Lacustrine Systems and the Transition to Early Food-Producing Societies in the East African Rift: What Role for Southern Ethiopia and Northern Lake Turkana?

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Résumé

During the Quaternary period, tropical Africa experienced major climatic upheavals linked to orbital variations in insolation, which modulated the intensity of the African monsoon. These cyclical dynamics led to alternating dry and wet phases, among which the African Humid Period 1 (AHP 1) stands out as one of the most significant. Beginning around 15,000 cal BP and lasting approximately 7,000 years, this favorable period was nevertheless punctuated by brief but notable arid episodes, particularly around 12 ky, 8.2 ky, and 4.2 ky cal BP. The causes of these climatic interruptions remain the focus of ongoing multidisciplinary research in paleoclimatology and hydrology. The East African Rift Valley, rich in lake systems, provides exceptional sedimentary archives for tracking these hydrological dynamics regionally. Lakes such as Abhé (on the border between Djibouti and Ethiopia), Gamari, Afambo, Ziway, Shala, Langano, Chamo, Turkana (between Ethiopia and Kenya), and Lake Victoria reveal significant fluctuations: regressions, transgressions, changes in biodiversity, and redefined paleo-shorelines. These transformations deeply impacted human societies, evidenced by numerous archaeological sites along these lakeshores dating from the end of the Pleistocene.

Yet the northern region of Lake Turkana, in southern Ethiopia, remains largely understudied from this perspective, despite its high potential. These lacustrine settings offer an opportunity to explore the role of the environment in shaping lifeways during a pivotal moment in human history: the transition from foraging economies to mixed systems incorporating domestic ruminant herding. Societies of this period proved particularly innovative and resilient: they adapted to environmental constraints, developed broad exchange networks, organized mobility, defined territories, initiated demographic shifts, and reconfigured their spatial practices.

This paper has three goals:

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To synthesize known adaptive trajectories between the end of the Pleistocene and the Middle Holocene, drawing on research from southwestern Djibouti, the central-western Rift Valley in Ethiopia, and northern Kenya;

To review current knowledge of the northern Lake Turkana region in Ethiopia;

To outline a potential research program in the southern Omo Valley focused on these questions.