



THE BANTUFIRST PROJECT: 2022 FIELDWORK REPORT ON THE KWILU-KASAI RIVER RECONNAISSANCE AND MASHITA MBANZA EXCAVATIONS (DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO)

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Introduction

Between 19 August and 26 September 2022 the BantuFirst archaeology team conducted a fifth season of research in Maï Ndombe and Kwilu provinces. The BantuFirst research project is a cross-disciplinary project funded by the European Research Council (ERC Consolidator's Grant no. 724275) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. The 2022 field team, made up of Peter Coutros (UGent), Igor Matonda Sakala (UNIKIN), Arnold Mabuaka (IMNC), and Isidore Nkanu performed survey and excavation along the Kwilu and Kasai Rivers as well as at the Late Iron Age site of Mashita Mbanza. Building on the previous BantuFirst surveys in the region (Seidensticker *et al.* 2018; Matonda Sakala *et al.* 2019; 2021; Coutros *et al.* 2022), this mission was broadly designed to both identify new localities and augment data from previously identified sites. The bulk of the 2022 mission was therefore spent conducting survey and excavation in order to establish the preliminary geospatial and chronological outline of archaeological phenomena along the Kwilu-Kasai River network (Figure 1).

In addition to continuing work along the Kwilu and Kasai Rivers, the team revisited the site of Mashita Mbanza, a fifteenth through eighteenth century CE site first identified during the 1930s (Maes 1935). The site is made up of 17 mounds, ten of which were believed to have been arranged in a 'perfect' semi-circle measuring 355 m in diameter (Pierot 1987: 111). Although excavations were previously conducted in 1984 (Pierot

1987; de Maret & Clist 1985), results were never published and many questions still remain unanswered. The unique arrangement of the mounds has led to several hypotheses regarding their purpose, their time of formation, and their creators. According to Maes (1935: 716-718), based on ethnographic accounts and varying amounts of historical imagination, the mounds may represent a monument marking the meeting place of the Pende Chiefs, the refuse mounds of an adjacent city, the remains of semi-subterranean structures, or the rallying point for various Pende clans. Another hypothesis, rooted in ethnographic accounts collected with several informants during the 1984 mission, indicates that each of the mounds was occupied by representatives of multiple different ethnic groups (Pende, Yansi, Cokwe, etc.). Unfortunately, due to the dearth of research from across the region and the lack of detailed published treatments of the 1984 mission results, it has thus far been impossible to test these hypotheses archaeologically.

Methodology

Investigations at Mashita Mbanza (Figure 2b) were carried out between 7-10 August 2022. Due to several days of disagreement between local leaders and conflicting claims of authority, the extent and duration of the archaeological investigations were limited. Informal reconnaissance of the plateau was conducted in the hopes of identifying the additional mounds not located by the previous teams. For each of the mounds identified, a team member used the track function on

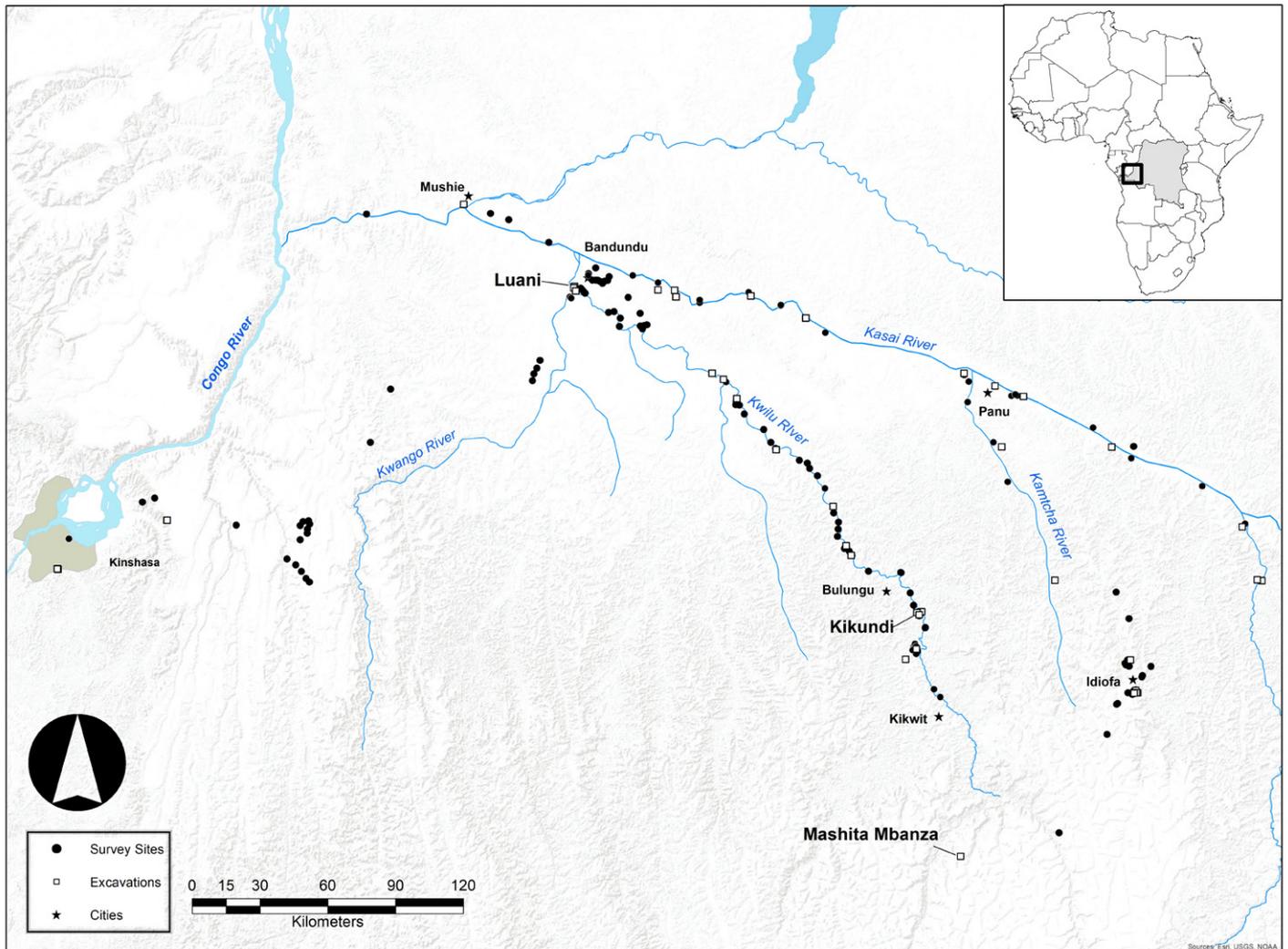


Figure 1. Map of sites identified by the BantuFirst project within Kwilu, Mai-Ndombe, and Kinshasa Provinces. (Map by P. Coutros.)

a Garmin GPSmap 62s to create a precise schematic of the perimeter. Excavations consisted of a total of 4 trenches installed across the site; two trenches were excavated on Pierot’s (1987) mound 3, one trench was excavated on a previously undocumented mound to the south, and the fourth trench was excavated to the west of the mound complex. All units measured 1x2 m and were excavated in 10 cm spits. The placement of two excavation units on Pierot’s mound 3 was designed to establish stratigraphic relationships with the previous team’s excavation units and thus produce more accurate comparative data sets. Conversely, as the previous team had placed an excavation unit within the center of the mound complex, the 2022 team placed a unit outside of the mound complex in order to assess the extent of subsurface deposits away from the center of the site. The final unit was then placed

on the furthest mound to the west of the main cluster (~250 m) with substantial deposits in order to compare the material culture and occupation chronologies of the individual mounds.

Following these excavations, a combined river reconnaissance and excavation program was conducted along the Kwilu River (between Kikwit and Bandundu) and along the Kasai (between Bandundu and Mushie). The general field methods mirrored those of the previous mission (Coutros *et al.* 2022: 14-15), whereby the team progressed down the river from Kikwit and stopped at villages, fluvial ports, agricultural fields, ridgelines, and exposed profiles for informal reconnaissance. Attention was particularly given to portions of the rivers that had not been fully surveyed or had fewer sites identified during previous surveys. Preferential surface collection was done at any location that yield-



Figure 2. Excavations at a) Kikundi, and b) Bagata Mukea. (Photos by P. Coutros.)

ed sufficient material, while a complete collection was carried out at those locations with a paucity of material. This collection included pottery, lithics, and slag samples for future analysis. Excavations were conducted, after consultation with local authorities, at locations that yielded promising results in the form of large surface scatters, a new type of material, or an exposed profile producing subsurface material. Unless otherwise noted, all units measured 1x2 m and were excavated in 20 cm arbitrary spits. Soil samples were also collected in vertical intervals of 20 cm from each excavation unit for both microbotanical analysis and soil geochemistry.

In addition to the survey excavations, larger scale excavations were carried out at the sites of Kikundi, approximately 43 km downriver of Kikwit, and Luani, on the southwestern outskirts of Bandundu. Kikundi (Figure 2a) is a relatively expansive site that extends across the top of the massif abutting the left bank of the Kwilu River, while Luani occupies much lower ground near the confluence of the Kwilu and Kwango Rivers. As these two sites were previously investigated by the BantuFirst archaeology team (Coutros *et al.* 2022), these excavations were designed to collect more targeted information on settlement organization and material culture, while establishing the integrity of deposits and chronological control. Detailed treatments of the finds from these sites are currently in preparation.

Mashita Mbanza

During the 2022 mission, 15 of the previously attested 17 mounds were identified through an informal survey accompanied by local informants. Perhaps the most surprising result of the Mashita Mbanza investigations was the layout of the mounds. While the previous investigators had noted the semi-circular nature of the mounds (Pierot 1987: 100), this arrangement was not exactly observed by the BantuFirst team. Instead, the mounds extend in a roughly linear direction from northwest-southeast, curving slightly in the eastern terminus to form a shape reminiscent of an upturned spoon (Figure 3a). This aligns well with the earliest reports of Mashita Mbanza by Reverend P. De Decker, as reported by Maes (1935: 715), who claimed '*l'orientation générale est sensiblement Est-Ouest*' ('the general orientation is noticeably east-west'). This discrepancy is likely due to a combination of higher precision mapping technology and the inclusion of all the identified mounds in the site map. Regardless, the orientation of the site, although revised, remains remarkable.

The excavations of the two mounds revealed a deeply stratified site, with remarkably dense deposits which yielded large amounts of pottery, iron slag, and stone grinding equipment (Figure 3b). While these deposits extended through the upper 2 m of the mounds, the bulk of material was recovered from between 70-

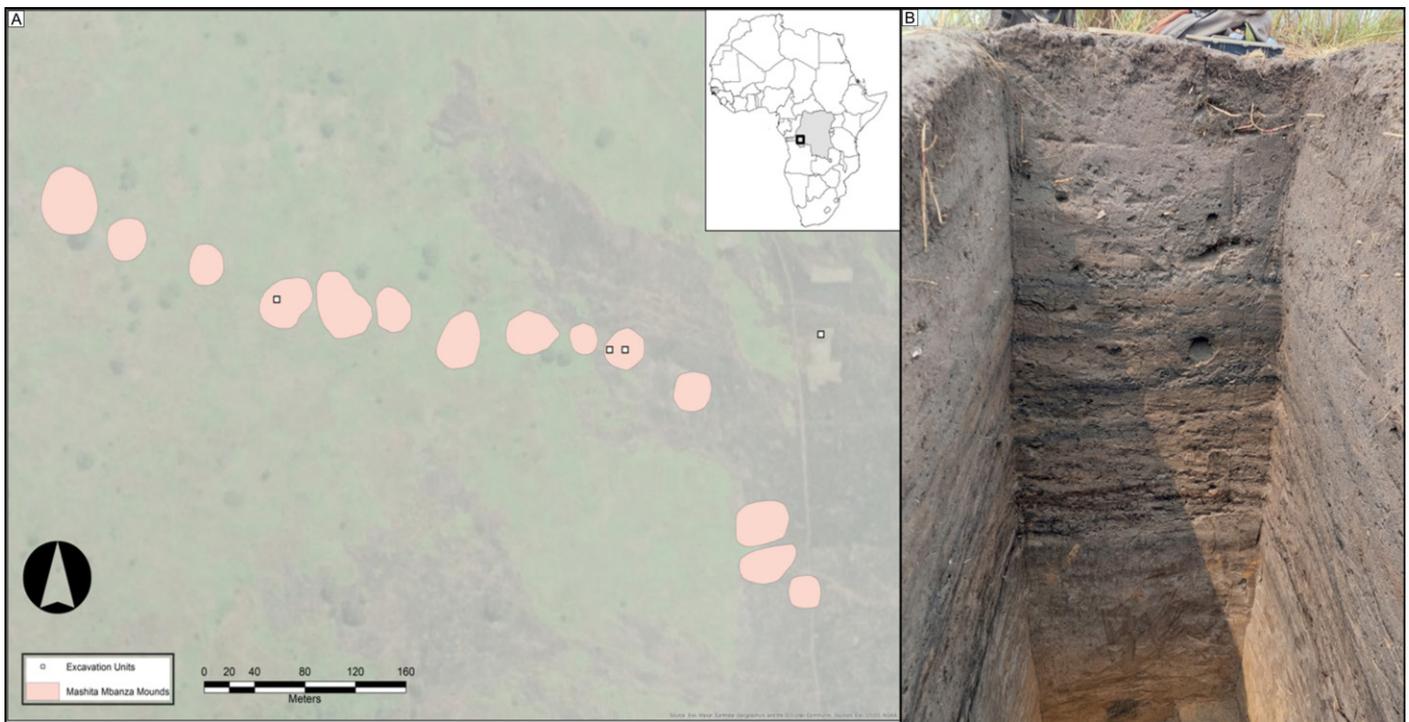


Figure 3. a) Revised map of Mashita Mbanza mound complex, b) excavation profile of 2022 Mashita Mbanza Unit 1. (Map and Photo by P. Coutros.)

175 cm. Below this, the soil matrix became an orange sand which produced few lithics. In contrast, excavations to the northeast of the mound complex yielded a limited amount of material, and was almost exclusively limited to the upper 40 cm. This is similar to the results of the 1984 excavations, where the bulk of material from the unit to the south of the mounds (Trench C) was *'assez pauvre, très peu... et très fragmentée'* ('rather poor, scant... and very fragmented'), coming largely from the upper 60 cm (Pierot 1987: 160). These two data points suggest that the cultural material - and thus the site activities - is restricted to the mounds and their immediate vicinity rather than extending across the broader landscape.

River reconnaissance

Over the course of the 2022 river reconnaissance, 38 previously undocumented sites were identified, bringing the total number of sites identified by the BantuFirst team to 178 since 2018. Excavations took place at 8 of these sites, with a total of 31 excavation units (Table 1). As with the previous missions along the Kwilu and Kasai Rivers, the region proved to be archaeologically rich. Along the upper Kwilu, nearly each location the team visited yielded archaeological material, largely dating to either the Early or Late Iron Age (EIA/LIA). Interestingly, the number of sites declined along the lower Kwilu, par-

ticularly between Bagata and Bandunduville. In addition, while there are exceptions, it appears that the number of sites with Pleistocene material increases with proximity to the Kasai River. Previous surveys along the Kasai (Matonda Sakala *et al.* 2021; Coutros *et al.* 2022) have revealed a large number of localities with both MSA and LSA material. However, as the bulk of these localities were either surface scatters or 'stone lines', this pattern may have as much to do with taphonomy as it does with the true distribution of this material (Taylor 2016).

Excavations at Kikundi revealed a two-phase occupation separated by a 20-30 cm archaeologically sterile horizon. Preliminary assessment of the archaeological materials has shown a marked difference between these two phases, suggesting a substantial break in occupation - and possibly a reoccupation by a distinct population. While it is suspected that these early and later phases represent the EIA and LIA respectively, the forthcoming C14 results will provide the requisite radiometric anchoring. At the same time, excavations at the site of Luani have revealed three distinct phases of activity. The earliest anthropogenic sediments are represented by a feature dug into the loamy-clay soil of the surrounding floodplain. The feature is lined with burnt clay and contains ashy soil mixed with charcoal, lithics, a nearly complete ceramic vessel, and osseous



Table 1. Locations and notes from sites excavated during the 2022 BantuFirst mission

No.	Site	Location	Unit #	Unit Size	Findings
1	Luani	S 3.35; E 17.35	3	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			4	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			5	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Lithics
			6	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			7	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			8	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			9	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			10	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
2	Kikundi	S 4.67; E 18.72	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics, Iron slag
			2	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics, Lithics
			3	2 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			4	2 m x 2 m	Ceramics, Lithics
			5	2 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			6	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			7	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
3	Kundji	S 4.40; E 18.43	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Lithics
			2	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Lithics
4	Lukombe	S 4.24; E 18.38	1	1 m x 1 m	Ceramics; Lithics
5	Tshinbane	S 4.01; E 18.16	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			2	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			3	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
6	Mfuba Kwan	S 3.80; E 18.00	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			2	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			3	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			4	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			5	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			6	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
7	Bagata Mukea	S 3.70; E 17.90	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			2	2 m x 2 m	Ceramics
			3	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Lithics
8	Mushie	S 3.01; E 16.92	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Iron slag
			2	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Iron slag
			3	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Iron slag
9	Mashita Mbanza	S 5.65; E 18.89	1	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Iron slag;
			2	1 m x 2 m	Ceramics; Iron slag;
			3	1 m x 2 m	Lithics Ceramics

Table by P. Coutros.

material. As both microliths and pottery were found as part of the assemblage, the feature is believed to date to the EIA or earlier. The presence of osseous material in the archaeological record of the Congo Basin is rare – particularly in contexts that predate the LIA – making the Luani site an exceptional record. Importantly, overlaying the feature are two archaeological horizons that resemble occupation layers, each containing distinct pottery traditions. Such stratigraphic succession suggests the integrity of the feature deposits, which

radiometric dating may further support. The ongoing analysis of the osseous and other material will provide significant information on the lifeways of these populations that is generally absent from archaeological investigations from within the Congo Basin.

Conclusion

As the fifth BantuFirst field season, and the third dedicated to survey and excavation along the Kwilu and Kasai Rivers, the 2022 mission has produced a wealth

of significant information – filling in many geographical and chronological gaps in our understanding of the region's occupation history. Thus far, the BantuFirst archaeology team has identified and investigated sites ranging from the Late Pleistocene through the historical period, providing a detailed scaffolding upon which future missions may be built. The analysis of the archaeological material and palaeoenvironmental proxies are ongoing, and publications of detailed treatments are forthcoming. Still, the preliminary results highlight the need for substantial archaeological investigations across Central Africa – particularly in the numerous regions that lack any modern research campaigns. In particular, future missions should target the regions between Kinshasa/Kongo Centrale and the Kwilu river, including the Kwango River, in order to connect the archaeological records of these areas.

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