More research on these micro-processes is needed if we are to be able to make detailed interpretations and correlations of stratigraphy and cultural association on different parts of the site.

Excavations to date

During approximately five and a half months of excavation between May and August in 1995 and 1996, we opened 14 units at Aissa Dugjé. These ranged in size from a 18m x 2m unit (Trench 1) bisecting a medium-sized mound from top to base in the central area of the site, to several 4 x 2 m units dug in other mounds in both central and peripheral areas, to a number of 2 m² and 1 m² excavations dug off-mound in both central and peripheral areas and on a flat area on the larger inselberg that overlooks Aissa Dugjé. Units depths varied from approximately 3.0 m-3.8 m on mound excavations to 40 cm. on a unit dug on the inselberg. We excavated this variety of units in order to sample different parts of a large, complex and possibly culturally diverse habitation site. This decision was confirmed in practice, as we encountered a number of different depositional regimes and probably have some evidence of internal differentiation of activities on the site. We also encountered a relatively large number of human burials in different contexts and in different parts of the site, and discovery of each burial led to negotiations with land-owners and village leaders from Aissa Hardé; in a number of cases (but not all), this led to cessation of work on particular excavations.

Some common features of these excavations can be emphasized. The matrix in the upper levels (approximately 1.2 - 2 m below surface) of the on-mound excavations is in most cases a rather unconsolidated, brown to gray-brown silty sand, with a variable but usually high ash content. This matrix is in many areas fairly undifferentiated; there is little evidence of differences in soil color or texture, and relatively few cultural features can be detected in these levels except for burials. We have also detected some traces of occupation floors and of probable mud walling, but the nature of the matrix is such that these features are hard to interpret. Artifacts recovered from these levels include very large numbers of small- to medium-sized potsherds, as well as some full pots, butchered animal bone, small amounts of iron slag, grindstone fragments and occasional small finds, including broken fragments of clay figurines of animals and humans, and beads, primarily of clay and ostrich egg-shell.

These relatively undifferentiated upper levels are underlain by stratigraphically more complex deposits of silty sand, with a lower ash content and far more internal differentiation. There is more variability in soil color and texture through these lower levels, which are between 0.5 m and 1.5 m thick, and there is more evidence of cultural activities, including pits and floor remains, as well. The artifacts recovered are similar to those in over-lying levels, although sherd densities tend to increase and there is often an accompanying increase in the amount of broken stone and grindstone fragments found. We have recovered ceramics characteristic of Neolithic occupations from the lowest of these levels in two units in the central area of the site. At the bottom of these mound units, the matrix changes to an orange-red sand, and artifact densities decline precipitously with contact with the sterile late Pleistocene levels below. As noted, the off-mound excavations are appreciably more diverse, but in general they display less evidence of the relatively undifferentiated, ashy soils found in the upper levels of the mounds, and are more similar to the lower levels.

The materials recovered from these excavations are broadly similar to those recovered from earlier seasons of work by members of the Mandara Archaeological Project and Projet Maya-Wandala, in Cameroon and in Nigeria (Bourges 1996; MacEachern, 1993, 1994, 1996). By far the greatest amount of the material recovered (over 95% of artifacts) are broken potsherds; whole or substantially complete vessels are infrequent, and are located in the upper levels of excavations or associated with human burials. Decoration on the pottery is primarily by various types of roulettes, usually twisted-string roulettes, although we also recovered pottery decorated with burnishing, incision, comb-stamping and red and black slipping. There appears to be relatively little change in the composition of ceramic assemblages through the stratigraphy of the mounds, although rouletting is less frequent and other techniques more so at the bottom of the excavations. As at other sites in the area, there seems to be some continuity of ceramic techniques from Neolithic to Iron Age levels, but the former levels
are unfortunately undated at this time (see below). Excavation on one low mound at the northern edge of the site yielded a substantial amount of slag and ash in a concentrated area, and it is likely that either an iron smelter or a forge was located in proximity to that unit. Smaller amounts of slag are ubiquitous through the mounds.

As noted, the number of burials found on the site was quite high, with burials in almost every unit; parts of the central area seem to have functioned as a cemetery from very early times. For the most part, these are adult burials, often under cairns made of stones and pots, and in a number of cases probable L-shaped burial pits, similar to those made in non-Islamic communities in the Mandara Mountains today, were detected. Infants and young children were often buried in large pots, generally similar to those used for beer and water storage in the area today.

**Equid remains**

We have found significant skeletal remains of five horses/donkeys to date. We have recovered no equivalent amount of horse/donkey skeletal material from previous Projet Maya-Wandala excavations in Cameroon and Nigeria before 1995, nor was any of equid bone recovered from the 1996 excavations at Aissa Dugjé. In addition, no significant amount of material was recovered from earlier Mandara Archaeological Project excavations at Mehe Djiddere (MAP 523, ca. 12 km southeast of Aissa Dugjé) or Sukur (in Nigeria). Horse teeth were recovered during excavations at the site of Mdaga, in Chad (Lebeuf et al. 1980). Such remains are rare from West/Central Africa in general (Blench 1993). Horses played a central role in the maintenance of elite status in the Sudanic zone of West/Central Africa (Law 1980; Seignobos 1987), and analysis of these equid remains (now being undertaken by Reeves) may be expected to yield important data on the contexts of horse use from earlier in this millennium or from the first millennium A.D.

These horse remains are at this point undated (see below). They appear in different depositional contexts. Two individuals, including one juvenile, were recovered from mound excavations in the central mound area, and appear to have been either interred in shallow pits or placed semi-prone on the mound surface and then covered over; the very

![Figure 3. Horse burial in Trench 1, Aissa Dugjé.](image-url)
loose matrix of these units and subsequent plough
disturbance makes detection of shallow pits diffi-
cult. Three other individuals, including one very old
animal, were recovered from two excavations away
from the central mound area. Of these, at least two
including the old individual were buried on their
backs legs flexed, in pits. Three of these individuals
have some canid skeletal material, rare on the site,
associated with them, and the very old animal noted
above is certainly associated with a dog burial.
There is no evidence of butchering of the equid
skeletons, nor is there evidence of weathering or
scavenging. We also recovered substantial samples
of bovid and ovicaprid bones, as well as fish
remains. Faunal analysis of these materials is in
progress.

### Table 1 Radiocarbon dates from Aissa Dugjé (PMW 642) (ranges for calibrated dates are all 2-sigma
(i.e. 95.5% confidence)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trench 1</th>
<th>Trench 2</th>
<th>Trench 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit C, level 5</td>
<td>Unit A, level 9</td>
<td>Unit A, level 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>910 ± 40 B.P.</td>
<td>1150 ± 50 B.P.</td>
<td>1270 ± 50 B.P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A.D. 1020-1210)</td>
<td>(A.D. 770-1000)</td>
<td>(A.D. 660-880)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-116641</td>
<td>Beta-116642</td>
<td>Beta-116647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit A, level 14</td>
<td>Unit A, level 15</td>
<td>Unit A, level 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100 ± 60 B.P.</td>
<td>1120 ± 40 B.P.</td>
<td>1130 ± 50 B.P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A.D. 790-1030)</td>
<td>(A.D. 800-1010)</td>
<td>(A.D. 780-1000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-116638</td>
<td>Beta-116643</td>
<td>Beta-116644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit A, level 20</td>
<td>Unit A, level 19</td>
<td>Unit A, level 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1030 ± 60 B.P.</td>
<td>1130 ± 50 B.P.</td>
<td>1220 ± 50 B.P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A.D. 880-1160)</td>
<td>(A.D. 780-1000)</td>
<td>(A.D. 670-900, 920-940)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-116639</td>
<td>Beta-116644</td>
<td>Beta-116645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit B, level 24</td>
<td>Unit A, level 22</td>
<td>Unit A, level 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1460 ± 90 B.P.</td>
<td>1220 ± 50 B.P.</td>
<td>1570 ± 90 B.P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-116640</td>
<td>Beta-116645</td>
<td>Beta-116646</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Dating of the site, and its implications

We have to this point obtained ten radiocarbon
dates on various levels from three units at Aissa
Dugjé. All are conventional 14C dates run on char-
coal samples by Beta Analytic (Table 1). These
dates indicate that the levels from which they were
taken accumulated during a relatively restricted
period of 600 - 700 years, between the middle of the
first and the early second millennium A.D. Three
important caveats should be borne in mind here. In
the first place, we now have radiocarbon dates for
only a small part of even the area excavated, which
in turn comprises only a small sample of the total
site. Second, the question of the effects of erosion
on the top levels of these mounds, noted by Connah
(1981) in adjacent areas 30 years ago, is difficult to
address; we cannot be sure how much material from
more recent periods has been removed from the
mound tops by wind, water and human intervention. Third, we require AMS dates from the bottom levels of these sites, where charcoal and bone samples are small, so that the timing and relationship between the Neolithic and earliest Iron Age materials can be studied. We have submitted samples from three of the equids for radiocarbon dating, but have not yet received the results.

Some initial observations can be made. First, these mounds at least are not associated with the Maya occupation of Aissa Hardé that is commemorated in local oral histories of their conflict with the Wandala; they had probably already been abandoned for some centuries when the Wandala began their takeover of the neighboring plains in the middle of this millennium. They thus belong to that semi-mythical period at the beginning of local historical constructions when the Sao giants created the dugjé, djiddere and poubelles that dot the plains south of Lake Chad. Second, it appears that accumulation of materials in the ashy upper levels of Units 1 and 2 happened quickly, with approximately two metres of material accumulating in a period of perhaps two centuries. This probably in large part accounts for the rather undifferentiated nature of these deposits, and also the lack of change in the characteristics of the ceramic assemblage in these levels. One on-going debate in the archaeology of this region involves the varying contributions of midden deposits and architectural constructions to the formation of these mounds: briefly, are they primarily garbage dumps, primarily house remains, both or neither? It seems that the upper portions of the deposits on these mounds are to a large degree the result of garbage disposal, with actual habitation on the mounds in mud-brick buildings playing a secondary role. Lower sections of the stratigraphy appear to have accumulated more slowly, and to incorporate more material from architectural episodes. We require different models of waste disposal than are provided by present-day populations in this area, who in general appear to dispose of garbage in a more distributed manner. Third, it should be noted that aggregation of these mounds seems to occur at significant speeds in the early-/mid-first millennium A.D. This is, again, a common feature of mound sites in this region, and may correspond to changes in site formation from as far away as Mali (McIntosh 1995). If there is a real change in accumulation rates at this point, it may be due to changes in construction techniques (the introduction of extensive building in mud-brick seems to occur at about this period, for example) or perhaps to environmental changes toward a slightly wetter climate in West Africa, or to some combination of such factors.

Fourth, we should note that equid skeletal material is associated with levels in Unit 1 that probably date to ca. A.D. 1000; this animal is to be directly dated. There are horse figurine fragments in levels dating to the same period in Trenches 1 and 2. It seems more likely that such models would be produced of horses or ponies than donkeys. If this dating of horses/ponies in this area is confirmed, it indicates that possession of horses around the Mandara Mountains has not in fact been the province of state-level societies in the present millennium, as one of us (MacEachern) has postulated, but that they were by no means uncommon in some plains communities for some hundreds of years before the coming of the Wandala and their slave-raiding compatriots. If this is the case, at least one model of state formation in the area (MacEachern's) will have to be rethought.

Conclusions

Our excavations at Aissa Dugjé have begun to add further nuances to the picture of culture history on the plains around the Mandara Mountains. We may be seeing, in this case, a large site that appears to have been occupied intensively for a relatively restricted period of time, where we find remains of an animal - probably the horse/pony - that has more recently been associated with military contests and elite status through this region. At the same time, Aissa Dugjé is located in an area not particularly well-suited for defense, at least in comparison to a number of sites that we have excavated dating from the same period, and it is not associated with the peripheral walling found on a number of these other sites (although it is in all of these cases difficult to associate walls with particular periods of occupation). It is possible that further work on the site will uncover further evidence for social and economic differentiation at Aissa Dugjé. To this point such evidence has not been found. Work continues, as well, on the analysis of the site in its local context, in an environment which must have been exploited for farming, grazing, fishing and probably hunting,
and from which essential raw materials such as iron ore, wood and charcoal, stone, clay and magical materials would have been extracted. Over time, we need to accumulate a more detailed view of the dynamics of life on and around this site, of the way that its occupation relates to the occupation of neighbouring communities during the same period, and finally of the ways in which modern populations of the region can trace their cultural ancestries back to these earlier inhabitants of the first millennium A.D.

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