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PREHISTORY IN THE UPPER NILE BASIN¹

BY PETER ROBERTSHAW

SEVERAL generations of anthropology students have more than a passing acquaintance with the peoples of the Upper Nile basin (Fig. 1), most notably the Nuer. More recently there has occurred an awakening of interest in the region's history. Yet much of this historical research has tended to be conjectural,² particularly when concerned with questions of origins. Thus the results of recent archaeological work in the Upper Nile basin may be of interest both to readers of this journal and, given the fascinating problems surrounding Dinka–Nuer relations,³ to the wider community of anthropologists. In 1979 and 1981 excavations were undertaken in the Dinka and Atuot regions under the auspices of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. Further north, the mound sites (*debbas*) of Shillukland have also been the subject of some initial archaeological investigations.⁴ The present paper summarizes some of the new information that has emerged from these researches. These findings are discussed within the context of the debate concerning the origins and ethnicity of the Nuer, Dinka, Atuot and Luo (Lwo); thus I begin this essay with a précis of the recent literature on this subject.

Over a decade ago Newcomer wrote that 'the Nuer are Dinka' and thus sparked off a lively debate.⁵ He argued that neither the Dinka nor the Nuer should be viewed as intruders into the Nilotic Sudan; rather, he suggested, the region was occupied, perhaps 400 years ago, by one culture/people/society resembling present-day Dinka in social structure. Population pressure then led to expansion to the ecological boundaries set by the land suitable for cattle-keeping; raiding and warfare ensued. Within this context the segmentary lineage developed as a 'social mutation' for predatory expansion, and out of this in turn arose the ethnic identity of the Nuer. Although Newcomer's ideas were subjected to rapid attack,⁶ they nevertheless prompted a major re-evaluation of the question of Nuer origins by Aidan Southall,⁷ who reminded us that for the people themselves, as opposed to outsiders, the

¹ I thank John Sutton and Jeremy Coote for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also acknowledge the contributions made by the other members of the 1981 expedition of the British Institute in Eastern Africa to the Southern Sudan, whose assistance made this report possible.

² I hasten to exclude the meticulous work of Douglas Johnson from this charge; see D. H. Johnson, 'The fighting Nuer: primary sources and the origins of a stereotype', *Africa*, LI, i (1981), 508–27; 'Tribal boundaries and border wars: Nuer–Dinka relations in the Sobat and Zaraf valleys, c. 1860–1976', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXIII, ii (1982), 183–203.

³ Recently the object of detailed study by Raymond C. Kelly, *The Nuer Conquest* (Ann Arbor, 1985).

⁴ E. J. Kleppe, 'The *debbas* on the White Nile, southern Sudan', in J. Mack and P. Robertshaw (eds.), *Culture History in the Southern Sudan* (Nairobi, 1982), 59–70.

⁵ P. J. Newcomer, 'The Nuer are Dinka: an essay on origins and environmental determinism', *Man* (n.s.), VII, i (1972), 5–11.

⁶ E.g. B. H. MacDermot, 'The Nuer are not Dinka', *Man* (n.s.), VII, iii (1972), 480; M. Glickman, 'The Dinka and the Nuer', *Man* (n.s.), IX, i (1974), 141–2.

⁷ A. Southall, 'Nuer and Dinka are people: ecology, ethnicity and logical possibility', *Man* (n.s.), XI, iv (1976), 463–91.

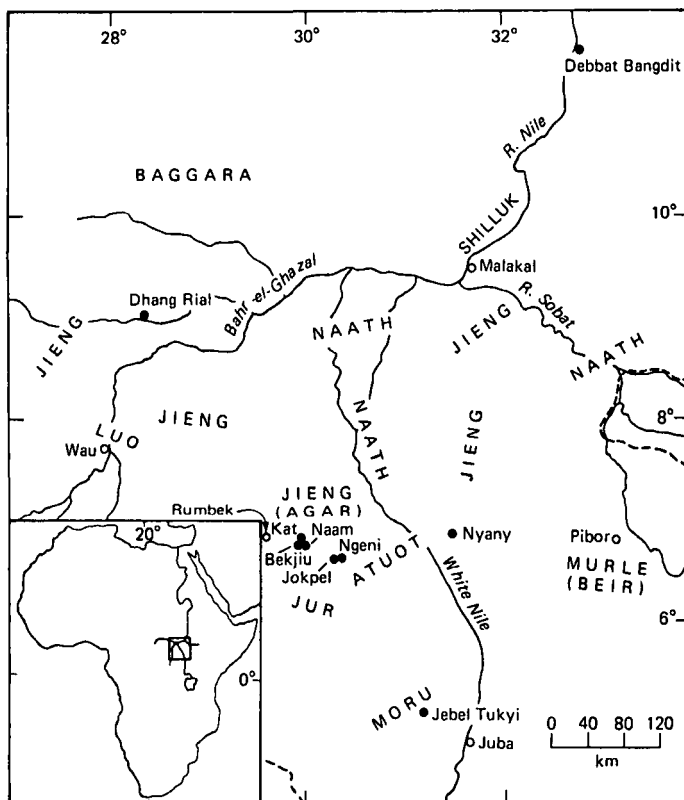


Fig. 1. Excavation sites.

Nuer are in fact *Naath* and the Dinka *Jieng*. In concordance with Newcomer, Southall assumed that Naath (Nuer) emerged from groups of proto-Jieng (Dinka), and he recognized that the 'burning question' is: how did the Naath become both culturally and linguistically distinct from the congeries of people who referred to themselves as Jieng? The answer that was suggested by an analysis of social institutions, myths, traditions and rituals is a complex hypothesis in which population movements figure large and in which local variations in subsistence ecology play a key explanatory role.

The hypotheses of Southall and his predecessors have recently been critically reviewed by Kelly,⁸ who has demonstrated that neither a study of ecological variables nor models based upon human demographic pressures can account for the phenomenal expansion of the Nuer during the nineteenth century. Kelly contends that this expansion is grounded in cultural rather than biological imperatives, specifically Nuer requirements of cattle for bridewealth payments which result in shortages of grazing during the dry season. In addition to the Nuer conquests of the nineteenth century, evidence is led by Kelly for an expansion of the Dinka to the peripheries of the seasonally flooded grasslands of the Upper Nile basin some time between

⁸ Kelly, *Nuer Conquest*, particularly chapter 2.

1500 and 1800, probably precipitated by Nuer expansion at the centre of the basin.⁹

The discussion over Nuer origins has been placed within a broader perspective by the results of ethnographic work among the Atuot, a people whose relationship to both the Nuer and Dinka had previously been poorly understood. Burton, in an essay that examines the question of 'Who are the Atuot?', attacks Southall's reconstruction as accounting 'for the present distribution of pastoral Nilotes in the Southern Sudan as though "tribal" groups and their tract of migration possessed the physical properties of pool balls pelleted across the swampland of the Upper Nile Basin'.¹⁰ In contrast, Burton¹¹ attempts to develop a deeper appreciation of the many levels at which the concept of 'ethnicity' may be applied to the complexities of the communities of the Nilotic Sudan and their interrelationships. Indeed, not only are contemporary inter-ethnic relations considerably more dynamic than a linguistic classification into Nuer, Dinka and Atuot would suggest, but even this linguistic classification masks the fact that there are not so much three distinct languages as variations of these languages in a number of dialects.¹² Furthermore, we are reminded that a 'common tribal affiliation does not necessarily impel common sentiments of social intercourse'.¹³

To account for this ethnic complexity, and in an effort to understand the basis of the symbolism associated with the fishing spear and the war spear in the Nilotic Sudan, Burton outlines a frankly speculative model of the region's prehistory. He suggests that a mode of subsistence in which fishing was combined with some horticulture preceded the advent of pastoralism to the Upper Nile Basin, and that, prior to the appearance of cattle, the Atuot, Nuer and Dinka were 'essentially the same people'.¹⁴ Reference to the Dinka political ethic of aggregation and incorporation leads Burton to speculate further that 'first there were the Dinka and then there were the others'.¹⁵ The secession of the Nuer and Atuot from the Dinka occurred some time after the advent of domestic stock and in the context of disputes over ownership of cattle and access to grazing. 'The Dinka are one people, united by their spear masters. The Atuot and Nuer... are separate peoples divided by their cattle.'¹⁶ Thus the migrations recounted by Southall, in which indeed the Atuot also took part, are to be understood with reference to the adoption of pastoralism and its effect upon the social order.¹⁷

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-23. It is impossible to do justice in the space of this article to Kelly's comprehensive and closely argued work.

¹⁰ J. W. Burton, 'Atuot ethnicity: an aspect of Nilotic ethnology', *Africa*, LI, i (1981), 496-507; quotation from p. 496.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; also J. W. Burton, 'Some observations on the social history of the Atuot dialect of Nilotic', in T. C. Schadeberg and M. L. Bender (eds.), *Nilo-Saharan: Proceedings of the first Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium, Leiden, September 8-10, 1980* (Dordrecht, 1981), 133-42; 'The wave is my mother's husband: a piscatorial theme in pastoral Nilotic ethnology', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, XXI, no. 84 (1981), 459-77.

¹² Burton, 'Some observations', 137, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.* 136, citing G. Lienhardt.

¹⁴ Burton, 'The wave is my mother's husband', 468.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 464.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 465.

¹⁷ Burton, 'Some observations', 139-40. This hypothesis is not incompatible with that of Kelly, *Nuer conquest*.

Burton, clearly realizing the potential of archaeological work for the evaluation of his model of Upper Nile Basin prehistory, was however forced to regret the absence of such research.¹⁸ Thus the results outlined in the present paper provide the first opportunity for this evaluation. Although these archaeological data do not represent a true test of Burton's model, their implications are suggestive. No claim is made that these data have the potential of answering the 'burning question' of the emergence of the Nuer, but they may well be very relevant to a related problem – that of Luo origins. At the very least, the archaeological findings will enable anthropologists and historians to speculate on questions of social process in the Upper Nile Basin from a rather more informed perspective on the region's prehistory.

However, before presenting the details of the archaeological discoveries, it is appropriate to consider the ticklish problem of identifying ethnic groups from archaeological data. While the concept of ethnicity and the definition of ethnic groups and their boundaries have exercised the minds of ethnologists for many years, the inherent limitations of archaeological data, in this instance the necessity of reliance upon patterns in the distribution of items of material culture, for the recognition of 'cultural' entities are particularly acute. For decades archaeologists have discussed, without reaching much consensus, whether the non-random associations of material objects that have traditionally constituted the archaeologist's 'cultures', 'traditions' or 'industries'¹⁹ are to be considered merely as archaeological constructs or as reflexions of 'real' ethnic groups. There seems little point in reiterating these arguments here. However, it would, in my opinion, be surprising if archaeologists ever managed to differentiate between the prehistoric archaeological manifestations of the Nuer, Atuot and Dinka. Thus a lack of differentiation in the archaeological record should not be interpreted as indicative that separation between these groupings had not yet occurred. Indeed, even a correlation between a particular archaeological 'culture' which may be widespread in the Upper Nile basin and the proto-Jieng would rest in part upon assumptions of dubious validity. None the less, recent work has suggested that in situations of considerable competition between ethnic groups ethnic identity may be emphasized through distinctive material cultures.²⁰ Since competition would seem to be a common element of Dinka, Nuer and Atuot interactions, detailed comparative studies of their material culture may indicate differences that might be manifest in the archaeological record.²¹

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The locations of the sites that have been excavated are shown in Figure 1. With the exception of Jebel Tuky, a rockshelter situated in dense savanna

¹⁸ Burton, 'The wave is my mother's husband', n. 12.

¹⁹ The particular term preferred is of little importance in the context of this discussion.

²⁰ I. R. Hodder, 'The distribution of material culture items in the Baringo district, W. Kenya', *Man* (n.s.), XII, ii (1977), 239–69; *idem*, *Symbols in Action* (Cambridge, 1982). See also John Mack, 'Material culture and ethnic identity in Southeastern Sudan', in Mack and Robertshaw, *Culture History in the Southern Sudan*, 111–30.

²¹ However, one must not forget in this context the possible implications for the understanding of variations in material culture of Johnson's reassessment of the 'Fighting Nuer': see note 2 above.

woodland, beyond the borders of the pastoral Nilotes, all the sites are mounds located on or at the edge of seasonally flooded grasslands (*toich*).²² Most, if not all, of these mounds, which appear to be the result of the accumulation of debris rather than of any deliberate attempt at mound-building, have been repeatedly occupied as cattle-camps in the recent past; thus they are highly visible whitish ash mounds, standing often 2–3 m above the level of the surrounding *toich*. The mounds east of Rumbek, investigated by the British Institute in 1981,²³ are situated in areas now inhabited by Dinka Agar and Atuot, while Dhang Rial, excavated in 1979,²⁴ is in Dinka Tuic country. Unfortunately, because of logistical constraints, excavations at all these sites have been of very limited extent; nevertheless some interesting results have emerged, particularly through comparison of the finds from different sites. This allows the construction of a cultural sequence that is remarkably consistent over such a vast region.

The beginning of this sequence, documented from the lowest levels of Bekjiu, Kat and Dhang Rial, is characterized by earthenware pottery decorated with comb-impressions, often applied in a zigzag motif by rocker-stamping. A fine, red-slipped ware also occurs. However, there is no evidence for iron-working nor are there any stone tools; given the paucity of available stone in the region, the latter observation is hardly surprising. Faunal remains are not preserved at Dhang Rial, but the sites east of Rumbek have yielded bones of cattle, a range of wild game, and fish. No date is yet available for this phase, but radiocarbon dates for the overlying deposits at Bekjiu indicate a *terminus ante quem* of A.D. 500. Yet, given the palaeoenvironmental sequence for this region that can be extrapolated from elsewhere, occupation is unlikely to have commenced more than about 4,000 years ago; prior to this date the *toich* may have been permanently flooded. The presence of cattle in this early phase is of particular interest in the light of Burton's hypothesis, suggesting, if he is correct, a relatively early split between Dinka, Nuer and Atuot. Corroboration of these early cattle is provided by their presence further south at Jebel Tukyi late in the first millennium B.C.²⁵ Here again the associated pottery is decorated by comb-impressions, but the layout of the decoration on the vessels, in so far as it can be reconstructed from the highly fragmented sherds, suggests that it falls in a different cultural tradition from that of the northern sites.

The succeeding phase of settlement in the Upper Nile basin is represented at one site only, Jokpel, where it would also seem to pre-date A.D. 500, though by how long is not known. Here the pottery comprises undecorated bowls with pinkish exteriors and fine temper. The associated faunal remains again indicate a combination of cattle pastoralism with fishing and hunting.

At Bekjiu, Jokpel and Ngeni sites, most of the deposits accumulated during the second half of the first millennium A.D. This period can be divided into two phases of settlement, between which much continuity is evident. In both phases the pottery was predominantly decorated by impressing a woven mat

²² Sometimes written as *toc* or *toic*.

²³ Peter Robertshaw and Ari Siiriäinen, 'Excavations in Lakes Province, Southern Sudan', *Azania*, xx (1985), 89–166; this article comprises the detailed excavation reports.

²⁴ Nicholas David, Paul Harvey and C. J. Goudie, 'Excavations in the Southern Sudan, 1979', *Azania*, xvi (1981), 7–54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27, 30.

on the wet clay, the most common vessel form being a constricted bowl. In the later phase, vessels with oblique scoring represent an addition to the potters' repertoire. Evidence for iron-working is present throughout. Sheep and goat bones are now found alongside those of cattle, but their absence from the earlier phases of settlement in the region may be attributable to the small sample sizes of identifiable faunal remains rather than to genuine absence. A wide variety of wild ungulates, as well as numerous fish, are also represented in the faunal assemblages. Although there is no direct evidence for agriculture in the form of carbonized seeds, the abundance of rubbers and fragments of querns is at least suggestive that crop plants were processed at the settlements. Seeds of *Zizyphus spina-cristi* indicate that fruits were eaten in season. The deposits at Bekjiu included a burial: the skeleton, belonging to a male aged between 18 and 25 years, lay in an extended position on its right side, oriented west-east with the face looking south. The skeleton could be described as 'Nilotic' in appearance – a moderately tall, slender individual – but one on which no dental evulsion had been practised.²⁶ A change in settlement layout is evident between the two phases under discussion in this paragraph; the later phase is characterized by remains of relatively substantial pole-and-daga structures with hardened clay floors, whereas there is no sign of any structures in the homogeneous deposits of the earlier phase. Unfortunately, because of the small size of the excavations, which were also concentrated towards the centre of each site, it is not known whether this change is attributable simply to sampling error, or rather to a shift in within-site spatial arrangements and/or in the type of structures that were built.²⁷

Far to the north-west, the Phase B occupation at Dhang Rial shows considerable similarities to the material described in the previous paragraph. Radiocarbon dates indicate that this occupation took place between approximately the eighth and thirteenth centuries A.D. and is thus roughly contemporary with that of the makers of woven-mat impressed pottery east of Rumbek. At Dhang Rial the pottery is decorated by a different technique, the application of a twisted-cord roulette, but constricted bowls are a common vessel form in both areas.²⁸ Furthermore, work in southern Africa has shown that techniques of pottery decoration often vary independently of ceramic traditions defined by design structure, and cross-cut ethnic identity.²⁹ The degree of fragmentation of the sherds at Dhang Rial and to a lesser extent at the sites east of Rumbek is too great to permit the delineation of the layout of decoration on the vessels; it is thus not possible to state whether or not all this pottery can be subsumed within a single tradition.

Besides pottery, the finds from Dhang Rial Phase B include iron jewellery, mollusc-shell beads, and baked clay figurines in the shape of humpless cattle. The small sample of faunal remains comprises cattle, wild ungulates and fish. Remains of structures and living-floors were also noted. However, the most remarkable similarity with Bekjiu lies with the burials recovered at Dhang Rial; the details match exactly those of Bekjiu, including the absence of

²⁶ L. Schepartz in Robertshaw and Siiriäinen, 'Excavations'.

²⁷ Robertshaw and Siiriäinen, 'Excavations'.

²⁸ David *et al.* 'Excavations', 40–1.

²⁹ T. N. Huffman, 'Ceramics, classification and Iron Age entities', *African Studies*, xxxix (1980), 123–74.

dental evulsion. Perhaps even more remarkable is that this style of burial has also been reported for an infant skeleton found at Debbat Bangdit in Shillukland, and dated to the mid-late first millennium A.D. The only difference in detail was the presence of a 10 cm thick layer of potsherds capping the burial.³⁰ Thus there is strong evidence of a single burial tradition throughout the Upper Nile basin around the late first millennium A.D. that was practised by people who did not indulge in dental evulsion.

The succeeding phase at Dhang Rial shows a continuity in pottery styles from Phase B that can be traced onwards to the pottery of the present-day Dinka Tuic. However, mollusc-shell beads are no longer found and habitation of the centre of the site appears to cease. Perhaps of greater interest is the fact that the cattle figurines are now humped rather than humpless, presumably reflecting the same change in the type of cattle herded. David has suggested that the disappearance of more permanent structures, from at least the centre of the site, with the introduction of humped cattle may document the beginning of a more mobile subsistence system reliant upon the greater stamina of the humped cattle breeds.³¹ If this is the case then it is tempting, if unduly speculative, to link the onset of the Nuer expansions of the last few centuries with the advent of humped cattle and their possibly radical influence on previously more constrained patterns of mobility.

East of Rumbek the course of events appears to have run rather differently. After the end of the occupation by the makers of the mat-impressed pottery, roughly around A.D. 1000, the excavated sites contain evidence for recent use of the mounds as seasonal cattle-camps by present-day peoples. Thus, from our limited sample of excavated sites, there would appear to be a hiatus in the occupation of the region between Rumbek and the White Nile spanning most of the present millennium. If this is correct, then some indication of where at least some of the people may have gone is to be found in the upper levels of Jebel Tukyi, situated in the woodlands to the south. Occupation horizons at this site which have been dated to about the fourteenth century A.D. contain constricted bowls with woven-mat impressions.³² Pots of this type are made nowadays in the vicinity of Jebel Tukyi by Central Sudanic-speaking Moru peoples, and further north on the southern edge of Dinka country by various Jur groups around Mvolo.³³

Other than the research in Shillukland for which only preliminary reports are available,³⁴ archaeological observations east of the Nile are restricted to the analysis of the material recovered from excavations at Nyany. Here there is a sequence in which comb-impressed pottery appears to be replaced

³⁰ E. J. Kleppe, 'Towards a prehistory of the riverain Nilotic Sudan: archaeological excavations in the Er Renk District', *Nubian Letters*, no. 1 (1983), 14-20; and pers. comm.

³¹ Nicholas David, 'The BIEA Southern Sudan expedition of 1979: interpretation of the archaeological data', in Mack and Robertshaw, *Culture history in the Southern Sudan*, 49-57; see p. 54.

³² This decoration is described in the original report on Jebel Tukyi as 'plaited-fibre roulette' (David *et al.* 'Excavations', 29). However, examination of the sherds, currently housed in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, has convinced me that they are decorated with woven-mat impressions.

³³ Ari Siiriäinen, 'Two Southern Sudanese pottery traditions in a historical perspective'. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, xvii, 1 (1984), 11-18.

³⁴ Kleppe as cited in footnotes 4 and 30.

| Date | Sites east of Rumbek | | Dhang Rial | | Jebel Tukyi | | Nyany |
|-----------|--|----------------------------|---|--|-------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| | Pottery | Other | Pottery | Other | Pottery | Other | Pottery |
| 'Modern' | Rouletted, Dinka | Cattle camps | | | | | |
| A.D. 1500 | | | ? | ? | ? | Woven mat impressions | |
| A.D. 1000 | Hiatus in Settlement? | | Twisted-cord rouletted | Humped cattle figurines, no structure in centre of site | | ? | Horizontal grooves (date?) |
| A.D. 500 | Woven mat impressions | Pole and daga structures | Twisted cord rouletted | Burials, iron jewellery, humpless cattle figurines, structures in centre of site | | | |
| | Woven-mat impressions | First iron working? Burial | | | | | |
| 'O' | Undecorated bowls (date?) | | | | | | |
| 500 B.C. | Comb impressions, zigzag motif (date?) | Cattle | Comb impressions (rocker stamped) (date?) | No bones preserved (date?) | | Comb-impressions | Comb-impressions (date?) |
| | | | | | | Cattle | |

Fig. 2. Upper Nile basin prehistory.

through time by pottery decorated with horizontal grooves.³⁵ This sequence bears no relationship to that assembled from sites west of the Nile. Rather, the affinities of the comb-impressed pottery may lie with poorly dated assemblages discovered in the mountains of Eastern Equatoria.³⁶ The pottery with horizontal grooves is reminiscent of even more distant material, that assigned to the Turkwel tradition found at Jebel Kathangor and at many sites west of Lake Turkana.³⁷

We can summarize these archaeological data as follows (Fig. 2): some time prior to A.D. 500 the Upper Nile basin west of the White Nile was occupied by people with comb-impressed pottery, but perhaps no knowledge of iron-working, who herded cattle, hunted and fished. These people were replaced by communities making pottery with very different styles, decorated by woven-mat impressions east of Rumbek and by twisted-cord roulettes at Dhang Rial. Whether this replacement was gradual, rapid, or preceded by a hiatus in settlement of the region is not known. However, a different cultural tradition, preceding that of the impressed pottery, was noted at Jokpel. The makers of the mat-impressed and the rouletted pottery were

³⁵ Robertshaw and Siiriäinen, 'Excavations', 138-40.

³⁶ See Peter Robertshaw, 'Eastern Equatoria in the context of later eastern African prehistory', in Mack and Robertshaw, *Culture history in the Southern Sudan*, 89-100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

familiar with iron, and towards the end of the first millennium A.D. constructed relatively permanent pole-and-daga structures with clay floors. However, they continued to subsist on the products of their herds, combined with hunting, fishing and almost certainly cereal crops. These people, who appear to have been relatively tall and slender but contrary to modern Nilotic custom did not practise dental evulsion, had a distinctive form of burial in which the orientation of the body seems never to have varied. At Dhang Rial cultural continuity from this tradition to the present is indicated, though with a switch to the herding of humped, rather than humpless cattle and perhaps concomitant changes in settlement and transhumance patterns. East of Rumbek there is no evidence for occupation of the region from about A.D. 1000 or shortly thereafter until recent settlement by present-day Dinka Agar and Atuot. However, woven-mat pottery is known archaeologically from the woodlands to the south around the fourteenth century A.D. and is still manufactured in those regions nowadays. The undated archaeological sequence from Nyany, east of the Nile, contains pottery, the cultural connexions for which appear to lie far to the south and south-east rather than elsewhere within the Upper Nile basin.

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

The information from historical linguistics of relevance to the archaeological data is sparse, and indicates that the major language splits in the region probably occurred prior to the period to which most of the archaeology relates. Thus Ehret suggests that the 'proto-Dinka-Nuer' (with Atuot) split from the 'proto-Luo' perhaps early in the first millennium B.C., speakers of the former language being located around the Bahr-el-Ghazal confluence, with the proto-Luo to their immediate south and east.³⁸ The subsequent Nuer-Dinka split has been 'dated' glottochronologically to around A.D. 85, but one suspects that this 'date' should not be treated seriously.³⁹ Nevertheless, the linguistic evidence can be taken as indicating that a significant degree of divergence between the Nuer and Dinka had occurred prior to A.D. 1500.⁴⁰

ORAL INFORMATION

Several of the mound sites east of Rumbek possess names which Dinka Agar informants insisted were non-Dinka words; Bekjiu is one of them. These

³⁸ Christopher Ehret, 'Population movement and culture contact in the Southern Sudan, c. 3000 BC to AD 1000: a preliminary linguistic overview', in Mack and Robertshaw, *Culture history in the Southern Sudan*, 19-48. Ehret, on p. 27, uses the term 'pre-Luo', rather than 'proto-Luo'. However, since in a historical sense we are referring here and later in this essay to the ancestors of the Luo, we will use the term 'proto-Luo' in preference to 'pre-Luo', which appears to have a distinct linguistic meaning, but as a historical term suggests something other than Luo.

³⁹ J. McLaughlin, 'Tentative time depths for Nuer, Dinka and Anuak', *J. Ethiopian Studies*, v (1967), 13-27. Glickman, 'The Dinka and the Nuer' regards this 'date' as conservatively recent. However, given the various complexities of Nuer-Dinka relations, both present and historical, as outlined by Burton and Johnson, to put any trust in the glottochronological 'date' would seem to be extremely foolhardy. Furthermore, the concept of a linguistic 'split' with its connotations of a population separating at a single point in time into two isolated groups appears far too simplistic.

⁴⁰ Kelly, *Nuer conquest*, 11.

names are attributed to the 'Jur', a term which must be handled with care. In this part of the Sudan there are not only Western Nilotic-speaking Jur-Luo, but also Central Sudanic-speaking Jur-beli people, the latter located in the woodland south of the Agar. However, the situation is more confused by the fact that Dinka use the term 'Jur' to refer to any stranger who does not speak Dinka. Therefore references in Agar oral tradition to 'Jur' simply mean that the people in question were not *Jieng* (Dinka). Various Agar informants related that when their ancestors settled in the Rumbek region they encountered 'Jur' from whom they learned iron-working, the making of pottery and, according to one elder, agriculture. The Agar traditions indicate that they (the Agar) followed the Nile southwards until they reached the vicinity of Shambe, where, preceded by the Tuic, they turned westwards. Furthermore, several passers-by observing the excavations at Bekjiu remarked that, although the site had been occupied in the recent past by Dinka, earlier inhabitants of the site at different times were 'Jur' and 'Gell'. 'Gell' is a name which does not seem to appear in any of the ethnohistorical literature.⁴¹

Atuot oral traditions recount that their ancestors, entering the region east of Rumbek in the vicinity of the Payii river, i.e. very near the archaeological sites of Jokpel and Ngeni, encountered hunters, fishermen and iron-workers. Dinka neighbours were said to be already settled.⁴² On genealogical and linguistic evidence, Kelly⁴³ suggests that the date of the Atuot migration is likely to fall between roughly A.D. 1500 and 1620. If this is correct, then the hiatus in the settlement of this region may be of shorter duration than is suggested by the archaeological evidence outlined above.

A tradition concerning unnamed archaeological sites, located probably in the Rumbek area, relates how the Dinka Twij met a people, called the Ber Ajou, who built mounds and whom they relieved of their cattle.⁴⁴ A further tradition recalls how a red-skinned people called Luel were chased out of the area occupied by the Dinka Cic.⁴⁵ Luel are also said to have occupied the archaeological site of Dhang Rial, where they lived as cattle pastoralists familiar with iron until they were expelled or assimilated by immigrant Dinka.⁴⁶ Lienhardt suspects that the Luel were Luo-speakers.⁴⁷ It has been suggested that the cradle land of the latter, whence they began to move southwards some time during the first half of the present millennium, lies in the Rumbek region.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Information collected by J. P. R. Coote and others during the 1981 fieldwork in the Southern Sudan of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. The second 'l' in 'Gell' is redundant.

⁴² John W. Burton, 'God's ants: a study of Atuot religion' (Ph.D. thesis, S.U.N.Y. Stony Brook, 1978), 32.

⁴³ Kelly, *Nuer conquest*, 16.

⁴⁴ G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: the Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961), 187. The identity of the Ber Ajou is problematic: Southall, 'Nuer and Dinka are people', n. 17, suspects that they are Murle, who are also known as Beir.

⁴⁵ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 177.

⁴⁶ David *et al.* 'Excavations', 32. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), 187-8, cogently warns that the ascription of Dhang Rial to the Luel may well be 'a Pope Johanna case', that is, where a tradition is spuriously linked to an archaeological site to account for the latter's presence on the landscape.

⁴⁷ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 177, n. 2.

⁴⁸ J. P. Crazzolara, *The Lwoo; Part 1: Lwoo migrations*, Museum Combonianum no. 3

Who, then are the Gell, the Ber Ajou and the Luel? And how do they relate to the Luo and the Dinka? While nothing appears to be known of the Gell, a corpus of information on the Luel and the Beer has been assembled by Santandrea.⁴⁹ According to Santandrea's information, the Luel formerly occupied almost the entire Bahr-el-Ghazal region,⁵⁰ where they lived on artificial mounds. They kept cattle, were expert iron-workers, and made pottery much superior to that of the Dinka and Luo. Traditions record that they came originally from the north, whither those who were not assimilated by the Dinka later retreated, although a decline in population may have set in well before the arrival of the Dinka.⁵¹ The Beer were a separate people, on friendly terms with the Luel, occupying most of the region prior to the appearance of the Luel and the Luo.⁵² As the traditions from which Santandrea constructed his synthesis have on the whole not been published nor, it seems, subjected to critical analysis, one should clearly not place too much confidence in the veracity of the historical reconstructions.⁵³

DISCUSSION

There are numerous problems, both theoretical and methodological, and in this particular case compounded by the paucity of the available information, in attempting to combine oral traditions with archaeological data in order to produce a coherent narrative of the prehistory of a given region. Thus I shall not attempt to produce such a narrative for the Upper Nile basin; rather I shall restrict the discussion to one or two points of particular interest.

The approximate contemporaneity of the end of the occupation at the sites east of Rumbek by the makers of woven-mat impressed pottery with the beginning of the Luo migrations, as estimated from oral traditions, does perhaps suggest that the excavations at these sites may be documenting some aspects of proto-Luo society. If these Luo are the 'Jur' of Bekjiu then possibly the Gell are to be identified as Dinka-speakers; use of a name other

(Verona, 1950). The beginnings of the Luo migrations are conventionally dated to around the thirteenth or fourteenth century A.D.; see, for example, D. W. Cohen, 'The River-Lake Nilotes from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century', in B. A. Ogot (ed.), *Zamani: a Survey of East African History* (rev. ed., Nairobi, 1973), 135-49, at p. 141. This dating is based on the Shilluk king-list, which is tied where possible to other sources, and on the assumption of thirty years to a generation and thirteen to a reign; see B. A. Ogot, 'Kingship and statelessness among the Nilotes', in J. Vansina, R. Mauny and L. V. Thomas (eds.), *The Historian in Tropical Africa* (London, 1964), 284-304, at p. 289 n. 24. Given the uncertainties of this method of establishing chronological dates and the further difficulty of extrapolating from Shilluk origins to early movements from the Luo cradle-land, I prefer in this essay a cautiously vague dating for the beginnings of the Luo migrations.

⁴⁹ Santandrea equates the Beer with the Ber Ajou. Stefano Santandrea, *Ethno-geography of the Bahr el Ghazal (Sudan)*, Museum Combonianum no. 37 (Bologna, 1981), 161.

⁵⁰ Broadly defined to include the area administratively referred to on occasion as Lakes Province, as well as Bahr el Ghazal Province.

⁵¹ Santandrea, *Ethno-geography*, 149-58.

⁵² *Ibid.* 159.

⁵³ As an archaeologist, I note with satisfaction Santandrea's plea (*ibid.* 154) for archaeological research, though I fear that the results presented in this paper may well not measure up to his expectations.

than 'Jur' arouses the suspicion that Agar informants considered the Gell to be *Jieng* (Dinka).

If we accept the proposition that the sites east of Rumbek were occupied during the second half of the first millennium A.D. by proto-Luo speakers, then the evidence of the burial practices at Dhang Rial and Debbat Bangdit, which match those of Bekjiu, indicates that we should extend this correlation to these sites. Such a spread of Luo-speakers in the late first millennium is not incompatible with the historical evidence⁵⁴ nor with the present distribution of Luo (Jur-Luo, Shilluk)-speakers. Nevertheless, there are problems with this reconstruction: all the ethnographies are unanimous in stating that all the Sudanic and Nilotic people west of the Nile, including Luo, practise dental evulsion, a trait which was widespread through Eastern Africa probably well before the first millennium A.D. Thus the absence of this trait in the burials from Dhang Rial and Bekjiu remains a mystery. However, the nature of the graves and the orientation of the body in these burials are similar to those recorded in the ethnographies of the Dinka and Nuer, except that in the ethnographic accounts the body is contracted.⁵⁵ Accounts of Luo burials are less specific on details but do not appear to be very different.⁵⁶ By contrast, the Central Sudanic and Western Bari-speaking people dig graves with recesses to prevent soil falling on the body, which is contracted and often faces west or east depending upon the sex of the deceased.

A further possible objection to the archaeological correlation with the proto-Luo concerns the pottery. Woven-mat impressed pottery is at present made by Central Sudanic-speaking peoples.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Luo pottery in Kenya is now decorated with knotted-cord roulettes, but this technique may be relatively recent.⁵⁸ However, as was noted above, decorative technique may be a poor guide to ethnic identity, so at least for the moment we may hold to the view that both the woven-mat impressed pottery from east of Rumbek, as well as perhaps the twisted-cord rouletted pottery of Dhang Rial, may be attributable to the proto-Luo.

I have criticized elsewhere attempts at archaeological-linguistic correlations on the grounds that they are often futile exercises which fail to advance our understanding of the development of cultural systems and tend to explain everything by invoking migration.⁵⁹ Although the correlation proposed here between the archaeological sites in the Upper Nile basin and the proto-Luo is an archaeological-historical one, rather than archaeological-linguistic, there is nevertheless a danger of falling into the same sort of trap that I have previously tried to expose. Thus we should not pursue this argument further but instead emphasize the fact that a growing body of *archaeological* data appears to indicate that major changes in land use, settlement patterns and

⁵⁴ Cohen, 'The River-Lake Nilotes', and note 42 above.

⁵⁵ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 289; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956), 145.

⁵⁶ C. W. Hobley, *Eastern Uganda: an Ethnological Survey* (London, 1902).

⁵⁷ Indeed Siiriäinen ascribes the sites east of Rumbek to Central Sudanic-speakers; Siiriäinen, 'Two Southern Sudanese pottery traditions'.

⁵⁸ Robert Soper, 'Roulette decoration on African pottery: some technical distinctions and misconceptions and its significance in culture-historical reconstruction', *MILA* VII (1984), 62-82.

⁵⁹ Peter Robertshaw and David Collett, 'A new framework for the study of early pastoral communities in East Africa', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxiv, iii (1983), 289-301.

human demography occurred in the Upper Nile basin and adjacent regions in the first few centuries of the present millennium. Many of the details remain obscure but are hinted at both by the evidence for the appearance of humped cattle and concomitant changes in settlement layout at Dhang Rial and by the apparent hiatus in settlement east of Rumbek.

The appearance of humped cattle in the *toich* grasslands has been linked to the westward spread of Arabs through the region to the north of the Sudd following the over-running of Christian Nubia.⁶⁰ If it were perhaps the Nuer or their antecedents to whom this superior breed of cattle, possessing the ability to travel over long distances, was introduced, then we may be seeing one of the causes of the Nuer expansions that have been summarized by Kelly and Southall.⁶¹ The ensuing turmoil may have had its effect on the peoples living east of Rumbek, who during the first millennium had maintained a mixed agricultural-pastoral-hunting-fishing economy in the region sandwiched between the *toich* and the tsetse-infested woodlands to the south. Under pressure from aggressive pastoralists (Nuer or Atuot?), emigration may have taken place southwards into the woodlands, as the archaeological evidence from Jebel Tukyi perhaps testifies. Herein may lie the beginnings of the Luo migrations that eventually reached as far as Lake Victoria. Like Roland Oliver,⁶² I prefer to see these migrants as agricultural parvenus rather than wealthy pastoralists, for the tsetse regions of far southern Sudan must have exacted a heavy toll on their domestic stock.

I am painfully aware of several shortcomings in the quality of the data presented in this essay. However, it is offered in the belief that it nevertheless represents a first step in removing the prehistory of the Upper Nile basin from the realms of speculation. It is unfortunate that the 'burning question' of Nuer origins cannot as yet be addressed directly through archaeology; for that to happen, there is a need for more fieldwork, particularly some excavations within the Nuer heartland. Although our discussion has focused on the events of the early part of the present millennium, it may in fact be the evidence for the considerable antiquity of cattle-keeping and the existence of a widespread cultural tradition in the region in the late first millennium A.D. that will eventually be shown to be particularly revealing.

SUMMARY

The results of recent archaeological research in the Upper Nile basin are summarized and placed within the context of the anthropological-historical debate concerning the origins of the Nuer, Dinka and Atuot as distinct ethnic groupings. The archaeological evidence demonstrates a considerable antiquity for cattle-keeping in the region, the existence of what appears to be a very widespread cultural tradition in the late first millennium A.D. characterized by a distinctive form of burial, and a hiatus in settlement in the area east of Rumbek early in the present millennium, possibly around the time when humped cattle were introduced further north. The implications of these data for the explanation of the origins of the Luo migrations are discussed.

⁶⁰ David, 'The BIEA Southern Sudan expedition', 55; R. Oliver, 'Reflections on the British Institute's expeditions to the Southern Sudan, 1977-1981', in Mack and Robertshaw, *Culture History in the Southern Sudan*, 165-71; see p. 168.

⁶¹ Kelly, *Nuer Conquest*; Southall, 'Nuer and Dinka are people'.

⁶² Oliver, 'Reflections', 170.