

## ■ NIGER

### The Projet SAHEL 2004: Preliminary review of new work in the Parc W, Niger

V. Winton  
School of Archaeology, Classics  
and Egyptology  
Hartley Building  
Brownlow Street  
University of Liverpool  
Liverpool L69 3GS  
United Kingdom

A. Haour  
Visiting Research  
University of Sheffield  
2 Portland Building  
Sheffield S6 3DZ  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: A.Haour@sheffield.ac.uk

O. Idé  
Institut de Recherches en Sciences  
Humaines  
Université Abdou Moumouni  
BP 318  
Niamey, Niger

In December 2004, Projet SAHEL carried out a pilot investigation of the archaeological sequence of the Mékrou Valley sediments in the Parc W nature reserve, southwest Niger (12°15'N, 2°22'E). The team combined expertise in Palaeolithic and historical archaeology and brought together researchers from the United Kingdom and Niger. It was led by Palaeolithic specialists Vicky Winton (University of Oxford) and Oumarou Idé (Institut de Recherches en Science Humaines, Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey) and by historical archaeologist Anne Haour (University of Oxford), and also incorporated the geomorphological expertise of Helen Rendell (University of Loughborough) and Michèle Clarke (University of Nottingham). The fieldwork was enabled by six further team members drawn from the universities of Niamey, Oxford, Warwick, and the local park authorities.

This work builds upon previously published research (Marchesseau 1966; Vernet 1994, 1996; Idé 2000) and provides further indications of the archaeological importance of the West African Sahel, particularly as regards the Pleistocene occupation. Along the Mékrou valley, gully erosion has cut through Pleistocene colluvial and alluvial sediments (Figure 1) to expose a rich archaeological stratigraphy spanning the Early Stone Age through to the Historic period.

Geographically speaking, the Mékrou valley forms a four-way crossroads with the Niger River and the (now fossil) *dallol* Bosso valley which reaches northwards into the heart of the Sahara and once drained its massifs. One can imagine that these natural, watery corridors played a key role in population movements between ecological zones, especially during periods of extreme climatic change in the Pleistocene. The quartzite bedrock of the Mékrou valley system clearly provided an important source of raw material for stone tool manufacture throughout prehistory (Vernet 1994, 1996; Idé 2000) and indeed may have attracted visits specifically in order to exploit this resource.

### Palaeolithic

As yet, very little attention has been paid to the question of human dispersals across the African continent. With particular regard to West African archaeology, it is telling to note that a recent review of the Middle and Upper Pleistocene archaeological record of Africa admits that the evidence from the western part of the continent is so poorly known that it is largely left out of the discussion (Marean and Assefa 2005:107). Publications by Vernet (1994, 1996), Idé (2000), and by researchers of the Ounjougou team (Robert *et al.* 2003; Huysecom *et al.* 2004; <http://archo.unige.ch/ounjougou>) therefore provide a crucial starting point for important new research in West African archaeology and the question of intra-Africa Pleistocene population expansions more generally. There are however, no absolute dates for any of the Palaeolithic material from the Mékrou valley.

Following a detailed analysis of the handaxes, cleavers, 'bolas', flakes and cores related to the earliest Palaeolithic occupation of the Mékrou Valley (Idé 2000; Figure 2) the 2004 Projet SAHEL

**Figure 1.** Erosion terraces along the Mékrou.



Palaeolithic investigations focussed upon obtaining samples across the sedimentary sequence in order to ascertain the potential for accurately dating the phases of Palaeolithic occupation by optically stimulated luminescence (OSL). Fine-grained sediments were sampled at four localities in the Mékrou Valley and analyses of acquired samples are on-going at Nottingham and Loughborough (Rendell *et al.* 2005; Haour *et al.*, forthcoming).

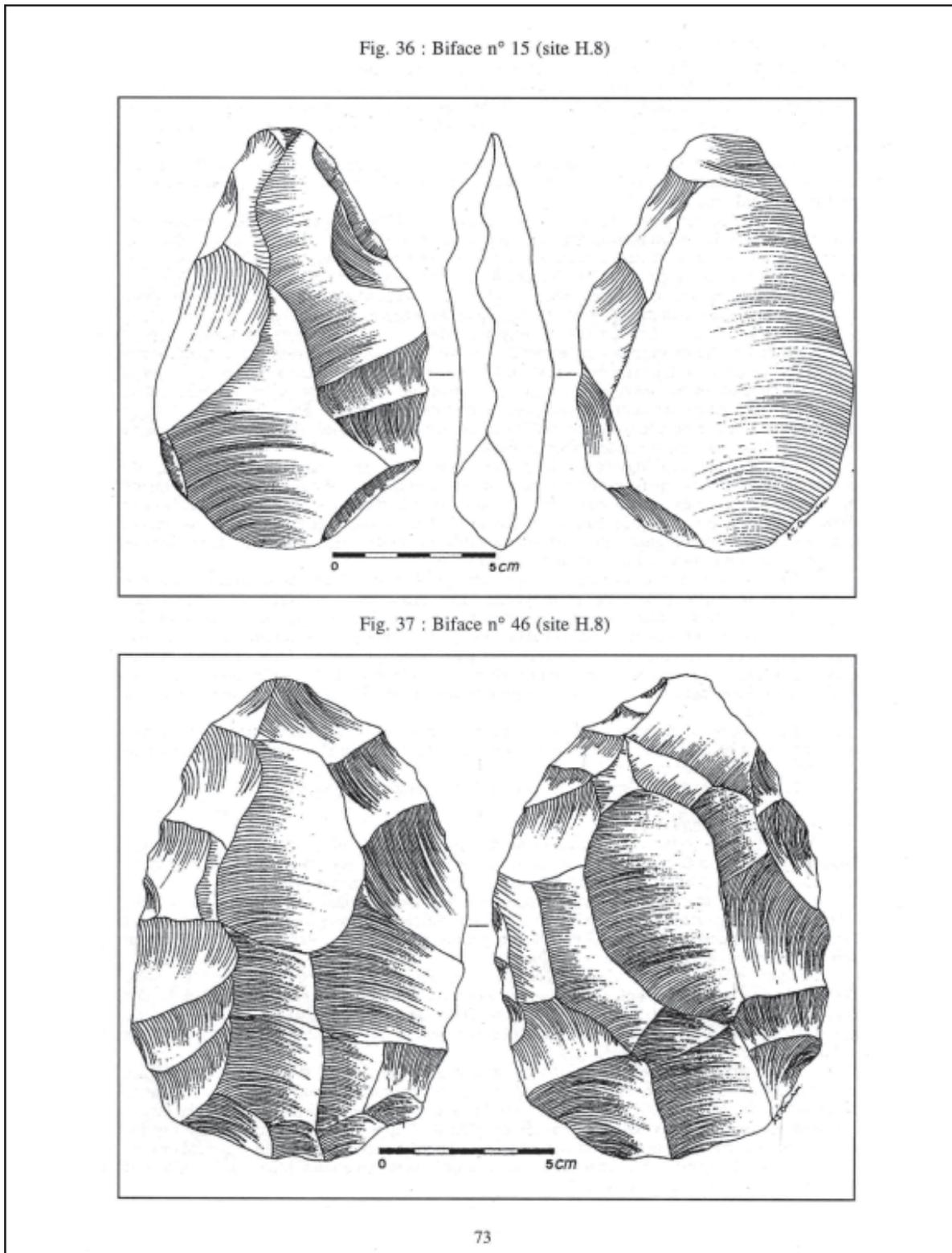
### Historic

It has been known from the late 1960s that past settlement sites featuring grinding stones, pottery and iron-working existed in Parc W (DeBeauchêne, 1969; Gado, 1980). Both Vernet (1996: Figures 173-178, 181) and Idé (2000: Figures 135-140), whose primary focus was the Stone Age, include a discussion and illustration of the historic material. Vernet (1996)

also obtained two dates ( $335 \pm 120$  bp and  $175 \pm 70$  bp) from ironworking and settlement contexts along the Mékrou. These are essentially “medieval” and are linked with a homogeneous and abundant ceramic group. Finally, ECOPAS (2002) reported at some sites within the park remains of quadrangular and circular structures, as well as earthworks and ditches.

The 2004 Projet SAHEL historic investigations carried out systematic collections of the very abundant surface material with a view to developing and reporting the first pottery sequence for this region. In addition, a deflated iron-working furnace and associated ceramic material was drawn in plan, and samples collected for both thermoluminescence and radiocarbon dating. This provides a unique opportunity to cross-check dates achieved by both methods, highly significant given the well-known difficulty of dating sub-Saharan metallurgical sites (Killick 2004; Childs and Herbert 2005).

Figure 2. Palaeolithic finds from the Mékrou. From Idé, 2000, Figs. 36 and 37.



### Directions for future work

The Mékrou River lies at a Sahelian crossroads, situated as it is on the north-south Niger River axis and on the east-west savanna band. The Mékrou Valley data add to important recent research, notably the Ounjougou Valley project in Mali (Robert *et al.* 2003; Huysecom *et al.* 2004; <http://archeo.unige.ch/ounjoujou>) and investigations of medieval populations in Niger (Gado 2004), in confirming the crucial significance of the Sahel region in the African past.

### References

Childs, S. T. and E. W. Herbert

2005 Metallurgy and its consequences. In A. B. Stahl, editor, *African Archaeology: a critical introduction*. Oxford : Blackwell, pp. 276-300.

De Beauchêne, G.

1969 Recherches archéologiques au Niger en 1966. In *Actes du 1er colloque international d'archéologie africaine, Fort-Lamy 11-16 Décembre 1966. Etudes et documents tchadiens; mémoires 1*. Fort-Lamy: INTSH:, pp. 50-61.

ECOPAS (Ecosystèmes protégés en Afrique Soudano-Sahélienne)

2002 *Mission exploratoire du Parc pour la valorisation du patrimoine historique et archéologique*. Programme Régional Parc – W (ECOPAS), 7 ACP RPR 742, République du Bénin, Burkina Faso, République du Niger, Fonds européen de développement. Rapport définitif de mission de recherche.

Gado, B.

1980 Le Zarmatarey – contribution à l'histoire des populations d'entre Niger et Dallol Mawri. *Etudes Nigériennes* 45. Niamey: Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines.

2004 Les systèmes des sites à statuaire en terre cuite et en pierre dans la vallée du Moyen Niger entre le Gourouol et la Mékrou. In A. Bazzana and H. Bocoum, editors, *Du nord au sud du Sahara : cinquante ans d'archéologie française en Afrique de l'Ouest et au Maghreb – bilan et perspectives*. Paris: Sépia, pp. 155-181.

Haour, A., V. Winton, O. Idé, H. Rendell and M. Clarke

Forthcoming The Projet SAHEL 2004: The archaeological sequence in the Parc W, Niger. Submitted to *Journal of African Archaeology*.

Huysecom, E., S. Ozainne, F. Raeli, A. Ballouche, M. Rasse, and S. Stokes

2004 Ounjougou (Mali): a history of Holocene settlement at the southern edge of the Sahara. *Antiquity* 78: 579-593.

Idé, O.

2000 Préhistoire dans la vallée de la Mékrou (Niger méridional). *Etudes nigériennes* 58. Nouakchott: SEPIA/CRIAA.

Killick, D.

2004 Review essay. What do we know about African iron working? *Journal of African Archaeology* 2: 97-112.

Marchesseau, J.

- 1966 Sur la découverte d'un gisement à industrie paléolithique dans le nord-ouest du Dahomey. *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, Série B, 28: 575-594.

Marean, C.W. and Z. Assefa

- 2005 The Middle and Upper Pleistocene African Record for the Biological and Behavioral Origins of Modern Humans. In A. B. Stahl, editor, *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 93-129.

Rendell H., M. Clarke, V. Winton, A. Haour and O. Idé

- 2005 Palaeolithic occupation of the Sahel: OSL dating of colluvial badlands in southwest Niger. *Poster presentation at 11<sup>th</sup> International conference on luminescence and electron spin resonance dating*, 24-29 July 2005, Cologne.

Robert, A., S. Soriano, M. Rasse, S. Stokes and E. Huysecom

- 2003 First chrono-cultural reference framework for the West African Paleolithic: new data from Ounjougou, Dogon Country, Mali. *Journal of African Archaeology* 1: 151-169.

Vernet, R.

- 1994 La préhistoire de la vallée de la Mékrou (Niger méridional). *Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Française* 91: 200-208.
- 1996 *Le sud-ouest du Niger de la préhistoire au début de l'histoire*. Niamey/Paris: IRSH/SÉPIA.