

Studies on the Early Paleolithic site of Melka Kunture, Ethiopia

Edited by Jean Chavaillon and Marcello Piperno

Cover: The Awash at Melka Kunture. Modified from an Ethiopian stamp drawn in 1977 by J. Dubois.

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List of Contributors

Guillaume Bardin, Arlette Berthelet, Grazia Maria Bulgarelli, Jean Chavaillon,
Nicole Chavaillon, Silvana Condemi, Yves Coppens, Andrea D'Andrea, Sarah Delerue,
Véra Eisenmann, Ivana Fiore, Rosalia Gallotti, Denis Geraads, Guy Kieffer, Andy Milton,
Geneviève Papy, Germaine Petter, Marcello Piperno, Gérard Poupeau, Jean-Paul Raynal,
Patricia Smith, Antonio Tagliacozzo, Uri Zilberman.

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Istituto Italiano di Preistoria e Protostoria
Via S. Egidio, 21 - 50122 Firenze
www.iipp.it
e-mail: iipp@iipp.it

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Dr. Yonas Beyene (*Head of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology - ARCCCH*)

Dr. Mamitu Yilma (*Director National Museum of Addis Ababa*)

Senator Prof. Fulvio Tessitore (*Former Chancellor University of Naples “Federico II”*)

Ambassador Francesco Aloisi de Larderel (*Former General Director Promozione e Cooperazione Culturale of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)

Minister Anna Blefari Melazzi (*General Director Promozione e Cooperazione Culturale of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)

Minister Eugenio Campo (*Direzione Generale per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)

Minister Maurizio Melani (*Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)

Embassy Consellor Marco Del Panta Ridolfi (*Former Head Office V, Direzione Generale per la Promozione e la Cooperazione Culturale of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)

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Foreward

I am indeed privileged to give some remarks about the prehistoric site of Melka Kunture in the Oromia State.

This magnificent geological, paleontological and prehistoric site is indeed the result of a worldwide important archaeological project carried out by the relentless academic and research work of eminent French and Italian scientists over the last thirty-five years.

This site for sure has a special significance in the cultural and economic development of Oromia. Its location by the river bank of the great Awash at its upper reach and in the hearth of Oromia State, only at about 50 km from the city of Addis Ababa, makes it extremely attractive for tourist destinations.

The regional government of Oromia will play active role in developing, protecting and promoting this site as one of the World's treasures.

Finally I would like to congratulate Professors Jean Chavaillon and Marcello Piperno and their associated fellow researchers for their hard work in exploring the site and writing this magnificent book.

Juneydi Saddo
President Oromia Regional State
of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Preface

It is a source of special satisfaction for us to acknowledge that, six years from the beginning of the work of the Italian Archaeological Mission at Melka Kunture directed by one of us, its first important objective has been achieved, that is the publication of a monograph including contributions by many Italian, French, English and Israeli scholars involved in ancient and new researches and projects at Melka Kunture and Balchit derived from the activities of the French Archaeological Mission directed by Jean Chavaillon from 1965 to 1982 and then from 1994 to 1995.

As indicated by the title, this volume is a collection of essays on various subjects, including: a history of researches at Melka Kunture; a synthetic introduction to the Oldowan and Acheulian sites either excavated or partially explored through limited soundings; a re-examination of its stratigraphic sequence; a study of the provenance of the obsidian utilized at this Paleolithic site; a detailed description of the lithic assemblages of the main Oldowan sites of Karre I, Gombore I and Garba IV; a re-examination of the faunal remains from Gombore I and Garba IV; the results of a detailed spatial analysis study of the Oldowan sites of Gombore I and Garba IV conducted over several years by means of an intrasite GIS; an archaeozoological study of the faunal remains of Garba IV D; and two studies of a so far unpublished jaw of a *Homo erectus* child found in 1982 at Garba IV E, preceded by an introduction on the remains of other hominids published in previous years.

We are aware that many things have changed since the beginning of our study of the lithic assemblages from Melka Kunture, especially in technical and typological approaches to the lithic industries of the Plio-Pleistocene. What we could call the “classical” approach to these assemblages was supplemented, quite a long time ago, by a study of operative sequences, on the one hand, and the examination of traces of wear and usage on the tools themselves, on the other. These two approaches have opened unexpected perspectives on the behavioral patterns of early hominids, and will also be applied to the materials of Melka Kunture in a near future.

Our second objective, which we set ourselves almost spontaneously as early as the first year of the Italian Archaeological Mission – but was inspired by an idea already put forward by Jean Chavaillon ever since the 1970s – was to turn Melka Kunture into an Open Air Museum where part of the archaeological areas and natural attractions could be opened to visitors.

Over the last few years, our projects have benefited from the increasing support of the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, the Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage, and the Oromia Culture and Tourism Commission. The results have been extraordinary. Significant contributions have included the replanting of woods in the protected area of Melka Kunture, the extension of the same area, decreed in 2003, and the Oromia Culture and Tourism Commission’s decision to allocate substantial funds for the building of a new museum at Melka Kunture with the necessary infrastructures (an asphalted road, running water, and electricity).

The English monograph on the earliest sites of Melka Kunture has filled a gap which, in spite of the many articles published by the members of the French Archaeological Mission over the years, had been limiting the scientific community’s understanding of the significance of Melka Kunture. Although it is usually cited as a representative site of the Acheulian, there are actually no other archaeological areas in Eastern Africa, with the exception of Olduvai Gorge, covering such a long time span and offering such a diversity and wealth of sites. Today, Melka Kunture, along with the extraordinary evidence from the nearby site of Balchit, is the most important testimony in the Rift of archaeological events between 1.7 Ma and the present day.

October, 2004

Jean Chavaillon and Marcello Piperno

List of Contributors

Guillaume Bardin

Résidence Parc des quatre seigneurs, 111 rue Francis Lopez, 34000 Montpellier, France.
indyluck@hotmail.com

Arlette Berthelet

Archaeological Mission Melka Kunture.

Grazia Maria Bulgarelli

Soprintendenza Speciale al Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “L. Pigorini”. Sezione di Preistoria, P.le Marconi 14, 00144 Rome-Eur, Italy. Tel. 39 6 54952237; fax 39 6 54952310.
pigorini@arti.beniculturali.it

Jean Chavaillon

Archaeological Mission Melka Kunture.

Nicole Chavaillon

Archaeological Mission Melka Kunture.

Silvana Condemi

CNRS UMR 6578, Faculté de Médecine la Timone, 27 rue Jean Moulin, Marseille Cedex 5, F-13385, France. silvana.condemi@voila.fr

Yves Coppens

Collège de France, 11 place Marcelin Berthelot, 75005 Paris. Tel. 33 (0)1 44271039; fax 33 (0)1 44271289. yves.coppens@college-de-france.fr

Andrea D’Andrea

Centro Interdipartimentale di Servizio di Archeologia, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Vicoletto I, Santa Maria ad Agnone 8, 80139 Naples, Italy. dandrea@iuo.it

Sarah Delerue

Institut de Recherche sur les Archéomatériaux, UMR 5060 CNRS-Université Bordeaux 3, Maison de l’Archéologie, Esplanade des Antilles, 33607 Pessac, France. sarahdelerue@hotmail.com

Véra Eisenmann

UMR 8569 CNRS, Institut de Paléontologie, 8 rue Buffon, 75005 Paris, France. vera@mnhn.fr

Ivana Fiore

Soprintendenza Speciale al Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “L. Pigorini”. Sezione di Paleontologia del Quaternario e Archeozoologia, P.le Marconi 14, 00144 Rome-Eur, Italy. Tel. 39 6 54952236; fax 39 6 54952310. pigorini@arti.beniculturali.it

Rosalia Gallotti

Archaeological Mission Melka Kunture, Largo Tito Betuzio Barra 4, 71022 Ascoli Satriano (FG), Italy. rosaliagallotti@tin.it

Denis Geraads

UPR 2147 CNRS, 44 rue de l'Amiral Mouchez, 75014 Paris, France. Tel. 33 (0)1 43 13 56 21; fax 33 (0)1 43 13 56 30. dgeraads@ivry.cnrs.fr

Guy Kieffer

UMR 6042 CNRS, Université Blaise Pascal, Maison de la Recherche, 4 rue Ledru, 63057 Clermont-Ferrand Cedex 1, Centre de Recherches Volcanologiques et GDR 1122 CNRS.

Andy Milton

Southampton Oceanography Centre, University of Southampton, Empress Dock, Southampton SO14 3ZH, England. jam2@soc.soton.ac.uk

Geneviève Papy

Université de Bordeaux I, Institut de Préhistoire et de Géologie du Quaternaire, UMR 5199 CNRS, Avenue des Facultés, F- 33405 Talence et GDR 1122 CNRS, France. g.papy@ipgq.u-bordeaux1.fr

Germaine Petter

UMR 8569 CNRS, Institut de Paléontologie, 8 rue Buffon, 75005 Paris, France.

Marcello Piperno

Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Archeologiche e Antropologiche dell'Antichità, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Piazzale A. Moro 5, Rome, Italy. m.piperno@tin.it

Gérard Poupeau

Institut de Recherche sur les Archéomatériaux, UMR 5060 CNRS-Université Bordeaux 3, Maison de l'Archéologie, Esplanade des Antilles, 33607 Pessac, France. gpoupeau@u-bordeaux3.fr

Jean-Paul Raynal

Université de Bordeaux I, Institut de Préhistoire et de Géologie du Quaternaire, UMR 5199 CNRS, Avenue des Facultés, F- 33405 Talence et GDR 1122 CNRS, France. jpraynal@wanadoo.fr

Patricia Smith

Laboratory of Bio-anthropology and Ancient DNA, Hebrew University, Hadassah Faculty of Dental Medicine, Jerusalem, P.O. Box 12272, Jerusalem, Israel. Tel. 972 2 6758577; fax 972 2 6784010. pat@cc.huji.ac.il

Antonio Tagliacozzo

Soprintendenza Speciale al Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico "L. Pigorini". Sezione di Paleontologia del Quaternario e Archeozoologia, Ple Marconi 14, 00144 Rome-Eur, Italy. Tel. 39 6 54952236; fax 39 6 54952310. pigorini@arti.beniculturali.it

Uri Zilberman

Laboratory of Bio-anthropology and Ancient DNA, Hebrew University, Hadassah Faculty of Dental Medicine, Jerusalem, P.O. Box 12272, Jerusalem; Pedodontic Department, Barzilai Medical Center, Ashkelon, Israel. Tel. 972 2 6757608; fax 972 2 6784010. uri-z@inter.net.il

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