

Continuity or Discontinuity?

The 1st Millennium BC – Crisis in West African Prehistory

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Abstract

In this paper, a model is presented of the transition from hunter-gatherers to full farming societies in semi-arid West Africa. Based on archaeological field work in Burkina Faso and northeast Nigeria and in accordance with evidence from other West African regions, we postulate that the transition was discontinuous and took place in two stages. Stage one comprises the Final Stone Age, from around 2000 cal BC to the early first millennium cal BC, with villages and temporary camps, pastoralism and initial agriculture. Stage two is the fully developed Iron Age from the middle of the 1st millennium cal BC onwards, with larger villages and towns, iron technology and diversified agricultural systems. In both areas, the two stages are separated by a gap in occupation, correlated with increasing aridity after 1000 cal BC. In Burkina Faso, archaeological evidence is almost absent for the 1st millennium BC, whereas in northeast Nigeria, the arid crisis was less severe, as the water resources of Lake Chad acted as a buffer, and the transition shows more regional variation.

Keywords: early food production, Late Stone Age, Iron Age, West Africa, climatic change.