

Unearthing Pan-African crossroad? Significance of the middle Nile valley in prehistory

Human migrations, their routes, ranges and the reasons are one of the most important issues that science deals with today. Archaeological research on the prehistory of sub-Saharan Africa makes it possible to better understand both the oldest migrations, the consequence of which was the colonisation of Asia and Europe, as well as later ones. We try to see not only the movement of communities, but also the culture, ideas and "inventions". For decades, the Nile Valley has been seen as the oldest and most important migration corridor of early man, used in both directions. More and more scientific evidence indicates that another, extremely important migration route on the W-E line was the Sahel connecting East, Central and West Africa. Both arteries probably crossed in the Great Bend region, i.e. in the area where Polish research has been conducted as part of the *PalaeoAffad Project* for several years. The results of archaeological research at Affad in Sudan have shown their unusually high scientific value and unique nature. Next to the well-preserved remains of prehistoric camps (relics of the oldest open-air hut in the world) and diverse hunting and gathering loci some 50,000 years old, a Polish team discovered extremely rich evidence of the presence of nomadic cattle keepers there – perhaps the first such cultures in Africa. The presented project focuses on these two very important stages of early human history in Africa: the Palaeolithic and Neolithic in its "African" variant with the fundamental role of nomadic cattle breeding.

The main goal of the currently proposed project is - based on our 20years lasting experience and knowledge, to find and to methodically explore the equally well-preserved remains of prehistoric settlement in other parts of the Southern Dongola Reach (except the Affad Basin). This is a region in the northern part of Sudan where great dry channels run from the south and west. Therefore, already in the earliest times, this location could have been a great "African crossroads" for migrating human communities and ideas. Tracking the discreet "markers" of material culture's elements, people and animals themselves, we assume to determine the region importance both during the first migrations of our species outside the African continent and in the period immediately preceding the birth of the first civilizations.

The project will be implemented over the next four years, covering both research in Sudan and specialist analyses in European laboratories. Our goal is to focus on three key, although actually unexplored areas. The first is the Letti Basin, a fertile depression that was the economic base for medieval Nubian civilizations, another one - the right bank of the Great Nile Bend, where, apart from the Affad Basin, further river bends require archaeological investigation (we have pre-identified areas with similarly high scientific potential). Finally, the third area, that is the left bank of the valley – especially the mouths of large dry channels, namely Wadi Howar and Wadi el-Melik, connecting the Nile with the plains of Central Africa. A group of experienced specialists will participate in the planned excavations. Spatial and geomorphological data enabling setting in time and space of the studied phenomena will be analysed, ceramics - including the oldest one on the continent, human and animal bone remains - key for research on "Neolithisation" of Africa. Bio-archaeological and isotope analyses will allow to identify the ecosystem in which the studied populations operated, and therefore the locality or allochthonicity of organisms. Finally, stone tools - a medium of basic information concerning the technological development of the communities in the dynamically changing realities of African prehistory.

One of the scientifically most important expected results of the project is the supplementation our basic knowledge concerning the directions and pace of migrations of early communities and the impact of an area extremely important at the dawn of human history – the Southern Dongola Reach – both during the era of the first migrations of our species, and much later, when pastoral communities with cattle herds were passing through the sub-Saharan Sahel. Implementation of the project will enrich the legacy of Polish archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa joining the knowledge about the past with still developing natural science methods.