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The KongoKing Project: 2012 Fieldwork Report from the Lower Congo Province (DRC)

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Abstract

In order to understand the origins of the Kongo kingdom, the KongoKing research group conducted a first survey in the area usually regarded as the former kingdom's provincial capital sites of Mbanza Nsundi and Mbanza Mbata in the Lower Congo Province of the DRC during the summer of 2012. Several test excavations and radiocarbon dates are starting to shed some light on the last five centuries in the area.

Introduction

KongoKing is a five-year inter-university research project uniting researchers from Ghent University (UGent), the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (RMCA), as well as from several partner institutions in Africa, Europe and the USA. It is mainly funded through a Starting Grant of the European Research Council under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). Its principal aim is to achieve a better understanding of the origins of the Kongo Kingdom, its early history and its homogenizing impact through an interdisciplinary

approach that relies mainly on archaeology and historical linguistics. For more general information on the research project, readers are referred to the project website (<http://www.kongoking.org>).

The archaeological research focuses on the kingdom's former capital or *mbanza* sites and their immediate hinterland in order to understand their origin and the processes of political centralization and economic integration as reflected in the archaeological record. We hope to document the rise of social complexity during the centuries preceding the first contacts between Kongo and Europe in 1483. Thereafter, for the last five centuries, archaeological data can be juxtaposed to an exceptionally rich body of historical sources, which are systematically archived and digitized as part of the project's documentation efforts.

The increase of political complexity, social stratification and economic integration led to the emergence of larger human settlements known as *mbanza* which are distinct from ordinary villages, commonly known as *vata* (pl. *mavata*) in Kikongo. The two major *mbanza* were situated in current-day Angola, i.e., Mbanza Kongo, the kingdom's central capital (see Thornton 2000), and Mbanza Soyo, its most important port town. The kingdom's provincial capitals were also called *mbanza*, e.g., Mbanza Mpangu for the province of Mpangu. Systematic excavations in these pre-colonial town sites are crucial to gain a better understanding of how this specific kind of early urbanism rose in West Central Africa. The archaeological research planned in northern Angola, the Lower Congo provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) intends to identify the precise location of the kingdom's provincial capitals, to understand when they were established and how they evolved. It also aims at gaining more insight into the layout of *mbanza* sites by locating their symbolic and ceremonial center, their main cemeteries, their most important market places and their relation with the major long distance trade routes documented by early reports and maps.

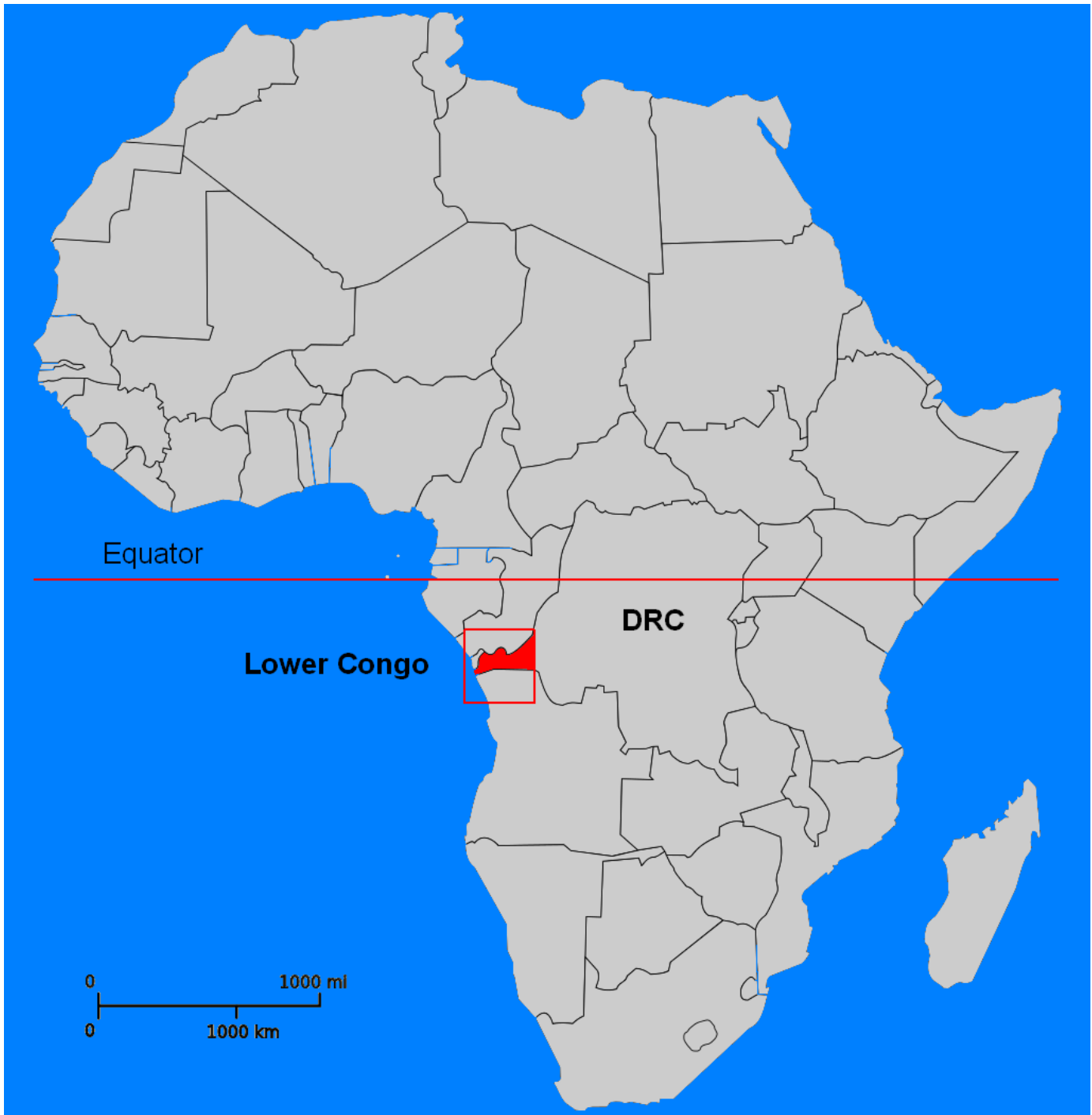


Figure 1: Location of the DRC Lower Congo province, enlarged in Figure 2.

No systematic archaeological research has been conducted so far on the origins of the Kongo kingdom, even if the question attracted archaeologists' interest (Clist 1991, 2012; de Maret 1982, 2002, 2006; Esteves 1989). Our knowledge of the Iron Age in the area remains also rather sketchy

(cf. Clist and Lanfranchi 1991, 1992; de Maret 1982, 1986, 1990; de Maret and Stainier 1999; Denbow 1990, 2012; Gutierrez 2008; Kanimba Misago 1991; Lanfranchi 1991; Pinçon 1991; da Silva Domingos 2003, 2009; Valdeyron and da Silva Domingos 2009; 2012). Moreover, important collections of

pottery and other types of archaeological artefacts are curated at the Royal Museum of Central Africa. Part of these collections has been studied already (cf. Clist 1982; de Maret 1972; Gosselain 1988; Rochette 1989; Vandenhoute 1973).

The 2012 archaeological fieldwork campaign took place in August 2012 in the Lower Congo Province of the DRC where, based on oral traditions collected in the 16th and 17th centuries AD, most historians have situated the origins of the Kongo Kingdom (e.g., Thornton 2001, and

see Figure 1 for the location of the Lower Congo). Surveys and preliminary excavations focused on the precise location of two provincial capital sites, i.e., Mbanza Nsundi and Mbanza Mbata, and the oldest church in the country studied in 1938 at Ngongo Mbata (Figure 2). The objective of this paper is to present the main outcomes of this fieldwork campaign, which resulted in the discovery of fourteen archaeological sites, the test excavation of 319m² on four specific sites and the determination of seven AMS radiocarbon dates.



Figure 2: Location of the Kindoki 4 and the Ngongo Mbata “church” sites in the Lower Congo Province, DRC.

Results of 2012 Fieldwork

Mbanza Nsundi

The modern village of Mbanza Nsundi is situated about 10km to the northwest of the small town of Kisantu (Mbanza Ngungu Territory, Cataracts District). It belongs to a cluster of villages, which can be spatially linked with the capital of the ancient Nsundi province, thanks to oral traditions collected by R.P. De Munck. According to Cuvelier (1946: 349), « *Les données sont multiples pour localiser Mbanza Nsundi avec exactitude, à proximité de Bololo* », Bololo being situated 5km southwest of Mbanza Nsundi. In 1973, Pierre de Maret carried out a surface survey around Mbanza Nsundi in the company of R.P. De Munck and was eventually taken to a series of several “Princes” graves. During the same mission, he did research on the fashioning of *Ndibu* pottery in the nearby village of Kimpanda (de Maret 1974). Interviews with the chiefs of the villages of Kindoki, Lemfu, the current Mbanza Nsundi, and Songololo, carried out during a preparatory mission in May 2012, allowed the confirmation of the presence of the tomb of supposedly a *mani Nsundi*, a traditional Nsundi chief, on the hill known as Kindoki. According to Laman (1957: 138), the last *mani Nsundi* was buried in 1835. During the same interviews in May 2012, the existence of a former church was reported on the same hill, which is in line with historical testimonies which signal the existence of a church on the site of the former Mbanza Nsundi since at least the 17th century. In an account from 1640 to Pope Urban VIII, François de Soveral writes « *Dans le duché de Sundi, il y a une église paroissiale avec un curé, [...]* » (French translation by Cuvelier and Jadin, 1954: 509).

The search for *mani Nsundi* tombs and traces of an old stone church, as the one at Ngongo Mbata (Bequaert 1940; cf. infra), led to the prospections executed at the beginning of August 2012 on the hilltop called Kindoki (05°04’069 S; 15°01’403 E), near the modern village of Mbanza Nsundi.

We excavated 279m² in order to study a multi-component archaeological site situated on a small area on top of the hill that measures approximately 1,000 x 500 m (Figure 3). Four occupation layers were identified, one from the Stone Age and three from the Later Iron Age.

- Stone Age 1: a 2m² trench was dug to collect palaeo-environmental samples (down to -3m) and in the course of this excavation a Stone Age layer was discovered at -2.65m. It consisted of a core, several blocks and a few large flakes of jasper.
- Late Iron Age 1: a layer buried at -60cm contained mostly local pottery, one decorated clay pipe bowl, and a fragment of whitish glass. Two AMS radiocarbon dates taken from samples collected in the archaeological layer, and in a small pit dug from it, are congruent (Beta-333283: 340 +/- 30 BP from the layer; Beta-333284: 310 +/- 30 BP from the pit) and are calibrated to AD 1450-1650 at 2 sigma.
- Late Iron Age 2: a layer buried at c. -40cm contained mostly local pottery and was associated with a single foreign potsherd (outside blue glaze, inside greenish glaze), two fragments of green glass, fragments of terracotta and steatite pipes, and a small block of reddish clay with the imprint of a branch (part of a house wall?). One AMS radiocarbon date taken from a sample collected in this archaeological layer (Beta-333286: 250 +/- 30 BP) was calibrated to AD 1530-1550 or 1630-1670 at 2 sigma.
- Late Iron Age 3: what was first thought to be the foundation of a stone church, similar to the one excavated in 1938 at Ngongo Mbata (Bequaert 1940), turned out to be a small cemetery with 11 tombs encased and covered with stones (Figure 4). A few meters

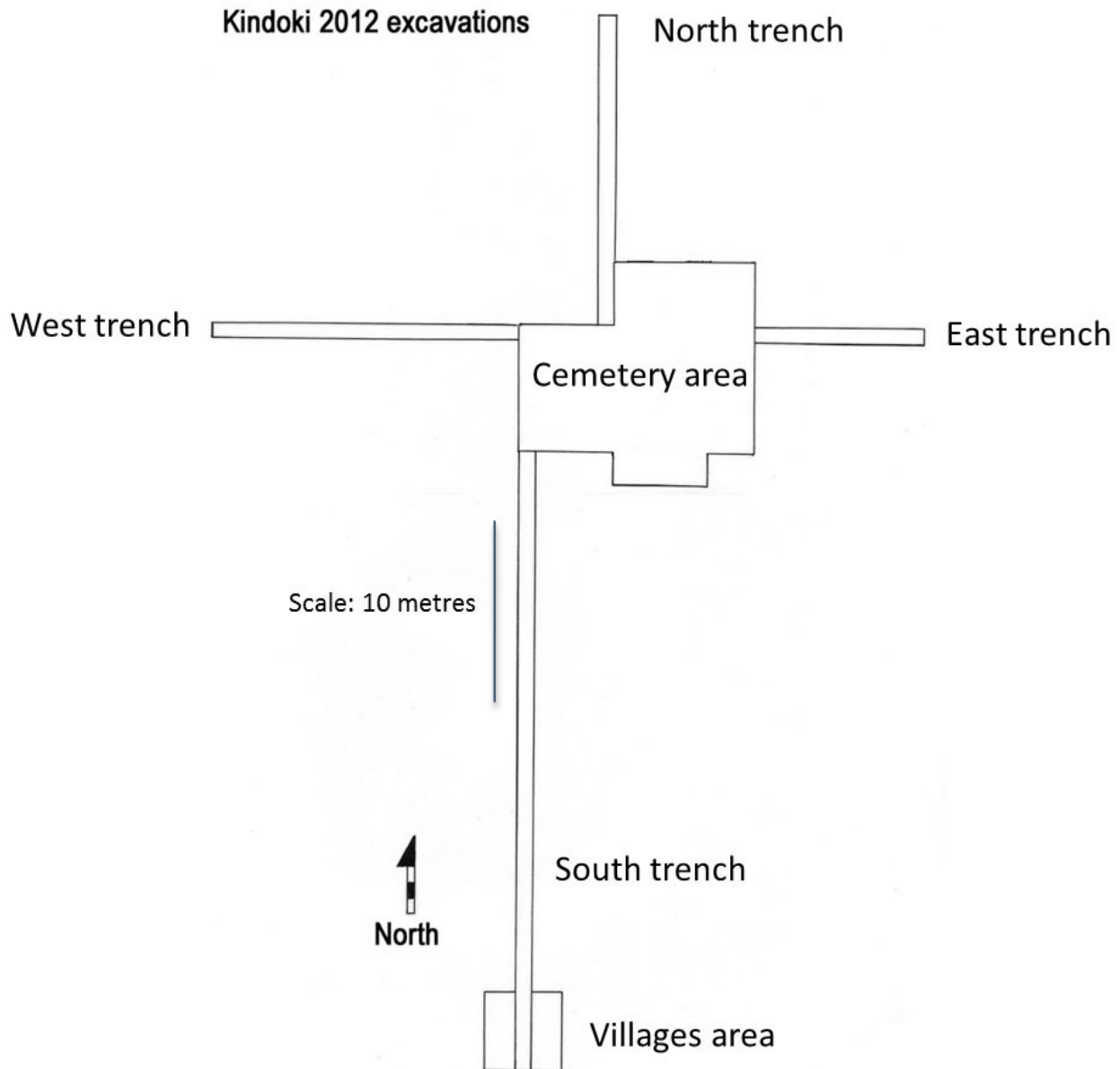


Figure 3: Kindoki 4 site. Location of the four test trenches excavated, radiating out from the central cemetery area.

to the west, an occupation layer was found containing, amongst others, a grinding stone and a grinder *in situ*. A pit from this layer was also identified (Figure 4: number 10). In addition, we discovered the remains of what is probably an earth wall running from the southwest to the northeast (Figure 4: number 14). It appears to be intersected by the installation of tomb number 8.

The findings and the local stratigraphy

led us tentatively to distinguish three successive occupation periods in LIA3.

- Late Iron Age 3a: An occupation layer is found a few meters to the west of the tombs of the Late Iron Age 3c period. Artefacts are rare in this layer; the layer was explored over only 12m² (cf. Figure 3). A grinding stone and a grinder were uncovered lying on the occupation floor, while a pit structure (feature number 10) of c. 2.50 x

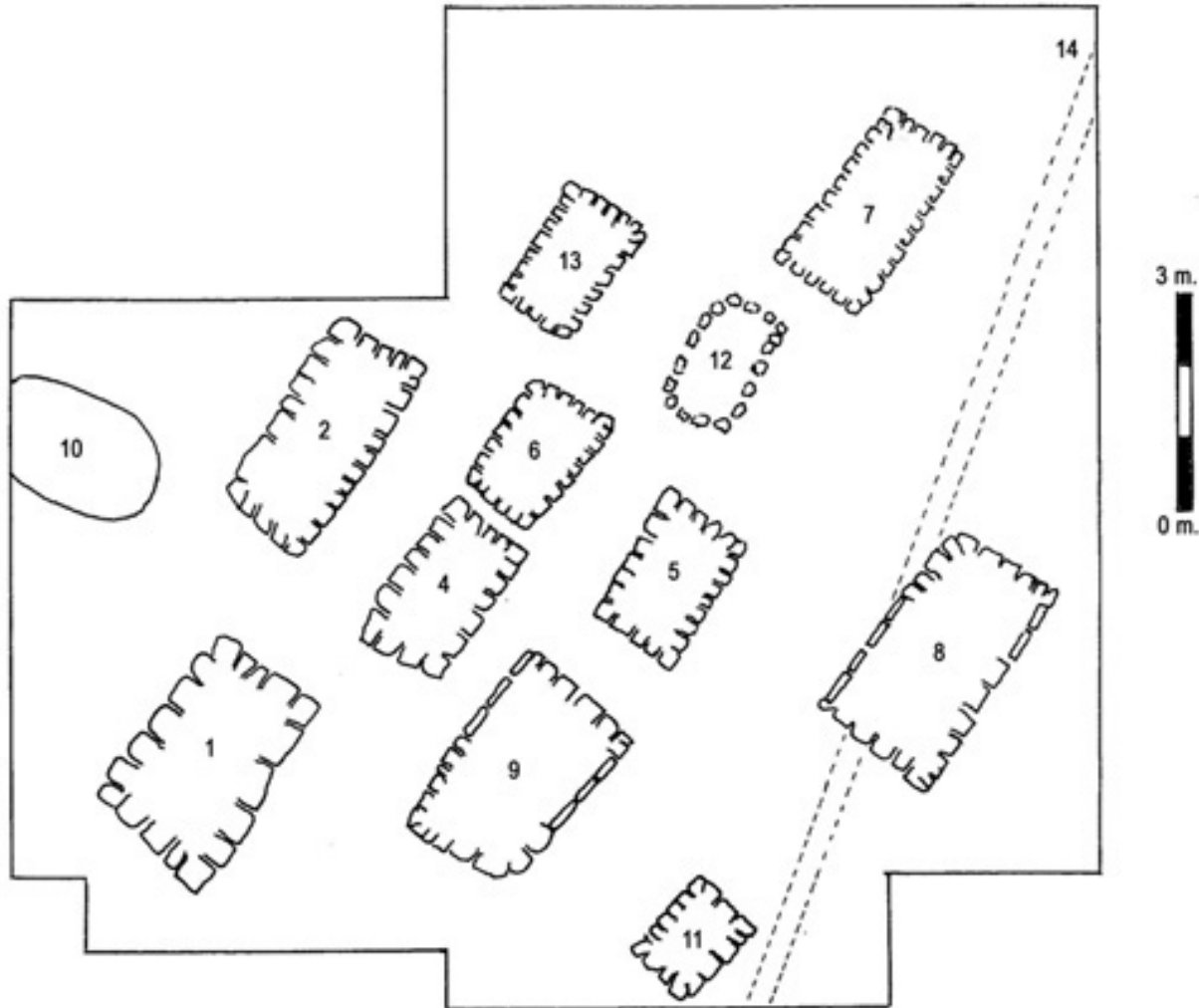


Figure 4: Kindoki 4 site. Central area of excavations. Position of the 11 tombs, feature number 10 (deep pit), and feature 14 (earth wall).

2m and 1.30m depth was excavated. A few potsherds, charcoal and stones were found in it. Charcoal from the pit at -40cm was dated by AMS: Beta-333282: 180 +/- 30 BP, calibrated at 2 sigma to AD 1650-1690 or 1730-1810. The pit is roughly oriented northwest / southeast. This is radically different from the tombs (cf. infra).

- Late Iron Age 3b: The base of a wall running close to the east of tomb number 11 and under tomb number 8, is thus earlier than at least part of the cemetery. For the time being, it cannot be associated with the Late Iron Age 3a remains.
- Late Iron Age 3c: The 11 tombs from the cemetery must be posterior to both the wall and the Late Iron Age 3a layer, as the stone cairns covering the tombs have elements that slid down over the old LIA 3c soil surface. It is also unlikely that a domestic area would be so close to a cemetery, taking into account the Kongo custom to strictly separate the two (e.g., Mertens 1943: 343).

After mapping the cemetery, the tombs seem to make up two groups based on their respective size: larger structures (tombs 1, 2, 7, 8, 9; about

2.80 x 1.40m, labelled Group A) and smaller ones (tombs 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13; about 2 x 1m, labelled Group B). All of these are oriented in the same direction (southwest to the north-east), in a cluster with no other tombs in a c. 40m radius. Two tombs were test excavated: tombs 9 and 13. Both of these share the same basic characteristics: the pit was dug down to 1.80m, and once completely filled, the pit was surrounded by stones laid on their side or laid flat. The rectangular area was then covered with flat-lying stones constituting a kind of pavement. Tomb 9, part of Group A, has a distinctive feature: once the deceased was deposited in the pit, it was filled up regularly by successive layers of earth and flat stones identical to the one topping the pit. Tomb 9 thus had two superposed stone pavements below the top one. While only a few teeth and fragments of bones were found in tomb 13, a well-preserved skeleton was found in tomb 9. This may result from the protection offered by the three stone pavements above it. No grave goods were found in tomb 13. The skeleton of tomb 9 was found with a musket with a flintlock – the stone still being in position in the mechanism – and possibly a doglock on its left side, two iron bracelets on its right arm, and a necklace made of white and blue glass beads. Charcoal close to the right arm was AMS dated to Beta-333285:190 +/- 30 BP calibrated to AD 1650-1690 or 1730-1810.

The remaining tombs will be excavated during the 2013 campaign. It is likely that the larger tombs of Group A were for adults, while tombs of Group B were for children.

- Late Iron Age 4: All the archaeological material found in the upper 20cm have been grouped together and no attempt was made to radiocarbon date it for obvious reasons.

It is unlikely that the area of Kindoki 4 so far studied was at the center of the old provincial capital of the Nsundi province. One would expect a much higher density of refuse from such an important settlement. A large-scale survey and test excavation on the Kindoki and other surrounding hilltops is

planned during the 2013 summer fieldwork.

Mbanza Mbata

Historical sources suggest that the capital of the Mbata province was repeatedly relocated through time, in contrast to Mbanza Nsundi whose position appears to have remained relatively stable. Cuvelier (1946: 346), for instance, claims that '*Mbanza Mbata (qui changea d'emplacement plusieurs fois) se trouvait vers le milieu du XVIIe siècle, à peu près à l'endroit où se trouve actuellement le village de Malau*'. Malau (05°47'00 S and 15°09'39 E) is situated on the left bank of the Inkisi River. In 1662, J. de Montesarchio coming from Nsongo village on the right bank of the Inkisi, crossed the river on a liana bridge before meeting the mani Mbata at his *mbanza* (de Bouveignes and Cuvelier 1951:149-150.). It is assumed that Mbanza Mbata was originally located on the Inkisi right bank until the so-called *Jaga* invasion in 1649, possibly where the modern village of Mbata Kulunsi or Makela (05°43'23 S and 15°08'41 E) is situated (Van Moorsel 1964).

The present-day Mbanza Mbata is an abandoned village whose hilltop lies near the Angolan border (05°50'893 S and 15°06'500 E). A single test trench of 1 x 2m was dug there in August 2012. Only potsherds and fragments of white clay African tobacco pipes were recovered between the surface and -20cm. Further excavations will be carried out in the summer of 2013. Preliminary analyses indicate that the pottery found there is possibly younger than the one found in Ngongo Mbata (cf. infra).

In 1938, M. Bequaert then working for the *Musée du Congo Belge* at Tervuren, was asked by local missionaries searching for the grave of one of their predecessors who had been killed in the area in the 17th century, to help them excavate a stone building at Ngongo Mbata (05°47'081 S and 15°07'026 E). This campaign resulted in the identification of a church with at least 35 tombs inside (Bequaert 1940; and Figure 5). The church

was built on a 2m high platform made of earth collected probably in its vicinity. Vandenhouste (1973) provides a detailed analysis of Bequaert’s finds in his unpublished MA thesis and sketches a more complex picture of this site than what had been published earlier (Bequaert 1940; Jadin 1955; Tourneur 1939). He concluded that most of the burials dated back to the 18th century and were dug into the ruins of a pre-existing stone church. The site’s stratigraphy indicates that some of the church’s stone walls must have been older than others. A few tombs were found below the oldest wall and thus pre-dated the stone building. Either the stone church was built on a burial site or there was an earlier church in perishable material incorporating tombs. According to 18th century texts, the stone church cannot have predated 1747 (de Bologne

1747: 99).

In August 2012, we were able to trace back to the site, which stands as what must be by far the oldest church in what is now the DRC. We opened three 1 x 2m test trenches to determine the stratigraphy and to correlate new information with the old data from 1938 and its analysis from 1973 (cf. Figure 5). While the north and west trenches only showed a humic layer and a single archaeological layer above the sterile sandy-clay soil, the south trench immediately uncovered a stone alignment under the humic layer at -30cm embedded in three distinct destruction layers. The extension of the trench along 12m² resulted in the discovery of a small stone building of 3.80 x 2.80m whose long axis is parallel to the church’s

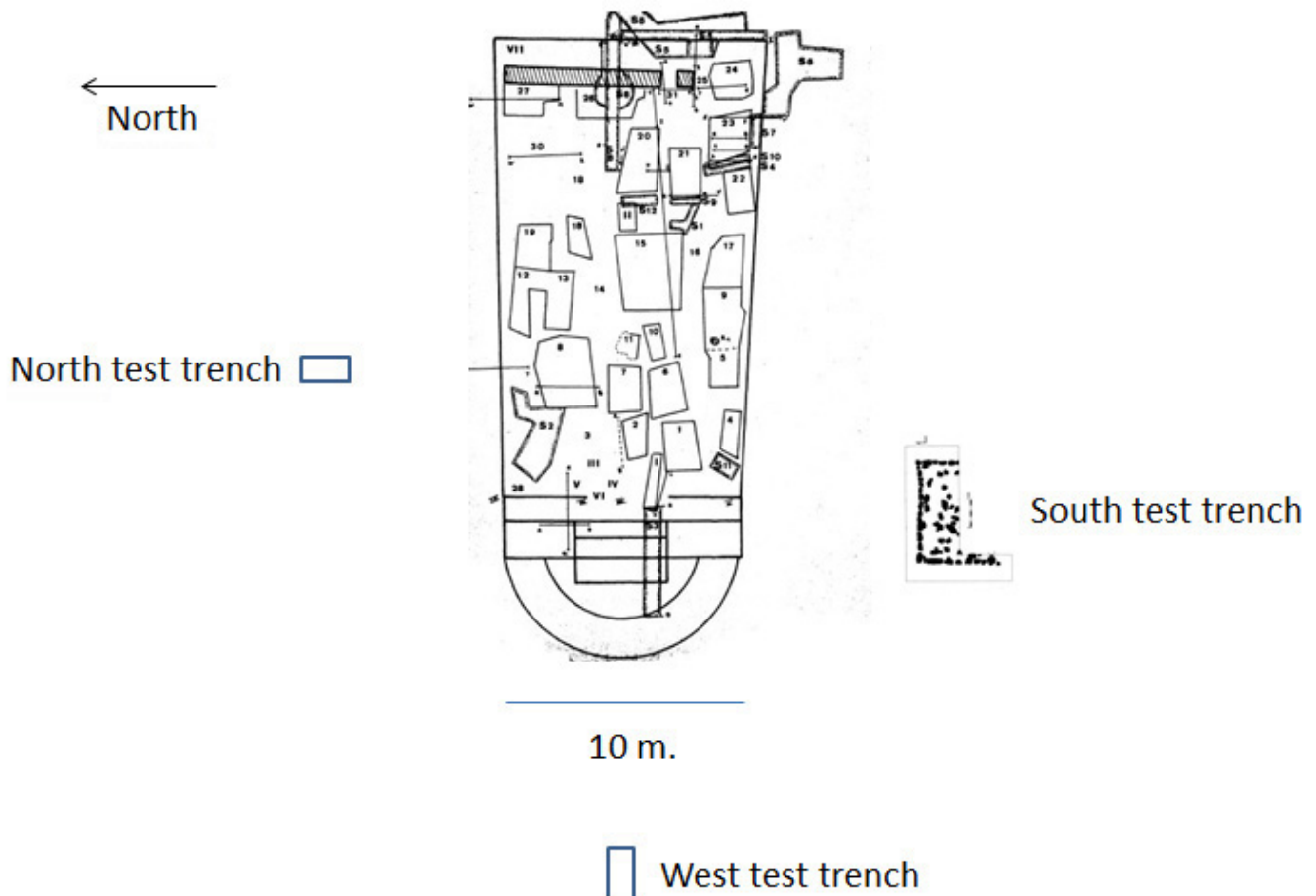


Figure 5: Ngongo Mbata “church” site. Location of the old 17th to 18th century church excavated in 1938, and location of the 2012 test trenches.

south limit 8m away. Artefacts are few in number, but some decorated potsherds and a gunflint were collected. Oral testimonies from the women of the nearby Kimfuti village who cultivate there, and our test pits suggest the existence of other stone structures extending along the south wall of the old church.

An AMS radiocarbon date was processed whose sample came from the first destruction layer of the small building: Beta-347644:120 +/- 30 BP calibrated to AD 1670-1780. This chronology is very similar to the one established by J. Vandenhoute in 1973 on the basis of the artefacts excavated in 1938, such as a Portuguese coin and several religious medals from Italy dating to the late 17th and 18th centuries (Tourneur 1939).

The old village site of Ngongo Mbata (05°46'429 S and 15°06'902 E) is situated 2km north of Ngongo Mbata church. This hilltop was abandoned one generation ago. Historical sources suggest that as early as 1584, Ngongo Mbata was an important trading post, situated at the crossroads of major commercial routes within the Kongo Kingdom (Hildebrand 1940: 102, 230, 299). As for Mbanza Nsundi, the challenge remains in finding where the center of this built-up area was located, as it kept moving.

In an attempt to locate Ngongo Mbata “old village” four test trenches were made, i.e. 22m² in total. While the AMS radiocarbon date from trench number 1 turned out to be modern (Beta-347645), the archaeological material collected between the surface and a maximum of -40cm looks homogeneous with African and European potsherds, glass fragments, glass beads, clay tobacco pipes, and some rare iron objects. Surprisingly, a Late Stone Age layer made up of quartz debitage was discovered in trench 4 at only -20 to -40cm.

Finally, the area around the Mbanza Nsundi and Mbanza Mbata test excavations was also surveyed. Most of the results relate to the Stone Age and the artefacts were surface collected from erosion

surfaces. Some finds were in stratigraphical contexts. Looking at better contexts in the archaeological record – i.e., Gombe point in Kinshasa (Cahen 1976, 1978), plateaux Bateke (Cahen and Mortelmans 1973), Mantsetsi, Kwimba, Ntende, and Dimba (Lavachery 1990) – they are likely to relate to the Late Tshitolean (“Tshitolien récent”).

Conclusions

Before completing more systematic excavations, the following tentative conclusions can be drawn from our initial 2012 fieldwork:

- Preliminary excavations in both areas resulted in evidence for open air stratified deposits of Late Iron Age date;
- The Kindoki 4 LIA sequence spans from the 15th to the 19th centuries;
- The Ngongo Mbata LIA sequence is tentatively dated between the 17th and the 18th centuries;
- Excavations at Kindoki 4 provided archaeological evidence for funerary practices situated between the late 17th and late 18th centuries, which closely resembles Kongo burial customs reported at the end of the 19th century (e.g., Weeks 1914);
- No potsherds related to the hitherto established pottery groups from the Lower Congo (Mortelmans 1962) have been found during the 2012 excavations, neither at Kindoki, nor at Ngongo Mbata;
- The former centers of both *mbanza* are still in need of identification; especially in the case of Mbanza Mbata. This may turn out to be very challenging, since the population of the capital of the former Mbata province

is known to have been rather low density. Moreover, it moved from the right to the left bank of the Inkisi River (e.g., Hildebrand 1940). The testimony of Antonio de Teruel from 1648 is very telling in this respect: “*Even though the Duchy of Bata is very extensive and populous, and this duke is very important and recognizes the vassalage of several Gentile Kings, as they have told us, with all this the city or Banza of Bata is not very large, because only some of these lords and their servants live here, and a few fidalgos with their families.*” (English translation in Thornton 1983: 39). We intend to identify the moving centers of Mbanza Mbata and especially to locate the oldest one, rather than finding the one and only Mbanza Mbata.

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