Overview

Archaeological research on the DGB-1 site, Far North Province, Cameroon, took place between 15 June and 4 August, 2008. This research was undertaken under Cameroonian Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation Research Permit # 090 (2008), in collaboration with University of Yaoundé I and the Department of Cultural Inheritance, Ministry of Culture, and was funded by National Science Foundation (United States) Research Grant # 0743058. The focus of this research was on the DGB-1 (Kuva-1) site, largest of the so-called DGB sites, complexes of dry-stone terraces and platforms on the slopes of the northwestern extension of the Mandara Mountains (Figure 1). (DGB stands for ‘diy-geä-ba’, or ‘ruins of chiefly residence’ in the local Mafa language.) Previous research on the DGB sites, particularly with excavations on DGB-2 and DGB-8, was undertaken by Dr. Nicholas David (2008).

Selected Research Results

The Central Courtyard Area (Unit 1)

The DGB sites are the earliest-known archaeological remains in one of the most densely settled human landscapes in sub-Saharan Africa, an area now home to dozens of different ethnic groups. Over the last four centuries, groups living in this area were involved in complex political interchanges with Islamic states in the Lake Chad Basin to the north, and this research was undertaken primarily to examine how these sites functioned in their social, political and ritual contexts. The fact that DGB-1 is the largest of these sites (Figure 2), with the most complex internal structuring, and its proximity (100m distance) to the DGB-2 site, suggest that this particular site played a central role in the ideological/political/social functioning of the DGB site complex during its period of use.

Fieldwork during the 2008 season (Figure 3) entailed: (1) clearing, cleaning and excavation in the sunken Central Courtyard Area of the DGB-1 site, which was filled with vegetation and debris from wall collapse (all DGB-1 architectural designations in this report after David 2008); (2) excavations on a number of different areas on the site itself, undertaken to access architectural variability and occupation history; (3) excavations in an area of high artefact density on the southeast periphery of the site, between DGB-1 and the neighbouring DGB-2 site; and (4) test excavation between the main DGB-1 site and the adjoining Northern Outlier.
Figure 1: Northern Mandara archaeological sites.

Figure 2: The DGB-1 site.
4.3m from bedrock to the top of the platform. At some point after the construction of the NC Platform, a platform extension incorporating the west wall of the CCA and its West Passage were built immediately to its south. Later, further building provided the south and east walls of the CCA (the latter including the East Staircase, discovered during 2008 excavation), and ultimately the complex Northeast Passage, gradually turning an open space beside the NC Platform into an enclosed sunken courtyard. One implication is that David’s (2008: 20) Central Platform is not a single architectural unit, just as the CCA is not, but rather the result of multiple building episodes.

Clearance of the CCA revealed a complex occupation surface, including a set of multiple floor levels, at approximately 3m below the level of the surrounding platforms (Figure 4). This surface included flat stones, some possibly placed for seating and/or other purposes, and a set of stone niches along the South Wall. The latter appear to have functioned as hearth enclosures, used at least for the cooking of meat. Analogy with modern Mafa communities around DGB-1 may be misleading, but meat preparation and consumption are an important element in Mafa ceremonial and sacrificial activities. It seems likely that the evidence of meat preparation in the CCA reflects similar ritual activities.

The upper levels of the excavation display significant levels of disturbance and admixture, associated with wall collapse and erosional movement of materials into the CCA. Lower levels of the excavation, below approximately 2m BD, are less disturbed, and at the probable occupation surface, materials appear to be in relatively undisturbed archaeological contexts. Distinctive DGB-type ceramics (David 2008) were found through virtually all levels of excavation in the CCA, although in upper levels they may well have been washed in from the platform surfaces above the courtyard. A variety of other material types were also found, including iron artefacts, two artefacts made of copper alloy, stone and (probably) glass beads, and two very small fragments of what appears to be tin-glazed earthenware. Some of these artefacts are probably foreign to the region around the DGB sites. They are not associated with modern Mafa material culture, nor are they usually encountered on Iron Age archaeological sites in the area. Glass beads and tin-glazed earthenware would almost certainly have originated north of the Sahara, while cuprous alloys might have come from other parts of the Lake Chad Basin.

The northeast and northwest corners of the CCA contained a number of metal objects, which appear to have been deliberately buried under the occupational surface. A cache in the northwest corner consisted of six iron artefacts, four of which were tanged and two socketed; large tanged iron artefacts are quite rarely found in this area. The tanged objects have the general form of spear points (one is small enough to possibly be a large arrowhead), while the socketed pieces have an unusual shovel-shaped head. The function of the latter artefacts is unclear. The precise significance of these deposits is unknown, although a similar group of metal objects was found in a similar context during excavations at DGB-2 (David 2008: 94).

At the end of the field season, the CCA was carefully refilled. Particular care was taken to support and stabilize vulnerable areas of the area (for example, partially collapsed walls, areas with extensive...
tree root intrusion, and the entrances to the West and Northeast Passages) with stone and soil support, and retaining walls and soil covers were put in place in order to avoid the effects of rain action on the unit.

**Unit R (combined Units 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22)**

Unit R is a 15m² excavation that was undertaken on the SW Terrace of the site. This terrace displayed no surface indications of architectural features, but was bordered by a 4m-high DGB wall to the west, one of the most impressive examples of DGB walling on the site. Excavation in an initial exploratory unit uncovered DGB-type walling immediately below the surface. Further walling was encountered in every extension of Unit R, which revealed a complex architectural history on the SW Terrace. The arc of DGB-type walling initially uncovered had a length of approximately 6.5m and a height of approximately 0.5m. At approximately the same time, another wall was constructed 0.75m to the south of the first arc of walling. This second wall not of the DGB type: instead, it was constructed with a single course of vertically placed rocks on a prepared base, an arrangement possibly associated with construction of a platform for grindstones, as now found within Mafa kitchens. This interpretation might be supported by the discovery of a lower and multiple upper grindstones within this vertical-stone wall, although grindstones were also found in other areas of the unit. The first arc of DGB walling uncovered was underlain by another DGB wall at a different orientation, roughly following the line of the modern terrace wall about 1.5m to the west. We were unable to excavate down into the fill associated with this deeper DGB wall, because of fears of destabilizing the SW Terrace as a whole, and so we do not know whether it represents the earliest construction activity on this part of the site. We were also unable to recover datable materials associated with this earlier wall feature.

Again, DGB-type ceramics were found throughout this unit, as was an assemblage of three grindstones in association with the upper half of a large pot. Mafa men working with us noted that the
particular grindstones recovered would today make up the equipment of a Mafa kitchen, although their placement and their association with the half-pot was not as it would have been in a kitchen. Unit R was obviously the site of a sustained and complex process of construction, occupation and reconstruction of domestic and possibly other kinds of cultural features. This extends and complicates previous interpretations of the DGB sites as primarily or exclusively ritual/ceremonial sites. It also raises the possibility that other open terrace areas on DGB-1 and other sites may yield evidence of similarly complex occupational histories.

**Unit 6**

Unit 6 was a 2 x 2m unit on the southeastern periphery of DGB-1, established in an area of relatively high surface ceramic density on an agricultural terrace on the edge of the main site, and was initiated to investigate the relations between peripheral and central zones of the site. No architectural features were discovered in Unit 6, but the unit yielded abundant ceramics, animal bone, charcoal, slag, lithics and other cultural materials down to bedrock, at depths of 70-140cm below datum. This unit displayed significant natural stratigraphy, with a lower brown sandy loam that followed a west-to-east downward slope of the bedrock with a depth of 50-80cm, and an upper dark brown/black loam that appears to be associated with the construction of the terrace at this location. Cultural material, including DGB pottery, was found through both levels, certainly *in situ* in the lower soil layer, but possibly somewhat affected by down-slope movement and/or through terrace construction and agriculture in the upper level. There is thus some evidence that the earliest DGB occupation in this unit was associated with a natural slope and so predated the establishment of a terrace. This is potentially quite significant, given the central importance of terrace agriculture to modern Mandara populations, but of course applies only to this one location.

The variety and amounts of cultural materials recovered from this unit, and especially the variety of ceramics and animal bone, indicate that most of the deposits found in Unit 6 probably originated in domestic trash disposal. Taken with the results from Unit R, data from Unit 6 imply a substantial intensity of domestic occupation along the edges of the DGB-1 site. If the amounts of material recovered from Unit 6 are also found in other terrace areas between DGB-1 and DGB-2 with significant surface ceramic densities, we will have evidence for a very substantial occupation of this area.

**Unit 21**

Like Unit 6, Unit 21 was initiated to appraise cultural activities off the main area of the DGB-1 site – in this case, to the northwest of the site, on an agricultural terrace in the small gully between the West Terrace and the Northern Outlier. Large, randomly oriented rocks were encountered almost immediately after excavations commenced. These rocks were probably fill behind a low wall, three stones of which were found in the southwestern corner of the unit. This almost pure rock fill continued until approximately 55cm BD, with very little cultural material (but including DGB-style ceramics). Below this level, excavators uncovered a brown sandy loam, with large amounts of ceramics (but no bone or charcoal), which continued until bedrock was encountered at approximately 1.1m BD.

The most significant discovery in this lower level involves the decoration on the recovered ceramics, which is different from that usually encountered on Iron Age pottery from this region, including both recent Mafa and earlier DGB ceramics. Pottery from the bottom of Unit 21 was not rouletted; rather, the decoration was dominated by cross-hatching and incision, especially on the upper body near everted rims on small neckless jars. This material appears to derive from an occupation that preceded at least some element of the DGB occupation of the site. Since the DGB sites are the earliest sites known in this area (and indeed in the northern Mandara Mountains more generally), the possibility of an earlier occupation is of considerable interest.

**Radiocarbon Dating**

Ten radiocarbon dates were obtained from different areas of the site (Table 1, Figure 5), with dating undertaken by Beta Analytic. Of these, four dates came from the CCA, three from Unit 6 and three from Unit R. The first date from the CCA (DGB-1/CCA/01) was take at a depth of 1.6 metres BD, levels primarily characterised by post-occupation debris and fill: the relatively recent date is thus not surprising. The other
three CCA (DGB-1/CCA/02-04) dates are on or in close proximity to an occupation surface near the base of the courtyard and correspond to different features (niches, caches) near the walls of the courtyards. All three date to essentially the period AD 1450-1650. We tentatively regard this period as the time of last usage of a courtyard that was probably cleaned periodically, and not the construction period, for reasons given below.

The DGB-1/13/01, -15/01 and –19/01 samples were recovered from different parts of the Unit R excavation, on the SW Terrace. These dates imply that architectural activity and occupation on this terrace occurred at the latest between AD 1400-1500, and potentially as late as AD 1600. As noted in the discussion of walling on Unit R, they are unlikely to reflect the earliest architectural activity in this area of the site. If, as seems to be the case, the SW Terrace is an addition to a developing architectural complex, we might expect that its construction post-dated architectural efforts around the centre of the site, near the present Central Courtyard area. We thus regard these Unit R dates as implying architectural activity on the centre of the site before AD 1400-1500; the 16th-century dates from the bottom of the CCA would then presumably derive from later in a very complex history of site use.

The oldest date so far recovered from DGB-1 comes from close to the bottom of Unit 6, on the SE corner of the site. DGB-1/6/01 was recovered from the lower of two natural levels in Unit 6, and was closely associated with relatively undisturbed ceramics, broken in situ and with little subsequent sherd movement. This implies occupation (quite likely midden deposits) on the site before AD 1300. As noted above, this may predate terrace construction in this very delimited area of the site. The other two dates come from the upper soil level, where there is abundant evidence for movement of DGB-style ceramics and other materials down-slope from the crest of the main site. The stratigraphic reversal of DGB-1/6/02 and -03 may well be due to disturbance of this kind. The date for DGB-1/6/03 corresponds almost exactly to DGB-1/13/01, and if accurate both might
<table>
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<th>Sample</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Depth BD (cm)</th>
<th>Lab Number</th>
<th>Date BP</th>
<th>13C /12C Ratio</th>
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<td>160</td>
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<td>W niche by S wall</td>
<td>304</td>
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correspond to the same occupation of the site. However, given the reversal between DGB-1/6/02 and -03, and the evidence for artefact movement in this part of Unit 6, we have little confidence in the chronological utility of either of these dates.

Discussion

It is at this point too early in the research process to put forward definitive conclusions concerning the 2008 excavations on DGB-1. Further study of ceramic variability through space and time, of the faunal remains and of beads and other small finds remains to be undertaken. At the same time, some initial observations on the DGB-1 site can be made.

In the first place, the construction history of the site appears to be significantly more complicated than was expected before excavations began. We investigated two of the major architectural features visible on the surface of the site: the CCA and the SW Terrace. In both cases, what initially were assumed to be the products of single, large-scale construction episodes turned out instead to be the results of multiple processes of construction, addition and renovation to smaller-scale architectural features. At least five phases of construction and use occurred at Unit R, while the CCA is essentially the space left over after at least four phases of construction and enclosure. Similarly, Unit 6 yielded a deep sequence, with soil development and abundant evidence for domestic discard activities on what initially appeared to be a small and peripheral agricultural terrace, while even Unit 21 displays at least three phases of use – with the earliest of these possibly pre-DGB.

Second, while radiocarbon, artefactual and architectural data from DGB-2 and DGB-8 has been interpreted as indicating that these sites were built and used over only a period of decades (David 2008: 101), the complexity and depth of occupation of the excavation units at DGB-1, along with the radiocarbon dates, implies a longer period of construction and occupation around the latter site. The earliest radiocarbon evidence for occupation at the site, from the mid-13th to late-14th centuries AD, comes from the lower level on Unit 6, while the bulk of dates from the CCA, Unit R and Unit 6 indicate site occupation from the early-15th to mid-17th centuries AD. These units all yielded DGB pottery, while the distinctively different pottery at the bottom of Unit 21 implies an even earlier (but still undated) occupational phase for the site. It is notable that these dates indicate contemporaneous occupation of DGB-1 and the adjacent DGB-2 site during the 15th century AD at least – implying that the two were functioning as a single (or at least intimately related) architectural complex at that time.

Third, the diversity of artefact types found during the 2008 season’s work was greater than expected. One aspect of this involved the discovery of probably domestic deposits, particularly in Unit 6, but also in Unit R and possibly Unit 21. More striking was the recovery, in stratigraphic contexts associated with DGB materials, of a variety of artefacts that probably did not originate in the northern Mandara Mountains: these include artefacts made of copper alloy, some iron artefacts, glass, beads and very small amounts of non-local ceramics. These artefacts were found primarily in the CCA, but also in Unit 6 and Unit R. The total amount of non-local material recovered is not great, but such material is quite rare in the region. One of the most striking results from Mandara archaeological research to date has in fact been the lack of material evidence for cultural contact and trade beyond the area, even when compared to areas further to the north, in the southern Lake Chad Basin (MacEachern in review).

The presence of materials foreign to the area may be in part due to the geographical position of the site, only 30 km south of the Wandala capital at Keroua/Kirawa. The Wandala are linked by culture and language to other Chadic-speaking populations of the area, but the location of Wandala territory on the northwestern extremity of the Mandara massif, and thus on the southern periphery of the Lake Chad Basin, seems to have exposed them to more intense interaction with sub-continental political and economic networks from the 15th century onward (MacEachern 1993, in review). The discovery of these artefacts at DGB-1 raises the question of the nature of relations between that site and communities beyond the Mandara Mountains, whether Wandala or otherwise, and the effects of such contacts upon all of the parties to them. Attempts to resolve such questions will play a significant part in fieldwork planned for the DGB site area in 2010-2011.
Bibliography

David, N.

MacEachern, S.