



The East African interlacustrine region bounded in the west by the Ruenzori mountains and equatorial forest. Scale bar, 300 km; shaded area, land over 1,500 m.

Ocean origin, introduced via the East African coast sometime in the first millennium AD. The yams and sweet potatoes are diverse, including not only African species of *Dioscorea* which may have been the first cultivated on the West African forest fringes, but also those of New World and trans-Indian Ocean origin.

Cattle occupy an important place in the traditional lifestyle of many of the region's inhabitants where this is not precluded by tsetse-fly infestation. Herding is a savannah activity that may be assumed to have begun following forest clearance.

Although the beginning of cultivation in the region may have been the reason for the onset of substantial clearance of the native forest, today the main reasons are the quest for firewood and the production of charcoal. Charcoal production may, however, have been a more significant early factor than is commonly realized, as recent archaeological investigations⁴ have revealed that this area, including the western Lake Victoria shore, saw the emergence of a sophisticated iron-smelting technology (2,500–2,000 BP) — the earliest in sub-equatorial Africa. Experimental reconstructions of the prehistoric smelting process⁵ have confirmed the substantial amounts of hardwood charcoal that were used; the long-term effect on forest cover is thus clear.

Archaeological investigations do not yet reveal a comprehensive picture of human settlement in this region throughout the Holocene. At Ishango on the western (Zaire) shore of Lake Edward, a specialized harpoon-fishing settlement⁶ has been dated to probably 11,000–6,000 BP. Elsewhere, presumed hunter-gatherers maintained a mainly microlithic technology.

Although the herding of domestic animals and possible plant cultivation had begun in the Lake Turkana basin of northern Kenya by approximately 4,500 BP⁷, and in the Rift Valley and adjacent highlands further to the south by about 3,000 BP⁸, there is no direct evidence that farming and pottery-making peoples were established west of Lake Victoria at this time. The earliest form of pottery recognized in the latter area is called Kansyore ware, named after an island site in the Kagera River, which was being made by about 2,500 BP⁹. It is associated with chipped stone stools rather than with iron, but the mode of subsistence of its makers remains unknown. The people who inhabited the sites where Kansyore ware has been found are a prime focus for future archaeological research in the Lake Victoria region.

By about 2,500–2,000 BP a distinct pottery tradition was widespread in the region, its northernmost occurrence being near Kabelega (Murchison) Falls. The tradition as a whole has been named after a site at Urewe in south-western Kenya, but several local sub-styles may be recognized¹⁰. There may have been some chronological overlap between the production of Kansyore and Urewe pottery, but at Gogo Falls east of Lake Victoria an Urewe deposit is stratified over one which contains Kansyore ware¹¹. It is at sites of this period in Rwanda that there is the first clear local evidence for food production¹² — teeth of goats (or sheep) and seeds of sorghum and finger millet. Urewe pottery is of particular interest in being associated with the smelting of metals, noted above. The Urewe settlement of the Lake Victor-

ia region is generally seen as a source from which derived the metal-using, mixed-farming lifestyle adopted by about 1,900–1,600 BP over much of the southern half of the continent¹³. This change to a food-producing economy is widely accepted as having accompanied the introduction of Bantu languages into southern Africa¹⁴.

It was probably about 1,200 BP that a distinct roulette-decorated pottery type first appears in the archaeological record of the region¹⁴; its connections are almost certainly with pastoral areas further to the north. It is more widespread than its predecessors, suggesting that more land was available for human settlement. The cereal cultivation and iron-smelting of Urewe peoples would, as the palynological evidence confirms, have led to significant reduction in the forest cover, permitting the eventual growth of herds of cattle. It remains for archaeology to demonstrate the human populations responsible for the earlier stages of forest clearance now suggested in the Lake Victoria region. □

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100 years ago



The *La France* above Paris. Facsimile of an instantaneous photograph executed at the Observatory of Physical Astronomy, Meudon. From *Nature* 33 422, 4 March 1886.