

## Early social complexity in the Dogon Country (Mali) as evidenced by a new chronology of funerary practices



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### ABSTRACT

The emergence and evolution of social complexity remains a major topic in African later prehistory. This paper aims to examine this question in the Dogon Country in Mali by reassessing the chronocultural sequence of *Toloy-Tellem-Dogon* that was defined 40 years ago. Our discovery of two new sites on the Bandiagara Escarpment with coiled clay tombs (Dourou-Boro and Yawa-vaches), the systematic dating of these structures, the re-analysis of similar buildings in Pégué, as well as the establishment of a typology of architectural techniques, led us to propose a continuous chronocultural evolution for these structures, now considered to be primary burials and not granaries, over about 1800 years. Detailed study of the ceramics also indicates the evolution of local traditions, progressively integrating new elements following many contacts with neighboring regions during the 1st millennium AD. Finally, the chemical analysis of the glass beads discovered in Dourou-Boro shows that these societies were using beads made in the Middle East at least from the last quarter of the 1st millennium AD on. The new data presented in this article highlight, on one hand, the originality, antiquity, and longevity of burial practices indicating a strong local cultural identity, and, on the other hand, the participation of pre-Dogon populations (long reputed for being isolated from the outside world) in broader African socioeconomic dynamics.

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### Introduction

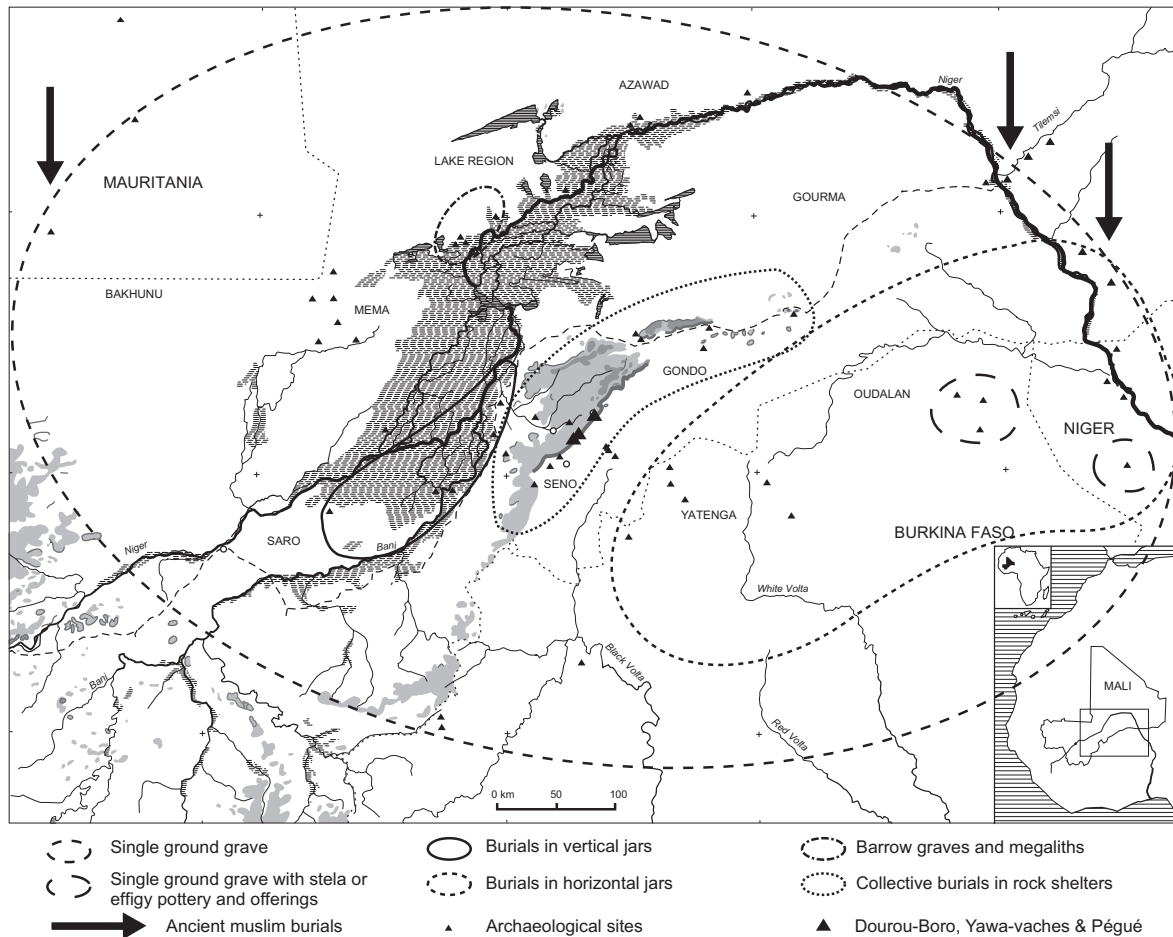
Located in the heart of the Republic of Mali, at the interface between the Sahel and savanna zones, the Dogon Country has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1989. The area includes a sandstone plateau ending in an escarpment, called the Bandiagara Escarpment, and a vast sandy plain, the Seno-Gondo (Fig. 1). Inhabited for several centuries mainly by Dogon millet farmers and Fulani herders, this region, partly because of its geography, is often considered as having historically been a refuge zone, where populations moved to live on the margin of centralized states. These populations regularly endured aggressions by empires established along the Niger River or in the Volta Basin (Gallay, 1994; Holder, 2001; Mayor et al., 2005). However, this situation did not exist prior to the 13th century AD, as shown by our recent archaeological research on several sites located on the Bandiagara

Escarpment and in the Seno plain, inhabited during the 1st millennium BC and AD (Huysecom et al., submitted for publication).

Studies carried out between 1964 and 1974 by researchers from the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands (Bedaux, 1972, 1991; Bedaux and Lange, 1983) revealed collective burials, in rock shelters in the Escarpment between the 11th and 16th centuries AD. These burials were protected by small walls of hand-molded mud brick, sometimes reinforced by wooden pillars, or by stone walls covered with clay. The dead were dressed or wrapped in a blanket and accompanied by offerings and personal objects from everyday life. A few rock shelters used for an ancestor cult were located close to these burial caves. At the same time, these researchers discovered circular constructions built with coiled clay in several rock shelters, sometimes coated with clay and decorated with finger impressions. These were interpreted as granaries, first built in the 2nd–3rd centuries BC during a cultural phase called "Toloy" and then reused as burial chambers during the 11th century AD by the "Tellem" (meaning "those before" in several Dogon languages). Construction techniques, as well as the associated pottery, were considered crucial to distinguish these two cultural phases, separated by a hiatus of more than a thousand years. The builders and re-users of these structures were thus described as two different populations, living in the area prior to the arrival of

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**Fig. 1.** Map showing the location of Bandiagara Escarpment (at the center), the three sites studied (large triangles) and the different burial practices in the Niger Bend (after Mayor, 2011a).

the Dogon in the 15th–16th centuries AD. This “Toloy-Tellem-Dogon” chronocultural sequence has been used without being questioned in the scientific and general literature for forty years, despite the rarity of data and ambiguity in the discovery contexts used to reconstruct population history, material cultures, and burial practices.

Our study is part of a body of research that is currently being developed in sub-Saharan West Africa (see Magnavita et al., 2009; Dueppen, 2012) in order to better understand the emergence of the social complexity and the integration of populations in long-distance global exchange networks during the last two millennia, looking at rural places instead of looking at cities, which have already been the center of the researchers’ attention for a long time.

Our archaeological research, in progress on the Bandiagara Plateau since 1997 (Huysecom, 2002) has already demonstrated the existence of human occupations from the 7th to 13th century AD, thus filling the most recent part of the cultural hiatus observed on the nearby Escarpment (Mayor et al., 2005; Mayor, 2011a). Other excavations on the Seno Plain on settlement mounds such as Damassogou, Nin-Bèrè, Ambèrè-Dougou (Guindo, 2011), and Sardia (Huysecom et al., 2010, 2011, submitted for publication), as well as on the plateau in Kokolo (Keita, 2011), indicate the establishment of villages inhabited by agro-pastoralists in the last centuries BC, and the first centuries AD, now entirely bridging the presumed cultural gap.

In this paper, we propose a new model for the evolution of funeral practices in the Bandiagara escarpment, in order to address the question of early social complexity from the end of the first

millennium BC in the Niger Bend. This research relies on a study conducted in 2007 and 2008 on coiled clay structures in several rock shelters of the Escarpment, which allows to reexamine the development of burial rituals, and the chronocultural sequence hitherto commonly accepted. Our approach involves the setting of a precise chronology of these coiled clay structures at two sites newly discovered by our team, Dourou-Boro and Yawa-vaches, as well as in Pégué-Cave A, previously studied by the team of the University of Utrecht and sampled again for our current research. First, we established a typology of the funeral architecture based on detailed descriptions of the structures of each site. Then, we elaborated a precise sequence of AMS radiocarbon dates on unburned short-lived vegetal materials incorporated as temper in the coiled clay buildings. In addition, our study of the new ceramic assemblage from Dourou-Boro, and reanalysis of pottery attributed to the “Toloy” phase (Bedaux and Lange, 1983), conserved at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, was aiming at reexamining the post-Neolithic cultural sequence of the Dogon Country. Finally, chemical analysis of glass beads of Dourou-Boro gave us the opportunity to better understand the economic network of populations inhabiting this remote region during the 1st millennium AD.

### Social complexity in the Niger Bend

An important question in African archaeology is the way social complexity has emerged, persisted and changed over time, and how it has been expressed in terms of status and material culture.

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