

Equatorial influences in the Prehistoric Cultures of Southern Africa

BY

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For many years now it has been apparent that the western equatorial regions of the African continent were, during the Stone Age, the home of cultures which showed as great a degree of specialisation in their stone industries as those of any other part of the continent. This degree of specialization must have been due fundamentally to the nature of the environment in which these cultures flourished rather than to any differences in physical stock, or inherited culture tradition of the makers. These would, however, have played an important part once man had established himself in equatorial forest country.

The evidence available suggests that, with the exception of the dry period at the end of the Lower and beginning of the Middle Pleistocene when for a time the makers of Oldowan Pebble Culture tools penetrated the peripheral parts of the forest country, it was not until the end of the Earlier Stone Age that man was able to establish himself permanently in moist evergreen forest country. Sites of Acheulian age are quite rare in this type of country and they are by no means common in the moist semi-deciduous or dry deciduous forest country either. Those that do occur show little or no difference in technique or typology from the Acheulian of the savannah and grassland regions where the Chelles-Acheul culture had developed. It is apparent, therefore, that the spread of human culture to the forest country was most probably an outcome of the widespread dessication that can be shown to have taken place at the end of the Kanjeran pluvial. Once established in Equatoria, however, (if we may refer to the region of the Congo basin by this name) the culture seems to have undergone a fairly rapid transformation as a result of a more balanced adaptation to an

ecology very different from that in which it had grown and flourished. As the forest retreated, so man advanced. During the succeeding Gamblian pluvial the ecological changes became even more emphasized with a correspondingly greater adaptation and degree of specialisation in man's material equipment. One only has to look at the typological differences between the Kalinian or Lupemban, on the one hand, and the several Middle Stone Age variants of East and South Africa on the other, to see that environment has played more than a minor part in moulding the particular forms of these different artefact complexes.

The Congo Basin has been described as «the nuclear region of Africa» and there is some evidence to suggest that this may have been as true of certain periods in prehistory as it is of historical times.

It has been suggested that in Stone Age times the Congo basin was one of the «retreat areas» to which man retired when the drier regions, which seem always to have been preferred, became too dry to support human life adequately. Conversely, with an amelioration of climatic conditions and an improved vegetation pattern, man moved back into those parts that he had previously had to vacate, bringing with him new forms of tool and new techniques for acquiring food that he had learned during his years of «exile». Exactly how far such a theory presents a true picture of events it is not possible as yet to ascertain owing to the incompleteness of the evidence. Recent indications show that it is unlikely that the «pluvials» and «inter-pluvials» represented the extremes of climate that would seem to be implicit in the terms themselves. It is permissible to employ them in a relative sense only and it is by no means so certain that human migrations were of the magnitude that the theory suggests. That local regional movements took place few are likely to deny, but in the writer's opinion the theory of the abandonment of vast areas on account of increasing dessication, especially in the savannah regions, does not take sufficient account of human or animal tenacity and adaptability.

During the Kanjeran/Gamblian interpluvial and the earlier part of the Gamblian itself, large parts of central and south-eastern Africa were occupied by the makers of the Sangoan complex. It has been supposed that this culture had its origin in Equatoria and spread from the Congo Basin as far south as Natal and as far north as the Sudan.

Immediately outside what is believed to have been its original forest home, many of the characteristic stone tools found in the culture's homeland are well represented. The further away from the focal area

we go, however, the less apparent do the supposed connections with it become. It may be questioned whether such a pattern is really indicative of a spread of Sangoan culture from Equatoria or whether it might not simply indicate that changes in diet due to climatic changes had necessitated the introduction of new methods of securing food and enabled man to move into previously uninhabitable country. In time these changes found expression in a new stone industry. For example the high proportion of woodworking tools present in most Sangoan assemblages may simply be man's answer to the necessity to make his home in a different type of country and need not necessarily imply that there is any more connection between, say, the Sangoan of the Congo and that in Natal other than that they both reflect the broad pattern of known cultures in wooded country at that particular period of man's development.

The pattern can equally well be explained, therefore, by assuming that in the most heavily forested country the greatest specialisation in woodworking tools will be found. In open savannah and thicket country the wood working tools will be reduced to a minimum and be generally of an unspecialised form, while there will be less necessity to replace the older traditional forms since no very great change will have taken place in the environment.

Which one of these theories approaches nearest to the correct answer will probably only be resolved by stratigraphical evidence. If the theory that the Congo Basin was the focal point in which the Sangoan developed and from which it spread, is correct then the earlier and developmental stages should occur only in that region and at an earlier time than the fully developed Sangoan appears elsewhere.

In so far as it is permissible to speak of a Sangoan or a Lupemban culture when all that is left to us are the stone implements and all knowledge of the social or economic organisation of their makers is lost for ever, then, bearing in mind that they all have their origins in a woodland economy, we can regard the broad overall similarities between the different variants of the Sangoan as knitting them together into a single complex. Considerable caution is demanded, however, before we can say whether these similarities are the result of specific cultural connections and movement of peoples or whether they are merely symptomatic of a particular stage of human cultural development under certain environmental conditions. The stratigraphical evidence is too conflicting at present for us to accept the migration theory unreservedly and it is greatly to be hoped that future research

will be directed to an attempt to elucidate this problem. Within the understanding of these limitations, therefore, we can point to certain Congo basin elements which make their appearance in regions sometimes many hundreds of miles distant from its borders.

The type-Sangoan culture (if we may call it such) of the Congo is best known from the fine pioneer work of J. JANMART (1) and L. S. B. LEAKEY (2) in North-eastern Angola, and of MORTELMANS (3) and others in the Belgian Congo. An exact knowledge of this culture in the «type region» enables us to appreciate its relationship with the other regional variants of the Sangoan, each of which shows individual characteristics. Although the regional Sangoan cultures differ in varying degree they all show an emphasis on heavy stone tools which are believed to be equipment for working wood and its by-products. Heavy chopping, planing and scraping tools are found throughout the complex and the similarities are close between some of the forms of parallel-sided or high-backed pick or horse-hoof scrapers, for example, whether they be from the Kasai, Katanga (4), Angola (5), Northern Rhodesia (6), Kenya (7), or Natal (8). The fact that the nearer the homeland the closer are the typological similarities lends support to the belief that the complex may have spread, not necessarily as a result of human movement, but by an exchange of ideas and techniques throughout those regions where the environment favoured or rather dictated such equipment.

Thus the specialisation that we find in the later Middle Stone Age industries in Equatoria in projectile weapons with cutting edges can probably be interpreted as man's answer to the difficulty of following game in forest country.

The ordinary wooden-pointed spear has little or no cutting potential but by mounting a stone head on the end of the spear the hunter provided himself with a weapon which could cut as well as penetrate. It is very much easier to follow the track of a wounded animal if it is losing blood and it is suggested that it was primarily for this purpose that the stone headed spear was evolved. It seems not unreasonable to postulate that, so far as southern and central Africa are concerned, this invention may have originated in woodland/forest country where visibility is often very restricted. Once evolved the idea must have spread very rapidly to most parts of the subcontinent.

The finest examples of the projectile points are the beautiful, long, foliate points found with the Lupemban (Djokocian) culture in the

Congo Basin ⁽¹⁾. The distribution of this type of tool is imperfectly known but it certainly extends east of Lake Victoria in Kenya and it is likely to be found also down the east side of Lake Tanganyika. Its southward extension is unknown but it probably extends into central Angola, and two fine examples have been found with what can be described as a Rhodesian Lupemban industry at the Kalambo Falls near the south-east end of Lake Tanganyika. This industry shows an interesting blending in its typology and techniques between the Congo Lupemban and the Rhodesian Stillbay industries of the savannah regions (Plate 1). Besides the «lanceheads» the Lupemban element is represented by various gouges, ciseaux and «pick» forms, and there can be no doubt that there must be close association with the Lupemban of the Kasai and Katanga. On the other hand various forms of unifaced point, scrapers on flakes and the well developed prepared core technique show that the more usual elements found with the Middle Stone Age in savannah country are also represented.

This same blending of typical Middle Stone Age forms with what we have come to consider as equatorial elements can be seen to exist, though less clearly, a good deal to the southward of the Kalambo Falls. The early Middle Stone Age industry from the Upper Pleistocene breccia deposits on Twin Rivers kopje, near Lusaka, is a fairly typical Rhodesian proto-Stillbay industry in quartz, with the exception of certain thick-sectioned lanceolate «points» up to 16 cms long, which resemble fairly closely some of the Kalinian or early Lupemban forms from the Congo (Plate 2 Nos. 1 and 4). Such tools at Twin Rivers are rare and quite unexpected but may be considered to indicate that influences from Equatoria were at that time capable of reaching into the Zambezi basin.

Further south still, in the Upper Zambezi Valley, the rather unexpected bifaced «points» that are found with the same stage of culture may perhaps be interpreted as the most southerly expression of the Kalinian or early Lupemban point or pick (*pic-poignard*), and resemble

⁽¹⁾ It is not intended to imply that this was the only use for these tools. The terminology employed here is that proposed by Mortelmans (See 13). Industries termed Upper Sangoan by Leakey in North East Angola (*Kalinian évolvé* of Breuil and Janmart) are described as Lupemban in the Belgian Congo. Leakey's Final Sangoan and Lupemban of North-East Angola (*Kalinian supérieur* and *Lupembienne* of Breuil and Janmart) correspond to a transitional and early Tshitolian in the Belgian Congo terminology.

forms found with what may be termed intermediate industries in the Katanga (intermediate between the forest and savannah forms (9)). (Plate 2 Nos. 2 and 3 Plate 3 Nos. 1 and 2). In most other respects, however, the proto-Stillbay of the Upper Zambezi conforms to the pattern of the savannah and park land regions. A few high-backed «boat» shaped tools, worked on the upper face only, occur in these industries, and it may even be that the apparently extraneous element in the central Transvaal represented by HARCUS' (10). Primorose Ridge industry can also be interpreted as an expression of equatorial forms that may be related to the «boat»-shaped tools and «tea cosies» of the Lupemban.

Another equatorial element that makes its appearance in more easterly regions is the small Kalinian-type pick. These are believed to have been small hand chisels, adzes and gouges and both bifaced and unifaced forms occur. These are the most characteristic tools of the Upper Sangoan industry in the Luangwa Valley of Northern Rhodesia and at the northern end of Lake Nyasa (11). A special form is made on a pebble, one face only is worked the other face being formed by the natural surface of the pebble (Plate 4).

There must be a fairly close connection between these industries and that at the Kalambo Falls and it is not unlikely that it may have been along one or both sides of Lake Nyasa and down the Mozambique Plain that the Sangoan influence represented in the Tugela Culture reached Natal.

During and shortly before the dry period at the end of the Pleistocene when cultures of the Second Intermediate Period flourished, the characteristic industries of southern Africa were of Magosian/Howieson's Poort type. Revolutionary new techniques and new types of tool were being introduced into the sub-continent, partly no doubt as a result of diffusion and culture-contact, partly also probably as a result of the southward movement of new racial stock. One of these new types of tool that appears to have been introduced into southern Africa during the final stages of the Middle Stone Age and First Intermediate times was the tanged or shanked point. Such forms, though rare, are known from the Cape (12) (Plate 3 No. 3), the Transvaal and Southern Rhodesia at this time. They have not yet, (with one doubtful exception), been found in Northern Rhodesia or in East Africa (except Uganda) but tanged points are well represented in the Congo and Angola with the Upper Lupemban and Lupembo-Tshitolian cultures (13). It seems possible that the tanged point (the

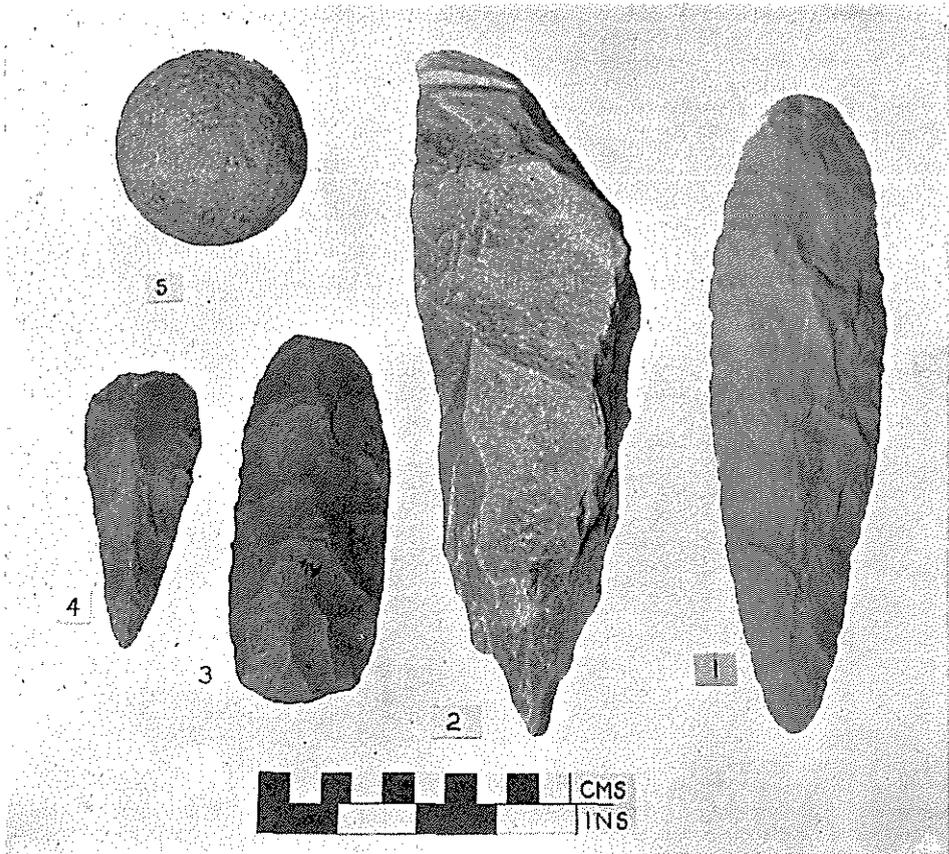
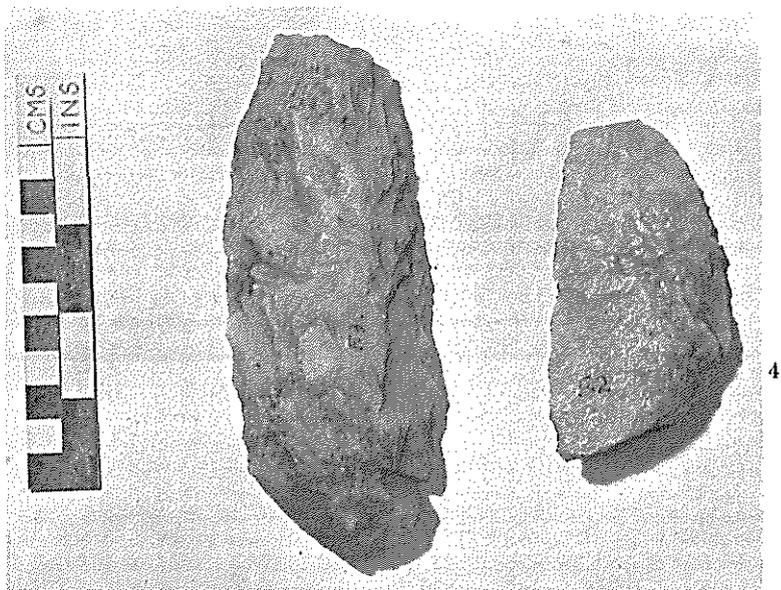


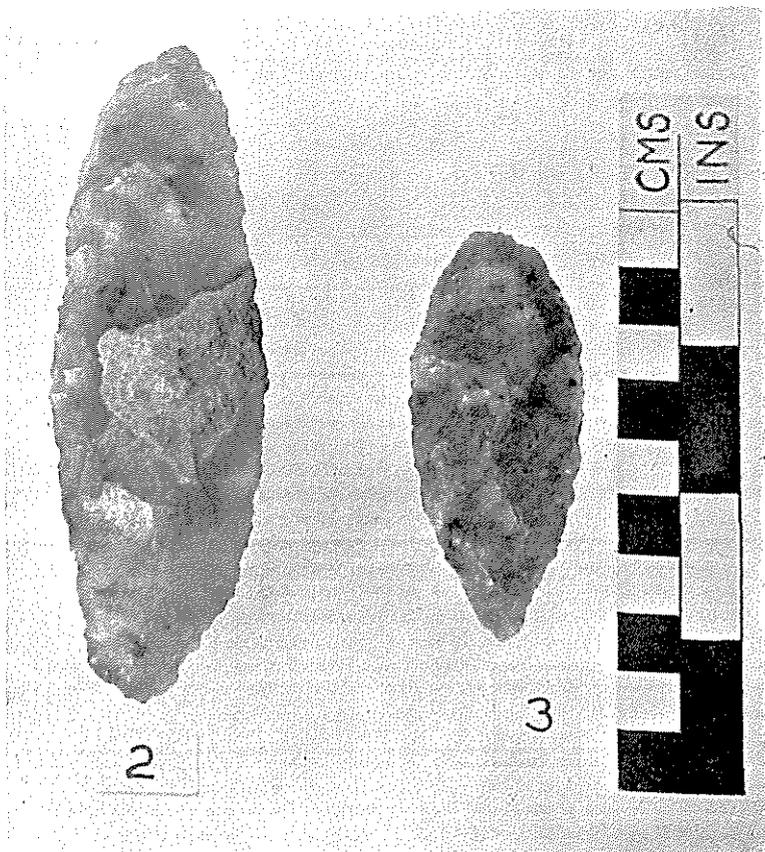
Plate 1 — Group of Rhodesian Lupemban Culture tools from Floor 3, Kalambo Falls, N. Rhodesia.

1—Bifaced lancolate point 2—Pick 3—Ciseau 4—Unifaced point 5—Stone ball from younges. Gravels, Zambezi Valley.



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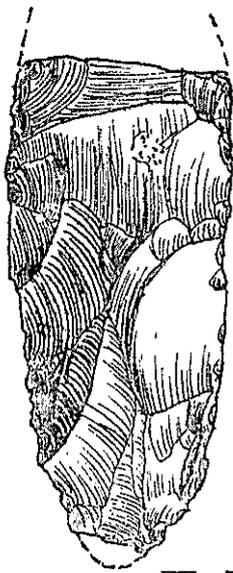
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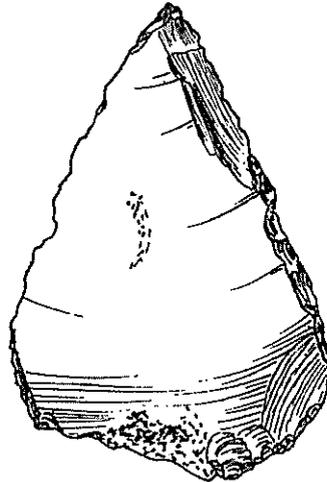
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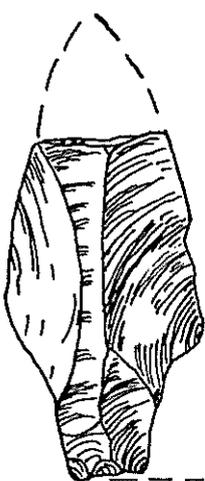
Plate 2—Nos 1 and 4 Two broken bifaced, lancolate «points» from breccia, Twin Rivers Kopje. Rhodesian proto-Stillbay Culture. Nos 2 and 3 Two bifaced foliate points from the upper Zambezi Valley. (Maramba River). Rhodesian Proto-Stillbay Culture.



1



2



3

Plate 3 — *Rhodesian Proto-Stillbay and Cape Stillbay tools.*

2 — Broken bifaced, point from scarp rubble, Victoria Falls. Unifaced point from scarp rubble, Victoria Falls. To show the association of Savannah (2) and Woodland/Forest (1) forms. 3 — Tanged or shanked point. From the Cape Peninsula (after Malan and Goodwin, 1933).

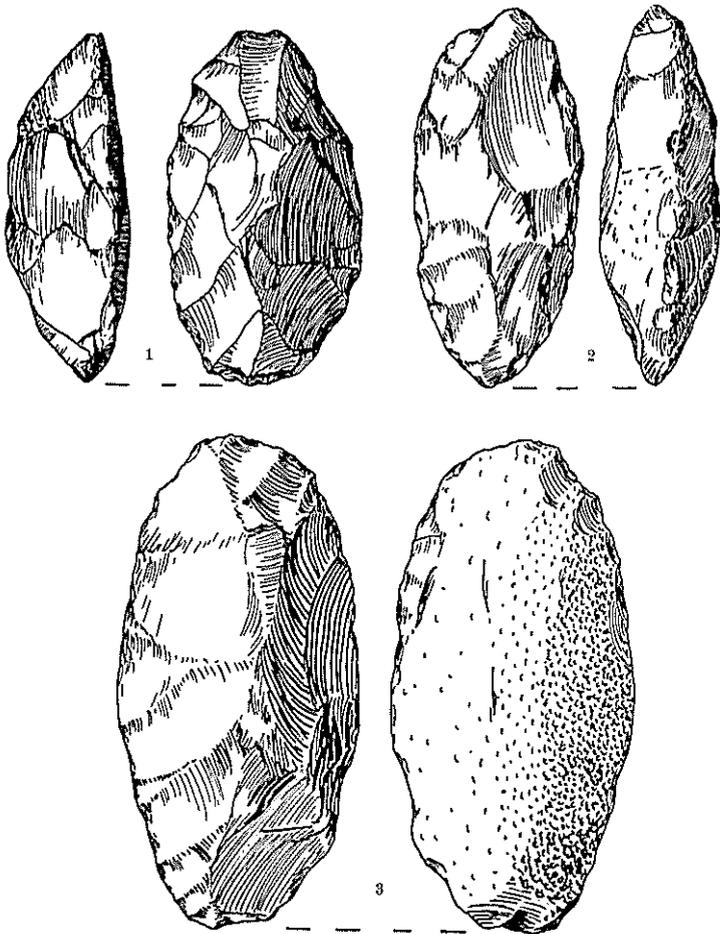


Plate 4 — Small hand-adzes or chisels from the Upper Sangoan industry at Mwenerondo Mission, northern Nyasaland.

1 — «Boat»-shaped tool; 2 — Fully bifacial type; 3 — Unifacial type with pebble cortex underface.

origin of which in Africa is presumably to be found in the Aterian) may have spread into southern Africa, therefore, from the Congo. As well as an eastern route through Rhodesia to the Transvaal and eastern Cape, a western route may also be found to exist through southern Angola and South West Africa to the western Cape.

During Later Stone Age times equatorial influences appear to have been confined to the peripheral areas only, but there can be no doubt that the Later Stone Age Nachikufan Culture of Rhodesia and Nyasaland derived its stimulus and characteristics from the Congo area. The emphasis on tranchet arrowheads, heavy scrapers and choppers, polished axes and adzes must surely result from a forest environment. Unfortunately the Later Stone Age cultures of the Congo and Angola are but imperfectly known, but the emphasis there, (as also in West Africa) on these types of tool at this time leaves little doubt that the Nachikufan belongs with these forest cultures rather than with the Wilton of the grasslands and that its distribution will be found far to the west and north of the region where it was first recognised.

In addition to these elements referred to above, it seems probable that the bored stone entered southern Africa by way of the high country east and west of the Tanganyika Rift. The distribution of the bored stone in Central Africa suggests that it is a «Great Lakes» rather than an East African form, and that the main route by which it reached and was dispersed in southern Africa may have been down the western side of the Rift Valley and thence onto the Central plateau.

There is more than a suggestion also that the schematic rock art which is widely distributed over the central plateau north of the Zambezi may have its origin in Equatoria. Rock paintings of this kind are found in southern and central Tanganyika, in the Nyasa and Tete Provinces of Moçambique (known from the work of Professor DOS SANTOS JUNIOR) (14) and in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (15). Isolated painted and engraved sites occur also in Uganda, the eastern Katanga, and eastern and southern Angola. Unfortunately suitable «canvases» are absent from much of the Congo basin and if art was practised there it is likely that some medium other than stone — for example bark or wood — was employed. The use of such materials may have been the cause of the particular expression taken by this art since it is, for example, much easier, owing to the «grain», to engrave geometric patterns on bark or wood than it is to draw naturalistic motifs. It will be of considerable interest to know whether this geometric art group extends also into the lower Congo region.

The Later Stone Age in Equatoria as in the remainder of the sub-continent lingered on until its replacement, sometime in the first millennium A. D., by metal-using agriculturalists. In time these food producers formed developed «confederacies», which appear to have been powerful units with complex and efficient political systems, based on a single centralised authority. Settlement in forest country tended to be more isolated and individualistic, with a corresponding weakening in cohesion between the various tribal groups, and so resulted in the evolution of new groups, and their splitting off and moving into new country to the south and east. As an example can be quoted most of the existing Northern Rhodesian and Nyasaland tribal groups which had their origins somewhere in the forests of the Kasai or North-eastern Angola. If it is permissible to refer to the Congo basin as being the nuclear region of Africa in historical times so also can such a claim be made for prehistoric times. As the writer has endeavoured to show in the foregoing pages, there were times from the end of the Middle Pleistocene onwards, when, from climatic or other causes, cultural influences, and perhaps man also, spread out and southward from Equatoria.

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