Integration of Atakora's archaeological sites (Northwestern Benin Republic) in the West African context

Didier N'dah,,

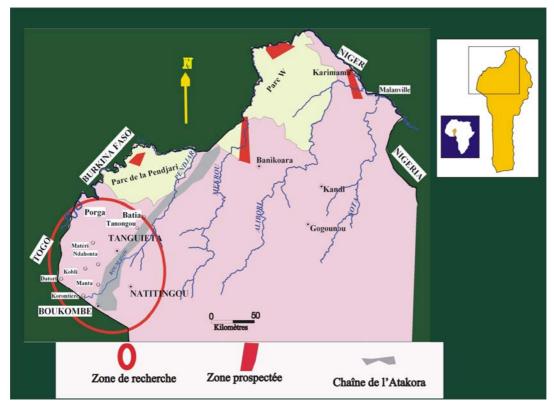
Department of History and Archaeology, University of Abomey-Calavi; Phd Candidate University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso [ndahdi@yahoo.fr; monidi@caramail.com]

The surveys undertaken between 1997 and 2001 in the Atakora region by a joint Benin and German team resulting from the co-operation between the National University from Benin and the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, and during the research carried out for my master and Phd thesis in progress, resulted in the location of several archaeological sites. These include caves and rock shelters, settlement mounds, iron smelting sites, open air sites and others. I present a brief summary of the results of this research and show that the study and the analysis of the sites from this area require their integration within the western African context in order to form better argued and less narrow hypotheses relating to them. The integration of archaeological research within a large framework is a necessity for the better interpretation of the data and of archaeological sequences of various parts of Africa.

The aims of our study are to:

- elucidate the questions relating to the process of settlement of this area from prehistory to the subactual periods
- establish precise chronocultural sequences for the region based on the lithic, ceramic and paleometallurgic material and on C14 dates
- document the ways of life of human societies during the prehistoric period, the transitional period, from the STONE AGE to the IRON AGE and during the first historical migrations.

Fig1 Location of the studied area



Among the sites discovered, the prehistoric sites, of Korontière Pendjari seems to be significant. On the site of Korontière, we found in 2000 an erosional cliff with fine grained deposits. These yielded a cleaver in situ and a handaxe at the surface below the cliff which must have eroded out from the same layer. In 2004 a chopping tool was found eroding out of an underlying layer. In 2006 erosion had removed most of the sediment. During the excavation of the remainder stone artefacts were found on top of the substratum in a ferrugenous coarse sediment. The site is not dated for the moment but can be compared with the site of Onjougou where the stone artefacts were found in the same kind of sediment. With the peeble tools Korontière can may be complete information from Onjougou.

Fig 2. Pebble tool from Korontière site

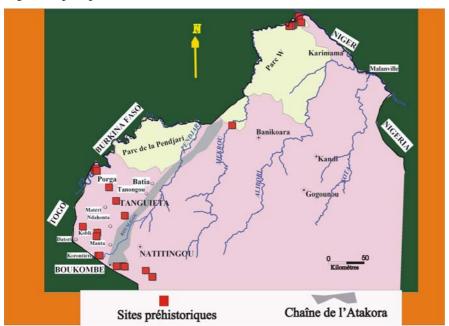


The date of Pendjari is 6440 ± 40 BP and is associated with microliths and pottery. This site is one of the oldest site in west Africa after the site of Konduga in Nigeria and the site of Onjougou Mali. We located also during our surveys in the Mékrou area many prehistoric sites with stone tools. We also found in this area matallurgic sites, circular standing stone structures and settlement mounds.

Fig 3: Standing stones near the Mekrou river.

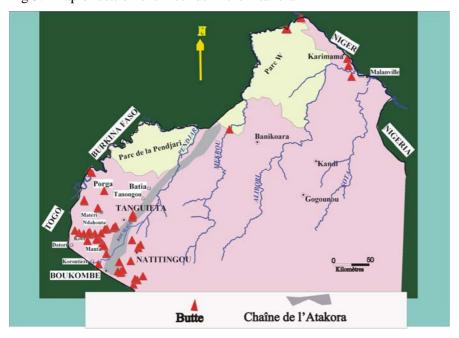


Fig 4: Map of prehistoric sites located in the Atakora.



The settlement mounds located in the Atakora are dated between the 7th century and the 14th century AD. The appearance of settlement mounds can be related to certain climatic conditions. Indeed In West Africa, the wetter and more stable environmental conditions between 300 AD and 1100 AD was a period which witnessed an increase in site size and number and also presumably in population (Scott M., 2005:443). The thousands of settlement mounds located in the Atakora region may be related to these events. In the first and second millennium AD in West Africa one note the development of cities, empires and kingdoms. The development of the settlement mounds can also be connected to this political situation?

Fig 5: Map of settlement mounds in the Atakora



Presence of iron in this region is attested in the slags and fragments of iron that were found during excavation of these settlement mounds. Therefore, iron is known in this area since at least the first millennium AD. It is not excluded that iron-metallurgy extends much further back in time as in Togo iron smelting was dated to 8th century BC (830 - 740) (De Barros 2003:77)

In conclusion, our study is on going and all these sites allow us to establish a regional chronocultural sequence which will enable us to study the population movements in the Atakora region and their integration in the broader context of the history in West Africa.

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